

**“[I]f it makes no sense then you understand it perfectly:” Exploring Ideas of
Fundamental Freedoms in the Theatrical Legacy of Sarah Kane**

by

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Abstract

This Thesis uses Sarah Kane's first and last plays, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*, as case studies to show Kane's development in appealing to contemporary history through performance, both as an act of warning against lethargy and as an opportunity to consider the extent to which issues can be represented as unmediated, outside of social structures, outside of the logic given by law or religion, and outside of the lobbying of various interest groups. Both plays are assessed not only as referencing their own period—*Blasted* as urgently calling attention to the globally long-ignored genocide in Bosnia, and *4.48 Psychosis* as a critique of mental institutions in the context of the further formalization of human rights in the UK—but also as having a significant potential for future performances highly relevant in more current political and social contexts, such as, for example, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur (Sudan), only one of 17 United Nations peace operations on four continents, or the case of Tony Nicklinson and his fight to legally end his life. In her exploration of the relationships between oppressor and oppressed, Kane recreates in her theatrical form a similar relationship of abuse between stage and audience. By recreating a sense of community within the space of the theatre and reinforcing awareness of a shared responsibility, Kane enters the public arena of global politics and confronts her audience with the question: 'Are you/will you remain only an audience member, or do you decide to act?'

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*Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening,
everything must be said again.*

-- André Gide

Introduction

The trademark “Sarah Kane” has come a long way since British critics erupted in response to her theatrical debut, *Blasted*, in 1995, and her plays have had an undeniable influence on both British and world theatre since then. Scandalous, revolting, immature, genius, morally abominable, fashionable, rubbish—all these and many other attributes have been associated with Kane’s work; yet despite their highly controversial nature, her plays have been securely established as key dramatic texts of the 20th century. Somewhat ironically, though perhaps not surprisingly, it was precisely the initial vitriolic resistance to Kane’s work that secured the canonical status to which her plays’ recurrent appearance on many university and secondary school syllabi, in the UK and beyond, attests.¹ What remains largely ambivalent, though, is the scholarly and critical reception of her work. Rather than follow accepted approaches to Kane’s plays – such as the kind of responses that depend almost exclusively on her haunting biographical details, or those that view her work in the context of such movements and categories as New Brutalism, Theatre of Catastrophe or the now infamous, and well-abused, umbrella term “in-yer-face theatre” – this thesis considers her as a member of a continuing tradition of British political drama and uses her work to examine some crucial questions about the function of drama in today’s (British) society.

¹ Graham Saunders’s “rough survey” conveyed through The Standing Conference of University Drama Departments

Aleks Sierz, the instigator of the “in-yer-face” label, dismisses his own earlier critical approach in his report from the 2002 “In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s” conference at the University of the West of England as an out-of-fashion “myth.” The Bristol conference resulted in the publication of *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, a collection that includes Sierz’s rethinking of the period, in which he comes to the conclusion that “[s]tylish but doomed, in-yer-face theatre was the James Dean of 1990s drama.”² Nevertheless, in the same book Sierz suggests:

Maybe the time has come to radically reassess in-yer-face theatre. [...] A good starting point would be to begin seeing in-yer-face theatre less as a literal representation of reality and more as a metaphor. As the latter, it combines many meanings: it celebrates the renaissance of new writing; it denotes an aggressive assault on theatre apathy; it promotes a radical theatre agenda; it implies a revival of a defunct art form; it asserts theatre’s role in cultural contestation; and it suggests a polemic against censorship.³

Yet the editors of *Cool Britannia*, Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders, the latter a key scholar on Kane’s work, decided to omit from this re-evaluation of 1990s British theatre any contributions focused specifically on Sarah Kane due to her alleged “dominance” in the period.⁴ This anxiety around critical engagement with Kane’s work is symbolic of her mixed, indeed highly fraught, reception and position in today’s theatrical and academic worlds. The superficial notoriety stemming from her first sensational London production, as well as from Sierz’s influential *In-Yer-Face: British Drama Today* critical assessment in 2001, has had the

² Aleks Sierz, “‘We All Need Stories’: The Politics of In-Yer-Face Theatre,” *Cool Britannia*, Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders (eds.), (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 33.

³ Sierz, *Cool Britannia* 35.

⁴ Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders (eds.), *Cool Britannia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 2.

effect of limiting the quantity and breadth of critical approaches to her work. Critics have become victims of the “myth,” and critical evaluations of Kane’s drama have been sorely lacking new interpretations and commentary. The result is that the accounts given by Sierz and Saunders have remained by far the most influential. Yet, there is another crucial aspect that has been formative in the creation of that myth: the politics surrounding the world of art at the time.

In response to Sierz’s call for new approaches, then, this thesis focuses on the cultural and socio-political aspects and significance of Kane’s work in an examination of the modern role of theatre as an artistic authority in the art world as well as in culture and politics. The young playwright radicalizes the already existing social concerns of post-1945 British theatrical tradition in the work of such writers as Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, John Arden, Howard Barker, Shelagh Delaney and Pam Gems, and through translating local context into global politics contributes to the articulation of a new theatrical language—one that, as this project proposes, enables theatre to have a constitutive role in reasserting, and indeed redefining, human rights in the British socio-political climate at the turn of the 21st century.

Dramaturgically, Kane narrows her subject with each play: while in her debut text Kane manages to let an almost domestic scene erupt into public, even global, chaos, the outer reality forcing itself into the interpersonal drama by implicitly drawing attention to the long-ignored civil war in the former Yugoslavia, there is a shift in direction after *Blasted*. *Phaedra’s Love* (1996) is essentially a family drama, even if framed within a culturally recognizable narrative of Greek mythology, interrogating the boundary between the general public’s interest and the privacy of the Royal family and, by extension, any celebrity. *Cleansed* (1998) narrows its focus further to examine the dynamics of couples, isolated in an institute governed by the inhumanly brutal Tinker who freely exercises on the lovers his tortuous experiments, not dissimilar to those

known from World War II concentration camps. *Crave* (1998) then becomes a multi-vocal study of the self functioning within the system of a larger entity, recreating the experience of schizophrenia for the audience. Finally, Kane's last play, *4.48 Psychosis* (1998, produced posthumously in 2000), explores the individual's allowance of freedom, and its abuse, within the confines of a mental institution, illustrating the ineffectual absurdities of forced treatment. It also represents an intense study into self-absorption, in which the central and arguably only character, or rather voice, in the play "los[es] interest in other people" and their reality awaits a "future [that] is hopeless and [in which] things cannot improve."⁵

Through craftily embracing the immediacy of theatrical experience and combining it with her dramaturgically unique practice of anti-sentimentality and brutality, Kane ultimately returns to a celebration of basic human values and challenges the fundamental moral and ethical principles of contemporary society. Through her politically specific, though not always geographically locatable, drama, Kane negotiates the ideals of fundamental freedoms and explores the power imbalance between victims and perpetrators and the influence of the bystander when these rights are violated. The boundaries between these positions are always in flux, shifting at times and reversing completely at others; yet, diverse as they are in content, Kane's five plays are connected by an undeniable sympathy for the oppressed, be it on the level of individuals or of community. Instead of looking *away*, her work *faces* the injustice and subsequently attempts to direct our focus to where it needs to be.

The Introduction develops the socio-political context and provides a framework within which Kane's plays will be examined. I will focus on two key areas: firstly, the influence of a changing political climate of culture and the arts in the UK, resulting in the mid to late 1990s

⁵ Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001) 206. After consulting other published versions of Kane's plays, I decided to refer only to the Methuen *Complete Plays* to remain consistent, as I did not find any significant textual variation that would be of significance to my analysis.

New Labour “Cool Britannia” culture campaign; and secondly, the new development in the formalization of human rights in the UK. Chapter 2 will examine her first and last plays, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*, as modes of enquiry into specific areas of human rights violations—one in the context of the Yugoslavian crisis and the other as a critique of mental institutions and forced treatment—where Kane does not attempt to provide us with a moral compass. Instead, defying the tendency to reduce meaning to binaries of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ she allows for (and demands) her audience “to craft their own response.”⁶ The means by which she reproduces the same bystander-collaborator or bystander-rescuer choice for her audience will be the subject of Chapter 3.

⁶ Kane as cited in *Rage and Reason* 131.

Chapter 1: “I Write the Truth and it Kills Me”⁷

1.1 Cultural Context: Swinging London Strikes Again

Sarah Kane’s short dramatic career begins in 1995, when, as the playwright says frequently, “*Blasted* happened.”⁸ Its premiere on January 17, without a doubt a landmark theatrical event of the 1990s, caused a stir at the London Royal Court Theatre Upstairs and drew outrage from critics, resulting in the play being wildly dismissed in reviews as a disgusting apocalyptic and catastrophic piece providing a nightmarish experience. Instead of holding a view similar to the contemporaneous reviewers who predominantly disregarded the play as an immature attempt to provoke, picking up only the shock value later reproduced in their sensational critiques, or to a more contemporary one, such as that of Karoline Gritzner, who claims that “Kane’s work increasingly forsakes the clarifying elaboration of values [...] for an anxious theatrical practise of insomnia and non-consolation,”⁹ I argue that Kane goes against the perceived loss of faith in humanity and in fact strives towards reconciliation. And furthermore, I see the dissenting reactions to Kane’s playwriting, both then and now, as triggered by the broader changing political climate of culture and the arts in the United Kingdom at the time.

During the mid to late 1990s in the UK, the New Labour “Cool Britannia” culture campaign, with its heightened sense of national pride, called for fresh, fashionable and stylish British art. Popular magazines like *Vanity Fair* gleefully exclaimed that “London Swings! Again!” referencing the cultural optimism of the 60s, and announced that the city “pulses anew with the good vibrations of an epic-scale youthquake!”¹⁰ The “Cool Britannia” ‘movement’

⁷ C in *Crave, Complete Plays* 184.

⁸ Dan Rebellato, *Interview with Sarah Kane: 3 November 1998*, Department of Drama and Theatre: Royal Holloway University of London, 2009.

⁹ Karoline Gritzner, *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010) 133.

¹⁰ David Kamp, “Cool Britannia: London Swings! Again!” *Vanity Fair*, March 1997.

became an umbrella term grouping together visual arts, fashion, music and performing arts along with theatre, and the debate about artistic values and norms it provoked partially explains the still frequent perception and portrayal of the young playwright as a shallow product of the New Labour era.

Part of this “youthquake” also included a group of visual artists, initially associated mainly with graduates of the London Goldsmiths College fine arts program. These Young British Artists (YBAs), Valerie Reardon observes, came out of the “Thatcherite ethos of entrepreneurialism” of the late 80s, but also successfully transitioned to the New Labour era of the mid-90s, while remaining more than willing participants in the new fabricated “cool” look of British arts that bridges these two periods.¹¹ Thanks to artists like Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, London saw a cultural renaissance that reinvented the metropolis as a significant modern European cultural scene. Interestingly enough, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture* identifies the YBAs as “highly theatrical,” “rel[ying] on the provocative staging of controversial subjects such as sex and death.” These attributes, of course, strongly resonate with Sarah Kane’s name, as does Reardon’s conclusion that “[t]he freedom to express profane pleasure of the flesh, whether alluding to pornography or paedophilia, means that the work lends itself to media coverage and public debate.”¹²

There are some obvious parallels between Hirst’s 1991 iconic work—a 4.3-meter long tiger shark preserved in a glass tank filled with formaldehyde presented in art galleries under the title “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living,” and any given image found in Kane’s work—for instance, the blinded Ian eating the body of a dead orphaned

¹¹ Valerie Reardon, “British Art in the Twenty-first Century,” *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*, Michael Higgins, Clarissa Smith and John Storey (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 190-194.

¹² Reardon, 192.

baby among the ruins in *Blasted*. Kane's sharing with Hirst part of the period in which he creates his controversial art and the readiness to embrace graphic imagery unfortunately invites other comparisons as well, as is evidenced by their shared public image as enfants terribles of their trades, securing both artists an indubitable notoriety—quite deliberately so in Hirst's case, arguably a lot more accidentally in Kane's.¹³

Hirst's works like "A Thousand Years"—a large glass display containing an insect trap and an increasing number of newly hatched flies and maggots feeding on a decaying cow's head (1990); "With Dead Head"—a grinning portrait of a young Hirst posing next to the head of a corpse at a Leeds morgue (1991); "Away from the Flock"—a glass, formaldehyde-filled tank showcasing a dead sheep body arranged to appear alive (1994); or the "Medicine Cabinet" series introduced in 1994—glass cabinets with surgical and laboratory equipment, or boxes and bottles containing various pharmaceutical pills at times simply, at times deliberately arrayed on the shelves (with titles like "Still," or "Naked," later complemented by "The Existence of Nothing Causes Nothing")—challenged the validity of modern art, and, to use Barbara Herrnstein Smith's terminology, raised the question of whether the evaluation of their interpretation does not far exceed their objective value of meaning.¹⁴ My aim here is not to attempt to assess Damien Hirst's and the YBA's contribution to contemporary art, but I think that considering the degree to which their work, and Hirst's enormous financial success in

¹³ Mary Luckhurst explores the phenomenon of celebrity within the theatre environment as a joint product of media and markets, formed in a particular era and social milieu in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, eds. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Contending that the last century saw the emergence of the playwright "as a personality in his or her right," whose cultural value depends on the concept of notoriety, fueled by controversy, scandal and sensation, Luckhurst then uses Kane as an example of a theatrical celebrity whose notoriety became commodified.

¹⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Value/Evaluation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 10.

particular, changed the atmosphere in the British world of art is crucial in understanding the complexities of the cultural climate that Kane enters in 1995.¹⁵

Devaluation of art was already part of the cultural narrative of the Margaret Thatcher era. The boundaries between the concept of high art, popular art and entertainment industries started to collapse with remarkable cuts in subsidies and funding for theatre companies when commercial success became the primary criterion, bluntly voiced by the Arts Minister Richard Luce in 1987: “[I]f it is any good people will be prepared to pay for it [...] The only real test of our ability to succeed is whether or not we can attract enough customers.”¹⁶ As such, this consumer culture openly brings contemporary art even closer to the world of marketing and business governed by principles of commercial interest and cultural capital, where the work of art ceases to be a craft or original artistic expression and becomes a commodity and currency. The criticism concerning YBAs then also focuses on the idea of art economy, but one that allows for consumption of decadent art that is in essence devoid of meaning, understanding of which is made available or dictated to the general viewer through exposure to mass media interpretations.

Popular taste is then manipulated by the media and driven by concepts of prestige and celebrity, so exhibits that would previously never pass as “art” are now celebrated. Julian Stallabrass speaks of “an art that looks like art but is not quite art, that acts as a substitute for art,” and, in recognition of the fact that not all the artists labelled YBA are British, and certainly

¹⁵ In reference to Philip Ridley’s 1991 play *The Pitchwork Disney*, Aleks Sierz reveals in 2010 that his understanding of the “new generation of writers” certainly was influenced by the cultural context, as “perhaps, more accurately, a history of the 1990s should begin by looking at St Martin’s College of Art and Goldsmiths College. Culturally, there’s clearly a nexus between the YBAs, Cool Britannia and Brit Pop,” the latter which, through a 1996 “Wannabe” Spice Girls song, provided the ‘in-yer-face’ catchphrase. Aleks Sierz, “Blasted and After: New Writing in British Theatre Today,” a lecture given at the Society for Theatre Research, 16 February 2010. Transcript and audio record available at *TheatreVOICE*: <www.theatrevoice.com/2491/new-writing-in-british-theatre-today/>.

¹⁶ Richard Luce, as cited in John Corner, *Enterprise and Heritage: Cross Currents of National Culture*, Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds.), (London: Routledge, 1991) 67.

not all of them are young, introduces in 1999 a new term—“high art lite.”¹⁷ On the other hand, David Batchelor offers an opposing view when he defends this “Material Culture” in *frieze* magazine, arguing for its introspective qualities:

In effect much of the most compelling, most demanding and most vivid [contemporary] art recognises that the boundary between art and non-art is neither clear nor consistent, and explores the uncertainty of its existence as a way of continuing to exist.¹⁸

The pivotal 1997 “Sensation”¹⁹ art exhibition of YBA at the London Royal Academy of Art supported by Charles Saatchi, a new-era art buyer and collector, presented a strange clash of an art establishment hosting provocative, and for many offensive and vulgar, installations that were as much the product of an individual’s artistic vision and need of self-expression as those of commercial and economic demands of a new marketing strategy. The wealthiest artist in the world,²⁰ due to his unprecedented sense of orientation in the world of contemporary art, Hirst is aware of his far-reaching influence (“[t]he position I’m in now, I’m responsible for a hell of a lot of things to do with the art world. What I do affects the course of art”²¹), and seems to confirm Smith’s observation that “value creates value.”²² “A master of supererogation,” Peter Schjeldahl asserts, “Hirst will go down in history as a peculiarly cold-blooded pet of millennial excess wealth. That’s not Old Master status, but it’s immortality of a sort.”²³

While Hirst certainly demonstrates that art value is relative, Kane’s work sorely shows how art evaluation is contingent. Since, as the director James Macdonald infamously points

¹⁷ Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London: Verso, 1999) 2.

¹⁸ David Batchelor, “Living in a Material World,” *Frieze*, no. 35, 1997, 46.

¹⁹ Norman Rosenthal et al. (eds.), *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

²⁰ Hari Kunzru, “Damien Hirst and the Great Art Market Heist,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2012.

²¹ Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, *On the Way to Work*, (New York: Universe Publishing, 2002) 86.

²² Smith, 10.

²³ Peter Schjeldahl, “Spot On,” *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2012.

out, *Blasted* is “perhaps the least seen and most talked about play in recent memory,”²⁴ commercial success is clearly not Kane’s priority. Nevertheless, the commercialization of art, the newly reinforced tactics of shock, exploration of previously tabooed topics, lack of interest in the viewer’s satisfaction and the resulting attack on art as lacking aesthetics, cultural values and meaning crucially affected the climate in which Kane wrote and was assessed. A significant shift had also occurred within academia—the so-called culture wars and literary canon debates of the 1980s and early 1990s. The ‘Multiculturalists’ may have won the battle fought over the Anglo-American canon within academia, exposing the canon as “an arena for the exercise of political power and social exclusion,”²⁵ but the canon wars did not only result in changing curricula. As these ‘wars’ were fought from within English and Theatre departments, they also indirectly fed into the already existing hostility against, and loss of respect for, the humanities. The traditional understanding of humanities as rudimentary to our learning has since then been challenged further and the discipline as much attacked as defended. The effects arising from this situation for Kane are two-fold. On the one hand, the multiculturalists’ defeat of the elitist canonical approach may have facilitated Kane’s inclusion in the new wider literary canon in the long run, but the ensuing undeniable need for a defense of humanities and their advocacy as enhancing our culture and stimulating intellect also significantly complicated her immediate situation.

²⁴ James Macdonald, “They Never Got Her,” *Observer Review*, 28 February 1999.

²⁵ Patricia Waugh, “Value: Criticism, Canons, and Evaluation.” *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 70.

1.2 Critical Reviews and Media Reaction: Beyond an Adolescent Desire to Shock

That the boundaries of art, both in terms of content and aesthetic form, need to be tested and, occasionally, pushed with each generation in order to stay alive, seems to be a given today. Yet when this supposition is actually fulfilled, the response is often not as positive as may have been hoped for—notable examples would include the poor reception of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. That audiences are not ready for such innovative spirit is, however, in fact a positive circumstance; if they were, avant-garde theatre or Kane's experiential anti-sentimentality would inevitably fall flat. The power of daring, groundbreaking art is partly dependent on the element of surprise, and as such needs to challenge or provoke the spectator. What is of much more concern here is the critical response. Critics, as experts in their field, should be far more open to new ideas and be capable of effectively anticipating trends in theatre. Kane herself brings attention to the distinction between critics and audience and maintains that in relation to her work, “[t]here was media outrage, but it was never a public outcry.”²⁶ In terms of exploring the reciprocal influence of culture and politics, revising the sweeping critical response to *Blasted*, a small black-box theatre production with a two-week run, is then especially rewarding.

The press vilified Kane for brutality while the same inhuman violence was happening as close to Britain as continental Europe, in the former Yugoslavia. “This disgusting feast of filth” that knows “no bounds of decency yet has no message to convey by way of excuse” offended Jack Tinker from the *Daily Mail*, while other reviewers wrote that watching the play was “like having your face rammed into an over-flowing ashtray, just for starters, and then having your

²⁶ Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997) 130.

whole head held down in a bucket of offal” (*Independent*); witnessing “a catalogue of lurid on-stage depravity”(*Guardian*); “gratuitous welter of carnage” (*The Sunday Telegraph*); “[a] sordid little travesty” (*The Spectator*); and “a lazy, tawdry piece of work without an idea in its head beyond an adolescent desire to shock” (*Daily Telegraph*).²⁷ The listing of such reviews could continue almost endlessly, but what clearly emerges is the inability or unwillingness of the critics to accept and critically analyze Sarah Kane’s work. Instead of reflecting the burning questions Kane introduces to the modern stage, contemporary reviewers address only the physical, visceral stimulus, not the intellectual one. They disregard the play as an immature attempt to provoke, and instead of considering the suggested global issues as a whole, they pick up only the shock value that they reproduce in their sensational critiques.

Part of the reason for the negative reception can be attributed to the very fact that the ruthless world of *Blasted* is a product of a female voice. Kane in fact started writing *Blasted* at the age of 22 while still finishing her MA degree in drama studies at Birmingham University, and thus lacked the reputation of a well-respected, established playwright. Even though Kane herself is not interested in gender distinctions,²⁸ claiming “I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don’t believe there’s such a thing,” her reviewers do not follow her example. Contrary to her wish to be considered “a writer, that’s what I am, and that’s how I want my work to be judged—on its quality, not on the basis of my age, gender, class, sexuality, or race. [...] I am what I am. Not what other people want me to be,”²⁹ the vast majority of her

²⁷ Charles Spencer, “Awful Shock,” *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1995.

²⁸ Cf. interview with Sarah Kane in Graham Saunders, *‘Love Me or Kill Me’: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 134.

²⁹ Stephenson and Langridge, *Rage and Reason* 134-135.

contemporary reviewers made a point of identifying Sarah Kane as a young female writer within the first paragraphs of their patronizing reviews, if not in the title.³⁰

The harsh critiques become even more unsubstantiated when we consider that very similar themes and techniques were in place already in the late 1960's and early 1970s through the works of Edward Bond, Peter Barnes, Howard Brenton and Howard Barker, collectively frequently labelled the "New Jacobians," who, as Graham Saunders confirms, display the same interest in exposing violence on stage and exhibit a "fascination with the grotesque, [...] frequently laced with a mordant humour."³¹ Significantly, the previously taboo topics always found their way on stage first through scripts written by male authors, as emerges from Sierz's "A Brief History of Provocation"³²: female frontal nudity (Charles Marowitz and Ken Dewey in 1963); the first 'fuck' in a character's speech; guards sodomizing prisoners, or an eaten baby (David Rudkin in 1962-65); homosexuality (in 1965, the year decriminalisation of male homosexual acts was proposed in the House of Lords, Noel Coward's *A Song at Twilight* featured homosexuality, John Osborne's *A Patriot for Me* involved a drag ball and Frank Marcus's *The Killing of Sister George* dealt with female homoeroticism). Starting in the mid 70s, "women continued to speak the unspoken,"³³ with groups like Women's Theatre group or Cunning Stunts, but, in comparison to their male colleagues, remained less radical in their aesthetics—a trend that Kane decisively breaks in the 90s.

A different reaction nevertheless comes from within the theatrical community, demonstrating that *Blasted* is not a marginalized avant-garde piece, but a serious play,

³⁰ For a discussion of how the "sexist media machine" pathologized Kane throughout her career and her resulting status of a (tragic) celebrity, see Luckhurst "Infamy and Dying Young: Sarah Kane, 1971-1999," *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain 1660-2000*, 106-122.

³¹ Saunders, 19.

³² Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001) 10-35.

³³ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, 24.

aesthetically affecting main-stage theatre and intellectually challenging the contemporary theatre-going public. Edward Bond, for instance, recognized the value of *Blasted* and supported Kane's play in the *Guardian* only a few days after the premiere:

The humanity of *Blasted* moved me. I worry for those too busy or so lost that they cannot see its humanity. And as a playwright, I am moved by the craft and control of such a young writer . . . this is the most important play on in London.³⁴

The arrival of new refreshing playwrights was in fact already called for. Graham Saunders notes that since John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the strain of provocative and radical art theatre seems to be disconnected. He supports his assertion by quoting David Hare's 1990s observation that "[w]hen Stoppard and Pinter looked behind their back they saw us coming up...when Howard [Brenton] or I look back we see no one – no young writers coming up to challenge what we stood for."³⁵ Saunders further calls attention to the fact that in 1994, "eighty-seven prominent British playwrights signed a joint letter to the *Guardian* newspaper complaining about the lack of new drama on the country's main stages."³⁶ Commenting on the dynamics within the theatrical community, Mark Ravenhill speaks of no community feeling among the new generation of playwrights, no sense of a unified group, but confirms the supportive attitude from the previous generation when he highlights the "generosity" and encouragement from playwrights like Churchill and Stoppard.³⁷

It should come as no surprise then that a response to the call for new, fresh work on the stage came from The Royal Court Theatre, a key stage for development of British drama since

³⁴ *Guardian*, 28 January, as cited in Philip Roberts, *Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 222.

³⁵ Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me* '2.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

³⁷ Debate hosted by Aleks Sierz at the Theatre Museum including Richard Bean, Mark Ravenhill and Simon Stephens, London 2004, transcript and audio recording at *TheatreVOICE* <www.theatrevoice.com/1890/theatrevoice-debate-new-writing-23-richard-bean-mar/>.

1945. In 2004, when asked how he would retrospectively explain the “enormous flash of energy” of the mid 1990s, when it seemed that a new young playwright was discovered on a weekly basis, as the interviewing Aleks Sierz hyperbolically suggests, Ravenhill not only speaks of “an ideological vacuum” where “political systems of thought and ways of evaluating the world collapsed, so new ways had to be found to look at the world,” but also claims that

[...] Stephen Daldry [Artistic Director] wanted a very fast turnover of new plays at The Royal Court. He wanted to create a sense of lots of plays happening very quickly, it was, you know, partly manufactured. The National Theatre Studio came in on that project and gave a lot of financial support to make that possible for a very quick turnover of plays.”³⁸

The rapidly growing production of plays had principally two negative effects: firstly, the currently fashionable plays, even if harshly criticised, were suddenly in part, or unashamedly directly, copied by new hopeful playwrights, providing scripts of highly variable quality that usually never got produced;³⁹ secondly, the number of plays similar in graphic imagery, often lacking a message behind its thus gratuitous violence, that were staged led to oversimplification in interpretation of the more ‘serious’ plays.⁴⁰ This perception is typical of the majority of Kane’s ardent dissenting critics, many of whom accused the Royal Court Theatre, which staged Kane’s plays, of merely “glamorizing brutality.”⁴¹ Combined with the media outburst that the theatre reviewers created around *Blasted*, these generalizations triggered a chain reaction that translated into critical academic assessments both of the period generally and of Kane’s work in particular. Matthew Collin thinks of the 90s in the UK as a period of “Ecstasy culture,” one

³⁸ Sierz, Theatre Museum 2004.

³⁹ Cf. Rebellato, *Interview with Sarah Kane*.

⁴⁰ Cf. a lecture by Aleks Sierz, “Blasted and After: New Writing in British Theatre Today,” Society for Theatre Research, 16 February 2010.

⁴¹ Luckhurst, “Infamy and Dying Young: Sarah Kane” 114.

lacking any formal organization, manifesto or any other form of public statement; as such, it “has no politics,” nor is it “saying anything or actively opposing the social order.”⁴² Collin is later echoed by Vera Gottlieb’s complaint about a lack of political focus: “the plays of the nineties seem to have moved even further away from the politically oppositional, and have given up any attempt to engage with significant public issues.”⁴³ Nevertheless, with *Blasted*, The English Stage Company put on a show faithful to its mandate and committed to artistic director Ian Rickson’s words: “[w]e’re not particularly interested in plays with wigs or plays set in drawing rooms. We want to put real life on stage in all its complexity, and we look for actors who can do that.”⁴⁴

Interest in Kane’s innovative use of her medium and experimentation of form remains prevalent in today’s theatre. Her playwriting skill is underappreciated in the UK but enjoys remarkable recognition in continental Europe, especially in Germany, a phenomenon that Clare Wallace explains through the general hostility of British stages to avant-garde theatre and Kane’s similarity with the Continental avant-garde of the preceding era, concentrated around surrealism, expressionism, the Dada movement and exemplified by the works of Alfred Jarry.⁴⁵ In her formal avant-garde exploration of *Blasted*, however, Wallace came to the conclusion that “while thematically the play deals with manipulation, violation and war, the focus is interior; the topology of subjectivity is a key aspect of the play’s exploration of extremes” and as such it “has little interest in surface reality or social inquiry.”⁴⁶ I posit quite the contrary, arguing instead that Kane’s theatre is far from self-seeking, introspective art, but instead relies on

⁴² Matthew Collin, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997) 5.

⁴³ Vera Gottlieb, “Lukewarm Britain,” *Theatre in a Cool Climate*, eds. Colin Chambers and Vera Gottlieb (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1999) 212.

⁴⁴ Roberts, *Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* 291.

⁴⁵ Cf. Clare Wallace, “Sarah Kane, Experiential Theatre and the Revenant Avant-Garde,” *Sarah Kane in Context*, eds. Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010) 88-99.

⁴⁶ Wallace, 92.

experimentation with form only in order to seek new ways of more successfully addressing the external world. Wallace's view is nevertheless far from singular; Graham Saunders's reconsideration of Kane's work also focuses on form, as "[u]ltimately, it is perhaps Kane's willingness to experiment and subvert dramatic form that is her most impressive legacy,"⁴⁷ echoing Mark Ravenhill's observation that "[s]he was in complete control of her medium."⁴⁸ Ravenhill concurs with Kane's obituary published in *The Independent* following her suicide in 1998 that her work "was a shock to the system."⁴⁹ These may be fair assessments in their own ways, but neither of these evaluations acknowledges the playwright's passionate desire to communicate with her audience and ignores the importance and content of her appeals.

The form, as I suggest above, is only secondary to the meaning of Kane's plays. Not a social activist per se, since her experiential, recognisably Artaudian, theatre provides no solutions or moral answers to the questions it raises and its motive is not to attempt to manipulate public opinion for its own purpose, Kane nevertheless does indeed have a political message to convey. Kane's work is not self-contained not only due to its dialogic nature with its audience. Aware that "there's something dead culturally,"⁵⁰ Kane uses the medium of theatre as a mediating platform for a meaningful dialogue of cultural contestation:

There was much debate about the morality of *Blasted* and its politics—well there wasn't actually enough debate; it was all just a kind of panic in the press about it. One of the major criticisms was 'Sarah Kane doesn't know what she thinks.' For me, the job of an artist is someone who asks questions, and a politician is someone who pretends to know the answers. And a bad artist is someone who's actually a

⁴⁷ Graham Saunders, "'Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama,' Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 13, issue 1, February 2003, 97-110.

⁴⁸ As cited in Amelia Gentleman, "Playwright Kane Kills Herself," *Guardian*, 23 February, 1999.

⁴⁹ Mark Ravenhill, "Obituary: Sarah Kane," *The Independent*, 23 February 1999.

⁵⁰ Rebellato, *Interview with Sarah Kane*.

politician. And I think what can I do other than say, ‘Well there’s this problem,’ and look at some of the aspects of the problem and let people make up their own minds.⁵¹

Kane’s characters, though with personal significance rooted in their immediate environment, become metaphors with far-reaching implications completely outside of their idiosyncratic spheres. Kane directly demonstrates this in a single striking image in *Blasted*, when a wall of a Leeds hotel, and the reality of the play so far, literally explodes onstage, signalling the onslaught of civil war. The playwright, in the words of the middle-aged morally corrupt journalist Ian, becomes the voice narrating stories that no one “wants to hear” (57). *Blasted* showed that Kane’s drama is overtly political, with a sharp edge that Kane would refuse to blunt throughout the rest of her work.

1.3 Human Rights Take the Stage: “Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander.”

In a 2004 Theatre Voice debate concentrated on new writing in theatre, Simon Stephens proposes that “the greatest joy of theatre is [that] the playwright isn’t a journalist” and as such bears little responsibility in promptly reflecting on global or local political events. Mark Ravenhill disagrees in saying he does feel that responsibility, yet, after admitting the shortcomings of his own attempts, he joins Richard Bean in explaining that, simply, theatre is “notoriously and always has been a very slow art form to respond.” Bringing to attention the fact that in 2004 the Young Writers Festival at the Royal Court received 549 plays addressing the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, surpassing the previous year’s submission dealing with the same

⁵¹ Kane in 1995 as cited in Graham Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber, 2009) 61.

topic by 200 scripts, Stephens concurs that theatre is indeed the slowest “of all the art forms.”⁵² While this supposition might seem largely true, it is also highly relative. Kane’s *Blasted*, written and produced during the then ongoing Balkan conflict, and almost half a year before the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia in July 1995, demonstrates that theatre can respond with immediate relevance. Some political events, of course, may span over substantially longer periods of time; yet these too represent a subject no less suitable to be negotiated in theatre, even when addressing as broad a topic as human rights, newly formalized in Britain in 1998.

Implementation of the 1998 Human Rights Act marked a pivotal moment in human rights development in the UK, as it incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (“ECHR”) into British law. The strong need for a formulation of basic principles of human rights across borders and cultures emerged after World War II and resulted in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (“UDHR”), the first common standard adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Seen hopefully as the “international Magna Carta of all mankind” by Eleanor Roosevelt,⁵³ the UDHR was, however, only a guiding principle representing moral commitment to the ideals of peace, freedom and equality, not a legally binding instrument. Since the United Nations failed to follow with a proposed Convention that would provide formal protection, the newly founded Council of Europe (1949) agreed on the regional ECHR. As well as being a member of the drafting UDHR committee, the UK, a founding member of the Council of Europe, also played an instrumental role in the development of the ECHR, and signed on in 1951. Nevertheless, this relatively straightforward British pursuit of human rights soon revealed a lack of intensity, as appeals to the European

⁵² Audio recording from Theatre Museum, London 2004, *Theatrevoice* <www.theatrevoice.com/1891/theatrevoice-debate-new-writing-12-playwrights-richa>.

⁵³ Eleanor Roosevelt's address to the United Nations General Assembly on the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights delivered on December 9, 1948 in Paris, France. Transcript available at Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute's website: <www.udhr.org/history/ergeas48.htm>.

Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg could not be made until the 60s and a British Bill of Rights did not follow for almost forty years.⁵⁴ As such, “human rights discourse” is, in the words of Maggie Beirne, “a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain [...],” particularly because “until the entry into force of the Human Rights Act in 2000, the issue of human rights was seen as an international rather than a domestic issue.”⁵⁵

The Human Rights Act does not subordinate British law to the international system of human rights law since the British principle of parliamentary sovereignty is maintained, but, as Michael Belof suggests, there is a principal change in attitude. Belof references Stephen Sadley who in 1997 commented on British public law as “not at base about rights, even though abuses of power may and often do invade private rights, [but] about wrongs – that is to say misuses of public power,” and concludes that in focusing on human rights as an entitlement, not a liberty, the enactment of the Bill shifts emphasis from the negative to the positive.⁵⁶ Both of these outcomes, the newly adopted discourse and the adjusted legislative focus, contribute to promotion and protection of human rights, and also attest to the ongoing human rights debate in Britain.

Considered against this background, Kane’s work bears new resonance. Roosevelt hoped the UDHR would “help forward very largely the *education* of the peoples of the world,” as “*a living document*, something that is not just words on paper, but something which we really strive to bring to [our] lives [...].”⁵⁷ While Roosevelt maintains that “[t]he place to discuss the

⁵⁴ Ed Bates, *The Evolution of the European Convention on Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 22.

⁵⁵ Maggie Beirne, “Social and Economic Rights as Agents for Change,” *Human Rights in the Community: Rights as Agents for Change*, ed. Colin Harvey (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2005) 43.

⁵⁶ Michael J. Beloff, “What Does it All Mean?” *The Human Rights Act 1998: What It Means*, ed. Lammy Betten (The Hague: Kluwer Law Publishers, 1999) 12.

⁵⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, “Promise of Human Rights,” in *Courage in a Dangerous World*, ed. Allida Black (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 162. Emphasis added.

22 *ibid.*, 162. emphasis added

issue of human rights is in the forum of the United Nations,”⁵⁸ Kane proves that her use of words in theatre indeed produces a living document that lends itself equally well to building a culture of human rights through exposing contemporary histories and mobilizing public pressure to make human rights a political and cultural priority. The discourses of power and empowerment can be seen within her scripts, as she explores the roles of “[v]ictim, [p]erpetrator [and] [b]ystander”⁵⁹; it is no linguistic coincidence that she uses terms that have been key in post-Holocaust human rights studies scholarship. I argue that the victim-perpetrator-bystander relationship provides a framework for the world of her plays, while simultaneously speaking to Kane’s negotiations of the role of three participants of a theatrical production—the playwright, the actor, and the audience.

Out of these three categories, the question of the bystander emerges as the most significant in relation to Kane as a playwright. Fred Grünfeld defines the bystander as a third party in a victim-perpetrator conflict “who will not act or that will not attempt to act in solidarity with the victims.”⁶⁰ Seeing this indifference caused by an alleged lack of knowledge as a masked ignorance, “a specific *choice* made by a bystander in order to avoid the compelling moral obligation to help,”⁶¹ Grünfeld contends there is no middle ground and denies the bystander neutrality. As an onlooker, the ignorant bystander becomes a “collaborator” of the perpetrator, as the bystander’s inactivity facilitates the perpetrator’s action by neither suppressing nor preventing the violation from happening (this ignorance is often promoted by

⁵⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt, “The Struggle for Human Rights” speech delivered in Paris, 28 September, 1948 <www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/eleanorroosevelt.htm>.

⁵⁹ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* 231.

⁶⁰ Fred Grünfeld, “The Role of the Bystanders in Human Right Violations,” *Rendering Justice to the Vulnerable*, F. Coomans at al. (Eds.), The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000. 131–143.

⁶¹ Emphasis added, Fred Grünfeld, *International Crimes and other Gross Human Rights Violations*, ed. M. Cherif Bassiouni (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2011) 336.

the perpetrator). However, if the third party chooses to intervene in support of the victim, they assume the role of “rescuer.”⁶²

Kane refuses the bystander-collaborator role by choosing to speak up as early as her first play at a moment when the international community had ceased to attend to the abandonment of longstanding humanitarian principles in the Balkans. She then continues in her negotiations with each play: “[t]here isn’t anything you can’t represent on stage. If you’re saying you can’t represent something, you are saying you can’t talk about it, you are denying its existence, and that’s an extraordinarily ignorant thing to do.”⁶³ Moreover, as if responding to Grünfeld’s objection against voluntary ignorance, Kane declares that her “responsibility is to the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be.”⁶⁴ Instead of looking *away*, her work *faces* the injustice and subsequently attempts to direct our focus to where it needs to be. The next chapter will examine her first and last plays, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*, as modes of enquiry into specific areas of human rights violations, where Kane does not attempt to provide us with a moral compass. Instead, defying the tendency to reduce meaning to binaries of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ she allows for (and demands) her audience “to craft their own response.”⁶⁵ The means by which she reproduces the same bystander-collaborator or bystander-rescuer choice for her audience will be the subject of Chapter 3.

⁶² Even though Grünfeld is a scholar focusing mostly on gross human rights violations and atrocities committed in international military conflict, he develops a 4-level system of investigation ranging from “individual level” to “international or global relationships” to which the victim-perpetrator-bystander trichotomy is applicable. I find his method particularly helpful in a trying to understand any human rights violations and will use it as a basis for my analysis. For a detailed discussion of the role of the bystander, see Grünfeld, *International Crimes and other Gross Human Rights Violations*, 331-417.

⁶³ As cited in Saunders, *About Kane* 48.

⁶⁴ Stephenson and Langridge, *Rage and Reason* 134.

⁶⁵ Kane as cited in *Rage and Reason* 131.

Chapter 2: “The Defining Feature of a Metaphor is That it’s Real:”⁶⁶ Facts behind Kane’s Fiction

In 2001, six years after “the brouhaha”⁶⁷ that surrounded Kane’s debut premiere, Andrew Smith remarked in *The Observer* that:

Time, however, has written two new acts for *Blasted* in the form of events in Yugoslavia and in Kane's own suicide in 1999. Six years ago, atrocities such as Kane imagines in *Blasted* seemed unreal, but by now we've all read accounts of similar happenings, very close to home, over the cornflakes of a morning.⁶⁸

The problem is, of course, that the very same atrocities were real even then; *Blasted* is a very contemporary, even if imagined, testimony to what was happening in the collapsing Yugoslavia, and *4.48 Psychosis* would present no less a critique of mental institutions, even if Kane’s personal life allowed for biographical speculation, as evidenced by the many critics who read the play as an obvious suicide note. This chapter uses Kane’s first and last texts, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*, as case studies to illustrate Kane’s development in appealing to contemporary history through performance, both as an act of warning against lethargy and as an opportunity to consider the extent to which the issues under scrutiny can be represented as unmediated and outside of the logic dictated by various social structures.

2.1 *Blasted*

Blasted was written during the Balkan crisis, at a point when Sarajevo had been nearly three years under siege and ten years after it held the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. The play is never

⁶⁶ Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* 211.

⁶⁷ Saunders, “Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama,” *Sarah Kane’s Theatrical Legacy* 97.

⁶⁸ Andrew Smith, “The Violence of the Damned,” *The Observer*, 8 April 2001
<www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2001/apr/08/featuresreview.review>.

explicitly situated in the context of the collapsing Yugoslavia, and the allusion to the Balkan situation is fully contingent on the time of its creation and Kane's own rationale. The location is never specific—the Leeds hotel room is consciously identified as “*very expensive [...] - the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world*” (35). The intentional manner in which any direct representation is eluded mirrors the failure of the British (and international) media to adequately report on the conflict, which spanned the years 1992 to 1995. Kane, aware of theatre's cultural responsibility, and hopeful of the potential political impact of her work, complains:

While the corpse of Yugoslavia was rotting on our doorstep, the press chose to get angry, not about the corpse, but about the cultural event that drew attention to it. That doesn't surprise me. Of course the press wish to deny that what happened in central Europe has anything to do with us, of course they don't want us to be aware of the extent of the social sickness we're suffering from—the moment they acknowledge it, the ground opens up and swallows them.⁶⁹

What began as a journalistic joke mocking the new theatre writing, a “cook[ing] up [of] the play as a news item”⁷⁰ that simultaneously deemed it unworthy of the attention, ended up unintentionally serving Kane's purpose by revealing the flaws of contemporary journalism.

If the media do not take the responsibility to adequately present the issue, especially after three years of intensive fighting, then how can the general public be held responsible for, or expected to know or care about, the Bosnian crisis or—on a larger scale—any other? Ian, a tabloid journalist of questionable ethics—not to mention his many personal flaws—embodies

⁶⁹ Kane as cited in *Rage and Reason* 131.

⁷⁰ Paul Taylor, “Obituary,” *Independent*, 23 February 1999.

the ignorant bystander in the play, which is ironically revealed by the Soldier, the perpetrator in the newly broken out conflict:

SOLDIER: [...] that's your job.

IAN: What?

SOLDIER: Proving it happened. I'm here, got no choice. But you. You should be telling people.

IAN: No one's interested.

[...]

IAN: I write...stories. That's all. Stories. This isn't a story anyone wants to hear.

(57)

This reluctant attitude towards monitoring and understanding the phenomenon of crimes against humanity is what modern post-Holocaust scholarship on human rights violations argues is the common feature and crucial inhibitor in their prevention and/or suppression.

In the case of Bosnia, the media's inattention and complacency only parallel how global institutions such as the EU, NATO, and the UN acted as the ultimate bystanders in their inactivity. For nearly two years there was little external intervention in the conflict, with the exception of the UN Security Council committing to safeguard six regions, Srebrenica and Sarajevo among others, that it declared "safe areas." Troops were sent to protect these Bosnian Muslim zones on June 4, 1993.⁷¹ The ultimate failure in third party peacekeeping and preventive action of the UN, however, came in the form of the now infamous Srebrenica Massacre of July 1995,⁷² despite, as Grünfeld confirms, that "[e]arly, clear, and reliable warnings" of an emerging genocide were available.⁷³

⁷¹ Other influence was mostly limited to diplomatic interaction and negotiations through the so-called 'contact groups' of Western super-powers and economic sanctions against Bosnian Serbs. Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries. *The Balkans: A Post-Communist History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) 347.

⁷²The International Criminal Tribunal unanimously ruled that "[b]y seeking to eliminate a part of the Bosnian Muslims, the Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide. They targeted for extinction the 40,000 Bosnian Muslims living in Srebrenica, a group which was emblematic of the Bosnian Muslims in general. They stripped all the male Muslim prisoners, military and civilian, elderly and young, of their personal belongings and identification, and

Scottish playwright David Greig offers another critical perspective when he argues in “Rough Theatre” that the British media presented the Balkan conflict as an ethnic one, deeply rooted in history and culturally inevitable, and as such beyond any external control. A crucial “by-product of this management strategy,” then, claims Greig, “was that it allowed consumers of the media to avoid empathy with the victims or the perpetrators of this violence.”⁷⁴ To return to Grünfeld’s categorization, the media assumed the role of a bystander-collaborator and by directly shaping public opinion created an atmosphere that facilitated the genocide.⁷⁵ Political scientist Daniel Goldhagen shares Greig’s idea of manipulation and proposes understanding ethnic hatred as a secondary tool exploited by the perpetrator. Goldhagen defines genocide as a deliberate political strategy and postulates that in the 20th century, genocide, as a systematic tool, shifted from the realm of the international to that of the domestic, and changed its purpose to “alter[ing] power relations within [...] one’s society.”⁷⁶ This view finds support in Valère Philip Gagnon’s *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, which rejects the obscuring of the Balkan crisis as the result of (primitive) ethnic hatred, or cultural and historical prejudice. Gagnon, however, ascribes agency to the political strategy of conservative elites in

deliberately and methodically killed them solely on the basis of their identity. The Bosnian Serb forces were aware, when they embarked on this genocidal venture, that the harm they caused would continue to plague the Bosnian Muslims. The Appeals Chamber states unequivocally that the law condemns, in appropriate terms, the deep and lasting injury inflicted, and calls the massacre at Srebrenica by its proper name: genocide.” President of the ICTY Theodor Meron, The Hague, 11 July 2005 < www.icty.org/sid/8569 >.

⁷³ Fred Grünfeld, “Failures to Prevent Genocide in Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica (1995), and Darfur (since 2003),” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 4, (August 2009) 221.

⁷⁴ David Greig, “Rough Theatre,” *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, 218.

⁷⁵ Another, then contemporary, voice suggesting the lack of coverage of the Bosnian Wars in Britain is that of Nicolas Kent, the artistic director of Tricycle Theatre. Tricycle Theatre is known for its “tribunal plays” reconstructing war crime trials in the form of courtroom drama, such as *Numberg* and *Srebrenica*. Having attended the Rule 61 Hearings against the Serbian political and military leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić at the Hague, he testifies: “[...] listening to [that] horrifying evidence I was appalled that so little media coverage was being given to it in this country. I mean, here we are, 50 years after the war that we wowed must never happen again, the Holocaust, and the gas chambers, and it’s all been going on a 90 minute flight away.” Jeremy Kingston, “Trials of a Court Reporter: All the World’s Crime is a Stage for Nicolas Kent,” *The Times*, 7 October, 1996.

⁷⁶ Daniel Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York City: PublicAffairs, 2009) 43.

Serbia and Croatia who, lusting after power in a new system of liberal economy after the fall of communist Yugoslavia in 1990, “imposed” violence “on plural communities from outside of those communities.” In his claim, Gagnon draws on the historically often peaceful coexistence of the ethnically and culturally diverse Balkans and concludes that “[i]f we can learn anything from Balkan history, it is that ethnic identities and the meanings ascribed to them are fluid.”⁷⁷

Kane points to the complexity of the ethnic hatred-provoked civil war as Ian and the Soldier discuss Ian’s nationality, an exchange that seems almost meaningless and casual in the context of their dialogue:

SOLDIER: [...] English.

IAN: I’m Welsh.

[...]

IAN: English and Welsh is the same. British. I’m not an import.

SOLDIER: What’s fucking Welsh, never heard of it.

IAN: Come over from God knows where have their kids and call them English they’re not English born in England don’t make you English.

SOLDIER: Welsh as in Wales?

IAN: It’s attitude. (41)

Ian’s “attitude” stands for the sense of rooted ethnicity and ethnic identity, and confirms his xenophobic views and open racial hatred that he so frequently demonstrates throughout the play. How important this attitude is to him, and how slippery, is exposed by his need to first assert himself as Welsh, and not English, then to dismiss the difference, while firmly forbidding the Soldier to call him by his name:

⁷⁷ See Valère Philip Gagnon’s Introduction, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) i-xxii.

SOLDIER: Learn some manners, Ian.

IAN: Don't call me that.

SOLDIER: What shall I call you?

IAN: Nothing. (42)

Ian embodies the seemingly relatively innocent racist who does not cause any 'real' harm; yet the audience is prompted to discover the link to the crimes against humanity coming to life through the horrid stories related by the Soldier. Ian's words are the first signs of "the emerging evil of nationalism" against which Václav Havel warned in his *Inauguration of the Human Rights Building Speech* in Strasbourg in 1995, a month before the massacre in Srebrenica. Havel points out that like any evil, nationalism is "contagious."⁷⁸ Ian's logic nevertheless continues to defy any such accusations as he insists on the divorce between the public and private histories while defending his neutrality:

IAN: I do other stuff. Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers. Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land. [...] who gives a shit? Why bring you to light? (48)

Kane, however, reveals this limited perception as naïve and provides *Blasted* with a structure that instead always reaches beyond the realm of interpersonal drama, eventually developing an immediate link between private assaults and war:

So I thought, 'What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia?' And suddenly the penny dropped and I thought, 'Of course, it's obvious, one is the seed and the other is the

⁷⁸ Václav Havel, *Inauguration of the Human Rights Building Speech*, Strasbourg, France, June 29, 1995 <old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/1995/2906_uk.html>. Havel himself embodies the inseparability of theatre and politics, as he is both an internationally distinguished playwright and a three-term president of Czechoslovakia and the newly formed Czech Republic, respectively.

tree.' I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilisation and I think the wall between so-called civilisation and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time.⁷⁹

To illustrate her point, Kane explodes the metaphorical wall. She essentially expands the play's focus by letting the scene erupt with a bomb blasting one of the apartment's walls—at that moment, a shocking reminder of how abruptly our seemingly stable world, symbolized by the isolated space of the locked hotel room, can be ripped apart enters the very structure of the play. The private battle between Cate and Ian, an unbalanced couple in a troubled, abusive relationship, is translated into the much broader context of a shattering war conflict.

Indeed, *Blasted* insists on a direct parallel between sex and violence from the very first scene. Opening the play with "I've shat in better places than this," Ian "*gulps down [a large] gin,*" and re-enters the stage after a shower "*with only a towel around his waist and a revolver in his hand*" (35). Kane promptly establishes a power imbalance with obvious sexual undertones, and as Ian puts the gun under a pillow on the bed that dominates the stage, he foreshadows the nocturnal rape that is about to happen. Ian's sense of superiority is not based solely on ethnic concerns, but extends to the manner in which he behaves towards Cate. He patronizes the young, insecure, and unemployed woman, who mentally resembles an even younger naïve girl who stutters "when under stress" (3). Ian repeatedly trivializes the object of his sexual desire as inferior, savage and primitive:

IAN: That's what football's about. It's not fancy footwork and scoring goals. It's tribalism.

CATE: I like it.

⁷⁹ As cited in Saunders, "Out Vile Jelly': Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 77, Volume 20, Part 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1 February 2004) 71.

IAN: You would. About your level. (44)

The rape itself, however, remains unstaged—an absence so prominent within Kane’s otherwise ruthless aesthetic that it paradoxically leads to a foregrounding of Cate’s victimization. As the initial intimate story of an isolated abuse moves beyond the boundaries of the modest Ibsen-like setting of a claustrophobic closed room, the elusive sexual assault proves to be a catalyst for the public violence to come and haunts the rest of the play.

The confining internal setting of the first half of the play is then revealed to be only symptomatic of the external chaos that is about to be exposed, the doom of society and catastrophism of the outside world at large. Still, the influence is reciprocal; the arrival of the Soldier invades the inner space of the hotel room and forces in the outside war, imposing its utter chaos and abruptly reversing the power relationship of the internal world. What was only an assumed external threat to the inwardly corrupted hotel room in the first half of the play, with every knock on the door treated as a potential danger by Ian, becomes a reality with the Soldier’s arrival. The never-ceasing atmosphere of fear and the ever-present threat of violence in both worlds are linked by Cate’s stutter and her fits, inside and outside of the room. These are provoked by anxiety, which she frequently tries to conceal by bursting into laughter, “*unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably*” (62), in effect only to further penetrate into the anarchic world of panicking hysteria. The sense of chaos deepens as Ian comes to the realization that there is no system in the world to rely on and nothing to believe in: “[n]o God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing” (55). The Soldier offers a simple logic instead, one he himself is satisfied by, where ‘an eye for an eye’ is the governing principle and power means right:

SOLDIER: Give us a cig.

IAN: Why?

SOLDIER: 'Cause I've got a gun and you haven't.

IAN: (*considers the logic. Then takes a single cigarette out of the packet and tosses it at the SOLDIER*). (40)

As much as Kane obscures the line between private and global violence, so does she complicate the role of victim and perpetrator through the ambiguity of her complex characters. What is a polite gesture at one moment can turn into fierce violence the next, and vice versa. Cate constantly moves from seductive behaviour suggesting her own desires to the defensive stance of an abused victim of a morally corrupt man twice her age. Yet despite the cruelty of the sexual assault and Ian's generally exploitative nature, his character, perhaps necessarily, elicits a certain degree of sympathy, as Ian becomes a blind, assaulted wreck on the ground of an apartment, with a rupture in the wall gaping onto the war-ridden world outside. We might now be willing to acknowledge that Ian is, all this time, only a dying man diagnosed with lung cancer, who, amidst his declarations of sovereignty, openly admits, "I'm scared of dying" (28).

Anne Dufourmantelle argues, in *Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy*, that our "condition of mortality [...] destines us to sex," and thus provides a legible explanation for Ian's behaviour, a twisted act of sexual oppression driven by the human need for connection. Dufourmantelle continues:

Sex is our only true response to the anguish of death. Making love makes us forget that life is always on the verge of ending and that the body itself belongs just as much to death as to life. Making love recalls us to death insofar as death is only conceived on the basis of life, and indeed that is what makes it always unreal to us; what fascinates us in death is its total opacity. Until the end we think within life,

with death but outside of death. Sex holds me at the edge of the certainty that one day I will disappear [...] Words, obscenity, gazes are not enough; nothing suffices if there is not in the body an immediate absolute response to death.⁸⁰

The sex-power-violence connection is reversed for Ian when the Soldier enters the room and now victimizes the former perpetrator, while generously offering horrid accounts of mass rapes in which he has taken part. These again find a clear parallel in the Bosnian conflict, where Muslim women in Foča (southeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina) were, as indicted by The Hague, victims of “a brutal regime of gang rape, torture and enslavement by Bosnian Serb soldiers, policemen and members of paramilitary groups after the takeover of the city in April 1992.” Parallel to the Soldier’s account, sexual exploitation through a brothel-like system was a reality for women as young as twelve years of age.⁸¹ While Dufourmantelle allows for rape to be seen as resultant of a natural act based on a sexual impulse driven by the desire for sexual gratification, human rights (feminist) advocates speak of a tool of a patriarchal system based on male dominance allowing for a “rape culture.”⁸² The authors of *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* address how sexual violence threatens peace and security, and attend to the disturbing lack of attention paid to sexual violence during war and genocide. Voicing narratives of rape on stage in 1995 emerges as especially important since, as attorney and founder of Equality Now Jessica Neuwirth reveals in reference to the Rwandan war tribunal, the female victims then faced the risk of a secondary wave of victimization as the survivors were often not able to reach the justice they sought, as no charges of rape entered any

⁸⁰Anne Dufourmantelle, *Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007) 102-103.

⁸¹ ICTY Press release CC/PIO/093-E, The Hague, 27 June 1996.

⁸²As suggested by Monika J. Flaschka in “‘Only Pretty Women Were Raped’: The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in the Concentration Camps,” and further discussed in the collection of essays dealing with the topic of sexual abuse: *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth, Rochell Saidel (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2010).

of the official indictments simply because the judges were not “interested in that part of the story.”⁸³ As for an institutional response to the sexual violence and war, the UN only declared rape a weapon of war thirteen years later, in 2008, with the Security Council noting that “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, [...] as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil[l] fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.”⁸⁴ Patrick Cammaert, UN Military Advisor, then summarizes today’s modern conflicts as ones in which “it is more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier.”⁸⁵

Yet, even the Soldier’s role is of course not portrayed as black and white. Despite his mechanical, disinterested listing of the atrocious crimes he committed or was a witness to, the Soldier’s very personal testimony reveals that he is not as impartial to his actions as it may seem. When he reveals his past to Ian, including the history of his violated, mutilated and murdered girlfriend, it is not done in an attempt to share, but possibly for the sake of voicing his story and being heard. In the Jacobean sense of revenge, the Soldier needs to perform on another the same violence his partner was subject to. The rape becomes a cathartic experience for him, as “*the SOLDIER is crying his heart out*” during the act. Even his discourse changes: instead of using the word ‘sex,’ the Soldier now confesses that “I Am Dying to make love, Ian” (42). Soon after, he “*blow[s] his own brain out*” (50).

Echoing Ian’s claim that “[i]t has to be... personal,” it is in these exchanges that we are not allowed to forget the individual in the army. The question of morality and responsibility is

⁸³ Jessica Neuwirth, Gender and Genocide: Sexual Violence during the Holocaust and Other Genocides Conference, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art on March 20, 2011.

⁸⁴ Resolution 1820 (2008), Adopted by the Security Council on 19 June, 2008
<[www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1820\(2008\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1820(2008))>.

⁸⁵ Wilton Park Conference, “Women Targeted or Affected by Armed Conflict: What Role for Military Peacekeepers?” 27–29 May, 2008, UK.

an ongoing interrogation in the play—to what degree is the soldier a tool of a higher structure, and to what extent can he be held responsible for his actions? The Soldier seems to firmly believe that “[a]t home I’m clean. Like it never happened” (58), yet his cathartic confession, Ian’s rape, and the Soldier’s subsequent suicide suggest otherwise. Again, the play reflects the instability of the situation in Bosnia and Serbia; Despite the UN’s founding of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the cases of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić are still unresolved.⁸⁶

Factors like these speak to the crucial need for public attention and awareness and point with urgency to art’s essential role in the complex apparatus of our society, as an imagined space where uncensored and independent discussion belongs. Where human rights activists complain about an acute lack of intellectual confrontation, Kane fights the silent acquiescence of the British media to the Balkan wars and provides new perspectives by exposing the conflict in its bare savagery. Instead of “glamorizing brutality,”⁸⁷ *Blasted* reveals Kane’s genuine interest in human rights, as she insists on bringing to the centre of a major world capital the

⁸⁶ Radovan Karadžić, the former president of Republika Srpska, charged with “two counts of genocide and a multitude of other crimes committed against Bosnian Muslim, Bosnian Croat and other non-Serb civilians in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war,” was able to hide for thirteen years before he was arrested in 2008. Ratko Mladić,⁸⁶ the former general of the Army of the Republika Srpska and the executor of the Karadžić policies responsible for the occupation of Bosnia, and the subsequent siege of Sarajevo, and the massacre in Srebrenica was captured on May 26, 2011—sixteen years after he was indicted by the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Mladić is still held to be a national hero by Serbian nationalists; to such a degree that even a \$5 million reward offered by the United States for information leading to his capture and a guarantee of the informants’ protection extending also to their families did not bear any fruit.⁸⁶ Karadžić seemed to enjoy a similarly surprising degree of freedom as he published several books of children’s poetry while he was in hiding after he was indicted, even appearing publicly in Beograd while lecturing on alternative medicine under the false name Dragan Dabić. The fact that they both still evaded capture even though their arrests were pre-conditions for Serbian EU accession draws attention to the need for a significant third party aid and protection of the fugitives on the level of the establishment, also considering that Serbia raised the financial award concerning Mladić to 10 million euro from 1 million only in 2010. *International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia* <www.icty.org> and Aleksandar Vasovic, “Serbia Raises Reward for Mladic to 10 million Euros,” *Reuters* <www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/28/us-serbia-mladic-idUSTRE69R3C320101028>.

⁸⁷ Mary Luckhurst, “Infamy and Dying Young: Sarah Kane, 1971-1999,” 114.

atrocities of what was utterly unimaginable in the realm of ‘civilized’ global-Europe, while it was very much a reality to thousands in Bosnia.

Part of the urgency of the play lies also in the fact that history repeats itself—Carla del Ponte, former ICTY chief prosecutor and the key figure in the pursuit of Karadžić and Mladić, alleges that Kosovo leaders, ethnically Albanian, kidnapped Serbs and sold their organs in the recent Kosovo war. Del Ponte gives an account of these procedures, reminiscent of Joseph Mengele’s human experiments in Auschwitz, as if it were a passage from Kane’s play:

The victims, deprived of a kidney, were then locked up again, inside the barracks, until the moment they were killed for other vital organs. In this way, the other prisoners were aware of the fate that awaited them, and according to the source, pleaded, terrified, to be killed immediately.⁸⁸

Yet, as explicit as Kane is in her imagery, she does not openly reference the actual events she is addressing. As such, while *Blasted* addresses the globally long-ignored genocidal warfare in Bosnia, potentially its future performances promise to be equally relevant in more current political and social contexts, such as, for example, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur (Sudan), only one of 17 United Nations peacekeeping operations on four continents.⁸⁹

2.2 4.48 *Psychosis*:

As much as Kane chooses in *Blasted* to drastically and suddenly expand her subject matter by moving outward from the almost domestic Leeds scene into a consideration of the international Bosnian conflict, her subsequent plays demonstrate an increasingly diminished interest in

⁸⁸ Harry de Quetteville, “Serb prisoners 'were stripped of their organs in Kosovo war,’” *The Telegraph*, 5 April 2011 <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1584751/Serb-prisoners-were-stripped-of-their-organs-in-Kosovo-war.html>.

⁸⁹ United Nations <www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/current.shtml>.

exploring global social structures and gradually start focusing inwards again. *4.48 Psychosis* marks the height of this growing fragmentation, as Kane's last play concentrates on the individual again, even more so that we now find ourselves witnessing a deeply personal and introspective exploration of the consciousness of the main character/voice in crisis. Unlike *Blasted*, *4.48 Psychosis* requires no contextual knowledge to immediately expose its subject of critique—our assessment of mental illness and its common modern treatment—with the underlying message that “[t]here’s not a drug on earth that can make life meaningful” (220). While this criticism of mental institutions and psychoactive drugs seems to be rather self-evident, the play suffers from being too often and too easily dismissed as an overly fragmented and extremely abstract autobiographical piece.

Critics like Michael Coveney reductively read *4.48 Psychosis* through the lens of Kane's suicide, and in doing so, trivialize it as “[n]ot really a play, more [of] an extended suicide note,” describing it as “the disturbing last work of the late Sarah Kane, who killed herself in February last year.”⁹⁰ Rachel Halliburton offers a similarly limited reading when she opens her review of what she calls a “psychological poetry of despair” by writing:

Sarah Kane was found hanging from a hook on a lavatory door in February last year. Her last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, will more than satisfy the death-imitating-art hounds sniffing around for macabre psychological detail.⁹¹

This kind of simplistic reading that seeks an explanation of the text in the author's voluntary death ultimately deprives the work itself of any meaning of its own. If we approach *4.48 Psychosis* convinced that the narrative of Kane's life is immersed in the narrative of the play, it becomes mere voyeurism into the breakdown of an individual. Kane's fate here finds a

⁹⁰ Michael Coveney, “Review of *4.48 Psychosis*,” *Daily Mail*, 30 June 2000.

⁹¹ Rachel Halliburton, “Psychological Poetry of Despair,” *Evening Standard*, 30 June 2000.

correlative in other female writers' histories, such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Virginia Woolf, whose work, too, has been locked in the myth their suicides have cast over it—and forced itself to become a seemingly integral part of their writing.

That critics and theatre practitioners who were dealing with the text immediately after Kane's death would pay close attention to the possible autobiographical interpretation is perhaps understandable, but this trend has continued unabated. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* serves as a good example, as he reviewed both the 2000 Royal Court Theatre Upstairs premiere as well as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe production in 2008. While in the former review he at least wonders "whether the play, which takes us inside Kane's head, ha[s] any general application," he firmly equates the "I" of the text with Kane's own voice;⁹² a view confirmed eight years later when he maintains that "the play can hardly be divorced from the tragic circumstances surrounding her suicide." As it turns out, this logic also applies to his own review that fails to address the play itself. Instead, Billington praises the Edinburgh production for its treatment of *4.48 Psychosis* as a "blatant piece of autobiography" and asserts, "while that may sound exploitative, it makes for thrilling theatre."⁹³ Graham Saunders, on the other hand, recognizes that "the play is only ever partly introspective in its treatment of mental illness" and acknowledges its "impassioned critique" of modern psychiatric practices.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, he agrees with dramatist Phyllis Nagy that *4.48 Psychosis* loses interest in its audience, which is rendered "not necessary."⁹⁵ The obvious paradox of a piece insisting on a certain message, but not concerned with its reception reveals the need to move beyond analyzing *4.48 Psychosis*

⁹² Michael Billington, "How do You Judge a 75-minute Suicide Note?" *Guardian*, 30 June, 2000.

⁹³ Michael Billington "Edinburgh Festival: 4.48 Psychosis/Looking at Tazieh" *Guardian*, 18 August 2008.

⁹⁴ Graham Saunders, "'Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama,' Sarah Kane's Theatrical Legacy," 106.

⁹⁵ Cf. Saunders, "Conversation with Phyllis Nagy," *Love Me or Kill Me* 158-159.

against the backdrop of Kane's suicide. In fact, the play clearly prompts the audience to consider our assessment and treatment of mental illness.

The narrative of what we might call, for lack of a better term, the main character, reveals a deep emotional crisis through her belief that “[t]here's no meaning to life in the light of my loss” (219). In what seems to be a dialogue between this “child of negation” (239) and her doctor, the patient's fear of potential medical treatment is met by a response suggesting an absolute view of suicide prevention at all cost:

— I won't be able to think. I won't be able to work.

— Nothing will interfere with your work like suicide. (221)

The seriousness of the matter lies in the fact that psychoactive medication is designed to change the way one feels and thinks. Such treatment has been revealed as highly controversial, even if increasingly widespread; it often leads to uncalled-for changes in behaviour and even poses a significant suicide risk as it triggers suicidal thoughts. Psychiatrist David Healey rebuts the usual argument trivializing the high risk of suicide connected to Prozac and other antidepressants—that the treated patients are at risk anyway due to their psychological problems—by manifesting that, especially in the early stages of treatment, these drugs “can also cause suicide in individuals who have no nervous conditions.”⁹⁶ Kane's Patient shows direct awareness of the inherent risk when she urges the doctor not to “switch off [her] mind by attempting to straighten [her] out” (220). Although psychoactive drugs are prescribed with the intent to improve the patient's condition and to restore competency—to treat such malfunctions in the brain as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, or to help manage psychological disorders like depression or emotional pain—psychologist Ronald Bassman warns against the

⁹⁶ David Healey, *Let Them Eat Prozac: The Unhealthy Relationship between the Pharmaceutical Industry and Depression* (New York: New York University Press, 2004) 15.

“benevolence of these intentions,” which are justifiable only when certain conditions are met. He provides a detailed list of assumptions that allow for medicalization: for example, that the “drugs will be effective in addressing targeted problems, including impaired judgement [and] incapacity to make important decisions, [...]” or that “the benefits exceed the risks.”⁹⁷

The institutionalized voice of *4.48 Psychosis* only confirms Bassman’s objections against the frequent failure of these drugs and their many, often unexpected, side effects. The Patient undergoes a transformation from someone who “wants to die” and is diagnosed with “[p]athological grief,” as evidenced by the symptoms of “[n]ot eating, not sleeping, not speaking, no sex drive, [and] despair” (223), to someone who becomes a hospitalized “fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool” (229). Instead of improvement, we witness a further decline in her psychological health as well as the severe physical damage she suffers due to a diversity of substance abuse. Kane mechanically lists various psychoactive drugs used for the patient’s treatment and, equally indifferently, offers an overview of their side effects:

Insomnia worsened, severe anxiety, anorexia, (weight loss 17kgs,) increase in suicidal thoughts, plans and intention. [...] Weight gain 12kgs. Short term memory loss. [...] Dizziness and confusion. Patient kept falling over, fainting and walking out in front of cars. Delusional ideas—believes consultant is the antichrist. [...]

Insomnia, erratic appetite, (weight loss 14kgs) [...]. (224-5)

As for positive results, there are none, as evidenced by a formula that keeps repeating itself: “No other reaction” (224-5).

The situation escalates with the implementation of Prozac, which results in “homicidal thoughts towards several doctors and drug manufacturers:”

⁹⁷Ronald Bassman, “Mental Illness and the Freedom to Refuse Treatment: Privilege or Right,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 2005, Vol. 36. No. 5, 489.

Mood: Fucking angry.

Affect: Very angry. (224)

Kane here juxtaposes the supposed notions of rationality and irrationality. On the one hand there is the therapeutic intervention that obviously does not provide the sought-after results and should logically be rendered insufficient, and on the other, a psychotic voice that is disturbingly rational in giving an account of the absurdity of the continuing treatment. The anger thus shifts from the self to the pharmaceutical industry and the impersonal “Dr This and Dr That and Dr Whatsit” (209), who are too willing to prescribe the drugs with aggressive side effects. As the ceaseless questioning of the Patient—that even the audience members must feel to be irritating and derogatory, if not debilitating and insulting—progresses, it raises the question: once you become a patient in the eyes of the institution, can you be ever regarded as sane? The following is one of the many examples of the Patient’s absurd struggles in communicating with the doctor:

- It’s not your fault, that’s all I ever hear, it’s not your fault, it’s an illness, it’s not your fault. You’ve told me that so often I’m beginning to think it *is* my fault.
- It’s *not* your fault.
- I KNOW. (220)

As the patient dryly utters “I’ve not killed myself before so don’t look for precedents” (241), Kane challenges what Bassman calls “the dominance of a one-large-size-fits-all treatment model that is rooted in biochemistry and the pursuit of the elusive magic-bullet drug.”⁹⁸ Yet, the medication, which above all resembles a method of trial and error, continues. When the Patient attempts to discontinue her therapy, “against medical advice,” she is “[r]estrained by three male nurses twice her size,” becomes “threatening and uncooperative” and demonstrates “[p]aranoid

⁹⁸ Ronald Bassman, “Mental Illness and the Freedom to Refuse Treatment: Privilege or Right,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 2005, Vol. 36. No. 5, 488-497.

thoughts—believes hospital staff are attempting to poison her” (223-24). Kane thus revisits a topic she has partially explored already in *Cleansed*, where she draws a parallel between a “university” and a concentration camp led by the brutal Tinker, who markedly resembles “the Angel of Death” from Auschwitz, physician Josef Mengele. When does medical treatment become involuntary torture and a medical institution simply turn into a prison? Where is the border between humane and inhumane treatment?

Kane insists that the line between the two is a thin one. She lets her play contribute to the debate about institutional psychiatry’s human rights violations of patients who, already in an extremely vulnerable position, often do not have the right to refuse treatment. Instead, they are deprived of free will and become medically controlled individuals, intimidated into accepting their given dose without receiving information about the inherent risks of the often addictive drugs or their possible alternatives. The threat of such pressure often translates into fear of psychiatric assault and results in the avoidance of any treatment for psychological and emotional problems altogether. Exploring the effects of medicating without consent, Bassman stresses that “[c]hoice is an important component of recovery,” and maintains that negative experiences with medication also defer any further drug treatment.⁹⁹ This secondary anxiety is mirrored in the play when the Patient reveals in the first few lines that she is “terrified of medication” (207).

Following the unsuccessful therapy, the Patient “refuse[s] all further treatment” and, arguably, immediately attempts suicide through a combination of an aspirin overdose and alcohol. When her attempt fails, more uncertainty and a deepening of her mental chaos ensue:

I’m seeing things.

I’m hearing things.

⁹⁹ Bassman, “Mental Illness and the Freedom to Refuse Treatment: Privilege or Right,” 491.

I don't know who I am. (225)

Helpless, she then thrusts herself back into the cycle of ineffective treatment, “out of one torture chamber into another, a vile succession of errors without remission” (239). The more the despair and hopelessness grow, the more fragmented the play becomes. Concluding that “[t]he only thing that’s permanent is destruction” (241), the Patient feels she has “nowhere left to turn,” and again chooses to take her own life, only this time most likely successfully.

To frame *4.48 Psychosis* within the current British socio-political environment, let us consider Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg’s warning against the over-use of antidepressants in the UK. Alluding to the title of the 2001 film, he maintained “Britain has become the true Prozac Nation. I believe this trend has gone too far. [...] Pills must not be a crutch for the wider issues in our society which cause mental health problems.”¹⁰⁰ The number of people treated for mental illness has increased dramatically in the past fifty years—according to the World Health Organization, more than 350 million people suffer from depression in 2012¹⁰¹ and it is deemed to be one of the most important problems of public health today. The question is whether people have suddenly become more depressed, more open to admitting their psychological problems, or whether, as British psychoanalyst Darian Leader suggests, there has been a significant campaign for depression diagnosis.¹⁰² Bassman presents a doubtful view of the effectiveness of psychoactive drugs, drawing on “Recovery From Psychotic Illness: a 15- and 25-year International Follow-up Study,” which shows that “people diagnosed with schizophrenia who live in developing countries with less access to drug treatments and mental health services have

¹⁰⁰ “Britain ‘is true Prozac Nation,’” *BBC News*, February 8, 2008 <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7233169.stm>.

¹⁰¹ “Depression is a Common Illness and People Suffering from Depression Need Support and Sreatment,” World Health Organization, 9 October 2012, Geneva <www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2012/mental_health_day_20121009/en/>.

¹⁰² See Darian Leader, *What is Madness* (Penguin Group, 2011).

a significantly higher recovery than people living in industrialized nations like the United States.”¹⁰³

In turn, Healey cautions against the modern corporatization of depression by the pharmaceutical industry, arguing that, in distributing these drugs to general physicians and psychiatrists, education and marketing go hand in hand. What is more, he traces the link between psychotropic drugs and suicide to the very first tranquilizer introduced in the 1950s. A direct outcome was the rise of criticism of the growing abuse of sedatives focused on issues of addiction in the 1980s, which led to an unforeseen shift in media attention to health issues, bringing to existence “the phenomenon of health news.” Not only did major newspapers start introducing regular health sections, but the topic also entered popular culture as it became a fashionable subject in talk shows like *That’s Life* (UK) and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (USA). This tremendous increase in attention has had two-fold results. On the one hand, it has raised awareness about depression, but on the other, it has only fed into what Healey calls “depression campaigns.” Depression has become a too familiar term and the general public has learned to accept the diagnosis and subsequent treatment without questioning its alleged benefits, which lead to the “diagnosis of depression for many people who do not regard themselves as being depressed or in need of treatment.”¹⁰⁴ Considered against this background, the Patient’s objection, “You know, I really feel like I’m being manipulated” (215), can be understood in a new light.

Another crucial issue Kane brings to review is the very phenomenon of suicide and the negative stigma attached to it. Prior to her treatment, the Patient’s attitude is one of submission: it is “[d]espair [that] propels me to suicide, [a]nguish for [w]hich doctors can find no cure[.]

¹⁰³ Bassman, “Mental Illness and the Freedom to Refuse Treatment: Privilege or Right,” 495.

¹⁰⁴ Healey 10.

[n]or care to understand” (239). Tired of the terror of her hospitalization, which has not helped her shake off the feeling that she is “eighty years old, [...] tired of life” and that “[her] mind wants to die” (211), she then deliberately chooses to leave a world in which she no longer feels at home. Saunders offers an interesting interpretation of the 2000-2001 Royal Court production of *4.48 Psychosis* directed by Macdonald, where in the final scene

the actors release the window shutters letting in light and sounds from the street outside. [...] This sense of something passing is important, for with the entry of the outside world (and perhaps exacerbated by the knowledge that Kane committed suicide after *4.48 Psychosis* was written), it becomes an exorcism of sorts for the audience.¹⁰⁵

To speak of exorcism is understandable considering the extreme discomfort of watching such a dark play, and opening up the studio to daylight indeed provides relief as it releases the claustrophobic atmosphere of the theatre. Macdonald’s production accentuated this sense of freeing, as the director understands the final scene to be about “letting go.”¹⁰⁶ However, the alleviating feeling is not pertinent only to the audience, but primarily mirrors that of the Patient. In my reading, the final line “please open the curtains” suggests liberation, as the Patient realizes she no longer needs to suffer in a world she perceives as governed by “the chronic insanity of the sane” (229) and chooses a perceived freedom over life.

¹⁰⁵ Graham Saunders, “‘Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama,’ Sarah Kane’s Theatrical Legacy,” 104.

¹⁰⁶ Director James Macdonald on Sarah Kane, The director talks to Aleks Sierz about *4.48 Psychosis* <www.theatrevoice.com/2258/director-james-macdonald-on-kane/>.

Chapter 3: Experiential Theatre: “Drama with Balls”¹⁰⁷

Kane’s tangible empathy with the oppressed shows that throughout her dramaturgical endeavours she must have had a belief in her audience—a belief that even if she does not provide a solution to the enigma of her plays herself, the audience’s reaction will have a transformative power. David Greig labels this style of active theatre, one that wants to move its audience and reach beyond the stage, one concerned with our role as members of a society, as “Rough Theatre.” Its basis lies in the belief that “truth sometimes arrives in art when the artist uncovers something which—if stated openly—might embarrass them.” Greig expands on this, writing that “[t]o produce such work, an author needs to ‘trick’ his or her conscious mind into letting out the unsayable and unacceptable.”¹⁰⁸ This is an opinion also shared by Guglielmo Schininà, who “believe[s] [...] theatre should work at the limits and the borders—and not at the center—of what is defined as ‘humanity.’”¹⁰⁹ In doing so, Kane does not compromise her vision in an attempt to adapt her work formally for the stage, or to accommodate to the viewer’s sensibility. Quite to the contrary, she creates a form that is constitutive in conveying its meaning—as much as the reciprocal, and, at times, transposable relationships between victims, bystanders and perpetrators are explored on stage, Kane recreates a similar relationship of abuse between the theatre’s stage and audience.

3.1 Victim

Kane’s drama departs from Aristotelian ideas of unity and rejects traditional Realist and Naturalist conventions, a tradition that Aleks Sierz refers to as “the Britishness of British

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Kane, “Drama with Balls,” *Guardian*, 20 August 1998.

¹⁰⁸ David Greig, “Rough Theatre,” *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, 213.

¹⁰⁹ Guglielmo Schininà, “Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Questions about Its Developments.” *TDR (1988-)*. Vol. 48, No.3 (Autumn, 2004). The MIT Press, 17.

theatre,”¹¹⁰ and, instead, embraces a fragmented and disrupted narrative in order to directly horrify our senses in an “emotional onslaught.”¹¹¹ Her work may be perceived as a key case study in the revolution of drama called for by the doctrine of Antonin Artaud, certainly disturbing “[o]ur sensibility” at times when “we surely need theatre that wakes us up heart and nerves.”¹¹² Kane delivers these moments with significant physical impact—Harold Pinter, in recognition of Kane’s strategy, declares even “the act of turning the page” of her texts to be “violent.”¹¹³ Kane elicits from her audience what emerges out of her work as the crucial human quality: emotion. In *Phaedra’s Love*, Hippolytus wastes half his life in an emotionless oblivion, until he is hurled out of it by Phaedra’s suicide. After his mother’s funeral ceremony, Hippolytus is cut “from groin to chest” (101) by his disguised father Theseus, and stoned by the cheering gathered crowd. Finding a perverse satisfaction in the intensity of his sudden misery, he dryly concludes, “if there could have been more moments like this” (103), and dies. Similarly, for audience members to achieve a point where they grow consciously complicit with the action on stage, they first need to become emotional victims of Kane’s experiential theatre.

This political metaphor of abuse is also reflected in the discourse of contemporary reviewers; Tom Morris, for instance, speaks of

a distinct trend in London's small theatres to *exploit* the intimacy of the environment with savage violence. [...] Watching the cruellest of these plays in a small studio theatre is like watching a simulated rape in your own living room. In very small theatres, it is impossible to walk out, so the audience is *trapped* in close

¹¹⁰ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011) 59.

¹¹¹ Saunders, “‘Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama,’ Sarah Kane’s Theatrical Legacy” 101.

¹¹² Antonin Artaud, “Theatre and Cruelty,” *The Theatre and Its Double* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970) 64.

¹¹³ Harold Pinter as cited in Simon Hattenstone, “A Sad Hurrah,” *The Guardian*, July 1, 2000.

proximity to the action, giving the playwright *free reign* to have his or her say in the bluntest possible terms.¹¹⁴

As a playwright, Kane is not interested in any form of detachment, but instead invades the audience's personal space—as much as there is no sense of safety within the plays, Kane's work also shatters our own sense of security. With no intermissions during her productions, the audience is never allowed emotional relief. Such a practice leads to unreservedly fulfilling Artaud's vision of theatre that is “unafraid of exploring the limits of our nervous sensibility,”¹¹⁵ where “a bitter clash of symbols takes place before us, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot.”¹¹⁶ Like the character C in *Crave*, Kane is an “emotional plagiarist, stealing other people's pain,”¹¹⁷ in the sense that she explores real stories and translates these into her work, subsequently exposing these translated stories to her audience so that they may re-live them.

Kane's experiential methodology finds its roots in Jeremy Weller's Grassmarket Project, *Mad*, a production she saw at the 1992 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Written in consultation with a mental health specialist and a psychologist, *Mad* was a collaborative piece casting nine women, who, without any professional theatrical training, decided to accept a newspaper call for respondents willing to share their personal experiences and observations about mental illness. Two original characters embodied by professional actors further completed the audience's exposure to the issue of psychosis. This cast of eleven, on stage as directed by Weller, faced the audience seated on an otherwise bare stage and forced them to reconsider their

¹¹⁴ Tom Morris, “Foul Deeds, Fair Play,” *Guardian* 25 January, 1995, (emphasis added).

¹¹⁵ Artaud, 66.

¹¹⁶ Artaud, 18.

¹¹⁷ Kane, *Complete Plays* 195.

own preconceptions of the notion of ‘madness.’¹¹⁸ Kane appreciated, and was especially influenced by, the “experiential as opposed to [the] speculative” nature of the piece: “[a]s an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress and then popped out the other end. What I did not do was sit in the theatre considering as an intellectual conceit what it might be like to be mentally ill.”¹¹⁹ If Artaud was sceptical about the current state of theatre, Kane proves that his ideas were not utopian and are successfully achievable on stage—already with *Blasted*, Kane demonstrated that theatre could, in Artaud’s words, “rebuil[d] itself on a concept of this drastic action pushed to the limit.”¹²⁰

Even though all theatre asks us to accept simplified representations of the world for the ‘real thing,’ a condition that Leon Balter defines as a “will to believe,”¹²¹ the visceral response called for by exposure to such experiential drama is far from an artistic illusion. Kane’s depiction of reality appeals to our senses more urgently than a reaction triggered by other media, such as news coverage, paradoxically even when the content of the play is artificially fabricated and partially fictitious. While the modes of address of particular mass media certainly differ and a text can be delivered in various forms, the reaction stimulated by such media is often criticized as geared towards pacifying an already passive viewing audience; this is radically different from the reaction generated by the experiential theatre of Sarah Kane. Kane’s spectator is not allowed a comfortable passive attitude as the playwright calls for cognitive engagement with her work. *Blasted*, for instance, shows that just as there is no sense of safety in the play, in the internal world of the Leeds hotel room nor outside it, a play can also shatter

¹¹⁸ Grassmarket Project website <www.grassmarketproject.org/index.php?pid=42&plid=28>.

¹¹⁹ Saunders, *About Kane* 47.

¹²⁰ Artaud, 65.

¹²¹ Leon Balter, “Magic and the Aesthetic Illusion,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* (50, 2002) 1166.

our own sense of security. When Ian begs the Soldier not to share his horrid stories, the Soldier, undisturbed, continues giving his heartless account:

SOLDIER: Three of us –

IAN: Don't tell me.

SOLDIER: Went to a house just outside town. All gone. Apart from a small boy hiding in the corner. One of the others took him outside. Lay him on the ground and shot him through the legs. Heard crying in the basement. Went down. Three men and four women. Called the others. They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turned her over and - Then she cried. Made her lick me clean. Closed my eyes and thought of - Shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles. (55)

Ian's words pleading for silence now mirror the audience's feelings. Yet just as the Soldier delivers his speech without interruption, the play continues relentlessly, forcing its reality on us as if invading our own personal space in the theatre.

Kane herself is drawn by this immediate aspect of the form, its liveliness and ephemeral quality, recognizing the sense of wholeness inherent in any performance: “[...] with *Blasted*, when people got up and walked out it was actually part of the whole experience of it. And I like that, it's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience.”¹²² Here, we are *present* to the action happening in front of our eyes. In terms of conventional media coverage, when any significant event occurs, it is immediately appropriated into a report and made widely available only moments after the actual incident, especially in today's cyber

¹²² Sarah Kane, interview with Nils Tabert, Brixton, London 8 February 1998 as cited in Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, 13.

age.¹²³ The form of the expression can vary, of course. At the most conventional or common level, we might gain access to the information through reading, be it in print or on the web. Once that same text is voiced aloud on the radio, though, the aural experience introduces a new dimension. Hal Kanter's metaphor of radio as the "theatre of the mind"¹²⁴ is an apt summary of our response to the medium's capacity to draw heavily on our imagination. Yet, Jody Berland points out a certain limitation of the medium when she asserts that listening to radio "leads to a form of passivity in which we lack discernment. And it is precisely this which, in turn, makes us vulnerable to any messages embedded in radio's 'continuous rhythm of sound.'"¹²⁵

Speaking of news coverage available online, Steven Jones offers a different perspective, as he suggests that the role of the audience is perhaps not passive, as, thanks to the vast availability of information,

[t]he range of possibilities has widened: we are no longer certain of what is reported in the news, and we are much more likely to allow alternative explanations. And perhaps the widening range of possibilities leads to a destabilisation of the present. It is not so much that we do not believe *what* we read, see and hear in the news as it is that we are inclined to believe that there is *more than* what we read, see and hear.¹²⁶

A certain level of detachment then emerges, and the same applies for television and film, which lack the crucial immediacy and presence of theatre. Even if we are watching a direct report from a war scene on a television screen, it becomes, as much as any work of fiction, a depersonalized

¹²³ Cf. Ian's sensational report about a "serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace in a sick murder ritual comma." Kane, *Complete Plays* 36.

¹²⁴ Gerald Nachman, *Raised on Radio* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 41.

¹²⁵ Jody Berland, as cited in David Hendy, *Radio in the Global Age* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 139.

¹²⁶ Steven Jones, "The Bias of the Web," *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*, Andrew Herman, Thomas Swiss (New York: Routledge, 2000) 177.

object in the process of our interpretation. For fear of bias, we now question the authenticity of what we see in pursuit of the ‘truth.’ We are too well aware of the vast influence the investigative coverage has on forming public opinion through artificially fabricating and marketing the “real” picture, realizing that even what we do see is selectively restricted for us through the lens of the camera. The notion that seeing something happen on a screen necessarily makes it true in the real world is long surpassed. Vice versa, if something does not enter into the realm of the visual, it does not automatically mean it does not exist, and so we doubt.

While Tara McPherson speaks of the “*illusion* of liveness” of ‘breaking news,’ be it on TV or online, which of course is not as “immediate” as ‘presented,’”¹²⁷ theatre represents a form that, in the words of Artaud, relies on its overwhelming “*spatial expression*” as a specific form of communication.¹²⁸ We see the actors’ bodies, not a two-dimensional representation of them as in news/film/TV; these are very much *real*, even if the roles of the actors are not. We are offered a full picture where the focus of our attention is not pre-determined for us. We have the whole scene to choose from, but at the same time we cannot escape the action on stage. Taboos are brought on stage and broken; just when we feel that there cannot possibly be anything worse than what we just saw, the imagery becomes that one step more graphic and fierce. Kane keeps raising, or perhaps lowering, the bar with each scene, further intensifying emotional and physical dissolution, which inevitably leads to complete aesthetic disruption. Thus we progress from nudity and oral sex to rape, masturbation, severe violence and public execution, to such images as gouged-out eyes, rats carrying pieces of a mutilated body, or the cannibalization of the body of a dead orphaned baby. The same collapse is observable in relation to the structure of Kane’s plays. *Blasted*, for example, formally breaks into several consecutive fragments and

¹²⁷ Tara McPherson, “Reload: Liveness, Mobility and the Web,” *New Media, Old Media: a History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Thomas Keenan, (New York, Routledge 2006) 202.

¹²⁸ Artaud, “The Theatre of Cruelty,” 68.

disturbing images, as the light on stage comes on and off. These then reveal Ian reduced to mere bodily experience and to fulfilling only his physical needs (“masturbating,” “*shitting [a]nd then trying to clean it up with newspaper,*” “*laughing hysterically,*” “*having a nightmare,*” “*crying, huge bloody tears,*” “*hugging the SOLDIER’s body for comfort,*” and “*lying very still, weak with hunger*”). Even if we look away, the tangible tension of the given production and its savage energy will not let go. We cannot just flip the channel, nor will there suddenly intrude a cheerful colourful advertisement offering a new flavour of chewing gum. That is, the strong political message that is interrogated will not be suddenly contrasted by ads running before or after the show,¹²⁹ as is often the case even during a news program, thus ruining our emotional and intellectual engagement with the subject.

If the emotional and physical impact of Kane’s drama poses a challenge to audiences, it certainly becomes a nightmare for the performers. All five plays create the same physical and emotional challenge for the actors, who themselves repeatedly suffer through the intense agonizing performances. The cast of the 2008 New York Soho Rep production of *Blasted*, for instance, reveal that they had to employ a “very workmanlike approach,” which allowed for a certain degree of indifference. Reed Birney (starring as Ian) confesses, “if you had to live through this that way, you’d blow your brains out.”¹³⁰ Even then, matinees were out of the question, as the necessary emotional involvement and amount of pressure would simply be too much. Artaud points to the danger for actors of such psychological interplay as *Blasted* demands:

¹²⁹ These in fact offer an interesting correlation with news broadcasters hunting for sensation, where even photos of tortured prisoners become a marketed object in the political discourse of the world media.

¹³⁰ Patrick Healy, “Audiences Gasp at Violence; Actors Must Survive It,” *New York Times*, 15 April 2011 <www.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/theater/06blas.html?pagewanted=2&_r=2&adxnlnx=1303091075-NEZi6dTVcWQkn9i36Udeew>.

Once launched in fury, [they] need infinitely more virtue to stop [themselves] committing a crime, than a murderer needs to perpetrate his crime, and this is where, in their pointlessness, these acts of stage feeling appear as something infinitely more valid than those feelings worked out in life.¹³¹

Birney reflects the same concerns and attests to the critic's words as he contemplates his role as an actor: "[t]he play has such huge demands that you simply have to surrender to it as an actor. It takes enormous courage from all of us. And that's what was most interesting to me about what *Blasted* is asking me as an actor to do—to be brave."¹³²

3.2 Perpetrator

Artaud's and Birney's comments reveal an interesting conflict in the dual position of Kane's actors, where they are simultaneously the victims of the given play but also the oppressors in regards to the audience as they bring the text to life. Artaud, in theorizing the essential value of cruelty on stage, suggests: "[t]here can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty as the basis of every show. In our present degenerative state, metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body."¹³³ Even though many audience members would hesitate to ever label the action on stage a "spectacle," the term is suggestive of the disturbing attraction Kane's work provokes. The audience is torn by feeling a perverse urge to follow the escalating atrocities on stage, while, when facing the repulsiveness of those images, wanting to look away or to leave the theatre. This strange sense of excitement partially finds its roots in the very reason we go to the theatre in the first place: we seek to experience something other than the mundane, we crave

¹³¹ Artaud 16.

¹³² Cf. Healy, "Audiences Gasp at Violence; Actors Must Survive It."

¹³³ Artaud, 77.

its tension and expect an element of surprise. For instance, what begins in the first minutes of *Blasted* with Cate and Ian's conflict—a sense of suspense related to whether Cate will shoot her abuser—gradually transforms into a much more agonizing experience. It is thanks to the step-by-step, carefully measured increase of intensity that the tension between the audience members' urge to run away and desire to stay to see what happens next is maintained.

The following scene from *Blasted*, where the Soldier toys with Ian while discussing the very act of killing, clearly demonstrates the ambiguity of the audience's role:

SOLDIER: What if you were ordered to?

IAN: Can't imagine it.

SOLDIER: Imagine it.

IAN (*imagines it*)

SOLDIER: In the line of duty. For your country. Wales.

IAN: (*imagines harder*)

SOLDIER: Foreign slag.

IAN (*imagines harder, looks sick*)

SOLDIER: Would you? (56)

This is a dangerous zone, as Kane ventures into the killer's psychology. The Soldier speaks to everyone else in the theatre as much as he does to Ian, regardless of whether they are on or off the stage. In the same manner, the stage notes now reflect the audience members, many of whom would certainly '*look sick*' facing the very same questions and orders as Ian. With the Soldier's speech, the audience members now not only engage with the play and participate in its stories of abuse, but their role becomes significantly more active due to the underlying implication that anyone can potentially become a perpetrator. When Kane directed *London Gate*

Theatre's production of *Phaedra's Love* in 1996, she emphasized this idea of ordinary perpetrators even more by having the mob that eventually castrates and tears apart Hippolytus rise up directly from the audience itself.¹³⁴

Both examples are illustrative of how Kane challenges our conceptions of personal responsibility, a theme which proves to be a common thread in all five of her plays. The difficulty to accept the suggested parallel between 'them' and 'us,' and the intensity of the reaction Kane's work has triggered extends beyond the playwright's sarcastic remark about the premiere of *Blasted*—Kane claims that only when she saw that the audience consisted mainly of middle-aged, male journalists in plaid jackets,¹³⁵ so blatantly caricatured on stage in the character of Ian, did she realize that her play would not be well received. I argue that the uneasy feelings behind many of the dismissive reactions from audience members and critics to Kane's work are ultimately a form of self-protection for the viewer. The rejection of Kane's reality is simply defensive in nature and stems from an insistence on the separation from the world on stage and the 'them' that inhabit it. It is a form of resistance against what Artaud refers to as "a revelation, urging forward the exteriorisation of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, becomes localised."¹³⁶

Kane forces us to consider what causes perpetrators to suspend their moral inhibitions and distance themselves from their actions and resulting consequences. Ever since Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil*, the question of the nature and motivation of perpetrators, and ultimately their moral and personal responsibility, has been

¹³⁴ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* 108.

¹³⁵ Saunders, *About Kane* 52.

¹³⁶ Artaud, 21.

extremely controversial in human rights scholarship. The political theorist here ultimately rejects the idea that even the most brutal perpetrators would necessarily be only individual exceptions of a twisted sadistic mind, to a limited extent a comforting argument used to explain most human rights violations. In relation to Adolf Eichmann's trial for his role in the deportation of European Jews to extermination camps, Arendt reports that a court psychiatrist certified him a "completely normal man, more normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him."¹³⁷ She then quotes Eichmann, who in his defense claimed he "did his duty [...] [and] he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed law."¹³⁸ The Soldier's reference to a perceived superior and legitimate third party authority reflects the same argument based on the denial of personal agency and moral responsibility in becoming a perpetrator. The Soldier, like Eichmann, finds personal vindication in explaining that his actions were merely a following of orders and in his conviction that at home he is regarded as innocent.

Arendt identifies how the perpetrator, in becoming an instrument of the system, does so because of his or her "inability to *think*,"¹³⁹ and their willingness to accept a given role. That such roles are not necessarily organically generated and understood by the subjects is reflected already by Ian, who finds himself incapable of orienting himself in his conflicting circumstances:

SOLDIER: [...] You a soldier?

IAN: Of sorts.

SOLDIER: Which side, if you can remember.

IAN: Don't know what the sides are here. Don't know where...

¹³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 25.

¹³⁸ Arendt, 137.

¹³⁹ Arendt, 49.

He trails off confused, and looks at the Soldier. (54)

A possible explanation of such compliance with authority is Herbert Kelman's concept of "crimes of obedience." Zygmunt Bauman further argues that morality is "inextricably tied to human proximity"¹⁴⁰ and suggests that the problem lies in modern bureaucratic management—theorized by Bauman as a "morality-eroding mechanism."¹⁴¹ Yet Kane refrains from judging any such reasoning as 'good,' 'bad,' or valid. Instead, in offering a range of perceived third party authorities (state/government/army in *Blasted*, monarchy/shared authority of society in *Phaedra's Love*, a twisted form of science in *Cleansed*, other members of community/family in *Cleansed*, or the mental institutions and pharmaceutical industry in general in *4.48 Psychosis*), she freely explores the social aspect of blame while always bringing the focus back to the individual. The exploration of the theme of social blame and ordinary perpetrators briefly escalates in *4.48 Psychosis*, when the Patient suddenly declaims:

I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me, I'll suck your fucking eyes out send them to your mother in a box and when I die I'm going to be reincarnated as your child only fifty times worse and as mad as all [...]. (227)

This short 'scene' appears to be disconnected from the rest of the text due to its topical specificity, but, on the contrary, it actually serves to unite Kane's examination of the victim-perpetrator-bystander relationship. Here the Patient refers to, and feels responsible for,

¹⁴⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) 192.

¹⁴¹ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 199. For discussion of the theory of "crimes of obedience," see Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

violations that have happened in all five plays and at once feels accountable for the crisis of humanity and the “eroded morality” out of which these abuses came—both as a potential perpetrator for some of those acts and as a by-standing member of society.

3.3 Bystander

In forging a comparison between her ‘heroes’ and the plays’ spectators, Kane places the latter in a psychologically and emotionally precarious state, but this is necessary and productive, she explains:

There’s only the same danger of overdose in the theatre as there is in life. The choice is either to represent it, or not to represent it. I’ve chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. [...] It’s crucial to chronicle and commit to memory events never experienced—in order to avoid them happening. I’d rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life. And I’d rather risk defensive screams than passively become part of a civilization that has committed suicide.¹⁴²

The reproduction of a relationship of abuse between stage and audience in her experimental form ultimately puts even more emphasis on what has traditionally been accepted as the spectator’s natural and perhaps most obvious role—bystander. In her exploration of the relationships between oppressor and oppressed, Kane then enters the public arena of global and local politics and presents her audience with Grünfeld’s ultimate choice between a bystander-collaborator and bystander-rescuer.

¹⁴² Kane in Langridge and Stephenson, *Rage and Reason*, 133.

Sitting in the dark of the auditorium, an audience member inevitably becomes part of the group, even as the sensation of loathing belonging to any social body might grow exponentially as the given play progresses. The two contrasting forces of fascination and repulsion create the necessary tension out of which stems a catalytic power to change and transform, even at the cost of temporary suffering. Kane never allows catharsis in her plays: a lack of answers and enigmatic conclusions mean Kane's call to action is directed towards the outside world. Kane sounds the proverbial warning bell and by recreating a sense of community within the space of the theatre, she reinforces an understanding of shared responsibility. Her work confronts the audience, asking questions such as: 'What attitude do you have towards society—do you accept what you see or do you attempt to change it? Are you/will you remain only an audience member, or do you decide to act?' Such an attitude also finds its roots in *Mad*, which Kane describes as life-changing: "It changed my life because it changed me—the way I think, the way I behave, or try to behave. If theatre can change lives, then by implication it can change society, since we're all part of it."¹⁴³

It is in the realm of theatrical reality that Kane responds to the social and political atrocities that elude public attention and ruthlessly calls for authentic feelings. Wallace maintains that "Kane wishes to preserve a clear distinction between representation and reality" and later adds that the "division she wants to maintain might, in the context of her own work, be said to fail since the plays themselves not only represent but are experienced as violent events."¹⁴⁴ To the contrary, this thesis has argued that Kane purposely insists on blurring that line, an insistence that largely constitutes the strength of her theatre. Kane's work is akin to her own definition of a "psychotic breakdown,"

¹⁴³ Kane in Langridge and Stephenson, *Rage and Reason* 133.

¹⁴⁴ Wallace, 199.

when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also you no longer know where you stop, and the world starts [...] and various boundaries begin to collapse.¹⁴⁵

It is precisely Kane's unsettling use of verbal language and the graphic physicality of her play that allow for Kane's gestures towards reconciliation to take a very simple form. These expressions of simple human connections and aspirations are important as they demonstrate that hope can be found even on a pile of ruins. In *Blasted*, Cate and Ian return to basic human needs and values—in an act of compassion towards her violator, through the simple gesture of providing food and preventing Ian from starving, Cate gives him life. If we are disturbed by Ian's opening sentence, "I've shat in better places than this," we are then equally surprised to hear his "thank you" just before the final blackout. The same applies to *4.48 Psychosis*, where the final line "please open the curtains," if understood as liberating, stands in stark contrast, in its politeness and composure, to the rage and despair of the rest of the play.

The impact of Kane's work may be temporarily destructive in the theatre, but certainly remains constructive in the social context. Not only does her drama provide a shared social experience for the audience, but it also speaks to Artaud's call for "a revolving show, which instead of making stage and auditorium into two closed worlds without any possible communication between them, will extend its visual and oral outbursts over the whole mass of spectators."¹⁴⁶ Kane produces and defends this dialogical understanding of theatre, complaining that

¹⁴⁵ Kane on psychosis while writing *4.48 Psychosis*, Rebellato, *Interview with Sarah Kane*.

¹⁴⁶ Artaud, 71.

[t]he press outcry at the images presented wasn't outrage at the idea of such a thing actually happening, but about being asked to consider the idea when viewing that imagery. The shock wasn't about the content, not even about the shock of the new, but about the familiar being arranged in such a way that it could be seen afresh.¹⁴⁷

This is evidenced by the fact that even though Kane gradually shifts from staged violence to violence transmitted through language and narration in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, the controversy surrounding her work has not ceased. Dramatist Murray Gold agrees with seeing such art as actively striving for social awakening when he proposes: “[w]e're not creating a catalyst for debate in the media, [...] [t]he plays themselves are a debate between young people who are interested in ethics, whether the commentators like it or not. The writers are talking to their audiences and each other.”¹⁴⁸ No matter what the label is, whether “in-yer-face theatre,” “new brutalism,” or “rough theatre,” this kind of theatre calls for an *active* response. The violent extremity of Kane's plays is then better contained in the word ‘stimulation’ rather than ‘provocation.’ As such, by engaging its audience in examining the ideals of fundamental freedoms and human rights, Kane's theatre becomes a form of social therapy.

¹⁴⁷ Kane in Langridge and Stephenson, *Rage and Reason* 131.

¹⁴⁸ As cited in Tom Morris, “Foul Deeds, Fair Play,” *Guardian* 25 January, 1995.

Conclusion

Challenging the relationship between culture and politics in modern society, Sarah Kane's theatre becomes a tool in the examination of power abuse and in calling for the observance of human rights and freedoms. Kane's plays speak to her audience on two levels: on the one hand, their formal elements produce an immediate experiential effect; on the other, their content creates a critical space for public debate. Kane fights the lack of public interest in human rights violations by forcing her audience to experience the oppressor-oppressed conflicts from three different angles, putting her spectators in the roles of victim, perpetrator and bystander. As such, the playwright provides an effective framework for a constructive dialogue and invites a plurality of voices to participate within that conversation. Her interest is wide-ranging and lies both in the local and more immediate communities, as well as in global issues that are not necessarily geographically or politically defined; yet, diverse as her plays are in content, their common feature is their political and social relevance.

Blasted shocked its British and subsequently international audience as much as the conflict in the former Yugoslavia shocked the whole of Europe. The sad reality remains that the massacre at Srebrenica,¹⁴⁹ then a United Nations-protected enclave, happened half a year after the premiere of Kane's play. Testifying to the atrocities of the Serbo-Muslim conflict are the numerous mass graves that are still being discovered today. Retrospectively, *Phaedra's Love* proved to be perhaps the most relevant of Kane's plays, as the public obsession with the private

¹⁴⁹The International Criminal Tribunal unanimously ruled that "[b]y seeking to eliminate a part of the Bosnian Muslims, the Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide. They targeted for extinction the 40,000 Bosnian Muslims living in Srebrenica, a group which was emblematic of the Bosnian Muslims in general. They stripped all the male Muslim prisoners, military and civilian, elderly and young, of their personal belongings and identification, and deliberately and methodically killed them solely on the basis of their identity. The Bosnian Serb forces were aware, when they embarked on this genocidal venture, that the harm they caused would continue to plague the Bosnian Muslims. The Appeals Chamber states unequivocally that the law condemns, in appropriate terms, the deep and lasting injury inflicted, and calls the massacre at Srebrenica by its proper name: genocide." President of the ICTY Theodor Meron, The Hague, 11 July 2005 <www.icty.org/sid/8569>.

lives of Princess Diana and Prince Charles escalated with Diana's untimely death, often ascribed to the media's pursuit of the Royal couple. For its part, *4.48 Psychosis* resonates today as much as it did in 1998 as the UK recently witnessed the case of paralyzed Tony Nicklinson, who starved himself to death after his unsuccessful fight to legally end his life, what he called a "living nightmare."¹⁵⁰

Kane demands that we acknowledge and confront society's culpability in severe human rights violations by showing that third parties (i.e. bystanders) are key actors in their prevention. That the same patterns of abuse continue to repeat themselves, however, is not a sign of the plays' failure, but proof that discussion of human rights does indeed belong on stage and should be discussed vigorously in as many public spaces as possible. Political writing with a message will never be out of date and the next generation of female playwrights, such as Rebecca Prichard (*Fairgame*) or Gurpreet Bhatti (*Behzti—I Dishonour*), attests to that. The topics these female playwrights take up range from human trafficking in Nigeria to sexual violence and murder in a Sikh temple. These works prove to be as deeply focused as Kane on "tak[ing] the audience by the scruff of the neck and shak[ing] it until it gets it," and they just as successfully "tell us more about who we really are"¹⁵¹ as did their 90s predecessor. Together they form a body of work that recognizes the importance of fundamental human rights and freedoms and insists on the culturally interrogative function of arts. It is absolutely essential that such plays do emerge, and it is equally crucial that there is space for them on stage, and that they are *received* as actively as they are produced. When the question of theatre as a dead form periodically pops up, plays like Sarah Kane's immediately suppress such doubts.

¹⁵⁰ "Right-to-die Man Tony Nicklinson Dead," *BBC News* 22 August 2012 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-19341722>.

¹⁵¹ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 4.

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