

Sarah Kane: interviewed by Dan Rebellato (Royal Holloway, University of London) 3 November 1998.

(8,600 words)

Dan: I can't think of a playwright that has got quite such vitriolic or personal reviews from critics as you have. Why?

SK: I honestly think it's because they don't know what else to say. If they don't know what to say about the work, they go for the writer. Or the director, or the actors. What happened with *Blasted*.. (The press response to my other plays is inevitably so clouded by what happened to *Blasted* so that everyone is constantly re-reviewing *Blasted*. Michael Billington must have reviewed *Blasted* more than any other play he's ever seen. I'm permanently reading about *Blasted* even now.)

What happened on that particular press night? It was a bit strange; the Court had programmed the play into a dead spot; they didn't really know what to do with it. A lot of people in the building didn't want to do it. They were a bit embarrassed about it, so they put it into a spot just after Christmas when no one was going to the theatre anyway and hopefully no one would notice.

It was in the Theatre Upstairs and what usually happens in the theatre upstairs is that they have two press nights because if you have one then every seat is full of press and it's completely unbearable. So you have two and you have a slightly mixed audience for both nights. Because everyone was a bit haphazard at the Court at that time, they failed to notice there was a major press night at another theatre, the Almeida in London, on one of those press nights so they were all coming on the same night anyway. So I was sitting at the back and I looked around and realised that the director was somewhere near the front and everyone else was a critic. I think there were about three other women in the audience. Everyone else was a middle aged, white, middle class man -- and most of them had plaid jackets on. (Laughter)

And it was literally only at that point that I realised that the main character of my play was a middle-aged male journalist. (More laughter) Who not only raped his young girlfriend but that is then raped and mutilated himself. And it suddenly occurred to me that they wouldn't like

it. (Laughter) It genuinely hadn't -- I really thought they were going to like it. I thought this is really good, they'll love it. And then the next morning, there was just complete chaos. My agent couldn't get off the phone to call me. There were apparently tabloid journalists running around the Royal Court going: "Where is she?" She's at home in bed. It's ten o'clock in the morning. And a lot of it passed me by at the time. My father is a tabloid journalist and very kindly didn't give my address to any other tabloid journalist. And they never caught up with me.

But I think largely what happened was that what I attempted to do, and probably succeeded, was to create a form for which I couldn't think of an obvious direct precedent so it wasn't possible to say: "This form is exactly like the form in a play written 20 years ago. I wanted to create a form that hadn't happened before. And because the form hadn't happened before no one knew what to say. Michael Billington couldn't say: "Ah, this is a nice bit of social realism I can talk about this." He couldn't say: "It's surrealism and I don't like that therefore don't go and see it." So what he could say was that this writer is clearly mentally ill and she should be locked away. And the *Daily Mail* did actually suggest that the money spent on the play should be spent on getting me some therapy. (Laughter) And I agree (laughs) but that's really not the point. But I genuinely think it's because if they don't have a clear framework within which to locate the play then they can't talk about it. So they have to talk about other things, such as the writer's personal life, their mental health, whatever it might be.

~~DR: In all the reviews there is a paragraph list... (which details a list of the play's atrocious acts)~~

SK: Yes, it drives me mad... Rape, masturbation... The thing is that the list is always wrong. It always includes "an underaged mentally retarded girl being crapped on by a doll" or something (laughter) that actually didn't happen. And a lot of the time it happened because once the story was picked up as a news story it was no longer the people who had seen it that were actually writing about it -- it was people like my father, tabloid hacks, who if they don't know the facts make them up. That's what their job is.

So, yeah, there's always the list. It's usually inaccurate. And a list of contents is not a review. But it doesn't only happen to me; it happens to

most new plays. What you get is a brief synopsis, and you get a list of things that happen and then a little note at the end saying whether or not this particular middle-aged male journalist likes this play, and whether or not you should go and see it. And it tells you nothing. It tells you possibly what's in the play, but if you list the contents of any play, it really doesn't tell you whether it's any good or not.

DR: You have a clear insight into what makes a bad critic What do think would be a good definition of a critic? How would they behave?

SK: They should be dying (laughter) -- do something else. It's almost an oxymoron for me -- good theatre critic, like military intelligence, Christian scientists, free love. Probably George Bernard Shaw is the best critic there's ever been. And of course he was a writer. And I think the best critics are probably people who are writers, whether or not they write for a living or do something else. And I think people who don't consider that to be their primary role on the planet, I think what frequently happens with theatre critics is they genuinely see their job, whether they acknowledge it consciously or not, as to destroy people -- and they do their utmost to do it. They really do. But I think if they also have another (I hate the word career) another line of interest in art then they're far less likely to do that.

I'd quite like to review plays. In fact, I got asked to review Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* for the *Observer*. I was really keen to do it, and then they phoned me up and said: "If you don't like it that would be great, and I thought um, complete set up, so I didn't do it." I think playwrights reviewing other plays would be really interesting, but I think genuinely caring about whether or not the play is good and actually wanting it to be good are prerequisites. And not this joy in how vitriolic can you be.

DR: Do you notice any difference in critical cultures around the world?

SK: My work is mostly produced in Germany. I did a press conference there quite recently, where I was astonished -- they'd all read all of my work; they had intelligent questions to ask about it; they weren't rude and abusive; they were genuinely interested in coming to see it. They'd

actually prepared in the way that you hope people will prepare when they're doing their work and that's completely different to this country.

I don't agree to interviews very often with the press, but in a few that I've done recently, the journalists turn up and say: "I don't actually know any of your work but..." and you think, well, "Is that really acceptable, when if you go to Germany and you're doing a press conference -- it's not even a one to one -- they do actually prepare?" But, having said that, although I feel the critics are much better out there, the standard of productions generally is much poorer and you have to allow a certain amount of cultural difference.

And I've seen some productions which have been vastly different to what I wrote which I've actually quite liked. There was one in Belgium which was just after the child abuse ring in Brussels had been exposed -- the play was on in Brussels -- the whole play became about the baby and there were people crying in the audience when the baby was buried. It all really bore very little relation to my play, but it was a genuine cultural reinterpretation and so I sort of accepted it. I felt a bit like my play had been used as a vehicle but then at other times...

I mean, I went to Hamburg to see *Blasted* and this man walked on stage and I thought: "Who's that?" This guy in this really trendy leather jacket, greased-back hair, sunglasses wraparound, "Who the fuck is that person supposed to be?" That thirty-year-old? And I thought, "Oh my God, that's supposed to be Ian." That's supposed to be a forty-five-year-old guy, nah, nah, but I then thought: "But I know this character; where have I seen this character?" And I thought: "It's Tarantino." And my heart just broke. I could hear this cracking in my chest. And actually, in some way, that becomes quite insulting. The work is seen as part of a school, which actually I abhor. And it gets put into that bracket and then reinterpreted in that way. That's really very insulting.

DR: What's seen as a good play at the Court and the Bush tends to be very naturalistic, but your plays have a lyricism and...

SK: I'm astonished I get produced at all because I don't feel that I do fit really. I mean, I started when I left university -- the first job that I had was at the Bush -- as a literary assistant or something -- and I spent a lot of time reading scripts, talking to the literary manager and I hated not

only almost everything I read but definitely everything that was produced. If I wrote a report saying this play is absolutely dreadful, I could be pretty sure that it would be on within six months. And it was always to do with form.

And yet it's true, obviously there are certain things that tell you to write; there are things you feel you want to write about; I write about love almost all the time, but driving all that there's always a desire to explore form and find a new form, find exactly the right form for a particular story or particular theme. And I'm personally very tired of seeing plays about disaffected groups of youths exploring their sexuality on a night on the beach and -- it's really hard to try to characterise, I mean I have a very clear mental image of a Bush play (can't help feeling it's got worse now). There is a particular image of a Court play which unfortunately is quite similar in a way but slightly more attention-seeking in the writing.

Then *Blasted* happened and suddenly the Royal Court became known for well, you know, two inanimate objects go up somebody's arse and if they do, and it's set on a beach and it's exploring somebody's sexuality (laughter), then probably this is the play for us. And I do think there's still an element of that and I do feel quite responsible for it, which is awful, but I don't think there are very many genuine innovators working at the moment. I think Martin Crimp is one who is, who is of an older generation, not particularly known or I think particularly liked very much by the general theatregoing public. Again, there is a particular kind of British form...

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**DR:** Scottish playwrights are different. If you think of Chris Hannan, David Grieg and David Harrower...

**SK:** I've always wanted to be in Scotland. Opening [*Crave*] at the Traverse has been the highlight of my life probably. I was really wanting to open a play at the Traverse. And yeah, you've named three of my favourite writers: Harrower, Grieg and Hannan. And it might be to do with the fact that there are masses of writers produced in London at the moment who get an absurd amount of national attention. I always find it ridiculous that when I have a play on in London, the *Glasgow Herald* will come down and review it. You think: "Why is anyone seriously going to get on a train from Glasgow and come down to see it unless they were a mate, in which case they'd come anyway." And I can't say I noticed the *Independent* rushing off

up to the Cits to review things really. And there is a complete imbalance in the press which means, for example, that Joe Penhall is more generally known than David Grieg, who is a far better writer. Also I think because they are more writers produced in London, there are inevitably more bad ones, but then again, when you think, three of the best writers at the moment are all from Scotland, what's that about? I don't think there are three writers as good as those three working in London. I don't know -- there's something dead culturally.

DR: How do you write?

SK: It's different for each thing that I write. And it often depends on what stage I'm at. At first draft stage, I tend to write an awful lot of rubbish very quickly and it has no form at all. *Blasted* was a very particular journey and I think because it was a first play, I wasn't really aware of what I was doing formally. I mean, I knew what I was doing but I wasn't consciously aware in the way I am now; I mean, within two pages when I started to write *Crave* I thought: "Ah, I can see what form this is going to be, how interesting." With *Blasted*, it wasn't until six months after it had closed that I went, "Oh, that's what I was doing."

And I think with *Blasted*, it was a direct response to the material as it began to happen. I mean, I knew I wanted to write a play about a man and a woman in a hotel room, and that there was a complete power imbalance, which resulted in a rape. And I started writing that and I was writing away and had been doing it for a few days, and I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing, and there was a very old woman's face, a woman of Srebrenica, just weeping and weeping and looking into the camera, and saying: "Please, please, help me, help me. We need the UN to come here and help us. We need someone to do something." And I was sitting there watching and I thought: "No one's going to do anything. How many times have I seen another old woman crying from another town in Bosnia under siege and no one does anything?" And I thought: "This is absolutely terrible, and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room -- what does it matter? What's the point of carrying on?" So this is what I want to write about and yet somehow this story about this man and woman was still attracting me. And I thought: "So what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia?" And then suddenly this

penny dropped and I thought: "Of course, it's obvious. One is the seed and the other is the tree." And I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilisation and I think the wall between so-called civilisation and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin and it can get torn down at any time.

And then I had to find a way of formally making that link, thinking: "How do I say that what's happening in this country between two people in a room could lead to that or is emotionally linked to that?" And then at some point I think I actually had a conversation with David Grieg about about Aristotle's unities -- time, place and action (David is the perfect man to talk to about this). And I thought: "Okay, what I have to do is keep the same place but alter the time and action." Or you can actually reverse it and look at it the other way around: that the time and place stay the same, no the time and the action stay the same, but the place changes. It depends actually how you look at the play. You can look at it either way.

And at that point I began to think: "Is there a precedent?" If there's a precedent, I don't want to do it, I'm not interested. And after a day spent looking at plays, I couldn't think of one, and then I needed an event. I think in the first draft, the soldier literally began to appear at different points -- it was like Ian was hallucinating and I just thought: "This is awful, kind of American Expressionism." And then I thought: "What it needs is what happens in war -- suddenly, violently, without any warning whatsoever, people's lives are completely ripped to pieces." So I literally just picked a moment in the play; I thought I'll plant a bomb, just blow the whole fucking thing up. And I loved the idea of it as well. That you have a nice little box set in the studio theatre somewhere and you blow it up -- because it's what I've always wanted to do. (Laughter) Just blow it up. It's like that, you know; you go to the Bush and you go in and you see the set and you go, "Oh no", and I was longing for it to blow up and so it was such a joy for me to be able to do that.

For me the form did exactly mirror the content. And for me the form is the meaning of the play, which is that people's lives are thrown into complete chaos with absolutely no warning whatsoever.

Physically how I write (I haven't answered the question properly) physically how I write, half the time I can't remember. I seriously have a finished script and I think: "God, when did I do that?" I do seem to have

been hanging around drinking coffee for six months and here's a play. It happens very haphazardly and brokenly and sometimes I write masses and sometimes... the thing I'm writing at the moment, I'm literally writing a line in a notebook with no idea where it belongs in the play, but I know it's in there somewhere. I think probably these days (it was different with *Blasted*) but I tend to amass material before I start.

DR: What do you think about the practicalities of staging?

SK: I've been asked this before, you know.

DR: The last stage direction of *Phaedra's Love*...

SK: A vulture descends and begins to eat his body.

DR: Every single page of your plays shouts: you'll never put this on -- or is it just that you're doing what you want to do and that's their problem...

SK: Well, you know, there was a crucial moment when I started writing *Blasted*, I can't remember what the crucial moment was, but back then I was directing plays. I stated out acting and then I realised I really like directors very much so I started directing. And then I realised that there weren't really that many plays that I liked so I started writing. And so while I was writing *Blasted* there was this crucial moment -- it may have been the bomb going off, I can't remember -- when I thought: "I wouldn't know how to direct this", and it was a sort of key moment. I thought: "Either I write a play that I can direct and or I write the play that I need to write, knowing that I can't direct it." And it was a very tough decision. And in the end I thought: "Well, the play has to come first, and I'm writing as a writer, I'm not writing as a director." So I wrote the ridiculous stage direction -- whichever one it was -- "He eats the baby" or something, probably. Then I did think: "It's someone else's problem; it's not my problem."

*Phaedra's Love* I had great fun writing because there were so many ridiculous things like "cuts off his genitals and throws them to the dog". And I'd just think: "Well, it's not my problem and then suddenly it was because I ended up directing it." (Laughter) That was very interesting because when I watched *Blasted* very often I didn't see exactly what I'd written and it would really annoy me, but suddenly I was confronted with



just how difficult it is to create the images that I write. But I really like doing it.

Now *Cleansed* is another story altogether. No one ever believes this, but it's the total truth: I was having a particular sort-of fit about all this naturalistic rubbish that was being produced and I decided I wanted to write a play that could never ever be turned into a film, that could never ever be shot for television, that could never be turned into a novel. The only thing that could ever be done with it was it could be staged. Believe it or not, that play is *Cleansed*. That play can only be staged. Now you may say: "It can't be staged", but it can't be anything else either, that's fine, it can only be done in the theatre. Of course, I knew there were impossible stage directions, but I also genuinely believe you can do anything on stage, both in terms of, you know, causing offence but also pragmatically you can do anything on stage. There's absolutely nothing you can't represent one way or another. It may not be represented naturalistically. It's completely impossible to do *Cleansed* naturalistically because half the audience would die just from sheer grief if you did that play naturalistically. But that was kind of the point: I never asked for it, I never asked people to actually chop legs off, or [use] real rats, although there is a production in Germany which is using real rats, apparently. They've been rehearsing rats... (laughter). I'm really serious. But I wanted to write something that was totally, totally theatrical. It couldn't be anything else. But there was also part of me that wanted to direct plays so, "That's their problem..."

But I thought: "In the end, you have to write the thing that you want." And ~~when you write a stage direction~~ (I'm not actually writing, you know, "the stage manager carries this on and this winch comes up here")... What I'm writing is the effect and everything. The effect we get is we understand that someone's feet have been cut off. How you do that is a completely different thing. and how you make that into a coherent production is another thing. For me, it's never about the actual thing -- it's not about someone writes down how much you love someone, so his hands get chopped off. It's not about the actual chop; it's about how that person can no longer express love with his hands. And what does that mean? And I think the less naturalistically you show those things, the more likely people are to be thinking: "What does this mean? What is the meaning of this act?" Rather than "Fucking hell, how did they do that?" (laughter)

Which is really not that interesting a response to elicit from an audience because you know David Copperfield can do that.

DR: How come you acted in *Cleansed*?

SK: There are rumours circulating that I pushed an actress downstairs -- it's not true. Her dog was trying to have sex with another dog in a park and she was pulling it off and slipped a disc.

DR: Oh, how very Sarah Kane. (Laughter)

SK: It would be. That is honestly what happened. And so we sort of sat there for two days going: "What are we going to do? Could it be pushed back in place?" But the problem was that she had to be flown halfway up a wall and do all sorts of extraordinary things -- which it's just not possible to do with a slipped disc, so we were going to close. At which point I got very depressed and thought: "I can't quite bear for the play to end in this way." And in a moment of rashness, I said: "Well, look, I know the lines, I can do it." And the next thing I knew I was being flown halfway up a wall and going: "Nah, I can't do this..." But, in the end, I did the last three nights and it was amazing. And I'm doing *Crave* as well. I am. I'm shoving actresses down stairs, things dropping out of the sky.

DR: Did you learn anything else about writing while acting?

SK: I learned a) how difficult acting is, and b) how easy acting is. And everyone makes it so very, very complicated. And it's really not. In fact, it's an extremely simple thing. And actually it's the simplicity that makes it difficult. I can't talk about all acting, but what *Cleansed* asked for was extreme simplicity. And that's a very very, difficult thing to do when you're standing in front of 400 people with no clothes on. Be simple, do you know what I mean? Your instinct is to run away. But actually it's a very simple thing. What do I want? What do I feel? How do I enable myself to feel that? I also learnt how difficult it is to do that particularly in a play like *Cleansed*, where you kind of disappear through a hole in the stage and you have precisely three and a half seconds to remove all your clothes, run around the back of the stage and get into a thing and come whizzing up through another hole. And I think at one point I said to one of the other actors: "God, this is really really hard isn't it?" And he went: "Yes, it is." (Laughter) And then I realised that I wasn't very popular.

But it was interesting, being the only person in the entire world who's ever been in and seen a production of *Cleansed*. It's extraordinary how different it is (God, this sounds like "How do you learn your lines?" stuff) how different it is sitting here and watching it, and being in it. I mean, for a start, it seems to last about fifteen minutes when you're in it. And when you watch it, it goes on for ever. But it was a very, very different journey through the play. But one which I liked. It suddenly becomes extremely clear to me. Exactly what you say. I thought, "Oh they're just in love." It's actually very sixties and hippie. It's just that they are all emanating great love and need and going after what they need. And the obstacles in the way are extremely unpleasant, but that's not what the play is about. What drives people is need, not the opposite.

DR: When I saw it the audience was not very appreciative...

SK: Where you there when people shouted at it?

DR: No, they...

SK: People actually shouted at it.

Q: Who do you write for?

SK: Me. I've only ever written for myself. In fact, the truth is that (suddenly feel a bit strange here) I've only ever written in order to escape from hell. And it's never worked. But, at the other end of it, when you sit there and watch something and think: "Well, that's the most perfect expression of the hell that I've felt", then maybe, it was worth it. I've never written anything for anyone else. Apart from a little comedy play for my Dad once. But that's very hidden.

Q: How did you expect audiences to react?

SK: Oh dear. Like I say, with *Blasted*, I expected them to like it, naively enough. Since then, I've always expected them to hate it and it's never been as bad as I thought. But for me, expecting something from the audience only ever comes after it's written and I've been through rehearsals. You can't ever anticipate, I mean particularly with what happened with *Blasted*, you can never anticipate that -- and if you do anticipate that kind of response you don't get it. I mean, I know a lot of people who've written things in order to get that kind of response and it

doesn't work. But you can't second-guess audiences and you can't make them behave in certain ways. I mean, I'm sure everyone in the room knows, everyone in the room must have been in a relationship where you think: "I'm going to make the other person do this", and it completely backfires. And that's one person that you know really well, so imagine trying to make 500 people or whatever behave in a particular way you don't even know. It's just not possible.

So I suppose what I think about when I'm writing is how I want a particular moment or idea to affect me. And what the best way of eliciting that response from myself is. And if it can make me respond in that way, then the chances are there'll be at least one other person who'll respond in the same way. And even if they don't, then it's satisfied me, which was the initial intention anyway.

Q: ??

SK: I think *Cleansed* is a slightly different ball game actually. (Now I want a piece of paper to draw something on. Have you got a piece of paper?) *Cleansed* is structurally based on *Woyzeck*, Büchner's play which I directed last year [1997]. It's the difference between plot and story, okay? Story is chronologically what happens, which is: okay, five years ago, there was this man and this woman called Ian and Cate, and they had a relationship which went very badly wrong. He was working for MI5 at the time, blah, blah, blah, you get to the end of the story and he's dead. The plot is: there are two people in the hotel room. As you go through it, things from the past are revealed, so it's basically the order of things which is changed. The plot is the order in which the story is revealed. So with *Blasted*, for example, the story and the plot are similar in that eventually all of those things are revealed.

With *Cleansed*, this wiggly line here which goes up and down, is the story, and the bits that go up are the moments of high drama, which tend to be violent. (Unfortunately.) And the bits under here are the bits that build up to this. So that's the story. Everything above the line is the plot. So all the stuff underneath is just shed. Now Büchner's *Woyzeck* is an absolutely perfect gem of a play to look at for this in that anything remotely extraneous or explanatory is completely cut and all you get is those moments of extremely high drama. And what I was trying to do with *Cleansed* was a similar thing, but in a different way.

And when I was directing -- I'd actually finished *Cleansed* when I directed *Woyzeck* -- but I was playing around with all the different versions because he'd died before completing the play, so no one really knows what order he meant the scenes to go in. And I sat there with all the scenes on different bits of card and moved them around and I thought: "When have I done this before?" And I thought, "Oh yeah, *Cleansed*." And I wrote all the storylines (the Robin/Carl story, the Grace/Graham story, the Robin/Grace story and the Tinker/stripper story) separately and I thought, "And where do they connect?" And I was doing this moving things around, going completely insane, thinking: "There's a scene missing; where's the scene?" breaking things into two scenes till eventually I had the thing that I wanted. So inevitably, when you describe it, yes, of course, that's what happens, because the only things that happen in the play are the moments above that line, up here, whereas I think with a lot of other plays, there are things like: "So then he runs off and tells his father." If you look at Greek drama, then the messenger comes on, all of which is much easier to take and gives you time to calm down. But I didn't want to give anyone time to calm down. Why is another question, but I think this, I wanted to strip everything down, I wanted it to be as small, when I say small I mean minimal and poetic and I didn't want to waste any words. I really hate wasted words.

And *Crave* in some ways is at the other end of the scale in that it's got more words than any of my other plays, but it's actually about half the length of anything else I've written. Again, there's no waste. I don't like writing things you really don't need. And my favourite exercise is cutting: cut, cut, cut... And I'm much hated at script meetings at the Royal Court because I read people's plays and inevitably I'm kind of: "If you just cut that line..." And it's become a habit, but I think it's quite a good one.

**Q:** Is the reason you write such extreme things that you know it will cause a stir?

**SK:** Some of the extreme things that I've put in my plays I've put in because they're true and I've been so appalled and horrified, but genuinely compelled, that I can't help but put them in my play.

When I was writing *Blasted*, there was some point at which I realised there was a connection with *King Lear*. And I thought: "I'm writing about fatherhood. There's this scene where he goes mad; and there's this Dover

scene with Cate when she unloads the gun -- is she going to give him the gun or is she not?" And I thought the only thing that I don't have is blindness, which is really odd, I don't have blindness. At the time (God knows why) I was reading Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs*, about football violence. You've all read *Blasted*, but when people hear it's real they get even more horrified. It's absolutely appalling. There was an undercover policeman who was I think was pretending to be a Manchester United supporter [tape ends] he then sucked out one of his eyes, bit it off (You see, you've all read the play and yet you're all reacting like this) bit it off, spat it out on the floor and threw this guy down and left him there. And I just couldn't fucking believe what I'd read; I couldn't believe that a human being could do this to another person, could actually do this but they had. I put it in the play and everyone was shocked. Then in the rehearsal room I'd say, "Well, actually where this comes from is..." and I'd tell them and they'd go, "Ahhhh", and they'd read the play -- what, do you think I make this stuff up? (Laughter)

The similar thing is true of Robin in *Cleansed*. Robin is based on a young black man who was on Roben Island with Nelson Mandela. He was eighteen years old; he was put in Roben Island and told he would be there for forty-five years. Didn't mean anything to him, he was illiterate. Didn't mean a thing. Nelson Mandela and some of the other prisoners taught him to read and write. He learnt to count, realised what forty-five years was and hung himself. When I tell people that, you know, I told the actor playing Robin that story, he was really upset and shocked. I said: "But you've read the play. It's in there." I really don't invent very much. I take a look around. I mean, I hate the idea of drama as journalism and I would never say I'm a journalist, but when it comes to the acts of violence in my plays, my imagination isn't that fucking sick. Do you know what I mean? I just read the newspapers -- it's not that there's something wrong with me. And all you have to do is look at the world around you and there it is. And I agree with you, *Blasted* is pretty devastating. But the only reason it's any more devastating than reading a newspaper, is that it's got all the boring bits cut out.

**DR: *Blasted* seems extraordinarily raw... but there's no sense that you believe Ian is a monster.**

SK: I don't. I really like Ian. I think he's funny. I can see that other people think that Ian is a bastard. And I knew that they would. But I think he's extremely funny. And the reason I wrote that character was this terrible moral dilemma that was thrown up at me when a man I knew who was dying of lung cancer was terribly, terribly ill, who was extremely funny, started telling me the most appalling racist jokes I've ever heard in my life. And I was completely torn: a) because they were very funny, and very good jokes, and I'd not heard them before; b) because I wanted to tell him I thought he was awful and I was glad he was dying of lung cancer; and c) because he was dying of lung cancer, I thought: "This poor man is going to be dead and he probably wouldn't be saying this if he wasn't..." And it set up all kinds of turmoil in me, but in the end, yes, I liked him. And no, I think when I wrote *Blasted* I just thought well, I'll just show these people as they are. And I don't really want to copy ??, I don't really know what I think of them. Yes, of course I think he's a monster; I also think he's great. All I knew is that I wanted the soldier to be worse. And I knew that, having created Ian, it was going to be a real problem having someone come through that door who made Ian look like a pussycat. So that was very difficult, writing the soldier was probably the most difficult thing I've ever done.

But no, I don't really know what I think of any of them. And yes, I think Cate's very fucking stupid: and, of course, what's she doing in a hotel room in the first place; of course, she's going to get raped. But yes, isn't it utterly tragic that this happens to her? And I did actually have nights during rehearsals for *Blasted* when I would go home and cry and say to myself: "How could I create that beautiful woman in order for her to be so abused?" And I really did feel a bit sick and depraved. A part of that was to do with the fact that there was no sort-of overwhelming sense that in the end Cate came out on top. Had there been that, I'm sure I would have felt completely exonerated. But I didn't; but then I don't think that in the end those people do come out on top.

Q: Two questions: gender in Crave's characters?

SK: To me, A was always an older man; M was always an older woman; B was always a younger man and C was always a young woman. I decided not to specify; I thought there were things the characters said which made it very clear. For example, it would be very odd if the man said: "When I wake

I think my period must have started." That would be very strange. Also it would also be very strange if a man kept on talking about how much he wanted a baby. But, on the other hand, yes it could be done. I'm sure I'll see a production in Germany where it's done (laughter). I absolutely know for a fact that that will happen.

But, I was trying to do something different with *Crave*, which was in a way about, not really about releasing control, but about opening up options. And in some ways, for me, *Crave* is very specific; it has very fixed and specific meanings in my mind, which no one else can ever possibly know unless I told them. For example, who here knows what 1997114424 means? None of you know. I'm the only person who knows and the actors know that. And I have no intention of telling anyone what it means. So I can't possibly expect to ever see the same production twice. Thank God. That won't happen. A, B, C and M for me do have specific meanings, which I am prepared to tell you: which is, A was (A is many things) is the author, abuser, Alistair as in Alistair Crowley, who wrote some interesting books which some of might like to read. Antichrist. My brother came up with Arsehole, which I thought was quite good. There was also the actor who I originally wrote it for, who was called Andrew. So that was how A came about. M was simply mother. B was Boy. And C was Child. But I didn't want to write those things down because then I thought they'll get fixed in those things for ever and never ever change. And let's face it, it is quite obscure. And I had a choice of, I mean the play's quite obviously quite heavily based on, or influenced by *The Waste Land*. And I had a choice about did I write a set of notes to go with the play to explain it. But what happened to T S Eliot -- poor bastard, I bet he regretted it for ever -- was everyone got more interested in the notes than the poem. Because how can you understand the poem without them? And I really didn't want that to happen. And also I knew that the notes section would actually be longer than the script, which is just ridiculous. So I thought, it's a very simple choice: either I explain everything, which means going into enormous detail about my own life, which I didn't really want to do. Or I explain nothing. And I thought: "I'll explain nothing." If nobody likes it, who cares? What was the second question?

Q: I've been haunted by the image in *Cleansed* of sticking a pole up someone's arse and it coming out of their shoulder. Is it true?



SK: (Laughter) Yes, it is true. Okay, where that comes from... prepare to feel very guilty about laughing. It's a form of crucifixion which Serbian soldiers used against Muslims in Bosnia. And they would do it to hundreds and hundreds of Muslims and hang them all up and leave them there and it would take about five days for them to die. It's possible and unfortunately it happens. And I tend to think actually that anything that has been imagined, there's someone somewhere who's done it. I had this thought about (laughter) forget that, yes, I'm afraid it's true.

Q: ??

SK: I write plays, I don't write films -- for a start. It's not a case of taking something from film and moving it on stage because I'm not very interested in films -- apart from the one that I've written. To me, it's a completely different thing. I think Tarantino films -- I'm talking specifically about Tarantino and not about directors, though Oliver Stone is different I suppose... Tarantino doesn't write about violence, or make films about violence. He certainly doesn't write or make films about love. He writes and makes films about films. That's what his films are about. They are about film conventions and they're completely self-referential and they refer to other historical films and that's all they do.

My plays, I hope, certainly exist within a theatrical tradition. Not many people would agree with that. And they are at a rather extreme end of theatrical tradition, but they are not about other plays. They are not about methods of representation. On the whole, they are about love. And about survival and about hope. And to me that's an extremely different thing. So when I go and see a production of *Blasted* in which all the characters are complete shits, you don't care about them, and in the second scene of *Blasted* in that production -- in the space between the first and second scenes Cate's been raped during the night -- the lights came up and she's lying there completely naked with her legs apart, covered in blood, mouthing off at Ian. And I thought this is so, oh God, I just wanted to die in despair. And I said to the director, "You know, she has been raped in the night; do you think it's either believable, interesting, feasible, theatrically valid, that she's lying there completely naked in front of the man who's raped her? Do you not think that she might cover herself up? For example." And evidently that's not to do with my own feelings about nudity on stage. I've been naked on stage myself and I've no problems with

that. It's simply about what is the truth of any given moment. And if the truth of a moment is that it refers to another film and the way in which someone's head's been blown off in that film, for me that's completely fucking meaningless. And I'm just not interested in it. Which is why I've only ever seen one Tarantino film, I'm afraid. I'm talking with great authority here. I've only seen *Reservoir Dogs*. But I thought I've given quite enough of my life to seeing that stuff and I'm not giving another second. Never mind three hours or whatever *Pulp Fiction* was.

**Q: Influence of your work and theatre in the future?**

SK: Oh God. Probably all [theatres will] be closed.

I don't know. As I said before, I think there's been quite a negative influence. Two weeks after *Blasted* was on, I got given a script to read by Royal Court which was about three people in a basement roasting a body and then eating it. And I thought: "I wonder if this person has seen *Blasted*?" Because there were some extraordinary similarities, including even lines. And there have been a whole sort-of glut of *Blasted* copies, none of which have been produced, I'm pleased to say. That's certainly a negative influence.

In terms of positive influence, I do think there is beginning to be a move away from naturalism. I haven't seen the new Nick Grosso play [*Real Classy Affair*] -- I don't know if you have -- I'm told that there's a huge leap away from naturalism, is that correct?

**DR: A hop.**

SK: A hop. I think, if that's true, certainly in terms of Nick Grosso's work that would be quite significant. Given what he's written before. But I don't know. I don't know if you can ever anticipate these things. I mean, It's like saying, Will the plays still be produced in fifty years time? Will any of us be here in fifty years time? is my question. I really don't know.

My hope would be that I discover that there's life after death, ?? In terms of what happens to my work after I die, it's just got nothing to do with me, I'm not going to be here. I hope people write better plays. That's all I can hope. But I doubt if they will. Rubbish is always being produced through the ages, mediocrity has always been praised. That's simply what happens and most plays are only really liked in retrospect and hindsight.

When *Cleansed* was on at the Royal Court and there was one point when we were playing to very small audiences. I saw, God knows where it was on, this bit of old tv footage: some actors who were in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, one of the most brilliant plays of the last hundred years, and one of the actors was saying: "You know, we don't understand it. We think it's a really good play, but last night no one came." Literally no one turned up to see it. And you think about it now it's an absolute classic. So how did it become such a classic, which it has? To me, I think it's kind of anything which no one turns up at some point it's bound to turn out to be quite good. And anything that sells to packed out audiences, there's probably something wrong with it. There's probably a real problem there, I mean the influence of *Mojo* -- I don't know how many of you have seen the play and/or the film -- Oh, if Jez [Butterworth] comes to talk to you, don't say I said that.

DR: What are working on now?

SK: I'm writing a play called *Four Forty-Eight Psychosis*. It's got similarities with *Crave*, but it's different. It's about a psychotic breakdown. And what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear. So that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also, you no longer -- which is very interesting in psychosis -- you no longer know where you stop and the world starts. So, for example, if I was a psychotic, I would literally not know the difference between myself, this table and Dan. They would all be ~~part of a continuum.~~ And various boundaries begin to collapse. Formally, I'm trying to collapse a few boundaries as well. To carry on with making the form and content one. That's proving extremely difficult, and I'm not going to tell anybody how I'm doing it, so if any of you get there first I shall be furious. Whatever it is that I began with *Crave*, is going one step further. And for me there's a very clear line from *Blasted* through *Phaedra's Love* to *Cleansed* and *Crave* and this one. Where it goes after that I'm not quite sure.