

AN ETHICS OF CATASTROPHE

The Theatre of Sarah Kane

Ken Urban

*What I can do is put people through an intense experience.
Maybe in a small way from that you can change things.*
—Sarah Kane

In the spring of 2001, London's Royal Court Theatre devoted an entire season to the plays of Sarah Kane, each one receiving either a production or a reading in the large Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Kane, during her brief career, created a substantial body of work that altered the landscape of British theatre in the 1990s, and the season was a chance to reflect on this accomplishment.

Kane's first play *Blasted*, set in an expensive hotel room in Leeds, charts the violence that befalls the dying journalist Ian and his unwilling sexual partner Cate, a mentally-deficient young woman plagued by fits. *Blasted's* exploration of personal violence erupts into a far more bloody spectacle when the hotel room is transformed into ground zero for a war. The play was greeted with a maelstrom of abuse by critics when first produced by the Royal Court in 1995. Respected newspapers, TV programs, trashy tabloids, all relished describing their disgust at this play and speculating about the "sick" twenty-three-year-old female author who wrote "this disgusting feast of filth," as *Daily Mail's* Jack Tinker not-so-subtly put it.

Despite this rancorous reception at home, Kane was welcomed by European theatre. *Blasted* was quickly recognized as one of the most important British plays of the decade. Her plays were produced throughout the continent, two of which won awards for Best Foreign Language Play in Germany. What seemed the start of a lengthy career was cut painfully short when Kane committed suicide in February 1999 at the age of twenty-eight. Though admired abroad, Kane remained a little-understood playwright in her own country. The critical tide had finally begun to turn by 1998 with *Crave*, but with her sudden death, her plays again became prime targets for biographical speculation.

Recognizing Kane's status as the most-talked about, least-seen British playwright, the Court decided to consolidate her work and make it available to a much wider audience. The season included new productions of *Blasted* and *Crave*, a transfer of

the Theatre Upstairs production of *4:48 Psychosis* (posthumously staged in the summer of 2000), and readings of *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998). This would allow the curious an opportunity to see her plays, the critics a chance to revisit them, and her supporters a means to celebrate her talent.

Inspired by the Royal Court's season, this article aims to do something similar for an American audience. While Kane is becoming more well-known in this country, her plays have still not been staged in New York City, bar one unsuccessful production in Fall 2000 (the Axis Theater production of *Crave* featuring Deborah Harry), or in other theatre capitals across the U.S. Here, Kane is becoming a recognizable name, but her work remains misunderstood. This is due, in part, to the lack of understanding regarding changes in contemporary British theatre.

The Kane season at the Royal Court made clear the formal innovations of the plays, which stray far from the "talking heads" theatre typical of the British stage. Yet, the season also highlighted their complex negotiation of ethics. Taking cues from the theories of playwright Howard Barker and philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a play such as *Blasted* dramatizes an "ethics of catastrophe." Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises, or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics. Morality is made up of "constraining rules" which judge people according to "transcendent values," such as Good or Evil (Deleuze). Ethics, on the other hand, are subject to change, even optional, emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being. An ethics does not forsake the difference between good and bad, but views such distinctions as evaluations rooted in one's specific existence, not as judgments based on universal principles. (Recall Nietzsche's statement: "*Beyond Good and Evil*, at least that does not mean 'Beyond Good and Bad.'") Kane gives us a world of catastrophe. As with Barker, hers is a theatre that offers neither solutions nor redemption. But Kane emerges from calamity with the possibility that an ethics can exist between wounded bodies, that after devastation, good becomes possible. To understand her aesthetic and ethical challenge, it is crucial first to consider the historical moment in which Kane and her fellow playwrights emerge.

Kane's *Blasted* remains the defining moment of British theatre in the 1990s, not because of the media brouhaha, but because it was a wake-up call: the critics had to recognize changes occurring in British playwriting. By the mid-90s, a divergent group of young writers had emerged whose plays addressed violence and sexuality in an unflinching manner, and many were produced by the Royal Court. Kane, along with Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Martin McDonagh, Joe Penhall, Jez Butterworth, and Judy Upton, were quickly dubbed by the press the "New British Nihilists" or "New Brutalists." These writers of "smack and sodomy" plays do not represent a coherent artistic movement. Like the work of the "Angry Young Men" of the late 50s, their plays demonstrate too wide a range of theatrical styles and methods to have a unified project. Yet, they share many central political and aesthetic concerns.



Ian (Neil Dudgeon) in the final moments of the 2001 production of *Blasted* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Photo: Courtesy Royal Court Theatre.

Foremost, the writers are Thatcher's children, a generation raised under eleven years of hard-line Thatcher rule. There is a shared hatred for the Tories's dismantling of the socialist state during the 1980s. But this anger is also coupled with an increasing sense of disillusionment at new Labour's move to the political center (not unlike that of the New Democrats in this country) during the 1990s. To most young people, Tony Blair's short-lived "Cool Britannia" campaign, a calculated mix of new Labour, Brit-Pop, and Ben and Jerry's, was anything but. The youth culture of the 90s often felt that no political alternative existed, just a monolith of the same. No event exacerbated that feeling in England, perhaps, more than the Yugoslav crisis, where both political sides eschewed any call for intervention and the media looked on indifferently at atrocities occurring only a short plane ride away.

Coupled with this anger at the Left's selling-out was also a hatred of "political correctness." The "political correctness" movement, with its call for positive representations of women, gays, and other minorities, had become by the 1990s little more than the Right's co-opting of 1970s identity politics for its own moralistic ends. The new generation argue that there is no such thing as a "correct" representation. Their plays often critique the conservative ideology that deems certain characters and subject matter unsuitable for art. As Kane stated clearly following the *Blasted* controversy, "There isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying that you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence. My responsibility is to the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be."

The strong Right is full of certainties, certainties which are abhorrent. The Left was full of certainties, certainties which proved to be bogus. So to write these big political plays full of certainties and resolution is completely nonsensical in a time of fragmentation. When you want to create a political piece of drama, there's no point in mimicking the form of resolution and certainty in a time of complete uncertainty.
—Mel Kenyon, Kane's agent and co-manager of her literary estate

Without a doubt, this political backdrop feeds into the aesthetic sensibilities of the playwrighting twenty-nothings and provides the spark for their theatrical innovations. They had grown tired of the epic pedagogical dramas of the 1970s and 80s by writers such as David Hare and David Edgar, whose school of critical realism approaches political subjects with a journalistic eye, and it must be noted that there is a long tradition of journalists turning to playwrighting in England. For an issue to be represented properly within this dominant theatrical model, one side must be confronted with its opposing viewpoint and through conversation lies the hope that dialectical reconciliation may be achieved. An individual character serves as a stand-in for a political ideology, a symbolic "talking head," and the dramatic form best suited for this forum of ideas was, hands down, a realistic linear narrative.

With the fall of Communism and the weakening of the Left, a theatre that relies on rational discussion and an abiding hope in socialism appears sentimental and

out-of-step with the times. This sense is made even more palpable when the Establishment greets such “Leftist” playwrights with continual approbation, awards, even knighthood. Unsurprisingly, the “Nihilists” turned to other figures in British theatre such as Caryl Churchill, Phyllis Nagy, and Martin Crimp for theatrical guidance. Here were writers who constantly reinvented form and looked to European theatrical traditions for ideas. While historically British theatre tended to be insular and shied away from more experimental forms, European figures such as Antonin Artaud and Heiner Müller began to exert a significant influence on the English stage. The plays of Crimp and Churchill in the 90s (for instance, Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* and Churchill’s *The Skriker*) reflect an increasing sense of theatrical adventurism, one which was highly contagious to the new writers.

Many of them also looked to the theoretical writings of Howard Barker. A lapsed Marxist whose plays chart a world of moral opaqueness, Barker fell out of favor with the major theatrical institutions. Yet, he continues to be produced in fringe and university theatres at home as well as abroad, and his critical essays about theatre are widely circulated and read by young theatre artists. Though *Arguments for a Theatre* was eyed with caution by theatre’s Marxist authorities, Barker’s essays calling for a “theatre of catastrophe” clearly exert a huge impact on this generation. His essays provide a critical means of getting beyond the “servile attitude to narrative and its critical-realist habits” which had colonized the British stage. Rather than a theatre that “throws light” on a subject, elucidating and illuminating its meaning for an audience, Barker calls for a theatre that finds ecstasy in pain, erodes the moral meaning of narrative, and “abolishes debate,” in hopes that the criterion of political authority by which a performance is judged could be obliterated. In short, it is against a theatre of journalism, against the stage as the domain of rational debate. Barker’s manifestos see theatre as a “site” or “landscape,” terms similar to Gertrude Stein’s and other avant-gardists such as Müller, where the “spectacle of free imagination” moves viewers far away from any clear notions of good and evil. His is a theatre of promiscuity, a theatre of speculation; in short, a catastrophic theatre.

The young writers, united by a historical moment and a set of common enemies, not to mention a producing theatre and, in many cases, a university (Kane, Ravenhill, and others attended Bristol University), represent a group which changed the notion of a “British play” in the 90s. Of all these writers, however, Sarah Kane emerges as the most far-reaching experimentalist. While some “Nihilists” held onto certain components of critical realism in their work (Ravenhill and Penhall), her plays represent the most devastating overturning of that form. While the plays of other “Nihilists” mimicked film and TV (Butterworth and McDonagh), Kane’s canon brims with a uniquely theatrical vision. Not dominated by dialogue, her plays use images and movement to re-imagine the British stage. Her work lacks any pretense to authorial closure, for the directors, actors, and even the readers of her plays become integral parts of their meanings. For Kane, content was nothing without a form that best expressed such exploratory demands, and thus, each of her plays literally recasts dramatic form. But as Kane herself noted, “the element that most outrages those who seek to impose censorship is form.”



Left to right: Madelaine Potter, Daniel Evans, and Jo McInnes in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs production of *4:48 Psychosis*, Summer 2000. Photo: Courtesy Royal Court Theatre.



Left to right: Ingrid Craigie (M); Alan Williams (A), Eileen Walsh (C), Andrew Scott (B), and Ingrid Craigie; Ingrid Craigie and Andrew Scott in the 2001 production of *Crave* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Photo: Courtesy Royal Court Theatre.

Phaedra's Love, Kane's second play, is her scathing and comedic take on the Royal Family, inspired by the Seneca play as well as Brecht's *Baal*. It was presented as a staged reading during the Kane season, but even in such a minimal setting, *Phaedra's Love* is clearly the most wickedly funny of all of her works. It is an economical play, comprised of eight compact scenes, many of which are terse exchanges between two characters. Its precision, however, captures the grandness of an empire near its end. Hearing director James Macdonald read the play's impossible stage directions, featuring such sights as the tossing of Hippolytus' genitals onto a barbecue, conveyed how images are significant carriers of meaning for Kane. The brutal images belie the violence of the Royals, a family that exists as little more than a nostalgic and repressive ideal, and whose present function is one of smug self-satisfaction.

But even more precisely, these spectacles embody the pain of Phaedra's unrequited love for her step-son Hippolytus, one which drives her to suicide following what she calls his "raping" of her. It is, however, Hippolytus who dominates the play with his violent detachment, his crisis of affect. The play renders him with surprising fondness. Actor Jason Hughes captured that vacillation between Hippolytus' sexual appeal and icy cruelty with conviction. The disconnect created by commodity culture (humorously shown in the play's opening montage of images, where Hippolytus watches TV, eats a hamburger, and masturbates into a sock) gives way to physical completion, but only in the moment of Hippolytus' violent martyrdom: "If there could have been more moments like this," Hughes exclaims before his character dies and a vulture descends for dinner. That vertiginous sense we experience, fluctuating between disgust and tenderness for Hippolytus, is a trademark of Kane's theatrical universe, one that the reading conveyed palpably. *Phaedra's Love* is, indeed, engaging, but it is the least adventurous, at least formally, of all of Kane's works.

The other reading included in the Kane season was *Cleansed*, a play which removes the final vestiges of naturalism from her work. She opts, instead, for a world of vivid stage pictures that push what theatre can show to its limits. A quick glance at the text reveals that there is almost as many stage directions as dialogue, and the spoken lines convey a sense of immense compression. She uses the smallest amount of words possible to achieve coherence and completeness. All exposition is stripped away; we are given just the most basic of details. The play is Kane's radical riff on Büchner's *Woyzeck* (which she directed at the Gate Theatre in 1997), and like Büchner's play, she sought to create a series of twenty episodes that could be played in a variety of orders and which could exist almost independently. The play is also inspired, Kane noted in interviews, by Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*. Barthes, struck by Bruno Bettelheim's description that the experience of an "amorous catastrophe" is akin to that of a prisoner in a concentration camp, asks, "Is it not indecent to compare the situation of a love-sick subject to that of an inmate of Dachau?" Barthes's answer: No, not entirely. Barthes finds the two seemingly irreconcilable situations share this in common: "They are, literally, panic situations: situations without remainder, without return." Though Kane was initially appalled at this comparison, she eventually concluded that Barthes's point was "about a loss of self.

And when you lose yourself, where do you go? There's nowhere to go; it's actually a kind of madness." How to live in the midst of this madness is the ethical problem at the heart of *Cleansed*.

In a play so rooted in the visual, I was startled by the reading in April at the Royal Court. Even though the stage directions were merely read and there was a minimal amount of movement, the play had the impact of a punch in the gut. *Cleansed* is a harrowing vision of discipline gone awry, of severe bodily torture on the grand scale of *Titus Andronicus*. Five inmates are imprisoned in a barbarous university, each one viciously controlled by a doctor named Tinker (a name undoubtedly referencing the *Daily Mail* critic so harsh toward *Blasted*). Tinker performs unspeakable, not to mention unstageable, acts on the inmates: a pole is pushed up Carl's anus until it emerges at his right shoulder, and then his tongue, hands, and feet are cut off; Grace becomes the subject of a botched sex-change operation, where Rod's genitals are stitched onto her.

This litany of bodily defilement is rendered with mechanistic precision by Tinker and hearing each one listed by Macdonald conjured up images horrifyingly imaginable. Neil Dudgeon, who played the role of Tinker, undercut the almost unrelenting anguish with a cold delivery that captures the play's double-edged humor. Kane, however, refuses to allow Tinker to be the source of evil. Between the scenes of torture, Tinker goes to an unnamed stripper in the converted sports hall showers and betrays his desperate need for affection in a peep-show booth. Like her Hippolytus, Tinker conveys that ethical uncertainty, enacting Kane's continual collapsing of the simple binary oppositions that provide an audience with a comforting moral assurance. During the reading, the sense of uneasiness in the room was palpable.

The Royal Court closed the season with productions of Kane's final two plays, *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis*. These plays are companion pieces, both reflecting a shift in her work. While images were central to her previous plays, these final pieces contain the images within the language of the plays, and she does this through the creation of a distinctly poetic style. Both plays are performance texts, with no stage directions, and in the case of *Psychosis*, no speaker designations.

In *Crave*, Kane again tackles the themes of love and the pain of its loss. The play's four speakers (A, B, C, M), while not characters per se, have clear genders and ages, and the play hints at a narrative structure. The older woman M displays affection for the young man B, while the young woman C is tortured by an abusive past which she cannot fully recall. In performance, however, *Crave* works powerfully as a series of disconnected meditations, fluctuating between the intensely personal and the powerfully abstract. While the narrative suggests the pain of individuals, the play has a distinctly international consciousness; B's use of Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, and German takes the personal and places it in a global context. The speakers's stories, as a result, become almost superfluous to the concatenation of images. Yet, the roles of the speakers have the power to complicate the language's ornate images, again placing the viewer in a space of moral uncertainty. In the middle of the play, there

is a lengthy speech by A which is a clutter of cliché images: “And I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath and massage your neck and kiss your feet and hold your hand. . . .” This deluge of desires sweeps you along, making you forget its banality, thanks to its length and rapid pace. *Crave*’s narrative structure, however, undermines the moment’s attractive sentimentality: A is very likely a pedophile, and his object of desire, an underage girl.

4:48 Psychosis extends the structural developments of *Crave*. This piece is the equivalent of a textual collage; there is a citational quality to the language, as if it were culled from disparate sources. The play has passages of poetic language juxtaposed with moments of naturalistic dialogue, intercut with lists of numbers of unknown significance, all placed in specific ways on the page to indicate possible delivery and meaning. Yet, the play’s multiplicity also creates the uncanny sensation that the text is deeply monologic, the product of a singular, albeit divided, self. Because it is the play that, Kane joked, “killed” her to write, at this particular historical moment, it is hard to read the play outside of biography. Mel Kenyon recently said in an interview, “I pretend that [*4:48 Psychosis*] isn’t a suicide note but it is. It is both a suicide note and something much greater than that.”

The play, like *Crave*, is fearlessly bleak in its charting of mental anguish, but still both plays conclude with the possibility of a space free from pain. *4:48 Psychosis* ends with, “please open the curtains,” a deliberately ambiguous final command from the speaker. Both Vicky Featherstone’s production of *Crave* and James Macdonald’s production of *4:48 Psychosis* grapple with the directorial challenges of these final plays in interesting ways, though both take rather conservative stances. Featherstone opts for a kind of talk-show setup for the four speakers, while Macdonald divides the text of *Psychosis* among three speakers, as Kane herself advised before her death, and uses angled-mirrors to reflect the stage’s action. While there is much more to admire about these stagings, I can imagine that over time these two plays will offer a wide-range of possibilities for directors, far divorced from the personal biography of the playwright, thus perhaps opening those metaphorical curtains even further to new theatrical visions.

The argument is made through form, through the shifts in styles
in *Blasted*. That’s how she constructs the argument, by taking
this setting in an English Northern industrial town and
suddenly transporting the action to a war zone.
—Joseph Hill-Gibbins, assistant director on
the 2001 production of *Blasted*

To conclude this tour of Kane’s work, I want to return to the show that opened the Kane season, Macdonald’s new production of *Blasted*. This play remains the most radical vision of an “ethics of catastrophe.” Here, the personal struggle between a xenophobic and homophobic journalist and a naïve young woman gives way to an epic exploration of the social structures of violence. Macdonald’s staging made clear

both the play's argument and its search for an ethical means of existing. At the start, the curtain reveals Hildegard Bechtler's set, a completely functional and sterile hotel room, "the kind," as the stage directions note, "so expensive it could be anywhere in the world." Macdonald allows the opening scene to occur in real time: Ian (Neil Dudgeon) undresses and showers, he orders a plate of sandwiches which Cate (Kelly Reilly) scours for vegetarian ones, he phones in a story to his editor. All of these elements create the sense that the world is familiar, and formally, it placates the audience into thinking that this is theatrical realism. Both Reilly and Dudgeon inhabit the space with such believability you forget they are acting. Reilly, in banal moments, sculpts Cate as immensely vulnerable, but not ignorant. While Cate may not be able to articulate her understanding of events, Reilly locates a physical means to show Cate's growing cognizance of events unfolding around her. Dudgeon creates an Ian who is both vile and broken, the endless sound of his hacking cough reminding us of his diseased body, falling apart after years of abuse, thus complicating his cruelty with reminders of his own vulnerability.

Kane, in mimicking a kind of critical realism, invests her dramatic form with an incredible impact. For Macdonald, the action most crucial to *Blasted* is the explosion at the end of scene two, where the hotel room is literally blasted apart. In that moment, the audience leaves the space of realism. Ian and Cate's relationship has devolved into rape and violence, with Cate fleeing from the bathroom window. Suddenly, an unnamed soldier (Tom Jordan Murphy) enters. He overpowers Ian, pisses on the bed, and with his hand on his penis, he sneers, "Our town now." With that, we enter hell. Bechtler's set is demolished, and with the help of Paul Arditti's sound design, the audience feels the physical impact, even in a space that large, of something coming apart at the seams as the walls crash in on Ian and the soldier. But for Kane, hell is not metaphysical; it is hyperreal, reality magnified.

Blasted's audience now becomes witnesses to the atrocities of war. The lighting lends a more abstract hue to the landscape of the broken hotel room and Macdonald makes it clear that we can no longer respond to the action as literal, but allegorical. The soldier tells Ian of the civil war occurring outside the room and then transfers such violence to Ian's body. The most endurance-testing moment is when the soldier, having recalled the murder of his girlfriend Col by "bastard soldiers," rapes Ian. Murphy rips Dudgeon's pants down and as the soldier nears orgasm, Murphy weeps and howls uncontrollably, the sounds more painful than the visual. Though the word "Bosnia" is never uttered, it is impossible not to think of the atrocities committed in the Balkans when watching *Blasted*, especially given the time the play was written.

Yet, *Blasted* is not a dramatization of the horrors of Bosnia or elsewhere. It does not seek to represent incidents, but reference them. The play and the production dramatize the abstract logic that allows such events to occur in the first place. "The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia," Kane argues, "and the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war." But this intellectual awareness comes only after you

walk away from the performance. Seeing an image such as the soldier devouring Ian's eyes overwhelms you. During Macdonald's production, first comes the emotion, the thinking, afterwards.

If *Blasted* stages the most catastrophic of events, it concludes, however, with a moment of ethical possibility. Kane leaves us with an image of good (though *not* of the Good) which emerges out of such devastation. Ian is reduced to an animal: shitting, masturbating, and consuming a dead baby for food. After all this, he finally dies. His head protruding from his self-made grave, it begins to rain, water dripping on his head. This moment of humor returns Ian to the living, for Kane is not through with him yet. Cate, her body scarred by rape and war, returns with some food, and she shares it with Ian. Reilly, in her blood-stained slip, crawls over to Dudgeon and feeds him some sausage and gin. In performance, it is a gesture of unimaginable generosity. In that stillness, Dudgeon utters the play's final line, "Thank you," with a delivery full of calmness and appreciation. It is not a moment of moral redemption, but, instead, a call for an ethical means of being in the world. Kane reminds us that change is possible, but not as the end point of some utopic political narrative. Rather, change occurs in those moments where comfortable designations break down (woman/man, victim/victimizer; native/foreigner, self/other) and everything must be rethought. To Kane, the good is not a moral imperative imposed from on high, but rather good is contingent, emerging from specific moments. The success of Macdonald's production is that Cate and Ian show us the possibility for good, that people ravaged by unfathomable violence can give each other the gift of survival.

As I left the Royal Court Theatre following the performance, I didn't really have any words to express what I had just undergone. Later that evening, it suddenly hit me: watching the news on TV before bed, I was suddenly overcome with tears. Kane was able to use the theatre in a manner that was distinctly visceral, making intense use of the *experience* of being in a theatre. But at the same time, she knew the stage is always, as Beckett taught us, a place of thought, and this made her push the boundaries. The Kane season at the Royal Court is a testament to these works and their cultural moment. An appreciation of the work now needs to extend across the pond. The time is ripe for theatre artists and critics working on the American fringe to tackle Kane's theatre.

KEN URBAN is a playwright and director. His new plays *Halo* and *Bodies Are Floors* were produced in New York City this past summer. He teaches in the English Department at Rutgers University, New Brunswick.

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