Between

Performing Simulacra: Human/Animal Intersections in the Work of Sarah Kane

Sara Soncini

Abstract

This article looks at the presence and function of animals in the dramatic works of Sarah Kane. The by now massive scholarship on Kane has tended to see her work as epitomizing the move beyond the dramatic paradigm famously theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann, and as equally marked by increasingly dehumanized constructions of subjectivity that culminate in the disembodied theatrical landscapes of her late plays. The research presented here addresses a hitherto unexplored dimension to Kane's joint engagement with the boundaries of subjectivity and the boundaries of theatre, namely, the pervasive presence of animals across her entire oeuvre and their thought-provoking intersections with the human subjects with whom they share the stage. Through a combination of textual and performance analysis, I chart the complex, changing configurations of this relationship of co-habitation and mutual implication, offering a comprehensive discussion of the role of animals as key players in Kane's dramaturgy of simulacra.

Keywords

Sarah Kane; Postdramatic theatre; Contemporary drama; Posthuman, Performance studies; Animal studies

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As amply documented by the growing body of challenging new work produced over the past two decades or so, the posthuman turn has acted as a powerful creative stimulus for contemporary theatre artists. More often than not, their endeavour to give scenic shape to the demise of the anthropocentric paradigm has involved a searching interrogation of theatre as a live art form, leading them to sound the limits as well as the resources of their medium of choice[1]. Governed as it is by the material presence of the actor's body, the field of performance might appear unhelpfully mired in a humanist aesthetic and ontology. On the other hand, dramatists and theatre-makers have been quick to turn the problematic physicality of performance into a strategic tool for estranging and critiquing the processes of subjectivation, pointing to the stage as an ideal space for querying and queering existing parameters of identity.

The work of Sarah Kane, one of the most celebrated and innovative British dramatists to have emerged in the 1990s, is a prime case in point. The by now massive scholarship on Kane has tended to see her writing as epitomizing the move beyond the dramatic paradigm famously theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann, and as equally marked by increasingly dehumanized constructions of subjectivity that culminate in the disembodied

[1] With their international reputation and circulation, the avant-garde works of Romeo Castellucci with Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Rodrigo García with La Carnicería Teatro are consistently singled out as the most paradigmatic examples in the critical literature. The new millennium has seen a steady rise in scholarly research that situates itself at the intersection between Animal Studies and Theatre and Performance Studies. A very useful review of the state of the art is offered in Orozco & Parker-Starbuck (2015: 2-4); the theoretical framework for my analysis draws on the essays collected in this volume as well as on the groundwork laid by Read 2000, Chaudhury 2003, Ridout 2006, and Orozco 2013.

theatrical landscapes of her late plays (Barnett 2008, Delgado-García 2015). The research presented here re-routes this line of inquiry by addressing a hitherto unexplored dimension to Kane's joint engagement with the boundaries of subjectivity and the boundaries of theatre, namely, the pervasive presence of animals across her entire oeuvre and their thought-provoking intersections with the human actors with whom they share the stage[2]. Through a combination of textual and performance analysis, this article charts the complex, changing configurations of these patterns of relationality, offering an extensive discussion of the role of animals as key players in Kane's dramaturgy of simulacra, on both the conceptual and the material level. I begin with *Blasted*, the first play in her compact canon and the most overtly political one in its twin concern with the violence of anthropocentrism and the violence of war. In the central section, devoted to *Cleansed*, the accents falls on Kane's investment in stage animals as a confrontational tool that can jolt theatre into a state of reawakening and rethinking of its representational boundaries. Finally, I turn to *4.48 Psychosis* and look at the «affirmative bond», in Braidotti's felicitous formulation, which Kane's last play and artistic summation establishes with animality in order to target the deeply imbricated ontologies of humanity and performance.

1. The politics of humanimality: *Blasted*

In Kane's debut play, human-animal relations are tackled from a distinctly political angle. First staged at London's Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1995, *Blasted* was conceived as a response to the war in the former Yugoslavia. Kane wrote her by now legendary 'Bosnian' play in outrage at the widespread othering of the Yugoslav conflict in public and media discourse at the time—the politically expedient tendency to confine the horrors of genocidal carnage to a supposedly non-European 'elsewhere' mired in atavistic hatreds and endemic nationalism. The action is set in a hotel room in Leeds and the dramaturgy is designed to provocatively collapse the distance between the perceived safety of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of the Balkan war zone. *Blasted* begins as an eccentric but still recognizable variation on the «chamber piece about relationships» (Greig 2001: ix), a highly familiar dramatic fare here played out between Ian, a middle-aged tabloid journalist, and Cate, a damaged twenty-one-

[2] The sole, albeit limited, exception to this critical lacuna is McCorry's insightful study of meat eating and violence in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (McCorry 2017).

year-old whom he appears to have been sexually exploiting since she was practically a child. Kane's desire to shatter the complacent belief that the 'tribal' bloodshed of ethnic violence could never happen in a civilized Western country becomes concretized on stage in the form of the mortar bomb that detonates midway into the play and refigures the social realistic domesticity of the initial scenes as a surreal Balkan nightmare filled with escalating horrors. Conceptually, *Blasted* asks the audience to see Ian's rape of Cate in the hotel room as the seed of the full-scale destruction of war, and the unspeakable atrocities inflicted upon him by a nameless Soldier as its brutal nemesis. Both the discourse and the performance of animality play a key role in establishing and sustaining this symbolical continuum between apparently discrete forms of violence: domestic and foreign, sexual and political, individual and collective.

Initially, animals appear in the play as food, meat products for human consumption. In the opening scene, Cate, an ethical vegetarian, refuses to eat the ham sandwiches that Ian has ordered in their room, and likewise rejects his sexual advances. On the following morning, post-rape, Ian calls room service and proudly asks for «two English breakfasts» (Kane 2001: 34)[3], only to plead absentmindedness when Cate turns with disgust from the sausages and bacon on her plate. While serving as a means of coercion and resistance in their fraught relationship, the animals' «dead meat» (*B*, 7), to use Cate's words, becomes steadily associated to the racial Other in Ian's chauvinistic rhetoric. The woman's refusal to eat ham is met by Ian's dismissive reply, «It's only a pig», followed by the proposal to «take you out for an Indian» (*B*, 7), with the ellipsis creating a slippage between place and person and implying the latter's equivalence with animal meat. When he learns about Cate's inappropriate fraternizing with the black hotel worker who brings up food to their room, Ian's possessive attitude towards *his* girlfriend is framed as a racist anxiety about the young woman's supposed hunger for «a bit of black meat» (*B*, 17). Each time the unseen «wog with the sarnies» (*B*, 6) is heard knocking on the door, Ian, who carries a gun and purports to be working for a mysterious governmental organization, appears visibly alarmed; earlier on in the dialogue, we hear him express a racist paranoia about the outside world when, after looking out of the hotel window, he describes Leeds as a battlefield in which «Wogs and Pakis are taking over» (*B*, 4). Although the actual agent

[3] Subsequent quotations from the same edition are noted parenthetically in the text using the abbreviations *B* (*Blasted*), *C* (*Cleansed*) and *P* (*4.48 Psychosis*).

of destruction that eventually crosses the doorstep, plunging the room's enclosed space into the chaos of war, appears to have no kinship with this post-imperial Other, the link with pigs persists. The Balkan-like atrocities related by Kane's deliberately nondescript Soldier—yet another «filthy» wog in Ian's eyes (*B*, 48)—include the image of refugees being «pack[ed] into trucks like pigs» (*B*, 50) and crushing each other to death; and even before that, the same animal presides over the beginning of Ian's interaction with his uninvited guest. When the Soldier breaks into the room, Ian is still holding a rasher of bacon from his breakfast; after an initial moment in which they stand still, staring at each other in surprise, the Soldier asks about the food in Ian's hand and, at the latter's reply of «pig» (*B*, 36), demands to be given the first morsel of what will be his increasingly gruesome spoils of war. This exchange of meat symbolically initiates the role reversal in the 'Bosnian' section of *Blasted*, with Ian turning from perpetrator into victim as the Soldier preys upon his flesh: first sexually, by raping him, then literally, when he sucks out his eyes and eats them one after the other with bloodcurdling deliberateness.

The horrible acts of violence inflicted upon Ian by the Soldier apparently obey a retaliatory principle: the rape, a punishment for his abuse of Cate and his arrogant machismo; the eye-gouging, another symbolical castration brought about by his unethical professional blindness, by his refusal, as a «home journalist, for Yorkshire» (*B*, 48), to report the Soldier's narrative of human suffering on account of its perceived lack of news value for British readers. At the same time, however, the reconfiguration of Ian's body as meat entails a significant weakening of the species barrier: by becoming food for the ever-hungry Soldier, Ian's human flesh finds itself on a par with the rasher of bacon, thereby revealing its full animal vulnerability. Ironically, moreover, Ian's dethronement from his human singularity already haunts the vocabulary he employs in the first part of the play to assert his supremacy over, at once, animals, Cate, and a whole range of non-normative subjects including «Wogs and Pakis» (*B*, 4) as well as «lesbos», «cocksuckers», «queers» (*B*, 19) and the mentally disabled. A terminally ill cancer patient, Ian describes his surgically removed lung as a «lump of rotting *pork*» (*B*, 11, emphasis added), equating his human body to animal meat. Conversely, in his exchanges with Cate and the Soldier he consistently refers to the varieties of animal flesh that he orders and consumes as «pig». Kane infuses Ian's discourse of human mastery with the fraught acknowledgement of his human body as a body made from meat; in parallel, the language he applies to the animal flesh he orders and consumes unwittingly reverses the commonplace objectification of 'pig' into

'pork' or, more precisely, the expedient 'prophylaxis' whereby human language occludes the violence involved in the production and consumption of meat by «eras[ing] the trace of the once-living animal» (McCorry 2017: 763). By the end of the play, this form of violence becomes one with the violence of fully-fledged warfare. Alone in the room after the Soldier has shot himself and Cate has gone hunting for food, a blind and helpless Ian exhumes and eats the corpse of the deceased infant rescued by Cate from the warzone offstage, then takes the baby's place in the makeshift tomb under the floorboards and «*dies with relief*» (*B*, 60), only to be immediately revived by the rain pouring over his head from a leak in the roof. Moments later, Cate returns with gin, bread and a «*large sausage*» (*B*, 60) she has procured by selling her body to the soldiers; she eats her fill and shares the rest with her self-interred roommate, who thanks her in return.

The twin meat-eating scenes in the final moments of *Blasted* effectively close the gap between the human and the animal body, foregrounding their shared materiality and fragility. They proclaim the flimsiness of the species barrier in a world drenched in violence in which everyone becomes potential meat for the other, pointing to a generalized condition of social existence that transcends geographical, as well as ontological, barriers. Ian's feasting on the baby's corpse—a girl, we learn—finds a match in the ghastly story he dictates over the phone to his editor in the first scene:

> A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace, S – C – R – A – C – E, in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday point new par. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point 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. […] (12)

Although the young woman in Ian's news story is not literally consumed as meat by her murderer, her killing is nonetheless framed as «slaughter», a term that points to the translation of her death into the hackneyed language of tabloid journalism as a form of cannibalism, a packaging of other people's suffering as savoury news items fed to a greedy domestic readership. A similar conflation of foreign and local violence underpins the eating of Ian's eyes. The Soldier presents his macabre deed as the repetition of an identical act of violence perpetrated upon her girlfriend by another soldier in the past («He ate her eyes. / Poor bastard. /

Poor love. / Poor fucking bastard»; *B*, 50). Through this comment, the audience is tricked into construing the Soldier's insanely literal application of 'an eye for an eye' as a Bosnian war crime. As Kane has revealed, however, the eye-eating ritual was directly inspired by a journalistic account of football hooliganism in the UK[4]: the Soldier's Balkan-like 'bestiality' ultimately turns out to be British to the bone. The overlap finds further and conclusive endorsement in the scene's unmistakable kinship with the horrific blinding of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a play to which *Blasted* is deeply and declaredly indebted[5].

To return to the play's closing line, Ian's acknowledgement of 'thanks' to the woman he has systematically abused in the initial scenes has generally been taken to signal his recovery of a first, tentative flicker of humanity, a shedding of his predatory masculinity as a result of the ordeal he has been put through. What has generally gone unnoticed in the critical literature is the degree to which this «slow and painful education» (Saunders 2002: 64) pivots on a critique of anthropocentrism as a means for undermining the other manifestations of human exceptionalism to which this mindset becomes related across the play: racist, sexist, xenophobic, and orientalist. In this sense, the human/animal intersections in *Blasted* are central to Kane's political project, seeing that they provide a strategic tool for questioning the boundary categories whereby we essentialize what we understand and treat as Other, and for denouncing the violence embedded in, and emanating from, exclusionary constructions of subjectivity.

A further, overlooked aspect that acquires particular significance in light of the line of argument pursued here is the heightened theatricality that surrounds the play's unsettling of the human/animal divide and becomes key to its dismissal of essentialist visions of identity. Kane presents Ian's rehabilitation as an embodied experience that begins with the discursive and then literal animalization of his human flesh, but progressively takes the shape of an out-and-out performance of humanimality. In the final scene Ian's mutilated, undignified, uncivilized body takes centre stage. The scavenging of the baby's carcass is preceded by a prolonged sequence of mostly mute vignettes where he is shown masturbating, defecating, strangling himself, crying «*huge bloody tears*» (*B*, 60)—«get[ting] as low as

[4] This is Bill Bruford's *Among the Thugs*, first published in 1990. Kane is quoted acknowledging this source in Sierz 2001: 102-103.

[5] On the Shakespearean palimpsest in *Blasted* see Saunders 2002 and Soncini 2018.

humanly possible» (Saunders 2002: 63), in Kane's own summary. These snapshots repeat, in distilled form, some of the actions performed or mentioned in the realistic first half of the play, while at the same time offering a more rigorous rendition of Shakespeare's version of «unaccommodated man» through a 'show' that Kane consciously set up as an equivalent of the storm scene in *King Lear*. Alone on the blasted heath, Ian puts on a performance of man as a «poor, bare, forked animal» (*Lear*, 3.4.105-106); as if responding to a prompt, he translates the words spoken by the old Shakespearean king into an embodied performance in which language, the prime guarantor of the species barrier, has given way to animal-like sounds or ceased altogether.

In his extended examination of *Blasted*, McCorry objects to the prevalent humanist interpretation of the ending, which sees Ian's loss of human dignity as «the tragic content of the play, while its (fragile) recovery allows for something like the possibility of redemption» (2017: 755). This anthropocentric perspective, he observes, obfuscates Kane's evident ethical orientation towards the nonhuman, her specific concern with meat as an «ontological and ethical category» that creates «the condition of possibility for the play's violence» (*ibid.*), rather than a mere analogue for infra-human forms of violence. In my view, these two readings as not necessarily incompatible. With its combination and indeed integration of actions that we would normally ascribe to either 'animal' or 'human' behaviour[6], Ian's solo show comes across, pointedly, as a moment in which this distinction no longer obtains. Through Ian's animal act, *Blasted* reframes the categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman' as a fictive production, a part that one can play or be made to play in the interest of various exceptionalist agendas.

The political meaning attached to humanimal performance in *Blasted* is brought into clearer view by another distinguished theatrical precedent for Ian's paroxysmal routine in the final scene. In addition to *King Lear*, Kane has pointed to *Waiting for Godot* as a major influence on the composition of *Blasted* (Saunders 2009: 39). The Beckettian palimpsest is at its most manifest in the bond of mutual co-dependency that locks Ian and Cate in a love/hate relationship; and the *Godot*-like quality of Ian's failed suicide

[6] Taking issue with critical thinking that insists on Ian's reduction to a basic animalistic form or state in this sequence, LePage (2014) points to his burst of hysterical laughter, his attempt to strangle himself, and the considerate burial of the baby's remains after the cannibalism as evidence that Ian is never fully dehumanized.

has been duly noted by critics. To the current list of acknowledged echoes I would however also add Lucky's turn as Pozzo's performing animal. Upon (re-)reading Beckett's play, Kane would hardly have missed the overlap between interspecies and interracial abjection in *Godot*, where Pozzo's colonial perspective constructs his (Irish) subjects as less than human: a condition typified by, but not limited to, his servant Lucky, as is apparent from the landlord's initial reluctance, when he first sees Vladimir and Estragon, to grant them membership in «the same species as myself» (Beckett 1990: 24). The intertextual link between Lucky's and Ian's respective 'shows' is activated by Kane's choice of pig as the prime animal presence in *Blasted*. From the ham sandwiches in the opening moments of the play down to the visually prominent, «*large*» (*B*, 60) sausage in its final sequence, pig (or rather its meat) is rarely absent from Ian's language or actions. In Beckett, Lucky's animal status is symbolized by the dog leash that binds him to his master, but since his very first appearance Pozzo's slave is consistently addressed as a «pig» (Beckett 1990: 30, 31), «swine» (32) or «hog» (39); most notably, his coerced performance as a thinking device mounted on a captive animal body is prompted by his master's order to «Think, pig!» (41). Lucky's virtuoso performance presents a human character who impersonates an animal that, in turn, plays a sentient human being. An awareness of this Beckettian antecedent contributes to elucidate the meaning of Ian's animal act, likewise presented as an accomplished performance of humanimality rewarded with a hard-earned sausage and closed by a «Thank you» that suggests an actor's bow to the audience. With its interspecies oscillations, the *Godot* palimpsest throws into further relief the theatricality of Ian's process of 'becoming animal', pointing to the binaries he embodies as performative, reversible, and fundamentally interchangeable.

2. Sharing the stage: *Cleansed*

In the rest of Kane's in-yer-face production it is the animals' turn to take centre stage and graduate to actors in their own right. Animal acts figure prominently among the admittedly «impossible» (Saunders 2009: 93) stage directions that punctuate *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998), impressing a distinctly self-conscious twist to Kane's trademark provocation. Going one step further than *Blasted*, animals are here enlisted as collaborators in a theatre of extremes that elevates unstageability to a dramaturgical strategy with a view to pushing the boundaries of theatre as a representational medium. A commission from London's Gate Theatre,

Phaedra's Love rewrites Seneca's plot with the declared intention of offering an unashamedly graphic portrayal of the violence and sexual content that remained mostly hidden from view in classical tragedy. In *Cleansed*, presented at the Royal Court Theatre in 1998, the dialogue is almost outweighed by stage directions covering a whole range of Kane's by then familiar theatrical impossibilities. These include, in addition to graphic sex, a gang rape, a hanging, several ghastly mutilations, and torture by electroshock and impalement—a hyperbolic display of violence perpetrated on the human body that entails an equally conspicuous disclosure of theatrical artifice. In point of unstageability, however, the palm goes to the actions performed by animals, such as the dog and vulture that take active part in the dismemberment of Hippolytus' body in *Phaedra's Love*, or the notorious rats that haunt the stage in *Cleansed* and have come to epitomize the gauntlet thrown by Kane to the performers and producers of her drama.

Initially conceived as a sequel to *Blasted* in a war trilogy that was never brought to completion, *Cleansed* is a complex, enigmatic play in which fully rounded characters give way to «states of being» (Saunders 2002: 88) and narrative recedes in favour of a kaleidoscope of viscerally powerful images. The play's polysemous title alludes to ethnic cleansing, in continuity with the preceding Bosnian play, but also to the treatment of drug addiction (Graham, the first character we encounter, is a junkie) and other perceived 'deviances' such as homosexuality and gender instabilities and, finally, to the ritual purging or purification of emotions through theatrical catharsis. The play's setting is equally, and eerily, multifunctional. According to Kane's stage directions, the story takes place in a university, but the unfolding events generate a crossover between prison, concentration camp, mental institution, scientific laboratory and slaughterhouse. Over the course of twenty scenes that do not build up to a plot, we watch a group of patients/prisoners undergo a series of brutal, sadistic experiments conducted or supervised by a character called Tinker. Kane's master of ceremonies is himself an agglomerate of roles: doctor, surgeon and drug dealer, therapist, interrogator and torturer, Good Samaritan and sexual exploiter, a mad scientist or the sinister agent of a totalitarian regime, while possibly also himself an inmate. Tinker's methods and behaviours vary accordingly, but the overall aim and rationale of his proceedings is, ostensibly, to test the limits of love and its chances of survival under conditions of extreme brutality and utter dehumanization.

A similar uncertainty surrounds the status and function of the rats that make their first, timid appearance almost midway into the play but soon rise to a prominent presence. Within the story, it remains unclear whether

we should see these pests as simply part of the environment or as enlisted collaborators in Tinker's project; in Scene Eight, an allusion is made to rat torture of the kind described in George Orwell's *1984*, but the actual ordeal threatened by Tinker in order to extort from Carl a Winston-like betrayal of his lover is, instead, a slow death by impalement[7]. In Kane's *theatrical* project, however, the rats are undoubtedly cast as active participants, given that her script requires them to accomplish actions that go well beyond mere presence. The more complex stage business is that of Scene Thirteen, when Carl's feet are amputated by Tinker and carried away by a pack of rodents. Through this attribution of agency, Kane's animals fully qualify as performers, on a par with the other, human actors on stage. The erosion of human monopoly over theatre is echoed in the play's closing image of Carl and Grace, by then two human wrecks, sitting next to each other in silence while «*the sun gets brighter and brighter, the squealing of the rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening*» (*C*, 151).

In preparation for this final takeover of representational space, with human language muted and replaced by animal sound, the play works in more than one way to close the distance between its human and nonhuman characters. For one, the rats' turns imagined by Kane always involve some form of interaction with and modification of the human body: stage directions depict them eating the characters' severed limbs, or chewing at their wounds. In this respect, the rats' behaviour seems to extend or even duplicate Tinker's penchant for 'tinkering' with the inmates' identities through the insane, butchery medical experiments that culminate in his uncouth mending of Grace's gender dysphoria through the stitching of Carl's male genitals onto her groin. As the rats' trespass into human space grows ever more substantial, we are left to muse upon their role in the characters' transformations under the pressure of Tinker's experiments. What will they do with Carl's feet offstage? Will they eat them, as we have seen them doing with his hand, or will they follow Tinker's example and use his limbs prosthetically to concoct a hybrid humanimal body? Is this one of the intended outcomes of Carl's gradual pruning to a dumb torso?

[7] Carl's frantic plea to his torturer in this scene, «Not me please not me don't kill me Rod not me don't kill me ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME» (*C*, 117), is an unmistakable echo of Winston's «Do it to Julia! (...) Not me! Julia! Not me!» in Orwell's dystopia. In a subsequent vis-a-vis with his lover, after his tongue has been cut out, Carl writes in the mud «and the rats eat my face» (*C*, 129), again recalling the climactic episode in O'Brien's torture chamber.

While potentially filling the role of Tinker's emissaries or even analogues, however, as typical laboratory animals the rats are also clearly affiliated with the human guinea pigs used in Tinker's experiments. This kinship finds apparent confirmation in a scene of mass extermination which indicates them as pests, a plague to be eradicated just like the other, human undesirables around the compound.

As undoubtedly predicted by the dramatist, these human/animal interactions have proven a prime stumbling block for producers who have risen to the challenge of staging *Cleansed*. One of the first and most illustrious victims was the revered German director, Peter Zadek. Resolved to confront head on the play's impossible stage directions, Zadek opted for an uncompromisingly literal, realistic rendition of Kane's script in his 1998 production for the Hamburger Kammerspiele. Having spent months trying to coax his animal actors into taking direction, he finally threw in the towel and decided to cut the rats altogether at dress rehearsal[8]. Earlier in the same year, in an interview given on the eve of the British premiere, Kane dismissed the question of how James Macdonald, the Royal Court director, was going to deal with the rats with a cheeky «I'm glad it's not my problem», followed by the observation that «Shakespeare has a bear running across the stage in *A Winter's Tale*, and his stagecraft was perfect, so I don't know why I can't have rats» (Saunders 2009: 93-94).

The implications of Kane's reference to Shakespeare's «*Exit pursued by a bear*», the quintessence of impossible stage directions, are worth discussing in some detail. When seen in the context of the troubled reception of her earlier work, Kane's mention of the bear act in *The Winter's Tale* is easily explained as an appeal to authoritative precedent. The Shakespearean parallel appears particularly apposite if one recalls that during the critical controversy surrounding *Blasted*, reviewers who had depicted Kane as an immature, unskilled writer had often relied on disparaging comparisons between the «adolescent desire to shock» (Spenser 1995) driving her theatre of extremes and Shakespeare's serious, expert handling of stage violence. (It is probably no coincidence that the ur-villain in *Cleansed* bears the same name as Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail*, who provided *Blasted* with its most vicious review.) Arguably, however, the dramatist's reasons for bringing Shakespeare's bear into the conversation were not purely expedient. Considering especially that *Cleansed* is Kane's most overtly Shakespearean and

[8] Zadek's debacle is reported by Niels Tabert, who collaborated on the German translation of *Cleansed*, in Saunders 2002: 141.

Jacobean play (Saunders 2009: 29)—with motifs and images from Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* woven into a Shakespearean blend of *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Titus Andronicus*—one can confidently assume that its rat scenes are likewise informed by an awareness of the deeper meaning and function of the bear act in *The Winter's Tale*. Similarly to Kane with her rats, there can be little doubt that Shakespeare had a bear appear on stage for the specific purpose of raising the issue of (un)stageability: Quigley (2020: 47) rightly remarks upon the lack of necessity to the plot of the complicated business of Antigonus' pursuit, considering that the king's servant could conveniently have died offstage with the other mariners on the voyage back to Sicily. The actual method for performing the bear scene in Shakespeare's times is still open to much speculation. The options explored by scholars range from an actor in bear costume, to rudimentary special effects, down to the use of a live animal: bear-baiting was a highly popular form of entertainment in early modern London, the site of the first purpose-built playhouses but also of the first baiting arenas[9]. Shakespeare knew that the same audience that came to see his plays enjoyed watching animals tear each other to pieces in the nearby baiting pits; indeed, as has been suggested, the proximity and «active collusion» between the practices of theatre and animal fighting «crucially informed Shakespeare's explorations into the nature and workings of humanness as a psychological, ethical, and political category» (Höfele 2011: 1-2). On one level, then, the animal act in *The Winter's Tale* implies an acknowledgement of, and commentary upon, these synergies. To this one must add the fact that the bear, more than any other wild beast or fighting animal, lends itself to probing—and staging—human/animal intersections. Bears are capable of upright posture and this makes them into potentially humanoid figures, easily impersonated by a human actor. With its potential or actual hybridity, then, the bear act can be seen to partake of the pervasive desire for liminality across *The Winter's Tale*, the same that finds epitomic expression in Hermione's statue coming to life—yet another performative investigation of the boundaries of the human.

While unquestioningly raising the bar of unstageability, in scripting the animal acts in *Cleansed* Kane followed her predecessor's approach and refrained from providing any indications about how to perform them,

[9] Other likely candidates for the part of the bear are the two polar cubs given to James I, the patron of Shakespeare's company, following an expedition to the Arctic in 1609: see Quigley 2020: 47.

leaving it to her directors to grapple with the practical, aesthetic as well as ethical implications of having the rats «*share the space*» (*C*, 135) with the human characters onstage. In the play's performance history, no option has gone untried: from live animals, as discussed above, to inanimate simulacra, to disembodied light and sound effects[10]. The first production at the Royal Court Theatre used toy rats, in line with James Macdonald's overall symbolical, ritualized approach to the other outrages committed onstage[11]. Further to risking a trivialization of the rats as a comical curiosity, however, these mechanical replicas proved no less reluctant to cooperate than their live counterparts in Zadek's production: Stuart McQuarry, who played Tinker under Macdonald's direction, recollects that «they never really worked, sometimes they moved about, but more often they wouldn't» (Saunders 2009: 185). In 2016 it was Katie Mitchell's turn to concede defeat. Confiding in the National Theatre's impressive stage machinery, the celebrated director set about proving that it was in fact possible to stage the impossible. Her production managed an utterly naturalistic, aesthetically impeccable realization of Kane's entire repertory of extremes—with the notable exception of the rat scenes. On the National Theatre stage, her animal performers were actively barred from entering the space of performance, let alone sharing it with its human residents and interacting with their bodies. Kane's rats only manifested themselves through a squealing sound that triggered a «rat alarm»; at which, intermittent lights came on as Tinker's assistants fired shots into the wings, went out to fetch the dead intruders, and laid their bodies on Tinker's table. In the infamous mutilation scene, Carl's severed feet remained inside Tinker's macabre «amputation machine»[12] and it was now the turn of the dead animals to be wheeled out with the table at scene change. Demoted from the role of active participants into that of hapless victims, or lifeless extras, the rats became irrele-

[10] While acknowledging that «there are real differences between live animal presence and other forms of animal presentation» and that these differences in performance approaches are worth of consideration, Orozco (2013: 50) argues that *qua* «human creations, either imagined or performing under [...] human control», all forms of animal presence on stage automatically turn the spot onto a representation of the other that is rooted in anthropocentrism.

[11] The mutilation scenes, for example, were consistently stylized through the use of red cloth to signify Carl's tongue and the blood streaming from his amputated hands and feet.

[12] The terms «rat alarm» and «amputation machine» appear in the production notes held at the National Theatre archive (National Theatre 2016).

vant and, tellingly, they were cut altogether from the production's finale: matching their complete loss of agency in human space and over the human body, instead of stealing the scene, in the closing moments of the play they just quietly vanished from the picture.

Mitchell has made no mystery about her frustration with the rat scenes[13]. If her production strove to «bring stage action as close to natural as possible in order to expose the ultimate futility of the attempt», thereby reflecting the play's concern with «doubling and the non-identity of things»[14], the failure to also include animal action in the attempt constituted a missed opportunity to fully engage with Kane's investigation of theatricality. The rehearsal notes in the production's prompt script (National Theatre 2016) show considerable evidence of the director and her team grappling with the play's scenes of torture and mutilation with painstaking attention to detail, admittedly with a view to exposing the inherent duplicity of the human subject on stage: at once actor and character, person and persona, substance and sign or simulacrum. The strange and estranging presence of the rats would have made for a heightened awareness of this double mode of presence, of the interconnected simultaneity of the natural and the artificial body on stage.

Like the directorial debacles mentioned earlier, then, Mitchell's production confirms James Macdonald's perception of Kane's rats as her «pièce de résistance» (Gardner 1999): the chief unstageables in *Cleansed* but also, in a more literal sense, the ultimate form of resistance that her writing poses to theatre. One is hardly surprised to find that the image of human and nonhuman characters «*shar[ing] the space*» (*C*, 135) envisaged by Kane has failed to find a match in the play's performance history: the very lack of reciprocity that surrounds human/animal interaction in the script seemingly prefigures this impossibility. In *Cleansed*, the inmates never appear to register the rats' presence on stage. Their obdurate blindness is not limited to the animals' «*scuttl*[*ing*] *around*» (*C*, 129) or their more conspicuous poaching and even eating of amputated limbs, but likewise extends to situations of actual physical interaction, such as for instance when they are

[13] For example, during this talk with Matt Trueman: "Katie Mitchell on *Cleansed*", National Theatre live platform, 7 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LizhtwXP8A (last accessed 5 April 2022).

[14] This is according to Dan Rebellato, a prominent Kane scholar and the compiler of the programme note for the National Theatre production. The quotation is taken from his blog: http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2016/2/24/cleansed (last accessed 4 April 2022).

described chewing at Grace's and Carl's wounds in the final moments of the play. In this context, the verb 'share' that the dramatist uses to describe her intended human/animal intersections is probably best understood as, precisely, an intention: a call to imaginatively extend theatrical citizenship to nonhuman performers and, relatedly, an embedded profession of faith in the animal as an agent of resistance that can work as a compelling and creative force in theatre-making.

3. «Accord body»: *4.48 Psychosis*

Kane's parallel explorations of the boundaries of the human and the boundaries of theatre find their point of convergence and culmination in *4.48 Psychosis*. In her fifth and final play, now widely regarded as her artistic manifesto, the writer strove to give scenic shape to the psychotic condition or, to quote from an interview given during the composition process,

> what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also you no longer know where you stop and the world starts. (Saunders 2002: 111-112)

In order to thematize psychosis as a boundary-breaking experience, Kane set out to break a number of *formal* boundaries as well, engaging in a radical redefinition of the very nature of drama and theatre. On the page, *4.48 Psychosis* consists of twenty-four fragments, each separated by a line of five dashes and offering a wide variety of textures that are not ascribed to a particular individual and are only occasionally woven into a dialogical pattern. The script has no stipulation of personnel on stage, their gender, how many performers there should be; no setting, action or time frame is given or implied; text is unallocated and at times it becomes unclear not only how it is to be spoken but, indeed, whether it is meant to be spoken at all (this is notably the case with the two fragments consisting entirely of numbers). Kane's relentless erosion of the very constituents of drama extends to the ultimate barrier, namely, the ontological distinction between art and life. *4.48 Psychosis* was written «in the almost certain knowledge that it would be performed posthumously» (Greig 2001: xvi); a couple of days after completing the play, Kane took her life while she was in hospital following an earlier suicide attempt, thereby enacting in real life the journey towards self-annihilation described by the voice(s) that inhabit her text.

Whereas the imbrication of the posthuman and the postdramatic in *4.48 Psychosis* has been promptly registered in Kane scholarship (see e.g. Barnett 2008), it is rather surprising to find no acknowledgement, in the vast amount of critical literature generated by her testament play, of its extensive, and cognate, engagement with the human/animal divide. Time and again, the text brings forth hybrid combinations between a human self, alternatively characterized as a «mind», «consciousness», or simply an «I», and various forms of animal life, beginning with this passage taken from the opening of the second fragment:

> a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting
> hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten
> thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all
> thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellent
> as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters
>
> > I had a night in which everything was revealed to me.
> > How can I speak again?
>
> the broken hermaphrodite who trusted hermself alone finds the
> room in reality teeming and begs never to wake from the
> nightmare (*P*, 205)

This occupation of the human mind by a swarm of cockroaches is the first of Kane's powerful, surreally vivid images across the play, marking a striking tonal shift from the more mundane doctor/patient conversation that opens the play. Central to this first instance of interspecies entanglement is the longing for an «accord body», a locution that can be extrapolated from Kane's stream of consciousness above through alternative syntactic segmentation of the fourth line: a pluralist, hospitable body («no longer expellent»), a place of encounter, coexistence and indeed continuity between (human) self and (nonhuman) other. Across the rest of the play, the trespass of the species barrier is typically contiguous with the destabilization of gender binaries, as already clear from this early instance, or of the normative opposition between the sane and insane—the signal political gestures of *4.48 Psychosis*.

Marking a sharp departure from Kane's earlier work, the human/animal intersections contained in *4.48 Psychosis* are of an exclusively virtual nature: like everything else in her last play, animals are only made present on stage by way of their verbal simulacra. With her postdramatic master-

piece, Kane brings to consummation the turn towards a non-representational form of theatre already inaugurated with *Crave* (1998), a quartet of nameless voices «speak[ing] in a void» (Saunders 2002: 158). In *4.48 Psychosis*, language becomes further autonomized in that it is not only uprooted from a fictional situation, but also effectively disengaged from its speaker(s). Kane's dramaturgy here is clearly designed to foreclose identification of the speaker as the originator of the discourses that populate the text, resulting in a thorough «removal of the individual from the performance» (Barnett 2008: 22). This divorce of language from self finds a counterpart in the mind-body split which the play thematizes as the defining feature of the psychotic experience, as in

> Here am I
> and there is my body
>
> dancing on glass (*P*, 230)

The recurring self-description, in *4.48 Psychosis*, of the 'I' as disembodied *cogito* appears wholly consonant with the posthumanist or, even, transhumanist notion of human identity consisting of an informational pattern that no longer depends on the body as its exclusive material support (Hayles 1999). Once the play is lifted from the page and produced on a theatre stage, however, the human body inevitably re-enters the picture with all its cumbersome, unhelpful physicality. The performers' all-too human presence is clearly at variance with the de-individualized «constellations of language» (Barnett 2008: 23) presented in *4.48 Psychosis*. In this respect, Kane's concomitant move towards the postdramatic and the posthuman elevates unrepresentability to an overall dramaturgical principle, rather than a problem arising from specific stage actions and/or images: with its resistance to, and indeed refusal of, embodiment, *4.48 Psychosis* is—even more than *Cleansed*—a *conceptually* unstageable text. And yet, at the same time, this is a text that demands to be staged: Kane first, and her heirs later, have always been adamant that her dramatic oeuvre must never be reproduced in a medium other than the theatre (Saunders 2002: 150). Quite appropriately for such an inveterate saboteur of dramatic form, Kane's artistic testament is a play that inherently defies theatricalization, yet can only be realized as theatre; a play built on the fundamental aporia of staging the self as simulacrum, of embodying scenically the disembodied presence which is indexed by the speaker's phantasmal deixis in the

passage quoted above («*Here* am I / and *there* is my body»)[15].

While tasking theatre-makers with imagining new performance possibilities, Kane's dramaturgy of simulacra points to animals as potential collaborators in the creative endeavour of bringing on stage the posthuman subject. The forms of interspecies 'accord' alluded to in *4.48 Psychosis* extend to a theatrical partnership which sees human and nonhuman players finally 'sharing the space' and concurring in the (virtual) performance of a pluralist, hybrid self. The resulting interspecies act enables Kane to turn the spot onto theatre and selfhood as mutually constructing categories mired in an anthropocentric bias that we are asked to reconsider and reverse.

The human/animal performance in question is produced by way of intertextuality, through the multiple references activated by a cryptic pair of lines in the play's final fragment, just before the suicidal «I» announces their (impossible) vanishing act:

> the chicken's still dancing
> the chicken won't stop (*P*, 243)

The primary source for this compulsively dancing chicken is the notorious closing sequence of Werner Herzog's 1977 film *Stroszek*, a bitter parable about the dehumanizing effects of capitalism starring Bruno S[chleinstein], a musician, street artist and mental patient before he became the German director's cult actor. The end of the film creates an implicit identification between Stroszek's inexorable defeat following his emigration to America and the dire predicament of various animal performers trapped in a Wisconsin amusement park. The star attraction among them is a chicken confined to a slot machine with an electrified floor; when a coin activates the current, the caged animal starts to 'dance' in tortured circles. Before heading to his self-inflicted death, Stroszek involuntarily shorts out the fuse-box and in this way condemns the chicken to an endless performance: «We can't stop the dancing chicken», one of the Native American policemen called to the scene reports into his walkie-talkie.

Kane's referencing of Herzog's chicken is mediated by a second, more direct, source. Legend has it that *Strozsek* was the last film seen by Joy Division frontman, Ian Curtis before he took his own life at the age of twen-

[15] On the stunning variety of scenic embodiments generated by Kane's script see Soncini 2020.

ty-three. The band's posthumous double album, *Still*, bears the inscription «the chicken won't stop»—the second line in Kane's pair—in the dead wax of the first side; the second and third side contain etchings of chicken tracks, while the fourth closes the series with «the chicken stops here». Joy Division was declaredly Kane's favourite band; both Kane and Curtis died very young; both suffered from depression; both killed themselves by hanging. Kane's exact quotation of the first phrase on the album is a token of her intense identification with her fellow artist; the second phrase is, however, changed into «the chicken's still dancing», thereby proclaiming the play's two-fold connection to both sources, the Joy Division album («still») and Herzog's film («dancing»). In this way, the chicken evoked in *4.48 Psychosis* is made to act as a catalyst for «a kind of palimpsest of suicides: Bruno S. in Herzog's film, Curtis, and Kane», as Harries (2017: 10) observes in his penetrating analysis of these intertextual links. As a *dancing* chicken, moreover, Kane's animal activates a second set of associations that pivot on performance, rather than suicide, as a *trait d'union*. The hieroglyphs stamped into the vinyl of Joy Division's *Still* allude to the kinship between the grim chicken act in *Stroszek* and Ian Curtis's unique performance style during the band's live concerts, an equally compulsive, manic dance that some have traced to the singer's increasingly frequent epileptic seizures during the late part of his brief career (*ibid.*).

Further adding to the multiplying identities, the palimpsest of «bodies compelled to move» (*ibid.*) generated by the dancing chicken is wholly consonant with the play's sustained theatricalization of its central self or selves, an «I» who not only sees their body «dancing on glass» (*P*, 230), but recurrently assumes the identity of an unwilling performer, a «fragmented puppet» (*P*, 229) whose movements appear to be induced and orchestrated by an external force. This compulsive kinesis is experienced as a form of punishment or torture and is at times suggestive of a sadistic director, while at others pointing to the controlling power of language over the human body. The latter is best exemplified in the sequence immediately following the image of the 'I-as-dancer', a block of repeated action verbs borrowed (with some significant variations) from the analysis of human motion developed by Rudolf Laban in the context of his seminal dance theory:

> flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash
> flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker
> punch flicker flash burn dab press wring press
> punch flicker float burn flash flicker burn (*P*, 231)

The sequence is given five successive iterations, conveying the idea of a never-ending ordeal that reprises and substantiates the speaker's obsessive question, in fragment 15, of «How do I stop?» (*P*, 226).

By foregrounding a common element of coercion, the theatrical isotopy surrounding the play's 'I' contributes to blur the distinction between the human performances inscribed in the text and the chicken's animal act. This distinction is traditionally rooted in notions of intention and self-consciousness: one must *intend* to perform in order to be considered a performer. Because intention is an exclusively human prerogative, the only animal that can truly aspire to the status of performer is the human animal. As Cull (2015: 21) observes, this assumption has formed the basis of much theoretical thinking about the nature of theatre and is still widely current today. For its part, the notion of performance as a human-only venue is tightly intertwined with the basic definition of human subjectivity in Western thought. From Aristotle onwards, the distinctiveness of the human species has been located in man's ability to reason and, consequently, act in accordance with (moral) judgement: for Descartes, animals' inability to think and feel puts them on a par with automata; Kant identifies willingness as the quality that distinguishes human from animal action and confers intrinsic value upon the (human) subject[16]. Conversely, within the then nascent discipline of performance studies Victor Turner famously defined the human as *homo performans* (Turner 1986: 81): to adapt Descartes' maxim, «I act, therefore I am».

Challenging these axioms, the 'accord body' that Kane conjures up through her dancing chicken invites circumspection about ascribing intention to human performance. Curtis's onstage movement is emphasized as a mechanical, automatic response to a physical stimulus; seen in this light, the Joy Division singer appears no less 'animal' than the chicken compulsively dancing in its coin-operated machine. The trained, disciplined performing body that the play's voice(s) claim as their own is similarly marked by an evident lack of 'willingness', perhaps reflecting a more general economy of dehumanization at work in the theatre: the actor's body reified into a sign in order to produce meaning on stage; the subjugation of the living/human body to the semantic/artificial body in order to maximize its efficiency as a signifier. This reversal of perspective enables, in turn, a recognition of the dancing chicken in Herzog's film as a «paradigmatic performer» (Harries

[16] A concise review of evolving conceptualizations of human-animal relations in Western philosophy is provided in Orozco (2013: 21-25).

2017: 12): an animal body enlivened by an external source of energy that obliges it to 'act'.

In the final moments of *4.48 Psychosis*, the 'I' takes leave from the play with the revelation «It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind» (*P*, 245). In its attempt to stage an encounter with «the human as (an)Other» (Micali 2019: 30), to simultaneously extend the boundaries of subjectivity and the boundaries of representation, Kane elevates the various forms of interspecies 'accord' scattered across her dramaturgy of simulacra to a prime conceptual and artistic ally.

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The author

Sara Soncini is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Pisa. Her main research interests lie in contemporary British and Irish drama, modern-day reproductions of Shakespeare (performances, translations, adaptations), Restoration and 18th-century theatre culture. Her publications include *Playing with(in) the Restoration* (ESI 1999, on 20th-century rewritings of Restoration drama), *Forms of Conflict: Contemporary Wars on the British Stage* (University of Exeter Press 2015) and *The School for Scandal*. *Superfici* (Mimesis 2022, with S. Greenup). She has engaged extensively with Sarah Kane's work, publishing articles in scholarly journals (*Altre Modernità*, *Critical Survey*) and edited volumes (*The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre Censorship*, forthcoming) in addition to a book-length study on the Italian afterlife of *4.48 Psychosis* (Pisa University Press 2020).

Email: sara.soncini@unipi.it

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