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The Hungarian Reception of Sarah Kane's Play *Cleansed*

Eszter Kovács¹

Sarah Kane: *Cleansed*. Dir. Sándor Zsótér. Transl. by Gabriella Schuller. Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, 2001.

[archiv]

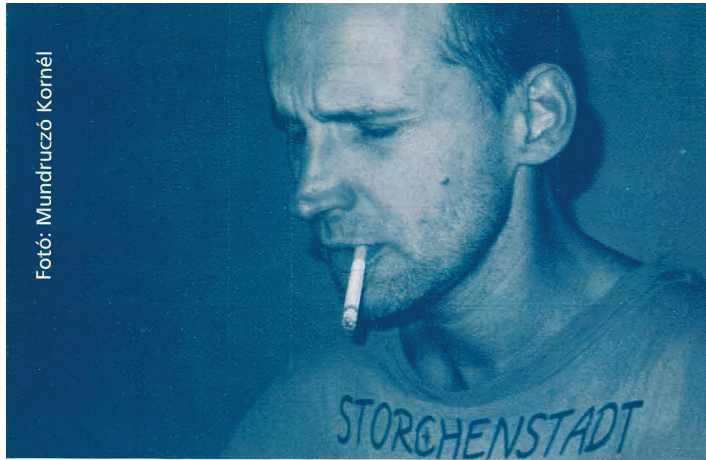
In Hungary, *Cleansed* was the first play by Sarah Kane that was staged in Budapest on 11 September 2001 at the Trafó House of Contemporary Arts. Before this debut, there had been a few articles about Kane and in-her-face theatre starting from 1998. Two of them revealed the opposing views about Kane's works ranging from disapproval to the desire for unconventional drama (cf. BÉRCZES 1998; JÁKFALVI 1999). In the post-socialist Hungarian culture of opposing artistic views, where experimental theatre was no longer restricted, *Cleansed* arrived at a newly formed institution of performing arts with its new theatrical language.

Before the political change of 1989, theatre institutions were nationalised in order to be controlled by the Party. In the cultural sphere, socialist realism became an empty, ideological expression, as an undefined expectation towards artistic productions (IMRE 2016). Following the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the new socialist regime implemented reforms to enhance the sense of well-being. Since then, socialist realism meant the entertaining, 'middle-class kitsch' which served the public expectations: plays were neither daring nor experimental (KOLTAI 1982; IMRE 2016). While experimental productions were created in the underground scene, they were not allowed to be discussed publicly.

Trafó was established in 1998 to give space to contemporary, experimental, never-seen innovations: art exhibitions and installations, contemporary dance and theatre productions. Each production ran only a few times, just like *Cleansed* which had three shows in the beginning of the fourth season. During the previous three seasons, press reactions to Trafó's events included words like 'purple', 'foggy', 'contemporary ghetto', 'unusual', 'the strangest' or even: 'I don't know how to write about this...'²

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2 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Hungarian are mine.



SARAH KANE: MEGTISZTULVA (CLEANSED)

Rendező: Zsótér Sándor

2001. szeptember 11–15. 20^h

színház



„A piac korrup. Tudnunk kell, van-e kortárs darab. Ami a valóságra kérdez rá, amelyben élünk. És belezavar megszokott észlelési mezőnkbe. Az előre látható, a biztos kikerülésével kockáztat.”

A magyar színházi élet egyik legformabontóbb rendezője, aki előszeretettel nyúl kényes témákhoz, illetve ha klasszikus darabot rendez, akkor sem a hagyományos dramaturgia szabályai szerint gondolkodik, a Trafóban Sarah Kane *Megtisztulva* című darabját állítja színpadra.

Ez a választás többféle kihívást rejt magában. Kísérlet arra, miként jöhet létre egy színházi előadás befogadó színházi körülmények között; miként lehet egy színpad nélküli üres teret beépíteni, használni úgy, hogy az adekvát módon hordozza és közvetítse ennek a kortárs angol darabnak lehetséges olvasatait. Zsótér színháza bizonyos értelemben könyörtelen színház, amennyiben a könyörtelenség a szembesítés aktusában rejlik. A Sarah Kane szöveg sokkoló módon mutatja fel egy kegyetlen világ képét. Ezek a történetek nem aktualitásukban fontosak, hanem az emberi lét végső kérdéseinek felvetése szempontjából. A velük való szembesülés révén meghatározhatjuk magunkat, újra megvizsgálhatjuk saját, személyes kérdéseinket és válaszainkat. Ez történik velünk Zsótér színházában vagy a Sarah Kane darab olvastán. Kettejük találkozására kerül sor 2001 szeptemberében a Trafóban.

Belépő: 600 Ft

'The market is corrupt. We have to know whether the contemporary piece exists. What researches on reality, in which we live. And it interferes with our usual perception field. It risks by avoiding the predictable and the sure.'

Szereplők: Harsányi Attila, Vati Tamás, Zarnóczai Gizella, Kuna Károly, Molnár Erika

Fordította:

Schuller Gabriella

Rendezte: Zsótér Sándor

Díszlettervező:

Ambrus Mária

Jelmeztervező:

Benedek Mari

A mű jogainak kizárólagos magyarországi képviselője a Creativ Média Színházi Ügynökség.

Támogató:



Figure 1: Cut-out of *Cleansed* from the brochure of September's programme at Trafó, 2001. Cast: Attila Harsányi, Tamás Vati, Gizella Zarnóczai, Károly Kuna, Erika Molnár. Courtesy of Trafó Archívum, Trafó Kortárs Művészetek Háza [Trafó Archives, Trafó House of Contemporary Arts]. [See <https://archivum.trafo.hu/media/4-evad-szeptember>]



Figure 2: The stage. Photo by Zsuzsa Koncz. Courtesy of Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet [Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute].

(TRENCSÉNYI 2000a, b, c, d; SZABÓ 2000). These reviews were based on a long-known bias against contemporary art such as it being considered ‘inappropriate to the needs of the audience’ and ‘incomprehensible’ (BÉCSY 1973; SZABÓ 2000). On account of the short presence of each show, audiences inured to socialist realism apparently had a hard time getting used to the new, non-realist conventions and forms of theatre.

Cleansed as a theatre production, directed by Sándor Zsótér, also differed from the well-known theatrical language of socialist realism. First, the setting in which every scene was played was a cursed grocery shop in a black box space. Second, contemporary dance accompanied the spoken text. And third, the tonality of speaking was modified with the use of speech impediments and monotonous repetitions. The characters could not be seen as personalities with a past or a background story to identify (MOLNÁR 2002). Therefore, cruelty was not explained through a logical narrative, but rather experienced through visual aesthetics, choreography, and acoustics.

To analyse the three elements of the fusion of this theatrical language, I outline the above-mentioned characteristics and their interpretations. First, the spatial concept was activated through a ‘huge’ and ‘empty’ space that incorporated neon lights and supermarket stalls (KOVÁCS 2001; MARIK 2001; CSÁKI 2001). The black box was used as an atmosphere to create a ‘tiny, closed community where isolated individuals torture themselves and each other’ (KOVÁCS 2001: 22). The scenes were differentiated

[archive]



Figure 3: Close-up image of Grace and Graham's dancing scene. Photo by Zsuzsa Koncz. Courtesy of Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet [Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute].

using lights to show each isolated fragment of the plot by putting different stalls into the spotlight. The spectator could have been confused by the contradictory use of space in which everything was coherently visible at the same time, while the scenes merged into each other due to the lack of spatial separation.

Second, the adaptation made use of spectacular physicality with the help of contemporary dance. According to this concept, the torturing and sexual interactions mostly became dance etudes in which convulsive movements followed or replaced the spoken texts. For example, there was a scene where Graham and Grace imitated each others' movements in a pulsing rhythm. Another scene focused on how disembodied voices tortured Grace, whose body was thrown (moved by herself and by the voices) to the walls and stalls. Because of the above characteristics, an article described the production as physical theatre: 'nightmarish visions of surreal movements' (BÓTA 2003: 17). These parts used physicality to contradict and to modulate the meaning of cruel acts which displayed a sensual rather than narrative logic.

Third, this fusion also applied the unnatural layers of verbality to show how language was not available as a way of expression. Speech impediments changed the tonality so that characters sounded like they were short of breath. Monotonous repetitions had a slowing effect on the ongoing, culminating speech. These two barriers hindered communication to an impossible level where it could not be perceived as an expressive, ordinary conversation. Spoken words throughout the production referred to what was done on stage. In this case, power dynamics worked both in language and in the body. Speaking as an act of power was both the tool of authority for Tinker and the tool of freedom for the others contesting this authority.

Not only were characters passive victims, but also constantly active perpetrators in this cruel system from which there was no escape. For instance, Tinker mutilates Carl for saying that he loved Rod, scene by scene until Carl did not have any body part to express his emotions with. During this process, the couple were squeezed into a tiny stall where they had to stay throughout the whole production. The presence of them being together was increased by the reduction of interaction. Tinker was always secretly present in the dark, with his back turned to the audience, and he suddenly approached the couple when they were starting to express hope or love.

The Hungarian reception was filled with interpretations of Tinker and his powerful position of authority. One article depicted him using words with former socialist connotations as an 'informer', 'voluntary policeman', 'denouncer', 'block commander', and 'social reformer who knows better than anyone what is best for them' (MOLNÁR GÁL 2001). However, in the director's opinion, Tinker was just 'an ordinary person' (ZSÓTÉR 2001) – which, as a universal description, allowed to see power and cruelty as an approachable tool for every ordinary person who did not refuse the position of authority.

The Hungarian reception of *Cleansed* had difficulties in depicting the above-described cruelty. During socialism, Hungarian theatre had been spread to different types of audiences as there had been 'promoted', 'tolerated', and 'banned' theatre productions. After the political change of 1989, these audiences might have met in



Figure 4: Close-up image of Carl and Rod who are approached by Tinker. Photo by Zsuzsa Koncz. Courtesy of Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet [Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute].

the same auditorium to see the same theatre production. The public sphere had expanded to the point where it was permitted to show the formerly 'banned' or 'tolerated' theatrical language on the 'promoted' stage. Similarly, the publicity of the press had also obtained freedom of speech; nevertheless, reviewers were seemingly confused about how to capture and interpret open cruelty seen on a public stage. The reviewers' differing methods of capturing the production demonstrate the polarised discourse surrounding contemporary art and explicit language on the recently uncensored stage.

Reviews interpreted *Cleansed* from two opposite points of view: as humour or as confrontation. Their evaluations were based on these points to declare whether the production had been a failure or a success. They were similar in depicting the sensation of monotony, but it was measured differently. On the one hand, based on the articles seeking humour, the production was a failure because the impulses repeated themselves monotonously, ending the laughter. For the viewers in this group, it was disappointing to realise that the production was not amusing at all. On the other hand, the production was successful in the eyes of critics who glamorised the fact that such a theatrical language could even be brought to the stage, thus opening up new possibilities for Hungarian theatre. In their view, boredom stemmed from a decreased rhythm which could be improved. The reception of cruelty on stage revealed two opposing artistic ideologies.

Regarding humour, the reviewers captured the 'funny' moments from the production. In one article, the mutilations were described as sources of laughter rather than shock (DEUTSCH 2001). In another article, the humour was considered 'hidden', which made the production less enjoyable (BÓTA 2001). While they recognised the absence of realism, they did not interpret it in a non-realist way because they did not consider those elements as serious theatrical attempts but rather parodies of reality. In this context, spectators leaving the auditorium before the end of the production were a direct result of the boredom and the failure of the production (SÁNDOR 2001).

Concerning confrontation, reviewers described the production as poetic and metaphorical, provoking sounds of indignation from the audience. In these types of reviews, cruelty was seen as a serious tool for provoking the spectator to think deeply (UPOR 2001). For instance, one critic reflected on how she was confronted with her stereotypes and the stigma around the so-called deviants, categorised by the so-called normal society (MARIK 2001). These articles celebrated the production as a groundbreaking addition to the theatrical repertoire that differed from the conservative genres. They praised the production as an innovative theatrical attempt, capable of balancing the diverse values within theatre (KOLTAI 2001).

Beyond these two polar opposites, reviews on both sides expressed difficulty in articulating their reflections on what they had seen. For instance, one critic remarked that even describing the 'plot' – if there had been one – was questionable (UPOR 2001), while another noted that it was challenging to view the theatre production's cruelty in comparison with the 9/11 attack – which was a recent global experience on the day of the debut (CSÁKI 2001).

To sum up, it was apparent that theatre critics were confronted with a new language on stage, one that was far more experiential and public than what they had been inured to. Critics and creators were in the process of developing a new critical language where the freedom of opinion and expression was no longer restricted by censorship. In Hungary, *Cleansed* as a theatre production was part of the broader effort to experiment with the boundaries of language use in both art and its reception. Since then, Kane's works have not been incorporated into Hungarian theatre culture, except for a few short-lived adaptations every decade.

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