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Editorial

Brutalism, Sarah Kane, and the Long Nineties Reconsidered

There is no question that in the 1990s the world radically changed. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War promised a new world order or even in the famous words of Francis Fukuyama ‘the end of history’ (FUKUYAMA 1992). Yet, at the same time, as Arjun Appadurai reminds in *The Fear of Small Numbers*, the 1990s is an epoch of extreme violence raging through different parts of the globe and diverse societies (APPADURAI 2006: 2). The atmosphere of those ‘brutal’ times was registered in the dramaturgy of Sarah Kane and other British ‘brutalists’ writing for stages in the 1990s. Their texts describe the world torn by violence, capitalism, war, boredom, and the unfulfilled lives of people searching for something meaningful but in reality losing any meaning. Kane’s dramas, most renowned and staged still today, showed violence and its embodiment in a hyperrealistic, almost surreal way, requiring some new theatrical strategies and aesthetic choices. Her writing ‘blasted’ the theatrical convention, introducing new language and new imagery onto theatrical stages.

In 2002 Aleks Sierz, theatre critic and historian who popularised Sarah Kane and 1990s young British theatre, was trying to convince the public to not call contemporary British dramaturgy ‘New Brutalism’. He argued:

The first step in understanding the phenomenon is to name it. [...] If [...] you choose to call this phenomenon New Brutalism, you are emphasising one aspect of contemporary theatre: its brutality and violence. Since the work of a writer such as Sarah Kane is as much about tenderness and love, this label conveys entirely the wrong impression. Also, a further drawback is that it implicitly compares theatre with architecture – the National Theatre in London is a new brutalist building – and I don’t think this comparison is at all fruitful or stimulating. (SIERZ 2002: 19)

Although his concerns and proposition to title this ‘new sensibility’ as ‘in-yer-face theatre’ were published in Polish in one of the most important theatre journals *Dialog* the very same year, Sarah Kane’s dramaturgy and the whole formation of dramaturges and theatre artists popular on Polish stages in late 1990s and early 2000s were still called ‘brutalists’. The world they described was indeed brutal. From Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* staged in 1999, through Kane’s *Blasted* (1999), *Cleansed* (2001), *4.48 Psychosis* (2002), Marius von Mayneburg’s *Fireface* (1999) and *Parasites* (2000) to Mogens Rukov and Thomas Vinterberg’s *Festen* (2002), this wave of new theatre was describing every kind of violence, war, hopelessness, isolation, and suffering as a main experience of an early 21st century subject. It was felt as true, raw and was raising social awareness of the new, capitalist reality breaking through the optimistic narration of political transition.

From today’s perspective this stubbornness of the Eastern European public in calling Kane’s and other writer’s dramas ‘brutalist’ or belonging to ‘New Brutalism’ without giving much attention to the unwanted associations with architecture or theatre buildings, gains another dimension. In his 2020 book entitled simply *Brutalism* Achille Mbembe, Cameroonian philosopher, states in the opening line: ‘I have borrowed the concept of brutalism from architectural thought, though in my view, the category is an eminently political one’ (MBEMBE 2024: xi). He explains that brutalism is a condition of contemporary subject and culture, power, societies, and global crisis, or in the words of Elizabeth Povinelli (2021), the ‘ancestral catastrophe’, ongoing and founding for the whole modernity. Mbembe continues, ‘I invoke the notion of brutalism to describe an age gripped by the planetary-scale pathos of demolition and production of stocks of darkness, in addition to all sorts of waste, leftovers, traces of a gigantic demiurgy’ (MBEMBE 2024: xii). When he describes the world and contemporary subject as wounded and spoiled, embodied through disembodiment and violence, one can have an impression of entering the stage of Kane’s *Blasted* or *Cleansed*. Maybe this close relationship of Kane’s dramaturgy with the transition that put the whole world on the path to climate crisis, technofeudalism, economic colonialism, and never-ending wars, that was not so visible from the Western Europe at that time, became evident in the eyes of the Eastern European public and now gets its African voice as Mbembe explores and establishes it.

That is why we find it so important to go back to those experiences and stagings, to the Eastern European history of brutalism and Sarah Kane’s dramas. We think they hold and archive something important about the history of a globally important moment of the great change when communism collapsed and brutalism revealed itself as a ruling world order. Theatre of the 1990s, of the political transition, already produced images and performances that responded to that reality. From this particular perspective Kane is not only a scandalous writer of the 1990s and ‘Cool Britannia’ moment but an important element of post 1989 brutalist sensibility, as her works represent and embody this new sensitivity in the most exquisite way – especially in reception outside Britain.

What interested us in this issue of *Theatralia* is the particular position Kane's writing gained in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Her texts were staged all around the region (in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and some other countries) and sparked important discussions about the shape of new, post-communist theatre. We wanted to know how it was staged and understood without the British context; how it framed the experience of the political transition in the region and what feelings it triggered for Eastern European publics. What was the experience of Kane's dramas in the region? Was it different between the countries and societies, or can we find some common threads allowing us to speak about Eastern European Kane?

To grasp the unobvious role her texts played in Eastern European cultural history, we propose to look at the local contexts around the region. Those microhistories of particular performances make up a mosaic of theatrical, cultural, and political brutality. Our interest in this comparative approach also stems from our own experiences. Our dialogue about Sarah Kane was triggered by Dorota's lecture in Brno based on her research project 'Odmieńcy. Performances of Otherness in Polish Transition Culture'. She presented Kane's dramas on Polish stages a repertoire for the time of political transition, serving to negotiate the meanings and images of Otherness after 1989. This perspective triggered David's personal reflection of his part as a translator in introducing Sarah Kane into Czech context. Translating *Cleansed* was part of a 'wave' amongst Czech dramaturges who shared interest in in-her-face drama, followed Kane, Ravenhill, or Crimp, and sometimes even took part in playwriting workshops at the Royal Court Theatre. There was something strange and uncanny about Sarah Kane's texts... There was a feeling among these Czech enthusiasts that there is a need to talk about the actual world (and Czech society) at the end of the 1990s in a different theatre language, to address the failures in political transition after the Velvet Revolution, and to speak about dark shadows crawling around in the seemingly happy capitalist and free society. For both of us, the editors of this issue, it was suddenly crystal clear that Sarah Kane is not only a historical phenomenon of British theatre in the 1990s, but her work has provoked and still provokes us to this day. Interested in continuing this conversation we became persuaded that it needs more context and more voices, especially from Eastern (or post-Soviet) Europe. Looking at Kane's staging in that regional, comparativist perspective can bring new answers about the past and present experiences of transition, its culture, social organisation, and the subject it created, which remains unrepresented in the global discourse. This perspective influenced the present issue and a range of topics raised by the authors.

In section Yorick three very diverse papers demonstrate the plurality of approaches which the texts and performances of Sarah Kane prompt. It is more than welcome for us, and strongly significant, that all authors read Sarah Kane beyond the English (or British) theatre context to reflect the local cultural and political situation in their respective regions.

The article 'Craving for the West: In-Yer-Face Theatre in the Land of the Vistula', written by **Anna Cybulska**, **Zuzanna Kluszczyńska**, **Zofia Kryspin**, and **Adrianna**

Łakomiak, a team of students from the Dramatic Art Academy in Warsaw, is especially methodologically symptomatic for the perspective of the whole issue. The authors investigate the Polish productions of Sarah Kane's plays as a reflection of post-communist Poland's yearning for Western validation in the 1990s. The paper departs from the analysis of two well-known productions – Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Cleansed* and Grzegorz Jarzyna's *4.48 Psychosis*. The authors reveal how these stagings, despite straying from Kane's original anti-liberal themes, captured the Polish theatre's desire for Western success and innovation. Then, using the methodological inspiration of Rebecca Schneider's archival approach, the paper looks at other, relatively marginal productions. This provides material for re-approaching the existing interpretation of the reception of Sarah Kane in Poland and critical discussion of the interplay between globalisation and tradition in Polish theatre, offering a fascinating look at how these adaptations negotiate cultural aspirations and artistic integrity.

Tomaz Toporišič in his paper 'Brutalist Theatrical Procedures of Sarah Kane, Anja Hilling, Simona Semenič, and Milena Marković' provides insightful exploration into brutalist procedures in drama writing in the last three decades, triggered by issues raised and the style used by Sarah Kane. Toporišič analyses the post-dramatic style of German playwright Anja Hilling, Slovene playwright and dramaturge Simona Semenič, and Serbian poet and playwright Milena Marković, demonstrating how Semenič's and Marković's accounts of the experience of the local political situation, especially the Balkan wars, opened new sensitivity to brutality and violence and triggered a search for very new, experimental, visually striking and symbolically charged theatrical strategies. By deconstructing traditional norms and embracing postmodern and anti-mimetic elements, they forged a 'theatre of unbelief' that challenges audiences to reevaluate the constructs of narrative and meaning. Toporišič clearly demonstrates how the playwrights' works not only 'locally' echo the legacy of Kane's New Brutalism but also carve a path for a specific localised reception and transformation of initial inspiration and create performative autonomy that defies conventional representation.

The last paper in the section, 'Affective Orientation in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*' by **Álvar Menéndez Cámara**, challenges existing views of Sarah Kane's writing by approaching it in the frame of affect theory. The paper highlights how Kane's fragmented narrative style and raw emotional intensity create a visceral affective orientation that deeply resonates with audiences. This opens up a new way of conceptualising the text and thus also understanding the performative and affective effect of contemporary performances of Sarah Kane's texts. Although this paper does not reflect on Eastern European Kane, by exploring affects and affective strategies of brutalism, it offers insight how the knowledge of 'the present moment' (WILLIAMS 1977: 128) created in 1990s theatre could be more felt than formulated, more lived through than written and archived.

Writings and reception of Sarah Kane are also reflected in the sections Events and Archive. **Nadja Satková** in her article 'Shock Therapy' provides evocative reflection upon visiting a performance of *4.48 Psychosis*. This staging, directed by Nemanja Mijović, from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, had quite a strong interna-

tional reception. Apart from the festival *Setkání/Encounter 2024*, the same production was presented at *BITEF* festival and at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg as part of the festival of young directors. Satková's reflection confirms that Sarah Kane's text can still – when performed with an unprejudiced and actual theatrical approach – create intensive, borderline experience for the audience. Another contributor to the issue, **Eszter Kovács** documents and explores the Hungarian reception of Sarah Kane's play *Cleansed*. She demonstrates the impact of the translation and the first performance directed by Sándor Zsótér (even though it was performed only three times) on Hungarian audiences. The performance brought up heated discussions with opposing views and confronted both audiences and critics with new, bold and brutal, theatre language.

Section Spectrum opens to other connected fields. Musicologist and historian **Jana Spáčilová** presents her long-term archival research in a rich and informative paper, 'Libreta z doby před rokem 1800 v knihovně zámku Český Krumlov' [Librettos from Before the 1800s in the Library of Český Krumlov Castle]. Her research explores librettos, musical scores, and other similar materials in the castle library of Český Krumlov. Even though the history of the castle is relatively known and different theatre activities are well-researched, this particular section of the library remained almost untouched for decades. Thus, Spáčilová's research provides very new and comprehensive information about the collection of librettos themselves, analyses connections between a series of case studies, traces the librettos across Europe, and contributes to the broader understanding of the dissemination of musical theatre in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Researcher **Vít Zeman** presents part of his research undertaken at the Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting (part of the Theatre Faculty of AMU, Czechia). His paper 'Silent Reading as a Latent Performance through the Lens of Ivan Vyskočil's Concept of Inner Dialogical Tripolarity' challenges the intuitive notion of 'silent reading' as an intimate, solitary activity, and analyses its performative aspects, bringing together conceptual inspiration from hermeneutics, phenomenology, and especially Ivan Vyskočil's concepts of 'dialogical acting with the inner partner' and 'inner tripolarity' in the situation of open dramatic play.

The papers, reports, and archival accounts of the reception of Sarah Kane presented in the volume definitely do not exhaust all the questions and problems which we initially proposed. These texts should rather provide a fresh and timely revisiting of the playwright's work, its recent reception, and also the transition process happening in the 1990s in the post-Soviet cultural space. No monument, but the trigger... and an invitation to explore land still unknown.

Dorota Sosnowska and David Drozd

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