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# 4.48 *Psychosis* by Sarah Kane: An Honors Thesis Production

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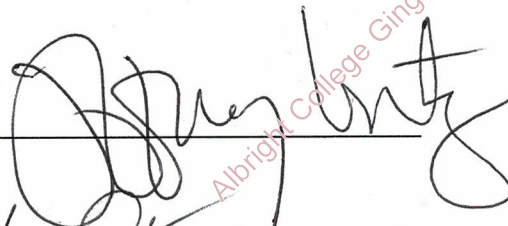
Bachelor of Arts

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

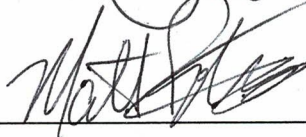
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## A Director Reflects: A Reflection on the Process, Production, and Ripples of *4.48 Psychosis*

By Sarah Crake

It is no secret that my writing aesthetic is inspired by the artist/philosopher Anne Bogart. As I have extensively studied her work, it is only fitting that my capstone follows an outline based on her book that started it all.

Seven chapters break the text of Bogart's *A Director Prepares*: Memory, Violence, Eroticism, Terror, Stereotype, Embarrassment, and Resistance. In Professor Jeff Lentz's THR350 class, I was to read from back to front. On the last page of the book, the end of the first chapter I ever read on Directing, is written the true ignition point of my scholarship:

"Do not wait...And, at the same time, be patient." (155).

What follows is a nontraditionally organized reflection. I will hesitate no more and invite your patience as you comb through my words and remind you and I both that my different way of thinking is what guides me. David Mamet (though a recycled improv adage born out of Second City) warns that the ending is in the beginning, and so I'll begin at the end.

### Resistance

It was during the week leading up to Opening Night that I began receiving declines to invitation. Many more people than I anticipated approached me with apologies, but insisting that the show was "too close to home" said they would not be in attendance. Some resistance came from a place of process. There were people strong enough to share that they were not ready to join me for personal reasons. And there were cowards that fled at the mention of suicide for personal reasons. Perhaps my word choice is cruel, but I find an unwillingness to recognize the self in all its flaws and brightness to be a cowardly trait.

Even so, being the well-taught empathetic student of the arts that I am, I understood and listened to these refusals. I did my best to make it clear that the play is an exploration of fundamental mortality and that I thought theatre was a very safe place to explore something so deadly. Each night a character would die and the actress would still live to take the curtain call. The characters were not afraid and possessed no self-pity, so why should the audience?

Resistance exists when two forces pull in opposite directions. When the forces move in the same direction, the force is twice as strong. In the case of this production, I pulled twice as much in my own direction to balance the opposite critics. I encouraged all who feared to resist their own temptation to run and instead to face their own resistance. All the more reason to explore in a safe, dark place for 65 minutes. It would be over quicker than a funeral.

Still, there were many who did not show. Of those that did, there were many who did not understand, several who were confused, one who left, and bunches who stayed to share their thoughts. I was thanked for my production by a few, and praised by more. Yet, I find what meant most was the words of those who did not want to attend for fear of feeling unsolicited and unpredicted emotions.

I wonder if I am harsh because of my own aversion to those who attempt to resist reality. I worry that I got caught, however briefly, in the inception of resistance to resistance. All that to say, at least I have learned to reconcile with my reality.

### **Embarrassment**

“If your work does not significantly embarrass you, then very likely no one will be touched by it” (113).

Troth, I knew this work would be difficult. The play I chiseled out of Kane’s marble tackled suicide, depression, homosexuality, rejection, faith, loss, hermaphroditism, and love in under 65 minutes. From the get-go, I intended to couple the deep vulnerability I needed to tell this story with a bright, childlike vulnerability of play.

And so we played ball. We played Catch, Keepy-Uppy, Dodgeball, Suey, Throw, and *Extreme* Keepy-Uppy. In all these games the ball should really only touch hands, walls, and the air. There is no time to waste energy on the ball you just dropped—the game is on! Risk, Fail, Risk Again. Throw, Drop, Throw Again. Most of our early rehearsals were spent like a recess.

We took our ball game skills to the stage. There were several sections of the play I had no clue how to navigate, but I knew they were games. I let the actors play. I set the conditions by identifying the given circumstances under which the section of text should unfold and I let them run until we found what worked. And we messed up and laughed at each other and then with each other.

I said early on that we needed to be considerate of one another in this process. That this was challenging work I had never tackled before. And so when I squirmed with responsibility for the juxtaposition of ukulele and a panic attack, I was proud.

Here is perhaps the worst photo of *4.48 Psychosis*. I find this presence touching.



(Photo credit: John Pankratz)

## Stereotype

Here is a joke: How many actors does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Answer: Just one. To hold it in place while the whole world revolves around him.

*4.48 Psychosis* is full of self-loathing humor and irony. I found a huge sequence to be an opportunity to invite the audience to laugh and then think twice about it. This portion of text started straight after an LSD trip and began with all three cast members speaking at once with

“Symptoms: Not eating, not sleeping, not speaking, no sex drive, in despair, want to die. Diagnosis: Pathological grief”

We then go into a sequence punctuated by different kinds of medicine followed by details about its effects on each character in turn. I crafted a first draft of this sequence with input from Vaudeville, Greek Chorus Coordination, slapstick comedy, and latzi performance. It was hysterical. It was too much.

We reviewed the section and were stopped by A’s raised hand. She expressed empathy on behalf of another crew member who felt unfit to speak. The concern was that we pushed too far without thinking of those who are actually affected by the medicine. It is not funny that people who take Citalopram get dizzy, confused, and walk out in front of cars. I intended to use the stereotypes the general public places on mental illness coupled with presentation to get the very reaction I got from my actor. “Aren’t we coming on a little strong?” Yes.

We talked for a long time, we sorted through my intention and edited the segment. I explained how I understood this fear, and I was adamant about these decisions. I knew we needed to be huge. It is much easier to take away than build on. We needed to break the mold. As Bogart writes, the *kata*, or container. I love it, and I use it, and I push through it to humanity.

## Terror

86  
79  
72  
65  
58  
51  
44  
37  
30  
23  
16  
9  
2

Perhaps the most challenging moment I had as director in this process was prompted by this very set of numbers. This list of numbers is a psychological exercise to calm oneself during a moment of chaos. The list appears twice in the script; the first all over the page and without pattern, the second a clear line down the page of x-7.

My greenest actor in the role of C was assigned this speech. It was pivotal to his plotline of accepting sexual identity. The actor wouldn't yell. He would not exclaim. It was as if his voice were swallowed even before the thoughts were formed. I would watch him work himself up, egg himself on and retreat, crestfallen, at the first sound emitted from his folds.

And so we stopped to talk. Knowing how logical and literal this actor was, I explained, again, the circumstances under which this 100 was to explode. He nodded and agreed but could not bring himself to articulate what it was that was troubling him so.

Fear, he later revealed to me, was the cause. He was used to equations and having a right answer and so he found discomfort in freedom. He wanted me to tell him *exactly* what he should do, he wanted a line reading, and he wanted to evade the possibility of failure. I told him we must fail. We must fail hard, and beautifully. In fact, part of the reason he was failing was because I was failing to communicate! And so we tried again, hoping beyond hope that this first "100!" would be the biggest yet.

And it wasn't.

### **Eroticism**

According to Bogart, the first stage of an archetypal passionate relationship begins when something or someone stops you in your tracks. She also asserts that Kinetic Art moves you, Static Art stops you. I find this to be especially useful in blocking shows. Throughout the rehearsal process, I found moments of movement that were movement for

movement's sake. I had actors moving because I told them to move rather than them finding a relationship with space or person that required a shift in space.

Love was such an apparent part of the composition of *4.48*. I encouraged the team to form a relationship with each piece of the set. I gave A what we called The Golden Fleece, a mustard fringe throw, to represent her deceased lover. B had sweaters and pillows to hide and find comfort in and C had a bible and a pen. More than inanimate objects, the three had one another to work with.

The moment of terror C had during his countdown ends in stillness and silence. He sees, for the first time, what he truly finds erotic. He is stopped in his tracks by the mere sight of B on his rug, writing. Their passionate relationship begins. C is moved, physically. Through a charged speech renouncing religious beliefs and asserting love, the space between B and C shrinks. A kiss follows and after, the pair sit in stillness. The erotic stop where they can do nothing else.



(Photo Credit: John Fankratz)

## Violence

Bogart teaches to acknowledge there are an infinite number of choices. By choosing one, you eliminate all other possibilities. Of course, in theatre, you can change it again. But the philosophy stays that you would still eliminate all other possibilities for that moment in time.

The notable YouTube reporter Philip DeFranco eloquently describes suicide as a “permanent solution to a temporary problem”. What is excellent about this play is that I can have a person commit suicide each night without actually dying. We can examine the



complexity of decided death without the violence of ending a life. Suicide is a violent choice in that it eliminates all possibility of life as you knew it.

I am inspired by Existentialism. I invited my team to think of the actions of the characters completely as controlled choices. Certainly influenced by medicine and mental state, but resigned, thought-thru choices. I wondered what would happen if a person truly chose death. As I wrote in my director's note I believe there a people searching for life in their death. By Bogart's definition, I find suicide to be the most violent decision a person can make.

Violently, I chose to give the characters full responsibility and control. Other examinations of the psychotic mind present victimized, crazed, uncontrolled caricatures. I wanted realness to invite the illusion that the characters on stage were not so far off from the people in the audience's life.

There were other decisions too. The text Sarah Kane wrote has little indication of place, time, character, dialogue, or circumstance. Part of my project was to decide place, time, characters, dialogue, and circumstance. I wanted an odd numbered ensemble, and due to budget restrictions I chose to cast three. I chose one man, one woman, and one hermaphrodite (that identified as a gay man). I didn't want to romanticize the suicide Sarah Kane acted, so choosing to cast one woman was to risk the telling the tale like a biography, and I wanted to use modern struggles of gender identity and love to help fuel the self-harm of the plotline. I chose a small, well-dressed apartment to set the scene—later to be realized by brilliant designer Cocol Bernal—and decided February 2016 would be an appropriate time. Dialogue, or who says what, was determined using the idea of 'yes, no, maybe'. If one character would commit suicide, one would never, and one could foreseeably do it. My assistant director, Nate Rothermel (Theatre 2018) and I divided the first two sections of text in a grueling, detail oriented, discussion heavy thirty minutes, and the rest of the dialogue fell in place. As I chose, the characters became clearer and the specifics unfolded.

## **Memory**

I spent a long time talking with the cast about the tension of opposites. The worst moment must be equal and opposite of the best moment. If we could not identify the worst or best in the play, we made it up. We made timelines, we invented the past to fuel the present. What was the big bang that started it all? What brought the apocalypse? We identified pivotal moments in the lives of the characters and then spent time existing as them. I would play music and give props, sometimes a prompt, and let the players play. It was important that they have the memory of time spent together when we moved into the space that was their apartment.

Whether the audience knew everything we knew was not important. If we did the homework appropriately, the audience wouldn't see it. If we powered the present with the energy of the past we would have a meaty play.

I tracked the days with a picture to preserve the daily tasks, failures, and fun. I remember the day we learned the Flash-Flicker sequence, the day we made brunch, the day Ean had a breakdown, the day Connor had a breakthrough, and the day Natalie was heartbroken. Our process was full of laughter, play, and pull.

What I have learned most of all is to remember the past and be here for the present. There is only now. My hope for the witnesses of my project is that sometime in the present they remember how they felt when they were part of the world I fashioned out of Kane's words.

It is very early for me to reflect on something I was so recently a part of. Yet, I remember the exhale I breathed when the house lights came up on closing night particularly potent. That moment is when *4.48 Psychosis*, for me, became a memory.