About the Playwright: Sarah Kane (730 words)

Communication is vital to our existence.  Sarah Kane’s[.1]  *Crave* explores just how this communication is conveyed.  Four voices make up the dialogue between the cryptically named characters C, M, B and A, giving the one-act play a genetic code which expresses itself in disjointed sequences of thought.   This quartet recalls multiple voices in a single mind, even as the lyrical rhythms attempt to steal all meaning in language for itself. It might be foolish to try and listen for personal communications of foreboding from the playwright in the narrative, yet it’s irresistible to do so[.2] :  *Crave*  premiered only one year before the death of the English playwright in 1999.

Sarah Kane was born to a pair of journalists in Essex on February 3, 1971.  She recalls[.3]  a critical juncture at age 18 or 19, where her childhood belief in Christ’s Second Coming  clashed with a growing secular understanding of mortality , causing what Kane considered her “first relationship breakup”.   Kane studied theatre at Bristol University, graduating with first class honours, before completing her MA from the University of Birmingham.  Five major plays, one short screenplay and two newspaper articles make up Kane’s professional body of work from 1995-1999, all featuring her exploration on the division of body and soul.

Kane took her own life at 28 years old, hanging herself in a hospital where she was being treated for an overdose on prescription drugs.  Four months prior, she revealed that personal torment directly influenced her art: “I’ve only ever written to escape from hell—and it’s never worked but at the other end of it when you sit there…and think that’s the most perfect expression of the hell that I felt—then maybe it was worth it.”  Kane’s agent, Mel Kenyon[.4] , describes his appreciation for Kane’s truth as way out of the tragedy of the artist’s death, where “the humour, the potent imagery, her incredible use of language and her emotional rawness…made it much easier to accept what had happened, even though I’m still angry that she felt she had to dig so deep to write the last play that she couldn’t find another way out.”

Death chills, but cannot overshadow, the bleak and raw esthetics Kane worked with as a playwright.  Kane’s 1995 MA production, *Blasted*, exploded the comfort zone of naturalist theatre when a hotel room is invaded by the military.   Explicit language accompanied by scenes of rape, cannibalism, and violence led critics to denounce the play as a “disgusting feast of filth”.  Kane’s critique of genocide in Bosnia was lost on critics as childish shock tactics, perhaps influencing her choice to adapt a Greek classic to modern prose in *Phaedra’s Love*in 1996. Kane revisited violence and the nature of power relationships in*Cleansed*(1997).  Here, four lovers are forced to sacrifice body parts and dignity under the domination of “Tinker”, perhaps based on Jack Tinker, one of Kane’s outraged critics in the Daily Mail tabloid.

Kane’s fourth play, *Crave (1998)*, departs from her previous work in bloody Jacobean revenge[.5] .   This break was significantly marked with the  pseudonym Mary Kelvedon, a hybrid of Kane’s middle name and hometown, in the playwright’s otherwise fictitious handbill biography.

*Crave* best encapsulates Kane’s comment that  “theatre has no memory, which makes it the most existential of the arts.” The narrative of *Crave*expresses this amnesia even as bits of  information re-circulate throughout the narrative for consideration. The déjà vu is fleeting as  both audience and actors are swept away by a round of rhythm and logical contradiction.

*Crave*’s experimental narrative style might be interpreted as a study for Kane’s final masterpiece, *4:48 Psychosis*, which was produced posthumously in 2000 at the prestigious Royal Court Theatre in London.   Where *Crave* is a bridge between separate actors and the self, *4:48 Psychosis* delves completely in the realm of the (sub)conscious[Library6] , with the entire three acts written  as stream-of-conciousness, absent of any characters or staging directions.

Kane foresaw her own resurrection in art, expressed through the words of “C” in *Crave*: “I hate these words that keep me alive/I hate these words that won’t let me die.” Alongside her work, a collection of annecdotes, industry interviews, and memoirs by Graham Saunders ensures Kane’s enigma survives in*“Love Me or Kill Me”: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*(Manchester University Press, 2002).