

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Phaedra's Love

Sarah Kane  
Young Genius Season  
Barbican Pit  
(2005)

The Young Vic's Young Genius Season at the Barbican is certainly proving to be very eclectic. Hard on the heels of Christopher Marlowe is another playwright who sadly did not make it to thirty. In Sarah Kane's case, this was because she took her own life, thus robbing the world of a genius that we are still gaining the measure of.

Miss Kane is flavour of the month, since, following [Cleansed](#) at the Arcola, this is the second of her plays to receive a London opening during November. It is therefore inevitable that theatre-goers and critics will be reassessing her work and deciding whether her reputation is built on puff or something more substantial.

*Phaedra's Love* was her first play and like so many members of the Brit pack of artists, she showed immediate maturity. She is also capable of packing a vast amount into only one hour as this play demonstrates.

As its title suggests, the play takes a new look at the classical tragedy originally brought to the stage by both Euripides and Sophocles.

Neither the ancient Greeks nor Racine, who also used this plot, would immediately recognise their world in this version that updates the story to the 1990s, a decade during which its playwright would become a leading figure in the *In-Yer-Face* movement.

On arrival, audience members discover fat, couch potato Hippolytus lazing on a chaise longue. He is surrounded by detritus and his laziness is such that his old socks are used both as handkerchiefs and mops following masturbation.

This man, played by Laurence Penry-Jones, is a prince who has everything but does not appear to enjoy his riches or opportunities. He is also ultimately shown to be not only entirely self destructive but also a dangerous heretic and a man easily capable of bringing down a dynasty.

While he can have any woman that he wants, he doesn't really want any and this proves a problem for his glamorous stepmother. Diana Kent's Phaedra has become dangerously obsessed with the boy since her husband Theseus's departure on their wedding day.

The position becomes even more complicated once Phaedra has pleased Hippolytus: he doesn't enjoy it and she feels nothing but shame. He cruelly reveals that her daughter Strophe (Alexandra Moen) has not only slept with him but also, on their wedding night, with Theseus as well.

Phaedra takes seemingly the only way out by killing herself, and in doing so creates a revolution outside the palace walls. By the end, horrific rape and multiple murders ensure that Miss Kane's

vision of Greek tragedy is as bloody as the original.

Anne Tipton, last year's James Menzies-Kitchin Award-winning director provides a powerful and visually pleasing production with only a couple of *longueurs*. While Sarah Kane has built up a reputation as a mistress of shock, the current revivals demonstrate that she also has hidden depths. It would now be good to see revivals of her other three plays so that a proper reappraisal can be completed.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)