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The Composer as Auteur: Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* as an Opera

Composed by Philip Venables, the opera adaptation of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) premiered for a four-performance run at the Lyric Hammersmith, London between the 24th and 28th of May, 2016. Presented in collaboration with the Royal Opera House and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the production was the culmination of Venables' period as Doctoral Composer-in-Residence at the GSMD, supported by the Guildhall and the Royal Opera House. Directed by Ted Huffman and with Musical Direction by Richard Baker, the work was performed by six female singers and twelve members of the chamber ensemble CHROMA. The critical response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

This was the first time that Kane's seminal text had been staged as an opera. Indeed, it was the first time that the Kane Estate had given permission for any of her stage works to be adapted, but under the condition that nothing was to be cut and it was to be performed in its entirety. It is a famously 'open' text: no characters are listed and speech is not attributed to specific performers nor does it specify the number of performers required. Despite four dialogues that imply a scenario between a patient and a medical professional, the text contains neither dramatic scenes nor a clear narrative; there are no stage directions to specify space or location although the text has been separated into twenty-four discrete segments, each separated in the script by five dashes. Its style varies from being dense textual collages of naturalistic speech to liturgical quotes and song lyrics, to sparse and ambiguous textual sequences containing a few words, letters, and sometimes numbers. *4.48 Psychosis* was notably also Kane's final work, completed shortly before she died by suicide in February 1999 at the age of 28, premiering posthumously at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in June 2000.

This paper is based on having viewed an early workshop in January 2016, as well as attending rehearsals and the *Sitzprobe* a week prior to the first public performance, and one performance at the Lyric Hammersmith. I would like to express my gratitude to Sarah Crabtree of the Royal Opera House, and the cast and production team for their generosity and their willingness in allowing me to observe their process.

Almost all of Kane's words were made present onstage during the performance: either sung or spoken, appearing as projected text, and sometimes projected in synchronisation with the music. Therefore to consider the composer as an *auteur* as outlined in my original abstract becomes somewhat unnecessary, as major interpretive decisions had already been

made by the composer prior to the beginning of the rehearsal process. Notwithstanding the complicated collaborative nature of developing and rehearsing new opera, the staging process could be considered as having been relatively conventional: the libretto and score prepared prior to the beginning of rehearsals, which were then subsequently staged and adjusted according to the artistic intentions of both director and musical director.

However, in rehearsal and in performance, the process of staging of *4.48 Psychosis* as an opera revealed other concerns that I consider worthy of further exploration. This paper is therefore presented as a very preliminary work in progress outlining some of these ideas, and my intention is to develop them into a fuller article.

Composer as Dramaturg

Rather than grappling with the notion of the composer as an *auteur* (and particularly when the production was also the work of a credited director), the rehearsal process and the production revealed that it might be more appropriate to consider the composer in this instance as a dramaturg. Significant choices regarding how the text was interpreted, utilised, and how it functioned and was incorporated within the *mise en scène* were all primarily the purview of the composer.

I would argue the process of composing *4.48 Psychosis* as an opera was not one of merely setting a libretto to music. The nature of the text itself and the stipulations regarding its use for this specific production, and also the absence of its author, meant that the compositional process was primarily concerned with the creation of a musical dramaturgy, rather than musical adaptation. This was not a process of adapting a pre-existing text for a new medium, but rather providing a score for a text where its potential adaptability was limited.

Significant dramaturgical choices were therefore necessitated by conditions attached to the use of the text. Had the entire text been set to music to be sung, the opera would have been far longer than its 90-minute duration. Therefore it was the composer that decided what parts of the text were to be musicalized; which were to be sung and how, which were spoken, or which to be projected. As a result of the various ways in which text was utilised, the resulting dramaturgy could be considered as one that was stratified with the text woven between instrumentalists, singers, and the scenography. This notion was echoed by the staging, as the spatial arrangement suggested the floor to be the site where text was sung, the wall where text was projected, and the ensemble playing on raised platforms above and behind the action being the location where text was articulated as rhythms.

It is also possible to consider the role of the composer as dramaturg in relation to the opera's critical response. Much praise was given to the score but some noted the 'literal' nature of the staging: the perceived effectiveness of the score was therefore attributed to the composer, while the less successful elements of the staging were attributed to the director. Theatre blogger and critic Andrew Haydon praised the music, while noting that Huffman's production 'is shockingly, shockingly bad. I mean: unbelievably inept. Grossly, offensively inept.' What were regarded as the 'literal' features of the staging however were noted as part of the composed score, and therefore in its reception it evidently became impossible to separate the contributions of the composer/dramaturg, and those of the director.

Postdramatic Text as Opera

Due to the very nature of the source material and the manner in which it eschews dramatic signifiers, one may argue that any production of Kane's text engages in a process of lessening its ambiguities; a staging will always require the imposition of a theatrical or interpretive framework. As a result, perhaps the actual genre or staging style is immaterial: this was not an opera of *4.48 Psychosis* as such, but merely a staging of *4.48 Psychosis* that elevated the significance of both musical and sonic elements as key components of the *mise en scène*.

A further consideration could be the performance style and the training required for performing a piece that is not predicated by notions of narrative or character. While physical, ensemble and devised work are broadly considered common strategies for the creation and rehearsal of postdramatic work, the same cannot be said of opera.

Musical Semiology, Pastiche, and the Construction of Narrative

Venables' score utilised a wide range of musical styles, sometimes used ironically and to humorous effect. Its composition can be interpreted as an extension or an echo of the source material which encourages a polystylistic composition. While it refuses to offer a single subjective viewpoint, it also contains occasional moments of aesthetic or structural (dialogic) coherence that could be loosely interpreted as dramatic scenes. The score contained few of what could be considered as discernible arias or extended melodic phrases, eschewing conventional vocal lyricism of both expressionist and post-minimal approaches to voice. However, there were instances of conventional – if somewhat didactic – dramatic expressions, melodic structures and musical phrases. Such an instance occurred in Scene Eleven as a performer sang into a tape recorder:

I dread the loss of her I've never touched
love keeps me a slave in a cage of tears (Kane, 2001: 218)

The singer sat alone upstage, singing to the accompaniment of a synthesiser. Here was an image of a lonely teenager, using an antiquated recording device and accompanied by an instrument that suggested a specific cultural moment. This was not set in the present. Unlike the majority of the action which took place in an ahistorical present, the production for the first time suggested a scene from a past event; a forlorn teenager, wallowing in the melodramatic angst of a pop song.

Similarly in Scene Seventeen, singers chanted:

Why am I stricken?
I saw visions of God

and it shall come to pass.

Grid yourselves:
for ye shall be broken in pieces
It shall come to pass (Kane, 2001: 228)

The latter tercet paraphrases Isaiah, Chapter 8, and the text gestured towards a future ritual. The orchestration utilised the use of bells suggesting a setting that was liturgical and sombre, and the stage appeared as a wilful and imagined acceptance of what will come after the text reaches its conclusion. Here was an imagined and rehearsed funeral, to take place at a later date.

The present of non-dramatic but fictive space in which the action took place can therefore be considered as current, signified primarily by identifiably 'contemporary' music. The use of synths and church bells then offered two temporal binaries; one for a remembered past and one for an imagined future. Two-thirds of the way through the performance, the music denotes the possibility of narrative; the conclusion is revealed and all subsequent action can only lead to its inevitable conclusion.

Music as Antagonist

Through the use of both live and recorded music, the production's sound design did not allow for any silence during its 90-minute duration. Sound - musical or otherwise - was a relentless presence for the entirety of the event, accentuated by muzak that played while the audience took their seats prior to the performance starting. (The ensemble had been instructed not to make any noises with their instruments until the performance started proper.) It would be unsuitable to consider the music as being somehow representative of mental illness or an individual's mental turmoil; the music does not attempt to dramatise

what is implied by the text. But we can consider the music, and especially its fragmented and unrestrained mixture of styles and techniques as being an unseen and intangible force that drives the stage action. If music is the central device within a stratified dramaturgy, the singers can be considered to be performing against and with the music; they, along with the audience, must endure what is sonic. The ceaseless and consistent presence of sound can be contrasted with the imperceptible and conditional construction of character. Sound becomes dominant and oppositional, and can be considered as an antagonist within the theatrical frame.

The vocal ensemble was conceived and presented as a 'hive mind' of a suggested 'patient', but during the performance the import of the single protagonist was brought into question; costume and choreography increasingly implied that all performers were one and the same. Therefore no 'other' was presented; the fathers, brothers, and lovers alluded to in the text are unseen and external. The protagonist(s) is/are female, and therefore it might be possible to consider the music as being if not oppositionally gendered, again as being an antagonistic presence.

This notion was accentuated by the score's most striking device, where dialogues between patient and doctor were reduced to rhythms. Lucy Schauer as a doctor and Gweneth-Ann Rand as a patient silently performed minimal physical actions that represented the actions implied by the text, while the words of their exchange was projected at the opposite ends of the wall behind them. The text for the most part appeared word by word, each syllable represented by a note played on a percussion instrument; the patient was a kettle drum, the doctor an increasing array of unpleasant noises: a scaffolding pipe and a hammer, a block of wood and saw. Again, music was presented as an oppressive, controlling other – both physically and sonorously – outside and above the setting of the dramatic scene.

Subjectivity and Character in Opera

If postdramatic theatre's general disregard of dramatic conventions and particularly the notion of character can be regarded as a shift from the actor to the performer, from the represented body to the actual body, then staging Kane's text as an opera can perhaps provide some insight into the manner in which both the text and music theatre signify subjective bodies. I have already noted that a staging of *4.48 Psychosis* must negotiate the manner in which it reduces the text to what is representable, locating itself between representing the real and the symbolic.

In this instance, the possibility of being able to make that distinction is limited as the performative logics of opera accentuate the most minimal vocal gesture as an aesthetic act; nothing here is a mimetic representation of the 'real'. But due to Venables' particular

treatment of the text and Huffman's direction, in which lines were sung and spoken within a dramaturgy that declared the performers to be capable of operatic gestures from the outset, the shift between actual and metaphoric bodies was always in a state of flux. The performers were discouraged from 'acting', and therefore instances of spoken text can be considered as ostensibly non-performative or non-dramatic utterances.

Scene Three contains a series of declarations that were individually sung by the ensemble:

I am sad

I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve

I am bored and dissatisfied with everything

I am a complete failure as a person

I am guilty, I am being punished

I would like to kill myself (Kane, 2001: 206)

All the 'I's were sung, but the rest of the sentence was spoken and in the singer's own native accent. This was an international cast, and the myriad of accents can be regarded as a refusal to acknowledge a cohesive fictive dramatic setting, while also simultaneously – and within the same phrase – drawing attention to a highly aestheticized, and skilful performative act. The production negated the need to make a distinction between the fictive and the real.

Reassessing Kane's Legacy

Finally, most audaciously and also perhaps potentially problematically, the opera of *4.48 Psychosis* allows for a radical reconsideration of what could be considered the text's intertextual and autobiographical constraints. Despite its ambiguities, and the fact that to consider it as a staged suicide note is the easiest and most reductive of readings, it is also the most autobiographical of Kane's works (Saunders, 2002: 100). The author remains very much present, and her absence and the complex autobiographical nature of the work is a fact that must be negotiated (if not necessarily directly addressed) by any production.

Huffman's staging left no doubt as to the fate of the lone female figure left onstage at the its conclusion: Rand climbed onto a table repeating the phrase 'Watch me' (p.244.), revealing a rope that was tied as a noose which was subsequently hung on an invisible hook. She held the noose in both hands, lengthening the opening, slowly bowing her head in its direction, before a blackout. The central 'patient' figure can be interpreted as now belonging to a long lineage of roles in operas that conclude with the destruction of the female lead.

I would like to propose that as an opera *4.48 Psychosis* overcomes the need to reconcile the inherent difficulties of staging Kane's text. By being sung, by being text, by being musicalized and positioned within a matrix of other sonic material, the logic of a lone authorial voice recedes. By allowing for a dislocating of the centrality of the text, *4.48 Psychosis* no longer has to carry the burden of its ambiguities. The opera can be considered to be an act of sublimation: the text begins to relinquish its author.

References

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