

Satková, Naďa

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Shock Therapy

Nad'a Satková

Sarah Kane: *4.48 Psychosis*. Dir. Nemanja Mijović, Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. Performed during *SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER Festival 2024*. Theatre on Orlí Street, Brno, Czechia.

cramped

discomfort

restlessness

shaking hands

[**depeše**]

What's in store for me? I'm confused, I don't know what to do, what the right thing to do is. I should sit down, but where? I can hardly tell where the chairs are and where there is empty space. I feel like I can't see very well and I can't find my way around the room.

My body is being rocked by loud, booming tones, like I'm at a drum'n'bass party,

and then at regular intervals, there is

a kind of beeping

that reminds me of all those annoying machines in the hospital...

In the context of Sarah Kane's autobiographical play *4.48 Psychosis* I tried to recall the feelings I experienced when I entered the semi-transparent cube created in a small room at the Theatre on Orlí Street, Brno, where four performances of *4.48 Psychosis* by the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade (directed by Nemanja Mijović) took place during the *SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER Festival 2024*. This festival is annually organised by students of the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU). The festival creates a space for mutual encounters between theatre schools, where experience is shared among students and teachers. Members of the Artistic Section of the festival invite

approximately ten productions from all over the world to Brno each year, which they select based on an assessment of their artistic qualities. Additionally, the performances of the individual artists and creators, the social relevance of the production's subject matter, and the level of student involvement in the production are also taken into account. Last but not least, how the productions correspond to the theme of the festival, which changes every year, is also assessed. The 34th edition of the *International Festival of Theatre Schools SETKÁNÍ/ENCOUNTER 2024* had the theme: *The Storm*. A storm of creativity, inspiration, and youth, which beautifully captures the very essence of the festival.

The production *4.48 Psychosis* from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade was perfectly suited to this theme – with its rawness, the techniques typical of in-your-face theatre, and the youthful courage to perform, for example, masturbation scenes on stage twenty centimetres from the audience. Even though *SETKANI/ENCOUNTER Festival* is a non-competitive festival, the jury gives the Marta Award for outstanding artistic achievements. Two actresses were honoured that year, one of them was Nina Perge for her performance in *4.48 Psychosis*.

Nemanja Mijović directed Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* in the third year of his studies at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. The performance was created together with students from the theatre academies in Belgrade and Novi Sad and is also their first collaboration as the art collective NIBIRU, a group of young individuals united by unconventional and experimental visions of art based in Belgrade. In 2024, the production of *4.48 Psychosis* participated in numerous festivals across Europe – it was invited not only to the *SETKANI/ENCOUNTER Festival*, but, for example, to the *Fast Forward Festival*, a European theatre festival for young directors, which took place in Dresden. These invitations are proof that the production resonates not only in Serbia.

The central performance area was a cream-coloured floor on which the actors wrote words with a black marker. It was surrounded on four sides by two rows of chairs: three chairs for the actors and about 30 more for the audience. This rectangular shape was flanked on all sides by walls of semi-transparent plastic, with an opening in the middle of each of the four walls through which the actors could

enter the space. The audience was seated around a central performance area, with the performance taking place both inside and outside it. There was always something going on behind the plastic walls, but it was not clear exactly what it was. It was as if someone was always walking around, sometimes touching the plastic and swinging it, sometimes pushing it out into the space towards the audience or sometimes hitting it violently with a hand. This activity behind the walls corresponded well with the themes of Kane's play: the tension between the outside and the inside – a situation where a person receives stimuli from the outside and can cope with some and cannot cope with others, and if the majority of these stimuli are received in the latter way, it can be a sign of a sick soul. Even things that we only suspect and do not attach much importance can affect our perception and feeling. The external world affects our inner world, as if it was pushing from the outside in, into our mind. It is as if we are imaginatively inside someone's head.

It was a head full of suicidal thoughts. A head with two voices or attitudes, played by two actresses (Nina Perge and Marta Šćekić), who were distinguished by their costumes – one wore everyday clothes, while the second wore a provocative red dress. The dialogue with them was conducted by an actor (Ognjen Mićović) who most often uttered lines related to medical authorities and the environment of the hospital. Since Kane did not divide the play into individual lines assigned to characters, it is up to each production team to decide how many actors to cast. Nothing in the original text refers to the gender of the main character's fellow actors, and therefore we may encounter different

casts that vary according to the number of actors and their gender. For example, in the premiere at the Royal Court Theatre, two women and one man were cast; in the Czech premiere at the National Theatre (2003, dir. Michal Dočekal) the same was true, but in HaDivadlo (2010, dir. Filip Nuckolls) three women were cast, while in Studio Alta two women were cast (2013, dir. Dominika Andrašková).

Although, as a spectator, I felt cramped and uncomfortable due to the small space and unpredictable movements behind the walls, I perceived the subtle interaction of the actors with the audience as pleasant. In several moments, the actors dared to completely break the illusion and unobtrusively started asking the audience (in English, whereas the rest of the performance was in Serbian with English subtitles), for example, what associations come to their mind when the word 'hospital' is said. The actors were able to return to Kane's text and continued without hesitation (for example, the continuation of the above-mentioned episode seemed, at first, as if the actress was telling another story from the hospital in a civil manner, but gradually she moved into more and more expressive delivery and vocal stylisation, until it was absolutely clear that this was not improvisation, but a return to the text of the play). In addition to asking the audience several questions, the actors invited them to interact three more times, which I describe in the following paragraphs.

In a situation where the actor playing a doctor was reading a list of symptoms, treatments, and the patient's condition, he brought the patient onto a hospital bed. At this point, he handed out surgical masks to the audience (which also

have a completely different energy and carry completely different meanings after years of covid) and invited them to stand around the bed. This allowed them to observe closely the facial expressions and reactions of the actress playing the role of the patient, who was experiencing the torment of body and mind caused by the medication. It was a powerful scene, voyeuristic, intimate, emotionally tense, which would not have come across as such if the audience had remained seated.

After about 60 minutes of violent and loud language, sudden loud noises and music, depictions of toxic relationships, and sexual, physical, and psychological violence, the actors gently guided the audience into a kind of relaxation phase, underscored by quiet and calm music, during which they were asked to close their eyes and breathe deeply. Suddenly, all tension fell away; there was a relieving relaxation and a washing away of unpleasant feelings.

Of course, this was just the calm before the storm. After the last line of Kane's play ('please open the curtain'), the semi-transparent walls rose half a meter. Then the actresses asked one of the spectators to read the text on a paper they had given him before they left the stage. It was a farewell letter in which a woman who had committed suicide wrote to her mother about how she did not want to be here anymore and how sorry she was that she had not become who her mother wanted her to be. She begged for her forgiveness and closed the letter with the word: *Goodbye*. There is no such letter in the original Sarah Kane's play. Although we do not know who the author of the letter is or if it is inspired by reality, this scene was very powerful.

When the actors interacted with the spectators, their empathy made the audience feel safe. At other times, the spectators were left in suspense – not knowing what was coming or where it was coming from. They were tense and often surprised, like when an actor crawled around their feet, when an actress masturbated in front of them, or when the music suddenly got too loud. Sharp sounds included the piano, which was played cacophonously by one of the actresses behind the plastic walls, and whose first notes were

a very surprising manifestation of something from the outside due to the volume and the fact that nobody had expected a real piano in such a small room.

Overall, the performance was unpleasant, claustrophobic. Everything was too close to the body. Two audience members fled the room at the very beginning of the performance. What more can we ask for from in-er-face theatre? An assault on all the senses, uncertainty, dismay, disgust, but also mercy and tears. It was all there.



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