

---

## Staging The Unstageable: Exploring Sarah Kane's *Blasted* As A Seminal Text Of In-Yer-Face Theatre

---

Shubhajit Nayak, Independent Researcher, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

---

**Article Received:** 23/02/2024

**Article Accepted:** 20/03/2024

**Published Online:** 23/03/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.3.82

---

### Abstract

The English theatre, its inception, and progressive evolution have been an exciting field of study in English literature. It has effectively caught the attention and imagination of readers and scholars alike. It represents an arena where various issues, historical events, and motifs collide and merge. Its long tradition has evolved from and traversed through the medieval miracle, mystery, and morality plays to the most experimental theatrical forms of the 20th century. As the experimentation grew more vigorously in the later years of the 20th century, many dramatic theatres appeared, including the Epic Theatre, the Theatre of Cruelty, and the Theatre of Oppressed, etc. All these theatres discarded conventional dramatic representation, and the playwrights began to write plays that dealt more with the actual circumstances of society, which frequently startled the audience and readers. The performance of these plays forced the audience to reflect critically and objectively on the challenges facing society. It brought in a distancing effect and put a kibosh on the audience's emotional attachment to the characters. Another such theatre to hammer the supposed passivity of the audience developed in 1990s London, namely, the In-yer-face Theatre, which was established through the plays of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Anthony Nielson, etc. Plays in this theatre portrayed taboo subjects such as frightening situations, unfathomable brutality, blatant sexual misconduct, drug addiction, mental health issues, misogyny, explicit language, etc. In this context, this article aims to evaluate one of the plays written by Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, to illustrate how she presented violence and how, in general, the techniques of In-yer-face Theater are put into practice.

**Keywords:** In-yer-face Theatre, Sarah Kane, Experimental Theatre, Epic Theatre, Violence

### Introduction:

*In-yer-face theatre* is a term that describes a confrontational style of drama that emerged in Great Britain in the 1990s. British theatre critic Aleks Sierz has been instrumental in coining and propagating this new theatrical form in his seminal book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. It is characterized by its aggressive, provocative, and often shocking approach to contemporary issues, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable on stage to provoke a strong reaction from the audience. In his blog, Sierz described it as a "theatre which grabs the audience by the

---

scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message" (In-Yer-Face Theatre). He adds, "It implies being forced to see something close up, having your personal space invaded. It suggests the crossing of normal boundaries. In short, it describes perfectly the kind of theatre that puts audiences in just such a situation" (In-Yer-Face Theatre). This theatre style is often associated with the work of young playwrights who sought to challenge societal norms and confront audiences with the harsh realities of life. The phrase suggests an invasion of personal space, forcing the audience to confront the material presented to them up close.

In-yer-face theatre emerged as a response to the socio-political climate of Great Britain in the nineties, particularly as a reaction to the policies and cultural atmosphere of Thatcher's Britain. It represented a break from the politically correct and self-pitying victim narratives that had previously dominated the stage. Instead, it brought forth a wave of new writing that dealt with contemporary life in a raw and unfiltered manner. The evolution of this theatre form can be traced back to the alternative theatre movements of the 1960s, but it was only in the 1990s that it became recognized as a distinct and influential drama style. As was mentioned above, this theatre is characterized by its bold, provocative, and often shocking approach to contemporary issues. Here is an in-depth look at the characteristics associated with this theatrical style:

**Confrontational Content:** In-your-face theatre is known for its confrontational nature. It often presents aggressive material that challenges societal norms and expectations. The content is designed to affect the audience and arouse public consciousness, pushing the boundaries of what is traditionally acceptable on stage.

**Shock Value:** The plays within this genre frequently utilize shock value to engage the audience. This includes the use of obscene language, graphic depictions of violence, nudity, and the portrayal of taboo subjects such as sexual violence, drug addiction, and mental illness.

**Emotional Intensity:** The emotional landscape of in-yer-face theatre is intense and raw. Characters often experience and express extreme emotions, from deep despair to uncontrollable rage, forcing the audience to confront the visceral aspects of the human experience.

**Subversion of Traditional Forms:** In-yer-face theatre subverts conventional dramatic structures and storytelling techniques. It disrupts social structures, challenges moral norms, and often presents a non-linear narrative that can disorient the audience and defy their expectations.

**Direct Engagement with the Audience:** This theatre style seeks to break the fourth wall, directly engaging with the audience and making them a part of the performance. The aim is to eliminate the distance between the actors and the viewers, creating a shared space where the audience is compelled to react to the unfolding drama.

**Political and Social Commentary:** In-yer-face theatre often serves as a commentary on the political and social issues of the time. It reflects the concerns of a generation and provides a platform for discussing topics that are otherwise considered uncomfortable or controversial.

**New Writing and Talent:** The movement is associated with a wave of new writing by young playwrights eager to make their mark and bring a fresh perspective to the British theatre scene. These writers were not afraid to experiment with form and content, and their work often reflected the zeitgeist of the 1990s.

**Influence of Previous Movements:** While in-her-face theatre is a distinct movement, it draws influence from previous theatrical traditions such as Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, which emphasized the sensory experience of the audience, and Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, which aimed to provoke critical thinking.

**Analysis:**

*Blasted* by Sarah Kane is a highly controversial and provocative play that has left a significant mark on contemporary theatre. Set in a hotel room in a war-torn city, the play follows the tumultuous and destructive relationship between a journalist, Ian, and a young woman, Cate. As the violence outside escalates, the horrors of war are mirrored within the confines of the room, where brutality, manipulation, and degradation unfold. Kane's unflinching portrayal of taboo subjects such as rape, cannibalism, and societal breakdown shocks audiences and challenges societal norms. Through fragmented narrative and explicit language, *Blasted* disrupts traditional theatrical conventions, pushing viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about human nature. The play serves as a scathing critique of violence, power dynamics, and the dehumanizing effects of war. Despite its divisive reception, *Blasted* remains a seminal work of In-Yer-Face theatre, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable on stage and demanding critical engagement with its confronting themes.

Like her other plays, this play, too, stands as a visceral testament to the raw power of theatre to confront and challenge societal norms. Central to its provocative nature is the graphic violence and brutality that permeate its pages. Kane's unflinching portrayal of physical and sexual violence serves as a stark reminder of the darkest corners of human nature, forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the human capacity for cruelty.

One of the most striking aspects of the violence in *Blasted* is its graphic and explicit depiction. Kane spares no detail in illustrating the horrors experienced by her characters, thrusting the audience into the midst of their suffering. Scenes of physical violence, such as Ian biting Cate's fingers until she screams or choking her into near-unconsciousness, are rendered with vivid clarity. Similarly, the sexual violence portrayed in the play is both shocking and confronting, with scenes depicting forced penetration and degradation leaving an indelible mark on the audience's psyche. For instance, when Ian forces his fingers into Cate's mouth, vagina, and anus, the brutality of the act is laid bare: "He forces his fingers into her mouth. He forces his fingers into her vagina. He forces his fingers into her anus" (23). This explicit language leaves no room for ambiguity, thrusting the audience into the harrowing reality of the characters' experiences.

Moreover, the destruction wrought by violence is palpable throughout the play. The hotel room setting serves as a microcosm of the chaos and devastation of war, with furniture overturned, curtains torn down, and fires raging. This physical

destruction mirrors the internal turmoil of the characters, highlighting the cyclical nature of violence and its far-reaching consequences.

In addition to its portrayal of external violence, *Blasted* also delves into the theme of self-harm. Characters inflict pain upon themselves as a means of coping with their trauma, further emphasizing the pervasive nature of violence in their lives. The scene where the Soldier bites off his tongue is particularly jarring, serving as a visceral representation of the internal anguish experienced by the characters: "The Soldier bites his tongue off and spits it out" (34).

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is a bold and unflinching exploration of taboo subjects, challenging societal norms and confronting audiences with uncomfortable truths about the human condition. Through its relentless portrayal of rape, violence, and degradation, the play pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable on stage, forcing viewers to confront the darkest aspects of human nature. Kane fearlessly delves into topics that are often deemed off-limits, such as rape and cannibalism, shining a harsh light on the underbelly of society. Scenes of sexual violence, such as Ian's brutal assault on Cate, are rendered with brutal honesty, leaving audiences reeling in shock and disbelief. The confrontational nature of the text can be seen in Ian's disturbing assertion of power over Cate: "I want to be raped. You will be raping someone somewhere. So why not me?" (28). This provocative statement challenges conventional notions of consent and agency, forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable questions about power dynamics and sexual violence.

Kane's exploration of taboo subjects extends beyond the realm of physical violence to encompass themes of psychological and emotional degradation. Characters are stripped bare, literally and figuratively, as they grapple with the existential horrors of war and human depravity. Scenes of cannibalism and self-harm serve as stark reminders of the fragility of the human psyche, pushing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the depths of human darkness; in addition to explicitly portraying taboo subjects, *Blasted* challenges societal norms through its fragmented narrative structure and provocative dialogue. Kane's disjointed scenes and non-linear storytelling disrupt traditional theatrical conventions, forcing audiences to piece together the fragmented reality of the characters' lives.

This radical play by Sarah Kane utilizes language and dialogue as powerful tools to confront audiences with the harsh realities of human existence. Through explicit language, profanity, and confrontational dialogue, the play challenges societal norms and pushes the boundaries of acceptable communication on stage. Kane's unapologetic use of language reflects the brutal world her characters inhabit, forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about power, violence, and the breakdown of communication. Kane does not shy away from using profanity and vulgarity to depict the raw emotions and brutal realities experienced by her characters. Scenes of confrontation and conflict are rendered with brutal honesty, leaving audiences shocked and unsettled. Through explicit language, Kane breaks down barriers and exposes human communication's raw, unfiltered nature. For example, when Ian asserts his dominance over Cate with aggressive language, stating, "I will fuck you when I want, whether you like it or not" (32), the audience is

confronted with the brutal power dynamics at play. This explicit dialogue forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about consent, agency, and the abuse of power.

Moreover, Kane's confrontational dialogue unsettles audiences and challenges societal norms. Characters engage in vulgar and aggressive exchanges, reflecting the breakdown of communication and the disintegration of relationships. For example, when Cate responds to Ian's aggression with defiance, stating, "Fuck off, you cunt! (33), the audience is confronted with the raw intensity of their interactions. In addition to its confrontational nature, the dialogue in *Blasted* also reflects the character's internal struggles and emotional turmoil. Through fragmented and disjointed exchanges, Kane captures the fractured nature of their psyches, highlighting the impact of trauma and violence on their ability to communicate effectively. The play's non-linear structure and fragmented dialogue mirror the chaos and confusion experienced by the characters, further immersing audiences in their harrowing reality.

### **Conclusion:**

In summation, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* emerges as a quintessential representation of In-Yer-Face theatre, a movement synonymous with confronting audiences with unsettling narratives and graphic portrayals. Within *Blasted*, Kane masterfully incorporates all the defining characteristics of In-Yer-Face theatre, making it a poignant exemplar of the genre's essence. Through graphic violence, explicit language, and the portrayal of taboo subjects, *Blasted* immerses viewers in an uncomfortable exploration of humanity's darker facets, epitomizing the movement's intention to shock and provoke. Kane's unrelenting depiction of brutality and confrontation is a stark reminder of In-Yer-Face theatre's core principles, challenging societal norms and pushing boundaries. Moreover, *Blasted* contextualizes within a broader discourse of In-Yer-Face theatre, offering a rich ground for further research. Future studies could delve into the enduring impact of *Blasted* and similar works on contemporary theatrical practices and explore how the genre continues to resonate with audiences in addressing socio-political issues. Furthermore, a deeper analysis could illuminate the sustained influence of Kane's confrontational narrative techniques on playwrights and theatre practitioners, shaping the theatrical landscape for future generations.

### **References:**

- Kane, Sarah. *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays: Blastad; Phaedra's Love; Cleansed; Crave; 4.48Psychosis; Skin*. A&C Black, 2001.
- Sierz, Aleks. "A History of the Transient In-Yer-Face Theatre." *The Theatre Times*, 25 Dec.2018, [www.theatretimes.com/history-transient-yer-face-theatre](http://www.theatretimes.com/history-transient-yer-face-theatre).
- . *In-yer-face Theatre: British Drama Today*. Faber and Faber, 2001.
- "What is in-yer-face theatre?" In-Yer-Face Theatre, [www.inyerfacetheatre.com/what.html](http://www.inyerfacetheatre.com/what.html).