

In Yer Face. The reception of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* on the British stage of the nasty nineties. 1995-2001

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Abstract

Blasted not only displaced the universe of possible options on the British stage of the 1990s but also ushered in the heretic break with the prevailing artistic traditions which would be known as *in-yer-face theatre*. This article offers a brief account of the symbolic production of Sarah Kane's play through and analysis of the moves of the most outstanding producers of its meaning and value, those agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of recognizing works of art as such. This is carried out through a concise comparison of the reviews of *Blasted* in British newspapers in its two Royal Court productions, in 1995 and 2001, followed by a discussion of the roles into which some of the above-mentioned agents were cast or chose to play themselves in the field of cultural production. The corpus was selected from the NTQ Checklist of sources by or about Sarah Kane published in August 2002.

Key words: British drama, *in-yer-face theatre*, Sarah Kane, reception.

In Yer Face. La recepción de *Blasted* de Sarah Kane en el teatro británico de los '90. 1995-2001

Resumen

Blasted no sólo desplazó en universo de opciones posibles en la escena británica de la década del noventa sino que también dio inicio a una nueva ruptura con la tradición teatral que sería conocida como *in-yer-face theatre*. El presente trabajo ofrece una breve reseña de la producción simbólica de la obra de Sarah Kane a través del análisis de las estrategias de los principales productores de su significado y valor, aquellos agentes cuyos esfuerzos mancomunados producen consumidores capaces de reconocer a las obras de arte como tales. Esto se lleva a cabo mediante una concisa comparación de las reseñas que *Blasted* provocara en la prensa británica en sus dos producciones en el Royal Court Theatre en 1995 y 2001, seguida de una discusión de los roles que cada uno de los agentes mencionados jugaron en el campo de producción cultural de la época. El corpus fue seleccionado de la compilación bibliográfica sobre Sarah Kane de la revista *New Theatre Quarterly* de agosto de 2002.

Palabras clave: teatro británico contemporáneo, *in-yer-face theatre*, Sarah Kane, recepción.

In Yer Face. A recepção de *Blasted* de Sarah Kane no teatro britânico dos anos 90. 1995-2001

Resumo

Blasted não só despertou um universo de opções possíveis na cena britânica dos anos 90, mas também deu início a uma nova ruptura com a tradição teatral que seria conhecida como *in-yer-face theatre*. O presente trabalho oferece uma breve resenha da produção simbólica da obra de Sarah Kane através da análise das estratégias dos principais produtores de seu significado e valor, aqueles agentes cujos esforços mancomunados produzem consumidores capazes de reconhecer as obras de arte como tais. Isto se leva a cabo mediante uma concisa comparação das resenhas que *Blasted* provocou na imprensa britânica em suas duas produções no Royal Court Theatre, em 1995 e em 2001, seguida de uma discussão dos papéis que cada um dos agentes mencionados jogaram no campo da produção cultural da época. A base teórica foi selecionada na compilação bibliográfica sobre Sarah Kane da revista *New Theatre Quarterly* de agosto de 2002.

Palavras chave: teatro britânico contemporâneo, *in-yer-face theatre*, Sarah Kane, recepção

In the silence after completion other voices gather interpreting, analysing and decoding the work until, eventually, the plays themselves can come to seem only palimpsests, barely glimpsed beneath the commentary.'

David Grieg: *Sarah Kane. Complete Plays. Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin.*

The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.

Pierre Bourdieu: 'The Field of Cultural Production'

Almost twelve years after the *premiere* of *Blasted* and eight after her suicide, Sarah Kane seems to be, of course, an impossible subject. But if nobody feared to tread, the never-ending discussion her *opera prima* appears to deserve would have hastily vanished without leaving any trace. When the would-be critic faces the flickering blank screen, however, he feels doomed to inescapable ill-fated failure and he is, in short, afraid. And the feeling evolves into an awful fear of defeat if he definitely acknowledges he would not be, nor ever could be, either an Edward Bond or a Harold Pinter. No, never a whit of a Charles Spencer to cut and paste the play as he pleases and serve it as we know it to the unenlightened and the yahoos, which has already been done by less-talented men than the commentator of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Indeed, as soon as *Blasted* was staged in 1995, it became a heretic break with the prevailing artistic traditions. Enormous though the enterprise may be, this essay is endeavoured to offer a brief and not very innovative account of the symbolic production of Sarah Kane's play in an attempt to analyse the moves of the most outstanding producers of its meaning and value, "the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such" (Bourdieu 1994: 58). This will be carried out through a concise comparison of the reviews *Blasted* provoked in its two Royal Court productions, from 17th January to 4th February 1995 and from 3rd to 28th April 2001, followed by a discussion of the probable roles into which some of the above mentioned 'agents', including the playwright herself, were cast or chose to play themselves in the stage which is the field of cultural production. The corpus was tailored on the basis of the selection of stage plays, interviews and profiles and secondary sources by or about Sarah Kane that appeared as a NTQ Checklist in the homonymous journal in August 2002.

For "the critics who act as arbiters of their cultural tastes" (Sellar 1996: 30) and who decided on this occasion to proceed almost in unison, *Blasted* seemed to modify and displace the universe of possible options. If not, at least it gave them reasons to cause media stir to attract attention to British drama, its decaying condition and its apparent

Renaissance. The main action in the play was, in most cases, succinctly depicted but followed by tirades of its gory details and long enumerations of its atrocities. Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail* set the agenda with his memorable and oft-quoted ‘a disgusting feast of filth’ and he was followed alike by the commentators for broadsheet newspapers as well as the ones for tabloids. “Where Kane depicts sex and violence as manifestations of deplorable social structures, the conservative critics only saw sex and violence for their own sake, and allegedly progressive critics saw the message but dismissed it.” (Sellar 1996: 34) Thus, both chose to judge the play mainly on ethic grounds but both also chose to shroud them in the seemingly naïve cloth of aesthetics.

In the words of Charles Spencer, for instance, *Blasted* started being ‘a work entirely devoid of intellectual or artistic merit’ but ended up not ‘just disgusting’ but ‘pathetic’ (1). Similarly, if John Peter justified his reaction as ‘partly aesthetic’ (2), Jack Tinker utterly stated it is ‘a play which appears to know no bounds of decency’ (3). Moreover, even though most of the critics emphasised the profusion of on-stage violence only leads to ‘diminishing effects’, ‘bombed-out indifference’ or to ‘unbearable’ boredom (4), all of them relished on exploiting their ‘literary’ abilities in order to give their readership a clear idea of the play, a picture which in some cases seemed to be based more on their own morbidity than on the macabre qualities of the work itself. The most daring ones even almost literally threw Shakespeare’s uses of violence on to the young playwright as a point of comparison hoping she would immediately admit defeat (5). ‘She isn’t as good a writer’, admonishingly sentenced Charles Spencer (6).

But that was 1995. By 2001, “most critics, who originally hated their work, have since her death been more sympathetic” (Sierz 2001a: 90). ‘Well, I was wrong’, mumbled Spencer, acknowledging that *Blasted* was like a modern version of *Titus Andronicus* (7). Ethic stances vanished. Nicholas de Jong, for instance, even appreciated that ‘it is, and always was a play with a fine, moral purpose’ (8). As the cover of *Theatre Record* spotted, critics embarked this time in offering ‘recognition at last for her debut play’. They either discovered the play has ‘meanings’ –‘how violence erodes and distorts humanity’ for Sam Marlowe (9), or ‘the line between civilisation and barbarity’ for Nicholas de Jong (10)– or they became resolute in finding ‘influences’ –‘echoes of Shakespeare and Beckett’ (11), not to mention Seneca, Brook, Pinter, Brecht, Barker and Bond, ‘even Einsenstein unfinished film *Que Viva Mexico*’ (12)– to conclude that even *Blasted* had already influenced Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (13). Chorally, in an almost Eliotic fashion, they now seemed to agree with Michael Billington on that ‘Her [Kane’s] work is part of an honourable tradition’ (14).

“What is the critic’s nightmare? That an exceptional new writer emerges and goes unrecognised. In January 1995, it happened. None of us realized the depth of Kane’s talent”, argues Aleks Sierz (2001a: 99). If that is true, however, the converse can also be

true. It could be posited that it was not necessarily that Kane went unrecognised. Far from that, she was actually widely recognised. In 1995, most commentators felt almost compelled to mention Sarah Kane was only twenty-three, which was actually a very telling preoccupation of the critics in view of her precocious abilities (15). But these of course they tried to hide. Apart from his above-quoted *dictum*, Charles Spencer preferred to go on to say that her writing was 'so bad it is almost touching' (16), to what Kate Kellaway added she 'does not know how to write' (17) and John Peter appended that 'her text lacks the saving grace of writing' (18).

By 2001, the exceptional fact about Sarah Kane was not her age, but that she had committed suicide suffering from depression (19). Miraculously, her writing had become 'exciting and noble' (20), 'urgently expressed and persuasively argued' (21) with an 'arresting poetic power and a potent theme of yearning' (22), full of dramatic and verbal flare and dense in references. Furthermore, Kane herself had become 'a true poet of the theatre', which was Carole Woddis' conclusion (23) but which seemed to be shared by then even by Charles Spencer who acknowledged she had a 'genuine artistic vision and great dramatic talent' (24).

This not only turns light but also makes evident that "every literary field is the site of struggle over the definition of the writer" (Bourdieu 1994: 62). So, when Edward Bond (2002), with a tone of patriarchal lament says "the market has become corrupt. We no longer know what a play *is*" (p. 281), he is just using his authority in the field of cultural production to state what is *vox populi* and to invest himself with the power to define both what a play is and who is a 'genuine' playwright. No wonder, unhesitant, he states 'everything Sarah Kane did had authority.' He did not consider, however, that, inevitably, 'one sees the play through the perspective of Kane's tragically short career' (25) or, worse, that "there is the sense that because she killed herself she really meant what she wrote and that is equally unhelpful" (Sierz interviewed by Shirley Dent 2003). In turn, Sierz does not take into account he has become functional in that threat.

Here is where the comparison between reviews starts to blur and a different degree of analysis and explanation is needed. It may be true that 'death changed the way we look at her [Kane's] work' (Sierz 2000), but it could not be death alone. It may be posited then than what changed the way her work is gazed at is the relativity as regards its properties as well as the way in which it is subjectively defined by the different members of the cultural field and in which it is viewed in respect to other works of art. Again following Bourdieu (1994), it should be stated then that "every position, even the dominant, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field" (p. 51).

If the position of drama critics was essential in the constitution of *Blasted* first as a media phenomenon and then as a work of art, the judgment of those who thought

themselves to be the immediate predecessors of Sarah Kane was not less so. Even in chronological order, those who needed to accompany the emergence of the exceptional new writer did so as expected immediately after it received the first attacks from and comparisons with 'alien' fields as the media and film, respectively. Caryl Churchill, who can be said to have occupied a similar if not so shocking place in a previous generation of playwrights, was quick to answer and praise the wit of the new talent. Edward Bond saved her from the muddy waters of film and TV even running the risk of not being actually faithful to truth. It may be debatable whether Quentin Tarantino's use of violence is "a gimmick, a new device" (Bond as quoted in Saunders 2002: 27) and Kane's is not. But it is not true that 'television did not mention it [Blasted]' since "it deals with 'culture' only when it can be made an anodyne consumer product" (Bond 2002: 189). On the one hand, it is plausible that Kane have somehow become a consumer product. On the other, it is a fact that television did devote two discussions to her work on *Newsnight* and *The Late Show*, both in BBC2 Television in January 1995. Harold Pinter came to rescue her, too, and had John Osborne been alive, he would have also stood by Kane.

Be it as it may, the critic had already stated by that time that '*Blasted* is one of those rare works of art that create the criteria by which they should be judged' (26). He did not acknowledge, nevertheless, that that is positively a fake tenet as works of art never create criteria by themselves but only by entering and positioning themselves in the field of cultural production which symbolically and collectively produces them. This is precisely what happened when some commentators decided to displace the relative 'success' of the play saying it was 'just for the academics' (27), that there are 'some critics and some audiences in *Germany and France* who think she died a fully-fledged, original and visionary artist' (28) (*italics mine*) or that 'only about 1,000 punters ever got to see the piece' (29).

However, it is not only on the page of newspapers where cultural struggles are fought. Institutions are one of the most important battlegrounds in the production of cultural products as they could have the weapons to decide the fate of any well or badly intentioned play. In the case of *Blasted*, the role of the Royal Court Theatre was crucial (30).

For some, "Stephen Daldry, then Artistic Director of the Royal Court, was looking back to the period of Osborne in order to find a strategy for its role in the future" (Saunders 2002: 2) and he "used all his charm, connections and theatrical clout to make them [the plays] hot" (Lesser 1997 as quoted in Saunders 2002: 3). Needless to say, if that is true, he got what he wanted as in January 1995 he had most critics discussing the reason why the Royal Court, sponsored by the Arts Council, saw fit to stage *Blasted* using taxpayers' money in amounts that grew substantially the same year it was produced as the theatre received a huge subvention from the National Lottery (31).

Others preferred to highlight tradition once more and tried to rescue the consciousness of the theatre of British Theatre history and of the Kane's place and that of its play in it.

So, they state, the Royal Court stood by Kane “far from worrying that institutional prestige could be damaged by the controversy” (Sellar 1996: 33). Of course the question haunts the mind as to whether its prestige could be damaged or its director was sure it would benefit from stir and controversy. No wonder the same critics who argued about the role of the theatre in 1995, by 2001 stated that ‘the Court is right to celebrate her [Kane’s] strange, tormented talent’ (32). Moreover, when *4.48 Psychosis* was staged, some saw the Royal Court as ‘discouraging publicity’ because ‘the poster advertising the play is black, with no picture’ (33). The contradiction becomes evident. There is no way of discouraging publicity and advertising at the same time and there seems to be no better way to publicise the production of a play whose author has recently committed suicide than with a black poster. Last but not least, yet later in time, ‘would the Royal Court now be embarking on a marathon festival of all Sara Kane’s work had she not died so dramatically?’ (34).

Publicity rings the bell of the market, the one a critic also chooses to ring when she stated that the staging of *Blasted* in 2001 was ‘a singular victory for the Kane industry’ (35). If there ever exists such an industry, it was born from the heated debate over the first production of the play in 1995 and it grew with the creative upsurge of the theatre with the phenomenon of the mid-nineties widely known as Cool Britannia (Sierz 1998) when it was ‘listed along with pop, fashion, fine art and food as the fifth leg of the new Swinging London’ (Edgar as quoted in Sierz 2002: 17). But *Blasted* never became a blockbusting hit. Moreover, “the play, despite having been seen in this country by no more than 2,000 people, has become a landmark” (Rebellato 1999: 280) and that was maybe due to the so-called Kane industry. This would probably not include the same kind of consumers and of products involved in the reception of a London musical but it would left-to-centre intellectuals who would buy, for instance, the *Frontline Intelligence* edition in which Kane’s first play was published or her complete plays, both published by Methuen in December 2000, which constitutes “a sure sign of canonization” (Buse 2001: 172) They would also by the *Guardian*, the newspaper in which, not paradoxically, most of the debate over *Blasted* took place.

If there ever exists a niche in the market to consume Kane’s work, it is precisely the group of people who would consume Methuen drama and who would read the above-mentioned newspaper. Sarcastically, in reference to the public of *Blasted* in 1995, Jonathan Miller commented in his review that ‘many of them were carrying copies of the *Guardian* and were presumably intellectuals for whom this masterwork was replete with significance’ (35). At the same time, and as Sierz (1998) notices, playwrights also seem to be turning and making specific signs towards targeted publics. Contemporary new plays then talk to their own ‘tribes’ rather than to a general constituency and they “appeal[s] to a targeted audience who share the writer’s and director’s relish for Tarantino and drug culture”

(Ansorge as quoted in Sierz 1998: 327). Put in more technical terms, “the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production [is that] where the only audience aimed at is other producers” (Bourdieu 1994: 59). Even though Kane’s seems not to be this perfect case, it may be posited that the quality of her plays actually expects an audience and not another. As does that of many of the plays written by that time.

This, in turn, creates another ring around Kane’s *oeuvre*. If consumers are difficult to fix into a slot, producers are not. Or, at least, it seems to be easier as this is what has been done throughout the whole history of literature. Here is where, as it was stated above, the role of Aleks Sierz, if not only his, becomes functional in the threatening constraints imposed on the group of young writers reaching their apogee around the time *Blasted* was on stage and afterwards.

Even though Benedict Nightingale has done the same in 1998, by 2002, Sierz decided that “the first step in understanding the phenomenon is to name it” (Sierz 2002: 18). Among the epithets available, which included ‘the Britspack’, ‘the New Brutalists’, ‘the Theatre of the Urban Ennui’ (Saunders 2002: 5), ‘smack and sodomy plays’ or ‘New Jacobeanism’ (Sierz 2002: 18), he chooses to label it ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre’ to galvanise the ‘aesthetic style’ –never the movement (Sierz 2002)– of a new generation of writers in the theatre. As soon as 1998 he had already stated “it is time to take stock of the claims made by the advocates of this new writing and to delineate its main characteristics” (Sierz 1998: 324) and from then onwards, he has used his label as a registered trademark and has made his most to encapsulate the authors whose writing he sees to be sharing similar traits within a given frame. And he chooses no better way than the traditional one of saying they belong to a group which establishes “a rupture with the past” (Sierz 2002: 18), the usual comment to be made about any ‘movement’ an academic wants to make sure already belongs to the past and whose corpse he is about to dissect. That is precisely what Kane would have rejected. “I don’t believe in movements. Movements define retrospectively and always on grounds of imitation” –she had already dictated (Kane 1999 as quoted in Saunders 2002: 7). But that is also precisely the way the market works, even the one who deemed itself academic. “The media and the market ‘named’ something, then ‘made’ something –and subsequently ‘claimed’ something.” (Gottlieb 1999 as quoted in Saunders 2002: 6) No wonder Sierz has already written articles, concocted a whole book and launched a web site under the umbrella of In-Yer-Face Theatre. If, in 1998, he thought “*Blasted* has a postmodernist structural form” (Sierz 1998: 332) now that it has become relatively fashionable to attack any ‘post’ form, he establishes In-Yer-Face is “an avant-garde group”, “modernist” (Sierz 2002: 18) because “it sets its face against postmodernism... It prefers old-fashioned ideas about political commitment and cultural provocation to new and trendy notions of irony, self-reflexivity and cynicism” (Sierz 2002: 22).

Last but not least, academic criticism starts making its impact on the transformation or conservation of the fields of forces that makes the consideration of an object as a work of art plausible. Even from the very first reviews, *Blasted* was at least implicitly inserted in the tradition of British theatre and, therefore, fruitful ground for researchers in the field of drama. Along came Aleks Sierz again but also other researchers who have produced critical materials in order to assess the play. These have pointed in mainly two directions. Scholars like Sellar, Grieg and Saunders are trying to find a place for Sarah Kane within the tradition and to this they commit their efforts as they are sure that “the play’s roots were not in the bloodbaths of post-modern cinema but in the Shakespearean anatomies of reduced men” (Grieg 2001: x) and that “a significant feature of Sarah Kane’s drama is the degree to which it is informed and influenced by an eclectic collection of theatrical, literary and musical resources” (Saunders 2002: 54-72). Peter Buse (2001), on the other hand, has made his attempts at a reading of *Blasted* from the perspective of American trauma theory in the fashion of Shoshana Feldman and Dominick LaCapra. Other critical materials in the NTQ Checklist being followed as the criterion of selection for this paper are only aimed at tracing the state of the art of British drama at the turn of the century and, consequently, they are not really worth considering as essentially significant contributions to the discussion about *Blasted*.

Undoubtedly, then, “the work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art” (Bourdieu 1998: 56). This collective belief, moreover, seems to make it move in the direction of stagnation preventing the ‘subversive’ element it may contain from actually evolving into ‘real’ forms of sedition. On these grounds, the case of *Blasted* seems to be that of a modernist work of art as Sierz claims, since “in modernism, form is not something pre-given which the artist must fulfil and whose fulfilment the critics and the educated public could check more or less closely against a canon of fixed rules” (Burger 1994: 145). That the critics and the educated public have chosen to do so is another issue. *Blasted* does constitute “an individual result, which the work represents” (Burger 1994: 145). This result, individual though it may be, may be posited to form its very seeds to point in the direction of the judgement and the gaze of an audience that stands as its target. At this point, the discussion again blurs from an explanation of the effects *Blasted* has had in the field of cultural production to a somehow partial explanation of the extent up to which these may have stemmed from the authorial intention and the place she also helps forging for her creative project.

After scandal and shock, Sarah Kane emphatically declared that “I wasn’t at all aware that *Blasted* would scandalize anyone” (Kane as quoted in Sierz 2001a: 94), that she was taken aback by the fact that some were ‘morally outraged’, and that ‘the media seem[ed] to be more upset by the representation of violence than by violence itself’ (Kane as

quoted in Sierz 2001a: 97). Nevertheless, such comments appear to be either extremely ingenuous or consciously administered as nobody who already knew the community in which he or she moved would expect a different reaction either from the media or from the critics. Moreover, rumpus was what she needed from the media in order to prove her point and she achieved it because *Blasted* actually “not only ... contain[ed] *disturbing* emotional material, but it adopted a *deliberately unusual and provocative* form” (Sierz 2001: 99. Italics mine.).

To a description like the one above she would surely have answered with a well-known motto, that “all good art is subversive in form and content. And the best art is subversive in form *and* content” (Kane interviewed by Stephenson & Langridge 1997: 130). Now the question seems to turn into considering the tenor of this subversion and the extent up to which *Blasted* or any work already approved for production in the Royal Court, for instance, could be labelled ‘subversive’. As a minor example to partially prove this point, it should be noted that, during an interview, she claimed that in her play she was ‘not only talking about tabloids’ (Stephenson & Latridge 1997: 130) but she did not choose the *Guardian* or, worse, the *Times* as an intertext to be inserted in her work with a totally derogatory tone. Of course, she chose the *Sun*, of all tabloids.

Sarah Kane was not some petulant *enfant terrible* who simply glorified in shocking audiences; she was a committed, sophisticated, challenging playwright who had a fine sense of the traditions she came from, and had a generous respect and love from the community of writers she moved in. (Rebellato 1999: 281)

Having a sense of tradition and belonging to a community of writers lie on the basis of any explanation of the way the field of cultural production is built and works. “The meaning of a work changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader.” (Bourdieu 1998: 51) T. S. Eliot, ancient though his work may appear now, had already taught us as soon as in 1919 that

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new –the really new– work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot 1932: 15)

and to this Kane utterly complies. Furthermore, echoes of Eliotic ideology seem to flood her words when she states that “art isn’t about the shock of something new. It’s about arranging the old in such a way that you see it afresh” (Stephenson & Langridge 131). Bond would agree and add that ‘*Blasted*, I think comes from the game of straws, from the centre of our humanity and our ancient need for theatre’ (36).

Indeed, it goes without saying that Kane's work was "influenced far more closely by classical and modern European theatre than 'rave culture'" (Saunders 2002: 7). The latter, however, did get a place in the symbolic construction of *Blasted* as a work of art and in the presence it acquires in the field of cultural production. Obvious comparisons with films produced by the same time it was on stage arouse. *Blasted* has been said to be "the theatrical equivalent of such films as *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs* or *Natural Born Killers*" (Saunders 2002: 23) but this, as has already been shown, was fiercely denied by the patrons of the dramatic institution and even by the playwright herself. "My plays certainly exist within a theatrical tradition... I am at the extreme end of theatrical tradition", she sharply concludes (Kane as quoted in Saunders 2002: 26). The comparison with such popular films and the fact that maybe unconsciously violence sneaked into the play as a mediated reflection of the *Zeitgeist* of the times, which the cinema also helps building, can be said to prove that "the newcomers 'get beyond' the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a socially non-congruent context" (Bourdieu 1998: 52). That was actually what Sarah Kane did.

The social non-congruent context is in the violence and the 'filth' of *Blasted*. The repetition and the reproduction, in her deliberate pointing at the dramatic tradition. As a W.B. Yeats of (post-?) modern times, she aspired "to create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair" (Kane as quoted in Skierz 2001a: 91) and this beauty could only be found, for somebody trained in the academic appreciation of art, in the literature of the past. Therefore, not only reviewers saw 'influences' in her work but also she craved for these and, ultimately, disclosed them publicly to the critics and the scholars, to the unenlightened and the yahoos. It has become common knowledge that *Blasted* changed after a friend gave her a copy of Bond's *Saved* (Sierz 2001) and that, while at university, "the writers I was interested in talking to –Pinter, Bond, Barker– were not the ones who were coming to talk to us" (Kane as quoted in Sierz 2001a: 92), and, lastly, that she thought "the first third [of *Blasted*] was influenced by Ibsen and Pinter, the middle section by Brecht and the final section by Beckett" (Kane as quoted in Sierz 2001a: 102) (37).

These ways of moving among shock and tradition may be seen as deliberate attempts at self-construction and self-inscription in the canon and they are clearly reinforced by her continuous insistence on self-explanation. Even though David Grieg (xviii) claims that 'Kane, herself, never supplied an author's note to her plays... believing that if a play was any good it would speak for itself', she did explain *Blasted* in a plethora of interviews –the ones with Nilks Tabert as quoted in Saunders (2002) (14), with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge (1997: 129-135), in which she dictates that '*Blasted* is no documentary' and she firmly establishes that 'the unity of space suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilization of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of

civil war' (pp. 130-131), or with BBC Radio 4, in which she stressed that her play is 'amoral' (Kane as quoted in Saunders 2002: 27). Moreover, she did supply *Blasted* with an afterword for its *Frontline Intelligences* edition, even though stating that "I adore Edward Bond's writing and I think that the forewords and afterwords he writes are brilliant, but there is no point in me trying to do that because I can't do it –it's not what I am" (Kane as quoted in Saunders 2002: 27).

Through her declarations to the media, the critics and the academics, Sarah Kane then did have an impact in the reception of *Blasted*, in its construction as a work of art and also in her own positioning within the literary or artistic field and within the wider field of cultural production. Everything Sarah Kane did had authority. This, however, does not only mean the authority of the quality of her writing and its place in the order of literary monuments. It also includes the authority bestowed onto her by her First Class Honours Degree at Bristol University, her having been a disciple of David Edgar, whose postgraduate course at Birmingham University taught most new wave writers, her Jerwood Foundation grant under whose auspices she wrote *Blasted*, her work as a Writer in Residence for Paines Plough and at the Bush Theatre as a literary assistant, and, last but not least, her long-standing relationship with the Royal Court, in whose European Summer Schools she led workshops with emerging playwrights. Kane thus seems to embody a case of a double affiliation for she can stand either with the artists and the creative upsurge they epitomise or with the academics whose task is precisely to decide whose artistic work would deserve the merit of canonisation. In sum, apart from being a playwright, she could not only side with 'teachers –*lectores* assigned to comment on the canonical texts– ' but also had a legitimate "ambition to act as [an] *auctor[es]*" (Bourdieu 1998: 57).

The instauration of *Blasted* as a work of art then cannot be naïvely read. This work did not try to make judgement fall upon the play but just to show, as the world already knows but sometimes prefers to forget, that the symbolic production of a work of art is seldom the result of the pristine waters of aesthetics, hardly only palimpsests, barely glimpsed beneath the commentary. More often than not, if not usually, the apparition of a new work of art in the crowd of the already existing ones constitutes the outcome of thunderous storms in the multitudinous seas incarnadine of the field of cultural production, of the furious struggles tending to transform or preserve this field of forces.

Notes

- (1) Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 1995. All quotations of reviews are from *Theatre Record*. Vol. XV. No. 1-2. 1995: (38-43) and Vol. XXI No. 7. 2001: (418-423).
- (2) John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 22 January 1995.
- (3) Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995.

- (4) Refer to the reviews by Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 21 January, 1995, Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 20 January 1995, and Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*, 23 January 1995, respectively.
- (5) Consider the reviews by Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 1995, Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*, 23 January 1995, Louise Doughty, *Mail on Sunday*, 22 January 1995, and Michael Coveney, *Observer*, 5 February 1995.
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 1995.
- (8) Nicholas de Jong, *Evening Standard*, 4 April 2001.
- (9) Sam Marlowe, *What's On*, 11 April 2001.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 4 April 2001.
- (12) Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 4 April 2001.
- (13) John Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 4 April 2001, and Brian Logan, *Time Out*, 11 April 2001.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Jane Edwards, *Time Out*, 25 January 1995, Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1995, John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 January 1995, Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 20 January 1995, Nick Curtis, *Evening Standard*, 19 January 1995, Kate Kellaway, *Observer*, 22 January 1995, and Jonathan Miller and John Peter in the *Sunday Times*, 22 January 1995 and 29 January 1995, made reference to the playwright's age.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Kate Kellaway, *Observer*, 22 January 1995.
- (18) John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 29 January 1995.
- (19) The event of Kane's suicide is mentioned at least by Sheridan Morley, *Spectator*, 14 April 2001, Brian Logan, *Time Out*, 11 April 2001, Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 4 April 2001, Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 2001, Kate Basset and Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 8 April 2001 and 5 April 2001, and Andrew Smith, *Observer*, 8 April 2001.
- (20) Nicholas de Jong, *Evening Standard*, 4 April 2001.
- (21) Sam Marlowe, *What's On*, 11 April 2001.
- (22) Georgina Brown, *Mail on Sunday*, 8 April 2001.
- (23) Carole Woddis, *Herald*, 10 April 2001.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 1 January 1995.
- (27) Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995.
- (28) Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 4 April 2001.
- (29) David Murray, *Financial Times*, 6 April 2001.
- (30) For a complete history of the role of the Royal Court in the United Kingdom and in many other European countries, Robert, Philip. *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 should be consulted.
- (31) Refer for instance to the reviews by Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995, John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 29 January 1995, Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 1995, Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 4 April 2001 and others.
- (32) John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 8 April 2001.

- (33) Aleks Sierz, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 2000.
- (34) Sheridan Morley, *Spectator*, 14 April 2001.
- (35) Carole Woddis, *Herald*, 10 April 2001
- (36) Jonathan Miller, *Sunday Times*, 22 January 1995.
- (37) Her play *Phaedra's Love* is also 'loosely based on Seneca', *Crave* is echoic of King James Bible, William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett, and 4.48 Psychosis follows 'the conventions of a modernist poem rather than those of a playtext' (Sierz 2001b: 286-287).

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