

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF THEATRE AND TELEVISION  
THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE ARTS

## PhD THESIS

„Getting out of psychosis”. Sarah Kane: the dramatic world of  
violence, trauma and depression

SUMMARY

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## **CONTENTS**

LIST OF PHOTOS	6
LIST OF FIGURES	8
INTRODUCTION	9
CHAPTER 1. THE AUTHOR AND HER WRITINGS	27
CHAPTER 2. SARAH KANE: CONTEXT AND INFLUENCES	55
CHAPTER 3. THEORIES, PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS AND APPLICATIONS	88
CHAPTER 4. THE VOYAGE IN. THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF TRAUMA AND DEPRESSION	133
CHAPTER 5. THE VOYAGE OUT. THEATRE PERFORMANCES	157
CHAPTER 6. GETTING OUT OF PSYCHOSIS	191
CONCLUSIONS	204
INDEX ROMANIAN PERFORMANCES	223
INDEX FOREIGN PERFORMANCES	224
BIBLIOGRAPHY	226

## **KEY WORDS**

Post-dramatic theater, traumatic theater, violence, depression, trauma, post traumatic growth, suicide, in-yer-face movement, cognitive psychology, catharsis, multiple Self, psychosis, victim, aggressor, witness, dramatic strategies, author, performance, expressive writing, emotional changing experience.

## INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY

The research "*Getting Out of Psychosis*" Sarah Kane: *The Dramatic World of Violence, Trauma and Depression* discusses, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the dramatic work of British writer Sarah Kane, analysing psychological models of trauma, violence and depression and their functioning mechanism within the dramatic texts and theatre performances, to the purpose of creating a *theater of trauma* which affects and transforms the public.

Our intention is therefore to investigate the dramatic strategies used by the writer in order to build an unique fictional universe, whose coordinates are violence and its internal forms (trauma and depression) and to analyze the effects of these strategies on theatrical performance practices.

The chosen theme is addressed in an interdisciplinary context (performing arts, dramatic literature, psychology and psychotherapy), bringing forth concepts, theories, current and relevant perspectives of contemporary society and contemporary arts.

Violence and psychological trauma are the key concepts around which identity of human species articulates nowadays. Sociological, psychological and anthropological studies show that aggressiveness and violence prove to be important features of our society, having a major role in the context of survival and perpetuation of the human species. In his book, *The Trauma Question (2008)*, Luckhurst shows that trauma as real life experience has become an important component of the structure of the Self.

Direct or indirect exposure to various acts of violence makes the contemporary person integrate and consider violent events as normal, showing an increasingly desensitization and indifference to the seriousness of these acts.

Given this theoretical framework, this study suggests that Sarah Kane creates the prerequisites to experience a traumatic event, in order to affect the public *and force* the public to reconsider convictions, to rethink values, to change their way of reacting and thinking.

In other words, the British writer offers to the public the tools for achieving and experiencing post-traumatic growth.

The investigative approach of the thesis is structured around the following research objectives:

1. To approach and discuss Sarah Kane's work within the context of post-dramatic theater (Lehmann, 2009), and the following cultural influences: the British in-yer-face movement, the theater of cruelty (Antonin Artaud), the absurd theatre (Samuel Beckett) and the avanguards.
2. To create working models of aggression, trauma and depressin in order to analyse Kane's dramatic world, dramatic strategis and her artistic intentions to create an emotional, visceral experience that will affect the public and stimulate it to change and reset the values of contemporary society.
3. To address how her dramatic texts translate to theatre performances and analyse several European performances (including the Romanian theatrer performances) during the last decade.
4. To imagine and discuss the future of Sarah Kane in terms of her dramatic work by introducing the concepts of expressive writing and multiple Self.

To achieve these objectives, I based my research on empirical and scientific methods of theater history, theater criticism, and psychological investigation.

## **STRUCTURE OF THESIS**

The first chapter presents the biography of the author and provides information about her dramatic work. The second chapter discusses the cultural, theatrical and the esthetic context in which her texts were written.

The third chapter addresses psychological, sociological and cultural theories of aggression, violence, trauma and depression. It also discusses a model of trauma seen not as a singular, isolating event, but as an intercultural bridge through shared emotional experience (Caruth, 1995, 1996). In this chapter I tried to create working models to explain Kane's dramatic intentions, dramatic work, and public reactions.

In the fourth chapter, the study addresses the legitimacy and significance of the connection between Sarah Kane's work and her life.

The fifth chapter brings forth the most important theatre performances staged between 1995 and 2011 in Great Britain, Poland, France and Romania. It analyzes performance practices

and explores the power and capacity of theatre performances to restructure cognitive profile, to induce emotions and change social values.

The last chapter discusses concepts of expressive writing and multiple Self as possible evolution of Sarah Kane's writing, and the way this kind of writing can influence both the author of the text and the reader/the public.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this research, I argued that Sarah Kane's theater is a construction of traumatic emotional experience, based on unconventional dramatic strategies such as rearranging the familiar as new, usage of excessive violent imagery and language; poetic language and poetic imagery juxtaposed to violent imagery and language, the deliberate creation of confusion by inserting unpredictable shifts in the developing of the drama, by forcing the public to take alternating roles of witness, victim, aggressor, by questioning the traditional aesthetic distance, forcing the audience to reposition itself against the dramatic world and story, or the lack of a clear, moral framework that guides the public how to feel and think about the message and the significant layers of the plays.

The research shows that Kane's dramatic work can not be easily categorized or labeled under the name of a theatrical aesthetics and it concludes that there is a unique, constantly evolving dramatic model, constantly looking for the perfect form, one that mirrors the content of the play. The dramatic work of Sarah Kane is a dynamic, unpredictable mixture of experimental anti-naturalistic, post-dramatic, therapeutic expressive writing looking to express the truth about human condition, about the dynamics of the inner self and ultimately, to heal and reconcile the wounded Self.

The research outlines, as well, an image of Kane's work in terms of theatrical performances and directors' vision, during 1995-2011, discussing the Romanian theatrical space, seen by the critic Graham Saunders, as an important period in the history of European theater and contemporary drama, which opens new paths of interpretation.

The research concludes that the controversies, the debates and the polemics triggered in the European theaters prove the Kane's texts are still alive and kicking, that they are still able to

provoke intense reactions from critics and audiences, transforming the theatrical experience into an existential experience.

The thesis describes, finally, Kane's work as a *dramatic experiment* addressing issues of self and its multiple manifestations. Facilitating the manifestation of the plural Self, the dramatic author reveals a great creative potential which allows her to capture and express the inexpressible.

Thus, catharsis and awakening become possible for audiences, in the theater space, while self rescue, salvation and integration are available for the author only in another dimension.

In conclusion, Kane's theater is a traumatic mechanism whose main purpose is to test society's values, such as love, loyalty and meaning of life, in harsh, extreme environments, and to expose the public to contemporary truths, such as the pathological fascination with violence, indifference to consequences, lack of responsibility and guilt.

Kane sensed that trauma as a personal experience has the power to reset the moral values of the public; therefore, she builds a fictional representational framework invested both with cathartic and thaumaturgic function.

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