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Diploma thesis:

**Social Themes in In-Yer-Face Theatre  
Plays**

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### **D e c l a r a t i o n**

I hereby declare that I wrote this diploma thesis myself and that I used only the stated sources.  
I also declare that Mr. Štěpánek agrees that I can include all the information from our interview into  
my diploma thesis.

Prague, June 18, 2010

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## **A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t**

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## **Abstract**

In-Yer-Face theatre is a new kind of theatre which was established in Britain in the 1990s. With it, a new sensibility arrived into the theatre. The first part of this diploma thesis is aimed to bring to the reader's attention the concept of In-Yer-Face Theatre and investigate the life and work of two of its playwrights. The main attention will be paid to two plays, *Blasted* (1995) by Sarah Kane and *Shopping and Fucking* (1995) by Mark Ravenhill who belong to the major representatives of In-Yer-Face Theatre of the so-called 'New Writing'. The in-yer-face themes in the context of 1990s British theatre will be demonstrated on these plays.

## **Abstrakt**

In-Yer-Face je název nového dramatického směru, který vznikl ve Velké Británii v 90. letech 20. století. Tento směr s sebou přinesl nový způsob pohledu a vnímání reality. První část této práce seznamuje čtenáře s tímto konceptem a pojednává o životech a dílech dvou jeho autorů. Hlavní pozornost je věnována dvěma divadelním hrám *Blasted* (1995) a *Shopping and Fucking* (1995) (první autorky Sarah Kane a druhé autora Marka Ravenhilla, kteří oba patří k hlavním představitelům směru In-Yer-Face), na kterých budou demonstrována témata typická pro in-yer-face dramaturgii devadesátých let v Británii.

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# 1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to acquaint the reader with British drama in the 1990s concretely with the concept of the so-called In-Yer-Face theatre and with two of the most influential authors of the exciting decade and their works. These two pillars of new writing in Britain are Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill and my work focuses on two plays, one by each of the authors, which are considered their crucial plays in terms of that these plays brought their authors into people's attention. Interestingly, it was in the negative sense, so it is accurate to speak rather about notoriety than about popularity as the most frequent attributes the critics attached to the plays were words like 'scandalous', 'disgusting', or 'dirty'. Furious discussions and even a few incidents that happened around the plays helped them gain a great deal of notoriety.

Although they knew each other well and were permanently in touch, Kane and Ravenhill differed a lot. This is another reason for the choice of right these two playwrights. Their lives make a very interesting couple in the sense that they in a way complement each other perfectly. Unlike Ravenhill, Kane was born to a Christian family. Though they both started to write from quite an early age, Ravenhill displayed more positive relationship to school and literature than Kane who had always been labelled as a problem student and had always had conflicts with the authorities at the schools she attended. They also differed in the way they wrote: while Kane worked in solitude and rewrote her plays always by herself, Ravenhill's works were often collaborative projects on which several authors or even actors participated. While Kane's *Blasted* (1995), one of the two plays which are going to be discussed in this work, is extremely innovative in its structure, Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1995), the other of the two plays, might be considered as rather old-fashioned from this point of view. On the other hand, they have a lot in common, the language used by both authors is innovative and blatant, the themes their works concern with are very up-to-date and deal mainly with the youths' lives, confusion, despair, but also hope. None of the two agreed when their works were labelled as dark, depressive and hopeless.

While Kane wrote altogether five plays and died very young committing suicide in

1999, Ravenhill's work is wider and still in progress. Like the whole concept of in-yer-face theatre, his work is continually developing and bringing new perspectives from which to look at all the contemporary themes included in his plays.

Watching or reading *Sleeping Around*, *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking*, one cannot disclaim that a new sensibility has become a norm in theatre in Britain. In fact, it has not only become a norm but also a dominant theatrical style of the 1990s. The titles of the works can say or at least imply a lot about their contents. Use of vulgarisms, showing nudity and sex onstage, violence developed into extreme, provocation, rape, humiliation and many other issues have become the new devices behind whose images deep truths are to be found and communicated to the audiences. They are not here to answer questions, but to pose them and invite the audience to start to look for their own answers.

## 2. The Concept of In-Yer-Face

### 2.1 What is In-Yer-Face

'The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation' (Sierz 4). This is how Aleks Sierz describes the essence of the experiential in-yer-face drama. 'It jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm' (Sierz 4). It uses shock tactics, in the sense that it is often experiential in form, structure or tone, which the audience is not used to. It challenges the existing ideas of what should or should not be shown onstage. It talks about the forbidden, violates taboos and it deliberately creates discomfort. It involves the audience a lot, it does not let them sit in detachment and contemplate about what they see, it is not speculative but very experiential and emotional by handling more primitive feelings, questioning moral norms, telling us about who we really are. 'The phrase 'in-your-face' is defined by the *New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) as something 'blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid' (Sierz 4). Very often, it is also labelled 'confrontational'. The phrase has its origin in American sports journalism of the mid-seventies and it gradually became a part of mainstream slang over the 1980s. It implies that you see something very close up, that you are dealing with a kind of theatre that crosses normal boundaries and invades your personal space.

It is not difficult to recognize whether a play is in-yer-face. 'It is the kind of theatre that inspires us to use superlatives, whether in praise or condemnation' (Sierz 5). The features are significant: it is the use of dirty language, talking about taboo subjects, the characters who become suddenly violent, take off their clothes and have sex onstage, get humiliated and experience other unpleasant emotions. Very often, this kind of theatre does not let you stay cool, it forces you to react. It may be so convincing that the audience considers it to be the best thing they have ever seen and they recommend it to their friends, or, on the other hand, they start to feel like going away which in fact happens quite often. It uses shock tactics to wake up the audience as it has something urgent to say to them. It attempts to question the current ideas of what is normal and

natural, what is real. In this way it pushes the boundaries of what can be accepted and it may be seen as the writers' attempt to find out how far they can go.

## ***2.2 Features of In-Yer-Face***

Provocation is a natural component of the in-yer-face plays ranging from a new tone of voice the audience hears for the first time, and being also a question of sensibility - which means how much it attacks an audience's prejudices. The core of success lies in the tactics when the play begins in a naturalistic mood and then it hits the audience with a strongly emotional material, or when it is an experiment in form which makes people question their opinions or beliefs. Controversy is not necessarily present in in-yer-face plays, however, it may be found in many of them. More often than in the plays it is reflected in the reactions to them which look more as a form of performance - some people walk out of the room, some write letters to the press, many critics use exaggerated language to comment on the plays etc.

There are two versions of the in-yer-face theatre - the hot version and the cool version - which differ mainly in the size of the venue, number of audiences, but also in the style and structure of the play. While the hot version is often performed in small studio theatres with audiences of between fifty to two hundred people, cooler versions have larger auditoriums as a distancing device. Hot version includes blatant language, explicit action, heightened emotions, while cooler versions mediate the disturbing power of extreme emotions by a more naturalistic style and more traditional structure. However, regardless of its version, this kind of theatre should always be able to trouble the audience emotionally and make them think about who we are.

In-yer-face theatre actually forces the audience to look at things, feelings and ideas which they would normally try to avoid as they are too unpleasant, painful or frightening. No wonder that people avoid them, as they remind them of awful things of which people are capable, in other words, they tell them bad news. They deal with the limits of people's self-control and the power of the irrational relating to it, as well as with the fragility of people's understanding of the world. At the same time, there is a similarity between theatre and other cultural forms in that it is a safe place in which to

explore such emotions and it is the threatening of this feeling of safety what makes experiential theatre potent.

A play can be provocative not only because it is written in a very blatant language, or because of the stage images it uses but also because of its form. The less it has to do with the conventions of naturalism, especially those of the well-made three-acts drama, the less likely it is that the audience will accept it. On the other hand, some shocking emotional material may become more easily accepted by people if the form or the tone of the play is traditional. 'Naturalistic representations of disturbing subjects are usually much easier to handle than emotionally fraught situations that are presented in an unfamiliar theatrical style' (Sierz 6). The reason why theatre is shocking is that it is live and breaks taboos right in front of people. They are watching it and can not help themselves but react. If they read in private about what they are facing at the moment, they would be able to bear it easily, but if they are confronted with it in public, suddenly the subjects seem electrifying, the situations embarrassingly intimate and the audiences become complicit witnesses. 'Live performance heightens awareness, increases potential embarrassment, and can make the representation of private pain on a public stage almost unendurable' (Sierz 7). Empathy plays an important role here too. Although everybody knows that all the atrocities and violence onstage is just make-believe, it appeals to their emotions very intensively in that they tend to empathize with the actors.

All these aspects of in-er-face theatre makes it more shocking and visceral than other art forms. Sometimes you may get so much involved in the performance that you feel as if you were living through the experience which is being represented and such experience tells you much more about an extreme state of mind than reading about it. Moreover, since the abolition of censorship in Britain in 1968, theatre became much freer than film or television. Using taboo language such as four-letter words is very impressive as people give them a certain magic power. They are special in the sense that they may often cause more offence than the acts they refer to. They inform us perfectly about what a culture is embarrassed by, what the people of a culture are afraid of or what they may get angry about. A typical example is the use of sexual swearwords in British culture. They work as a slap into the mouth being a verbal act of aggression and it is even stronger in theatre where it is used openly.

Every intimate and private experience which is seen onstage bears stronger emotional charge and may be more unsettling than if we experienced it in real life. It is because the acts in theatre are deliberate and therefore they are invested with more power and effort than real life itself. For example, showing sex onstage automatically raises questions about privacy although everyone knows that the acts are not really committed. What is unsettling about it is the fact that it shows sex publicly and reminds people of their most intimate feelings and of something what they want to keep secret. Images of sex are powerful and they increase anxiety as they have to do with uncontrollable feelings, and if the feelings of neediness or loneliness are added, it may have a very disturbing effect. It is the same case with nudity. If shown onstage, it is also more powerful than in films, television, paintings or sculptures for the simple reason that the person is actually present. A naked body is a source of metaphors mainly for its inherent vulnerability. It may imply moral exposure as well as loss of illusions, liberation from conventions.

Violence is always impossible to ignore while people are exposed to it directly. Violence is shocking as it breaks the rules of debate, it goes beyond words and confronts you by humiliation, pain and degradation. It is often primitive, destructive and irrational. At the same time, it has an anomalous feature - while it has the power to affront us, disgust us, shock us, it may also turn into what fascinates us most. In a way, it tells us more about ourselves that we want to know but are afraid to find out; it publicly stages intimate subjects, people's secret desires and monstrous acts which draw the audiences in and make it possible that what they enjoy watching may tell them unwelcome truths about who they really are.

An essential part of a confrontational sensibility is shock which is, however, very relative. What shocks us totally one time may become amusing the second time. It means that people can get used to it and gradually become immune to bigger and bigger shocks. Not only time and experience but also geography play a role here. In Britain, for example, most metropolitan audiences want to be unshockable, small-town audiences may be more open or passionate in their reactions (Sierz). Shock often sells shows, and so it can also be a good marketing strategy. The author's wish to disgust and shock may

or may not be politically motivated - in fact, any theatrical image can be intended either to convey moral outrage or to be reactionary. Therefore, confrontational theatre is a permanently contested territory.

The new sensibility which arrived into British theatre in the 1990s brought into it a lot of blatant extremism. It was a new phenomenon, even though, it also drew from tradition.

### ***2.3 Tragedy and Provocation as the Ancestors of In-Yer-Face***

Violence, sex, extreme states of mind, brutal deaths, suicides, suffering, cannibalism, human sacrifice, humiliation, rape and incest, all this is scarcely new in theatre. We can trace these topics as far back as to the Ancient Greece. At this point, it is suitable to point at Oedipus who symbolizes one of the most familiar taboos thanks to Sigmund Freud. The themes of murder, incest or rape are to be found in the stories of Medea, Agamemnon or Phaedra and are still evoked by these names. The power of fate and the most intimate human fears are mixed in Greek tragedies which gives evidence that people at that time were well-aware of the mixture of heroism and hopelessness in taking a stand against the unexplainable and inexorable. The purpose of tragedy can be seen in trying to purge the bad feelings and negative emotions of people. The fact that they are put through extreme torment gets them rid of their inner demons; it heals them as it helps them face their time, it is a kind of shock therapy. This idea is at the root of experiential theatre which churns up the audience's emotions.

The genre of the tragedy always challenges writers to reinvent it. For example, Jacobean tragedy relished painful torture and brutal murders. The revenge tragedy, e.g. *Spanish Tragedie* or *Hamlet*, is called the 'tragedy of blood' rightfully. Depictions of evil and terrific stage images attracted the audience and, on the contrary, what disturbed them was the plays' implications of upsetting of the Christian moral principles. Their expectation that morality would be finally restored allowed them to enjoy the play guiltlessly. Later on, long after the Jacobean age, the tragedy survived in the gothic fantasy, melodrama and horror story. However, for its great brutality, Jacobean tragedy became used in rather broader terms, and so even today it is used by some critics as a

label for some violent contemporary plays.

#### ***2.4 Censorship and Concerns of Theatre after its Abortion***

Because people often saw uncontrolled emotions as a danger and felt need to make theatre safe, censorship was established in Britain in 1737 which meant a strict control of the nation's stages by Lord Chamberlain who read and licensed all plays. He prohibited the showing of material that was somehow offensive, indecent and therefore unacceptable. The list of banned items included nudity, swearwords, profanity, homosexuality and representations of God or the Royal family and anyone living (Sierz). A male and female actors appearing together in bed under one sheet was unthinkable. Political radicalism was not welcome too. A crucial role in the establishment of censorship is ascribed to Henry Fielding, a playwright and later novelist who satirized contemporary politicians, more influential figures of the London theatre of that time and, last but not least, those who considered themselves a 'good society'. His *The Historical Register of the Year 1736* was an immediate impulse for the introduction of censorship on the stage. He criticized English manners and morals, exposed the corruptness of political life and the twisted values of the beau monde. Owing to it Sir Robert Walpole's, the then Prime Minister's, government introduced a Licensing Act for the theatre in 1737. In practice, however, the process of censorship was based on negotiation: it was a result of a contest between the editor and the writer. At the same time, it had a paradoxical effect - while it forbade showing or even suggestions of sex and violence, it caused that the plays were paid more attention. As a result, censorship provoked writers to examine the forbidden subject even more often instead of fulfilling its original aim to make theatre safe.

In Victorian and Edwardian eras strict ideas of decorum ruled the theatre. Many words e.g. 'pregnant' or those describing the condition after the use of a drug were considered vulgar and 'likely to inflame lascivious thoughts' (Sierz 12), but became immediately acceptable if substituted by French equivalents. 'If you were classy enough to speak French, presumably you were immune to sudden lust' (Sierz 12). Foreign plays imported to Britain were also expected with certain tension. Some of the adaptations of

Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias* were prohibited. After the premiere of Ibsen's *Ghosts* in 1891, the critics were shocked to find the references to syphilis in it and did not hesitate to call it 'open drain' or 'a loathsome sore unbandaged' (Sierz 12). Another sensation was caused by only one expletive word which was uttered by a woman. When Liza in Shaw's *Pygmalion* said 'Walk! Not bloody likely. I am going in a taxi' (Sierz 12), a moral panic broke out. One of the bishops who wanted to ban the play claimed that he was chagrined that a married actress who had children could use such a vulgar word. Shaw's 'bloody' is a great example of a word's travel from sensational to mundane. In 1956 it was considered too banal for *My Fair Lady*, the musical version of *Pygmalion*, that it uses a stronger expression 'Move your ruddy arse!' (Sierz 13) which is further transformed into 'Move yer bloomin' arse!' (Sierz 13) for the film version of *My Fair Lady* from 1964. British theatre struggled to keep itself safe from shock, however, it did not prevent experimental theatre from creeping in from abroad and soon several enthusiasts learnt about Zola, Chekhov, Strindberg, Ibsen, Brecht, Ionesco and many others, especially Artaud whose radical ideas about a Theatre of Cruelty were inspired by the Greeks and Jacobean. Naturalism was provocative when it crossed the boundaries depicting the rough side of life because the audience was not used to it. However, they still preferred it to the Absurd. Soon after, scandal became a tradition at the Court and in the postwar period, writers were considering censorship as a nuisance and started to enjoy provoking Lord Chamberlain. They were looking for ways of avoiding censorship and so they transformed the theatre into a private club selling tickets only to members in advance. Censorship was an unpleasant obstruction for the introduction of Samuel Beckett's and Tennessee Williams's plays onto British stages. Beckett's denying of God's existence and referring to him as to a 'bastard' was judged as attacking religious reverence and Williams's references to homosexuality and cannibalism were worried about too. Yet that the censor was not too oppressive turned out in 1956 when he relaxed the rules about showing homosexuality onstage.

Although majority of shocks were caused by deliberate transgressions and disclosures of taboos, there was one more issue which was sometimes considered offensive - the arrival of a new sensibility. Here, the year 1956 is a kind of landmark when the critics got outraged by the language, shabby setting and hectoring tone of John

Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* after its premiere on 8 May 1956 at the Royal Court. 'If, in the year of Suez, Britain was complacently snoozing, Osborne wanted to shake it awake, to teach audiences to feel. To do so, he showed how class war can be fought through sexual conquest. Many critics resented this' (Sierz 16). Osborne's play was not the only shock that hit British theatre, another one, also introduced in 1956, was the play *Cards of Identity* (1955) written by Nigel Dennis, a novel written in 1955 and converted into a play the next year which is a scathing satire of psychology, identity theory, and class prejudice.

In-er-face dramatists wanted to explore new social landscapes and so they became interested in working classes, poor and disadvantaged people and those living outside the Home Counties, gangs, hooligans, their rituals and other accents. Nudity onstage was only acceptable if the figure did not move. Violence was controlled too, extremely frequent and cruel above all in David Rudkin's work which became marginalized by its own extremism although it criticized social norms. It was not just bad language but an abortion scene was banned from being performed onstage.

A truly confrontational theatre first appeared in Britain in the early 1960s when Ken Dewey and Charles Marowitz showed a nude woman onstage. It caused sensation, but Dewey avoided censorship by arguing that the woman was not moving as she was wheeled in on a trolley. Soon after came the Theatre of Cruelty and Peter Brook who wrote 'one of the classic manifestos of provocative theatre: the intention was to 'crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him back to his senses again' (Sierz 18). He broke all taboos and contributed a great deal to revive the interest in theatre again. By the mid-1960s, provocation increased among the liberals and in November 1965, Kenneth Tynan said 'fuck' for the first time on television. It was on the BBC during a late-night discussion about showing sex onstage where he said: 'I doubt if there are very many rational people in this world to whom the word 'fuck' is particularly diabolical or revolting or totally forbidden' (Sierz 18). Tynan's act caused a great outrage of some journalists and also the public disagreed with his liberal opinion on allowing sex onstage. A letter was written to the Queen and parliament set down four motions. Another scandal arose with Edward Bond's play

*Saved* (1964) in which a gang of youngsters stone to death a baby in a pram. For all the uproar and heated discussions around it, the play became a symbol of the freedom of artistic expression, in both positive and negative terms, in the struggle for and against censorship. Interestingly, the scene with the pram finally turned out to shock the audiences less than the play's truthful depiction of people's tendency to the physical after they find themselves unable to express their emotions and needs and desires. Bond justified the use of shock by his need to deliver something important to the audience. It highlights the desperation of the situation and makes the audience think about it and look for reasons until the end of the play. The year 1965 brought with itself immediately a lot of other provocations with Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1964) which was roughly found as downgrading as 'masturbating in public' (Sierz 20). In the same year, a licence was refused to Osborne's *A Patriot for Me* (1965) and some other plays which dealt with homosexuality and lesbianism and the sadism of relationships. Joe Orton was another one who extended the group of provocative playwrights. His work was considered a shocking example for young audiences and breaking every principle of decent behaviour. Some reactions equated his *Loot* (1965) to a 'sickness' while he defended each individual's right to shout the unutterable (Sierz). Many other taboos carried on to be broached during the sixties such as vicious attack on a woman or showing a handicapped child, but, at the same time, the society and its norms changed which ensured some support for provocative plays. When Bond came up with his *Early Morning* in 1968, showing not only cannibalism but even a lesbian relationship of Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale, it as if started a certain shift in censorship as in the same year the first full-frontal female nude appeared onstage. The end of censorship in Britain arrived in September 1968 with *Hair*, an American musical, provocative in its name evoking Hippies and in its nudity, which became a commercial hit. New provocative writers in Britain included for example Howard Brenton, John Hopkins, or during the 1970, Chris Wilkinson was one of those who brought new insights concerning sado-masochism, pornographic fantasies, sex was connected less with liberation than with darkness. This was also the time of the outbreak of feminism as a radical new sensibility raising questions about the 'natural' role of women and arguing against their marginalization. Women broke taboos speaking openly and frankly about sex and went further on speaking the unspoken, e.g. the under-age sex and other

taboos. Another theatre which has often been deliberately in-ye-face is militant gay theatre. Its intention is to confront the spectators with their prejudices and show that the gay community has a right to be proud of their identity.

In 1975, Steven Berkoff had troubles with the word 'cunt' in his play *East*. The play includes a scene which is called 'Mike's Cunt Speech' and it brims over with the word. Berkoff did it for a simple reason - he just wanted to break the taboo barrier. 'In those days it was a formidable hurdle to say this word in front of a mixed audience and not just say it, but say it over and over again until the word is pummelled to death and the shock has worn off and by a process of overkill the taboo power is reduced' (Sierz 26). Steven Berkoff and his work became very influential and Aleks Sierz, a journalist, broadcaster and drama critic, considers him to be a pioneer of in-ye-face theatre.

Talking about taboos and breaking taboos became quite normal at the end the seventies, though, there were still authors who wanted to go further. It was Caryl Churchill who was outstanding in her innovative and thrilling theatrical voice. She combined overlapping dialogues, emotional truth and shifting timescales in an original way, but still, most public controversy was caused by sexual violence at that time. And after the word 'fuck' which became increasingly common, there was an explosion of the word 'cunt'.

In the 1980s, power relations between the sexes started to be explored, especially by feminists. Some of the feminists were accepted by the mainstream, but others had problems. Sarah Daniels, for instance, was even 'labelled a man-hating feminazi' (Sierz 28), for her bitter black humour and her excellent combination of hilarity and despair. Another theme popular in the eighties, depicting the brutality of life for women under Thatcher's regime. It was the time when the term 'new brutalism' came into existence in line with themes like exploring women's attitudes to pornography and prostitution. A new form of tragedy was manifested by Howard Barker - a 'Theatre of Catastrophe', a form of tragedy that offers no comfort' (Sierz 29) - which attacks the conventions of naturalistic theatre. At the same time, Jim Cartwright is another precursor of the new sensibility of the nineties dealt with topics like joblessness and poverty and in his *Road* (1986), he made up a horrific picture of the squalor and confusion in the town of

Lancashire. Many writers followed his unique voice in the following decade.

Exploration of people's lives and feelings was the aim of the writers of the nineties who did not hesitate to use explicit and directly confrontational material for their work. 'Never before had so many plays been so blatant, aggressive or emotionally dark' (Sierz 30). Extremes of experience attracted many new writers (as well as some older ones). 'Ideas were kidnapped and taken to the limit. If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown. While men behaved badly, so did women' (Sierz 30). The term 'in-yer-face' characterizes nineties drama very accurately. It broke all taboos, ignoring the basic assumptions and rules on which our sense of reality is built. Other labels like 'new brutalism' or 'theatre of urban ennui' were also coming up, but did not achieve much currency. Drama had always represented human cruelty, however, it never seemed so common before.

In-yer-face theatre caused a shift of the line between offensive and acceptable words. Religious insults became less offensive than sexual and racial ones. The reason could be seen in the fact that religious topics do not play as important role as racial or sexual topics in today's society and in its everyday life, especially among the young audiences who started to go to the theatre in larger numbers. Racial insults like 'Paki' or 'Jew' started to be judged even stronger than sexual ones. Nudity in theatre underwent an extreme shift of its meaning in the way it started to be looked at as a symbol of victimization or vulnerability, in contrast to its former association with liberation which means, logically, that nudity was used in ever more provocative ways. What provoked the audiences and made them feel that it was wrong, was nudity of old bodies or reversal of stereotypical ideas in the way that, for example, an old woman falls for a young man and they kiss. Violence onstage was also drawn to extreme simulating, for example limb amputation. The question of the division between performers and audience arose as well as the question of who decides what socially acceptable behaviour is. When David Mamet's *Olleana* (1992), a story about a professor accused of sexual harassment who finally attacks his accuser, a female student, opened at the Court in 1993, the reaction of some men in the audience was surprising; they cheered. 'In New

York, there had been shouts of "Hit the bitch!" (Sierz 32). At this point, it is at most convenient to ask whether masculinity has been hit by a crisis or what else could be the reason for which they failed so much in their reaction. The effect, anyway, remains that they became part of the problem instead of trying to observe and think about the issues raised in the play.

The permanent shift in sensibility was to be seen not only in the works of new writers, but it also affected older writers. Innovations in plays' structures, highly explicit stage images and exploration of uncomfortable emotions appeared mainly in the works of Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill which were more or less successful. John Osborne, one of the so-called Angry Young Man of the 1950s, made an unexpected comeback in the decade, though, soon it felt that the times were calling for something new.

## 3. Sarah Kane

### 3.1 Introduction

Sarah Kane was at the forefront of In-Yer-Face Theatre in the 1990s. Her work consists altogether of five plays; *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), *Cleansed* (1998), *Crave* (1998) and *4:48 Psychosis* (1999) which are considered as the most controversial of the decade. From all the shocking issues about her personality stands out the fact that she committed suicide on 20 February 1999. This date had an extraordinary impact; it tempted many critics to look at her work from the perspective of her death. Alex Sierz writes that they labelled her 'the most daunting, disturbing voice of her generation', 'a moralist of sometimes rebarbative rigour and mordant wit' and 'fiercely courageous' (Sierz 90). Her friend, the playwright Mark Ravenhill, called her a 'contemporary writer with a classical sensibility who created a theatre of great moments of beauty and cruelty' work whose 'austere beauty was a shock to the system' (Sierz 90).

As her last play *4:48 Psychosis* deals with suicidal tendencies and was written during her periods of deep depressions, many critics wrongly thought about her work as about a preparation for suicide. Sarah's brother, Simon Kane, heard it and found it necessary to point out that because of the play's topic such an interpretation was understandable, but in fact it was very simplistic and did injustice both to the play and to his sister (Ravenhill). Some of the critics who originally hated her work started to be more sympathetic. There is a danger that her death plus all the speculations about it and the resulting changes of some critics' perspectives might obscure her achievement (Sierz). The work of an author should not be looked at with respect to their mental state as it tends to limit the interpretation of their work. One should also avoid the tendency to sanctify a writer just because they passed away young. It is important to approach the work objectively and try to remain neutral so that, after reading one's work, the reader is able to create their own opinion.

Sarah Kane's first play, *Blasted*, was put on in January 1995. At that time, she was twenty-three years old and completely unknown. The play started a great flow of the

most aggressive reviews of the decade and became a complete scandal. The reason is logical; the critics were taken aback by so many shocking aspects of the play from its language, form, powerful images of rape or eye-gouging and cannibalism etc. All these things provoked so much that they concentrated on the horrors of her work at the expense of its essential optimism. Kane herself did not agree with being labelled 'depressing' or 'shocking' (Sierz).

### 3.2 *Life*

Sarah Kane was born on 3 February, 1971. She grew up in Kelvedon Hatch, near Brentwood, Essex. She was raised by Christian parents; her mother, a teacher, and her father, a *Daily Mirror* journalist. She also became Evangelical in adolescence. She started to write short stories and poems during her stay at Shenfield Comprehensive School. She claimed she hated school until the sixth form but at the same time she admitted she admired her English and drama teachers. Her decision and enthusiasm to study drama at the university in Bristol might come from that time.

She was a very controversial and provocative person. At university, she got into trouble with its authorities in part for her confrontational attitudes to some of her tutors. 'When one accused her of writing 'a pornographic essay', she threw porn mags at him at the next tutorial' (Sierz 91). Because of her complicated personality she caused herself a lot of inconvenience. During the first two years at Bristol she was not to be seen at the department often. Instead she would rather spend her time directing, acting and writing – 'which was much more important and interesting than anything she was actually supposed to be doing' (Sierz 91). Yet soon she stopped acting regarding it a 'powerless profession' (Sierz 92) and she started directing. Then she wrote three twenty-minute monologues, the sum total of her playwriting until she wrote *Blasted*.

With a First Class Honours Degree, she left Bristol in 1992 and as an audience member she took part in a project by Jeremy Weller in Edinburgh called *Mad*. The aim of this project was to bring together professional and non-professional actors who all had some experience with mental illness. It impressed Kane a lot as it was very unusual, totally experiential. The audience were confronted with and exposed to extreme mental

discomfort and distress instead of staying detached and mildly interested and considering mental illness intellectually from a comfortable distance. This experience gave a strong impulse and meant a crucial turning point in Kane's further professional orientation. Since then she had been absolutely certain about what direction she wanted to go, in other words, what kind of theatre she wanted to make – experiential theatre. Her participation in *Mad* had such a strong impact on her that it also influenced her health condition. She said that 'it was a bit like being given a vaccine. I was mildly ill for a few days afterwards but that jab of sickness protected me from a far more serious illness' (Sierz 92). She herself admitted it changed her completely, the way she thought and behaved. She believed theatre to be a very powerful device that can change lives as well as society as it is an integral part of it, not just an external force acting on it, that it reflects the way people view the world.

In 1992, she started to attend an MA course in playwriting at Birmingham University but it proved clear again that she was not attracted by academic life; she felt like an outsider and did not want to be academic at all. She felt bothered by everything traditional, by studying things that has already been discovered and was keen for doing and inventing things that had not been done yet. Despite this, it was a crucial period in her career - she wrote the first forty-five minutes of *Blasted* there which ended in a workshop performance at the end of the course. She moved to London, finished the play and then started working at the Bush theatre as a literary assistant. The Court did a reading in January 1994, directed by James Macdonald, after which Kane did one final draft produced a year later (Sierz). Later she wrote for Paines Plough theatre company for one year. She also encouraged other writers of experiential theatre. This young woman who wrote on a manual typewriter and had a particular liking for bands like the Pixies or Joy Division took her life in 1999 by hanging herself in a bathroom at London's King's College Hospital.

### ***3.3 Work – specific features, inspiration***

To name the most shocking aspects of her work, we come across a large scale of issues; great rawness of the language, brutality and dealings with death, sex, war,

politics and mental illness. Kane wrote her plays with the intention to place them on a small stage with a very limited number of seats for the audience. The extremeness and ruthlessness of her characters' actions, thoughts and language added to the intensity of her plays and made the audience feel and respond. Kept in such conditions, they had no chance to stay separated from what was happening onstage, they could not stop perceiving it and relax for a while. They were totally grabbed by it and the only way of escaping was to leave the room.

Kane set her work in an essential, somehow substantial, landscape – into a brutally naked environment. The horrors of Auschwitz and Kosovo did not contravene her taste but served her as inspiration.

### ***3.4 Blasted***

Kane's first play *Blasted* opened at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs and immediately met the outrage of critics. The play became the most talked about play for years as well as the most notorious play of the decade. All of that arouse great interest of media and public. Television, newsreaders and cultural commentators altogether bear responsibility for the fuss and panic spread about *Blasted*. Critics were disgusted by its exaggerated accounts of sex and violence onstage, and even national papers got a lot of letters. What exactly were the moments or aspects of it that made them react so vehemently and violently? Before trying to answer this question, it is useful to introduce the play's content.

#### ***3.4.1 Plot***

The play opens with the arrival of Ian and Cate at an expensive hotel room in Leeds. Ian is a middle-aged hack and Cate a rather naïve young woman. When first seen they make impression of totally different personalities. Ian looks as a very self-assured man using rough language, while Cate sucks her thumb and stutters when she is nervous. He is at the age of her parents and seems to dominate over her. After their arrival at the room he wants to have sex with her. When she faints then, he rubs himself against her.

Later, he discloses that he suffers from a paranoia of being an undercover agent after which she fellates him and then bites his penis. She also has need of revealing her feelings so she says to him that she used to love him but what she feels now is distaste and that he has become her nightmare.

Then, the course of events accelerates and intensifies. A nameless soldier enters the room and Cate escapes. He urinates on the bed and soon after there is a bombing and the hotel is blasted apart by a bomb. In the ruins, the soldier talks to Ian depicting him the horrors of war, but Ian replies that no one wants to hear that. Then he is raped, his eyes are sucked and eaten by the soldier. The soldier shoots himself and Cate comes back, holding a baby. Before she leaves again to get some food, the baby dies and she buries it under the boards of the floor. Ian, who is weak with hunger, masturbates, strangles himself with his bare hands, defecates, laughs hysterically, has a nightmare, cries bloody tears and finally eats the baby. By now, major part of his body is under the floorboards, only his head is poking out. Ian dies. Cate returns carrying some bread, sausage and a bottle of gin. She talks to Ian informing him that it is raining and he is going to get wet. He replies he knows. She sits next to his head, eats the food she has brought, washing it down with gin. Ian is listening to her and she starts to feed him with the remaining food. Finally, she pours gin in his mouth and sits apart from him. She drinks the gin and sucks her thumb. Ian thanks her.

### ***3.4.2 Critical reactions as a result of *Blasted's* peculiarities***

To get back to the question raised at the end of the opening paragraph of this section, it should be mentioned that critics appeared to concentrate only on the content. This is partly understandable as it contained so many shocking images and disturbing emotional material concentrated in a rather short time period. They appeared to deny that the play might have any dramatic merit. They were wondering why the Court staged it, considering it a waste of the taxpayers' money. One of the best known and most frequently seen labels was the one given to it by Daily Mail's Jack Tinker, he called it 'Disgusting Feast of Filth' (Sierz 95). Alex Sierz writes that 'in the media, lurid adjectives kept piling up. The most popular were 'disgusting', 'disturbing', 'degrading'

and 'depressing'. 'Kane's atrocity play' attracted labels such as 'prurient psycho-fantasies', 'unadulterated brutalism' and 'degradation in the raw' (Sierz 95). But their reasons for it are not explicit. Maybe, the critics were so displeased by the play's contents or some of them found themselves in it. The play is about a middle-aged male journalist who rapes his girlfriend in a hotel, but such interpretation would seem at least far-fetched. More likely, what caused all the turmoil was the experimental and experiential (rather than speculative) character.

The play's plot is located in Leeds, in a very expensive hotel room. This demonstrates one of the innovations Kane brought in her play that contrasted with critics' expectations – she intentionally wanted to avoid being realistic, which would imply the link to tradition – therefore it completely lacks the sense of external reality. This feature penetrates the whole piece; although we are informed that there is a war outside the hotel, we do not know who exactly the participants are. Critics might have not been ready for such a change.

If we look at *Blasted* from the traditional point of view, it might seem like that Kane wrote an imperfect or even incomplete play. She omitted or ignored many rules plays had been supposed to have until then. She not only did not care about the outside reality, she did not hesitate to completely break the form. No wonder then that the play's world may seem incoherent and you may also come across difficulties while trying to find the message in such an unrealistic plotting.

The form of *Blasted* is very experiential, it is deliberately disturbing, therefore provocative. It has nothing to do with a classic issue play. The pros and cons are not balanced. Kane tries to put both the form and the content at the same level. The form communicates the meaning. When the play collapses in its second part, it is meaningful. Kane wants to put the audiences through the experience, to make them feel things they have previously only witnessed. She wants to imply that it is complacent to think that Britain is immune from civil war. Kane says that 'There was a widespread attitude in this country that what was happening in central Europe could never happen here' (Sierz 98), but she wants to show that this is a wrong account.

In addition to other specific features like, for example, the blatant language, there

was one more aspect – a missing resolution. Kane does not state anything, she does not intend to get the spectators under any kind of pressure, she simply offers points of view. She does not want to communicate a message, instead, she just makes connections. She denied the idea of being a moral writer. She found it useless and irrelevant to discuss whether her play was moral or immoral, she did not care about it. She did not want to provide people with any answers about things like morality, violence, sexuality or masculinity, and thus she forswore any responsibility for what they worked out for themselves. The only responsibility she felt was not to the audience, but only to the truth, however difficult it was. She did not want to explain anything, but wanted everyone to go their own way in thinking of her work. When she was pressed upon, she offered a general interpretation: 'For me, the play was about a crisis of living. How do we continue to live when life becomes so painful, so unbearable? *Blasted* really is a hopeful play because the characters do continue to scrape a life out of the ruins. There's a famous photograph of a woman in Bosnia hanging by her neck from a tree. That's lack of hope. That's shocking. My play is only a shadowy representation of a reality that's far harder to stomach' (Sierz 106).

The title of *Blasted* refers to the content of the play but, consequently, it also seems to refer to the impact it has had on audiences. Some of them felt enthusiastic about it while others were disgusted or even left the theatre in the course of the performance. By means of *Blasted*, Kane seemed to have denied the mainstream media's belief that concerns of sex and violence are prevailingly male.

Thanks to *Blasted*, Kane became enormously popular. Considering she was a young writer who had just come through her debut, she appeared in an incredible number of headlines in the press. They seemed to be obsessed with her play and she became hounded by reporters, cartoons were published about her. Her father was very proud of her play. There was one quite a funny moment for him in all that uproar; at the *Mirror*, his colleagues made him laugh doing everything, except asking him, to find Sarah Kane not knowing that she was his daughter.

### 3.4.3 *Kane's defenders*

In the face of all the negativity around *Blasted*, Kane got supported by playwrights such as Edward Bond and Harold Pinter. Bond praised the play for its 'strange, almost hallucinatory quality', and Pinter said that its author was facing something actual and true and ugly and painful' (Sierz 97). Kane commented on it very concisely noting that she was shocked by the reaction of the media which seemed to have been more disgusted by the representation of violence than by violence itself. She supported this comment by saying that her play grabbed more headlines than the real rape and murder of an adolescent girl.

*Blasted* got even more defenders. James Macdonald and Stephen Daldry, who decided to put the play on, felt need to argue and defend both their decision to do so and the play itself. In *The Observer*, Macdonald argued that because theatre is a forum for debate, it should be used to address the issue of violence and our fascination with it. Praising the 'assurance, wit and economy' of *Blasted's* writing, he called it 'a moral and compassionate piece of work'. He believed that the critics completely missed 'the strand of wry humour' in the play and lacked 'any sense of sympathy for the characters'. They didn't understand Kane's 'bold but assured treatment of theatrical time and place' and saw only a 'catalogue of unmentionable acts'. (Sierz 97). On BBC2's *Newsnight*, Daldry remembered reviews of the original productions of *Look Back in Anger* and predicted that one day *Blasted* would become a classic. His permanent advocacy of the play evoked further controversy that only assured him of his belief that, though unwittingly, Kane had brought a new mission to the Court.

Despite all the media outrage, the public did not seem to share the same opinion. When members of audience were asked about the play and the impression it made on them, positive reactions were heard. They considered the play educational, found messages in its showing an aspect of moral degradation, or even found a metaphor for people's indifference to Bosnia. It seems that only the media caused the scandal about *Blasted*, they reacted hysterically and precipitately and irresponsibly without having thought about the play deeper, they did not care about the reactions of the public and all that fuss was just an adventurous action they intentionally spread. As it may always

happen with controversial issues of such extent, some of the theatre critics involved in it sponged upon its popularity taking advantage of it to draw attention to themselves. They assumed a moral perspective, but it proved to be a fatal mistake. Sarah Kane, an exceptional new writer emerged in January 1995, but the depth of her talent went unrecognized.

*Blasted* is the most outstanding play of the decade not only for its form, language and all the other aspect which have just been named. The process of its writing and the circumstances under which Kane wrote it were unusual and were strongly influenced by one moment seemingly unrelated to its original content. It was a TV report which was on one day during the first couple of weeks when *Blasted* was being worked on. Kane switched on the television and there was an old woman from Srebrenica crying for help into the camera. It was in 1993 and Srebrenica, a town northeast of Sarajevo, was under siege. Although Kane originally intended the play to be just about an imbalanced couple in a hotel room, about a much older and dominant man raping a young and rather submissive woman, suddenly she felt she wanted the play to distribute to its readers the message of the video recording she had just seen on television. At that point she did not know what to do as one half of the play had already been written, but promptly she realised that, in fact, the play was exactly about it. It dealt with violence and rape happening between two people who know and love each other (Sierz). It is very interesting that she never intended her play to be explicitly political. She never mentioned Bosnia directly. It only serves as a device to show the violence and denial of a society.

Kane made number of drafts before the final one saw the light of day. She changed many things; she cut out all the long dense monologues about the characters' backgrounds, she gave out stating every feeling and speaking every thought. Instead she figured out that it was short dialogues which would do. She discovered that the fewer words they say the more articulate and precise they may become and so about ten words at a time seemed appropriate. Every draft was made to be later buried again, to make the message felt rather than spoken - from there comes the great emotional force of the play (Sierz).

A big problem came up when thinking about the possible connection between the two parts of the play: what the connection between the war in Bosnia and a rape in a Leeds hotel could be, Kane explains it as follows: 'One is the seed and the other is the tree'. And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization and I think the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time (Sierz 101). And soon after she adds: 'What this needs is what happens in war - suddenly, violently, without any warning, peoples' lives are completely ripped to pieces' (Sierz 102). For Kane it was the bomb which blasted the hotel apart. 'I'll plant a bomb and, just to blow the whole fucking thing up. And I loved the idea of that as well. Just blowing up the set' (Sierz 102).

Why did she not simply drop the naturalistic first part of the play after finding the new message to communicate to the readers? It would certainly have been easier and help prevent the play from many negativistic reactions, however Kane did not do it, and, on the contrary, took it as a challenge; she tried to find a link and she succeeded. It looks like two different plays turned into one. The illogicality of war became the rationalization for the bizarre connection of the first, naturalistic, part and the second, symbolic, part. Kane remarked: 'War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable' (Sierz 102). She knew that what most stimulated the critics to react so fiercely was the form. For her, the form and the meaning of the play was one identical thing. It impersonated the chaos of war as a parallel to what the audiences were thrown into without any warning while watching the play. Many people think that the second half on the play is a dream or even a nightmare. Maybe, it is because of its abstractness. Paradoxically, Kane does not identify herself with this suggestion. She reverses it saying that it is exactly the other way round. The second part should be looked at as absolutely real which would make us wonder at the end if the previous part was a dream. Her work with time, place and action is also interesting. She plays with the setting very well. Either the place remains the same but the time and action change or the place changes and the time and action remain the same. In other words, the play remains in Britain, and warns against people's complacency or it moves to Bosnia, into the war, erasing the geographical distance and indifference of other

nations to the situation in there. Very generally, it also shows a parallel between war and life; they are both unbearable but must be endured. Kane's point of view is very optimistic: 'Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity, humour and freedom as you can' (Sierz 107).

It may seem that Kane did not look for any inspiration for her play, that she rather noticed what the particular part resembled just after having finished it. However, she mentioned two things which she cared for while writing *Blasted*. At the point where Ian gets mad and Cate unloads the gun and we are curious whether she is going to hand it to Ian or not, Kane realized that the scene might draw from *King Lear*. What she needed was blindness. Here she found an idea in Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs* (1990), a book about football violence which she was reading at the time. There was a treat of a policeman who got attacked by a young man at the football match. The man sucked one of his eyes, he bit it off, spat it out and went away. Kane was shocked and could not believe that a human being could be capable of such a disgusting crime. She used it in her play to shock the audiences too.

*Blasted* is full of savage acts, though it undoubtedly draws from real life. Kane adds: 'The only reason it's any more devastating than reading a newspaper is that all the boring bits have been cut out' (Sierz 103). This is one of the comments characteristic of her personality.

### **3.4.4 Characters**

Kane's treating of the characters is ambivalent. She claimed she liked Ian very much and found him funny. She created his character on the basis of a man she knew. He impersonated a horrible moral dilemma of a man dying of lung cancer but being able to tell her appalling racist jokes at the same time. She experienced a mixture of emotions which tore her apart. On the one hand, she would like to laugh for the jokes were funny, on the other hand, she was close to telling him that he was lousy and she wished that he died of the cancer, but at the same time she felt sorry for him going to be dead soon which might have been the real reason why he kept saying the jokes. Kane was aware of Ian being a monster, but as she felt sympathy for him she needed to create another

character who would be much worse than Ian. So the soldier came.

In contrast to the two, Cate represents a beautiful, naive, and rather submissive young woman, dependent on Ian. Kane felt almost sick about this character. She put this beautiful woman into the play just to be raped, and, moreover, she did not allow her to get on top in the end saying that 'people like her never win' (Sierz 103).

### ***3.4.5 Blasted outside Great Britain***

It is interesting how different cultures are either more or less able to accept particular issues and how their attitudes to them may differ with respect to various cultural traditions. *Blasted* spread to other European stages and the productions varied a lot being also in contrast with Kane's original intentions. 'In Romania, for example, 'The idea of a soldier bursting into a room and raping the inhabitant isn't particularly difficult,' says Kane. 'What shocked them was the language, as they've only recently got rid of theatre censorship. They are used to doing things through strong images but not to saying "fuck" onstage' (Sierz 105). In Germany, the play was very well received, but Kane did not like the first Hamburg production which celebrated violence being wrongly considered a stage version of Tarantino films. She argued that *Blasted* treated the concerns of love and hope which the director in Hamburg missed. One of the Belgium productions happened to be put on incidentally just after a child-abuse in Brussels. Consequently, the audience's perception of the whole play got limited in the sense they paid attention mainly to the baby and some of them were crying when the baby was buried. Another production disappointed Kane showing Cate 'lying there completely naked with her legs apart, covered with blood, mouthing off at Ian' (Sierz 105) after she has been raped. She found that absolutely beside the point and having nothing to do with the truth of the given theatrical moment.

Originally, Kane herself was quite confused about the message she wanted her first play to convey. It was rather a process of giving together connections which she was familiar with instinctively but she did not want and could not articulate them.

She was not the first playwright of the decade to break the rules, but thanks to her

notoriety she managed to proclaim that transgression has been done and a new sensibility had come. She, as well as many other new writers, reacted to a new complacency and lack of risk-taking in theatre. Her plays were innovative in form and full of striking theatrical images. Her obsession with cruelty and atrocity made some critics blind to the affection which her work contains. She was a purist who always struggled for unity of form and content and was permanently looking for new dramatic devices to express her vision of the truth. Undoubtedly, her best work is experiential, but at the same time it questions the conventions of naturalism. She was well aware of the theatrical tradition. She uses the shock tactics premeditatedly so the readers should avoid simplistic judgements about her work and should instead go deeper in it to find its thoughtfulness.

According to Anthony Neilson's words, Kane tried to show a way out of disgust and despair many people felt about the politics of that period. She managed to speak for an almost apathetic generation which had stopped to believe that their acts could change anything. In *Blasted* she implies that only 'horror coming into your living room is the only way you can feel something and get yourself motivated' (Sierz 121). Similarly, Kane says: 'What I can do is put people through an intense experience. Maybe in a small way from that you can change things' (Sierz 121). It cannot be denied that she stood her word.

Because of the scheduling, only about 1,100 people got a chance to see the play which made it one of the most talked about play of the decade, though least seen.

## 4. Mark Ravenhill

### 4.1 Introduction

Together with Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill proved that a new sensibility truly took control of theatre in the nineties. As well as Kane's *Blasted*, his play *Shopping and Fucking*, a controversial shockfest, carried a great load of innovative elements. When the play opened at the Royal Court Theatre on 1 October 1996, the theatre abandoned its historical buildings and had moved to a staid part of the town, the middle of London's West End. The Duke of York's Theatre and the Ambassadors were rented and their proud Victorian interiors were made into dark and doomy ones.

### 4.2 Life

Mark Ravenhill was born on 7 June 1966. He was brought up in Haywards Heath, West Sussex, by his parents Ted and Angela Ravenhill. He started to cultivate an interest in theatre very early, from the ages of ten to sixteen he attended after-school drama classes. He wrote his first little play at the age of thirteen. After the sixth-form college in Chichester, he studied Drama and English at Bristol University. Originally, he wanted to become an actor, but he soon realized that others were better at it than him and started to concentrate on directing and writing, led workshops and taught drama.

He began his work career as an administrative assistant at the Soho Poly, a new writing theatre, where he would meet actors, writers and directors and could learn a lot about how to put on a play. After he left the place and became a freelance director, he started to work for Finborough theatre and taught drama.

In 1993, his comedy called *Close to You*, directed by Carl Miller, opened which proved to be very controversial. In 1994, he wrote *Fist* with contributions from Anthony Neilson and Robert Young, which in fact was a ten minutes dialogue of two men about sex. He deliberately lied being asked by the director Max Stafford-Clark about if he had had a full-length play. He said yes and knew that he would have to write one.

The first draft of *Shopping and Fucking* was ready in spring 1995. Originally, Ravenhill named it *Fucking Diana*. It dealt with a group of young people who share a flat and whose vocabulary and philosophy had been defined by the conditions in which they had grown up - by the decade which was only interested in buying and selling. The market influenced every aspect of their lives, they were so much involved in it that even sex became an object of public transaction. By means of the play, Ravenhill intended to refer ironically to novels by authors such as Jackie Collins.

Writing *Shopping and Fucking* was a collaborative process. In June 1996, Stafford-Clark directed the play in a two-week workshop and there were rehearsals in August. Anthony Riding, who played Gary, asked about how Gary was getting by financially after leaving home at the age of fourteen. It was him who threw up the idea that his character could be a rent boy. Ravenhill really enjoyed and appreciated workshopping claiming that it was very enriching for the play and stimulating for the actors who could thus participate in making the play. About seven or eight drafts were made before *Shopping and Fucking* got its final shape and the changes had been made up to the last moment.

Ravenhill admits that he found inspiration for the play in American novels of the late eighties and early nineties. What he appreciated about them was the fact that 'they managed to capture the essence of what a generation had experienced, a sense of materialism and a kind of moral vacuum' and they 'reflected my sense of the world better than any British fiction or drama' (Sierz 124). He saw the starting point for a young contemporary playwright in irony, cynicism and other similar sentiments as that was the foundation of the sensibility of the generation under thirty. Other authors who influenced Ravenhill in a way were, for instance, David Mamet, Caryl Churchill or Anthony Neilson.

Ravenhill wrote *Shopping and Fucking* without having seen Kane's *Blasted*. He had been put off from seeing it by the reviews that labelled it a mess. This is also the reason why he stated he did not feel himself being part of the movement. He came across *Blasted* by chance while supervising a student's dissertation. Then, he read the play and realised that what he was holding in his hands was one of the best contemporary plays.

He was impressed by Kane's absolutely innovative treatment of its structure which brought the structure to the forefront among all the aspects considered by critics.

More than from any inspiration his play profited from his longtime practical experience. He had been concerned with all performative arts. While thinking about how to present the story dramatically, he drew from film as well as from theatre. He put particular emphasis on the structure. From this point of view, *Shopping and Fucking* is a traditional, old-fashioned play.

### ***4.3 Shopping and Fucking***

One look at the title is sufficient for everyone to imagine that scandal became another name for the play. Max Stafford-Clark's company got legal advice that it was unrealistic that the title would appear in advertisements or on posters and consequently the word 'fuck' was prohibited from public display. Therefore, there was an image on the first posters where the F-word was obscured with a splintered fork. Another version used asterisks, so the title changed into *Shopping and F\*\*\*ing*. The title provoked Carl Miller to write a polemic on the Court's website to pinpoint how little had changed since the word 'fuck' was first said on television in 1965.

On the play's tour in Britain, seven towns accepted the posters with the splintered fork, but even the ones with asterisks were rejected by local authorities of another three towns. They advertised the play as *Shopping and*. In Swansea, in what Ravenhill calls the 'Welsh bible belt', a dozen Christians made a block booking and ten minutes into the show stood up and began singing hymns' (Sierz 126). Police had to interfere.

Paradoxically, incidents such as the one in Swansea helped the play gain notoriety a great deal. Though small in number, they were much more effective than all the advertising. Legends and clumsy jokes concerning the alternative titles accrued.

#### ***4.3.1 Plot***

The play begins with a scene from a shabby flat where Lulu and Robbie are trying to

persuade their flatmate Mark to eat from a carton of take away food. A series of rapid scenes follows where the characters attempt at self-improvement but do not really succeed. Mark who is drug addicted goes into a clinic to get rid of the habit, but he has sex with another addict there and has to leave. He meets Gary, a teenage rent boy who falls for him.

Meanwhile, Lulu strips off for Brian, a middle-aged man, in her struggle to get a job. He wants to test her so he gives her 300 Ecstasy tablets to sell, but Robbie, who has taken, gives the tablets away and causes troubles to both himself and Lulu as Brian is threatening them with torture now. They need to give him back the money they owe him, so they sell telephone sex. The plot culminates when Mark, Garry, Lulu and Robbie meet. They play a truth and dare game. It results in Gary, who used to be abused by his father, offering them to pay off their debts but he wants them to penetrate him with a knife in return.

Later on, Brian explains his philosophy that 'Money is civilization' (Ravenhill 87) and the situation calms down. At the end of the play, the three friends, Brian, Robbie and Lulu, share a meal.

The original production was full of mighty theatrical images for the play's themes supplied with flashing neon messages and pumping music and characters resembling cartoons. Brian, very detached, demonstrated the opposite of the rather artificial and desperate Mark, Robbie and Lulu. Only the boyish Gary was really touching. Most of the action took off in the second half of the play, during the truth and dare games. Ravenhill wanted to make the gang-rape of Gary something what he wished, so he let the character ask twice to be abused. As the play was written for a small audience of about 65 people, it turned out to be very experiential. 'At the end, as the *Guardian's* Michael Billington noted, 'the chief sensory impression' is the 'smell of the cheap microwave-cooked food', 'a symbol of society's conspicuous waste" (Sierz 127). Here again, the smallness of the venue proved essential for the effect of the play.

The play met a generally favourable critical reaction which might seem surprising. Some critics who put themselves into opposition to Kane's *Blasted* praised *Shopping and Fucking*. Although some negative reactions to the scenes of rimming and rape

appeared, most critics 'realized its achievement in putting onstage a world where sex is a commercial transaction and consumption sexually arousing' (Sierz 128). The play seemed to be more legible for them. Ravenhill himself was very surprised by the critical reactions, he was expecting that they would be of the same character as the ones to *Blasted*. Instead, the critics were able to see the values of his work and they praised it. Thus, the only thing they could not easily cope with was the title.

*Shopping and Fucking* toured around Britain, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, Australia and Israel and came back to the West End in June 1997. Its title was still a problem for the public. It became an interesting paradox about its opening at the Gielgud theatre in Shaftesbury avenue that it took place around the corner in Soho, a district where the word 'fuck' can be heard at every corner of this 'red light' zone.

Interest in the play got particularly significant among the gay part of population, it was advertised in a gay shop and in Soho and written about in the gay press and gay style magazines. It started a cult and the tickets sold enormously. It also succeeded in attracting young audience by treating themes and images which were very appealing for them. There were some who looked down on the play finding it an unfeeling irony, which, however, was a complete misinterpretation.

There is a spectacular thematic balance in the play. The themes are mirrored in the course of the play among the number of metaphors of consumption and sexuality. At the beginning of the play, Mark tells a shopping story - a fantastic story about buying Lulu and Robbie in the supermarket - which he mutates a bit and retells in the end. Another theme, dealing with sex in a toilet, first appears with Mark who is thrown out of the clinic for it and later it reflects in his cubicle story about Fergie (Ravenhill 69-77). Or Robbie's 'Fuck money' (Ravenhill 39) is put into contrast with Brian's 'Money is civilisation' (Ravenhill 87). This balance is quite impressive and adds to the effect of fluency of the play.

### ***4.3.2 Characters***

Aleks Sierz says, 'Each character becomes involved in some kind of 'transaction',

this is set in the context of a nineties boys' story' (Sierz 130). This becomes the play's main theme. While all the boys' actions are rather disturbing, Lulu, the only female character, functions as a joining element. She is the one who shoplifts food for them all, she gets a new job when Robbie loses it, she tries to save the situation after Robbie has given away all the Ecstasy pills and she is also the one who is aware of the Rule Number One of drug dealing. Metaphorically, she treats them as if she were a mother of the three boys who never grow up. Interestingly, Ravenhill denies writing about a crisis of masculinity intentionally, he just claimed that 'people in the play are just trying to make sense of a world without religion or ideology' (Sierz 130). He adds: 'They're kids without parental guidance - they're out there on their own having to discover a morality and a way to live as they go along' (Sierz 130). It can be a long way with uncertain results.

Ravenhill does not make his characters victims. Conversely, they are quite tough, optimistic, always struggling to find a way without moaning by which they are able to provoke in a way. They do not ask the government for help, they do not want other people or authorities to sort out their lives, they do not complain about the unemployment benefits and do not use political vocabulary. All this happens because Ravenhill's intention is not to make the audience feel engaged but to 'keep the audience on its toes by juggling with conflicting feelings of empathy and criticism' (Sierz 130). He actually plays with the characters as well as with the audience. This idea has been supported by the fact that he named the characters after members of the band Take That. He disclosed that he decided himself for the names by chance when he saw the band's CD lying on his desk. He did it because he did not find names important and thought it would be a waste of time to think about them any longer.

Soon he could see that the choice of names was very happy. Firstly, young people considered it amusing, secondly, it made them feel the play 'belonged' to them and was written both for and about them. Lulu's name referred to the single which she recorded with Take That.

At the same time, Ravenhill's characters are believed to be the most problematic aspect of the play. His idea of them is unrealistic. The adaptor of *Pride and Prejudice*

for the BBC, Andrew Davies, 'says the characters don't have a life to sustain them for more than ninety minutes' (Sierz 131). To this Ravenhill replies that the nineteenth-century character notion is not the only good one and does not guarantee a play's quality. Therefore, he did not depict them in the tiniest detail but, on the contrary, he leaves them more open. Not because he would be contemptuous of human beings but because introducing the characters through the sum of their actions allows 'the actor to add to them and the audience to project onto them' (Sierz 131). Unlike the traditional approach, this gives a lot of freedom to both actors and audiences and makes them think about the issues individually, each for themselves, which naturally results in a variety of questions that will rise into their heads and will be dealt with individually.

If any of the play's characters is central, then it is Gary. He symbolizes neglect and abuse. Yet, instead of supporting this interpretation, Ravenhill makes his rape at the end of the play something Gary wishes for which decreases the horror of the climax. He had a reason, of course. He deliberately made the situation dialectical and got the audience into thinking about who actually the victim was. Was it still Gary even though he wished for the rape? Or the others whom he urged to do something which frightened them? Ravenhill showed that it is never only an oppressor and a victim in black and white colours but the roles are always more ambiguous. Gary's despair contributes much to the play's grimness, though, there is no explicit signal of his death so that it does not turn to be really touching. Again, it is something unstated and therefore ambiguous.

### ***4.3.3 Popularity or Notoriety? Shift of values?***

Famous names' arguments served the purpose of defending the play's showing violence onstage such as Laurence Olivier, Edward Bond, or John Webster. The programme of *Shopping and Fucking* quoted Sarah Kane's 'if you don't represent something, you risk 'denying its existence'' (Sierz 131) and Kenneth Tynan who in 1965 wrote: 'Unless we can use the theatre as a platform on which to demonstrate the serious problems of today, particularly violence, we feel that we are not serving a useful purpose in society' (Sierz 131). The play's defenders agreed on and highlighted the fact that the play delivers a message stating what an ugly world we have made and asking

what we can do about it.

In contrast to Kane's *Blasted*, the play ends up in an optimistic way. Some people saw in it a deliberate optimism as a reaction to the end of Thatcherism in Britain. Ravenhill wrote the play as an implicit critique of Thatcher's statement that 'There is no such thing as society' (Sierz 132). He concluded that what it resulted in was a cynical and angry generation from which the sense of society had disappeared. *Shopping and Fucking* captured the young generation with their hardness and cynicism, their distrust of the media, their constant internal search for answers.

Two different values are reflected in the play - traces of old values in Brian's bringing the video of his son playing the cello and the philosophy of capitalism where everything is being derived from money. Gary complains about being abused and is offered a leaflet - it suggests the loneliness and confusion of young people. The only ways out of the greyness are shopping and fucking. At this point, Ravenhill recalls that we are not dealing with sink estate children but children of middle class and their crisis personalises part of the country's self-image redefinition. For Ravenhill, 'the image is that heroin addiction just happens on Glasgow housing estates' (Sierz 132). He points out that this is not a problem of a fractional part of society but it covers of a large number of people.

A few postmodern features are to be found in the play though Ravenhill claims he does not know much about postmodernism. Discourses change frequently so that the form resembles a collage. About seventeen stories are included in the play, nevertheless it is not only due to postmodern stylishness but also due to the chosen theatrical technique. Ravenhill considered it dramatically effective that the characters told each other stories. Some of the stories were more provocative than others, especially the one about sex with the royals which had to be changed on tour after 31 August 1997, after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Ravenhill was afraid that the it would be too much for the audience and would kill the laughter completely if this story came first, so he decided to swap the order having Fergie first and Diana second. It did not seem to solve the problem utterly, though, as a kind of uncomfortable laugh was heard there after the second story.

By 1999, *Shopping and Fucking* had been translated into most major languages and boasted more than twenty versions of overseas productions which obviously exemplified how various cultures and their interpretations of particular issues differ as well as their theatre traditions. Because of the number of productions, it was difficult to keep track of them, but, for example, the first German production is worth mentioning. It took place at the Baracke in Berlin and was directed by Thomas Ostermeier. It showed that German audience is not used to feel empathy with the characters. The very upsetting moment when Gary says that he wants to be anally stabbed would be completely unmoving at German stage if it was just stated, so the director transformed it into an about seven-minute action full of blood which showed the stabbing with the knife explicitly and in real time. At the same time, it was unacceptable for German audience to have a play's set consisting only of a room with a sofa. Naturalism is rather looked down on in German theatre as intellectually unjustifiable and so such settings were scandalous. For Ravenhill, the most disturbing point about the play lies in the feelings and yearns of its characters, not in the anal sex or rimming. What shocks is their isolation from each other and from the rest of society and their misunderstanding of the world. However, the play was not written to put the audiences into depression and enforce that everything is bad and people are spoiled, unemotional, degenerated creatures. There is a little bit of optimism in it. 'So while creates a supermarket society where everyone's for sale and anything can be packaged, he shows his compassion by suggesting, with quiet optimism, that love, mutual caring and the search for new values are possible' (Sierz 134). For example, earlier in the play, Lulu was obsessed with the fact that they could not share their food, but it changed and they did it later. This suggests that the characters might be capable of sorting things out.

The tone of *Shopping and Fucking* is predominantly ironic. Whatever its shock value, its tender-hearted idealism prevails over the brutal scenes. At the end of the play, Brian gives up drug dealing and gives Lulu and Robbie their money back. Ravenhill shows how 'the brief cultural moment that was hyped as Cool Britannia is a place of small consolations and large contradictions' (Sierz 134). He calls *Shopping and Fucking* 'a piece of Britpop'. Later on, in 1999, his play *Some Explicit Polaroids* opened which was seen as a follow-up to *Shopping and Fucking* with some commentators unaware

that he had written three more plays in the interim with the first of them being more intellectual and much darker in compared to *Shopping and Fucking*.

#### ***4.4 Ravenhill's work - Significant Features and Problems***

After Ravenhill's thrilling debut with *Shopping and Fucking*, he wrote three plays that, in various aspects, proved problematic. The first of these was a free adaptation of the Faust story, Ravenhill's attempt to do a contemporary version of *Faust* after Nick Philippou of the Actors Touring Company, which specialises in radical updates of classics, commissioned him to do it. Ravenhill drew inspiration from Philippou and Stewart Laing's project called *Brainy* from which he borrowed the idea of shaking off academic life and setting out on an adventure. The story contains brutal scenes mixed with postmodern ideas, contemporary references to Bill Gates, Kurt Kobain, Saddam Hussein, CNN, MTV and many others, all put into a claustrophobic set. It turned out to appeal more to intellect than to emotions. A very interesting thing about this play is that Ravenhill used multimedia approach in it. It is written for three characters but one of them is present only virtually, on video. Paradoxically, Ravenhill did it because there was enough money only for two actors, but the effect of it was clear - the audiences missed the fact that he was the real victim as they were not really connected with him.

In a second production in April 1998 in Los Angeles, the play was rewritten so that the virtual character, Donny, could appear onstage and audiences saw him cutting himself. The theme of cutting oneself was particularly strong in the play. Ravenhill wanted to express his denial of a 'rather trendy performance art in which people cut themselves' and his scepticism about 'academic writing about the body and the fascination with piercing' (Sierz 137). He says that usually 'it just means there's something deeply wrong. In LA, they told me that cutting has almost taken over from anorexia. People who are powerless find the only thing they can control is their bodies, however perversely' (Sierz 137). He is against the idea that people who cut themselves are somehow interesting. At the same time, there is a chorus in the play of which each member was chosen from a different ethnic group in a second production. Ravenhill gives an explanation of it that that was what choruses were all about - the voice of the city.

The audience liked the play, although only a few of them thought it was better than *Shopping and Fucking*. Actors Touring Company conducted a survey among the audience which found out that the average age of the audiences was twenty-three. They did not mind the intellectual content, accepted the emptiness of the play and appreciated the video. *Faust Is Dead* mixes postmodern ideas and traditional morality and is a good example of freedom in turning old myths into new sources of meaning which was also a field of interest of the decade (Sierz). Not only Ravenhill but also Kane and other playwrights of the 1990s found their inspiration in old myths and we can see in their works traces which go as far back as to the Ancient Greece.

*Handbag* (1998), the play where Ravenhill mentions his inspiration by Caryl Churchill, offers a polemical view of the characters. Two modern couples live in a greedy society which puts emphasis only on each individual's needs. Ravenhill makes the characters infantilized and self-centred. 'Walled up with these huge mortgages, they're selfish people trying to do something selfless, having a child'. He shows 'that it is impossible to have children as a selfless act in a society that is basically selfish (Sierz 142). One of the characters, Phil, is a junkie. This idea comes from Ravenhill's own experience when he worked in a rehab unit, and so a lot of the drug culture themes root in real life. Ravenhill also explores the relationship of today's world with the Victorians. He says that 'More than any other period in history, the Victorian era provides us with images that are the reverse of what we are now' (Sierz 143). Watching its cold and crinolined characters, audiences tend to feel themselves completely different from them, sexually repressed and class-bound. What Ravenhill does is that he raises a question for the audience trying to make them think about the progress people have done since that era in their approach to parenting. In other words, he asks if modern parenting is as alienating as Victorian parenting adding that there is so much for progress in other spheres of life if you look e.g. at the gulf between the rich and the poor, men and women leading segregated lives etc. To imply a link between the present times and the Victorian era, Ravenhill uses time-travel. In one of the scenes, Phil injects heroin and time-travels in and out of the era. This is a very important and the most theatrical moment of the play for it works as a device linking the past and present which comes quite late in the play when audiences are already wondering what the link could be. As

with all of Ravenhill's work, collaboration during workshops was essential with this play.

#### ***4.5 Sleeping Around***

*Sleeping Around* and *Handbag*, next two plays of the triad, share the same problem. He devoted too much energy to the form, and so other qualities such as emotional empathy or character development, are lacking. *Sleeping Around* is not purely Ravenhill's work, it is a collaborative project which started in 1997, at the time when Ravenhill was the literary director of Paines Plough, a national touring company that cultivates new writers. Several writers worked on it with the intention to make a new version of Schnitzler's *La Ronde*. *Sleeping Around* consists of twelve scenes and Ravenhill originally wanted twelve authors to write one each. He gave up the idea though as it was not manageable and decided on four. Authors from Scotland, Ireland and Wales were chosen and finally, Ravenhill created the play together with Stephen Greenhorn, Hilary Fannin and Abi Morgan at the National Studio. Before they started to write, they needed to do some research of contemporary notions of class so they interviewed people who worked in advertising, marketing and academia. Then they separated to write on their own and met up again for a week in the studio and then another bout of writing followed. At this point, they found their work horrendous and not working so they cut and remade it completely.

It was first put on in March 1998, performed by two actors who played all the roles. In spite of all the struggle and precision, the play appeared to be incoherent and its experiment in form did not really work. Still, the play 'offered rueful images of the sex wars of the nineties' (Sierz 138) showed a great deal of sensibility and was written in a neat, crude and also queerly poetic style.

The play opens with a scene where a woman masturbates a man at the launch of a scheme to project a corporate logo onto the moon. The saddest scene shows a woman who convinces or almost begs her AIDS-stricken lover to have sex with her. The emotional bleakness of the relationships blends with the humour of the play, the most shocking thing being the painful picture of the couples who stay together but do not have sex. There is a strong feel of emotional frustration, lack of love and deep need in

the play but, like in *Shopping and Fucking*, we can find a touch of optimism in the belief that people still have a potential for a true connection with another human being. *Sleeping Around* became very much praised by young audience as they felt it was about real life and about people like them. Though it reveals a lot about sexuality on the eve of the millennium, the raw feelings and confusion included were more important. The notion of sex was attacked by some critics who said that playwrights criticize it as just another consumer appetite and at the same time they use it as a marketing trick to attract young audiences.

#### ***4.5.1 Czech Production Alias Sleeping Around on the stage of Strašnické divadlo***

Czech theatre has always been very diverse and open to foreign influences. It is no wonder that experiential theatre found one of its new stations also in the Czech Republic where it is known under the designation 'cool dramatika' [cool drama]. Several directors in the Czech Republic have already showed that they are able to cope with the in-er-face topics and find their own way of presenting it to our audience. Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, for example, was staged at the National Theatre in Prague on 6 March 2003, three years after its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. Today, more Czech theatres are involved in cool drama, e.g. Žižkovské divadlo, Vinohradské divadlo, Strašnické divadlo etc.

The play *Sleeping Around* by playwrights Fannin, Greenhorn, Morgan and Ravenhill has been on the programme of Strašnické divadlo since 27 January 2010. It was directed by Vojtěch Štěpánek, a young and promising director who studied music and drama at the Musical Theatre department of the Prague Conservatory under the leadership of Hana Maciuchová and Jan Novotný. During his study he staged a few one-act plays and, together with Petra Špalková, directed several of his schoolmates' dissertations. His last performance written at the school was called *dGenerace* [*dGeneration*] which he also directed with the assistance of Brano Holiček. He wrote it for the students of his year of studies with whom he later cooperated once more when he directed Dürrenmatt's play *Dvojník* [*Stand-In*]. Then he brought this play into Strašnické divadlo where he has worked as an actor and director since 2006.

Vojtěch Štěpánek himself talks about the in-er-face theatre as about a genre which is not a closed chapter in any case, which is still in progress and compares it to a big container into which plenty of new plays flow every year. He says that only a few of them are worth staging from the number of the new published plays, as today, it is not difficult for an author to have his play published. If someone decides to put on a new contemporary play, they usually have to go through many of them and make effort to think about what message it wants to deliver to the audience as, unfortunately, many of these works do not often include any message being just a chaotic compilation of brutal and pervert images and vulgarisms lacking a deeper thought.

After being asked why he picked out just Ravenhill's *Sleeping Around* he replies that it was just a coincidence. He needed a play for two actors and this one was offered to him. When he found out which genre he was dealing with he took it as challenge. He did not know much about the genre at that point but after reading *Sleeping Around* and some other in-er-face works his resolution to put it on got stronger as he was getting curious about what the reaction of the audience would be like, though he admits he also felt slight nervousness as staging this kind of play was a kind of risk.

According to him, the most difficult part of the preparations of the play's staging was the stage itself. There are twelve scenes in the play which create an imaginary circle, each one following the other in tight succession until the last one meets the first one at the end. Vojtěch Štěpánek finds the fluency very important, penetrating the whole work. He mentions not only the fluent shifts from scene to scene but also a specific kind of fluency which must be put into the play by the actors themselves which is a very demanding task but essential for the play. He says that the first precondition for it lies in that actors cannot feel comfortable onstage. He defines acting as a rank of mechanical actions which fluently follow one another. The actors must not have time to think between any two of them. As soon as they would feel relaxed, the fluency would get broken and the effect of the whole play would suffer. Štěpánek praises his stage designer Milan David for he did a great job in designing *Sleeping Around*. The stage looked simple, dark, almost empty which made the important details protrude. He highlights especially the cross which was drawn on the stage and the actors avoided

stepping on it all the time except the moments when they were expressing some of their most internal feelings.

It is known that the experiential theatre turns its back to tradition. Štěpánek does not see it as a kind of categorical denial but rather as a result of natural cultural and social development. He says that the change came spontaneously with the arrival of the nineties - the arrival of American influences into Europe, the arrival of Nirvana and Kurt Cobain, the arrival of depression into the mainstream. A shift of values came with all of this, the audience was sick of the 'licensed' dramatic theatrical speech and appreciated normal casual civil dialogues. According to Štěpánek, the geniality of the authors of the genre lies in their ability to encode great and serious topic into a casual chat at the table. He thinks that what the genre minds about tradition is the license - what they want is to express the content through the form, not to 'pollute' the form by the content. They see the licence in the theatrical tradition which actually is the prescribed form into which everything is wrapped.

What Štěpánek sees as the most appealing problem of today's society covered in Ravenhill's work is the feeling of solitude. He defines the play as bringing inner monologues into the open. In this world full of modern communication technologies, facebook, MSN and other inventions, people experience a striking paradox - they have all their friends and relatives seemingly always with themselves but, at the same time, they suffer from a lack of communication and solitude. They feel they need to communicate but the question if they are able to remains. This question is essential for the play. The need to communicate is sometimes so urgent that it often results in breaking the rules of a normal communication so that the dialogue may look like this one from the Czech production:

**Greg:** A lot of young women look lonely at present. The cell phone at their ear makes you think that they will need a surgeon to remove it. And twenty-four hours a day they are saying: "I am lonely, I am lonely."

The other person's reaction is somewhat surprising.

**Annie:** If you were to decide, Greg. A night with Wynona Ryder or a night with Sharon Stone? Which one would you choose? (tisková zpráva)

People are lonely and unable to communicate with each other. The play is about passing

by, about the fact that people often do not speak to each other but one in front of the other. They lead their inner monologues without any kind of connection with the people around us which may end in a catastrophe.

The play has the subtitle *Four authors, twelve dialogues, twelve characters, two actors and one desire*. It is a contemplation over people who still do believe that two people are capable of a true and honest connection despite the permanent loneliness and pressure from outside they have to face. The producers aimed to explore the characters in detail to figure out how they work and why, what they are powered by - if it is money or love. At the same time, they did not answer these questions. Vojtěch Štěpánek explains that everyone is able to answer these questions for themselves, his job is just to lead them to the point where they realize it and begin to think about it. He says that there is this point in the play where all the people really do it, no matter what their job is or how old they are. At that moment, they get limited in their perception only to the basic information about themselves and the others and they start to impart their inner selves and this is the moment when everybody find themselves on the same 'tone' with others. By now, the audiences, the actors, the director and the author are interconnected. Štěpánek says this also explains why he chose Jan Zadražil and Ljuba Krbová, whose ages differ so that she could be his mother.

Another theme which holds all the scenes together is sex. It is present in every scene, if not physically then it is at least spoken about in a way and it is always somehow dysfunctional, e.g. in the scene where a woman begs her lover to have sex with her although she knows he has AIDS and he denies it. *Sleeping Around* is in fact a set of sad images of the sex wars of the nineties where women are mostly seen as the initiators of sex. This suggests a question 'what the role of women in the play is'. Here Štěpánek replies that it is not a good idea to try to generalize it, though they often tend to dominate over men in that they are more apt to bear the responsibility and handle various problems.

To the question 'why some directors ignore or refuse experiential theatre' he gives his explanation that they are probably afraid of such an experiment, they do not want to risk that the play would get rejected or they do not see the depth of the new writing

which is more likely the case of the ones from older generations.

## **5. Violence and Crisis of Masculinity**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

Boys and young men today learn very early that being a so-called 'young man' means to show the world only certain sides of themselves, those which the dominant culture has defined as manly. They see manliness in being physical, strong, independent, in control, powerful, respected, muscular and tough. They know that these characteristics are what the society attributes to the so-called 'real man' and they learn it at various places - in their families, their community, but one of the most influential sources are the media which provide them with a steady image that defines the man as the one who is associated with dominance, power and control. For example, they present typical men as tough guys in bars, boxers or criminals, there are tendencies to present, for example, the Asio-American men as martial artists or violent criminals, or the Afro-American men as boxers. The media help to construct violent masculinity as a cultural norm, they make violence a socially accepted aspect of masculinity. Therefore, the dangerous connection between being violent and being a man has been established mainly thanks to the media. It is no wonder then that most cases of murder, assault, abuse, rape or domestic violence are committed by men. Moreover, this is a cyclical process, these men often grew up in abusive households. They behave as they do to survive in their peer culture, as they feel they are pressed upon by their peers and the society's expectations. However, all of this comes with the cost in terms of damage to their psyches and the ability to act as decent human beings. They often incline to machoism because they see many girls and women validating it, there are fewer women who value the men who reject transforming themselves into the 'tough guys'. Similarly, men tend to be considered victims if they seem to have lost their power and uncover their emotional side. Many men today are looking for new, healthier, self-respecting ways of being respected men in this rapidly changing world.

Young men play a very important role in in-yer-face theatre. In fact, its plays are

sometimes called 'boys plays', suggesting that boys, or young men, are crucial to them. Both Kane's *Blasted* and Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* are full of clear evidences of this fact.

## ***5.2 Shopping and Fucking***

To analyse the play chronologically from the beginning to the end, an interesting moment should be mentioned just at the end of scene one. It is located in a flat where Robbie and Lulu are trying to get Mark to eat a takeaway food they have brought. Mark says that he is going to find some professional help to advise him how to cope with his personal problems. Here Lulu seems to understand him and to be patient with him. Robbie, on the contrary, starts to urge Mark to explain why he sees his leaving as the only possible solution and presses on him emotionally saying that he thought Mark loved him and now he sees that he does not. He even asks Lulu to tell Mark he loves him and really wants him to stay. In this scene, the woman, Lulu, is the strong element, who decides that they do not need Mark and are able to get by. Her strength is also proved in scene two, situated in an interview room where Brian interviews Lulu who is applying for a job. She shows she is certain and well-aware of her qualities saying 'Instinct. I have good instincts. That's one of my qualities. I'm an instinctive person' and adding later on that 'Although of course I can also use my rational side. Where appropriate' (Ravenhill 8). Apart from instinct and reason, she pinpoints she likes order and having everything in its place. All of this consolidates the fact that she in a way takes over the function of the boys' mother, she is the one who is confident about her qualities and abilities, she is able to think rationally and she is the only one of them who is able to solve their problems - not only her own problems but also the boys', or at least find and show a way out of their biggest troubles.

Unlike Mark, who is searching for help and openly admits he needs another person to help him sort things out, and unlike Robbie, who is mourning and depends on Mark's love, Lulu decides to face the situation courageously and get a job. She does not drown in permanent thinking about her feelings, she does not find it useful to speculate constantly about her relationships with other people and trying to figure out why this or

that happened, instead she takes it into her hands and starts to solve the problem properly. In the second scene, Brian is interviewing Lulu and describing her a plot of a film which Lulu has not seen. Yet, she is always right in completing the plot when she is asked to do so. It is clear from Brian's reactions that he did not expect her to be so good and accurate in her prediction. He seems to be surprised by her intuition which may imply that he underestimates women's intellectual capacity, or it may suggest that what men consider interesting and not at all clear-cut, women either take for granted or are able to guess intuitively. Brian seems to get frustrated or maybe irritated by her abilities which makes his 'manly side' emerge and he tells her to take off her jacket. It looks as if he felt he was losing his intellectual power which makes him use the 'physical' one in terms of taking advantage of the natural physical dominance of men over women. Finally, he makes her take off the jacket under the threat that he will not consider her for the job any more. There are two more moments which are worth mentioning in this scene; the plot of the story which Brian is describing to Lulu contains a mention of 'the Cycle of Being' in 'Because now the dad speaks. And he says: 'The time has come. It is time for you to take your place in the Cycle of Being (words to that effect). You are my son and the one true king.' And he knows what it is he's got to do. He knows who it is he has to kill. And that's the moment. That's our favourite bit' (Ravenhill 9). This might have been incorporated deliberately as a metaphor of Lulu's (and Mark's and Robbie's) life as well as to the young generation's lives in wider sense. It is a metaphor showing that they all live their own cycles of being which are full of stereotypes and routines which have a negative impact on them. The word 'cycle' suggests that they are locked in the cycles unable to get out of them on their own. Lulu, though being the strongest of them, is not an exception from the rule. Her stereotypical behaviour is revealed when she takes off her jacket worrying less about her nudity than about the fact that the two stolen meals which she has stolen in a supermarket could fall out. This strange and sad shift of Lulu's sensibility is elucidated when Brian asks her about her family and it turns out that she meets her parents rarely, mostly once a year for Christmas; from this, it is evident that she comes from a dysfunctional family.

In the third scene, Robbie and Lulu are telling each other their experiences from the day. Again, Robbie appears to be the weaker one depicting first the would-be

adventurous and dangerous incident from the burger chain fast-food restaurant where he worked. He was attacked by a man with a plastic fork which snapped before it did any damage, and after this incident he was sacked. He says to Lulu that it is her who has to pay for everything from now and asks if she got the job in the TV she applied for. It seems he thinks that he has already done a lot when he worked for the burger chain and therefore it is all right now to leave the responsibility on Lulu. When she gives him a positive answer she explains to him that she has been offered a temporary assignment and produces three hundred Ecstasy tablets in a clear plastic bag telling him that she wants him to make himself useful helping her to sell them. Then Lulu exits and Mark comes in and starts a conversation with Robbie confessing himself to his 'Lick and Go' experience from the sanatorium which he calls a mere transaction. They lead a dialogue about what is a personal relationship and emotional dependency during which time Robbie takes two Es. Here again, the woman, Lulu, enters with two microwaved ready meals on a tray and when she sees Mark she only says it is hard to share the meals, they are done individually, not made for sharing. This implies that she is setting the rules clearly, she is only going to share food with Robbie as they both have already made effort to find a job and cope with their difficult situation while Mark has done nothing and he had even left them and had gone to sort his own problems with no regards to Robbie and Lulu. Lulu gives him no choice same as he gave them no choice when leaving them. If he wants to stay with them he has to accept the rules; Mark seems to understand this and decides to go to get some food for himself.

In scene five, Robbie offers Lulu to sell the Es for her because she needs to have a rest after an attack on a shop-assistant she witnessed in a shop. It is Lulu again who cares for the rules and wants him to mind that 'there's just one rule, OK? That's what they reckon. If you're dealing. There's just rule number one. Which is: He who sells shall not use' (Ravenhill 31). In scene seven, Robbie turns out to fail again in doing this 'new job' as he takes three or four Es himself and then gives out the rest to the people in a pub for free.

In scene six, Mark and Garry are in a bedsit drinking from a bottle of champagne after Mark has licked Gary's arse. Garry is bleeding and recalls the times when he got regularly sexually abused by his mother's 'bloke' (as he calls him): He comes into my

room after News at Ten ... every night after News at Ten and it's, son. Come here, son. I fucking hate that, 'cos I'm not his son' (Ravenhill 32). He is a good example of a young man who grew up in an abusive household and who demonstrates a typical paradox - he hated his abuser for what he did to him, yet on the other hand, he does not mind Mark to do to him the same for money. For him, sex is just a transaction as well as for Mark. It is therefore not personal and does not interfere into their private lives. There is a shift of values or shift of the attitude to sex which was caused by the abuse that happened in a dysfunctional family. It is indisputable that Garry lacks a real dad to care for him saying 'I want a dad. I want to be watched. All the time, someone watching me' (Ravenhill 33). The story about Gary's abuse proves that it is not possible to separate sex from one's personal life making it a mere transaction - the experience made Garry recall the past and it made him feel a need to talk about it. Mark did not want to listen to the story, he was not able to face it as this was a complete opposite of what he came for. He wanted to think over his set of values, have a rest and make sure that sex for money has nothing to do with his private - emotional - life. Instead, he was now exposed to the story and supposed to listen to it which was a burden too heavy for him to bear. In this scene he also says: 'I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self. Which is actually potentially very destructive. For me - destructive for me' (Ravenhill 33). He demonstrates a typical example of a man who the more he is trying to sort things out the more frustrated he gets.

Scene seven contains a dialogue between Lulu and Robbie where Lulu asks what happened with the three hundred Es she gave him to sell. Robbie gradually confesses that he has given them out in a pub after he had taken some himself. Lulu gets furious, recalls the rule number one and, finally, she hits him several times in his face. Robbie is explaining what made him give out all the tablets: 'I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth. And I see this kid in Rwanda, crying, but he doesn't know why. And this granny in Kiev, selling everything she's ever owned. And this president in Bogotá or . . . South America. And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab. And I think: Fuck Money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let's be . . . beautiful. Beautiful. And happy' (Ravenhill 39). Lulu

punishes him as a mother punishes her son and explains to him like to a little boy that his act of kindness he has done to make the world 'beautiful and happy' is going to have a bad impact on both of them asking scornfully where the beautiful justice is which he was talking about.

The eighth scene opens with Garry telling Mark about how his step-father used to abuse him. He complains about the council's worker whom he asked for help but was offered nothing more than a leaflet. The violence committed on Garry by his step-father was then substituted by another sort of violence - the psychological violence in the sense of humiliation which Garry had to overcome, first, when he was to talk about such an intimate thing in front of a completely unfamiliar person and, second, when the person offered him a leaflet instead of a proper help. This act of offering a leaflet could be seen as violent from more reasons. Not only it shows the worker's indifference to Gary's problem and, in fact, his fate, but it also shows more generally the indifference of today's society to the problems of an individual. Similarly, it reflects the loneliness and confusion of young people.

Brian, Lulu and Robbie meet together in a flat in scene nine. They watch a video of a schoolboy playing the cello which makes Brian weep repeatedly. He apologizes for it feeling a bit ashamed but then he loses his temper when Robbie offers him first a toilet paper and then a dirty handkerchief to wipe his eyes with. He punches Robbie who slumps to the floor and takes the handkerchief away with an apology. Then Mark and Lulu start to talk about the effort the playing requires. Here Mark calls attention to the fact that it is not only his son's effort in terms of having to practise for hours a day, but also his own efforts as he is the one who has to sponsor it all. The climax of their conversation comes right here when it turns out that Mark has played the video tape with the intention to make Robbie and Lulu aware of that they should always care about the rules and realize that they must bear the responsibility for everything they have done. He says: 'Learn the rules. Money. There's boarding fees and the uniforms, the gear, the music, skiing. Which is why I run such a tight ship, you see? Which is why I have to keep the cash flow flowing, you see? Which is why I can't let people FUCK. ME. AROUND. You understand' (Ravenhill 49)? He adds that he does not like mistakes, and he has made one when he put the three hundred Es in trust with the two. He knows

that he has only one chance how to get his money back and it is giving them more time. To make his demands more understandable and serious he threatens them with physical violence inserting another tape on which a man with insulation tape over his mouth is being drilled through his face. This part of the book may look as a collection of violent acts, however, if we look deeper into it, we find a message which says that in this almost emotionless world where everything is measured by money the only way of being successful and respectable is using violence.

In scene ten, Robbie and Lulu sell telephone sex to earn the money they owe to Brian. While doing so Lulu realises that there are a lot of sad people in this world and contemplates over it for a moment. Robbie calms her down by saying that they are making money and therefore they are going to be all right by which he exemplifies again Brian's motto that 'Money is civilisation' (Ravenhill 87). This scene shows how Robbie and Lulu have been violated by today's world's values. They have captured sex as a commercial transaction and a means of earning money quickly instead of keeping it private.

In the remaining scenes, ten to fourteen, most of the important actions happen. Garry and Mark talk about their relationship when shopping at Harvey Nichols. Mark reveals his feelings for Garry and says that he loves him. Garry rejects and despises this saying that it is not what he needs, he does not want a man like Mark, who would like to develop a relationship that is mutual with respect for and recognition of the other's needs. Conversely, he wishes to be owned, to be looked after and 'fucked in the way it hurts' (Ravenhill 87). Mark takes him to visit Robbie and Lulu to show him where he comes from. Meanwhile, Robbie is wondering why the phones have not rung for so long and finds out that Lulu has disconnected the phones to eat the microwave meals at rest. She explains that she spoke to someone on the phone who told her he was masturbating to the video from a supermarket which appeared to be the video from the day she witnessed the violent attack of a shop-assistant by a wino. It is Lulu who feels disgusted and touched by the coincidence unlike Robbie, who insists on that they have to carry on making money as there is no time for resting. When Mark and Garry enter, Gary tells Robbie about Mark's feeling for him. Robbie does not believe it and they fight. Again, Lulu is the one who tries to stop it and protect the ready meals. When they

calm down, Gary says to Robbie that Mark does not do anything for him as he is too gentle and that he longs for something absolutely different, something strong, firm. He demonstrates a paradox in the sense that he is a young man who hates his step-father for he used to abuse him repeatedly, but now, what he wants is to be owned and abused by someone dominant. At this moment, he asks Robbie to play a truth or dare game with him and offers him money for it. Robbie accepts it as he sees it as an easy way of getting the money he and Lulu need to pay to Brian. He does what Gary wants - he puts a blindfold on his eyes, takes him up the stairs and rapes him. Then he invites Mark to make his own turn too, but he denies the last wish which is to penetrate Gary with a knife and exits so at the end of the thirteenth chapter, Mark and Gary are left in the room and we do not know how it is going to end. All the three men exemplify what a destructive impact the confusion and feeling of loneliness can have on young men. They do desperate things as they think it might help them cope with their problems, while, on the contrary, they get only more confused. This may go into extremes as in the case of Gary who sees the best and only solution in his death.

The last scene appears to be a kind of pacification in the end after all the violence and disquiet. Brian returns Robbie and Lulu their money, explains his philosophy that 'Money is civilisation' (Ravenhill 87) and tells them that they have already been civilised which means that they have learned from their mistakes and therefore he gives them the money back. The end of the play is quite optimistic, as it shows Mark, Robbie and Lulu sharing their meal together - they even feed each other. All of this implies that not everything is lost in this world, there is still a ray of hope that the society will get better and everyone may finally find what they are looking for and make their own sense of the world.

### ***5.3 Blasted***

The play is divided into five scenes out of which, in fact, the first two scenes and the other three create two contrastive parts. The borderline between these two parts is to be found approximately in the middle of the text at the very end of scene two when the soldier enters the hotel room where Ian and Cate are accommodated. In comparison to

the first part, the second part of the play gradually becomes much more acute encompassing plenty of the most brutal images which are taken into extreme. Violence could be another name for the whole second part.

The first scene begins with the two main protagonists, Ian and Cate, who enter a very expensive hotel room in Leeds. After a description of the room's equipment the author also offers a description of the characters. 'Ian is 45, Welsh born but lived in Leeds much of his life and picked up the accent. Cate is 21, a lower-middle-class Southerner with a south London accent and a stutter when under stress' (Kane 3). When they enter, Cate is amazed at the classiness of the room while Ian comes in, throws a small pile of newspapers on the bed and goes straight to the mini-bar to pour himself a large gin. From the descriptions of the characters and their introduction at the beginning of the first scene it is clear that Ian is the dominant one while Cate looks rather submissive, shy, callow and maybe a bit naive. This is even more evident after Ian's first utterance when he says: 'I've shat in better places than this. I stink. You want a bath?' (Kane 4) while Cate still keeps silent and only shakes her head. The scene includes many moments which show the dominance of Ian over Cate, as well as several examples of machoism. To support the image of Ian as a dominant, strong man, he goes into the bathroom after they enter the hotel room and comes back with only a towel around his waist and a revolver in his hand. Although the gun might be seen as a proof of his strength and power, it in fact implies his uncertainty and weakness. He would like to get Cate on his side, he would like her to love him, but he does not know how to do it. A big problem lies in their communication. He uses a rude language, full of vulgar expressions which leads to the effect that Cate either keeps silent or argues with him, but without using vulgarities. As a side-product, his manners make her feel sorry for him, rather than hate him, which makes him believe he has power over her but the truth is that she does not enjoy such communication, feels uncomfortable and stutters even listening to it, and so she finds it easier not to say anything. However, thinking that it is a proof of her weakness would be a misinterpretation. She has a great inner strength, unlike Ian, who only tries to show his power by means of using aggressive vocabulary, wearing gun and treating other people with contempt while in reality he feels uncertain and emotionless inside. The language they use reflects how different the two are. Cate's

sensibility is included not only in her own parts of the dialogues, but also in the author's comments on her actions in the book. While Ian 'throws' the newspapers on the bed and goes into the bathroom, Cate 'puts' her bag down and bounces on the bed. She goes around the room, looking in every drawer, touching everything. She smells the flowers and smiles' (Kane 4). Her first word in the play is 'lovely'. She seems to be enjoying the place and feeling relaxed until Ian comes back from the bathroom - she starts to suck her thumb then. The beginning of the play makes an impression that Kane did her best to put the two characters into a complete contrast. Reading about Cate makes the reader feel nice and optimistic, while reading about Ian makes them feel rather uncomfortable and disgusted. He speaks a blatant language, wears a gun, drinks alcohol and offers it to Cate too, coughs terribly in the bathroom, spits in the sink, and repeatedly displays indecent manners towards Cate. Kane mastered the work with her characters. She created two completely different characters not only in the way they look and act, but also in the way they feel. While the man, Ian, looks strong from outside, the woman, Cate, looks weak from outside but is quite strong inside.

When Cate says that she was worried about Ian, he first thinks that she said it because of the coughing she heard from the bathroom and derogates it by saying that it does not matter. When she explains she did not mean the coughing but she thought that he sounded unhappy he goes for a champagne without a reply. Here Cate asks what they are celebrating but he does not answer again and goes to the window to have a look out and says that he hates 'this city. Stinks. Wogs and Pakis taking over' (Kane 4). He sounds rather aggressive, even more after Cate tries to calm him down a bit saying to him that he should not call them that. He has a go at her accusing her of being 'a nigger-lover' and liking 'our coloured brethren' and subsequently calling her brother a 'retard' when Cate defends the Indians by saying that her brother is a friend with some of the Indians who work at the same place as him (Kane 5). After that he insults her too saying that he feels sorry for her mother having 'the two of you like it' (Kane 5). He speaks to Cate from the position of a dominant person and he intentionally puts himself into this position and therefore he dares make such judgements and such an offending conclusion about her and her family. At the same time he does it as he feels need to make himself sure that he is strong and he is the one who has the power to manipulate her. It may be

seen in between the lines that he scorns other people because he is discontented with himself, and this is an easy way of compensating his discontent as he is not strong enough to change himself.

When he says 'You know I love you' and 'Don't want you ever to leave' (Kane 5) she produces a big friendly and non-sexual smile. From that it is clear that she does not love him. He asks her immediately if she has ever thought of getting married and adds that he would marry her. She replies she could not and this rejection puts her into a dominant position for a while. However, she adds that she could not leave her mother which negates it. That the beginning of the play looks like a chain of permanent swapping of Cate's and Ian's positions in terms of dominance and submission is exemplified again later on when Ian says he does not like Cate's clothes because she looks like a lesbian in them and she replies that she does not like his either. At this moment, it seems that she is getting the dominance again, however, Ian manages to stop it for a while by taking all his clothes off, standing naked in front of her but just until telling her to 'put her mouth on him' when she bursts out laughing. Here, Ian feels embarrassed, gets dressed again and to calm down, he picks up his gun, unloads and reloads it to re-acquire self-confidence and expose his power in front of her. Then he asks her if she has already got a job and having heard a negative answer he adds: 'Still screwing the taxpayer' (Kane 8) to humble her too. He even becomes gradually rude and almost aggressive as he adds that there is no chance that she would get the job she applied for and any other job neither as she is stupid. Because of the power imbalance between Cate and Ian, Cate begins to tremble when Ian's manipulative actions are taking place, he tries to enforce her that she is dumb and non-separate and that she cannot get along without other people's help. Cate faints and when she is back again, Ian tells her: 'Don't do it again, fucking scared me' (Kane 10). Soon after he adds: 'Can't stand it' (Kane 10) and goes to the mini-bar to pour himself another large gin and lights a cigarette. His actions demonstrate how little he is able to cope with difficulties. His way out of troubles is always accompanied by some of the tough 'manly' acts; either he plays with a gun, or he uses vulgar language, or gets refreshed by an alcoholic drink or cigarette, or even a combination of all these alternatives.

Cate realizes that Ian behaves that way for a reason; he knows that he is slowly

dying of lung cancer caused by smoking and he has only a few months of life left. When she is told this she tries to persuade him to stop smoking and speeding it up and, instead, get a transplant, to which Ian replies that 'Why? What for? Keep me alive to die of cirrhosis in three months' time . . . Enjoy myself while I'm here' (Kane 12). She starts to pity him which he recognizes immediately and takes it as a chance to kiss her. She responds and he carries on putting his hand under her top, moving it towards her breast, undoing his trousers and demanding sex from her. She pushes him away but when he continues persuading her she tells him that she really likes him but cannot do this. However, he does not seem to stop it though, which makes her panic and she is losing consciousness again. This is the only thing that persuades Ian not to go on pushing on her. His fear from his helplessness in case she would faint prevails over his lust. Then, hoping to make her concede and have sex with him, he tries to manipulate her again and to thrust upon her that she intentionally hurt him showing her willingness to have sex but then stopping him suddenly and leaving him in pain. He always manages to control Cate by making her feel guilty. Cate, feeling guilty, agrees to masturbate him after which he asks her if they can make love tonight. She denies saying she is not his girlfriend any more and he continues manipulating her: 'Why not? . . . Have you slept with him? . . . Slept with me before. You're more mine than his' (Kane 16). She says she does not belong to him and he replies: 'What was that about then, wanking me off? . . . Sorry. Pressure, pressure. I love you, that's all' (Kane 16). Unable to explain why he stopped phoning her he orders her not to ask about it any more, he wants her to leave it and keep quiet. Scene one ends in Ian persuading Cate to make love with him and Cate refusing and saying she cannot because she does not love him. The whole scene is penetrated with the misunderstanding between Cate and Ian as Ian thinks that her decision to go to the hotel with him was in fact an agreement to having sex with him. He is unable to accept her explanation that she did it to help him because he looked unhappy and she felt sorry for him.

Scene two begins with Ian coughing and suffering from an intense pain in his chest, each cough tearing at his lung. Cate is watching him with an expression of disgust in her face. He notices it and says 'Don't worry, I'll be dead soon' (Kane 25). Then he tosses the gun onto the bed, invites her to have a pop and goes into the bathroom. She picks up his

jacket, smells it and rips the arms off at the seams, then picks up his gun and examines it. When he has gone back from the bathroom he sees the damage and cannot prevent himself from being aggressive: 'Sarky little tart this morning, aren't we?' (Kane 26). Then he wrestles her onto the bed but she takes the gun from his holster and points it at his groin which makes him back off rapidly. To take over the control of the situation he does not hesitate to manipulate her and hurt her saying 'You don't want an accident. Think about your mum. And your brother. What would they think?' (Kane 26) which causes her trembling, gasping for air and faint. He feels he has reclaimed the power again and this feeling devours him so much that he continues in his aggression; he lies her on the bed on her back, puts the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and simulates sex. As he comes, she sits upright with a shout. He panics and does not know what to do so he moves away and points the gun at her from behind. She laughs hysterically, crying her heart out, collapses and lies still. When she comes to herself she says to him that she is leaving. He prevents her from her intention locking the door and pocketing the key. Then there is an enormous bang outside as a car backfires and Ian throws himself flat on the floor. She explains to him there is nothing to be scared of, but he replies he is scared of dying. She starts to kiss him, his neck, chest, back and she begins to perform oral sex on him, finally she bites his penis as hard as she can. She tells him she used to love him but he has changed and turned into a nightmare for her. She is so desperate and disgusted by all Ian's deeds that she would not mind being shot by him. Therefore, when he points the gun at her head again she encourages him: 'Do it. Go on, shoot me. Can't be no worse than what you've done already. Shoot me if you want, then turn it on yourself and do the world a favour . . . I'm not scared of you, Ian. Go on' (Kane 34). At this point, the situation in the hotel room has become so acute that it is time for another character to interfere. Paradoxically, it is a soldier who enters the room and with him, instead of an appeasement, another lot of violence comes which is going to be even much worse. He eats Ian and Cate's food, takes Ian's keys, wallet and passport, stands on the bed and urinates over the pillows which disgusts Ian. There is a huge explosion and sound of summer rain.

Scene three opens with a description of the hotel blasted by a mortar bomb. Ian and the soldier are lying on the floor, Ian's gun which has been dropped by the soldier lies

between them. The soldier starts to scrutinize Ian asking about his origin and the purpose of his visit to Leeds, to tell him finally that he is dying to make love and describe him the gruesome, bloody crimes from outside he and his colleagues committed on men and women. He also discloses to Ian that he used to have a beautiful girlfriend but she is dead because a soldier killed her. That was a reason for him to go to the war. He implicitly admits that the crimes he has been committing are being committed as a revenge. There is a similarity between Ian and the soldier in that they both are not strong enough to cope with an injustice done on them. Instead, they are only able to feel relief when they see other people suffer. As the soldier continues depicting his horrible deeds they resemble Ian's aggressions against Cate, only they are much more brutal. The character of the soldier works as a metaphor for Ian's character as they mirror in each other.

Later on, the soldier asks Ian to write about him into the newspaper but Ian replies: 'I write . . . stories. That's all. Stories. This isn't a story anyone wants to hear. . . . I'm a home journalist, for Yorkshire. I don't cover foreign affairs. . . . I do other stuff. Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers. Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land. It has to be . . . personal. Your girlfriend, she's a story. Soft and clean. Not you. Filthy, like the wogs. No joy in a story about blacks who gives a shit? Why bring you to light' (Kane 48)? This outrages the soldier so much that he decides to make up for his anger so he pushes the rifle in Ian's face, orders him to turn over and announces him he is going to rape him or he will shoot him. Ian tells him he prefers being shot to being raped and shot, but the soldier rapes him anyway and noticing his smell resembles him the one of his girlfriend, he is crying his heart out. Then puts the revolver up Ian's anus telling him that the soldier who killed his girlfriend pulled the trigger on her and asking him what it is like. Ian is unable to answer. It resembles the first scene when Ian abused Cate because she was in his power and therefore she stuttered and was not able to speak comprehensibly. It looks as if there was an analogy between the relationships of Cate - Ian and Ian - the soldier or, in other words, it seems as if Ian has fallen into the submissive position of Cate and the soldier has taken over the role of Ian, the dominant and powerful one. In the dialogues between Ian and Cate it was Cate who was able to display her feelings, unlike Ian who did not

display any except saying to her he loved her but always with the intention to manipulate her. Now, it is Ian who is shocked by the brutality of the soldier, though he is still able to say he is sorry for what happened to his girlfriend and he is the one who lets the soldier bully him into submission.

The soldier carries on telling Ian the terrible images he has witnessed in the war and finishes his speech saying that he is starving. He asks Ian again to make sure there is not any food left. Ian, intuiting that the soldier is capable of everything, including cannibalism, asks the soldier if he is going to kill him. Instead of answering, the soldier grips Ian's head in his hands, puts his mouth over one of his eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. Then he does the same with the other eye adding that the soldier did the same to his lover.

At the beginning of the fourth scene, Cate enters the room carrying a baby. She sees the blind and miserable Ian lying next to the dead soldier who has a revolver in his hand and his brain blown out. She only repeats 'You're a nightmare' (Kane 51). Ian is begging her to help him end his suffering but she refuses. He asks her for finding the gun and fetching it to him so that he can do it on his own. She finds it, removes the bullets out of it and after having considered it for a while, she hands it to him. Meanwhile, she is rocking the baby, then she looks down at it and after she finds out it is dead she bursts out laughing hysterically, uncontrollably. This scene shows Cate as a mature, reasonable woman, in contrast to all the previous scenes. She experienced the life outside and came back as a strong, rationally thinking woman with another woman's baby in her arms which she wants to rescue. On the contrary, Ian became dependent on her, begging her first for a touch, then for her return to him and finally for the gun to end his sorrow.

In the last scene, Cate is burying the baby under the floor and is fretting about the fact that she was supposed to look after it but did not manage to keep her promise. She is praying for the baby and Ian is wondering if she will pray for him too when he is dead. She says she will not and turns to leave. Ian begs her to stay but she goes anyway. Ian's despair is extreme. He is masturbating, then strangling himself with his bare hands, defecating and then trying to clean it up with newspaper, then laughing hysterically, having a nightmare, crying huge bloody tears, hugging the soldier's body for comfort,

lying very still finally, weak with hunger (Kane 60). The next day he rips up the floor, lifts the baby out of the floor and eats it. He dies with relief.

The end of the play is ambiguous, Cate returns with a large sausage and a bottle of gin, there is blood seeping from between her legs. She speaks to Ian and he answers. Their last dialogue has only five lines:

'Cate: You're sitting under a hole.

Ian: I know.

Cate: Get wet.

Ian: Aye.

Cate: Stupid bastard' (Kane 60).

Although she has always been a vegetarian, she eats the sausage and bread and washes it down with gin, as Ian used to do. Then she feeds Ian with the remaining food and pours gin in his mouth. She sits apart from him, drinks the gin and sucks her thumb. He thanks her. The last scene suggests that Cate has given up all the ideals she used to have. When the baby died, she started to doubt whether God exists although recently she was at cross with Ian when he denied his existence. This would also explain why she started to eat meat; she did not eat it because of Ian who liked meat and whom she hated. Now, when she experienced the injustice of the baby's death, she stopped to judge Ian so strictly and her hatred to him decreased.

Although the text is full of violent acts and brutalisms, it is not hopeless. We do not know if Ian really died, all we can be sure about is that he has been properly punished for his aggression and lack of compassion. There is an interesting moment when Cate returns in the end with blood seeping from between her legs. It might be a suggestion of losing her ideals and hope, it might be a metaphor for the baby's death implying a connection between the dead baby which Ian ate and his own child Cate miscarried. However, it might also imply that she has got rid of all the wrong Ian had ever done to her.

From all that has been written up to now it is clear that *Blasted* is a place where many forms of violence or issues which somehow relate to violence meet. Kane makes a connection between the male urge to self-destruction, homophobic feelings, racist

hatred, sexual fantasy and open warfare. The play also makes the reader think about what the connection between maleness and violence could be without providing an answer. It raises a question of how the violence in the home turns violence on the streets, whether it is possible that the tabloid attitude to violence anaesthetize us to the real thing, or, if all men are the potential rapists. We could conclude that the play argues not only that all men are animals, but also that while men abuse vulnerable women, they treat other men even worse. The play is very much concerned with the crisis of masculinity as well as with violence which goes hand in hand with it throughout the whole piece.

## 6. Conclusion

This diploma thesis deals with the concept of In-Yer-Face drama which has brought a new sensibility into the British theatre in the 1990s. The aim of this work was to introduce this new dramatic style to the reader, depict its concerns and main features and demonstrate some of them on the plays by two of the most significant playwrights of the decade, Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, each of whom is dedicated a separate chapter.

The first chapter offers an explanation of the in-ye-face drama with an insight into the history of provocation and censorship which are closely connected with it. The second chapter deals with Sarah Kane, a very talented playwright who stood at the forefront of this new theatrical sensibility in the nineties and is ascribed the biggest credit of carrying it into the public's attention. Although she managed to write only five plays during her short life, the first of them, *Blasted*, brought her and the new genre enormous popularity and is considered one of the best plays written in the nineties. The circumstances and all the havoc accompanying the play from its introduction to the theatrical scene as well as the fact that the play was first perceived with disgust and scorn and, after a short time, praised and admired were impressive. Kane's plays have been twinned by a mystery after her death dividing the critics and the audience into two groups, one believing that her death was a natural result of the deep depressions she suffered, and the second denying it and claiming that her suicide was a premeditated and intentional act to bring fame and immense attention to her work.

The third chapter focuses on Mark Ravenhill, another playwright who stands out among the in-ye-face authors, and who, interestingly, does not include himself into this dramatic style. The name of his first full-length play, *Shopping and Fucking*, provoked a huge outrage even before it could appear in advertisements. Ravenhill's writing is original in that he usually collaborates on his plays with other authors. He maintained the idea that collaboration can enrich the play a lot as it stimulates the actors who thus participate in making the play. This chapter also mentions another of his plays, *Sleeping*

*Around*, which was put on in Strašnické divadlo in Prague. I made an interview with Vojtěch Štěpánek, the director of the performance, and included it into this chapter.

The last chapter analyses both *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking* with the focus on the themes of violence and crisis of masculinity. It comes into a conclusion that although both the plays are full of violent acts they do not lack hope and certain hints of optimism. Concerning the notion of masculinity, the plays do not provide us with a clear answer to whether it is in crisis or not, it just creates a basis on which everyone can build their own interpretation and, consequently, a possible resolution.

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