

“Took it as read. Or The Curious Incident of the Fog in the Sightline.”

Sarah Kane, Theatre and Mental Health

An investigation in ten stages

I’m going to start with a quote from one of David Bowie’s must read 100 books. It’s a cracking list, which you can find on goodreads. But this one won’t win the prize for best known.

1. "O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind! What ineffable essences, these touchless remembering and unshowable reveries! And the privacy of it all! A secret theater of speechless monologue and prevenient counsel, an invisible mansion of all moods, musings, and mysteries, an infinite resort of disappointments and discoveries. A whole kingdom where each of us reigns reclusively alone, questioning what we will, commanding what we can. A hidden hermitage where we may study out the troubled book of what we have done and yet may do. An introcosm that is more myself than anything I can find in a mirror. This consciousness that is myself of selves, that is everything, and yet is nothing at all - what is it? And where did it come from? And why?"

By kicking off with an excerpt from the [Introduction](#) to *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* by Julian Jaynes (1976)

I am not willfully leading you into a place of obscurity and obfuscation, but rather inviting you to join me on a journey into language, into mind, and into theatre and form. To consider pattern, meaning and what it is to contest, as Jaynes does here with his deliberate coinings such as “prevenient” and “introcosm”... I am going to touch on the work of playwright Sarah Kane and its reception, but also her suicide and how the state of her

mental health is often conflated with her work - as an approach to how theatre deals with mental health, and how we might approach both. I do this as a theatre practitioner and academic with no claims to medical or scientific training or expertise. But I still expect you to hold me to account. I'm going to use a range of different texts drawn from different sources on this journey. We will also watch something on you tube and listen to an audio documentary. This will take about 50 minutes. I'm going to move you around the topic a little, partly as I hope to retain your interest and partly because this is not easy to come at directly.

As an anchoring point, I'm going to go next to a brief extract from a paper entitled:

2. Acute Mental Health Nursing: From Acute Concerns to the Capable Practitioner

edited by Marc Harrison, David Howard, & Damian Mitchell
published by Sage Books 2004

"Sarah Kane took her own life when she was in hospital, where she should have been "safe". According to the Guardian newspaper report, medical staff had recognised her suicide risk as she had been admitted three days earlier after a suicide attempt from taking an overdose of anti-depressants and sleeping pills. However the 2 psychiatrists who assessed Sarah Kane did not communicate to nursing staff that she should be observed closely because of her high risk. A psychiatrist **"took it as read"** that she would be "constantly observed" by nursing staff. The nursing staff therefore had not been directly informed that she required special monitoring. Shortly after 3.30 am on 20th September 1999 a nurse found Sarah Kane hanging from the hook inside the toilet door, hanging by a shoelace. She had not been seen by nursing staff for 90 minutes".

We will revisit Sarah Kane later, but before that I'm going to share a couple of blogs with you which start to cover some of the wider terrain.

3. What's On Stage Guest Blog: Theatre's special relationship with mental health

By actor Sally Rose • 4 Oct 2012 •

http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/10-2012/guest-blog-theatres-special-relationship-with-ment_2520.html

"Mental health is a subject that has intrigued theatre makers for centuries. There has always been a close relationship between the two: after all, theatre is about creating an alternate reality; acting, the art of assuming a different character.

Shakespeare regularly explored themes of madness and melancholia: Hamlet feigns madness, Ophelia is driven mad and Jacques is a casebook melancholic. Links between theatre and the mind can also be found in reverse: Freud's Oedipus Complex theory, describing the origins of certain neuroses in children, has its roots in Sophocles' plays.

In the 18th century people used to go to Bedlam to stare at the lunatics. For a penny one could peer into their cells, view the freaks of the "show of Bethlehem" and laugh at their antics. In the 21st Century people are attracted to understanding the fragility of the human mind through theatre, and although attitudes have changed since the 'freak shows' of Bedlam, it's clear that our fascination with madness remains.

Playwrights have used theatre to express and understand the nature of various psychoses, often using madness as a metaphor to critique the state of the society we live in: [Peter Weiss'](#) *Marat/Sade* is set in a mental asylum and

explores themes of political violence, suffering and the class struggle.

Theatre provides a forum for bringing these often taboo subjects into the public consciousness: Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*; Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange* and Dale Wasserman's stage adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are all examples where an exploration of mental health is the main theme. More recently, Julie McNamara's *The Knitting Circle* was written from authentic testimonies of survivors of the long stay hospitals/asylums that closed in the 80s; accounts that highlight the barbaric treatments and the betrayal of thousands of people outcast from a society that wouldn't take responsibility for its most vulnerable citizens.

As with [Sarah Kane](#), creatives have often responded to issues of mental health through their work, such as Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys, to name but a few. [Stephen Fry](#) and Ruby Wax are more modern day examples of artists who are publicly open about their own experiences...

Making mental illness less of a taboo is a vital step towards helping people - both men and women - to ask for the support they need. There is always the hope that by addressing these issues in theatre making, we can help unlock some of the fears and concerns people have about talking about mental health".

- In this article we can see three things

1. How theatre can embrace mental health as a topic for exploration
2. How some theatre artists are publicly open about their own experiences
3. How presentation on stage of mental health issues may enable a better or different understanding and engagement with mental health issues

But we don't see the relationship between and across these three...

4. Writing on 14 July 2013 Everything Theatre blogger Dr Rachel Proctor argues that theatre has an opportunity and a responsibility to educate us about the realities of mental illness, not simply increase our misunderstanding and paranoia.

"...what really strikes me" ,she says, "is the frequency with which I see mental health weaved into plays.

It's not a new theme. Was Medea unwell when she perpetrated her crimes? [Mike Barlett's recent adaptation](#) would certainly suggest he thinks so, and a modern reading of Euripides' original play would be hard pressed to see her as a stable, level-headed person. There is mental illness throughout Shakespeare's plays, especially his tragedies – what would be the modern day diagnosis of Hamlet, of King Lear, of Othello? Paranoia, depression, morbid jealousy?...

As someone with a professional interest in health and ill health, perhaps I just notice it more, but it does strike me that within the last year I have been to very few plays where there wasn't some hint or suggestion, or even down-right discussion, of mental illness on stage. Really it shouldn't surprise anyone – we all know the statistic banded around about how one in four people will suffer from mental illness ([although quite where that figure comes from, and what exactly it means, is up for debate](#)). It's incredibly common and you can argue its rightful place is to be portrayed as often as it is. But personally I feel that's not the sole reason we so frequently see mental illness on stage. In fact I think other factors are probably more important, and potentially more worrying.

One aspect that I think is also at play here is that we have an almost macabre fascination with the mentally ill. This stems at least in part from a lack of understanding. When we see someone walking down the street talking to themselves, most of us become very uncertain of what to do, and while the vast majority of people with a mental illness are never going to do anyone any harm, anxiety

often sets in as a result of portrayals in the media. What the stage therefore provides is a safe space in which to investigate and unfold these 'other' people, these mentally ill. What we have is a chance to be voyeurs in situations where common decency would normally force us to turn our heads. Thinking about it like that makes me feel a little uncomfortable.

There are obvious and important exceptions like Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. [*The Effect*](#), a play explicitly about mental health and neuroscience, was a wonderful play and despite its arguable stance on the use of medication in mental illness, the final scene is one of the resounding images I am left with of the last 12 months – Anastasia Hille's beautiful and heart-rending depiction of depression was exceptional.

But instead, (more often) you see the manic parts of mental illness, the dangerous and psychotic patients. And it isn't just on stage; books and films are just as guilty of cherry picking the fashionable and shocking mental illnesses, although the need for rapid action does potentially skew the stage picture furthest from the truth.

Am I criticising the portrayals? How can I – writers, directors and actors have a right to put on stage anything they want... Mental illness scares us – whether through lack of understanding or fear of it in ourselves. Theatre is a powerful educative tool, and I believe it has a place – and indeed a responsibility – to educate us on this topic".

So here we see another three things

- 1. Mental health, or mental illness might appear to be an increasingly frequent topic for theatre.*
- 2. The fashionable and shocking are cherry picked*
- 3. Theatre should educate us about our fears around mental health.*

But still nothing that links these together.

Both blog pieces mention Sarah Kane, so lets now return to her and watch a short news item about her death.

5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueQt7ENn9fI>

"The Death of Sarah Kane

After the inquest and before the opening of 4.48
Psychosis, her final play.
posted on You Tube by mishima1970"

The fashionable and the shocking cherry picked, with the piano music that sits underneath and the hyperbole describing her talent. The actual focus of this piece is the inquest. But "The wrangling". and "The controversy" are not undercut by the assertion that her final work is "Not necessarily Auto-biographical." For we end with "A play that culminates in the suicide of a young woman."

The critics had pilloried her first play, Blasted, so what did they make of her last?

6. Here is Charles Spencer writing on 14 May 2001 in the **Daily Telegraph**

"JOE PENHALL won all the best new play awards last year with Blue/Orange, [a piece that turns mental illness into theatrical entertainment](#), albeit of a gripping, thought-provoking kind. In contrast, Sarah Kane's astonishing 4.48 Psychosis shows us what suicidal depression feels like from the inside. It was written throughout the autumn and winter of 1998-99 as Kane battled with one of her recurrent bouts of depression. On February 20, 1999, aged 28, [the playwright committed suicide](#).

As her friend and colleague (*the playwright and current Artistic Director of the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh*) David Greig writes in the introduction to her collected plays, 4.48 Psychosis is "perhaps uniquely painful in that it appears to have been written in the almost certain knowledge that it would be performed posthumously". It is one of the bravest and most distressing plays I have

ever seen. On the page, the piece looks like a poem. No characters are named, and even their number is unspecified. It could be a journey through one person's mind, or an interview between a doctor and his patient.

James Macdonald's production has three performers, whose roles constantly switch between doctor, victim and witness. The technique creates an appropriately disorientating impression of disintegration and mental anguish. "My mind is the subject of these bewildered fragments," says one of the play's voices, and that mind is putting the speaker through hell. Anyone who has suffered from depression will recognise the way Kane's language pins down the way in which its victims become trapped in repetitive loops of useless thought and feeling, and the desperate desire for peace or mere oblivion.

When 4.48 Psychosis was first performed at the Royal Court last year, Kane's family were anxious that it should not be seen as a suicide note. Yet it is impossible not to view it as a deeply personal howl of pain, a work ripped not just from its author's churning brain, but from the core of her being.

Macdonald's staging, with the audience sitting in steeply raked seats on the stage and the action taking place in what was once the Royal Court's stalls, is hypnotic, harrowing and strangely beautiful. The production makes brilliant use of an overhanging tilted mirror, reflecting the actors and the audience; video and lighting effects suggest the sickening fizziness of a diseased, overmedicated mind and the distant normality of everyday life that lies so tantalisingly beyond the patient's agonised solipsism.

The performances of Daniel Evans, Jo McInnes and Madeleine Potter have a precision and an emotional rawness that are almost unbearable to witness. The final moments offer an astonishing coup de theatre, and a most moving suggestion of peace. This is a great production of a masterpiece of mental and emotional

extremity. That Kane should have written it in the midst of the depression that she so unsparingly chronicles strikes me as an act of artistic heroism.

I have little space for *Crave*, Kane's penultimate play, now being staged on a raised platform in the Royal Court's circle. It is a poetic, musical quartet for four voices, of great formal beauty, with echoes of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and T S Eliot.

What I missed when I first saw it in Edinburgh in 1998 was the despair that is barely contained by the work's cool, detached structure. Memories of abuse, pain and the terrible inequality of love pulse through the play like a throbbing, infected wound. Death beckons, with an enticement that proved irresistible”.

Despite almost knowing better, he cannot help himself. Death may have beckoned, but it was the enticement that was too much for Charles Spencer.

7. It took the playwright Mark Ravenhill to stop (us) taking it as read, in an article for the Guardian entitled:

'Suicide art? She's better than that'

The by-line describes them thus:

“They were friends and colleagues, and together caused a scandal in British theatre. Six years after her death, playwright Mark Ravenhill says it's time to look again at Sarah Kane”

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica **persona**, plural *personae*: in literature, the **person** who is understood to be speaking (or thinking or writing) a particular work. But of course. it can also mean (in the psychology of C. G. Jung) the mask or façade presented to satisfy the demands of the situation or the [environment](#) and not representing the inner personality of the individual; the public personality (contrasted with [anima](#)). And furthermore - a person's perceived or evident personality,

as that of a well-known official, actor, or celebrity;
personal [image](#); public role.

Ravenhill used his perhaps uniquely configured position to tell a different story, writing in [The Guardian](#), Wednesday **12 October 2005**

But before we hear from Ravenhill

"The following apology was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Tuesday October 18 2005

We say in error in the article below that the late playwright, Sarah Kane, was sectioned under the Mental Health Act. She was voluntarily admitted to the Maudsley hospital, London, on two occasions and then discharged. We also give the impression that she was under observation in a psychiatric wing when she took her life. This is inaccurate. She was in a general ward in King's College hospital, London. We wish to extend our apologies to her family and friends for any distress caused"

The fashionable and the shocking cherry picked? Was it Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway who urged "never let the truth get in the way of a good story"

Ravenhill's piece is worth hearing pretty much in full:

"Did you know Sarah Kane?" Whatever country I've travelled to in the past few years, whatever theatre, it's always the same question, the same hushed voice, the same awed look in the eyes, the same need to hear the story.

Yes, I knew Sarah Kane.

There's a little moment of anticipation and then: "What was she like?"

I can feel the pressure now to provide the dramatic, the definitive character portrait. I suppose they want the Tale of the Troubled Genius. But I can't do it. When you know someone - when you've actually known a person as a friend and a colleague - how do you provide an instant snapshot? That would be somehow to cheapen them.

My questioner soon drifts away, disappointed that they haven't been fed their own personal piece of the Sarah Kane myth. And a myth there almost certainly is. We prefer our artists to be Romantic. We want a Sylvia Plath, not a Jeff Koons. We are still drawn to the idea that the artist is suddenly struck by the muse, that at a painfully young age they are compelled to write. No learning a craft, no honing a work: just a straight explosion from the Self on to the Page.

Sarah Kane slips easily into the mythic mould. She burst quickly on to the theatre scene: *Blasted*, in 1995, was an instant scandal. And, after writing four more plays - *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* - over the next four years, she took her own life after a struggle with mental illness. Like the great Romantic poets, Kane was drawn to death. Like the 20th century's icons - like Marilyn, like Jimmy - she died young. What greater end to the life of a young genius than suicide?

I suppose when a young artist commits suicide, leaving a relatively small body of work, it's natural to want more. We know there are no more Sarah Kane plays to come, so people want more of her. We want to build up the myth. Her death leaves a vacuum that we want to fill. It's an understandable instinct, but not a good one.

Kane's plays have almost certainly achieved canonical status. All over the world, they are seen and admired. Almost since the arrival of *Blasted*, she has been regarded as the most important of the new British dramatists. No doubt some of the initial interest in her work was a wish to jump on the bandwagon of sensation that *Blasted*

caused on its UK premiere, but with the passing of time Kane's work has proved its significance.

Kane's work wasn't just some outpouring of the soul. It was immensely crafted. She wrote the first draft of *Blasted* while studying in Birmingham. But, she told me one day in her basement flat in south London, that draft was very different. It was full of long, rich sentences, inspired by Howard Barker. When a friend suggested that a more edited form of language might be better, Sarah began retyping the play, working on her manual typewriter, each time refining, tightening, honing it. Yes, there was something of the obsessive artist about her. Yes, that retyping, over and over, had a compulsive drive. But it was that discipline that informed *Blasted* as much as the emotion at its core.

Kane's first involvement with the theatre in London was at a pub theatre, the Bush, where she read scripts and worked alongside the literary manager. She even considered, she once told me, applying to be its artistic director. This was where she initially pictured *Blasted* being produced. *Blasted* is a work of dense metaphor - but also of very concrete reality; she rewrote it with the specific claustrophobia of the Bush in mind.

The play was eventually picked up by the Royal Court. The opening night caused a sensation. The play angered many of the critics. Several compared it unfavourably with a conventional psychological thriller that, ironically, the Bush was producing at the time. We're unlikely to hear of Killer Joe again. History has made Kane's critics look rather foolish. But, really, who could have said then that *Blasted* was a landmark in theatre, Killer Joe a passing moment? In retrospect, we - theatres, audiences, translators, teachers, students, biographers - pick out the good art from the bad until we're left with some kind of canon. But in the moment no one can really tell.

I came to know Kane a year after *Blasted* had been produced. One day I picked up a copy and was amazed to

be reading a play that was so different from its critical reception, a play in which language and incident had been squeezed into a poetic whole, an intensely powerful piece of work. This clearly wasn't some fevered young show-off but a writer of great craft. I was literary manager of the theatre company Paines Plough at the time and approached Kane: would she be writer in residence?

I met her for a drink. She was a fascinating mix of the fragile and the fighter, still rather alarmed by the frenzy that *Blasted* had unleashed but excited by the possibilities that it had opened up for her. She had a substantial intellect. Of all my playwriting contemporaries, she was the best read. It struck me that she was essentially a modernist - her enthusiasms were Beckett, TS Eliot; work that was flinty, imagistic, not immediately accessible. Whereas I would locate characters in a postmodern landscape of shiny surfaces under which pain was bubbling, Kane was placing her work in an essential, somehow more substantial, landscape. My artistic world was the claustrophobic bubble of high capitalism; Kane's was a more brutally naked environment. The horrors of Auschwitz and Kosovo provided her with inspiration; mine came from the hollow world of the Big Mac and Disney World. I wrote on a laptop, Kane on a manual typewriter. We understood each other, but our visions were very different. We joked a lot at our first meeting. I teased her about her taste in indie music - she had a particular liking for the Pixies. I bought her several beers and, as she relaxed, her sardonic humour and ability to tell an amusing story came to the fore. We got along.

I also went to the Gate theatre to see her production of her new play, *Phaedra's Love*. She proved herself to be a powerful director. Whereas most British theatre has a slickness, a sheen, that conceals a lack of real engagement, Kane's was a production that had gone straight to the heart of an experience without bothering to create the traditional British smoothness.

She agreed to join Paines Plough for a year. Mostly writers in residence are invisible. Not Kane. She was a strong presence, running a busy writers' group. She seemed happiest here, encouraging other playwrights to find their voice.

She found the next step forward in her own work by assuming another identity. *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* shared the same aesthetic contours: language, psychology, self stripped back to a visceral plane. *Crave*, which she first presented as a lunchtime reading for Paines Plough, was something else. She wrote the first draft under the name Marie Kelvedon. She said she didn't want people to read the play as "the new one by the woman who wrote *Blasted*". There was already a myth forming around her work. And Kane knew that a myth is something that will distort a writer's development, particularly if the writer believes it herself. But I suspect she herself needed to clear her head of that old work, and "Marie" allowed her to do that.

Crave was a play of voices; it had a freedom of language that she had not yet explored, where character had been replaced by the interplay of dialogue. It was a play that had been many years in the making. She scoured old notes, poetry she had written several years before, to find its opposing voices. And she was delighted to be able to watch the reading with the audience, not one of them knowing *Crave* was by her. Here was a play not being read in the light of the opening night ruckus of *Blasted*, with frenzied responses from the *Daily Mail* and *Newsnight*. Having seen the reading, and freed her voice, she carried on reworking the play, confident now that she could put it in the body of work called "Sarah Kane".

It was around this time that I became aware of Kane's problems with mental illness. Her depressions became more intense; she denied herself food for long periods; eventually her thoughts turned to suicide. Even now, I wouldn't like to guess whether that depressive aspect of Kane's personality had been informing her work all along.

Or whether the bouts of depression were interruptions to her creative self. Maybe something of the two. But I would certainly resist the idea that she was a great writer because she had suicidal impulses.

Eventually, Kane's depressive periods became longer and longer. She was sectioned. At one particularly grim moments in our lives, I was in a critical condition in an Aids ward, and she was under observation in a psychiatric wing. Our respective problems kept us apart. And then one day I got a phone call from Mel Kenyon, the agent that Sarah and I shared. Mel just said: "She's done it." I knew straight away what she meant.

There's a danger that we see all of Kane's work as one long preparation for suicide. We shouldn't. Only the last play, 4.48 Psychosis, is a play written during her periods of depression and hospitalisation - and even there, the ending is ambiguous. There's a glimmer of light - but in life or in death? Rather, I think we should look at the plays as the work of a writer of great anger, of sardonic humour, who saw the cruelties of the world but also the human capacity for love.

When a friend commits suicide, you're always going to feel angry with them. Any personal anger that I felt towards Sarah has long since gone, but I still feel a flash of anger that she could leave a fine body of work that can be appropriated as suicide art. Her work is far better than that.

Now there's a chance to reappraise it, with revivals of Phaedra's Love and Cleansed. They're very different plays: Phaedra's Love a blast of sardonic nihilism, Cleansed a wave of almost operatic romance in the middle of a harsh world. Kane told me she wrote Cleansed when she was in love. Neither play was written by a person who knew she would commit suicide. Myth, biography and gossip crowd around the work of any artist, clouding our view, but maybe no one more so at the moment than

Sarah Kane. We don't know her. We never knew her. Let's look at her work."

Since we can't do that right here, right now, let's have a listen to

8. BLASTED: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF SARAH KANE

<http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/sarah-kane-documentary/>

In this half-hour audio documentary, playwright and Professor, Dan Rebellato explores the work of Sarah Kane from *Blasted* to her final, posthumous performance text *4.48 Psychosis*. It features interviews with her agent and friend Mel Kenyon, director James Macdonald, playwright Mark Ravenhill, and her brother Simon Kane. The piece talks about her plays, to some extent her life, and the legacy of her work. The documentary was broadcast to mark the tenth anniversary of her death but part of the work of the documentary is to get beyond her death, to some extent, hoping to find a way of thinking about her work away from the shadow of her suicide".

We are going to listen to the second half, in which Rebellato gets Kane to talk about *4.48 Psychosis*, and we hear an extract from the play.

(start at 14.50)

9. I found Mick Gordon's small volume, *Theatre and The Mind*

(Oberon, 2010)

particularly useful here in its consideration of theatre and developments in contemporary neuro-science. Mick Gordon was formerly Artistic Director of The Gate Theatre in Notting Hill at the time Sarah Kane was writing and went on to run a much bigger theatre in Aarhus, Denmark.

Gordon begins:

"All theatre happens in the mind. What occurs on the stage is a contrivance, an illusion, presenting us, the audience, with specifically chosen information. The quality of that information and how it is communicated will vary, but regardless of quality when we are in the theatre our minds suspend disbelief and legitimise the illusion. And it is our minds that pull the experience of theatre together with a single silent question: what's the story?" p7

He says:

"Theatre offers us a safe thinking space. In the theatre, we the audience, are not actors. And so our minds intuit no danger from the actions, thoughts and feelings being presented. After all the imagined actions, thoughts and feelings are not real and they and their consequences are not ours to negotiate. And so the mind feels safe from the threat of change." p19

he continues:

"In the theatre our minds enjoy experiencing the cognitive dissonance of the characters in front of them... And our minds assume from the theatre what they find so difficult to admit in real life that it is unconscious emotion and not conscious thought that tends to form our beliefs and motivate our actions". P36

and finally:

"Challenging the security of the mind's narrative paradigm is possible and exciting. The difficulty lies in the fact that initially our minds *will not like it*. Samuel Beckett was one of the greatest pioneers in issuing and exploring challenges to conventional theatrical forms, which is to say, conventional mind paradigms. And the critical assault which met the premiers of his work can be read as the mind's intuitive reaction against the usual hardwired thought patterns. The shock of his inventions demanded a response. For many minds the response was rejection, for a still growing number the response was to open up a

thinking space. In Beckett's work form is inseparable from content." P67

10. Some concluding thoughts

It can, as we have seen, be difficult to separate our idea of the person from our idea of their work. One only has to think about Woody Allen. How these both get mediated compounds the difficulty even more. This separation of person from their work is complicated *still* further when the content of an artist's work deals with subject matter which has a strong connection to the critical issue at hand.

A reappraisal of the central relationship in the film *Manhattan* is perhaps almost unavoidable in the light of allegations, which are so far what they remain. Allen not only writes and directs but plays a character, not dissimilar from himself and significantly older than the that portrayed by Mariel Hemingway, who at 17 we might well consider to be on the cusp between adolescence and womanhood.

Person and persona (perhaps even personae) start to become very blurred in their boundaries.

Dramaturgy may not be a term with which you are overly familiar. It has many meanings. A simple explanation is that given in the free dictionary: "The art of the theatre, especially the writing of plays". I might add to that definition the craft. So its *how* stuff happens. In other words an approach to understanding what happens in the crafting not only of a play, but that play in performance when it is produced on stage with an audience.

I'm going to ask you now to make an imaginative leap, which is what good theatre does well, towards what Gordon would describe as the transcendent. But instead of the Judeo-Christian template of transcendence to which Aristotelian thinking is most usually applied. (Aristotle is the mother and father of Western dramaturgy), I'm going

to step sideways – and across. I’m going to draw on the Yoruban mask tradition of Egungun, as explained to me by playwright, novelist and poet Gabriel Gbadamosi, where annual ceremonies in honour of the dead serve as a means of assuring ancestors a place among the living. I want to offer this notion of the metaphysical world of the living, the dead and the as-yet-unborn as a dramaturgical *strategy*.

And I am going to posit the idea that what the playwright does in the theatre – drawing on a world of traditions of theatre practices in culture and society - is to enable a story to be told, as the playwright Peter Arnott explained to me, not in front of us on the stage, but in the back of the audience’s head, in their mind. For this, to echo Mick Gordon, is how meaning is actually made. In this meaning-making process in the theatre the audience and what happens on stage enter into a contract where disbelief is suspended.

If we push this contract to an extreme metaphysical level, I am going to suggest that the theatre is a place in culture and society where the audience - as the living - can collectively ask questions of the dead, as the unreal, manufactured, imaginary action is *played* out on stage. Because it is safe to do so. Now, it may seem that such a notion is more readily available to us here in London by looking at the plays of, say, Wole Soyinka or other playwrights working with Yoruban cultural traditions. But this formulation is also present, as Gbadamosi has said, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or Euripides’ *The Persians*.

Sarah Kane, like Samuel Beckett, challenged theatrical form and with it conventional mind paradigms. The outrage expressed by some critics at her debut production, *Blasted*, echoes the initial reception of Edward Bond’s work.

Because she took her own life the *safety* of the theatre space with which we, as audience members, can explore cognitive dissonance is called into question, albeit by

proxy. Add to this the sensationalising effects of the media and their mediation of story and we can see how this makes it particularly difficult to see the work differently from her life (and its end).

My conclusion is this: If, to borrow from Mick Gordon, in Sarah Kane's work, form is inseparable from content, you will simply have to go and see the work for yourselves. For only in separating out the work on stage, and its relationship to an audience in performance, from the life of the artist-creator, can we reconnect to ourselves. Because only when we re-suspend our disbelief can we as audiences make it safe again to ask questions of the dead.

Its an act of cleansing well worthwhile.

Removing the fog in the sightline.

Thank you.

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Originally presented at Kings College London

Institute of Psychiatry

As part of the Beautiful Mind programme

20/03/14

Revised for its re-presentation there 07/03/18

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Online Articles / Video, audio clips

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<http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/sarah-kane-documentary/>

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The Death of Sarah Kane
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueQt7ENn9fI>