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ABSTRACT

This thesis will consider the oeuvre of Sarah Kane in terms of its similarities with the work of French theater theorist Antonin Artaud. I will show how Kane uses techniques which engage Artaudian principles in order to eliminate critical distance between the audience and the action on stage. The extent to which Kane engages Artaudian principles makes her unique among her contemporaries. Through Kane’s engagement with Artaud, Kane’s theater transgresses the established norms of the relationship between spectator and spectacle in theater. It is this transgression which is ultimately responsible for the rocky reception Kane’s plays have had in the United Kingdom and United States. Kane’s approach to theater can also be seen as a reaction to the intellectualization of the modern theater. Lastly, I will argue that Artaud and Kane used similar techniques because they were trying to accomplish similar goals. They both saw a need for a new form of artistic expression in the theater, one which, free of the limitations of established forms, could affect an individual on the level of consciousness.
The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Catherine Wiley
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The action of theater, like that of the plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it.

-Antonin Artaud, The Theater and Its Double

In this thesis I will examine the oeuvre of Sarah Kane in order to demonstrate the congruity of her plays with the dramatic principles of Antonin Artaud. I will show how Kane uses techniques which engage Artaudian theories in order to affect the consciousness of audiences in specific ways. Both Kane and Artaud sought to lessen the distance between audience and action in the theater. Kane accomplishes this through her attack on subject and her attack on form. Kane's elimination of character leaves a void which can only be filled by the audience inserting themselves into the drama, thereby implicating them in the action on stage. Through her attack on Naturalism, Kane merges form and meaning which forces audiences into an unfamiliar space that allows for a new experience of the familiar. She uses the full force and capabilities of live theater to bypass our cultural identities and to affect individual consciousness on the level of the senses. Kane uses violence and obscenities (both in acts and language) to create a demoralizing and dehumanizing experience. Kane's use of the abject is a tactic meant to expose to the audience who they really are; it is the
vision of ourselves as we exist (or as we are capable of existing) behind the edifice of culture. In these ways Kane's theater transgresses the established norms of the relationship between spectator and spectacle in theater. Kane's theater forces us into an understanding of ourselves and of our human condition. However, her theater is not a call to action; there is no moral waiting for us at the end. Kane's theater simply forces us to see ourselves clearly, hoping that after the veil falls we will take up a superior and heroic attitude in order to overcome our basest nature. It is possible, she insists, to confront the best and the worst of humanity. What makes the theater the ideal arena for this confrontation is theater's unique ability to approximate life; it is as Artaud would claim, life's double. Theater is a means by which we can experience the torments of living without being subjected to the physical consequences.


After her death there was, inevitably, a lot of looking back at her life and her work. There was also a significant amount of re-evaluation of her work, at least by the critics. While the critics were slow to warm up to Kane (some never did), she was mostly admired among her peers. In the obituary published in The
Independent, fellow dramatist Mark Ravenhill recalls his first experience with Kane—the spring of 1996 when he “reluctantly” sat down to read *Blasted*. His apprehension stemmed from the publicity following the play’s premier, which left Ravenhill under the impression that *Blasted* was nothing more than “shock tactics masquerading as theater.”¹ This impression was certainly a reasonable one based on the attention the play received in the media. Ravenhill remembers that after having actually read the play, he was left with a very different impression than the one he was expecting:

But *Blasted* blew me away. From the first few lines, I knew I was in the hands of a playwright with total mastery of her craft. The dialogue was honed: so lean and tough and expressive that I would have wept with jealousy if I hadn’t been so gripped. And as the play progressed it was clear Kane had got the structure sorted as well, controlling perfectly the momentum so that its conclusion was logical and awful and beautiful.²

The critics, however, had a much harder time with Kane. As Kane remembered it, all of the hysteria surrounding *Blasted* came exclusively from the press, not from the audiences. The reason, she thought, was that the critical establishment had failed to “develop a satisfactory critical language with which to talk about plays.”³ Kane later commented: “I genuinely think it’s because if they don’t have a clear framework within which to locate the play they can’t talk about it.”⁴ Kane recognized her work as something new in the United Kingdom of the 1990s. She

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² Ibid.
saw in theater the potential to explore real issues and to affect real change—to her, the critics were just getting in the way. “I think the obsession with content that the critics have means that any play which contains scenes of violence will be seen as a violent play rather than a play about violence, because they don't know how to talk about it—and that's exacerbated by the fact that theater is a live art.”

Throughout the remainder of her career, she would continue to push the limits of theatrical experience, and in so doing, earn the respect and admiration of some, and the animosity and dismissal of others.

The controversy that surrounded the premier of *Blasted* in January of 1995 focused mainly on what some saw as an obscene and shockingly violent play. Immediately critics and scholars began to question the role of violence in art and how exactly to distinguish between the necessary and the gratuitous. But it cannot be just the violence in her plays that elicited such strong reactions. After all, the director of notably violent films, Quentin Tarantino, debuted a full three years earlier with his film, *Reservoir Dogs*. Violence was not unknown even within the world of British theater—Edward Bond’s *Saved* premiered at the Royal Court theater in 1965 after being originally censored because of a scene in which a baby is stoned to death. Edward Bond himself, however, rejected the oft made comparison between the work of Tarantino and the work of Kane:

> [Sarah Kane] was able to penetrate very deeply what happens inside everybody, and that's not just a subjective thing it's how you relate to our external reality. If you let the outside world into yourself that is a chaotic and dramatic process and she was able to touch that process

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and people don't like it. There's a huge difference between Tarantino and *Blasted*. Both deal with chaos. One says chaos is dangerous for us but we have to go into chaos to find ourselves. The other says chaos is a gimmick, a new device—it's a trick. Tarantino will make his fortune. Sarah Kane kills herself.\(^6\)

The comparison illustrates several important aspects of Kane's work in regards to violence. In response to the numerous critics of the violence in *Blasted*, Kane noted that the violence in the play was de-glamorized and therefore of a different kind than that of people like Tarantino. Without glamor, violence is presented as it really is: repulsive. Kane wondered why people had a problem with it in that case: “Would people seriously prefer it if the violence were appealing? You'd think people would be able to tell the difference between something that's about violence and something that's violent. I don't think it's violent at all. *[Blasted is]* quite a peaceful play.”\(^7\) And so this became Kane's struggle during, and for some time after, the premier of her first play. She felt that violence was the most pressing issue of the day and thought it not only should be, but *needed* to be addressed. Kane believed, as people such as John Fraser did, that art was perhaps the best means with which to explore “the nature of the beast.”\(^8\) As we shall see, Kane insists that theater is a supremely effective means through which we may confront the abject and thereby find ourselves.

Sarah Kane was certainly not the first to recognize the connection between

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8 John Fraser, "Art and Violence: Some Considerations," *Western Humanities Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 120.
her work and the work of French theater theorist Antonin Artaud. Kane only became familiar with Artaud towards the end of her work on *Crave*. She talked about this in an interview with Nils Tabert in 1998, and it is worth quoting at length:

A lot of people said to me for a long time that I must really like Artaud, and I hadn’t read any of that. Artaud was recommended to me by a lecturer at university who I hated so much that I thought, 'Well I’m not going to read it if he thinks Artaud is good—he simply can't be!' So I only started reading him very recently. And the more I read it [the more] I thought this is a definition of sanity: this man is completely and utterly sane and I understand everything he’s saying. And I was amazed how it connects completely with my work. Also, his writings about theater are stunningly good. And it's amazing to me that I’d never read it... I also think depression is quite a healthy state of being because all it reflects is a completely realistic perception of what’s going on. I think to a certain degree you have to deaden your ability to feel and perceive. In order to function you have to cut out at least one part of your mind; otherwise you'd be chronically sane in a society which is chronically insane. I mean look at Artaud. That’s your choice: go mad and die or function but be insane.9

Kane saw similarities between Artaud and herself in terms of theory and in terms of temperament. It is remarkable just how similar their visions for the theater were. The similarities are evident in their goals, techniques, and even in what they saw as the possibilities for the theater. It would be one thing if Kane were simply trying to implement Artaud's theories—but the fact that she hadn't even read them until near the end of her life makes it all the more remarkable. Susan Sontag once declared that “the course of all recent serious theater in Europe and the Americas can be said to divide into two periods—before Artaud and after

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Artaud."  While Artaud's theories have woven their way, even subtly and unconsciously, into the works of most contemporary theater practitioners, few have experimented with his principles to such a degree as Sarah Kane.

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CHAPTER II
CONTEXT AND CULTURE

In her seminal work, *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt described the 20th century as being a century that was most notably marked by violence.11 It was during the extreme violence of the 20th century that even the idea of violence underwent a shift in the popular imagination. John Fraser comments that in Britain, in the pre-war years, “the general attitude towards violence was untinged with metaphysical concerns.”12 Violence was seen as natural, if uncivilized, and therefore posed no problem intellectually. This attitude can be seen reflected in the art of the time, and was not to last.

Humanity, battered and bloodied, emerged at the end of the century having developed a new relationship with violence. Fraser argues that the extreme brutality of the World Wars, and of the Holocaust in particular, demanded an intellectualization of violence in the western mind.13 Given the emergence of new technologies in mass media, there were few who were spared a confrontation with the extremes of human experience. It is certainly possible to see how, in the face of trying to understand how man is capable of such barbarity, our defense mechanisms might be triggered.

Indeed, we can see this tendency explicitly in one of the most well known post-war playwrights, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s ‘epic theater’ sought to insert the

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13 Ibid., 84-5.
intellect between action and emotion. In an interview in 1953, Brecht explains his vision of theater this way:

Suppose a sister is mourning her brother's departure for the war; and it is the peasant war: he is a peasant, off to join the peasants. Are we to surrender to her sorrow completely? Or not at all? We must be able to surrender to her sorrow and at the same time not to. Our actual emotion will come from recognizing and feeling the incident's double aspect.14

Brecht rejected theatrical illusion and purposefully created distance between the audience and character—his goal being intellectual understanding instead of, or in addition to, commiseration. Brecht's fear was that a too emotional response would prevent an audience from being able to understand and therefore learn from the drama. It is perhaps unsurprising that this political and intellectual theater emerged in Germany, a country trying to rebuild itself after tremendous devastation. However, Brecht's was certainly not the only response to the terrors of the times.

A full six years before even the events of WWII were to unfold, Artaud wrote: “In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theater which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times.”15 Artaud desired a theater that in the face of tremendous events would not be made impotent. It is the same attitude that we can see in Kane, half a century later. Kane, like Artaud, felt that the extraordinary nature of our time demanded a response that intellectualization

was not providing. The violence we find in Artaud and in Kane is in some ways a reaction to this very intellectualization.

Artaud’s interest in the idea of theater as antidote to modernity was perhaps born out of the chaos of his own life and of the world around him. Born in Marseilles in 1896, Artaud was struck with meningitis as a child, which, though sparing his life, left him with chronic pain in the form of neuralgia. Before his death (an overdose of medicine he was taking for cancer) in 1948, he lived through two world wars, more than 14 total years of incarceration in various mental asylums, poverty, homelessness, starvation, drug addictions, and 51 electro-shock therapy treatments (in the very early years of that treatment, when it was particularly savage). While we can only guess to what extent Artaud’s work was influenced by his life, his work remains particularly salient in the development of contemporary theater, proving the universality of the truths which he sought.

To Artaud, culture was something which humanity imposed on itself—a way of bringing stability to the tumultuousness of living. Culture and civilization were artifices which prevented us from experiencing anything except culture and civilization. He wrote:

> a cultivated “civilized” man is regarded as a person instructed in systems, a person who thinks in forms, signs, representations—a monster whose faculty of deriving thoughts from acts, instead of identifying acts with thoughts, is developed to an absurdity.

> If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of

their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force.\textsuperscript{17}

We have become so concerned with the form of the thing that we have lost any idea of what it is to experience it at all. This is a direct assault on the kind of intellectualization that the Western mind had come to favor. Although Artaud himself never invoked these concepts, it is perhaps useful to think in terms of Freud's superego and cultural superego. Artaud saw the chaos of the world around him and came to the conclusion that the superegos had led humanity in the wrong direction. The only way to save ourselves would be to subvert the cultural will and force people to reconnect with their id/ego, or what Artaud referred to as \textit{l'esprit}.

Artaud saw that the theater of the day not only failed to address these problems, but was actually a manifestation of the problems. Artaud insisted that “if the public does not frequent our literary masterpieces, it is because those masterpieces are literary, that is to say, fixed; and fixed in forms that no longer respond to the needs of the time.”\textsuperscript{18} If the theater of the day was not adequately responding to the needs of the time, it was because it too was a result of the same processes that had so obscured any notion of what it truly meant to be alive. Artaud believed that the contemporary theater had lost any feelings for seriousness and laughter. Theater no longer conveyed what he called “Danger,” i.e. effects that are both immediate and painful.\textsuperscript{19} Humor was not neglected by Artaud, as he saw in laughter a kind of “anarchic dissociation,” and anarchy he

\textsuperscript{17} Artaud, \textit{The Theater and its Double}, 8.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 42.
believed was at the root of all true poetry.\(^\text{20}\) Artaud believed that theater was in a unique position—in that it was capable of breaking through culture.

Liberating man from the chains of civilization would not be easy, however. Artaud recognized this, and so named his conception of theater the 'Theater of Cruelty'. Artaud used 'cruelty' to describe the necessarily severe effect he hoped to achieve in his audience and the intense dedication he tasked practitioners with in order to achieve those effects: “cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.”\(^\text{21}\) This approach required theater to adopt a new attitude—one that above all “wakes us up: nerves and heart.”\(^\text{22}\) This uncompromising attitude is, in part, what leads to Artaud's famous comparison between the action of the theater and that of the plague.

The plague is an exceptional analogy for the type of experience Artaud wanted the theater to achieve. He wrote that, “beneath such a scourge, all social forms disintegrate.”\(^\text{23}\) Under the devastating force of the plague, man is revealed as he truly is, behind the masks of civilization and culture. Artaud, while vividly describing a plague-ridden town, identifies the exact moment when theater is born:

The dregs of the population, apparently immunized by their frenzied greed, enter the open houses and pillage riches they know will serve no purpose or profit. And at that moment the theater is born. The theater, i.e., an immediate gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit.\(^\text{24}\)

\(^\text{20}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{21}\) Ibid., 101.  
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid., 84.  
\(^\text{23}\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^\text{24}\) Ibid., 24.
This gratuitousness is as close as we can get to experiencing a reality outside of the social constructs of our world. Anything that would make it non-gratuitous (necessary) would do so only based on the criteria of a constructed social system and therefore would not be suitable for a 'pre-cultural' experience. It is an experience which is not dependent on culture for meaning—it strikes us on a deeper level as it is born of the id and of the ego. It is our freedom from the oppression of socially constructed meaning.

The plague also demonstrates the erosion of culture inasmuch as it inflicts severe physical pain. Physical pain is unique in that it is an experience which shuns language. Elaine Scarry picks up on this quality of pain: “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”

This is another way of exposing our pre-cultural selves. It is antintellectual, instinctual, and demands an immediate, uninhibited response.

Even the Greeks saw the limitations of words to express suffering. David Morris notes that at the moment when Oedipus comes to his awful revelation, and the moment after he blinds himself, “what we hear is not words but only a single, repeated cry of agony: speech rolled back into mere sound and torment . . . a frozen moment of pain that contains nothing except the mutilated human body and its wordless suffering.”

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26 David Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press,
easily a precursor to Artaud's mistrust of language and perhaps gives us insight into why he saw pain and suffering as key to accessing the acultural part of ourselves.

Scarry argues that pain's rigid resistance to language is not accidental but rather, “essential to what it is.”\textsuperscript{27} It is what makes pain pain. Pain's relationship to a person is unique among experiences, she argues, “for physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not \textit{of} or \textit{for} anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.”\textsuperscript{28} As we shall see, both Artaud and Kane seem to understand this aspect of pain and make use of it accordingly. However, I contend that this phenomenon should not be limited solely to physical pain—that pain works in the same way regardless of its degree of physicality.

Physical pain, while certainly represented in Artaud's theater, was not central to the Theater of Cruelty. In fact Artaud sought to reassure people of his seriousness after writing the manifesto for his theater, worried that people might misunderstand him as only wanting to shock the audience. In 1932 he writes that the theater is not concerned with sadism, bloodshed, or with horror in general (at least not exclusively).\textsuperscript{29} Artaud advocated comedy as much as tragedy, music and pantomime were just as important as screams and violence. This is made

\textsuperscript{1993}, 248.
\textsuperscript{27} Scarry, 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Scarry, 5.
\textsuperscript{29} Artaud, \textit{The Theater and its Double}, 101.
obvious by his open admiration for the Balinese theater: “in a word, the Balinese have realized, with the utmost rigor, the idea of pure theater, where everything, conception and realization alike, has value, has existence only in proportion to its degree of objectification on the stage.”

The political and social did not play a role in the theater which Artaud desired. Referential content, satire, any attempt to comment on the contemporary—meant a theater which was too bound in culture to be able to affect an individual on a level outside of culture. Artaud believed culture was both the jail and the jailer. Culture was the manifestation of the problems of modernity and so Artaud called for a theater which culture could not contain.

Artaud’s theater was almost certainly, in part, a reaction to the course that theater was on in the early parts of the 20th century. From Maeterlink to Ibsen and early Strindberg, drama was clearly on the path of naturalism. The audience would witness themselves in the characters on stage, like peeping toms behind an imaginary fourth wall. This is the illusion of theater as perceived by people like Strindberg. Plausibility is central to keeping an audience invested in the drama. Strindberg thought of himself, as author, as a kind of hypnotist—lulling an audience into believing what was happening in front of them was real.

Strindberg described his vision for the theater in his 1888 introduction to his play, Miss Julie. His theater, at least at this point in his career, was about trying to convince the audience that they were flies on the wall, witnessing actual events. He railed against the conventions of the day, such as painting shelves on

30 Ibid., 53.
canvas walls of sets. For *Miss Julie*, he confined the action to only one setting, claiming that: “with only one setting we should be able to demand that it be realistic . . . even if the walls must be of canvas, it is surely time to stop painting shelves and kitchen utensils on them. We have so many other stage conventions in which we are asked to believe, we should not have to strain ourselves trying to believe in painted pots and pans.”31 Interestingly enough, Artaud also mentions this facet of the theater while writing about one of Strindberg's later works: *A Dream Play*, which he planned to produce at his Alfred Jarry theater. But Artaud sees the problem very differently: “Nothing is less capable of taking us in than the illusion of phony props, pasteboard, and painted backdrops which the modern stage presents. One must take one's choice and not try to compete with life.”32 Artaud was interested in the reality of the truths, not necessarily the strict realism of the set. Strindberg’s insistence on the illusion of reality demonstrates the focus of his theater—the goal of his writing.

Strindberg shared his goal with all the Naturalists. For all their effort, expended to create a 'realistic' theater experience, their ambition was nothing compared with that of Artaud. As Strindberg wrote, he sought to “see a new drama arise, or at the very least a theater that was once again a place of entertainment for educated people.”33 This is the theater which Artaud was steeped in, the very one he found both decadent and useless. Plays like *Miss

33 Strindberg, 75.
*Julie* may entertain. They may make an audience reconsider how they think about class issues. Artaud would take issue, however, with the fact that that is all they do, and theater is capable of so much more. Artaud believed in the uniqueness of theater. The presentness, the liveness of theater is what makes it unique and gives it qualities that are not shared by any other form of art. Therefore, he saw theater as the only means by which humans, in our present cultural state, could be affected in the way in which we need to be affected.

Artaud would also object to the myopic attitude towards representation that dominated in the naturalistic theater. J. O. Urmson argues that in drama there are two kinds of representation: simulation and stylization. Simulation is deception, and stylization is the conveyance of certain meanings via convention. As we will see, both Artaud and Kane spend considerable effort in their careers to prove that representation in theater is not limited to Urmson's modes.

This is not to imply that the course of contemporary theater was a straight one. Surrealism, expressionism, cubism, dadaism, etc. all represent deviances from the naturalistic path. Artaud saw in these movements, however, only more of the same: “if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.” Artaud was not interested in representations of the world that existed. He saw in theater the potential to expose our true natures. The theater he envisioned was one in which “all that is obscure, hidden, and

unrevealed in the mind will be manifested in a kind of material, objective projection.”36 The popular forms of the day and their theorized functions all worked within the context of culture and therefore could never achieve anything truly revolutionary. This was one of the contributing factors to his break with the surrealist movement. The surrealists were headed in the right direction, but Artaud saw them as so mired in the form that they had lost sight of the possibilities.

The possible effects of theater, of course, have been of great concern for a long time. Thomas Munro writes that the 'technical' theory of art says “that art is, or can be, a means to an end. It holds that art can be rightly evaluated on the ground of its effects and consequences.”37 Indeed as Mathew R. Martin and James Robert Allard note: “classical poetics attribute to the theater tremendous power to transform and communicate pain.”38 They argue that it is this attribute of theater which Plato regarded so suspiciously in his Republic, in which Socrates says: “when even the best of us hear Homer, or some other tragic poet, imitating one of the heroes in a state of grief and making a long speech of lamentation, or even chanting and beating his breast, you know we enjoy it and give ourselves over to it. We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously.”39 It is

36 Artaud, Selected Writings, 160.
this very aspect of theater which lead Plato to banish it from his hypothetical society. If it draws its power from depictions of human suffering, then it must be morally corrosive as it undermines reason's control over the passions. Plato saw what Artaud saw: theater's ability to undermine society's control over the individual; Plato saw this as potentially devastating, while Artaud saw it as a cure.

Aristotle was acutely aware of the power of the theater, as demonstrated in his Poetics. In describing how actors need to give themselves over to the emotion of the characters they are meant to be representing, he notes that “poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness,” showing a certain degree of misgiving about the power of theater. Aristotle wrote that “tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude.” This attitude towards the seriousness of theater is similar to what we have seen in Artaud, and one that certainly carries forward to Kane.

The Greeks, of course, didn’t actually stage violence. Rather, they relied on eye witness reports in their tragedies, or at the most, silent tableaux which depicted the bloody scenes. Horace, in fact, advises the poet that,

Medea must not shed her children’s blood,  
Nor savage Atreus cook man’s flesh for food,  
Nor Philomel turn bird or Cadmus snake,  
With people looking on and wide awake.  
If scenes like these before my eyes be thrust,  
They shock belief and generate disgust.  

40 Allard and Martin, 12.  
42 Ibid., 10.  
Horace seems more troubled by the bathos of these scenes, given the technical limitations of the day, than by the actual violence. In the ancient Greek plays we see the beginnings of what would become all too familiar in later centuries: reliance and emphasis on form instead of on effect. That is not to say that the Ancient Greeks did not innovate, nor to say that they had no concern for the effect on the audience, but only to point out the origins of formalism in their work. The very stylized nature of the violence in their theater does not preclude it altogether from inciting the kind of experience Artaud was after, but it is only one part of a larger equation. As we shall see, more abstract representations can have just as much real emotional presence as those that are strictly realistic.

Artaud’s vision shared many characteristics with the vision of the pragmatists, as illustrated in 1934 by John Dewey. In *Art as Experience* Dewey argues that art is not the sculpture, the painting, or the performance. To Dewey, art is the experience that one has with these ‘art products’. The close relationship Dewey places on art and experience is very much in line with how Artaud saw his art. While they admittedly might have differed in terms of kind and goal of experience, their shared acknowledgment of art as experience made them rather unique. Artaud wanted to kick art off of its pedestal. Art had become elitist and remote; the vast majority of the population was no longer capable of understanding it. Artaud wrote: “masterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us. We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and
direct, corresponding to present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone.”\textsuperscript{44} Here Artaud expresses the idea that the efficacy of art is inextricably bound to cultural context. Because art is more than the object (Dewey's art products), because it is an experience between artist, object, and audience, it must be able to communicate to audience—it cannot be in a 'language' that is not understood. It must be able to confront the very issues which plague their consciousnesses through the corrupting influence of culture. Dewey argues the same: “art must be understood as a phenomenon of human communication, taking place in a biological, historical, and cultural context.”\textsuperscript{45} Artaud's theater was a reaction to the context of his day, just as Kane's drama, as we shall see, reacted against her own. The fact that they ended up using remarkably similar techniques shows the similarity of their cultural contexts as well as the appropriateness of their responses.

It is the role of distance in theater which preoccupied the great theater artists of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Edward Bullough set the stage for these experiments with distance in his 1912 article: 'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle. Bullough argues that it is those moments when “our practical interest snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension, and we watch the consummation of some impending catastrophe with the marveling unconcern of a mere spectator” when we can say that we have experienced the insertion of

\textsuperscript{44} Artaud, The Theater and its Double, 74.
In any act of theater the audience is, inevitably, removed a certain amount from the action on stage. Distance in this case means detachment; it is a measure of unreality—the amount the audience is aware of itself as audience. It is what separates staged drama from real life. The 20th century has seen more experimentation with this aspect of theater than any other time in history.

If one considers distance in theater as a spectrum, it is easy to see the two extremes represented by Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski. Brecht, as we have seen, sought to maximize the distance between audience and drama. To Brecht, the play should be an object; it should be suited for proper and thorough investigation by the intellect. Grotowski, on the other hand, took inspiration from Artaud, and sought to minimize the distance between the performer and the spectator. Grotowski pushes well past Artaud in this endeavor, ultimately eliminating the distance completely and thereby, arguably, making it 'not theater' (Daphna Ben Chaim calls it “group therapy”).

The fact that Artaud is not the extreme on the spectrum actually illustrates a very important point about the kind of theatrical experience Artaud advocated. While he certainly sought to reduce the distance between audience and action, he did not want to eliminate it entirely. He saw them as distinct entities on the same continuum. He wrote that “between life and theater there will be no distinct division but instead a continuity.” If we take it, as Chaim does, that “Artaud . . .

46 Edward Bullough, “Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle,” *British Journal of Psychology* 5, no. 2 (June 1912): 89.
wants 'no vacuum' in the mind of the theater spectator, no part of the psyche not filled with sensation—and therefore no part of it reserved to observe itself,”⁴⁹ then we must ask how he intends to achieve this. Artaud had many ideas on how to go about it, but they all relied upon some bit of 'untruth'. This is illustrated most clearly by Artaud's reliance on audience and the project of theater. The very existence of an audience implies separation and distance. Artaud sees theater as having a unique relationship to audience: “For, unlike writers or painters, we cannot do without an audience; indeed, the audience becomes an integral part of our undertaking.”⁵⁰ The audience is not tricked into thinking it is not an audience; rather the audience is acutely aware of who they are and why they are there.

The spectator who comes to our theater knows that he is to undergo a real operation in which not only his mind but his senses and his flesh are at stake. Henceforth he will go to the theater the way he goes to the surgeon or the dentist. In the same state of mind—knowing, of course, that he will not die, but that it is a serious thing, and that he will not come out of it unscathed. If we were not convinced that we would reach him as deeply as possible, we would consider ourselves inadequate to our most absolute duty. He must be totally convinced that we are capable of making him scream.⁵¹

Artaud retains the distinction between audience and performer. It is the latter's job to affect the former. While Artaud does not reject the audience/performer relationship (only Grotowski would do this), his purpose is to change both the kind and quality of that relationship. “Regardless of the degree of success of our performances, those who attend them will understand that they are participating

⁴⁹ Chaim, 40.
⁵¹ Ibid., 156-7
in a mystical experiment by which an important part of the domain of the mind and consciousness may be definitively saved or lost."\textsuperscript{52} Just as he demands a dedication and seriousness from his actors, Artaud requires a certain attitude from his audience, a willingness. We will see how Artaud, and Kane, attempted to control the relationship between audience and action and in so doing we will learn what they hoped to achieve.

Fifty years after Artaud’s death, Sarah Kane found herself reacting similarly to contemporary theater. Kane was a young writer on the British stage, and was often grouped in as part of what Aleks Sierz dubbed “in-yer-face” theater, which he described as a kind of theater which “takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message.”\textsuperscript{53} While exactly what makes a play part of this genre may be obvious, Sierz emphasizes the shock tactics employed by the playwrights in order to “wake up the audience.”\textsuperscript{54} The group of playwrights Sierz includes in this group include: Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh, Jez Butterworth, and Sarah Kane, among others. As for other critics, Kane is most often compared to writers like Edward Bond and John Osborne. The similarities lie not so much in style or theme, but in reception and response. Despite some legitimate comparisons, however, Kane stands relatively alone among her contemporaries.

If these playwrights were primarily influenced by the two opposing forces

\textsuperscript{52} Artaud, “Manifesto for a Theater that Failed,” in \textit{Selected Writings}, 161.  
\textsuperscript{53} Aleks Sierz, \textit{In-Yer-Face theater: British Drama Today} (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 40.  
\textsuperscript{54} Sierz, 41.
of “political revolution globally and political inertia at home,”\textsuperscript{55} as Kane scholar Graham Saunders contends, one would surely expect to see very political theater. And for the most part, with some obvious exceptions, that became the rule. James McDonald (director of the premieres of \textit{Blasted}, \textit{Cleansed}, and \textit{4.48 Psychosis}, all at the Royal Court theater) saw Kane reacting against what had become the dominant theater of the day:

broadly, the Royal Court play of the Seventies and Eighties, driven by a clear political agenda, kitted out with signposts: indicating meaning and generally featuring a hefty state-of-the-nation speech somewhere near the end. More than any one, [Kane] knew that this template is no use to us now.\textsuperscript{56}

Kane, as we shall see, was remarkably apolitical for a female playwright of the 1990s. Indeed her writing became more and more internal as it progressed and by her last play she had left all signs of externality behind.

Besides the ever diminishing amount of politics in her plays, critics and commentators have been quick to mention the vulgarity of Kane's work—her most damning critics seeing her theater as nothing more than a \textit{grand guignol}. The Guardian chose to describe \textit{Blasted} in Kane's obituary as: “scenes of fellatio, frottage, micturition, defecation, homosexual rape, eye gouging and cannibalism.”\textsuperscript{57} Marvin Carlson points out that when \textit{Cleansed} premiered in Germany (a country with a long history of experimental theater) it “introduced to the German stage an unprecedented level of nudity, violence, and sadistic

\textsuperscript{55} Saunders, \textit{About Kane}, 12.
\textsuperscript{56} James MacDonald, quoted in Saunders, ‘\textit{Love me or Kill me}’, 9.
eroticism.” And, to a certain extent, those critics who claimed that Kane was trying to shock were right. What they often overlooked, however, was the motivation and effect of the tactic.

Again, we can see this tactic employed by Artaud. In *The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)* Artaud describes an experience which might be suitable for his theater. He chooses themes which might be bloody, and which correspond to agitation and unrest. He imagines a staging of the conquest of Mexico, a spectacle which depicts the serene and the tranquil decay into chaos and turmoil. The country is engulfed in war and the audience is presented with the full spectacle of it, affecting every sense. He vividly describes the scene: “the stage wall is stuffed unevenly with heads, throats; cracked, oddly broken melodies, and responses to these melodies appear like stumps . . . Lights and sounds produce an impression of dissolving, unraveling, spreading, and squashing.” Artaud aims to overwhelm with what might be best classified as 'disturbing,' in terms of both images and sound. There is a reason why Artaud prefers these ghastly images and jarring sounds in his theater. It is because there is a certain quality of experience which they evoke that cannot be achieved through alternative means.

Julia Kristeva puts forth a theory which articulates why certain vulgarities strike us in such a peculiar manner. Kristeva dubs 'abject' anything which

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58 Marvin Carlson, *Theater is More Beautiful than War; German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 42.
60 Ibid., 130-1.
“disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”61 These are things which, most notably for our purposes here, are rejected by culture. They are those things which are opposed to the superego. “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.”62 The abject can be seen in the dissolution of identity and in the elimination of the distinction between subject and object.63 Kristeva gives a name and an explanation to a concept which Artaud had most certainly been familiar with, and a concept which both he and Kane would utilize in their pursuit of total theater.

It is this concept of the abject which Kane deploys in her theater and which some confuse for an immature desire to shock. When Jack Tinker reviewed the premier of Kane's Blasted, he wrote that they play “appears to know no bounds of decency.”64 But what his outrage perhaps failed to let him consider was why one might put such acts of debauchery on stage. Perhaps we cannot fault a theater critic, of all people, for being so engaged with cultural norms as to miss the point of something which aims to subvert them. While some critics were hostile to the end, there were some who warmed up to Kane as they saw what she, and her

62 Ibid., 15.
63 Ibid., 207.
plays, were capable of. They were those who went to her plays and learned not to expect the preachy, political kind of play that was so popular among her contemporaries but to be ready to experience something which functioned on a deeper, more intensely personal level.

Kane’s violence is sometimes criticized not for its mere existence, but rather for how it is used in the larger structure of the play. Linda Joffee objects to it on these grounds. In comparing *Blasted* to a play by Tracy Letts: *Killer Joe*, which also features violence prominently, Joffee identifies what for her made the difference between the two. She argues that by sticking to theatre basics, which for her means that it has “a strong beginning, middle, and end,” the violent excesses in *Killer Joe* serve to “ratchet up the dramatic tension,” instead of being only “gratuitous,” as in *Blasted*.65 Joffee was surely not alone in her disdain for Kane’s move away from established forms. Indeed, Kane’s theatre is a dramatic move away from the kind of realist theatre that dominated the British stage in the 1980s,66 but Kane was interested in addressing issues, and not limiting herself to the means of expression dictated by tradition.

Kane designed her theater to answer the issues of the day, and perhaps that is why she inevitably created some controversy. Because violence was considered such an important issue at the time (and remains so), there were those who thought witnessing violence on stage was not only unpleasant, but

actually harmful. In 1999, J.D. Martinez wrote that “given the irrefutable causal relationship between viewing violence and its negative psychological and social effects, it is unthinkable for artists to continue to justify the dramatic portrayal of violence by making distinctions between essential and gratuitous violence.”67 Alvis Hermanis of the New Riga Theatre sees violence as a common, but not necessary, tool in the theatre. He goes so far as to claim that “almost all the plays in the history of theatre have been written about mentally disordered individuals,” and that aggression is not a productive means of communication.68 But Martinez fails to take into account the difference in kind between different art forms. As we saw with the comparison of Kane and Tarantino, violence in film is not the same as violence on stage. Even only within the realm of theater, Hermanis fails to consider that the way in which the violence is presented affects how it is perceived. In fact, it is precisely keeping violence at an intellectual distance which may be causing the harm which people like Martinez are worried about. Kane, like Artaud, wanted to re-familiarize people with experience, and the theater is the only means to do that, outside of life itself.

Looking at Kane's plays broadly, it is possible to see a clear progression from her early struggles with naturalism to her final full embrace of the abstract. But as we will see, the various forms her plays take can be considered as experiments all aimed at proving the same hypothesis: that theater is capable of

reaching through our damaged superegos and affecting real change in consciousness.
CHAPTER III

THE PLAYS OF SARAH KANE

_Blasted_

_Blasted_ masquerades as a piece of naturalism for much of the play. It is set in a nice hotel room in the city of Leeds, where we find the middle-aged Ian with a rather younger woman, Cate. As they enter, Cate is amazed by the classiness of the room, but Ian speaks first, declaring: “I've shat in better places than this.”\(^69\) The juxtaposition of the sweet Cate and the vulgar Ian immediately brings a tension to the play that hints at the fact that this will not be the typical fourth-wall drama. Ian quickly establishes himself as a somewhat repulsive individual: before the end of the first page of dialogue he has stripped, put a loaded gun under the pillow, cursed, and used a racial slur.

Soon after the first of Ian's rebuffed sexual advances, Cate has an episode in which she faints, then laughs hysterically and says: “Have to tell her,” and “She's in danger,”\(^70\) before waking up. She later describes these fits as like being in a reality where time has slowed, where she is powerless against the inevitable—like the moment of orgasm.\(^71\) It becomes apparent that Cate and Ian were lovers at some point in the past, and that Ian still has sexual desire for her.

At the beginning of the second scene we learn that Ian has raped Cate during the night. Cate, later in the scene, tries to exact revenge on Ian by biting

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\(^{69}\) Sarah Kane, “Blasted,” in _Sarah Kane; Complete Plays_ (London: Methuen, 2001), 3.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 23.
down on him during fellatio. And it is after these sexual violences that the naturalism begins to break down. Cate at one point looks out the window and comments: “looks like there’s a war on.”72 As Cate disappears into the bathroom at the end of the scene, a soldier from the invading force enters, and the room is “blasted by a mortar bomb.”73

Scene three finds Ian and the soldier in the rubble of what used to be the hotel room. Through the course of a very tense scene, the soldier recounts the war-time atrocities he has committed as well as those that have been committed upon Col, a woman he cared about. The soldier rapes Ian at gunpoint, then proceeds to suck out and eat his eyes—evidently doing to Ian what was done to Col.

The scene change between scenes three and four includes the sound of autumn rain. Each scene change includes the sound of seasonal rain: spring, summer, autumn, winter. It is clear that time is passing, but it is not made clear how much time. The passing of time, quickly sometimes and slowly at others, is another technique Kane uses to disorient the audience. As the lights come up on scene four it is revealed that the soldier has shot himself in the head. His corpse rests on the rubble of the destroyed hotel room, next to the now blind Ian. Cate comes back into the room to discover the blinded Ian, and she is carrying a baby, explaining only “a woman gave me her baby.”74 Ian asks her to give him the gun so he can kill himself, and Cate hands it to him only after removing the bullets.

72 Ibid., 33.
73 Ibid., 39.
74 Ibid., 51.
By the end of the scene the baby has died, and Cate responds by laughing hysterically. The stage goes dark and the audience hears the sound of winter rain.

At the beginning of scene five, Cate is burying the baby under the torn up floor boards. She leaves, ignoring Ian's cries for food. The change in seasons indicated between the scenes did not, evidently, mean an interruption in the action. This temporal distortion gives way to a series of moving tableaux—glimpses of Ian's life as time passes.

Darkness.
Light.

**Ian** masturbating.

Ian: cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt
darkness.
light.

**Ian** strangling himself with his bare hands.

Darkness.
Light.

**Ian** shitting.
And then trying to clean it up with newspaper.

Darkness.
Light.

**Ian** laughing hysterically.

Darkness.
Light.

**Ian** having a nightmare.

Darkness.
Light.

**Ian** crying, huge bloody tears.  
*He is hugging the Soldier's body for comfort.*

Darkness.  
Light.

**Ian** lying very still, weak with hunger.

Darkness.  
Light.

**Ian** tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby’s body out.

He eats the baby.

He puts the remains back in the baby’s blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole.  
A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.

He dies with relief.  

It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.

Eventually.

**Ian:** Shit.75

The sense of depravity initially conveyed during these moments is lessened as one realizes he is doing nothing more than satisfying our natural urges.  He is only surviving in the midst of extraordinary circumstances.  As Ian crawls into the hole in the floor, with only his head exposed, the stage directions tell us that, “he dies with relief.”76  It is evidently more of a symbolic than actual death.  Cate re-

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75 Ibid., 59-60.  
76 Ibid., 60.
enters, “blood seeping from between her legs,” and in the last act of the play offers some food and gin to Ian. Ian's final words: “thank you,” lead some to believe that the story is redemptive.

Critics, among others, have found it easiest to describe the play by simply listing the most violent and vulgar moments. But any such description obviously misses the context in which these things occur. Kane walks a fine line in Blasted, teetering on the brink of gratuitousness. The violence in this play, however, does not rely on the existence of a moral to justify itself—rather, it is its own justification. Kane uses techniques which are aimed at eliminating critical distance between the audience and the action on stage, which makes the events experiences, opening them to a rather novel level of meaning. Many have speculated that this was precisely what left some with a sour taste in their mouth after seeing a play “that assaulted the senses without making easy sense of what was occurring.”

Blasted conflicted with an audience's expectations of what a play should be—and that is the reason why it received such a rocky initial reception.

Ian's very first line establishes him as a less than savory character—and yet there is no hint that Kane is condemning him—his actions and words are what they are; no moral judgments damn him. Cate, while rebuffing Ian's advances, never voices her moral superiority—she doesn't castigate Ian. Because of Ian's

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 61.
immediate repulsiveness, Cate's sweetness makes her the obvious object of sympathy. And so, in this unfamiliar situation, the audience naturally looks to Cate for a cue on how to take Ian. In this way, her acceptance of Ian and all his crassness becomes the audience's acceptance of Ian. The fact that Ian is terminally ill (as revealed through his coughing and dialogue with Cate) only adds to the initial response to see Ian through Cate's eyes.

Similarly, Artaud had no interest in the common preoccupation of the theater of his day, that of the opposing forces of good and evil. He wrote that “[theater's] object is not to resolve social or psychological conflicts, to serve as battlefield for moral passions, but to express objectively certain secret truths.”

This belief, that there are deeper truths than the simplistic dualities of good and evil, is prevalent throughout Artaud's writing. Even Artaud's play, Les Cenci (an adaptation of a play by Shelley), is focused on this idea. Cenci, whose acts make him unquestionably evil, questions the distinction between victim and perpetrator as he argues agency. Cenci ponders in a monologue:

Repent! Why? Repentance is in God's hands. It is up to him to rue my actions. Why did he make me the father of a being whom I desire so utterly? Before anyone condemns my crime, let them accuse fate. Are we free? Who can maintain we are free when the heavens are ready to fall on us? I have opened the floodgates so as not to be engulfed.

If we are all the victims of fate and circumstance, than anyone can recognize themselves in even the most evil among us.

During the first scene of Blasted there are few hints as to the backgrounds

80 Artaud, The Theater and its Double, 70.
or histories of the characters. There are no declamations to that effect. We (the audience) infer that they used to date. Cate is evidently living with her mother, taking care of her brother, but there are no more details offered. We find out that Ian is a tabloid journalist, as he dictates a short article to an editor over the phone. The story is of a series of murders taking place in Leeds, and Ian's cold dictation of the details (spelling out the latest victim's name, indicating punctuation, etc.) encapsulates the drama on stage. One simply cannot emotionally connect with the victims of the story in the manner in which the story is related. In a similar way, Kane carefully controls what kind of relationship we are allowed to have with Cate and Ian. As we will see, empathy is not Kane's goal; she does not want us to relate to the experience but to live through the experience.

When Cate mentions that they always used to go to Ian's apartment to meet, Ian responds: “That was years ago. You've grown up.”\(^2\) The implication that their previous relationship occurred before Cate had 'grown up' suggests that her involvement may have been less than consensual. This ambiguity is clearly illustrated after Ian kisses Cate and she responds positively before pushing him away. He uses her hand to masturbate, and thereby physically demonstrates the imbalance of their relationship.

Without much of a foundation for character, the audience is forced to accept them for who they are, based only on their actions in the present. Character is not something Kane wants to emphasize. She is after action, or

\(^2\) Kane, 13.
rather, what the action signifies. The rest only gets in the way. Characters don’t exist for their own sakes, but rather they exist to express relationships and meaningful dynamics.

After Ian's rape of Cate which, typically for Naturalism is not staged, one would be forgiven for assuming that the roles of victim and of perpetrator had been firmly established. Cate's seduction of Ian, followed by her physical violence to him at his moment of climax, marks the beginning of the decay of those archetypes. When the soldier rapes Ian (an act which is represented on stage) he also becomes a victim.

The soldier himself goes through this same metamorphosis as he establishes his dominance via his humiliation of Ian, but very shortly after reveals his weakness by taking his own life. Even his brief dialogue displays this blurred distinction between victim and perpetrator as he recounts the atrocities he has committed and those that have been committed upon those he loves. His rape of Ian seems to be a re-enactment, or at very least revenge for, what was done to his girlfriend.

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

Ian:  Why?
Soldier: Going to fuck you.
Ian:  No.
Soldier: Kill you then.
Ian:  Fine.
Soldier: See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.
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Ian: Yes.
Soldier: And now you agree with anything I say.

He kisses Ian very tenderly on the lips.
They stare at each other.

Soldier: You smell like her. Same cigarettes.

_The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand._
_He holds the revolver to Ian’s head with the other._
_He pulls down Ian’s trousers, undoes his own and rapes him—eyes closed and smelling Ian’s hair._
_The Soldier is crying his heart out._
_Ian’s face registers pain but he is silent._
_When the Soldier has finished he pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver up Ian’s anus._

Soldier: Bastard pulled the trigger on Col. What’s it like? 83

It is after this exchange that the Soldier sucks out and eats Ian’s eyes.

While it was around this time (what Kane once referred to as “eyeball-munching time” 84) when a few members of the audience would inevitably walk out of the theater, it is certainly not the first example of forced enucleation in British theater. The most notable example being, of course, the blinding of Gloucester in Shakespeare’s _King Lear_. There are, however, obvious differences between Cornwall’s “Out, vile jelly,” and the Soldier’s “Poor fucking bastard.” 85 The critic Sarah Hemming noted that “Shakespeare was no slouch when it came to depicting horror and violence. But he did offer plot, character, poetry and a coherent moral framework. _Blasted_ just provides incident upon incident of

83 Kane, 48-9.
84 Sarah Kane, interview, _Start the Week_, BBC Radio 4, February 20, 1995, quoted in Saunders, _About Kane_, 51.
85 Kane, 50.
violence and degradation.” Hemming, while trying to be disparaging, has actually hit the nail quite on the head. Violence in Kane is not on an epic scale, involving grand plots and scheming royalty. Violence exists on a level that is accessible to all, and therefore all the more frightening. A moral framework does not have to be imposed on violence that is as honest, real, and visceral as Kane's. This violence implies its meaning, and is not staged in accordance to any preexisting notion of morality. If the goal is to have an act strike one on a precultural level, its relative morality (a cultural construct) becomes meaningless.

Ken Urban believes that the play at least allows for the possibility of an ethics. He recognizes that Kane does not provide the audience a chance for moral judgments, and argues that instead Kane “dramatizes the quest for ethics.” He writes that as opposed to morals, ethics “are subject to change, even optional, emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being.” Indeed, if one is to find any transcendent message in Kane, ethics (or the possibility of ethics) is as close as we can get without the unwarranted assigning of morals to the characters and actions in her plays.

Jack Tinker of the Daily Mail exposed what made Blasted different than the typical new play of the British stage in the 1990s in his review titled: “The Disgusting Feast of Filth”. In addition to the violence, he confides that what really turned him off was that the play had “no message to convey by way of

88 Ibid.
This one complaint is at the heart of what makes Kane’s plays unique among her contemporaries. It is an integral part of how her plays function. Urban is correct in his thesis that Kane is exploring the possibility of ethics in her plays, which does not fit comfortably into either the traditions of drama or into the trend of the British theater of the mid to late nineties.

The destruction of the set by the mortar blast can be seen as a not-so-subtle destruction of the fourth wall. But it is also part of a tactic to bring space into the realm of relevant action. The idea that not even the walls of the set are safe brings the audience further into the action, removing the psychological comfort typically offered by the clear distinction between 'playing space' and 'audience space' in a theater. Similarly, Artaud conceived of the space of the theater as an instrument: “The problem is to make space speak, to feed and furnish it; like mines laid in a wall of rock which all of a sudden turns into geysers and bouquets of stone.”  

Spectacle needed to be re-conceived as something capable of consuming the spectator. Carlson writes of Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Blasted* at the Schaubühne theater in Berlin in 2005, “Jan Pappelbaum [the designer] created a bright, modern hotel bedroom on two separate turntables and an astonishing coup de theatre at midpoint when an apocalyptic explosion totally destroys this set, the furniture raising ceilingward, the ceiling ripping apart, and debris falling to the stage in a torrent of light and

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Kane, like Artaud, places a great deal of trust in designers and directors, as they are the ones most immediately responsible for the relationship any given audience has with a performance.

Ian's ignored death is yet another attempt by Kane to break the audience of any notion of naturalism. She wants to emphasize the reality of the experiences, not the reality of the actions. Ian's death is therefore felt as death without it necessarily being the physical truth. It is perhaps an attempt at classic catharsis. Ian's death is feared and, when it comes, we find it to be a relief and a release. The fact that his death doesn't stick cannot change its previous existence, nor the audience's reaction to it. Kane herself noted a tendency among directors to view the second half of the play as more metaphoric. She argues that while the first half may seem real, if done correctly the second half should seem even more real. Reality exists in the effect and in the experience, not in the action.

Sean Carney also notes the techniques used by Kane to escape naturalism, and argues that *Blasted* represents a new kind of tragedy for the modern moment. He suggests that there are two levels of meaning operating in *Blasted*, and considers the relationship between the phenomenological and the semiotic. Carney says that in Kane’s aestheticized violence we can see the phenomenal and the noumenal struggle to unite. He even sees this struggle in Artaud’s Theatre of

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91 Carlson, 174.
92 Graham Saunders, “'Just a Word on a Page and there is the Drama.' Sarah Kane’s Theatrical Legacy,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13, no. 1 (2003), 103.
Cruelty, as Artaud is forced to create a language with which to textualize his raw phenomenal experience. This tension is present in both theatre and history, Carney argues, which is why they both constitute an experience of the impossible—that experience which is at the heart of tragedy.

Kim Solga sees Cate's unseen rape as a gendered critique of the genre of realism. She argues that Ian's rape is “not a substitution for Cate's rape but a supplement to it, designed in its uncomfortably visible corporeality . . . to call our attention to its very absence, its status as disappeared.” While Solga's very political reading of Kane may have some truth to it, Kane herself never spoke specifically about the decision to omit Cate's rape. She was very much aware of the form of the play and how she deliberately destroys it. As Kane describes it: “a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters and the play into a chaotic pit without logical explanation.” If the entrance of the soldier is the disruption of the traditional form, it is clear why Kane didn't stage Cate's rape. Sexual assault has not been a traditionally depicted act, despite it's common inclusion in drama. The ancient Greeks, as we have already seen, did not stage violence as a rule. Jacobian drama, and revenge plays in particular, are ripe with instances of rape, but again these are not staged. As an example, the stage directions in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus read: “Enter the Empress' sons with Lavinia, her

94 Kim Solga, “Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible,” Modern Drama 50, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 357.
95 Ibid., 359.
hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished.” 96 Here, Shakespeare's treatment of his Philomela is paradigmatic of how rape would be treated in the theater for the next several hundred years. The violence of the act, the depravity, is demonstrated only by the actor acting “ravished” (whatever that looks like). Similarly, and more recently, Tennessee Williams tackles the subject of rape with the stage directions: “He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly.” 97 The point is that rape is often used as a plot point, and yet it is rarely actually part of the action.

Elaine Aston attempts a feminist look at Kane by tracing the thread of oppressive gender positions through Blasted, Cleansed, and Crave. But Aston notes that at the time of Blasted, Kane was almost always grouped with, and compared to, male playwrights. The first feminist considerations of her work were not contemporaneous with the productions. Kane’s break with Brechtian theater, the very theater which gave inspiration to the feminist theatrical critiques of social and political institutions, also seems to have, to some extent, put her at some distance from the feminist tradition of the 1990s. Kane herself fought against labels, either of herself or of her work. When asked what she felt her greatest responsibility as a female writer was, she responded: “I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing. . . I don't want to be a representative of any biological or social group of which I happen to be a member. I am what I am. Not what other people want me to

96 Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, act 2 scene 4.
97 Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (New York: Signet, 1951), 130.
be.”98 When talking about her work, she never spoke in terms of gender politics—that would have been far too narrow for her. Her politics, when present, tended to focus on larger, more comprehensive issues such as 'violence' or 'love'. Piotr Gruszczynski suggests that in Kane’s work we see nothing less than the search for the true nature of humanity. The focus is on existence itself, a subject which not many playwrights are willing to take on.99 But Kane did see the connections between large and small issues. Kane expressed this succinctly in an interview after the premier of Blasted: “So I thought what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia? And suddenly the penny dropped and I thought of course it's obvious, one is the seed and the other the tree.”100 By focusing on affecting people on the level of consciousness itself, she hoped to stop the growth of the tree by killing the seed. Similarly, Artaud saw in grand themes a way of accessing the individual. He called for themes that would be cosmic and universal and that would “bring into fashion that great preoccupations and great essential passions which the modern theater has hidden under the patina of the pseudocivilized man.”101 The very fact of their universality demonstrates that they are not bound to any particular culture or society and therefore able to affect an individual on the most basic level of consciousness.

Peter Buse argues that the atrocities acted out in *Blasted*, while horrifying, remain somewhat familiar to us as they are surely no more horrifying than those traumas experienced throughout the 20th century, beginning with World War I.\textsuperscript{102} Drawing upon similar themes as we saw with Fraser earlier, Buse is concerned with how the violence of the 20th century has informed our cultural consciousness. Through his look at trauma theory, Buse posits that perhaps what made critics unconsciously uneasy about *Blasted* was that “the soldier's compulsive repeating of the same brutalities appears to be partly mitigated by his own trauma, which he is acting out again and again.”\textsuperscript{103} The unease that accompanies the problematizing or complicating of the easy black and white distinctions of victim and perpetrator is a distancing effect used by Kane not only in this play, but in all her plays, as we shall see.

In addition to the ambiguation of the classically archetypal roles, Christopher Wixson submits that *Blasted* trespasses on audience comfort zones through its violation of the norms of place and identity. Wixson points out that the very fact that Kane brings such violences onto the stage is a disruption of place, as they are acts which are “not meant to be shown on a stage,”\textsuperscript{104} a principle which is born out by theater's long tradition of violence only via second-hand reports or implication. The most obvious violation of place is the set being literally blown apart by a mortar blast halfway through the play. The comfort

\textsuperscript{102} Peter Buse, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 174.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 178.

\textsuperscript{104} Christopher Wixson, “'In Better Places': Space, Identity, and Alienation in Sarah Kane's Blasted,” *Comparative Drama* 39, no. 1 (2005), 86.
that the realistic set offered, the security that comes with being able to identify space and all the metaphysical trappings of space is directly challenged in this moment. The idea that a foreign war could erupt in a Leeds hotel room disorients and denies the audience the possibility of contextualizing the action on stage in a physical sense. As Ian crawls into the hole in the floor at the end of the play, “alienated space and alienated identity become one as Ian . . . merges with his environment, helpless and victimized.”105 Ian, like the baby before him, becomes a signifier of the disrupted sense of space, thereby helping to shift the spectators’ experience away from the realm of the expected.

This idea of using space as more than simply a way of communicating location can also be seen clearly in Artaud. For Artaud, space itself was part of the language of theater, and as such, was capable of communication and expression. In his essay “Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène,” Artaud considers a painting as an example of how space is capable of speaking. In the various details of the landscape of the painting (Lucas van den Leyden's “The Daughters of Lot”) Artaud sees expressed ideas of becoming, fatality, chaos, and the marvelous. He claims that “this painting is what the theater should be, if it knew how to speak the language that belongs to it.”106 As the painting makes the most of its inherent capabilities, theater must be made to do the same. Theater's language includes all that can be expressed in three-dimensional space and its potential for expression should not be limited.

105 Ibid., 84.
Even beyond the confrontations with the unexpected that we have already noted, the play left people in a kind of shock. Critics like John Peter were left with “a question of a kind of visceral tact: how much despair can you convey, how much horror can you show, before an audience is overdosed?” When asked about it, Kane responded: “Most people experience a lot more despair and brutality than John Peter would like to believe. There’s only the same danger of overdose in theater as there is in life. The choice is to represent it, or not to represent it.” Kane here starts to conceive of the relationship between theater and life in a similar fashion as Artaud. Kane said: “I’d rather risk overdose in the theater than in life. And I’d rather risk defensive screams than passively become part of a civilization that has committed suicide.” Here we find Kane expressing her exasperation at the decline of culture while also indicating that theater has the power to heal. It is this same exasperation that we see in Artaud, who, in a letter in 1932 complains that the waning interest in the theater is perhaps because the theater has stopped representing the very age from which it demands support. Both Kane and Artaud are responding to the ills of the society and culture that they see around them. In theater, they see a way of confronting those issues that in life cannot be confronted less they destroy us.

_Blasted_ was written as a parallel to the war it portrayed, in form and content. The destruction of the set in the middle of the play comes suddenly,

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108 Stephenson and Langridge, 132-3.
109 Ibid. 133.
without warning, just as actual violence can interrupt the functioning of any society. The fact that Kane wanted to draw attention to this seemed almost to outstrip the attention that actual violences received. Kane noted in an interview that “the representation of violence caused more anger than actual violence. While the corpse of Yugoslavia was rotting on our doorstep, the press chose to get angry, not about the corpse but about the cultural event that drew attention to it.”\textsuperscript{111} Kane’s play was an attempt to de-intellectualize the violence that was actually happening in the world, and it turned out to be more upsetting (or at least more news worthy) than the violence itself. This is because it is the very de-intellectualization of the violence which shocks, not the violence itself. While the stories out of Yugoslavia were filtered through the media and therefore the cultural consensus, \textit{Blasted} forced an experience which subverted these traditional modes of understanding.

Some critics saw \textit{Blasted}’s violence as an attempt by Kane to draw attention to the fact that depictions of violence are mass consumed in society which, in turn, has a negative affect on our well being. Peter Buse wrote that “\textit{Blasted} implies that modern Britain is a society where potentially traumatizing events, such as rape and murder, are rendered inconsequential by the constant diet of them provided by the press.”\textsuperscript{112} It is Ian’s casual and detached reporting of the details of a murder which strikes us as not at all out of the ordinary. The tabloids are full of such graphic depictions of the same kinds of violence that the

\textsuperscript{111} Stephenson and Langridge, 131.
\textsuperscript{112} Buse, 186.
spectator is presented with in *Blasted*, so why is it that the play managed to elicit such outrage? Buse continues to speculate that “*Blasted* . . . makes those events strange by presenting them so graphically and in such an intimate environment. This is where theater has a capacity to defamiliarize the kinds of images television and film bombards us with, breaking up the 'automatism of perception' of horrific events.” Buse's idea that *Blasted* disrupts the 'automatism of perception' is, arguably, a direct response to the intellectualization of violence which Fraser warned us about. It is, to a certain extent, a kind of ostranenie, taking violence out of its typical place in our consciousness so that we are forced to re-perceive the phenomenon. This is a technique that Kane would use throughout her career.

**Phaedra's Love**

Kane's second play was a commissioned work: an adaptation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* for the Gate theater in Notting Hill. The story has been well represented throughout history, with versions by Euripides, Seneca, Racine, O'Neill, and many more. In *Phaedra's Love* one can see Kane grappling with some of the same themes she took on in *Blasted*. The play would be the only play of hers which she directed herself. Typical of the reviews, Michael Billington of The Guardian wrote: “Viscerally, her play has undeniable power: intellectually, it's hard to see what point it is making.” But as with all of Kane's plays, it is perhaps improper to draw a distinction between the visceral and the intellectual.

113 Ibid.
—or perhaps best to ignore both categories altogether.

Like *Blasted*, *Phaedra’s Love* sets the tone of the play almost immediately. As the lights come up we find Hippolytus lounging on a sofa watching television. He is surrounded by dirty laundry, expensive toys, and fast food wrappers. He masturbates into a sock before discarding it onto the floor. Much like Ian, Hippolytus is not a pleasant person. Like Ian, Hippolytus also is flawed, almost pitiable. Through Phaedra’s early interrogation of a doctor we learn that Hippolytus is depressed. Phaedra is obsessed with Hippolytus, a fact that her daughter points out to her, and in the process exposes Phaedra’s tragic element:

**Strophe:** You can have any man you want.
**Phaedra:** I want him.
**Strophe:** Except him.
**Phaedra:** Any man I want except the man I want.¹¹⁵

Hippolytus is revealed to be contemptuous, vulgar, and direct. He criticizes the presents given him on his birthday and only takes interest in the one he got for himself. He lives with no concern other than for the present. He sees honesty as his virtue, as he submits himself to only his desires, to his basest impulses. When Phaedra hangs herself, leaving a note accusing him of rape, Hippolytus finally becomes engaged with something. He calls it “not boring,”¹¹⁶ and so Hippolytus sees it as Phaedra’s last gift to him and goes to turn himself in rather than taking Strophe’s advice and hiding.

When Theseus gets home from his travels he ensures that vengeance is taken upon those that have wronged him. Theseus, disguised as a commoner,

¹¹⁵ Sarah Kane, “Phaedra’s Love,” *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, 72.
¹¹⁶ Ibid., 87.
incites a crowd and together they mutilate and kill Hippolytus (first cutting off his genitals and throwing them onto a barbecue before Theseus himself adds Hippolytus' bowels to the grill). Theseus rapes a woman who tries to protect Hippolytus and then slits her throat to the cheers of the crowd. When he realizes it was Strophe he has done this to he cuts his own throat and dies atop the bodies of Strophe and Hippolytus. As the curtain closes, a vulture descends and begins to feed.

The gratuitousness of *Phaedra's Love* seems intentional. The violence in the play is in stark contrast to the versions by Seneca or Euripides, which, in the Greek tradition, do not stage the actual violence. When asked about this difference, Kane replied: “I mean, if you're not going to see what happens, why not stay at home? Why pay ten pounds to not see it? . . . personally I’d rather have an image right in front of me.”117 In a way this attitude is a reflection of Hippolytus' obsession with truth. The actions of the play are not hidden, their truths are allowed to exist without being first filtered through a second-hand report. It is a way of exploring the limitations of language's ability to express truths. Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of rape, an accusation which he does not deny. In reality, 'rape' doesn't do a great job of describing what happened. Phaedra performs oral sex on Hippolytus, who only betrays his complete indifference by holding her head down as he ejaculates. It is routine for him, uninteresting. Phaedra is in love with him and almost expects him to reciprocate.

But to Hippolytus there is nothing special about Phaedra, she is just another in a long line of women willing to please him. It is that very indifference which makes the scene uneasy; that, and the fact that as Phaedra exits Hippolytus mentions that she should see a doctor because he has gonorrhea. Hippolytus' refusal to engage with Phaedra on any level other than that of object denies her very humanity and in fact is not the simple indifference that Hippolytus believes it to be. In actuality it is a vicious attack on Phaedra's identity. Kane mentions this scene specifically: “what Hippolytus does to Phaedra is not rape—but the English language doesn't contain the words to describe the emotional decimation he inflicts. 'Rape' is the best word Phaedra can find for it, the most violent and potent, so that's the word she uses.”118 By staging the act itself, she can avoid the failure of language to adequately describe the event.

Kane transforms the genre of tragedy. In the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, the tragedy is always inevitable. The direct cause of the tragedy (the misunderstanding, the too late realization, etc.) could have potentially been avoided—but the fate of the characters is sealed, and it is never in doubt that Tiresias' prophecies will come true, and that ruin will befall the characters. But in Kane, there is no misunderstanding that leads to the misery of the characters. From the beginning they are set in their paths to destruction, and the audience is therefore denied the chance to see how they got to the place they are in. The play begins with depression and debauchery and ends with the same. By denying progression or development (or even the possibility of progression), Kane once

118 Kane in Stephenson and Langridge, 132.
again disrupts the typical relationship between audience and action on stage. Since growth is not allowed, the audience cannot speculate about the future of the characters and must therefore be intensely focused on the present.

In her production of *Phaedra's Love*, Kane experimented with altering the physical distance between actor and spectator. Saunders notes that the “seating was dispersed around the theater, and no single playing space selected,” that actors were disguised as audience members, and bloody body parts were thrown over the heads of the audience.\(^{119}\) The attempt at unnerving the audience in this physical way also serves to implicate the audience in the action. Like the destruction of the set in *Blasted*, it serves to break the audience out of expected theater experience by eliminating, or confusing, the idea of space in theater.

Artaud also believed in the convergence of audience and action in the theater. In his first manifesto for the Theater of Cruelty, he wrote:

> We abolish the stage and auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of action. A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle . . . from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.\(^{120}\)

Artaud sought to fundamentally change the relationship that spectators had with spectacle. By destroying even the trappings and physical space of that relationship, he could ensure that the audience would be affected; unprotected, so to speak, from their umbrella of expectation.

\(^{119}\) Saunders, *Love me or Kill me*, 80-1.
\(^{120}\) Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, 96.
Cleansed

Cleansed premiered on April 30th, 1998 to mixed reviews. While just as violent as Blasted (if not more so), Cleansed offers few of the naturalistic tokens of Kane's first two plays. There are characters, and they seemingly occupy time and space, but all of those things are ill-defined. Cleansed is a play about the relationships inside what is ostensibly a university, but one might be more tempted to call an asylum or prison. The audience's inability to identify setting foreshadows the disrupted expectations that will persist throughout the play. Tinker, the sadistic jailer, tests the relationships among the inmates—torturing them both physically and mentally. This play, about the limits of love, abandons almost all explanatory narrative—instead presenting the audience only with scenes filled with lyricism, both in terms of its use of language and in terms of its use of often violent action.

The play opens with Graham asking Tinker for a way out. Tinker obliges and provides Graham with the overdose of Heroin which he wanted. Graham injects the drug into his eye and dies. The second scene introduces the audience to Rod and Carl. Carl is trying to convince Rod to exchange rings, as a sign of commitment. Despite Carl's declarations of limitless love, Rod insists to Carl that he can't promise anything beyond the immediate:

Rod:  *(Takes the ring and Carl's hand.)*
Listen. I'm saying this once.
*(He puts the ring on Carl's finger.)*
I love you *now.*
I'm with you *now.*
I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you.
Now.
That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you.
Carl: I'm not lying to you.¹²¹

The honesty with which Rod confronts Carl is indicative of how the play will go. With no history and no future for the characters, there is only the present—an example of Kane’s emphasis on experience.

The third scene introduces the audience to two additional characters: Grace, Graham’s sister, and Robin, a boy. It has been six months since Graham overdosed, and Grace has learned from Tinker that his clothes were given to Robin. Grace makes Robin strip and exchange clothes with her. This scene marks the beginning of the play’s attack on identity. Throughout the play Grace loses her identity and merges with the character of her dead brother. In this play identity seems to become fluid. Cristina Delgado-García argues that Kane’s violence is enacted upon the very concept of the liberal-humanist subject.¹²² As we will see, Kane’s attack on subject will persist throughout all of her plays.

Scene four finds Carl being beaten by an “unseen group of men.”¹²³ Tinker finally signals the beating to stop, but Carl’s reprieve is short lived as Tinker then sodomizes him with a pole. After a while of this torture, Carl begs for Tinker to spare his life—to take Rod instead. Rod literally falls into the scene, having heard Carl’s betrayal. As Carl begins to apologize, Tinker cuts out his tongue with a pair

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¹²¹ Sarah Kane, “Cleansed,” Sarah Kane: Complete Plays, 111.
¹²³ Ibid., 116.
of scissors. Just as the character of Grace is on a journey of transformation in the play, changing identities, Carl is also on a journey as he slowly, throughout the play, loses bits of himself.

Grace wakes up in a white room and is reunited with her dead brother, Graham. He expresses his love for her through dance, and she joins in, mimicking and mirroring his movements, becoming him. Their dance stops and they become terrified. “Love me or kill me, Graham,” Grace says after a kiss; they make love and “a sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads.”

The sexual atmosphere carries over into scene six, where we find ourselves in the 'Black Room,' which Kane describes in the stage notes as “the showers in the university sports hall converted into peep-show booths.” Tinker watches a woman dancing as he masturbates. He takes the woman to be Grace, but she won't let him see his face. He wants to save her from an apparent life of sexual servitude, or at least to monopolize that servitude. Tinker's acceptance of this sexual character as Grace is yet another way in which Kane subverts subject, not to mention that the woman is herself dehumanized by being presented as object. Faceless and nameless, she is without identity—a fact accentuated by Tinker's imposition of Grace's identity on to her.

Grace teaches Robin how to write, and talks about the nature of love and identity as she is questioned by both Robin and Graham. Robin becomes attached to Grace and asks her to be his girlfriend. Whatever sweetness exists in

124 Ibid., 120.
125 Ibid., 121.
the scene is short-lived, as the next brings the audience back to the yard of the university, with Rod and Carl. Rod points out Carl's hypocrisy in declaring his love and shortly after betraying him to Tinker. Carl tries to communicate with Rod by frantically writing in the mud. Tinker, who has been watching, chops off Carl’s hands—one of which is promptly fed upon by rats.

As the play continues, Grace is beaten and raped by a group of unseen assailants. In her mind, she looks to Graham for an escape and he shields her from volleys of executioner's bullets. The wall behind Grace is struck with the hail of bullets and becomes pitted and splattered with blood. Tinker tries to comfort Grace, but she only hears Graham in her ears. Their words blend, and Grace is as oblivious to Tinker's words as Tinker is to the fact that Grace's responses are only to Graham. At the end of scene twelve the stage directions read: “An electric current is switched on. Grace's body is thrown into rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out.”

Carl dances for Rod, a dance of love which becomes frenzied and spasmodic. The ever watching Tinker enters, and cuts off Carl's feet, which are carried away by the rats. A child sings in the distance.

Tinker's sadism continues as his relationship with the dancing woman grows violent. He tortures Robin and eventually hangs him for loving Grace. He finally brings Carl's torment to the extreme by murdering Rod. Tinker fulfills Grace's wish by surgically removing her breasts, and attaching Carl's penis to her groin. She has become Graham. The characters literally become each other, destroying the modern notion of subject in favor of one of intrasubjectivity. The

126 Ibid., 135.
play ends with the sun growing in brightness as the sound of the rats becomes deafening.

To say that Cleansed is a tough play is perhaps a bit of an understatement. The ceaseless brutality is purposefully difficult. This play pushes to the limits Kane's idea that there is only the same danger in the theater that there is in life. But there is method to Kane's madness in Cleansed. Kane, throughout her oeuvre, is interested in presenting real experience in the artificial venue of the theater.

Hillary Chute sees in Cleansed an attempt by Kane to tweak the notion of distance in theater. She argues, and is unquestionably supported by Cleansed, that “Kane's work problematises the idea of a correct distance by presenting her theater as a confrontation with discomfort.” 127 Discomfort may be putting it lightly. This discomfort is Kristeva's abject. It is our forced confrontation with culturally rejected actualities. This confrontation with the abject is precisely what made many uneasy about Kane.

Cleansed received similar press as Blasted had three years earlier. James Christopher speculated in The Independent that it might be the “biggest theatrical gamble” of James Macdonald's directing career. 128 Nicholas De Jongh of The Evening Standard complained in his headline of being “force-fed horror at

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[a] gross banquet of cruelties.” However, as extreme as some of the language is, most of the reviewers all seem to come to the conclusion that while violent, the violence in the play is of a different, and better, kind than that of *Blasted*. The difference is the more abstract nature of the play. Christopher puts it this way: “there is also a dream-like quality to *Cleansed* which is absent in *Blasted* and a clearer indication that there is a deeper language at work.” To the reviewers, it is precisely Kane's move away from naturalism which is the savior of the play. Perhaps they saw in *Blasted* an attack on naturalism that they were uncomfortable with—a problem they don't have with a clearly more abstract piece.

The present, in *Cleansed*, is ill-defined, and Chute interprets it as a metonymic representation of an encounter with anxiety. Thus, the time and setting of *Cleansed* are not alien to an audience, as it can exist within the realm of common experience. Chute also posits that since the violence in *Blasted* and in *Cleansed* is not anchored in either the everyday or in history, in the context of theater it is “able to mean afresh.” Violence in this sense is experienced outside of a culturally predefined metaphor. It is not alluding to or invoking anything other than its own reality. Kane's metonymic and anti-metaphorical approach give her plays the capacity for novel meaning. Again, Kane engages ostranenie in

131 Chute, 166.
order to force audiences into a re-evaluation or reappraisal of how we experience meaning.

As with *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed* is also an exploration of the tenuous distinctions between victim, perpetrator, and bystander. Tinker, despite his intense sadism, is also reassuring and gentle. In scene three, Tinker strokes Grace's hair in an effort to calm her,\(^\text{132}\) a gesture he repeats in the scene after to comfort Carl.\(^\text{133}\) In that same scene Tinker even kisses Carl's face gently.\(^\text{134}\) These moments of tendernesses stand out against Tinker's typical detached sadism and even serve to accentuate his cruelty. Tinker dances back and forth over the line between bystander and perpetrator. In almost every scene Tinker is on stage, watching. He observes the characters, a bystander to their acts of love, and then forcefully exerts his will into their lives. Tinker is absolutely a perpetrator, let there be no mistake, but the scenes in which he is with the dancing woman reveal him to be a victim as well. These scenes demonstrate Tinker's weaknesses (the very things he exploits in the others) and show his humanity. In this way Tinker is similar to Hippolytus; they are, both of them, devoted completely to an absolute—victims of their own determination.

Kane further disrupts the intellectual distancing of the audience from the action by utilizing techniques Artaud himself calls for in his manifestos for the theater of Cruelty. Artaud argued that one way in which theater could reach an audience was through the use of dissonances. These dissonances are an example

\(^{132}\) Kane, 113.
\(^{133}\) Ibid., 117.
\(^{134}\) Ibid., 116.
of how Artaud (and Kane) departed from naturalism in their quests to elicit real experience in their audiences. Artaud specifies in his Second Manifesto on the Theater of Cruelty that the means to be used are broad: “These means, which consist of intensities of colors, lights, or sounds, which utilize vibration, tremors, repetition, whether of a musical rhythm or a spoken phrase, special tones or a general diffusion of light, can obtain their full effect only by the use of dissonances.”

Dissonance, or disharmony, is jarring to the psyche. These disruptions are meant to prevent inactive perception of experience. They force upon the audience an active role in decoding what is happening around them.

Kane’s exploration of this principle begins in earnest in Cleansed. At the end of scene ten, the automatic gun fire and blood splattering is immediately followed by the miraculous growth of yellow daffodils which cover the stage. Tinker’s humiliation and torture of Robin presents the audience with arguably the most depraved moments in the play. In scene 15 Tinker discovers Robin with a box of chocolates that he had wanted to present to Grace, as a symbol of his love. Tinker forces him to eat the chocolates, one by one—all twelve, until there are none left. When the moment of release comes, and Robin finishes the chocolates, Tinker removes the empty tray from the box and reveals the bottom tray. Robin is forced to resume his eating. The trauma of Tinker forcing Robin to eat the entirety of his gift for Grace is overwhelming. Robin wets himself. Tinker rubs Robin’s face in the puddle and orders him to clean it up. Robin uses the only thing at his disposal, the books with which Grace had been teaching him. He

135 Artaud, The Theater and its Double, 125.
tears the pages out, sopping up as much as he can. When there is nothing else to be done, Tinker forces him to burn the books. This scene demonstrates perfectly Kristeva's duality: the intimate and public sides of the abject being suffering and horror respectively.

Two scenes later, Robin demonstrates how much he has learned with Grace's help by counting on an abacus how many days he perceives remain before he is able to leave. He counts, and counts, to fifty then to thirty, all the while looking for some acknowledgment or encouragement from Grace. Grace is catatonic and doesn't respond. Robin continues counting as he strings up the noose. He calls Grace's name, over and over, desperate for her acknowledgment. She is incapable of a response. Robin hangs himself.

The eating of the chocolates, the counting of the beads of the abacus, Robin's repeated plead of 'Grace'—all of these moments are designed to break with our expectations of what should be part of a play. Even on the vulgar level of practicality, one wonders how an actor is to eat 24 chocolates every day, thrice on weekends. Counting is also not something one expects to experience in theater, as it is, at least superficially, not entertaining. These techniques interrupt our expected experience of play going, and yet prove themselves to create emotionally significant moments. To watch this character slowly and carefully count for an extended period strikes us, therefore, as poignantly real and allows us to experience the action on stage in a way that is fresh, that bypasses our culturally established safeguards and cuts us to the quick. Our very discomfort with the unexpected becomes part of the experience, feeds into it, and shapes it in a way
which strikes us distinctly—in a way in which the expected simply cannot.

In her attempt to affect audiences in new ways, Kane also demands creativity from anyone attempting to stage her plays. *Blasted* and *Phaedra’s Love* present the director with tough decisions about how to represent the atrocities committed, but *Cleansed* pushes the envelope of what it is possible to depict on stage. Sunflowers and daffodils spontaneously emerge from the stage. Limbs are unceremoniously lopped off and subsequently nibbled on and carried away by rats. Body parts are removed and sewn onto other bodies. One actor is required to gorge himself on chocolates. Characters are beaten and raped by both seen and unseen assailants. How does one practically stage these things which Kane calls for in her scripts?

James MacDonald recalled the first German production of *Cleansed*, in which the director, Peter Zadek, had spent months training live rats to take part in the play, only to cut them at the last minute upon realizing that they were not strong enough to drag away the prop human limbs.\(^{136}\) The vulture at the end of *Phaedra’s Love* is often simply left out of productions. But Kane was convinced that if you could imagine a thing, it could be represented.\(^{137}\) Indeed this inevitably leads to a more abstract interpretation of Kane. If some of what she demands is literally impossible to stage, the result will obviously be less than strictly realistic. In fact, there is the possibility that attempting to make things too real (physically) may actually result in bathos, as Horace worried. In an


\(^{137}\) David Greig, introduction *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, xiii.
article discussing the premier of *Cleansed* just a few weeks before its opening, Jeremy Herbert (the scenic designer for the production) posits that “if you baffle people with tricks it takes their mind off the play.”\(^{138}\) The idea is that making a moment real requires more than just making it appear real, indeed it may not need to appear real at all.

But the lack of strict realism does not equate to a lack of real experience. Artaud, and Kane, believed that often times a move away from the real was the best way to access real emotion and real experience. Kane believed that “audiences are really willing to believe something is happening if you give them the slightest suggestion that it is.”\(^{139}\) Artaud wrote that in his theater, “the illusion will no longer depend on the probability or improbability of the action but on its communicative power and its reality.”\(^{140}\) Any action, so long as it is capable of communicating something real, is suited to the theater. This, also, is indicative of Artaud’s refusal to be subjugated to forms. He was completely ends oriented, making use of whatever means happened to best serve his purposes. This same focus can be seen developing in the work of Kane. Each of her plays takes one step further away from established forms. This goes back to Artaud and Kane’s insistence that dramatic form is not limited to Urmson’s two modes of representation. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of theater is its capacity for a multiplicity of modes of representation.

\(^{139}\) Sarah Kane, interview by Nils Tabert, quoted in Saunders, *About Kane*, 68.
\(^{140}\) Artaud, *Collected Works*, 156.
**Crave**

Kane further develops her theme of abstraction leading to real experience in her last two plays. Originally written under a pseudonym, *Crave* leaves all notions of naturalism behind and relies even more heavily on the abstract to find its purpose and its effectiveness. The play has no traditional characters, instead it is divided only between four voices, labeled A, B, M, and C. These voices are contextless, and throughout the play only a few small hints are given as to their identities. M and C both reveal their genders early on, as M mentions her pregnancy and C references her menstruation. One could reasonably interpret B’s “yeah” on the second page as an affirmative response to M's “David?,” while A early on self-identifies as a pedophile and seems to be in some kind of relationship with the girl C. These few glimpses of identity, however, do little to provide a sense of narrative in the play.

Indeed narrative, and even the very content of words, is de-emphasized in the play. Instead the lines work together to create a mood, a feeling, that intangible something that transports you out of yourself and places you into a new emotional landscape. Kane accomplishes this through her use of abstraction, repetition, rhythm, dissonances, tempo, volume, emphasis—all the things which make up the range of human vocal expression. This is extremely reminiscent of Artaud's idea of total theater, and his new language of theater.

Artaud writes in his first manifesto:

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141 Sarah Kane, “Crave,” *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, 155.
142 Ibid., 156.
143 Ibid., 156.
Once aware of this language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels.

The question, then, for the theater, is to create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression, in order to rescue it from its servitude to psychology and “human interest.”

Meaning comes therefore not from the thing itself, but from what it symbolizes; it comes from the effect of the thing. This pragmatic view of theater is not new, either for Artaud or for Kane, but it is an aspect of theater that had fallen out of fashion in the modern era. Artaud's theater was closer to ritual than to drama. The quality of the experience was aimed at the metaphysical. “Rhythmic repetitions of syllables and particular modulations of the voice, swathing the precise sense of words, arouse swarms of images in the brain, producing a more or less hallucinatory state.”

Language, as an instrument, must be used to its full potential. It must not be stifled—used only as a means to make speech. Urmson, in his essay on dramatic representation, relies on and expands upon J. L. Austin's equation that in order to have a complete speech-act there must be both a phonetic act and a phatic act. But Artaud and Kane demonstrate that there are no useful distinctions between these modes of expression. A purely phonetic act is just as, if not more capable of communicating meaning as a complete speech-act. Poetry had started to see the potential for language to be used in this manner, but theater, Artaud believed, had the capability to push the experience even further.

144 Artaud, The Theater and its Double, 90.
145 Ibid., 120-1
146 Urmson, 335.
The voices in *Crave* seem to be talking both to each other and to no one. At times the conversation seems fluid, while at other times it seems disconnected and disjointed. The meaning comes from the experience of the cumulative effect.

C I'm looking for a time and place free of things that crawl, fly or sting.
M Inside.
A Here.
M Be the one.
C If she'd left -
M I don't want to grow old and cold and be too poor to dye my hair.
C You get mixed messages because I have mixed feelings.
M I don't want to be living in a bedsit at sixty, too scared to turn the heater on because I can't pay the bill.
C What ties me to you is guilt.
M I don't want to die alone and not be found till my bones are clean and the rent overdue.
C I don't want to stay.
B I don't want to stay.
C I want you to leave.
M If love would come
A Let it happen.
C No.
M It's leaving me behind.
B No.
C No.
M Yes.
B No.
A Yes.
C No.
M Yes.
B Let me go.147

The dialogue provides the audience only with glimpses of actions, parts of stories, or states of mind. Even the longer monologues provide no context and instead focus on the extremely specific—the personal yet undeniably universal emotions. A expresses what love is through what must be personal experience,

147 Kane, 165-6.
and yet ends up expressing something that resonates far beyond A’s personal experience. “And I want to play hide-and-seek and give you my clothes and tell you I like your shoes and sit on the steps while you take a bath and massage your neck and kiss your feet and hold your hand and go for a meal and not mind when you eat my food,” A continues in this way for almost two pages. As with all of her plays, Kane uses punctuation to indicate delivery, not to conform to the rules of grammar. The lack of punctuation in A’s speech translates to a sense of longing, of desperation, and of exhilaration.

There are no stage directions in Crave, and so the violence is limited to only what the voices describe. The violence is metaphysical, inflicted upon the audience by the rawness of the emotion and the intensity of the experience. Through the voices we hear of tendernesses and rapes, love and loss, mania and depression. The thoughts are sometimes congruous, sometimes disparate, coming in waves or all at once, they seem to mimic human consciousness and by so doing create real feeling. They are the textual approximation of the complications of life. When staged, the director is not only given, but encouraged to experiment with the full range of expression to bring the experience to completion. Artaud knew that the language of words was not being used to its full potential in the theater. He placed special emphasis on intonation, on the “faculty words have of creating a music in their own right according to the way they are pronounced, independently of their concrete meaning and even going counter to this meaning—of creating beneath language a subterranean current of

148 Ibid., 169.
impressions, correspondences, and analogies.” This aspect of language plays a crucial role in Kane's last two plays. Indeed this use of language is also something Kristeva identifies in her pursuit of the abject: “If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary—the violence of poetry, and silence.” This sentiment seems to describe Kane's late works perfectly.

Crave is a tough play because it is utterly devoid of hope. While Blasted may offer some sense of redemption with Ian's “thank you,” and Cleansed presents love as perhaps being the one thing that can survive in the bleakest of circumstances, Crave offers no salvation. The voices in Crave have given up, something that can't necessarily be said of the characters in Kane's previous writings.

    B    Kill me.
    A beat.
    A Free-falling
    B Into the light
    C Bright white light
    A World without end
    C You're dead to me
    M Glorious. Glorious.
    B And ever shall be
    A Happy
    B So happy
    C Happy and free.

As if taking a page from Uncle Vanya, the voices long for the peacefulness of

149 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 38.
150 Kristeva, 141.
151 Ibid., 200.
death. Despite the potential emotional trauma of the play, it lacked the visceral action of her previous plays and consequently received significantly more positive reviews. Perhaps because of this, *Crave* was the first of Kane's plays to be produced by a professional theater company in the United States. It played, to mixed reviews, at the Axis theater Company in New York with Deborah Harry taking the role of M in November and December of 2000.

**4.48 Psychosis**

Kane's last play, *4.48 Psychosis*, continues Kane's stylistic slide into the abstract. Having premiered posthumously, it is hard to read the play as anything other than at least partially autobiographical, but it also seems to be the natural place for Kane to end up given the trajectory of her writing. The play contains no character delineations and no stage directions—only words on the page. Even Kane's standard disclaimer about punctuation being used only to indicate delivery is missing. It is the ultimate destruction of character and represents her most ferocious attack on form. The roles of victim, perpetrator, and bystander—which Kane has tweaked in each of her plays, are now made completely irrelevant as the notion of subject itself is demolished. The distinction between external and internal is eliminated, and in so doing Kane exposes the complexity of every consciousness. This is perhaps the most violent action of the play; it is the forced recognition that every mind contains its own devils, and that none of us can escape ourselves unscathed.

The play is the truth of a disordered mind. The voice(s) is trapped in
depression and rages against the endless cycles of doctors and drugs which never
seem to help. The text ranges from fragmented thoughts to lengthy paragraphs.
Prose and poetry both mix with disassociated thought—sometimes only numbers,
splattered across the page.

It is done

    behold the Eunuch
    of castrated thought

    skull
    unwound

    the capture
    the rapture
    the rupture
    of a soul

    a solo symphony

    at 4.48
    the happy hour
    when clarity visits

    warm darkness
    which soaks my eyes

    I know no sin

    this is the sickness of becoming great

    this vital need for which I would die

          to be loved\textsuperscript{152}

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\textsuperscript{152} Sarah Kane, “4.48 Psychosis,” \textit{Sarah Kane: Complete Plays}, 242-3.

4:48 in the morning is the brief moment of clarity in an otherwise untenable
existence. 4:48 marks the beginning of the hour and 12 minute window of sanity,
which ultimately cannot prevent the inevitable. The play is not about suicide, though that is how it ends. It is the journey, not the destination, which strikes the audience—for as all tragedy, the end is never in doubt.

Again, Kane plays with repetition and harmony, affecting the consciousness poetically. In a moment of mania verbs are almost vomited from the page: “flicker punch slash dab wring press burn slash press slash punch flicker flash press burn slash dab flicker float flash flicker dab press burn slash press slash punch flash flicker burn,” followed by a truncated countdown—the verbal and textual actualization of almost inexpressible anxiety. Kane seems to be attempting to bring Artaud's ideas for a metaphysical theatrical language to life. On the metaphysics of language, Artaud wrote:

To make metaphysics out of a spoken language is to make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing physical shock; to divide and distribute it actively in space; . . . to turn against language and its basely utilitarian, one could say alimentary, sources, against its trapped-beast origins; and finally, to consider language as the form of *Incantation*.  

This attitude towards the function and nature of language represents a shift in the typical relationship that exists between audience and spectacle. Artaud argued that language, used in this way, makes the experience closer to that of ritual “in the sense that they extirpate from the mind of the onlooker all ideas of pretense, of cheap imitations of reality.” In *4.48 Psychosis*, Kane disrupts typical speech patterns by shifting between prose and poetry, monologue and

153 Ibid., 232.  
155 Ibid., 60.
dialogue, and blurring the line between the internal and external. This varied use of language imbues it with meaning beyond what meaning the words can convey by themselves.

The voice in *4.48 Psychosis* is, at times, an expression of the unbelievable tension which is created when mind is separated from body. The ultimate theme of the play is epitomized in the moments which express feelings of disassociation such as:

- Body and soul can never be married
- I need to become who I already am and will bellow forever at this incongruity which has committed me to hell
- Insoluble hoping cannot uphold me
- I will drown in dysphoria in the cold black pond of my self the pit of my immaterial mind

Kane herself believed that madness was “the split between one's consciousness and one's physical being”. This theme is not limited to *4.48 Psychosis*; it is, in fact, a theme which can be seen as one of the driving forces behind all of Kane's work. The mind/body dichotomy is an expression of the struggle between man and culture. Artaud saw this split as evidence of what was wrong with Occidental theater, which relied solely on psychological themes. Oriental theater, Artaud believed, had not, for the most part, lost its connections between the psychological and the physical and was therefore able to create layers of meaning unknown to western culture. It is this principle which is enacted in *4.48*

156 Kane, 212-3.
157 Kane, interview with Nils Tabert.
Psychosis—Kane's experience of madness.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

Violence is ubiquitous in Kane's plays. But Kane was only responding to a culture in which it has become pervasive. The insidiousness with which violence has woven itself into the cultural consciousness requires that necessarily severe measures be taken to combat it. Fraser saw the roots of this problem in the intellectualization of violence which occurred as the world tried to process the atrocities of the Holocaust. Regardless of the cause, however, it is clear that violence poses a problem to modern man unlike any other we have faced. How does one combat something which has made itself part the very fabric of our social consciousness?

Kane wanted to present her audiences with violence in a way which would circumvent our culturally ingrained habit of intellectualization. Kane knew that to understand violence was not to know violence, and that that distinction was one that the theater was capable of teasing out. Harold Pinter, Kane's friend and admirer, saw this as the key aspect of Kane's work.

What frightened me was the depth of her horror and anguish. Everyone's aware, to varying degrees, of the cruelty of mankind, but we manage to compromise with it, put it on the shelf and not think about it for a good part of the day. But I don't think [Kane] could do that. I think she had a vision of the world that was extremely accurate, and therefore horrific. Because the world is a fucking awful place. It's a very beautiful place, but this species mankind is an absolute bloody disaster. The elements of sadism are astonishing.¹⁵⁸

Kane, at the end of the 20th century, saw the same potential in theater which

Antonin Artaud had seen during the first half of the 20th century.

Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty was an attempt to reach through the obfuscating cloud of culture in order to affect the underlying consciousness of the individual. And so he sought to shock, to disrupt, and to bring to his audiences a glimpse of what it truly was to be alive. The techniques which Artaud devised in order to achieve his ambitious ends can be seen in the work of Kane, despite her unfamiliarity with Artaud’s work.

Kane makes her intentions clear in her first play, *Blasted*. Her attack on naturalist drama is less than subtle. The violence in the play lacks the elements with which we are familiar; it is not glamorized and it does not offer a moral—it is raw and sudden, meaningless and awful. The play's destruction of the genre of naturalism also is an attempt to disrupt the audiences' preconceptions and thereby force a fresh experience of play-going. The same tactics are used in *Phaedra's Love* to illustrate the limitations of language and emphasize the power of action. In a time marked by the intellectualization of violence, Kane wanted to make us *feel* it—to know it as something real in the world that needs our attention.

In *Cleansed*, Kane begins in earnest her experiments with creating real experience through abstraction. Artaud insisted that theater needed a new language, a language in which gesture and thought merge, where words take on the capacity for meaning that they have in dreams. *Cleansed* presents us with characters who lose identity and whose identity is forcibly taken away. Normal speech is interrupted with repetition, counting, or singing. Abstract concepts are
represented physically, and at every moment we are confronted with truth. Kane employs the abject in an effort to force us out of our culturally normalized capability for perception.

_Crave_ and _4.48 Psychosis_ take Kane's use of the abstract even further. They de-emphasize character and focus on experience. In the formless scripts Kane leaves most decisions to the actor and director in a way which echoes Artaud's own distrust of scripts and his emphasis on _mise en scène_. Their use of dissonances, both verbally and physically, asserts a re-engagement of the audience with the material. The way in which Kane erodes identity in these plays hinders our ability to remove ourselves from the action, as without a concrete subject to ascribe actions to we find our own sense of selves filling in the gaps that Kane leaves.

It is possible to see Kane's exploration of the rift between mind and body in her last play as a reaction to her own, personal torment. Kane's struggles with depression ultimately ended in a suicide attempt which landed her in the hospital. It was during her stay in the hospital that she hanged herself. As we have seen, however, _4.48 Psychosis_ is far more than a suicide note, and what it communicates stands easily on its own. There are a number of characters in Kane's plays whose only moment of 'truth' happen right before they die. The Soldier in _Blasted_, Hippolytus in _Phaedra's Love_, Rod in _Cleansed_, all exhibit this tendency for clarity at the moment when their mortality becomes evident. After the premier of _Phaedra's Love_, Kane said in an interview that she met someone who is continually trying to kill herself, and at the last minute thinking
better of it. She hypothesized as to this woman’s motivation thusly: “She’s more connected with herself than most people I know. I think in that moment when she slashes herself, when she takes an overdose, suddenly she’s connected and then wants to live.”\(^\text{159}\) Perhaps there is something which, when one is directly confronted with mortality, allows one to experience a kind of harmony between mind and body. This seems to be what Kane’s characters are striving for.

It is also not hard to understand Artaud’s struggle with the mind/body dichotomy as a natural reaction to his own situation. Plagued in life with illness, depression, drug-addiction, and poverty, Artaud’s quest to reunite the body with \textit{l’esprit} can be seen as a consequence of his struggles with being.

But the sometimes chaos that was their lives is also, in a way, a reflection of the chaos that was the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. If both Artaud and Kane were reacting to the endemic intellectualization of the western mind, it follows that their approaches would be similar. Theater, they believed, was best suited to achieving the kind of transformation in consciousness that they knew was necessary. It is because of theater’s close relationship with life that it occupies this unique position amongst art forms. It is capable of assaulting every one of the senses and thereby bypassing the intellect. It is the closest we can safely get to an actual expression of our fractured consciousness. Artaud wrote that “the theater, which is in \textit{no thing}, but makes use of every-thing—gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness—redisCOVERs itself at precisely the point where the mind requires

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\(^{159}\) Kane, interview with Tabert, 1998.
a language to express its manifestations." This conception of theater is one which is neither bound to culture nor surpassed by it. It is the theater of Artaud, and of Kane.

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