

PSYCHOSIS 4:48:
PERFORMANCE – READING – PLAY
Miroslava Todorova

Psychosis 4:48, by **Sarah Kane**, translated by **Miroslava Todorova**, directed by **Desislava Shpatova**, lighting by **Emil Hristov**, music by **Emiliyan Gatsov**

Cast **Snezhina Petrova**, **Ivo Dimchev**, **Helene Kostadinova** and **Kaloyan Cholakov**.

A co-production of *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival and *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory, 2005



Photographer Simon Varsano

Snezhina Petrova and Ivo Dimchev in *Psychosis 4:48*

Desislava Shpatova's performance *Psychosis 4:48* featuring Snezhina Petrova and Ivo Dimchev (a co-production of *Varna Summer* International Theatre Festival and *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory with the support of the National Theatre

Centre) was one of the most interesting events at this year's edition of the festival in Varna. This was the Bulgarian premiere of that quite famous and provocative text, staged many times and translated in many languages, which also "made its

Ivo Dimchev in *Psychosis 4:48*

mark" because of the grim fate of its author Sarah Kane (1971–1999) who committed suicide shortly after she wrote it and thus allowed for suggestions about its prophetic autobiographism. The play is a poetic representative of the newest British drama from mid 1990s summarized by Alexander Sierz in the definition of in-*yer-face-theatre* ("in your face theatre" that is "pushed into being more experiential, more aggressively aimed at making audiences feel and respond," characterized by "intensity, deliberate relentlessness and ruthless commitment to extremes"¹). The authors of that generation are also called "the new British nihilists" or the "new Brutalists"² because of the

¹ Sierz, Alexander. *In-*yer-face Theatre**. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2000, p. xiii.

² Urban, Ken. *An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane*, as cited in Николова,

nightmarish hyper-reality of concentrated moral catastrophes depicted in a seemingly real environment which – by their excessiveness, even perversity – aim at the corpus of the late capitalist civilization.

Sarah Kane's *Psychosis 4:48* is an extremely non-dramaturgical play as long as that definition still contains any sense in the time of post-dramaturgy when neither dramaturgy responds "correctly" to the classical ideas of a theatrical text, nor is the dramaturgy of a performance exhausted by the idea about its text. In a number of fragments of a variety of genres – poetic; dialogic and monologic, narrative, confes-

Искра. Съвременната драма: теории и практики. – *Homo Ludens*, 8–9/2003, с. 153. [Nikolova, Iskra. *Contemporary Drama: Theories and Practices*. – *Homo Ludens*, No. 8–9/2003, p. 153.]

sional; in the form of a personal diary, of a medical epicrisis, of swarming words – unconnected semantically and in terms of punctuation but acoustically approximated, by the negative particle “un” (“unpleasant unacceptable uninspiring impenetrable irrelevant irreverent...”) or by the expressiveness and stress of suggestion (“slash wring punch burn flicker dab float slash”) is unfolded the ever slipping poetics of the pain of the very vulnerable and incurably wounded soul unfit for this imperfect world – a banal topic because of its everlasting topicality. It is precisely because of that banality that yet another confessional, martyred text would not impress anyone but the viewers of emotional therapy and personal issue-oriented talk shows.

Psychosis 4:48 is far from being an innermost tale of the torments of a sick soul

although it looks like one, and in this sense any autobiographism or biographism of suffering and loneliness is a pointless strategy of deciphering. As far as “deciphering” digs into the sense and message hidden behind language, and they are not a matter of interest for the author it is rather the “reading” that would unlock the scents of this text. “Reading” – as an act of passing along the signs and testing their vocal registers and their direct impact on consciousness and emotions – is the right approach to making sense. The quests of this dramaturgy are neither the pity, nor the sympathy for the out-of-tune harmony of the consciousness whose sorrows are recognizably marked in the text (the catharsis after vicariously experiencing the character’s sorrows is deemed an old-fashioned and manipulative theatrical pursuit for the “new angry wave”). The text is not a sign



Snezhina Petrova in *Psychosis 4:48*

Photographer Simon Varsano

Snezhina Petrova and Ivo Dimchev in *Psychosis 4:48*

of suffering that pushes towards deciphering and empathy but the suffering itself. The inconsolable sorrow and the death drive are not detectable in the ideas, the language itself is that sorrow and that drive. In its expressiveness, incoherence, collapses, illogicality, incompleteness, surreal poeticism, genre intertwists, language performs (as Barthes would put it). It is the wounded corporeality, the dimmed consciousness, the temporary insights, the flickering hope, the neurotic breakdown, the ailing soul. Thus it seems to me that the reading as a private term of this text designating the free fall along the “field of the signifiers” (Roland Barthes) is the aptest approach to the play and its stage being. There is no narrative, there is no plot, individualized characters, dialogue in the classical sense (alternating dialogues or dialogised fragments expressing a rather self-reflecting consciousness than an ex-

change of thoughts); words, figures, sentences with no punctuational articulation are scattered on the pages. Resorting to the means of the known stage transfer of theatrical texts and relying on auxiliary specifics – in terms of dramaturgy or set design – would helplessly suffocate the raging energies of the text, would lower its cosmic dimension of insubordination and desolation of the conflict.

The performance of Desislava Shpatova, Snezhina Petrova and Ivo Dimchev attempts to make use precisely the energies of the text without grounding and taming it into a sentimental individualization of the characters, situations, drama. The performance is constructed through two actors who conditionally depict the two sides of consciousness: the one from this side, the lit one that contains rationality, faith and life (Snezhina Petrova), and the other – the one beyond normality, the neurotic

one handed to hysteria, pain and eclipse (Ivo Dimchev). The two of them build up dramaturgically the performance (whose non-constructivity in semantic and structural terms we have already mentioned) that conditionally differentiates two characters, and at the same time they dramatize the mind's flashing and dying out. The banal allocation of reason and insanity between the characters has been avoided because they represent the parts of the same disassembled consciousness. This is literally materialized in terms of set and costume design: on a bare and dark stage Ivo Dimchev and Snezhina Petrova, dressed in the same tracksuits – black and pale blue, respectively – are sitting on two chairs under hanging light bulbs that go on at one moment and off at another. The actors, perhaps among the most interesting in our theatre now, are quite different in their expression and yet bound into some emotional whole. Snezhina Petrova keeps the ostensible rationality, balance and sense at a purely gestural, plastic and vocal level but at the same time she creates the feeling of tension, effort and un-naturalness of the attempt to stay afloat. The blank gaze and torpid, mechanical intonations give away the sick substance that swallows increasingly bigger pieces of vitality. Ivo Dimchev is let loose completely beyond, in the uncontrollable unconscious when the mind goes out and the human being is transformed into "a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool". Here, this actor is definitely in his element – unimaginable, farcically hysterical convulsion of madness produced solely by the surprising modulations of the voice and the extremely stretched, impossible mimics of the face. This creature does not even aspire anymore to the balance of the mind and has

consumed the entire energy. The acting performance is safeguarded against any internalized projection, empathy, suffering, it is focused on depicting, acting out – running through the signifiers and animating them on stage. Thus are preserved the elusiveness and multiplicity of the text which is boundless in its problem and untraversable like human consciousness and to which a gesture of deciphering is impossible and pointless. The connection with it is carried out entirely sensuously.

There is a lot of sense of humour in the play coming from the refusal to interpret and decipher, even by employing this "anti-approach" to the drama, and to present it through laughter and to make it stand out in the contradiction between substance and form. Since director's work does not dig towards substances (and that's why the performance does not shake and relax cathartically but certainly works on an emotional level) the emphasis is on the acting potential of the text which is inexhaustible considering its being inscribed into the "aesthetics of lack"³ and the freedom of reading and combining what is available and the gaps that stems from there. The acting moves into the huge amplitude ranging from focused maintenance of normalcy to the excess of the over-theatrical insanity – especially when the eccentric Ivo Dimchev indulges in his talent for easily leaving the domain of the logos, and when Snezhina Petrova falls into her sophisticated delusions, always with grace and command of the pressing madness. This draws sincere laughter from the spectators – without harming the sense, aes-

³ See Iskra Nikolova, *op. cit.* p. 149. It is about the decline of all signs in which the genre of drama is recognizable.

thetics or ethics of the performance – and thus paradoxically the drama is rehabilitated (in the text and on stage) in the realization of its “irrational irreducible irredeemable unrecognisable”⁴ and principled refusal to be recognized and (vicariously) experienced (both by the character (s) and by the actors) because of the profanization effect that would cause.

Two kids also appear in the performance (Helene Kostadinova and Kaloyan Cholakov) who dutifully utter the facts from the medical record of a patient suffering from “pathological sorrow”. This is as much distanced touch to the signs in the play as possible because the details from the professional information about diagnoses, medicines and their effects on the patient sound unusually and oddly to hear from the mouths of 10-12-year old kids. When children stand for adults their remoteness and inability to comprehend the problem together with the entire absurdity that they might ever be engaged by it, make the catastrophe seem even greater and more incomprehensible in the most innocent way.

In the last part of the performance Ivo Dimchev in an astonishing red suit and Snezhina Petrova in a vivid red dress alternate to give small performances upstage to a microphone. They show up one after another dancing to the sound of Emiliyan Gatsov’s splendidly innocent and carelessly joyful music that somehow blissfully accompanies the text in order to have it removed – at yet another level – from its signifieds. Ivo Dimchev pretending to be skilfully plastic and Snezhina Petrova with childish clumsiness and audacity pass through the stage. This is the overture to their miniature show that happens based

on the principle of mutual sabotage of the words, intonational discourse and vision. Actors recite with the pathetic inspiration of a tragic monologue (Ivo Dimchev) or with the unconscious wandering uttering of impenetrable words (Snezhina Petrova); words swarm as some stand-up comedy jokes or as eternal truths from a Protestant confession with equal insensitiveness to their sense which gives a new perspective to the approach of text reading. Snezhina Petrova goes into the trance of uttering rambling and unrealized words which totally dissociates her creature from its being here and renders it one not belonging to the drama. Only the red dress highlights her physical presence. The overt theatricality works with the surprising intertwist of the signifiers whereupon they lose any connection to the idea of their emergence (even before Sarah Kane’s text); the corporeality is excited by all means by language leaving to it the polyvalent potencies; the references to any specific drama are quite remote. The unsolvability and predestination of the situation is shown not as a realized breakdown but as a suffering convulsion of the body and the spirit indicating some cosmic defect. Its only possible “reading” is acting out. The last cue of the play “please open the curtains” marks the borderline area of theatre and reality. Has the theatricalised and aestheticised catastrophe been exhausted or will it touch now someone beyond theatre?

Published in Homo Ludens 2005/No. 11.

*Translated by
Atanas Igov*

⁴A quote from *Psychosis 4:48* by Sarah Kane.