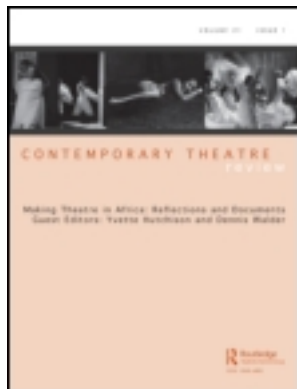


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# Sarah Kane's Illyria as the Land of Violent Love: A Balkan Reading of *Blasted*

Duška Radosavljević

## Balkanism

The space referred to as the Balkans has been repeatedly redefined, either geographically to refer to the semi-peninsula stretching between the Balkan mountains in the north and the Mediterranean sea in the south, or politically to refer to the part of the Ottoman Empire within Europe between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries (Image 1). From the western perspective, this liminal space (including the former Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece) has often been seen as troublesome, mysterious, and as operating under idiosyncratic conventions.<sup>1</sup> The term, temporarily defunct during the Cold War, has re-entered common usage since the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, thus causing a geographically inaccurate and politically problematic conflation of the idea of the Balkans with the Yugoslav wars.

In her 1998 study of the representation of the Balkans in fiction, Vesna Goldsworthy explores 'the imaginative colonisation' of this area by British writers – a phenomenon which has otherwise been referred to as 'Balkanism'<sup>2</sup> – tracing it back as far as Shakespeare's 'Illyria'. Usefully, Goldsworthy points out that the verb 'to balkanise' – meaning 'to divide into a number of smaller and mutually hostile units' – has now entered almost all European languages. While acknowledging that this kind is more innocent than economic colonisation, she also warns that the

1. Andrew Hammond identifies four major tropes which characterise traditional Balkanism: 'obfuscation, savagery, discord and backwardness'. Andrew Hammond, 'The Danger Zone of Europe: Balkanism between the Cold War and 9/11', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8 (May 2005), 135–51 (p. 136).

2. Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). A year previously, Maria Todorova published *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) in which she expounded her notion of Balkanism. Though seemingly unaware of each other's work, both Todorova and Goldsworthy refer to the original proposition of Balkanism as a term inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism* in Milica Bakic-Hayden's 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, 54.4 (Winter 1995), 917–31.



Image 1 Map of the Balkans. Source: <[http://wikitravel.org/shared/Image:Balkans\\_regions\\_map.png](http://wikitravel.org/shared/Image:Balkans_regions_map.png)> Creative Commons License, Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0.

3. Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania*, p. 9.
4. Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804–1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) p. xxi.
5. Hammond, 'The Danger Zone', p. 135.
6. Boris Buden, *What to Do with the Question 'What Will the Balkans Look Like in 2020?'*, <[http://www.bcchallenge.org/general/main.php?akcija=news\\_detail&id=228](http://www.bcchallenge.org/general/main.php?akcija=news_detail&id=228)> [accessed 28 November 2011] (p. 4).

stereotypes created through literature can be strong enough to influence seriously the political attitude of the westerner. Crucially, she highlights that contrary to the traditional patterns, the Balkans represent the only instance of a part of Europe colonised by the East. This has resulted in a particularly unstable definition of the Balkan 'Other' varying between 'Europeanness' and the 'Oriental difference'. In addition, Goldsworthy notes that the 'enlightened, democratic West' routinely defines itself by opposition to a 'despotic East' while the 'industrious, rational cultures of the North' similarly feel superior to the 'undisciplined, passionate cultures of the South', and therefore identifies 'a kind of European hierarchy in which the north-west represents the highest and the south-east the lowest symbolic value'.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, while analysing the representation of the Yugoslav conflict in the media, Misha Glenny notes a use of such clichés which had long ago been outlawed when reporting from Africa, the Middle East or Asia, finding that: 'The Balkans apparently enjoy a special exemption from the rules against stereotyping'.<sup>4</sup> And Hammond goes as far as to propose that following the end of the Cold War the Balkans assumed the status of a 'civilisational antitype'.<sup>5</sup> Even as recently as 2010, the Croatian philosopher Boris Buden noted that:

The Balkans are not simply a geographical region of Europe that one can clearly demarcate on a map. Instead, they are a figure of exclusion, a highly abstract cultural and ideological concept that, precisely because it is ideological, has real effects indeed.<sup>6</sup>

7. Andrew Hammond, 'Balkanism in Political Context: From the Ottoman Empire to the EU', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 3.3 (2006), 6–26 (pp. 19–20).
8. A most interesting challenge to this melodramatic depiction of the real life protagonists of war was presented to us through the 2008 arrest of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić. The former psychiatrist and poet, and multiple indicted war criminal, was finally found to be leading a very public life under a false identity, as an alternative medicine practitioner and 'healer'.
9. Differences and similarities between Croatian and Serbian have been disputed for years and the 2010 book *Jezik i nacionalizam (Language and Nationalism)* by Snježana Kordić (Zagreb: Durieux, 2010), has once again provoked a debate in Croatia. Based in Germany, the Croatian philologist advocates the thesis that Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin (the latter two of which have only recently been proclaimed as languages) are varieties of the same language. This perspective seems very plausible from the outside looking in.
10. As pointed out by one of the readers of this article, it is worth highlighting another perspective on the causes of the breakdown of Yugoslavia as being rooted in economic rather than ideological problems.

Crucially, for this study, Hammond is adamant that a combination of Balkanist attitudes coming not only from politicians but also from writers and thinkers that would otherwise be considered liberals (as with Michael Ignatieff relating the war in Bosnia to a lack of 'imperial restraint' and the *Guardian's* Julian Borger suggesting that a "benign colonial regime" was necessary for a democratic development in Bosnia) was a major contributing factor to the escalating wars in the former Yugoslavia and to the "culturalist racism" that has vindicated the last fifteen years of Europe's enlargement'.<sup>7</sup>

### *Homo homini lupus* – A Brief Look at Freud and Žižek

In addition to Balkanism, in dealing with the Yugoslav wars, western writers often deployed a set of stereotypes based on a Hollywood-style dramaturgy whereby in every conflict there had to be an identifiable villain and a victim.<sup>8</sup> What was customarily overlooked was the fact that the people involved in the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia had a shared history, spoke the same language<sup>9</sup> and very often had relatives in common. This was not only a matter of disputed land or racial intolerance, in fact what the respective factions were trying to assert – as a means of gaining neighbourly autonomy after years of living together in the super-national commune – was an ethnic and religious difference.<sup>10</sup>

According to Freud, who is distrustful of communism on the basis of his conviction that instincts are stronger than rationalisation:

[A] neighbour is [...] not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts [others] to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*.<sup>11</sup>

Here is an interesting piece of trivia: in colloquial Serbo-Croatian the word for 'the back of the beyond' or 'the middle of nowhere' is 'vukojebina'. Literally, this means 'the place where wolves fuck'. The Balkans – the place where, at least at times, 'homo homini lupus est' – has clearly often been seen as Europe's 'vukojebina'.

I have attempted to show elsewhere that the dominant feature of the 1990s Balkan conflict was a case of Freudian 'narcissism of small differences'.<sup>12</sup> However, Slavoj Žižek – a philosopher from the Balkans – actually saw the relevance of Freud's essay, which the quote above belongs to, on a much bigger scale. Speaking about the end of communism as an ideology and the consequent new stage of capitalism, in 1997 he notes:

it is as if we are witnessing the ultimate confirmation of Freud's thesis [...] on how, after every assertion of Eros, Thanatos reasserts itself with a vengeance. At the very moment when, according to the official ideology, we are finally leaving behind the 'immature' political passions [...] for the

11. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion, Civilisation and its Discontents and Other Works* (London: Vintage, Hogarth Press, 1930/2001), p. 111.
12. This was a view originally expressed by the Croatian writer Slobodan Šnajder which formed the basis for my article, 'The Alchemy of Power and Freedom: A Contextualisation of Slobodan Šnajder's Hrvatski *Faust* (The Croatian Faust)', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 19(4 2009), 428–48.
13. Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 162.
14. *Pentecost* was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in October 1994. Meanwhile David Greig's *Europe*, which was also seen to be thematically linked to the events in the region, but not explicitly set in the Balkans, premiered in the same month at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.
15. Another great play, which followed Kane's in 1996, would also follow Kane's suit in its use of the analogy between the Balkan war and a dysfunctional romantic relationship – Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). Screen fictions, meanwhile, routinely continued to deploy black-and-white characterisations as a means of encoding the narrative for a western viewer (as with Michael Winterbottom's *Welcome to Sarajevo*, 1997).

'mature' post-ideological pragmatic universe of rational administration and negotiated consensus [...] at this very moment, the foreclosed political celebrating a triumphant comeback in its most archaic form: of pure, undistilled racist hatred of the Other.<sup>13</sup>

On a very simplistic level this perspective could be read into the example of the Eros of communism being replaced by the Thanatos of war. However, by the 'foreclosed political celebrating a triumphant comeback', Žižek is suggesting that the western multiculturalist late-capitalism has in fact led to a kind of 'postmodern' racism which is manifested in our selective embracement of the 'folklorist Other' deprived of its substance: we accept 'ethnic cuisines' but reject the 'real' Other on the grounds of its 'patriarchal' and 'violent' 'fundamentalism'.

It is symptomatic that Žižek's observations emerge within two years of the premiere of Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* which in its own way seems to tackle the same principle of 'postmodern' racism and the process of Thanatos reasserting itself over Eros. She confronts the British audience with this idea of racism and causes a furore.

### *Blasted* – As a British Play

Prior to *Blasted* there was one notable example of a new British play making reference to the ongoing war in the Balkans – David Edgar's *Pentecost* (1994).<sup>14</sup> Set in an imaginary Balkan country – in which the locals are often depicted as volatile, unpredictable and speaking a variety of English without any accents – *Pentecost* fell neatly into the tradition of Balkanism.<sup>15</sup> It is the purpose of this reflection to show how Kane transcended and at least momentarily demolished the stereotypes attributed by the western gaze to the Balkans (by choosing not to portray but to personify the conflict through British characters) and opened up a new perspective on not just her chosen subject matter of microcosmic and macrocosmic relationships, but on the changing function of the contemporary British – and later European – theatre practice.

A particular intimation of Kane's regarding the content of the play is of crucial importance here and worth quoting in detail:

Originally, I was writing a play about two people in a hotel room, in which there was a complete power imbalance, which resulted in the older man raping the younger woman. [...] At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing [in March 1993] I switched on the television. An old woman was looking into the camera crying. She said, 'Please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something'. I knew nobody was going to do a thing. Suddenly I was completely uninterested in the play I was writing. What I wanted to write about was what I'd seen on television. [...] Slowly it occurred to me that the play I was writing was about this. It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other.<sup>16</sup>



16. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 100–01.
17. Furlan is better known in the United States as the star of *Babylon 5* and *Lost*.
18. Mira Furlan, 'A Letter to My Co-Citizens', *Performing Arts Journal*, 53.18 (1996), 20–24 (p. 20).
19. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 97; Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 54 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
20. 'She talked enthusiastically about football and indie music but also about plays and literature. She was the best-read young playwright I knew – well aware of the influences on her work of Bond, Beckett and Barker. "Only playwrights with a B surname?" I teased. "Definitely", she replied.' Mark Ravenhill, 'The Beauty of Brutality', *Guardian*, 28 October 2006, <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/artsandentertainment/story/0,,1933492,00.html>> [accessed 20 October 2007] (para. 8).
21. Kane, cited in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 98. Helen Iball highlights that in 2003 Saunders re-qualified this claim asserting that Kane's drama is only "partly experiential" because of a "strict formal control" she asserts over a performance text'. Helen Iball, 'Room Service: En Suite on the Blasted Frontline', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 15 (August 2005), 320–29 (p. 322).

This kind of sentiment is indeed documented in an open letter published in various international media by the Croatian actress Mira Furlan,<sup>17</sup> who being married to a Serb, was ostracised by her colleagues and compatriots, subjected to anonymous death threats and forced into exile, first into Serbia and then into the USA. On her departure she likened her experience of the ongoing conflict to:

the end of some clumsy, painful love story, when you keep wanting, wrongly, to explain something more, even though you know at the bottom of your heart that words are wasted; there is no one left to hear them. It is over.<sup>18</sup>

The uproar with which Kane's play was received when it opened in January 1995 has already entered the annals of history, joining the likes of Bond's *Saved* and Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. Kane has famously pointed out that the furore that greeted the play completely eclipsed real life events including the rape and murder of an adolescent girl, thus giving more attention to 'the representation of violence than the violence itself'.<sup>19</sup> However, even though Kane lists Bond as one of her major influences alongside Beckett and Barker,<sup>20</sup> the shock value of Kane's play is contained at a unique level. It is not merely the use of violence that alienated Kane's viewers but, according to the playwright's own very accurate appraisal, two other factors were responsible for such reception: the experimentation with the form, whereby by blasting the play apart half-way through, she deliberately '[puts] the audience through the experience they have previously only witnessed', thus making the play 'experiential rather than speculative';<sup>21</sup> and the play's deliberate 'amorality' contained in the removal of a 'defined moral framework within which to place yourself and assess your morality and therefore distance yourself from the material'.<sup>22</sup>

In his book *Violence* (2008), Žižek considers Sam Harris's notion of the 'ethical illusion' whereby 'it is much more difficult for us to torture an individual than to sanction from afar the dropping of a bomb which would cause the more painful deaths of thousands'.<sup>23</sup> The root cause of this particular paradox is perceived to be an evolutionary split occurring between our highly developed powers of abstract reasoning on the one hand, and on the other – our powers of emotional-ethical responses which 'remain conditioned by age-old instinctual reactions of sympathy to suffering and pain that is witnessed directly'.<sup>24</sup>

In a way, Kane therefore confronts the desensitised TV news viewers in theatre on an instinctual rather than on the level of abstract reasoning by asking us to witness various kinds of 'simulated torture' and at the same time addresses the inherent hypocrisy of our indifference. Her method however seems to be motivated by a deeply personal experience of the world rather than an explicit political sentiment. And in the words of David Benedict, Kane's technique results in 'challenging an audience to deconstruct the values of their society as represented on stage, rather than merely asking them to empathise'.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to this, Sierz has noted that '[I]ike Pinter, Kane rejects the complacent view that Britain is immune from civil war' and illustrates this

22. Kane in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 27.

23. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 36.

24. Ibid.

25. Kane quoted in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 10.

26. Kane quoted in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 98.

27. Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 4.

28. Helen Iball too focuses on the significance of this 'telescoping of frames' in the play's opening line. Iball, 'Room Service', p. 325.

29. Kane is ambivalent about her characters. 'I really like Ian. I think he is funny. I can see that other people think he's a bastard. And I knew that they would. But I think he's extremely funny.' His character is based on a terrible moral dilemma that arose 'when a man I knew who was dying of lung cancer was terribly ill, and started telling me the most appalling racist jokes I've ever heard'. And Cate is naïve 'And yes, very fucking stupid: I mean what's she doing in a hotel room in the first place? Of course she's going to get raped.' Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 103.

30. Kane, *Complete Plays*, pp. 19–20.

with a quote from the playwright: 'There was a widespread attitude in this country that what was happening in central Europe could never happen here. In *Blasted*, it happened here.'<sup>26</sup>

### ***Blasted* as a Play About the End of Love: A Balkan Reading**

I propose that it is precisely this attitude of Kane's that seeks to underline similarities in the human condition rather than cultural differences between Britain and the Balkans that represents a break from the tradition of 'imaginative colonisation' and elevates the play to the status of a modern classic. At the same time, another part of Kane's mission seems to be a break from the dominant dramaturgical traditions, not only in relation to dramatic action which she detonates half-way through the play, but particularly in relation to morally ambiguous characterisation within victim–perpetrator relationships, and of the location as symbolic rather than contextual.

The play's opening stage directions – 'A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world'<sup>27</sup> – signal a twofold use of place: a juxtaposition between a culturally specific and that which would have been considered positively 'universal'. Thus a pre-existing conception of 'Illyria' or 'Ruritania' is rendered obsolete in Kane's representation of the Balkan war as something taking place just outside a hotel room in Leeds.<sup>28</sup> As noted above, this kind of deliberate deconstruction of stereotypes is also apparent in Kane's use of characters, whose respective differences serve to set up a power inequality and a moral juxtaposition.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the five-act structure allows for a classicist reading of the plot and a very clear analysis of Kane's formal experimentation. The main theme is set out in Scene One, where in between attempts to have sex with Cate, Ian recites a story on the phone to his office about the murder of a Leeds student in Australia. Here Kane establishes three points concerning violence which will be elaborated on later: violence is a ubiquitous phenomenon – it can happen anywhere; nevertheless, violence is only topical if it concerns us directly (i.e. that is the official line that Ian as a member of the press represents and will verbalise later); and finally, the emphasis falls on the form of delivery (Ian's formal specification of the punctuation that accompanies his text) rather than the content of the story – which creates a distancing effect but also sows the seeds of the play's stylistic approach.

Kane elaborates on this theme further by reference to football. The rhetoric surrounding the war in the Balkans – often perceived at the time as a 'tribal war' – is evoked by Ian's comment on football as tribalism in the opening scene. Perhaps in an echo of the advocates of bombing as a means of international conflict resolution, Ian suggests that Elland Road should be bombed, in response to which Cate confesses that she goes to Elland Road and – in a moment reminiscent of 'ethical illusion' – asks: 'Would you bomb me?'<sup>30</sup> Interestingly the war in Croatia is often seen to have begun with a football match between Red Star Belgrade and

31. James Montague, 'Five Games That Changed the World', CNN, 13 January 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SPORT/football/01/05/iraq.asia.six.games/index.html> [accessed 12 June 2011].
32. The moment Kane has identified as 'a kind of castration' of Ian (Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 54) is famously inspired by a real life account of football hooliganism in Bill Bruford's *Among the Thugs* – 'I couldn't believe that a human being could do this to another person. I put it in a play and everyone was shocked.' Kane in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 103. Sierz also reads this moment as symbolic of 'the media's moral blindness' (p. 107).
33. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 33.
34. Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, pp. 52–53.
35. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 40.
36. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (London: Hogarth Press, 1940), pp. 55–57.
37. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 43.
38. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 48.
39. Here I mean Ian's protracted suffering contained in a non-verbal sequence of tableaux. Kane herself has been quoted by Saunders as saying that the point where Ian's blood is washed away by the rain struck her in performance as

Dinamo Zagreb a year before the official start of the war.<sup>31</sup> However, the most gruesome moment in the play where the Soldier sucks out Ian's eyes at the end of Scene Three is a gesture which Kane borrowed from a British account of football hooliganism.<sup>32</sup>

Evocative of the Second Act of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Scene Two opens with scattered flowers suggesting that a sexual intercourse has taken place during the blackout. As with the war in Bosnia, Kane's inciting incident – which will set off a vicious circle of power struggles – has occurred outside of our gaze. Although inherently dramatic, this tuning into the sequence of events 'in medias res' renders us into a position of a TV viewer witnessing a war as a series of consequences of past actions without prior knowledge of its causes. And interestingly, later on in the scene Cate will look out of the window (rather than a TV screen) and observe disinterestedly 'Looks like there's a war on.'<sup>33</sup> But by the end of the scene the war is literally brought home.

Famously, by Scene Three, the hotel room has been 'blasted' – possibly suggesting that if the expensive hotel room can be 'anywhere in the world', so can a bomb-site. Saunders notes that in an earlier 1993 draft the Soldier who arrives at this point had been conceived as explicitly Serbian<sup>34</sup> – at which time Serbs were commonly considered villains. However, Kane revises her initial decision and leaves the Soldier's ethnicity unknown in the final version of the script. If on a metaphorical level, we may perceive the end of Ian and Cate's torrid affair to be representative of the acrimonious end of Yugoslavia – as already suggested by Kane above – Scene Three could perhaps be seen as being representative of a relationship between Britain and the Balkans. Only in this case Ian no longer stands for a domineering Serb in relation to Cate's Bosnian Muslim, but for a Brit and a Welshman that he is anyway designated as, confronted by a savage Balkan man.

Inevitably, Ian and the Soldier's encounter entails a certain clarification of respective positions and allegiances – 'which side' each one is on.

Soldier: [...] English.

Ian: I'm Welsh.

...

Ian: English and Welsh is the same. British. I'm not an import.

Soldier: What's fucking Welsh, never heard of it.<sup>35</sup>

The Soldier's final remark is readable as a reflection of the fact that many a Brit would have similarly declared at the time that they had never heard of Serbs or Croats or Bosnians; and by further extension in the glorious days of Yugoslavia, the super-national Yugoslav denomination would have been equivalent to that of British. In any case the relations being negotiated here are certainly reminiscent of Freud's observations concerning groups whereby they may be brought together by mutual interests when confronted with an outside threat, or conversely they may be driven apart and forced to emphasise their differences when the mutual interest ceases and they are once again rendered as potentially hostile neighbours.<sup>36</sup>

The British attitude to the war in the Balkans is further problematised in this scene, thus leading to a disintegration of Balkanist and character



being 'Christ-like'.  
Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 17.

40. Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. 55.

41. On an additional level, Iball in 'Room Service' identifies the way in which Kane taps into the cyclical nature of 'theatrical radicalism', p. 327 and returns to the primacy of the 'theatrical image', p. 329.

42. Bond, cited in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 49.

43. Iball, 'Room Service', p. 321.

44. Added to this is also *Blasted's* conscious referencing and paraphrasing of various classics including Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie* as well as Bond's *Saved* and Brenton's *Romans in Britain*, in whose controversial steps it has followed.

45. This might also be seen as a feature of the Eastern European 'other' especially in the discussion by Boris Buden of the views of Slovenian philosopher Rastko Močnik who is quoted as saying: 'An identity is the ambiguous privilege of those doomed to remain local, particular, peripheral: it is a euphemism for the incapacity to attain the serene firmament of universality.' Močnik in Buden, *What to Do with the Question*, p. 6.

46. Kane, cited in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, pp. 27–28.

47. Hammond, 'Balkanism', p. 21.

stereotypes. When the Soldier shares his story of rape, he does not necessarily elicit a morally outraged reaction commonly expressed in relation to similar stories of wartime atrocities. Our perception of the Soldier's story is made more complex by the presence of Ian who is by no means perceivable as morally superior to the Soldier in our eyes as we have just witnessed him potentially become guilty of a similar crime, albeit in a situation involving a former girlfriend. In addition we have witnessed Ian's 'crime' directly whereas the Soldier's account of his is given to us on the level of 'abstract reasoning'. Moreover, when asked by the Soldier if he had 'done anything like that'<sup>37</sup>, Ian denies it – at least twice.

The depiction of the Soldier deepens when he reveals that his crimes were provoked by the fact that his lover had herself been brutalised by her murderers. When asked by the Soldier to report his story, Ian however refuses on the grounds of duty:

I'm a home journalist, for Yorkshire. I don't cover foreign affairs. [...] I do other stuff. Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers. Not soldiers screwing each other for a patch of land. It has to be ... personal.<sup>38</sup>

The latter two scenes of the play will then progressively enter the sphere of the abstract, the metaphorical, and the non-culturally specific. As Cate reappears in Scene Four carrying a baby she had been given on the street – she represents a combination of two archetypal images: that of motherhood (as with the Virgin Mary holding Baby Jesus) and that of salvation (babies rescued by strangers from dying mothers at the time of war). Despite Ian's despair and Cate's seemingly dispassionate composure, this scene – which would indeed correspond with the Aristotelian 'peripeteia' – features inklings of real tenderness between the two characters and the possibility of a triumph of love through forgiveness. This process of theatrical metaphorical abstraction will continue and culminate with Ian's 'crucifixion' in Scene Five.<sup>39</sup>

In a moment that will resonate with anyone who saw 1989 as a turning point in recent history, Ian professes profound disillusionment in big narratives and his loss of faith – 'No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing'<sup>40</sup> – attempts suicide, and fails. Similarly to the people in the Balkans, his fate does not seem to be in his own hands. But it does not seem to be in the hands of potential saviours either.

Ian eventually dies in Scene Five, but in a potential paraphrase of Sartre's idea of hell, everything stays the same – although the rain, which continues to fall in between scenes, finally washes over him. Ian's final words of gratitude to Cate who feeds him, are often interpreted as a hopeful and optimistic ending. Nevertheless, the overtly cyclical nature of the play's structure represented by a natural succession of seasons in between scenes, highlights a significant question of whether a disruption to the established cycle is at all possible.

Both Goldsworthy and Glennly note the 'cyclical nature' of violence in the Balkans and see the detached attitude of the West towards it as a source of the continuing, recurring troubles.<sup>41</sup> As a result of its

48. 'If I was going to rewrite it I'd try the purifying images even more, and I'd cut even more words out if such a thing is possible, because for me the language of theatre is image.' Kane, cited in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 50.
49. Nebojša Romčević, 'Slučaj Sare Kejn', *Scena*, 38 (2002), 75–76 (p. 76), <[http://www.komunikacija.org.yu/komunikacija/casopisi/scena/XXXVIII\\_2/d17/download\\_ser\\_lat](http://www.komunikacija.org.yu/komunikacija/casopisi/scena/XXXVIII_2/d17/download_ser_lat)> [accessed 21 July 2008]. My translation.
50. Darka Šešljija, 'Moj Ugao: Noćna mora Sare Kejn', *B92 Kultura*, 26 April 2005, <[http://www.b92.net/kultura\\_old/index.php?view=70&did=9152&plim=110](http://www.b92.net/kultura_old/index.php?view=70&did=9152&plim=110)> [accessed 21 July 2008]. My translation.
51. Interview with Paulina Manov and Daniel Sič, Beogradsko Dramsko Pozorište, 17 May 2010, organised thanks to Maša Stokić.
52. Ana Tasić, 'Sara Kejn konačno medju Srbima', *Ludus*, (2005), 120–21, <<http://ludus.sdus.org.yu/content/view/24/48/>> [accessed 21 July 2008] (p. 4, para 4). My translation.
53. Tatomir Toroman, 'Novi uspeh Biljane Srbljanović', *B92*, 31 August 2006, <[http://www.b92.net/kultura/pozorista/o\\_predstavi.php?nav\\_id=237370](http://www.b92.net/kultura/pozorista/o_predstavi.php?nav_id=237370)> [accessed 21 July 2008] (para. 1). My translation.

uncompromising method, *Blasted* was initially seen first as a play about rape, violence and cannibalism and only second as a play about humanity and the possibility of forgiveness – although the latter view was most notably represented by Edward Bond who suggested that *Blasted* came 'from the centre of our humanity and our ancient need for theatre'.<sup>42</sup>

In the last few years, there has been an increasing number of voices warning against a 'premature canonisation'<sup>43</sup> of Kane on the grounds that the power of the controversy with which her work appeared on the British and European stages at a particular moment in time might have eclipsed the plays' real value. It seems that this play's form which was initially seen to be its main feature is beginning to be seen as inherently flawed. My position is that Kane's entitlement to a place in the canon comes from neither the form nor the content of her plays but from her ability to tap into the zeitgeist and express it in terms that are timeless and non-culture specific – a skill not unlike that of Shakespeare himself.<sup>44</sup>

If nothing else, by bringing the Balkan war home, Kane certainly began to break down the vicious cycle of Balkanism in British consciousness and elevated the nature of the conflict above the level of stereotype – or even 'antitype' – and to a level of archetype. Although this may be seen as problematic from the point of view of Foucauldian and more specifically postcolonial thought, it has to be acknowledged that another paradox contained in the perspective of the Balkan 'other'<sup>45</sup> is precisely the desire to be seen as possessing the 'universalising' features of the western civilisation. And Kane took the perspective on Yugoslavia as part of Europe rather than its violent 'other':

While the corpse of Yugoslavia was rotting on our doorstep, the press chose to get angry, not about the corpse, but about the cultural event that drew attention to it. [...] Of course the press wish to deny that what happened in Central Europe has anything to do with us [...]. They celebrate the end of the Cold War then rapidly return to sex scandals (which sell more papers) and all that has been done to secure our future as a species is the reduction of the overkill factor.<sup>46</sup>

In this way Kane has unknowingly responded to Etienne Balibar's 1999 appeal to Europe to 'recognise in the Balkan situation not a pathological 'aftereffect' of underdevelopment or of communism, but rather an image and effect of its own history'.<sup>47</sup>

### *Blasted* in the Balkans

Contrary to the initial outrage the play caused in Britain, by 2001 *Blasted* very swiftly received an enthusiastic welcome in most European countries whose respective traditions of prioritising the mis en scène over the text facilitated an easy appropriation of Kane's own image-based theatricality,<sup>48</sup> and alongside Ravenhill and Neilson, subsequently set a trend for 'New European Drama'.

The Balkan countries were not immune to this phenomenon, although it took a while before Kane's plays received successful productions in the

54. V. Seksan, 'Psihoza Sarah Kane', *Dani Online*, 4 May 2001, <<http://www.bhdani.com/arhiva/204/opservatorij.shtml>> [accessed 21 July 2008] (para. 6). My translation.

55. Kane's other plays including *Crave* and *Phaedra's Love* were also staged in various theatres in the region – most recently, *Phaedra's Love* had a notable production in Belgrade in 2008 and in Zagreb in 2011.

56. Sanja Nikčević, 'British Brutalism, the "New European Drama"', and the Role of the Director', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 21 (August 2005), 255–72 (p. 261).

57. Nikčević, 'British Brutalism', p. 270.

58. For example, it does not seem to be fully understood that the British theatre tradition is more biased towards the playwright than the director and that the British director (particularly a new writing director) has less of an authorial role than the case might be elsewhere in Europe; while, in addition to that, Kane's own sensibility as a playwright – through its explicit concern with theatrical image – is atypical of the British tradition.



Images 2 and 3 Paulina Manov and Boris Komnenić in *Razneseni (Blasted)* by Sarah Kane, directed by Djurdja Tešić, 2005, the Belgrade Drama Theatre Archive. photo: Predrag Zagorac.

region (Images 2 and 3). Nebojša Romčević makes the big claim that he was the first Yugoslav to have read Sarah Kane's work when *Blasted* arrived at his desk at the National Theatre in Belgrade in 1996, but he also confesses that despite commissioning a translation and a director, his attempt at putting



59. Nikčević, 'British Brutalism', p. 264.
60. 'When Jonathan Miller went, he found tabloid journalists trying to squeeze "shock-horror" quotes from Middle-Englanders. Eavesdropping on one interview, he heard a "lecturer from a college of further education" explaining "how he thought the play a metaphor for our indifference to Bosnia".' Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 97.
61. 'Balkan film-makers prefer to depict their own cultures through the eyes of Westerners and that travelogue style of narration is still prevalent in Balkan film-making. Ingenious imagery is offered, but the way it is used often just mirrors established stereotypes.' Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and Media* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), p. 64.
62. '[Emir Kusturica's film] *Underground* is thus the ultimate ideological product of Western liberal multiculturalism: what [it offers] to the Western liberal gaze is precisely what this gaze wants to see in the Balkan war – the spectacle of a timeless, incomprehensible, mythical cycle of passions, in contrast to decadent and anaemic Western life.' Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, p. 163.
63. It is interesting that of all Emir Kusturica's films, the least known is *Arizona Dream* (1993), featuring Johnny Depp in the lead, alongside Faye Dunaway and Jerry Lewis.

the play on failed due to the team's fears that they would not be able to find actors prepared to engage in such 'drastic' actions, or the audience prepared to watch them.<sup>49</sup> The play had to wait ten years for its Serbian premiere which finally took place at the Belgrade Drama Theatre in 2005 where – possibly challenged by the play's formal demands – the young director Djurdja Tešić staged the first three scenes realistically and rendered the remaining two as a recitative with the actors standing at microphones. Nevertheless, according to some accounts,<sup>50</sup> this seems to have gone down well with the audience as it served to heighten the play's poignancy.

An interview I conducted with the actors Paulina Manov (Cate) and Daniel Sić (Soldier) in 2010 revealed that the act of speaking parts of the text into the microphones and other parts directly to the audience was intended to act as an analogy of selective media reporting. The play did not come across to them as 'in-yer-face' but as a piece of realism, as it was reminiscent of the familiar imagery conveyed during the media coverage of the war, but they understood that Kane's intention was to bring the war closer to a UK audience. The actors praised the text as a whole and the scope it offered for their imaginative input into the characters. Manov, for example, found Cate's seizures to be a helpful leitmotif in gaining access to the inner world of the character. She did not consider that her character was necessarily raped by the character of Ian, but that their relationship was pathological in the first place, and most interestingly, she referred to the play's spiralling structure and the cyclical nature of violence as the 'circles of hell' through which the characters went. However, much as they enjoyed the formal aspects of the piece, the cast noted that the piece was ultimately 'elitist' and they quickly ran out of audiences who wanted to watch it.<sup>51</sup>

Ana Tasić speculates that the reason why Kane's work took such a long time to arrive in Serbia was linked to the fact that Serbian theatre at the time was dominated by various forms of escapism.<sup>52</sup> However, as pointed out by Tatomir Toroman, it is also true that Serbia's own formidable woman playwright Biljana Srbljanović, who was occasionally likened to Kane, was simultaneously putting out her own provocative work which may have been a bit more palatable to the local theatre-making traditions and audiences. Interestingly, in 1999, Srbljanović came second – straight after Sarah Kane – in the German magazine *Theater Heute's* poll for the best play of the year.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, in Bosnia, *Blasted* had its first production in the form of a graduation piece from the Drama Academy by Robert Krajinović and Arma Tanović in 2001. Journalist Vedrana Seksan's account is revealing, although tinged with some inter-ethnic Balkan rivalry:

Despite all prejudices, the extent to which Bosnia is a liberal country after all can be gleaned through the fact that the same play has had three unsuccessful attempts at production in Croatia. The reason for this, every time, was the refusal of the actors to be in a play featuring rape, cannibalism and eye-gouging.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed the first play by Kane to be shown in Croatia was an adaptation of *4:48 Psychosis* by Mario Kovač, staged by an independent fringe theatre

64. Hammond, 'The Danger Zone', p. 135.
65. If the recent proposition by Tim Judah is to be believed, economic pressures in the Balkan region have meanwhile led to the formation of a concept of the 'Yugosphere' involving all former Yugoslav republics. Tim Judah, 'Good News from the Western Balkans: Yugoslavia Is Dead, Long Live the Yugosphere', available at: <[http://www2.lse.ac.uk/european\\_institute/research/LSEE/PDF%20Files/Publications/Yugosphere.pdf](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/european_institute/research/LSEE/PDF%20Files/Publications/Yugosphere.pdf)>.
66. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 34.
67. Nikčević, 'British Brutalism', p. 264.
68. Freud's elaboration of the 'death instinct' as an instinctive urge of humans to return to 'their primaeval, inorganic state' (Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, pp. 118–19) began with his consideration of the post-World War I traumas experienced by soldiers who survived – in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London & Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1922) – and grew from his observation that traumatic events are often re-enacted over and over again (even in child-play). Hence, perhaps, the indication of a cyclical nature of both the violence in the Balkans and Kane's own play. It is almost as though Kane's obsession with Thanatos is an exploration of a hypothetical trauma caused by intense love and a manifestation of a desire to return to an 'original state' of Eros.

company in 2003.<sup>55</sup> Writing in 2005, the Croatian scholar Sanja Nikčević quotes the Croatian actress Anja Šovagović who 'not only refused to play in *Phaedra's Love*, but wrote about it publicly and openly – because it is “a bad play, senseless and without any need for actor's art”'.<sup>56</sup> Nikčević's article delivers a scathing criticism of the entire trend which she refers to as the 'New European Drama' – the kernel of which is 'British Brutalism'. She warns against the popularity of these plays on the grounds of their apolitical and meaningless content, condemns their formal openness as a means of pandering to directorial intervention and, crucially, she likens the plays to horror-movies in that they only '[serve] to increase an audience's tolerance towards the evil [they] play out'.<sup>57</sup> Although the article neglects to acknowledge individual culture-specific theatre traditions in Europe or consider the plays discussed in any real depth,<sup>58</sup> it also condemns the generalising tendencies of *Blasted* itself, though for slightly surprising reasons:

[A]fter you see the play you will know exactly the same about the Bosnian war as you did before. You will have no need to do something about it, to change the situation in Bosnia, or even Britain, because violence has merely been shown to be an intrinsic part of human nature. The location is used to market the scene.<sup>59</sup>

Nikčević's objection seems to be twofold: first, that the play does not illuminate or mobilise the viewer in relation to the war in Bosnia or in relation to violence in general and second, that the play cynically uses the war as a marketing device. From what we know about the play and its effect on the British audience, both aspects of this objection are clearly unfounded – not least because its reference to Bosnia was implicit and only deduced by the viewers and critics.<sup>60</sup>

However, Nikčević's observation is symptomatic of potential additional levels of Balkanism – specifically in relation to the ethical question of the outsiders' (non)-involvement with the Bosnian war. On this topic, both Dina Iordanova<sup>61</sup> and Slavoj Žižek<sup>62</sup> have pointed out that the West's Balkanist attitude is reinforced by many authors – specifically filmmakers – from the region who have gained international recognition. It is almost as though in order to be able to have a dialogue with the West, these Balkan authors have to perpetuate the existing Balkanist modes.<sup>63</sup>

Even though I doubt that Nikčević would have been happier if Kane had actually set out to address the war in the Balkans more directly – as her grievance primarily seems to concern the play's form – the extent to which Kane had transcended Balkanism, as well as any issues of moral duty for that matter, could also be measured by the fact that very few in the Balkans could immediately relate to the play in any already familiar way.

### Sarah Kane's *Illyria*

Hammond proposes that after the end of the Cold War, the Balkans 'as a model of otherness, creat[ed] for a younger generation a similar style of alterity to that which their parents had in Soviet communism'.<sup>64</sup>



69. Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 93.

70. The impaling of Carl on a pole is chosen by Kane as a torture technique used in the Balkans in the 1400s. Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 90.

71. Her later play *Crave* does this too in its use of the Serbo-Croatian language. However, in a typical Kaneian twist, she will transcend any potential Balkanist mode of this gesture by also using Spanish and German phrases in the same way, thus simply absorbing Serbo-Croatian into the European linguistic landscape.

72. I would like to thank students and staff at the University of Bristol Drama Department for their help in developing this paper, a version of which was first presented at the Sarah Kane: A Reassessment Conference, University of Cambridge, 16 February 2008. I am grateful to Maša Stokić, Paulina Manov and Daniel Sić for their time and insights, and to Beogradsko Dramsko Pozorište for providing archive photographs and reviews of their production of *Blasted*. My thanks are due to the editors of the volume and various anonymous readers of this article for their comments.

Considering that the former Yugoslavia was the only Eastern European country officially exempt from the Cold War stereotyping thanks to its liberal variety of communism, it seems ironic that its constituent units eventually found themselves back within a mould of 'Otherness'. Hammond notes that this othering process has particularly since 9/11 moved towards the Middle East.<sup>65</sup>

In his more recent discussion of a covert type of post-1989 western racism, Žižek highlights Jacques Rancière's notion of 'post-politics' as a kind of politics concerning itself with administration and management rather than old-style ideological struggles.<sup>66</sup> Not explicitly intended as a political play, Kane's text might be fittingly deemed a post-political one. In it, like Nikčević has pointed out, she was not interested in the kind of political theatre which 'shows the relationship of individuals to their society [...] and the potential for political change'.<sup>67</sup> Instead she picked the Balkans as a political manifestation of the principle of death or Thanatos.<sup>68</sup> It is this metaphysical dimension of Kane's approach that ultimately bestows a potential for emancipation from stereotypical representation on her characters, on the Balkans as a European 'other' and on the idea of violence itself.

It is widely documented that Kane's next original play *Cleansed* was inspired by her reading of Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* in which the condition of a rejected lover is likened to 'the situation of a prisoner in Dachau'.<sup>69</sup> With its inferred reference to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as well as instances of torture,<sup>70</sup> sexual degradation, and explicit violence, *Cleansed* too indirectly revisits the imaginative colony of Illyria and its geographical counterpart.<sup>71</sup> This play's stark juxtaposition of the extremes of love and death – identified also by Saunders who names his book *Love Me or Kill Me* as a result – is at the same time an elaboration of the main theme of *Blasted*, which can be contained in the hypothetical question of whether love can survive pain, suffering and death. As a play about the end of love, *Blasted* could therefore be seen as serving to conceive of Kane's Illyria as a land of broken hearts.<sup>72</sup>