

The Mark of Kane

By Dan Rebellato

Genesis 4:1-12 tells us that of the first two people to be born on earth, one became the first killer and the other became the first to be killed. After Cain killed his brother, Abel, God cursed Cain: the land where he spilled his brother's blood would grow no crops; expelled from the family, he would be forced to wander; and, finally, a mark would be placed upon him, so that all who see him would know of his sin.

The playwright, **Sarah Kane**, as a teenager a devout, evangelical Christian, was very familiar with this story, which carries within it a number of the themes and motifs that dominated Kane's plays. Most obviously, perhaps, the story is one of sudden, atavistic violence, of the kind that rips apart **Blasted** and **Phaedra's Love**. These two plays also echo the story with its family turned in on itself, which also pulses through **Crave** and finds its mirror-image in the incestuous brother-sister coupling of **Cleansed**. God's brutally implacable judgment may be detected in the peremptory punishments inflicted by Tinker on Rod and Carl in **Cleansed** and in the sufferings inflicted on Ian in **Blasted** and the nameless fragmented protagonist(s) of **4.48 Psychosis**.

The biblical story is explicitly mentioned once in Kane's work. In **Crave**, the character 'A' (which Kane thought might stand for 'author' among other things)

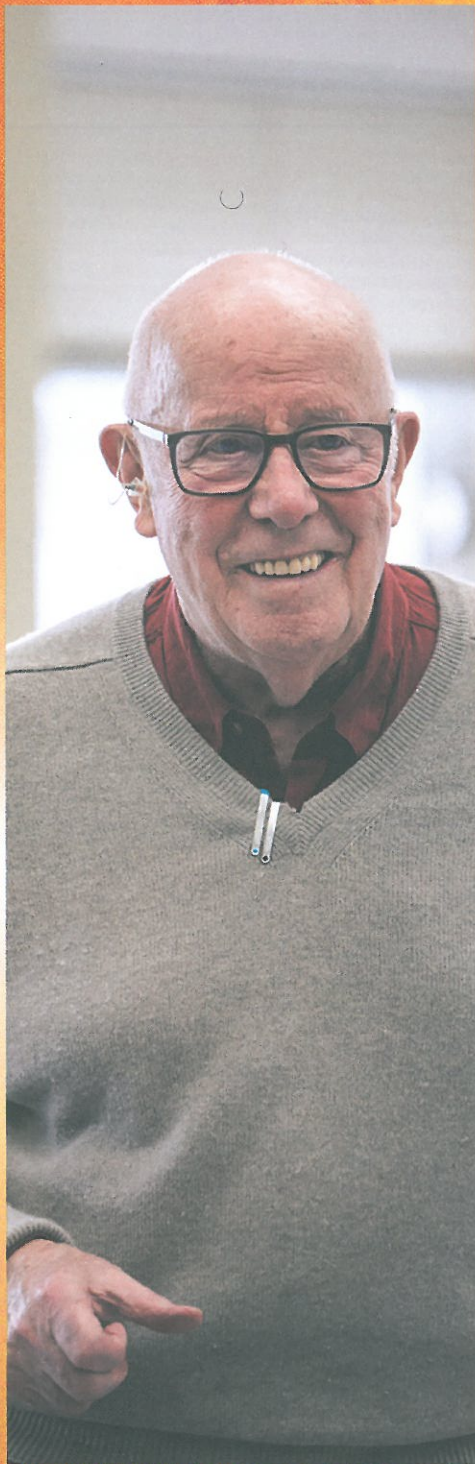
declares: 'God has blessed me with the mark of Cain.' Although Kane had abandoned her faith long before writing her mature plays, she still seems to have carried with her a sense of guilt and sin. In the same interview, she explained that 'A' might also stand not just for 'author' but also for 'abuser'; throughout her work is a recognition of the thinness of our civility, a deep intuitive understanding of the way people can pass, with troubling ease, from civilisation to barbarism. Ian in **Blasted** is both abuser and abused. The cryptic and fragmented text of **4.48 Psychosis** refers to 'victim, perpetrator, bystander', a triad that, from the first production, has been a way of seeing the multiple roles in the play but, crucially, three positions that each of us can and do occupy. Kane felt, it seems to me, marked by an original sin, perhaps even just in her name. (It is striking, perhaps, that to undertake the biggest stylistic shift of her career, from the slaughterhouse horrors of **Cleansed** to the wintry poetics of **Crave**, she removed the mark to write under a pseudonym, Marie Kelvedon.)

These reflections on the traces left in Kane's work by her faith are important, I think, to move discussion of her plays away from an emphasis on the purely personal, the author's own troubled psychology. While her suicide continues to cast a shadow over the work, it is vital to insist on the wider dimensions of her writing, its clarity and reach. The collapse of Kane's faith in God,



Martin Marquez and Jessica Barden in **Blasted** rehearsals.

Rehearsal photography by Mark Douet



Richard Wilson directs *Blasted*.

it seems to me, left much of her Christian cosmology standing, but with a hole in the centre that denied redemption. A world of sin and no Saviour. Christian motifs pepper the plays; God is invoked more than three dozen times in the plays, in ways that deny Him ('*There is no God. There is. No God*' and '*Fuck God*' from **Phaedra's Love** or Ian's comprehensive dismissal '*No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Namia*' in **Blasted**) but also yearn for Him ('*Dear God, dear God, what shall I do?*' calls out one of the abandoned souls in **4.48 Psychosis**). In **Blasted**, Ian - the racist, the rapist - undergoes a series of humiliating trials, leading to a crucifixion in a contemporary Calvary, beneath the floorboards of a boutique hotel. With his face to the heavens, as if asking why he has been forsaken - a lament that incidentally finds its modified way into **4.48 Psychosis** - Ian dies and, almost immediately, is resurrected. Kane's playfulness with belief and unbelief recalls Hamm's furious denunciation of God in Beckett's *Endgame*: '*The bastard! He doesn't exist.*'

This explains both the plays' bleakness but also their dark humour and their curious kind of political existentialism. The absence of a saviour obliges us to commit not to the hereafter but to the here and now: '*I love you now.*' Rod tells Carl. '*I'm with you now. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. Now. That's it. No more.*' Later, he adds: '*There's only now...That's*



Martin Marquez in *Blasted* rehearsals. Rehearsal photography by Mark Douet

all there's ever been.' God's abandonment of us compels us to commit to our own existential choices and responsibilities, a theme that surfaces continually in even these plays' darkest corners.

I say these plays are 'political' because Kane's work unfolds in a recognisable contemporary register, often against a recognisable backdrop; even the most abstract of them, **Crave** and **4.48 Psychosis**, exist in a world of tape recorders, cigarettes, motorways, NHS waiting rooms and Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon. More broadly, these plays focus their attention on global conflict that continue to haunt and horrify. I am writing these words in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo killings and another massacre perpetrated by Boko Haram, both events that seem continuous with the world shown by **Sarah Kane**.

Indeed, the plays insist on our interconnectedness and they do so by a kind of enforced wandering (**Blasted** is set in a hotel room '*so expensive it could be anywhere in the world*') that erases the differences between here and there, between us and them. As such, these plays are acts of judgment and expiation; their bravery, their brutality, their dark humour are all part of a search for something that binds us, gives us value, and gives us hope. That, more than anything, is the mark of Kane.