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The beauty of brutality

In 1995, Sarah Kane rocked the theatrical world with her play, *Blasted*; less than five years later, she took her own life. As the Barbican prepares to stage a German-language version, Mark Ravenhill remembers a rare talent



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Violence in a confined space... Zerbombt (*Blasted*) at the Barbican, London. Photograph: Arno Declair

In the spring of 1997, I boarded a plane to Berlin with Sarah Kane. Along with several other young British dramatists, we were going for a week of readings of our work. Sarah spent the journey shaking violently, her eyes screwed shut, muttering to herself. The British theatre's newest enfant terrible, whose play *Blasted* had caused a wave of protest at its graphic violence, suffered from a fear of flying.

In hindsight, that week in Berlin proved to be vital for Sarah and for me. Organised by the Royal Court Theatre's international department, it gave us our first contact with the stages of mainland Europe - stages that, within a year, were enthusiastically presenting the work of a new generation of young British dramatists. The most widely produced and fervently admired was - and still is - Sarah Kane.

But all this lay in the future as we made our way through a chilly Berlin and checked into our functional hotel. Just to walk from there to the rehearsal room was to pass the site of many of the 20th century's most exciting innovations in theatre. The readings took place in the Barracke, a makeshift building in the grounds of the Deutsches Theater, an imposing 19th-century building in the former East Berlin. It forms a kind of theatre triangle alongside the Volksbühne, an ambitious 1920s attempt at a workers' theatre that still attracts an exciting young audience, and the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, home of the Berliner Ensemble, founded by the playwright Bertolt Brecht and the great actor Helene Weigel. As for the Barracke itself - a tiny, confined, shed-like space - it was hosting a young artistic team led by the director Thomas Ostermeier, who was exciting great interest in Germany with muscular stagings of new German plays, alongside a few classics.

We enjoyed our week in Berlin but thought nothing much of it and headed home with few expectations. Over the next year, however, Ostermeier committed to productions of *Blasted* and my own *Shopping and Fucking*, and within 18 months offers of productions were coming in from across the world. Suddenly we were a "movement". Commentators lined up to give us a label: the New Brutalists, the School of Smack and Sodomy, In-Yer-Face Theatre. "They're calling us the Blut und Sperma school in a German newspaper," Sarah told me one day. "What does that mean?" I asked. "Figure it out," she said with a smile.

But we had no intention of being a "school". I hadn't met Sarah until well after the first production of *Blasted* in 1995, and I had neither seen nor read her play when I wrote *Shopping and Fucking*. I remembered the storm surrounding the opening night and idly thought it was probably another bad play that the sensation-hungry media were making too great a fuss about. But then, in the spring of 1996, a young female student whose work I was supervising chose to write about *Blasted* and I sat down reluctantly to read it.

I quickly realised that this was a substantial piece of writing. The first few pages - a young woman and an abusive older man are locked in a hotel room - were driven by some of the sharpest, most sardonic dialogue I had ever read, underpinned by a mounting sense of claustrophobic violence. The second half, in which a soldier bursts into the room, tears the structure of the play apart. The play escalates through a series of grim images - part Goya, part Beckett.

At the time, I had just become the literary manager of Paines Plough, a small new-writing theatre company, and arranged to meet Sarah. Would she be our writer in residence? Sarah, for whom *Blasted* had brought great notoriety but as yet no real financial reward, agreed. I visited her in Brixton and she showed me the manual typewriter on which she had written *Blasted*. In early drafts, she told me, the play progressed through huge speeches - language inspired by the British playwright Howard Barker, in whose play *Victory* she had appeared as a student. But she decided it would be a far better piece if she edited it severely, and so was driven back to it time after time, always seeing how much she could take away. What had seemed to many of the male, middle-aged critics to be a shapeless piece of graffiti masquerading as a play - "a disgusting feast of filth", as the Daily Mail labelled it - was, in fact, a carefully honed piece of work, having gone through some 20 drafts.

At this stage, there was no sign of the mental illness that was to increasingly dominate her life. She was great company. She talked enthusiastically about football and indie music but also about plays and literature. She was the best-read young playwright I knew - well aware of the influences on her work of Bond, Beckett and Barker. "Only playwrights with a B surname?" I teased. "Definitely," she replied.

In 1996, the tiny Gate theatre in London's Notting Hill invited Sarah to rewrite a classical work. She chose the story of Phaedra's illicit and overwhelming passion for her stepson, Hippolytus. In many ways, *Phaedra's Love* is her funniest play, with its satirical portrait of a corroded royal family and its playful disjunctions of a classical world with the abrasive modernity of porn mags and pizza. But in the figure of Hippolytus - a terminally depressed, physically repellent young man - there was perhaps her first attempt to dramatise the constant pull she felt towards a depression which, she feared, would eventually become all-consuming.

It was another two years before Sarah's work was seen again in London. But interest in *Blasted* was spreading around the world. This was partly fuelled by the controversy the play had sparked in Britain but also by a genuine enthusiasm for her writing. With the

fall of the Berlin Wall, the dominant aesthetic in European theatre - which focused on a "great tradition" of European dramatic literature - began to look old-fashioned. The door was open for a wave of younger directors who were looking to present less monumental productions.

By the time Sarah's next play was produced on the London stage, theatres in other countries were paying attention. *Cleansed* had been triggered in Kane's imagination after reading Roland Barthes's line that "being in love was like being in Auschwitz". She had found his comparison morally repugnant but discovered that it stayed with her, and decided to write a play that explored her reactions to the idea. *Cleansed* draws a group of characters - a twin brother and sister, a gay couple, a peepshow dancer - into a concentration camp, overseen by the figure of Tinker, who is part Prospero, part Nazi commandant. Even before the play opened in England, there were requests for the script and productions planned across the world.

With its echoes of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the play was a successor to *Blasted* in many ways, and Sarah suggested it could be the second part of a *Blasted* trilogy. But where *Blasted* dealt with the violence of three confined people, *Cleansed* had a huge, expansive theatricality. With a playful sense of provocation, Kane created a series of bold theatrical images: severed limbs are carried away by armies of rats; a giant sunflower bursts into bloom; the young female lead sprouts a penis. The celebrated German director Peter Zadek, Sarah told me with glee, was already training an army of rats in the hope that they could carry prosthetic limbs. Zadek failed with his rat training but his production proved that the senior directors of European theatre were keen to show they could tackle Kane's work. She was starting to find her way into the heart of the European repertoire.

Although her next play, *Crave*, opened just three months after *Cleansed*, it marked a significant departure. Culled from years' worth of jottings in notebooks, *Crave* is the interplay of four unnamed voices, calling out into the void with lyricism, humour and often distress. Beckett's later plays were clearly an influence, but it was also Sarah's attempt to find a dramatic form that would capture the highs and lows she was experiencing as her mental health deteriorated. In little over a year, Sarah was dead, taking her own life in the autumn of 1999.

As the news spread around the world, it became obvious that her life and work were being processed into the great Romantic legend of the tortured suicidal artist - the same eternally fascinating myth that had swept Germany after the publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Although Sarah would have had some sympathy with this fascination - she was drawn to the music of Joy Division and their suicidal singer Ian Curtis - the re-reading of her own life and work as a prelude to the final act does little to honour the complexity of the person I knew or the richness of her writing.

There was one final posthumous play to be produced, *4:48 Psychosis* - so called, Sarah said, because 4:48am was often the time when she found herself at the very depths of her depression. It takes us right into the psychotic mind, all attempt at dramatic character and situation stripped away. But it would be wrong to read the play as a suicide note. Though there are no named speakers in the text, there is a dramatic dialectic between the urge to order and the need for self-destruction. At the time of writing, Sarah did not know which she would choose.

Now British audiences have a chance to reappraise *Blasted*: the Barbican are putting on a German-language production by Thomas Ostermeier. Sarah Kane's work is now right at the centre of the world's repertoire. But in its brutal honesty, it still has as much power to disrupt and disturb as it did when we got on that plane for Berlin a

decade ago.

• Zerbombt (Blasted) is at the Barbican, London EC2, from November 7-11. Box office: 0845 120 7500.

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