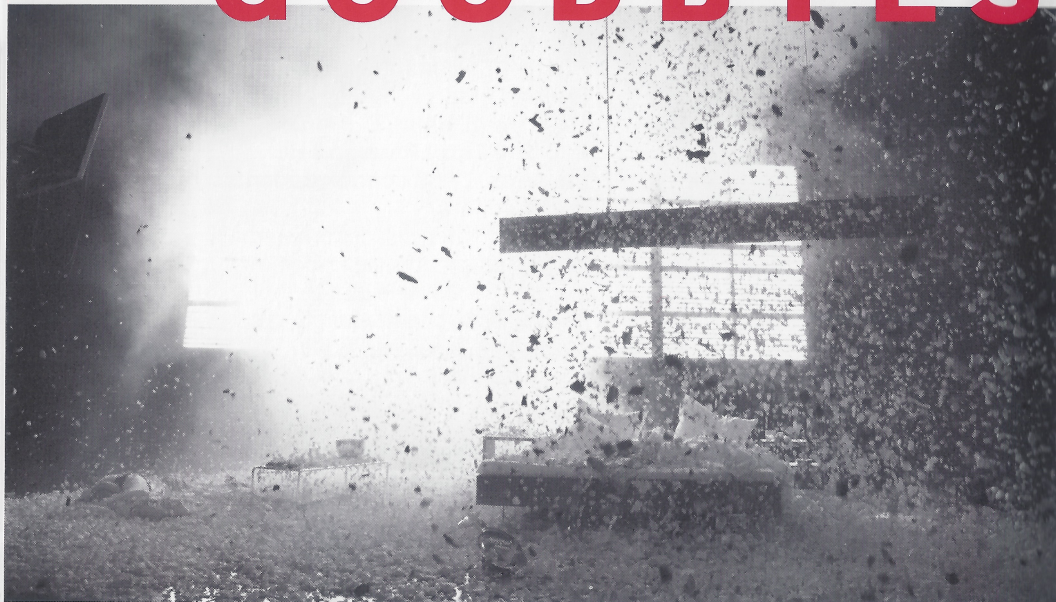


# SCORCHED EARTH: SARAH KANE'S GOODBYES



A scene from *Blasted*, staged at Schaubühne, Berlin in 2005  
Photo © Donald Cooper/photostage.co.uk

There's something both depressing and exciting about being in a tiny audience. When I first saw *Cleansed* in May 1998, we were a shamefully thin crowd, scattered across the stalls of the West End's Duke of York's Theatre. I doubt we'd got much beyond double figures. In our depleted state, it was hard to give much back to the actors: I remember some moments of genuine laughter and lots of rapt attention – though afterwards, as we shuffled towards the exit, a man murmured to his partner, 'pretentious crap'. As for me, I stood outside the theatre for half an hour, smoking cigarette after cigarette, reeling from what I'd experienced: a succession of discontinuous brutalities and a

hymn to the possibilities of theatre; a picaresque journey through the depths of human cruelty and an unabashed play about love.

Seven years earlier, above a pub in Bristol, I'd seen Sarah Kane's very first play, *Comic Monologue*, which the author performed herself. When *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court in 1995, I went just as the furor broke and was startled less by the play's violence than by its confidence, its deft construction and equally deft deconstruction of its own dramatic form, of which more in a bit. The following year, *Phaedra's Love*, Kane's reworking of Seneca, confirmed for me first that I was not wrong to see a mischievous comic strain in her work and second that this was a playwright who was thrillingly prepared to take wild creative risks.

by Dan Rebellato

But outside the Duke of York's Theatre, I was finding it hard to take in the scale and beauty and daring of *Cleansed*. It seemed to me that Sarah Kane – like those flowers that periodically flare into life in the play – had magically blossomed as a playwright, spreading herself through an imaginative landscape richer and more extensive than had any British playwright for a decade or more. *Cleansed* is the work of a writer who saw no barriers to her imagination and had the courage and rigour to take playwriting to wholly new places.

I couldn't know then that almost exactly a year later, I would be back in the same theatre to attend her memorial.

Sarah Kane killed herself in February 1999, a few days after completing her last play, *4.48 Psychosis*. The play traces an unnamed person's descent into severe depression leading to their decision to take their own life, which has tempted some people to regard this rich, heartfelt and complex play as some kind of suicide note. And actually, at the tense and emotional press night a year later in 2000, it did seem that Sarah Kane was indeed using parts of this tough and tender play to say goodbye.

But her plays are plays, not the raw outpourings of a troubled mind. I last met Sarah in November 1998, only three months before she died. Among other things, she discussed the form of *4.48 Psychosis*, its relation to other existing play structures, the leap she was taking with it. Although she may have written the play in a state of tough-minded despair, she planned it out with lucidity and

enthusiasm: for theatre, for writing, for communication. She was a writer fascinated by writing and what it can do.

There is, I think, a valedictory quality to a lot of Kane's playwriting, but it's not life she's saying goodbye to. In each piece, Kane bids farewell to some cherished features of the Great British Play, as if she was engaged in an ongoing project to see what playwrights can do without. 'As soon as I've used a theatrical form,' she once said, 'it becomes redundant'. But each time she discards some facet of contemporary playwriting, it's not boredom or petulance, it seems to issue from a belief that the way we tell each other stories about the world has ferocious moral importance and if some dramaturgical principle no longer measures up, it simply has to go. Her plays taken as a whole have something of a scorched-earth policy towards dramatic form.

*Blasted* waves goodbye to conventional dramatic structure. The first half is an astonishingly confident piece of (fairly) conventional play construction, handling space and silence, dialogue and character, movement and tension with huge assurance. There are moments reminiscent of post-war giants like John Osborne and Harold Pinter, though shot through with her own acerbic humour and eye for pitiless detail.

But then, halfway through, *Blasted* gets blasted. In the play, an explosion rips away one wall of the hotel, but in a way it's also a bomb placed under conventional theatre:

in destroying the hotel room, it destroys box-set naturalism and the well-carpentered traditions of playmaking that it contains. In a series of juddering aftershocks, the formal elegance of the play starts to disintegrate as if trying to keep up with the hellishly deteriorating life it depicts; even the orderly procession of scenes collapse into a series of brutal tableaux framed by a bare alternation of darkness and light.

You can see this in the early unpublished monologues, all written before *Blasted* and which, like so many political plays of the 1980s, address 'issues' in sexual politics: bisexuality, sexual violence, eating disorders, and more. The earlier monologues have moments of overt commentary, but slowly Sarah Kane's opinions become less and less explicit, the handling of the material increasingly dense, ambiguous and complex. One of the things that confused some of the early audiences of *Blasted* was its lack of explicit authorial commentary; in 1995, to present violence without overtly condemning it was easily mistaken for naivety or voyeurism. In fact, she had said goodbye to that kind of political writing; she was already trusting the audience.

By *Cleansed*, Sarah Kane had been firmly tagged as an *enfant terrible* with a penchant for theatrical violence. She once said *there isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence and that's an extraordinarily ignorant thing to do.*

This might seem like an argument for presenting explicit violence on stage (of the kind associated with what has been called 'In Yer Face' theatre). But this is to assume that

all theatrical representation must be *literal* representation. *Cleansed* is actually a challenge to that entrenched semi-naturalist tradition in British theatre. On the page the play is strewn with tortured bodies – an eyeball is injected, tongue, hands, feet and genitals are dismembered, a throat is cut, and more – but the very extremity of the events defies their theatrical realisation.

In the late 1940s, when the legal category of a 'crime against humanity' was created in the wake of Auschwitz, the phrasing suggested that such acts shook the very limits of our minds, our capacity to mentally comprehend such things: these were crimes that 'shock the conscience of the world'. I think what the text of *Cleansed* tries to do is find a form of representation that shocks the imagination – first of its theatrical collaborators (because how *do* you show these things on stage?) and then of its audiences. The recent genocide in Bosnia was very much in the background of this play when it first appeared and it tries both to respect the unthinkable nature of those horrors and insist on our responsibility to think them nonetheless.

*Cleansed's* farewell is to conventional stage realism in favour of forms of representation that were mostly unfamiliar to 'new writing' theatre of the late 90s, more typical of European director's theatre, in which there is a deliberate imaginative gap between the letter of the text and its theatrical realisation.

After all, are these events even real? There's certainly a way of seeing *Cleansed* as unfolding entirely in the dying mind of Graham as he takes the lethal dose of crack at the end of scene 1. (Similarly, you could see the second half of *Blasted* as taking place in one of Cate's cataleptic visions, while both *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* could plausibly



be interpreted as the retrospective thoughts of characters at the very moment of death.) The play's images have a dream-like quality at times – two bodies combined in one, a cricket match juxtaposed with a concentration camp, a box of chocolates turned into a weapon. But at the same time, the play insists that these are real events and asks us to bridge the gap between nightmare and reality.

At the time, I saw Kane's next play *Crave* as a huge and surprising change of direction. From the image-led bombardment of *Cleansed* to a language-led theatrical poem of four voices, like Büchner had followed up *Woyzeck* by writing Beckett's *Play*. But in some ways it's the same journey we're on. The work of both plays is as much in the audience's imagination as on the page or the stage. Now she's stripped away much of the stage image; the *dramatis personae*, too, have been reduced to letters (A, B, C, and M), as if dramatic character is only clinging on by its initials. By *4.48 Psychosis*, she is saying goodbye to character entirely, as well as any semblance of dramatic structure, even the very typographical

conventions that tell us that this text we are looking at is a play. *4.48 Psychosis* is not so much a play as a pure event.

This is why Sarah Kane was so much a woman of the theatre. There is no better cultural form to explore the way reality splits and doubles itself than the theatre, which is always one thing *and* something else. The theatre is both reality and fiction, both 'on the other side and here' as Grace/Graham puts it. All those farewells in the work are about seeing that doubleness and intensity more clearly. Kane took in, as all writers do, influences from writers like Bond and Barker, Crimp and Shakespeare. But she also influenced a whole generation to think again about what a play has to be. Her influence is felt everywhere in the new play. In her short writing life – a handful of unpublished monologues, five plays and a short film script – Sarah Kane cleansed British theatre writing and left it changed and renewed.

© Dan Rebellato, February 2016.

Dan Rebellato is a playwright and professor of contemporary theatre at Royal Holloway University of London.