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Crave by Sarah Kane (review)

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Gaining access to theatre took on a new meaning in summer 2020, when theatres across the city opened their lobbies to protesters joining the Black Lives Matter uprising. These spaces, closed to typical audiences by COVID-19, offered a more literal watering hole: drinking fountains, outlets to charge phones, a place to rest and regroup. One year later, just as conventional performances returned to major venues, *The Watering Hole* sent out trickles, rivulets, and streams imagining how theatre might become more accountable for the equity and safety of all its potential participants, especially people of color. In the future, these streams might become a transformative flood.

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CRAVE. By Sarah Kane. Directed by Tinue Craig. Chichester Festival Theatre, Chichester, UK. November 3, 2020.

In *Crave*, the penultimate play in Sarah Kane's small but enduring oeuvre, four voices struggle against incurable loneliness and isolation. These are characters bereft of intimacy and chronically kneecapped in their desperate longing to connect. Given its thematic content, few plays seem better-suited to capture the grinding solitude of sequester that many of us experienced during the protracted height of COVID-19. In terms of staging, too, the play readily accommodates, if not invites, the kind of blocking that became an albatross around directors' necks in the era of socially distanced theatre. One imagines that these factors played a part in the Chichester Festival Theatre's (CFT) decision to program *Crave* at the end of 2020, when the United Kingdom relaxed restrictions (albeit briefly) on public performances. Scheduled to run from October 29 to November 7, 2020, the show not only played to a socially distanced audience in attendance at the CFT but also livestreamed every performance online. When the country reentered lockdown on November 5, however, the final performances of the run continued to be streamed while the actors played to an empty house. Thus the grim realities of the global pandemic once again thwarted an earnest, urgent longing to reunite the theatregoing public—and this uncanny extratheatrical parallel to both the form and content of Kane's play made the CFT's production of *Crave* especially emblematic of the COVID era.

In Tinue Craig's evocative production, the play's thematic interest in isolation became a structur-

ing scenic principle. The design, by Alex Lowde, confined each of the play's quartet of actors (Erin Doherty, Alfred Enoch, Wendy Kweh, and Jonathan Slinger) to separate conveyor belts, evenly spaced apart, that sped up, slowed down, or stopped altogether throughout the show. On its face, the staging proved a brilliant solution to the challenge of socially distanced blocking: in contrast to a number of other shows that struggled to incorporate the mandated distancing of performers' bodies, the actors' physical separation in this case succeeded in visually expressing *Crave*'s central tension. Here are characters struggling to connect with one another and (often) failing, desperate to reach across gaps that seem impossible to bridge.

Indeed, touch is a recurring motif in *Crave*. The word ricochets among the characters' mouths across the duration of the play, as they vocalize, at turns, both a yearning for and a revulsion toward touch. One character—a young woman and a survivor of childhood sexual trauma—recoils from the obsessive, predatory advances of an older man and confessed pedophile. "Don't touch me," she intones, and later, "My bowels curl at his touch." Ravi Deepres's video design, projected on the back wall—a mix of live feed and prerecorded material—enlarged the actors' bodies and faces to sometimes distressing proportions, evoking an up-close intimacy that bristled with discomfort and reminded us of touch's capacity to invade and violate. And yet, the call that resounds most clearly in Kane's play is the titular craving for intimacy, for an antidote to loneliness. "Love me," begs one character; another fantasizes about the "relief" of being "held and touched and kissed and adored"; and the pithy antimetabole "I fucking miss you. . . . I miss fucking you" articulates a delirious need for companionship and closeness, both sexual and otherwise. Even the young woman, played by Doherty—who at several



Alfred Enoch (as B), Erin Doherty (as C), Wendy Kweh (as M), and Jonathan Slinger (as A) in *Crave*. (Photo: Marc Brenner.)



Erin Doherty (as C), Alfred Enoch (as B), and Wendy Kweh (as M) in *Crave*. (Photo: Marc Brenner.)

points in the show represented her insularity from the others by cowering, crawling, and prostrating herself on her conveyor belt—will finally murmur “Hold my hand.” Meanwhile, a sequence early in the play that begins with the exchange “LEAVE. / COME BACK.” culminates with a rare instance of all four characters speaking in unison: “STAY.”—an emphatic reminder of Kane’s investment in touch as a vehicle for tenderness and attachment.

The almost Beckettian imagery of Craig’s production—the confinement, the futility suggested by the looping conveyor belt, the illusion of forward movement where there is really only stasis—emerges even more forcefully in retrospect as a perfect metaphor for so much of life during the global pandemic. For every hubristic overestimation of our progress was the humbling recognition that we are still very much in the mire. I was fortunate to see *Crave* in the first part of its run, and, although I streamed the performance from my home, I was delighted to attend an event, at a fixed time, that was reminiscent of a night at the theatre (or a matinee in my case, given the time zone). As I watched spectators file into the auditorium and settle into their seats, I felt something of the live, collective theatrical experience that I had not enjoyed in nearly a year; physical remoteness notwithstanding, I felt myself

part of a group that was simultaneously gathered to partake of the show. And yet, the material conditions of performance were inevitably mediated by the extratheatrical context of COVID-19. The return to in-person performance in the United Kingdom turned out to be a false start that ended in another lockdown. Like the characters in the play, the theatre community has struggled to bridge the gap of isolation while repeatedly coming up against barriers and forces beyond its control.

The CFT’s production of *Crave*, therefore, stands out as a deeply representative piece of theatre for COVID times, from its thoughtful theatricalization of the form and content of Kane’s work to the show’s contingent relationship to the world beyond the theatre. Although steeped in despair, to be sure, both the play and the production are everywhere shot through with reminders that it is precisely our desperate commitment to human connection that will see us through whatever darkness, misery, or isolation. After all, Kane, per her wont, lets in the light at the end of the play, concluding with the hopeful, forward-looking reassurance that we will soon, once again, be “[h]appy and free.”

ALEX FERRONE

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