

## Opponent's Report

### Klára Strnadová, "Violence and Formal Challenge in the Plays of Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp"

Klára Strnadová has set herself a challenging task in her thesis, which is to write a detailed comparative study of the dramatic works of Sarah Kane and Martin Crimp on the backdrop of the contemporary British theatrical scene. She has succeeded in a remarkable manner, not only in linking the work of two playwrights who would seem to many as radically different in their method, but also in providing a number of insights into the current position of the theatre as regards its role as a vehicle of social criticism, and, furthermore, generally as a means of artistic expression. Ms Strnadová's work is perhaps best characterised as thought-provoking in the best sense of the word: while there are numerous issues generated by aspects of the main argument that seem to require to be addressed, the very fact that these arise prove the well-informed and thoughtful nature of the thesis.

The structure of Ms Strnadová's argument is lucid and intelligent, and while synopses of the plot of the plays under discussion are provided in the opening part, the following chapters eschew an over-descriptive approach. The style of writing is largely elegant and clear, while the bibliography of sources consulted is genuinely impressive, ranging from Aristotle up to most recent critical discussions of the playwright's work, and including even manuscript versions of three of Kane's plays.

Aspects of the thesis that need to be highlighted as being of particular value include, above all, the persuasive and detailed case Ms Strnadová makes for viewing both playwrights as sharing a prominent concern with ethics, despite their fundamentally different methods. Furthermore, the positioning of Kane vis-à-vis earlier theatrical modes, and within the modern/postmodern dichotomy would in itself suffice as a basis for a successful MA thesis.

The following comments are not intended as a criticism of the overall argument, and are rather of the nature outlined above, i.e., should be perceived as remarks triggered by the sheer scope and detail of the overall analysis. They may perhaps serve as the basis of the thesis defence.

First, I understand the need to start with a clear-cut definition of the fundamentals of what tends to be perceived as "traditional" theatre – hence Ms Strnadová's recourse to Aristotle's views on tragedy. However, I wonder about the specific relevance of the classical notion of tragedy here, particularly as regards the work of Martin Crimp. The use of the passages from Aristotle's *Poetics* seems to imply that the plays under discussion are generally to be viewed as tragedies; the obvious question would be, in what sense exactly? This relates particularly to the


notion of catharsis and the way it is applied to the theatre of Kane and Crimp – who is it that undergoes “purification”: the protagonists, the audience...? What is the nature of the process? Perhaps the fact that catharsis in Greek tragedy happens firmly on the background of a solid metaphysical system of belief (which is hardly the case in contemporary Europe) may require reconsideration as regards the relevance of the term when applied rigorously to the plays of Kane and Crimp. And, to hypothesize further, this may potentially lead to a consideration of the fact that many a spectator is bound to leave the theatre after watching a Kane or even a Crimp play not exactly “cleansed” but merely disturbed and frustrated to an utmost degree.

A minor point perhaps, given the overall objective of the thesis, but fascinating nonetheless: the thesis discusses at several points the relation between language and meaning in a number of the plays, while mentioning, for instance, Kane’s carefully crafted rhythm the words follow in *Crave*, together with her wish for the lines to be spoken quickly, regardless of content (16, 35-6, 59). How is meaning constituted in such a production then, and what kind of mimesis may one speak of (cf. 16, where Kane’s work is discussed as essentially mimetic)?

Finally, given the scope and depth of the discussion of theatrical influences on the respective playwrights and the ways in which their work resonates with that of their predecessors, it is somewhat curious that Harold Pinter is not mentioned whatsoever in relation to Martin Crimp (while Beckett duly receives treatment): is this a deliberate omission?

I recommend this outstanding thesis for defence and propose to grade it “excellent”.

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