

puppeteers skillfully handled marionettes with anywhere from eight to sixteen strings. The second piece of the show, "Himalayan Scene," which symbolized the chaos of the world in the early days of creation, and featured a horse, a monkey, a turtle, a snake-dragon, and ogres, offered a stunning example of the troupe's virtuosity. Two large, green, bejeweled ogres engaged in a fight. As the fight built, they took turns leaping on top of each other, forcing the two puppeteers to enmesh and disentangle their strings repeatedly as they swung the puppets from side to side across the stage. The scene that followed, "The Alchemist," also played on skillful manipulation as it introduced the red and yellow-clad, bearded figure of a yogi-daoist magician known for his mastery of incredible acrobatic feats. The alchemist performed numerous complete flips in a lively dance and balanced upside down on a stick. The careful and concentrated work of a single puppeteer allowed the alchemist to lose and recapture his stick in the course of the scene. The program also included a dance of royal pages and a comical courting dance between two rural characters, an old bachelor and a spinster.

The New York engagement offered an unscheduled appearance as well. U Tin Maung Cho, a classical Burmese dancer based in New York, performed some "dueling marionettes" with the company. In this classic bit, the human performer mimics the movements of a puppet while a puppeteer pretends to manipulate his invisible strings from above. Dressed as a prince, U Tin Maung Cho danced in competition with a prince marionette. This piece dramatized the view of many scholars and puppeteers that *Yokthe Pwe* is the source of classical Burmese dance.

Amid all this practiced skill and artistry, the highlight of the program for me came at a less formal moment in the final scene, a romantic love duet between a prince and a princess, which in the end included a clown figure. Comic banter between the clown and the prince puppets became a pretext for the puppeteers to joke and improvise with one another, with the musicians, and with the audience. During this exchange, in spite of a simultaneous translation that was often difficult to follow, barriers between performer and audience, actor and musician, puppet and manipulator, broke down. The puppeteers took focus, and their individual personalities became apparent, even as they supposedly spoke for the puppets they manipulated. The clown's bawdy humor was followed by his apologies to the audience in English, French, Japanese, and Italian. The show transformed from a display of masterful puppetry into a community event in which puppeteers bridged, through direct

personal engagement, any linguistic and cultural gaps separating them from their audience. This type of exchange could go on at length at a Burmese pagoda festival, where puppet entertainment works along with the festival as a whole to strengthen community bonds.

While the performance at the American Museum of Natural History could not mimic an all-night pagoda festival, it was a replica of the performances the company regularly offers to tourists at their puppet theatre in Mandalay. This show, however, had the additional advantage of Schuster's introductions, a lengthy explanatory handout, and the final performative interchange between puppeteers, musicians, and spectators, all of which gave the audience greater insight and a deeper experience of the form. The money brought in by the company's tourist shows in Myanmar, and by this tour as well, makes possible the more traditional, though still evolving, community temple performances. In this way, Burmese and non-Burmese together sustain and reinvent a traditional art form.

**CLAUDIA ORENSTEIN**  
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**CRAVE.** By Sarah Kane. Axis Company, Axis Theatre, New York. 8 November 2000.

It is fitting, given the ironies and contradictions of her brief yet impressive career, that Sarah Kane would receive her official introduction to US audiences in a play she wrote under a pseudonym. Kane was something of the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British theatre, emerging in the flurry of exciting mid-1990s theatre. The press quickly dubbed Kane, Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*), and Martin McDonagh (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*) as the "New British Nihilists." Kane's first play *Blasted* (1985), featuring scenes of cannibalism and sodomy, was made infamous by the *Daily Mail's* Jack Tinker who called it "a disgusting piece of filth." The play quickly became a media event, and in the debacle the play's investigation of violence and gender was largely lost in a debate centering on the Royal Court's right to stage a play which, according to Tinker and others, "knows no bounds of decency." Kane continued to explore the violence of authority and institutions in the plays that followed: *Phaedra's Love* (1996), her adaptation of Seneca; and *Cleansed* (1998). However, a different Kane emerged with her next play.

*Crave* (1998) is a poetic drama in which four speakers, two men and two women named A, B, C

and M respectively, muse on the turmoil of loss and desire. Devoid of stage directions, the play achieves a careful balance between sparse dialogue, often directed at the audience, and lengthy monologues. Kane's writing, as even her critics would admit, was haunting and lyrical, garnering comparisons to late Beckett and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, while displaying Kane's biting sense of humor. First staged as part of the Edinburgh Festival, far from the notice of London critics, and credited to writer Marie Kelvedon (whose fake bio humorously included a stint as a roadie for the band Manic Street Preachers), *Crave* marked a transition from Kane's earlier work. While not without its flaws, the play promised a new and exciting period in her writing. Sadly, this was not to be. Kane, while being treated for depression, committed suicide in February 1999 at the age of twenty-eight.

The Axis Company is to be commended for staging the challenging work of a British playwright mistakenly overlooked in this country. With the exception of readings at New Dramatists (a



Deborah Harry as M in the Axis Company's production of Sarah Kane's *Crave*, directed by Randy Sharp at the Axis Theatre, New York.

Photo: Dixie Sheridan.

development organization where Kane spent time on a playwriting fellowship), Kane's plays have not received a venue in New York City or elsewhere in the United States. For those interested in her work, it is hard not to be grateful to the Axis Company for the opportunity to see one of her plays; that said, however, director Randy Sharp's production failed to capture Kane's strengths. Sharp and her four actors (Blondie's Deborah Harry, David Guion, Kristin DiSpaltro, and Brian Barnhart) turned *Crave* into a static and dull piece of theatre. Sharp's use of video projections and stylized lighting made the piece sculpturally beautiful, but the show was theatrically dead, lacking the irony and anger that make Kane's writing so potent. With few exceptions, the production rendered the play's satire flat. Case in point was A's (Barnhart's) monologue: A's lengthy catalogue of a lover's wishes, culled from the banal and sentimental images of pop culture, revealed the logic of obsession, a textual burst of hysteria meant to be spoken quickly. Barnhart delivered this monologue as a "real" emotional moment, complete with lengthy pauses and tears, no irony in sight.

The play's staging only compounded this fatal lack of humor. Sharp set the play in a disembodied space where the four black clad actors stood in a line while videos playing over the actors' heads set the piece firmly in New York City. Although the text does not specify a setting, a director would be wise to give the piece a sense of location, as Vicky Featherstone did in the play's first production when she put four multi-ethnic actors in a mock talk-show environment. Here, the specific geographical location of the prominent videos only made *Crave* a cliché of urban angst. In straddling nowhere and downtown, Sharp made the play a dull exercise.

Certainly, it was a piece of genius to cast Deborah Harry as M, the older woman who, as B notes, is "not older per se." Harry was at her best when her new-wave persona came through, bringing much-needed humor to a line like "I don't want to grow old . . . and be too poor to dye my hair." Harry and her fellow performers, however, seemed trapped and unsure on stage. While that might have been Sharp's point, that road has been traveled far too often to still be interesting, and no amount of video and lighting effects can hide that, tedium well done is still tedium. A more physical, more ensemble-style approach among the four actors would have injected a good deal of life into the production.

And that lack of life was the most troubling aspect of Axis's *Crave*. It seemed more a testament to Kane's death, reducing the play's meaning to

biography. Granted, when C says, "I'm not ill, I just know my life is not worth living," biographical connections seem inevitable, but locating the source of the work's profundity in biography does Kane a disservice. When I attended a memorial reading of *Crave* at New Dramatists after her death, Kane's fellow playwrights spoke passionately of her energy, her relentless humor and her commitment to the art of theatre. While the Axis Company's production showcased Kane's technical skill as a writer, it was detrimental to the humanity and humor of a play like *Crave*. As a result, it reminded us that we are still waiting for a worthy stateside production of Kane's work.

**KEN URBAN**

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**A DREAM PLAY.** By August Strindberg. Stockholm's Stadsteater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York. 3 December 2000.

August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* is a signal contribution to the now century long exploration of the relationship between symbolism and natural-

ism. The work is his response to a question that remains of central concern to our age: how do we make meaning (of suffering)? As the title suggests, Strindberg's answer involves an investigation of theatre itself, which he presents as a central metaphor for our very relationship to questions of meaning. A significant portion of the play's action takes place outside a theatre side door within which lies the promise of an answer, perhaps even the answer. This, however, is a door to which no one has a key. Many of the greatest theatre directors have taken up the challenge of this play including Max Reinhardt, Antonin Artaud, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Lepage. An opportunity to experience Robert Wilson's investigation of the piece occurred at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival 2000. Throughout his singular career, Wilson has explored the theatre of time and space with relentless precision, and in this production, which premiered at Stockholm's Stadsteater in November 1998, he applies his knowledge with astounding effect. Theatricality is precisely framed in this work, for even as we are seduced by the visual mastery of his stage pictures, we are conscious of the act of watching.

The building blocks for this production are thirteen large tableaux separated by dissolves and



Robert Wilson's production of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of BAM's 2000 Next Wave Festival. Photo: Lesley Leslie Spinks.