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Theatralia. 2025, vol. 28, iss. 2, pp. 40-57

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2025-2-3>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83099>

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Access Date: 06. 12. 2025

Version: 20251204

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Brutalist Theatrical Procedures of Sarah Kane, Anja Hilling, Simona Semenič, and Milena Marković

Tomaž Toporišič

Abstract

The essay examines three cases of brutalist procedures in contemporary theatre and drama, focusing on artists' inventive responses to war, violence, and subsequent deaths happening around the world. Sarah Kane's in-yer-face theatre, marked by hypertrophied violence and symbolic dynamism, is compared with selected plays by German playwright Anja Hilling (*Black Beast Sorrow*), Slovene playwright and dramaturge Simona Semenič (*the feast; we, the european corpses*), and Serbian poet and playwright Milena Marković (*Pavilions; The Doll Ship*). The essay explores how these artists challenge theatrical representation and create, through heterogeneous textual and visual strategies, a 'theatre of unbelief' (Deleuze), re-framing Kane's brutalism for post-socialist European contexts.

Key words

brutalist procedures, in-yer-face theatre, Sarah Kane, post-socialist Europe, no longer dramatic texts, theatre of unbelief

The essay was written in the framework of the research programme 'Theatre and Interart Studies' (P6-0376), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

*Something is rotten in these
years of European hope.*

Dejan Dukovski, *Who the Fuck Started All This*
(The Third Circle)¹

Towards a theatre of disbelief

The paper discusses three cases of brutalist procedures in contemporary theatre and drama. I argue that as a reaction to the atrocities of the omnipresent war and the inflation of violence and death, the four discussed playwrights create inventive artistic procedures to emphasise theatrical representation of violence and death along with the idea of theatrical representation itself. I start with one of the most prominent authors of in-*yer-face* theatre Sarah Kane, labelled as ‘the most famous and infamous playwright of the 1990s’ (REES 2012: 112), and her style of hypertrophied violence beyond the bounds of the plausible, depicted within extremely dynamic scenes, shockingly brutal yet functioning symbolically and metaphorically. I continue by comparing her works with three outstanding representatives of the German, Slovene, and Serbian (no longer) dramatic and post-dramatic theatre: Anja Hilling’s *Black Beast Sorrow* (2007) and *Monsoon* (2005); Simona Semenič’s *the feast or the story of a savoury corpse ...* (2018) and *we, the european corpses* (2015); and Milena Marković’s *Pavilions* (1997) and *The Doll Ship* (2004).

I focus on the tactics of the selected artists creating a specific tension between repetition and representation to produce an effect of (post-)Brechtian *V-effect* (alienation effect) and *différance* (*sensu* DERRIDA 1982). Among other things, I analyse a stand-still in theatrical representational mechanisms. Moreover, the use of dialogic form in heterogeneous textual and visual strategies – from stage directions to descriptions, narrative, essayistic, and other techniques – serves as a reminder to the audience that what they are reading or watching is no longer a realistic dialogue. Its structure is the structure of what Deleuze would find in Nietzsche’s theory and name it ‘a theatre of unbelief’ in which ‘humour and irony are indispensable and fundamental operations of nature’ and ‘the grounding of the repetition in eternal return on both the death of God and the dissolution of the self’ (DELEUZE 1994: 11). Finally, I show how Hilling, Semenič, and Marković are framing and recontextualising some basic procedures of Kane’s New Brutalism and in-*yer-face* theatre to new, mostly post-socialist European political and aesthetic realities. While one might expect a level of depression, even darker than that of Sarah Kane and her generation, Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, quite surprisingly, the contemporary authors analysed here have established a certain poetics of ‘innocence’. This poetic is a departure from the reflex of harshness often characteristic of the British ‘Brutalism’ from Harold Pinter and Edward Bond to Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill.

¹ Doctor Phallus in Dukovski’s play makes the following statement, linking Europe to the Balkans: ‘Something is rotten in these years of European hope. The Balkans are a prison’ (DUKOVSKI 2000).

The shattered theatre of Sarah Kane

The brutality of Sarah Kane's theatre is most evident in the reactions following the premiere of her play *Blasted*, offering two rapes, masturbation, and a tabloid journalist eating a baby, that drew attention to her first full-length work. *Blasted* (1995), written by a then-young playwright, which opened at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in London, had bitterly divided the critics. While the play's supporters proclaimed her brutalist play as a magnificent, dark vision of the late 20th century and a brave portrayal of human brutality, Michael Billington asserted that the play was not logically structured because she refused to provide an answer to the question 'Who exactly is meant to be fighting whom out on the street?' (quoted in SIERZ 2001: 96).

Yet, one could say that *Blasted* in a similar way to Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* served to reinvigorate the theatre once again as a place where new dissenting voices could be heard.

Nick Curtis choose a specific title 'Random Tour of a Chamber of Horrors' for his review in the *Evening Standard* in which he stated:

I do not think I've yet seen a play that can beat Sarah Kane's sustained onslaught on the sensibilities for sheer, unadulterated brutalism. Heaping shock upon shock, *Blasted* is a powerful experience in the same way that being mugged is a powerful experience. Rape, torture, cannibalism, death: they're all here, over two uninterrupted hours. (CURTIS 1995: 46)

Following the war of defenders and offenders of the play one cannot but quote a highly personal response of Edward Bond, published in *The Guardian* in 1995:

The images of *Blasted* are ancient. They are seen in all great ages of art – in Greek and Jacobean theatre, Noh and Kabuki. The play changes some of the images – but all artists do that to bring the ancient imagery, changed and unchanged, into the focus of their age. (BOND 1995)

This vehement critical approbation that greeted *Blasted* has proved that a play, performed in a small studio theatre to an audience of a thousand people during its very short British run, could become a national news story about the depiction of violence on-stage. Thus, it provided a rare example of how the aberrant can suddenly find itself occupying a prominent place in mainstream culture. Even though in the book *In-Yer-Face Theatre* he interpreted Sarah Kane as a brutalist author, Sierz changed his reasoning in a 2010 essay 'Blasted Ethics', published in *Performing Ethos: International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*. Although he still interpreted *Blasted* as both 'a denunciation of the horrors of war and a domestication of them', he concluded:

The play is not an example of brutalism, nor does it brutalise the audience, but – perhaps, and ironically – its effect in the culture might have been to help habituate us to extreme violence. And this habituation in culture might aid power to prepare us for even greater

brutality in the real world. War becomes more acceptable, because it's more familiar. Our hunger to know more about extreme human behaviour might lead not to outrage, but to satiation. The ethical question would then be: is it enough to characterise any play as either/or good/bad? Surely, the complexity of theatre, and of audience reaction, is such that our habitually binary 'either/or' thinking should be replaced by a 'both/and' point of view? (SIERZ 2010: 112)

With Sarah Kane, we enter a world beyond classical representation of the psychological-realistic tradition. Catherine Rees outlines the fact that

Blasted deliberately destabilised genre conventions by playing with naturalistic form and then fracturing it shockingly and violently. Kane deliberately refused to give a context to the violence in this play: we are never told who is fighting whom and, most crucially, we are never told whose side to take and whose to condemn. (REES 2012: 135)

Violence in her works is hypertrophied, already beyond the limits of plausibility. It is depicted within extremely dynamic scenes, where stage directions and secondary descriptions often take precedence over the primary text. These descriptions rudimentarily, yet shockingly, outline cruel acts on the edge of believability. Despite their hyperrealism, these acts begin to function symbolically and metaphorically. Take, for instance, the scene of *Blasted*, where a soldier rapes Ian.²

Verbal violence and verbal torment often overshadow real, physical violence, where the verbal aspect becomes secondary, merely accompanying acts that are extremely brutal: rape, blinding, castration, cannibalism, sadism, murder, and the dismemberment of bodies. Sarah Kane consciously attempts to present these brutalities (contrary to the general belief that theatre is not a medium capable of adequately portraying acts like rape, murder, and other atrocities live on stage) in the form of texts for the theatre (TOPORIŠIČ 2009/2010: 34–36).

In a Thielemans's 'Conversation with Sarah Kane and Vicky Featherstone', when asked why she writes for theatre, she responded:

I decided on theatre because it is a live art. This direct communication with an audience I really like. When I go to a film, it does not matter what I do. It makes no difference. But when you go [to] the theatre, and you just cough, it may alter a performance. As a member of an audience, I like the fact that I can change a performance. As a writer, I like the fact that no performance will ever be the same. (KANE and FEATHERSTONE 1999: 14)

Sarah Kane viewed theatre as a performative act triggered by the theatrical text. Her texts seem to function in a way described in the famous book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* by Erika Fischer-Lichte, as a sacrificial animal in ancient Greek rituals (FISCHER-LICHTE 2005: 231–233). Kane's texts set the stage

2 The cruel acts are analysed in detail in (KNOWLES 2025).

for modern ritualistic dismemberments of the foundational tenets and coordinates of contemporary civilisation, highlighting its ethical shortcomings. She saw the interplay between the performance and the audience as a kind of ritual act, one that metaphorically tears apart and sacrifices the protagonists of her plays to deconstruct and expose the ethical void and ideological perversions of the modern world.³

In dramaturgy and theatre of the last three decades, Kane's texts perhaps most radically confront the fact that the utopia of a better world is an unrealistic dream. Theatre, Kane seems to assert, neither wants to nor can replace reality; it lacks the transformative potential Fischer-Lichte identifies in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Kane's *theatre of cruelty* speaks the unspeakable. Through theatre and within it, she repeatedly addresses the wounds of the world, overwhelmed by simulacra and the hyperactive production of media-generated parallel realities. Her work persistently returns to cruelty, which, as Alain Badiou (2007) argues in his book *The Century*, is a significant literary theme of this century. Kane engages with 'cruelty as both the material and the source of literary production' and the notion that '[t]hroughout the century, cruelty has been less a moral question than an aesthetic one (yet another debt to Nietzsche). One can think of Artaud and his call for a "theatre of cruelty", of Bataille's reflections on sacrifice ...' (BADIOU 2007: 115).

In a world where 'the power of words to name is affected', where 'the relation between words and things comes undone', and where 'a central component of any oppression nearing its end is this ruin of language – a contempt for any rigorous and inventive nomination, the dominion of a language which is at once facile and corrupt, the language of journalism' (BADIOU 2007: 46), Kane writes Artaudian plays of cruelty. Here, language is no longer, as with Ionesco, Pinter, or Handke, an artful weapon of verbal violence against the individual; it is already destroyed, corrupted, incapable of naming – banal and horrifying in its banality. Thus, the dialogues, monologues, and stage directions in her plays read as unique linguistic surfaces, bringing in the discourses of others, much like the work of Elfriede Jelinek and Heiner Müller.⁴

The goal for Kane was to set herself an impossible task: 'to do things in drama no one had done before, to invent new forms, to discover new modes of representations' (SIERZ 2001: 92), or to tear into her formal elusiveness. She draws the reader and the viewer into their Artaudian theatre of cruelty, where the author-rhapsodist internalises wars within the text and performances. This state, remarkably close to Heiner Müller's concept of the explosion of memory, might, in theory, be termed the rhapsodic emergence of theatre, in which – following Handke's notion – the boundaries between drama, poetry, and narrative are no longer clearly defined (SARRAZAC 1999: 200), or do not exist at all. Instead, we witness an extraordinary condensation of what Sarrazac

3 For more details on this topic see (TOPORIŠIČ 2007; 2018).

4 E.g., Jelinek's *Bambiland* (2003), *Ein Sportstück* [Sports Play] (1998), *Prinzessinnendramen: Der Tod und das Mädchen* [Princess Dramas: Death and the Maiden] (2002); and Müller's *Hamlet/Maschine*, *Hamlet/Machine* (1989/1990), *Der Auftrag* [The Mission] (1982), *Germania Tod in Berlin* [Germania Death in Berlin] (1978).

describes as the blurred, stuttering voice of the modern scribe, or the voice of the failed subject (SARRAZAC 1999: 201).

If *Blasted* was also almost unique in its willingness to both confront and dramatise the conflict in Yugoslavia and the atrocities associated with the civil war in Bosnia, it also raised (through the character of Ian, a tabloid journalist) the theme of the passivity and culpability of the media and their consumers. Kane's comments in an interview about how the Bosnian conflict inspired the play must have touched a nerve with the Slovene theatrical community, who witnessed the war as something happening almost in their own country.

And I think with *Blasted*, it was a direct response to the material as it began to happen. I mean, I knew I wanted to write a play about a man and a woman in a hotel room, and that there was a complete power imbalance, which resulted in a rape. And I started writing that [...] and I switched on the news one night [...] and there was a very old woman's face, a woman of Srebrenica, just weeping and weeping and looking into the camera, and saying: 'Please, please, help me, help me. We need the UN to come here and help us. We need someone to do something.' And I was sitting there watching and I thought: 'No one's going to do anything. How many times have I seen another old woman crying from another town in Bosnia under siege and no one does anything?' And I thought: 'This is absolutely terrible, and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room – what does it matter? What is the point of carrying on?' So this is what I want to write about and yet somehow this story about this man and woman was still attracting me. And I thought: 'So what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia?' And then suddenly this penny dropped and I thought: 'Of course, it's obvious. One is the seed and the other is the tree.' And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so-called civilisation and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin, and it can get torn down at any time. And then I had to find a way of formally making that link [...]. (KANE 1998: 6–7)

The trend of in-er-face theatre, affirmed by British authors Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Patrick Marber, and Enda Walsh, resonated with a series of European dramatists and found its way to plays and performances. Sierz described in-er-face theater as

less a school of writing or a movement than a series of networks, in which individuals such as Neilson, Ravenhill, and Kane formed a temporary milieu, [...] an arena, an imaginary place that can be visited or passed through, a spot where a writer can grow up, or where they can return to after other adventures. (SIERZ 2001: 249)

So, what exactly did Kane write about? The brutalism of her plays can be seen in clear solutions in her early plays *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, and her film script for *Skin*. She wrote about the ethical crisis of Thatcher's United Kingdom with a style Sarah J. Ablet describes as

notorious for its depiction of graphic scenes of violence and repulsion, which range from representations of defecation, diseased bodies, and violent dismemberment to physio-moral transgressions of social and cultural boundaries in acts of torture, rape, and cannibalism. These plays thus offer a particularly rich source for an analysis of the aesthetic manifestation of typical semantic fields of disgustelicitation. (ABLET 2020: 130)

The horrifying events depicted in her works were shared with great intensity with her audience. But also with her contemporaries and the generations that followed in Slovenia (Draga Potočnjak, Simona Semenič, Matjaž Zupančič), Serbia (Biljana Srbljanović, Milena Marković), Macedonia (Žanina Mirčevska, Dejan Dukovski), Croatia (Filip Šuvagović, Ivana Sajko), Poland (Ivan Wyrpajew, Przemysław Wojcieszek), Russia (Ljudmila Razumovskaja, Nikolai Koljada), Ukraine (Natalka Vorozhbyt), as well as in Germany and Austria (Anja Hilling, Marius von Mayenburg, Falk Richter). I believe there are more similarities than differences between them and that the response to this ‘disgustelicitation’ lies in their plays, as well as in the different, but nevertheless quite similar historical contexts they belong to.

For example, in Slovenia, the impact of Sarah Kane and in-her-face theatre was not the result of mass media coverage. Mainstream theatres were a bit slow to react to her work. The off-scene was a bit too concentrated on new performative strategies that were not linked with new drama, as if they were afraid of the brutalist new British dramatic voices of Kane and her generation. Thus, the reaction to her work had more to do with the new politics of stage as well as new forms of post-dramatic political drama.

Blasted, which was performed in Slovenia only in 2008, after *Cleansed*, *4.48 Psychosis*, *Phaedra’s Love*, and *Crave*, nevertheless had, together with her other works, a strong impact on both Slovene drama and theatre.⁵ The situation mirrored largely that of Poland, described in an essay by Dorota Sosnowska. Polish theatre was introduced to Sarah Kane and her brutalism in ‘2001 and 2002 when, in a big coproduction by three Polish theatres, Krzysztof Warlikowski staged Kane’s *Cleansed* and soon after Grzegorz Jarzyna produced *4.48 Psychosis* with unquestionable success among the public’ that was widely used to ‘describe a big change in Polish theatre’ (SOSNOWSKA 2024: 91).

The first Slovene stagings were less provocative, but nevertheless, they can be interpreted as a clear mark of the introduction of the new aesthetics of a new generation. Kane’s *Cleansed* was staged with a big success at the Ljubljana National Theatre in 2001 by a representative of the new theatrical turn Jernej Lorenci. This was followed by two consecutive stagings of *4.48 Psychosis* in the Mladinsko Theatre (together with *Phaedra’s Love*) in 2001 directed by Eduard Miler and with the dramaturgy of the representative of new drama generation Žanina Mirčevska, and at the Ljubljana National Theatre in 2002, directed by Sebastijan Horvat, the second prominent exponent of the theatrical turn of the late 1990’s. The Slovene directors linked Sarah Kane’s plays to a wider context of personal relationships, as both a ‘State-of-the-Nation’ and a ‘State-of-Europe’, with particular emphasis on the theme of the war in Bosnia.

5 For the impact of Sarah Kane and brutalism on Slovene theatre and drama see (MURNIK et al. 2025).

I strongly believe the authors discussed below adapted and reused some basic techniques of Kane's brutalist theatre:

- a) the deconstruction and reconstruction of the fabula as a parallel event (Semenič),
- b) through the gradual breakdown of the fabula or a specific re-fabularisation, which nevertheless exposes the reader to communication disruption, creating a distinct aesthetic (Hilling),
- c) the poetisation of drama through various techniques related to the morphology of fairy tales (Propp) and popular music culture, which produces the multiplication of fabulas, a specific combination of brutalist and poetic theatre (Marković).

The schizophrenic dismemberment of body and voice

Let us take German playwright Anja Hilling as the first example of new brutalism following the legacy of Sarah Kane. The theorist of drama after 2000s, Danijela Kapusta, notes that for Hilling and her contemporaries, the text is not 'a firmly set "Nonplus ultra" but a material as a beginning of something yet to come' (KAPUSTA 2011: 64).⁶ Nevertheless, Hilling is strongly opposed to the cold and distanced approach to text and tries to find a way to transform the postdramatic playfulness of signifiers into something that has emotion and feeling. The playwright sees her own play *Schwarzes Tier Traurigkeit* [Black Beast Sorrow] as her 'most bombastic text' in which she 'tried to test the catastrophe in relation to the nothingness of human life' (HILLING 2013). She left behind the 'pure' interiority, which she shared with British playwrights, and moved closer to a dissolution of the boundary between exteriority and interiority.

In *Black Beast Sorrow*, ideally, the protagonists would all be lifelong friends. But their barbecue in the forest on a sweltering summer evening gradually reveals tensions and old resentments. As they sleep, a twig sparks a fire, leading to one of the most powerful scenes in contemporary theatre. Trapped, each character experiences absolute terror, second by second. For the survivors, nothing will ever be the same again. Anja Hilling enacts a journey from the dramatic realism of its first part – focusing on the dialogue and interaction between the six friends during a barbecue excursion – to the theatrical hyper-realism of the second part, where a catastrophic forest fire results in the fragmentation of the individual subject and consequently to the breakdown of dramatic dialogue. A forest fire catalyses the theatrical action: the social construct of the individual is overcome. Individuality is shed to reach a higher level of reflection, free of personal desires:

Perhaps that is it. You plough on because you are thirsty. This feeling is possibly stronger than the pain. Perhaps you know that when you do not feel thirsty anymore, pain will no longer be an issue. However, you have not yet reached that stage on this little excursion,

6 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from German, French, Slovenian, and Serbian are mine.

the place, where nothing exists anymore, no wishes, only the relief from pain. (HILLING 2009: 54)

Another Hilling's play *Monsoon* narrates the impact of the death of a child upon two couples, stressing the inability to communicate and the schizophrenic dismemberment of body. Bruno, a B-movie screenwriter, is married and has an eight-year-old son named Zippo. At the same time, Coco and Mélanie are desperately trying to have a child. Then comes the accident: Mélanie, driving her car, runs over Zippo – he dies. This tragedy brings the characters' lives into collision. Unable to cope with what she has done, Mélanie leaves to shoot a documentary in Vietnam. And it is as if we are watching the characters through the lens of a camera – they reveal a sensitivity that, within the authentic time of the theatre, expresses a tragic sense of absence. Influenced by two masters of absurd drama, Pinter and Beckett, but also by Sarah Kane and her brutalist theatre of the absurd, Hilling uses (post)Brechtian V-effect to highlight the absurd repetitions of a highly mediatised society. Let us quote an example:

VOICE OF THE RADIO NEWSCASTER. What a rain. In Berlin and in Brandenburg. Munich, Hamburg, and the whole of Germany is under rain. Also, Vienna reports showers. Rain rain rain. I want to go barefoot on the street. Right now. Rain in Prague. Thunderstorm in Moscow. Drops form on the eyelashes. Floodwaves put Scotland under water. In Vietnam, many people have lost their homes. What a rain. I feel myself as a wild poppy that tears open its red mouth in the middle of the field. This is how I feel: born again. (HILLING 2006: 56)

Hilling's concern is with contemporary society and, more specifically, German society. The characters do not want to face traumatic past events. That can be interpreted as the basic reason for their incapability to organise their lives toward a successful future. As Birgit Haas points out, the action in Hilling's plays is 'realistic, but, at the same time, it is almost too realistic' (HAAS 2008: 98). They can be read as a brilliant exercise in Brechtian alienation, a productive questioning of the aesthetic realms of television and theatre (HAAS 2008: 98). As seen from the excerpt above in contrast to Brecht's goal to use this technique to portray social processes as seen in their causal relationships, the actors in Hilling's play use it for a deeper investigation of the character's interiority. This effected a defamiliarisation of interiority, the presentation of the character's emotion from a different point of view. Birgit Haas understands a specific effect produced as a specific substitution of the reality in postdramatic theatre by 'the so-called "Real" [...] this simply means the positioning of the presence of the performance as the absolute, which attempts to disrupt reality through a shock effect' (HAAS 2007a: 28).

This Brechtian critical realism can be seen as a hidden criticism of the clichéd aesthetics of television. Hilling does not use deconstructivist devices like Semenič, discussed below, to break free from the linear and synthetic structure of narration. Nevertheless, she uses the critique of both the dramatic and mediatised soap opera form in the Brechtian sense. She is pointing to what Haas defines as a specific *transposition-*

effect: 'Whilst Brecht sought to achieve a productive "dialogue" between various layers of history by juxtaposing them, Hilling achieves a productive mutual "questioning" of the aesthetic realms of television and theatre' (HAAS 2008: 98).

Simona Semenič: deconstructing and reconstructing representation

Simona Semenič is probably the most radical representative of the new Slovenian drama of the first two decades of the 21st century. Danijela Kapusta (2011) speaks about the main shifts in German drama in recent decades, resulting in the fact that the text is no longer something fixed but rather material for 'something that has not yet emerged' (KAPUSTA 2011: 64). The same could also be said about the very essence of the plays of Simona Semenič and a young generation of Slovenian dramatists.

In her no longer dramatic procedures, Simona Semenič goes radically against representation while using repetition and *différance*, which produce the effect Jacques Derrida understood as a fact that meaning is not inherent in a sign but arises from its relationships with other signs, a continual process of contrasting with what comes before and later.⁷ She produces forms one could define as a no longer dramatic text rhizome, which has replaced the traditionally understood physicality of the book, the *livre-racine* (*sensu* DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1980). Her texts remind us of William Burroughs and his cut-up method, interpreted by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'the folding of one text onto another, which constitutes multiple and even adventitious roots (like a cutting)' (DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1980: 6). Due to the fact that they seek to move away from the logocentric representational structures of the dramatic tradition, her plays can be interpreted also in the sense of Lehmann's theory of the postdramatic theatre as 'post-Brechtian theatre' (LEHMANN 2006: 33). Or in the sense of Gerda Poschmann's theory of 'no longer dramatic texts for theatre' as a consequence to the fact that drama is no longer seen as an adequate representational framework by contemporary playwrights (POSCHMANN 1997: 38). In her texts, Semenič touches the ideology of nomadic reproduction and distribution elaborated by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* and returns to his ideas of 'crowned anarchy'. Not unlike the texts of Sarah Kane, the plays of Semenič are therefore 'neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying' (DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1980: 10).

The dialogical form of Semenič's writing has ended up in the company of heterogeneous textual strategies: from stage directions to descriptions that are closer to the narrative, essayistic, theoretical, and other techniques, reminding the audience that

7 Derrida introduced the term in his lecture 'La Différance' (1968). He explains the complexity of the term as follows: '*Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return' (DERRIDA 1982: 6).

what they are reading or watching is no longer a realistic dialogue. For example, let us look at the opening fragment of Semenič's drama with a long title *the feast or the story of a savoury corpse or how roman abramovič, the personage janša, julia kristeva, age 24, simona semenič and the initials z.i. found themselves in a puff of tobacco smoke*:

*yes, of course we are in a theatre, but this theatre is about to throw you a very special feast
a feast to which some eminent guests have been invited, we shall sit them behind a table
(this of course does not mean that there has to be a real table on stage, there can be, of course, there
can be a whole line of tables or a pile of them, the entire stage can be a table, the tables can hang
from the ceiling upside down or the other way around, there can also be a sign saying table in one or
another language, and there can be no sign anywhere and no thing anywhere; no table, no chair and
no soup tureen with delicious smelling stew, what I mean to say is, the important thing is that you, the
distinguished viewer, can imagine our eminent guests on stage before you having a feast)
this feast is an extremely special and significant one
namely, our eminent guests before you on stage, respected publikum, are feasting on a corpse
so, yes, dear viewership
each spoonful of the stew that the eminent guest puts in his mouth is a spoonful of a stew cooked from
a dead body
therefore, this corpse that you see on stage, this corpse is not a living personage
(dramatis persona, if I had it my way)
this corpse was once a living personage, once, before it ended up in the stew I am about to serve at
tonight's feast
this personage
before you, being impersonated
(and I mean impersonated in such a manner that takes your breath away)
by a true theatre star
it is a personage who gets cooked in the stew that the guests, present at tonight's special and important
feast, which will start any minute now, are about to eat. (SEMEIČ 2010)*

As is clear from the quotation, Semenič proposes the structure of what Deleuze would find in Nietzsche's theory and names it 'a theatre of unbelief' in which 'humour and irony are indispensable and fundamental operations of nature' and 'the grounding of the repetition in eternal return on both the death of God and the dissolution of the self' (DELEUZE 1994: 11). Thus, Semenič leads us to Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's eternal return as well as his thoughts on univocity and difference (DELEUZE 1994: 6–8). At the same time, she does not duplicate the unstructured workings of the real world but creates instead an aesthetic commentary, dealing with the issue of narrative development, establishing a relationship with the past, and producing a critical narrative of the present.

Contamination with the lyrical and post-Brechtian: Milena Marković

Let us conclude with a specific voice of Serbian poet and playwright Milena Marković. A notable critic Vera Kopicl (2016) writes that contemporary Serbian drama is largely characterised by a distinct female sensibility embodied in the works of authors such as Biljana Srbljanović, Milena Marković, Maja Pelević, and Milena Bogavac. She highlights Milena Marković, noting transitions in her works ‘from fragmentation to lyricism, from the exhibitions of performance within the body of classical dramatic pathos to the cabaret of historical drama’ (KOPICL 2016). These characteristics invite some interesting comparisons with contemporary Slovenian dramatic writing, that seems to share with Marković the need to unfold reality in a postdramatic way but nevertheless try to make reasonable criticisms of contemporary society. Authors such as Simona Semenič, Simona Hamer, Žanina Mirčevska, Varja Hrvatin, and Maša Pelko can be mentioned here, as well as contemporary German drama, for instance, works by Anja Hilling, Ulrike Syha, and Dea Loher. Both Dea Loher and Milena Marković deliberately provoke what Birgit Haas defines as ‘a feeling of uncertainty, mainly due to the mixture of private and public political discourses’, revive ‘the Brechtian theatre in the context of the post-postmodern age, an age in which human beings have again reclaimed the theatrical space’ (HAAS 2006: 85). Their politically engaged theatre empowers the bewildered reader and the spectator in front of a destroyed history (HAAS 2006: 85). Moreover, this brings us very close to the universe of Sarah Kane, her *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and *4.48 Psychosis*.

The writing of Milena Marković is distinctive in its ‘poetisation’ or ‘lyricisation’ of dramatic form, which she introduces across stylistically and generically diverse texts, including *Paviljoni* [Pavillions] (1997, staged 2001), *Brod za lutke* [A Little Boat for Dolls] (2004), *Šuma blista* [The Forest Shines] (2005), and *Nahod Simeon* (2006). Marković considers herself primarily a poet; thus, the structure of her plays simultaneously approaches the so-called episodic technique used by Strindberg and, before Brecht, by expressionist drama. The authors discussed herein, I argue, operate within the principles associated with such drama. They renounce ‘the causal logic of the story and empirically grounded dramatic character. [...] They represent a spiritual pilgrimage of the central ego toward a final goal, which may be the protagonist’s catharsis or a revolution of spirit’ (KRALJ 1998: 29).

The lyricisation of monologic structures in Marković’s plays, combined with the unique form of post-Brechtian songs, create a distance and a poetic space of freedom where drama and lyricism meet as distinct building blocks. Marković emphasises fragmentation as a specific quality, believing that ‘so-called fragmentary dramaturgy adds a particular lightness, freedom, and openness to plays as a distinct genre quality’ (MARKOVIĆ 2007: 47).

Marković establishes a unique form of estrangement. She dismantles artistic illusion by directly exposing and revealing the theatrical ‘machinery’ that enables the performance but usually remains invisible to the audience. The resulting aesthetic often leans toward the grotesque and eclectic citation-based and montage-like structure

that follows various references from art, culture, and society. Let us take as example the use of a fairytale as a code. Pešikan-Ljuštanović points out that ‘with her lyrical brutalism, powerful and terrifying imagery, and intense emotional outbursts achieved through the use of the fairytale as a code, Milena Marković effectively testifies to the undying aesthetic and semantic vitality of this genre’ (PEŠIKAN-LJUŠTANOVIĆ 2010: 591). This creates parallel processes of semiotisation and desemiotisation, reflecting identity crises in a world long abandoned by gods. She describes the world of her plays as a theatrical landscape in which ‘there is no mother, no homeland, no myths about gods and heroes, beginnings and endings. Born in a country that “is no longer called that”, in spaces desecrated by death and decay on multiple fronts – the protagonists of these dramas have no way out’ (PEŠIKAN-LJUŠTANOVIĆ 2011: 16).

Conclusion: how to deconstruct the concept of dramatic and post-dramatic representation and construct a performative autonomy

To slowly conclude. Like Ivan Dukovski, Przemyslaw Wojcieszek, Vassily Sigarev, Biljana Srbljanović, Filip Šovagović, Matjaž Zupančič, Draga Potočnjak, Gisele von Wysocki, Oliver Bukovski, Friederike Roth, Dea Loher, Thomas Brasch, Marlene Streeruwitz, Werner Schwab, Xavier Durringer, Theresia Walser, Roland Schimmelpfennig, Marius von Mayneburg, the dramatists Simona Semenič, Milena Marković, and Anja Hilling all seem to share a specific restlessness with Sarah Kane. The very restlessness that Badiou identifies as characteristic of the 20th-century art, where

form constitutes the transit of being, the immanent overcoming of its finitude, and not simply an abstract virtuality for a descent of the Ideal, under whose thrust it would merely need to ‘shift’ the established devices (dispositifs). Indeed, there can no longer be any established devices for the production of art. There is only the *multiplicity of formalisations*. (BADIOU 2007: 155)

Each of their works represents a new formal experiment, another contribution to this multiplicity of formalisations. As we have seen it with *Blasted*, the critics of the works of Semenič, Hilling, and Marković are mostly confounded by their antinaturalism (a feature evident also in the work of their other predecessors like Caryl Churchill and Sarah Daniels) and a deliberately provocative structure. If Kane described the choice of an open, fragmented dramatic form as intentional, an act in which she deprived the audience of the comfort of a familiar form, Semenič, Hilling, and Marković follow similar procedures and show us, how people’s lives can descend very quickly into total chaos without any warning.

One could stick to the claim that playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Elfriede Jelinek, Heiner Müller, and Sarah Kane produced

'open' or 'writerly' texts [...] that they require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning. (JÜRS-MUNBY 2006: 6)

The dramatists discussed above are following their steps and using cryptic citations and drawing upon what Badiou calls 'the corrupted journalists' (BADIOU 2013: 415), particularly tabloids. When Kane herself remarked that her raw drama was 'more devastating than newspapers', because 'I skipped the boring parts' (Kane quoted in SIERZ 2001: 99), she could be talking about the works of Semenič, Marković, or Hilling. Their works follow a logic of grotesque phantasmagoria, creating linguistic surfaces that, through citation, adaptation, condensation, and other manipulations, channel the rhetoric of tabloids and electronic media. These surfaces speak of lives thrown into chaos without warning. Their works thrust viewers and readers into an organised chaos of sexual fantasies, football tribalism, homophobia, and racism, sexism of all kinds, militarism, and other elements of the globalised First World of the 1990s, Second World of post-socialism, post-Thatcherism, and the horrors of War in Bosnia, Refugee Crisis, and postcolonial catastrophes.

The plays mentioned emerge as reactor texts, speech and visual material planes, and texts for a theatre that refuses to be representation. To quote Elfriede Jelinek speaking about her texts – though she might as well be describing the works of Sarah Kane and other authors discussed:

I don't want to act, just as I don't want to watch others acting. [...] People shouldn't speak words and pretend to live. I don't want to see the false unity of life reflected in the actors' faces. I don't want to see the interplay of forces on this 'well-oiled muscle' (Roland Barthes) – the interplay of language and movement, the so-called 'expression' of a well-trained actor. I don't want the voice and body to merge. [...] I don't want theatre. Maybe I just want to deconstruct the activities someone might perform as a form of representation but without any higher meaning. (JELINEK 1989: 102)

The authors discussed follow the path of possible new styles for the theatre of a new era. They persistently deconstruct the concept of dramatic and post-dramatic representation and construct a performative autonomy where language is no longer subordinate to dramatic form or representation. Sometimes they form what Haas describes as '[t]he new realistic theatre' that 'contains in itself the aesthetic "tradition" of deconstruction' (HAAS 2007b: 274). This new Realism does not simply fall back into a bourgeois dramatic art but 'incorporates the postmodern inheritance into the plays without reproducing postmodern aesthetics' (HAAS 2007b: 274). The works of the authors I discuss could describe a very different set of texts and spectacles and, apart from Slovene, German, and Serbian dramas, it could include Polish, Scandinavian, French, or post-Soviet texts. As with in-yer-face theatre, we are witnessing a specific

‘instability of the term, its fluctuating and shifting character’ (SOSNOWSKA 2024: 91). The works discussed thus highlight both the process of de-semanticisation and the emphasis on the performative dimension of the text, the sonic materiality of language, the textual corporeality, its musicality, and polysemy, which generate decentred readings. They also emphasise the fact that ‘theatre cannot escape semiosis even in its anti-mimetic provocation’ (HAAS 2007a: 30). This very fact brings Semenič, Marković, and Hilling very close to the heritage of Sarah Kane.

Life and death have both become a vast screen, a picture of themselves, concealing nothing behind them. The analysed artists follow the path of Sarah Kane, juxtaposing the profoundly deep with the most trivial, abstract concepts with the concrete. They exploit their own vulnerability and that of the theatre to their advantage, persistently undermining the ground of dramatic form and creating ever-new textual-performative-theatrical tactics that are inherently hybrid.

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