



ISSN: 1817-6798 (Print)

Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

available online at: www.jtuh.org/

Rasheed Hamid Rasheed
Assist. Prof. Dr. Awfa Hussein
Mohammed

University of Tikrit
College of Education for Humanities
English Department

* Corresponding author: E-mail :
aofahosaentu.edu.iq

Keywords:

Balsted,
violence,
Antonin Artaud,
cannibalism,
Dehumanization,
Theater,

ARTICLE INFO**Article history:**

Received 15 July 2023
Received in revised form 25 July 2023
Accepted 6 Aug 2023
Final Proofreading 25 Dec 2023
Available online 30 Dec 2023

E-mail t-jtuh@tu.edu.iq

©THIS IS AN OPEN ACCESS ARTICLE UNDER
THE CC BY LICENSE

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities

Blasted: Staging War's Brutality and the Tropes of Dehumanization

A B S T R A C T

The issue of distinguishing between authentic and simulated distress in theatrical performances has garnered attention from various practitioners in the twentieth century. One prominent figure in this discourse is Antonin Artaud, who advocated for a novel form of theatre, namely Theater of Cruelty, that would stimulate and challenge spectators to re-evaluate the events unfolding before them on the stage. In parallel to this context, Sarah Kane's career in theatre has defined itself by such Artaudian novelty. Sara Kane's *Blasted* fosters the brutality of war through the symbolic representation of violence, sexual abuse and cannibalism. This research argues that Kane's *Blasted* is an imitation of life—a matter that makes reality a more conscious reproduction enhancing the cathartic shock of the spectator.

© 2023 JTUH, College of Education for Human Sciences, Tikrit
University

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.30.12.2.2023.12>

انفجار : تجسيد وحشية الحرب على المسرح واستعارات التجريد من الإنسانية

رشيد حامد رشيد/ جامعة تكريت/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

ا.م.د. اوفى حسين محمد/ جامعة تكريت/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

الخلاصة:

لقد حظيت مسألة التمييز بين الشدة الحقيقية والمقلدة في العروض المسرحية باهتمام مختلف المهتمين

بالمسرح في القرن العشرين. أحد الشخصيات البارزة في هذا الخطاب هو أنطونين أرتو، الذي دعا إلى شكل جديد من المسرح، وهو مسرح القسوة، الذي من شأنه أن يحفز ويتحدى المشاهدين لإعادة تقييم الأحداث التي تتكشف أمامهم على خشبة المسرح. وفق هذا السياق حددت مسيرة سارة كين المهنية في المسرح نفسها من خلال هذه الحادثة الأرتودية. تعزز مسرحية الانفجار للمخرجة سارة كين وحشية الحرب من خلال التمثيل الرمزي للعنف والاعتداء الجنسي وأكل لحوم البشر. هذه المسرحية ما هي الا تقليد للحياة وهو الأمر الذي من شأنه يشافي صدمة مواهة واقع الحياة المرير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانفجار، العنف، انطونين ارتو ، اكل لحوم البشر، التجريد من الإنسانية، المسرح

1:1 Introduction

Sarah Kane introduces an explosive reality that the wider culture would prefer to suppress into postmodern theater, much like John Osborne did when he unleashed his belligerent Jimmy Porter onto the post-war British stage. In the late 1990s, Kane explores extreme, horror, and social degradation, much like Osborne did in the 1950s when he tapped into a furious national psychology of class resentment, and Edward Bond did in the 1960s and 1970s when he made fierce characters and language scream for poverty and brutality (Sellar,1996). As such, the play goes beyond words and thus meets Artaud's notion that the theatre of cruelty should release emotional repression engendered by life's forces, including war. She noted in an interview: "There isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying that you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence. My responsibility is to the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be" (qtd. in Urban, 2001: 39). Kane's concept of theatre diverges notably from the traditional approach, as it encompasses all aspects of performance, encompassing dialogue, action, and presentation, with the aim of challenging the audience's perception of reality.

Theatre requires the audience to suspend disbelief and empathize with the characters in order to captivate them effectively. The spectators' emotional investment can lead to heightened responses to a visceral and provocative theatre production. Theatre has a greater capacity to evoke heightened emotional responses compared to other art forms. Sierz (2000) defines theatre as a deliberate act that can be controversial because it elevates the portrayal of reality to a higher

level of importance than reality itself. (7) The portrayal of sexual or nude imagery alongside feelings of loneliness or despair can result in anticipated discomfort.

The theatrical production of *Blasted* can be classified as an instance of the "In-Yer-Face" dramatic genre. Provoking the audiences' emotions through severe, and unlikeable characters, language, and imagery, this genre's end goal is to challenge conventional moral norms. Identifying Kane as one of the main pioneers of this theater, *Blasted*, as an In-yer-face theatre, meets Artaud's theatre of cruelty in a sense that the two types aim at one goal that is representing nudity, violence, and taboo subject-matter so as to shock the audience and consequently face the brutality and futility they are surrounded by. The play, according to Kane, is an important factor to take into account because it "is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays." (Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, 130)

In 1993, Kane was in the process of writing what was then 'a play about two people in a room' when she saw an item about the siege of Srebrenica on the television news. Kane began searching for connections between rape in a Leeds hotel and the Bosnian civil war. Accordingly, *Blasted* can be understood in the context of two key historical backgrounds that are 1990s Balkans 'civil conflict and hooligan violence. These two are performed with the aid of stage direction that relies heavily upon spot lights, decor, scattered furniture, disturbed behavior, and a whole gloomy atmosphere.

Kane was highly influenced by the political conflict that had taken place in Balkans. In April 1992, Bosnian Serbs refused to accept the Bosnian declaration of independence and to live under Muslim rule. The Serbs then launched a military offensive, which by the end of the year had been hugely effective in the aim of creating their own Bosnian Serb republic by means of ethnic cleansing, such as driving Muslim civilians from their homes. Kane responded to the Serbian attacks on the Bosnian city of Srebrenica in 1993 by changing the form of the play she was writing. These attacks led to the United Nations Security Council declaring the city one of six 'safe areas'. Two years later, in July 1995, Serbian troops overran the city, NATO air strikes having failed to stop their advance. Kane's depiction of the atrocities of civil war encompassed not only the accounts of war rape and torture in the Balkans as reported by the press, but also their equivalents in British culture. This served to highlight the proximity of the seemingly remote violence to the British experience. Despite the absence of the term "Bosnia" in the theatrical piece,

Kane asserts that the Bosnian strife that occurred in the initial years of the 1990s served as a source of inspiration for her. During the interview with Saunders, she explained the way this particular conflict inspired her:

I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing *Blasted*, and there was a very old woman's face in Srebrenica just weeping and looking into the camera and saying, 'Please, please, somebody help us, because we need the UN to come here and help us.' And I was sitting there and watching it and I thought no one's going to do anything...I thought this is absolutely terrible and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room. [...] 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 is the tree.' (Kane, qtd. In Saunders 2002: 48)

Sarah Kane drew upon her observations of localized violence during her adolescence, as a basis for her understanding of hooliganism. She incorporated these experiences into her memory and later utilized them in *Blasted*. These experiences can be traced back to the mid up to late 1980s when fans exhibited violent and unlawful conduct at home games in the UK as well as games in Europe. The most severe of these occurrences took place at Heysel Stadium in Brussels before Liverpool's game against Juventus in 1984, causing 39 deaths and 600 injuries. The street clashes in European cities resembled war, as the government intermittently deployed tanks and armed escorts. Kane, alongside the events she herself witnessed, had read a play by Bill Buford entitled *Among the Thugs* (1991) in which he dramatizes a soldier sucks out and bites out one of the character's eyes, namely Ian's. Buford draws a comparison between the hooliganism he witnessed and a photograph depicting crowd behavior in a conflict-ridden region. The play gives the following description of the incident:

As he pulled the policeman's head to his face and sucked on one of his eyes, lifting it out of its socket until he felt it snap behind his teeth, he seized the policeman by the ears. He chewed it off after

that. Harry rolled off the officer, got to his feet, and headed home.
(Buford,1991: 241)

"Fan violence continued even after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Quite contrary to the predictions of those who in the early 1990s claimed that once interethnic conflicts ended there would be no more fan incidents, such phenomena have become even more frequent, with even more serious consequences. In the period of disintegration of the SFRY from 1991 to 2000, the war psychosis and an incredible political pressure caused Serbian fans to turn to right-wing political structures in the long run. In this period, fans began to professionally deal with club support as their only activity. The initiators of this exceptionally negative social phenomenon were fan leaders of FC Partizan who became the official club's agency with a clearly defined activity – for the sake of gaining privileges in the resale of tickets, sale of supporter equipment, resale of football players and paid travels to matches held abroad. This, inter alia, encouraged the criminalisation of supporters, an excessive influence of hooligans on the operation of clubs, and the spreading of this phenomenon to other bigger clubs in the country" (Turanjanin,2013:31).

Blasted is one of the most controversial plays in the history of British drama. In the play, the relationships between three characters, Ian, Cate and Soldier are set in a hotel room in Leeds with a war taking place in the background. Ian is a middle-aged journalist who is constantly attempting to abuse his ex-girlfriend Cate, a young girl who bursts into fits whenever under stress. The conventional flow of the play concerning a man-and-woman relationship is obstructed by the intervention of a new character, Soldier. He appears abruptly in the second half of the play and he represents any soldier who has gone through the physical and psychological hardships of war. Following his intrusion, a bomb devastates the room out of a sudden and it, along with Soldier, discomforts the domestic realistic atmosphere of the hotel room. Further, Soldier urinates on stage, gouges and eats Ian's eyes, rapes him and then commits suicide. Meanwhile, Cate takes a baby from the battleground and brings it to the hotel, who later dies due to hunger and whose flesh Ian eats. In addition, Cate is raped by the soldiers outside while trying to obtain food, she feeds herself and Ian, and at last, Ian dies.

On January 12th, 1995, *Blasted* was performed on stage at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London. Ian was played by Pip Donaghy, Cate by Kate Ashfield, and the Soldier by Dermot Kerrigan, all under the direction of James Macdonald. According to the journalists who wrote the initial reviews of the performance, the play includes various acts of violence such as anal rape, frottage, urination and defecation, infanticide, sexual contact, and ocular torture. Kane employs strong theatrical imagery, many of which have invasive visceral characteristics that elicit an emotional response. The significance attributed to *Blasted* is derived from its innovative conceptualization. Kane's play commences by establishing a scenario that seemingly derives from her personal sphere of familiarity. However, she exhibits bravery by incorporating aspects into the play that are remote from her own lived encounters, as will be expounded upon in the next section.

1:2 *Blasted*: Staging Post War's Dystopia

The concept of dystopia is characterized by a delicate balance between evoking feelings of apprehension and inducing a sense of despair. The primary characteristic of dystopian drama is its depiction of a setting that is not only unappealing to the audience, but also plausible. When faced with the challenge of designing initiatives for theatrical performances centered around dystopian environments, designers often choose to employ performance techniques that preserve a sense of realism. As such, quoting Siddhartha Biswas' perspectives in his *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation* (2017), "in the case of theatre, [the text] becomes a much greater collaboration with the playwright, the director, the actors, the technicians and the audience-member coming together to create a final meaning for that performance." (16) Several actors have noted that one of the challenges of the play is to convincingly stage brutal acts. Kate Ashfield, who portrayed Cate in the initial Royal Court production, shared with Graham Saunders that her initial reaction was to contemplate how these acts would be executed. (Saunders, 2002: 163). Subsequently, the written text transforms from a mere theatrical narrative to a comprehensible experience for the audience.

According to Aristotle, catharsis and the pursuit of pleasure are inextricably linked. The term "catharsis" refers to the positive emotional response an audience has to a play's successful conclusion, regardless of whether the story is sorrowful,

comedic, or neutral. The issues presented are resolved to the satisfaction of the audience, leaving them delighted and pleased. In many plays, the resolution of the emotional experience occurs at the end via a process of reversal-recognition and individual salvation. The audiences' response to the performance of *Blasted* was not that of cathartic effect, it was rather a response of disgust. Jack Tinker, one of *Blasted*'s reviewers who wrote an essay review about the play on 19 January 1995 under the headline "This Disgusting Feast of Filth", believes that:

Until last night I thought I was immune from shock in any theatre. I am not. Finally, I have been driven into the arms of Disgusted of Tonbridge [sic] Wells. For utterly and entirely disgusted I was by a play which appears to know no bounds of decency, yet has no message to convey by way of excuse. (qtd. in Singer 145)

Likewise, Paul Taylor, an Independent journalist, described the experience of watching the play as "having your face rammed into an overflowing ash tray, just for starters, and then having your whole head held down in a bucket of offal." (Taylor 1995) This is enhanced by taboo activities that can be found in *Blasted* include Ian's addiction to alcoholism, his masturbation, Ian's raping of Cate, Ian's cannibalistic action of eating the dead baby, the homosexual relationship between Ian and the Soldier, the Soldier's cannibalistic action of eating Ian's eyes and his suicide as well as Ian's and the Soldier's murder and rape stories.

The above perspectives can be interpreted as an intentional end goal of Kane herself in a sense that she aimed at creating an equilibrium between the action and reaction, the call of the content and the response of the audience. War and its aftermath can be nothing but a disgusting experience. Kane stated "personally, I think ... the play being experiential rather than speculative. The title refers not only to the content but also to the impact it seems to have had on audiences. What makes the play experiential is its form" (Sierz, 2000: 106) ; she added "in *Blasted*, the form and content attempt to be one. About the content and the form, it is poured in, Caryl Churchill, one of Kane's defenders. She believed that:

...there's been such a ridiculous outcry about *Blasted* that I'd like to say how much I admire it. Far from being a mindless string of violent events, as the press has suggested, I found it a coherent story starting from ... social observation ... but able to move into

the surreal to show connections between local, domestic violence and the atrocities of war. I find it hard to see why people are so shocked by these things being in a play rather than by the things themselves. (qtd. in Fisher)

Churchill believed that the brutality shown in Kane's art was inherent to the human condition. It seems that reviewers had more issues with how these events were portrayed onstage than with the events themselves. After attending most of the performances, Kane anticipated that the negative portrayal of her play in the newspapers would overshadow its positive aspects. She explains:

I wasn't at all aware that Blasted would scandalize anyone. At the time I wrote it, I didn't even expect it to be produced. Personally, I think it is a shocking play, but only in the sense that falling down the stairs is shocking – it's painful and it makes you aware of your own fragility, but one doesn't tend to be morally outraged about falling down stairs. (Sierz, 2000, 94)

Sarah Kane possessed a remarkable ability to penetrate the essence of subjective experience, which alludes to an individual's internal reaction to objective reality. She experienced the violent and dramatic process of internalizing external reality, which was met with criticism from others. Kane described how she perceived the play and its significance to her:

For me, the play was about a crisis of living. How do we continue to live when life becomes so painful, so unbearable? Blasted really is a hopeful play because the characters do continue to scrape a life out of the ruins. There's a famous photograph of a woman in Bosnia hanging by her neck from a tree. That's lack of hope. That's shocking. My play is only a shadowy representation of a reality that's far harder to stomach. It's easier to get upset about that representation than about the reality because it's easier to do something about a play -- ban it, censor it, take away the theatre's subsidy. But what can you do about that woman in the woods? Take away her funding? (Sierz, 106)

The production centered on a profound existential problem. Strategies of performance are employed to sustain one's existence in the face of insurmountable agony and intolerable conditions.

Blasted, however; is suffused with optimism, as its characters endeavor strongly to feel their existence amid the desolation. The suffering the characters endure is indicated directly. Ian's expressed desire for death is indicative of his severe despair, which is related to the loss of his wife and son, who were of the highest priority in his life. Due to his melancholy, he lacks the drive to undergo a lung transplant procedure that would precipitate his mortality. In Scene Four, the protagonist requests a firearm from Cate in order to commit suicide on another occasion. This request is made as a result of the protagonist's recent loss of sight, which has caused overwhelming physical and mental anguish:

Ian: Help me.

[...]

Ian: Be dead soon,
anyway, Cate, and it hurts.

Help me to – Help me – Finish It (Kane,1995: 50)

From the beginning of the play to the end, he pleads Cate not to abandon him. Though he always harms, abuses, and humiliates Cate, he always ends his bad behavior by telling her he loves her, pleading with her to remain with him, and once even asking her to marry him so she won't abandon him. Cate, on the other hand, has a terrible opinion of herself and thinks she deserves all the bad things that happen to her and that she should be with a wicked person like Ian. She clearly suffers from "the inability to sustain a feeling of personal identity " (Tyson, 16), which is indicative of a more basic problem. Therefore, Cate is vulnerable to the influence of others due to this fundamental problem; for example, her mother, who seems to decide everything instead of Cate, and then Ian, who is always pressuring her to alter some aspect of her identity, like her clothing, because she looks "like a lesbos" (1, 7). The soldier also suffered from a negative psychological experience and profound depression due to the death of his fiancée, who was of the uttermost

importance in his life, He exhibited aggressive tendencies and committed acts of torment, sexual assault, and murder due to his melancholy disposition. The Soldier forces Ian to visualize one of the brutal scenes he has been a participant of in the ongoing civil war outside and he tells: Three men and four women. Called the others. They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there...Closed my eyes and thought of –...shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles. (3, 34)

Blasted events take place in a single room in a hotel. Like the naturalistic plays, Scene One opens with a full description of the hotel room that contains: "double bed, a telephone, mini-bar, bouquet of flowers and two doors" (*Blasted* 3) In addition, the use of both "Darkness" and "Light" suggests that the duration of the theatrical presentation is not limited to one.

The presentation of Ian and Cate suggests a distinction between the two in terms of their respective age and social circumstances. Cate is currently 21 years old, whereas Ian is 42 years old. Cate exhibits awe upon entering the luxurious hotel room in Leeds, indicating that she is unfamiliar with such accommodations: "She goes around the room, looking in every drawer, touching everything. She smells the flowers and smiles." (scene one , 4) The kinds of drink, namely gin and champagne, Ian takes and offers Cate enhance the social gap between the two. In more simple words, Ian and Cate are clearly opposites from the start. Kane contrasts her joy with his pessimism. Ian says he has "shit in better places than this," while Cate is "amazed at the classiness of the room" (1, 3). Masturbation transports Cate, but she doesn't drink or smoke. Ian, on the other hand, finds sex, booze, and cigarettes unsatisfying, even death. Like Kane's use of box-set reality, *Blasted* establishes its victim/good girl, Cate, and perpetrator/bad guy, Ian, then exploits these archetypes to blow reader\ spectators expectations and create a more nuanced situation. Ian, described at the play's start as "Welsh born but lived in Leeds all his life and picked up the accent" (1:3), doesn't realize the irony of his "immigration" to Yorkshire or that he switches between Welsh and English depending on the situation. Cate can easily see Ian's absurd viewpoint.

Evidently, over the duration of the theatrical production, it becomes apparent that Ian is destined to be in a perpetual state of unrest. Consequently, he employs diverse strategies, such as substance abuse, smoking, and domestic violence against Cate, in an attempt to attain a state of calmness that is evidently

unattainable. His physical condition appears to be debilitated due to an unspecified ailment, and he is consistently observed to be experiencing discomfort. As the plot progresses, the degree of affliction seems to develop.

The setting is a crucial aspect in the creation of the overall performance. It involves a process of either situating or displacing, which enables the spectators to engage with the theatrical experience. As far as the playwright lacks the privilege of presenting his characters in a vacuum, the presence of a stage is essential, and it must possess specific cues that the spectators will absorb and thus interpret. Established on the backdrop of a Civil war, *Blasted*'s whole conflict is set "in a very expensive hotel room in Leeds" which, as explained by Kane in the written text of the play, "could be anywhere in the world." (Scene 1) Kane employs a "Postmodern zone" as described by McHale (1994, 45), which refers to a fabricated location that transforms into a "deconstructed space." Armstrong's portrayal of the hotel room as a constructed space that is subsequently destroyed by the explosion and becomes "deconstructed" (2003, 44). This assertion is reinforced by Kane's interview, wherein she asserts that the play's structure corresponds with the disorderly structure of war. Kane posits that the unexpected and forceful destruction of people's lives in war is analogous to the play's narrative structure (Saunders, 2002, 41). The atmosphere shifts from an opulent hotel room in Leeds to a battlefield, with the bed transformed into a portable toilet and the floors used as a graveyard. The "Leeds" chamber looks like a decaying Bosnian building.

Blasted's opening events are remarkable for their agreement with realism tactics while also housing a variety of other dramatic forms that do not exactly adhere to the traditional unities of time, space, and action. In terms of place, for example, Ian moves back and forth between the room and the bathroom where he dresses, coughs, and spits in the sink. Interestingly enough, what he does in the bathroom is recognized by the stage sound effect —a matter that allows the spectators to internalize what is presented behind the walls of the stage. Each stage direction is important because it reveals something about the plot, the characters, or the time period. In his *Post Dramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann states that the Aristotelian theatrical tradition is fundamentally characterized by the norm of time unity. The principle of unity of time requires a cohesive and uninterrupted sequence of events that contributes to the lucidity and holistic understanding of the production. Any disruptions or deviations from this principle may impede the

audience's comprehension. (Lehmann, 2006, 158). Kane's justification for this tear in the story is twofold. Kane expounded on the nature of war in an interview, thereby being the first to bring attention to this topic. "War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Acts of violence simply happen in life, they do not have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible (Kane cited in Saunders, 2002, 48). The reason for Kane's formulation of the play causes further examination, particularly in light of the responses it has elicited. As such, the playwright's notes on the set, decorations, and costumes are written with the actors in mind, not the spectators. However, the playwright's insistence on these details may restrict the director's ability to make any necessary or interesting adjustments to the production. While the director is free to change certain minor aspects of the set, the room itself must be kept the same. The effectiveness of the play might be diminished if this step is skipped. (Biswas, 18)

Performing war's brutality and its dystopian effect are fostered through the kind of language, action, and reaction exchanged between the characters and the readers in the written text and between the actors and the spectators in the performed text. In this regard, Male and female characters\ actors are essential to the storyline of *Blasted*. One needs to highlight that Ian and Cate were once lovers and for the most part Ian has brought Cate to the hotel room to resume their affair. He has prepared all the elements of seduction such as a large double bed, champagne chilling in an ice bucket, and a bouquet of flowers. However, Cate has not come to pick up where they left off but rather because he seemed unhappy. Kane's portrayal of Ian is juxtaposed with Ian's illness and decay, he smokes and drinks far too much yet one learns that he had surgery on his lungs last year. It is through the characters' conflict, particularly that one of Cate and Ian, Kane draws a connection between a civic disturbance and the hotel sexual assault of a young lady. Ian's unpredictable actions and aggressive tendencies are in stark contrast to Cate's innocence. Whenever this innocence is threatened or violated, Cate stutters, and her body, as such, is described with as "motionless": "I t-t-t-t-t- told. I really like you but I c-c-c-c- can't do this" (scene one, 13)

Ian's use of a gun as a representation of his manhood could be indicators that he desires to find thrills and do sadomasochistic things. When Ian uses a weapon in a

sexual situation, it shows that he cannot engage in normal sexual actions and that he needs to hurt Cate in order to feel sexually satisfied.

He pretends to have a sensual relationship with Cate by taking the pistol to her head as she lies on her back. This is not the first time that Ian's desires have led him to physically assault Cate. He thought to have raped her throughout the night earlier in the narrative, although Kane does not really depict this. Instead, Ian and Cate broach the subject at breakfast the next day:

Ian:

Loved me last night.

Cate:

I didn't want to do it.

Ian:

Thought you liked that.

Cate:

No.

Ian:

Made enough noise.

Cate:

It was hurting.

Ian:

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

Cate:

You bit me. It's still bleeding.

Ian:

Is that what this is all about?

Cate:

You're cruel.

Ian:

Don't be stupid.

(Kane, 31-32)

Ian has been trying to seduce Cate from the very first scene, and his behavior has been more aggressive as she has rejected him. Armstrong explains this away by saying that it's because Kane portrays sexual activity as violent: "war uses sex as a

weapon, and war is institutionalized violence. Sexual acts are generally erotic in nature, but in *Blasted*, sex is used as a weapon of violence (Armstrong, 2003:62). Ian displays his masculinity by exerting dominance and belittling Cate throughout the play. He calls her as "Joey," a British slang term for "stupid," and asserts that she lacks comprehension. One can propose that he derives sexual gratification from exerting dominance over her. The moral ambiguity of this desire is implied by Kane due to the significant power differential between the two parties involved. Cate, who is younger than Ian by half, is disadvantaged and somewhat naive. Despite this, she has shown genuine concern for Ian and agreed to visit him after he expressed unhappiness. Her lack of worldliness, as Ian claims, leads to a startling outcome. Ian's physical abuse and subsequent sexual assault of Cate suggest his disregard for her mental faculties. Kane's depiction of Cate as intellectually limited aligns with Ian's objectification of women—a matter that benefits him.

The performed conflict is enhanced by means of mise en scene effects. Tackling mise en scene entails: setting including decor, lightening, custom and make up, and movements and performance. These four elements set the whole mood of the play which can never be comprehended fully without handling the general effect of each element, the context of each scene, linking the effect to specific details of the scene, and linking all the previous elements together. Situating the four elements within an Artaudian context, it is believed that:

The costumes, the music, the light – all the elements would be so crafted that they would truly jolt the audience and play on their nerves. Artaud wanted to experiment with each and every element, such as the style of speaking, the musical instruments. Quite obviously the actors were not inspired to present characters true to life; rather, they were supposed to use all their devices to present heightened emotions in a way that would initiate the same in the audience. (Biswas 59-60)

Blasted's opening scene is firmly planted in realism, and Kane frankly confesses that Ibsen was an influence. (Kane, cited in Saunders, 2002:41). Kane describes Ibsen's influence as the standardization of naturalism and psychological realism in the theater. The first scene's set design echoes the "fourth" wall style used by writers such as Ibsen and Chekhov. (Saunders, 2002:41). Kane's choice to adopt

the confines of naturalism in the opening scene is an important one, as Kim Solga writes in her paper *Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible...* realism relies for its signifying power on a closed, carefully self-selected world and the promise that its spectators will eventually see all that world has to offer, in order to perpetuate the truth of its narrative.” (Solga, 2007:346).

Symbolic approaches to thematic concerns such as seduction, misguided love, abuse, and rejection may involve the use of a double bed, chilled champagne, and a bouquet of flowers. Saunders employs flowers as a symbol of seduction, love, and romance in the opening scene. The flowers are later depicted as strewn across the floor with their petals torn, indicating the end of the romance and the insincerity of Ian's love token gesture to Cate (Saunders, 2002:41). The symbolic significance of the main door is heightened by Kane's use of it. The door functions as both an exit from the action scene and a gateway to the unknown beyond, becoming a source of tension before the soldier's arrival. On the use of symbols and the spectator's response to their meanings Biswas states:

Since theatre claims to have its own language, it is worthwhile to look at it from the semiotic point of view. Just like in the case of language, theatre also comes with a pre-organized meaning. And the negotiation of that meaning and the interpreted meaning is what makes this whole study so interesting. The success and failure depends on how well the signs have been used or presented. And since communication is the keyword in theatre, all this becomes rather relevant. Of course, this is where the major paradox lies. Communication is never equal when we are dealing with a large audience. Each individual will respond differently. To demand the same response is to undermine one's freedom of interpretation. (11)

In accordance with the given context, with regard to the theatre, various elements such as dialogue, setting, props, gestures, attire, makeup, lighting, performance, and music serve as immediate indicators. At times, these indicators may operate autonomously, however, for best functionality, they must exhibit seamless cohesion. The written form of a play is typically static, subject only to the reader's interpretation. During a theatrical performance, a collaborative effort takes place, leading to a diverse range of interpretations. A significant difference exists

between the play as imagined by the reader and its performance by live actors, which creates a sense of authenticity.

1:3 Performing Dehumanization

In *Blasted* Kane portrays the repulsiveness inherent in human interaction. The thematic element of oppression and the effects of oppression exert significant pressure on spectators, leading them to exhibit instinctual and deeply personal reactions. In Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, there is a notable emphasis placed on the essentiality of violence as a method for scrutinizing the nature and qualities of individuals who find themselves in a state of oppression. The presence of violence in the play leads the characters to erroneously perceive themselves as animals, thereby highlighting the theme of dehumanization. The audience observes various side effects, such as anger, dissatisfaction, and sadness, as a consequence of these traumatic experiences.

Both Kane and Artaud advocated for a confrontational approach towards the audience in order to disrupt the mass spectacle and rescue the spectator from a state of apathy. Kane employs the principles outlined in the Theater of Cruelty manifesto to underscore the prominence of spectacle in his theatrical works, while deviating from Artaud's notion of a theater solely driven by sensory experiences. *Blasted* effectively illustrates the impact of Artaud's influence on Kane, particularly in her preference for action over verbal expression. In accordance with Artaud's guidance, Kane's stage directions exhibit a conventional stage setup devoid of any particular emphasis on lighting or music. Instead, her primary focus lies in the enactment of cruelty, aiming to jolt the senses and thereby stimulate cognitive engagement. Kane effectively conveyed a sense of malevolence to the audience by utilizing the theatrical medium, enabling them to bear witness to acts of brutality through the embodiment of the theatrical experience. The spectators are exposed to the direct sensation of witnessing, perceiving auditory cues, and empathizing with the violation and torture inflicted upon Ian. In contrast to films and television, where there exists a physical separation between the audience and the depiction of violence, no such barrier is present in the current context, as the violence is situated directly in front of the audience. The audience is subjected to a form of brutality due to the fact that the observation of violence in theatrical performances may produce effects similar to those experienced when directly witnessing actual

acts of violence. While cruelty for Artaud could “be anything from a loud sound to a scene that eliminates the comfortable space between audience and performer” (Blankenship,2008:6), it is defined, according to Kane, as one person inflicting harm on another. No brutality is shown on the stage that does not directly result in damage to the characters, including but not limited to verbal abuse, rape, torture, murder, suicide, and even a bomb.

This can be exemplified by the soldier who is captured by feelings of sorrow and shame because of what he did and witnessed and. Kane manifests the violence that will shock both Ian and the audience in following abusive action of the Soldier. “He pulls down Ian’s trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian’s hair” (49). Kane effectively challenges societal barriers to comprehend the malevolent aspects of the outside world by employing the narrative of a homosexual assault and the emotional experience of the perpetrator. Soldiers are often anticipated to engage in acts of homicide and sexual assault against the others. Therefore, Kane demonstrates that engaging in these activities is not only permissible but also encouraged as far as veterans do not take them home. However, Kane disproves this by having a journalist from Wales become the victim of acceptable violence in a hotel room in Leeds. In an effort to shock the audience and push them into understanding the ramifications of violence, Kane has combined what happens in war with what may and does happen in daily life. Ian is still preoccupied with himself even after becoming a victim of assault. He asked the soldier whether he planned to kill him. The Soldier replies by means of barbaric action rather than abusive words; he “puts his mouth over one of Ian’s eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. He does the same to the other eye” (50) Since Ian was unable of seeing above his immediate concerns, Kane decides to remove his eyesight entirely, turning him as powerless as he has ever been. Even if their humanity is undermined by their harshness, the characters in Kane's stories still have something to lose. There is tragedy in its loss, but there is also hope in its (fragile) recovery towards the end of the play. Laura Lopez argues:

throughout the second half of the play, Ian undergoes both a dehumanizing and a humanizing process, as, on the one hand, he is dehumanized from his former violent, uncaring and insensible type of humanity and, on the other, this dehumanization enables him to finally embrace a new kind of humanism which makes him capable,

by the very end of the play, of uttering the significant words “thank you” to Cate. (116)

The tactics employed in *Blasted* contribute to the audience's sense of unease during the performance. Cate occasionally experiences episodes of losing control of her temper, resulting in hysterical screaming, particularly during intense situations. The audience is unsettled by the loud noises, which could be interpreted as either expression of fear or amusement. The attacks come again in Scene IV when the child passes away in her arms, and she begins laughing "unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably" (54). After being victimized by Soldier and being left alone by Cate, Ian, too, erupts into fits and shouts hysterically. The audience's reaction to these disquieting sound effects does not occur on an intellectual or emotive level, as the audience is "affected" according to Dee Reynolds (2012: 124). Prior to the formation of emotions or concepts, affect serves as the immediate response to the experienced triggers, specifically the cries of Cate and Ian (Reynolds, 2012: 124). The effect that it has on the audience is immediate, fully experienced, and based on auditory perception. During the intimate encounter, Cate engages in oral stimulation with Ian, applying significant pressure to his genitals resulting in significant pain for him. Subsequently, she endeavors to cleanse her mouth of any blood or other substances present. The audience members participating in the performance's embodiment simulation may find the experience to be quite unpleasant. In addition to visual representations, certain sensory encounters, such as the taste and tactile perception of hair and blood in the mouth, can also elicit disquietude among spectators. In a similar vein, the audience is presented with the experience of witnessing the consumption of human flesh, as Soldier consumes Ian's eyeballs and Ian consumes the remains of the deceased infant. According to Reynolds in his *Kinesthetic empathy and the dance's body: From emotion to affect. Kinesthetic empathy in creative and cultural practices* (2012), The term "intermodality" is used to describe the phenomenon of experiencing multiple sensations during a dance performance. (124) The objective of this concept is to encourage the spectators to actively engage with and interpret the sensory experience of their observations. The concept of intermodality can also be applied to analyze the audience's discomfort in these specific scenes, where various bodily sensations are simultaneously evoked, blurring the distinction between the performer's body and the audience's body. The "affective" interaction

between the spectator and the actors, which Reynolds seeks in dance performances, is achieved through the extension of the audience's physical presence onto the stage by means of sensual scenes (126).

Every individual's perception of the world and any given work of art is unique and influenced by their distinct embodied experiences. The nature of these embodied experiences plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' understanding and interpretation of theatrical works of art. The reason why the representation of violence on stage causes more attention and reaction than the one on media can be explained with reference to an explanation by Gallese's term, discussed in *Seeing with the eyes closed* (2011), that is "liberated embodied simulation," in which the audience is engaged during the performance (64). Gallese asserts that "very often artistic fiction is more powerful than real life in evoking our emotional engagement and emphatic involvement" (64) This is exemplified by the recurrent theme of rape in *Blasted*.

The first rape, for example, is staged in accordance with the convention of depicting the most violent offenses offstage. Though the audience does not witness Ian's violation of Cate during the intermission between acts one and two, the author provides sufficient evidence to infer that Cate is violated. Given the graphic portrayal of Ian's rape later in the play, Kane's symbolic representation of Cate's rape through flowers is even more startling. The flower metaphor becomes fundamental to the narrative of the entire drama. The symbol of the torn bouquet returns in the final scene when Cate comes back to the hotel to find a violated and disabled Ian: "She looks around and finds two pieces of wood. She tips the lining out of Ian's jacket and binds the wood together in a cross which she sticks into the floor. She collects a few of the scattered flowers and places them under the cross" (57).

By the end of the play, this form of violence becomes one with the violence of fully-fledged warfare. Alone in the room after the Soldier has shot himself and Cate has gone hunting for food, a blind and helpless Ian exhumes and eats the corpse of the deceased infant rescued by Cate from the warzone offstage, then takes the baby's place in the makeshift tomb under the floorboards and «dies with relief» (60), only to be immediately revived by the rain pouring over his head from a leak in the roof. Moments later, Cate returns with gin, bread and a «large

sausage» (60) she has procured by selling her body to the soldiers; she eats In Sarah Kane's play "Blasted". Here, meat eating is used as a metaphorical element to explore themes of violence, power, and degradation. The characters in the play engage in consuming meat as a representation of their brutal and primal nature. Meat eating represent as a symbolic way of illustrating the dehumanization and objectification of individuals in a violent and oppressive world. Artaud, among the founder figures of performing cruelty on stage, reflects on a theatre that would create such an intense and harrowing experience for the performer and the spectator that they would be left in a state of purification in the end: "I will devote myself from now on exclusively to the theatre as I conceive it, a theatre of blood, a theatre which at each performance will stir something in the body of the performer as well as the spectator of the play." (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004, 165) Artaud's goal in the theater is to take the audience somewhere they wouldn't go otherwise, to a region of anguish and ecstasy. Doing so, a cathartic process might be started in motion intended to have impacts on reality while being risk-free:

[T]his total theatre is the ideal. This anxiety, this guilt feeling, this victoriousness, this satisfaction, set the tone, feelings and state of mind in which the audience should leave our theatre, shaken and irritated by the inner dynamism of the show. This dynamism bears a direct relation to the anxieties and pre-occupations of their whole lives. (Artaud qtd. in Leach 2004: 169)

In response, Kane states:

"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 the cultural event that drew attention to it. That doesn't surprise me. Of course the press wish to deny that what happened in Central Europe has anything to do with us, of course they don't want us to be aware of the extent of the social sickness we're suffering from – the moment they acknowledge it, the ground opens up and swallows them" (Natasha&Heidi,1997:131).

The audience either stop caring because of the constant barrage of graphic violence and depictions of human degradation, or they are horrified by that performance

itself. The play's depictions of brutality and tragedies are not intended to elicit a sympathetic response from the spectators. Instead, the audience must find their own equilibrium since Kane deliberately doesn't provide us with any safe haven. Leading us into a state of humiliation. Kane wants the audience to understand the brutality of conflict via the terrible deeds shown in *Blasted*.

Conclusion

Blasted is one of the most challenging British plays for performers, directors, and audiences to stage and see until the end. It uses all theatrical means to depict sexual, verbal, and physical aggression, punching the audience in the face with the violence that permeates every civilization. *Blasted* seems more than being political pronouncements on war and brutality, feminist issues with rape, and spectacular media descriptions of its text and stage's filth. The audience feel the overturning of the play scenes and close proximity to the stage. Furthermore the audience's bodies are initially touched by the convulsive depictions, that few authors or directors have ventured to produce. The audience are gripped by blood, flesh, contact, taboos, and combat screams. Their quivering bodies in theatrical seats stretch to the stage and are pulled to a battle zone. With their activated mirror neurons, people re-enact newspaper and TV events they hate. The audience's fears, wishes, expectations, and ideas about violence and abuse are triggered by the play's physiological emotions. The familiarity from the other hand, and physiologically imprinted character of violence affects observers. Still, if the writer allowed them

to be familiar with one of the play's stances or opinions, they would feel comforted. Sarah Kane denies her viewers this respite and she intentionally blurs position boundaries. The character who victimizes in one moment is victimized in another as Ian. The victimizer is both aggressed and forgiven in the same scene like Soldier, or the thought of being raped is disturbing in one scene but honorable in another. By offering several perspectives, the dramatist subverts and reshapes sentiments and memories. Blasted's audience enact the performance from numerous perspectives and is shattered. They're compelled to travel back and forth till they're exhausted.

Works cited

Artaud, A. (2010). The theatre and its double. London House.

Armstrong, J. L. (2003). Postmodernism and trauma: Four/fore plays of Sarah Kane . Ph.D., University of Alberta (Canada).

Blankenship, Mark.(10,feb.2008). "It's Not Just Cruel; It's Unusual, Too." New York Times.

Blankenship, Mark. "It's Not Just Cruel; It's Unusual, Too." *New York Times* .p.10. 39 steps .(10 Feb. 2008).

Buford, Bill (1991), Among the Thugs. London: Arrow.

Gallese, V., & Sinigaglia, C. (2011). What is so special about embodied simulation? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 15(11), 512-519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics>. 2011.09.003.

Leach, R. (2004). *Makers of Modern Theatre: An introduction*. Routledge.

Lopez, Laura (2009). Witness Inside /Outside the Stage.The Purpose of Representaning Violence in Edward Bond's *Saved*(1995) and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995). University of Barcelona. En3650@wanadoo.es.

Kane.(1995). *Blasted*. The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London.

Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. Routledge.

Langridge, Natasha, and Stephenson, Heidi (1997). *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. London: Methuen. 131.

Biswas Siddhartha (2017). *Theatre Theory and Performance: A Critical Interrogation*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.p:18.

Solga, Kim.(2007). “Blasted’s Hysterics: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible.” *Modern Drama*, V. 50 issue 3, pp. 346-374.

Kane, (1995), *Blasted* ,?The royal Court theatre upstairs, London.

Pena, Laura Lopez. “Witnesses Inside/Outside the Stage: The Purpose of Representing Violence in Edward Bond’s *Saved* (1965) and Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995).” *Folios* 29 (2009): 111–18.

Reynolds, D. (2012). Kinesthetic empathy and the dance’s body: From emotion to affect. *Kinesthetic empathy in creative and cultural practices* (D. Reynolds & M. Reason. Eds.) Intellect. 121-136.

Saunders, G. (2002). ‘Love me or Kill me’: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.

Saunders, Graham.(2002). 'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extreme. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sellar, Tom (1996), ‘Truth and Dare: Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* ’. *Theater*,27 (1), 29–34.

Sierz, Aleks.(2000). *In-Yer-Face Theater: British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber.

Solga, Kim.(2007). “Blasted’s Hysterics: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible.” *Modern Drama*, V. 50 issue 3, p. 346-374.

Turanjanin ,V. (2013).*Youth and Hooliganism at Sports Events* ,Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Mission to Serbia.

Tyson, Lois.(2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2 nd edition. New York: Routledge.

Urban, Ken.(2001), “An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane.” PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art. 23.3 : 36-46.

Iball, H. (2008). Sarah Kane’s blasted. Continuum International Publishing Group. no. 2, 2004, pp. 139-171.

Singer, Annabelle. “Don't Want to Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane.” TDR (1988-), vol. 48, no. 2, 2004, pp. 139-171.

Tylor, P. (1995). THEATRE / courting disaster. Independent .

Tyson, L. (1999). Chapter 2: Psychoanalytic Criticism. In Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Urban, Ken (2001), ‘An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of 27 (1), 29–34.