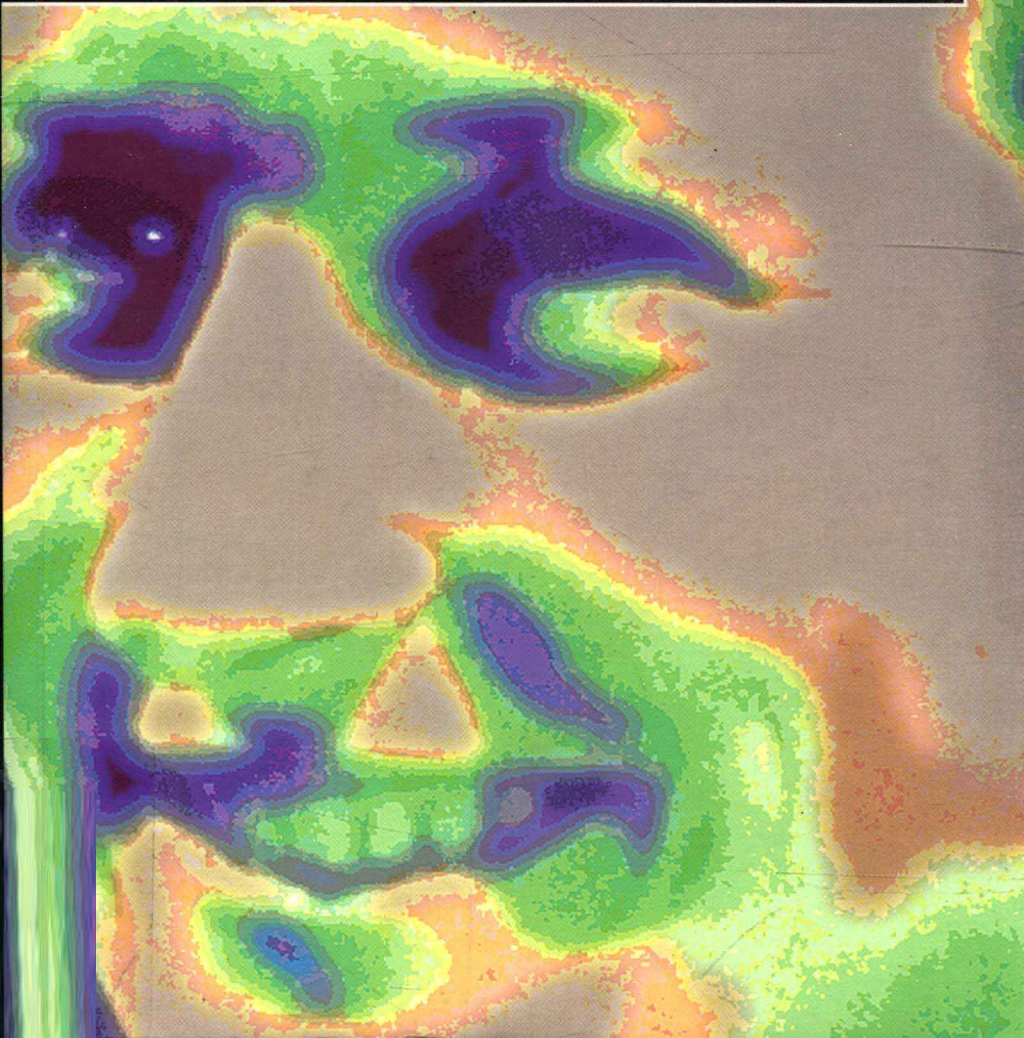
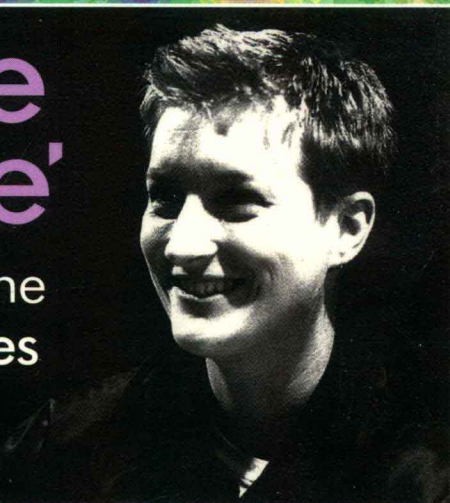


'Love me or kill me'

Sarah Kane and the
theatre of extremes

GRAHAM SAUNDERS





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江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York

distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

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Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall, Vancouver, BC,
Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 0 7190 5955 0 *hardback*
0 7190 5956 9 *paperback*

First published in 2002

10 09 08 07 06

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Typeset by Northern Phototypesetting Co. Ltd, Bolton
Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow

PREFACE

Sarah Kane's reputation as a playwright has gone through a series of ambiguous and contradictory changes since her debut *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court in 1995. In their recent assessment of twentieth-century British theatre, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright comment that Kane was a 'profoundly original playwright who ... rewrote the theatrical map'.¹ Yet, *Blasted* at the time of its first British production was almost universally castigated by the critical establishment as 'no more than an artful chamber of horrors designed to shock and nothing more'² and 'a lazy, tawdry piece of work without an idea in its head beyond an adolescent desire to shock'.³

While from early on Kane established a reputation in France and Germany as an important new dramatist, in Britain she has sat uneasily as the theatrical representation of 'Cool Britannia', and included amongst work ranging from Danny Boyle's film *Trainspotting* (1996) to artists such as Damien Hirst. She has also unwillingly been claimed as one of the leading figures in the emergence of a young group of dramatists in the wake of *Blasted*; these figures included Mark Ravenhill, Rebecca Prichard,

- 1 Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000), p. 374.
- 2 Nick Curtis, 'Random Tour in a Chamber of Horrors', *Evening Standard*, 19 January 1995.
- 3 Charles Spencer, 'Awful Shock', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1995.

Jez Butterworth and Nick Grosso, who were said to exhibit a shared interest in violence together with an abnegation of morality in their work.

This muddled status changed further after Kane's suicide in February 1999. Her last play, *4.48 Psychosis* (1999; Performed 2000), was reviewed by the majority of British theatre critics as little more than a dramatic suicide note, and the appraisal of previous work given a biographical approach in an attempt to seek connections between her work and life. Those looking for such methodology in this book will be sadly disappointed. David Greig comments in his introduction to Sarah Kane's *Collected Plays* that 'it would be a pity if, in attending to the mythology of the author, we were to miss the explosive theatricality, the lyricism, the emotional power, and the bleak humour that is contained within the plays themselves.'⁴

The aim of this study is to provide an introduction to Sarah Kane's work as a dramatist, exploring principle themes and dramatic structure as well as literary and dramatic sources. Sarah Kane was an eloquent and passionate defender of both her own writing and the importance of theatre itself as both an art form and a tool for living sanely. Bringing together interviews, letters and Kane's own writings about the theatre, I have attempted, as much as possible, to let her own words provide the commentary on her own work. In keeping with the introductory nature of this book I have tried to eschew a particular 'reading' or theoretical approach to the plays, but rather draw attention to, and elaborate upon, particular aspects of Kane's dramatic style, as well as develop comparable parallels to some of the rich dramatic and literary sources that inform the plays.

Of course it is also impossible to remain scrupulously neutral in assessing and criticising the work, and my own prejudices and interests surface on occasions. Mainly this takes the assertion that Sarah Kane's theatre was essentially 'Jacobean' in its imagery, characterisation and philosophy. Kane herself draws attention to this in the chapter on *Blasted* with her admission that Shakespeare's *King Lear* was a major influence, and where this aspect occurs in other work (notably *Cleansed*) I do point this out.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section is a chronological introduction to each of the plays. The first chapter attempts to outline the main dramatic methods and themes employed in Sarah Kane's work, as well as her place within the context of a so-called 'movement' of other young writers with shared concerns who emerged in the British theatre of the mid 1990s. Each chapter thereafter looks in more detail at each play.

4 David Greig, Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London, 2001), p. ix.

The second section is comprised of interviews with various theatre practitioners who have either worked directly on Sarah Kane's plays or express a particular interest in her work. All the material in the second section is free of commentary. Hopefully these exchanges open up new avenues regarding Sarah Kane's work not discussed in the first section. There is also a reprinted essay by Edward Bond, *Sarah Kane and Theatre*, which was originally written shortly after Kane's death. Bond was one of the earliest and most perceptive commentators on Kane's work,⁵ realising from the start both its moral integrity and bold theatrical experimentation. The essay makes a passionate argument, for both Sarah Kane's drama and the crucial human need for theatre itself.

I am aware that a book of this nature contributes to David Greig's fear that the plays will become choked by a colonising critical process, 'interpreting, analysing and decoding ... until eventually, the plays themselves come to seem only palimpsests, barely glimpsed beneath the commentary.'⁶

However, it is hoped that both the first section as well as the 'other voices'⁷ in the second, will help to give a chance to those with an interest in Sarah Kane's drama to develop a positive criticism and appreciation of her work, either through scholarship, or more importantly by actual performance of the plays.

A book of this nature will always contain omissions and in keeping with the title I have only made cursory mention of the short film *Skin* Kane wrote in 1995. The script has now been published in the collected edition of the plays, and while it is evident that it shares many of the themes and imagery realised in the theatrical work, I have limited the scope of the book to discussing the stage plays only.

A note on the text

Unless stated otherwise, all quotations from Sarah Kane's work come from *The Complete Plays*. A reference such as (4:53) refers to the scene followed by the page number.

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5 See Edward Bond, 'A Blast at our Smug Theatre', *Guardian*, 28 January 1995, p. 22.

6 Greig, *Complete Plays*, p. xviii.

7 *Ibid.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals and institutions who gave their time and advice in helping with this study. I particularly want to thank the interviewees Kate Ashfield, Daniel Evans, Vicky Featherstone, Mel Kenyon, James Macdonald, Stuart McQuarrie, Phyllis Nagy and Nils Tabert. Edward Bond generously sent me selections from his own correspondence with Sarah Kane and theatre notebooks relating to her work, as well as reading and offering advice on the manuscript; Ingrid Craigie, Josephine Machon, Dan Rebellato and Aleks Sierz also generously allowed me access to interview material. Greg Hobbs allowed me to see the 1993 Birmingham drafts for *Blasted*; Lesley Gabriel and Simon Glaves transcribed several of the interviews; Caridad Svich kept me up to date with productions in America; Sarah Wolf also pointed me in the direction of several obscure but useful resources. My colleague David Ian Rabey at the University of Aberystwyth provided valuable criticism which contributed greatly to the shaping of the book. I particularly wish to thank Maria Delgado who has constantly offered prompt and practical guidance at all stages of its writing.

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1

Introduction

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 watch something and think that's the most perfect expression of the hell that I felt then maybe it was worth it. (Sarah Kane, Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998)

On Christmas Eve 1994 the dramatist John Osborne died. This prompted commentators, not surprisingly, to reassess his contribution to post-war British theatre. Most agreed that his debut, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), while not necessarily being his best play, nevertheless 'set off a landmine'¹ and invigorated a British theatre which until then had seemed in a state of genteel decline, 'dominated by ingenious productions of the classics or insipid little comedies assuming that manners [had] really not changed since 1914'.²

Osborne's death, together with almost exactly five years remaining to the end of the millennium, gave commentators just the excuse they needed to launch a discussion on the current state of British theatre. Bold new writing in the vein of Osborne's early work was felt to be lacking: Benedict Nightingale, surveying 1990s' drama, alludes to this poverty through the somewhat backhanded compliment that Stephen Daldry's

1 Alan Stiltoe, 'An Osborne Symposium', in John Russell Taylor (ed.), *Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (London, 1978), p. 185.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

1992 revival and reinterpretation of J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1947) 'seemed the most contemporary play in London'.³ The dramatist David Hare also saw the 1990s as a time that marked a breach in the continuity of a process that had evolved since *Look Back in Anger*: 'When Stoppard and Pinter looked behind their backs they saw us coming up ... when Howard [Brenton] or I look back we see no one – no young writers coming up to challenge what we stood for'.⁴

While these commentators might have been looking back to a dimly realised golden-age of radical yet populist drama, they appeared to represent a consensus who believed the raw energy of *Look Back in Anger* was unlikely to happen again. This debate had been intermittently revived since the decade began; indeed a month before Osborne's death, eighty-seven prominent British playwrights signed a joint letter to the *Guardian* newspaper complaining about the lack of new drama on the country's main stages. The theatre critic Michael Billington pointed out that if allowed to continue this policy would turn British theatre into 'a dusty museum rather than a turbulent forum where society carries on a continuous debate with itself'. Billington felt this to be symptomatic of an equally worrying cultural trend whereby, 'It is as if we, as a society, are becoming increasingly wary of work that confronts the nature of the times or that deals head on with big issues'.⁵

It was during this atmosphere of nostalgia for another *Look Back in Anger* that less than three weeks after Osborne's death, on 12 January 1995, a new play called *Blasted* would premiere at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs by an unknown 23-year-old woman that would share some striking similarities with *Look Back in Anger*. Some commentators, such as Richard Morrison writing in *The Times*, saw this connection between the two plays very early on: 'Three weeks ago, after John Osborne's death, I deplored the lack of danger in the British theatre at present. How they must have giggled at the Royal Court when they heard that! For they knew what I did not'.⁶

Wendy Lesser believes that at the time of Osborne's death, Stephen Daldry, then Artistic Director of the Royal Court, was looking back to the period of Osborne in order to find a strategy for its role in the future. Hence Daldry's directorial debut in February 1994 was a revival of Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1959), and Jez Butterworth's new play *Mojo* (1996)

3 Benedict Nightingale, *The Future of Theatre* (London, 1998), p. 27.

4 Peter Anson, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles: On Writing for Theatre, Film and Television* (London, 1997), p. 4.

5 Michael Billington, '87 Deadly Sins', *Observer*, 22 November 1994, p. 5.

6 Richard Morrison, 'Radical Chic Better than FBI Cheat', *The Times*, 21 January 1995, p. 5.

would be his 'talismanic'⁷ version of *Look Back in Anger*. Lesser also believes 'If Macdonald's [Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Sam Shepard's *Simpatico*] and Rickson's [*Mojo*] turned out to be the hottest plays in the Royal Court's 1994-5 season, that was in part because Daldry used all his charm, connections and theatrical clout to make them hot'.⁸ Despite headlines that greeted its reception such as, 'Rape Play Girl in Hiding',⁹ and 'Cash Fury at Vilest Ever Play',¹⁰ Kane herself seemed sceptical about a carefully constructed master-plan by the Royal Court to unleash a new generation of controversial young dramatists in the wake of *Blasted*. In fact Kane maintained that everything possible was done *not* to promote her play: 'The Court had programmed the play into a dead spot. They didn't really know what to do with it. A lot of the people in the building didn't want to do it – they were a bit embarrassed by it so they put it into a spot just after Christmas when no one was going to the theatre and hopefully nobody would notice'.¹¹

Moreover, some commentators, writing after Kane's death, felt at the time there was also an element of mischief-making in some of the expressions of outrage that greeted the play. Paul Taylor in the *Independent* observed:

I was present straight after the first-night performance when two of my colleagues on other papers led the charge by deciding to cook up this play as a news item. My informed guess is that: a) neither of them had been profoundly offended by the play, and b), their subsequent behaviour was not motivated by malice, but by an almost childish sense of journalistic fun – they thought that it would be a wheeze to drag the theatre out of the ghetto of the theatre pages and into mainstream public attention.¹²

The irony concerning *Blasted* is that despite starting out on a trajectory of mock outrage, time has given it a far more favourable assessment, and while it might be an exaggeration to claim that *Blasted* caught the *Zeitgeist* in quite the same way as *Look Back in Anger*, or galvanised a new generation of young writers in the theatre (although some commentators, as we shall see, have made such claims for it), its director James

7 Wendy Lesser, *A Director Calls: Stephen Daldry and the Theatre* (London, 1997), p. 114. Also see Aleks Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London, 2000), pp. 38–9, 234–5.

8 Lesser, *A Director Calls*, p. 98.

9 *Daily Express*, 20 January 1995.

10 *Daily Mirror*, 20 January 1995.

11 Dan Rebellato, 'Brief Encounter Platform', public interview with Sarah Kane, Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998. See Mel Kenyon's comments about the Royal Court's scheduling of *Blasted*, p. 146.

12 Paul Taylor, 'Obituary' *Independent*, 23 February 1999.

Macdonald is probably right when he calls *Blasted* 'perhaps the least seen and most talked about play in recent memory'.¹³

'F***** and Chopping': the New Brutalists

Another notable effect of *Blasted* was that it came to be seen, in much the same way as *Look Back in Anger* over thirty years previously, as a catalyst in restoring the fortunes of new writing to the British stage. The impact and notoriety of the play seemed to spawn and bring to prominence a group of young dramatists whose work, like those who followed Osborne such as John Arden and Arnold Wesker, came to be seen – rightly or wrongly – as sharing similar themes and styles. Certainly, *Blasted* was considered by some commentators to be the precursor 'that put critics on their toes about a new strain of writing and a new kind of audience'.¹⁴ These so-called writers of 'smack and sodomy plays'¹⁵ included Jez Butterworth, Nick Grosso, Joe Penhall, Rebecca Prichard and Michael Wynne. Probably the other most prominent figure in this supposedly writer-led movement was Mark Ravenhill, who also provoked considerable media prurience with his Royal Court debut *Shopping and Fucking* (1996).

Although *Blasted* is said to have been the play that marked a resurgence in the Royal Court's reputation, Aleks Sierz is right to maintain that 'historians may be tempted to date the start of theatre's Cool Britannic phase from the play's premiere ... But they would be wrong to do so'.¹⁶ In fact, the play that preceded it at the Theatre Upstairs in December 1994 (*Ashes and Sand* by Judy Upton) was perhaps the first play that provided signs of what was to come from this new group of writers. Upton's play, about a violent girl-gang in a southern British seaside town, led the theatre critic Claire Armitstead to observe that 'suddenly the Royal Court has found a current and is swimming with it'.¹⁷

13 James Macdonald, 'They Never Got Her', *Observer Review*, 28 February 1999.

14 James Christopher 'Rat with Hand Exits Stage Left', *Independent*, 4 May 1998, pp. 6–7.

15 Cited in Susannah Clapp, 'West End Girls (and Boys)', *Observer*, 24 May 1998, p. 5.

16 Aleks Sierz, 'Cool Britannia? "In-yer-face" Writing in the British Theatre Today', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 56 (1998) 325.

17 Claire Armitstead, 'Riotous Assembly', *Guardian*, 8 December 1994, p. 8.

Aleks Sierz identifies even earlier writers from the decade who could claim to be precursors of what he terms 'in-yer-face' writers, and includes Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator* (1993) and Philip Ridley's *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1992). In an uncanny echo of the initial reactions *Blasted* was to provoke, Tom Morris expressed the disquiet he felt about being in such close proximity to graphic staged violence: 'Watching the cruellest of these plays in a small studio theatre is like watching a simulated rape in your own living room. In very small theatres, it is impossible to walk out, so the audience is trapped in close proximity to the action, giving the playwright free reign to have his or her own say in the bluntest possible terms'.¹⁸

Nevertheless, *Blasted* brought theatre, temporarily at least, out of hibernation to dominate the cultural arena, and perhaps more importantly, its fortuitous scheduling at the beginning of the year focused critics' attention keenly, not only on the rest of the Royal Court's season, but on new writing in general. Hence, by the following year, plays such as Joe Penhall's *Pale Horse* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* had convinced some critics that a new generation of young writers was emerging. Benedict Nightingale for instance detected a shared vision: 'Certainly we can say that dramatists under forty are approaching the new millennium in an uneasy, uncertain yet unsolemn frame of mind ... There's a bravado in their evocation of a Britain they regard as being in disarray'.¹⁹ Michael Billington and Lyn Gardner, writing in 1996, concur, and in their assessment they attempt to explain what has spawned this new drama: 'It is partly a reaction against the drab uniformity of television ... and where the single play, if not the film, is a dead duck. New writing at the moment is also driven by a total disillusion, often jauntily expressed, with social decay: specifically with the breakdown of any binding moral code or common sense of decency'.²⁰

This disaffected group of dramatists quickly came to be known under a series of different names by theatre and cultural critics in an effort to describe what were seen to be the preoccupations of their work: epithets included 'the Britpack', 'the New Brutalists' and 'the Theatre of Urban Ennui'.²¹ In 1998 Benedict Nightingale attempted to summarise their concerns:

If one were to derive a capsule play from already performed work, it might involve gangs of girls adrift in a London where criminals dump bits of their

18 Tom Morris, 'Foul Deeds Fair Play', *Guardian*, 25 January, 1995.

19 Nightingale, *Future of Theatre*, p. 21.

20 Michael Billington and Lyn Gardner, 'Fabulous Five', *Guardian*, 13 March 1996, p. 10.

21 Nightingale, *Future of Theatre*, p. 20.

rivals in plastic bags, rent boys are casually raped, there's a lively back-street trade in stolen burglar alarms, and voracious spivs gather beside ageing charabanc drivers dying of a surfeit of porn. These dramatists are stronger on character and situation than conflict, tension and structure, preferring to offer vivid snapshots rather than concoct plots, maybe because plot implies some coherence in people's lives. They relish the oddball, the misfit, the bizarre; but they are troubled by the helplessness and unhappiness they see all around. They are vastly entertaining yet they radiate moral concern. They are Mrs Thatcher's disorientated children.²²

From the pessimism that started 1995, its close prompted Michael Billington to note with enthusiasm, 'the abundance of new plays that both found an audience and addressed big issues'.²³ By the following year talk about a resurgence of new writing in British theatre had become 'listed along with pop, fashion, fine art and food as the fifth leg of the new Swinging London'.²⁴ The media, quick to respond to what they perceived as a new culture emerging, christened this flurry of artistic activity 'cool Britannia'. While Vera Gottlieb saw the whole thing as an artificial construct – 'The media and the market "named" something, then "made" something – and subsequently "claimed" something'²⁵ – a number of self-congratulatory newspaper articles started to appear around 1995. Robert Hewison's assessment was a typical response:

We have the makings of a cultural renaissance, based on a new generation of young talent that is being recognised nationally and internationally. From Brit-pop to Bryn Terfel, from Stephen Daldry to Damien Hirst, from Jenny Saville to Nicholas Hytner, from Rachel Whiteread to Mark Wigglesworth, there is a renewed sense of creative vigour and excitement ... We are on the threshold of either a decadent *fin de siècle* or the breakthrough that characterizes Vienna in 1900, when artists, playwrights, poets and composers launched twentieth century modernism.²⁶

The mood of the time even began to permeate and influence interpretations of classical drama, such as Shakespeare. For instance, Mark Rylance's 1996 production of *Macbeth* saw 'the action ... punctuated by loud, trippy trance-techno music, and when the grungy witches offered up their prophecies they slipped Macbeth a tab of acid for good measure'.²⁷

22 *Ibid.*

23 Michael Billington, 'Review of 1995: An Irishman Captures London', *Guardian*, 27 December 1995, p. 6.

24 David Edgar (ed.), *State of Play Issue 1: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London, 1999), p. 28.

25 Vera Gottlieb, 'Lukewarm Britain', in Colin Chambers and Vera Gottlieb (eds), *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford, 1999), p. 209.

26 Robert Hewison, 'Rebirth of a Nation', *The Times*, 19 May 1996.

27 Andrew Smith, 'How to Get Rave Reviews?', *The Times*, 11 February 1996.

However, the concept of contemporary culture influencing classical theatre seemed to Benedict Nightingale a one-way process. Despite being a defender of the 'New Brutalists', he nevertheless saw a conspicuous absence, both in their work and in post-war drama, of 'an ear for metaphysics ... where people feel "tragically" ... they're [British dramatists] writing in a medium best suited to the conflict of the individual and the individual with his society'.²⁸

The playwright David Edgar also had misgivings, in that while he applauded the resurgence of new writing in terms of the important issues it addressed (which he identifies as the crisis in masculinity), he nevertheless saw that in terms of *dramatic form* the new generation of dramatists were conservatives, 'operating within the context of a British television drama ... imprisoned within the homogenising constraints of genre. And the return to plays set in real rooms has been matched by the equally dramatic re-emergence of plays set in real time'.²⁹

This is where Sarah Kane's drama most clearly deviates from the preoccupations of her contemporaries, or what she called 'plays about disaffected groups of youths exploring their sexuality'.³⁰ Although Aleks Sierz calls her work 'Harold Pinter and Edward Bond for the chemical generation',³¹ Kane's drama is informed and influenced far more closely by classical and modern European theatre than 'rave culture'.

Jez Butterworth – whose play *Mojo* also made a spectacular debut at the Royal Court in the same year as *Blasted* – described as the 'undisputed leader of the stage brat-packers',³² was also quick to ridicule the analogy: 'This idea of a motorcycle gang of playwrights I was leading just doesn't exist'.³³ Kane herself was equally disparaging, not only about the movement in general, but about her own work being seen at the vanguard:

I do not believe in movements. Movements define retrospectively and always on grounds of imitation. If you have three or four writers who do something interesting there will be ten others who are just copying it. At that moment you've got a movement. The media look for movements, even invent them. The writers themselves are not interested in it. Some of the writers who are said to belong to the movement I haven't even met. So, as far as I am concerned, I hope that my play [*Crave*] is not typical of anything.³⁴

28 Nightingale, *Future of Theatre*, p. 25

29 Edgar, *State of Play*, p. 28.

30 Rebellato, 'Brief Encounter'.

31 Aleks Sierz, *Tribune*, 15 May 1998.

32 Billington and Gardner, *Guardian*, 13 March 1996.

33 Jim Shelly, 'The Idler', *Guardian*, 4 July 1998, p. 25.

34 Johan Thielmans, *Rehearsing the Future*, 4th European Directors Forum. Strategies for the emerging Director in Europe (London: Directors Guild of Great Britain *et al*, 1999), p. 10.