

## “THE FORM IS THE MEANING”: NOTES ON A PRODUCTION OF SARAH KANE’S *BLASTED* BY “SERMOEN”

Ilka SAAL

“The form is the meaning,” Sarah Kane insisted when her first play *Blasted* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London in January 1995.<sup>1</sup> Back then Kane’s iconoclastic “in-yer-face” realism prompted scores of offended spectators to walk out and puzzled critics to heap abuse onto the 23-year old playwright. *Blasted* was variously dismissed as a “disgusting feast of filth” and a “random tour in a chamber of horrors.”<sup>2</sup> Some fifteen years later, in October 2009 at the Tinnenpot Theater Ghent, the audience bravely sat through the various depictions of rape, torture, mutilation, and cannibalism-- perhaps because it has already been hardened by a generation of “new brutalist” performances, or perhaps because with this particular production of *Blasted*, director Simon De Vos has set a fresh and original emphasis.

One of the production's most startling innovations is its provocative fusion of Brechtian and Artaudian elements. As we enter the theater, we confront a bare stage, next to which sits a musician (Anouk Sturtewagen) softly playing a harp and continuing to do so throughout the play. Enter Cate and Ian (performed by Eva Binon and Patrick Vervueren), who by simply relating Kane’s stage directions begin to lay out the scene for us: “A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive that it could be anywhere in the world.” Through their narration a large double bed and a bar with champagne on ice take shape for us. It doesn’t matter much that in the course of the action, Ian will repeatedly “walk across” the make-belief bed, nor that Cate obviously wears a skirt rather than the trousers that she asks us to imagine. What matters is that this epic approach immediately opens up a critical distance between stage and audience as well as between the actors and their actions. Similar to Brecht’s imagined street scene, they show us what happened rather than reenact it. And they do so with great gusto, throwing themselves into the portrayal of their characters – often to the point of caricature and grotesque hyperbole, such as in Ian’s boisterous aria of laughter, Cate’s indulgence in prolonged epileptic fits, or their extremely funny mating dance. The effect is two-fold; providing both Brechtian *Verfremdung* of the play’s ostensible bourgeois living (hotel) room realism as well as an Artaudian stylization of the archetypal. What we encounter in Binon and Vervueren’s portrayal of Cate and Ian are human beings in their most primitive, that is, instinctual condition: the body in pain, fear, and desire.

It is thanks to such reduction to basic essentials that we begin to grasp to what extent the lives of these ordinary citizens are underwritten by love and aggression, *eros* and *thanatos*. De Vos brilliantly illustrates the intrinsic link between the two by rendering literal what in Kane's script remains merely a poetic allusion to Ian's rape of Cate: a torn flower bouquet. Here, a rose is not a rose . . . but the archetypal symbol of romantic love is refunctioned into one of the evening's most drastic images of cruelty: Cate tearing the crimson rose petals off the stem and cramming them into her mouth— a gesture that is later repeated when the soldier forces rose petals into Ian's mouth and buttocks. Evidently, the line between romantic love and rape is a thin and fragile one, as is the line between the "normality" and "ordinariness" of a common date rape in an expensive hotel room in Leeds and the unimaginable atrocities (institutionalized rape of women and men, mutilation, even cannibalism) of the war zone. In contrast to Kane's stage directions, this thin line is, however, not simply "blasted" away by an outside explosion, but literally smashed to pieces by the characters themselves in an exuberant and infectious orgy of destruction that not even the harpist can resist, who now suddenly interjects dissonances into her otherwise stoically harmonious accompaniment of the stage action.

The second part of the evening strikes one, in spite of the accumulation of atrocities, as far more "realistic" than the first one. Gone is the farcical and grotesque hyperbole, gone is also some of the actors' exuberant playfulness. If Ver-vueren has up to that point excelled in his energetic portrayal of Ian's machismo, he now portrays his character's victimization with much simplicity and restraint. The clipped conversations and coarse interactions between Ian and the unnamed soldier (played by Phillippe Annaert) are to the point and full of intensity — a tension that is wonderfully sustained by Annaert. Such resolute understatement in acting stands in chilling contrast to the actors' dialogue. In an utterly dispassionate tone the soldier relates unimaginable cruelties that he's committed during war. And yet, when he subsequently turns to Ian, a journalist by profession, demanding that he record and pass on his tale, "proving it happened," his voice rings a desperate plea for recognition: "Tell them you saw me. Tell them. . . you saw me." Ian, however, coldly responds that his readers cared only for the titillating violence of the quotidian, for "kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers. Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land." Nobody, so he insists, would be interested in the "ordinary" atrocities of war, and with this statement he turns straight to the audience, daring us to contradict him.

De Vos's dramaturgy along with the actors' performance thus creates a provocative link between the domestic violence of the first half and the political



*Blasted by Sermoen*

violence of the second. The 45-year old journalist from Wales might not have killed anyone (yet), but the physical and psychological violence he commits (in form of misogynist and racist comments) are the very kernel from which the mind-boggling cruelties of the soldier arise. Moreover, in juxtaposing the farcical with the realistic, De Vos also underlines how dissimilar our perception of the two related phenomena can be.<sup>3</sup> The recognition of our own indifferent perception of violence (whether in personal relations or in war) is at the heart of one the most startling images of cruelty in the play's second part: the blinding of Ian by the soldier—here rendered in the whitening of his face with flour. This gesture evokes the specter of the tricked and suddenly impotent Gloucester along with that of Oedipus Rex's ultimate abdication of human understanding, of *logos* itself. Like his literary ancestors, Ian has not only been unmanned by the violence of the soldier (literally so, when being raped by the latter), but his blindness also symbolizes the recognition of his previous indifference to the violence he reported as well as inflicted. Notably, the flour that is used to “blind” Ian is also used to suggest the dust-cloud settling over the destroyed set. Covered in flour, Ian now appears as his own ghost-like apparition, a mere specter of his former self.

In Kane's script, Ian's final moments bespeak the utter reduction of his humanity to crude bodily functions. In a series of tableaux, separated from each other by blackouts, we watch Ian crying, masturbating, shitting, cuddling up to the soldier's dead body for warmth, and eventually eating a dead baby. In De Vos's rendition, Ian, too, crawls up into the hole of the baby's grave. Yet, we do not get that stark sense of desperation that marks Kane's text. While some of it might shine through in Vervueren's ridiculous attempts to pull on Cate's tiny sweater, which she had left behind as a cover for the dead baby's body, the scene strikes a predominantly humorous note, even to the point of slapstick. The burlesque mode of the performance is further underlined when upon her return Binon's Cate dryly remarks: "Ge zit in een gat" ("You are sitting in a hole"). The obvious redundancy of this remark along with its rendition in Flemish dialect transforms this potentially tragic moment into utter bathos. Ian's angst, anger, and trauma, along with the bruises and wounds that Cate brings back from the war zone (having bartered her body for food), do no longer signify what Aristotle would call the tragic scene of suffering -- the essential crisis for character and audience—but are here addressed as a "new normal," a temporary state of affairs that one simply has to sit through.

Accommodation rather than catharsis – this is also the tenor of the closing tableau, in which we behold Cate crouching next to Ian, sharing her hard-earned coke and candy bar with him. If in Kane's script, Cate's sharing of gin and sausage denote the extent to which continued exposure to violence has forced her to abdicate fundamental principles (at the beginning of the play she is a strict vegetarian and refused alcoholic drink), then their substitution with Coca Cola and Mars suggests the very abdication of ethics as such. Today's Ian and Cate are no longer able to make ethical distinctions; nor do they care to do so. What matters is alone the continuing circulation and consumption of the tokens of the global market – to which they willingly surrender. Not surprisingly, there's no space here for Kane's notable last words, which she gives to Ian: "Thank you." These two words, if uttered with appreciation, could ultimately assert that an ethics does exist between wounded bodies, that humanity can reemerge from catastrophe.<sup>4</sup> De Vos has little patience with such cathartic hopes for insight and regeneration. Beaten but alive, his protagonists seem oddly reconciled with each other as well as with their lot when munching their Mars bar. This cynical conclusion suggests that in the end nothing really has changed. But looking out at us, they turn the tables: the spectator is now the spectacle and implicit in their direct gaze at us is the challenge to act differently -- if we dare.

Thanks to such radical reinterpretation, De Vos's *Blasted* succeeds admirably in taking this play-- by now a classic of contemporary Western theater-- beyond

its initial iconoclasm and shock effect and in making it matter again for a new generation steeped in media and consumer culture. The form *is* the meaning – in 1995 just as today.

*Blasted* is a production by Sermoen Theatermakers. First night at Tinnenpot, Ghent on 22 September 2009. The production will be revived for the “Theater aan zee” festival in August 2010 at Ostend.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- <sup>2</sup> Jack Tinker, quoted in Ken Urban, “An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane.” *PAJ: Performing Arts Journal* 23.3 (2001): 36 and Nick Curtis. “Random Tour in a Chamber of Horrors.” *Evening Standard* 19 January 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> This observation was inspired by Timothy De Fauw. Along with him, I would like to thank all students of the third-year English course at Ghent University for their astute comments and observations on the Tinnenpot performance.
- <sup>4</sup> See Ken Urban. “Ethics of Catastrophe,” 46.