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**“How skinny I got, and how fucking weird I was”:**

**Michael Shannon, Sarah Kane, *Woyzeck* and Experiential Theatre**

By

Marti Lyons

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**“How skinny I got, and how fucking weird I was”: Michael Shannon,  
Sarah Kane, *Woyzeck* and Experiential Theatre**

**The Problem**

The majority of academic focus on Sarah Kane has been on Kane the playwright; the purpose of this paper is to offer insight into Kane’s artistry by examining Kane the director. In this paper I expand Aleks Sierz’s concept of experiential theatre by using Sarah Kane’s 1997 production of *Woyzeck* as a prototype. Essentially, experiential theatre is about blurring boundaries such as those between observer and participant, or between actor and character, or between the personal and the professional. In the rehearsal process and production of *Woyzeck* Kane blurred many boundaries; I will examine three in this paper: the actor/audience boundary, the actor/actor boundary and the actor/director boundary.

**Justification**

Kane’s direction is a heretofore unexamined aspect of Kane’s works, yet, an area that is rich with accounts of Kane’s ideas, methodology and art. In light of Kane’s recent death, now is an opportune time to begin analyzing her directing. Primary sources, such as people involved with the productions, are becoming both increasingly difficult to find, and less reliable as memories fade. Textual documentation, such as reviews, will continue to exist, but some may be lost and others misinterpreted without the insight of firsthand accounts. It is from a combination of both primary and secondary sources that I draw my conclusions.

**Significance**

Although it is thirteen years from the premier of *Blasted*, Kane’s most famous play, there is continued interest in her works. She still is produced in large venues such as

Thomas Ostermeier's 2006 production of *Blasted*, and James MacDonald's 2004 revival of *4.48 Psychosis*. It seems too that, with Graham Saunders forthcoming biography, *About Sarah Kane: The Playwright and the Work*, and the recent *Sarah Kane: A Reassessment* conference at Cambridge in February of 2008, academic assessment of Kane's legacy is just being born.

### **Methods and Procedures**

My contribution to the primary documentation of Kane's work is an interview I conducted in October of 2007 with Michael Shannon, who starred in Kane's *Woyzeck*. My interview with Shannon lasted an hour and a half. I recorded the interview and transcribed it. My paper focuses primarily on this interview in addition to reviews of the *Woyzeck* performance and comments about the process that Kate Ashfield, who played Marie, made in an interview with Graham Saunders, published in 2002.

### **Limitations**

Kane directed two professional productions. The first was *Phaedra's Love*, which the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, London commissioned her to write in 1996. The second was Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which she also directed at the Gate. The Gate is a small and successful pub theatre that primarily produces new translations. There are a few instances in which I use accounts of the *Phaedra's Love* rehearsal process to demonstrate patterns in Kane's methodology. Yet, in an attempt to best distill the characteristics of Kane's directorial process, in this paper I focus mainly on her direction of *Woyzeck*. I chose this focus because in the *Woyzeck* process she had only the role of director, and not director and playwright as with *Phaedra's Love*. I also chose this focus because *Woyzeck* was very highly reviewed. Michael Billington, Britain's longest dramatic critic, in a 2005

critique of another *Woyzeck* states “The best *Woyzeck* for me remains Sarah Kane’s 1997 Gate production...”.<sup>1</sup>

I also compare the themes in Kane’s playwriting with the themes in her directing. This is not and cannot be a direct comparison, as playwriting and directing are two very different mediums. This is therefore another limitation, as I only use her plays and writing process as a place to begin and then sparingly. To further compare Kane’s directing and writing would be a worthy endeavor, but as I intend only to begin to build a foundation for Kane’s directing documentation, I will mostly be using this comparison to highlight the elements of experiential theatre in Kane’s writing and Kane’s directing.

### **Literature Review**

Playwright and Kane’s friend David Greig, author of the introduction to her *Complete Works*, offers a summation of Kane’s work:

Sarah Kane is best known for the way her career began, in the extraordinary public controversy over *Blasted*, and the way it ended: in her suicide and the posthumous production of her last play, *4.48 Psychosis*.

Both were shocking and defining moments in recent British theatre and their shadows are bound to haunt any reading of her work.<sup>2</sup>

By characterizing Kane’s career as beginning explosively and ending tragically, Greig touches on a theme in Kane’s work: dramatic human experience, in theatre, in life, and in death. Greig is also correct in the assertion that Kane’s tragic suicide, and turbulent life, continues to color the perceptions of her work. Although there is critical suggestion of the events of Kane’s life haunting the analysis of her writing, I argue that the events of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Billington, “Exuberant Icelanders Earn Place in Young Genius Season,” *The Guardian*, 13 October 2005, pg. 38.

<sup>2</sup> David Greig, “Introduction,” in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), i.

Kane's life are useful in the analysis of Kane's artistry, particularly her role as a director. In her directing, Kane made a point of utilizing personal experience in her productions, creating an experiential theatre that the actor and director experienced at least as much as the audience experienced. Therefore it is not only useful but also essential to examine her both as a person and as an artist in her creation of experiential theatre.

As an artist, Kane is best known for her first play; *Blasted*. A piece that oscillates between aggressive realism and nightmarish expressionism, *Blasted* is notorious for its graphic content and unique structure. When the play premiered in 1995, it created a stir in the media, the academy, and the theatre.

This controversy caused many scholars and theatrical critics to categorize Kane's work. Aleks Sierz, author of *In-Yer-Face Theatre; British Drama Today 2001*, explains: "People called [*Blasted*] 'Neo Jacobean', 'new brutalism', 'in-yer-face' theater, and 'theatre of urban ennui', those were the four main labels."<sup>3</sup> Sierz's book claimed Kane as part of the in-yer-face movement, which he explains as: "...any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message."<sup>4</sup> Yet, there is more at work in in-yer-face theatre than just shock value. As Sierz further defines: "Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative."<sup>5</sup> Kane's work best fits this definition of in-yer-face theatre. Her work "takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin", and as I will argue, "it is experiential, not speculative", although I will

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<sup>3</sup> Mireia Aragay, et al., eds., *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 142.

<sup>4</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. (London: Faber, 2000), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

later give a more substantial definition of “experiential” and then examples of Kane’s experiential nature before claiming her fully as such.

Although I use Sierz and Kane later to give the current definition of “experiential theatre” it is important to acknowledge that Sierz, in an interview published in the 2006 *British Theatre of the 1990s*, still claims Kane as a writer of the in-yer-face movement: “...I would passionately advocate ‘in-yer-face’ theatre as being the one that is truly distinctive of the 1990s. It’s not the only style that writers used; it’s not a movement – it is a *sensibility*.”<sup>6</sup> If we take Sierz at his word, then perhaps Kane can be a part of other movements and still part of the in-yer-face “sensibility”.

Yet there is something unique about Kane when compared to the other in-yer-facers: Kane is a woman. In *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, published in 1997, Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge categorized Kane instead with other brilliant female playwrights, like Caryl Churchill and Phyllis Nagy. Stephenson and Langridge notice trends in the British women writers of the 1990s, especially use of the surreal simultaneously with the real, the use of personal to represent political, and new fragmented or alternative structures. In Stephenson and Langridge’s introduction they articulate: “Women playwrights have broadened the agenda of British drama. Both the form and content of their work have pushed the boundaries of what it is possible to show and tell on stage and our theatre culture is infinitely richer for their contribution.”<sup>7</sup> *Blasted*, as well as all of Kane’s other work, fits the women writer’s movement criteria as well as the in-yer-face criteria. *Blasted* is subversive in both form and content, and it is now looked at as a landmark in British and world theatre. The

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<sup>6</sup> Mireia Aragay, et al., eds., 143-144.

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. (London: Methuen, 1997).

reputable *Wadsworth Anthology of Drama: Fifth Edition* published in 2007 includes *Blasted*. This is a prestigious notoriety, as *Wadsworth* refers to Kane as a playwright who “changed the landscape of British theatre in the 1990s with her series of brilliant, violent parables.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Kane fits the criteria of many theatrical categories and movements, no single category seems sufficient. I prefer Graham Saunders categorization of Kane. In discussing the concept of the “new brutalists,” he begins with a description of a famous British reviewer, Benedict Nightingale’s, issues with that classification:

Despite being a defender of the “New Brutalists’, he nevertheless saw a conspicuous absence, both in their work and in post-war drama, of ‘an ear for metaphysics...where people feel “tragically”...they’re writing in a medium best suited to the conflict of the individual and the individual with his society’...This is where Sarah Kane’s drama most clearly deviates from the preoccupations of her contemporaries, or what she called ‘plays about disaffected groups of youths exploring their sexuality’. Although Aleks Sierz calls her work ‘Harold Pinter and Edward Bond for the chemical generation’, Kane’s drama is informed and influenced far more closely by classical and modern European theatre than ‘rave culture’.<sup>9</sup>

Saunders goes beyond Sierz’s categorization of Kane as an in-her-face playwright, and Stephenson and Langridge’s view of Kane as a female playwright, and analyses Kane as an individual genius, beyond the reach of a theatrical movement. To further Saunders’s

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<sup>8</sup> W.B. Worthen, ed. *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama; Fifth Edition*. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 871.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Saunders, *‘Love me or kill me’: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 7.

explanation of Kane's exceptional talent: I believe it is her ability to combine the personal with the metaphysical, and in doing so, combine in-yer-face with radical structural innovations to create her art.

Playwright Edward Bond, in an article he published shortly after Kane's death, articulates yet another perspective on Kane's unique talent through describing his experience of *Blasted*:

...halfway through watching *Blasted* in a small, cramped theatre, in an adequate production, I realized that reality had changed. I do not exaggerate...*Blasted* changed reality because it changed the means we have of understanding ourselves. It showed us a new way in which to see reality, and when we do that reality is changed. Einstein changed natural reality, —we understand it differently and so we make different bombs. Drama of the second sort changes human reality. It makes a demand on us. We must either respond to it or reject it and in doing so we define ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

It is through the combination of shocking content and, as Nightingale puts it, “an ear for metaphysics” that Kane's drama “changes reality”. Kane's ability to “change the means we have of understanding ourselves” is precisely what makes her a genius who cannot be claimed wholly by any movement. Many of the women playwrights of the 1990s are positively brilliant, but none of them use graphic sex and violence the way Kane does. They do not “take the audience by the scruff of the neck and shake it.” Meanwhile, the in-yer-face plays, while full of explicit sex and violence, lack the feminine sensibility that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 189-190.

so seamlessly combines expressionism with realism. Kane uses these tactics and more to “change human reality”.

Bond’s description of Kane’s written work with *Blasted*, is similar to other reviewers’ descriptions of Kane’s directing that I will discuss later. In addition, his description of drama that “changes human reality” is similar to Sierz’s definition of experiential theatre. Kane’s first play, *Blasted*, is experiential theatre. Graham Saunders, in further defining his criterion for Kane’s unique genius, also discusses her approach to reality in art: “It is this rejection, or at least manipulation, of the conventions of realism that is perhaps the key distinguishing feature of the dramatic strategy employed in Sarah Kane’s work.”<sup>11</sup> As Bond and Saunders illustrate, Kane’s true legacy stems from her ability to represent and somehow intensify realism. In terms of Kane’s direction, I will call this intensified realism experiential theatre.

### **Feasibility**

To add to the expanding literature on Kane, I wanted to combine new resources with old resources in beginning to analyze her work as a director and continuing to flesh out her artistry. In addition to my interview with Michael Shannon, in November of 2007 I flew to London and visited the Gate Theatre. I also visited Graham Saunders and Dan Rebellato, another British theatre historian who conducted a still unpublished interview with Kane. At the Gate I analyzed documents including smaller newspaper reviews that were not found on Lexis Nexis as well as production photos. During our meeting, Dan Rebellato was generous enough to lend me an unpublished interview with Kane that he conducted in 1998. Likewise, Graham Saunders generously lent me excerpts of interviews and discussions of *Woyzeck* that are soon to be published in his *About Sarah*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9.

*Kane: The Playwright and the Work*. It is through these resources as well as other reviews of *Woyzeck* and *Phaedra's Love* that I make an argument for Kane's participation in experiential theatre.

### Definition of Terms

What is experiential theatre? According to Sierz in the *British Theatre of the 1990s* interview, Sarah Kane had her own term when questioned about the type of theatre in the mid-nineties: "Sarah Kane called the method they used 'experiential' theatre, and if there is a distinctive aesthetic innovation in 1990s theatre, it is surely that."<sup>12</sup> In *In-Yer-Face Theatre* he defines experiential theatre further (substituting the term in-yer-face at times):

In-yer-face theatre always forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too unpleasant or too acute...at the same time, theatre is similar to other cultural forms in that it provides a comparatively safe place in which to explore such emotions. Experiential theatre is potent precisely when it threatens to violate that sense of safety.<sup>13</sup>

Experiential theatre is theatre that causes us to experience "ideas and feelings we would normally avoid". The key is that experiential theatre does not just "force" audience members to look at these "ideas and feelings", it also "threatens to violate" the only "sense of safety" left to audience members: the standard that theatre is a safe place to explore dangerous emotions. This violation of safety is therefore the experience. In the case of *Woyzeck*, one such violation was Michael Shannon starving himself for the role.

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<sup>12</sup> Mireia Aragay, et al., eds., 143.

<sup>13</sup> Sierz, 6.

With *Woyzeck* the audience was “forced” not only to look at the “idea” of a man starving (Woyzeck), but “forced” to “feel” for the man who was actually starving (Michael Shannon). Therefore the receptive audience cannot help but question what it is to starve, the ethics of watching someone who does starve, and what it would be like if they themselves starved. I will discuss this particular starvation example later in the paper.

A further clarification of experiential theatre is found in *Love Me or Kill Me; Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, published in 2002, Saunders describes Kane’s first encounter with experiential theatre, Jeremy Weller’s *Mad* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1992. He quotes Kane explaining:

It was a project that brought together professional and non-professional actors who all had some experience of mental illness...as an audience member, I was taken to a place of extreme mental discomfort and distress – and then popped out the other end...*Mad* took me to hell...and the night I saw it I made a decision about the kind of theatre I wanted to make – experiential...it was a bit like being given a vaccine. I was mildly ill for a few days afterwards but that jab of sickness protected me from a far more serious illness.<sup>14</sup>

*Mad* was Kane’s most memorable experience of the blurring of actor/character, and actor/audience lines. As she explains, both the “professionals and non-professionals” had “some experience of mental illness”, which means that all the performers, whether professional or not, were both actors and non-actors, both characters and themselves. Instead of “sitting, detached and mildly interested,” Kane was enveloped in their experience, in their “hell.” Through this experience, Kane found a mission: to give the

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<sup>14</sup> Saunders, 92.

audience a protective “vaccine.” To stretch this metaphor further; Kane decided her mission would be to inject a bit of illness into audience members to then immunize them to catching the illness later in life.

In an interview conducted during a rehearsal for *Woyzeck*, Kane spoke of this idea specifically with regard to her directing: “‘I’m not interested in sloganizing,’ she says, ‘No one would listen to me. But what you can do is put people through an intense experience. Maybe in a small way, from that, you can change things.’”<sup>15</sup> It seems the vaccine is used to change people’s perspective and perhaps behaviors. As Bond explained, experiential theatre, or the vaccine: “...changes human reality. It makes a demand on us. We must either respond to it or reject it and in doing so we define ourselves.” In another interview Kane explains further, “If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering whereas speculation leaves us untouched...”<sup>16</sup> So instead of considering...intellectual conceits”, Kane believes we must experience things as if we had lived through the events, or witnessed the events. Therefore we should not leave the theatre “untouched.”

### **Review of Remaining Sections**

In the first section I discuss the actor/audience boundary. In this section I argue that the actor blurs relationship lines with the audience, causing audience members to oscillate between observer and participant. In the second section I explore the actor/actor boundary, and provide Shannon’s description of blurring lines in actor/actor relationships, which causes the actors to have experiences and relationships similar to

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<sup>15</sup> James Christopher, “Backstage,” *The Observer*, 7 November 1997, pg. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Stephenson and Langridge, 133.

those of their characters. Finally, I will focus on the actor/director boundary, in which I examine Shannon's account of the relationship between himself and Kane, and how the lines between the personal and the professional were blurred so that both he and she seemed to embody the *Woyzeck* experience. It is through these examples that I argue *Woyzeck* is a paradigm of experiential theatre, whose details help to flesh out Sierz's definition.

### **Actor/Audience**

The first component of experiential theatre I will address is the actor/audience relationship. In the introduction of this paper, I quote Sierz defining experiential theatre as "waking up the audience." The experiential psychological aspect of "waking up the audience" was intensified by the actors' proximity to the audience in Kane's production of *Woyzeck*. Shannon mentioned the actor/audience proximity in his description of the Gate Theatre's performance space: "But the audience was pretty lit up...that was all there was room for, and all those people...I could see their faces. I could see every little thing that was going on with those people...if you sat along that side of the rectangle you were in that damn play."<sup>17</sup> Performing in an intimate space can easily blur boundaries, as often the playing space and the audience space are shared. There is a different sort of relationship between actor and audience when either could reach out and touch the other. In fact, the audience did touch Shannon in the pre-show, as a reviewer recounts: "Woyzeck even lets spectators feel his pulse."<sup>18</sup> This physical boundary blurring is extremely effective, as it causes psychological or emotional boundaries to blur as well, as Sierz explains:

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Shannon, interview by author, tape recording, Chicago, IL., 27 September 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Bassett, "Atrocities on the Fringe," *The Telegraph*, 30 October 1997.

...because every performance is different, there is always a risk that something unexpected might happen ...and because the actors are always real people breathing the same air as the audience, the public tends to empathize strongly with them...it can sometimes be an emotional journey that gives you a startling feeling of having lived through the experience being represented.<sup>19</sup>

Live theatre typically involves “real people breathing the same air as the audience”, but in-*yer-face* theatre involves actors breathing on the audience. In-*yer-face* theatre usually means that the actors will literally be “in-*yer-face*.” This nearness intensifies the audience’s sense of bearing witness. Kane used this extreme proximity to help create an experience for her audience. These experiences were documented in the various reviews of *Woyzeck*. David Benedict, reviewer for *The Independent* explained, “Sarah Kane’s well-acted staging is beautifully spare, although the intensity is sometimes too much for this tiny space.”<sup>20</sup> Dominic Cavendish, also for *The Independent*, stated: “Come the murderous denouement, we are quite aware of the magnitude of the suffering involved...the only drops of blood you’ll see onstage are the real ones deposited by cast-members hurling themselves around like open razors...”<sup>21</sup> These descriptions indicate that violation of that sense of safety that Sierz discussed in defining experiential theatre, as Benedict admitted that part of his discomfort was the “intensity” of being contained in “this tiny space.” Cavendish seems to empathize with the actors, as his comment “we are quite aware of the magnitude of the suffering involved” suggests. Cavendish expresses concern for the actors, and notices the violation of safety, illuminated by his comments

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<sup>19</sup> Sierz, 7.

<sup>20</sup> David Benedict, “Curtin Calls,” *The Independent*, 1 November 1997, pg. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Dominic Cavendish, “Unhinged,” *The Independent*, 27 October 1997, pg. 4.

about the “real” “drops of blood”, and the “cast-members hurling themselves around like open razors...”.

The reviewers of *Woyzeck* were most impressed with the actor with the highest immersion in the “experience”, Michael Shannon. Cavendish also states:

Above all, she [Kane] is aided and abetted by Michael Shannon’s *Woyzeck*. Not only does his penurious soldier look unsound of body – with ragged combat clothes, patchily shaved pate and painfully thin and veiny limbs – but he looks the sort who will ‘go mad with all that thinking’. His eyes rolling dementedly in their sockets, and American-accented psychotic strains seemingly ventriloquised from offstage (like the stabbing cello accompaniments), this is a man teetering on the brink of a personal Armageddon he can’t articulate.<sup>22</sup>

Cavendish’s focus on Shannon’s appearance in addition to his comments about the “drops of blood” and “suffering involved”, reports not simply on his alarm for the character, but for the actor as well. Shannon can act crazy, his “eyes rolling dementedly in their sockets”, and “psychotic strains seemingly ventriloquised from offstage”, but certainly the “painfully thin and veiny limbs” are not Shannon acting psychosis, but a result of Shannon experiencing psychosis. The fact that Cavendish was so impressed with this “man teetering on the brink of a personal Armageddon he can’t articulate” suggests that Cavendish not only saw Shannon performing madness, but also witnessed Shannon experiencing madness.

Playwright Phyllis Nagy, while discussing Kane’s written work, raises a potential problem with this experiential way of relating to an audience:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

...challenging the audience into self-awareness by disguising that self-awareness – that is to say, to present a scenario of what it *might* be like as someone ‘other’ ...suggests that people learn to walk in another’s shoes in order to gain self-awareness. I find this very compelling because it is dangerous – the risk of an audience rejecting such an invitation is high.<sup>23</sup>

Kane is not only asking her actors but her audience to accept “a scenario of what it might be like as someone ‘other’”. Nagy argues that this is a “dangerous” way of working, because “challenging the audience into self-awareness” may be a challenge the audience rejects. If that is so, then how was *Mad* so effective to Kane and *Woyzeck* so successful with reviewers? Perhaps if “the risk of an audience rejecting such an invitation is high”, the effectiveness of the events in which the audience accepts the invitation are all the more potent.

What makes these vaccinations palatable? What makes an audience entertain a “challenge”? Surely, some audience members will be more receptive to an “experience” than others, but there must be something to the quality of the performance, and something to the commitment of the performers. In discussing his portrayal of *Woyzeck*, Shannon has one answer: “It had a lot to do with the degree with which I was willing to become the person and just how skinny I got and how fucking weird I was.”<sup>24</sup> It seems that the performers must be committed to having an experience before the audience will take the risk of experiencing. So, in the vaccination analogy, the actors would not be the “doctors” or “nurses” administering the vaccine, but they would rather also be “patients.” The actor/audience boundary is blurred when the actors and the audience become partners in

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<sup>23</sup> Saunders, 158-159.

<sup>24</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

experience; they both experience a “violation of safety”, and therefore their collective reality can be “changed”.

Before delving into the next section of this paper, I will make a segue into a brief history of Michael Shannon and his involvement with the *Woyzeck* process. Shannon is an American actor who had his start in London theatre starring in Tracy Letts’s *Killer Joe* in 1995. The Gate’s producer, Rose Garnett, invited Shannon to do Letts’s *Bug* at the Gate, and in 1997 Shannon returned there to perform as *Woyzeck*. Wilson Milam, director of *Killer Joe* and *Bug*, was originally slated to direct *Woyzeck*, but when he backed out Garnett and Shannon thought of Kane. Kane, who loved *Woyzeck* and cited it as her inspiration for her play *Cleansed*, immediately accepted.<sup>25</sup>

Shannon is an actor notorious for his portrayal of drug addicts, criminals, and the insane. In talking about why he was chosen for *Woyzeck* Shannon admits: “I mean I have a lot of ammunition for that kind of stuff. I’m kind of suited to that stuff...it’s not hard for me to get upset about stuff.” His type casting is related to his emotional predisposition to portray these dark, unstable roles. In addition to playing mentally unstable characters in *Killer Joe* and *Bug* in the mid-nineties, Shannon played a dimwitted murderer in *The Pillowman* at Steppenwolf last year, and a drug addict in *The Little Flower of East Orange* currently Off-Broadway. There is something about Shannon’s aesthetic, both physically and performatively, that is both attractive and daunting. There is something simultaneously helpless and threatening about his tall, dark, slightly off kilter appearance.

Yet, more than just being “suited to this kind of stuff”, or looking “suited to this kind of stuff”, Shannon is extraordinarily talented. He is currently in the peak of his career as he has recently starred in the film version of *Bug*, which was released in 2007,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

as well as the soon to be released *Revolutionary Road* and *The Missing Person*. In addition, he is currently the lead in *The Little Flower of East Orange*, directed by Phillip Seymour Hoffman at The Public Theatre in New York. It is not a surprise then that his predisposition and talent mixed with Kane's predisposition and genius to create a unique and compelling production.

### **Actor/Actor**

The second component of experiential theatre is the actor/actor relationship, in which I will address what exactly it is the actors (primarily Shannon) experienced.

Kane was known for putting her actors through intense experiences. David Farr, one of the producers at the Gate, and the man who commissioned Kane to write *Phaedra's Love*, describes one of Kane's *Phaedra's Love* rehearsals:

Entering her rehearsal room was like walking into a religion. Every actor was utterly consumed in their individual act of faith. Cas Harkins (Hippolytus) spent whole days alone in a cupboard-sized room. And that's what came over in the production. Ninety minutes of the most intense belief – belief in the vivid necessity of what is happening on stage.<sup>26</sup>

Harkins, like Shannon, was surely one of the most "intense" believers in Kane and her work; the mention of him spending "days alone in a cupboard-sized room" directly correlates to the exercises that Kane would later do with Shannon. Shannon further explains the idea of "intense belief":

What she did in the rehearsal process was so far away from like 'making a play' or making a presentation, and so much more about 'just live these

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<sup>26</sup> David Farr, "'Walking into her rehearsal room was like entering a religion,'" *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 October 2005, pg. 33.

events in real time', she was like, "I don't care what it looks like, I don't care what it sounds like, it has, it has to happen. Every one of these events has to happen *for real*. You know, obviously, you can't stab somebody."<sup>27</sup>

The idea that the events happen "for real" requires the actor to commit wholeheartedly. But how can a play happen "for real"? How does one actually experience onstage? What does it mean that Kane does not care what the production "looks like" or "sounds like", that she just wants everything to "happen for real"? When considering Weller's *Mad* as well as Kane's *Woyzeck* rehearsal exercises, it seems that Kane wants all the events to feel realistic. She wants the actors, as well as the audience, to "experience" the events as "really happening". Kane explains further in her description of a *Phaedra's Love* rehearsal:

We made a decision that I would try to do the violence as realistically as possible...and the very first time we did the final scene with all the blood and the false bowels by the end of it we were all severely traumatized. All the actors were standing there covered in blood having just raped and slit their throats; and then one of them said, 'this is the most disgusting play I've ever been in', and he walked out. But because of the work we'd done before, all of us knew that point was reached because of a series of emotional journeys that had been made. So in the most compassionate way, it reminds, none of us felt it was unjustified, it was just completely unpleasant...<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

<sup>28</sup> Saunders, 80.

Here, again, is a description of everything happening “as realistically as possible”, and not sugarcoated to be more palatable. Although we assume, just as “obviously you can’t stab someone”, that although Kane says “all the actors were standing there covered in blood having just raped and slit their throats” that none of the actors were actually raped, nor none of their throats were actually slit. “As possible” means that the actors only feel as though they have been raped, and their throats have been slit. The best evidence for these feelings is in the case of the actor walking out of the rehearsal. This actor is so disgusted by the rehearsal, and perhaps other elements of the process that Kane does not mention in this quote, that his action of leaving is one that supports the idea that those actors in some way (an emotional way) experienced rape and death, although they did not literally experience rape and death.

Shannon recalls *Woyzeck* rehearsal exercises that were similar to the *Phaedra’s Love* exercise. Shannon explains:

...she just took every event that happened in the play and made us live through that event as real people, as opposed to actors...there’d be a day, the “Sergeant’s Day” where we’d go in and the Sergeant would get to make us do exercises...it was almost very childlike, it was like in order to understand this, or to do this you have to...actually do it.<sup>29</sup>

Shannon’s description indicates a process of intense realism, which is the term I used earlier to describe Kane’s writing. Kane dusted off the antiquities of *Woyzeck* and made Shannon and David Seamark, who played the role of the Captain (whom I assume Shannon is referring to when he mentions a “Sergeant”), “live” the experiences so that they would feel “real”. In fact, Shannon specifies that they were made to live through the

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<sup>29</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

events “as real people, as opposed to actors”. This comment is fascinating, especially in relation to the comments that Kane made about Weller’s *Mad*. It seems that the validity of her experience with *Mad* was warranted by each of the “actors” and “non-actors” having lived through the trauma they portrayed. The actor is not portraying a meaning that is outside him or her but that the meaning is he or she, that he or she is a real person and no longer an actor in this kind of experiential artistry. Therefore, it is not only the audience who is vaccinated, the actors must be inoculated as well.

Shannon explained another exercise that included he and Jonathan Bruun, who played the Doctor:

...there were days that were like “Doctor days” where it was me and the Doctor, and I’d show up to rehearsal, it was in this big, it was in this beautiful room that had these big windows but all the curtains were drawn, it was very dark, and there was like a table there for me to lay on, and then the Doctor had all his, she gave him all these tools and things and, so obviously he’s not a doctor, he’s an actor, he doesn’t know what the hell, but it was like, you just spend two hours like doing these imaginary, you know, like you just do things, like he’d make me do things, test my reflexes...<sup>30</sup>

Here is another example of what could be classified as intensified realism. Just as in the *Phaedra’s Love* rehearsal, where the actors tried out everything “for real”, Shannon and Bruun participate in exercises that make their Woyzeck/Doctor relationship manifest. Yet again, it seems Kane is less interested in things happening “for real” than she is in the actors feeling things realistically. She is not interested in the accuracy of a Doctor

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

performing on a patient; there was no research into how a Doctor in 1836 or in 1997 would actually “perform tests” on a patient. Instead, there were “imaginary” tests. It seems that Kane was not interested in her actors performing or experiencing accurate tests, but rather that they performed and experienced the reality of the relationship and power dynamic between the Doctor and Woyzeck. Shannon continues:

And it’s very much about like power and authority that people have over each...specifically in that relationship [Doctor/Woyzeck] was the intimacy of that relationship; somebody doing things to your body, having control over you, and you just constantly making decisions are you going to allow them to do that, or is this when you finally say I’ve had enough, get away from me?<sup>31</sup>

The unique quality of Kane’s “experiential” theatre is that it does not only use task based experience to intensify the understanding of a character; Kane’s experiential theatre uses imagination, relationships, and power dynamics in order to *make* the actor the character. The power dynamic is potent precisely because of “the intimacy of that relationship”, and at some point both Shannon and Woyzeck must have been asking themselves “are you going to allow them (Bruun and Doctor) to do that, or is this when you finally say I’ve had enough, get away from me?”

Kane invited the Doctor and Sergeant to use their imaginations to supplement the experience that an actual Doctor or Sergeant would have in order to further collapse identity. The boundaries collapse because the actors are aware that even though one may be performing the exercise as the Doctor, there is no script or research on how one should act as a Doctor. The actor is utilizing himself as much as he is utilizing any concept or

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

“reality” of a Doctor. This exercise has a fuller effect than just living the event, because it establishes a solid relationship between not only the two characters, but also the two actors.

Graham Saunders, in his interview with Kate Ashfield, who played Marie in Kane’s *Woyzeck*, questioned her about the *Woyzeck* process. Ashfield relayed similar experiences:

We did so many different things in rehearsal; lots of exercises with Sarah, and then with the whole cast. We all went through these exercises; getting up in the morning and going through what you would do as your character, then you mimed it out in front of the cast. Then you’d go to bed at night, get up in the morning, and you’d do it again, and try to get some sort of idea of what those character’s lives would be like.<sup>32</sup>

Ashfield’s description establishes a consistency to Kane’s directing method. Ashfield also participated in Kane’s exercises. These exercises were based in individual activity that would then be presented to Kane and the cast, much like Cas Harkins’s three-day adventure in a closet rehearsing for *Phaedra’s Love*. Both Ashfield’s recollections and Shannon’s recollections involve being given real tasks that would later be judged by Kane. The four main players in *Woyzeck*, Ashfield, Bruun, Seamark, and Shannon, were given tasks that resulted in an emotional and at times physical experience and created relationships with their character’s lives.

As the process continued, the Shannon/Ashfield relationship became stronger, and lines were blurred as the *Woyzeck*/Shannon fusion intensified. Shannon explains: “Cause

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<sup>32</sup> Saunders, 167.

I definitely, you know, I went through that whole thing of actually falling in love with this woman, and all that. And Sarah knew, she kind of knew that was happening.”<sup>33</sup>

This is an aspect of the *Woyzeck* experience that Ashfield fails to mention in her interview with Saunders. Whether Shannon individually took these “character’s lives” exercises to heart more than Ashfield is speculative, as it is something Ashfield neither admits nor recounts. Nevertheless, Shannon explains, seemingly nonchalantly, that he had fallen “in love” with Ashfield. There was a blurred boundary between Woyzeck’s love for Marie, and Shannon’s love for Ashfield. In addition, when Shannon mentions that “Sarah knew, she kind of knew that was happening”, it seems that Kane was aware of this boundary blurring. This “love” was just another level of the boundaries blurring between character and actor, actor and actor, and professional and intimate.

#### **Actor/Director**

The final component of experiential theatre that I will explore is the actor/director dynamic, specifically between Shannon and Kane. With Kane and Shannon there was a collapse of the director-to-actor relationship in this process, to the extent that “experiential” theatre for Shannon meant not only experiencing the life of the character Woyzeck, but also the life of Kane herself. Shannon describes:

This building...it was basically a boarding house, it was in Hammersmith...I lived there, and Sarah lived there...I’d spend all day rehearsing with Sarah and then, I’d stay in the kitchen talking with her till three in the morning. I mean we were around each other all the time. And Sarah was dealing with...her own issues that we would talk about at night. There were nights I spent trying to tell her all the reasons she shouldn’t

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<sup>33</sup>Shannon, interview by author.

harm herself. It was weird, that reversal, because you know directing is authoritative. So that the person who is essentially your boss is being so vulnerable, and that fed into what the play wound up being...I felt like not only was I representing Büchner I was also trying to represent her point of view and my own point of view.<sup>34</sup>

By Kane's "experiential" method, it follows that in "trying to represent her point of view", Shannon would have to experience Kane's point of view. Just as the participants in *Mad* had all experienced madness, so Shannon experienced some of Kane's illness that would later result in her suicide. Although it was not Kane's intention that she and Shannon live together, as Shannon explained to me that living at the producer's Hammersmith house was part of his contract, that he had board in addition to a salary; living in the same boarding house in which Kane lived did become part of his experiential process. The personal relationship was a major part of the professional relationship as Shannon was concerned for Kane's safety. When Shannon articulates that it was the position of authority that changed between rehearsal and home life, it seems that Shannon experienced Kane's suffering first as an audience in their three in the morning conversations, and later as a performer trying to represent her suffering. Kane's witnessing of Jeremy Weller's *Mad* and bringing the experience to her art also parallels Shannon witnessing Kane's pain and bringing the experience to his art.

Shannon's discussion of blurred authority in his actor/director relationship with Kane sounds similar to his earlier description of the acting exercises he endured with the Doctor: "And it's very much about like power and authority that people have over each—you know who's controlling who...knowing she knew that there, there's certain things

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

you can't think, you have to, you really have to understand them."<sup>35</sup> This is where it becomes apparent that, whether intentional or not, Kane's relationship with Shannon became a theatrical tool as well as a private friendship. Just as Kane ran the exercises between *Woyzeck* and the Doctor, purposefully blurring the lines of actor and character, and thereby blurring the lines of power and control in the relationships of the actors, so she blurs the lines of director and character, and the relationship between director and actor. Her relationship with Shannon was "very much about like power and authority that people have over each other—you know, who's controlling who..."<sup>36</sup> The extent to which Kane intended her personal relationship with Shannon as a rehearsal tool is uncertain, but the reviews and the interview indicate that it was successful in creating an experience for Shannon. It also seems that the blurring of the personal/professional boundary was a pattern as it was something Kane had explored before. As David Farr, who produced *Woyzeck* with Rose Garnett, reminisces:

We stayed in touch and Sarah became close to Rose, often staying at Rose's house in Hammersmith. She would host the music at parties and only her choices would be allowed. She would occasionally come down from bed and ask us to remove all the pills from the bathroom. We thought it was slightly over-dramatic.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear from Farr's description that Kane and Garnett blurred the lines of professional and personal in living together and in Kane's being "slightly over-dramatic" at the parties Farr attended. The extent to which Kane blurred the lines with Garnett is unclear, and when I tried to contact Garnett, she replied that she was uncomfortable discussing Kane,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> David Farr, pg. 33.

as she is still very upset by Kane's death.<sup>38</sup> Although Kane's relationship with Garnett and Farr were director/producer relationships, these examples nevertheless demonstrate a pattern of Kane blurring her personal life with her professional life.

If Kane blurred relationship boundaries even with producers who had authority over her, Kane's collapse of identity boundaries with her actors was likely even more extreme. Shannon admits:

...when I was living with her I felt very close to her, but it's maddening to be around someone who is in that much pain all the time. And maybe part of it was just osmosis, cause like, I'm surrounded all the time. We were always either talking about the play or talking about misery...it was just constant misery. Misery in the play all day and then misery at night at home...I think part of [Woyzeck] was just so, you know, just being around her.<sup>39</sup>

This "osmosis" is one of the keys to Kane's experiential theatre. The proximity in Shannon and Kane's relationship exacerbated the misery; it was too close. It was "maddening."

Just as playwright David Greig characterizes her writing, "It is as though by excavating herself rather than attempting to capture an invented character's consciousness, Kane has opened her writing out to the audience, leaving a space in which they can place themselves and their own experience,"<sup>40</sup> so too Kane opens herself up to her actors. Likewise in her directing, she did not create characters or find actors who

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Shannon, <katearrington@hotmail.com> "Re: Michael Shannon." 21 October 2007. Personal e-mail.

<sup>39</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

<sup>40</sup> Greig, Xiv.

would merely represent her, she found actors who would *be* her. In a 1997 interview, when Kane was questioned about her writing process, she admitted: “My main source of thinking about how violence happens is myself, and in some way all of my characters are me.”<sup>41</sup> Though Kane is talking about her writing in this quote, it seems that in a very practical sense Kane’s actors become her as well as her characters. In Kane’s case, this was a very effective, and very dangerous way of working.

In terms of the official rehearsal process, as opposed to conversations at the boarding house, the exercises were extreme, and also resulted in intense experience.

Shannon recounts:

There was one day where I showed up for rehearsal and she turned to me and she said, “You have to go out on Bay’s Water Road there,” you know, Notting Hill, and she was like, “Go, and, go make some money, just go somewhere and get somebody to let you work so you can make money.” Cause essentially that’s what Woyzeck is doing; he’s trying to make money. So I’m running up and down Bay’s Water Road...going into places and saying, “Can I wash dishes or whatever, I just have to make some money.” Of course everybody was looking at me like I’m a freak, nobody said yes, and finally I cheated, I went to the production office, and said “Rose, you, you got some money? I can’t take this anymore.”<sup>42</sup>

Here is yet another example of intense experience. Shannon is pursuing a task that his character would pursue. He is “running up and down Bay’s Water Road...going into places” and asking for work and money. In this exercise Shannon becomes Woyzeck

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<sup>41</sup> Stephenson and Langridge, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

through experiencing what Woyzeck would experience in “cause essentially that’s what Woyzeck is doing; he’s trying to make money”, with one exception, Shannon “cheats”. Or, Shannon thinks he “cheated.” The experience becomes too intense, and Shannon “went to the production office” and asked for money saying “I can’t take this anymore.” But is this cheating? The exercise was to get money, and Shannon got money...perhaps more interesting than whether or not Shannon cheated in the exercise, is the fact that Shannon thinks he cheated. Ten years after the production Shannon still expresses some sort of guilt at not following Kane’s directives exactly. This is the best evidence for a psychologically intense experience. Shannon did not just experience the physical hardships of his character; he is still psychologically subject to the power dynamic Kane created ten years ago.

It is fascinating to see manifestations of guilt in Shannon’s articulation when there were so many other extremes he was willing to experience. As I have already established, reviewers were aware of Shannon’s passion and desperation. Now I will use reviews to help describe the extent to which Shannon committed to his experience. As Patrick Marmion of *The Evening Standard* describes: “Kane’s direction takes Büchner’s raw material and transforms it into a nightmare of paranoid abstraction where people are reduced to objects and objects assume a twisted life of their own. “ Jeremy Kingston, reporter for *The Times*, commented, “Although my preference is for a Woyzeck played less like an open wound on legs, Shannon’s virtual madman is a mesmeric interpretation of humanity at the end of its fragile tether.”<sup>43</sup> Carole Woddis of *The Herald* describes, “At its center is the gaunt, skeletal figure of Michael Shannon’s Americanized Woyzeck...this pale, scabby, razed haired GI is the production’s throbbing nerve

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<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Kingston, “Drowning his Sorrows,” *The Times*, 28 October 1997.

center.”<sup>44</sup> *The Sunday Times* observes, “Michael Shannon’s emaciated, dirty-finger nailed Woyzeck suggests both a Vietnam vet and Everyman.” These articles do not exaggerate, as Paul Ros’s production photos illuminate Shannon’s “gaunt, skeletal figure”, and “emaciated, dirty-finger nailed Woyzeck.” One picture in particular, published in the *Metro* in November of 1997<sup>45</sup> shows Jonathan Bruun (the Doctor) examining a shirtless Shannon. The image is disconcerting, to say the least. Shannon looks like a Holocaust victim, or a Bratz doll, his skin clutching to the remnants of bicep, tricep, and forearm. The over definition of his arm muscle is almost cartoonish, culminating in his protruding shoulder bone. The shoulder bone is connected to the clavicle, and the clavicle is connected to the sunken sternum, around which we see every nook and cranny of Shannon’s chest cavity. I can literally count Shannon’s ribs, until the cage ends and his shape retracts into the concave of his waist. Shannon’s head, precariously balanced on his veiny neck, looks ten sizes too big for his gaunt frame. Yet, even his face is withered; past his “razed haired” pate, his eyes have sunken into their sockets and his cheekbones are protruding, partially with the aid of Bruun’s finger which is pressed against the last bit of fat just above Shannon’s cheek.

Shannon himself relates the nature of his physicality:

I took the whole thing real seriously, I mean I was, you know, not eating, and shaved off parts of my hair so I had bald spots, and at one point my dad and a couple of my friends came to see it, and they were worried. I mean I , I was doing it responsibly, I knew how to, I wasn’t like literally starving myself, but I had gotten, it was just that, the reason I brought it up

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<sup>44</sup> Carole Woddis, “Woyzeck, Gate, Notting Hill, London,” *The Herald*, 1 November 1997, pg. 19.

<sup>45</sup> “Don’t Miss”, *Metro*, 8 November 1997, pg. 39.

is just that the sight of the people coming out there [actors coming onstage], way long before we even started talking, it was just, it was very uh...I don't think I've ever been in a more intense show...<sup>46</sup>

It is clear in the interview that much of his broken speech is due to the attempt to remember events that happened ten years ago, but it is also clear that at times the jumps in his speech are due to emotion. This is another example of Shannon's articulation of emotional memory. He explains that he was "not eating", and that his father and friends were "worried", then he quickly counters by mentioning that he was "doing it responsibly" and that he "wasn't like literally starving" himself. Then, his voice alters to an urgent tone as struggles explain the "reason he brought it up", that "the actors coming onstage were sight enough to worry the audience." He stumbles for words and then decides to simply express that he has "never been in a more intense show."

Not only was Shannon "literally starving himself," he cannot comfortably admit that he was literally starving himself. He is only able to say that he "took the whole thing real seriously" and was "not eating" and "shaved off" parts of his hair in the attempt to experience life as Woyzeck. But he is aware that this directly correlates with reviewers thinking that the show was "too intense...too much to deal with," which is fascinating considering his earlier comment that when living with Kane it was "maddening to be around someone who is in that much pain all the time." Shannon found Kane too intense, and yet compelling, and the reviewers found Shannon too intense and yet captivating. This is the kind of realism that is too real. Shannon is maddened, even in an interview ten years later, by knowing too much about how his director actually suffered, and the

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<sup>46</sup> Shannon, interview by author.

reviewers are disturbed in knowing too well that Shannon is violating his safety for the sake of performance.

Shannon justifies the commitment by explaining: “I guess one of the reviews was like, ‘Yeah, sure, it’s a great performance but I can’t watch it...[because] it was like watching somebody puncture themselves...’ But I thought well, what else, how else can you play it?”<sup>47</sup> Later in our interview, Shannon expounds on his justification when discussing Kane’s motivation for working with him in such an extreme way. He claims that “Sarah was *Woyzeck* in her life” and that “she’d never write anything or direct anything that she hadn’t already been through in some way, or experienced...she wasn’t trying to manipulate people...it seemed natural to her...like how, why would it be any other way?” In addition, in describing the nature of his professional relationship with Kane he says, “...she trusted me a lot and she, she was very nurturing, which is surprising, considering how much personal things she was dealing with.”<sup>48</sup> Based on these comments, and the extent of his commitment, it is clear that Shannon felt that *Woyzeck* was worth all of the suffering. Based on the reviews it is clear that the experiences were extreme and effective. Although, considering the emotional and psychological consequences considered, we might be left to wonder about the cost of those experiences.

### Conclusion

As defined by Aleks Sierz, experiential theatre “...forces us to look at ideas and feelings we would normally avoid because they are too painful, too frightening, too

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

unpleasant or too acute.”<sup>49</sup> Experiential theatre is about blurring boundaries and challenging expectations of actors and audience. Kane’s *Woyzeck* is a perfect example of experiential theatre as the rehearsal process and production were about blurring boundaries between actor/audience, actor/actor and actor/director. The blurring of conventional lines and these violations of safety resulted in a highly reviewed four week run of *Woyzeck*.

*Woyzeck* was a successful and dangerous production. It was potent experiential theatre because it was committed and dangerous; because there were violations of almost every standard artistic boundary. *Woyzeck* could not have been successful experiential theatre without these violations or without Shannon and Kane’s commitment. Challenging artistic expectations in this way is to me exciting and exceptional work. I believe that it can and does change reality, which seems to make this art almost heroic. Yet, despite my fascination with this potency, I must, as I said at the beginning of the paper, consider the personal with the professional. Ten years after the production, considering Kane’s suicide, and Shannon’s strained emotions in recollection, I wonder not only about the ethics of this process, but if processes such as these are worth their weight in suffering; if the vaccine inoculates or infects? I do not have the time to analyze this question in this paper, but although I do not have the answer, I cannot stop asking myself the question.

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<sup>49</sup> Sierz, 3.

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