

## Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*

reviewed by **Steven Barfield**  
University of Westminster, London

Director: Anne Tipton, Bristol Old Vic Studio, 20<sup>th</sup> October -5<sup>th</sup> November 2005 then touring. Co-produced with BITE 05, Barbican and the Young Vic as part of the young Genius Season.



**Plate 1:** Phaedra (Diana Kent) and Hippolytus (Laurence Penry-Jones)  
(Photographed by Manuel Harlan, Courtesy of Bristol Old Vic Theatre)



**Plate 2:** Hippolytus (Laurence Penry-Jones) and Strophe (Alexandra Moen)  
(Photographed by Manuel Harlan, Courtesy of Bristol Old Vic Theatre)

The late Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was one of the few contemporary British playwrights to have created a body of work that remains provocative, alarming and above all, extremely urgent in its appeal to an audience. Despite her early death at 28, her work continues to generate enormous interest and it now appears no overstatement to describe her, as do the programme notes for

this production, as 'the most dazzling poet-dramatist of her generation'. (Simon Reade, the Artistic Director of the Bristol Old Vic.) Or indeed, as Michael Billington remarked in the *Guardian*, after attending a recent Kane symposium in Germany at the Schaubühne theatre: '[the European view of Kane is] ... that she possessed, more than any of her contemporaries, a prophetic awareness of our modern, terror-haunted world'. While some (such as Edward Bond) would probably argue that her true gift to us is her recognition of a world haunted by the decline of the human in the face of late capitalist modernity and the struggle to map out our attendant possibilities of survival, they would all agree that she remains a crucial dramatist.

Kane's reputation has risen dramatically. While her first play *Blasted* at the Royal Court in 1995 was met with almost unanimous condemnation by theatre critics, it has since become widely accepted as one of the landmark events of contemporary drama (Sierz, 2001; Saunders, 2002.). Kane's decision freely to adapt and rework Seneca's *Phaedra* in 1995 for a commission from David Farr at the Gate theatre in London therefore starkly underlines our historical moment's engagement with classical tragedy as a relevant genre for delineating our world. As Farr recalls in an article in the programme for this production, two weeks after he lent a Seneca collection to Kane she came back to him on the telephone with: 'Yeah I love Phaedra. I want to do Phaedra. When do you need it by?'

Bristol Old Vic's revival of the play followed only one previous professional production in Britain, the original staging directed by Kane herself at the Gate in 1996. (For discussion see Saunders 2002:71-85 ) Before discussing this new production, however, it is useful to consider how the play relates to its Roman original and to the Hippolytus myth. There have been several plays based on this myth written by Euripides, Seneca and Racine. From what Kane said to various commentators, it seems that Seneca's retelling was the one on which she based her own version. To my mind though, the palpable and pervasive claustrophobia and *ennui* of Theseus' court, the conflict between religiousness and atheism indicated in the 'priest scene,' as well as the concentration on Phaedra herself as a tragic figure caught between her uncontrollable passion and her role as the Queen, would all seem to suggest some kinship with Racine's version as well as those by Seneca and Euripides. However, the main thrust of the plot remains largely recognisable, give or take Kane's strategic and bold interpolations.

There is for example, a scene when the desperate and love sick Phaedra performs *fellatio* on a disinterested Hippolytus, while he is trying to watch television (he has some difficulty with this under the circumstances). In another, we see the condemned and imprisoned Hippolytus who is refusing to make any terms with God by repentance, being given further oral sexual pleasure by the priest, perhaps as a substitute for the more traditional religious forgiveness. And we are treated to the disguised, recently returned Theseus' rape and murder of his daughter Strophe (who is also in disguise), egged on by the crowd he is manipulating to ensure that Hippolytus is suitably punished. Strophe is guilty of asking for Hippolytus to be spared, as Hippolytus has previously refused to deny Phaedra's imputation that he raped her and thus drove her to suicide. Kane in *Phaedra's Love* puts much more of the physical violence and bodily unpleasantness (with some additions) on stage, rather than off, as in Seneca's original: such as Hippolytus' genitals being first chucked onto a fire, then tossed around as a child's game and finally thrown to a dog. (Aleks Sierz noted in the post-show discussion November 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 that in Kane's version the death of Phaedra also occurs off stage.) However, it is the characterisations, the emotional tone and the setting that are predominantly different in Kane's retelling of the Hippolytus myth, rather than the plot itself.

The play is reset with the House of Theseus as a contemporary European royal family and their actions and reactions, as well as that of the crowds that form their public, owe not a little to the dysfunctional worlds of soap operas such as, in the UK, *Eastenders*, or reality TV shows such as *Big Brother*. The family are royal celebrities and Strophe, at least, has a wary eye on what the media and thus the public will do, if they discover Phaedra is having an affair with Hippolytus. Strophe: 'It's the excuse they're all looking for. / We'd be torn apart on the streets.' (68) While Hippolytus, in his own way knows that the adoring subjects who deliver take-away sex as speedily as they bring his preferred junk-food diet of hamburgers, are driven by a desire for his social identity as people's prince and heir apparent, rather than his actual self. It is his birthday when the play commences and throughout the play we see his condemnation and disdain of his fans' desire to give him presents. Hippolytus: 'News. Another rape. Child murdered. War somewhere. Few thousand jobs gone. But none of this matters 'cause it's a royal birthday.' (70) There are deliberate echoes here of another royal family which sold its image to the public as a way of maintaining its power and then found the cost of encouraging and manipulating such mass idealisation was to leave it increasingly vulnerable in the face of family scandals, while simultaneously in thrall to the impossible fairytale image that it had created of itself for public consumption.

Hippolytus, as the previous comments suggest, is the most altered character. Kane's cleverest change is to reverse the myth, in which Hippolytus' chastity becomes his impenetrable barrier to Phaedra's desire. At a stroke, this deflects the accusations of implicit misogyny sometimes laid at the door of the Hippolytus myth, where in Euripides and Seneca for example, it is the ungovernability of female sexual desire that powers the drama. In Kane's version Hippolytus is a virtual sex addict, but empty and unable to feel any passion, a kind of misanthropic stereotype of a nihilist. Phaedra can certainly have sex with him if she desires, as he doesn't have much objection to the process, or indeed, who it is it with; whether Phaedra, Strophe or a random man

in the royal garden. But for Hippolytus it is only ever that: a physical process bereft of emotion, meaning or significance. There is something of a doubled-edged quality to Kane's profoundly melancholic, if not depressed Hippolytus, which owes something to the figure of Hamlet. Here the character is intended to invoke as much disgust as admiration, as much pity as a thorough dislike. In certain ways he is a perpetually retarded and self-obsessed adolescent, playing with his remote controlled car in his room, masturbating to pornographic films and using his discarded socks to wipe his cum, as well as his nose. He has grown fat like the older Elvis Presley on a diet of junk-food and narcissism, and as the other characters tell us: he smells. But in other ways (and more like Prince Hamlet), he is a more active nihilist, fully aware of the emptiness of the values that frame not only his existence as the Prince, but those of the society in which he exists. As Hippolytus remarks of his life, in a Beckettian sounding line, he is generally 'filling up time': 'Fill it up with tat. Bric-a-bra, bits and bobs, getting by, Christ Almighty wept.' (75)

Phaedra is herself as ambivalent a character as Hippolytus, though almost his emotional opposite. Her romantic candour making her sound somewhat unhinged at times and her 'burning' passion is etched into a very physical idea of what being in love means. This sometimes sounds like an adolescent riposte to Hippolytus' cynicism and sometimes like a maternal response. Is this lust and infatuation, or being madly in love? For example, in the scene after Phaedra's *fellatio*, there is the following verbal exchange:

Phaedra: 'I wanted to see your face when you came'.

Hippolytus: 'Why?'

Phaedra: 'I'd like to see you lose yourself'. (77)

Hippolytus retorts: 'everyone looks the same when they come.' (78)

Is there perhaps some truth when he accuses Phaedra of an 'idealisation' of him, as a psychoanalyst might say? That is to say, does she want to save him because she truly loves him, to does she love him because she wants someone to save? Is her love for him really a kind of infatuation or fantasy, as Hippolytus suggests, which has little to do with him as a person: 'Wouldn't be about me. Never was.' (78) At turns she is an older woman acting like a mother towards him, trying to save him from himself, and at other times she sounds like a self-centred, spoilt child, oblivious to the consequences of her action.

This ambiguous treatment of the main characters is indicative of the awkward and ambivalent emotional tone of the play as a whole. Should we sympathise with Hippolytus, who does at least understand the empty horror of the world he inhabits and gestures towards it, or must we condemn his effectively abusive treatment of others? As the royal doctor who is called on to cure him (surely of the psychiatric persuasion) remarks in a memorably funny line: 'There's nothing wrong with him medically. [...] He's just very unpleasant.' (64) Should we pity Phaedra's, compulsive grand passion for this offensive, super slob Hippolytus, as if she were a victim, or instead ask whether her obsession, in full knowledge of the consequences of her act, amounts to a kind of destructive selfishness on her own part? After all, there is nothing beyond the control of human individuals in the play, no power, unless we accept desire as a wholly contingent and overwhelming force, emanating from some outside metaphysical world.

Is the play therefore a black comedy with overtones of farce (indeed it has some of Kane's funniest lines and she was, despite her reputation, a very comic writer)? Or is it a moral fable about the sudden power of love, or the need for love to promote change in a world where all significance has been eroded and where it would appear that, as in T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land': 'death has undone so many'? If so, isn't that a dangerously Romantic and perhaps a rather apolitical notion, albeit validating Phaedra's intention behind her 'birthday present' to Hippolytus, the suicide note that falsely accuses him of rape? Unlike Seneca's version, she accuses him of rape, not out of despair at his rejection, but at least in Hippolytus' view to help him learn how to be 'alive' again. Her suicide and subsequent accusation of rape is therefore at least possibly an act of supreme love, rather than of revenge. Consider the end of the play where after the once adoring crowd have castrated and disembowelled him, barbecuing his manhood for good measure, Hippolytus seems to finally feel alive and cries out: 'If there could have been more moments like this.' (97) But is this a moment of high tragedy or of broad farce? The line has a little too much of the slickness of one too many advertising campaign and the flat, self-regarding clichés of life style magazines. The audience in Bristol responded to the final scene with a bemused mix of nervous laughter, averting their eyes, leaving before the end, and sitting there perplexed. This suggested, perhaps, just how difficult this question and the others are to answer with any certainty and that Kane designed the audience's experience to be as ambivalent as possible.

Anne Tipton's production dealt very successfully with the deliberate emotional unevenness of the play, as it swerved between farce, black comedy and tragedy, as well as the difficulties involved in presenting two main characters whose identities and our view of them remain so ambiguous and fluid. In the main it favoured restraint, understatement and cool precision in both acting and the minimal contemporary staging. This fitted well with Kane's lean and stripped-down dialogue, while also acting to counterpoint the declamatory violence of much of Kane's language. But the production could also take on more threatening and

hysterical scenes, for example the striking 'posse' of Burberry-clad 'chavs' and 'chavettes' (including the frightening 'chav' children) who formed the crowd throughout the play. ("Chav" is slang, in the UK, for people living in a social housing culture of low expectations and high crime rates) Or, the irony and black comedy of the common or garden, portable barbecue that formed the resting place of Hippolytus' genitalia in the final scene. Parts of the play could have been set in almost any socially deprived area of a big British city. Theseus asks the question, 'Come far?', to one of the crowd he is attempting to whip up to ensure Hippolytus punished. Man 1 replies: 'Newcastle'. (92)

An exception to the general coolness was the torture and rape of Strophe by her father Theseus. This was presented as a particularly brutal, shocking and violent moment. In contrast, while Phaedra's own death is not seen, her cremation on her funeral pyre becomes a lyrical and quiet scene. In the Bristol production, it was represented on a raised platform outside of the stage area, partly obscured by a screen, with a gradually rising glare of red lights reminding us of the 'fire' trope, that Phaedra continually uses to describe what love means to her, throughout the play. As she earlier says to Hippolytus: 'You burn me.' (79) Hippolytus himself was played by Laurence Penry-Jones as an appropriate mixture of the apathetic and aggressive, sometimes surly and unfeeling, at other times depressed and despairing. My only real problem with his depiction though, is that casting wise, his Hippolytus is never as unpleasant and physically repulsive as Kane suggest he is. Penry-Jones at his most slobby is no Johnny Vegas for example. In contrast, Diana Kent's Phaedra was very much the emotional opposite to Hippolytus: torn between control and restraint on the one hand, and overwhelming and self-destructive passion on the other. This led to a striking performance that was variously tense with waiting, but also at times manipulative and narcissistic.

The stage itself consisted of a raised rectangular platform in the Bristol Old Vic studio (suggesting the studio origins of this play) dominated by a sofa, the floor strewn with the discarded rubbish of Hippolytus' self-incarcerated life. There was no change in scenery to indicate the different rooms, instead Emma Chapman's intelligent and sensitive use of lighting served to distinguish spaces and, as in the scene of Phaedra's cremation, had an extremely important role to play in the overall success of the production. One of the problems faced by a director in the play is what to do about the relation between naturalism and stylisation at its core. This problem is true of much of Kane's work, but is particularly acute in the case of *Phaedra's Love*. The main characters are psychologically clearer and more developed than anywhere else, even more than in *Blasted*, yet simultaneously the play becomes more and more stylised as it develops, where the universalising ethical themes predominate over any motivations produced from characterisation. As for example, in the suddenness with which Hippolytus realises that Phaedra's accusation of rape offers him a way out of his deathly life, or Phaedra's sudden decision to commit suicide. Tipton's solution was to go for a basically naturalistic staging and presentation throughout, including a clear set of visual metaphors that located the crowd as members of the contemporary British underclass, though this did raise some problems as regards the bloody farce that is the final scene of the play. In particular, if the play becomes too located in the present and focussed around the relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus, there is a danger it loses its thematic edge. After all, as Tipton said at the post-show discussion, the play is essentially about the redemptive possibilities of love and the recovery of an ethical stance towards the world. But if so, then the danger in becoming too contemporary and psychologised is that it threatens to make such abstract themes overly concrete, although this is as I suggest above a thematic and presentational tension within the play. Kane is using her version of classical tragedy to provoke us to question and measure the relationship between our superficial contemporary existence and more authentic modes of living, where life is faced in all its glory and despair.

#### Notes:

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