

**On the experience of vulnerability in British drama today –
from Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995)
to Polly Stenham’s *That Face* (2007)**

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The issue of the ethical value of performance has been a debated issue since Antiquity. While Plato, in *The Republic*, is wary of emotions because he believes these are likely to hinder in spectators their use of reason, and thereby their access to truth, Aristotle proposes that performances can be good for society, contending that excessive emotions are purged in performance and thereby can be tamed in real life. For Plato, the risk lies in the failure to distinguish between reality and fiction, and between good and bad; because we are too steeped in our emotions we cannot fight our own prejudices which are indeed “readily expressed in our emotions” (Ridout: 22). On the contrary, Aristotle shows the ethical potential of emotions represented and experienced via identification and the process of catharsis. In “The Emancipated Spectator,” Jacques Rancière takes up this critique of theatre underlining the fact that for Plato theatre is a stage of illusion and thereby of passivity. Since for Plato looking is deemed the opposite of knowing and acting, the spectator is constructed as lacking any power of intervention (Rancière: 272).

This debate should be approached from the specific vantage point of the category of *In-Yer-Face* theatre and of its links with more recent British plays. According to Aleks Sierz, British theatre at the end of the 20th century was dominated by “a theatre of sensation [which] jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm” (Sierz 2001: 4). This theatre was aggressive and provocative, as it was meant to shock audiences and to make them experience the violent emotions shown onstage:

Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best *In-Yer-Face* theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. (Sierz, 2001: 4)

Sarah Kane, one of the leading figures of *In-Yer-Face* theatre wanted to induce in people a “visceral” impact (quoted in De Vos and Saunders: 89). With *Blasted*, her first play performed in 1995, she was successful in her task, as reviewers complained of “upset stomachs,” or of feeling “soiled” even by the events and actions shown onstage (De Vos and Saunders: 16):

Personally, said Kane, I think the press outrage was due to the play being experiential rather than speculative. The title refers not only to the content but also to the impact it seems to have had on audiences. (quoted in Sierz 2001: 98)

In the light of these elements, one can wonder how plays that are mainly meant to provoke affects rather than address our intellects, and that inspire responses based on repulsion and abjection in the Kristevian sense, can be made compatible with a critical response involving intellectual reasoning. To explore what is at stake in the relationship between the experiential value of these plays and their philosophical content, I will look at two plays in particular: *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, and a more recent one entitled *That Face*. *That Face*, which was written by Polly Stenham when she was just 19 years old, premiered in 2007 at the Royal Court Theatre in London as part of the opening season, together with Mike Bartlett’s *My Child*. As we will see, this play, though not literally part of the *In-Yer-Face* moment or decade, shares structural and thematic traits with *Blasted*. Like *Blasted*, *That Face*¹ questions the ways in which violence and torture are received by an audience. What is more, the very title of the play invites us to reflect on the notion of the “face” and on its ethical and theatrical dimensions. To do so, I will draw from Judith Butler’s reading of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics in relation to the notion of vulnerability.

Comparing *Blasted* and *That Face* is an illustration of British theatre critics’ contention that there was a narrowing of concern in

plays performed in Britain in the 2000s as compared to the 1990s.² *Blasted* starts off in an expensive hotel room in Leeds where Cate, a naive and emotionally fragile young woman and her former lover Ian, a middle-aged man, obviously terminally ill, meet up. Ian, a journalist who also talks about a mysterious undercover job, owns a gun and forces himself sexually on Cate who retaliates by biting his penis. While Cate is in the bathroom, a soldier holding a sniper's rifle knocks at the door. After eating the couple's breakfast, the soldier urinates on the bed. In the next scene, the "hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb" (B: 39) while war is being waged outside. The soldier, after having recounted his war crimes and told how his own girlfriend was killed, rapes Ian, sucks out his eyes and eats them. In the next scene, the soldier has committed suicide. Cate comes back carrying a baby that eventually dies; Ian wants Cate to help him kill himself but she leaves to find food instead. Meanwhile, Ian masturbates, defecates, has a nightmare, cuddles the soldier's body, and finally eats the baby's flesh. Minutes later he dies, his head poking out of the broken floorboards of the room. When Cate comes back, she feeds the living dead Ian who eventually thanks her.

As for *That Face*, it focuses on a dysfunctional British upper middle-class family. The play starts off in a boarding-school dorm where Mia, the teenage daughter of the family and her friend Izzy are busy bullying their "house sister" (TF: 10) Alice in a disturbing hazing ritual. Alice has been tied to a chair and a "beanie-style hat has been pulled over her face" (TF: 9). But the ritual comes to a sudden end when Alice, who is in charge, realizes Mia has drugged Izzy with her mother's Valium. The next scene takes place in Mia's mother's apartment in London where she lives with her 18-year-old son Henry. Henry has dropped out of school; he has been looking after Martha, his alcoholic and mentally ill mother, for the past five years; he obviously shares a sadomasochistic and incestuous relationship with her. Mia and her brother visit Alice at the hospital. Alice, whose face is badly bruised, pretends to be unconscious while Mia and Izzy, who is also visiting, continue to harass her. Hugh, the father, flies in from Hong-Kong and manages to save his daughter

from being expelled from school by contributing but “a few new digital cameras” (*TF*: 68) to the institution. In a final climactic family reunion, Henry urinates on the bed while dressed in his mother’s underwear. In the end, Mia and Henry are left to their own devices.

Though what is represented in *That Face* is much less violent and offensive than what is shown or even just suggested in *Blasted*, both plays share an inclination for strong language and provocative details, like a character urinating on a bed. As a matter of fact, Charles Spencer for the *Telegraph* championed “the [stunning] power of [*That Face*’s] emotional climaxes” (*Telegraph*). Clearly, both plays rely on the power to shock visually³ and to make audiences uneasy, even disgusted by what they are attending. But it is also essential to see that these plays provoke emotional reactions other than just abjection or outrage. If “Kane reacted against productions of her work that were too emotionally cool,” as one critic has it, she “also reacted against productions that were too ‘hot’ and bloody” (Campbell: 177), as we can see from her comments about the German production of *Blasted* in Hamburg the 1996. This she reportedly found “too in your face—it lacked sensitivity, fragility, and subtlety. It was more about the physical violence than the mental, emotional violence” (Saunders: 138). My contention is that one of the most crucial emotions provoked by these plays has to do with mental violence, entailing a feeling of vulnerability, akin to the fragility mentioned here by Kane. Indeed situations of psychological and physical vulnerability are explored in these plays, as Cate in *Blasted* and Henry in *That Face* are open to abuse and manipulation by Ian and Martha respectively. Alice’s powerlessness in the opening scenes of *That Face*, even if it is treated with dark, gallous wit, comes strikingly across as well. In similar fashion, as one critic notes, after watching *Blasted*, “shell-shocked reviewers [...] resonate[d] with the vulnerability and fragility of Cate, whose body faints and fits ‘under pressure’ ” (De Vos and Saunders: 17). What is more, in both plays, the powerlessness of the characters to solve the crises they are faced with and to counter the deleterious effects they produce is transmitted to the audience, as Kane suggested herself:

Personally, I think it is a shocking play, but only in the sense that falling down the stairs is shocking – it's painful and it makes you aware of your own fragility, but one doesn't tend to be morally outraged about falling down the stairs. (quoted in Sierz 2001: 94)

In what follows, let us consider this feeling of vulnerability, which is central to the reception process taking place in *That Face* and *Blasted*, as a sort of theoretical, dramaturgical and critical answer to the passivity of the spectator critiqued in Rancière's reading of Plato. To do so, Judith Butler's use of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics, in response to post-9/11 trauma, will prove useful – especially Levinas' notion of the “face,” which resonates strongly with the two plays under study. As Judith Butler notes in *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, the notion of the “face” was introduced by Levinas “to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us” (Butler: 131). Indeed, Levinas responded to what he thought were the disastrous consequences of modern rationality, by replacing an ethics based on the freedom of the individual or the realization of individual potential with an ethics based on the other (Ridout: 8). The Levinasian face is an abstract notion that communicates what is human, thus vulnerable, in the Other. More specifically, as Butler writes in her Preface to *Precarious Life*, Levinas “makes use of the ‘face’ as a figure that communicates both the precariousness of life and the interdiction on violence” (Levinas: xvii-xviii). To face and see the Other means to acknowledge the vulnerability of the Other and to respond to the injunction “Thou shalt not kill.” Moreover, Butler applies Levinasian ethics to dominant forms of representation in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. She highlights how, in the post-9/11 media, representations of the faces of the enemy effaced what was most human about them, and she further discusses the ethical stakes of such dehumanization as we have become more insensitive to human suffering exposed in the media.⁴

Butler argues that contemporary media coverage of events such as the Iraq war has not recalled us to the face of the human but has instead dissimulated it to such an extent that many of us have become insensitive to human suffering and finitude. (Atterton and Catarco : xi)

Thus Butler believes that the main task of the humanities today is to remind us of our duty to the “face” of the Other. She also contends that one way of resisting the rise of anti-intellectualism and censorship in the media after 9/11 (Butler: 1) is to be “open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy” (Butler: 18).

In 2006, Dominic Cooke, the new Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre in London where *That Face* premiered the following year, said:

[I will stage plays that] explore what it means to be middle class, what it means to have power, and what it means to have wealth... plays seem to be about the dispossessed, which is important, but you can't really understand a world if you're only looking at one corner of it [...]. (quoted in Rebellato: 74)

That Face exposes the demise of all forms of authority, be they parental or institutional as well as the normative structures of power, privilege and violence that sustain these social structures. Many recent British plays, like Mike Bartlett's *Contractions* (2008) or Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010), explore such power relations in the workplace or in upper class clubs. In *That Face*, the opening hazing ceremony is for that matter quite telling as the rite is clearly a way to impose and prolong a well-established form of domination. Furthermore, it is likely that it would have seemed rather familiar to the audience attending the play, as they would most likely be themselves “middle class”⁵ and thereby familiar with such practices. The experience of vulnerability and powerlessness, which the audience is made to share, purports to make them feel and experience the power structures upholding social relationships and norms, structures in which they, we, actually take part. As one critic puts it,

In *Phaedra's Love*, as with *Blasted*, Kane uses acts of violence and sexuality to force the audience into recognising their own complicity in the violence of the contemporary world, even if it is simply through their complacency as passive spectators. (Campbell: 178)

It seems as though the audience were meant to identify in turn both with the victimizer, making them realize their symbolic role in the victimizing process, and with the victim, making them process feelings of inescapability and powerlessness. Passivity, in this view, is

not negative, quite the contrary; it is an integral part of the cognitive reaction specific to *In-Yer-Face* theatre and to plays which abide by some of the traits of *In-Yer-Face* theatre, even though the moment of *In-Yer-Face* may have passed.

This analysis ties up, to a certain extent, with Martha Nussbaum's idea in her study of Greek Tragedy and Philosophy and the "goodness" of fragility, that emotions play a cognitive role in informing us about matters of ethical significance. Emotions can partake in knowledge when combined with judgment (Nussbaum: 364) since according to Aristotle, virtues require "openness or guilelessness rather than self-defensiveness", an attitude enhanced by emotional states (Nussbaum: 339). But this is further complexified by another emotional state which is central to these dark comedies, namely the half-hearted enjoyment induced by black humour. Indeed many of Kane's and Stenham's lines potentially contain such dark humour: "rather be shot than fucked and shot," the Soldier says in *Blasted* (B: 49), while Martha, reading a historical biography of Marie Antoinette, comments: "This is good. Marie-Antoinette knew her rights," to which Henry answers: "She got executed" (*TF*: 23). Laughter in these plays is a complex issue; undeniably, such grotesque humour brings comic relief and creates an emotional distance. By making the unbearable bearable it entails a form of survival; to a certain extent, it might be said to be redemptive and messianic. But at the same time, such laughter is cruel and negative in nature, based as it is on the Hobbesian theory of humour. It exploits a feeling of superiority, as when we are made to share in Mia's and Izzy's mockery of Alice in the hospital scene (*TF*: 35-42). In that respect, we experience Bergson's view of laughter as "an absence of feeling" (Bergson: 2) and a "momentary anesthesia of the heart," (Bergson: 3) when we are made to feel superior to the ridiculed target, where such humour is "not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless" (Critchley: 12). Thus, such comedy partakes in the problematization of power structures in the plays under study, which they render even more complex depending on whom the audience identifies with, the victim or the victimizer.

Additionally, both plays invite us to make “connections” between distant situations. In *Blasted*, the situation strongly reminded the first spectators of the play of the war in Bosnia, as Kane explained: “There was a widespread attitude in this country that what was happening in central Europe could never happen here. In *Blasted*, it happened here” (quoted in Sierz 2001: 98). In *That Face*’s opening scene, it was war in Irak and Abu Ghraib prison torture pictures released in 2004-2006 that were conjured up in the midst of this eminently British boarding-school initiation ritual.⁶ If war isn’t as omnipresent in *That Face* as in *Blasted*, it is implicitly present at a structural and symbolic level as each relationship – between school friends, parents or siblings – is a destructive and perverse one, the love-hate relationship between mother and son being paradigmatic in this respect; tellingly, Martha, the mother, recurrently calls her son “my little Russian soldier.” Likewise, at the hospital, Alice is said to be “looking like a war victim” (*TF*: 37). Here, the collapse of familial values mimics the collapse of social values, while in *Blasted* rape in an expensive hotel room in Britain evokes rape in warfare in Bosnia or elsewhere around the world.

Finally, both plays raise the related issues of vision, voyeurism and spectatorship. As noted by April de Angelis, one of the keys of the success of *That Face* had to do with the monstrous mother figure – a seductively dressed woman in a silk shift “who destroys her son’s clothes and forces him to dress in her nightdress, and leaves him urinating like a child on her bed” – and with “the voyeuristic invitation to an audience to consume Martha’s exhibitionism” (De Angelis: 558). Similarly, in *Blasted*, the sexual acts that take place onstage – acts which are usually confined to the private sphere – entail similar kinds of reactions. Furthermore, events staged and character construction remind us of these issues, when Martha murmurs to Henry in the final lines of *That Face* that once she is in rehab: “I won’t be able to see you. And I want to see you. I want to see that face. My baby’s face” (*TF*: 94); or when in *Blasted* the soldier, prior to his blinding of Ian, asks him to testify that he has seen him: “Tell them that you saw me. Tell them... you saw me” (*TF*: 48). Spectators are thus invited to question their position as

viewers. For Butler, our collective responsibility means being able to see and hear “beyond” what we are usually able to see or hear. With *In-Yer-Face* theatre and more recent plays inspired by *In-Yer-Face*, this may be achieved via the experience of powerlessness which we, as spectators, are made to feel and see, about situations in which we are potential participants and that we may be contributing to sustain.

Much of the debate over the *rehabilitation* of theatre as an ethical practice has had to do with making the spectator an active subject. As Rancière puts it, the alleged passivity of the spectator has led both theorists and practitioners to pursue a theatre “where spectators will learn things instead of being captured by images and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers” (Rancière: 272).⁷ The challenge of *In-Yer-Face* and of theatrical forms which abide by some of its provocative means is that they play with our alleged passivity as spectators – the point being to make us, the usually powerful and dominant, feel not only vulnerable but also powerless. The precariousness thus exposed in these plays reveals our sociality, and is the basis for the fragile but necessary dimensions of our interdependency, as opposed to the myths of omnipotence constructed around the characters of both Ian in *Blasted* and of Martha in *That Face*, myths which are blown apart before our eyes in the plays. What is more, the powerlessness of both characters and audience make us realize the concreteness of abstract power structures. The passivity of the spectator, far from being a liability, becomes an advantage for the playwrights who exploit the cognitive value of the feeling of precariousness experienced by the audience. Laughter, in this framework, offers a means of release and survival, while also entailing an emotional disengagement which is highly disquieting for spectators. Thanks to all these means, as Butler puts it in *Prekarious Life*, these plays make it possible for us to become “open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy” (Butler: 18).

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¹ In what follows, *Blasted* will be shortened as *B* and *That Face* as *TF*.

² “[P]lays were becoming gradually introspective, a pale imitation of the energy and exuberance of the 1990s that so excited critics” (Lane: 27).

³ The same kinds of comments were made about both plays:

“*Blasted* worked well onstage because of the vividness of its image.” (Sierz 2001: 99)

Vivid stage images included the opening ritual in the boarding-school dorm, with the initiation ceremony looking like a terrorist kidnap, and the climactic appearance of Martha in a scarlet dress and jewels while her son wears her silky slip and pisses on her bed. (Sierz, 2011: 182)

⁴ Likewise, in recent years, Levinas’ contribution to ethics has been appropriated by theatre studies:

Levinas’ account of the encounter with the face offers the appealing prospect of identifying theatre and performance [...] as a cultural practice well suited to the exploration of ethics. [...] we might be able to develop a model of performance as an ethical encounter, in which we come face to face with the other, in a recognition of our mutual vulnerability which encourages relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference.

(Ridout: 52-54)

⁵ Sierz explains:

In today’s theatre, as in much postwar culture, the audience has largely been middle-class, middle-aged and white—despite New Labour policies to broaden it. The general picture is of audiences that tend to sit quietly, and that absorb meaning in an individual rather than a collective way. All very English.

(Sierz 2011: 6)

⁶ “A girl is tied to a chair and her face covered by what looks like a black sack. Your first thought is Guantanamo” (Bilen: *New Statesman* 19 May 2008, 44).

As Mia herself points out to Izzy with deadpan humour: “Your responsibility is tied to a chair looking like a torture victim” (*TF*: 13).

⁷ Two recent responses discussed by Rancière comprise that of Brecht and his *verfremdungseffekt* and that of Artaudian theatre with its magical and vital experience. While one confronts spectators with the strange and the unfamiliar (Brecht), the other literally seeks to draw them *into* the spectacle (Artaud). Other theoretical responses involve a “doubling of the self [of the spectator] in which both reason and emotion are at work,” this being the basis for a “critical theatrical practice” (Ridout: 35). Theatre becomes in this regard an art of physical and mental and aesthetic interpellation, the spectator being addressed by the performance in many different ways.