

In–Yer-Face: The Shocking Sarah Kane

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Drama and Performance studies in the School of Literature Studies, Media and Creative Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, November, 2008.

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As the candidate's Supervisor I have approved this dissertation for submission:

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Acknowledgements

My heartfelt and sincere thanks go to:

Dr Veronica Baxter, my supervisor, for her mentorship, professional guidance and dedication to the academic pursuits of others, as well as her friendship, support, and tissues when needed.

The NRF for funding and making my academic pursuits possible.

The Drama and Performance Studies academic staff for their guidance, inspiration and ongoing support.

The Hexagon Staff for their friendship, support and moments of respite.

My dear friends James, Eloise, Morwenna, Daniel, Avi, Ari, Sita, Mbo, Kiara, Jackie, Justin, Claire, Debbie, Jean and Paul for bearing with me, for comfort and advice, for laughter and support, and above all a soft place to land.

A special thank you to Kiara Worth for editing, formatting and proof reading my dissertation.

Special acknowledgements go to my Mom, Dad, and brother, David for their unconditional love and unwavering faith in me.

And to Brett, for everything.

ABSTRACT

Playwright, Sarah Kane emerged as a new voice in British writing in the early 1990s. Her work, recognized most notably for its shocking content, was the source of media hype, and rendered her work, with that of her peers, as In-Yer-Face Theatre.

This dissertation analyses the use of shock in Kane's work, with particular reference to her first and last plays: *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*. I discuss the shock elements employed by Kane in these texts and consider the reasons behind their use, particularly Kane's break with realism and subversion of form.

My research draws upon social constructionist thought as a strand of the larger discourses of postmodernism, in particular those which inform the existence of war, violence and trauma. Focusing too, on the work of theatre practitioners such as Antonin Artaud, whose 'Theatre of Cruelty' is reminiscent of Kane's own theatre.

I discuss the origin of In-Yer-Face Theatre as well as its forerunners by examining Post-War British Theatre from the 1940's, especially those plays that have resonated on a provocative level. My research also explores the social and political factors influencing theatre over the decades and in relation to Kane, particularly the Thatcher government of the 1980s. I argue that the social and political climate of the 1980s and 1990s played a direct role in the formation of Kane's theatre and examine Kane's work and its reception in relation to other playwrights of the time. I have deliberately chosen to locate my research in terms of British theatre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
CHAPTER ONE	9
Rise of the “Angry Young Man’	10
Osborne’s Forerunners.....	13
The Sixties and Seventies	15
Edward Bond	16
The 1980s and Margaret Thatcher.....	19
CHAPTER TWO.....	26
Patrick Marber’s <i>Closer</i>	31
The Violent 90s.....	33
A New Aesthetic vs Realism	38
CHAPTER THREE	41
Forerunners to <i>Blasted</i>	42
Shopping and What?!	44
Sexism and Killer Joe	48
Kane’s Influences	51
Kane and the Unpresentable	58
CHAPTER FOUR.....	60
It’s quite a peaceful play	61
That Blasted Play!.....	62
Form and Function.....	63
Are we still in Leeds?	68
Sex and Violence.....	69
Rape and War	75
The Abandonment of Realism: Staging the Unseen.....	80
A Silver Lining	85
Blasted Revisited	86
4.48 <i>Psychosis</i>	86
Staging 4.48 <i>Psychosis</i>	89
Kane: The Suicidal Nihilist?	93
4.48 <i>Psychosis</i> : Genius or Suicide Note?	97
CONCLUSION	101
REFERENCE LIST	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

INTRODUCTION

This research report deals with the British theatre phenomenon known as In-yer-face and in particular a forerunner within this genre: Sarah Kane. In-yer-face Theatre alludes to any work that makes use predominantly of shock tactics on stage and for this reason I have chosen to examine the work of Kane, who shocked British audiences with her raw, brash and nihilistic style of writing.

The colloquial understanding of shock suggests that it is something upsetting but also capable of eliciting outrage. It is most definitely the latter definition that best describes the intentions of the young twenty-something playwrights in Britain in the early 1990s producing this form of theatre. In order to fully appreciate the rise of In-yer-face, like most new phenomena, the socio-political sphere preceding its development must be examined. Therefore, in this research paper I shall present an in depth analysis of the political and social climate of the 1980s, with Britain under the rule of Margaret Thatcher, and how this particular time frame informed and inspired a new theatre in the 1990s.

It is interesting to note that this form of theatre did not exist in a bubble. Like most new emerging genres it is heavily dependent on the work of predecessors in the theatrical field. In-yer-face Theatre productions countered neoliberal values with theatre that shocked and disgusted audiences. The plays appealed to a younger generation in an effort to bring them back to the theatre and this, coupled with the relatively young age of the writers of the genre, informed a new trend where theatre was once again fashionable and saw the writers of the form hailed as the 'Britpak'.

The rationale behind this research project is an interest in the work of Sarah Kane; the 'bad girl' of British theatre writing. I first became acquainted with her work in 2004 when I read *Crave* and from then on I was drawn to reading more of her work. At such a young age Kane's work carried a depth and perceptiveness that was rare and her work resonated with my own ideas very strongly. After reading *Blasted*, I was both shocked and in awe of how she achieved her vision for this play onstage and her complete

subversion of form added a new level of excitement and possibility. By subversion of form I am referring to Kane's departure from realism as conceived of by Aristotle. In the Aristotelian model, tragedy is drama not narrative. Plot is considered the most important feature and is made up of a distinct beginning, middle and end. In order for the plot to be most effective it needs to be structurally self-contained with complete unity of action. The end of tragedy/drama is catharsis which is the cleansing of emotions in order to reduce these passions and to restore balance (McManus,1999).

My first encounter with Kane's work inspired me to play with my own writing form and the result was the writing of my Honours directing play *Purge*. This play moved away from the realm of realism with characters, not unlike Kane's in *Crave*, that operated in a liminal space without interacting with each other. It was from this point I learnt of In-yer-face Theatre and Kane's influence on this genre, as defined by Aleks Sierz (2000).The form resonated on some levels with the work of Antonin Artaud and his 'Theatre of Cruelty' and Kane (writing about her work) described her form of theatre as being 'experiential', a term used to describe the kind of drama that gives audiences the experience of actually having lived through what was being depicted on stage.

My own subject position is that of a young, white, female practitioner of theatre within South Africa. I realise that my choice to then examine a primarily British phenomenon is questionable, however I feel that my research into this particular aspect of theatre is of value within a South African context. The work of Kane and other writers like her served to shake up the British stage and bring about change; at the time of its inception there was a shift away from the Thatcher style 'bums on seats' mentality. There was no money available for the aforementioned practitioners, but they had an abundance of passion for the creation of new work, and undeterred by their lack of resources it resulted in theatre that embodied a spirit unlike anything that was being performed in the 1980s. Despite the fact that this is a British phenomenon, I feel that the rise of this form of theatre and the socio-political climate that influenced it are of relevance to South Africa. For the purpose of this research, however, I have not extended into the realm of what is happening on this front, if anything, but instead choose to focus on the form of theatre and its development in Britain.

The primary focus of this research is the use of shock in Kane's work. First and foremost I would like to offer a brief insight to physiological and psychological symptoms induced in a state of shock. The event of trauma is one that is re-experienced in numerous ways by the recurrence of distressing recollections of a traumatic event, sometimes including images or flashbacks. Dreams also play a role in the re-living of the event and people experiencing trauma often feel that the moment is being repeated. These feelings can manifest on a physiological level with victims experiencing chest pain, difficulty in breathing, fatigue, tremors and various other shock symptoms. On a behavioural level, shock and trauma can lead to emotional outbursts, erratic movements, inability to rest and withdrawal as a means of avoidance (oqp.med:2008).

In her book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) author Naomi Klein examines the use of Shock Therapy in the 1960s, with particular reference to Doctor Ewen Cameron. Cameron devised a treatment using shock therapy as a means to violently 'de-pattern' his patients. His motivation was that shock therapy coupled with various other techniques, bordering on torture, would render the patient a clean slate which he could 're-programme' and ultimately cure. During the process, Cameron describes: *there is not only a loss of the space-time image but loss of feeling that it should be present* (Cameron cited in Klein, 2007:32). I cite this example to illustrate the power of shock on both a physical and psychological level; whilst I am not suggesting that Kane tortures or tries to 're-pattern' her audiences, she does use shock in the form of violent images to elicit change through her work. Her subversion of form and rejection of realism in most instances renders her work disturbing for an audience, who look to those signposts to create meaning and cohesion. Kane fractures the time space image to further problematise the search for understanding, and in this paper I explore the ways in which she achieves this destabilisation of form.

For the purpose of this study I will be examining two of her plays; *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*. My mode of enquiry is informed by writers such as Bakhtin and his notion of grotesque realism which alludes to the notion of 'degradation' and the grotesque body, which is the body continuously becoming rather than an evident completion. I intend to

inform my study with constructionist thought which draws from the larger discourse of postmodernism.

I will be looking at the predecessors of In-yer-face Theatre and how their own work has served to inform writers of the 1990s. These examples show that the use of ‘shock’ in theatre was not new. This dissertation will also address the waning popularity of In-yer-face in the late 1990s and question whether this lack of interest is inherently built into its form. In-yer-face will be examined for its socio-political stance in comparison with other theatrical innovations. Whilst Kane’s work has been analysed within the realm of feminist thought, this paper will not focus on this particular area of research.

Chapter One, as previously mentioned, will examine the theatrical predecessors of the form, notably the work of John Osborne and Edward Bond, as well as the climate of British theatre post-war. Chapter Two will continue this analysis with primary focus on Britain in the late 1980s from a social, political and theatrical view and how this led to the rise of In-yer-face Theatre. I will also discuss the definitions of the form and its influences. Chapter Three will deal with Sarah Kane, her work, influences, as well as interviews and newspaper articles written about her work. Finally, Chapter Four will consist of a close textual analysis of two of her texts and how these plays employ the element of shock.

I would like to stress that enquiry into this kind of theatre is limited by the lack of theory written on this particular topic, and as such I will be relying on the principle theories of postmodernism and the grotesque to analyse the texts themselves, as well as the use of shock that underpins the form. Further key sources will be Aleks Sierz’s seminal text on In-yer-face Theatre, Graham Saunders exploration of Kane’s work in *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, the unpublished Doctoral thesis of Jolene Armstrong, *Postmodernism and Trauma: Four/Fore Plays of Sarah Kane* which provides invaluable research into Kane’s theatre, and finally the published works of Sarah Kane.

CHAPTER ONE

Looking Back: A Brief History of British Drama since 1940

*“People of our generation aren’t able to die for
good causes any longer... There aren’t any good,
brave causes left.”*

Look back in Anger, John Osborne, 1982

In this Chapter I will examine post-war British Drama since 1940 in order to show moments in British Theatrical History that marked a change in style or the creation of a new genre. I argue that theatre is strongly influenced by the political and social climate within which it exists and I will examine closely such moments in time where work emerged that was shocking and profound in its content, as a direct result of the climate in which it was created. In his book *English Drama since 1940*, David Ian Rabey makes the following pertinent observation that drama: ... *importantly provides cues for occasions and experiences which speculate in the reversibility of all power*, and he continues to argue that *drama has often deliberately worked, or been annexed or invoked, for both social consensus and social determinism* (Rabey, 2003:1). I concur with this statement and intend to show when such moments have taken place in an attempt to offer background to the emergence of In-yer-face Theatre and consequently the work of Sarah Kane in the early 1990s.

For the purpose of this research I will offer a brief history of British Drama with particular focus on those plays that showed a marked change in the current theatre climate. Whilst I appreciate the various forms of theatre that operated during British Theatre history I have chosen to restrict my focus to those particular moments where there was a tear in the fabric of what theatre was perceived to be through the decades 1940-1980. This means that much of my focus will deal with plays that resonated on a provocative level, and by this I refer to the provocation of sex, explicit language and violence depicted on stage.

Rise of the “Angry Young Man’

In 1956 John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* exploded onto the British stage and Rebellato in his book *1956 And All That* notes that, *consequently, the old era becomes exclusively characterised by the absence of Anger, and the new era by its presence* (Rebellato, 1999: 4). The play became the site of much controversy but whether you loved or hated it, critics agreed that it was a new voice on the British stage. The three act play is set in a bedroom flat in the British Midlands. The lead character, Jimmy Porter is part of the lower middle class, has a University education and lives with his wife Alison. The couple share their home with Jimmy’s business partner Cliff Lewis, who helps Jimmy run a sweet stall. Jimmy becomes extremely frustrated reading the newspapers and argues and taunts his friends for their blind acceptance of the world around them; he gets angry to the point of violence and reserves much of his anger for his wife Alison and her friends and family. The situation is made worse by the arrival of Alison’s actress friend Helena who is appalled by Jimmy’s treatment of Alison. As a result of this, Helena sends for Alison’s father to remove her from the situation. As soon as Alison is gone, Helena moves in with Jimmy. Alison returns for a visit after the miscarriage of Jimmy’s baby. Helena no longer able to cope with Jimmy’s rage leaves and Alison returns to Jimmy (Osborne, 1982).

This particular form of theatre would come to be known as *Kitchen Sink Drama* (Changing Minds: 2008), which was characterised by its domestic realism. Another trait of this genre was the use of everyday language and its ability to shock with its bluntness. The play follows a linear narrative and, unlike the work of Kane, does not subvert its form but the language used within the play still maintains its power to shock. In a particularly vicious speech Jimmy, unaware that Alison is pregnant with his child, attacks her with the following speech as a means to shock her out of her sensibilities:

If only something – something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of India rubber and wrinkles. Please – if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognisable human being yourself. But I doubt it.

(Osborne cited in Rebellato, 1999:30)

Look Back in Anger gave rise to Osborne being labelled as a *vanguard of the 'Angry young man'* (Rabey, 2003:30), with his confrontational approach that served to question social purpose after World War Two. Britain was not rebuilding as promised and its comfortable state of stagnation was questioned by a youth that felt life offered little excitement. The 1950s also saw the disappearance of job transitions from fathers to sons (prior to this sons would learn and work in the same trade as their fathers) and the emergence of a Rock 'n Roll culture which embraced the provocative spirit. *Look Back in Anger* embodied this anti-consensual drive and served to challenge English Theatre conventions – it also provided a platform and independence for English writing at a time when the British stage was dominated by the American Musical and other theatres from abroad (Rabey, 2003:30). The youth of the day sensed the social stagnation of the post-war British climate and it is purported by David Marquand, British writer and academic, that what these so called '*Angry young men*' are most angry about is that they have *nothing on which to focus their anger* (Marquand cited in Rebellato, 1999:12). This is expressed in one of the plays key moments when Jimmy Porter is in full flood:

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids [...] There aren't any good brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you.

(Osborne, 1993:83)

In his study of 'John Osborne', Banham writes that *Look Back in Anger* was not a revolutionary piece of theatre with regard to its form, in fact in many ways it was formally conventional which served to direct attention to its disturbing content (Banham cited in Bond, 1999). Despite its conservative form, *Look Back in Anger* radicalised British Theatre – its success provided further clues to the concerns and anxieties of its generation. As Kenneth Tynan observed in his review of the play, Jimmy Porter *represented the dismay of many young Britons...who came of age under a Socialist government, yet found, when they went out into the world, that the class system was still mysteriously intact* (Tynan, cited in Bond, 1999).

In his article *An Inarticulate Hope*, Paul Bond suggests that it is the, *mistaken association of the post-war labour government with the failure of Socialism per se that accounts for Porter's frustration* (Bond, 1999). Bond goes on to say that the play expresses a political impasse that was a direct result of British life being dominated by Stalinism and social democracy. The play also challenges this view by speaking out and despite its disturbing themes maintains a level of hope at its core (Bond, 1999). For the first time the play offered London theatregoers a very different theatrical 'voice' from the public school received pronunciation they were accustomed to. Instead, according to Rabey, Osborne dared to associate a non-BBC accent with articulate intelligence (Rabey, 2003: 30). In this way, *Look Back in Anger* was also responsible for bringing the class issue to British audiences.

Look Back in Anger, not unlike the work of Sarah Kane or other In-yer-face dramatists, emerged as a direct result of the political and social climate. Britons having lived through a Second World War had come to accept life in a post-war generation and the singularly British adage of a 'stiff upper lip' served to compliment an air of acceptance. The welfare state saw new provisions for social welfare which meant increased access to medical and educational facilities, all the while supported by the notion of a 'presumed public morality', identified by the thrifty and disciplined consumer. The emphasis then was on deferral and thrift and soon these were equated with patriotism and responsibility. The post-war population continued to experience rationing and queues for food and transport but despite this remained docile and accepting This was true for most class groups and

even if you did have the means to afford luxuries there was a general shortage of them (Rabey, 2003:6). I would argue that this was the perfect climate for John Osborne's anger, the sense of apathy and acceptance that came with being a good citizen as well as the imminent change that followed.

While suffering raged on, around it the theatre of 1956 continued to cater to a small portion of society and ignored the rest. By the time *Look Back in Anger* was written *the rarely challenged securities of the early 50s new Elizabethan age gave way in 1956 to the fracture of hegemony and the myth of British coherence* (Rabey, 2003:29). This was a direct result of the division of public opinion over the Suez crisis in which Britain's impulsive authority was judged at a domestic and global level, and seen to have overstepped its political mark. Prior to this was the decolonisation of India in 1948 that marked the beginning of the end of Britain's status as an empire and by 1961 South Africa too had gained its independence as The Republic of South Africa. With the widespread availability of television which enabled a wider viewing audience, Osborne's play had the perfect platform to attack *the vicariousness of English life* (Rabey, 2003:29).

Osborne's Forerunners

In order to understand the impact of Osborne's play it is of value to understand what kind of theatre existed before its inception. Peter Brook describes the aim of 1940's theatre in his book *The Empty Space* as *...a reaching back towards a memory of lost grace* (Brook, 1968:48). The dance hall of the war years had been elevated above theatre but by 1945 the local government act saw the empowerment of local authorities to fund arts locally. This brought with it a status quo in terms of what material was considered appropriate and playwright Terrence Rattigan publicly maintained the importance of never upsetting the average theatregoer whom he dubbed 'Aunt Edna' – this gives some insight into the lack of theatre options available on regional offer (Rabey, 2003:7). English theatre of the 1940s was also a period led by actors rather than dramatists, legends such as Olivier dominated plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov. In 1947 *Oklahoma!* with its celebration of energy and simplicity became a popular musical option and opened the doors of the West End for other American Musicals (Rabey, 2003:8).

The 1950s marked the start of the British television era and the artistic highlight of the week was the Sunday night play, *often a 'tried and trusted' Theatrical success, purporting to (re)establish, (re)educate and (re)introduce an interest in Drama* (Rabey, 2003:8). By 1956, however, Rebellato writes that British theatre was in a terrible state, the West End was dominated by theatre managers who sought to produce *emotionally repressed, middle class plays, all set in drawing rooms with French windows as vehicles for stars whose only talent was to wield a cigarette holder and a cocktail glass while wearing a dinner jacket* (Rebellato, 1999:1). Rebellato is referring to work by such playwrights as Noël Coward, whose work later became referred to as Drawing Room Comedy, or 'Comedy of Manners' (Answers.com: 2008). Some traits of this particular theatre are witty lines and verbal banter delivered among wealthy, genteel, upper class characters. The genre is seen as being a satire on social attitudes, attacking values of superficiality and materialism. Usually these plays are marked by characters lacking any real depth as well as being stock characters. Marriage appears as a frequent subject and the plots are usually fast moving with rapid twists brought on by a miscommunication (eNotes, 2006).

An example of one such play was Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* which centres around wealthy socialite Charles Condomine who after attending a séance with the eccentric Madame Arcati, is haunted by his first wife Elvira, who sets about to destroy Charles' current marriage. Ironically the play provoked a small outcry, as some felt it was making a mockery of death at the height of World War Two, however this was short-lived and the play went on to break all records at the British box office for a West End comedy, that were not beaten until 1970 (Crawford, 1992).

It is not difficult to imagine why Coward's play, with its wit, trivialities and play on the upper class of Britain's society, would be such a sell-out hit. It offered its audiences something to laugh at, it didn't require much thought and it provided the escapism so many theatregoers were in search of after the horrors of World War Two. At the same time however, this form of theatre catered to an elite sector of society, until *Look Back in Anger*. Osborne's play was distinctly different from dramas such as Coward's. While drawing room comedy busied itself with the lives of gentry in manor houses and plush

apartments, Osborne's characters, who are working class or lower middle class, struggle to understand their existence in cramped bedsits or terraces (Bond, 1999). *Look Back in Anger* was a reaction to drawing room comedy and having considered briefly their differences it is apparent why *Look Back in Anger* was so shocking for its time.

Gone was the mannered speech of Coward's characters and in its place Jimmy Porter's working class brogue. Gone too were the drawing rooms of the elite, replaced in *Look Back in Anger*, with a small midlands bedsit. The division of classes had never been so startlingly portrayed along with the violence and rage of Porter, who despite his background made absolute sense with his coherent and intelligent speeches.

At the time *Look Back in Anger* was produced theatre held little appeal for the youth of Britain, but after the televised extract the theatre saw a revival with the show being attended by people in their late teens and early twenties. The play led to a new wave of dramatists who followed in Osborne's wake – speaking for a generation that had for so long remained silent and this progression led to the creation of a vibrant, vital theatre. (Rebellato, 1999:2)

The Sixties and Seventies

This gave rise to the theatre of the 1960s and 70s, which was dominated by a contemporary prioritisation of the 'theatrical event' through performance art and 'happenings', coupled with the ideas of Artaud that had begun to filter into British theatrical discourse (Rabey, 2003:73). Theatre practitioners such as Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz offered up experiments that illustrated Artaud's impulses towards a Theatre of Cruelty. In 1964 they hosted 'The Theatre of Cruelty' season at the Royal Shakespeare Company where they presented works in progress that explored Artaud's ideas culminating in a premier of Artaud's play *Jet of Blood*. In this 'theatre' Artaud envisioned *the truthful distillation of dreams where its taste for crime, its erotic obsessions, its savageness, its fantasies, its utopian sense of life and objects, even its cannibalism, come out not on an illusory make believe but on an inner level* (Artaud 1989:101).

Edward Bond

Another important and influential voice of this era was Edward Bond who, through his work, attempts to illuminate and resolve the cyclical social aggression prevalent in his plays. Bond believes that human beings are inherently violent and because of this uses violence as a political device.

One of his most provocative plays *Saved* was first staged on November, 3, 1965. It tells the story of Pam who becomes romantically involved with her family's lodger Len. After a time she becomes bored with his conventional outlook and develops a crush and increasing obsession with Fred. Fred is violent and leads a local gang in South London; we learn that his anger and violent outrage stems from his experience of war. Pam becomes pregnant, believing the father of her child is Fred, but the baby is not wanted and hence is unloved and neglected. The climax of the play occurs when Pam encounters Fred and his gang while out with her baby. She approaches Fred and attempts to win him round but fails miserably, in light of this humiliating rejection she leaves, forgetting the baby in its pram. The bored gang proceed to torment and torture the child and finally stone the baby, Fred being egged on to throw the rock that kills it. The play ends with Fred being jailed and Pam still obsessed with him, even after his subsequent release and further rejection of her (Bond, 1984). The pivotal moment in the play where the baby is stoned to death, critically highlights social degradation, with a group of men reducing the unseen baby to a sub-human thing, a contemptible 'yeller nigger', or 'yid' with no 'feelin's' as an excuse for their own violence. This scene is supported by other moments in the play, for example, Pam regularly drugs the baby into a stupor and, an ironic twist added by Bond, occurs when Pam returns after the fatal stoning to collect her baby, only to push the pram off without even a glance inside (Rabey, 2003:79).

The play caused a major uproar on its opening night with audience members shouting at the actors onstage and fights breaking out in the foyer during intermission and after the show. Not unlike Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, the show received a similar response from the media with critics passing comment such as Jeremy Kingston from 'Punch', who wrote of the pivotal scene, *One of the nastiest scenes I have ever sat through* (The Guardian,

Kingston cited in Ellis, 2003). The play, like Kane's, was also defended on the basis of it being a moral play by Peter Lewis of the Daily Mail, and thirty years later would see Bond defending the work of Sarah Kane whose *Blasted* has often been compared to *Saved*. Bond himself admits, *I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners* (Bond cited in Bower, 2005). However, Bond goes on to defend the use of violence and shock in his work by stating his belief that violence shapes and obsesses our society and that if the violence does not cease we will have no future. He argues that people who do not wish for writers to write about violence want to stop the recording of our life and time. Ultimately, for Bond, *it would be immoral not to write about violence* (Bond cited in Bower, 2005).

Because of the shocking nature of *Saved*, the play had to achieve 'club' status in order to be performed. The main reason for this was that the Lord Chamberlain (official censor of British Theatre) had demanded major alterations to the script before he would grant a licence for it to be performed at The Royal Court. A loophole in terms of the censorship was to present the play as it was written, without a license by giving it private club status, in this way Lord Chamberlain had no authority over the production (eNotes, 2006). The support that emerged in the wake of this in defence of theatre was a major force in the abolition of the requirement of the Lord Chamberlain licensing of plays for production in 1968 (Rabey 2003:79).

When Bond wrote this particular play, it was the beginning of the social revolution – what was to become known as the 'Swinging 60s' for the attitude that prevailed - free love became a popular slogan and Bob Dylan ruled the airwaves. It was a time of counter-culture and psychedelic drugs. The 1950s and 60s also heralded in the rise of postmodernity influenced by Western European disillusionment brought on by World War Two, this saw a complete re-evaluation of the Western value system with regard to love, marriage and popular culture. The decade saw the large scale 1968 uprisings in Paris where 800 000 students, workers and teachers marched through the capital's streets demanding the fall of government under Charles de Gaulle as well as protesting against the police brutality that had occurred during the protest. This sentiment was echoed in the USA with protests against the war in Vietnam.

On British soil race relations were becoming a major issue and as a result, 26 November 1968 saw the Race Discrimination Law tightened. The new law made it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to people because of their ethnicity. The Act also saw the creation of a Race Relations board whose responsibility it was to deal with complaints of discrimination as well as to set up a new body called the Community Relations Commission to promote 'harmonious' relationships within the community. A few months prior to this, issues of racial discrimination had made the news with right-wing conservative MP Enoch Powell's speech against immigration into Britain from Commonwealth Countries. In his speech he spoke of "rivers of blood" should the government continue to allow immigration into Britain. He was fired soon after this but government was shocked to find some sections of media applauding Powell's sentiments. As a result, thousands of workers staged strikes in protest and marched to Downing Street in support of Powell. The new Race Relations Act was to serve as a counter balance to the UK's immigration Act and to fulfil the government's promise at the time to be "fair but tough" on immigrants (BBC, 2008).

For the purpose of this research I have chosen to focus mainly on theatre that was considered mainstream, but feel it important to mention the alternative theatre scene that emerged from 1968 after the Theatres Act was passed and Lord Chamberlain's role of censor officially came to an end. In her book *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, Sandy Craig writes of the beginnings of the Fringe theatre in Britain. Around this period various alternative theatre venues were opened, most notably The Theatre Upstairs where Kane was later to stage her debut work *Blasted*. Reasons for the existence of these theatres were two-fold, Craig explains, firstly they provided a means to present new work faster and cheaper, and secondly, to provide a bridge between mainstream and alternative theatre (Craig, 1980: 16-17).

Craig brings to light the view held that the best conditions for the creation of art are those which impose boundaries, as complete aesthetic freedom leads to self-indulgence. She goes on to say that in part this may be true but also argues that one important limitation (funds) acted as a creative lubricant. Cash-strapped artists were forced to think creatively when funds did not allow for expensive naturalistic sets. Furthermore, Craig states that

financial restrictions underpinned a revolt against Capitalist materialism. Along with this aesthetic freedom came a certain naivety which Craig points out. Often this alternative theatre used shock for shock's sake, sometimes cruelly expressed. Craig argues that the problem with this was that these shock tactics were not shocking the right people i.e. the bourgeoisie, as most of these plays were performed in and to alternative society. Themes included violence, power, sado-masochism and paranoia. Craig states that while some freedom was gained through these performances, often enough responsibility was denied by those creating the work (Craig, 1980: 17).

I have chosen to comment briefly on the select few playwrights mentioned above to offer a taste of what work was being produced in the period 1940-1970. I have specifically chosen to write of the work of those playwrights whose work was noted for being provocative in their use of violence, explicit language or sex.

This brings me to the most important and influential period for In-yer-face Theatre as it marks clearly the shift in theatre from the 1980s to the early 1990s. For the purpose of this research I would like to examine in more detail the Thatcher government and its influences on the British Stage and more importantly how it influenced the rise of In-yer-face Theatre.

The 1980s and Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher's influence on the theatre of the 1980s was important and prolific. As reported by Rabey, Thatcher created and manipulated a mood of 'jingoism'. Questioning of her policy by the church, educators or the media was met with her wrath which was often expressed through legislation usually causing pressure in order to restrict traditional rights. Whatever liberal reform that existed before her she proceeded to dismantle, her philosophy supporting and sanctioning consumer acquisition rather than nurturing production or creativity. England adopted a pseudo-American enterprise and business culture which was expressed and supported by Thatcher's assurance that there was 'no such thing as society' only the self interest of the individual and the family to which she appealed with the invocation of 'Victorian values' that directly supported monetarism. (Rabey 2003:108).

In his book *Thatcher's Theatre* (Peacock, 1999:25) D. Keith Peacock raises more about this 'Victorian' attitude – which was illustrated ironically in Thatcher's attitude as well as praise of the Conservative model of a housewife and mother. Peacock believes that the administration of Thatcher as Prime Minister had a profound and lasting effect on British theatre, due to the social policies enacted during her time in office. She was derisive of anything that smacked of feminism and in her mind nothing more was needed to correct women's positions in society. *The battle for women's rights has largely been won* she claimed (Peacock 1999:25). Under her administration Britain invested in London and its Southern counties and this served to intensify social division and put a strain on economic and social conditions elsewhere as a result of cash restraints.

In 1984-1985 the North of England was decimated by the miners' strike, with the government initiating policy that would seriously affect the British coal industry. This became a defining moment in history as it would weaken the British Trade Unions movement and bring about deep divisions within British society. The strike took on a symbolic resonance as the government closed various pits and mechanised others which led to major job cuts. A culture emerged of writers and singers from the strike who produced work about the miners. Women also took on a valuable role in the strike itself by raising funds as well as being politically involved in a way that they had not done before. Through Thatcher's policies Britain saw increased power invested in police and security forces, restrictions on the press and media and the erosion of the national health and education services (Rabey 2003:167).

In its 1985 prospectus entitled *A Great British Success Story* the British Arts Council emphasized commercial aspirations. The buzz words of the 80s were 'cost-effectiveness' as well as 'value for money'. The fear and impact of AIDS was an excuse to hold forth in praise of the family, fidelity and above all heterosexuality and as a result, Section 28 of the Local Government Act outlawed the promotion of homosexuality in the arts and education. This led to the politicisation of many of the gay and lesbian communities against the government. However, the people of Britain internalised Thatcher's ideology and in 1987 the Conservatives entered their third term in office (Rabey 2003:168).

As Rabey points out, this period also saw the prioritisation of short term profits over long term safety which exposed a spate of national transport disasters during the period 1987-1988. These ideas are further discussed in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* as disaster capitalism. The public began to grow sceptical of the notion of consumption without accountability in terms of wealth creation and this became evident in the 'green' arguments of environmentalists and an increased public demand for organic products (Rabey, 2003:168).

British Theatre of the late 1980s chose to reflect the ideology of commercial gain rather than create, as Rabey describes it, 'a future identity'. I would argue that British Theatre in the 1980s was not left much of a choice when it came to what was reflected. Heavily reliant on funding and the fact that the theatre produced had to be a money spinner in order to acquire such funding in the first place, theatres were forced to take on projects that were a 'sure thing'. Larger theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company moved towards a more cost-effective director's theatre as a result of this, and away from new writing (Rabey 2003:168).

Despite cash restraints in arts funding, new work being written by established playwrights such as Howard Brenton, Edward Bond, David Hare and Caryl Churchill continued to be produced at the Royal Court, The Royal Shakespeare Company and The National, although it is important to note that new work was being produced but to a smaller extent. Peacock points out however, that as the decade advanced, chances of new playwrights seeing their work produced – even in smaller studio theatres - became highly unlikely. *In order to attract the size of audience required by funding bodies, theatres preferred to produce plays by established playwrights, using known actors* (Peacock 1999:187).

New writing was viewed as too great a financial risk despite the fact that writers continued to inundate theatres with plays. According to Peacock, The Royal Court, which was perceived to be the home of new writing, received as many as 40 new scripts a week by new writers. The chance of one of these plays reaching the stage was about one in five

thousand and although some were commissioned only half of those were produced (Peacock 1999:188).

Rabey points out that this insistence of the Thatcher government for accountability and market value had the effect of disempowering radical theatre companies as well as leaving “established” theatre unenhanced. Pressure caused by cuts in subsidisation led towards minimal rehearsal – the repercussions of this decision meant that designers were left to collaborate with directors to conceal artistic flaws using at times extravagant visuals to compensate for weaknesses, which was referred to by Peter Ustinov as ‘Veneer disease’ (Rabey 2003:169). Thatcher’s enforcement of binary choices such as either/or sought to reduce the value of both/and alternatives at the cost of theatre.

Respect was given to artists like Andrew Lloyd Webber who fulfilled much of Thatcher’s ideology. He had made a fortune in keeping with consumer aesthetics and the success of his work worldwide had made him a valuable export raising Britain’s status in the eyes of the foreigner. Webber’s great success of the 1980s was his show *CATS* based on TS Eliot’s book of children’s verse entitled *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. The play was a number one hit, boasting elaborately beautiful sets and lighting, and fitted the mould of what Thatcher wanted theatre to be – a machine that could ultimately make money. *Everything is costed and nothing is valued* became the epithet to characterise the 1980s (Peacock 1999:28). A prime example Peacock offers, is to be found in ‘Right Turn’, a collection of essays dedicated to Thatcher by labour supporters and Members of Parliament who had transferred their support to the conservatives.

Kingsley Amis, a popular novelist, poet and critic at the time, gave his reasons for abandoning state funding as follows:

The drama, with the obvious exception of Shakespeare makes little appeal to me, and makes that much less nearly every time, I take the appalling risk of seeing a play by a contemporary playwright. If stage companies had to cover all their costs, all concerned would be forced to become less self-indulgent. I cannot say I fancy paying the bills of some supposedly promising young person while he writes his political

(=left wing) or experimental (=nonsensical) play, these apparently being the only two categories tolerated.

(Right Turn, 1978:56)

At the close of the 1980s theatre was in a perilous state and some of these concerns and complaints were raised at a conference entitled 'Theatre in Crisis' at Goldsmith College University of London on the 4 December 1988. It was attended by many theatre practitioners and academics and a declaration was signed stating the following:

- The full and free development of every individual depends on the full and free development of all;
- Cultural activity is an essential part of this social process in which theatre has a distinct and important role to play;
- For theatre to play this role it must be as diverse as the society it represents, it must be linked to and therefore accessible to that diversity of needs and interests whether they be national, regional, local community-based, gender-based, ethnic, educational, rooted in class, age, sexuality, or stemming from physical circumstance;
- A free market economy and private sponsorship cannot guarantee the necessary conditions for theatre to fulfil its many functions in the current climate of increasing authoritarianism and regulation, the health of the theatre along with cultural activity of all kinds has been seriously impaired and is under further threat;
- For theatre to regain and sustain its vigorous social role, for theatre to grow and be fully creative, the foundation of its funding at a level adequate for its basic needs and future development must be public, and the management and distribution of that funding should be democratically organized and devolved.

Many of these statements, Peacock points out, reiterated the liberal, humanitarian aims that had inspired the founding of the Arts Council in 1946 and which, after almost a decade of Thatcherism, appeared strangely anachronistic (Peacock, 1999:57).

Inevitably the political climate of the 1980s and 90s drove many writers and dramatists to interrogate the ideologies the Conservative party were attempting to enforce. One such dramatist is Howard Barker whom Rabey describes as having striven to reclaim language from the social crisis which he sees being expressed as a form of ‘Fatalistic determinism’ which he defines further, as the belief that there is only one possible end result. This subversion that Rabey refers to in Barker’s work is brought about by his unique combination of style and content, his theoretical arguments and *mise-en-scene*, *he has countered the implicitly authoritarian presumption and proposition of supposedly ‘natural diminutions’ or ‘inevitable’ restrictions of the options whereby one might think, feel, speak, act, love and exist.* What makes Barker’s work so interesting according to Rabey is that he refuses to offer reconciliation in a society that demands to reconcile people to their predetermined roles as well as actions in a form of social and artistic symbolism and ritual (Rabey, 2003:182).

I would argue that Barker and playwrights like Churchill and Bond were to the 1980s what Kane was to the 1990s; dramatists who broke the mould dictated by hegemony to produce work that went beyond all restrictions, work that ultimately reflects the social and political climate from which it emanates. Like Barker, Kane too refuses to accept these reconciled binaries and through her work and subversion of form, challenges these presumed theatrical norms. Like Bond, Barker and Churchill, Kane too observes theatre as a vehicle for change and it is with this in mind that her work resonates beyond its inherent shock value.

Barker (Barker cited in Rabey, 2003:183) himself, felt that change in form could only become possible with the deterioration of political and habitual assumptions, and the resistance had to lie in the question of principle which was theatre’s special territory. Barker uses the example of violence on stage, he states that it is the responsibility of the creative mind to stretch both themselves and their audiences especially in a time of increasingly restricted options – the audience has a right to be amazed and to be taken to the limits of their tolerance in order to test morality at its source. He goes on to refer to the culture of the Thatcher government as one that allowed “Philistinism to parade as democratic art” and criticizes theatre managers who became power hungry; wanting what

he termed as 'gold and spectacle'. And finally, while *the fringe, which had sheltered even those whose aesthetic was not oppositional, suffered a double relapse, a miniaturist art no longer fitting the ambition of writer or actor and shrivelling again into scenes of domestic life* (Rabey 2003:183).

It makes sense then that Thatcher's dogmatic assurance "there is no alternative" would be decisively challenged in the 1990s and that the emerging genre would be volatile, nihilistic and extreme. For so long theatres were forced to play it safe as the financial risk of putting on anything new was too great. Theatre by the end of the 1980s was in a sorry state of affairs and needed to be revitalized. In the next chapter I will examine the rise of In-yer-face Theatre and what defines this form.

CHAPTER TWO

Putting a Face to In-yer-face Theatre

I hate the idea of theatre just being an evening pastime. It should be emotionally and intellectually demanding. I love football. The level of analysis that you listen to on the terraces is astonishing. If people did that in the theatre... but they don't. They expect to sit back and not participate. If there's a place for musicals, opera or whatever, then there should be a place for good new writing, irrespective of box office.

Sarah Kane cited in Saunders (2002:15)

In Chapter One I dealt with theatre that pre-empted the rise of In-yer-face theatre, with some background to the social political arena which informed the work of playwrights of the time, whose work illustrated a provocative spirit. In this Chapter I will discuss In-yer-face Theatre, how it has been defined and explore the work of some of the playwrights within this particular genre. I will also discuss the early 1990s when this particular form of theatre was born and some of the social and political moments that leant themselves to its creation.

The widest definition of In-yer-face Theatre as defined by Aleks Sierz in his book *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* is *any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it til they get the message* (Sierz, 2000:4). He goes on to describe In-yer-face Theatre as a theatre of sensation that through various devices, snaps audiences out of their conventional responses by provoking and shocking them. For most theatre goers the theatre represents a place one goes to be entertained, theatre etiquette allows, in most cases, for the audience to enjoy this entertainment from a distance seated within a dark auditorium, this entertainment may not ask anything other than for them to enjoy the show, have a drink at an interval and once the show is over, applaud. In this convention,

the audience is usually removed from the action on stage – and whilst they may identify with the characters, suspend their disbelief and invest emotionally, the conventional form most theatrical productions take allow them the safety to do so. This differs to In-yer-face Theatre, which breaks with convention and therefore invokes different reactions from an audience.

Often In-yer-face drama makes use of various shock tactics which give this particular theatre a flavour that is *bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to* (Sierz, 2000:4). In-yer-face Theatre does not afford audiences the opportunity to contemplate what they have seen in detachment but instead takes them through an emotional experience, *in other words*, says Sierz, *it is experiential, not speculative* (Sierz, 2000:4). By the term ‘experiential’ Sierz is referring to In-yer-face Theatre as being a form that takes its audience through a journey, the aim being for them to have actually ‘lived’ through what is being depicted on stage.

The precedents of this notion lie in the work of Antonin Artaud, specifically his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ which forces its audiences to reassess their interpretations of reality. Artaud felt that a piece of theatre should affect the audience as much as possible in order to shock them out of their complacency, and in order to do this he made use of a mixture of strange and disturbing forms combined with lighting, sound and performance. By the term cruelty however, he was not referring to sadism or pain but for the performer and director to create a new language on stage that existed somewhere between thought and gesture (Artaud, 1970). I will examine his ideas in comparison to the work of Sarah Kane more fully in my next chapter.

The term In-yer-face, according to Sierz, originated in American sports journalism with reference to American football in particular, during the 1970s and gradually became a slang term. It implies the sense of one’s space being invaded, that normal boundaries have been crossed and describes aptly its association with this form of theatre (Sierz 2000:4).

The term and its association to a somewhat violent sport give some indication as to what to expect from this genre. As in most contact sports, polite boundaries are done away

with and contact is often made in an aggressive way. This means that In-yer-face is literally that, an overstepping of polite boundaries forcing one to engage or respond to it. It is my observation, having spent time in Britain, how guarded people appear to be. On the tube, most are absorbed in books or listening to iPods, eye contact is seldom made and I felt that were I to overstep this boundary it would not be welcome.

Sierz offers various 'signposts' that he believes define a piece of In-yer-face Theatre. These include the use of obscene language, taboo words such as 'fuck' and 'cunt', nudity, sex, and violent images that whether you appreciate them or not evoke strong feelings from an audience. The form is further described as 'Hot' or 'Cool'. The hot version Sierz defines as being those pieces performed in small studio theatres with a seating capacity of between 50-200 people where the mood is heightened by the close proximity of performer to audience – literally in your face. The cool version employs various distancing devices, such productions would take place in large auditoriums, would have a more conventional structure or form and in some cases use comedy as a distancing device to defuse emotionally fraught situations (Sierz, 2000:5).

In-yer-face theatre serves to challenge the binaries upon which people define themselves. Unlike Margaret Thatcher's rigid 'either/or' mentality In-yer-face examines good/evil, just/unjust, true/untrue and destroys them completely. This can be particularly upsetting for an audience as it violates our sense of safety, directly opposing the views that underpin most of mainstream societies' thought.

Another aspect of this drama that Sierz describes and which I will elaborate on later is In-yer-face Theatre's destabilization of form. The further a play departs from the 'safe' conventions of naturalism the more disturbing it can be. Sometimes shocking material can be more acceptable if it is presented in the form of a 'well-made' three act play as the audience is aware of this convention and the 'safety' of it. Sierz asks how this form of theatre can be so shocking and then goes on to say that the main reason it does shock so much is because taboos are broken out in the open and live on stage. He says, *When you watch a play not only do you find yourself reacting but you also know that others are reacting and are aware of your reaction... when taboos are broken in public, the*

spectators then become explicit witnesses (Sierz, 2000:7). As the medium of theatre is a live event there is also the threat that something unexpected may occur and this serves to add to the tension on stage which in turn poses *a strong sense of territorial threat and of the vulnerability of the audiences' personal space* (Sierz, 2000:7).

In order for theatre to exist and engage an audience it requires that they suspend their disbelief and empathise with the characters, this leads to spectators investing emotionally in what they are seeing, so when theatre is visceral and shocking it has the power to evoke much stronger emotions than other art forms. Sierz describes theatre as *a deliberate act, and can cause offence because the representation of real life is invested with more power than real life itself* (Sierz, 2000:7). It is not surprising then that showing sex or nudity on stage coupled with feelings of loneliness or despair can be very disturbing.

Like stopping to stare at the scene of a car accident, provocative theatre can both repel and draw a spectator in, there is also a chance that we may enjoy what we are witnessing which may bring with it unwelcome truths about who we are. Shock has a pivotal role in this theatre, but what shocks us the first time may only serve to amuse us the second time round. Eventually we may become immune to any shock at all. Sierz points out that while shock may be relative in terms of our experience it is also relative in terms of geography – the example offered is, that whilst British Metropolitan audiences may be unshockable or wish to appear so, small town audiences may respond to shock with greater disgust (Sierz, 2000:9). Sensation uses various tactics from shocking an audience by attacking them or by not providing them with neatly tied up meanings or conclusions, and as Sierz says, despite it being a relative tactic that loses its novelty and shock value to become an established form, it can still force audiences to react and piques curiosity, in this way shock can be made use of as a powerful marketing tool (Sierz, 2000:9).

Having said this it is important to mention that while shock may be an important aspect of provocative theatre such as In-yer-face Theatre, it doesn't mean that all of it is good or profound or even ethical. Sierz points out that the playwright's agenda may be politically motivated but despite this the outcome can still be puerile. He goes on to say that because

any image can be used in this form of theatre a negative response to it is not necessarily wrong, and for this reason In-yer-face Theatre is a hotly contested territory (Sierz, 2000:9).

While In-yer-face theatre was a new form in the early 1990s it had its roots in tradition, as I have discussed in Chapter One. It injected a dose of extremism into British theatre and artistic directors were eager for more. Young writers of the 1990s who had grown up under Thatcher were suddenly empowered and with the cuts in art subsidies there was a general feeling that if you wished to achieve anything you had to do it yourself. Lack of arts subsidies meant that writers were no longer bound to produce economically viable work and it was this that sparked the creative imagination to test the boundaries. Whilst before you may have thought twice about writing for a cast of ten, this climate allowed for any possibility. This too was a double edged sword – while before work subsidised by the government would have to be approved and in some ways ‘controlled’, the new freedom allowed for anything to be produced regardless of how puerile it may be.

In Jolene Armstrong’s PhD *Postmodernism and Trauma: four/fore plays by Sarah Kane*, she examines this phenomenon from a postmodern perspective with particular reference to the work of Kane. Armstrong argues that the link between theatre and economy is worth further investigation, in light of the fact that it correlates with Jameson’s theory of postmodernism which posits it as an expression of late capitalist culture (Armstrong, 2003:5). In his theory, Jameson states that aesthetic production has been integrated into a culture of commodity, hence the result being that artists are increasingly more reliant on funding to subsidise their work. For Jameson, this implies an unwritten code at its core, which dictates that artists are expected to conform to the demands of their funding and as a result are not as free to create art that reflects more of their own aesthetic evolution. Jameson goes on to link this theory with American postmodern culture which he believes expresses a sense of world domination on the military and economic front and in terms of class history, the underside of this culture is informed by blood, torture, death and terror (Jameson, 1998, cited in Armstrong, 2003:5). Having said this, it is interesting to note that much of Kane’s own work was subsidised, yet despite this her work remains true to her own aesthetic; moreover it contradicts directly the themes that appeal to capitalistic

audiences and in many ways she presents a postmodern parody of this capitalist culture¹ (Armstrong, 2003:6).

It is important to realise too, that In-yer-face theatre did not exist in a vacuum but was concerned with and directly influenced by the socio-political climate of the 1990s and the themes explored in most In-yer-face plays were relevant to the time. A common theme, for instance, was the ongoing war between the sexes, as Sierz points out, fashion at the time emphasised bisexuality and clothes and adverts sported androgynous models. The all girl band 'The Spice Girls' used the slogan 'girl power' and post feminism meant new roles for women², which left their relationships with men even more problematic (Sierz, 2000:178).

No one knows exactly what has happened to sex in the nineties. Society's tolerance of sexual behaviour, freedom, orientations and minorities has never been so high; (many people) have simply accepted that sex has taken over the world in terms of imagery.

(Murray Gold, Oxford Stage Company, 1999)

Patrick Marber's *Closer*

Writers wrote of sexuality with tones of raw aggression and these were represented explicitly on stage; anal sex, masturbation, fellatio and cunnilingus, nothing was too extreme. Plays did not concern themselves with family, Sierz points out, *normality was abandoned and writers chose to focus on more dysfunctional and problematic relationships* (Sierz, 2000:179). One such play, which has subsequently been made into a movie, is Patrick Marber's *Closer*. While the play itself did not physically depict provocative images, the language used and the way it was said was provocative.

The play starts in a hospital where Dan, a journalist, takes Alice, a beautiful young waif and stripper, for treatment after she is knocked over by a cab. They fall in love and Dan

¹ I discuss these themes in Chapter Four.

writes a novel about Alice's life. Dan goes to Anna, a photographer, to be photographed for his book, he falls in love with her but she rejects him. Dan adopts Anna's persona on the internet and seduces Larry, a doctor, online inviting him to meet Anna. At their first meeting Larry makes a fool of himself in front of Anna, but she forgives him, they fall in love and eventually marry. Six months later Dan and Anna are having an affair, Dan tells Alice and she leaves. When Larry finds out about the affair he questions Anna about the sexual details of her betrayal. Act two opens in a strip club where Larry meets Alice. They begin an affair. In the interim Anna has asked Larry for a divorce but he will not grant it unless she provides him with a 'sympathy fuck'; she agrees and admits it to Dan who demands details. Dan still dreams of Alice. Anna goes back to Larry and in a vindictive scene, Larry tells Dan of his affair with Alice. Soon after, Dan and Alice are back together but they end up quarrelling after Dan demands she give him details of her affair with Larry. Anna and Larry part ways and Alice is killed by a car in New York (Marber, 1997).

Sierz describes the play as being elegantly portrayed in its telling, the play followed a conventional structure made up of twelve short scenes divided between two acts. The critics loved the show and despite its use of strong 'taboo' language, reviewer Charles Spencer thought it was completely justified in its poetic intensity (Sierz, 2000:188). Georgina Brown of the Mail On Sunday said that Marber's combination of *physical restraint with verbal savagery* was far more shocking than had he employed nudity or more In-yer-face tactics (Sierz, 2000:188). According to Sierz the media reported on audience responses to the play, many were embarrassed by the blunt language on stage and some felt that it was too much trauma without any catharsis (Sierz, 2000:189). So damaged were the characters in the plays of the 1990s that Mark Ravenhill – a writer within the genre - suggested that it represents *heterosexuality in crisis rather than masculinity*. He goes on to say *the male and female parts of our psyches are pushing further and further apart and to bring them together on stage can only result in conflict* (Ravenhill cited in Sierz, 2000:180). The happy couples were under siege and definitions

² Sarah Kane did not view herself as a feminist writer, although it is possible to read her work from a feminist perspective. Kane purportedly hated labels and I discuss the impact of this in Chapter Three.

of sexuality were questioned, as a result *gender confusion and sexual ambiguity became typical 90s tropes* (Sierz 2000:180).

The Violent 90s

Along with the sex wars, the 1990s was a violent decade. The media reported on war and death, terrorists and ethnic cleansing. A seminal story was the murder of the toddler Jamie Bulger at the hands of two ten year old boys in 1993. This, Sierz says *was one of the key events in 90s Britain, not only because of the intrinsic horror of the event, but also because of the impact of the grainy security video image of the child's abduction* (Sierz, 2000:206). The abduction and subsequent murder of James Bulger shocked and outraged the public, the brutality of his murder and the fact that it was committed by two young boys raised questions of the innocence of children and public responsibility. The repeated images of the actual abduction on grainy CCTV cameras was played again and again in the media which added to the horror of the crime, especially since police suspected before identifying the killers, that he'd been murdered by a paedophile (BBC, 1993). Along with these images of abuse, crime and violence the public no longer saw home as a safe haven and crime existed as a serious social problem. Despite this, the public's appetite for violent movies was not quelled and movies directed by Quentin Tarantino with his cult hit *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* in the same year were box office hits (Sierz, 2000:206).

Just as the sexes and masculinity in crisis were central themes of 90s theatre, violence was another aspect. *Aggressive behaviour in small studio spaces generated powerful feelings of entrapment as serial killers, rapists and abusers became as common onstage as high-society dandies or working class families once were. Yet the gender implications of violence remained complex* (Sierz, 2000:207). In-yer-face Theatre also served to reclaim the glamorisation of violence depicted in big budget movies and whilst the content in these plays portrayed violence at its most base and brutal level writers tried to contest ignorance about the reality of it, and writers such as Kane used violent imagery in the spirit of morality (Sierz, 2000:207). This did not mean that the glamorization of violence was not depicted on the British stage in the early 1990s, Sierz talks about the

‘heroin chic’ culture that emerged at one point, where the depiction of violence and drug addiction was indeed glamorised without necessarily exploring a moral perspective³. In-yer-face Theatre was everywhere in the 90s. Young writers could sum up unbearable pain in one image and were driven by the need to bring home the most unwelcome of truths. Using shocking images onstage violated the intimacy of small studio spaces and extremism became the new norm (Sierz, 2000:233).

As I have mentioned, not all In-yer-face productions were political or even moral, but for the purpose of this research I am specifically examining the work of Kane and how it stands out from that of her peers. I argue that Kane is in a league above many of the young writers writing within the In-yer-face genre – having discussed some of her peers work, Kane’s appears bolder in its subversion of form and content. She deliberately chose to work with the medium of live theatre, and saw its limitations as a challenge to what she could depict onstage. Armstrong argues that in many ways film may have been more adept at conveying Kane’s images but at the same time its ability to do so in such a realistic manner would draw attention away from why it was necessary in the first place, instead of focusing on the power of the effect itself (Armstrong, 2003:22). Kane utilises theatres ‘live’ medium which allows for an audience to inhabit a space and time together, as Armstrong points out, *in film, furthermore, the camera selects what the viewer will see; in theatre, the viewer sees everything* (Armstrong, 2003:23).

I argue that Kane’s work falls into Lyotard’s paradigm of postmodernism which posits it as *putting forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable* (Lyotard, 1984:81). In this way Kane’s work operates on a countercultural level as she breaks the boundaries of what can appear on stage, utilising shock as a means of reaching her audience yet without glamorizing violence. Kane offers no ‘solace’ to her audiences – she does not provide answers to the questions raised within her work and in this way they are forced to draw their own conclusions as to what they have witnessed onstage. Whilst I

³ I discuss this point further in Chapter Three.

myself am shocked by much of Kane's work I do not feel that she is gratuitous in her use of shock, nor do I believe that the inherent violence within her work promotes that which it critiques.

The resurgence of new writing at the time was labelled by the media as a new culture and christened 'Cool Britannia' some saw it as an artificial construct, *the media and the market 'named' something, then 'made' something and subsequently 'claimed' something* (Gottlieb, 1999, cited in Saunders, 2002:209). Sierz labels the writers within this particular genre as Thatcher's children and accepts their view of the world came from being brought up in the 1980s. In-yer-face Theatre fiercely attacked market economics and was a reaction to the idea that society did not exist. Images of loose women and violent men stemmed from the growing feminist movement and the behaviour depicted on stage came to reflect the importance of 'yoof culture'. It was obsessed with bad behaviour and masculinity in crisis and by turning its back on the '*State-of-the-nation-and-issue play*' it suggested, as Sierz points out, *a crisis of the liberal imagination* (Sierz, 2000:238). In-yer-face Theatre, as I have already mentioned, was brutal and extreme. Artistic directors were willing to give young writers licence to travel to hell and back and report on what they'd found (Sierz, 2000:37).

Theatre had moved from the 1980s 'well-meaning' and 'well-reasoned' victim based plays to a period of freedom where rules were broken and ideologies discarded. While some writers chose to focus on past models of theatrical practice others were responding directly to the cultural climate of 1990s Britain. Highly critical, armed with severe language and imagery to do it, they were a formidable force and compared to TV or film you could do or say almost anything onstage.

The 1990s still remained an era of cuts in arts subsidies but as Ian Rickson of The Royal Court says, *the writers who grew up under Thatcher experienced two things: they were disempowered and simultaneously empowered. On the one hand, the state was strengthened at the expense of the individual: on the other, the only way of achieving anything was to do it yourself* (Sierz, 2000:39). The backlash of Thatcherism had created a climate of anger coupled with the urge to do something about it, and Aleks Sierz

provides some clarity as to the concerns that the young 90s writer was dealing with. Sierz begins by asking us to:

Imagine being born in 1970. You're nine years old when Margaret Thatcher comes to power; for the next eighteen years- just as you're growing up intellectually and emotionally – the only people in power in Britain are the Tories. Nothing changes; politics stagnate. Then some time in the late eighties, you discover Ecstasy and dance culture. Sexually, you're less hung up about differences between gays and straights than your older brothers and sisters. You also realize that if you want to protest, or make music, or shoot a film or put on an exhibition, you have to do it yourself. In 1989 the Berlin wall falls and the old ideological certainties disappear into the dustbin of history. And you're still not even twenty. In the nineties, media images of Iraq, Bosnia and Rwanda haunt your mind. Political idealism – you remember Tiananmen Square and know people who are roads protestors – is mixed with cynicism – your friends don't vote and you think all politicians are corrupt. This is the world you write about.

(Sierz, 2000:237)

Despite the State-of-the-nation plays falling out of favour with young writers in the 1990s, it did not mean that writers did not present vivid accounts of real life in contemporary Britain. As Sierz points out, the only difference was that home was viewed as a bleak place where families were highly dysfunctional, individuals were drifters without purpose and relationships were riddled with problems. Episodic stories replaced the customary three act plots of the well-made-play and were inhabited by vivid characters engaging with situations abounding with metaphor. Despite the bleak portraits drawn, dripping with pain and nihilism, glimmers of hope were more often than not alluded to. The metaphors used in 90s drama were criticised for being literal images of horror but they also came to represent greater depth than 80s drama as they saw the world in a more complex light (Sierz, 2000:239).

Despite In-yer-face Theatre's emphasis on the crisis of masculinity it also was political. Sierz states that it was symptomatic of the 90s that traditional categories of left or right

politics were no longer made use of anymore as they simply did not fit. He describes the writing of the time as being anti middle-class – it criticised the social values of this segment of society and was overall sceptical of the values of middle class England. Sierz argues that it is difficult to view these plays as pro-working class either, as behind the violence lies a sense of anger and confusion that he defines as their response to living in a post-Christian, post-feminist, post-Marxist and postmodern society. Sierz says *...if the proletariat was no longer God, commodity Capitalism was still Satanic* (Sierz, 2000:240).

So is In-yer-face Theatre political? To some writers, such as David Greig, political theatre needs to contain an element of hope that insists that change is possible and the content of the play needs to inspire the audience with that message at its core. In the eyes of theatre critic Michael Billington, In-yer-face plays imply that there is little hope of change. Billington goes on to say, *we are living in an aggressive post-ideological age* (Sierz, 2000:240). Whilst In-yer-face plays may not be overtly political they came to focus on more personal acts of violence and explored private values above the morals of society. Sierz feels that the political edge in this theatre comes from the expression of private pain and that young writers had discovered through this the adage that the personal is political, that the smallest stories could resonate as loudly as grand narratives (Sierz, 2000:241).

In-yer-face Theatre has been criticised for many things but central to this criticism is the belief that it lacks heart. Sierz explains that the reason for this, *is the paradox that an era flattered itself as being 'the caring decade' as opposed to the 'greed is good' 80s – produced a drama that often lacked compassion* (Sierz, 2000:242). It is understandable therefore that along with its lack of compassion and abrasive, violent presentation In-yer-face Theatre could be perceived as shocking and insensitive; after all, compassion serves an important role in a play, as Sierz points out it roots the production in the humanist tradition which serves to emphasize a naturalistic aesthetic. This works in its favour as it offers the audience characters that they can identify with, feel for and ultimately believe in. When compassion is not present it can have an alienating effect on the audience (Sierz, 2000:242).

Phyllis Nagy, a writer of the genre, argues that women writers in the 90s were more experimental than men and that they tackled difficult subjects with greater emotional depth than their male colleagues. She also attacked much of 90s drama and said that the main subject of this writing should be *the collapse of our daring, of our collective bravery*. She went on to criticise the *zeal for the literal* and argued that plays that deal with violence and sex may be topical but are rarely radical (Nagy, 1999, cited in Sierz, 2000: 242).

Another argument is presented by writer Harry Gibson, who argues that new waves are welcomed in and then hastily condemned: *In their first hot flush, critics loved rawness and uncompromising vision; but the morning after, they wish it had been properly cooked, served with an explanatory salad and a garnish of redemption*. Gibson goes on to describe In-yer-face Theatre as a culture for readers and wives, and describes it as processing pornography and all the ritual humiliation of the Jerry Springer show, *the excess of the wild folk becomes a spectacle for the tame folk; a form of cultural tourism that ignores the real problems that are its subject matter* (Gibson cited in Sierz, 2000:243).

I disagree with Gibson's appraisal and would suggest that he is referring to the more puerile brand of In-yer-face Theatre. I argue that the above statement does not hold true to the work of Sarah Kane, despite depicting what Gibson would call 'the wild folk', the heart of her work does address the real problems contained within the subject matter. In *Blasted*, Kane explores the theme of gender violence and how this act can lead to greater violence, In *4.48 Psychosis* she examines the theme of depression with such raw and open honesty one would be hard pressed not to identify or sympathise. I examine this point further in Chapter Four.

A New Aesthetic vs Realism

Sierz argues that whichever way one chooses to view it, In-yer-face Theatre did pioneer a new aesthetic, and he goes on to suggest that one of the reasons such heated debate existed around it was that audiences – especially of the more extreme or hot versions of the genre – were simply not ready for it. He raises an important point in saying that

however conscious of theatrical tradition these writers were, writers such as Sarah Kane were consciously choosing to make a break from traditional forms of writing. A result of this new aesthetic was that the criteria upon which critics' gauged new work needed to change. Sierz identifies the problem that came with judging new writing in the 90s in terms of using naturalism or social realism as a benchmark. By using these styles to compare and evaluate In-yer-face Theatre it meant that these conventions were being imposed on a new form. The problem was made worse; Sierz says *...by the influence of postmodernism which not only undermined established critical categories but also promoted a pervasive cultural relativism that weakened the very idea that work could and should be judged* (Sierz, 2000:243).

Despite this problem Sierz also makes it clear that regardless of these issues one is still able to distinguish good writing from bad no matter which form it takes. Although In-yer-face was a groundbreaking new aesthetic it also had its conventions. Just like the well-made play relies on a good plot, much of In-yer-face makes use of provocation and the experiential. Just as the well-made play has well rounded and complex characters, In-yer-face represented types rather than individuals and just as well-made play conventions make use of long theatrical monologues and speeches, In-yer-face Theatre relies on curt dialogue which mimics real speech with faster exchanges and direct and extreme expressions of emotion without being necessarily realistic. The well-made play usually makes use of naturalistic contexts whereas In-yer-face often exists in more liminal worlds that exist beyond realism (Sierz, 2000:244).

Sierz also defines a break evident in In-yer-face Theatre, where the ideas explored in this drama are not concerned with ideologies and, unlike political or feminist theatre, does not debate issues; rather it presents ideas surrounding individual's lives and works with the contradictions to be found within that character. Another innovative aspect of In-yer-face Theatre was the change in structure. Sierz suggests that this reflects the world which has become increasingly fragmented and dislocated and that some writers have chosen to emphasise this in their writing. This sometimes leaves audiences longing for cohesion in the narrative and a dramatic resolution. New writing was not interested in the well-made

play and although some chose to follow a linear narrative their attitude to form was generally experimental with women writers being the most radical (Sierz, 2000:244).

Whichever way you viewed it, the 90s was an exciting time in British theatre and within a do-it-yourself culture young writers were free to explore whatever their hearts desired. Although the validity of In-yer-face Theatre was hotly contested it did serve to bring theatre into the fore again and raised the tempers of many a critic. Harry Eyres of 'The Spectator' had the following to say: *Sensationalism is predicated on insensitivity. The idea is that dulled audience response must be jerked into life by whatever violent means are necessary.* He goes on to argue, *sensation merely entrenches the insensitivity it is supposed to challenge* (Sierz, 2000:242).

It was in this environment that Sarah Kane emerged as a new writer in the In-yer-face genre and in Chapter Three I will examine her influences and work within this climate.

CHAPTER THREE

Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Evisceration

We live in a world of rampant cruelty, waste and injustice; we see it in every place, at every level. It's a given...Yet in theatre, this didn't stop wealthy, healthy, middle-class folk looking at some inane subject like pensions or architecture or spying or newspapers and finding more rottenness than in any Denmark, more pain than in any Holocaust, more apocalypse than any Hiroshima.

Mike Bradwell, *The Bush Theatre Book* (Methuen, 1997)

I've only ever written to escape from hell – and it's never worked – but at the other end of it when you sit there and watch something and think that's the most perfect expression of hell that I felt then maybe it was worth it.

Sarah Kane, Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998
(Saunders, 2002:1)

In this chapter I will look at the playwright Sarah Kane, her influences, her peers and her critics in order to give some insight into her writing. I will argue like Armstrong in *Postmodernism and Trauma: Four/fore plays by Sarah Kane*, that Kane recognized the postmodern condition as an inherently violent and traumatic one, and that much of her work enacts violence and sex creating a postmodern concept of fractured identity and in turn emphasizing its proximity to trauma (Armstrong, 2003:1). I will examine some of the traits within her work that support her ideology as well as offer further insight to the New Brutalist movement and the writers operating within this genre. Through my research I intend to argue that despite criticism levelled against In-yer-face Theatre's use of shock for shock's sake, yet providing little in terms of a political agenda that Kane's work, and the manner in which she uses the device of shock through graphic language and visuals is inherently political.

Sarah Kane blasted onto the theatre scene in January 1995 with her play *Blasted*. At the time she was only 23 years old and consequently her youth and gender would be used against her. The play, according to Kane, had been programmed into a dead spot – the period right after Christmas when theatre attendance usually dropped, in light of the fact that this particular play would shove Kane into the spotlight it is ironic - as Kane points out - that everything possible was done *not* to promote her play (Saunders, 2002:3). Despite this *Blasted* became the centre of a media furore with many attending the small Jerwood Theatre Upstairs to be shocked, titillated and disgusted.

Forerunners to *Blasted*

Although *Blasted* has been hailed as the forerunner in this writing revolution, Aleks Sierz points out that it would be wrong to do so. According to Sierz, *Blasted's* precedent was Judy Upton's play *Ashes and Sand* which was performed in the same venue the year before and gave audiences a taste of what was to come (Sierz, 2000:234). The play was about a girl gang operating in the Southern British seaside town of Brighton, the central character Hayley is 15 years old and along with the gang steals money in an attempt to get to Bali. She has a crush on an older plain clothes policeman Daniel, who has a fetish for makeup and women's clothes. Shocking moments onstage occur when Hayley's girl gang strip and abuse Daniel. The abuse of Daniel resonates on a shocking level because the abuse is carried out by young women who are overtly aggressive and violent; their stripping of Daniel renders him powerless and his nakedness leaves him vulnerable. Hayley is aggressive and this frequently lands her in trouble and Daniel shoplifts women's shoes and wears make up, ironic considering that he works in a typically male dominated profession. Is this gender confusion a result of a deeper need to connect with what he perceives to be a gentler female nature? If this is Upton's motivation she subverts the notion of the 'fairer sex' through the violence employed by the girl gang. In doing this issues of gender roles and sexuality are brought to the fore.

The media hyped up the play with the Independent calling it a *vicious hand grenade* and like *Blasted* was compared to the work of Edward Bond – in particular his play *Saved*. The crux of the play is the brutal violence and aggression which is never fully explained,

however Sierz maintains that the play is more than just a shocker. There are also moments of incredible tenderness between Hayley and Daniel which reflects both their need for love and their separation. Sierz describes this expression of tenderness as *one of the tenderest scenes of alienated love in nineties drama* (Sierz, 2000:216).

Upton's play was made up of a series of short scenes and the 90 minute drama was fast paced, violence was a central theme of the play as well as Daniel's fetishism which was highlighted by the Stiletto heel on the poster, however, Upton did not come under the same media crossfire that Kane experienced with *Blasted*. I argue then that the reason for this has to do with the fact that unlike Kane, Upton did not subvert the form of her play – it still maintains a linear narrative which as mentioned earlier makes it easier for the audience to bear. Upton's play also had moments of tenderness to contrast the brutality of the action and again this offered some hope and to an extent respite to an audience. Similarities shared with Kane are reflected in the fact that the onstage violence is never explained, and by the end of the play there is no neat conclusion. Like Kane, Upton's play raises questions surrounding violence as Sierz points out: *why are some women attracted to violent men? Are those complicit in violence equally to blame, or is a culture of blame just a way of hiding from uncomfortable truths?* (Sierz, 2000:218) Upton raises these pertinent questions yet provides no answers. At the time the show opened the press reported on a seemingly unrelated story involving actress Elizabeth Hurley being mugged and since Upton's play told the story of a girl gang who frequently committed this sort of crime a parallel was drawn between the two. So the play then served to highlight a prevalent crime which made it easier to digest for an audience accustomed to this daily occurrence (Sierz, 2000:219).

Kane does not offer her audiences the same package – her subversion of form apparent in an aesthetic that breaks with the structure of the 'well-made play' brings the audience out of their comfort zone and the parallels she makes in her own narrative are sometimes not as easily recognizable.

Shopping and What?!

Upton's play led theatre critic Claire Armistead to observe that *suddenly the Royal Court has found a current and is swimming with it* (Saunders, 2002:5). Sarah Kane was at the forefront of this wave and in her wake followed a series of equally brutal plays – most notably, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). The title alone became a problem in terms of publicity leading to the more acceptable *Shopping and F***ing* and promotional postcards on the West End in the same spirit used a quote from the Evening Standard: “Entert***ing, Sh*cking & St*mulating” (Sierz, 2000:125).

The play begins with Lulu and Robbie trying to get flat mate Mark to eat takeaway food; this is followed by a number of rapid scenes where the three central characters' plans for self-improvement are thwarted. Mark books into a clinic for his drug addiction and ends up having sex with another patient, as a result of this he is kicked out. On the street he meets Gary, a teenage rent boy who has a crush on him. Lulu tries to get a job, at the interview middle-aged Brian forces her to strip and then tests her by giving her 300 ecstasy tablets to sell. Robbie gives the drugs away while stoned and Brian threatens to torture the couple. To raise the money to pay back Brian they resort to telephone sex. The climax of the play occurs when Mark brings Gary home to meet Lulu and Robbie; they end up playing a truth and dare game which ends up with Gary offering to pay back their debt if they penetrate him with a knife. Brian arrives and after explaining his views that money is civilization the accounts are settled, harmony restored and the flat mates share a meal (Sierz, 2000:126-127).

Shopping and Fucking appeared on the scene after the *Blasted* furore and Ravenhill expected to be ‘mauled’ by the press for the use of shock in his own play. Yet after the event received favourable reviews and put it down to the notion that *Blasted* had softened up the critics. Jack Tinker, one of the critics leading the barrage against Kane, said of *Shopping and Fucking* ...*whereas I led the chorus of disapproval (against Blasted), I can only applaud the Court's courage in staging this dangerous and, no doubt to some, offensive work* (Sierz, 2000:128). Other critics sprang on the values expressed in the play bringing these to the fore. I argue, as in the case of Upton's *Sand and Ashes*, that as long

as In-yer-face writers alluded to some crisis or moral issue in society the most extreme shock could be forgiven, depending of course on the form it adopted and the level to which those watching could draw from their own experiences.

Tinker's defence of Ravenhill's play may have had to do with the fact that *Shopping and Fucking* would, according to Sierz's reference, fall into the 'cool' version of In-yer-face Theatre as I have mentioned earlier. This, coupled with the fact that the play's characters appear almost cartoon-like, makes the shock factor more palatable with the use of humour to diffuse tense situations.

Kane did not make it as easy for those watching her plays; despite critics that referred to Ravenhill's work as experiential he went on to stage *Shopping and Fucking* behind the safety of the proscenium arch which according to Sierz not only lessened the impact of the shock onstage but also served to bring out the play's humour (Sierz, 2000:129).

The rise of plays in the In-yer-face genre led critic Michael Billington to say that new drama *is driven by a total disillusion, often jauntily expressed, with social decay: Specifically with the breakdown of any binding moral code or decency* (Sierz, 2000:5). In contrast to Billington's statement, I argue that Kane's plays – especially *Blasted* - are the result of an intense moral outrage and that the form she employs to explore these issues is a direct consequence of this. I would like to make it clear that when I refer to "moral outrage" I am speaking of Kane and how her personal ideas have led to such brutal and shocking forms within her writing. Kane herself did not want to directly express a moral voice in her plays, she wanted it to be the audience's responsibility to draw from her work what they could and therefore she offered no solutions, explanations or conclusions. Kane herself states that many defended her plays on the basis that they are moral but asserts that she does not view *Blasted* as a moral play, she goes on to say, *I think it's amoral, and I think it is one of the reasons people got terribly upset because there isn't a defined moral framework within which to place yourself and assess your morality and therefore distance yourself from the material* (Saunders, 2002:27).

Who was Sarah Kane? In Jolene Armstrong's PhD *Postmodernism and Trauma: Four/Fore plays by Sarah Kane* she tells of her journey to put together some form of

biography on the life of Sarah Kane and how she was met with ‘polite resistance’ from Kane’s family, friends and colleagues (Armstrong, 2003:264). Armstrong has therefore drawn together various strands from print media and interviews to provide some sort of ordered semblance of the life of Sarah Kane. For the purpose of my research I feel it is of value to offer some salient points with regards to Kane’s life as a means to contextualise the world within which she was writing.



(Sarah Kane, www.ianfischer.com/kane.html)

Sarah Kane was born on February 3rd 1971 and died on February 23rd 1999. She was 28 years old and she committed suicide by hanging herself with a pair of shoelaces three days after her first attempt to overdose on pills was unsuccessful. In Armstrong’s research she notes that the coroner at the inquest declared that Kane had taken her own life as a result of being *plagued with mental anguish and tormented by thoughts of suicide* (Armstrong, 2003:264). Kane had indeed suffered from depression for at least ten years of her life.⁴

Kane viewed theatre as a vehicle through which social criticism could pass as well as a place where change could occur. This was expressed through anecdotal evidence of a *four page essay about the future of British theatre and hence the world* (Armstrong, 2003: 268). Kane herself was also very religious until the age of seventeen; this insight is relevant to her work as a writer as it informs a seminal change in her world view. As

⁴ Whilst I cannot speak for Kane my own experience of depression and writing is that they are inextricably linked, often unconsciously. I believe that Kane’s work could have been quite heavily informed by her mood but at the same time the work reflected is so intelligent and insightful it would be wrong to deduce that her plays are merely the rantings of a depressed woman.

Kane said: *I seriously believed that Jesus was going to come again in my lifetime and that I wouldn't have to die...it suddenly hit me that the thing I should have been dealing with from at the age of six – my own mortality – I hadn't dealt with at all...so, I suppose in a way that split is a split in my own kind of personality and intellect* (Saunders, 2002: 22).

Kane's religious affiliation became a means to attack and reduce her work; critics stated she was a religious fanatic and offered her loss of faith at age seventeen as a means to explain her *obsessively apocalyptic view* (Spencer cited in Armstrong, 2003:268). I concur with Armstrong that Kane's openness with regard to her own religious ideas is a double-edged sword. On the one hand this knowledge allows the reader insight and a greater appreciation of her work but on the other it serves to discredit her work, implying that her writings are that of a *cult/religious fanatic turned anti-religious amoralist* (Armstrong, 2003:269). Kane subsequently became an atheist and from that point her work was, as one critic put it, *fired by the cruelties carried out in the name of God* (Armstrong, 2003:269). As Armstrong observes, Kane's relationship with religion is an important element as she makes use of images and allusions to the Bible in her writing (Armstrong: 2003:269), examples of this are most evident in Kane's final play *4.48 Psychosis*, where the use of Biblical language serves to heighten the mood and speech of the play.

According to Kane's literary agent Mel Kenyon, Kane experienced a severe depression after writing *Crave* and was reluctant to take medication, despite being prone to depression Kane was not afraid to delve into the dark corners of her imagination and she told one critic that, *you have to go to hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality* (Armstrong, 2003:270). In her own work this opinion is supported by the unrelenting and ultimately experiential journey Kane subjects her audience to through her plays.

Having noted what critics had to say of Kane's work it becomes clear that Kane's dislike of labels was not unjustified. Her last wish was that there be no biographies and she hated being defined by her gender or sexuality. She strongly rejected the terms 'woman writer' or 'lesbian writer' which she felt people used as a means to legitimize her work:

When people talk about me as a writer that's what I am, and that's how I want my work to be judged – on its quality not on the basis of my age, gender, sexuality or race. I don't want to be a representative of any social or biological group of which I happen to be a member

(Langridge and Stephenson, 1997:134)

Unfortunately Kane could not escape the media's desire to assess her work in relation to her sexuality, gender and religious convictions. These all became a yardstick upon which Kane's work was critiqued in what was at the time a male dominated arena. Critics wrote of her; *Kane has proved she can flex her muscles alongside the toughest of men* (Edwards cited in Sierz, 2000:95). Yet according to Kane's friends the media outrage following gender claims such as this were feigned. In the previous year a play entitled *Penetrator* by Anthony Nielson had been performed and contained just as much sex and violence as *Blasted*, friends of Kane therefore surmised that the media outrage was a direct assault on *Blasted* because its author was a young woman (Armstrong, 2003:28).

Sexism and Killer Joe

This claim is validated as in the same year that *Blasted* was being set upon by the media a play by Tracy Letts entitled *Killer Joe* opened to favourable reviews in England. I would like to mention at this point that the play's author is an American and whilst I am not looking at the phenomenon of In-yer-face Theatre in Countries other than the UK the play is relevant in terms of the time it was performed (not long after *Blasted*) and the manner in which it was received in comparison to Kane's play. The play won a Fringe First award at the Edinburgh Festival and from there made its way to London's West End. The play, set in an American trailer park, is as Sierz describes it *peopled with the poor white trash of America* (Sierz, 2000:53). The story opens with Chris arriving at the trailer in the middle of the night to be greeted by his stepmother Sharla, who is wearing *only a mans sweat-stained tee-shirt that falls above her ass*, she lets Chris in and there he meets with his redneck father to whom he complains that Sharla *answered the door with her beaver puckered out like it was tryin' to shake my hand* (Sierz, 2000:54). The play progresses into the thriller genre and Chris in debt turns to a crooked cop, 'killer Joe' to murder his mother for insurance money. Unable to pay Joe upfront, Chris and his redneck

father Ansel offer Chris's sister Dottie as collateral, she is twenty years old and a virgin. By act two Dottie is in love with Joe, mother is murdered but the insurance policy is in her lover's name and a vicious scene ensues where Joe forces Sharla to perform fellatio on a chicken leg before announcing his intentions to marry Dottie. The play concludes with Dottie pointing a gun at Joe's head and declaring, *I'm gonna have a baby* (Sierz, 2000:54).

Today newspaper raved that the play was as *raw as a fresh knife wound and just as bloody*, in *The Guardian* newspaper critic Tom Morris suggested that the play's *enduring impact* is not the violence, *but the ease with which violent thoughts are accommodated*, Morris also used this as a means to comment on the media outrage at depictions of violence on stage by arguing that *Killer Joe* is a *moral play*, and that *if we believe something is moral, we will stomach any amount of shock* (Morris cited in Sierz, 2000:54).

Quotes such as these only add to the argument that if In-yer-face genre plays give their audiences a clear moral framework within which to work, the shock value employed is more acceptable. *Killer Joe* is just as violent and shocking as Kane's *Blasted* but the difference lies in its form. I argue then that the root of the media outrage surrounding Kane's work stems from her destabilisation and rejection of realism— by doing this the audience have no safe, predictable and 'acceptable'⁵ structure to work within or expect and hence the shock and brutality onstage have an even more powerful impact than if they had been employed in the parameters of more conventional theatre. I will explore these ideas further in my analysis of Kane's plays.

Having discussed some of the criticism levelled at Kane as well as the medias' seeming receptiveness to some other plays within the genre I will now look at how this criticism, to many degrees, was biased against Kane on the premise that she was a young *female* writer. Throughout her career Kane refused to take a gendered stance as a playwright and this is ironic according to Armstrong who writes, *for a writer that was repeatedly a part of the In-yer-face trend of theatre, her personal politics were markedly not in anyone's*

face, even if her politics were (Armstrong, 2003:27). Tracy Letts's *Killer Joe* was hailed by the critics and one went so far as to say of the play: *Letts's writing is leavened with humour, he handles the audience expertly... Kane's version is born of unleavened, almost puritanical moral outrage* (Peter cited in Armstrong, 2003:26).

Here I concur with Armstrong who comments on the prevalent sexism to be found in comments such as these. The critic cites Letts's piece as a more balanced and acceptable account of violence because he uses humour to soften the blow,⁶ whereas Kane's work is reduced to misplaced moral outrage – inappropriate and unleavened. In this account Armstrong argues that Kane's work is portrayed as some form of feminine hysteria and that she is not as skilled a writer as Letts who has managed to *handle the audience expertly* (Armstrong, 2003:26). Peter was not the only critic to draw comparisons between Kane's work and that of Letts; other reviewers were just as scathing. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* wrote *...one reason why Tracy Letts's Killer Joe is bearable – in a way that Sarah Kane's Blasted at the theatre upstairs is not - is that it recognises the imperatives of art. In other words, the violence of Letts's brilliant play is related to social context and human character* (Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 27 January 1995). Kane too, was not unaware of this bias and put it down to the fact that the critics, like the one mentioned above, were not grappling so much with the depiction of violence but the fact that it stemmed from a woman's pen. Having said this, Kane was also to receive favourable bias from Mel Kenyon who was to become her literary agent. Of Kane, Kenyon had the following to say, *[o]nly a woman could have written a play [Blasted] that understood violence so profoundly, from the perspectives of both victim and perpetrator, without glamorising it* (Hattenstone cited in Armstrong, 2003:27).

⁵ By acceptable I am referring again to critics who were unable to assess Kane's work outside of the conventional 1-3 act 'well made play' with its predictable form and often linear narrative.

⁶ The use of humour in an In-yer-face play renders it a 'cool' form of the genre – as I mentioned in Chapter two, devices such as these help to break the tension on stage offering the audiences some distance from the shock tactics employed. Other distancing devices include staging the piece in a larger venue with a proscenium arch which allows the audience to watch the play without actually having to live through it. The audience is constantly aware that what they are watching onstage is not real and by allowing them some distance or respite from the situation they are not expected to invest as much emotionally as they would in a play like *Blasted* for instance.

Kane's Influences

Thus far I have offered some insight to Kane's context as a writer, her critics and her work in relation to some of her contemporaries, I will now move on to discuss Kane's influences. When reading plays such as *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis* it is apparent why Kane's work has been compared to that of theatre practitioner Antonin Artaud. Artaud envisaged a theatre based on cruelty and defined this not by acts of sadism but by using techniques such as shock to draw the audience out of complacency, of this he wrote:

This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid.

(Artaud, 1970:122)

This resonates strongly with Kane's own moral outrage and her compulsion to express it in her work, especially in *Blasted*. By constructing theatre as something visceral and in direct contact with thought and feeling, (Sarah Kane, *The Guardian*: 13 August 1998), she provided an audience some insight into violence that is raw, and untainted with glamour. The heart of this expression, I believe, lay in Kane's subversive use of form for which she was harshly criticized but without this subversion her work, I believe, would not carry the impact that it has.

Along with this "severe moral purity" was the language employed to construct this altered form. Artaud too, wished to create a language that existed between thought and feeling yet he did not maintain that the spoken word should be at the fore. Kane however wields her pen to create language that is both stark and disturbing. Artaud describes language as follows:

I realized that the only language I could have used with a public audience would have been to take bombs out of my pockets and throw them in its face with a characteristically aggressive gesture. Because I don't think conscience can be educated or that it's worth bothering to try to educate it. And violence is the only language I feel capable of speaking...These are not just words, ideas, or any other kind of phantasmatic bullshit, these truly are real bombs, physical bombs, but it is so naïve and childish of me, isn't it, to say these kind of things so innocently, so pretentiously.

(Artaud, 1970:33-34)

The abovementioned quote resonates quite strongly with Kane's own thoughts on theatre and form. In *Blasted*, nothing short of Artaud's willingness to throw bombs at a punch drunk audience, Kane literally blasts open the set to create the imagery, chaos and violence that is war. Kane herself only became aware of Artaud once her work had been compared to his 'Theatre of Cruelty', she was introduced to his writing by a university lecturer and once she had started reading his work she commented, *Now this is a definition of sanity; this man is completely and utterly sane and I understand everything he's saying. And I was amazed on how it connects completely with my work* (Kane, interview with Nils Tabert, cited in Saunders, 2002:16)

In James Hansford's assessment of Kane's work he draws parallels between Artaud and Howard Barker's 'Theatre of Catastrophe' which Barker defines as a theatre that allows audience and performers a choice. This drama tests boundaries – moves to the brink of what is acceptable and then explodes it. Theatre of Catastrophe relentlessly refuses what is expected and Barker theorizes that, by inundating an audience with excessive images, they will not become punch drunk but envisage a sense of possibility that in turn will destroy their sense of expectation (Rabey, 2003). Theatre for Barker is not a digestible experience but rather an irritant and he compares Theatre of Catastrophe to Humanist theatre in the following way:

Humanist Theatre	Catastrophic Theatre
We all really agree	We only sometimes agree
When we laugh together	Laughter conceals fear
Art must be understood	Art is a problem of understanding
Wit greases the message	There is no message
The production must be clear	The audience did not grasp everything; nor did the author
We celebrate our unity	We quarrel to love
The critic is already on our side	The critic must suffer like everyone else
The message is important	The play is important
The audience is educated	The audience is divided
And goes home happy and fortified	And goes home disturbed or amazed

(Barker, *Theatre en Europe*, 1989)

It becomes clear that many similarities to Barker's Catastrophic Theatre can be found in the work of Sarah Kane. Critics and audiences alike were divided on whether her work was brilliant or puerile. Kane too, offers no framework for which an audience can understand her work and whilst I believe there is a message in her plays – that message is deduced from one's own personal response to it and not from being told implicitly through the course of the play what that message is supposed to be. Hansford however, warns against applying both Barker and Artaud's theatres too rigidly when examining Kane, as while all three are concerned with pushing theatre to its extremes, *there is a declamatory economy and austerity in Kane's work that is not found in these other theoreticians and practitioners* (Hansford in Riggs, 1999:349). Saunders locates Kane's theatre as a magical and ritualised space where moments of cruel suffering and punishment contrast with images of beauty and love. He argues that this imagery is reminiscent of Artaud's vision of the theatre and its 'double' in this theatre, *Artaud sought to remove aesthetic distance, bringing the audience into direct contact with the dangers of life. By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was committing an act of cruelty upon them* (Jamieson, 2007:23).

This is similar to Kane's own theatre – where audiences were crammed into small venues within close proximity to the stage, where a cough, let alone walking out of the show,

would disrupt. The space combined with the action on stage does not allow the audience a moment's respite or the ability to distance themselves from the action.

Kane's work has also been likened to that of a series of writers in the 1960's and 70's who were called the 'New Jacobean'. This title harkens back to Elizabethan and Jacobean drama where the audience was asked to suspend all disbelief for the existence of strong feelings and absolute values. In his book on the subject, Benedict Nightingale predicts that theatre in the future will reflect the classics of the Jacobean age; he argues that audiences are tired of the triviality of contemporary British drama and long for the richness that is classical theatre (Nightingale,1998:29). Mark Ravenhill describes Sarah Kane as being, *a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility* (Ravenhill cited in Saunders, 2002:19), and it is for this reason that her work has been compared with that of the New Jacobean writers who consisted of literary greats such as Edward Bond, Howard Brenton and Howard Barker.

The common thread these writers share, according to Saunders, is their depiction of violence and the grotesque (Saunders, 2002:19). John Russell Taylor when assessing new British writing in 1971 saw these dramatists moving beyond what he termed, *literal minded realism...as an approach to the extremes and complexities of modern experience*, he goes on to say that *in the world we live in today, dark fantasy and savage comedy may well be the most direct, may even be the only possible way, of telling the truth without compromise* (Taylor cited in Saunders, 2002:19). I agree with Taylor's assessment of theatre for the reason that in the information age we are bombarded with images in the media of terrible atrocities⁷ and are seemingly becoming more and more resilient to the shock of such brutality. Kane uses this to effect in her theatre by forcing the audience to experience what they are witnessing as a means to shock them out of this state and she does it by using themes that resonate on a classical level. I would like to emphasise that whilst Kane was classed amongst a group of writers at the time called the 'New Brutalists' her work differed from theirs in that her work was informed and influenced by

⁷ I refer here to recent images in the press of the xenophobia crimes that have been committed in recent weeks, most notably the horrific image of a man on fire. Images such as these are to a degree common with a world in turmoil, particularly in a country like South Africa with its violent history and current increase of violent crime.

Modern and Classical European Theatre rather than contemporary ‘rave culture’⁸ (Saunders, 2002:7).

I have attempted to offer some of Kane’s major influences; however it is important to note that while she may share similarities with many theatrical forms her work ultimately differs from them in some way. The New Jacobean writers of the 1960s and 70s were usually concerned with a political agenda and because of this their work held various signposts that made their intentions recognizable to an audience, their plays, as Saunders also points out, would usually have a State-of-the-Nation speech somewhere towards the end. These plays appeared to follow a template which Kane discarded in her own work; Saunders feels that it is this rejection of realism that is the key distinguishing trademark of Kane’s work. I agree with Saunders’s appraisal and would go as far as to say that much of the criticism of her work was due to the misunderstanding regarding critics’ ability to assess it. I have touched upon this briefly in Chapter Two and would like to reiterate the point that critics watching Kane’s plays no longer had the benchmark of social realism as a point of comparison; some tried to apply this model to Kane’s work but ultimately failed as Kane’s plays do not fit the confines of social realism.

Armstrong, in her PhD thesis on the work of Sarah Kane, argues that Kane’s work is influenced heavily by shock and trauma which is how she defines the postmodern experience. Armstrong also theorises that there is a correlation between Kane’s theatre and the economy and she supports this argument with Jameson’s theory that posits postmodernism as a response to late capitalist culture⁹. I agree with Armstrong’s assessment which supports the paradox that Kane’s work was being publicly funded and

⁸ Rave culture refers to the all night dance parties where young people went to dance and get high – the culture has generally been associated with the taking of drugs such as ecstasy and purporting a sense of love and compassion. Rave became popular in the 1980s and ended in the 1990s.

⁹ Jameson suggests that aesthetic production today has become integrated into a commodity production and that as a result the market demands new aesthetic innovation and experimentation. As a result artists are left to rely heavily on funding in order to produce new work. Jameson observes that the problem with this is that artists are then expected to conform to the demands of funding bodies, which inevitably have the say over what type of work is produced. This then leaves artists in the predicament of not being able to produce work according to their own aesthetic ideas. Jameson also points out that this theory is underpinned in the global yet essentially American postmodern culture that is expressed by the increase of American military and economic prowess throughout the world; he proposes then that the underside of this culture is death, torture, blood and terror (Jameson cited in Armstrong, 2003:5).

rather than portraying themes and stories in accordance with capitalist culture her work serves to depict society as excessive and in many ways, as Armstrong proposes, serves as a postmodern parody of capitalist culture. Armstrong goes on to argue that In-yer-face Theatre is a result of a backlash to the tastes of a capitalist culture and not simply a backlash against cultural norms (Armstrong, 2003:6).

At the time of this new wave of writing the British economy was in the throes of an “economic boom, *yet despite this “the gap between rich and poor [was] widening* (McGuire and Elliot cited in Armstrong, 2003:4). There was also a dramatic cut in arts subsidies which Armstrong feels would therefore mean less experimental work and more of the Thatcher eras ‘bums on seats’ mentality, yet Sierz points out that the 1990s was an era where the cultural climate was what mattered the most and in this particular climate there was a desire to create new and exciting work (Sierz in Armstrong, 2003:4).

As a result the In-yer-face genre lent itself to a number of ‘copycat’ writers who jumped on the shock wagon and Sierz notes that there was an *element of fashion: one year, theatres would receive dozens of plays about heroin; the next there would be a heap of gangster stories. But despite such copycat dramas, the nineties saw a great liberation of the imagination of British dramatists* (Sierz, 2000:236-7). Armstrong argues that despite the imitations that served to glamorise violence and drug culture, Kane’s work did exactly the opposite. Kane did not glamorise the culture of sex, drugs and social degeneration; she achieved this by presenting these realities in a stark and austere manner that placed its shock in the reality of violence (Armstrong, 2003:8).

As I have mentioned in Chapter Two, criticism has fallen on In-yer-face writing for not bringing politics to the fore and Sierz cites sources who feel that it is *generally ghettoized in its presentation*, he goes on to say that, *contemporary plays flatter their audiences rather than engaging with them, and talk to their own ‘tribes’ rather than a general constituency* (Sierz, 2000:10). Armstrong argues this point by saying that this break from earlier ‘state-of-the-nation’ plays is precisely what makes plays such as Kane’s *so political, controversial and provocative; for a playwright such as Kane, the British population is not the homogenous mass posited by the rhetoric and politics of Empire,*

espoused by magazines that are myopic in the scope of their audience and representation (Armstrong, 2003:10).

Armstrong argues that Kane's work has a strong political stance that also rests upon the theory that "the personal is political". An early slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement "the personal is political" is derived from the conviction that there is no detail, however small, of social or individual life, which does not have wider political significance and therefore the ability to bring about change (Craig, 1980:58). The manner in which Kane foregrounds serious societal problems by linking them to larger issues offers the reader and audience alike a proposed point from which these problems originate by linking them to the grander scheme without underpinning them within a clear moral framework. Armstrong describes Kane's theatre as a form of theatre that *is dystopian*¹⁰ and as such, *conveys the death of society* (Armstrong, 2003:11). Armstrong proposes that the portrayal of this death is to be found in Kane's later works which also examine the death of the notion of the individual in society – an example being Kane's lack of clear character identities in her play *4.48 Psychosis* which I will analyse in the next chapter. Armstrong cites the work of Dragan Klaic's theory that,

Dystopian imagination in drama...foresee[s] not only a gloomy future but an end of time as well. A version of the future, imagined as much worse than the present, is out-matched by a prediction of a future denied, terminated, closed – with an end to humanity and the entire living world.

(Klaic, 1991, cited in Armstrong, 2003:11)

This theory is most notably evident in *Blasted* where the hotel room becomes the site of a bomb blast and the action that ensues comes to represent the character Ian's demise that is expressed in an almost apocalyptic vision.

¹⁰ Dystopian is the opposite of Utopia. A Utopian world is proposed to be the ideal world whereas a dystopian world is a nightmare. Armstrong cites the argument that a dystopian view of the world can also be a form of utopia and that Dystopian drama is one that offers Utopian ideals while also describing its collapse (Armstrong, 2003:11).

Kane and the Unpresentable

I concur with Armstrong when she posits Kane's work as postmodern due to its tendency to raise ontological questions according to the postmodern theory of Brian McHale in *Postmodern Fiction*. McHale suggests that postmodern literature asks ontological questions for its audience such as, *which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?* (McHale, 1994:10).

Armstrong links this to Kane's own sense of existential anxiety surrounding issues of death, suffering and alienation and furthermore to the term 'postmodern' representing a fractured and deconstructed identity (Armstrong, 2003:15).

Kane's work can also be interpreted as postmodern in its lack of neatly tied up conclusions, and work that seldom offers its audience any solace. It has been suggested that Kane's work is in keeping with Lyotard's postmodern paradigm which conceptualises postmodernism as that which, *puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable* (Lyotard, 1984:81). Like Armstrong I concur that this 'unpresentable' is the very core of Sarah Kane's work; making that which is seemingly impossible, possible on stage. Kane tests the boundaries of this most notably in *Blasted* where she literally blasts the hotel room into fragments, there is a strong sense that Kane is pushing the boundaries of live theatre in her constant subversion and execution of style and form (Armstrong, 2003:18).

The concept of trauma is drawn from the work of Cathy Caruth who defines trauma as:

...an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and therefore is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor... so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely **not known** in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.

(Caruth, 1995:4)

Based on Caruth's definition of trauma Armstrong theorises that Kane's work bridges both the realms of postmodernism and trauma theory to create a 'theatre of trauma' which she suggests is a new genre (Armstrong, 2003:19).

I agree with Armstrong's theory and believe that Kane used the devices of shock to traumatise her audiences. Kane wanted people watching her plays to be active participants in the drama, not just spectators. I believe that all the devices she employed in her writing, e.g. subversion of form, use of taboo language and explicit images, violence and other shock tactics, were her means to achieving this.

In Chapter Four I will discuss in greater depth how Kane employed the above mentioned strategies in her work, how they were received and offer an in-depth textual analysis of two of her plays.

CHAPTER FOUR

Revealing the wound: *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*.

Again and again these dramatists are attracted to such subjects as child murder, sex murder, rape, homosexuality, transvestism, religious mania, power mania, sadism, masochism. And although the angle of approach to these subjects varies enormously from play to play and writer to writer, one thing at least we may be sure about in advance: that it will not be any easily predictable, accepted angle... 'Social problem' subjects will rarely ever be approached as social problems, for solemn, semi-sociological or psychological dissection.

John Russell Taylor, 'British Dramatists: The New Arrivals: The Dark Fantastic.

Remember the light and believe the light.

4.48 Psychosis, Kane (2001:206)

In this Chapter I will be examining two of Sarah Kane's plays, *Blasted* and *4.48 Psychosis*. I have chosen to look particularly at these plays because they are Kane's first and final works and because the shock value in both is completely different. Thematically I am more interested in them from the angle that they differ in form and content when compared to Kane's other plays. I will, through close textual analysis, examine the use of shock in each of these pieces and how they are typically postmodern in their conventions. I will also offer insight as to audience and critics' responses to these plays. Furthermore, I will discuss Armstrong's opinion that the work of Kane makes use of the fictional world as a means to pose obstacles to an audience trying to make sense of what they are seeing (Armstrong, 2003:29). I will also discuss Kane's subversion of form and how the use of this device adds another dimension of shock to the work as a whole.

It's quite a peaceful play

Blasted was the first of Kane's plays to be produced at The Royal Court Theatre. As I have mentioned, the play was slotted in after Christmas – a quiet period in theatre attendance, yet despite this became the centre of a media furore. Critics were disgusted by its content and lack of decency, yet Edward Bond commented, *the only contemporary play I wish I'd written, it is revolutionary* (Bond, 2000).

In response to the media barrage Kane commented *I don't think it is violent. It's quite a peaceful play* (Woddis cited in Armstrong, 2003:32). This comment both smacks of irony and with what Armstrong refers to as an act of 'postmodern blasé' as the play *is* shocking and violent on the level of a mental assault. Armstrong comments that Kane's 'blasé' is extended to the play itself which she describes as *a bored, and at times boring representation of violence incessantly repeated until the audience ceases to care* (Armstrong, 2003:33). I agree with Armstrong's comment to a degree, the unrelenting violence could leave an audience punch drunk, yet in my own opinion this barrage of ceaseless violence serves to add to the horror of the events onstage. At no point when reading this play did I 'cease to care' – I was only engulfed with a sense of revulsion and horror as Kane 'rolls with the punches' through every line and action delivered throughout the course of the play. Is Kane trying to numb us through this barrage of violence? I would argue that the repeated use of violent imagery is maintained to create what she termed as an 'experiential' theatre and that perhaps through its repetition Kane is numbing us to the violence in order for us to gain perspective on what we are witnessing.

Kane herself went on to say, *personally, I think it is a shocking play, but only in the sense that falling 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 the stairs* (Sierz, 2000:94). Armstrong views this statement as Kane denying moral opposition to her work and in doing so asking her audiences to consider the play's events without moral pronouncement. The bottom line is that *Blasted* is shocking and violent but the events it represents are just that, things that happen, and it is the audiences' responsibility to make

sense of it in whatever way they can (Armstrong, 2003:34). Kane's *Blasted* is unashamedly violent and shocking yet what makes the audience and media's responses to it so interesting is that every event depicted on stage is no more shocking than the condition in which it was produced. War, racism and gender violence are realities of life; we witness accounts of atrocities on the news and in the media everyday without so much as flinching at the tales of horror we encounter, yet the same events depicted in *Blasted* took on epic proportions in terms of the public's shock, revulsion and outrage at what Kane depicted onstage.

That Blasted Play!

I would like to begin my analysis of *Blasted* by offering a summary of the play itself. The action takes place in a hotel room in Leeds, where we are introduced to the two central characters Ian and Cate. It becomes clear that they were once lovers but Cate is no longer in love with Ian and resists his advances. During Ian's attempts to seduce her it is implied that he rapes her.

In the second half of the play an unnamed soldier enters the room; he proceeds to make Ian his hostage. The soldier finding evidence of Cate's presence tries to find her but she has managed to escape through the bathroom window. During the course of his interaction with Ian, the soldier describes the atrocities he has committed, especially crimes against women, through the course of the war. He then proceeds to inflict this violence upon Ian, whom he rapes and blinds, before turning the gun on himself and committing suicide. Cate returns to the hotel room which has now become the site of an explosion, she has a baby in her arms that someone gave her to look after. Ian is dying and pleads with Cate. The baby dies and Cate buries it under the floorboards, she then goes out to look for food. Ian on the brink of death eats the baby and proceeds to bury himself under the floorboards, awaiting death. Cate returns, bleeding from between her legs, it is apparent she has exchanged sex for food or has been raped. She eats and drinks and then begins to feed Ian. After a time Ian dies. The first production of *Blasted* was directed by James Macdonald.

The title of the play, as Armstrong points out, lends itself to many connotations. First and foremost the verb “blasted” alludes to an explosive device that has been detonated or the idea that something has been blown to pieces. This interpretation works well within the context of the play where Kane “blasts” previous conceptions of war and violence and then figuratively and literally “blasts” the characters lives and the space they inhabit. Furthermore, Armstrong refers to the English adjectival curse “blasted” which is also used as an expletive. Kane through the theatrical conventions she employs sets to literally “blast” audiences’ assumptions of war by providing a graphic view of violence with the ‘soldier’ character in particular and furthermore blasts the conventions of realism and its signposts which further complicate our understanding of the play. Whichever way you choose to look at it, the title alludes to destruction, things being torn and blown apart. For Armstrong, the two meanings collectively signify the destruction of hope, dreams, happiness and love (Armstrong, 2003:41).

Form and Function

An important point worth mentioning is that *Blasted*, unlike Kane’s later plays, is most conventional in its script format. By convention I refer specifically to the fact that she offers extensive stage directions in terms of the set and characters’ appearances, accents and gestures, for example Ian has a Welsh accent, and Cate sucks her thumb. These directions form an integral part in the meaning of the play and gain further significance later on when all notions of realism are blown apart. It also breaks with convention in terms of Kane’s other plays such as *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* where there is a marked lack of stage direction.

What sets *Blasted* apart most notably, along with Kane’s other work is her break with ‘the-well-made play’ and realism as well as her disruption of form. It is these particular elements that serve to make her work more shocking as audiences have no safe context in which to locate themselves and their understanding of the play. I believe that it is this particular element that provides the key to understanding why Kane’s work has been regarded as so shocking, as well as the reason *Blasted* created such a media furore.

In her paper *Don't want to be this: The Elusive Sarah Kane*, Annabelle Singer argues that in *Blasted*, Kane has effectively blown up the confines of naturalism as a means for the audience to understand the implications and chaos of civil war and domestic violence. The ensuing violent imagery thrusts audience members into a realm in which there are no signposts, no cohesion and no return to the realm of realism and ultimately, safety. Singer argues that it is this break with realism that led to the medias' harsh criticism of the play as instead of sorting through the atrocities witnessed with guidance they instead faulted the play for failing a social realist standard, as Singer puts it *it did not reveal the good guys, the bad guys, and the moral* (Singer, 2004:146). Furthermore Singer argues that *Blasted* was too effective in creating naturalism and because of this did not provide enough clues to an audience that there was a 'metaphorical landscape' at work (Singer, 2004:146).

Bearing this appraisal in mind, how then do we interpret Kane's work? Sierz, in his paper *Form follows Function*, considers Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* which looks at theatrical forms developed since the 1960s. In his analysis, Lehmann concludes that the new forms that have evolved have one element in common; they no longer focus on the dramatic text (Lehmann cited in Sierz, 2007:378-379). Postdramatic is termed by Lehmann as a replacement for postmodern and his definition is based on a series of oppositions. In brief, Lehmann conceives of postdramatic theatre as being a form that offers "states" and "ceremony", anonymous speakers instead of a *dramatis personae*, juxtaposed language surfaces rather than dialogue and unlike drama's stable setting postdramatic theatre provides an indistinct time and place (Sierz, 2007:379).

Postmodern theatre is further challenged using the idea of narrative. Sierz cites Nick Kaye's analysis which posits that: *narratives and narrative conventions are presented in such a way that their claim to authority is challenged. Narratives are resisted or disrupted in such a way that the nature of their move toward unity and containment is made visible* (Kaye cited in Sierz, 2007:379).

On many levels Kane's own work can fit Lehmann's form of postdramatic theatre and Kaye's challenge to narrative, however it is her combined representation of realism and

metaphor and her disruption of that realism that, I believe, ultimately renders her work so shocking. Another reason why Kane broke away from the traditional form of naturalism is explained in an interview with her agent, Mel Kenyon: *She found existing forms quite constraining or restraining because those big structures offer a kind of security and comfort which I think she felt was dishonest* (Kenyon cited in Saunders, 2002:40).

I agree with Armstrong's appraisal that Kane's work is typically postmodern and will now examine how this postmodernity is presented in her work. Kane achieves this through numerous devices but in *Blasted* especially, she manipulates and disrupts time and action as well as making use of what McHale refers to as a 'Postmodern zone'(McHale, 1994:45). This is characterised by a presumed 'constructed' place becoming a 'deconstructed space', Armstrong illustrates this with her depiction of the hotel room as being a constructed space which is later blown apart by the bomb blast to become 'deconstructed' – a truly postmodern zone (Armstrong, 2003:44). This is further supported in an interview with Kane where she maintains that the structure of the play resonates with the chaotic structure of war: *I think that what happens in war is that suddenly, violently, without any warning whatsoever, people's lives are completely ripped to pieces* (Kane cited in Saunders, 2002:41).

The private spaces of bedroom and bathroom are further deconstructed and made obscene. One notable moment occurs when the soldier begins to urinate on the bed which is regarded as an intimate space; this act usually performed in private is made public in this instance upon the Soldier's entrance. Armstrong recognises this as Kane's attempt to deconstruct conventional notions of place and setting. The room which in the opening scene exists as a posh hotel room in Leeds is transformed into a war-zone, the bed a toilet, the floorboards a grave site. Furthermore it is suggested that the play is set in Leeds, but not in Leeds, the implication that it could be Bosnia, but it is not (Armstrong, 2003:44). This is most clear upon the entrance of the soldier, where the 'Leeds' hotel room could easily be read as a blasted building in Bosnia.

The opening scene of *Blasted* is rooted in the confines of naturalism and Kane admits that this opening section was influenced by Ibsen (Kane, cited in Saunders, 2002:41). Kane

defines this influence from Ibsen as being a theatrical tradition of naturalism and psychological realism. The model of the stage in the opening scene also reflects the model of the 'fourth' wall inherited from playwrights such as Ibsen and Chekhov (Saunders, 2002:41). Kane's choice to adopt the confines of naturalism in the opening scene is an important one, as Kim Solga writes in her paper *Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible... realism relies for its signifying power on a closed, carefully self-selected world and the promise that its spectators will eventually see all that world has to offer, in order to perpetuate the truth of its narrative* (Solga, 2007:346). Kane maintains this charade for a while and as the play continues and time and action become further disrupted the setting remains the same. In this way the 'unity of action' is retained, according to Saunders, this is possible through the use of props which gain symbolic significance as the play continues.

Most notable of these are the double bed, champagne on ice and the bouquet of flowers which serve as signposts or symbolic means of interpreting notions of seduction, misplaced love, abuse and rejection. An example Saunders offers, are the flowers which in the opening scene are neatly arranged in a bouquet, a symbol of seduction, love and romance, yet later appear strewn across the floor, petals torn suggesting the end of romance, as well as the hollowness behind Ian's love token gesture to Cate (Saunders, 2002:41).

I agree with Saunders here, when he suggests that the opening scene prior to the blast precludes what is to follow. The tension created manifests on numerous levels, sexual, psychological, and social and these serve to drive the story on, they also, as Saunders suggests, act as a premonition of what is to come. Kane herself comments that the form and content appear to be one and that the form provides the meaning of the play. The tension created in the first half of the play acts as a premonition of the disaster that is to follow and the structure allows that fracture and entry, she continues by saying: *The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilization of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning* (Kane cited in Saunders, 2002:45).

This interpretation is further supported by Kane's use of the door which takes on a symbolism of its own. The door takes on dual roles, first and foremost it is the entrance to the space where the action occurs, and it is also an opening to what exists beyond the room and this becomes a site of fear and paranoia, pre-empting the soldier's entrance.

Important moments illustrating this occur when Ian and Cate hear a knock at the door, both jump and Cate says: *DON'T ANSWER IT DON'T ANSWER IT DON'T ANSWER IT* (Kane 1995:35). The mood of danger is broken with Cate, opening the door to collect the breakfast trays but once she exits the bedroom to go to the bathroom, the knocking resumes and a cat and mouse game ensues as Ian responds to a sequence of knocks from outside, eventually Ian (assuming there is no real threat) places his gun in its holster and opens the door to find a soldier with a sniper gun on the other side. It is from this point that the play moves into the realm of surrealism and the form of the play fractures to allow this to occur.

The disaster that occurs after the soldier's entrance (which includes the subsequent rape and blinding of Ian) occurs completely unexpectedly which makes it incredibly shocking. Audiences who up until this point have been watching a piece of realist theatre are left to deduce what exactly has happened. In his book *Postdramatic Theatre* Hans-Thies Lehmann describes the rule of the unity of time as being essential to the Aristotelian tradition of theatre. This unity of time is an action of coherent totality, in which no jumps or transgressions must occur that could detract from the clarity of the production and overall understanding of the work (Lehmann, 2006:158). Kane's justification for this tear in the story is twofold. The first being to highlight the nature of war, as Kane commented in an interview: *War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Acts of violence simply happen in life, they don't have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible* (Kane cited in Saunders, 2002: 48). Secondly is the reason behind Kane writing the play, in order to understand this better it is important to examine responses to the play.

Are we still in Leeds?

In her unpublished PhD, Armstrong offers numerous questions that have been raised as to where the play is set, *is Kane talking about Ireland? Bosnia? Leeds?* (Curtis cited in Armstrong, 2003:45), *Is Sarah Kane writing about Britain or Bosnia, real people or anguished symbols of man's inhumanity to man?* (Spencer cited in Armstrong, 2003:45). Armstrong reports that audiences were unsure how to understand the play's location and as the Balkan crisis was heating up around the time the play was staged, the parallel was drawn between the two by audiences and critics alike trying to construct meaning from the play (Armstrong, 2003:46). At the time of Kane's writing of *Blasted* Serbian forces under the rule of Slobodan Milosevic had been involved in war and campaigns of terror in Bosnia. As a result, these campaigns included the mass killings of civilians, forced displacement of millions resulting in what was to become the largest flow of refugees in Europe since World War Two. Violence included the systematic rape of women and a series of concentration camps (Armstrong, 2003:47). Despite Kane setting the play in Leeds she admits to Bosnia being her source of inspiration:

At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing [in March 1993] I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the camera, crying. She said, 'please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something.' I knew nobody was going to do a thing. Suddenly, I was completely uninterested in the play I was writing. What I wanted to write about was what I'd just seen on television. So my dilemma was: do I abandon my play (even though I'd written one scene I thought was really good) in order to move onto a subject I thought was more pressing? Slowly it occurred to me that the play I was writing was about this. It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other.

(Sierz, 2000:100-1)

Armstrong suggests that at any point in history a number of parallels could be drawn between the horror portrayed in *Blasted* and the events taking place in a war-torn country.

What she finds interesting about this though, is that Kane is dramatising the presence of an absent centre. Despite Bosnia never being mentioned in the script it is the context most often referred to by the media. Armstrong suggests then, that the external referents in *Blasted* – specifically those related to rape and war, are problematised in a postmodern way which in turn renders them a symptom of trauma and dissociation. Furthermore Armstrong argues that through this destabilisation, what we understood in the beginning of the play to be realism is now blown apart and decontextualised. This in turn leads to the source of the trauma being incongruous and renders the experience more traumatic as it is unassimilable (Armstrong, 2003:47-48). In many ways this represents the universality of Kane's production and the power of her writing; as Armstrong suggests, Kane's work should be welcomed in its attempt to find new ways of expressing war, not merely as a re-enactment, but as a *continuous, contiguous, pervasive, invasive, global (as opposed to regional) experience that requires its own unique mode of location, representation and discourse* (Armstrong, 2003:48).

Sex and Violence

Another central theme in *Blasted* is the relationship between gender roles and sexual violence. In order to examine this further I would like to offer a brief analysis of each character in order to better understand their relation to one another.

Ian is 45 years old, a tabloid journalist and we learn later in the play that he was also a type of mercenary and has killed before. At one point Cate asks *Do you think it's hard to shoot someone?*, and his response to that is, *Easy as shitting blood* (Kane, 1995:20). We learn early on in the play that Ian and Cate were once lovers and for the most part Ian has brought Cate to the hotel room to resume their affair. He has prepared all the elements of seduction, a large double bed, champagne chilling in an ice bucket and a bouquet of flowers but Cate has not come to pick up where they left off but rather because he seemed unhappy. Kane's chauvinistic portrayal of Ian is juxtaposed with Ian's illness and decay, he smokes and drinks far too much yet we learn that he has had surgery on his lungs and that, *Last year. When I came round, surgeon brought in this lump of rotting pork, stank. My lung* (Kane, 1995:11).

The metaphor of illness and decay suggests that Ian's sexual advances on Cate are diseased or corrupted and that her position, which is one of diminished power, provides a site for him to conquer (Armstrong, 2003:68). Ian brags of his prowess as a male while holding a gun which in many ways becomes an extension of the phallus throughout the play, this could also be interpreted as thrill-seeking behaviour on behalf of Ian who gets off on this sado-masochistic act with the gun. The fact that the gun is used at all in a sexual context alludes to Ian's inability to have 'normal' sex and that his sexual gratification is achieved through violent acts performed on Cate. At one moment he goes to Cate, forces her on to her back and puts the gun to her head while he simulates sex with her. This is not the first instance of Ian's gender violence towards Cate, it is suggested earlier on in the text that during the night he raped her, Kane does not portray this rape physically, and it is only alluded to through a conversation between Ian and Cate the following morning:

Ian:

Loved me last night.

Cate:

I didn't want to do it.

Ian:

Thought you liked that.

Cate:

No.

Ian:

Made enough noise.

Cate:

It was hurting.

Ian:

Went down on Stella all the time, didn't hurt her.

Cate:

You bit me. It's still bleeding.

Ian:

Is that what this is all about?

Cate:

You're cruel.

Ian:

Don't be stupid.

(Kane, 1995:31-32)

From the opening scene Ian has attempted to seduce Cate, the more she rejects him the more violent he becomes. Armstrong puts this down to Kane depicting sex as a form of violence: *war uses sex as a weapon, and war is institutionalised violence. Sexual acts are generally erotic in nature, but in Blasted, sex is used as a weapon of violence* (Armstrong, 2003:62).

Throughout the course of the play Ian uses various strategies to convince Cate to have sex with him, when the fancy hotel room, champagne and flowers don't work he calls her a 'lesbos', this label is used in a pejorative manner and for Ian, being a lesbian is an aberration. As Armstrong points out, to his sexist way of thinking a lesbian is a woman who does not respond to a man – particularly his sexual advances in the traditional heterosexual manner. This is a form of aberrant sexuality which he does not know how to respond to. Armstrong continues to point out that Ian is a man existing within the rigid code of his gender and cannot understand a woman who does not fit into her neatly defined gender role. We also learn that Ian's hatred towards lesbians is as a result of his wife discovering her own sexuality and consequently leaving him. Armstrong rightly defines Ian as a man for whom the concept of lesbianism is a threat and insult to his masculinity.

Throughout the play Ian asserts his masculinity by trying to dominate and demean Cate. He calls her a 'Joey' which is a British slang word for 'stupid' and claims that she is *too thick to understand*, yet despite this, as Armstrong suggests, he finds this dominance over her sexually arousing. Because the power dynamics between the two are so different this desire becomes morally questionable although Kane does not overtly state this at all (Armstrong, 2003: 67-68). Cate is half Ian's age, she is disadvantaged and somewhat naïve, and she has genuinely cared for Ian and has agreed to visit him because he sounded unhappy. She is not as worldly as Ian attests to being and because of this, what consequently happens to her is so shocking. Ian's abuse of her body and subsequent rape supports the belief that Cate's mind is immaterial to him and Kane's portrayal of Cate as being somewhat simple minded is a fortunate coincidence for Ian who objectifies women.

Cate is 21 *a lower-middle-class Southerner with a South London accent and a stutter when under stress* (Kane, 1995:3). We learn early on in the play that she is prone to fits which the doctors have said she'll grow out of. She says, *Don't know much about it, I just go. Feels like I'm away for minutes or months sometimes, then I come back just where I was* (Kane, 1995:10). Solga points out that Cate's illness erupts early on in the text and repeatedly, asserting themselves as a form of trauma on her body which in turn makes us question the reason for their onset. The closest explanation Solga suggests is the link between the fits and Cate's father which asserts that the fits are a psychosomatic response to Cate's endurance of verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Solga, 2007:361). In this manner Cate is already set up as a victim on many levels. She is a victim of her father, a victim of her fits, a victim of Ian and finally the ensuing war. She exists as a site of abuse upon which further violence is played out on.

On another level these fits seem to represent a coping mechanism for Cate, whenever she is stressed or upset they are brought on and she is granted a form of 'respite' from whatever may be happening to her. I concur with Armstrong's appraisal of Cate as being too powerless to fight back or get out of the situation she finds herself in with Ian, instead she becomes stupefied which is her response to being threatened. Armstrong describes this as a form of catatonia and suggests that it might be the origin of Cate's name (Armstrong, 2003:69).

Another important element to Cate's character is that she is a thumb-sucker, at any point where she needs comfort she sucks her thumb like a little girl, which adds to her sense of naivety and serves to emphasise yet again the scale to which the power dynamic between Cate and Ian differs.

Finally there is the character of the Unknown Soldier, unlike Ian or Cate no age or accent is assigned to him other than that he carries a sniper gun. The Soldier character Kane describes as an expression of Ian himself, she goes on to say,

The soldier is a kind of personification of Ian's psyche in some sense, and it was a very deliberate thing. I thought the person who comes crashing through that door actually has to make Ian look like a baby in terms of violence – and I think that's successful. It's difficult because when you look at what Ian does to Cate it's utterly appalling, and you think 'I can't imagine anything worse' and then something worse happens.

(Kane cited in Saunders, 2002:46)

The Soldier performs two very important roles in the play; first and foremost he is the catalyst for the shift in the plays focus. The collapse of the realism is brought about using the Soldier who turns the violence upon Ian who in the first half of the play had been the perpetrator of appalling abuse (Saunders, 2002:45). Furthermore, he is worse than Ian, much worse, as Kane intended. Suddenly pitched against a soldier, with a bigger gun, fulfilling a more 'masculine' role Ian finds himself the weaker power. Suddenly the two men are competing as a means to gauge who has committed more atrocities. The ensuing conversation is shocking and repulsive.

The Soldier alludes to the murder of his girlfriend by a soldier from an enemy troupe, Kane uses this story as a vehicle to drive the Soldier's own atrocious crimes, although she never condones this vengeful behaviour, instead she highlights the ludicrousness of it all. The Soldier himself has become a perpetrator of the same heinous crime inflicted on his girlfriend without the slightest shame or moral conscience. After describing his girlfriend to Ian he relates the following story:

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

(Kane, 1995:43)

Ian himself appears to be shocked after hearing the soldier's story, when asked by the soldier; *Never done that?* he replies, *no*, the soldier continues by asking him if he is *sure?* and Ian responds, *I wouldn't forget*. The soldier says, *You would* and Ian's response is ironic: *couldn't sleep with myself* (Kane, 1995:43). Ian's response clearly alludes to his own denial or failure to recognise the seriousness of his own crimes against Cate. Not long before this conversation took place, he had raped her, yet he seems to bear no recollection of this nor understand the irony in his response. Kane's introduction of the Soldier character and the graphic stories he relays are shocking and repulsive, although I do not believe they are gratuitous. As mentioned earlier, Kane introduces the Soldier as a tougher and more vicious version of Ian – this is supported in his actions and by the horror he attests to seeing and participating in. The soldier further emphasises the harsh reality of war that exists beyond what had appeared to be a safe hotel room.

The scene between the Soldier and Ian escalates into violence that culminates in Ian being raped by the Soldier at gunpoint, not much different to his second rape of Cate with the gun at her head and him simulating sex, the only difference is that this time it is real – again Kane draws parallels between sex and violence.

Aesthetically, the gun becomes a phallic substitute for the literal phallus in this act of simulated sex; sex is violence, sex is a gun that oscillates between being a literal/figurative gun/ penis held to the head of Cate, in a society in which heterosexual roles are violently imposed and enacted.

(Armstrong, 2003:85)

The soldier climaxes and then shoves the gun up Ian's anus before withdrawing it. The scene is nightmarish and graphic and Kane harkens back to a central question, 'Is this real?' Cate escapes during her fits but always returns to where she was, not unlike a nightmare this is one from which you cannot wake up. Prior to the rape of Ian by the Soldier he trails off mid-sentence confused and disorientated, he even comments, *Think I might be drunk*, but there is no respite and his hopes of the whole scenario being some terrible nightmare are very quickly dispelled by the Soldier who replies: *No. It's real* (Kane, 1995:40).

Rape and War

It could be argued that Kane by choosing to depict such horror onstage renders the piece untheatrical and rather something that exists on the level of television news, however I believe Kane consciously chose to stage this level of violence in order to create an experience for her audience. The fact that this is being presented 'live' on stage, with only a short proximity between audience and actors renders such a depiction incredibly uncomfortable. Unlike a television which one can switch off at the click of a remote, the small theatre in which *Blasted* was first performed was an awkward space from which to exit because of its size and the close proximity of audience to actor. Furthermore I concur with Solga who argues that Kane's decision to stage Ian's rape draws attention to the absence of Cate's rape by Ian (Solga, 2007: 59). This erotisation of violence is an important aspect in the play and Kane's work which I will return to explore later.

As if the situation could not get any worse the Soldier continues to tell of the most unspeakable acts, after the rape of Ian he asks *You never fucked by a man before?*, Ian is silent, the Soldier continues to speak,

Didn't think so. It's nothing. Saw thousands of people packing into trucks like pigs trying to leave the town. Women threw their babies on board hoping someone would look after them. Crushing each other to death. Insides of people's heads came out of their eyes. Saw a child most of his face blown off, young girl I fucked hand up inside her trying to claw my liquid out, starving man eating his dead wife's leg. Gun was born here and won't die. Can't get tragic about your arse. Don't think your Welsh arse is different to any other arse I fucked. Sure you haven't got any more food, I'm fucking starving.

(Kane, 1995:51)

Through the Soldier's relaying of events Armstrong identifies another important role that his character fulfils in the play. She suggests that he functions as a storyteller and through his stories renders rape as a prominent feature of war. Above I have listed two such stories where the Soldier has described brutal and shocking instances of violence, completely detached and at times even boastful of his exploits. His arrogant yet distanced accounts of the horrors he has witnessed and committed suggests that the Soldier too is a victim of shock and a site of trauma. His inability to express any level of humanity attests to his own 'depatterning' that has occurred whilst fighting in the war. Armstrong recognises a sense of ritual and symbolism in the Soldier's accounts and puts this down to a fragmentation and erotisation of the female form which has reduced the body to nothing but fetishised parts (Armstrong, 2003:77-78).

I return now to the script and the unfolding scene between the Soldier and Ian. The Soldier, completely desensitised through the witnessing of so much violence relates his terrible story and then in the same breath asks for food. It is shortly after this that Kane presents another shocking and deeply disturbing image, the Soldier without warning proceeds to grip Ian's head in his hands. *He puts his mouth over one of Ian's eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye* (Kane, 1995:50).

In the following scene Ian lies next to the Soldier who has committed suicide. Cate returns and on seeing Ian exclaims *you're a nightmare* (Kane, 1995:51), which harkens back to the nightmare/dreamlike quality of the play that is echoed in its form and in Cate's fits. She is holding a baby, an innocent victim, too small to understand its victimhood, which is ironic, as it is Cate holding it – a victim herself, grown and able to understand this of herself. She appears stronger and more empowered than in earlier scenes, it is as if the war and the baby have given her a sense of purpose.

Ian begs Cate for mercy and comfort, he asks her for his gun so that he can end his life, she refuses on the basis that *God wouldn't like it* (Kane, 1995:55). Ian's response to this is that there is no God and that the mysteries around life after death scenarios that Cate speaks of all have a scientific explanation. Cate empties the gun of its bullets, a symbolic moment which Armstrong describes as a *metaphor for removing the seed from the phallus*, in this way she has literally taken away Ian's ability to exercise power over his own life and not granted him the mercy he expects (Armstrong, 2003:96). Cate hands Ian the gun, he holds it in his mouth and pulls the trigger.

When his suicide attempt is thwarted, Cate suggests that it is fate and alludes to God having a hand in it, she is cut off by Ian whose response to the word 'God' is *cunt* (Kane, 1995:57). Kane has introduced a powerful taboo word that through its use in the play has adopted a dual meaning. A pejorative word for the female sex, that resonates strongly with Ian's character, who symbolises all that is sexist and violent and who has committed crimes of a sexual nature against Cate and secondly the word is used as an expletive against God who Ian has called a 'cunt'. The use of this word adopts further meaning when later in the scene Ian, at the height of degradation, masturbates to the word 'cunt', which is repeated eleven times. Sierz maintains that this scene was created to shock and commented that, *if "cunt" is still a taboo word... Kane makes Ian... say it eleven times while masturbating* (Sierz cited in Saunders, 2002:63). I agree with Sierz, the scene is shocking, yet it also achieves her aim to present a man at the height of degradation. Furthermore the use of the word 'cunt' is a reminder of Ian and the Soldier's erotisation of violence.

Again the landscape of the hotel room has shifted from bomb shelter to grave after Cate has buried the baby, the floor boards are nailed together as a cross and the flowers which were present in the first scene are strewn over the baby's grave. It is here, under the floorboards that Ian has positioned himself waiting for death.

The passing of time is a powerful destabilising technique which Kane has implemented throughout the course of the play, in this particular scene Ian's suffering is drawn out for an extended time. The passing of time is shown through the use of lights that operate between darkness and light. Again, Kane's destabilisation of form increases the shock and trauma presented onstage. This occurs through a number of devices along with the one I have just mentioned, that work together to create a nightmarish vision. The first instance of this destabilisation of form occurs with the bomb blast which, as I have mentioned, moves the play from the realm of realism to surrealism. The passing of time becomes an important device and this is represented in the text with Kane's stage directions. Armstrong suggests that this aids in elucidating further meaning from the play as the use of conventional time is ruptured in order to alienate and prevent the audience from reaching a cohesive understanding of the play (Armstrong, 2003:58).

As I have mentioned in the opening paragraph to this chapter, this is a clear example of Kane using the fictional world to provide obstacles to an audience. The play seems to begin in real time but as we reach the end of Scene One time appears to speed up, Kane expresses this with the suggestion that not only have hours passed but whole seasons as the blackout happens to *the sound of Spring rain* (Kane, 1995:24). Like Armstrong, I recognise this to be a completely impossible stage direction and furthermore agree that the passing of time is nonsensical and completely out of sync with the passage of time passing onstage. Seasons continue to pass, reflected in the sound of Summer and autumn rain and by Scene Four it is Winter; this suggests that a whole year has passed, time speeds up even further during Ian's final moments of degradation which see him move through a series of moments/vignettes exhibiting intense suffering on a base level (Armstrong, 2003:58-59).

The scene begins with him masturbating then trying to strangle himself, this moves to him “shitting” and trying to wipe it up with newspaper, following this is Ian laughing hysterically, having a nightmare, crying bloody tears whilst hugging the dead Soldier’s body for comfort, the scene culminates in another shocking image, Ian weak with hunger tears up the cross, rips the floorboards up to unearth the dead baby and then he eats it. As Kane herself admits, this scene provided the most ridicule and offence. Kane was frustrated by the critic’s literal interpretation, yet she also was concerned about how the scene would appear translated from page to stage:

A lot of people said to me when they read it before it was performed ‘we’re not sure about the baby eating,’ and I kept looking and thinking ‘is it gratuitous? What does gratuitous mean anyway? And does it become unbelievable?...When you see it he’s clearly not eating the baby. It’s absolutely fucking obvious. This is a theatrical image. He’s not doing it at all. So in a way it’s more demanding because it throws you back on your own imagination. But somehow, I don’t know – it’s more realistic when you read the scene because you get simply the act.

(Kane cited in Saunders, 2002:66)

The baby eating scene is for me one of the most powerful moments in the play, it symbolises the complete level of degradation and suffering Ian has reached that he would stoop to this act of cannibalism. It also has been interpreted as an act of hope, Ian’s final gesture before dying. It can also be a symbol of the ingestion of something pure and innocent, a symbol of the beginning of life and the end.

I would suggest in this scene more than any other in the play that Kane’s work echoes Bakhtin’s ‘Grotesque Realism’ which he defines as that which emphasises the material and the bodily, a further and essential principle of ‘Grotesque Realism’ is the notion of degradation, which Bakhtin does not define necessarily as a negative process but rather as one that reminds us that we are all creatures of the flesh and hence degeneration becomes a symbol of regeneration and renewal (Dentith, 1995:67). When read in the context of Ian’s demise this evaluation is apparent in his own degeneration and most obviously when he dies only to wake again as if trapped in a continuous spiral. Kane’s dark humour

allows Ian to die with ‘relief’ yet after this ‘death’ rain starts to pour through the roof and onto his head – the rain itself a symbol of cleansing and renewal – only to have Ian ‘wake’ and say “shit” (Kane, 1995:60).

Furthermore Bakhtin draws a distinction between what he terms the ‘Classical body’ which is defined as being an achieved and completed thing whereas the ‘Grotesque body’ is incomplete, *a thing of buds and sprout*, furthermore this grotesque body is described as a *pregnant death, a death that gives birth* (Dentith, 1995:68). Ian, whose own body is in a state of decay, exemplifies again Bakhtin’s ‘Grotesque body’ *a body in which becoming rather than completion is evident* (Dentith: 1995:68).

In the final moments of the play Cate returns, we learn earlier in the scene that she has left to find food and that she more than likely will barter her body for this commodity. Cate, as I have mentioned before, is very different from the earlier Cate who escapes trauma through the onset of her fits, she now appears more confident and self reliant despite the violence she has endured. Kane’s stage direction states that blood is seeping from between her legs and that she carries food and a bottle of gin. Again, rape and sexual violence are brought to the fore as Cate becomes a victim once again, this time as a result of the war outside where rape is an ‘acceptable’ side effect. As Armstrong points out, the rape in the play reflects most strongly that rape is a tactic of war used as a means to exert power over the enemy’s women and the enemy themselves. We have seen this brutality time and time again, not only in Bosnia but around the world, where rape is a powerful and effective form of “terrorism against women” (Armstrong, 2003:81).

The Abandonment of Realism: Staging the Unseen

This brings me to what I believe to be the central and most important theme in Kane’s play, one that attests to and dismisses earlier criticism of In-yer-face Theatre writers on the basis that their work is not political. As I have mentioned previously, for many writers, including Kane, the personal is political but in *Blasted* she goes one step further by exploring the fundamental nature of war and nationhood within which she posits sexual violence as the catalyst. This message is carried throughout the play with all three characters.

Kane links two seemingly disparate places together in a manner which does make complete sense. What happens to Cate in a Leeds hotel room with Ian is not unlike what is happening in a war zone. Both situations are nightmarish and both are crimes of power. Kane explores this further through a belief that gender violence is often eroticised, especially in the media. This is most apparent with the character Ian who works as a tabloid journalist. Early in the play he receives a work call where he dictates a story he has been working on. He finds ways of eroticising the violence that has occurred in the article; this is achieved by the graphic detail he uses when telling the story and furthermore by his description of the murder victim *Samantha, a beautiful redhead with dreams of becoming a model...* (Kane, 1995:12). Armstrong renders Ian's description as almost pornographic in its detail, the fact that she was a "beautiful redhead" bears no relevance to the story, the facts of the matter are that a woman has been murdered and that it is a tragedy – ultimately a person has been killed, whether they are young and attractive is irrelevant. Armstrong suggests that Ian, in adding this description is rendering the victim as an erotic subject and that for men like Ian she comes to represent the sexual fantasy of the passive female in her depiction as a victim. The tendency to link sex and violence is played out when Ian reads one of his articles to the soldier:

Kinky car dealer Richard Morris drove two teenage prostitutes into the country, tied them naked to fences and whipped them with a belt before having sex. Morris, from Sheffield, was jailed for three years for unlawful sexual intercourse with one of the girls, aged thirteen.

(Kane, 1995:48)

The crime is clear. Sexual intercourse with teenage prostitutes, one of them being underage. Yet Ian does not just present the facts but a range of superfluous information surrounding the crime. He describes again in graphic detail what happened to the girls before the perpetrator had sex with them, Armstrong renders this telling as *thinly disguised pornography and worse, paedophiliac porn, rather than news* (Armstrong, 2003:87).

This is made worse by Ian's use of the word 'kinky' to describe the perpetrator, suggesting that his tastes are unusual rather than criminal and despite the crime

committed the implication is that the man is relatively harmless. Armstrong points out that the term “unlawful sexual intercourse” is a euphemism for rape and that, overall, the fact that someone was raped is glossed over, hidden under pornographic detail (Armstrong, 2003:87). I concur with Armstrong’s appraisal that the story is not written with the intent of providing news but rather as a means to provide readers like Ian, with a voyeuristic and titillating erotic story. Like, Armstrong, I agree that Kane is criticising the media’s eroticisation of violent crime and that doing this results in desensitisation towards sexual violence (Armstrong, 2003:87).

Ian is contrasted with the Soldier – who is worse than Ian but not unlike him. The violence that Ian has committed is no less horrific than the soldier’s own acts of violence. I think that this is the point that Kane is trying to make, that essentially these acts are linked. By contrasting Ian with the Soldier, we may be prone to see Ian in a better light because the Soldier’s crimes are so much more horrific, but as the scene ensues we come to see the Soldier as a mere continuum of Ian’s own violence. Another valid reason highlighted by Armstrong is that Kane is attempting to confront biases that audiences may hold regarding rape and its victims, she does this by examining rape in both the private and public spheres.

In *Blasted*, Kane presents two forms of social violence, war which is primarily a male dominated activity, is publicly sanctified violence and as a result of that more easily regulated, whereas rape, another male activity, is a type of violence that usually takes place in private making it much more difficult to regulate. By dramatising these two forms of violence, Kane is drawing attention to biases her audiences may hold. As Armstrong points out, there is a tendency in private crimes such as rape to scrutinise the victim and their role in the crime rather than the perpetrator. In *Blasted*, Cate is too much of a stereotype to blame for what happens to her and Armstrong suggests that this was a conscious choice for Kane, in order to trap the audience. Furthermore Armstrong suggests that Kane’s ‘*obscene*’ rape scene is a result of trying to effect social awareness around gender violence. Despite Kane’s claims that her work is not moral she uses shock to draw attention to issues she is concerned with. As I have mentioned earlier Kane supports the view that artistic work can be used as a means to effect change and this is

clear in her own manner of drawing attention to social issues that concern her (Armstrong, 2003:72-73).

Kane attempts to avoid the eroticisation of violence by *not* staging the rape of Cate. This is in my opinion the most important aspect in the reading of *Blasted* and the justification, for myself at least, as to why so much of the violence Kane depicts is necessary. The reason for the absence of Cate's rape could be that Kane recognises the seriousness of the act and is maintaining the integrity of it by concealing it, furthermore in order for the act to be effective it cannot be sensationalised, in other words it must be portrayed as violence, not as sexual intercourse. Kane's sensitivity to this issue is relayed by Sierz. The story goes that Kane was very disturbed by a German staging of *Blasted* in which after the rape of Cate, *the lights came up and she's lying there completely naked with her legs apart, covered in blood, mouthing off at Ian. And I just wanted to die in despair.'* Kane said to the director, *'Do you think it's believable, interesting, feasible, or theatrically valid, that she's lying there completely naked in front of the man who's raped her? Do you not think she might cover herself up?'* (Sierz, 2000:105).

Armstrong maintains that in order for the rape to hold the most impact it must take place in such a way that avoids all previous beliefs and biases an audience might have towards Cate, furthermore she cannot be portrayed as an object of desire or as someone who would reciprocate that desire, finally the act of rape cannot be depicted as a sexual act but as an act of violence, so as not to confuse the seriousness of the situation. Rape *is* an act of violence (Armstrong, 2003:72).

In her paper Solga describes the rape of Cate as a spectacular non-event and points out that the revelation of it is equally so, as we only learn of it after Scene Two well into a few minutes of dialogue. Solga argues that most critics have chosen to read the absence of Cate's rape as a premonition of the violence to follow, but in her own reading of the play she interprets this absence as an exploration of the implications of allowing sexual violence against women to become something that is culturally normalised. Solga sees Cate's experience as a metaphor for the violence we encounter in the second half of the play. This is represented as the violence between men, the violence of war and the

violence which the Soldier commits on Ian's body. As Solga points out this is violence we are able to see. For Solga this highlights the implication in our own society of our reception to rape, primarily because it is a crime that goes *unseen*. Solga continues:

If we cannot see Cate's violation, how are we to read it and account for it? How are we to understand ourselves in relation to it? How are we to bear witness to it? Better, perhaps, to find a way to displace its affect, to look for its traumatic rehearsal on Ian's body; better to displace Cate's added, unclear suffering so that the more familiar shock of war may appear in its place.

(Solga, 2007:349)

It is from this particular angle that Solga argues that the decision to leave Cate's rape unstaged was deliberate and politically motivated on Kane's part. Furthermore Solga sees this exclusion as Kane's attempt to challenge the gendered and spatial dynamics of modern realism (Solga, 2007:349). If we are to accept this appraisal of Kane's work it is possible then to justify most if not all the violence depicted on stage as a means to draw attention to what is missing and unseen. For Solga, Cate's rape is pivotal to the violence that ensues and it is the point at which all other acts turn. She continues to argue that by not staging what is missing – that which we ultimately fail to see, Kane puts her audience as spectators of realism on trial by challenging the ways in which we view power, authority and knowledge in the theatre (Solga, 2007:349).

Blasted is written to be performed without an interval and a performance of it is described by Sierz as a *gruelling one hour and fifty minutes* (Sierz, 2000:99). Again Kane subverts the norms of theatre convention, the exclusion of an interval comes to serve a number of contributing factors to the play. First and foremost the action is not broken or interrupted by an interval – this would most definitely render this production gruelling as Sierz has described. For nearly two hours the audience is met with a barrage of violent images without a moment to talk about what they have witnessed let alone reflect on it.

This is further exacerbated by Kane's reluctance to offer neat conclusions which further add to the play's disturbing nature. The absence of an interval means that the audience is

subjected, as Armstrong puts it, to a form of ‘theatrical trauma’ which mirrors the trauma depicted within the play (Armstrong, 2003:55). Further use of this device in *Blasted* means that the audience is left to contemplate and make sense of what they are witnessing in a personal and private capacity.

A Silver Lining

Despite its shocking content *Blasted* does offer its audience glimpses of hope. In the final moments of the play Cate buries the baby with as much dignity as she can afford despite the horrific circumstances (Armstrong, 2003:103). Kane’s own view when discussing the play also lends itself to some belief in hope: *Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity and humour and freedom as you can* (Kane cited in Armstrong, 2003:103). I believe that this is ultimately what Kane tried to do through her work and whilst *Blasted* takes its audience through a horrific, experiential journey we are left with the thought that hope is possible. Of course Kane doesn’t display this in any overt way but she does make it possible. In the last moments of the play Cate sits beside Ian’s head and eats, feeding him from the remaining food – she is stronger in this scene than any other – it appears that she has empowered herself despite her victimhood throughout the play. The final sound effect is that of rain, Kane does not specify what type of rain, but the water pouring down on Ian is reminiscent of cleansing, of a washing away – it is directly after the rain has begun to fall that Ian expresses what appears to be the kindest words he has offered to Cate in the whole play: *Thank you*, and this is where *Blasted* ends.

One gets the feeling that in these final moments things have changed irrevocably for the characters Ian and Cate; that the cycle of violence has ended and the reason for the end of violence is to be found in Cate. In the final moments of the play she feeds Ian in an act of compassion rather than retaliate or put him through the violence she, herself has experienced throughout the play.

Armstrong suggests that another form of hope to be found is through an audience, making the link between the private sexual violence that is rape and the public violence

of war. She argues that if the audience can make this link and understand the inherent meaning of Kane's play that hope is possible (Armstrong, 2003:104).

Blasted Revisited

In a revival of *Blasted* staged in 2001, Solga relates how many critics who had slated Kane's play returned to watch it a second time round. It appeared that those who had criticised it most strongly (Billington of *The Guardian*), attempted to locate its dramatic value in the second viewing. Responses from critics declared the play better and more coherent in its revival, which may have had something to do with the fact that it was staged in a larger theatre which served to dissipate the shock value of the play's violent imagery, which in turn rendered the use of this violence more organic to the play as a whole. Solga describes this process as one of finding value in Kane's work, which was achieved by making sense of it. Critics who had previously damned her work were able to understand better what she was doing, and whilst not all critics were favourable their reviews were far more generous towards the play (Solga, 2007:50).

4.48 Psychosis

4.48 Psychosis is Kane's final play before she committed suicide. The play has been described as *a declaration of suicide* and a *75 minute suicide note* (Billington cited in Saunders, 2002:110), yet Saunders maintains (rightly so) that to view the text this way lends itself to too reductive a reading of the play's themes and comments (Saunders, 2002:110). Armstrong, refers to Kane's own increasing interest in *finding performance more interesting than acting, theatre more compelling than plays* (Kane cited in Armstrong, 2003:204), and this is most evident in the way that her final play pushes even further the conventional boundaries of playwriting. Of all her texts, *4.48 Psychosis* reads less like a conventional play and more like a prose poem lending itself to a more interpretive form of performance (Armstrong, 2003: 04). Because of the way in which the play is constructed it is not possible to offer a synopsis of its events but rather an idea of the themes it explores. The play is a journey into the realms of the psyche and explores feelings of alienation, unrequited love, depression and suicide.

Unlike *Blasted* with its shocking and violent use of imagery, *4.48 Psychosis* uses the device of shock primarily in its language, which remains violent and nihilistic whilst still providing the audience with an experiential theatrical journey. Again, Armstrong links the postmodern fragmented subject to the play with regard to its *impossibility of presenting an individual as a unified whole, as a cohesive logical unit* (Armstrong, 2003:204). Rebellato, quoted in Saunders, further describes the play as

...a psychotic breakdown and what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life

(Rebellato cited in Saunders, 2002:111)

This is not dissimilar to *Blasted* in which the boundaries between waking, dreaming and nightmares is constantly pushed as one tries to find the reality of the horrors presented only to realise that it is real.

In *4.48 Psychosis*, the vehicle for this exploration is language and Kane explores and interprets these themes using monologues, doctor/patient conversations, medical terminology, clinical case histories and the language of 'self-help' books as well as disembodied text and numbers (Saunders, 2002:112). This is strung together in what could be read as a poem and further more she alludes to Biblical visions and language which serve to create a heightened mood onstage. The Biblical allusion in the play harkens back to Kane's early struggle with Christianity and her eventual abandonment of religion. The fact that it is resurrected in *4.48 Psychosis* – her final play - is testament to her struggles. The Biblical language convention when used in a play about suicide brings further significance to the text. In this way Kane uses these devices of unconventional language and theatrical imagery to communicate the nature of suicide and depression to the audience (Saunders, 2002:112).

Through this form Kane has successfully managed to communicate feelings of depression and suicide by engaging the audience in a journey rather than postulating about the subject. She explores these themes from many angles in an attempt to draw attention to

conceptions of mental illness. Through the play, characters grapple with living with and without medication and Kane asks whether this is really the answer, is another prescription really necessary. She summarises for her audience her disillusionment with the psychiatric profession's ability to provide adequately for patients' needs, at one point the 'Doctor' character says: *You don't need a friend you need a doctor* and the patient responds, *you are so wrong* (Kane, 2000:236). I concur with Armstrong's suggestion that these lines are indicative of feelings of alienation as well as the desire for meaningful human contact to alleviate the unbearable loneliness the character is experiencing (Armstrong, 2003:207).

4.48 *Psychosis* breaks with convention in that Kane does not designate lines to a particular voice or character. The script offers no instructions as to how it should be performed, what gender the cast should be and how many should be in the cast in the first place. For this reason the play has been performed around the world with casts of up to six, mixed genders and even as a one woman show. The original production directed by James MacDonald, used three actors, two females and one male. The play was presented in one act and its duration was one hour. Kane offers hardly any stage directions apart from a series of perfunctory pauses and silences.

Through the play the theme of alienation is explored, through a consciousness dealing with unrequited love and the depressive state in which it is subsumed. As Armstrong points out, there is a prevailing sentiment expressed throughout the play that suggests there is a diminished sense of responsibility towards other human beings. One character has been left trying to understand the failure of his/her relationship – in this context he/she says:

I've never had a problem giving another person what they want. But no one's ever been able to do that for me. No one touches me, no one gets near me. But now you've touched me somewhere so fucking deep I can't believe I can't be with you. Because I can't find you.

(Kane, 2000:215)

Armstrong sees the above quoted line as an overtly cynical view of relationships, love and the world in general and implies that it describes a view of the world being a greedy and emotionally disconnected place (Armstrong, 2003:208). I agree with Armstrong's appraisal, but within the context of the play and the feelings of despair that permeate the characters' views on every level, this opinion and depiction of the world is remarkably honest, and attests once again to Kane's ability to sum up moments of immeasurable pain in a few lines. The raw emotion Kane presents in *4.48 Psychosis* makes this play relevant and resonant with anyone watching it, simply because it deals with human relationships, those that have failed, those we long for and those we never have. There is an overwhelming grief throughout the play as the disparate voices struggle to cope with these failures and the sense that they have been let down, not only by others but by themselves. The Biblical allusions brought forth in the form of heightened language further express the sense that there is no aid even from a higher power and that life is without hope or redemption. The language fragmented and unrelated in many cases to any cohesive thought further emphasises the postmodern fragmentation and alienation felt by its characters.

Staging *4.48 Psychosis*

I was fortunate to see a production of Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* at The Grahamstown National Arts Festival, June/July 2008 directed by Ingrid Wylde (pictures courtesy of Ingrid Wylde and Michael Dexter, 2008, courtesy of CuePix/ National Arts Festival). I would like in my analysis to look at both this interpretation of Kane's work as well as the original production performed at The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in June/July 2000. I feel that a comparison of the two productions may be useful in assessing how open to interpretation the text is, as well as, getting a clearer idea as to what impression these interpretations create.



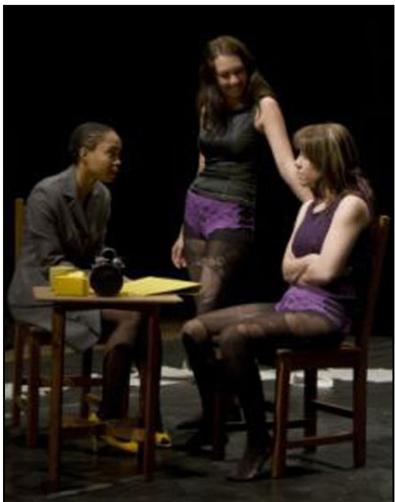
The South African production was comprised of a cast of three women. The set was simple, the space delineated by a border of strewn sheets of blank white paper creating a circle in which the play was performed. The paper for me



most ardently symbolises the plight of one of the voices who is reluctant to go on medication because it curbs their ability to function in their job, at one point in the play the following lines are delivered, expressed in Kane's potent dark humour with the 'patient' figure saying: *I won't be able to think. I won't be able to work* and the 'Doctor' responding: *Nothing will interfere with your work like suicide* (Kane, 2000:221).



Apart from the paper border the set comprised of a desk and chair, an iron bed with a mattress and another chair. The single chair positioned downstage right was the realm of the 'Doctor' character, while the desk and bed area situated downstage left and centre stage respectively were mainly occupied by the two other characters' who are defined by their attempts to work and cope with depression.



The characters costumes were sombre but marked with snatches of colour. The Doctor character for instance, wore a grey jacket and skirt suit, punctuated by bright yellow high heels. The two other characters were dressed the same, barefoot in torn black stockings, underwear and purple tops. The colours' indicative of their emotions – the bright yellow, a reflection of happiness and light, while the purple seems to allude to intense and passionate feeling as well as the notion of a wound or a bruise.



Along with the use of coloured clothing, yellow and purple ribbons were also made use of most effectively. Despite being symbols of mood, the ribbons were used to cover oversized pencils which the characters used in a





scene reminiscent of people filling in a questionnaire, ticking the most applicable box. Later in the play, the purple ribbons wrapped around the two ‘Patient’ characters pencils are removed to reveal the bright yellow. Two particularly moving moments in the play that made use of colour were when the ‘Doctor’ character begins to communicate with the ‘Patient’ in what could be seen as an unprofessional manner:

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 ok because I like you and you can’t like someone who doesn’t like themselves. The people I fear for are the ones I don’t like because they hate themselves so much they won’t let anyone else like them either. But I do like you. I’ll miss you. And I know you’ll be ok.

(Silence)

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.

(Kane, 2000:237)

As the ‘Doctor’ character speaks these lines she begins to unbutton her grey jacket – her professional attire, the more she opens up we are exposed to her undergarment which is bright purple, the same colour the ‘Patient’ characters wear. It is as if we are being allowed a glimpse of her soul and the exposure of the colour mirrors her exposing her private feelings. Once she has said her piece she buttons up her jacket and resumes the ‘professional’ role of ‘Doctor’.

The second moment in this version of the play that used colour just as effectively is in the final moments where the 'Patient' characters are resolved to die. Once the decision is made, one of the 'Patients' hands the 'Doctor' her yellow ribbon in an act which symbolises the giving up of joy, of life and of light. Shortly after this moment the second 'Patient' character begins to collect the scattered border of papers, as she lifts them, we are exposed to a thread of bright yellow ribbon which can be read as a symbol of life, light or even clarity. A central line in the play is brought to mind in this image, it alludes to light and darkness, life and death: *Remember the light and believe the light. An instant of clarity before eternal night.* (Kane, 2000:206).

Armstrong describes the original production as being equally sparse, comprising of a table and chair and most memorably a large mirror hung at a forty-five degree angle above the stage. She describes the colours as sombre and the lighting being a mixture of high tech video projection and natural light. The mirror was used as a means to add another dimension to the playing area (Armstrong, 2003:210).

Armstrong constructs Kane's work as a new form of drama and dramatic language which uses the theatrical space differently. Because of the language of Kane's script there is a sense that it necessitates a production that is conscious of the space it occupies. As Armstrong says, *this play is not a simile or an extended metaphor of suicidal depression; it is the enactment of it* (Armstrong, 2003:211). As a result of this the original production made use of various spaces moving between the interior and exterior experiences of consciousness depicted by the actors and refracted in two planes : within the mirror and onstage (Armstrong, 2003:211).

The South African production made similar attempts to delineate space, the paper border signified one way of achieving this, and within the performance space itself, it was clear that there were three defined spaces, the realm of the Doctor, the Subconscious, and the exterior conscience.

Kane: The Suicidal Nihilist?

The play is decidedly postmodern in its unwillingness to reassemble its fractured pieces. As Armstrong points out, there is no moment of dramatic cohesion or potential for healing or respite. Instead, Kane offers only nihilism (Armstrong, 2003:210). The figures in 4.48 *Psychosis* are reminiscent of Nietzsche's "suicidal nihilist" who is described as someone who has:

Sought 'meaning' in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the 'in vain', insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and gain composure – being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long.

(Nietzsche, 1968:12)

These characters exist in this dimension and I agree with Armstrong's appraisal that these subjects are also in a state of trauma which reveals itself in the form of helplessness they express and the victim's own desires to retaliate or disappear under the circumstances (Armstrong, 2003:247).

Based on this interpretation Kane presents us with characters who are real. The poetic language is raw and to the point and whilst one could interpret the play as a piece of self-indulgence, Kane spares us from it by the honesty in the language. One may ask how this play is relevant, particularly in South Africa where we exist in a context of violent crime, rape and HIV/AIDS. Why would anyone wish to stage a play about suicide with characters wishing to end their lives? In response to this I would argue that this play's relevance lies on the basis of Kane's disclosure. The open manner in which the topic of suicide is handled allows it to resonate on many levels. Despite presenting us with a postmodern, fragmented, nihilistic and incohesive piece of drama, perhaps that is the play's power. By expressing the character's feelings of loss, disappointment, sadness, failure and alienation, Kane renders cohesion possible in reality as an audience is able, despite this, to identify with the subjects depicted in the play.

Like *Blasted*, Kane subverts the boundaries of time, place and action. There is no unity of time or cohesion of action, despite the fact that the play culminates in suicide (the only linear progression in the text). There is no logic in the progression to this moment within the play and the only allusion to time is the reference '4.48', Armstrong suggests that in *4.48 Psychosis*, ...*time has been dissolved to give way to an emotional experience that stands outside of the usual awareness or marking of time. What happens during this play, happens outside the necessity of time* (Armstrong, 2003:219-220). Armstrong notes this reference to a specific time as a moment in the play when time operates under different chronological rules, this is expressed by the disparate moments associated with 4.48 (Armstrong, 2003:220).

In the first instance it is associated as a time of desperation and the moment when the character will hang him/herself, yet the character does not want to die. Later 4.48 comes to represent something completely different, instead it becomes the time *when sanity visits/ for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind. When it has passed I shall be gone again, a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool* (Kane, 2000:229). As Armstrong explains, the character is "fragmented" because the speaker is a dis-unified subject, and a "puppet" because he or she is controlled by forces beyond his/her control (Armstrong, 2003:220).

It becomes apparent in reading the play that the character/s has/have experienced many 4.48s and in the repetition of this comes the realisation that one of these moments will be his/her last. Armstrong recognizes that the act of suicide for this person is out of their control and that they do not want to die. This is supported throughout the play with lines such as: *I don't want to die, DON'T LET THIS KILL ME* and the reference to suicide as a "sub-intentional death" (Kane, 2000:226). Armstrong defines the time as functioning almost like a character, becoming the antithesis working against the character's struggle to remain alive. Armstrong compares this circular looping and the repetition itself as a form of trauma from which neither the characters nor the audience can escape (Armstrong, 2003:221).

I would argue that this contradiction in the character's intent further adds to the shocking aspect of the play. No-one *wants* to die but the characters in this play feel that death is the only release, that all options have been exhausted, that they are hopeless. This adds to the impact of the tragedy of *4.48 Psychosis* and alludes once again to Kane leaving her audiences without a neat conclusion. Her character's are more complex, they present all sides of the argument, they are able to reason, they are intelligent so, when in the final moments the suicide takes place, we are left with the same sense of despair.

In my dissertation I have argued that it is Kane's subversion of form that audiences find most shocking. Without the safe confines of realism and 'The-Well-Made-Play' we are not left with enough signposts to fully understand what it is Kane is trying to say. In *Blasted* this is especially true, after the bomb blast the spectator is given no reason as to what exactly has happened. I would argue that in *4.48 Psychosis* Kane maintains this disruption of form but to quite a different objective. Despite its lack of cohesion and any form of linear thought, the play allows us to *understand* from the very beginning the thoughts, justifications and feelings of its characters. We are complicit witnesses to their breakdown and I would argue that because of this fact *4.48 Psychosis* is more shocking than *Blasted*. As spectators we are offered no respite from these feelings which are repeated in many forms throughout the piece. Although there are moments in the play where Kane alludes to things we may not understand on a logical level they still impact the spectator in their delivery and add to our greater understanding or reading of the play as a whole.

Kane's use of repetition is a noteworthy motif in the play. Most memorable of these is the repetition in varying order of the words *flash flicker slash burn wring dab press slash punch* (Kane, 2000:231-32); this continues for a while and I concur with Armstrong who defines it as a form of verbal violence on an audience who does not understand what it means (Armstrong, 2003:222).

A further cryptic repetition is to be found with the line *Hatch opens stark light* (Kane, 2000:225). Armstrong lists it as being repeated five times with no clear indication as to what it means, suggesting that it be interpreted as a vehicle for transporting the dead or

some hallucinatory vision. Whatever the meaning, the phrase pre-empts the act of suicide. After the fourth repetition the line *the rupture begins* (2000:241) follows, which marks the beginning of the end of the play. As Armstrong proposes, there is finality to the line and the word rupture implies the sense that all has broken down, is breaking down. The line also marks the irreversibility of the decision; from this point suicide has been chosen and is inevitable.

The character lists the mode of ending his/her life by matter of factly stating that he/she has taken: *One hundred Lofepamine, forty five Zopiclone, twenty five Temazepam, and twenty Melleril*, he/she goes on to say, *everything I had/ swallowed/ slit/ hung/ It is done...* (Kane, 2000:241-42). An important point further raised by Armstrong, is that Kane, rather than enact the suicide, chooses instead to stage it as a death through language. The final lines race through to the end of the play which concludes with the line *Please open the curtains* (Kane, 2000:245), Armstrong suggests that the closing line sounds almost like a stage direction and that in its delivery the line between *act(ion) and performance have been blurred. It is a signal to the audience that the moment is over, that they can leave now. They are no longer witnesses to this event* (Armstrong, 2003:222). Again there is no neat conclusion to be drawn from the ending, the South African version of the play attempted to create a more well rounded dénouement by gradually fading the lights that were centred on the empty desk once occupied by the character who ended her life.

4.48 *Psychosis*' shock is not found in its imagery but in its use of language. The most vitriolic expression of this is to be found when the 'Patient' character says:

I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged me for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me, I'll suck your fucking eyes out send them to your mother in a box and when I die I'm going to be reincarnated as your child only fifty times worse and as mad as all fuck I'm going to make your life a living fucking hell I REFUSE I REFUSE I REFUSE LOOK AWAY FROM ME.

(Kane, 2000:227)

In the production I watched, this provocative speech failed to illicit great shock, I think this had to do with the overall mood created in the piece as well as the director playing down the anger expressed in these lines. Instead they were delivered almost matter-of-fact, completely downplayed. The speech is nihilistic, raw and confessional and alludes once again to a somewhat base level within the character of failure, shame and accountability. The character in this speech more than likely did not gas the Jews or rape small children, but in its language Kane has created a sense of helplessness that the character feels. It is as if he/she has tried to account for the sins of the whole human race and in doing so is alienated from that which he/she wanted to belong.

Before watching the play I was concerned that a study of suicide could so easily be romanticised and clichéd, however the nature of the writing is not sentimental or saccharine, as Armstrong says, *it is the complicated poetry of a fragmented consciousness in its final moments* (Armstrong, 2003:225). Despite the serious subject matter it also lends itself to humour, which in the production I saw was interpreted to full effect in the scene where the ‘Patient’ characters including the ‘Doctor’ list the antidepressant medications they have tried, along with their dosage and side effects delivered with wide smiles on their faces and outward expressions of absolute joy – as if they themselves were ‘high’ on the medication they refer to.

4.48 Psychosis: Genius or Suicide Note?

In her analysis of *4.48 Psychosis*, Armstrong suggests that the play is a reaction to Kane’s generations attempt to reject an existence that has become intolerable (Armstrong, 2003:212). In light of this statement, Kane’s work takes on further political relevance. In *4.48 Psychosis*, she depicts a world with a diminished sense of human contact and more importantly *humanity*. The patient character’s shame and loneliness are made manifest by the doctor’s bedside manner which in turn has a distancing effect and through the fragmented nature of the script, which heightens further the sense of alienation felt by the characters. As the play progresses the patient’s speeches become more graphic perhaps as a desperate attempt to break through to the ‘doctor’ character – as well as a last attempt from Kane to break through to her audience.

From Kane's perspective we glean a world where there is not much to look forward to and these themes can be firmly situated in the time of Kane's writing. As Armstrong suggests, Kane had much to be angry about, she came from an era of anger and violence, where punk culture found its roots and football hooliganism was rife. It is also a nation where people live off the dole and there is a huge chasm between the class of rich and poor. Furthermore this division is exacerbated by feelings of displacement, brought about by a society and economy that exists within rigid class structures and privileges an economic minority (Armstrong, 2003:212). This is reflected most clearly in the work of Kane and others like her where *art, is a culture steeped in violence, disassociation from the comfort of traditional values, and stark alienation from a consumer and consumption driven and oriented society* (Armstrong, 2003:212).

Whilst I do not think Armstrong's argument is without merit I would argue that Kane's anger and disillusionment stems too from the depression she suffered from for many years of her life. In her paper, Annabelle Singer relates that after Kane's death two camps existed: one of these saw her entire body of work in light of her suicide and the other declined to make any connection between her death and her work. The first group attempted to assess her work based upon her mental anguish and even Kane's agent commented that existential despair was what made Kane tick. Other's felt that her work was far too complex and important to review based on her suicide, yet after the opening night of *4.48 Psychosis*, Singer relates a story of the critics gathering to discuss Kane's play, and uncertain as to how to read it came to a joint conclusion that the work was in fact a '70 minute suicide note' (Singer, 2004:160). This assessment of Kane's work was the source of much anger especially for those belonging to the second camp of thought. Fellow playwright Anthony Nielson commented on this anger:

It worries me when Sarah Kane's agent Mel Kenyon talks about 'existential despair' being 'what makes artists tick' (Playwright Kane kills herself, February 24). Nobody in despair 'ticks' – and for Sarah Kane the clock has stopped. Truth didn't kill her, lies did: the lies of worthlessness and futility alike, but we canonise one and stigmatize the other. They both battle the same benign forces: crazy and irregular tides of chemicals that crash through the brain. Far from enhancing

talent, these neurological storms waste time, narrow vision and frequently lead, as here to, that most tragic, most selfish of actions.

(Nielson, 1999)

It is difficult to know which camp I side with, with regards to Kane's work. For the most part I agree with the second camp's notions that Kane's artistic vision is too important to reduce merely to mental anguish, yet I still don't feel that it is entirely possible to separate this knowledge of Kane from her work – especially in *4.48 Psychosis*. The more I have read it, the more I feel that it is Kane coming through her characters, that it is her deepest thoughts we are hearing and reading and that ultimately it is her cry for help.

In her paper Singer defines Psychosis as being *a severe mental disorder, with or without organic damage characterised by derangement of personality and loss of contact with reality and causing derangement of normal social functioning* (Singer, 2004:161). With this definition in place it is possible to view the characters in *4.48 Psychosis* as having lost touch with reality.

It is interesting to note that *4.48 Psychosis* was based on Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which is about a man who kills himself because of unrequited love. Singer points out too, that reference to another suicide is made with the line: *the chicken's still dancing/the chicken won't stop*, this line originates from the Herzog film *Stoszek* which is the last film seen by Ian Curtis of the band *Joy Division* before he committed suicide. Singer suggests that *4.48 Psychosis* can teach us a lot about suicidal despair, not only Kane's but of others' state of mind (Singer, 2004:161). Whichever way you intend to interpret Kane's work, in reading the play and its sentiments it is no wonder then that Kane's voice is silenced at the end of *4.48 Psychosis*, and that the solution offered is based on a fragmented, nihilistic goal of suicide.

4.48 Psychosis had its premiere in 2000 the year after Kane ended her own life. Critics from *Time Out* described it *as compact and beautiful as a diamond*; *The Guardian* wrote of Kane, as a powerful and striking writer who *wrote simply and starkly about the world she saw around her... a mature and vividly theatrical response to the pain of living*. In *The Times* Kane was described as *a dramatist original enough to communicate ultimate*

emotions with a strange beauty as well as frightening bluntness. It is apparent that by her last play the furore over her first play, *Blasted*, had died down and critics seemed able to step away from sensationalising the shock value and instead, were able to give a more balanced review of Kane's work. As Howard Barker put it best, in his 'Arguments for a Theatre' *The most appropriate art for a culture on the edge of extinction is one that stimulates pain* (Barker, 1999:18-19).

Kane achieves this in *4.48 Psychosis* more than in any other of her plays. Unlike *Blasted* where we are left with some sense of hope, *4.48 Psychosis* leaves us with nothing, nothing more to hope or wish for than suicide. Kane's representation of a racist, corrupt, godless society, dominated by violence is a bleak outlook intimating that life is not for the fragile or the fearful. For this reason I concur with Armstrong, who views *4.48 Psychosis* to be the most shocking of all Kane's plays, as she concludes: *It is a nihilistic view that has lost all hope and, arguably, has even lost the desire to effect social change* (Armstrong, 2003:248).

CONCLUSION

Despite its popularity in the 1990s, In-yer-face Theatre had a ‘sell-by’ date according to Aleks Sierz. By 2002 few works by writers of the time had been staged. I feel this has much to do with the fact that audiences were rendered punch drunk from an over saturation of violent and provocative images onstage. This along, with the current violent culture we live in could go a long way in explaining that audiences have perhaps tired of this form as what it represents is a reality of day to day existence for most. As Sierz points out:

The whole In-yer-face sensibility, which had been so provocative in the mid 1990s, began to show signs of rapid ageing. For example, depictions of anal sex, which had once been a powerful stage image of the “crisis of masculinity”, soon became as mannered as cigarette-holders were fifty years ago.

(Sierz, 2005:57)

Living with Kane’s work and the theory and criticism surrounding it for the past two years has left me running a gamut of emotions. At times I have read her work and been shocked and repulsed by it, at other times I have felt punch drunk and decidedly ‘unshockable’, there have been times I have questioned whether her plays are puerile or gratuitous, and at other times I have questioned my own response to them. Despite these contradictory opinions the conclusions I have drawn about Kane stemming from my early interest in her work have somehow remained the same when reaching the conclusion of this research paper.

Writers such as Sarah Kane had injected a dose of extremism into mainstream theatre and despite In-yer-face’s popularity coming to an end, had provided British theatre with a new form and outlook for the future.

Armstrong points out that Kane’s plays are more than just an arrangement of words or bodies in a space. Rather than perpetuate illusion within her staging Kane forcibly breaks

from this deceiving, theatrical intent (Armstrong, 2003:251). This further renders her work postmodern as McHale describes:

Postmodernist fiction is above all illusion-breaking art; it systematically disturbs the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and fictional worlds. It foregrounds precisely what Gardner insists must stay in the background if fiction is to be moral.

(McHale, 1994:221)

I concur with Armstrong who argues that, yes, Kane's plays are radical and violent but that this is necessary to foreground an awakening (even if that awakening is a rude one) to extreme realities she believed were worthy of scrutiny (Armstrong, 2003:251).

In her own unique way Kane sought to highlight important issues in a manner, not unlike Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', which allowed audiences the experience of having lived through something. As Kane herself said:

If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our own future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched...It's crucial to chronicle and commit to memory events never experienced – in order to avoid them happening. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life.

(Langridge and Stephenson, cited in Saunders, 2002:22)

Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that for a politics of perception in theatre to exist, there has to be disrespect for tenability or positive affirmation. In order to achieve this there has to be a transgression of taboos. Theatre, Lehmann states is responsible, in an age of rationalization, to deal with extremes, to break taboos and by its constitution to hurt feelings, shock and disorientate. Through this, spectators are directed to their own presence through 'amoral', 'asocial' and cynical events (Lehmann, 2006:186).

In my research paper I have argued that Kane's work and subversion of form have in particular rendered her work most violent to an audience – aside from the graphic and violent words and imagery she portrays in her art. Through her writing Kane has found new ways of reading and making theatre, and I argue, like Armstrong, through this theatre, is making pertinent statements about the violent society in which we live (Armstrong, 2003:253).

Kane offers us no catharsis. Her plays do not, as Aristotle defined, purge us of excess tensions or anti-social emotions in order to return passive to our society. Instead she leaves us despairing and questioning. I believe that through art Kane explored these themes in order to create awareness and evoke change. In the opening of Chapter Four I quote Kane in reference to *Blasted*, saying that it is in actual fact a ...*peaceful play*, perhaps she is right, not so much in that what the play presents is peaceful but in that it's creation, its raw depiction of violence can make us re-think and reassess our attitudes and through that bring or at least touch peace.

In conclusion, Kane left an indelible mark on British theatre by trying to create work that she believed to be honest. In 2002, a conference was held to discuss In-yer-face Theatre and the impact that writers such as Kane made on British theatre. The conference became a forum at which the current condition and future of British theatre was discussed. Sierz in his closing address spoke of the work of Sarah Kane now being a required reading taught in every post-war British drama course throughout universities in Europe, and whilst her work once belonged to the realm of the avant-garde her work has quickly been claimed by the mainstream culture (Hero UK:2002).

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