

# British Theatre Guide

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## Blasted

Sarah Kane  
Sheffield Theatres  
Crucible Studio  
3–21 February 2015

Sheffield Theatres' Sarah Kane Season provides an opportunity for audiences to re-evaluate and appreciate her work.

*Blasted* received a particularly hostile critical response when it was first performed at The Royal Court in 1995, though the small Theatre Upstairs was fully booked for what appeared to be a 'succes de scandale'.

The play uses strong language, includes violent action and is anything but a straightforward naturalistic drama. Its themes are large themes: sexual exploitation; cruelty; the de-humanising effect of war; life; death; and even love, of a sort.

The action of the play falls into three main sequences. We meet Ian and Cate when they arrive at the expensive Leeds hotel room where they are to spend the night. It soon becomes apparent that this is no simple romantic tryst.

He is twice her age, a cynical journalist, dying of lung cancer; she is a wide-eyed, thumb-sucking innocent subject to epileptic fits which leave her unconscious for minutes at a time, and seem to be almost 'visionary' experiences. It becomes apparent that this unequal relationship has been going on for some time, suggesting earlier child abuse.

At this point the play is reminiscent of early Pinter, like *The Room* or *The Dumb Waiter* where the room provides a haven against the outside world where a relationship of sorts can be carried out.

In the second and central sequence of the play the security of the room is shattered by the arrival of a brutal soldier in full combat gear. Soon after, the 'Blast' of the title occurs and the room is a shattered wreck.

By now, Cate has escaped to the outside (a war zone) and Ian is subjected to a series of increasingly gruesome attacks which he responds to inertly and in silence. We have now entered the violent and emblematic world of Seneca or Jacobean tragedy.

The final sequence concerns the return of Cate, who assumes the role of carer and provider. Roles have been reversed, and a kind of reconciliation achieved. Ian's final humble 'Thank you' is a fitting end to the play.

The play makes considerable demands on the designer and James Cotterill rises to this superbly. The destruction of the hotel room is a masterpiece of transformation, as is the use of the under floor stage space. Lighting (Paul Keogan) is also used very effectively throughout, in creating atmosphere and cleverly blinding the audience to make scene changes invisible.

Richard Wilson's slow-paced direction allows plenty of time for the audience to consider the implications of the verbal exchanges, and to adjust to the metaphorical significance of the later action.

Visual imagery is resonant and recalls Shakespeare, Bond and Beckett. Additionally, the play adds to a debate that goes back to Sophocles. Is violence more affecting when it is presented as reported speech or as live action? Both models are present in the play.

The play is an emotionally and physically exacting experience for the three actors. The many sexual encounters and acts of violence are discretely presented and never sensationalised. What they represent is more important than the action itself.

Martin Marquez gives a powerful and convincing performance as Ian. He is completely compelling in the final sequence of short desperate episodes where he struggles to hang on to the last threads of life, or to precipitate a welcome ending.

Mark Stanley's Soldier is unexpectedly less brutal than I expected, but his measured performance encompasses the horrors he experienced in war as well as the appalling atrocities he perpetrated. A grim portrait of de-humanisation, as familiar today as in accounts of the Bosnian war.

Jessica Barden gives a definitive performance as Cate. The strangeness of her initial behaviour, the open-eyed wonderment as she explores the hotel room, her slow and slightly inarticulate speech, and the thumb sucking, make complete sense as more is revealed about her character.

Despite her simplicity or because of it, she is the moral compass of the play, sympathetic and understanding of others, however undeserving, reluctant to continue in a loveless relationship (ignored) and ultimately the provider and nurturer, who effects reconciliation. An impressive interpretation of the role.

The Sarah Kane season continues at Sheffield Theatres with performances of *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* during March as well as staged readings and a film of other work. An opportunity to explore Kane's work in depth.

**Reviewer:** [Velda Harris](#)