Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was the daughter of a Mirror journalist and grew up in Essex. Her career as playwright began quite early at the age of seven, when she wrote her first "violent" short story about someone whose father was shot. Some years later, by the time she was studying for A-levels, she was also busy directing Chekhov's The Bear and the Joan Littlewood musical Oh, What a Lovely War! at school. After A-levels Kane began her drama degree in Bristol. Here she stood out as an actor and director, not yet as a writer. Her first substantial written work, a series of three monologues under the umbrella title of Sick, was firstly performed in Bristol and then at Edinburgh Festival in 1994. One was about rape, one about a woman questioning about her sexual identity and another about eating disorders: they were all performed in the first person, confrontational, and it felt as one was listening to a first hand experience. Kane later withdrew the monologues - disowned them in effect - because she thought that audiences regarded them as confessional: these monologues are now hard to find and have never been performed afterwards.

Kane graduated from Bristol and went straight on to David Edgar’s playwriting MA at Birmingham University, being accepted on the course on the basis of a monologue called Starved, which tells of a bulimic woman. It is during this period that she started her first play Blasted, but kept it hidden from her tutors until it was well under way. Mel Kenyon, an agent, went up to Birmingham to see the end-of-year show in 1993 and when the embryo of Blasted was performed, she was “awe-struck” and later asked Kane if she could read the whole

1 Simon Hattenstone, “A Sad Hurrah”, “The Guardian Weekend”, The
thing when it was completed, thus becoming her agent.

Blasted premiered on January 18th 1995 at the Royal Court Upstairs Theatre in Sloane Square, London. It was a horrifying examination of the effects of contemporary war on three people in a Leeds hotel room and included scenes of fellatio, frottage, micturition, defecation, homosexual rape, eye-gouging, cannibalism and suicide.

Accused of putting audiences through a “catalogue of lurid on-stage depravity”\(^2\), she was vilified by the press and proclaimed the most notorious playwright in Britain.

Unfazed by the cacophony of media criticism, she directed her second full-length play, Phaedra’s Love, at the Gate Theatre of Notting Hill in London in May 1996: the play was her contemporary take on the myth of King Theseus’s wife, Phaedra, and her taboo-breaking passion for her stepson Hyppolytus. Here she both waved a variation on classical myth and worked her way through masturbation, fellatio, rape, castration and disembowelment. Predictably more condemnation followed and some journalist commented that it was not a theatre critic that was required to review the play, but a psychiatrist.

In 1997 she completed her third play, Cleansed, that opened at the Royal Court Theatre in the London West End in May 1998: it was a twenty-scene play about love, death and drug addiction in a concentration camp. The play was no less violent than the previous and outraged a new set of critics with scenes that included injection of heroin into an eyeball, violent amputation and suicide. Again, it was fuelled by her revulsion of Serb atrocities, minimalist and elliptical but once again the critics suggested that the violence in Cleansed was gratuitous and exaggerate. In other critic’s opinions however, her first plays demonstrated remarkable insight and clarity because they offered us a powerful warning, by showing the tragic but logical conclusion of humanity’s escalating, destructive behaviour.

Her fourth play, Crave, which opened at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh during 1998’s Fringe Festival and was subsequently transferred to the Royal Court in London, was a sudden change of style. A virtuoso poem for four voices, styled

as two parallel conversations, it drew on T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the Bible, and proved that Kane could write with tender, playful, Beckettian brilliance. The play was written by Kane under the pseudonym “Marie Kelvedon” (Marie was her middle name and Kelvedon Hatch was a town near where she was born): it was a means of writing for – and seeing her work played in front of – an audience unswayed by the influence of the *Blasted* phenomenon.

In *Crave*, four nameless voices (Methuen names them A, B, C and M) – different characters of warring factions of one person’s consciousness – sit around and discuss love, desire, abuse and the ultimate desire, death. It marked a departure in Kane’s work because, having pioneered a new theatre where brutality and action express an emotional narrative, here she deployed language like music. Many critics hastening to talk about Kane’s new found maturity as a playwright, *Crave* was widely reviewed as Kane’s best piece of writing.

Only a few months later, when she committed suicide, she was under commission to a number of theatres and had a play soon to go into production (*4:48 Psychosis*, which premiered at the Royal Court Upstairs in London in June 2000): like all her work, it was about the catastrophe of love and its extreme consequences. The play is, in fact, a sombre, poetic and subjective meditation on suicide and it is definitely the most refined of Kane’s plays.

*Blasted, Phaedra’s Love, Cleansed, Crave and 4:48 Psychosis* add up to a body of work, which pushed recklessly at theatre’s naturalistic boundaries. Each was a new step on a journey in which Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes: of violation, loneliness, power, mental collapse and, most consistently, love. As James Macdonald (the director of *Blasted, Cleansed* and *4:48 Psychosis*) said, it is astonishing that so young a dramatist could so in short time write plays stylistically so different from each other as the five she left us. She was, as Mark Ravenhill said, “a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility who created a theatre of great moments of beauty and cruelty, a theatre to which it was only possible to respond with a sense of awe”.

\(^3\) She pioneered a form of experimental theatre, which gave audiences a powerful sense of hav-

\(^3\) Quoted in Simon Hattenstone, *art. cit.*, p. 34.
ing lived through the events shown on stage, and tackled the large issues of war, violence and love, identity, insanity and desire.

Kane wrote simply and starkly about the world around her, a world in which violence and love were deeply entwined, and hope and despair were mirror images of each other. For her, *Blasted* was simply a play about fragility, survival and hope. Her intention was to be absolutely truthful about abuse, violence and war. And since war is illogical, it seemed wrong to her to use a predictable theatrical form; instead, she tried to draw on lots of different authors, from Ibsen to Pinter, to Brecht and, eventually, to Beckett, in order to create some kind of dramatic course within the play, like drama history within the play itself.

She thought that acts of violence simply happened in life, they didn’t have a dramatic build-up, and they were horrible. There is, she said, “no real debate in this country about how you represent violence in art. We don’t know how to talk about it; we don’t know how to deal with it. The violence in this play [Blasted] is completely de-glamorised. It’s just presented. [...] Of course that’s shocking. Take the glamour out of violence and it becomes utterly repulsive” 4. Kane didn’t seem to know how she wanted her audience to respond. Her job was to represent it, while people should judge for themselves and she had no interest in trying to manipulate people’s emotions or opinions: what she wanted to do was to tell the truth about human behaviour as she saw it. As a matter of fact, Kane’s plays do not take sides: she showed compassion for her characters but does not justify their behaviour.

Furthermore in this direction, Kane hated the idea of theatre just being an evening pastime, she thought it should be emotionally and intellectually demanding. But people, in her view, only expect to sit in front of a play and not participate. To fight this tendency, Kane claimed that there should be a place for good new writing, irrespective of the box office, for one cannot second-guess audiences and control how they will respond to any given theatrical experience.

Kane would rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life, because, if theatre can change lives, then by implication it can

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change society, since we are all part of it: for theatre is not external force acting on society, but it is part of it, a reflection of the way people, within that society, view the world. And films, books, or theatre, they all represent something which already exists, even if only in someone’s head, and through that representation they can change or reinforce what they describe. Playwright Harold Pinter, who knew and appreciated Kane, said:

“What frightened me was the depth of her horror and anguish. Everyone is aware, to varying degrees, of the cruelty of mankind, but we manage to compromise with it [...] but I don’t think she could do that. I think she had a vision of the world that was extremely accurate, and therefore horrific. Because the world is an awful place. It’s a very beautiful place, but this species mankind is an absolute bloody disaster. The elements of sadism are astonishing. She wasn’t simply observing mankind; she was part of it. It seems to me she was talking about the violence within herself, the hatred within herself, and the depths of misery that she also suffered” ⁵.

Kane thought that through being very, very low comes the an ability to live in the moment because there isn’t anything else. What do you do if the truth is behind you? Many people feel that depression is about emptiness but actually it is about being so full that everything cancels itself out. And since you can’t have faith without doubt, what are you left when you can’t have love without hate? Long before she died, Kane admitted that she found the creative process gruelling and exhausting. A character in Crave says “I write the truth and it kills me” ⁶. In an interview just before her suicide, the playwright said she felt much the same.

We want now to focus our attention on the production of Kane’s first play, Blasted, in the British première of 1995 and in the first Italian staging of 1997: for, although notorious and worrying, Kane’s fame run throughout Europe very quickly and wasn’t – and isn’t nowadays – neglected by other European countries (not to mention the American and Australian productions), in whose staging, directors and actors gave new, different and interesting interpretations of Kane’s body of work.

⁵ Quoted in Simon Hattenstone, *art. cit.*, p. 31.
The action in *Blasted* is set in a fancy hotel room in Leeds where Ian, a dying racist, middle-aged tabloid journalist has brought a speech-impaired, seemingly epileptic 21-year-old former girlfriend Cate for purposes of seduction.

He enters the room, fag stuck in his mouth, and marches over to the minibar to pour a double gin, leaving Cate waiting uncertainly in the doorway. After much hesitation she decides to stay. While they talk we come to know that Ian was once married and has a son. The gunsling he wears suggests it’s not just the forces within he has to fear, and, from his constant racist jibes and confessions he makes to Cate, we gather that he is an undercover operator from some secret right-wing nationalist army.

Ian wants to reconquer Cate, insists that he loves her but makes violent advances on her: he calls her a “spaz” and, during one of her cataleptic fits, he rapes her. There are following scenes of oral sex and masturbation; eventually Cate goes to the bathroom and disappears.

Outside is the civil war and the city seems to be taken over by the military. A soldier bursts in the bedroom: he takes Ian’s gun, eats his food, drinks his gin out and checks his passport. Suddenly a shell blasts a hole where the window was. When the two men recover from the blow, the soldier describes in lip-smacking details the appalling atrocities he has committed elsewhere and the tortures that his dead girlfriend Col had to suffer. Then he rapes Ian at gunpoint and eventually bites out his eyes and eats them.

When Cate comes back the soldier has killed himself. Cate carries a baby who cries because it’s hungry. After a while the baby dies and Cate buries her under the floorboards. Ian wants to die as well but Cate prevents him from doing it and then she goes out looking for food. The play shows now a sequence of snapshots of Ian masturbating, defecating, laughing, having a nightmare and eating the baby’s corpse.

Eventually Cate enters the room carrying some food and gin, blood seeping from between her legs. She sits next to Ian, eats her food (meat, but she was previously a vegetarian) and then feeds Ian with the remaining; she drinks some more gin.

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and sucks her thumb and in the end the scene goes completely dark.

Following Kane’s precise stage directions, the set of the play is indeed a very common hotel room ("the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world"), rendered with alarming naturalism. The stage immediately suggests the kind of chamber piece about relationships with which theatre-goers are so familiar. And yet, almost from its first words, "I've shot in better places than this", there is an uneasy awareness that this play is not behaving itself: the moral unease that accompanies these first lines grows until the scene finally changes and we learn that, during the night, Ian has raped Cate.

The 1995 British production of Blasted, directed by James Macdonald, followed meticulously Kane’s precise stage directions, for which nothing is left to imagination, from the furniture on stage to every act of violence perpetrated by and on the characters (this, of course, was the most disturbing element of the staging).

On one hand we have a precise geographic reference, on the other hand indefiniteness: so even from the beginning we can literally feel a tension, which is never to be released, between two poles, the realistic and the oniric poles, on which the whole structure of the play is based. Moreover, the hotel room in Leeds is one of those places/no places that, since they belong to a globalised industrial production, are made of those standard elements which are always the same wherever in the world we are: let us think to Mac Donald’s fast foods, or Holiday Inn hotels, for instance. Therefore, the hotel room is the symbol of the Western world which enters the rest of the world though preserving its unaltered models.

The first part of the play has the precise aim of introducing the characters and their interpersonal relationship: Ian (Pip Donaghy) is racist, xenophobe, hates the immigrants and the homosexual people, fears diversity and has an almost maniac need for law and order, whereas Cate (Kate Ashfield) impersonates astonishment and innocent amazement: what, however, prevents the play from commonplace, is the absence of any moralism, either in the text and in the actress’ interpretation, so that the audience avoids identification with Cate’s innocence.

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8 Sarah Kane, Blasted & Phaedra’s Love, London, Mehtuen Drama, p. 3.
9 Ibidem.
because her innocence is rendered as childishness and handicap.

At the end of the first part of the play, before entering the bathroom, Cate looks outside the window and, almost by chance says “Looks like there’s a war on” 10: this line introduces the second part’s scenery. So without any notice, the second part begins with the entrance of an armed soldier (Dermot Kerrigan): when Cate leaves the stage, there is a loud knock on the door, and, in the play most daring moment, the soldier enters, apparently from nowhere, bringing with him the terrifying fragments of a world blown apart by violence. In this way, the tension of the first part of the play is almost premonition of the disaster to come. And when it comes, the structure of the play fractures to allow its entry: the form is a direct parallel to the truth of war it portrays – a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters and the play into a chaotic pit without logic explanation.

Nothing is said, nor when he speaks or even in the original text, about the soldier, nor a description of his uniform (on stage he wears trousers and vest), nor about his nationality: he represents the logic of war, destruction, violence and madness, which contrasts openly with the apparently opposite logic, that of the extreme right-wing policy, which is racist, cynical, equally violent but self-styled as “civil”, the one Ian represents.

The tension culminates when a bomb shell hits the hotel and leaves a big, dark, disquieting hole on the wall which represents the connection with the outer world: it will allow Cate to enter the room and leave it when she afterwards goes out in search of food and means that the violence which occurred in the hotel room has also destroyed the world outside it. The blast made by the bomb also seems to introduce the most explicitly violent and criticised part of the play, i.e. when the soldier rapes Ian at gunpoint and then munches noisily on his eyes: there are no changes in the scenery, apart from the hole, no different or dimmed lights, nor attempts to disguise what is going on, the violence happens right in front of us and we can also hear all the noises. At this point the audience,

10 Sarah Kane, Blasted & Phaedra’s Love, London, Methuen Drama, 1996, p. 34.

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during the first première, was stunned and shocked and many had already left the theatre, outraged by the explicitness of the scenes.

So, when Cate comes back with the baby in her arms, the stage is still showing the hotel room, but its scenario is definitely bleaker and more horrid: the once beautiful and luxurious room is reduced as a battlefield – again, parallels with the outer world, torn by the civil war, are evident. The lights now have gone down to show only blind Ian, who is almost buried by the floorboards apart from his head: this seems to allude to Ian’s near death, even because, when the baby Cate has brought with her dies, she buries her in the same place.

When Cate leaves again in search for food, sudden changes of lighting (“Darkness. Light. Darkness. Light” \(^{11}\) is the line we read in the text, and almost the same effect that we have on stage) show us Ian performing a series of actions which look like horrific vignettes about a crazy man who is dying and the play gives up dialogue: he masturbates, defecates, laughs hysterically, cries and eats the dead baby – again the audience averts their eyes because of the extreme vividness of the images. Then Cate comes back with food which she got in exchange for sex from the soldiers (the blood seeping from between her legs has a disquieting likeness with the real one), she eats the food and feeds Ian who eventually thanks her.

The end of the play is as disconcerting as the rest of it: it seems like Macdonald – and the author as well – is trying to tell us that a certain sense of peace is pervading the brutalised scene: there is rain, then silence, the lights are very low, and then a sudden blackout, which leaves the audience uncertain about what to do.

Kane said that Blasted was a text about survival and hope: as a matter of fact, it is an act of hope that, in the chilling scenery of the end of the play, we must interpret Cate’s final gesture: she finds the nerve for an act of open-handedness towards Ian, with whom she shares her food. So, in the end, it is Cate who, previously childish and unfit for the world, now reveals herself to be the strongest character of the play: her innocence and purity eventually win, because they remain the same even through human degradation and physical violence.

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In a world where human dignity is systematically lowered, solidarity stands up as only value: so, even if the starting point of the play was a political dimension (a clear, pitiless analysis of contemporary society), the solution is to be found the human and private dimension.

Nevertheless, when *Blasted* premiered, critics were quick to condemn it as a “feast of filth” 12 although some were brave enough to subsequently revise their opinion, noting, like Edward Bond, that Kane’s play was written in the bleached language of truth and poetry.

*Blasted* implies that modern Britain is a society where potentially traumatizing events, such as rape and murder, are rendered inconsequential by the constant diet of them the press provides.

In a language at once sensational and habitual, the reporting of limit events is evacuated from any significance and real trauma is buried without a trace: it is no coincidence that Ian is a journalist, and, as such, responsible for witnessing on a daily basis, but here the traditional role of the journalist as the bearer of historical testimony is reduced to the churning out of lurid clichés down the telephone:

“A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday new point par. The bubbly nineteen-year-old from Leeds was among seven victims buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest pint new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par …” 13

The journalist writes of horrific events from which he is removed by thousands of miles, in hackneyed language repeated in different variations in countless newspapers. There is a formula, *Blasted* is telling us, for rendering atrocities in a familiar, easily digestible fashion: there is nothing strange in the murder of seven people. Journalistic haste – to meet a deadline, to capture a readership – only expresses further the real kernel of a traumatic event.

13 *Sarah Kane*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
Sarah Kane's Blasted

Ian is obviously a bad witness: not only does he make the events he reports seem routine and commonplace, but he is detached, both literally and symbolically, from those events. In this way, Blasted is also the story of the revenge of the events on the bad witness, culminating in the removal of his eyes.

Irony heaps upon irony in the press reception of Blasted, with accusations of gratuitousness and sensationalism. In isolating and fetishising various sexual acts, the media had presented exactly the kind of distorted, alienated sexuality that Kane seeks to examine. Ian's chauvinism, racism, homophobia and bigotry are dissected to reveal his sexual relations at a battlefield in which he strives for power and dominance, while desperately trying to tighten a grip on life made vulnerable by disease and the threat of political assassination. So, in separating sex from its context, the media has failed to recognise Kane's work as an examination of the social construction of sex: Blasted shows us the violence in society and suggests a material basis for its existence.

However, nothing could have prepared Kane for the response to Blasted, which cast her as the bad girl of British theatre. She expected criticism but didn't expect it to become a news item on Newsnight and The World at One. The thing that shocked her the most way was that the critics seemed to be more upset by the presentation of violence than by violence itself. "I mean, a 15-year-old girl has just been raped in a wood but there's more space in the tabloids about my play than about this brutal act. That's the kind of journalism that the play absolutely condemns" 14.

Kane wasn't actually surprised by the fact that the press chose to get angry about the cultural event that drew attention on what was really happening in Bosnia, and the shock wasn't much about the content, not even about the shock of the new, but about the familiar being arranged in such a way that it could be seen afresh. Speaking in terms of Aristotle's Unities, the time and action are disrupted while unity of place is retained: this, of course, caused a great deal of offence because it implied a direct link between domestic violence in Britain and civil war in former Yugoslavia. In a 1997 interview she said: "Of course the press wish to deny that what happened in

14 Quoted in Stephenson, Langridge, op. cit., p. 132.
central Europe has anything to do with us, of course they don’t want us to be aware of the extent of the social sickness we’re suffering from – the moment they acknowledge it, the ground opens up to swallow them. They celebrate the end of the Cold War then rapidly return to sex scandals (which sell more papers) and all that has been done to secure our future as a species is the reduction of the overkill factor.”  

Blasted raised the question ‘What does a common rape in Leeds have to do with a mass rape as a war weapon in Bosnia?’ And the answer appeared to be ‘Quite a lot’: the unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime in Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war, a wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning. “With Britain an island, we are not used to people marauding through our country – Kane said – people think we are safe here. But with the rise of nationalist machismo, it could happen here.”  

Time, however, has written two new acts for Blasted in the form of the events in Yugoslavia and in Kane’s own suicide in 1999. Seven years ago, atrocities such as Kane imagined in Blasted seemed unreal, but by now we have all unfortunately read accounts of similar happenings which are very close to home. At the same time, the young playwright’s lonely death suggests that the torment of the play was about more than enthusiastic extrapolation from the world outside her window, but it was also an expression of some dark, internal process. This lends the play to an extra dimension which was nurtured by Macdonald’s new and, as critics said, deft direction and superb, selfless performance from the cast: it seems there is nothing gratuitous in Blasted and when the play is produced nowadays, the audience feels like the cast on stage, unsure whether to laugh or to cry. Of course the play might still be flawed for somebody, but it survives today as a more humane, impassioned, dramatic testament which has encouraged even not-British directors to produce it.

Since 1995 Blasted has been produced at least once in almost every country in Europe and soon enough it was staged in our country as well.

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15 Quoted in Stephenson, Langridge, op. cit., p. 131.
The Italian director of the Teatro della Limonaia\(^{17}\), Barbara Nativi, met Sarah Kane in London 1996 when she was already working on the Italian translation of *Blasted*. What in *Blasted* attracted Nativi, was its total lack of linearity, so that in the beginning she definitely didn’t get the point of it at all, but it nonetheless fascinated her and therefore, after completing her work, she proposed to the actors of Laboratorio Nove (the theatre’s company of actors which Nativi directs) to stage Kane’s play. After reading the play, the first reaction of the actors was a complete rejection of the play which, they unanimously claimed, was just disgusting and devoid of any artistic merit. Nativi was then forced to defer a further attempt for the following year. It was necessary, as Nativi said, that, when staging such a piece, a certain complicity would reign between the director and the actors, otherwise the director becomes only a sadist in front of them.

Eventually, a few months later in Siena, Nativi directed the very first Italian *mise en espace* of *Blasted*, which was a very risky experience for the actors: it was only a public reading of the play but they already felt very ill at ease with the text. The scenes of the first part of the play were probably the hardest to be performed-read because of the strict stage directions written by Kane on the text. Nativi asked herself why was the first part of the text so realistic, so full of details, whereas the second part of the play showed us a more oniric and surrealistic dimension.

Naturalism was a choice made by Kane in order to express criticism and condemnation against a society that accepts violence and what made her great was indeed her ability to connect violence from the world outside with the violence we undergo in our private life: nothing in the context changes and nobody does anything against it. So, in order to be as detailed as reality itself, Kane wanted her text not to lack precise description of reality.

It is actually hard, for Italian actors, to act in a naturalistic

\(^{17}\) The Teatro della Limonaia is located in Vila Corsi Salviati, in Sesto Fiorentino, one of the smaller towns on the outskirts of Florence and has an established tradition of cultural activity. In 1987 the old lemon-house in the villa became the Teatro della Limonaia (as the name suggests) and was placed under the artistic direction of Barbara Nativi: in this space has afterwards born a new company of actors – il Laboratorio Nove – with Silvano Panich as its director.
way, since we are used to emphasising and underlining every sentence, which is not how English actors work; being natural for us, is to be considered a great conquest. And even the Italian setting of the play is different from the almost sober hotel room of the British production: the room’s furnishing (Dimitri Milopoulos’ scenes and costumes) here has a direct bound with the furnishing of the Venetian theatre La Fenice which burnt in that same year, as if to quote theatre being indeed inside of a theatre, and to draw closer the parallel between far away violence and domestic violence by making the action happen in Venice, just in the core of Europe.

The play premiered at Teatro della Limonaia on September 16th 1997 under the Italian title of Dannati (“damned”, although Nativi’s choice appears to limit the sense of the English original title only to the mental state of the characters and not also to the world that surrounds them) with Silvia Guidi as Cate, Roberto Posse as Ian and Michele Andrei as the soldier.

In the first part of Nativi’s production there is nothing but the exact execution of the stage directions, as if to wait for the situation to be shaped by something that will come later: indeed, because of this, in Nativi’s experience, the first two scenes were definitely the worst to be performed and also to be watched.

Already in the second scene however, naturalism seems to fade slightly: at the point when Cate disappears and the soldier knocks at the door, Nativi saw the beginning of the so-called Brechtian phase of the play. Ian and the soldier knock at the sides of the door alternatively, as if they were playing in some kind of give-away show: they look like children playing hide-and-seek or, worse, the game of war, but the result is quite a funny scene, which definitely doesn’t anticipate what will happen next.

What happens next is the most striking moment of the whole production: the bombshell blasts the hole on the wall, the noises are very loud, colours fade away and it almost gives one goose-bumps. The effect is that of an action movie and not of a theatre piece: light and music playing on the scene and on the characters, make them look like unreal, as if we were watching a screen and not a three-dimensional space in which it is represented the catastrophe of a civil war in England.

After the explosion the only light that illuminates the scene
is an almost Expressionist greenish-yellowish light which is a fit introduction to the almost oniric dimension which we are entering now: when Ian finally meets his destiny and destiny takes revenge on him under the shape of the violent soldier. And what exactly makes violence explode is, in Nativi's interpretation of the text, a certain line said by Ian during the dialogue between him and the soldier: the soldier is trying to convince Ian that, being a journalist, he should write about the tortures and the violence that the soldier's girlfriend Col has suffered before dying. But Ian answers: "I don't cover foreign affairs" 18 and hence the soldier's rage against Ian's coarseness which culminates in the anal rape and the eye-gouging, rendered, again, so truthfully that the audience had to avert their eyes from the stage.

The scene now is very similar to the British production: blind Ian is buried under the floorboards and the only light on stage illuminates him from above. Behind him, the window curtains fall on the floor to reveal Cate who is holding the baby. In Silvia Guidi's interpretation of Cate, the character, like in the English production, has not lost her innocence and her unfitness, but is more firm, somehow she appears stronger, surer of what she needs and what she has to do. Acting now is very far from initial naturalism and the play just follows the stage directions which, in this production, are read by a voice behind the scene that describes Ian's actions (the only thing we don't see is Ian eating the baby) while rain falls on him.

When Cate comes back again the whole scenery falls apart, leaving the stage appear what it really is: Nativi saw in this sudden stage effect a parallel with Cate's final loss of innocence. Cate now walks rigidly, as if she has been traumatised by some event or person (but in this production blood doesn't seep from between her legs, we get that she's been probably raped only by the way she walks), and brings meat which she eats (and she previously was a vegetarian) and then feeds Ian. The last actions are disconnected from the voice which speaks from the backstage: the play ends with Cate's final gesture of compassion for Ian. She opens an umbrella to protect him from the rain that is still falling from the ceiling and, after this last tender gesture, the stage is blacked-out, as Kane wanted, and very similar to the English production.

18 Sarah Kane, op. cit., p. 48.
Italian critics were less outraged by Kane’s play than the English two years before. They acknowledged Nativi’s ability as a director and praised the actors’ “bravery” to act in such a difficult piece. Once we overtake the embarrassment given by the explicit sex scenes, some said, the play makes us focus on its main theme, that of violence, of human indifference and of pitiless insensitivity towards it. Blasted lets us think about the loss of certain values that our world has lately undergone and deserves to be seen and discussed. Kane indeed, as we have already seen, thought that there was nothing else than violence to write about: because, in her opinion, violence was the first and most important problem for us mankind, although she profoundly disliked it. There should be no attempt to make spectacles of her plays, but just to condemn what society instead acknowledges and takes for normality: like Kane said, we need to see things happen in order to understand them.

Moreover, if we go back to British drama history, we find that sex and violence were hardly unheard of on the London stage.

In 1956 John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger opened the floodgates to a long suppressed wave of creative energy. Osborne together with Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Arden, became a new, salient force in English drama by means of focusing their attention on the working classes, portraying the drabness, mediocrity and injustice in the lives of people. In 1965 Edward Bond’s Saved was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre in London: almost immediately it achieved notoriety through a shocking scene in which a baby in a pram was stoned to death. And in 1980 the Royal Court presented Howard Brenton’s The Romans in Britain, where was simulated an act of anal rape. Sarah Kane’s theatre was made of scenic and verbal excesses from the very first of her works, Blasted, in 1995, which marked and about turn in British playwriting. Kane relied on a precise tradition of scenic horrors, following a blood-red thread which runs through the English staging culture from the Elizabethans (even more from the Jacobians), to our contemporaries, and especially to Edward Bond. Elizabethan and Jacobean references become in this way, models which need to be drawn up again, whereas the tales of violence are filtered through scenography, while they keep their traditional conventions but become also highly contemporary (many any are, for instance, the references to Shakespeare: in
Blasted Ian is blinded by the soldier like Gloucester in King Lear).

And if we overlook at British theatre of the last ten years we realise that it has undergone nothing short of a revolution and has thrown up a volatile, vigorous, highly exciting generation of new dramatists whose fame extends beyond the UK. What do these writers have in common? Youth certainly, in that they are mostly in their late-twenties. A love of language that knocks on the head the fashionable notion that we live an age entirely dominated by images. A faith in theatre as a moral weapon or means of telling a good story; all possess highly individual voices, but although they are to disparate to be called a movement, they have revitalised a theatre which for too long had lived off the glories of its past, i.e., the authors that became famous in the 60s and 70s (David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, John McGrath, Car-yl Churchill, just to quote some of them).

From 1968 on in England emerged a new generation of playwrights who were strongly politicised and thought that theatre should not only denounce the unjust elements of society, but also try to draw the country towards a socialistic transformation. The trust in the concrete possibility for a socialistic alternative in Great Britain suffered a big defeat in 1979, with the electoral triumph of the Conservative party led by Margaret Thatcher, whose government marked a turn in British political and cultural life. The main difference between Thatcher and the previous conservative governments was the end of the consensus policy, that until then had guaranteed a certain agreement on autonomy and Welfare State. Thatcher created a new consensus based on individualism and the principles of free market: what she obtained was the diffusion of the so-called enterprise culture at public expense and so increased unemployment and weakened Welfare State. The direct consequence of this was the loss of the collectivity spirit because “there is no such thing as society: there are individuals, men, women and families” 19.

For what concerned theatre, Thatcher cut the funds for the Arts Council because they were convinced that culture was like any other product in the market and that it had to be subject-

ed to the same laws, so it was given impulse to self-financing and private sponsors. But sponsorisation often implied subtle censorship that weighed on the “political” theatre which had born in the Seventies. And what we have in the Eighties is a great impulse given to commercial theatre: musicals and comedies (the ones by Tom Stoppard, Alan Ayckburn or Alan Bennet) and revivals of those plays written in the 30s and 40s (especially the ones by Priestley, Rattigan and Coward).

The crisis of the political theatre in the 80s was worsened by the facts of 1989, which marked the end of the socialistic alternative for the capitalistic models. Some authors were able to mediate their social criticism with the new commercial issues of the so-called mainstream theatre: the results were works like Howard Brenton’s and David Hare’s *Pravda* (1985) and Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money* (1987) that had great success.

The new generation of the Nineties is made of young people who, by virtue of birth, are all children of Thatcherism: they grew up in a Britain that witnessed the decline of many once sacred institutions (the monarchy, the church, the law, the family and even government itself) and that regarded financial success as a measure of individual worth. What they have in common is a disillusion with the world they inherited and they write, often with jaunty humour, about its violence, its decay, its lack of idealism and moral values. They often use tactics to get their point across: and however one reviews their work, all these writes seem motivated by a sense of dismay at the moral vacancy of modern life. Their attitude is more towards cynicism and nihilism than protest, but the absence of solution is not a limit, on the contrary, it is one of their main themes: what they stage is the end if ideologies and the absence of an alternative positive model. And the form they use is “enstranging, destabilising the conventional relation between spectator and performance, disrupting traditional expectations of narrative and aesthetic coherence; de-familiarising and interrogating the oppressive power of naturalised cultural forms” 20.

The greatness of these authors (Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp, Jez Butterworth, Philip Ridley and, of course, Sarah Kane) is their new language that reaches new audiences and the means they use: participating in the theoretical debate on what is our

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contemporary age; using the elements of mass-communication; working out a new relationship with the past literary tradition. This is the most important contribution that these authors are giving for a new definition of the role of theatre as critical conscience of society.

The scene, in Kane's works, is the place where conflicts happened, where she revisited all the aberrations on the 20th century and tried to imagine new ones for the 21st.

For Kane, reality was mostly represented by threatening violence, and even by the role of its victims, the ones who are almost unable to speak and express themselves properly: in Blasted, Cate stammers, in Cleansed, Carl is deprived of his tongue. Many are thus the occasions in which silence is forced, muteness seems almost imposed and expression is erased, although there is still space for a certain tenderness, for showing affection and love even in those bleak scenarios.

An author that dies so young, however, is normally blocked in a fixedness of stylistic and linguistic gestures which should build up his or her truest expressive marks. But often, even in the most uniqueness of a creative plot, we can find some threads of different colours and some atmospheres which are totally new.

On one hand, all Kane's work is characterised by the idea of scene as a battlefield, on the other hand, the meaning of actions changes radically from play to play. Crave, for example, tells of violence and abuse, but is poetically structured and refers explicitly to Beckett's last plays, sometimes to Shakespeare and the Bible. Her last work, 4:48 Psychosis, shows that this choice is even more radical. Here Kane argues over identity by affirming and denying it, and it is almost impossible to state a definition of gender for the play.

Where Blasted had at least a pseudo-conventional setting – a hotel room through which the total nightmare of civil was bursts, the last two plays can be placed everywhere. Where Cleansed boasted a catalogue of cruelties performed in an university campus, in Crave and in 4:48 Psychosis physical self abuse is rendered as a verbal torrent (“flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash”). And where Crave, which 4:48 Psychosis most resembles, had a quartet of vaguely distinguishable

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personae, 4:48 Psychosis could, in theory, be performed by any number of actors.

Apart from these differences anyway, the scene becomes always the place where catharsis happens and where the extreme horrors of violence sublimate into passion or complete absence, into excess or total lack of words.

ABSTRACT
After completing an MA in playwriting at Birmingham University, Sarah Kane (1971-1999) exploded onto the London theatre scene in January 1995 with her controversial first play, Blasted (Royal Court Upstairs), a horrifying examination of the effects of contemporary war on three people in a Leeds hotel room. Accused of putting audiences through a "catalogue of lurid on-stage depravity", she was vilified by the press and proclaimed "the most notorious playwright in Britain". Unfazed by the cacophony of media criticism, she directed her second play, Phaedra's Love, in May 1996 and two years later, Cleansed and Crave. Short before committing suicide she had finished her fifth play, 4:48 Psychosis, which premiered in London in June 2000. In the last six years her plays have been staged all through Europe, and even in Italy, Kane found her interpreter and director in Barbara Nativi which directed two of her plays, Blasted and Crave. Her plays offer us a powerful warning, by showing the tragic but logical conclusion of humanity's escalating, destructive behaviour, and simultaneously they force us to confront our shared responsibility for the brutal reality which already exists. Together with other contemporaries, such as Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp and others, she pioneered a new generation of playwrights who, against all traditions, gave the English scene a new and deep impulse.

KEY WORDS