

Sing Without Hope, Tender With Trust

Cristina Delgado-García



Left to right Susanna Hurrell, Jennifer Davis, Gweneth-Ann Rand, Clare Presland and Lucy Schauer. ©2016 ROH. Photograph by Stephen Cummiskey

There is a moment in *4.48 Psychosis* that captures, with exquisite dark humour, how hopeless we are at understanding hopelessness:

- No?
- No. It's not your fault.
- It's not your fault, that's all I ever hear it's not your fault, it's an illness, it's not your fault, I know it's not my fault. You've told me that so often I'm beginning to think it *is* my fault.
- It is *not* your fault.
- I KNOW.

Since its premiere in 2000, the reception of Sarah Kane's last play has reflected our awkwardness towards open manifestations of despair. Kane's depression at the time of writing *4.48 Psychosis* has been repeatedly invoked, as if only illness could explain such a hurting text. However, this framework is dangerously reductive. In harnessing *4.48 Psychosis*

to Kane's biography, we risk ascribing her dramatic prowess to a self-destructive state of mind rather than to the robust trajectory of formal experimentation that began with her first full-length play, *Blasted* (1995). We also risk limiting our imagination regarding what a text as malleable as this can become onstage. Sixteen years after its first posthumous performance at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, we must rethink the ways we approach *4.48 Psychosis*. The particular musicality of this extraordinary text, its emotional demands on the spectator, its stance on character, and its faith in art: these are just some of the features worth emphasizing.

It is perhaps surprising that *4.48 Psychosis* has never before been produced as a piece of music theatre. The script is drenched in sound. Kane's text recurrently situates itself in the domain of musical expression, aural experience and dance: 'I sing without hope on the boundary', 'this is the rhythm of madness', 'I shall hang myself / to the sound of my lover's breathing'. Verification is impossible and ultimately irrelevant, but the script also carries the echoes of popular song titles. Shirley & Company's 1970s disco hit haunts the line 'shame shame shame', but the bouncy vivaciousness of the original is missing. There is another probable reference to hard-rock hit 'Dancing on Glass' by Mötley Crüe; its catchy edge is also gone, but the song's spirit resonates with *4.48 Psychosis* – the aching need, the dangerous desire, the appointment with death.

However, it is Kane's careful orchestration of an affective spectatorship that forges the play's strongest links with music. The text does away with many conventions of dramatic playwriting; it does not offer a list of characters, it does not assign lines to a specific number of speakers, it does not allow a clear plot to unfold. Kane's writing is composed of an assemblage of materials that frustrate any rational or complete interpretation. There are opaque and highly poetic sections, real or imagined dialogues between unknown interlocutors, number sequences, Biblical passages. Context is missing. There are no indications of time or space. Like a musical piece, the text of *4.48 Psychosis* invites us not to understand the external reality of its speakers, but to feel the pulse of images, timbres, rhythms, patterns. It requires that we grasp emotions through cadences, often beyond the meaning of words:

flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash
flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker
punch flicker flash burn dab press wring press
punch flicker float burn flash flicker burn

it will never pass

dab flicker punch slash wring slash punch slash
float flicker flash punch wring press flash press
dab flicker wring burn flicker dab flash dab float
burn press burn flicker burn flash

Nothing's forever

(but Nothing)



Conductor Richard Baker in rehearsal. ©2016 ROH. Photograph by Stephen Cummiskey

Kane's insistence that her work should only be staged in the theatre has meant that the text for *4.48 Psychosis* has found its way into music just once before: as a track on the album *Waiting for the Moon*, by British independent band Tindersticks. This 2003 recording is just over five minutes long, but the self-effacing and obsessive energy of Kane's original text is intensely present. Here, Stuart Staples delivers a selection of lines extracted from the play with fragile detachment; his ragged voice is almost buried under increasingly dense layers of guitar and violin.

Not so in Philip Venables' opera. Instead of proposing a solitary voice, Venables astutely picks up on the polyphony in Kane's writing, and builds a full-length performance for an ensemble of six voices and twelve players. On the page, *4.48 Psychosis* resists the notion that each of us is a clearly distinct and autonomous being. It is not just that the lines are meticulously equivocal about who the speaker might be. It is rather that the text has been shaped by the insight that our sense of self is composed of our relationships with others, that there are traces of them within us – even when they are gone or pushed away. Venables' opera materializes this vision presenting a character that is collectively embodied by every performer onstage. This character lingers in the space after the players have stopped playing. It shimmers in the vibrations of sound.

This is only one of the possible formulations of character that *4.48 Psychosis*' unassigned script allows. In the original staging, directed by James Macdonald, Daniel Evans, Jo McInnes and Madeleine Potter were reflected on a large slanted mirror. Doubled and decentred, this image of the performers materialized the experience of disassociation

presented in the script: 'Here am I / there is my body'. A year later, at the Schaubühne in Berlin, Falk Richter's German language version, *4.48 Psychose*, played with Jule Böwe, Bibiana Beglau, Sylvana Krappatsch and Kay Bartholomäus Schulze; the stage design seemed to follow an Escheresque pattern, with large windows and black seats positioned so as to blend interior and exterior equivocally. Claude Régy's Francophone 2002 production featured the always-enigmatic Isabelle Huppert, whose monotone outpourings were received by Gérard Watkins in the role of a doctor. TR Warszawa's Polish production (which was given its premiere at Teatr Polski in Poznań the same year, but was programmed in Edinburgh's King's Theatre in 2008 and London's Barbican in 2010) built a clear dramatic narrative from Kane's elliptical text. The protagonist was a female experiencing unrequited lesbian love, self-hatred and the incomprehension of friends and medical staff. Young Welsh company Run Amok made original decisions in their 2013 production at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, both in terms of gender and context. Under the direction of Izzy Rabey, Rhodri Brady focused on the spirituality, pathos and delirious humour of Kane's text, while the set situated obsession and disappointment within a hyper-connected yet solipsistic generation. Also unusual was Luciano Cáceres' Argentinian production, which featured a middle-aged Leonor Manso as the only performer of this 'solo symphony'. The imminence of death here acquired a different hue.

As its rich production history attests, *4.48 Psychosis* does not simply allow the artistic intervention of directors, casts, venues – it desires it. The text's reluctance to clarify either the identity of its speakers or the story behind their emotional collapse endows the play with a future that must be, necessarily, creative, rhythmical and chameleonic. For all its thematic despair, *4.48 Psychosis* is a generous invitation, a dare tendered with absolute trust in the theatre arts.

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