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Extremely Violent, Shockingly Painful, Strangely Tender: The Theatre of Sarah Kane

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A mio Zio che mi ha insegnato cosa sia la bontà,
ai miei Genitori che mi hanno cresciuto e amato
e a tutti/e le studentesse, gli studenti, i colleghi e le colleghe
che non ce l'hanno fatta o che sono ancora qui

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Introduction

"No art is possible without a dance with death", Kurt Vonnegut once said. Usually, the main purpose of an artistic work is to represent something to a concrete audience, and generate a stream of feelings in them, which range from sadness to happiness. An aspect that is not taken enough seriously is, though, that the most genuine and memorable kind of art is the one that upsets disturbs. In history, there were many cases where a film, a book or even a painting were put under a heavy scrutiny, with many reactionaries calling for censorship. Artists were put on trial and sometimes even arrested under the charge of obscenity. In more contemporary cases, their art is mercilessly lambasted and misunderstood, only to gain a better reception in later years.

It was the case for Sarah Marie Kane, a British playwright whose short career during the In-Yer-Face Theatre years acted as a break from everything that had happened on stage in the 90s. The dichotomy of disturbing-tender imagery of her plays, the critical backlash she received and her tragic death through suicide made her another symbol of the torment artist/poète maudit trope. Unfortunately, in these cases, the tragic passing of authors and artists is used to read their works in a very dark version of “biographical phallacy”.

In this dissertation I analyse the five plays Kane wrote. The first chapter is a general introduction to the theme of violence, its representation in medias and how it affects our society. Furthermore, it surveys "violent plays" from the Elizabethan times to the Grand Guignol Era. Finally, the historical-literary context in which Kane lived and worked will be considered, with an analysis of some notorious passages from plays that can be seen both as an influence and part of the In-Yer-Face current, ranging from Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965) and Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) to Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Dennis Kelly's *Osama The Hero* (2004). The groundbreaking essay *The Theatre and its Double* by Antonin Artaud (1938) will also be referenced.

The second chapter deals with Kane's first experiences as a playwright with her "monologue trilogy", and how the horrors of the Yugoslav Wars shaped *Blasted* (1995), her first groundbreaking play, which will be analyzed in detail from a literary-critical perspective. Films such as Srđan Dragojević's 1996 film *Лепа села лепо горе* (trans. "Pretty Village, Pretty Flame"), Jasmila Žbanić's 2020 *Quo Vadis, Aida?*, the Srebrenica massacre and Kitty Felde's 2007 play *A Patch of Earth* are also taken into consideration.

In the third part, I focus on Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996) will be discussed, with its ties to the Ancient-Modern classics and how they are adapted in contemporary settings. Aside from the "canonical" versions by Euripides, Seneca and Racine, I also refer to Tony Harrison's *Phaedra*

Britannica (1976), along with other contemporary adaptations of plays and myths, such as May El-Toukhy's 2018 film *Dronningen* (Eng. Queen of Hearts) and Derek Jarman's 1991 cinematic rendition of *Edward II*.

The longest section of this dissertation will be dedicated to *Cleansed* (1998), Kane's fourth and most accomplished play. The concept of bodily plasticity theorized by Michel Foucault is explored, with direct references to Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) to give practical examples of this theory, while also discussing the literary influences behind the play.

The fifth chapter is entirely dedicated to Kane's *Crave* (1998), its influence coming from Eliot's *The Waste Land* and how it can be considered as completely different from anything that Kane had done before. The similarities and differences between the two will also be highlighted.

The last chapter is dedicated to *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), Kane's fifth and final play. It is an exploration of the controversial topic of suicide, its pathology and how the media can dangerously glorify it. The central part of the chapter deals with the play's analysis, with its themes and representations. The chapter ends with a summary of Kane's final days before her death.

Unconventional, unapologetic, sincere yet incredibly empathetic and compassionate, Sarah Kane cannot simply be connected to the In-Yer-Face Theatre. She was an original, uncompromising voice on the British stage that was never afraid to deal with difficult themes such as rape, graphic murder, ableism and cruelty, but she was also a resolute poet who wrote about love of any kind, with all the hardships that follow it, through an elegiac, desperate style that was impossible to forget.

1. The Scene that shocked the World

You may not like these in-your-face productions,
but they are quite impossible to ignore.
(Charles Spencer, *Trainspotting* Review, 1995)[1]

1.1 Regarding the Violent Scene

When the term "violent" is used, it refers to a specific kind of thing that can be either be found in different contexts (e.g. a violent quarrel, a violent storm, a violent music, etc.) but in each of these cases the meaning expressed is always the same. According to the *Merriam Webster* Dictionary (2022), the term "violence" is "an intense, turbulent or furious and often destructive action or force"[2]. It can be so sudden and so fundamentally atrocious an event that it might shock the perception of the world: we might feel repulsed and frightened by it, but it would be a lie to claim that the more the event is disturbingly violent, the more we might get attracted by it. When a man or a woman is brutally assaulted in the streets, there could be people recording the scene with their phones, just to share it on the internet, Some of these spectators can take it even further, especially if they are the ones perpetrating violence: for example, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the neofascist islamophobic responsible of the Christchurch mosque shooting occured on 15 March 2019, live-streamed himself on Facebook while he was gunning his victims down. We could clearly read the comments of some Internet users during this bloody spectacle: "OMG he's doing it for real", "this guy's a hero", "Journalists are next", "Heil Hitler" and so on. The point is, as blood-curdling as these comments from Tarrant's fellow white supremacists are, violence can be considered as a form of physical and linguistic outburst of rage against something.

The people cheering for a racist white man slaughtering muslims might be compared to those who cheer after a serial killer is sentenced to death by electrocution. Some might argue that one of these two groups is more "morally right" than the other, but the argument is always the same: when publicized, recorded or televised, violence can become not just a rage manifesto, but a macabre form of spectacle in every sense possible: to incite, to expose, to criticize, to merely shock and even to mindlessly entertain. The flesh-tearing deeds of murderers such as Jack The Ripper or Jeffrey Dahmer are turned into movies and TV shows, or they are discussed in an episode of one of the thousands true crime podcasts; the cinematic depictions of a soldier or civilian's lives during wartime

[1] "In-Yer-Face in Popular Culture", http://www.inyerfacetheatre.com/archive21.html accessed 26/11/22
[2] "Violence", https://www.merriam-webster.com/, accessed 26/11/22

can either be horrifying or epic, according to the representation applied. However, despite all this, reality is far more terrifying and surely less safe than what fiction claims to represent, contrarily to the over-used "based/inspired on true events". As John Fraser has written, "part of the cruelty lies in one's being unable to escape from the real time occupied by these actors stamping their feet, yelling at the top of their voices"[3].

The killing of an unarmed civilian always makes the headlines and the bombings, tortures and massacres in war can be found in videos or photographs. While we look at these, the mind can be shaken, as what is being witnessed is not a dramatized, watered-down version of events, but a captured, still moment we are sharing with the people depicted, with the only difference that we are somewhat "safe", while the subjects are experimenting fear, pain, desperation and brutality. These atrocities are also reflected in their bodies: eyes that are like pieces of glass much is the fright; dirty, blood-soaked clothes; bodies that are maimed by bullet holes, cuts or burns. For a casual viewer who is not used to this kind of representations, all this can result in a jaw-dropping anguish at the sight of these horrors, and he / she may ask himself/herself how all of this could be possible. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), writer and photographer Susan Sontag argued that "the photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore"[4]. Furthermore, when stating how the audience nowadays may act as outraged and shocked when being exposed to these forms of chaos intruding in the normality of things, Sontag quotes Virginia Woolf: "We are not monsters, we members of the educated class. Our failure is of imagination, of empathy - we have failed to hold this reality in mind"[5].

Every single day, when we connect to the Internet or turn on the television, we are bombed by violent images. On February 24 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared war on the nation of Ukraine. In the next days, war experts, sociologists and pundits were consulted regarding how the situation could evolve. The threat of a nuclear war was brought up, and the brutal fights and killings were televised and commented. It was the first time after one century that the shadow of war made a comeback in European soil. Such was the dread, that many showed support to Ukraine, while others were justifying Putin's actions. Civilians' death, responsibilities and possible solutions had been talked for weeks, even months, but then the dust gradually settled, despite the fact that the war was far from over: it does not matter if this could happen to us, as well as to all the other parts of the world. Violence can appear shocking and terrifying at the beginning, but then it dramatically becomes the norm, and people start to get used to it. As the camera man character played by Joaquin Phoenix in Terry George's 2004 biopic on the Rwandan Machete Season *Hotel Rwanda* claims, "I think if

[3] John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts (Illustrated Edition)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p. 45.
[4] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin, London, New York, 2019, p. 4.
[5] *Idem*, p. 5.

people see this footage, they'll say 'Oh my God, that's horrible", and then they'll go on eating their dinners"[6].

It is important to point out that violence has not just shocking or apathetic effects, but also charming ones. It can be compared to a thunderstorm or a hurricane: we might feel indifference towards it if we are watching a recording posted on the Internet, as "these things happen", as well as being scared of it, but the cards are overturned when we start to get morbidly attracted to it, without caring about those who suffered it. All the violent content that we consume almost every day, whether voluntarily or unintentionally, can become an iconographic tool for propaganda, thus awakening our sadistic, voyeuristic desire to enjoy the pain of the others. Sontag writes, "the iconography of suffering has a long pedigree. The sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human [...] the viewer may commiserate with the sufferer's pain - and in the case of Christian saints, feel admonished or inspired by model faith and fortitude - but these are destinies beyond deploring or contesting"[7].

The images of martyrdom found in churches or museums, such as Christ on the cross or Saint Sebastian striken by arrows, are meant to be taken with sadness, empathy or hope by believers, but are also meant to be seen in their atrocious beauty: the bodies depicted are usually athletic and muscular, ruined by the signs of the tortures the subjects had to endure. The idea of suffering is here celebrated as both an artistic and religious triumph: the painting/sculture is a wonder to see and, for believers, the suffering represented is worthwile to ensure a message of love and brotherhood. Looking at a painting such as Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522), one encounters pain: the dead Messiah depicted has nothing sacred or religious, he is a man who suffered a long ordeal that not even death itself can alleviate. Susannah B. Mintz writes:

> Pain is powerfully intersubjective, not only in the phenomenological sense of establishing relations between embodied subjects, but also because it initiates a kind of storytelling that, in demanding to be read, moves outward from the self [...] pain can also become a mechanism of control, a way of captivating an audience pruriently interested in the failings of the body.[8]

Images of pain and suffering are thus strumentalised by audiences and governments to expose a truth, deliver a message that is intimidating or anger-inducing or just to shock: "perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could something to alleviate it [...] or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean

[6] Terry George, *Hotel Rwanda* (Lionsgate Films, 2004).
[7] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, cit., p. 34.
[8] Susannah B. Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering of the Body*, Bloomsbury, London, New York, 2015, p. 95.

to be"[9]. However, here lies a paradox: despite all the horrific events that are so easily purchasable in the medias, contemporary society still regards violence as a taboo, especially when it concerns its fictional depiction. Many people walked out in outraged disgust at the screening of a Gaspar Noè's transgressive picture or a Quentin Tarantino's over the top bloodfest: in these two scenarios one may see a dichotomy of how violence can be represented in fiction.

Tarantino's usage of it is often for entertainment purposes: a head exploding for an accidental gunshot is unexpectedly hilarious as the satisfying, cheerful fictional murder of Adolf Hitler by the hands of two Jewish partisans; while Noè's nine minute uninterrupted static shot of a rape scene or a face being bludgeoned with a fire extinguisher in close up are unnerving and uncomfortable, but their purpose is not to deliver "sadistic pornography" as some critics claimed, but an exposé, a knife inserted and twisted in a badly sewed wound: these things happen in the real world, and trying our best to hide them can be seen as hypocritical, considering the afore mentioned admirations viewers may have for works of art depicting deaths of saints or boschian hellscapes. As John Fraser stated mentioning the works of authors such as Sorel, Pareto and Fanon,

> [They] were motivated by a much deep hatred of bourgeois society and were led to a much more radical break with its moral standards than the conventional left [...] To tear the mask of hypocrisy from the face of the enemy, to unmask him and the devious machinations and manipulations that permit him to rule without using violent means, that is, to provoke action even at risk of annihilation so that the truth may come out [...] It is easy enough, therefore, to see why violence should have come to be seen in terms of an escape, a release, an intense self-affirmation, whether by individuals or groups; or, relatedly, as a way of forcing people to truth[10].

In the artistic environment, nothing can be seen as a closer experience of atrocities and suffering than a stage representation of an "extreme" play from Seneca, Martin McDonagh or others. What the audience witness on stage is undoubtedly fictional, "no matter how direct the actor's relation to the pain performed may be"[11], yet there is no cinematic screen in front of us, nor a painting frame. Despite the separation between audience members and the actors performing as theorised by many playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht ("Spectator and actor should not come close to each other but should distance themselves from each other. And each should be distanced from him- or herself"[12]), when a torture scene happens on stage, audiences feel they are actually witnessing to a real atrocity, without the possibility to intervene and stop it. Spectators only have three options: to

[9] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, cit., p. 36.
[10] Fraser, *Violence in the Arts (Illustrated Edition)*, cit., pp. 41-42.
[11] Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering of the Body*, cit., p. 119.
[12] Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (edited by), *Brecht on Theatre*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2015, p. 27.

walk out of the theatre, to look away or to experience it in a meta-narrative frame where they vicariously become victims, perpetrators and bystanders. In fact,

> Torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt-experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body. It then goes on to deny, to falsify, the reality of the very thing it has itself objectified by a perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power.[13]

From the perspective of audience members witnessing a gruesome act pain develops from an individual experience to a collective one, "that brings us powerfully in contact with our bodies as we cry out stories of it, an experience that overlays alienating loneliness with affective connection, enstrangement and contact, self-awareness and non-coincidence"[14].

1.2 The Grand-guignolesque Theatre of Cruelty

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players": William Shakespeare once wrote these lines, uttered by the character of Jacques in his comedy *As You Like It* (1599-1600). The idea that humans, are mere actors playing a part on a stage is both amusing and terrifying. On countless occasions have human lives been permanently changed by tragic events such as loss, unexpected disease or poverty and wars. In the latter, people fought in kill-or-be-killed situations, they were mercilessly slaughtered or they themselves took part in the carnage. There are books, paintings, songs and films portraying all these scenarios, from the daily life in any century to nightmarish (and sometimes allegorical) visions of destruction. This only confirms the idea that art as a whole is strictly tied to life, and thus the same old question emerges: is art imitating life or is life imitating art? It could be the former, the latter, or even both; but it is almost undeniable that these two dimensions, one carnal and the other artificial, are two sides of the same coin.

Even though one may feel empathy for fictional film characters or real civilians sharing a testimony in front of a recording interviewer, there is always a perceivable distance between screen and viewers. On the other hand, the stage is something completely different. It does not matter if the play is the work of a well-known playwright: the reception of spectators can be completely shattered and any sense of comfortable safety can be put on stake, especially when it comes to represent acts of violence, not just fist fights, stabs or gunshots, but hangings, dismemberments, rapes and much more.

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[13] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, p. 27.

[14] Mintz, *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering of the Body*, cit., p. 124.

If an audience member has no idea about the play's content, he/she may feel, and the whole Brechtian distance between stage/audience may vanish because of an event that can disturb and unnerve spectators. The thin line between reality and fiction can be torn.

In the case of film, despite its disturbing nature, one knows that behind a certain scene there were special effects and many takes in order to get it done; but if it is a stage, the deictic relation offers real people, in flesh and blood. Despite the script, the proximity of audiences to actors makes every experience more tangible and realistic: the people who had luck to be the first ones to witness the premiere of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1589-1593) had no idea of the shocking nature the show was going to have, nor had the audience that paid the ticket to see the first Grand Guignol performance ever. In the case of *Titus*, a revenge play filled with rape, murder and mutilation, what could be seen as a senseless orgy of splatter is, in reality, an allegory of the clash between two different cultures, the Goth and the Roman; a representation of the corruptive powers that led to the fall of the Roman Empire, as well as a portrait of the colonial violence committed in foreign lands.

Elizabethan extremes aside, the violent stage had a huge success especially in the France of 1897, where the Grand Guignol theatre had its first opening until its closure in 1963. Short plays such as André de Lorde's Le *laboratoire des hallucinations* (1916) or Maurice Level's *Le Baiser dans la Nuit* (1912) have been performed many times much to the shock and enjoyment of audiences ready to witness explosive acts of blood. The stories staged somehow shaped the idea of horror we have today, as the barbaric violences depicted took place in a realistic, everyday setting, with little to no use of supernatural elements. Lavel's *La Baiser* regards a vengeful man disfigured with acid by a "femme fatale" who gets his payback by making her suffer the same thing she did to him; De Lorde's *Le laboratoire* presents a mad doctor of "moureauian" nature that performs a graphic brain surgery on his wife's lover, thus turning him into a zombie-like being who in the end slaughters his "creator" by stabbing him in the head with a chisel.

A casual reading of these two plays could make them see as vulgar, mysoginistic spectacles meant just to shock, but an in-depth analysis of the texts may offer a more comprehensive view: De Lorde's mad doctor could be seen as a promethean allegory of the scientist who challenges human limits for personal gains just to succumb to them, while Lavel's story refers to the impressive amount of real life vitriol attacks that have left many victims horribly disfigured. What really strikes about this is that apparently the majority of perpetrators were women who, according to Ann-Louise Shapiro, relate to a "rising discourse surrounding the extension of female power beyond the domestic sphere, and more significantly, of their power to adapt a feature of their domestic arsenal (vitriol

being a cleaning product more often purchased by women than men) into a weapon who facilitated an aggressive revolution in the power structure of a relationship"[15].

The list of notorious "extreme" performances in theatres is very long, and this might testify to the continuous presence of violence not just in real life, but also in its narrative and dramatic reflections on an artificial, man-made dimension we call "a stage". By presenting Amiri Baraka's staging of his play *The Motion of History* (1978), which screens a brief documentary featuring graphic scenes of oppression and revolt, Timothy Murray argues that "even when the lights go up demistifying the screen as an empty field of technological projection, the dreamlike images of violence and oppression continue to hover over the stage"[16]. As Antonin Artaud claimed in his revolutionary and somewhat anarchist collection of essays *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), "There can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty as the basis of every show"[17]. The French actor, in fact, complained how "theatre lost his identity" and how it was up to the younger generations of authors and actors to create a new theatrical dimension: the Theatre of Cruelty. He argues,

> Our sensibility has reached the point where we surely need theatre that wakes us up, heart and nerves. The damage wrought by psychological theatre, derived from Racine, has rendered us unaccustomed to the direct, violent action theatre must have [...]In the anguished, catastrophic times we live in, we feel an urgent need for theatre that is not overshadowed by events, but arouses deep echoes within us and predominates over our unsettled period. [...] Everything that acts is cruelty. Theatre must rebuild itself on a concept of this drastic action pushed to the limit. [...] That is, instead of harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive, we must first break theatre's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought.[18]

Acts that violate beliefs in the human good nature that one thought were unrepresentable in the arts are probably the most efficient method to deliver a powerful message, and for Artaud, it is the playwright's duty to do so in the most memorable, provocative way possible. In fact, "the author or director may begin by postulating a deservedly shockable bourgeois audience, but ends up with an audience that is begging for shocks to begin with, either because it identifies with the artist against 'society' or because it is slumming"[19]. In times of social and international turmoil, when the raw truth is put aside and not mentioned for the sake of a fictional wellness, it appears that it is the right moment for the artist(s) to embrace the role of truth-giver(s) and force the gullible, unaware audience

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[15] Stewart Pringle, "Violence and Vitriol - Exploring *Le Baiser dans la nuit*: Part 1", *Theatre of The Damned*, 3 November 2010, http://theatredamned.blogspot.com/2010/11/violence-and-vitriol-exploring-le.html, accessed 17/11/22

[16] Timothy Murray, *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video and Art*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 157.

[17] Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (translated by Victor Corti), Alma Classics, Richmond, 2010, p. 70.

[18] *Idem*, pp. 60-63.

[19] Fraser, *Violence in the Arts,* cit., p. 44.

to see what they do not want to see. Just like Hans Backovic, the ficticious director of the cursed film *La Fin Absolue du Monde* featured in John Carpenter's *Cigarette Burns* (2005), the artist must destroy the audience's beliefs and sense of safety. "The effect of ['cruel'] theatre", writes Artaud, "is as beneficial as the plague, impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness and even two-facedness"[20].

1.3 Bond, Brenton and the Evolution of In-Yer-Face

On the contemporary British stage, there have been many cases in which a single play has caused an uproar in the audience, with following harsh reviews and requests of censorship, from the most polemical one in terms of language and content to the most graphic one.

The British stage has been heavily influenced by the social realities of the United Kingdom, and some playwrights have dedicated their whole work to exposing "the truth", which was usually hidden by the ruling tories following and reinforcing the "sun-never-sets-on-England" myth. The more something is repressed, the more it is likely to come out aggressively. Many theatrical movements have dedicated themselves to tell "real stories" about "real people", but the themes of agony, injustice and rage against society's bigoted hypocrisy never had the same anarchist, provocative representation that the "In-Yer-Face Theatre" gave them. This movement, which developed on the British scene during the 1990s, was, as Aleks Sierz writes, a "theatre of sensation":

> It jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what the audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are[21].

As one of the major experts of this drama, Sierz makes the distinction between two version of "in-yer-face": the "hot" version and the "cool" one. The former uses violence as a form of aesthetic, with explicit actions and heightened emotions, thus making the whole experience as an open aggression to the audience; the latter "meditate[s] the disturbing power of extreme emotions by using a number of distancing devices: larger auditoriums, a more naturalistic style or a more traditional structure"[22]. In this "cool version" of in-yer-face the playwright makes frequent use of comedy, in order to dilute just a bit an already emotionally frantic situation. The name itself, with the slang

[20] Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, cit., p. 21.
[21] Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber and Faber, London, 2000, p. 4.
[22] *Idem*, pp. 5-6.

inflexion "yer" instead of "you" indicates an intention to create a series of performances that are more grounded and colloquial, quite distant from the lyricism of a Racine or Ibsen. The characters presented are usually broken, unlikable people from the suburbs, the so-called "invisible men and women", and the use of violence and explicit sex is shamelessly thrown to the viewer's faces.

From these elements, which incorporate Elizabethan-Jacobean extremes and the gratuitous shockfest of the classic Grand Guignol, it is important to point out that many of these plays are not mere, puerile provocations meant just to disturb the bourgeois' sweet tooth, but an angry reaction to a society that does deplorable things to its citizens and then tries to hide it to appear warm and welcoming. In the 1990s, the Margaret Thatcher era was over, and the ruins it had left behind hit mostly the British working class, who had already suffered most under the Iron Lady's regime, from financial cuts to working strikes ended in police repression. "These writers of 'smack and sodomy' plays", writes Ken Urban, "are Thatcher's children, a generation raised under eleven years of hard-line Thatcher rule; there is a shared hatred for the Tories's dismantling of the socialist state during the 1980s, but this anger is also coupled with an increasing sense of disillusionment at New Labour's move to the political center during the 1990s"[23]. While the main influences of this movement could be traced back to the times of Seneca and the most violent Elizabethan/Jacobean plays, there was one peculiar work that had the greatest impact on the soon-to-be in-yer face authors: Edward Bond's *Saved*.

Written in 1965, the story concerns the troublesome relationship between two young Londoners, Len and Pam. They meet, they fall in love and then break up after Pam starts to date Len's friend, Fred, with whom she later has a baby. Fred and Pam's story slowly falls apart and reaches its most tragic moment in the unexpected, extreme violent act of the sixth scene. In there, Pam and Fred are in a park with their baby, who is in a pram. They are reached by four friends, Pete, Colin, Mike and Barry. Then, Pam and Fred have a fight that prompts her to exit the scene, leaving the baby behind. Left alone with it, the group first try to toy with the baby, then grow increasingly annoyed when the unseen infant defecates in the diaper, which makes them commit acts of violence such as aggressively agitating the pram and eventually stoning the baby to death.

> BARRY *(pushing the pram)* Rock a bye baby on a tree top When the wind blows the cradle will rock
> When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
> And down will come baby and cradle and tree
> an' bash its little brains out an' dad'll scoop 'em up and use 'em for bait.
>
> *They laugh.*

[23] Ken Urban, 'An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Sep., 2001, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 37-38.

[...]
COLIN. Got me!
He falls dead, BARRY pushes the pram over him.
Get off! I'll 'ave a new suit out a you.
[...]
BARRY. What about the nipper ?
PETE. Too young for me.
[...]
BARRY. 'Ere! Dirty bastard !
He projects the pram viciously after COLIN. It hits PETE.[24]

The scene begins almost innocently, with Barry singing a lullaby to the pram, but then the sequence takes a dark turn when he mentions the baby's brains being "bashed out" and used as a bait by the father. Later, the gang start to quarrel, prompting to push the pram "viciously" after each other. From then on, the situation escalates for worse. The gang starts to physically attack the infant by pulling the hair, pinching it and even hitting it with fists, in order to prove its supposed intolerance to pain:

COLIN. Mind yer don't 'urt it.
MIKE. Yer can't.
BARRY. Not at that age.
MIKE. Course yer can't, no feelin's.
PETE. Like animals.[25]

The discomfort provoked by all these vicious attacks reaches its climax in the (in)famous stoning sequence:

BARRY. Give us some.
He takes stones from COLIN.
COLIN (throws a stone). Right in the lug 'ole.
FRED looks for a stone.
PETE. Get its 'ooter.
BARRY. An' its slasher!
FRED (picks up a stone, spits on it). For luck, the sod.
He throws. [...] [MIKE] starts to throw burning matches in the pram, BARRY throws a stone.[26]

[24] Edward Bond, *Saved*, Methuen Drama, London, 2000, pp. 63-64
[25] *Idem*, p. 67.
[26] *Idem*, pp. 70-71.

This scene is a crescendo which relentlessly takes the audience to the senseless and gruesome killing of the baby, something so unexpected and so immoral that it might appear as a sensationalist spectacle, with little to no message. Bond's play underwent censorhip and tons of controversies: some critics called it muddled and disgusting, while people such as Sir Laurence Olivier defended it, as "he saw theatre as a place that could show us how to comprehend cruelty, 'teaching the human heart the knowledge of itself'"[27].

When analyzed, Bond's play can be seen as a realistic portrait of a lost generation, betrayed by the government and left with a repressed anger waiting to explode. The image of the unseen baby in the pram thus becomes a symbol of lost innocence. This may also explain the reason why all the characters react to brutality with indifference: it is a product of alienation, of a society that is both shaped and obsessed by violence. One may also interpret the baby's murder as a biblical allegory: while the stoning penalty was usually perpetrated for a crime of blasphemy, Bond turned this point upside down. The real sinners stone the baby because of its apparent immunity to pain and its purity, something they have lost for good. It is a shock tactic that Bond described as "aggro-effect": "The reason for putting the audiences through such ordeals must be because you feel you have something desperately important to tell them [...] Shock is justified by the desperation of the situation or as a way of forcing the audience to search for reasons in the rest of the play"[28].

The "casual" theatre audience usually choose a play based on the actors performing it, they use to pay little attention to the narrative and like to rest during the performance; they surely do not expect a scene such as the one Bond presented. In fact, as playwright Howard Brenton once wrote,

> Acting opens a door to profound recess of our being. And the audience of the 'premature curtain', with which I began this speculation, were there to hear the voices of the actors, just the voices of their darlings. They were in a sense of worshipping the actors. The play didn't matter. I don't agree. I want plays and entertainments I'm involved with to have meaning, to be awake and to wake the audience up.[29]

Brenton himself was in the eye of the storm for his 1980s historical play *The Romans in Britain*, another possible influence on the themes handled by the future in-yer-face playwrights. It is the heavily dramatized story of the Roman invasion of Britain at the time of Julius Caesar. In the play one can detect similarities to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, not just for the graphic depictions of violence, but also for the themes of colonisation and imperialism, with the difference that this time the perspective is more focused on the invaded, rather than the invaders. "For the Celts", Brenton

[27] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today,* cit., p. 19.
[28] *Idem*, p. 19.
[29] Howard Brenton, *Hot Irons (Diaries, Essays, Journalism)*, Methuen, London, 1995, p. 17.

writes, "the appearence of the Roman army is the end of their culture, its touch is death; I tried to imagine what it must have been like for three young Celts, seeing Roman soldiers for the first time"[30]. The most (in)famous scene in the play happens in the third scene of the first act, and depicts the slaughter of three Celtic brothers and the homosexual rape of the only survivor, Marban, described in its grossest details:

> *The SOLDIERS run at MARBAN, smashing their shields against him from three sides. MARBAN's knife goes flying, he stumbles away and falls. The FIRST and THIRD SOLDIERS begin to strip.*
> THIRD SOLDIER. Hold him, then.
> SECOND SOLDIER. I'll do him in the neck.
> THIRD SOLDIER. Don't, he'll shit himself.
> FIRST SOLDIER. All this trouble for a bit of a swim.
> THIRD SOLDIER. No, I want him to feel this. You can cut him out a bit if you want. Here!
> [...]
> *The THIRD SOLDIER, now half-naked, takes the knife from the SECOND SOLDIER, kneels and cuts MARBAN on the buttocks. [...] The THIRD SOLDIER holds MARBAN's thighs and attempt to bugger him.*
> THIRD SOLDIER. Keep this fucking arse still!
> [...]
> *The SECOND SOLDIER hits MARBAN on the top of the head with the butt of his sword. MARBAN is knocked unconscious. His left leg twitches twice then is still.*
> *A silence.*
> THIRD SOLDIER. Oh *(he sits up)*. Oh oh.
> SECOND SOLDIER. I said, are you in trouble comrade?
> THIRD SOLDIER. Arseful of piles. Like a fucking fistful of marbles. I mean, what do in this island, sit with their bums in puddles all year long? (he stands) Huh? (he looks at himself) And I'm covered in shit.[31]

Throwing such a scene in the audience's face is a way, for Brenton, to depict the cruelties perpetrated in all kinds of war/colonial settings. It is a discourse that claims that factors such as rape and slaughter are elements of the human heart that transcend history itself: it is not unusual if in the play the Romans use contemporary British slurs, referring to the Celts such as "wogs" or "mick" (used respectively to insult black or Irish people, which were both victims of British imperialism), nor when, at the end of the first act, the invaders appear on stage now dressed in military uniforms with the sound of a helicopter roaring in the background. This performative choice implies that the invasion of 55 AD had erased the distance with our timeline: it happened in the past but it is still happening in scenarios that are far, yet somewhat close.

[30] *Idem*, p. 29.
[31] Howard Brenton, *The Romans in Britain* in *Plays: 2*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 1996, pp. 33-36.

Brenton stated that "cruelty is hard to dramatise; what you must never do is pretend, by stagecraft sleight of hand, that the cruelty is not as bad as it is". Furthermore, "if you are not prepared to show humanity at its worst, why should you be believed when you show at its best, in a play that attempts to do both in equal measure? You must not sell human suffering for short"[32]. This affirmation is perfectly explained by the way Caesar is represented in the play. He is not the heroic, mythical leader of the canon, but an eccentric warmonger who keeps complaining about a toothache. The monologue he delivers in front of the wounded, frightened Marban is the perfect representation of the destructive power brought by Imperialism over indigenous populations: "Listen, listen to me! On the mainland I burn your temples. Your priests that will not serve the Roman Gods - I kill. I desecrate their bodies. Desecration according to your beliefs. The head off and burnt, etcetera. Because there are new Gods now. Do you understand? The old Gods are dead"[33].

Bond's *Saved* and Brenton's *The Romans* paved the way to the explosion of the In-Yer-Face Theatre in the '90s. If the former dealt with the results of the lower class' alienation and the latter with England's violent past masked through the lens of an event that took place in ancient history, the '90s In-Yer-Face exposed the rotten identity of a nation, the voices of the forgotten and all the governmental failures and atrocities. The moralisms and bigotries were explicitely challenged, with no qualms or restrictions, starting from the representation of graphic sex scenes on stage. As Sierz has written, "showing sex in public is often unsettling because it is a reminder of our most intimate feelings, and of what we most desire to keep secret; images of sex cause anxiety because they refer to powerful and uncontrollable feelings; when sex is coupled with emotions such as neediness or loneliness, the effect can be immensely disturbing"[34]. However, as he later pointed out, " by the nineties, nudity was no longer a symbol of liberation, but had become more problematic, often associated with vulnerability, with being victimized"[35].

One in-yer-face play that involves explicit sex scenes tied with disturbing themes such as drug addiction or masochism is, undoubtedly, Mark Ravenhill's corrosive black comedy *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), which many consider "the manifesto" of the In-Yer-Face Theatre *par excellence*. The play, unconventional for its structure and themes, involves a group of three misfits friends (the narcissistic drug-addict Mark, the aspiring actress Lulu and Mark's bisexual lover, Robbie) and their economic struggles in a seemingly dystopian society that has been devoured by eccessive consumerism.

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[32] Brenton, *Hot Irons (Diaries, Essays, Journalism)*, cit., p. 31
[33] Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, cit., p. 49.
[34] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 8.
[35] *Idem*, p. 31.

At the beginning of the play, Mark has been thrown out a rehab clinic after having had sex with another addict. Due to his emotional dependency on people, Mark starts to date Gary, a teenage hustler whose life was deeply scarred by the brutal sexual abuses his father had perpetrated on him, thus prompting him to develop masochistic tendencies. In the meantime, Lulu and Robbie start to work for the eccentric, psychopathic drug dealer Brian. When they lose 300 tablets of ecstasy that they were meant to sell, the pair is threatened by their employer, and have to find every possible way to pay him back. With ist dark, morbid humor and multiple references to a desperately consumistic post-thatcherian world, Ravenhill's play is a fierce satire against the fake positivity imposed by the Capital, where human emotions and genuine relationships devolved into mere commercial transactions, which not even an act of violence happening right in front of our eyes can suscitate a genuine reaction that is not self-serving, as illustrated in Scene Five. When they meet in a pub, Lulu tells Robbie an episode she had witnessed:

> LULU. I mean, what kind of planet is this when you can't even buy a bar of chocolate?
> ROBBIE. I think that's why I worried so much.
> LULU. And afterwards of course you feel so guilty. Like you could have done something.
> ROBBIE. They attacked you?
> LULU. Not me. The Seven-Eleven. Walking past and I think: I'd like a bar of chocolate. So I go in but I can't decide which one. There's so much choice. Too much. Which I think they do deliberately. I'm only partly aware - and really, why should I be any more aware? - that an argument is forming at the counter. A bloke. Dirty pissy of -
> ROBBIE. Wino?
> LULU. Probably. Wino sort of a bloke is having a go at this [student] girl [...] behind the counter. Wino is rising his voice to student. There's a couple of us in there. Me-chocolate. Somebody else, TV guides. (Because now they made the choice on TV guides so fucking difficult as well.) And wino's shouting: You've given me twenty. I asked for a packet of ten and you've given me twenty. And I didn't see anything. Like the blade or anything. But I suppose he must have hit her artery. Because there was blood everywhere [...] I took the bar of chocolate. She's being attacked and I picked this up and just for a moment I thought: I can take this and there's nobody to stop me. Why did I do that? What am I?[36]

Loss of humanity, indifference towards the suffering of others and a nostalgia for a "pure" past that probably never existed are also reflected in Scene Nine, when Brian pays a visit to Robbie and Lulu's flat. He shows them a video of a child playing the cello. During the viewing, the pusher weeps, and laments how this is "like a memory, a memory of what we've lost"[34], just to angrily lash out to Robbie and threaten them both for having blown the selling of the drugs: "Learn the rules. Money. There's boarding fees and the uniforms, the gear, the music, skiing. Which is why I run such

[36] Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and Fucking* in *Plays: 1*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2013, pp. 28-31.

a tight ship, you see? Which is why I have to keep the cash flow flowing, you see? Which is why I can't let people FUCK. ME. AROUND. You understand?"[37]. The scene ends with the bizarre drug dealer slyly threatening the pair by playing a video showing a man being tortured to death with a drill: the same fate will happen to them if they do not pay him back. The wholesome beauty of a child playing a cello is completely shattered by a snuff, a man awaiting a gruesome death, and all of this because of the god that rules this society: money.

In the end, all the problems related to it will be paid off by Gary, the teenage hustler, through a disturbing scene of "consensual" rape. Over the course of the play, there are many explicit sex scenes between him and Mark, but nothing can be compared to the sheer brutality of this climax. In it, Gary is blindfolded by Lulu and viciously raped in turn by Robbie and Mark. During the intercourse, Gary revives the terrific abuse of his father, who tended to use a knife on him, which prompts his abusers to do the same. The scene ends abruptly, and spectators jump to a conclusion: the debt with Brian is paid ("Money is civilization, and civilization is money") and the last scene shows Mark, Lulu and Robbie feeding each other with food, apparently at peace with each other.

"The people in the play are just trying to make sense of a world without religion or ideology", Ravenhill says, "they're kids without parental guidance - they're out there on their own having to discover a morality and a way to live as they go along". However, it would be wrong to see them as victims: "they are quite tough and optimistic, they keep trying out new schemes, they don't moan [...] they don't call on the government to sort out their lives; they don't say they should get more unemployment benefit; they don't have a political vocabulary" [38]. Here lies the playwright's provocation: the audience feel unsure whether to feel empathy or disgust for them.

The controversial rape scene involving Gary was seen by some as a kind of messed-up christological symbolism, but Ravenhill denied that: "I wanted the power situation at that moment to be dialectical; Gary seems to be the victim, but actually it's the others who have become victims because he led them to a point where he expects them to do something that horrifies them - and they've got to do it; in most power relations, there's something more complex going on than just a simple oppressor and oppressed; it's more ambiguous"[39]. After that sequence, Gary does not appear on stage anymore, nor is he mentioned again. His fate is unknown, although one could argue that the unknown food the three misfits eat might possibly be Gary's flesh: they possessed him and might have literally eaten him in the same monotone yet chaotic routine of consumerism, where love is nowhere to be found and sex is strictly related to shopping and purchasing.

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[37] *Idem*, p. 44.
[38] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 130.
[39] *Idem*, p. 131.

A critique against society, this time focused more on its fears instead of its selfish consumerism can be found in Dennis Kelly's controversial *Osama the Hero* (2002). Written at a time when the In-Yer Face theatre movement was no longer as popular as it was in the 90s and where the post 9/11 terrorist attacks paranoia spread all over the world, the play involves a teenager who, after causing controversy for writing a school project defending Al-Qaeda Leader Osama bin Laden, is abducted, tied to a chair and brutally tortured with a hammer by his four neighbours, who accuse him of having bombed the garage of one of them.

MANDY puts the tape back on.

LOUISE. Gary? I want you to nod that you did it. If you don't, Mark's going to smash you in the teeth with his hammer. D'you understand?

Gary nods.

FRANCIS. Louise -

LOUISE. Make sure his skull's against the floor.

FRANCIS. Maybe he's had enough.

[...]

LOUISE. Gary, did you do it?

Shakes his head.

Hit him.

MARK smashes the ball of the hammer into the front of his mouth. MANDY looks away.

FRANCIS. Fuck!

MARK. Pervert.

LOUISE. Gary, did you do it? Gary?

GARY shakes his head.

[...]

MARK hits his teeth again. [...] MARK hits him in the mouth again, choosing a different angle that haven't been smashed.

[...]

MANDY. He's chocking on the blood.

MANDY begins to take the tape off[...] She pulls. Rips his lips off.[40]

Kelly's play presents various similarities with Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, not just in the numbers of characters employed (five), but also for its depiction of a society that is on the edge of destruction, in which it takes a "scapegoat" to "cleanse" the sinners' damaged lives and souls, just like the baby in Bond's *Saved* or Ravenhill's afore mentioned work. The hammering scene, with the repetition of hits on Gary's taped mouth and teeth, is unnerving and disturbing, especially for the characters' reactions: while Louise and Mark seem to sadistically enjoy it, Francis and Mandy feel

[40] Dennis Kelly, *Osama the Hero*, Oberon Books, London, 2013, cit., pp. 56-59.

horrified by it. The play's controversy lies also in its fiercely provocative title, that once prompted the police to interrupt its performance at London's Hampstead Theatre.

These four plays show how art continuously refers to real life events to provoke reactions, to criticize and portray the harsh realities of the world. In the specific case of In-Yer-Face Theatre, some detractors argued that it was just a sensationalised provocation with no deeper meaning other than being shock-provoking. Yet it is undeniable that its authors, like Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Martin Crimp or Patrick Marber, have managed to change the perception of British drama for good. However, one single author has left a greater mark than all of them. Her plays, as disturbing and hard-to-look at as hose of her colleagues, also have a tender, empathetic sense of humanity and redemption, even for the nastiest characters. She wrote only six works before her tragic death, which occurred on 20 February 1999. Despite her short life and career, this author is nowadays regarded as one of the best and most prominent authors of contemporary British theatre, and her works transcend the aggressive provocation of the others. In them one finds also a moving lyricism, even if they do not backtrack at all when it comes to show atrocities. This playwright's name is Sarah Kane.

2. *Blasted*, or "the Disgusting Piece of Filth"

Igra rokenrol cela Jugoslavija
Sve se oko tebe ispravlja i savija

The whole Yugoslavia plays rock and roll
everything around you is straightening and bending
(Električni Orgazam, Igra rokenrol cela Jugoslavija, Song)

2.1 Kane's Early Years

From her early, still unpublished monologues to the *4.48 Psychosis* "swan song", Sarah Kane's works all deal with themes that are directly related to the extremes of in-yer-face theatre. There is a lot of disturbing imagery, from throats being cut, hangings, dismemberment and cannibalism to rape and sodomy, which are represented in front of a live audience. However, what really stands out in Kane's plays is the theme of love in all its forms, as well as an unsettling, tender sense of empathy felt not just for the victims of such depraved violence, but even for the perpetrators. This is a significant departure from the usual in-yer-face movement, whom Kane herself described as "plays about disaffected groups of youths exploring their sexuality"[41]. Furthermore, she added: "Movements define retrospectively and always on grounds of imitation. If you have three or four writers who do something interesting there will be ten others who are just copying it [...] The media look for movements, even invent them. The writers themselves are not interested in it"[42].

Sarah Marie Kane was born the 3 February 1971 in the Kelvedon Hatch village, in the Borough of Brentwood, Essex. Her mother was a teacher and her father, Peter, was a Daily Mirror journalist. Grew up as a Christian, just to later become an atheist ("It was my first relationship breakup, I suppose"[43]). Since her very young age, Kane showed a particular interest in writing short stories and poems. After high school, she enrolled at the University of Bristol to study drama. The experience there, however, proved to be a difficult one, especially for the hostile relationship she developed with some of the lecturers. One time, when one of them panned an essay she wrote by deeming it "pornographic", she reproached by throwing some porn magazines at his face during the next class. This, along with other troubles with the University authorities, prompted her to spend two years completely avoiding the department whenever she could.

[41] Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2016, p. 7.
[42] *Ibidem*.
[43] *Idem*, p. 22.

During this period she had her first stage performance as an actress in the role of Bradshaw in Howard Barker's 1983 play *Victory*. The three-hour long drama involves Kane's character, a Puritan woman whose husband, a Republican revolutionary responsible for the murder of King Charles, was brutally executed, with his dismembered remains displayed at public behest. Bradshaw tries everything in her power to get her husband's desecrated body back, even if it means to face off the wrath of Charles Stuart, the new power-hungry monarch. The play is not just an epic tale that presents the first stages of the capitalistic plague that would infect British history and politics, but also an imaginative retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone*. As Bradshaw, the Sophoclean heroin challenges authoritative figures, both divine and political. It is a struggle that puts into question the female role in a mostly male-dominated society. Kane herself reprises this motif in her 1998 play *Cleansed*, with the grief-stricken character of Grace, whose search for her dead brother's body in the campus/concentration camp administered by the cruel Tinker leads to her imprisonment, torture and forced, gruesome sex change.

Kane also directed a corpus of monologues from Samuel Beckett's literary production and an adaptation of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), but it was only in early 1991 that she had her writing debut, "commissioned" by her friend and colleague David Grieg for the opening night of the Hen and Chicken Pub Theatre in Bedminster. The text was entitled *Comic Monologue*, which was later re-proposed to the *Edinburgh Festival of Theatre* for an exhibition entitled *Dreams, Screams and Silences*. For the same festival, Kane also wrote *What She Said*, an improvised play with her then-partner Vincent O'Connell, who later directed *Skin* (1995), her only credit as screenwriter. At that same time, she wrote a third monologue, *Starved*, and attended the performance that probably had the greatest impact on her writing: the experiential play *Mad* by Jeremy Weller, which was a part of his Glassmarket Project. The main purpose of this collective, involving both professional and non-professional actors, was to "give voice" to the subalterns, the mavericks, all the people that were casted aside by society. If a play like *Soldiers* dealt with the (non) actors' real life experiences in the Northern Irish/Bosnian conflict, *Mad* involved the delicate theme of mental illness, and saw actually mentally-ill patients performing. As Kane recalled,

> It was a very unusual piece of theatre because it was totally experiential as opposed to speculatory. As an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress and then popped to 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 [...] *Mad* took me to hell, and the night I saw it I made a decision about the kind of theatre I wanted to make - experiential[44].

[44] Graham Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, Faber and Faber, London, 2009, p. 47.

Traumatic events can also be found in the three afore mentioned plays that Kane wrote in her early years. Although the scripts were never published ("Perhaps she considered them juvenilia; perhaps she felt they were too personal, or too provisional"[45] as Dan Rebellato argues), the original copies are still conserved in the University of Bristol's Theatre Collection. *Comic Monologue*, *What She Said* and *Starved* can all be considered part of a "bodily" trilogy, involving the suffering and evolution of the human body, from sexual abuse to sexual orientation and passivity and concluding with the painful metamorphosis concerning starvation and eating disorders.

The female protagonist of *Comic Monologue*, with her straight-to-the-point, seemingly deadpan delivery, recounts her date with a man named Kevin. One night, while at his place, the man demands sex from her, an act that they still have not done. Upon her refusal, a furious struggle ensues, with the date now turned aggressor forcing the narrator to oral sex. In her final statement, the protagonist bleakly asserts how there is no turning back after suffering rape. In this play, some similarities with Franca Rame's 1981 *Lo Stupro* (trans. The Rape) can be detected. On the night of 9 March 1973 Rame, wife and strict collaborator of Nobel Prize winner playwright Dario Fo, was ambushed and locked inside a van by a group of neofascists who at the time were acting as agents provocateurs in left-wing circles. For the whole night, Rame was viciously tortured and raped by them. The most shocking part of the whole ordeal was that the attack was commissioned as a vengeance for Rame's anti-fascist political activity. Her monologue, which starts from the initial confusion and proceeds with the unfiltered retelling of the most barbaric acts she had endured, along with the sexist untrustworthiness of the Law officers, shows how it is not just a simple retelling of a tragic event in its raw honesty, but a commentary on the exploitation the female body suffers at the hands of violent forces.

While Rame starts with the initial spaced-out uncertainty of the context, Kane's narration goes in a crescendo:

> The tightly controlled, sparse prose in some senses clashes jarringly with the subject mattter, but creates a buildup of subtextual emotion that emerges powerfully in the final paragraphs. The economy of the writing perhaps also serves to suggest the annihilation of the speaker's sense of self in that violation, an effect emphasised by the fact that the man is named 'Kevin' while the speakers remains only 'WOMAN'[46].

What She Said deals with a love triangle between the unnamed protagonist, her passive boyfriend Howard and her flamboyant, lesbian friend Deb. The title is a clear reference to The

[45] Dan Rebellato, "Sarah Kane before *Blasted*: The Monologues", in Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (edited by), *Sarah Kane in Context*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011, pp. 28-44, p. 28.
[46] *Idem*, pp. 31-32.

Smiths' song of the same name. Both the play and the song deal with an insecure, frail young woman unsatisfied of her life and who is looking forward for "a tattoed-boy from Birkenhead to really open her eyes". The main character of Kane's play, who is in an open relationship with Howard, starts to question her own bisexuality when Deb points out men's fundamental misogyny. The two form a sexual relationship from which the protagonist gains more confidence in herself. As Dan Rebellato writes, "unlike the austere, precise *Comic Monologue*, this play brims with puns and allusions, mostly deriving from the cut-and-thrust of the speaker's banter with Deb"[47]. The three characters that are voiced by a single narrator, which creates a sense of uncertainty on who is speaking. This choice, that will later become an important part in the semiotic, prosaic streams of consciousness of Kane's *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, along with the idea of the gender-changed present in the future *Cleansed*, can both be seen as a metaphor on the fluidity of gender that intercourse among the protagonist, Howard and Deb: they are respectively shy, weak and wisecracking, and through their encounters, they mix and separate, until becoming one single individual/speaker.

The third and final monologue of this trilogy, *Starved*, is told by a teenage girl suffering from a severe form of eating disorder, that leads to her hospitalization. With its rhythm echoing Samuel Beckett's prose, this text might be considered as the most mature and sophisticated of the three monologues, a heap of all the thematic elements that will be found in Kane's following works. From the depiction of a seemingly dystopian society where major institutions such as schools and healthcare are just a fertile ground for every kind of abuse that anticipates the Orwellian atmosphere of *Cleansed* to the speaker's prose, where "as her weight diminishes, the piece's dramaturgical syntax disintegrates and the second half is fragmented, impressionistic, and sometimes numbed with apparent horror at the brutality of the world"[48]. If the narrative ambiguity of *What She Said* was implying the change/fluidity of two genders, here the readers are witnessing the mental and physical breakdown of a Foucaldian "plastic body", made even more disturbing by the protagonist's insistence of telling them that she is feeling better.

In this trilogy, one finds all the elements that make Sarah Kane's theatre so revolutionary, with all the extremes of love and pain, or Eros and Thanatos. Although dark and gut-wrenching, Kane did not feel her work should be labeled like that. In fact, she said: "I don't find my plays depressing or lacking in hope. But then I am someone whose favourite band is Joy Division because I find their songs uplifting. To create something beautiful about despair, out of a feeling of despair, is for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do"[49].

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[47] *Idem*, p. 34.
[48] *Idem*, p. 35.
[49] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 91.

After these first experiences, the real controversial breakthrough came when Kane's first play, *Blasted*, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs of London on 12 January 1995. Its unexpected, gruesome metaphor of the bloody war that was destroying Yugoslavia at that time, and the hopeful idea of finding humanity in the worst scenario possible cause lots of negative reviews and press, but it was at that exact moment when Sarah Kane's name entered by force on the British stage and on the history of theatre as a whole.

2.2 Stages of War Crimes

On 27 June 1971, an opening ceremony of the Tunnel of "Brotherhood and Unity" in the Goražde municipality in eastern SR Bosnia-Herzegovina, in ex-Yugoslavia, was held. The creation of this passage connects the borders of Bosnia and Serbia. Present at the ceremony is Džemal Bijedić, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia. The joy and happiness are everywhere in the cheering crowd, until Bijedić accidentally cuts his own thumb during the ribbon-cutting ceremony, his blood rapidly gushing on the people's faces. This scene, which constitutes the incipit of Srđan Dragojević's 1996 darkly comedic war epic *Лепа села лепо горе* (trans. "Pretty Village, Pretty Flame"), is a bleak omen of how things in Yugoslavia went downhill, until the outbreak of one of the bloodiest wars ever occurred in European soil, which also caused the definite fall and division of Yugoslavia and the systematic slaughter of almost 100.000 people, among civilians and soldiers.

The story of Yugoslavia is long and complex, and since the early modern times, due to the various invasions of the Ottoman Empire, it has always been a multi ethnic society shared by Serbians, Croatians, Bosnian Muslims, Macedonians and Montenegrins. However, over the course of its history, Yugoslavia faced many pogroms against religious and ethnic minorities. In 1846, Prince Bishop and poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš published the epic poem *Gorski vijenac* (trans. "The Mountain Wreath") in which, through a series of dialogues and monologues, the national inner conflict against the spread of the Turkish power is depicted. The idea of mixing with a Muslim population is seen, by the main character of Metropolitan Danilo I Petrović-Njegoš (the author's ancestor) as a threat to Montenegro's traditional and cultural values, represented by the "pure blood" Montenegrins converting to Islam. The poem, just like the real story in which it is based on, ends with a total massacre of the Muslim population, carried by the Christian Montenegrin chieftains during the Christmas Eve in 1702. Despite its huge importance in the national Montenegrin culture, Petrović-Njegoš' epic is now regarded by some as a manual for ethnic cleansing and fratricidal genocide. If the controversial panorama of the 1990s Yugoslavia is taken into consideration, the author's ideas and theories get a bleaker significance.

After the end of World War II, with the defeat of the Italian fascists and the Hitler regime, the Yugoslavian territory, under the leadership of President Josip "Tito" Broz, former partisan, unified and became a Federal Republic based on the USSR model. All the ethnic and religious tensions among the populations were firmly repressed, in order to create a utopian state based on equality and peace. Tito's dream ended with his death, which occurred in 1980. In the following ten years, the balance restored by the "Uz Maršala" started to slowly crumble. All the nationalistic sentiments that were so thoroughly repressed by Tito, sometimes even by force as during the 1971 Croatian Spring, started to crawl back. Demands for independence and abolition of multilingualism began to flow, while inflation caused a progressive devaluation of the national currency, the Yugoslav dinar.

In these complicated times, many nationalistic politicians surfed the wave of these hateful sentiments ready to explode again. Among them, Serbian politician Slobodan Milošević managed to suppress every Titoist feeling in Serbia, claiming that the Serbian population had actually been discriminated by the Yugoslavian constitution. In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the following dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the war that was so feared in the Yugoslavian territory finally broke out. The first was Croatia, followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, in a macabre domino effect. The economic, social and ethnic tensions that were put under control during Tito's years finally exploded in a climate of ultra-nationalistic ethnic cleansing: friendships were divided, families destroyed and cities and villages burned to the ground. The amount of war crimes was atrocious, especially for the slaughters and rapes perpetrated against civilians, especially against the Muslim community. As Indijana Hidović Harper recalls,

> The Serb purge of Muslims through ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, even slaugh- ter, has been overwhelmingly supported by Bosnian Serbs (this is a fact corroborated by many ethnically cleansed Muslims and, recently, some released camp inmates I have personally spoken to). The worst and most abhorrent acts of violence are committed by yesterday's neighbours and friends. So, Serbs were in the grip of mass hysteria, I told myself. That still leaves us with Croats, victims of Serbian aggression like us. [...] The Western indifference and refusal to act to save my people has left me increasingly wondering if our victimization is not acceptable to our Christian neighbours on the grounds that we are Muslims, and therefore undesirable in their midst[50].

The suffering of the population, forced to run away or subjected to atrocious tortures and humiliations, became an international sensation with the televised massacres that showed a clear example of the Sontagian view of the pain of the others. One of the most infamous episodes of the war was the Srebrenica Massacre. In July 1995, the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, which was under the

[50] Indijana Hidovic Harper, "Personal Reactions of a Bosnian Woman to the War in Bosnia", *Feminist Review*, Autumn, 1993, No. 45, Thinking Through Ethnicities (Autumn, 1993), pp. 102-107, pp. 104-105.

Dutch UN Troops' protection, was attacked by the Serbian army. Surrounded and outnumbered, the Dutch had also the responsibility of taking care of thousands of civilians, mostly Bosnian muslims:

> Though the Dutch shared their water and food with refugees, supplies were totally inadequate. Some women grew so desperate that they risked encounters with Serb soldiers by scouring abandoned houses in Potoćari in search for food and water. There were virtually no sanitation facilities for refugees and they were forced to urinate and defecate where they sat. [...] The stench of sweat and excrement became unbearable [...] Clearly the situation was untenable, and a speedy evacuation of the refugees seemed the only possible solution[51].

The inability to provide basic needs to the civilians, the failure of organizing a safe evacuation and the unclear information received by the Headquarters prompted the Dutch to accept a pact with the Serbian General Ratko Mladić, thus allowing him and his men to enter the compound where all the civilians were hiding and proceed to inspect them and starting to organize what appeared to be an evacuation plan.

General Mladić was the son of Neđa, a Yugoslavian partisan who was killed by the ultranationalist members of the Ustaše during World War II, an event that prompted the young Ratko to develop a profound hatred for Croatians and Muslims. During the Yugoslavian war, he and his troops were known especially for their sheer brutality in action, as well as for their participation in the construction of concentration camps for Muslims. However, during the Srebrenica siege, Mladić, filmed by his own camera crew, presented himself as a liberator in front of the terrified and confused refugees: "All who wish to go will be transported, large and small, young and old. Don't be afraid, just take it easy. Let the women and children go first. Thirty buses will come and take you in the direction of Kladanj. No one will harm you"[52]. After this delivery, he proceeded to distribute bread, sweets and water. This act, along with the unarmed civilians being transported on bus to what seemed to be a safe area, appeared to be a rare act of kindness and humanity in wartime, but, as it turned out, it was just a carefully mastered plan of extermination. As Mladić later said to the civilians, without the presence of his camera crew: "Do you see now what your government has done to you? It has abandoned you. It wouldn't protect you, even NATO cannot protect you. It's all in vain because we are not afraid of anybody. You thought that Srebrenica would never fall, but we will take Srebrenica when we like"[53].

The foreign camera crews and journalists that were investigating were assaulted and forced to step back, the refugees were robbed of their money and cards and then brought inside some inhabited

[51] Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, Penguin, New York, 1997, pp. 28-29.
[52] *Idem*, p. 35.
[53] *Idem*, p. 40.

warehouses, far away from Srebrenica. There, all huddled together, more than ten thousand Muslim men, women and children were all systematically gunned down by Serbian soldiers. Hakija Huseinović, a man who miraculously survived the massacre, recounted this version:

> There was a lot of screaming, shouting, people were crying out for help in the warehouse. Many were wounded. As I lay down, the right-hand side of my body got soaked in blood. [...] I covered myself with two dead bodies and stayed underneath for twenty-four hours. During the day I heard someone calling 'Salko, Salko'. He repeated it about twenty times. [Then someone said] 'Fuck your Turkish mother. You're still alive.' There was a rifle shot. You couldn't hear the voice again. Afterwards, a truck and a mechanical shovel appeared. They started tearing down the side of the warehouse facing the road, then they started loading [...] I was thinking, 'This is the end for me, all that fear has been in vain', but you have to keep hoping whilst you're still alive. And then I heard someone say 'Park the shovel, wash the tarmac and cover the dead bodies with hay. It's enough for today.[54]

Hakija managed to escape during the night. To this day, many of the corpses are yet to be found.

Considered as one of the most terrible war crimes in contemporary history, the Srebrenica event was later dramatised in the 2020 film *Quo vadis, Aida*, directed by Jasmila Žbanić. Told through the perspective of a Bosnian interpreter (Jasna Đuričić), the film raises a provocative question. The bloodshed still happens, but it is off screen. The only thing the audience sees in the shot of the rifles entering through the warehouse's windows and firing, without seeing their effect on the victims' bodies. Throughout the film, Žbanić manages to create an unnerving feeling of suspense, especially when Mladić (Boris Isaković) and his men appear to show an image themselves as saviors rather than butchers on television. The hidden violence in the film becomes, then, even more disturbing in its "not seeing anything".

The event generated lots of condemnation and attacks from the International Press. The Dutch Un Unit's general, Thom Karremans, was accused of negligence and cowardice, while Mladić and his collaborators were trialed and sentenced for crimes against humanity. The war officially ended with the NATO intervention, but it was already too late. Yugoslavia ceased to exist, and all its states became independent: a wound in their history that will never stop bleeding. Tito's dream of a unified nation failed, when all the humanity was darkened by the rapes, massacres and destructions. The images of corpses shot full of holes abandoned in the middle of the streets, the writing "Welcome to Hell" on Sarajevo's walls and the testimonies of survivors and perpetrators still haunt the now former Yugoslavia's memory.

In Kitty Felde's 2007 stage play *A Patch of Earth*, on the trial of a 25-year-old veteran from the Srebrenica massacre, the main character, Dražen Erdemović, is haunted by the ghosts of his own victims and decides to testify in order to seek redemption for the atrocities he had committed. Felde

[54] *Idem*, p. 56.

uses lines which literally quote the minutes of the trial before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia:

> JUDGE: Mr. Erdemović. Tell us please. Why did you decide to testify before this tribunal? What feelings underlie your decision?
>
> *The lights go out on the judge, once again leaving Erdemović alone on stage.*
>
> ERDEMOVIĆ: I wanted to testify because of my conscience. Because of all that happened. Because I did not want that. I was simply compelled to, forced to. And I could choose between my life and the lives of those people. And had I lost my life then, it would not have changed the fate of those people. The fate of those people was decided by someone holding a much higher position than I did. And as I have said already— what really got me—it's completely destroyed my life. That is why I testified.
>
> [...]
>
> PROSECUTOR: Your honors. The defendant before you, Dražen Erdemović, will be the first person to be sentenced before an international criminal tribunal in fifty years. Mr. Erdemović has pleaded guilty to a crime against humanity. [...] Were Mr. Erdemović the one who planned, organized or instigated this monstrous crime, my recommendation to you would be simple and direct: impose a life sentence. That will not be my recommendation to you. In this case, Mr. Erdemović, a low ranking member of the Bosnian Serb army, followed orders [...] Let me very clear on this point: Mr. Erdemović has provided substantial assistance to the prosecutors' office in relation to the investigations of Srebrenica. His cooperation was and continues to be unconditional. I will tell your honors quite frankly: his assistance to us has been invaluable.[55]

What really had stood out, in all these atrocities, is the complete powerlessness that spectators from all over the world felt while watching the bombings blasting that war-torn nation. All the sources available were only the peak of the iceberg, and many gruesome details were kept hidden for years. As the morality struggle for suppressing something for the sake of hiding the truth, it was up to art to narrate these events with no filters, thus showing the audience the raw truth of the world surrounding it. These elements of hidden/showed suffering, with the related feelings of impotence and search for redemption in a world at the eve of destruction were the main inspiration for Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Initially conceived as a play involving the meeting between a young woman and an

[55] Kitty Felde, *A Patch of Earth*, in Robert Skloot (edited by), *The Theatre of Genocide: Four Plays about Mass Murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, and Armenia*, University of Winsconsin Press, London, 2008, pp. 173-175.

older man in a hotel room that escalates into a sexual assault, the story later took a different turn due to the Yugoslavian conflict itself. As Kane later told to Graham Saunders,

> The day I started writing it it was in 1992 when Srebrenica was under siege, and I was getting more and more depressed having been reading about what was happening in Bosnia during the previous two years, and then seeing all this footage on television. And there was a woman who looked directly at the camera, who looked about seventy years old; and her face was lined and grey - she was just crying her eyes out. And she looked at the camera and said 'Please, please help us. We don't know what to do, please help us', and I just sat there crying watching it; and it wasn't even the so much a sense of helplessness, as just seeing such extreme pain. And I don't think it was conscious, but I think I started to want to write about that pain. That was probably when I had the idea that I wanted a soldier in it.[56]

In these events, some might choose to forget and hope for a better future, others might learn to live with pain and melancholy, like the character of Valja (an extraordinary Nicolas Koslo) featured in Dragojević's *Лепа села лепо горе*, who dances with a sad smile to the rhythm of an 80s Serbian rock song while his platoon torches a village, with its inhabitants and cattle in it.

2.3 Ian, Cate and the Soldier

A hotel room with a bed, a minibar and a window with a city view. On stage, there are two characters, a young woman and a middle-aged man. It seems the beginning of an ordinary, one-room setting play that either evolve into a romantic dramedy, but the first line spoken by the male character ("I've shat in better places than this"[57]) completely changes the tone. The mention of a bodily process such as defecation, and the following racist statement of the same character ("Tip that wog when he brings up the sandwiches"[58]) immediately throw the audience into what seems to be an escalation of linguistic, sexual and physical violence that will upset and disgust. The stage shared by the two figures will later present the appearance of an unnamed soldier, thus plunging the whole story in a nightmarish war setting, with the same room being destroyed by an explosion.

This was *Blasted*, Sarah Kane's major breakthrough in the British stage scene after the "underground" performances of the unpublished trilogy of monologues. Its opening at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs provoked a huge amount of controversies that could be compared to those caused by Edward Bond's *Saved* and Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. Many spectators walked out of the theatre during the performance, the adjectives "depressing", "disturbing" and "hopeless" were thrown around a lot to describe its graphic nature, and theatre critics were divided

[56] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., pp. 49-50.
[57] Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020, cit., p. 3.
[58] *Idem*, p. 3.

between those who loved it and those who despised it. Among them, Jack Tinker of *The Daily Mail* gave it an utterly scathing review, as "[he] found Ms. Kane's budding talent so utterly and entirely disgusting that he had been driven, finally, into the arms of 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'; Mr. Tinker suggested that the reason only one person left the 65-seat theatre during the performance was that the British were too polite and stoical to do anything but grin and bear it"[59]. Tinker, notorious for his flamboyant, savage writing style, advised Kane to find some therapy and defined her play a "disgusting piece of filth"[60], a line that was later used by the media to identify what was seen as the work of an immature, provocative enfant terrible. As Kane later recalled, "I wasn't at all aware that Blasted would scandalize anyone; at the time I wrote it, I didn't even expect it to be produced; personally, I think it's a shocking play, but only in the sense that fallinng down the stairs is shocking - it's painful and it makes you aware of your own fragility, but one doesn't tend to be morally outraged about falling down stairs"[61].

Despite the harsh backlash, the play also had its defenders. John Peter from *The Sunday Times* praised it as a work "born of an unleavened, almost puritanical moral outrage [that is needed] Theatre is alive only if it is kicking"[62]. Playwrights Edward Bond and Harold Pinter were positively impressed by the disturbing, anti-naturalistic nature of the whole performance. Harassed by reporters and paparazzis, with her face appearing in every newspaper of the United Kingdom, now Sarah Kane was known by everyone. However, she claimed that,

> It was a kind of self-perpetuating hysteria amongst journalists which wasn't really shared by audiences [...] I think it's to do with the failure of the critical establishment in this country to develop a satisfactory critical language with which to talk about the plays...what *Blasted* got - almost without exception - was a list of atrocities as if this somehow was a value of judgement on the play. And it is what most theatre reviews are - a kind of synopsis of what happens and then a short note at the end saying whether or not the story was pleasing to the critic.[63]

What might be considered really disturbing was in fact the hysterical media coverage given to this fictional story, something that is completely different from the apathetic, stone-wall approach usually given to actual rapes and murders, as if the representation of violence itself were more dangerous than the real, actual horrors affecting our world. As Andrew Lukas, a 25-year-old audience member said after attending a performance of *Blasted*, "it was more educational for me than therapeutical; it showed an aspect of moral degradation and there was something everyone could learn from it"[64].

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[59] Mary Braid, "Young Playwright Blasted for 'Brutalist' Work", *The Independent*, 20 January 1995, accessed 08/02/2023.
[60] David Benedict, Disgusting Violence? Actually It's Quite a Peaceful Play, *The Independent*, 22/01/1995, accessed 08/02/2023.
[61] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 94.
[62] *Idem*, p. 96.
[63] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., p. 51.
[64] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 97.

With the Yugoslavian conflict raging on Eastern Europe with heavy casualties on all sides, the Leeds hotel room that serves as a setting for the play being attacked and destroyed could be seen as a direct blow to the seemingly comfortable moral of the untouchable England, or the West world as a whole. Similar to Brenton's *The Romans* entering on stage dressed in military uniforms and using contemporary racial slurs; the hotel room is our own land, our body, that can be raped and devastated at any moment, a poetic device that was used also by the *My Vagina Was My Village* monologue presented in Eve Ansler's controversial *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), featuring a Bosnian woman retelling her horrific experience in which, after the destruction of her village, she was sent to a rape camp. These brutalities were happening in the East, and they could happen anywhere else too. The blasting of a familiar setting, a so called "safe space", creates discomfort and fear, along with the bloodshed that follows.

It seems clear from the very beginning that Kane wanted to represent all the shades of violence, starting from its language. The male character, Ian, is described as a 45 years old, Welsh-born journalist who suffers from a terrible cough, a symptom of his terminal lung cancer, and has a revolver with him. His first two lines, devoted to a vulgar function and a racist statement against a black waiter, already establish his character's nature. Kane based his persona on an acquaintance she had, who was also dying from cancer: "He was extremely funny, but started telling the most appalling racist jokes I've ever heard in my life [...] I thought he was awful and I was glad he was dying; and it was because he was dying of lung cancer that I thought this poor man is going to be dead and he probably wouldn't be saying this"[65].

The female character, Cate, is a 21-year-old Southerner with a South-London accent, and is the complete opposite of Ian. She is childish, naive and pure. Among her traits, she does not eat meat, she still sucks her thumb and stutters when she is put under pressure. The first action she does while being on stage define her nature as well. Like a child,

> *Cate comes further into the room.*
>
> *She puts her bag down and bounces on the bed.*
>
> *She goes around the room, looking in every drawer, touching everything.*
>
> *She smells the flowers and smiles.*
>
> CATE. Lovely.[66]

The dialogues between Ian and Cate are back-and-forth, reminiscing Pinter's. The feeling of the whole scene seems unnatural and uncomfortable, with Ian drawing his gun every time there is a

[65] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., p. 55.
[66] Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, in *Complete Plays*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020, p. 4.

knock on the door, underlining the paranoia that someone from the organization he works for is coming for him. While this characteristic can be considered as a direct influence from Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), featuring two hit men waiting an assignment in a filthy basement, Ian's repeated taunting of Cate's fragility is a direct reference to Henrik Ibsen's *Doll's House* (1879) or *Ghosts* (1881), especially the female representation of a passive woman being forced to share her life with an abusive man.

> IAN. Hate this city. Stinks. Wogs and Pakis taking over.
>
> CATE. You shouldn't call them that.
>
> IAN. Why not?
>
> CATE. It's not very nice.
>
> IAN. You a nigger lover?
>
> CATE. Ian, don't.
>
> [...]
>
> IAN. Don't like your clothes.
>
> *Cate looks down at her clothes.*
>
> IAN. You look like a lesbos.
>
> CATE. Oh. *(She continues to eat)* Don't like your clothes either.
>
> *Ian looks down at his clothes, then gets up, takes them all off and stands in front of her, naked.*
>
> IAN. Put your mouth on me.
>
> *Cate stares. Then bursts out laughing.*
>
> IAN. No? Fine. Because I stink?
>
> *Cate laughs even more. Ian attempts to dress, but fumbles with embarassment. He gathers his clothes and goes into the bathroom where he dresses.* [67]

Ian's racist and homophobic rants are clearly a way of manipulating Cate, as well as showing off his machism, as witnessed by him exposing his nudity in front of her. The desired effect is erased when she laughs at him. In fact, as Sierz noted, "when masculinity is in crisis, then the effects of this are shown as an uncontrollable explosion of abuse"[68]. Immediately after this humiliation, Ian starts taunting Cate, calling her a "stupid" who "will never have a job". Cate starts to stutter and then, frustrated, falls into an epileptic fit, which first amuses him and then terrifies him once she faints, seemingly only to bolt upright, startling him. The apparent death of Cate prompts their conversation

[67] *Idem*, pp. 5-8.
[68] Aleks Sierz, "Looks like There's a War Going on": Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Political Theatre and the Muslim Other", in Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (edited by), *Sarah Kane in Context*, cit., pp. 45-67, p. 54.

to swift to the topic of "not-being". Ian is dying of cancer, but that does not stop him from drinking gin and smoking, despite Cate's objections.

IAN. Can't stand it.

He goes to the mini-bar and pours himself another large gin and lights a cigarette.

CATE. What?

IAN. Death. Not being.

CATE. You fall asleep and then you wake up.

IAN. How do you know?

CATE. Why don't you give up smoking?

Ian laughs.

CATE. You should. They'll make you ill [...] Imagine what your lungs must look like.

IAN. Don't need to imagine. I've seen [...] Surgeon brought in this lump of rotting pork.

Stank. My lung.

CATE. He took it out?

IAN. Other one's the same now.

CATE. But you'll die.

IAN. Aye.

CATE. Please stop smoking.

IAN. Won't make any difference.[69]

Ian's self destructive, uncaring behavior might be a direct reference to what Al Alvarez, in his 1972 essay *The Savage God: A Study in Suicide* defined as "chronic suicides", or " people who will do everything to destroy themselves, except admit that is what they are after; they will, that is what will, that is, do everything except take the final responsibility for their actions [...] the alcoholics and drug addicts who kill themselves slowly and piecemeal, all the while protesting that they are merely taking the necessary steps to make an intolerable life tolerable"[70].

Ian tries to kiss her, but Cate retreats, as "[their relationship] is characterized by something of a mating ritual of advance and retreat, one in which possession of the upper hand varies; the audience is encouraged to make assumptions and then those assumptions are challenged, facilitatinga more subtle understanding of sexual engagement between female adolescents and (middle-aged) adult

[69] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 10-11.
[70] Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study in Suicide*, Bloomsbury, London, 1971, p. 155.

males"[71]. Ian is miserable, both morally and physically, and tries everything in his power to break Cate's resistance to him. He exposes in front of her, insults her and draws constant sexual allusions. Among these, it is worth mentioning the graphic journalistic account he dictates to a colleague on the phone, regarding the gruesome murder of British tourist Samantha Scarce, who was killed by an unknown killer while visiting New Zealand:

> IAN. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point par.[72]

After this, Ian laughs loudly, adding "That one again, I went to see her. Scouse tart, spread her legs"[73]. This cynical attitude that jumps from the most graphic retelling of a murder to a sexist comment might also be Kane's critic against tabloid journalism as a whole, which is much more interested in the pains of the flesh rather than the victims themselves. It is also quite interesting to notice how Ian's article somehow predicted the same kind of writing rethoric that was used by theatre critics and journalists to review the play.

On one side, there is a violent and bigoted journalist, and on the other a pure, innocent girl who is constantly berated and manipulated by him. There are various hints implying that Ian and Cate's relationship has been going on for a while, and that he changed for the worse. They both refer to their respective families, as well. Ian's wife, Stella, has left him for another woman and he has not seen his only son, Matthew, for a very long time. On the other hand, Cate, is very fond of her family, from her mother and her brother, whom Ian aggressively calls "retarded". This constant back-and-forth of moral aggression and seemingly affectionate acts such as hugging Cate, telling her he loves her and wants to make love with her are all typical traits of manipulations masked as acts of tenderness. Even at the end of the first scene, where Ian offers her flowers, " [he] constructs his romantic gestures, undercut by a crass and unrestrained sexual appetite, express the devastation he visits upon Cate and which, later, in exaggerated form, is visited upon him"[74].

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[71] Helen Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted*, Continuum, London, 2008, p. 26.
[72] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 13.
[73] *Idem*, p. 13.
[74] Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted*, cit., p. 34.

The feeling of uncomfortable uneasiness of the first scene dashes into more gritty territories in the second one. It is the morning after in the hotel room. The couple shared the same bed. Ian wakes up, pours himself a glass of gin and goes to stare at the window. Once he takes a sip, he is overcome by a pain that brings him to his knees, as Cate watches him silently. When the fit passes, the girl utters the first line of the scene, by calling him a "cunt". Her attitude is changed: she is more disgusted by the journalist's manners. As it is later mentioned in the scene, Ian sexually assaulted her during the night. Their relationship, already toxic and troublesome, degenerates just like the situation outside the hotel room. A car backfires in a tremendous bang that frightens Ian so much that he dives for cover on the floor. Cate mocks his fear, and the audience soon find out that Ian has been working for a secret criminal organization, that has later put a hit on him. Cate tries to seduce him in order to get to know more about his shady affairs:

> CATE. Why would they shoot you?
>
> IAN. Revenge.
>
> *Cate runs her hands down his back.*
>
> IAN. For things I've done.
>
> CATE. *(massages his neck)* Tell me.
>
> IAN. Tapped my phone [...] Driving jobs. Picking people up, disposing of bodies, the lot.
>
> *Cate begins to perform oral sex on Ian.*
>
> IAN. Said you were dangerous. So I stopped. Didn't want you in danger. But had to call you again
>
> Missed this. Now I do the real job. I. Am. A. Killer.
>
> *On the word "killer" he comes. As soon as Cate hears the word she bites his penis as hard as she can. Ian's cry of pleasure turns into a scream of pain.*[75]

Cate's innocence is gone: after being tricked by Ian over the course of the previous scene, she plays his same card by having him lower his guard and almost evirating him of the symbol of his toxic manhood. The situation is drastically escalating from the car's explosion to the girl's line uttered while staring at the window: "Looks like there's a war going on"[76]. The knocking at the door is heard two times. The first time it appears to be the unseen waiter bringing the English breakfast ordered by Ian, which causes Cate to stretch due to the presence of sausages, the second time it is the third character of the play: the unnamed Soldier. Knowing the danger that is coming, Cate runs hiding in the bathroom as Ian puts his gun in his holster and opens the door. The following situation is bleakly humorous:

[75] Kane, *Blasted*, from *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 29-31.
[76] *Idem*, p. 33.

IAN. *(under his breath)* Speak the Queen's English fucking nigger.

He opens the door.

Outside is a SOLDIER with a sniper's rifle.

Ian tries to push the door shut and draws his revolver.

The Soldier pushes the door open and takes Ian's gun easily.

The two stand, both surprised, staring at each other.[77]

The Soldier immediately forces Ian to fetch him the just-ordered breakfast and then, "smelling sex", goes in the bathroom to find Cate, much to the journalist's panic. However, to their surprise, Cate has managed to escape from there. "Gone. Taking a risk. Lot of bastard soldiers out there"[78]says the intruder, who ends the second scene by urinating on the bed, just like an animal would mark its territory.

The opening scenes of the play remind the Pinterian idea of an outside threat that is resembled by the characters' estranged relationship, while the bodily element of illness, invoked by Ian's terminal cancer, was a representation of the moral and political decay of the human nature. Now, the menace has entered the stage, and Ian will have to face his own diseased masculinity with a blood-thirsty, numb Soldier for the whole of the third scene. It is at this moment that the Bosnian war's reality enters the play's reality and, in a certain manner, the audience's own too. The room's wall has been blasted by a mortar hit, thus leaving a huge, gaping hole from which spectators finally see the city outside: it could be Leeds any other city. Even the Soldier's final line from the second scene ("Our town now"[79]) somehow relates to what General Mladić said off camera when he and his men conquered Srebrenica. Ian is alone with the product of a cruel environment that has been raging and devastating for a very long time.

The situation in the first two scenes is turned upside down: while Ian was first the assaulter, now he becomes the assaulted, held at gunpoint by an external threat of his same gender, who demands his food and makes sexual allusions ("I am dying to make love, Ian"[80]). The Soldier's curiosity about Ian's nationality and work, along with the recognition of him "not being there long" underlines how the specter of war, represented by this new character, did not come to Leeds, but the other way around: it was Leeds that was transported into a war zone. The Soldier asks Ian if the previous night he had sex with his "girlfriend", and receives a denial. After this, the Soldier starts to tell all the atrocities he had committed with his fellow fighters since the war had started. He begins

[77] *Idem*, p. 36.
[78] *Idem*, p. 38.
[79] *Idem*, p. 39.
[80] *Idem*, p. 42.

by recounting the raid on a civilian house, inhabited by three men and four women, with the youngest being only twelve.

The Soldier raped all the females, before shooting the father in the mouth and hanging the remaining men by their testicles. When asked if he had done something similar and if he had planned to murder Cate, Ian rebuffs him again. His denial of sexual assault, as well as claiming how he never loved her (contrary to what he had previously said), parallel to his bigoted, misogynistic and self-valorizing claims, so that when the Soldier claims that he mistook Ian for a similar, all the journalist's machism crumbles at the face of a monster worse than him, who is literally desperate to confess his crimes to someone who, despite the job he does, is not willing to listen.

When the Soldier tells him that his girlfriend Col's murder had prompted him to enroll in the army and begs him to tell his story, Ian claims that "this isn't a story anyone wants to hear", possibly referring to the numbness the general audience feel once it get used to violent imagery. He tries to prove his point by reading another article he wrote to the Soldier, this time involving a pedophile who kidnapped two young prostitutes (one underage) and whipped them with a belt before violating them, just to downplay it as "just a story". It is at this moment that the Soldier, claiming to be worthy of mention for all the crimes he had committed as payback, leads to Ian's humiliating punishment after Ian's refusal:

SOLDIER. Tell them...you saw me.

IAN. It's not my job. [...] I'm a home journalist, for Yorkshire [...] I do other stuff. [...] Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land. It has to be personal. Your girlfriend, she's a story. Soft and clean. Not you. Filthy, like the wogs. No joy in a story about blacks who gives a shit? Why bring you to light?

SOLDIER. You don't know fuck about me. I went to school. I made love with Col. Bastards killed her, now I'm here. *(He pushes the rifle in Ian's face)* Turn over, Ian.

IAN. Why?

SOLDIER. Going to fuck you.

IAN. No.

SOLDIER. Kill you then.

IAN. Fine.

SOLDIER. See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.

IAN. Yes.

SOLDIER. And now you agree with anything I say.

[...]

The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand. He holds the revolver to Ian's head with the other. He pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him - eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair. The Soldier is crying his heart out. Ian's face registers pain but he is silent.[81]

The dismissive attitude the Soldier demonstrates after the sodomy is followed by another account of atrocities, including women throwing their babies on board truck, desperate to save them but accidentally crushing them; and a starving man eating a leg from his woman's corpse. The theme of trauma and its close relation to memory brings into question the atrocious experiences of men in wartime. As a journalist, Ian should know "how it feels like", but instead he quickly rejected the feeling. The choice of this behavior might be another critique against the tabloid journalism he is paid for, but also a portrayal of what might bring people to perpetrate barbaric thuggery on fellow human beings. What is seen here is, in fact, a dynamic thirst of revenge, toxic influence and will to have power over other bodies.

The Soldier's speech on the crimes committed and the reasons behind them is explored also in Paul Schrader's 2021 film *The Card Counter*, the character of William Tell (Oscar Isaacs), an Abu Ghraib former torturer then-turned poker player, recalls his past actions in a bone chilling monologue where he also seeks to give a reason on why he and his comrades acted like that:

> The noise. The smell. Feces, urine, oil, explosives, bleach, sweat, smoke, all day, every day. Sand spiders, camel spiders, ants as big as cockroaches. The heat. The fear. The adrenaline jack. Mortars. The sheer noise of it. And blood, and the only way to survive was to rise above. Rise and laugh. Surf the craziness. To see a grown man shit and piss on himself! Sing the song. The noise. The fucking noise. The noise. We were all trapped in there. In the same shit, shit, shit, shit hole. Them and us. Am I trying to justify what we did? No. Nothing, nothing can justify what we did.[82]

Schrader's character was trapped in a hellish environment, and all he could do to survive was to vent his frustration on the prisoners; while Kane's soldier endured an attack in which his loved one was taken away from him: in both cases, it is shown how the environment itself and the war circumstances can turn civilised people into emotionless killing machines capable only of murder and maim. The sequence ends with the starving Soldier inflicting a further humiliation to Ian, which seems somewhat Jacobean-Shakespearean influenced:

> IAN. Are you going to kill me?
>
> SOLDIER. Always covering your own arse.
>
> *The Soldier grips Ian's head in his head. He puts his mouth in one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye.*

[81] *Idem*, pp. 48-49.
[82] Paul Schrader (dir.), *The Card Counter* (Universal Pictures, 2021)

SOLDIER. He ate her eyes. Poor bastard. Poor love. Poor fucking bastard.[83]

The fourth scene opens with Ian, now reduced to a broken, blind relic of a former human being, lying close to the Soldier's dead body, having shot himself in the head off stage. In Ian's conditions, the failures of the flesh are explicitly displayed. If castration deprives a man of his own sexual force and sodomy is an external weapon destroying his dignity, blinding someone who works as a journalist can be compared to both. It is a case of what may be seen as a form of poetic justice: as he assaulted a woman to show off his male power and refused to see the hell around him, he has been now raped and blinded. In the meantime, Cate has returned in the room, carrying a crying baby in her arms. The choice might symbolically allude to Ian's now being completely dependent of her. In fact, he desperately asks her for a tender physical contact to feel human again. After having his hair gently stroke by her, Ian decides to put an end to his misery by killing himself:

IAN. Will you help me, Catie?

CATE. How.

IAN. Find my gun.

Cate thinks. Then gets ups and searches around, baby in arms. She sees the revolver in the Soldier's hand [...] She takes the revolver from the Soldier and fiddles with it. It springs open and she stares in at the bullets. She removes them and closes the gun.

[...]

CATE. It's wrong to kill yourself. [...] God wouldn't like it.

IAN. There isn't one.

CATE. How do you know?

IAN. No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing.

[...]

Cate gives him the gun. Ian takes the gun and puts it in his mouth [...] He pulls the trigger. The gun clicks, empty. He shoots again. And again and again and again. He puts the gun out of his mouth.

IAN. Fuck.

CATE. Fate, see. You're not meant to do it. God-

IAN. The cunt *(throws the gun away in despair)*.[84]

This sequence is tragicomedy at its finest. The now "worm-man" Ian wants to finish his own suffering for good, but he cannot. Like a modern Cain, guilty of killing his own brother and condemned to wander the Earth, Ian does not manage to free himself from the pain, thus making the

[83] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., p. 50.
[84] *Idem*, pp. 54-57.

Soldier's torture and Cate's removal of the bullets a form of demented divine intervention. It could also be a "kanian" re-elaboration of two pivotal moments from two distinguished plays: William Shakespeare's King Lear (1605-1606) and Samuel Beckett's Endgame (1957). In the former, the character of Gloucester, having had his eyes gouged out, finds nothing to do but blame the heavens for his miserable conditions like Ian does; while in the latter, the figure of the blind, wheelchair-bound Hamm curses God himself, claiming his non-existence. The scene ends with the baby dying, and Cate later buries it under the stage floorboards, which became "spatial, part of the contemporary landscape that destroyed their innocence and vitality"[85].

For the first time ever in the play, Cate finally gains control of the body that Ian had tried to possess and break: against his objections, she decides to go out and look for some food, knowing that she will have to give herself sexually to the soldiers storming the city. Ian is left alone again, and in a striking montage of dark/light scenery spectators see him leaving behind every little trace of humanity left in him:

> *Darkness. Light.*
>
> *Ian is masturbating.*
>
> IAN. cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt
>
> *Darkness. Light.*
>
> *Ian is strangling himself with his bare hands.*
>
> *Darkness. Light.*
>
> *Ian shitting. And then trying to clean it up with newspapers.*
>
> [...]
>
> *Darkness. Light.*
>
> *Ian crying, huge bloody tears. He is hugging the Soldier's body for comfort.*
>
> [...]
>
> *Darkness. Light.*
>
> *Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby out. He eats the baby.*[86]

When interviewed about the genesis of this scene, Kane recalled, "If that's going to be a moment of the most extreme horror then he has to get as low as he can get; and I thought I'll just take basic things, like eating, wanking and shitting and see how awful they can be when you're really

[85] Christopher Wixson, "'In Better Places': Space, Identity, and Alienation in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*", *Comparative Drama*, Spring 2005, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 75-91, p. 84.
[86] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 59-60.

unhappy - which is pretty awful"[87]. In addition to that, the basic stage directions also anticipate "the destruction of language" that will later characterize Kane's last two works, while Ian's body in pain being an instrument of encapsulation of suffering might also recall a famous adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear starring Sir John Gielgud. During the staging of the famous storm scene, Gielgud/Lear, instead of reacting against it, he embodied it in the movements, just like Ian does in this sequence, with this alternate staging of light and darkness.

The baby-eating moment has a strong Christian overtone, as does the stoning of the infant in Bond's *Saved*. It resembles a messed-up communion, where the body of Christ/the Baby is devoured by a hunger-stricken Ian in a desperate attempt to feed himself and, possibly, to find a redemption for his sins. The journalist seemingly dies when he crawls inside the made-up grave for the infant, but a very dark, humoristic surprise is waiting for him:

> *[Ian] puts the remains back in the baby's blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole. A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor. He dies with relief.*
>
> *It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.*
>
> *Eventually.*
>
> IAN. Shit.[88]

Resurrection, the very thing he early mocked, has happened to him. As Christopher Wixson points out, the cyclical return of Ian's first line means that "the contemptuous, unstable authority of a temporary tenant becomes the emblem of social and existential impotency fittingly, when he finds at the end of the play that he cannot die and cannot find relief"[89].

The play ends silently, with Cate appearing again on stage, this time carrying bread, sausage and a bottle of gin. The blood seeping between her legst implies she had to sell her body to get these basic needs. She sits near Ian's head, eating her meal, and then decides to feed him as well. The line that closes the play is Ian's "Thank you"[90], the first time ever in the play in which he displays genuine gratitude. The quiet tenderness evoked here is like a slow, silent recovery from all the horrors witnessed so far. After all the things Ian and Cate had been through, a thin line of desperate optimism is still standing: in such a perverted world, not all is lost, and finding empathy is the only way to remain human beings. After the abuse she endured by his hands, Cate could have just left Ian starving, but she chooses not to. As Jolene Armstrong states,

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[87] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., p. 57.
[88] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., p. 60.
[89] Christopher Wixson, "'In Better Places': Space, Identity, and Alienation in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*", *Comparative Drama*, Spring 2005, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 75-91, p. 85.
[90] Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, cit., p. 61.

> There is a cycle of brutality in this play that is initiated through Ian's brutal and relentless sexual victimization of Cate which enforces and confirms her inferior status. Ian as liberal citizen and privileged male is, in turn, brutalized by the Soldier, which thereby reduces Ian's status, rendering him a victim of the same violent privilege that had once ensured his superiority. The Soldier, although a symbol of brutality, is eventually brutalized by his own agenda [...] the fact that [Cate] must prostitute herself for survival; she simply does it. If there is any hope to be found at the end of this play, as Kane insists there is, it is to be found in the determination that Cate musters to survive [...] This is a different girl than the one who has "fits" every time the situation gets stressful, or the girl who is taken advantage of by a perverse, ailing old hack. There is a refusal in the play, despite the desperate circumstances, to give in to despair; it would simply be too gratuitous to do so.[91]

In the end, *Blasted*, whose title refers not just to the bombing effect that destroys the room's wall, but also to the character's broken lives, would be too reductive to be read as a simple play about war, rape and all the violence in the world. It is, in fact, a play about mankind's best and worst sides. When all hell breaks loose, it is up to people to choose whether to be victims, perpetrators or survivors. Cate is the real heart and soul of the story, and despite all the manipulation and the abuse, she manages to keep her own morality even in the face of her aggressor. now turned into a pathetic, frail wreck. Regarding the controversy surrounding her first work's graphic nature, Kane herself added,

> The play was about a crisis of living. How do we continue to live when life becomes so painful, so unbearable? Blasted really is a hopeful play, because the characters do continue to scrape a life out of the ruins [...] There is an attitude that certain things could not happen here [the UK]. Yet there's the same amount of abuse and corruption in Essex as anywhere else, and that's what I want to blow open. Just because there hasn't been a civil war in England for a very long time doesn't mean that what is happening in Bosnia doesn't affect us.[92]

Despite all the criticism, the play gained enormous popularity and was immediately performed all over Europe. Sarah Kane's name became a sensation, and her short career as a unique playwright began.

[91] Jolene Armstrong, *Cruel Britannia: Sarah Kane's Postmodern Dramatics,* Switzerland, Peter Lang, 2015, pp. 94-95.
[92] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., pp. 61-62

3. Sarah and Phaedra

I don't want your love unless you know I'm repulsive,
and love me even as you know it.
(Georges Bataille, *My Mother*[93])

3.1 The Many Faces of a Tragic Queen

If the comedic genre shows hilarious everyday life situations from a satirical point of view, the tragic genre deals especially with the rise and inevitable fall of individuals entangled in situations that will only lead to their destruction. In the case of Ancient Greece, tragedy mostly concerned the ruling upper class, with its deviancies, corruptions, and moral ambiguity destined to be overturned by divine, inhuman factors that were brought by the Gods or by the human characters themselves. If a tragedy like Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 BC) is concerned with the warmongering power of political authority and the godly punishment reserved to those who arrogantly put themselves on the same value of divine sovereignty, a play such as Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428 BC) concerns the aristocratic chaste, and how a scandal can bring it to a tragic downfall. The story, based on the famous myth following the even more famous story of Theseus and the Minotaur, has been adapted many times on stage, with different approaches and re-adaptations, sometimes keeping the same setting and other times plunging it into a contemporary setting.

In Euripides' version, the titular character is the son of the mythical Athens king Theseus and the Amazon Queen Hippolyta. The prince's complete devotion to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, prompts a deep feeling of jealousy in Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Hippolytus is proud of his devotion to a sexless and loveless existence, and the scorn he feels against Aphrodite is enough to sign his death warrant, which will have tragic and devastating consequences not just on himself, but on the whole aristocratic family.

The play opens with the appearance of Aphrodite, delivering a monologue to the audience and hence introducing the story:

> APHRODITE. Now I will quickly tell you the truth of this story. Hippolytus, son of Theseus by the Amazon, pupil of holy Pittheus, alone among the folk of this land of Troezen has blasphemed me counting me vilest of the gods in heaven. [...] I do not grudge him such privileges: why should I? But for the wrongs that he has done to me I shall punish Hippolytus this day. [...] Phaedra, his father's

[93] Georges Bataille, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse, Penguin Classics, London, New York, 2012, p. 12.

> noble wife saw him and her heart was filled with the longings of dreadful love. This was my work. [...] Her suffering shall not weigh in the scale so much that I should let my enemies go untouched escaping payment of a retribution sufficient to satisfy me.[94]

Phaedra, the female protagonist of the tragedy, has already a "cursed" background: daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, King and Queen of Crete. Her father was a bloodthirsty tyrant and her mother was condemned by the gods for refusing to sacrifice an extremely beautiful bull to Poseidon. As a penance, a godly spell made her fall in love with the same animal she wanted to protect. The blasphemous intercourse that occurred between the Cretean Queen and this bull gave birth to the Minotaur, who was then imprisoned in a labyrinth and used by Minos to kill the prisoners he made during his wars. The arrival of the heroic Theseus, the slaying of this monster, and the marriage with Phaedra seemed to have broken the wretched cycle of her heritage, but as a line from the 1999 film *The Green Mile* states, "Sometimes the past just catches up with you, whether you want it or not"[95].

Phaedra, like her mother before her, is cursed by a jealous god as an act of revenge against Hippolytus. The passion she feels for his stepson makes her appear pale and sick, the classical love malady that precedes the stereotype of womanly madness. Upon finding out his stepmother's feelings for him, Hippolytus reacts with such fury and disgust that prompts her to commit suicide, not before wrongfully accusing him of having raped her. King Theseus, convinced of his son's guilt, blasts him, and Hippolytus is subsequently mortally wounded by a sea monster summoned by Poseidon. Only with the final appearance of Artemis, the truth about Hippolytus' innocence comes to light, and Theseus can do nothing but ask for forgiveness for his dying son. The Prince dies, and the family honor, despite being put at stake, is finally preserved.

The Queen's character here is just marginal and represents the misogynistic archetype of the "vengeful liar", whose actions are determined by an external, somewhat demonic possession, while Hippolytus is regarded as a virtuous, pious young man. In this seemingly conservative nature, the sexual element, although being incestuous, is an example of the triumphant apollonian, and the same goes for the violent one. Like the majority of ancient plays, graphic violence only happens off-stage and is told by other characters in long, detailed speeches.

The elements that can be found in Euripides' version were reprised by Roman playwright Seneca (before 54 AD) and French author Jean Racine (1677). Although the story remains the same, the two authors made significant changes in both of their versions. Seneca's *fabula cothurnata* is a primary example of the limited selection of the works he wrote and did not get lost. One of the main

[94] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (edited by), *Greek Tragedies I*, University of Chicago Press, London, pp. 254-255.
[95] Frank Darabont (dir.), *The Green Mile* (Warner Bros, 1999).

characteristics of the Latin tragedy was the performance's unholiness: violent, repulsive imagery with the addition of the theme of a nefarious, corruptive monarchical power was a pivotal recurrency in the stories, as the Roman Empire itself was built out of centuries of struggles against dictatorial powers. While the Greek theatre was performed during public religious celebrations, the Roman was more indulged in the *panem et circenses* typical of the Colosseum's gruesome spectacles.

In Seneca's retelling, the godly element is almost wiped out and, as the title suggests, the focal point is shifted from Hippolytus to Phaedra herself. One of the main differences lies in the main character's revelation of her burning passion to his son: if in Euripides the misogynist Prince was informed by a Nurse, here he is told by his stepmother in person.

> PHAEDRA. My heart is inflamed, kindled to madness by the heat of passion. A raging wildfire courses through my deepest marrow, through my veins, just like a swift-moving flame races through dry timber along a tree-line.
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. The love with which you burn – no doubt it's the pure love you feel for Theseus.
>
> PHAEDRA. Hippolytus, it's like this: I love Theseus' looks – well, those looks of his earlier years, when he was just a young man, with the first signs of a beard gracing his fair cheeks, when he faced the Cnossian monster's dark dwelling and escaped the twisting labyrinth by gathering up the long trail of thread. [...] he resembled you. Oh yes, that's exactly how he looked when he charmed his enemy, and he held his head high, proud, just like you! But you – you've got a ruggedness about you. You radiate toughness, a good-looking toughness. Yes, you've got your whole father in you, and yet a tiny part your stern mother contributes her own grace in equal measure: a Greek face with austere of Scythian features! […] Behold, at your feet lies the child of a royal house, now a humble suppliant begging for mercy. No stain has ever tarnished my honour. It has always been unblemished, but now I've changed for you alone. This day will bring an end to my pain, or else my life. Pity your lover!
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. Great ruler of the gods, do you hear? Do you see such wickedness but refuse to act? When, when will you hurl your thunderbolt with ruthless force, if now the sky remains serene? Demolish the bright dome of heaven! Bring it all crashing down! Plunge the day into dark clouds! Drive the stars back crosswise along their course! Can you, glorious celestial body, radiant Sun-god, can you stand to watch the wickedness of your own brood? Bury the light! Flee into the shadows![96]

Once again, the elements of female malaise felt due to a forbidden law are present, but differently from the predecessor, the Seneacean Phaedra does not immediately kill herself after enduring her stepson's rejection but waits for Theseus' return to make her rape accusation. Her enraged husband curses the Prince, who meets the same fate as Euripides' Hippolytus. However, his demise here is much more gruesome: the appearance of the sea monster causes him to lose control of his horses'

[96] Seneca, *Phaedra*, in *Phaedra and Other Plays*, R. Scott Smith (trans. by), Penguin Classics, London, 2011, cit., pp. 136-137.

reins, and his limbs, being entwined, are torn apart. Phaedra got her revenge, however she does not find satisfaction, but rather regret:

> PHAEDRA. Me, assail me, you pitiless lord of the deep sea! Send all your monsters in the dark sea against me, whatever distant Tethys harbours in her deep bosom, whatever Ocean embraces and hides beneath the shifting waves of his far-off streams! O Theseus, always cruel, you never return home without ruining your kin! Both your son and father paid for your home-comings with death; you always wreck your family, whether it be out of love or loathing for your wives. [...]Listen to me, citizens of Athens, and you, a father more deadly than a deadly stepmother: I made up a false story, I lied about his wicked act – one that I myself contemplated and obsessed over in my fevered mind. You punished your son for nothing, father, and now that faithful boy lies dead, the victim of a faithless accusation, a virtuous, innocent victim *(PHAEDRA plunges the sword into her body*). [...]
>
> THESEUS. Bring the remnants of my dear son's corpse here. Give me that heap, that tangle of limbs and flesh. *(Attendants bring the body to THESEUS)* Hippolytus? Is that you? I now realize my crime: it was I who destroyed you. And I was guilty not just once, nor did I limit the guilt just to myself: no, I, a father venturing on a reckless act, implicated my own father in the crime. *(Gesturing to the body)* Behold, this is my reward for using my father's gift. O death of a child, bane that brings sorrow to these broken years! Kneel down Theseus, you pitiful soul, embrace his body and clutch close to your sad heart all that remains of your son. [...]Open up the doors of the palace, polluted by murderous death. Let all of Attica, land of Mopsopus, resound with shrill lamentation. You, ready the fires for the pyre, a funeral for kings; you, range over the lands and look for the scattered remains of his body. As for the woman, dig a grave and cover her body with soil – may the earth weigh heavily upon her wicked soul.[97]

The ending of Seneca's play is much bleaker than the previous tragedy: Hippolytus' body is dismembered and Theseus is never forgiven; Phaedra commits suicide and will receive a traitor's inglorious funeral. The proud fire burns the Prince's royal corpses, while the Queen's will be devoured by insects and vermins. Phaedra is once again depicted as a vengeful liar who will be remembered as such, similar to the fate reserved for Shakespearean villains like Iago or Gamora.

Racine's version, *Phèdre*, while keeping the same Ancient Greece setting takes an interesting turn towards the titular character and focuses especially on her inner turmoil, represented by a dangerous "languor" with erotic connotations: "the gravity of her desire is constituted by her will to pull free of it in the experience of conscience; the promised ecstasy of libidinous transgression is directly proportionate to the power of moral prohibition."[98] In fact, according to Racine's adaptation, the Gods are the embodiment of a Jansenist worldview: humans are corrupted from birth, and the only thing they can manage to do is commit evil, sometimes even unintentionally. That is the reason

[97] *Idem*, pp. 152-155.
[98] Critchley, ""I Want to Die, I Hate My Life: Phaedra's Malaise", cit., p. 23.

why the Gods in Racine's world never intervene: they are silent, watchful spectators. They do not make the world, we do. This paradox is the main source of a malady that is not going to be extinguished, not even when death comes. For this reason, as French philosopher Maurice Blanchot wrote in his essay *L'écriture du désastre* (1980):

> Suicide is in a sense a demonstration (whence its arrogant, hurtful, indiscreet character), and what it demonstrates is the undemonstrable: that in death nothing comes to pass and that death itself does not pass (whence the vanity and the necessity of its repetitiveness). But from this aborted demonstration there remains the following: that we die "naturally," of the death that requires no fuss and is of no note conceptually (this affirmation is always to be put into doubt), only if, through a constant, an inapparent and preliminary suicide, accomplished by no one, we encounter (of course, it is not "we") the semblance of the end of history, when everything returns to nature (a nature which is supposed to be denatured), and when death, ceasing to be an always double death, having apparently exhausted the infinite passivity of dying, reduces itself to the simplicity of something natural, more insignificant and more uninteresting than the collapse of a little heap of sand.[99]

The corpse is not just Phaedra's but also of "the illusion of the polis, the city, the state, the political order; the tragedy here is that of the political order, of Helleno-Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, or Heideggerian *In-der-Welt-Sein*; [...] built up through war, conquest, bloodshed, and usurpation, it is destroyed by them too; the moral inference is that life in the world is a game of power, a farce of force, a murderous illusion"[100]. Phaedra's desire of dying is not just physical, but also allegorical: the curse that has plagued her family will follow her to Hades, and this time it will last for eternity.

3.2 Phaedra's Skin

Some themes, even if presented in a written work that is centuries old, can still be applied to contemporary times. A matter like the aristocratic tragedy, with its complex characters and devastating events that will bring the whole family to an inevitable downfall, can be adapted in whatever century and they would still be relevant. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon states,

> All these adapters relate stories in their diferent ways. they use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on. But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere, not

[99] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Anne Smock (trans. by) University of Nebraska Press, 1995, pp. 70-71.
[100] Critchley, ""I Want to Die, I Hate My Life: Phaedra's Malaise", cit., p. 36.

> invented anew. Like parodies, adaptations have an overt and deining relationship to prior texts, usually reveal- ingly called “sources.” Unlike parodies, however, adaptations usually openly announce this relationship.[101]

This task can be both intriguing and challenging. Some stories present some themes and motifs that are still relevant to this day even after centuries from their first appearance. If we consider William Shakespeare's plays, many of them were adapted to film and on stage with a different setting, while still preserving their original spirit. *King Lear* saw one of its greatest depictions in Akira Kurosawa's 1985 war epic *Ran*, which takes place in a war-torn feudal Japan, and in Edward Bond's 1971 contemporary stage re-imagining *Lear*, with the titular character being a paranoid, power-hungry warlord who builds a wall that divides his nation.

This work of changing the source to make it more "adaptable" for a contemporary audience was done also for Christopher Marlowe, the underrated "rival" of Shakespeare, and his queer-themed tragedy *Edward II* (1594). In 1991, in a tumultuous time when homosexual people and activists were still struggling against the oppressive homophobia of the government, the late British director Derek Jarman decided to adapt Marlowe's tragedy into a post-modern setting: the love story between King Edward II (Steven Waddington) and his trivial, rebel lover Piers Gaveston (Andrew Tiernan) and their tragic fate at the hands of a close-minded, fascist upper class embodied by the character of Mortimer (Nigel Terry) was the perfect *topos* that Jarman could use to represent the LGBTQ+ community's hardships in a time where the HIV pandemic and the events of Stonewall still matched the moral and social wound gay people had to endure. A similar treatment can also be found in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, released in the same year as Jarman's most political and provocative work. Van Sant used as an inspiration Shakespeare's *Henry IV* while telling the journey of Mikey (River Phoenix) and Scott (Keanu Reeves), two male hustlers belonging to two different social classes but bounded by a deep friendship. Their bond will end when Scott, the son of Portland's mayor, decides to leave behind the street life and pursue the living of a "model citizen". When Bob (William Richert), a friend of his and Mikey, approaches him in a luxurious restaurant, Scott cruelly rejects him. Like in Shakespeare's *dramedy*, Scott/Prince Hal lives a life of excess and entertainment with his lower-class friend John Falstaff (here represented by both Mikey and Bob), and when the King's duty comes, he is ready to abandon his partner with no second thought. Just like Falstaff dies of heartbreak, Bob will die of a heart attack on the same night of his rejection. As can be seen, the themes of a work written centuries ago can still be applied and adapted to a contemporary audience, as human history is just a continuous repetition of past events that will always take place in different contexts and nations.

[101] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 3.

When it comes to Phaedra's myth, its two major cinematic depictions include a mediocre, uninspired 1962 version set in a contemporary, capitalistic Greece with a boyish and naive Hippolytus (played by Anthony "Norman Bates" Perkins) who meets his inevitable death by crashing his car down a cliff after a high-speed ride with Bach's organ music playing in the background and a more recent retelling that takes place in contemporary 2019 Denmark, entitled *Dronningen* (eng. Queen of Hearts). This film, directed by May el-Toukhy, deals with an upper-class, middle-aged, and sexually frustrated woman named Anne (Trine Dyrholm) who falls in love with her teenage misfit stepson Gustav (Gustav Lindh), that culminates in an explicit sex scene that devolves the whole story into a dramatic ending. On stage, an interesting retelling of the myth was made by Tony Harrison in his 1976 play *Phaedra Britannica*, which draws heavily on Racine's 1677 version and could be considered as "an adaptation of an adaptation".

An accomplished playwright and poet, Harrison was not new to the art of re-adapting seminal works into a contemporary setting: his 1990 *The Trackers of Oxhyrinchus* moved the original lost Sophoclean *Ichneutae* from Ancient Greece to a 1907 archaeological excavation, while 1995 *The Labourers of Herakles*, based on the remaining fragments of dramatist Phrynichos, dealt with the ethnic cleansing that at the time was bathing the Balkans in blood and was set in a Ballardian industrial complex. His version of Phaedra used the 1895 Anglo-Indian colonial period as a location. The choice of "betraying" the classical Greek framework by moving it to contemporary times is a definite reinforcement of the close link between the past and the present. As he states, "the way to re-energise *Phèdre*, setting aside for the moment the well-nigh insuperable problems of doing that for an English audience, is to rediscover a *social* structure which makes the tensions and polarities of the play significant again; to make the roles, neglected for the sake of the 'vehicle' role, meaningful again"[102]. Like Racine, Harrison casts upon the titular character (here re-named Memsahib) the same cursed polarity of being the daughter of a dictator and a queen who was forced to sin by committing an act of beastiality, one of the factors that were also used by the colonizers as a justification for the racist oppression they committed against the indigenous people: "To Western eyes India seemed actually to celebrate a world where everything was sexually possible"[103]. However, the playwright also pointed out how colonization itself, while being presented as a civilizing, paternalistic mission to help the "poorly educated", was just an excuse for the *homo victorianus* to project his repressed desires and will to control, something that was already mentioned in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

[102] Tony Harrison (introduction) in *Plays: 2*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002, p. 119.
[103] *Idem*, p. 122.

Phaedra/Memsahib thus becomes an agent of the racist, Kiplingian discourse about the dangers of mixing with a race that is considered inferior. Like her original counterpart, Memsahib was stripped of her original identity and made a wife by Theseus/The Governor, and her estrangement to a setting that does not belong to her leads to a chain of devastating events culminating in the death of Hippolytus/Thomas Theophilus, the Governor's son:

> GOVERNOR. You've won your victory. I've lost my son. Now new suspicions and misgivings start sending tremors through my broken heart. But what's the use? No, take your spoil. Enjoy the harsh destruction of my gentle boy.
>
> [...]
>
> MEMSAHIB. Richard! Listen! I need to reassure a father that his son died chaste and pure. The guilt was mine. For which I now atone. The inordinate desire was mine alone. The ayah took advantage of my state of shock and faintness to incriminate your son to you, and of her own accord accused him. She's had her just reward. Like her, I wanted instant suicide but wished to clear his name before I died. I wanted, needed to confess, and so I chose another, slower way to go *(The Memsahib sinks to her knees)*, there's poison in my veins, and beat by beat the heart that once was blazing loses heat. It's all as if I saw you through dark gauze, through rain beginning like a slow applause.
>
> [...]
>
> ADC. She's dead!
>
> GOVERNOR. But her black actions, they won't die. They'll blaze for ever in the memory. Clearer than day it all comes home to me. Now let me force myself to go and see what's left of him, and try to expiate my dabbling with strange gods I've come to hate. He must be buried with all honours due his mother's and my rank …[104]

Sarah Kane's adaptation, entitled *Phaedra's Love*, differently from Harrison's and all the other works mentioned before, although still keeping the same narrative *topos*, it betrays it and creates a realistic, grossly dark comedy about the degeneracy of the ruling class and its condemnation to self-destruction. This time, the violence that had been hidden behind the curtains in the classical theatre explodes in its most explicit, provocative signs.

A title like that may create a sense of expectation in theatre critics and aficionados. What might be anticipated is a modern retelling of a myth that by now everyone knows about. Euripides and Seneca's versions both opened with long speeches that introduced the story and characters, so the audience that saw the first-ever premiere of *Phaedra's Love* could have been puzzled and grossed out when they witnessed such prologue:

> *A royal palace.*

[104] Tony Harrison, *Phaedra Britannica*, in *Plays: 2*, cit., pp. 205-207.

HIPPOLYTUS sits in a darkened room watching television. He is sprawled on a sofa surrounded by expensive toys, empty crip and sweet packets, and a scattering of used socks and underwear.

He is eating a hamburger, his eyes fixed on the flickering light of a Hollywood film. He sniffs. He feels a sneeze coming on and rubs his nose to stop it. It still irritates him. He looks around the room and picks up a sock. He examines the sock carefully and then blows his nose on it.

[...]

He picks up another [sock], examines and decides it's fine. He puts his penis into the sock and masturbates until he comes without a flicker of pleasure. He takes off the sock and throws it to the floor. He begins another hamburger. [105]

It might be clear that from this silent, obscene prologue the pious, devoted Hippolytus that the audience has come to know and appreciate is gone, substituted by this bored, detached and dirty individual who looks more like an animalistic, binge-eating addict than a royal prince.

It is the opening of what could be considered Kane's most political and provocative work, coming under the aforementioned subgenre of the *dramedy*. The play was written out of a commission for the Gate Theatre. The purpose of this task was to re-adapt a theatrical work from the past into contemporaneity. Kane's initial suggestions of recreating Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836-1837) or Brecht's *Baal* (1923) were both rejected respectively for an already planned season and the avoidance of getting into copyright issues with the Brecht estate. The committee then suggested her to rewrite a Greek or Roman play. Kane recounts, "I thought, 'Oh, I've always hated those plays. Everything happens off-stage, so what's the point?' But I decided to read one of them and see what I'd get; I chose Seneca because Caryl Churchill had done of his plays [*Thyestes*] which I had liked very much; I read *Phaedra* and surprisingly enough it interested me"[106].

Kane's retelling is based more on Seneca's idea than Euripides and Racine's: the focus is more on Hippolytus than on Phaedra, with the addition of a refreshing take that makes him participate in the evolution of the final disaster, hence making the whole play a major revision rather than a re-adaptation with smaller changes. Apart from keeping the original characters' names, Kane moved the action into a not-really implicit British setting. The Gods and Phaedra's past are erased, and all the events unfold as consequences of this dysfunctional royal family's actions. 1995, the year in which the play was written, saw the exploits of Prince Charles III and his wife Lady Diana Spencer making the head news. The public and media, which always had a morbid curiosity regarding celebrities' personal lives, were constantly following them everywhere. The more the details about Charles' infidelity emerged, the more tabloid fodder was made. That was until their divorce, which happened one year after. Paparazzi and journalists hounded them both like vultures flying over a carcass, invading and damaging the little privacy they had left. Although Lady Diana was loved and respected

[105] Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 65

[106] Saunders, *Love me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes,* cit., p. 72.

by the British people, many of them disapproved her choices, deeming them shameful and disrespectful to her role as a monarch's wife. As the character of Strophe utters in the third scene of the play: "They do love him, everyone loves him. He despises them for it. You'd be no different"[107]. From this context Kane's idea about the play came to fruition: the monarchy is no more, and the people acting like monarchs are just a bunch of tabloid celebrities playing a part.

After Hippolytus' wordless, hilariously puke-inducing prologue, we are introduced to his stepmother, Phaedra, while she is consulting a doctor:

> DOCTOR. What does he do all day?
> PHAEDRA. Sleep.
> DOCTOR. When he gets up.
> PHAEDRA. Watch films. And have sex.
> DOCTOR. He goes out?
> PHAEDRA. No. He phones people. They come round. They have sex and leave.
> [...]
> DOCTOR. Does he have sex with you?
> PHAEDRA. I'm sorry?
> DOCTOR. Does he have sex with you?
> PHAEDRA. I'm his stepmother. We are royal.[108]

The entire conversation, with its scarce and rhythmic prose, is witty and subtle. When the Doctor explicitly asks Phaedra if she had sexual intercourse with Hippolytus she quickly denies it under the label of being royal. Considering that historically speaking royal intermarriages between cousins (e.g. Philip II of Spain and Mary I of England) or even between brothers and sisters (e.g. the House of Habsburg) her line assumes an ironic statement, fooling around a taboo concept like incest. Another element that emerges in their conversation is Phaedra's sexual repression due to Theseus' absence and her clear jealousy regarding her stepson's promiscuous, regular sexual activity:

> DOCTOR. I don't want to be rude, but who are these people he has sex with?
> PHAEDRA. I really don't know.
> DOCTOR. He must pay them.
> PHAEDRA. He's very popular.
> DOCTOR. Why?
> PHAEDRA. He's funny.
> DOCTOR. Are you in love with him?
> PHAEDRA. I'm married to his father.

[107] Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 72.
[108] *Idem*, p. 66.

[...]

DOCTOR. Who looks after things while your husband is away?

PHAEDRA. Me. My daughter.

DOCTOR. When is he coming back?

PHAEDRA. I've no idea.

DOCTOR. Are you still in love with him?

PHAEDRA. Of course. I haven't seen him since we married.

DOCTOR. You must be very lonely [...] He's bound to be feeling low, it's his birthday.

PHAEDRA. He's been like this for months.

[...]

DOCTOR. Get over him.[109]

In the third scene, which follows immediately after the Doctor's meeting, the dialogues that usually distinguish the Phaedrean passion of the previous versions are parodied. The awkward exchange between Phaedra and her daughter, Strophe, a character resembling the classical confidant Nurse here turned into the Queen's daughter, is a clear reference to the embarrassing conversation between Charles III and his lover Camilla Rosemary Shand that was illegally recorded in 1989, later to be known infamously as "Camillagate" or "Tampaxgate". The Queen's over-the-top passional statements are quickly rebuffed by Strophe, who is quite appalled knowing her mother finds attractive a sloppy person who treats people like garbage after having sex with them:

PHAEDRA. Go away fuck off don't touch me don't talk to me stay with me [...] Have you ever thought, thought that your heart would break? [...] Wished you could open your chest tear it out to stop the pain?

STROPHE. That would kill you.

PHAEDRA. This is killing me.

STROPHE. No. Just feels like it

PHAEDRA. A spear in my side, burning.

STROPHE. Hippolytus.

PHAEDRA screams.

[...]

PHAEDRA. Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile.

STROPHE. Why don't you have an affair, get your mind off him.

PHAEDRA. There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be.

[...]

STROPHE. He's not nice to people when he's slept with them. I've seen him.

PHAEDRA. Might help me get over him.

STROPHE. Treat them like shit.

[109] *Idem*, pp. 66-68.

PHAEDRA. Can't swith this off. Can't crush it. Can't. Wake up with it, burning me. Think I'll crack open I I want him so much. I talk to him. He talks to me, you know, we, we know each other very well, he tells me things. We're very close. About sex and how much it depresses him, and I know-

STROPHE. Don't imagine you can cure him.[110]

The idea of an incestuous relationship inside what already appears to be a frail balance in the family prompts Strophe to try to convince the unhappy mother to find someone else or, like the Doctor at the end of the previous scene said, to "get over him"[111], as if the people would find it out, they would all be "torn apart in the streets", but it is already too late. Despite the subtle irony, the scene also foreshadows the characters' fate: Phaedra's corpse will be burned by Theseus, and Strophe and Hippolytus will be lynched in the streets by the hands of a raging crowd. The irresistible decline of this family has already begun.

The Queen visits her stepson while he is playing with a remote control car and watching television at the same time. The room is untidy, with plenty of socks and food packets spread all over the floor. The two do not interact with each other until Hippolytus breaks his silence by asking her about the last time she had sex, to which she does not reply. The boy then rants about what he is seeing on the TV: "News. Another rape. Child murdered. War somewhere. Few thousand jobs gone. But none of this matters 'cause it's a royal birthday"[112]. This vulgar, cynical prince has realized the whole hypocrisy lying around the upper-class roles in society. While rape, murder, and war are raging "somewhere", all the attention is given to an event as common as a birthday, with the difference that the person celebrating it is wealthy. The hatred is thrown also against the people sending him presents ("It's revolting [..] get rid of this tat, give it to Oxfam, don't need it"[113]). But what really stands out in this gross character is his brutal honesty: he taunts Phaedra for having married a rich man for a financial arrangement while he was "born into this shit"[114]. Yet this only induces Phaedra to finally admit her feelings.

PHAEDRA. You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day and watch TV all night, you crash around this house with sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you.

HIPPOLYTUS. Not very logical.

PHAEDRA. Love isn't.[115]

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[110] *Idem*, pp. 69-71.
[111] *Idem*, p. 73.
[112] *Idem*, p. 74.
[113] *Idem*, p. 75
[114] *Idem*, p. 77.
[115] *Idem*, p. 79.

The Kanean Hippolytus pursues honesty instead of purity, a characteristic that the monarchy herself has always hidden. Kane herself added, "the purity of his self-hatred makes him much more attractive as a character than the virginal original"[116].

In the end, the sexual tension explodes: Phaedra sits close to him on the sofa and eventually performs oral sex on him. He barely reacts and does not feel any pleasure not even when he reaches orgasm. To him, sex is just a mechanical process to pass time. Phaedra, on the other side, is willing to let it happen again, just to hear him reject her exactly as Strophe had warned her he would do. When the stepmother mentions a certain Lena, a possible ex-girlfriend of his, Hippolytus has a sudden, violent reaction: he grabs the Queen by the neck and forces her to never mention that name again. Just like he uses his socks to masturbate or wipe his nose, Hippolytus does the same with people. In order to humiliate Phaedra even more, he reveals that the incestuous intercourse they had was not the first time something similar had happened in their "big happy family": he had sex with Strophe, and she did the same with her father, Theseus. The sexual deviancy that Phaedra performs is a common trait in this royal setting, it shines a light on its darker side and reduces to shambles the line she uttered at the beginning in the conversation with the Doctor. Furthermore, the whole concept of the "burning" passion underlined by the Greek tragedies is brutally ridiculed once more when Hippolytus ends the scene by telling a shocked and abashed Phaedra that he has also gonorrhea: this is another grossly hilarious moment of the bleakly "life-saving" humor of the story.

Phaedra commits suicide off-stage by hanging herself and leaving a letter that accuses Hippolytus of having violated her. The revelation triggers the population to an uprising. Strophe confronts his stepbrother, who seems not to be afflicted at all by the possibility of being lynched, focusing instead on his tongue, which has turned green due to a pleurococcus, which also caused him to contract halitosis. The fact that the tongue coating was affected after his confession to Phaedra implies how "he uses language not only to express his radical honesty, but also (alongside his offensive disregard of rules of hygiene and other revolting habits) as a tool to keep people emotionally and physically distant from him"[117]. The conversation between stepsister and stepbrother reminisces the notorious scandal involving US President Bill Clinton and his cheating affair with his intern Monic Lewinsky, but is also a tender moment where two characters share a moment of vulnerability and sadness, in which Hippolytus finally finds a moment of apparent regret for having caused Phaedra's death:

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[116] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes,* cit., p. 76.

[117] Sarah J. Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2020, p. 146.

STROPHE. She's dead you fucking bastard.

HIPPOLYTUS. Don't be stupid.

STROPHE. Yes. What did you do to her, what did you fucking do?

STROPHE batters him about the head. HIPPOLYTUS catches her arms and holds her so she can't him. STROPHE sobs, then breaks down and cries, then wails uncontrollably.

STROPHE. What have I done? What have I done?

HIPPOLYTUS' hold turn into an embrace.

HIPPOLYTUS. Wasn't you, Strophe, you're not to blame.

STROPHE. Never even told her I loved her.

HIPPOLYTUS. She knew.[118]

Strophe wants him to hide to protect the family's honor and to force him to confess his innocence, but he refuses:

STROPHE. What is wrong with you?

HIPPOLYTUS. This is her present to me.

STROPHE. What?

HIPPOLYTUS. Not many people get a chance like this. This isn't tat. This isn't bric-a-brac.

STROPHE. Deny it. There's a riot.

HIPPOLYTUS. Life at last.

STROPHE. Burning down the palace. You have to deny it.

HIPPOLYTUS. Are you insane? She died doing this for me. I'm doomed.

[...]

STROPHE. I'll help you hide.

HIPPOLYTUS. She really did love me.

STROPHE. You didn't do it.

HIPPOLYTUS. Bless her.

STROPHE. Did you?

HIPPOLYTUS. No, I didn't. *(He begins to leave)*

STROPHE. Where are you going?

HIPPOLYTUS. I'm turning myself in.[119]

Despite being innocent, the Prince still decides to surrender to the authorities to be arrested, tried and, in the end, executed by an enraged mob. This baffling choice that contradicts his brutal honesty was explained by Kane in an interview with Nils Tabert, in 1998:

[118] Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 89.
[119] *Idem*, pp. 90-91.

> [Hippolytus is compelled to tell the truth] and he lies as well. He lies because he confirms the rape, but at the same time he's actually telling the truth. Because it's the only way she [Phaedra] can express what he did to her and so it becomes true [...] Someone said to me -which ended up in the play - because I was going on and on about how important it is to tell the truth, and how depressing life is because nobody really does; and you can't have honest relationships. And he said, 'That's because you've got your values wrong. You take honesty as an absolute - and it isn't. Life is an absolute. And without that, you accept that there is honesty. And if you can accept that you'd be fine.' And I thought, if I can accept that if not being completely honest doesn't matter, then I'd feel much better. But somehow I couldn't, and so Hippolytus can't. And that's what kills him in the end.[120]

Hippolytus is arrested and put into a cell, where he receives the visit of a Priest, offering him absolution from the crime he is accused of. The absence of God(s) is discussed in this pivotal sequence, where "the foul Prince" and a man of God debate the meaning of life and the role of faith. Hippolytus rejects religion and the possibility of an afterlife where an invisible person would keep torturing mankind for eternity:

> HIPPOLYTUS. There is no God. There is. No God.
>
> PRIEST. Perhaps you'll find there is. And what will you do then? There's no repentance in the next life, only in this one.
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. What do you suggest, a last minute conversation just in case? Die as if there is a God, knowing there isn't? No. If there is a God, I'd like to look him in the face knowing I'd died as I'd lived. In conscious sin.
>
> [...]
>
> PRIEST. Your sexual indiscretions are of no interest to anyone. But the stability of the nation's morals is. You are a guardian of those morals. You will answer to God fo the collapse of the counry you and your family lead.
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. I'm not responsible.
>
> PRIEST. Then deny the rape. And confess that sin. Now. [...] Pray with me. Save yourself. And your country. Don't commit that sin.
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. What bothers you more, the destruction of my soul or the end of my family? I'm not in danger of committing the unforgivable sin. I already have.
>
> PRIEST. Don't say it.
>
> HIPPOLYTUS. Fuck God. Fuck the monarchy.[121]

Through his blatant honesty, Hippolytus manages to break another person's belief and appearance and turning the conversation upside down: from penitent he is the confessor, vice versa for the Priest, who has witnessed a huge doubt being cast upon his faith. The Prince recognizes himself as the closest role a divine being would have on Earth, hence calling out the confessor's supposed

[120] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., p. 70.
[121] Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 94-95.

dishonesty and admitting that facing his own fate, like Christ did to save the human race, will put the last nail on the monarchy's coffin:

> PRIEST. You're not God.
> HIPPOLYTUS. No. A prince. God on Earth. But not God. Fortunate for all concerned. I'd not allow you to sin sin knowing you'd confess and get away with it. [...] It may be enough for you, but I have no intention of covering my arse. I killed a woman and I will be punished for it by hypocrites who I shall take down with me. May we burn in hell.[122]

The scene ends with the now subjugated priest bending down and performing another act of oral sex on the mocking Prince/God, who then encourages him to leave before being "burned". Hippolytus knows that his destiny is sealed, and is willing to face it with the same determination as a man who has nothing left to lose.

It is at this moment that Theseus makes his entrance in the story. He appears in front of his wife's veiled corpse. What could have been a long soliloquy in pure ancient tragedy fashion is turned into a wordless, physical performance that is quite similar to the Darkness/Light moment seen in *Blasted*. If Ian embodied the coming tempest, Theseus embodies pure, vengeful rage. Aleks Sierz noted how the play "isn't just a barbed comment on Britain's dysfunctional royal family; it's also a study in extreme emotion"[123]:

> *PHAEDRA's body lies on a funeral pyre, covered. THESEUS enters. He approaches the pyre. He lifts the cover and looks at PHAEDRA's face. He lets the cover drop. He kneels by Pheadra's body. He tears at his clothes, then skin, then hair, more and more frantically until he is exhausted. But he does not cry. He stands and lights the funeral pyre - PHAEDRA goes up in flames.*
> THESEUS. I'll kill him.[124]

Regarding the first live performance of the play, which took place on 15 May 1996 at the Gate Theatre of London, it might be interesting to notice how the other three main characters (the Doctor, the Priest, and Theseus) were all played by the same actor, Andrew Maud, as if to represent all the hierarchical powers in a monarchy embodied in one single, shape-shifting actor. The enraged King has his vengeance in the final scene of the play, and Phaedra, in death, is both allegorically and literally burned: the passion she felt from the beginning destroyed both her body and the empire.

A crowd of people gathers outside the court, waiting for Hippolytus to show up. The conversations heard from the assembled people are esemble another parody of the classical, solemn

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[122] *Idem*, pp. 96-97.
[123] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 107.
[124] Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 95-96.

Greek chorus that comments on the unveiling of tragic events. Among them, there are also Theseus and Strophe, both disguised and unaware of each other's presence. The people are ready for violence, throwing insults at the Prince and claiming that the rotten apple must be erradicated for their own sake. Once Hippolytus appears escorted by two policemen, the crowd starts to throw rocks at him. Amid the confusion, the young man comes face to face to Theseus, who reveals himself and orders the crowd to kill his stepson. In a moment, the rioters are onto Hippolytus, choking him with a tie and kicking him. Strophe tries to intervene but to no avail. Her father, a victim of his own homicidal frenzy, does not recognize her and brutally rapes her in front of the mob, who cheers and laughs at the act. The girl then has her throat slit by Theseus. In the meantime, the lynching of Hippolytus continues, and is both tragically gruesome and darkly humorous:

> *MAN 1 pulls down HIPPOLYTUS's trouser. WOMAN 2 cuts off his genitals. They are thrown onto the barbecue. The children cheer. A child takes them off the barbecue and throws them at another child, who screams and runs away. Much laughter. Someone retrieves them and are thrown to a dog. THESEUS takes the knife. He cuts HIPPOLYTUS from groin to chest. HIPPOLYTUS' bowels are torn and thrown onto the barbecue. He is kicked and spat on. HIPPOLYTUS looks at the body of STROPHE.*
> HIPPOLYTUS. Strophe.
> THESEUS. Strophe.
> *THESEUS looks closely at the woman he has raped and murdered. He recognises her with horror.*[125]

The massacre is interrupted by the intervention of the police, whose random beatings quickly disparage the mob. The only characters remaining on stage are the dying Hippolytus, the dead Strophe and a flabbergasted Theseus, desperate and regretful for having killed his daughter. All he can do now is join his family in death by cutting his own throat. The play ends in a silence of death and misery, with three corpses laying on the ground, until Hippolytus' final line:

> THESEUS. Hippolytus. Son. I never liked you. *(to STROPHE)* I'm sorry. Didn't know it was you. God forgive me I didn't know. If I'd known it was you I'd never have - *(to HIPPOLYTUS)* You hear me. I didn't know.
> *THESEUS cuts his own throat and bleeds to death. The three bodies lie completely still. Eventually, HIPPOLYTUS opens his eyes and looks at the sky.*
> HIPPOLYTUS. Vultures. *(he manages to smile)* If there could have been more moments like this.
> *HIPPOLYTUS dies.*
> *A vulture descends and begins to eat his body.*[126]

[125] *Idem*, pp. 101-102.
[126] *Idem*, p. 102-103.

The monarchy is destroyed, and from its rotting corpse the vulture, which could represent an obsession with celebrity status and its scandals, flies slowly onto it to devour what has been left out. The lynching scene, which goes from a rape-murder to genitals being chopped off and thrown to hungry dogs - somehow reminiscing a controversial scene from Tinto Brass' 1979 film *Caligula*, where the Mad Emperor (Malcolm McDowell) evirates a victim and feeds the mutilated penis to his hounds - is shocking and disgusting, as well as leaving spectators to wonder how such level of splatter and gore could be represented in front of a live audience. Recalling his own stage production, Peter E. Campbell comments,

> The entrails, which were actually pieces of raw, bloody meat, were then, as per the stage directions, thrown on to a grill., where they sizzled and smoked as they cooked. The audience then could see an image of a bloodied, disembowelled Hippolytus on the monitors [...] The coolness of the staging of these violent rituals, in silence with deliberate and specific choreography, took the action of the realistic realm; still, the staging highlighted the horror of the actions without providing an emotional context other than the spectators' own with which to judge the violence they had observed .[127]

In his final moments, the foul Prince gains a sense of complete sanity, the way Phaedra also had after learning about the secret incests in her family. What must be pointed out is how, while drawing from ancient tragedy and the decadent status of the British monarchy, *Phaedra's Love* is also a play about the effects of depression. Kane recalled: "I suppose I set out to write a play about depression because of my state of being at the time. And so inevitably it did become more about Hippolytus. Except that it was also about a split in my own personality... The act of writing the play was try and connect two extremes in my own head. Which in the end wasn't only a depressing experience but also very liberating"[128]. A male character breaks a female one's spirit, but it is the action that the latter performs that brings a sudden realization in the abuser, hence offering a painful redemption.

Like Ian being raped and blinded and Hippolytus being ripped apart by a ruthless crowd, Kane brought the same trope in her single filmmaking credit as the script of Vincent O'Connell's short film *Skin* (1995). It is the tale of Billy (Ewen Bremner), a neonazi who, after violently crashing the wedding of a mixed-race couple, is lured into the flat of his black neighbour, Marcia (Marcia Rose). They have sex, and then she ties him up to re-educate him through physical torture: she slaps him, carves his skin by removing his nazi tats, and feeds him with dog food in a form of Bataillan view of suffering. The author of *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928) claimed that the more pain we experience

[127] Peter A. Cambell, "Sarah Kane's *Pheadra's Love*: staging the implacable", from Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (edited by), in *Sarah Kane in Context*, cit., pp. 173-183, p. 180.
[128] Saunders, *Love me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes,* cit., p. 73.

the more we come close to the divine: Kane makes a similar statement regarding redemption. After the torture, Billy is a changed man and has sincerely fallen in love with his capturer, but she firmly rejects him. Back home, the former neonazi tries to commit suicide but he is saved by Neville (Yemi Ajibade), a black musician he had previously mocked: the sense of the Kanean poetic justice comes full circle once again.

Compared to her previous groundbreaking first work, *Phaedra's Love* may fail to take the audience in an emotional journey into the disturbing imagery that *Blasted* fearlessly represented in favour of something that a couple of critics may claim is a Tarantinian vision of violence - although Kane herself despised that kind of writing, deeming it an oversimplified, self-referential gimmick), but it must be nevertheless regarded as a unique take on a classic genre like Greek/Roman tragedy with the explored theme of power, male/female clash and the decline of a regime corrupted to the core, whose carcass is only waiting to be devoured by voyeurs, paparazzi and peasants, all birds of prey that are flying closer and closer to the rotten corpse of what was once known as a respected entity, with its shady sides being hidden in the dark.

4. The Dachau Love of *Cleansed*

And so I face the wall
Turn my back against it all
How I wish I'd been unborn
Wish I wasn't living.
(Eurythmics, *Sex Crime*)

4.1 A Story of Fragile Bodies

Even if it is supposedly made of solid matter, human anatomy can be moved, broken, or reshaped by external forces at any time. In her 2006 essay *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler states,"[The body] is not a mere surface upon which social meanings are inscribed, but that which suffers, enjoys, and responds to exteriority of the world [...] that responsiveness may include a wide range of affects: pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, to name a few".[129] In addition to that the body, when met by a power that is not located in its inside, can be deeply affected. Regardless of the feelings a human might have about a similar, whether love or contempt, the mind transmits these sensations to the organs, the muscle fibers, and all the other components that create the body as a whole. Contempt causes a dark languor in the stomach; love, in case of rejection from the other person, provokes untidiness, a feeling of a desperate need for acceptance that turns the skin into a pale-colored tone, with red eyes, an archetype that literary scholars usually referred to as "love malady".

In his essay *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977, eng. "A Lover's Discourse: Fragments"), French philosopher Roland Barthes created a "dictionary" based on all the terms related to the so-called "love sickness". By doing so, he quoted or paraphrased aphorisms of authors such as Diderot, Kierkegaard, and De Sade, as well as taking the primary example of Goethe's Werther, the rejected lover *par excellence*. In the chapter dedicated to the term "Catastrophe", Barthes references Bruno Bettelheim to define the amorous catastrophe: "a situation experienced by the subject as irremediably bound to destroy him"[130]. Barthes goes even further by comparing the love living itself to the life of a prisoner in the Dachau concentration camp:

> Is it not indecent to compare the situation of a love-sick subject to that of an inmate of Dachau? Can one of the most unimaginable insults of History be compared with a trivial, childish, sophisticated, obscure incident occurring to a comfortable subject who is merely the victim of his own Image-repertoire? Yet these two situations have this in common: they are, literally, panic situations: situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself

[129] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London, cit., pp. 33-34
[130] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, Richard Howard (trans. by), Hill and Wang, New York, 2001, cit., p. 48.

> into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.[131]

In extreme situations, reason is erased, and the whole body becomes just a tool at the hands of those who have power over it, whether a potential lover who has dismissed the feelings or a sadistic jailer who cannot wait to exercise absolute domain on others. The body then becomes like a wooden stick: it can be bent, thrown, or broken in half. What is factual, however, is that this wooden stick will never rebel against the person who is holding it. This pessimistic scenario was illustrated by Michel Foucault in the theory based on bodily plasticity. One of the greatest, inner desires of a human mind is the inclination to have power and control over fellow humans. Like the rejectful objects of a lover's interest tend to use this feeling to gain something from that person, governments and powerful people do the same to the masses and lower-class men. In a perfect, rigid society, there is no need for people to contest or go against the "norm". All the supposed subversives must be educated and made docile. For this instance, as Michel Foucault writes,

> A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved [...] In every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints prohibitions and obligations [...] These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called "disciplines".[132]

"Discipline" is, in fact, another keyword strictly related to the concept of control. In military academies, the cadets are taught to maintain a rigid "chin-up" position, to train extensively to gain an athletic physique, and often get yelled at by drill instructors, who do not backtrack when it comes to personal insults, that usually involve body-shaming the physical appearance. All of this is made to shape perfect individuals and soldiers, and to instill the idea of sheer obedience in their heads. The concept of masculine perfection in a world made of rules that need to be respected at all costs was also a typical rallying cry of totalitarian regimes, where absolute power reinforced, corrupted, and destroyed the individual's body with pleasure and hatred. The rebels or "abnormals" were captured, tortured, blackmailed, and often killed.

This nightmarish concept of repression of any kind of individual freedom, whether sexual, social or political was thoroughly explored in Pier Paolo Pasolin's last, controversially provoking film *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), from which Kane's *Cleansed* might have taken various inspirations. Based on the Marquis De Sade's tongue-in-cheek, over-the-top bloodfest, Pasolini

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[131] *Idem,* pp. 48-49.
[132] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (translated by), Vintage Books, New York, 1978, cit., pp. 136-137.

changed the setting from France at the height of Illuminism to the last days of Mussolini's regime. Four wealthy fascists, the Duke (Paolo Bonacelli), the President (Aldo Valletti), the Magistrate (Uberto Paolo Quintavalle), and the Bishop (Giorgio Cataldi), after swearing a blood oath between each other, kidnap a group of young boys and girls with the help of the SS. They segregate the young victims in a luxurious mansion isolated near Marzabotto, Emilia Romagna. For 120 days, the helpless prisoners will be subjected to all forms of depravity by the four lords and their collaborators. A series of rules are also established: any act of rebellion or disrespect against the lords, any demonstration of genuine affection and love between the prisoners, and any sign of religious devotion will be severely punished.

The film is divided into four "Dantesque circles" encapsulating the aberrations that will be perpetrated over the victims, that go from sexual humiliation and tortures including mutilation of private parts, are a clear expression of torture as "an expression of liberty, sovereignty, and imperial power; [...] the contemporary dimensions of torture as an instrument of civilization"[133], and also a practical example of the aforementioned discipline Foucault described.

If De Sade's novel was meant to be a satire against moralism, Pasolini's version is a gritty, hopeless warning against the corruptive, hateful power hiding in every corner. The victims in De Sade's novel are just shells invented to be massacred, while the Pasolinian prisoners arouse more empathy from the audience: some of them were taken away from their families, and others were sold by their same family members. The level of violence also differs: the Marquis depicts it as an explosive, exaggerated force; Pasolini chooses a colder, calculated representation, as "the more ordered and channeled the energies making violence are, the more significant the violences themselves are likely to be, and the more enlightening the entailed empathy"[134]. The victims in Pasolini's *Salò*, like the ones depicted in Kane's *Cleansed*, struggle to maintain a form of human dignity despite being reduced to mere objects to exploit the perversions of four sadistic torturers, but only a few of them manage to do that: Antiniska and Eva (Antiniska Nemour and Olga Andreis) form a lesbian relationship, have sex every night and try to kiss in front of the lords despite their menaces; Ezio (Ezio Manni), a collaborator, turns against them and is fatally shot. Others instead chose to play the game of their capturers, whether developing a Stockholm syndrome, becoming their allies or betraying the other inmates by revealing their transgressions in order to be spared. The choice is double: rebel and die, or collaborate and live.

In the bleak setting of a prison, where all values and morals are denied and the inmates are at the mercy of brutal keepers, the freedom of the self and the body is almost impossible to show. It is

[133] Eduardo Subirats, Christopher Britt Arredondo (translated by), "Totalitarian Lust: From *Salò* to Abu Ghraib", *South Central Review*, Spring, 2007, Vol. 24, No. 1, On Torture (Spring, 2007), pp. 174-182, cit., p. 180.
[134] Fraser, *Violence in the Arts*, cit., p. 92.

all a matter of belief and acknowledgment of having nothing left to lose, as well as the realization of the potential of becoming a symbol of resistance. For instance, while having collaborated to the creation of this sadistic game, *Salò*'s Ezio dies with dignity by showing the Socialist closed fist salute before being gunned down by the four lords.

The decision to defy the forced captivity's power to preserve some human dignity was repeatedly shown in real life, like when IRA militant Bobby Sands chose his own fate by undergoing a hunger strike during his years in prison, which resulted fatal to him. Despite his emasculated, weeping-sores-covered body being a direct effect provoked by the Thatcher government to not guarantee the status of political prisoners to the IRA members, Sands decided of his own free will to die for the cause. Steve McQueen's masterful biopic *Hunger* (2008) documents Sands' final years, in a powerful statement of defiance against government violence and oppression. In the end, despite the brutal beatings and humiliations, Sands dies like a free man, with a thin, swollen body that chose to break itself. It can be said the same for Rod's character in *Cleansed*, who in the end, despite the tortures and the possibility to sell his lover to his death, chooses to sacrifice himself for him: an act of defiance, and one last moment of an individual committing an indirect suicide for a greater cause.

As can be seen, emotional and physical situations can affect directly an individual, whether through change, death, or something more emotional like a refusal. It is the paradox of a solid material that is, in reality, fragile and ready to be crushed by foreign agents. The story that Sarah Kane depicted in her third play, *Cleansed* (1998): a tale of violation, torture, and pain, but most importantly, it is a story of fragile people with fragile bodies who love and want to be loved, in a world in which affection is seen as a sentiment that must be wiped off.

4.2 Woyzeck and the Others

After the scandalous debut of *Blasted* and the smaller-scale satire of *Phaedra's Love*, Sarah Kane's third play could be seen as the beginning of a slow, gradual distancing from the more grounded, Aristotelian rules-respectful stories that she previously represented. By reading its script, it could be said that *Cleansed* was so far the most ambitious and experimental work she has ever done. Starting from an over-the-top level of violence that presents limbs cut off and devoured by rats, impalements, and hangings, to a divided structure of acts that appear more like "fragments" than actual scenes and with a prose that anticipates the absent punctuation of her two last plays. If *Blasted* was inspired by true events as *Phaedra's Love*, with the former being an unapologetically sarcastic rewrite of a classic, *Cleansed* is Kane's most complex work in terms of inspiration and staging. It was originally intended to be the second chapter of a "war trilogy" (the first being *Blasted*), but the author then decided to scrap it. Despite being far different from *Blasted*, the shadow of the Yugoslavian war still covers the

play's content, from the title itself, which might reference the infamous ethnic cleansing that was raging in the Balkans at the time, to a particular scene where one of the characters is tortured via a brutal method that was used during that conflict: the so-called Turkish crucifixion, that will be done at the expense of one of the characters, Carl. Aside from that, the title might also be intended as symbolic: the cleansing of individuals, but also of love; or it might even be said that love itself is what brings cleansing to the desperate characters.

The play could be summarised as the tragic odyssey of a group of 'unwanted' people imprisoned in a University campus now turned into a concentration camp. However, the events that follow are not linear, and the whole thing could last from a couple of weeks, months, or even years. This episodic structure intentionally obliterates any possiblity of realism. While talking about the genesis of *Cleansed*, Kane recounted,

> I was having a fit about all this naturalistic rubbish that was being written, and I decided that I wanted to write a play that could never be turned into a film - it could never ever be shot for television; it could never be turned into a novel. The only thing that could ever be done with it was it could be staged, and believe it or not that play is *Cleansed*. You may say it can't be staged, but it can't be anything else either.[135]

Cleansed is, by all means, the darkest play Kane has ever written. The disturbing unsettlement caused by the representation of this apparent dystopian, loveless world reminds the atmosphere of Kane's third monologue, *Starved*. Like in the former, the focus is on the slow disintegration between the body and mind of an ED patient, her ordeal through various hospitalizations and medical treatments, all condensed in a gradual breakdown, highlighted by the insistent repetition of the main character/narrator to be "okay". But whereas in *Starved* the body in pain is the result of an apparent individual choice, in *Cleansed* it is a higher institutional power that plays a determinate role in the utter dehumanization of the body, represented by the sadistic Tinker, who ironically shares the name with the theatre critic who mercilessly panned *Blasted*. The basic idea of *Cleansed* came to Kane by reading Barthes' *Fragments*, and being struck by the aforementioned comparision between being love and beind a Dachau prisoner. Kane said,

> When I read it I was just appalled and thought how can he possibly suggest the pain of love is as bad as that. But then the more I thought about it I thought actually I do know what he's saying. It's about the loss of self. And when you lose yourself, where do you go? There's nowhere to go, it's actually a kind of madness. And thinking about that I made the connection with *Cleansed*. If you put people in a situation in which they lose themselves and what you're writing about is an emotion which people lose themselves then you can make the connection between the two.

[135] Saunders, *Love me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes,* cit., p. 87.

The play also took inspiration from literary works such as William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (1601-1602), Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). These three main sources, although written in different historical and social contexts and apparently unrelated, all masterfully converge into a unique work. What stands out in *Cleansed* is the representation of a gender that is in constant fluidity. The identities between man-woman are switched, transformed, or surgically changed. One might start with Tinker, who throughout the play acts like a lethal chameleon: he is a drug dealer, a doctor, an interrogator, a torturer, and an agent of the despotic institution that rules the Campus (or even an inmate himself, like a *kapo*); Grace and Graham are brother and sister in an incestuous relationship, with the former starting to wear her dead brother's clothes, mimicking his voice and gestures and adopting his name after transitioning; Robin appears on stage wearing Graham's old clothes and then he ends up cladding Grace's dress. The inspiration for this gender change, both sexual and textile, comes directly from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In it, two twins, Viola and Sebastian, get lost in a shipwreck on the coast of Illyria, a Balcanic peninsula. Believing his brother to be dead, Viola adopts the male identity of the pageant Cesario to serve Duke Orsino, who is in love with Olivia, a wealthy lady who is still grieving her brother's death. In this comedy, the villainous character is embodied by Malvolio, an arrogant bigot who serves as a steward of Olivia's household.

In the end, Viola and Sebastian reunite, she marries the Duke and Malvolio gets publicly humiliated. Shakespeare's work is a comedic celebration of love, with the rigid puritanism portrayed by the pompous steward ridiculed and a mocking commentary of the traditional rule of Elizabethan theatre that forbid women to act on stage, as Viola recites: " Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man"[136]. Despite all this, the Kanean version of *Twelfth Night* is nothing sort of a comedy. At its foremost, it presents the idea of affirming an individual's identity as an act of love and submission. If Shakespeare celebrates the affection of "all's well that ends well", with bigotry being ridiculed and defeated; Kane chooses to depict a world in which affection is brutally repressed by Tinker, the darker counterpart of Malvolio.

By the time she was writing *Cleansed*, Kane was also directing an adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* for the Gate Theatre of Notting Hill in October 1997. Büchner's work though, was and still is incomplete. All the fragments that have been collected after the author's death might not be in the order Büchner himself intended it to be. There are continuity errors, and the story ends in a cliffhanger, unlike Werner Herzog's 1979 cinematic adaption that concludes with the titular character

[136] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Elizabeth Story Donno (edited by), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 131.

(played by Klaus Kinski) drowning in the river while hallucinating blood instead of water.[137] The plot seems simple: it is based on an actual true crime committed by a simple soldier who murdered his wife after she cheated on him multiple times. The trial proceeded with various psychological analysises of the killer, which went from schizophrenia to depersonalization diagnosis and ended with the culprit's execution.

Büchner used this real-life event to create a theatrical discourse that anticipated the modern bourgeois drama of eight years. *Woyzeck* is, in fact, a "proletarian tragedy": a mentally-ill outcast, usually employed as a comedic relief, is now at the center, he has the opportunity to speak and to become an unintentional tragic hero. The fragmented text might also be seen as a symbolic representation of a fragmented mind, something that the original author probably did (not) expect it to be: there are thirty scenes, with little to no connection to each other, apart from Marie, Woyzeck's lover, and her gradual fall into adultery with the unnamed Drum Major. The scenes' order changes from edition to edition. For example, the order proposed by Werner R. Lehmann starts with the protagonist and his comrade Anders chopping woods in the fields, with Woyzeck giving clear symptoms of mental instability due to perceiving dark, supernatural forces surrounding them; while the edition published in 1998 by the Oxford Classics with a translation made by Victor Price opens with Woyzeck shaving his despotic captain's beard. Regarding her adaptation, Sarah Kane recalled: "The thing I found reall interesting about this piece, that I wanted to capture myself, was that for me the scenes were like balloons that in a way float above ground but at the same time are tied to the earth, rooted but floating"[138]. The constant taunting of his superiors, his partner's adultery, and the humiliation he gets when confronting the Drum Major, are all elements that induce Woyzeck's final breakdown, which culminates with him taking Marie in the woods and stabbing her to death, like a deranged Othello slaying an actually guilty Desdemona. With a broken body and a broken mind, Woyzeck has become the demented child of the 19th Century, where the seeds of madness reside in the morality of the supposed sane.

Aside from depicting a mentally unstable loner as a relatable character, Büchner also addressed the cruel usage that can be made of science. Being a medical student himself, he inserted in the play the character of a slimy doctor who performs bizarre experiments on Woyzeck, including a forced diet based only on peas to study the effect they have on his patient/lab rat's urine. The exchange between the two is hilariously grotesque:

> DOCTOR. I saw you, Woyzeck. Pissing in the street. Pissing up against the wall, like a dog. And me giving you threepence a day, plus board! That’s bad of you, Woyzeck. The world is denitely going to the bad.

[137] Werner Herzog (dir.), *Woyzeck* (Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1979).
[138] Saunders, *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, cit., p. 42.

WOYZECK. But Doctor, when nature calls …

DOCTOR. Let it call! Haven't I proved that the musculus constrictor vesicae is subject to the will? Nature indeed. Man is free. Man is the transfiguration of the individual urge to freedom. Can't hold his water. *(Shakes his head, puts his hands behind his back and walks up and down)* Have you eaten your peas, Woyzeck? Nothing but peas*, cruciferae*, remember. There's going to be a revolution in science, I'll blow the whole thing sky-high [...] Pissing against a wall—and have I your written agreement! I saw with my own eyes. I had just that moment put my nose out of the window to catch the rays of the sun - I wished to study the phenomenon of the sneeze. *(Going up to him)* No, Woyzeck, I am not angry. Anger is unhealthy. Unscientific. I am perfectly calm. [...] Woyzeck, you shouldn't have pissed against that wall.

WOYZECK. But Doctor, some people are built that way. It's in their character. But nature's a different kettle of fish. As far as nature's concerned—*(He snaps his fingers)* It's a kind of thing … I mean to say …

DOCTOR. Woyzeck, you're philosophizing again.[139]

The "mad doctor" in the play, with his bragging about a future scientific revolution that, in retrospect, might be seen as a gloomy anticipation of the inhumane eugenics experiments Doctor Josef Mengele performed on the Auschwitz inmates, from which Kane might have taken inspiration for the "medical" Tinker, who will perform the forced sex-change of Grace, the heroin, and Carl, the homosexual victim.

Science is also a major element in Kane's play, considering its setting in a dystopian world, in which the discipline of creation can also become the discipline of control. It is in this exact scenario that the inspiration coming from George Orwell's world-changing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes evident. Orwell's dystopia, set in the fictional world of Oceania, a nation-state at war with Eurasia, tells the story of a small-time worker named Winston Smith and his daily life under a terrible, maniacally observing dictatorship-entity guided by a human-god ruler simply identified as Big Brother, usually depicted as a mustached man (a possible nod to either Adolf Hitler or Iosif Stalin). The citizens are constantly spied upon, and all the transgressions are punished via torture or execution. Big Brother also owns the news, and the propaganda machine is so strong that all the things reported might be invented by the Party itself to keep the population under control. The majority of people have been brainwashed into accepting this miserable condition ("Freedom is slavery", as one of Oceania's commandments states).

Winston's life takes an unexpected turn when he engages in a sexual relationship with Julia, a female colleague of his. This transgression will be their only form of rebellion against the tyranny. In a world where all humanity has been bent and forcibly shaped, sex becomes the only engine of survival. Thomas Horan writes,

[139] Georg Büchner, *Woyzeck* in *Danton's Death, Leonce, Woyzeck*, Victor Price (ed. and trans. by), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 206-207.

> It is sex, not love that generates the bond between Winston and Julia, enabling their social conspiracy. For Orwell, the trust between individuals that makes their individuality possible and ultimately facilitates a culture of ethics and justice originates with sexual desire, not the grace of a particular god, which is why the Party employs traditional mechanism of institutional religion such as sexual repression. Orwell, like the other authors in this study, asserts that as much as totalitarian regimes need to control the flow of desire, they can never do so absolutely. Sexual hunger always re-emerges as the catalyst for rejuvenating tendencies.[140]

Starting as a mere liberating act, it slowly develops into a love story between the two. They arrive to swear to never betray each other in case of being captured and put under ill-treatment by the party:

> When once they get hold of us there will be nothing, literally nothing, that either of us can do for the other. If I confess, they'll shoot you, and if I refuse to confess, they'll shoot you just the same. Nothing that I can do or say, or stop myself from saying, will put off your death for as much as five minutes. Neither of us will even know whether the other is alive or dead. We shall be utterly without power of any kind. The one thing that matters is that we shouldn't betray one another, although even that can't make the slightest difference.[...] 'I don't mean confessing. Confession is not betrayal. What you say or do doesn't matter: only feelings matter. If they could make me stop loving you — that would be the real betrayal.' She thought it over. 'They can't do that,' she said finally. 'It's the one thing they can't do. They can make you say anything — anything — but they can't make you believe it. They can't get inside you.' 'No,' he said a little more hopefully, 'no; that's quite true. They can't get inside you. If you can feel that staying human is worth while, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them.' [141]

This fable is nevertheless short-lived. Winston and Julia get captured by the Party's enforcers and sentenced to be re-programmed in the ironically named "Ministry of Love". There, under the sadistic supervision of O'Brien, a colleague that the protagonist wrongly believed to be an opposer to Big Brother. For an unspecified time, Winston is starved and beaten, while also enduring psychological torture from O'Brien:

> 'You are rotting away,' he said; 'you are falling to pieces. What are you? A bag of filth. Now turn around and look into that mirror again. Do you see that thing facing you? That is the last man. If you are human, that is humanity. Now put your clothes on again [...] We have beaten you, Winston. We have broken you up. You have seen what your body is like. Your mind is in the same state. I do not think there can be much pride left in you. You have been kicked and flogged and insulted, you have screamed with pain, you have rolled on the floor in your own blood and vomit. You have whimpered for mercy, you have betrayed everybody and everything. Can you think of a single degradation

[140] Thomas Horan, "Desire and Empathy in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in *Desire and Empathy in Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019, pp. 149-150.
[141] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, p. 130.

that has not happened to you?' Winston had stopped weeping, though the tears were still oozing out of his eyes. He looked up at O'Brien. 'I have not betrayed Julia,' he said.[142]

Despite having his body destroyed, covered in bruises and scars, Winston has remained loyal to Julia. This is until the Room 101 supplice, in which the prisoners are tortured using the their worst fear against them. In the case of Winston's, it is rats. Only when a rat cage with starving rodents trapped is attached to his face, does the protagonist's devotion to his lover shatters:

There was a sharp click. Winston made a frantic effort to tear himself loose from the chair. It was hopeless; every part of him, even his head, was held immovably. O'Brien moved the cage nearer. It was less than a metre from Winston's face. 'I have pressed the first lever,' said O'Brien. 'You understand the construction of this cage. The mask will fit over your head, leaving no exit. When I press this other lever, the door of the cage will slide up. These starving brutes will shoot out of it like bullets. Have you ever seen a rat leap through the air? They will leap onto your face and bore straight into it. Sometimes they attack the eyes first. Sometimes they burrow through the cheeks and devour the tongue.' [...] [He] had suddenly understood that in the whole world there was just one person to whom he could transfer his punishment — one body that he could thrust between himself and the rats. And he was shouting frantically, over and over. 'Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!'[143]

The Party won. Winston and Julia have been successfully reprogrammed and are ready to be set free as "model citizens". Every trace of love they have felt for each other has been erased, with their bodies and minds shattered and rebuilt by a higher power that will do anything to force all the citizens into submission of his own will, by any means necessary.

In Orwell's novel, it turns out that the lovers' promises were broken by both under torture. Sarah Kane changed this tragedy with the homosexual couple of Carl and Rod, with the former being the only one betraying his partner while being impaled by Tinker, holding a metal pole. Contrary to Winston and Julia, Carl and Rod's love becomes stronger than ever, with Rod choosing to sacrifice his own life to save Carl from their oppressor's clutches. In addition to that, Kane also implements the use of rats eating Rod's face and Carl's severed limbs. According to Professor Sara Soncini, "while potentially filling the role of Tinker's emissarries or even analogs, however, as typical laboratory animals the rats are also affiliated with the human guinea pigs used in Tinker's experiments"[144]. And yet, despite Orwell's pessimism, Kane chose a more dramatic, but at the same time more hopeful approach : no matter how one tries to suppress it, love will always be stronger and will always survive, against all odds.

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[142] *Idem,* p. 212.
[143] *Idem*, pp. 221-222.
[144] Sara Soncini, "Performing Simulacra: Human/Animal Intersections in the Work of Sarah Kane"*, Between*, vol. XII, n. 24 (November 2022), pp., p. 494.

4.3 The Patients

In his 1967 controversial documentary *Titicut Follies*, filmmaker Frederick Wiseman portrayed the daily life at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. In its grimy black and white photography, the film documents impartially the treatments reserved for a group of patients. One of them, an old man known only by the name "Jim", is stripped naked, force-fed through a tube inserted in his body through a nostril, and constantly taunted by the Hospital staff. Through this ordeal, Jim switches from chatting normally to the nurses to cursing and swearing, until his death, which happens off-screen. During the preparations for his burial, Jim's corpse is dressed, washed, and treated with a dignity that he, in life, could not get. It seems that, according to Wiseman's vision, when an inmate has all its rights and humanity denied, death is the only instrument for eternal peace. It is in fact, the theme that is presented in *Cleansed*'s first scene.

"I want out"[145] says Graham to Tinker, while the latter is heating some heroin in a spoon. The setting is inside the perimeter fence of a university, in winter. Graham appears to be a drug addict in crisis of abstinence, while Tinker (in one of the many roles he will act throughout the piece) is his pusher:

> TINKER. I'm a dealer not a doctor.
> GRAHAM. Are you my friend?
> TINKER. I don't think so.
> GRAHAM. Then what difference will it make?
> TINKER. It won't end here.
> GRAHAM. My sister, she wants -
> TINKER. Don't tell me. [...] It's just the beginning.
> GRAHAM. Yes.
> TINKER. You'll leave me to that?
> GRAHAM. We're not friends.
> *Pause.*
> TINKER. No.
> GRAHAM. No regrets.
> *TINKER thinks. Then adds another large lump of smack to the spoon.*[146]

This scene, acting as a prologue, is short, with fast-paced, minimal dialogues between the two, but it is enough to set the mood of the entire, fragmented story: the will to embrace death to escape a miserable existence and the apparent absence of any form of love and empathy. An important note,

[145] Sarah Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 107.
[146] *Idem,* pp. 107-108

that will become recurrent over the course of the play, is the circular repetition of sentences and motifs uttered or embodied by some characters that will be reprised by other figures in different situations: Tinker will claim to be a doctor, just to deny it after performing the sex change on Grace; he will also reprise Graham's "No Regrets" line, and the usage of numbers will be adopted by Robin while counting on the abacus.

The supposed drug dealer provokes an overdose to Graham to accomplish his client's "want out" wish by injecting the heroin in his socket. During this act, he performs a ritual that "echoes relaxation techniques"[147], similar to the doctor's advice to the patient undergoing anesthesia:

> TINKER. Count backwards from ten.
> GRAHAM. Ten. Nine. Eight.
> TINKER. Your legs are heavy.
> GRAHAM. Seven. Six. Five.
> TINKER. Your head is light.
> GRAHAM. Four. Four. Five.
> TINKER. Life is sweet.
> GRAHAM. This is what it's like.
> *They look at each other. GRAHAM smiles, TINKER looks away.*
> GRAHAM. Thank you, doctor. *(he slumps)*
> TINKER. Graham? *(Silence)* Four. Three. Two. One. Zero.[148]

The small gesture of looking away at Graham's smile is a wonderful example of "show, do not tell", which also sets Tinker's personality. In this dystopian world, where every form of love and affection is abolished, Tinker has to play the game imposed by this repressive institution: he feels shameful or even repulsed by a small act of gratitude like a smile, but at the same time, overdosing Graham can also be seen as a merciful killing, despite all the atrocities that Tinker [will] commit[s]. In addition to that, the only moments in which Tinker shows off some vulnerability is when he is assisting the dancing sessions of a nameless woman, who performs them in the University's showering rooms - turned into peep show cabins:

> *The Black Room - the showers in the university sports hall converted into peep-show booths.*
> *TINKER enters. He sits in a booth. He takes off his jacket and lays it over his lap.*
> *He undoes his trousers and puts his hand inside. With his other hand he puts a token in the slot.*
> *The flap opens and he looks in. A WOMAN is dancing. TINKER watches for a while, masturbating.*
> *He stops and looks at the floor.*

[147] Stefani Bruesberg-Kiermeier, "Cruelty, Violence, and rituals in Sarah Kane's Plays" in *Sarah Kane in Context,* cit., pp. 80-87, p. 85.
[148] *Idem,* pp. 108-109.

TINKER. Don't dance, I - can I see your face? [...] What you doing here?

WOMAN. I like it.

[...]

TINKER. You shouldn't be here. It's not right.

WOMAN. I know.

TINKER. I can help.

WOMAN. How?

TINKER. I'm a doctor [...] Please, I won't let you down.[149]

"The fluidity of identity", writes Graham Saunders, "make Tinker one of the most problematic characters in all of Kane's plays; his puzzling and contradictory identity seems in part to come from the amalgamation of several of the literary sources that influenced Cleansed"[150]. The countdown to zero that concludes the sequence also makes it work as a prologue, an *Anti-Inferno* from which the audience will then be drawn into a series of hellish circles filled with mental and physical torture, with the only difference lying on the nature of the sinners: they are not souls that have already experienced death, but human beings seen as abnormals, dangerous threats to a perfect society based on an empty lack-of-feelings ideal.

4.3.1 A Pair of Star-Cross'd Lovers

There are many lovers in *Cleansed*, and each of them represents a specific kind of love. The one that Carl and Rod represent is the homosexual one, and by far, it is the most tragic and romantic among the others. Homosexuality has always been seen as a mortal sin in the Holy Texts, and for centuries it was perceived as a crime to be severely punished with prison or death. In Great Britain, especially in England, the infamous Labouchere Amendment punished not-proven homosexual acts of sodomy as "gross indecency" and sentenced the culprit to hard labor or, in the case of Alan Turing, to chemical castration. The struggle gay people had to endure was perfectly encapsulated by Derek Jarman in his 1990 highly experimental feature *The Garden*. In this series of apparently disjointed sequences featuring a Virgin Mary with Baby harassed by paparazzi and a Judas being hanged and later marketed to advertise credit cards, Jarman, who at the time was facing death from AIDS, inserts the story of a pair of homosexual lovers. The two are depicted as pure, innocent, and loving, things that do not suit the straight-conservative normativity of Britain. In the film, after a short-lived experience in an idyllic life together, the two are arrested, severely beaten, and humiliated by a group of sadistic policemen, before being sentenced to crucifixion. The last time we see them, they are carrying two crosses on their backs, like Jesus Christ did while walking towards the Golgotha to meet his fate.

[149] Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 121-123.

[150] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes,* cit., p.96.

Carl and Rod are similar to these two nameless "star-cross'd lovers" in the Jarman feature, with the difference that they did not experience a brief glimpse of a loving life together, but they apparently met in this bleak, dangerous Campus/Concentration Camp. The first time we see them is in the college green, in Summer, always at the inside perimeter of the fence. A cricket is chirping from the other side of the fence, hinting at a freedom they are not experiencing. The pair had known each other for three months. Carl, the most romantic one, takes off his ring, asking Rod to do the same. The latter, however, is detached and cynical. "It's suicide"[151] he says, despite Carl swearing that he would do everything for him:

> *CARL closes his eyes and puts the ring on ROD's finger.*
> ROD. What are you thinking?
> CARL. That I'll always love you *(ROD laughs)*. That I'll never betray you *(ROD laughs even more)*. That I'll never lie to you.
> [...]
> ROD. I wouldn't die for you.
> CARL. That's all right.
> ROD. I can't promise you anything. [...] *(Takes the ring and CARL's hand)* Listen. I am saying this once. *(He puts the ring on CARL's finger)*. I love you *now*. I'm with you *now*. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. Now. That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you.[152]

The scene ends with the two kissing, with Tinker silently watching them from a distance. This couple clearly evokes Winston and Julia's relationship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: both are normal citizens deciding to go against the rules imposed by the Dictatorship and feel something more, something that is thoroughly repressed by the agents of this camp.

Theirs is an act of pure transgression that is severely punished in Scene Four: Carl is being brutally beaten up by an unseen group of men, possibly the Campus-Lager's guards and Tinker's minions. The mephistophelian chameleon-like figure is assisting the scene, raising an arm to stop the beating and lowering it to reprise it. Once the inmate is left unconscious, Tinker immediately awakens him, just in time to subject him to a horrific and humiliating torture:

> TINKER. There's a vertical passage through your body, a straight line through which an object can pass, without immediately killing you. Starts *here (he touches CARL's anus)*
> *CARL stiffens with fear.*
> TINKER. Can take a pole, push it up here, avoiding all major organs, until it emerges here *(he touches CARL's right shoulder)*. Die eventually of course. From starvation if nothing else gets you first.

[151] Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 109.
[152] *Idem*, pp. 110-111.

CARL's trousers are pulled down and a pole is pushed a few inches up his anus.

CARL. Christ no

TINKER. What's your boyfriend's name?

CARL. Jesus

TINKER. Can you describe his genitals?

CARL. No

TINKER. When was the last time you sucked his cock?

CARL. I

TINKER. Do you take it up the arse? [...] Don't give it, I can see that [...] Close your eyes imagine it's him.

CARL. Please God no I

TINKER. Rodney Rodney split me in half [...] I love you Rod I'd die for you.

CARL. Not me please not me don't kill me Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME.

The pole is removed. ROD falls from a great height and lands next to CARL.[153]

This is another passage that clearly references Winston's ultimate betrayal of Julia, his lover. The torture that Tinker subjects is also a bleak remark to the atrocities perpetrated during the war in Yugoslavia. As Kane recalls, "It's a form of crucifixion which Serbian soldiers used against Muslims; and I tend to think that anything that has been imagined, there's someone somewhere who's done it"[154]. By doing so, Tinker is also blatantly mocking homosexual sex with a brutal, homophobic practice that is not too different from what Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* had to endure in his tragic, gruesome death. "In this 'lesson'", Sarah J. Ablett writes, "Carl's psychological integrity is broken, which is symbolically displayed on a physiological level, yet clearly predominantly a psychological issue since his physical integrity is only slightly violated, while the mental torture he is subjected makes him feel like he is being killed"[155]. The usage of a pole, an apparently harmless tool that turns into a weapon of supplice, is a common practice in the sick art of torture, especially considering that, among its name synonyms, the "pole" has "rod" as one, making the entire practice even more sadistically cruel:

> The weapon and the tool seem at moments indistiguishable, for they may each reside in a single physical object (even the clenched fist of a human hand may be either a weapon or a tool), and may be quickly transformed back and forth, now into the one, now into the other. At the same time, however, a gulf of meaning, intention, connotation and tone. If one holds two side by side in front of the mind [...] it is then clear that what differentiates them is not the object itself but the surface on which they fall. What we call "a weapon" when it acts on a sentient surface we call a "tool" when it acts on a nonsentient surface. [156]

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[153] *Idem*, pp. 122-123.
[154] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 117.
[155] Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane*, cit., p. 152.
[156] Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World,* cit., p. 173.

Rod appears on the scene literally falling from the sky, and landing exactly next to his traitor, who immediately jumps on him apologizing for what he just did, but Tinker interrupts him again:

> CARL. I couldn't help it, Rod, was out of my mouth before I -
> TINKER. Shh shh shh. No regrets *(He strokes CARL's hair*). Show me your tongue.
> *CARL sticks out his tongue. TINKER produces a large pair of scissors and cuts off CARL's tongue. CARL waves his arms, his mouth open, full of blood, no sound emerging. TINKER takes the ring from ROD's finger and puts it in CARL's mouth.*
> TINKER. Swallow.
> *CARL swallows the ring.*[157]

After humiliating Carl by mocking a sexual practice and proving his untrustworthiness, Tinker's removal of the betraying organ, the tongue, is a symbolic act of violation that openly, blasphemously parodies the sacrament of communion, and prevents him to speak to Rod ever again. This attempt of destroying their love fails when they are reunited in Scene Eight-Thirteen, with Rod tearfully forgiving his partner and with Carl's body being subjected to further mutilations.

In Scene Eight, Carl and Rod are close to the perimeter fence again. The grass now turned into mud due to the rain. There is no cricket this time, but a foul rat enters on stage. The hope represented by the shining sun seen in the third scene in which the two lovers first appeared is no longer to be seen, and these voracious, dirty rodents are crawling over them, another symbolic reference to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> *CARL scrabbles around in the mud and begins to write while ROD talks.*
> ROD. And the rats eat my face. So what. I'd have done the same only I never said I wouldn't. You're young. I don't blame you. Don't blame yourself. No one's to blame.
> *TINKER is watching. He lets CARL finish what he is writing, then goes to him and reads it. He takes CARL by the arms and cuts off his hands.*
>
> [...]
> *ROD goes to CARL. He picks up the severed left hand and takes off the ring he put there. He reads the message written in the mud.*
> ROD. Say you forgive me. *(He puts on the ring)* I won't lie to you, Carl.
> *The rat begins to eat CARL's right hand.*[158]

[157] Sarah Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 117-118.
[158] *Idem*, pp. 129-130.

The image of a tongueless and armless Carl writing in the mud to explain his thoughts recalls Lavinia's rape and mutilation in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, but the boundaries of stage representativity are at stake with the introduction of an animal eating a severed limb.

The rodents appear again in Scene Thirteen, carrying away Carl's feet when they are chopped off after performing a "dance of love" for Rod, while an unseen child is singing the Beatles' song *Things we said today.* The choice of this piece of music, taken from the Fab Four's *A Hard Day's Night* album (1964), has the lyrics resembling a distant "future nostalgia" for the things two lovers confessed to each other. It is as if both Carl and Rod already know that one of them might get killed at any day and at any moment, and they decide to make treasure of the brief moments of tenderness they are sharing in a God-forsaken place like that. In his monologue, also, Rod not only claims to do what Carl failed to accomplish despite his initial oath but also reflects how sometimes people like Tinker, their butcher, can kill someone without actually giving it death:

> ROD. If you'd said 'Me', I wonder what would have happened. If he'd said 'You or Rod' and you'd said 'Me', I wonder if he would have killed you. He ever asks me I'll say 'Me. Do it to me, not to Carl, not my lover, not my friend, do it to me'. I'd be gone, first boat out of here. Death isn't the worst thing they can do to you. Tinker made a man bite off another man's testicles. Can take away your life but not give you death instead.[159]

This disturbing imagery of such sadism recalls a pivotal scene in Pasolini's *Salò*, in which the four lords, during "Il Girone della Merda" (eng. "The Circle of Shit"), decide to organize the competition of the "best bottom" among the young victims, with the winner gaining a quick and painless death. As in Cleansed, Pasolini's *Salò* presents a higher power repressing every form of affection, as well as a constant toying with the victims, destined to be torture, and it appears that death is the only hope left to achieve, in order to be spared by worse torments. After inspecting them all, the bottom of the young Franco (Franco Merli) is chosen as the winner, and the boy has a gun pointed to his temple by one of the guards. When the Bishop orders to shoot, it is revealed that the gun is empty. The morbid, messed up empathy of a quick demise was just a tasteless, cruel illusion that the four capturers made up to give a sense of false hope among the prisoners. As the Bishop taunting Franco says, they would kill him one thousands times, to eternity's limits, if the former even had them[160].

Against all odds, the love between Carl and Rod is still stronger than ever, and it reaches its climax in their final scene together, the number Sixteen. In it, we hear the sound of fire, most of the rats are dead. Rod realizes that there is no future for them: they can only live in the present, just like

[159] *Idem*, p. 136.
[160] dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Produzioni Europee Associate, 1975)

he said in their first appearance, and for this reason, he and Rod make love for the first time. Their first moment of pure intimacy will also be the last one when Tinker shows up again. This time, there will not be just mutilation, but the final test for Carl and Rod's love:

> ROD. There's only now *(he cries)*.
> *CARL hugs him.*
> ROD. That's all there's ever been.
> *CARL kisses him. He makes love to ROD.*
> ROD. I will always love you. I will never lie to you. I will never betray you. On my life.
> *They both come. ROD takes off the ring and puts it in CARL's mouth. CARL swallows it. He cries. They hug tightly, then go to sleep wrapped around each other.*
> *TINKER is watching. He pulls ROD away from CARL.*
> TINKER. You or him, Rod, what's it to be?
> ROD. Me. Not Carl. Me.
> *TINKER cuts ROD's throat. CARL struggles to get to ROD. He is held.*
> ROD. It can't be this *(he dies*).
> TINKER. Burn him.[161]

In this unexpected twist, despite the awareness of their temporary relationship, Rod still decided to be faithful to Carl, and keep his promise. If Carl was "human" in his betrayal, Rod is a "man", who accepted his own fate to put an end to his misery as well as allowing Carl to live, though unknowingly condemning him to suffer another, final humiliation at the hands of Tinker. These two "star-cross'd lovers" are a reflection of the struggles that LGBTQ+ people had (and have) to endure in all the contemporary years, with the discrimination and the prejudices enforced by a ruling society that always saw them as different, subnormal abominations, and never realized the purity and innocence of the love they showed to each other.

Carl and Rod's story can be compared to the one experienced by Max and Horst, the main characters of Martin Sherman's award-winning play *Bent* (1979), centered on the relatively unknown condition of gay men in Nazi concentration camps. Max, hiding his homosexuality and falsely pretending to be Jewish due to his belief of having better chances of survival in the lager, meets the openly gay Horst. Despite the hellish environment, they manage to find love between each other, and even have "mental" sexual intercourse in one of the play's most tender moments:

> MAX. We can't look at each other. We can't touch.
> HORST. We can feel...
> MAX. Feel what?

[161] *Idem*, p. 142.

HORST. Each other. Without looking. Without touching. I can feel you right now. Next to me. Can you feel me? [...] I'm kissing you.

MAX. Burning.

HORST. Kissing your eyes. [...] Do you feel me inside you?

MAX. I want you inside me.

HORST. Feel...

MAX. I have you inside me...[...] Now! (gasps) Oh! Oh! My God! *(has orgasm)*

[...]

HORST. Max?

MAX. What?

HORST. We did it. How about that - fucking guards, fucking camp, we did it!

MAX. Don't shout.

HORST. Ok. But I'm shouting inside. We did it. They're not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love. They're not going to kill us.[162]

Max and Horst. Carl and Rod. These two couples showed that, despite the utter dehumanization they endured, they were not stopped by anything from feeling each other. Not even the betrayals made for the sake of survival (Max' hiding his sexual orientation and Carl's Winston-like shout) could destroy their love and its purity, a rare sign of empathy and compassion that in an environment created on the Conradian motif "Exterminate all the brutes" are the only instruments to survive, and keep each other's humanity.

4.3.2 G/ra(ham)ce

In Scene Three, the audience is introduced to what might be called the "heroine" of this story: Grace, Graham's sister. The setting is a white room, identified as the University's sanatorium. Tinker appears wearing doctor's clothes and holding a file in which Graham's death is certified. The dialogue between the two resembles the main plot point of Sophocle's *Antigone*, a tragedy of self-sacrifice against political corruption, which had already been re-adapted by Howard Brenton in his 1983 *Victory*, where his Antigone, a woman named Bradshaw, was also played by a young Sarah Kane in one of her rare acting performances.

Graham's body has been burned, and all that remains are just his clothes. Differently from Antygone, Grace does not have the possibility to retrieve his brother's body for a proper burial and thus decides to get back his garments, the only trace left of him. However, they had already been given to another patient of the campus, a shy, mentally-ill boy named Robin. The usage of dead

[162] Martin Sherman, *Bent*, Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, New York, 1998, cit., pp. 55-58.

people's clothes being recycled or burned is a bleak remark to the practice the Nazis did in order to sell materials (e.g. gold, glasses, etc.) or bodily items (e.g. hair, teeth, etc.) belonging to dead inmates to collaborators or industries. It is in this subplot that the influence from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* comes to play, especially for its theme regarding the fluidity of gender, starting from the clothes. Robin, wearing the garments that belonged to Graham, is seen by Grace as a bad imitation of his beloved brother, as well as a disrespectful act against his memory, thus making her force him to strip himself and give them to her:

> GRACE. *(to ROBIN)* Take off your clothes.
> ROBIN. Miss?
> GRACE. Grace.
> TINKER. Do it.
> *ROBIN takes off his clothes, down to his underpants.*
> GRACE. All of them.
> [...]
> *GRACE undresses completely. ROBIN watches, terrified. TINKER looks at the floor. GRACE dresses in ROBIN/GRAHAM's clothes. When fully dressed, she stands for a few moments, completely still. She begins to shake. She breaks down and wails uncontrollably. She collapses. TINKER lifts her onto a bed. She lashes out - he handcuffs both arms to the bed rails. He injects her. She relaxes.*[163]

The fit Grace has right after wearing them can be seen as a prelude to a physical and mental metamorphosis into a male role, his brother. The change is so sudden and unexpected that her body starts twitching without control: she is not ready yet. In the meantime, Robin will wear the feminine dress Grace wore before the exchange. Over the course of the scene, Tinker shows off once again small acts of empathy, when he sedates her, and then when trying to convince her to go away from the Campus/Lager as he cannot protect her, but she utterly refuses, her mind still thinking about Graham and how they both looked similar ("I look like him. Say you thought I was a man"[164]). Left alone by the "doctor", Grace asks Robin to write to her father, in order to let her father know where she is, but the boy starts to incoherently ramble about how he will soon be released from there, to reunite with his mother, but all of this is made for the shame of being illiterate:

> ROBIN. Leaving soon. Going to my mum's.
> *GRACE stares.*
> ROBIN. What you doing here, don't have girls here. Staring at me [...] Voice told me to kill myself.
> *GRACE stares.*

[163] Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 113.
[164] *Idem*, p. 114.

ROBIN. Safe now. Nobody kills himself here. [...] Could be pretty soon, me leaving. Could be in thirty, Tinker said. Could be -

GRACE. You can't write, can you?

ROBIN opens his mouth to answer but can't think of anything to say.

GRACE. It's not the end of the world.[165]

Grace will start shortly after to experience visions of Graham who, like a ghost in an Elizabethan/Jacobean Drama, will appear on stage, with Grace the only one capable of seeing him. His apparition in Scene Five is met with a physical altercation from her, who then hugs him as tightly as she can. He initiates a dance of love for Grace, just like Carl did for Rod. In the stage directions, Kane highlights specifically how brother and sister's identities are slowly, fluidly mixing with each other:

GRAHAM. More like me than I ever was.

GRACE. Teach me.

GRAHAM dances - a dance of love for GRACE. GRACE dances opposite him, copying his movements. Gradually, she takes on the masculinity of his movement, his facial expression. Finally, she no longer has to watch him - she mirrors him perfectly as they dance exactly in time. When she speaks, her voice is more like his.

GRAHAM. You're good at this.

GRACE. Good at this.

GRAHAM. Very good.

GRACE. Very good. [...] They burned your body.

GRAHAM. I'm here. I went away but now I'm back and nothing else matters.[166]

The love Graham and Grace feel for each other is not just brotherly, but also incestuous. After the dance, they consume a passionate sexual intercourse on the bed, finding each other's rhythm and causing a sunflower to burst through the floor. Suzanne Sylvester, Grace's original actress before being replaced by Sarah Kane herself in the three final performances, remembered how "the play became suddenly clear to me; the characters are all emanating great love and going after what they need; the obstacles in the way are extremely unpleasant, but that's not what the play is about; what drives people is need"[167]. If Carl and Rod need each other to feel a sense of humanity in a world that sentenced them to die, Grace needs Graham because she loved him more than a brother, and her soon-to-be-revealed gender dysphoria makes her desire not just to be *like* him, but rather *be* him. She voluntarily got locked up in this prison, as her Greek counterpart Antigone had been locked up in a grave. Her need, based on her forbidden feeling for Graham, is so hard that has the power to create

[165] *Idem*, p. 115.
[166] *Idem*, pp. 119-120.
[167] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 115.

something as magical as a sunflower out of nowhere, in a scene that might recall the onirical desert sex scene between Mark Frechette and Daria Halprin in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*. Upon seeing the product of their love, Graham pulls the flower towards him and smells it, uttering the same, very first line Cate from *Blasted* said once entering the hotel room and finding the flowers: "Lovely"[168].

The relationship between Grace and Graham soon has a third character including himself into it: it is Robin, whose Grace's kindness towards him prompted him to fall in love with her. In an act of genuine compassion, the young woman decides to teach Robin how to write. In the "lesson" that takes place in Scene Seven, Graham is present on stage, and he is speaking the same lines Robin utters as if to underline Grace's decaying mental state, incapable of accepting his death. As Christina Wald has pointed out, "Grace talks simultaneously to Graham and to other characters and thus pursues two overlapping conversations which create double meanings for audiences"[169]. In the dialogue, Grace mentions how she had a past relationship with a man who abused and almost killed her by strangulation, and she also relates her body dysmorphia:

> ROBIN/GRAHAM. Gracie.
> GRACE. What?
> ROBIN. If you could change one thing in your life what would you change?
> GRACE. My life.
> ROBIN. No, one *thing* in your life.
> [...]
> GRACE. My body. So it looked like it feels. Graham outside like Graham inside.
> ROBIN/GRAHAM. I think you've got a nice body.[170]

Throughout the scene, Robin also confesses being in love with her, and Tinker watches them from a distance. Grace rejects him, and Tinker interrupts the lesson and burns down the paper in which Robin has been writing, once it is revealed that he has drawn a flower. The punishment reserved for Grace is brutal: in the same Red Room where Carl was beaten and impaled, she is being battered by the same unseen group of men, this time armed with baseball bats. For the first time, we hear their menacing voices:

> GRACE. Graham.
> VOICES. Dead, slag. She was having it off with her brother. Weren't he a bender? Fucking user. All cracked

[168] Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 121.
[169] Christina Wald, *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, cit., p. 201.
[170] Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 125-126.

up. Shit no shit yes crack crack crack

GRACE is hit once on each crack

GRACE. Graham Jesus save me Christ

VOICES. He can never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* never *(crack)* save you *(crack)*[171]

Graham is there with her, incapable of reacting or protecting her sister. All he can do is try to teach her a relaxation technique to ease the pain, similar to what Tinker did when he accomplished Graham's desire to die, while at the same time recalling some memories from their possible childhood. This concept of anticipating the pain can also be found in Blanchot's writing, as "the mark of the disaster is that one is never at that mark except when one is under its threat and, being so, past danger"[172]

GRAHAM. Switch off your head. That's what I did. Shoot up and switch off before the pain moves in. I thought of you [...] I used to put my spoon in my tea and heat it up. When you weren't looking press it on your skin at the top of your arm and you'd *(crack)* scream and I'd laugh. I'd say Do it to me.

GRACE. Do it to me.

GRAHAM. You'd press a hot spoon on me, I'd not feel a thing. Knew it was coming. If you know it's coming you're prepared. If you know it's coming -

GRACE. It's coming.

The blow comes. GRACE's body moves - not with pain, simply with the force of the blow.[173]

Soon after, the young woman is brutally raped by one of the voices, with Graham holding her head between his hands all the time. In addition to that, when he touches her body, blood stains start to appear in the same places as both of their clothes. The suffering of Grace is the suffering of Graham, who is carrying it with her as Christ carried on his own back the cross representing mankind's guilt. The entire scene reminds of a war setting, and it is even more shocking when the sound of a machine gun is heard:

VOICES. Kill them all

A pause. Then a long stream of automatic gunfire. GRAHAM shields GRACE's body with his own, and holds her head between his hands. The gunfire goes on and on and on. The wall is pitted with bullet marks, and as the gunfire continues, huge chunks of plaster and brick are blown from the wall. The wall is being shot to pieces and is splattered with blood. [...] Out of the ground grow daffodils. They burst upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage.[174]

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[171] *Idem*, p. 131.
[172] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 4.
[173] Kane, *Cleansed* in *Complete Plays*, p. 132.
[174] *Idem*, p. 133.

This powerful scene, which once again might bring back the shadow of the Yugoslavian wars, shows once again how Grace and Graham's love for each other can be stronger than everything else, even acting like a shield in front of raging bullets fired hatefully by a group of aggressors. In addition to that, according to Hillary Chute, "the act of speaking made *spatial* is made explicit here - 'literal' in fact - and sounds, language, speech, words enter us, enter our subjectivity and enter Grace through rape"[175]. The scene ends with the appearance of Tinker, who presents himself as Grace's savior, as it will be seen in the enigmatic Scene Twelve, Grace, Graham and Tinker are alone on stage. The two men are on her two sides. Grace is illuminated by a tiny shaft of light coming down from the ceiling. The dialogues are broken and incoherent, as to resemble Grace's confused state of mind after the beating. The lines of Graham appear to be Tinker's, while the murderous voices are still heard:

> TINKER. Can take you there.
> GRACE. I know.
> VOICES. Burn you clean
> GRACE. Hold my hand.
> *GRAHAM takes one hand, TINKER the other.*
> GRACE. My balls hurt.
> TINKER. You're a woman.
> VOICES. Lunatic Grace
> GRACE. Like to feel you here
> GRAHAM. Always be here. And here. And here.
> GRACE. *(laughs, then suddenly serious)* They keep calling me.
> [...]
> GRAHAM. Don't cut me out.
> GRACE. Graham
> VOICES. Frazzle it out
> TINKER. Tinker.
> VOICES. Burn it out
> [...]
> *TINKER drops GRACE's hand. An electric current is switched on. GRACE's body is thrown into rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out.*[176]

It appears that, after breaking Grace's body through the beating and rape, Tinker and his minions took control of Grace's mind through electroshock therapy. For this reason, once she reappears on stage in Scenes Fifteen and Seventeen, she is completely silent and numb, as if her spirit left her body for

[175] Hillary Chute, "'Victim, Perpetrator, Bystander': Critical Distance in Sarah Kane's Theatre of Cruelty", in *Sarah Kane in Context*, cit., pp. 161-172, p. 167.
[176] Sarah Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 134-135.

good, leaving behind just an empty shell, or like a caterpillar who has forced to close into itself in order to become a butterfly.

In these two scenes, we also have the involvement of Robin, who will act in two of the most unnerving, repetitive sequences of the text. The boy, having been rejected by Grace, has in the meantime tried to find love somewhere else by attending one of the Woman's dancing sessions in the Black Room, as Tinker often does. Having found this out, the torturer confronts Robin and, after threatening him with a knife, forces him to eat all the chocolates from the box he has bought for Grace. The stage notes are long and insist in describing the act:

> *ROBIN eats the chocolate, choking on his tears. When he has eaten it, TINKER tosses him another. ROBIN eats it, sobbing. TINKER throws him another. ROBIN eats it. TINKER throws him another. ROBIN eats it. TINKER throws him another. ROBIN eats it. TINKER throws him another. ROBIN eats it.*[177]

The stage directions from the script cover one page and a half repeating this mechanical action of forced feeding, making the whole act unbearable to both readers and spectators. By ripping off the perfectly packaged box and forcing the boy to eat all the contents until he wets himself and making him use the same box to clean up the urine, is another tactic of humiliating submission that Tinker subjects to the inmates, this time destroying the idea of genuine, boyish love Robin feels for Grace. To make it worse, he forces Robin to burn all the books that Grace gave him to study. Robin's fate is sealed when, after learning how to count with an abacus, he finds out the number of days he has left before he can be released from this cruel institution. The scene is again daunting and repetitive, as Robin's counting on the abacus becomes more nervous and repetitive. Once the result is found ("Thirty fifty-two sevens"[178]), Robin can do nothing but hang himself with the tights that once belonged to Grace. The act is made even more disturbing by the fact that Grace, broken by the electroshock, is unresponding. What is actually twisting is the fact that Robin, while chocking on the knot, notices Graham for the very first time, and holds out a hand for him, as if he is asking to help him to die, a wish that Graham accomplishes by pulling Robin's legs down, killing him. The inspiration for Robin's character comes, according to Kane, to an illiterate young black man that Nelson Mandela met during his imprisonment on Robben Island. "Some of the other prisoners taught him how to read and write", Kane said, "he learnt to count, realized what forty-five years was and hung himself"[179]. Robin, among the other characters in the play, is the only one who had not found love. While Grace had Graham, Carl had Rod and Tinker had the Woman in the booth, Robin had no one. An outcast among the outcasts. As Annette Pankratz notices,

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[177] *Idem*, p. 139.
[178] *Idem*, p. 144.
[179] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, cit., p. 117.

> *Cleansed* correlates mobility not only with Tinker's sadistic power, but also with Robin's attempt to get closer to Grace. He intrudes into the Black Room. Furthermore, his love for Grace even makes him venture 'outside' and buy a box of chocolates. These contrast with Robin's inability to enter Grace's mind-space. Spatial transgressions converge with insurmountable personal distance. [...] Unable to express his love, amd stunned by the remaining time of supposed imprisonment, Robin commits suicide.[180]

The play ends with Grace being moved in the White Room again, and this time, the awaited metamorphosis finally takes its toll. She is lying unconscious on a bed, with "a tight strapping around her groin and chest, and blood where her breasts should be"[181]. On scene, we found Carl again, right after Rod had been killed in front of him. He has a bandage on his groin. As a final stab, Tinker reveals that he has accomplished Grace's desire to become her brother, Graham. A forced sex change that deprived her of the original identity to give her another one. To make Carl's ordeal worse, Tinker evirated him and placed his genitals on Grace. The woman, speaking at the same time with Graham, says that the process hurt, and Tinker sarcastically apologises: "I'm sorry, I'm not really a doctor"[182]. Both he and Graham says goodbye to Grace and exit the stage. This will be the last time we see Graham, her brother. His goodbye is also a symbolic reference to how Grace now no longer needs him, because she *is* him. Carl, in the meantime, having been taunted by Tinker for being the "passive" person in a relationship, has now turned into a woman. The two survivors share the stage on the last, remarkable scene that ends the play, taking place in the same perimeter of the fence on a rainy day. Grace/Graham delivers a monologue that is a heap of all the topics and events of the play:

> GRACE/GRAHAM. Body perfect. Chain-smoked all day but danced like a dream you'd never know. Have they done it yet? Died. Burnt. Lump of charred meat stripped off its clothes. Back to life. Why don't you ever say anything? Loved. Me. Hear a voice or catch a smile turning from the mirror You bastard how dare you leave me like this. Felt it. Here. Inside. Here. And when I don't feel it, it's pointless. Think about getting up it's pointless. Think about eating is pointless. Think about dressing is pointless. Think about speaking is pointless. Think about dying only it's totally fucking pointless. Here now. Safe on the other side and here. Graham. *(a long silence)* Always be here. Thank you, Doctor.[183]

Grace/Graham and Carl have lost everything: their mind, their body, and their lovers. Yet, despite everything that happened, it seems there is still hope, a tiny, feeble light at the end of the tunnel. The

[180] Annette Pankratz, "Neither Here nor There: Theatrical Space in Kane's Work", in *Sarah Kane in* Context, cit., pp. 149-160, p. 155.
[181] Sarah Kane, *Cleansed*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 145.
[182] *Idem*, p. 146.
[183] *Idem*, p. 150.

rain stops, and the sun starts shining, getting brighter and brighter. The two look at it, captured, and while Carl sobs, Grace/Graham smiles. Christina Wald writes,

> The play's final image thus suggests the juxtaposition of a man-turned-woman and a woman-turned-man. However, audiences know that Carl's femininity is far from "perfect" and only consists in his lack of 'literalised' masculinity, that is, the lack of a penis. As a second rat chews at Carl's wounds, the final image highlights the mutilations of both figures. Rather than establishing two unequivocally sexed bodies, the ending thus foregrounds their status in-between the sexes.[184]

At the same time, Tinker manages to find his happiness when, for the very first time, he has sex with the nameless Woman, whom he decides to call "Grace", hinting at the religiosity of her figure, that "graced" him with love, a feeling he has been trying to reject and repress, or to the heroine's name, implying how he was in love with her all the time. "Like her Hippolytus", Ken Urban writes, "Tinker conveys that ethical uncertainty, enacting Kane's continual collapsing of the simple binary oppositions that provide an audience with a comforting moral assurance"[185].

Over the course of the story, these fragile bodies twitched, broke, and reshaped into other forms by the power of a greater scheme that creates, plagues, and destroys. While in Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* death seemed the only peaceful moment an inmate could experience, in *Cleansed* death can be denied in order to prolong the suffering. Yet, despite everything, the hopeful note represented by the blinding light of the sun could imply that this oppressive power can still be destroyed. Love, in fact, is immortal. It did not die when Carl betrayed Rod, and it survived even when Grace changed sex, as exemplified by her tending Carl's severed hand at the end, and even when Tinker found love, it could be said that this could be the beginning of a revolution that will shatter this institution, like "a sturdy-seeming tree that has become hollow inside and can be toppled by a casual storm or a few resolute strokes of the axe"[186].

With its fragmentation, *Cleansed* not only pays tribute to the Büchnerian *Woyzeck*, but also symbolizes the fragmentation of bodies and minds. It might be Kane's most disturbing work, but also the most hopeful and tender. The bodies displayed on stage have been broken, but their fluidity has preserved them for survival and for a future rebirth made possible thanks to the intervention of lovers, acting as benign foreign agents in their partner's bodies. As Maurice Blanchot writes, "the other is, for his part too, always other, lending himself, however, to unity; he is neither this one nor that one, and nonetheless it is to him alone that, each time, I owe everything, including the loss of myself"[187].

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[184] Wald, *Hysteria, Trauma and* Melancholia, cit., p. 210.
[185] Urban, "An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane", cit., p. 43.
[186] Fraser, *Violence in the Arts (Illustrated Edition)*, cit., p. 133.
[187] Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.13.

5. A Waste Land of *Crave*

Blended sunrise
And it's a dying world
Humming Rheingold
We scavenge up our clothes
(David Bowie, *Strangers When We Meet*)

5.1 The Life of Marie Kelvedon

When dealing with the origin of *Crave*, Sarah Kane recalled how one day, while waiting for a meeting in director Vicky Featherstone's office, she saw a copy of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1968 play *Preparadise Sorry Now*. A perfect example of antitheatricality, this German work involves every kind of society's misfits (eg. prostitutes, exploiters, criminals, etc.) in a sheerly honest portrait of humanity's worst and desperate traits, with the main characters being none other than Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the infamous Moors Murders that between 1963 and 1965 rampaged around Manchester, England, killing five children. Fassbinder's play, which depicts the diabolical couple as Messianic figures who want to create their own paradise through the submission of what they consider inferior creatures, is told through a series of fragmented imagery that involves a high, religious meaning expressed through Gregorian chants, prayers, and communion rites. The whole play, with this ingenious mixture of sacredness and profanity, can be seen as a dramatic, "punk" reenactment of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Both deal with a hopeless, miserable humanity, and religious symbolism is used to make everything more grotesque and dramatic.

These two works are, in fact, the greatest influences for Kane's *Crave*: a poetic play about a group of outcasts, with a non-linear, unclear structure that uses, as Eliot, a heap of references to songs, literary works, and holy books. However, the real meaning behind *Crave* is even more enigmatic than its primary inspiration. In Kane's view,

> The play is very influenced by *The Waste Land*, and I had a choice as to whether I wrote a set of notes to go with the play, to explain it. But what happened to T.S. Eliot, poor bastard - and I bet he regretted it forever - was that everyone became more interested in the notes than the poem; because how can you understand the poem without them? I really didn't want that to happen and I also knew that the notes section would actually be longer than the script, which would be just ridiculous. So it was a very simple choice; either I explain everything, which means going into enormous detail about my own life, which I didn't really wanto to do, or I explain nothing. And I thought I'll explain nothing and if no one likes it then who cares?[188]

[188] Sarah Kane in conversation with Dan Rebellato, Youtube, November 10, 2015. Mancano dati

The breakdown of language, already perceived in *Cleansed*, is slowly reaching its peak. Stage directions are minimal, there is no clear setting and the characters are identified only with alphabet letters: C, M, B, and A. All this underlines how this work was something completely different from everything Kane previously did. Although scenes of graphic rape and violence are described, they do not happen on stage but are rather told by the characters themselves, especially A, whose tone in describing such events and his abusive relationship with C clearly reminds of Ian and Cate from *Blasted*. Like Ian was dictating horrific events to a colleague hanging on the phone, A brings out stories that could be taken from a tabloid journal article:

> A. A small boy had an imaginary friend. He took her to the beach and they played in the sea. A man came from the water and took her away. The following morning the body of a girl was found washed up on the beach. [...] A Vietnamese girl, her entire existence given meaning and permanence in the thirty seconds she fled from her village, skin melting, mouth open.[189]

However, what differs is the tone itself. It is lyrical and darker, yet less explicit, like a *De Profundis*, a poem on violent, disturbed people that are already dead, without actually realizing it.

According to Nils Tabert, the choice of dropping the graphic violence seen of her previous work might have been due to the fact that it had become so stylized to be stripped out of its disturbing, unnerving nature. Furthermore, Tabert reports Kane's words: "I'm past violence - I'm really sick of it; it's become like *Trainspotting* with film - so marketable and boring I don't want to deal with it anymore"[190]. According to Eckhart Vogts-Virchow, *Crave* is "a modernist retreat from the employment of violence, to an involvement with a poetic methodology of semi-Beckettian 'verbal despair'"[191], further embodied by the heartbreaking idea of having "fallen in love with someone that doesn't exist"[192].

In addition to that, the unusual form and content of the play prompted Kae to write it down under a pseudonym. Her *alter-ego* was also given a fictional biography, published in the program notes of the play:

> Marie Kelvedon is twenty-five. She grew up in Germany in British Forces accommodation and returned to Britain at sixteen to complete her schooling. She was sent down from St Hilda's College, Oxford, after her first term, for an act of unspeakable Dadaism in the college dining hall. She has had her short stories published in various European

[189] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 163-180.
[190] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, cit., p. 135.
[191] Clare Wallace, "Sarah Kane, Experiential Theatre and the Revenant Avant-Garde", in *Sarah Kane: In Context*, cit., pp. 88-99, p. 96.
[192] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 190.

> literary magazines and has a volume of poems *Onzuiver* ('Impure') published in Belgium and Holland. Her Edinburgh Fringe Festival debut was in 1996, a spontaneous happening through a serving hatch to an audience of one. Since leaving Holloway she has worked as a mini-cab driver, a roadie with the Manic Street Preachers and as a continuity announcer for BBC Radio World Service. She now lives in Cambridgeshire with her cat, Grotowski.[193]

In this humorous, self-parodying account, Kane jokingly depicts her own life, starting from her *alter-ego*'s name: Marie was Kane's middle name; Kelvedon comes from Kelvedon Hatch, the village in which she was born and raised; the act of "unspeakable dadaism" might be a reference to the incident she had with her professor at the University of Bristol, and the debut to "an audience of one" could refer to the opening night(s) of *Comic Monologue* or *Blasted*.

The first line of the play is uttered by C ("You're dead to me"[194]), apparently a black, underage girl whose life has been scarred by a series of traumatic events. She appears to be in a relationship with A, although it is implied he has been grooming and abusing her. The second couple, M and B, are respectively a middle-aged woman and a boy, the former a wannabe mother who wants the latter to father the baby she never had. The detached attitude of B, as well as this complex relationship with M, clearly resemble Hyppolitus from *Phaedra's Love*.

The gender of the characters is identified only through the lines they utter, while their real names - besides B, who apparently is called "David" - remain unknown. Kane stated,

> To me A was always an older man, M was always an older woman, B was always a younger man, and C was a woman. I decided not to specify. I thought there were things the characters said that made it very clear [...] A, B, C, and M do have specific meanings which I am prepared to tell you. A is many things: the author and abuser, because they're the same thing; Aleister as in Aleister Crowley, who wrote some interesting books that you might like to read, and the Antichrist. My brother came up with arse-hole, which I thought was good. There was also the actor who I originally wrote it for, who was called Andrew, so that was how A came to life. M was simply mother, B was boy and C was child. But I didn't want to write these things down, because then I thought they'll get fixed in those things forever and they'll never change. [195]

The opening lines already set the cryptic, dark mood of the play:

> B. My will reads, Fuck this up and I'll haunt you for the rest of your fucking life.
>
> C. He's following me.
>
> A. What do you want?
>
> B. To die.
>
> C. Somewhere outside the city, I told my mother, You're dead to me.

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[193] Crave (play) - "Marie Kelvedon", *Liquisearch*, https://www.liquisearch.com/ accessed 11/05/2023.
[194] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 155.
[195] Saunders, *About Kane*, cit. p. 79.

B. No that's not it.

C. If I could be free of you without having to lose you.

A. Sometimes that's not possible.

M. I keep telling people I'm pregnant. They say How did you do it, what are you taking? I say I drank a bottle of port, smoked some fags and fucked a stranger.

B. All lies.

C. He needs to have a secret but he can't help telling. He thinks we don't know. Believe me, we know.

M. A voice in the desert

C. He who comes after.

M. There is something in the way.

A. Still here.[196]

The spectators/readers know that M is desperate to give birth to a baby; B wants to die; C is reminiscing about the estranged relationship with her mother and the paranoia of someone following her, possibly A. It appears that despite the fear and disgust she feels for him, he is paradoxically the closest thing she will ever have to someone who loves her. In addition to that, the line "something in the way" could be hinting to the 1991 song of the same name by the grunge band Nirvana. This musical piece is a romanticized, autobiographical account by the band's singer, Kurt Cobain, regarding an episode that allegedly happened to him as a child: after running away from home, Cobain slept for days under a bridge near the Wishkah River in Aberdeen, Washington, USA. There, he had different encounters with wild animals who later became "his pets". The progressive degradation of a singer into a wild-like beast then symbolizes how trauma can become a barrier, "something" in the way of life that will make the traumatized victim unable to move on and recover. *Crave*'s characters, like the singer-narrator of this song, are stuck in their traumatic past, unable to forget and moving away to a better future.

Aforementioned characteristics aside, A also appears to be the kind of manipulator who tries to pass off as a decent person. He claims that he never smokes, that he is a vegetarian, and that he is not a rapist, although he later states of being a pedophile. It is his monologue that is the most recognized piece of this play-poem- A brilliant description of all the desires a person in love has, but also a creepy and unsettling portrayal of obsession, written in a Joycean stream of consciousness:

A. And I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath and massage your neck and kiss your feet and hold your hand an go for a meal and not mind when you eat my food and meet you at Rudy's and talk about the day and type up your letters and carry your boxes and laugh at your paranoia and give you tapes you don't listen to and watch great films and watch terrible films and complain about the radio and take pictures of you when you're sleeping and get up to fetch you

[196] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 155.

> coffee at midnight and have you steal my cigarettes and never be able to find a match [...] and look at your photos and wish I'd known you forever and hear your voice in my ear and feel your skin on my skin and get scared when you're angry and your eye has gone red and the other eye blue and your hair to the left and your face oriental and tell you you're gorgeous and hug you when you're anxious and hold you when you hurt [...]and make love with you at three in the morning and somehow somehow somehow communicate some of the overwhelming undying overpowering unconditional all encompassing heart-enriching mind-expanding on-going never-ending love I have for you.[197]

If it is taken out of context, this monologue might result in a beautiful love declaration, but C's reaction to it - the repetition under her breath "This has to stop"[198]- makes it a dangerous, disturbing statement from a possessive abuser. Throughout the (non)story, A makes some cryptic remarks over "a fucking mess of a woman", who might be his previous lover or C herself, also hinting about her race and the abuses she endured in the past:

> A. In a lay-by on the motorway going out of the city, or maybe in, depending on which way you look, a small dark girl sits in the passenger seat of a parked car. Her elderly grandfather undoes his trousers and it pops out of his pants, big and purple. [...] And when she cries, her father in the back seat says I'm sorry, she's not normally like this.[199]

Despite the early *captatio benevolentiae*, A contradicts himself by not backtracking when it comes to recognise his diabolical, criminal nature:

> A. And I am shaking, sobbing with the memory of her, when she loved me, before I was her torturer, before there was no room in me for her, before we misunderstood, in fact the very first moment I saw her, her eyes smiling and full of the sun, and I shudder with grief for that moment which I've been hurtling away from ever since.[200]

As a victim of abuse, C is a psychiatric patient who, like Graham in *Cleansed*, "wants out". Later on in the play, M tries to behave like a real mother to her, asking some questions ("Have you ever been hospitalized?"[201]) followed by a series of diagnoses: "Impaired judgement, sexual dysfunction, anxiety, headaches, nervousness, sleeplessness, restlessness, nausea, diarrhoea, itching, shaking, sweating, twitching"[202]. C then goes on to describe what appears to be a process applied in psychiatric hospitals to "protect" patients with suicidal tendencies:

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[197] *Idem*, pp. 170-171
[198] *Idem*, p. 171.
[199] *Idem*, pp. 157-158.
[200] *Idem*, p. 177.
[201] *Idem*, p. 172.
[202] *Idem*, p. 187.

C. If I die here I was murdered by daytime television

A. I lied for you and that is why I cannot love you.

M. Do not demand,

A. Do not entreat,

B. Learn, learn, why can't I learn?

C. They switch on my light every hour to check I'm still breathing.

B. Again.

C. I tell them sleep deprivation is a form of torture.

B. Again and again.

M. If you commit suicide you'll only have to come back go through it again..

B. The same lesson, again and again.

A. Thou shalt not kill thyself.

C. Vanity, not sanity, will keep me intact.

M. Do you ever hear voices?

B. Only when they talk to me.

A. Weary souls with dry mouths.

C. I'm not ill, I just know that life is not worth living.[203]

According to Meg Peters, "There is a discrepancy here between the idea that C is suffering and the idea that they therefore necessarily fall into one of the diagnoses that come up throughout the play; C rejects the medical model of madness that diagnoses mental distress as individual physical illness; this rejection of illness is crucial to an alternative understanding of madness, of that which is not 'sanity' and is not 'ill', but falls somewhere in between"[204]. It is for this reason that *Crave*, among all the works Kane has done, might also be the most "Artaudian" of Kane's plays, as "cruelty reaches beyond language and cannot be contained by words"[205]. Regarding the type of theatre Antonin Artaud was prophesying, Kane claimed,

> The more I read it [the more] I thought this is a definition of sanity: this man is completely and utterly sane and I understand everything he's saying. And I was amazed how it connects completely with my work [...] depression is quite a healthy state of being because all it reflects is a completely realistic perception of what is going on. I think to a certain degree you need to deaden your ability to feel and perceive. In order to function you have to cut out at least one part of your mind; otherwise you'd be chronically sane in a society that is cronically insane. I mean, look at Artaud. Tha's your choice: go mad and die or function but be insane.[206]

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[203] *Idem*, p. 188.
[204] Meg Peters, "White on White and Black: The Terror of Whiteness in Sarah Kane's *Crave*", *The Comparatist*, Vol. 42 (October 2018), pp. 98-114, cit., p. 102.
[205] Laurens De Vos, "Sarah Kane and Antonin Artaud: Cruelty towards the Subjectile", in *Sarah Kane: In Context*, cit., pp. 126-138, p. 129.
[206] Saunders, *About Kane*, cit., pp. 87-88.

This bleak idea of accepting (in)sanity in a world where morality has gone ashtray is perfectly expressed by C's line "I crave white on white and black, but my thoughts race in glorious technicolour, prodding me awake, whipping away the warm blanket of invisibility every time it sears to smother my mind in nothing"[207]. The usage of colours, that might resemble the shade of bruises, can also be seen as the character's refusal to identify with her psychiatric condition, a "glorious technicolour" from which she is trying to escape, in order to disappear into deathly nothingness.

M and B's relationship is also another distinct part of this exploration of craving. B states from the beginning he has self-hating and self-destructive tendencies:

> B. I smoke till I'm sick. [...]I feel nothing, nothing. I feel nothing. I drink till I'm sick [...] I shake when I don't have it.[...] Brain melts when I do.[208]

In the play, B also utters some lines in foreign languages ("El dinero viene solo"[209], "Du bist die Liebe meines Lebens"[210] "Jebem radoznale"[211]) in what appears to be a parody of the foreign sentences Eliot included in his poem. M, while acting as a mother figure to C, wants to be a mother herself, and has "chosen" B to be the one who will help her accomplish this task, much to his detachment:

> M. David?
> *A beat.*
> B. Yeah.
> [...]
> M. Do you remember me? [...] I looked for you. All over the city.
> B. I really don't
> M. Yes. Yes.
> A. You do.
> M. Yes. [...] I want a child.
> B. I can't help you.
> C. None of this would have happened.
> M. Time is passing and I don't have time.
> C. None of it.
> B. No.
> [...]
> B. Look. My nose.

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[207] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., p. 174.
[208] *Idem*, pp. 155-159.
[209] *Idem*, p. 160.
[210] *Idem*, p. 172.
[211] *Idem,* p. 179.

M. What about it.

B. What do you think?

C. Broken.

B. I've never broken a bone in my body.

A. Like Christ.

B. But my Dad has. Smashed his nose in a car crash when he was eighteen. And I've got this. Genetically impossible, but there it is. We pass these messages faster than we think and in ways we don't think possible.

C. If I was If I If I was

M. HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

B. And you don't think that a child conceived by rape would suffer?

C. But as it is.

M. You think I'm going to rape you? [212]

M's craving for a child is also highlighted by her sexual repression, hinted from a childhood memory where she saw her grandparents sharing an intimate moment in what later turned out to be a ghostly vision, as her grandfather died before she was born. Her repression is also connected to her own fear of getting old, depicted in her direct reference to the Eliotian's "Hurry up please it's time" found in the second section of *The Waste Land* and in this passage, that collocates M in a role that is similar to the neurotic-exotic woman waiting for her lover:

M. Inside.

A. Here.

M. Be the one.

C. If she'd left –

M. I don't want to grow old and cold and be too poor to dye my hair.

C. You get mixed messages because I have mixed feelings.

M. I don't want to be living in a bedsit at sixty, too scared to turn the heater on because I can't pay the bill.

C. What ties me to you is guilt.

M. I don't want to die alone and not be found till my bones are lean and the rent overdue.

C. I don't want to stay.

B. I don't want to stay.

C. I want you to leave.

M. If love would come.

A. Let it happen.

C. No.

M. It's leaving me behind.[213]

[212] *Idem*, pp. 156-163.
[213] *Idem*, pp. 165-166.

What might appear confusing in this puzzling piece of writing is also how B's gender, despite him being apparently named David, is ambiguous due to his line "rape me"[214]. It might be another reference to a Nirvana's song, but considering the play's desperate theme, "B's articulated desire here undermines the normally understood conditions of desire, and craving becomes not only distinct from but opposed to choice; if one chooses one's objects of desire, cravings germinate within the physiology of the person; it is a sensation over which little choice can be exercised outside of choosing to satisfy that craving or to cope with the gap created by an unsatisfied craving"[215]. Like Brandon Sullivan (Michael Fassbender), the protagonist of Steve McQueen's 2011 film *Shame*, B is driven by a drive of self-hating and and self-destruction that includes drinking, smoking. and what he calls "pointless fucking":

> M. Do you *have* relationships with men?
> B. The only thing I want to say I've said already, and it's a bit bucking tedious to say it again, no matter how true it is, no matter that it's the only unifying thought humanity has. [...] In a day or two I'll go back for another affair, although the affair is now so on-going it almost constitutes a relationship.[216]

The lost, hopeless relics of mankind that Kane represents in her Waste Land are destined, like Eliot's, to witness a metaphorical apocalypse. However, whereas in the Modernist poem Judgement Day happens but is suddenly stopped with the healing of the Fisher King ready to reunite his kingdom, in Kane the apocalypse is inevitable and almost peacefully accepted by the characters. To do so, the author references various passages taken from the Bible that C, B, M, and A utter until the final climax. It is also important to point out how A, among the others, utters lines taken from Aleister Crowley, the pioneer of occultism and satanism. This conglomerate of sacred and profane creates a powerful dichotomy between the roles of victims and abusers in the four figures:

> B. Here I am, once again, here I am, here I am, in the darkness, once again,
> A. On the edge of nothing,
> B. Here I am,
> C. Hold my hand,
> A. Glory be to the Father,
> M. The truth is behind you,
> B. I'd give it all up for you,
> C. Into the light,
> A. As it was in the beginning,

[214] *Idem*, p. 199.
[215] Armstrong, *Cruel Britannia*, cit., p. 144.
[216] Kane, *Crave*, in *Complete Plays*, cit., pp. 172-174.

C. Beyond the darkness,

M. And ever shall be,

B. Into the light,

A. At the end of the day it comes back to this,

B. Gaining time,

A. It comes back to me,

M. But losing light,

A. It comes back to this,

C. Fat and shiny and dead dead dead serene,

M. Can't save you,

A. And clean.

C. Other lives

B. No fucker can.

M. Rolled into a ball.

A. Deliver my soul form the sword.

B. I wake as I dream.

M. Alone

A. Which passeth understanding [...] Satan, my Lord, I am yours.[217]

The ending of the play-poem quotes Eliot again not just from reprising the biblical quotation "peace which passeth understanding" included in *The Waste Land* but translated into Hindu, but also from the Buddhist belief taken directly from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, in which the dead soul must follow the bright white light during the trespassing, to reincarnate in a new life. However, Kane strips this belief of its spirituality and underlines how peaceful it is to accept mortality and be free from all the hardships that plague the individuals' lives. Furthermore, through the voice of A, she gives a brief comment on the power of poetry itself; how it can be used as a language on its own and thus giving the audience/spectators a reason in trying to interpret everything that has been said so far:

A. And don't forget that poetry is language for its own sake. Don't forget when different words are sanctioned, other attitudes required. Don't forget decorum. Don't forget decorum.

A beat.

B. Kill me.

A beat.

A. Free-falling

B. Into the light

C. Bright white light

A. World without end

C. You're dead to me

[217] *Idem*, pp. 197-199.

M. Glorious. Glorious.

B. And ever shall be

A. Happy

B. So happy

C. Happy and free.[218]

After rambling uncertainly about their past, their sins and their broken dreams, the characters have accepted their fate: a death that promises to end all their miseries. The symbolism of darkness/white light, which Kane recurrently used for Ian's "tempest" in *Blasted* and in the ending scene of *Cleansed*, is present again as a symptom of truth and, in this case, of freedom. An acceptance that in the wake of a life spent through abuses and torment, death and rebirth become irrelevant. A similar concept of a series of wretched outcasts facing their traumatic past can also be found in the recent Jackie Kay's play *The Lamplighter* (2007). Told through different voices belonging to different characters, Kay's lyrical writing depicts the tragic journey of a group of female Africans from the capture in their homeland to the inhumane sea journeys to the difficult, work in sugar plantations or brothels in the West. If the *Crave* characters are describing their fragmented past through a non-linear structure, Kay chooses an approach that provides little to no stage directions. While Kane's figures are divided into victims and abusers, Kay's are all victims, yet they are all struggling for acceptance and redemption, in a miserable world where death is seen as the final solution to all the pains:

LAMPLIGHTER. My voice is coming back, Stronger by the day, By the light of the silvery moon. Close, slavery. Close – too close ever for comfort. A trudge and a slide away. A scrape and a pull away. A skip and a
jump away. I remember when I was bought and sold and weighed as if it was yesterday.

BLACK HARRIOT. This is the story of Herself.

MARY. Told without the bit between the teeth.

LAMPLIGHTER. The deaths I managed to avoid. The deaths I did not live.

BLACK HARRIOT. The endless deaths in us, the windowless deaths, The deaths in the dungeons, The deaths at sea. The deaths in the ship The deaths in the new land. The deaths tied to the tree. The deaths in the plantation. The deaths in the shacks. The tobacco deaths, the sugar deaths. The broken-hearted deaths. The love-missed and missing Deaths. The in-your-face deaths. The stowed away deaths. The sea deaths. The deaths at sea.

LAMPLIGHTER. Death looked like a big steel ship called *Grace of God*. Death tasted Like a wounded bird, like captured freedom.

MARY. And death was in all of us.[219]

[218] *Idem*, p. 200.

Crave had its first premiere at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh from August to September 1998 where, according to Michael Billington,

> *Crave* was far more than 'a one man show for four voices', and had an inherent theatricality of its own which came from the physical presence of the four actors themselves; and despite the fact that they are seated throughout the performance, the actors' bodies brought a particular visual dynamic to their speaking voices [...] C's reaction to A's long 'love speech' as she 'twists and writhes like a trapped snake', while the other actors avert their faces throughout this episode, returning to normal after A has finished speaking [...] even small physical movements such as these make the play far more than an exercise in dramatic poetry: 'on the radio, the play could easily be abstract music: in the theatre it is full of neurotic tension.[220]

This play, so different yet so similar to Kane's previous works, seemed to be the beginning of a critical reappraisal of such a controversial playwright. In the same year in which *Crave* was being staged, in an interview with Dan Rebellato, Kane mentioned the new work she was working on:

> I'm writing a play called *4.48 Psychosis* and it's got similarities with *Crave*, but it's different. It's about a psychotic breakdown and what happens to a person's mind when the barriers 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 when the world starts [...] That's proving extremely difficult, and I'm not going to tell anyone how I'm doing it because if they get there first I'll be furious! But whatever it is that began in *Crave* it's going a step further - where it goes after I'm not quite sure.[221]

This anticipated work, the most experimental one she has ever done from a linguistic, thematic, and performative perspective, will also prove to be her swan song, summing up all the pain and anguish that Sarah Kane had treated, denounced and comprehended in her short, yet impactful career. The curtains were opening again, for one last time, with *4.48 Psychosis*, with the difference that this time the shadow of Kane's tragic fate was hovering in the first posthomous performance.

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[219] Jackie Kay, *The Lamplighter*, Picador, London, 2020, pp. 25-26.
[220] Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, cit., p. 106.
[221] *Idem*, pp. 111-112.

6. *4.48 Psychosis*: The Final Testament

Oh, I'll break them down, no mercy shown,
Heaven knows, it's got to be this time,
Watching her, these things she said,
The times she cried,
Too frail to wake this time.
(Ian Curtis, *Ceremony*)

6.1 Open Curtains

When an artist has established itself in the world despite a rocky beginning, all of her/his works are reappraised. But if the author of critically reviled pieces commits suicide, then the whole response becomes more problematic. It was Sarah Kane's case and, before her, the case of many other women writers. In fact, people like Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf or Charlotte Perkins Gillman are all seen as landmarks of literature, but among audiences and critics, the shadow of their death covers the majority of their production.

When Kane died before *4.48* had its first performance, many critics that first despised her plays and belittled her as the "bad girl" of the British stage, now seemed to backtrack their claims. Charles Spencer is a primary example: "Well, I was wrong. When Sarah Kane's *Blasted* opened ... I was convinced that it was meretricious rubbish produced by a young writer with an adolescent desire to shock ... I can only apologise to Kane's ghost for getting her so wrong the first time around. And may she now sleep in peace"[222]. The play, involving the nervous breakdown of a psychiatric patient with suicidal tendencies, was seen as a direct connection with the reality the playwright was facing: her death was the final bow of a shocker-turned-acclaimed writer. It is for this reason that, as Aleks Sierz writes, "In September 1999, her brother, Simon Kane, had to issue a press release pointing out that although her last play *4.48 Psychosis*, deals with suicidal despair, it was not a 'thinly suicide note'"[223]. Problematic critical reappraisal aside, *4.48* can still be seen as a "cursed" play, but not in the same way *Macbeth* is conceived as one, nor for the fact that author immolated herself. The real curse of *4.48* consists in its honest, raw and unapologetic portrayal of a suicidal mind. By diving into it, the uneasy feeling of heartbreak is devastating, and it is the final step of the linguistic self-destruction Kane gradually employed in her written work.

[222] Alicia Tycer, "Victim, Perpetrator, Bystander: Melancholic Witnessing of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Mar., 2008), pp. 23-36, cit., p. 25.
[223] Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, cit., p. 90.

The stage directions are bare-bones as in *Crave*, but, while the characters in the former are still identified, in *4.48* there is no clear distinction. The text itself is fragmented: words are composed and decomposed among huge spaces, in a more psychotic rendition of James Joyce's *stream of consciousness*. If Molly Bloom's monologue could still be regarded as a text despite the missing punctuation, Kane's *4.48* takes this concept and twists it to the limits

> a black and white film of yes or no yes or no yes or no yes or no yes or no yes or no
> I've always loved you
> even when I hated you
> What am I like?
> just like my father
> oh no oh no oh no[224]

According to Professor Sara Soncini, "la drammaturgia di Sarah Kane si serve di questo apparente paradosso per esaltare il potenziale creativo della messa in scena come atto trasformativo, anzichè meramente traspositivo"[225].

In its first performance at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in London, the play was directed once again by James Macdonald and involved only three actors: Daniel Evans, Jo McInnes, and Madeleine Potter. The provocative silence Kane used for the play could also be seen as a growth in her perception: while being protective of her work at the beginning, she then decided to give future directors and performers greater creative freedom with her work, although for the first years after her death, her family tried everything to keep theatre companies and directors away from this specific text. Macdonald, having already experienced the staging impossibility of *Cleansed*, opted for a scenography made of mirrors and projections. In his review, Steve Earnest wrote,

> The stage set consisted of a large mirrored surface suspended from the stage at a 45-degree angle, allowing the audience to see the action from both in front and above. Onstage properties were those referenced in the text: a table and two chairs, with the table placed so that its reflected surface in the mirror above became a window onto which video projections could occur. The production limited footage to the recurring projection of a busy street somewhere in England, (presumably) outside the hospital. [...] Multiple projectors, reflections and severe lighting angles enhanced *4:48 Psychosis*'s visual elements. The production gradually trained the audience to watch the action in the mirrored surface, and through that visual dynamic the message be- gan to function on multiple levels. Characters lying on the floor appeared to be suspended midair, hanging, floating, and watching from above. Horizontal gaps in

[224] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., p. 240.
[225] Sara Soncini, *Le metamorfosi di Sarah Kane:* 4.48 Psychosis *sulle scene italiane*, Pisa University Press, Pisa, 2020, p. 26.

the mirrored surface created the effect of a prison cell as shadows of four long “bars” appeared from top to bottom of the stage surface. [226]

Nowadays, most performances of this play are monologues or, as Soncini writes, "assoli femminili" (trans. "female solos"), hence taking the meaning behind the play as Kane's suicide note: "l'attrice si fa carico dell'esperienza di un 'Io' singolo che viene più o meno esplicitato a coincidere con l'autrice suicida e ci restituisce questa esperienza come dramma individuale da rappresentare e agire, organicamente, sulla scena"[227]. Macdonald chose an Artaudian approach, refusing any kind of possible biographical references, with the actors playing "voices" rather than "roles".

The play is divided into twenty-two sections. Some read like dialogues between an imprecise number of nameless characters, others might be monologues or even just abbreviations or numbers, displayed asymmetrically on the sheet. The opening already sets the mood:

A very long silence.
– But you have friends.
A long silence.
You have a lot of friends.
What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?
A long silence.
What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?
A long silence.
What do you offer?
Silence.[228]

It seems that the dialogue is between a Doctor and a silent Patient, who is refusing to answer. The second section is staggered between what appears to be the patient finding his/her voice again, while another voice seems to describe a disturbing, dark setting filled with bugs while an androgynous figure is waking up:

… a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters
I had a night in which everything was revealed to me. How can I speak again?
the broken hermaphrodite who trusted hermself alone finds the room in reality teeming and begs never to wake from the nightmare

[226] Steve Earnest, "4.48 Psychosis (Review)", *Theatre Journal*, 57, Number 2, May 2005, pp. 298-300, cit., p. 300.
[227] Soncini, *Le metamorfosi di Sarah Kane*, cit., p. 54.
[228] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., p. 205.

and they were all there
every last one of them
and they knew my name
as I scuttled like a beetle along the backs of their chairs
Remember the light and believe the light
An instant of clarity before eternal night
don't let me forget[229]

This image, identified with the pronoun "hermself", while being a possible reference to Grace's gender dysphoria in *Cleansed*, can also be seen as a possible commentary on the type of language applied in the redaction of the play. *4.48* is, in fact, a work that conveys varieties of linguistic styles, merging all its fragments into a single one. That is why Ken Urban identified it as a "montage play". By quoting critic David Graver, Urban states: "In montage, the disparate fragments of reality are held together and made part of the work of art by the work's constructive principle; all elements are related rationally to the whole despite the obvious heterogeneity of their sources. In collage, the fragments of reality are not fully integrated into a representational scheme of the work of art"[230]. In fact, "*4.48 Psychosis* is written in a language that is reduced to a bare minimalist script; after the bodily amputations, language as a means of communication is being amputated here. The consolations of form are being severely attacked; neither does language still suffice to give shape to the hidden truth. Instead, silences, single words or phrases take over"[231]. In addition to that, as seen in *Blasted* and *Crave*, the pair of darkness/light appears again, with another possible reference to the Tibetan Book of the Dead that closed the previous play.

What follows is an obsessive nomenclature from the Patient[s] of the possible defects that thrusts his/her hatred:

I am sad
I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve
I am bored and dissatisfied with everything
I am a complete failure as a person
I am guilty,
I am being punished
I would like to kill myself
I used to be able to cry but now I am beyond tears
I have lost interest in other people

[229] *Idem*, pp. 205-206.
[230] Ken Urban, "Sarah Kane", in Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer; Aleks Sierz (edited by), *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, Methuen Drama Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2011, cit., pp. 315-316.
[231] Laurens De Vos, *Cruelty and Desire in the Modern Theater: Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane and Samuel Beckett,* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Maryland, 2011, cit., p. 148.

I can't make decisions
I can't eat
I can't sleep
[...]
At 4.48
when depression visits
I shall hang myself
to the sound of my lover's breathing
I do not want to die
I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit suicide
[...]
Some will call this self-indulgence
(they are lucky not to know its truth)
Some will know the simple fact of pain
This is becoming my normality[232]

The bleakest aspect of all is the overcoming malaise that is overshadowing every aspect of the patient's life: everything seems so pointless and mere that living does not matter anymore. Furthermore, it seems that Kane is going back to the roots of her third monologue *Starved*, with its Orwellian landscape represented by Doctors who, like Tinker, seem to be making things worse:

Dr This and Dr That and Dr Whatsit who's just passing and thought he'd pop in to take the piss as well. Burning in a hot tunnel of dismay, my humiliation complete as I shake without reason and stumble over words and have nothing to say about my 'illness' which anyway amounts only to knowing that there's no point in anything because I'm going to die. [...] Dr This writes it down and Dr That attempts a sympathetic murmur. Watching me, judging me, smelling the crippling failure oozing from my skin, my desperation clawing and all-consuming panic drenching me as I gape in horror at the world and wonder why everyone is smiling and looking at me with secret knowledge of my aching shame.
Shame shame shame.
Drown in your fucking shame.[233]

The patient's own faith in the world can never be restored. Everything that s/he has left is depression, from which come anger, self-harm and suicidal thoughts that are vented on the (possible) psychiatrist by mentioning overdose, hangings and slit wrists. The Subject also claims that "Body and soul can never be married"[234]. Two opposite sides that, if broken, can cause catastrophic damage to

[232] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., pp. 206-208.
[233] *Idem*, p. 209.
[234] *Idem*, p. 212.

the individual. The Patient also ponders that, after the 4.48 hour, s/he shall never speak again. According to Laurens De Vos,

> The persona in *4.48 Psychosis* experiences the gap between body and soul, the division that marks her as a human subject, a preoccupation that had been haunting Kane and recurs as a major theme in all her plays. Unable to accept the loss as inherent in the subject, she seeks to overcome this lack of being. [...] Kane's last play shows the murderous way that the drive covers toward a wordless, unnameable nothing. This drive to merge in an all-encompassing, flawless unity of mind and body, in which life is experienced in a most unbridled way, is too irresistible for the persona to not surrender to the measureless *jouissance* in which she will disappear.[235]

Disappear into the light, into the peaceful nothingness where the suffering of a miserable existence can finally end. The Patient can do nothing but lash out to the people from his/her past: a lover that disappeared, an absent family, and God himself, for which s/he feels nothing but pure contempt, with a delivery that takes direct references to *Cleansed* and *Crave* and seemingly quotes a pivotal moment from Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957):

> Sometimes I turn around and catch the smell of you and I cannot go on I cannot fucking go on without expressing this terrible so fucking awful physical aching fucking longing I have for you. And I cannot believe that I can feel this for you and you feel nothing. Do you feel nothing?
> *Silence.*
> And I go out at six in the morning and start my search for you. If I've dreamt a message of a street or a pub or a station I go there. And I wait for you.
> [...]
> What does she look like?
> And how will I know her when I see her?
> She'll die, she'll die, she'll only fucking die.
> *Silence.*
> Do you think it's possible for a person to be born in the wrong body?
> *Silence.*
> Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there, fuck you for making me feel shit about myself, fuck you for bleeding the fucking love and life out of me, fuck my father for fucking up my life for good and fuck my mother for not leaving him, but most of all, fuck you God for making me love a person who does not exist, FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU.[236]

Sometime after, the same Doctor visits again, and the audience learns that the Patient has cut his/her arm. From then on, the self-destructive path is speeding up, and it does not matter if the Doctor is trying to help with a weak, *Good Will Hunting*-like excuse:

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[235] De Vos, *Cruelty and Desire in the Modern Theater*, cit., pp. 141-146.
[236] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., pp. 214-215.

– I don't feel contempt.
– No?
– No. It's not your fault.
– 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, I know it's not my fault. You've told me that so often I'm beginning to think it is my fault.
– It's not your fault.
– I KNOW.
– But you allow it.
Silence.
Don't you?
– There's not a drug on earth can make life meaningful.
– You allow this state of desperate absurdity.
Silence.
You allow it.[237]

The two sections that follow are juxtaposed The first, with its connecting contraries and alliteration ("unpleasant unacceptable uninspiring impenetrable"[238]; "True Right Correct Anyone or anybody Each every all"[239]) looks like a nursery rhyme or a musical poem. The other is just the transcript of the illness' diagnosis, from its name to the required medication and symptoms ("Symptoms: Not eating, not sleeping, not speaking, no sex drive, in despair, wants to die; Diagnosis: Pathological grief; Sertraline, 50mg. Insomnia worsened, severe anxiety, anorexia, (weight loss 17kgs,) increase in suicidal thoughts, plans and intention. Discontinued following hospitalisation"[240]). The condition seems irreversible, and the Patient acknowledges it and then goes on a violent eruption of apocalyptic atrocities that recall the Soldier's monologue from *Blasted* and its eye-gouging scene:

I'm seeing things
I'm hearing things
I don't know who I am
tongue out
thought stalled
the piecemeal crumple of my mind
Where do I start? Where do I stop? How do I start?
(As I mean to go on)
How do I stop?

[237] *Idem*, pp. 220-221.
[238] *Idem*, p. 221.
[239] *Idem*, p. 223.
[240] *Idem*, p. 223.

[...]

- 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 sent 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 fuck I'm going to make your life a living fucking hell I REFUSE I REFUSE I REFUSE LOOK AWAY FROM ME.[241]

For Alice Tycer, "The 'I' that she claims clearly exceeds autobiographical dimensions and embraces victim, perpetrator, and bystander positions; the 'I' to whom Kane refers has not been depicted as a despot, but rather as a spectator who, exposed to inconceivable violence, has transferred culpability to him/herself; whether perceived of as stemming from a sense of survivor guilt or from a hyperbolic imagination, the claim attempts to come to terms with multiple historical atrocities"[242]. Having already dealt with the horrors of the Yugoslav War and the hellish power of concentration camps, Kane encapsulates all of this into a mental prism, where the psychache is wrestling inside the Patient's brain, who after blaming others for his/her misery, puts the culpability on himself/herself. To make everything more provocative and meta-theatrical, Kane condenses the psychic into the trinity of "victim, perpetrator, bystander"[243]. Who is the Victim? Who is the Perpetrator? Who is the Bystander?

In Kane's poetic, the fluidity of gender[s] and role[s] never stops, and once again, they are acted out on the audience in a sort of "guess who" game. The Patient might be the Victim, the author could be the Perpetrator and the spectators may be the Bystander[s], as the latters are sitting comfortably in the theatre's seats witnessing a painful meltdown, and cannot do (or do not want to do) nothing, like pedestrians standing before an unarmed individual being subjected to police brutality or a homeless man dying of starvation in the loneliest corner of a not too crowded street. On the other hand, the audience can be the Victim, as it might feel empathy for what is happening on stage and suffer with the Protagonist; or it can even be the Perpetrator, for willingly ignoring the fact that atrocities and mental sufferings exist, but prefer to live in a fabricated, safe entropy. The game is enigmatic and provocative, and it shows how Kane was a challenging and yet empathetic writer.

The identification is interrupted by a macabre, "musical" scale with no punctuation ("flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker"[244]), to which "la stessa modalità di comunicazione del materiale è soggetta ad alternanza di codice, con

[241] *Idem*, pp. 225-227.
[242] Tycer, "Victim, Perpetrator, Bystander", cit., p. 31.
[243] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., p. 231.
[244] *Idem*, p. 232.

momenti in cui sul canale auditivo prevale quello visivo [...] e altri in cui le parole si traformano in pura materia fonica"[245].

In the next meeting, Doctor and Patient seem to have developed a form of affection that is deeper than the usual, medical one. Previously, in fact, in his/her recurring nightly despair, the Patient defined the Doctor as "my saviour, my omnipotent judge, my priest, my god, the surgeon of my soul; And I am your proselyte to sanity"[246], highlighting both the needs of *succorance* and *deference* that Shneidman theorized. This little hope led him/her to enumerate all the necessities to overcome this anguish, which go from the basic goal-reaching ambitions to finding someone who can understand and protect him/her. But the tiny hunch of lovely flame is brutally extinguished by the Doctor himself/herself, who rejects the reveal by making further excuses:

– You're my last hope.

A long silence.

– You don't need a friend you need a doctor.

A long silence.

– You are so wrong.

A very long silence.

– But you have friends.

A long silence.

You have a lot of friends. What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?

A long silence.

What do you offer your friends to make them so supportive?

A long silence.

What do you offer?

Silence.

We have a professional relationship. I think we have a good relationship. But it's professional.

Silence.

I feel your pain but I cannot hold your life in my hands.

Silence.

You'll be all right. You're strong. I know you'll be okay because I like you and you can't like someone who doesn't like themself. [...] Most of my clients want to kill me. When I walk out of here at the end of the day I need to go home to my lover and relax. I need to be with my friends and relax. I need my friends to be really together.

Silence.

I fucking hate this job and I need my friends to be sane.

Silence.

[245] Soncini, *Le metamorfosi di Sarah Kane*, cit., p. 25.
[246] Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, in *Modern Plays*, cit., p. 233.

I'm sorry.[247]

In the play, this is the last moment in which a literary structure vaguely similar to a canonical, stage play layout is employed. Like *Crave*'s characters and all the other Kanean figures suffering the romantic love malady, the Patient has fallen in love with a person that does not exist. The only way out of their pain is actually the instrument that gives the final blow. This plunges the Protagonist into a worse spiral:

Fattened up
Shored up
Shoved up
my body decompensates
my body flies apart
[...]
how have you inspired this pain?
[...]
What am I like?
the child of negation
out of one torture chamber into another
a vile succession of errors without remission
every step of the way I've fallen
Despair propels me to suicide
Anguish for which doctors can find no cure
Nor care to understand
I hope you never understand
Because I like you.[248]

From then on, the pages of the text begin to be filled with fewer and fewer words, as if to indicate that the will of living is getting gradually erased bit by bit. In it, Kane also inserts a cinematic reference:

my final submission
my final defeat
the chicken's still dancing
the chicken won't stop[249]

[247] *Idem*, pp. 236-237.
[248] *Idem*, pp. 238-239.
[249] *Idem*, p. 243.

The image of a dancing chicken is taken directly from Werner Herzog's 1977 black comedy *Stroszek*. This heartbreakingly humorous story (which was also Joy Division's singer Ian Curtis' last film watched before his suicide) is about Bruno Stroszek (Bruno S.), a down-on-his-luck German musician who, after being released from prison, travels to the United States with his lover, the prostitute Eva (Eva Mattes), to find a better living. The American Dream will reveal itself as a sneaky illusion. Having lost everything, Bruno will shoot himself with a rifle while riding a cableway. The closing scene then shifts to a chicken dancing on a plate in a nearby tourist trap. The shot of that animal "dancing", while non-sensical, tender, and humorous at the same time, is a depressing representation of the futility of human existence. In these roadside attractions, chickens are performing this dance only because the plate in which they are standing is electrified. It seems that Herzog wanted to point out how men are simply spectacles in front of a larger audience that subject them to a mindless, painful, and never-ending performance for their own amusement. Like Bruno, the *4.48* Patient has no saviour that will come to help. The dance of pain is endless until death finally makes its long-awaited appearance:

> Black snow falls
> in death you hold me
> never free
> I have no desire for death no suicide ever had
> watch me vanish
> watch me
> vanish
> watch me
> watch me
> watch
> It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind
> please open the curtains.[250]

The haunting final line that concludes the play is also the very last line Kane has ever written. Many interpretations of its meaning have been done, and the majority so far claimed that it is a farewell she did to her audience. The show is over, it is time to appear on stage, get the applause, bow, and disappear forever. Aside from this meta-theatrical interpretation, some might consider how this connects to the end of *Crave*. The Patient disappears into the blackness of malaise and, by opening the curtains (the stage's? The room's?), s/he allows himself/herself to be engulfed into the whiteness of light, accepting death and finally free of all the miseries that have been plaguing body and mind.

[250] *Idem*, pp. 244-245.

4.48 Psychosis is another example of the Kanean-Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty where despite there being no violence shown through actual acts, the voice[s] convey[s] all its gruesome imagery. The theme of madness is explored deeply, as well as its relationship with the "norm", embodied by the viewers: "like the doctor, audience members may initially wish to distance themselves from the patient, but Kane implies that the only buffering factor is their sense of comfort as members of the majority"[251]. Even if for one last moment before death s/he seems to change his/her mind about that choice, claiming that s/he never had a death wish, the end is inevitable. The heavily implied fact that the Patient committed suicide does not deter that even though it was written shortly before her death, the play has some hopeful moments in the face of its bleakness. As Kane once said,

> I don't find my plays depressing or lacking in hope. But then I am someone whose favourite band is Joy Division because I find their songs uplifiting. To create something beautiful about despair or out of a feeling of despair is for me the most hopeful life-affirming thing a person can do. Because the expression of that despair is part of the struggle against it, the attempt to negate it.[252]

6.2 Death of a Poet

The last years of an artist's life are usually the most sensitive aspect to deal with, principally if they ended on a peculiarly tragic note, with the vulture media keeping on going at the chronicler flesh taken from a celebrity's corpse. Through that, the majority of people will get stuck with those images and theories on why such tragic thing happened. Even today, when a high-regarded celebrity apparently dies of suicide, the more paranoid will create a conspiracy theory out of it.

All of this, though, usually denies completely the mental state of an individual. Celebrities are worshipped and stalked as if they were Gods walking on Earth, and the public does not feel any touch in putting pressures on them. Fame, success, and failure are part of a star's everyday life, and sometimes this same demand becomes so unbearable that it leads to a dangerous route of neurosis, depression, and, in the worst case, death.

Mental health is still a taboo that many fail to acknowledge. If the mind gets broken, the body will soon follow. The result of a celebrity's death via suicide is shocking to the majority, but the reasons behind it are often downplayed.

Sarah Kane suffered from depression for a large part of her life. A condition that became so aggravating to force her to voluntarily institutionalize herself at the Maudsley Hospital of London,

[251] Tycer, "Victim, Perpetrator, Bystander", cit., p. 33.
[252] Saunders, *About Kane*, cit., p. 105.

where she acted as an in-and-out patient. Her experience there inspired the writing of *Cleansed*, which was dedicated to the patients and medical stuff of the ES3 floor.

In the last months of her life, she was taking prescribed anti-depressants. It was not until 17 February 1999 that Kane tried to end her life by overdosing on pills. An alarmed friend of hers, David Gordon, quickly called an ambulance once he found a note she left for him. Sarah was taken to the King's College Hospital, where she was rescued at the last minute. Doctor Nigel Tunstall, who had her in cure during her permanence at Maudsley, stated: "In terms of her intention, it was very clearly the case that she was intending to kill herself and she was surprised and upset that she had not succeeded. She said she had no intention of killing herself while she remained at King's College Hospital, but in abstract terms she said that at some point she would certainly kill herself."[253]

The reactions Sarah had to the psychiatric cure were counterproductive. Her agent, Mel Kenyon, recounted how much she hated the anti-depressants treatment:

> She didn't like taking pills because they numbed her response to the world, which is, of course, what they're supposed to do. But as an artist, it's extraordinarily difficult if your responsive level is made less intense. What do you do? Take pills and take away the despair? But despair also engenders knowledge in some way, and that knowledge fuels your understanding of the world and therefore your writing, but at the same time you want to exorcise the despair. She tried to weigh it up all the time [...] However, she didn't threaten suicide ever. You know, you'll feel differently about me when I'm dead, we never had that conversation. Never. I felt, as other people did, strangely protective of her. You just want her to be as happy and as safe as possible[254].

Despite Kenyon's assumptions, on 20 February 1999, after having been left alone by the nurse personnel for more than ninety minutes, Sarah crept out of her room at 2 am, went into the lavatory, and hanged herself with a shoelace, "from a hook on the back of a cubicle door"[255]. She was 27.

An investigation followed, and the hospital staff was interrogated under the charge of suspected negligence. Peter Kane, Sarah's father, argued: "I'm angry, I'm very angry; I made it clear to the hospital that we're not seeking financial compensation, what we want is answers to what led up to the death of our daughter"[256]. Although the coroner Selena Lynch afforded the definite solution that was the same thing that led to her death, her brother Simon did not believe that she was ill.

Among her colleagues playwrights and directors, Harold Pinter himself delivered a touching eulogy:

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[253] Steve Boggan, "Hospital let playwright repeat her suicide bid", *The Independent*, September 23, 1999, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/hospital-let-playwright-repeat-her-suicide-bid-1121161.html accessed 01/06/2023.
[254] Simon Hattenstone, "A Sad Hurrah (Part 2)", *The Guardian*, July 1, 2000, 01/06/2023, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jul/01/stage1.
[255] Boggan, *The Independent*, September 23, 1999.
[256] *The Death of Sarah Kane*, Youtube, July 10, 2007, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueQt7ENn9fI.** Accessed 01/06/2023.

> Some playwrights take on a different personality, and you say, 'How can that fellow have written that?' But she was her work. It was one thing. And, as such, it could be extremely uncomfortable. [...] What frightened me was the depth of her horror and anguish. Everyone's aware, to varying degrees, of the cruelty of mankind, but we manage to compromise with it, put it on the shelf and not think about it for a good part of the day. But I don't think she could do that. I think she had a vision of the world that was extremely accurate, and therefore horrific. Because the world is a fucking awful place. It's a very beautiful place, but this species mankind is an absolute bloody disaster. The elements of sadism are astonishing. She wasn't simply observing mankind; she was part of it. It seems to me she was talking about the violence within herself, the hatred within herself, and the depths of misery that she also suffered [...] Anyway, I would like to tell you she was a girl of tremendous spirit. Despite everything I've said, she was a lot of fun [...] I think she seemed to be in love most of the time. When her love life was going well, she was happy.But it rarely did go well. As far as I could glean, she had a very unhappy love life. About a year before her death, she came here and a relationship with a woman had just finished. She was very distressed about it - who wouldn't be? - but again the depth of her suffering was her own, very singular. Her antennae were very sharp for every bloody thing, including love.[257]

James Macdonald, her most trusted director, described the reappraisal of her work following her death in a way that,

> It is easy to misread a tone you don't recognise, and completely new forms often create a strong emotional and intellectual response. But it has to be said they still haven't quite got Sarah. She wasn't just promising, she delivered - a brave, angry, poetic body of work quite unlike anything else. She chose to talk about the political through the personal, and found new forms for doing so. At a time when much new writing was content to inhabit received dramatic form, each new play she wrote found a new structure to contain its ideas and feelings [...] She had the most beautiful heart. At the beginning of last year, I went to fetch her from the Maudsley, where she had been recovering from a breakdown. I held her bag while she went right round the day room saying goodbye to all the friends she had made there. And then she went into the office and did the same thing with the nurses. Those faces told me how much they loved that heart. [258]

With the hypocrisy behind the reappraisal, with the audience now associating her pieces with her death, Mark Ravenhill wrote, "I think we should look at the plays as the work of a writer of great anger, of sardonic humour, who saw the cruelties of the world but also the human capacity for love [...]We don't know her. We never knew her. Let's look at her work"[259], while Edward Bond polemically accused the critics who bashed *Blasted* as the real responsible: Sarah did not kill herself, the media forced her to do that.

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[257] Hattestone, *The Guardian*, July 1, 2000, accessed 01/06/2023.
[258] James Macdonald, "They never Got Her", *The Guardian*, February 28, 1999, https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/1999/feb/28/featuresreview.review9 , accessed 01/06/2023.
[259] Mark Ravenhill, "Suicide Art? She's better than that", *The Guardian*, October 12, 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/oct/12/theatre, accessed 01/06/2023.

It has been twenty-four years since Kane delivered her final piece to the audience, and nowadays she has become one of the most appreciated and respected playwrights in contemporary English literature, with her plays being represented worldwide, although much of her production is still reviled as a mere provocation and often disrespectfully parodied, like in Chris Lee's *Crushed,* whose tongue-in-cheek, bad taste rendition of Kane's style does nothing but proving her originality and uniqueness:

> *A head appears.*
> HEAD. Fuck. Cunt. Fuck. Cunting fucking cunting fucking fuck.
> *A man walks on with a baseball bat. He bends down and kisses the head. He stands up. He smashes the head with a baseball bat. He puts down the bat. He pulls down his pants and urinates on the head. He waits. He defecates on the head. He waits. He masturbates and ejaculates on the head. A tree immediately appears where the head had been.*
> TREE. At last I have truly known love.
> *Suddenly the tree explodes. The man explodes. The theatre explodes. The world explodes.*
> Fuck you all.[260]

The idea of violence represented for the sake of shocking the audience with a badly-attached message is a fair criticism, but in the case of Sarah Kane, it does not land. A detailed analysis of her works shows how her violent stage was a faithful, yet dreamlike representation of the real world: a place filled with obscenities, immoralities, and weaknesses, but also a stage where kindness and empathy can still save lives. As Cate feeds the broken, blinded Ian, as Rod sacrifices himself for Carl, or even as M takes care of C, real humanity lies there. Where everything is bending down, keeping a sense of compassion and empathy is the only thing that will guarantee survival and hope for a better future where all those inhumane atrocities will disappear. Sarah Kane understood that by putting herself into it, molding herself into her works, and creating a body of literature for all future generations to enjoy and learn; but thus paying the ultimate price with her life.

To conclude, all the violence raging across her stage was a bewildered attack on society's hypocrisy and supposed norms. Why do we tolerate the massacres on TV but get defensive when something fictional is represented? That was the question she sought to answer, but it would be disingenuous to label all her work just as "violent" and "provocative". Sarah Kane was an honest, empathetic writer who saw and struggled against the worst aspects of our world, and she did so by climbing up on stage, that dimension which creates an illusion where actual flesh and blood laugh, suffer and die for real and for fiction at the same time. Her entire work was about love, how it can spring in the worst possible places and how it always manages to survive. She was a writer, a poet, a

[260] Saunders, *About Kane*, cit., p. 4.

playwright, but most importantly an artist that tore the veil of stage fiction with a clamor that not even the various Crimp, Ridley, or Ravenhill could ever do. Sarah Kane was like a meteor that came from nowhere, hit the British stage and blew it up, before turning into the nothingness of the open curtains and walking away, in silence.

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Appendix

Intervista alla Prof.ssa Sara Soncini

- Sarah Kane è un'autrice che, quando menzionata, viene spesso accompagnata dall'etichetta di artista "maledetta", oltre ad essere direttamente associata al movimento dell'In-Yer-Face. Nonostante le caratteristiche più o meno affini, lei non si è mai riconosciuta in questo movimento. Cosa la rende secondo Lei l'autrice più "pariah" rispetto ad altri esponenti di questa corrente teatrale?

L'In-Yer-Face non è mai stato un vero e proprio movimento. Il nome è stato coniato dalla stampa del periodo. Poi c'è stato Aleks Sierz con il suo omonimo libro che ha raggruppato tutti questi autori, autrici e opere in un'unica etichetta. Kane stessa non ha mai voluto considerarsi parte di questo gruppo, in parte perchè era un'individualista parecchio insofferente a figure come insegnanti e leader. Ciò che la contraddistingue dai suoi contemporanei è il fatto che lei usasse una violenza molto più onirica, metaforica e anti-naturalistica. Motivo per cui lei non sopportava nemmeno il fatto di essere paragonata a Quentin Tarantino, celebre in quel periodo, e alla sua trasformazione della violenza in un prodotto estetizzato e "cool".

- Molto spesso, specialmente in un contesto contemporaneo, le scene di violenza rappresentate su un palcoscenico vengono additate come un qualcosa di irrispettoso e di cattivo gusto. Secondo Lei, prendendo il caso di Blasted, quando si può dire che la scena violenta sul palcoscenico è giustificata e quando invece diventa un semplice strumento di provocazione?

Tenderei a rispondere che questo dipende dalla natura dell'opera. Spesso, nel caso di *Blasted*, la critica nei confronti di Kane era una questione legata a questioni di genere. In un ambiente ancora a predominanza maschile come quello del teatro, Kane ha violato un tabù, scrivendo di sesso e violenza, territorio percepito prettamente maschile. La violenza sul palcoscenico è un atto di provocazione, mirato soprattutto allo spettatore, atto a mettere in dubbio le sue certezze, proprio come Kane fece con *Blasted*, portando il conflitto etnico che stava dilaniando la ex Jugoslavia all'interno di una stanza di un hotel di Leeds.

- In un testo come Cleansed, le immagini di mutilazioni e torture risultano insostenibili tanto nella lettura quanto nella performance. Eppure certe trasposizioni sceniche (vedasi l'originale ad opera di James Macdonald o quello italiano ad opera di Francesca Caprioli) obliterano queste immagini, in favore di una rappresentazione più concettuale e metaforica. Dall'altra parte, tuttavia, ci sono allestimenti come quello ad opera di Katie Mitchell per il National Theatre, che ha portato il testo

sul palco mostrando esplicitamente tutti i suoi estremi. Tra il vedere/non vedere, l'effetto disturbante è assai differente. Secondo lei, quale tra questi si può considerare il più efficace nel rappresentare il significato originale del testo?

Io ebbi modo di vedere la messinscena di Katie Mitchell dal vivo. Lo trovai un allestimento molto freddo e chirurgico, su cui poi la solita critica sensazionalista ha voluto evidenziare come molte persone durante la rappresentazione siano svenute o abbiano addirittura abbandonato la sala. E' stato un esperimento interessante, quello di realizzare in scena, in modo assolutamente realistico,tutte le cosiddette "didascalie impossibili" di Kane, anche se non del tutto riuscito: sui famigerati ratti che compiono una serie di azioni sceniche sul palco anche lei, come Peter Zadek in precedenza, ha dovuto gettare la spugna. Nel testo, questi animali sono onnipresenti in certe scene, e neppure lei è riuscita a trovare un modo di rappresentarli dal vivo. Differentemente, Macdonald (che ha definito Cleansed una "punizione nei suoi confronti" da parte della scrittrice) ha optato per un allestimento più stilizzato, con una violenza quasi sempre metaforica.

- 4.48 Psychosis, con la sua prosa da stream of consciousness alla Joyce, viene spesso allestito come un monologo femminile o, come Lei lo descrive nel suo libro, un "assolo femminile". Essendo esso stato l'ultimo lavoro scritto da Kane prima della tragica scomparsa, viene spesso visto come un testamento artistico, una sua lettera d'addio, una cosa che i suoi amici e familiari hanno negato. Visto l'assenza di note e il primo allestimento postumo, secondo Lei quale potrebbe essere la versione più vicina al significato originale del testo tra quelle che Lei ha citato nel suo libro?

Quest'opera è la più "libera" di quelle che Sarah Kane ha scritto proprio perché, oltre a essere priva di didascalie (con la sola eccezione di sporadiche pause o silenzi), non fornisce nemmeno indicazioni sul numero di attori presenti in scena, sull'attribuzione delle battute, e addirittura su come segmentare il testo in battute. All'inizio della sua carriera Kane prova a mantenere una certa forma di controllo sulla realizzazione scenica dei suoi lavori. Si dice insoddisfatta di come alcuni registi hanno messo in scena *Blasted* (come nella versione "tarantiniana" realizzata in Germania-Amburgo) e, forse anche per questo, decide di curare lei stessa la regia di *Phaedra's Love*. A partire da *Crave*, e ancor di più , con la sua ultima opera, Kane sceglie invece di dare libertà pressoché totale ai futuri registi. migliori Non sono in grado di indicarle una versione "giusta" o migliore, ma quella che ho apprezzato di più nella mia esperienza di spettatrice è la riduzione operistica di Philip Venables. Il testo viene in parte recitato, in parte cantato da un cast formato da otto tradi soprani e mezzo-soprani che alternano assoli a momenti corali. Alcune battute vengono "pronunciate" da percussioni mentre il testo viene proiettato sulla parete di fondo. È il primo adattamento di *4.48 Psychosis* a essere stato autorizzato

dagli eredi di Kane, in genere molto rigidi specie per quanto riguarda gli allestimenti realizzati sulla scena inglese o anglofona.

- L'In-Yer-Face viene spesso visto come una meteora nella scena teatrale britannica. E' arrivata, è esplosa causando numerosi danni e poi è gradualmente scomparsa. Stando all'attuale situazione teatrale si potrà mai parlare di un secondo In-Yer-Face, o esso si può considerare solo come un prodotto del suo tempo, nato in un'Inghilterra ferita e arrabbiata dopo anni di Thatcherismo?

Non credo che l'In-Yer-Face si possa considerare come una semplice meteora. Certo, ci sono alcuni autori che sono stati considerati dei veri e propri padri fondatori di questa corrente che in seguito hanno imboccato tutt'altra strada, come nel caso di Mark Ravenhill. Se guardiamo alla drammaturgia britannica, comunque, la produzione in-yer-face si estende fino almeno all'inizio del nuovo millennio, anche se il grande fenomeno degli "anni zero" è la rinascita del tutto imprevista del *documentary theatre*, genere che era stato dato per morto e sepolto dopo la grande fioritura nel secondo dopoguerra. Nel corso della storia del teatro è possibile individuare diversi momenti di sperimentazione con l'estetica della violenza, da Shakespeare e gli altri autorielisabettiani e giacomiani per arrivare, nel panorama contemporaneo, alla "crudeltà" di Artaud o al teatro della catastrofe di Barker. E' un processo ciclico.

Riassunto

La tematica della violenza, intesa in un contesto generale, è un argomento che fa provare grande timore e repulsione nella gente comune, ma anche un'innegabile fascinazione. Quando si pensa ad eventi come aggressioni per strada, tentati suicidi e via dicendo, l'era digitale ha chiaramente cambiato la nostra percezione nei confronti di questo tabù. Se si pensa poi ad episodi come il massacro di Christchurch o l'invasione russa dell'Ucraina, il primo è stato ripreso e trasmesso in diretta su Internet dall'esecutore stesso, il secondo è stato ripreso in diversi momenti, dalle scene di battaglia a quelle di vero e proprio eccidio di civili.

Assistendo ad atrocità simili dalla comodità della propria casa, dal computer o da un telefono cellulare, ci permette di entrare in qualche modo in contatto con una realtà diversa dalla nostra, facendoci provare empatia, orrore e disgusto con le vittime designate. Secondo Virginia Woolf, infatti, come riportato da Susan Sontag, il fallimento più grande dell'umanità sta nel non avere alcun senso di empatia nei confronti di altre persone che hanno avuto la tragica sfortuna di trovarsi in una situazione di devastante catastrofismo. L'uso della violenza, nonostante oggigiorno sia accessibile a chiunque, viene sempre condannato, ma a finire nel mirino della censura sono quasi sempre rappresentazioni fittizie, che fanno uso di questa caratteristica o per il semplice valore estetico o, nei casi più "studiati", come un monito, un'onesta rappresentazione di ciò che ci circonda e può esplodere da un momento all'altro.

Lo si vede nei film, nei quadri rappresentanti i martiri dei santi o scene di guerra, ma anche nel teatro. In quest'ultimo, poi, si va a creare un paradosso: nonostante ciò che avviene sul palcoscenico sia chiaramente finzione, ciò a cui gli spettatori stanno assistendo è un'esibizione di persone vere, in carne ed ossa, estremamente vicine a loro da poter essere toccate, eppure separate da un velo invisibile che separa la platea e il palco, creando per quest'ultimo un mondo completamente a parte. Assistere ad episodi di violenza sul palcoscenico, come smembramenti, violenze sessuali o suicidi, è un'esperienza estremamente scioccante per lo spettatore, ed evidenzia ancora di più la sua impotenza ad intervenire. Viene quindi creato un dittico di reale-fittizio, vicino e lontano contemporaneamente, che gli autori hanno spesso utilizzato come provocazione e denuncia nei confronti del falso moralismo delle masse.

Di opere teatrali violente ce ne sono sempre state: dalle mutilazioni e gli atti cannibalici del *Tito Andronico* di Shakespeare agli *exploits* politicamente scorretti della scena grand-guignolesca francese, e ci sono stati autori come Antonin Artaud che teorizzarono un vero e proprio "teatro delle crudeltà", atto a riportare l'arte teatrale alle sue origini, al fine di spossare il pubblico, evocando sensazioni sepolte nell'animo umano tramite una vivisezione del linguaggio e dell'azione violenta.

In questo senso, a cavallo tra la fine degli anni ottanta e per la maggior parte degli anni novanta, nel Regno Unito, si sviluppò quella che poi venne raggruppata da Aleks Sierz come la corrente dell'*In-Yer-Face Theatre*. Caratterizzata da una profonda rabbia e disillusione nei confronti della società britannica post-Thatcher, questa corrente teatrale, che comprendeva autori del calibro Philip Ridley, Martin McDonagh o Martin Crimp, si operò a portare in scena storie ed eventi di natura provocatoria, impenitente e senza filtri. Fortemente debitori a controverse opere teatrali come il *Saved* di Edward Bond o *The Romans in Britain* di Howard Brenton, rappresentanti rispettivamente la lapidazione di un neonato e il violento stupro di un celtico da parte di un gruppo di legionari romani, gli autori In-Yer Face si scagliavano apertamente contro ogni tipo di moralismo e norma sociale, dipingendo una realtà quasi del tutto priva di speranza, dove i rapporti umani sono annullati e la brutalità può esplodere da un momento all'altro. Fu il caso di *Shopping and Fucking* di Mark Ravenhill, una commedia nerissima sulle vicissitudini di tre amici disadattati alle prese con la povertà e la frenesia di consumo sfrenato tipica del Capitale, il tutto condito con grafiche rappresentazioni di abuso di droga, tortura e violenza carnale; oppure, in tempi dove ormai l'In-Yer-Face aveva raggiunto la sua fine, l'*Osama The Hero* di Dennis Kelly, dove le tensioni post-11 settembre si riflettevano in una storia di rabbia e insoddisfazione sociale che culminavano nella sistematica tortura ed uccisione di un capro espiatorio. Tra questi autori, tuttavia, figurava un personaggio in particolare la quale, pur non riconoscendosi direttamente nella corrente, ne divenne al tempo stesso la più esemplificativa e la più *pariah*: Sarah Kane.

Nata a Kelvedon Hatch, Essex, il 3 febbraio 1971, dopo una breve esperienza come attrice, Kane iniziò a lavorare come commediografa in una serie di rappresentazioni teatrali underground, che le permisero di scrivere quella che si può considerare una trilogia di monologhi: *Comic Monologue*, *What She Said* e *Starved*. Pur non essendo mai stati pubblicati (in quanto Kane probabilmente li riteneva dei lavori eccessivamente giovanili), essi presentano già diverse tematiche che poi torneranno ricorrenti nei suoi successivi lavori: le sofferenze amorose, la violenza, la fluidità di generi e il disfacimento linguistico-corporeo di un personaggio, il cui corpo in mano ad agenti esterni viene plasmato, riformato e distrutto.

Negli anni in cui Kane iniziava a farsi un nome, poi, avveniva anche la famigerata guerra in Jugoslavia, dove l'atroce pulizia etnica imperversava sui Balcani, con brutali stragi di civili innocenti dinanzi alla totale impotenza e disinteresse del mondo occidentale, culminato nel massacro di Srebrenica ad opera dell'esercito serbo guidato dal generale Ratko Mladić. Gli eventi diedero a Kane l'ispirazione necessaria per poter scrivere quella che, oltre ad essere la sua prima opera "vera", sarà anche quella che la farà diventare famosa in tutto il Regno Unito: *Blasted*.

Ispirato all'attesa pinteriana del *Dumb Waiter* e agli eccessi del teatro giacobino, l'esordio era incentrato sul rapporto di dominanza-dominato tra Ian, un giornalista di mezza età omofobo, razzista e misogino, e Cate, una ragazza ingenua e innocente. Per tutta la prima parte dell'opera, si assiste alla creazione di questa atmosfera di disagio in questa stanza di un albergo di Leeds, facendo presagire che sulla scena avverrà uno stupro. Ian, malato terminale, manipola più volte Cate, prima insultandola, poi mettendola a disagio con i suoi discorsi xenofobi e in seguito dicendo di amarla. La violenza avviene, ma il pubblico non la vedrà. Ciò che accadrà in seguito sarà un totale cambio di registro: di colpo, pare che sulle strade sia scoppiata una guerra. Cate riesce a fuggire, mentre Ian si ritrova bloccato nella stanza con un soldato armato. Quest'ultimo, dopo aver raccontato tutte le brutalità da lui compiute, sodomizzerà Ian e lo accecherà, in una sorta di punizione karmica per ciò che lui ha fatto precedentemente a Cate. Ora completamente dipendente da lei, Ian tenta il suicidio, ma fallisce, e nell'ultima scena vediamo lei che, nonostante tutto, nutre con del cibo il suo aguzzino, ormai ridotto ad un patetico relitto umano.

L'opera, fortemente influenzata dagli eventi che stavano devastando i Balcani, fu aspramente criticata e accusata di essere un semplice pezzo sensazionalistico senza gusto e senza messaggio. Celebre fu la stroncatura di Jack Tinker, che lo definì un "disgusting piece of filth" (trad. "disgustoso pezzo di merda"). Nonostante le brutalità, il testo è in realtà un disperato richiamo al pubblico di tornare a provare empatia. Secondo Kane, infatti, l'unico modo per restare umani in un contesto infernale dove ogni tipo di moralità viene soppiantato dalla sete di massacro e vendetta, è cercare di compiere piccoli atti di gentilezza e comprensione, anche nei confronti di chi se lo meriterebbe di meno, come in questo caso il personaggio di Ian. Tra i due, infatti, è Cate ad uscirne vincitrice. Dapprima vittima, lei diventa una punitrice-salvatrice. Non solo impedisce ad Ian di suicidarsi, costringendolo a vivere in una nuova miserevole condizione, ma si offre di badare a lui nutrendolo. Questo capovolgimento di ruoli, infatti, tornerà in tutte le altre opere di Kane.

Dopo le varie polemiche ricevute con *Blasted*, Kane si ripresentò l'anno successivo con *Phaedra's Love*. Riadattamento contemporaneo della classica tragedia greca già portata in scena da Euripide e Seneca e in seguito riproposta da Jean Racine, il secondo lavoro di Kane è una commedia nerissima, volgare e politicamente scorretta che oltre ad ispirarsi agli scandali reali di quel periodo (su tutti, il Camillagate e il successivo divorzio tra Lady Diana Spencer e del Principe Charles di Windsor), ribalta completamente la storia originale. In un'operazione tipica del periodo contemporaneo che vede i testi classici riproposti in chiave più o meno attuale, come Tony Harrison aveva fatto con lavori come *Phaedra Britannica* o *The Labourers of Herakles* rappresentando rispettivamente il colonialismo britannico e la pulizia etnica jugoslava, o come Derek Jarman aveva agito ambientando l'Edoardo II di Christopher Marlowe nel periodo della lotta omosessuale contro il

regime omofobo thatcheriano, Kane ribalta ogni stilema tipico del teatro classico: Ippolito non è più un giovane devoto religiosamente al limite della misoginia sessuofobica, ma un prinicpe viziato, sciatto e debosciato. Viene giocata la carta dell'ironia per mettere alla berlina l'abitudine tipica delle famiglie aristocratiche ad avere rapporti incestuosi, e la morte del protagonista, la quale nelle precedenti versioni avveniva fuoriscena, qui viene letteralmente gettata in pasto al pubblico con un grottesco linciaggio che comprende uno sbudellamento e un evirazione. Ippolito, in questo caso, non ottiene il perdono del padre Teseo, ma accetta il suo destino in quanto stufo dell'ipocrisia aristocratica, conscio che la sua dipartita comporterà al disfacimento dell'aristocrazia.

Con la sua quarta opera teatrale, *Cleansed*, ispirata ai testi di Shakespeare, Büchner, Orwell e Barthes, Kane crea il suo lavoro più complesso ma anche quello più riuscito. E' qui che si può trovare la summa delle sue tematiche, dalla violenza rappresentata senza filtri sul palco alla fluidità di generi che si uniscono, vengono separati con la forza e poi riassemblati in qualcosa di unico. La tragica odissea di un gruppo di pazienti "indesiderati" rinchiusi in una specie di college universitario adibito a campo di concentramento, è una rappresentazione da incubo di un mondo distopico dove un sentimento come l'amore è stato completamente obliterato. I personaggi dell'opera, dai fratelli incestuosi Grace e Graham, alla coppia gay Carl e Rod fino al ragazzino mentalmente instabile Robin, sono tutti bisognosi di amore, e ogni qualvolta che lo cercano vengono severamente puniti tramite atroci torture perpetrate (che vanno dall'impalamento, la nutrizione forzata e l'elettroshock) dal sadico e crudele Tinker, figura enigmatica che rappresenta la *gender-role fluidity* che caratterizza l'opera, dato che di scena in scena appare come medico, sorvegliante, aguzzino e interrogatore. Questo "camaleonte infernale" però non sfugge alla sensibilità dell'autrice, che mette chiaramente sottinteso come anche lui, nonostante i gesti efferati che compie, è un'anima persa che ama e vuole essere amata. Ciò che contraddistingue l'opera è anche il graduale svisceramento del linguaggio, con una prosa più scarna rispetto ai lavori precedenti: un aspetto che sarà pienamente presente nelle ultime due opere che Kane scrisse.

Con *Crave*, ispirato alla *Waste Land* di T.S. Eliot e al *Pre-Paradise Sorry Now* di Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Kane cambiò quasi completamente genere, passando dalla prosa alla forma poetica. Se il poema di Eliot, fortemente modernista e rappresentante un mondo sconvolto dal primo conflitto mondiale in una galleria di personaggi mitologici e realistici che si incontrano-scontrano nel malessere e la disillusione della loro esistenza e auspicano ad un nuovo inizio rappresentato dalle enunciazioni hinduiste-buddhiste, *Crave* si concentra su un gruppo di persone già (simbolicamente) morte. Identificati solo per lettere (B, M, A e C), e ciascuno di essi rappresentanti un certo tipo di desiderio o mania che va dalle tendenze suicide-autodistruttive (C e B), la crisi di mezza età e la seguente sessualità repressa (M) e la crudeltà della manipolazione e dello stupro (A), i personaggi di

Crave si ritrovano in un luogo imprecisato, a parlare delle loro vite passate in maniera criptica, che alterna momenti di scarna prosa a veri e propri flussi di coscienza joyceani. Se Eliot utilizzava immagini provenienti dal folklore britannico-indiano, Kane utilizza frasi prese direttamente da canzoni, oltre ad inserire parole in lingue straniere e a ricorrere al simbolismo hinduista-buddhista del poema di ispirazione, con la differenza che invece della speranza di una vita migliore, si auspica a morire definitivamente, privandosi di ogni dolore e sofferenza. Il lavoro, diverso per stile e rappresentazione, fu un enorme successo di critica e di pubblico, il primo vero apprezzamento che Kane ricevette.

Terminata la stesura di *Crave*, l'autrice di Kelvedon Hatch si mise al lavoro con quello che sarà il suo ultimo testo, *4.48 Psychosis*, una disturbante e disperata rappresentazione della depressione e del suicidio di uno/una paziente psichiatrico/o, caratterizzata da un altro tipo di flusso di coscienza che distrugge completamente la concezione di testo stesso, con immagini di autolesionismo, atrocità belliche e lunghi, disagianti elenchi di patologie, sintomi medici e ambizioni fallite. Tornando ad una tematica già presente in *Starved* e in *Cleansed*, Kane crea una summa di tutte le sue opere, con il linguaggio ormai completamente fatto a pezzi e riassemblato in una maniera completamente insolita, e la voluta non-specificazione del numero di personaggi e del loro genere. Come il precedente *Crave*, anche *4.48 Psychosis* assembla parole prese da canzoni o immagini di film, su tutti, il grottesco gallo ballerino presente nella straziante scena finale dello *Stroszek* di Werner Herzog.

Questa fu l'ultima opera che Sarah Kane scrisse. Sofferente di depressione da diverso tempo, lei tentò il suicidio, venendo salvata in tempo e ricoverata presso il King's College Hospital di Londra. Una volta lì, lei tentò nuovamente di togliersi la vita, questa volta riuscendoci. Scomparve un'autrice insolita, anarchica e controversa, e di colpo tutti i critici che avevano da sempre stroncato il suo lavoro fecero marcia indietro quando *4.48 Psychosis* venne rappresentato per la prima volta postumo. Era un'autrice che faceva uso della violenza e della provocazione per toccare tematiche ben più sensibili, con un profondo senso di empatia e compassione anche per soggetti che il pubblico stesso doveva trovare spregevoli. Un'attenta lettura, infatti, mostra come il teatro di Sarah Kane sia una cosa completamente fuori dallo schema tipico dell'In-Yer-Face: la voglia di scandalizzare la normatività è solo la punta dell'iceberg per delle storie di profonda umanità e speranza, le uniche armi possibili da imbracciare dove la violenza regna sovrana, venendo spesso glorificata o falsamente tenuta nascosta.

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