CRITICAL SURVEY OF DRAMA
GEORG KAISER

**Born:** Magdeburg, Germany; November 25, 1878  
**Died:** Ascona, Switzerland; June 4, 1945

**Principal drama**
- *Die jüdische Witwe*, pb. 1911, pr. 1921  
- *Europa*, pb. 1915, pr. 1920  
- *Von morgens bis mitternachts*, pb. 1916, pr. 1917 (*From Morn to Midnight, 1920*)  
- *Die Koralle*, pr., pb. 1917 (*The Coral, 1929*)  
- *Gas*, pr., pb. 1918 (English translation, 1924)  
- *Hölle Weg Erde*, pr., pb. 1919  
- *Gas: Zweiter Teil*, pr., pb. 1920 (*Gas II, 1924*)  
- *Der gerettete Alkibiades*, pr., pb. 1920 (*Alkibiades Saved, 1963*)  
- *Noli me tangere*, pb. 1922  
- *Kanzlist Krehler*, pr., pb. 1922  
- *Gats*, pr., pb. 1925  
- *Oktober tag*, pr., pb. 1928 (*The Phantom Lover, 1928*)  
- *Die Lederköpfe*, pr., pb. 1928  
- *Rosamunde Floris*, pb. 1940, pr. 1953  
- *Der Soldat Tanaka*, pr., pb. 1940  
- *Zweimal Amphitryon*, pr. 1944, pb. 1948  
- *Das Floss der Medusa*, pr. 1945, pb. 1948 (*The Raft of the Medusa, 1951*)  

**Other literary forms**

Georg Kaiser published film scripts, essays, and two novels: *Es ist genug* (1932; it is enough), an autobiographical work whose plot unfolds in an imaginary setting, and *Villa Aurea* (1940; *Vera*, 1939), which is—like many of Kaiser’s plays—based on an abstract thought or thesis: Humankind is afraid of nothingness; it knows that nothingness is the only truth, but it does not want to acknowledge it.

During his exile in Switzerland, Kaiser wrote several short stories. Many of them draw their inspiration from political events, such as the occupation of Czechoslovakia by German troops (“Lieutenant Welzeck”) or the rise of Adolf Hitler and his hypnotic power over the German masses (“Nach einem verlorenen Krieg”). Like many (former) expressionists (such as Ernst Barlach, Reinhard J. Sorge, and Alfred Döblin), Kaiser used the fairy-tale genre to express his philosophical and theological views (humility as the devil’s creation in “Die Ausgeburt”; love as a purifying force in “Das Märchen des Königs”). Kaiser’s poetry, especially the poems written during his exile, shows the strong influence of Rainer Maria Rilke. The film scripts, essays, novels, stories, and poems have been collected in the fourth volume of the 1971 edition of Kaiser’s collected works, edited by Walther Huder.

**Achievements**

Georg Kaiser was one of the most prolific playwrights in the history of German drama. He wrote approximately seventy plays, many of which were performed throughout Germany in the 1920’s. Among all the expressionist dramatists, he developed the most progressive antinaturalistic dramaturgy. His influence on younger playwrights both inside and outside Germany was considerable. Bertolt Brecht, a major and influential dramatist himself, has acknowledged that he learned much from Kaiser’s dramatic techniques, particularly from Kaiser’s views about the role of the audience. Kaiser did not want his audience to adopt an attitude of passive empathy. Spectators were not supposed to forget themselves by means of uncritically identifying with the protagonist onstage. Kaiser’s abstract style was devised to counteract such an attitude and foster an alert and critical
mental disposition on the part of spectators. The fact that many of Kaiser's plays have been translated into English and other languages attests his international reputation.

Biography

Georg Kaiser was born on November 25, 1878, in Magdeburg, Germany. He attended elementary school in Magdeburg from 1885 to 1888 and then entered a Lutheran monastery school, which he left in 1895. During his years in the monastery school, he frequently attended concerts, operas, and plays. In 1895, he worked as an apprentice in a Magdeburg bookstore but gave up after a few weeks because his lofty ideas about literature and books were shattered by his experience of the commercial aspects of the book trade. In 1896, Kaiser worked for a commercial firm and began to study foreign languages. Three years later, he traveled to Buenos Aires, where he found employment as a clerk in the branch office of the General Electric Company (AEG) of Berlin. During that time, he contracted malaria. He returned to his parents in 1901. After having suffered a nervous breakdown, he was treated for half a year in a Berlin sanatorium.

During the years from 1903 to 1907, Kaiser wrote several plays. In 1908, he married Margarethe Habenicht, the daughter of a wholesale merchant. Kaiser was not drafted during World War I because of a nervous disorder. He volunteered, however, to work for the Red Cross in Weimar. The years from 1916 to 1918 brought Kaiser fame as a playwright; many of his plays were performed in German cities such as Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, and Berlin.

In November, 1918, Kaiser moved to Munich, where he befriended the expressionist writer Ernst Toller, who was one of the leaders of the short-lived Soviet Republic in Bavaria. Because of financial problems, Kaiser pawned and sold some furniture and art objects belonging to the owner of a house he had rented in Tutzing, Bavaria. This led, in October, 1920, to Kaiser's arrest in Berlin. Kaiser was charged with embezzlement. In February, 1921, he was sentenced to one year in prison but was released in April of the same year and placed on probation for six months. In the following years, Kaiser's plays were staged in major cities all over the world. In 1926, Kaiser became an elected member of the Prussian Academy of Arts and Letters.

The rise of National Socialism meant the end of Kaiser's career as a playwright in Germany. Publication and performances of his plays were forbidden by the new regime, and his books were burned along with those of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Lion Feuchtwanger, and others in May, 1933. For a while, his plays could still be performed in Austria (before the "Anschluss" in 1938) and other countries.

In 1938, Kaiser fled to Switzerland via the Netherlands after a search warrant for his home near Berlin had been issued. Until his death in 1945, Kaiser lived in Switzerland, where he continued to write plays, novels, poetry, and film scripts. He wished to emigrate to the United States, but Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann failed in their efforts to obtain a visa for him. On June 4, 1945, Kaiser died in Ascona, Switzerland. Most of the plays that he had written af-
After he left Germany were performed on German stages after the end of World War II.

**Analysis**

Many of Georg Kaiser’s plays are, in both form and content, part of literary expressionism, a movement in central European countries that can be regarded as an integral part of the revolutionary trends stirring literature and art in Europe around 1900. This movement, supported by the young generation of artists and writers, was a reaction against the passive reproduction of reality by the artists and authors of impressionism and naturalism. To be sure, the expressionists also intended to show certain aspects of a society shaped by industrialism and technology, but they also wished to conjure up a vision of a better world and of a “new man.” This vision necessitated a new style disregarding the rules of mimesis and realism, a style that abstracted from observable actions and events what was taken to be their “essence” underneath an often misleading “appearance.” Expressionist aesthetics prescribe that the primary impulse of the creative act should originate in the author’s or artist’s subjective creative intuition. The observable real world serves as material to be shaped according to the creator’s “vision.”

This is why in Kaiser’s plays, as well as in those of his fellow expressionists, the characters have been reduced to “types” representing an idea or a typical social function. They no longer speak and act according to psychological role models. Indeed, they are highly artificial creatures whom one would presumably never meet in real life. Nevertheless, they embody the flaws of society or the Utopian hopes of the author for a new society. Kaiser’s plays also reduce naturalistic detail to a minimum of essential props. Light and color frequently assume a symbolic function. Most of Kaiser’s plays have a highly intellectual quality. Their antithetical and dialectical structure is based on an idea or a thought that is carried to its conclusion, even though in the process, the plot may take a turn toward the absurd and paradoxical. Just as Kaiser’s plots often assume an utterly unrealistic quality, the characters in his expressionistic plays speak a language that is as artificial and abstract as they themselves are. This is no longer the language of the naturalists, who strove to copy as faithfully as possible the way certain human beings talk in real life, right down to the shades of local dialects. Kaiser’s language is one of typification and condensation. Its function is, once again, to reveal the essence behind the mask of appearance. Adjectives are used sparingly, and verbs and articles are frequently omitted.

If there is one common thematic denominator in most of Kaiser’s plays, it is his deep concern about the quality and dignity of human life in a changed socioeconomic environment. Kaiser exposes the shortcomings of his characters (and of the societies in which they live) when he depicts individuals as well as entire groups of humans as victims of war, selfishness, hatred, greed, or technological “progress.” These are the forces that militate against a better form of life that has not yet advanced beyond the stage of a Utopian dream. Yet Kaiser offers a glimpse of this better world, of a nonrepressive and just society ruled by the “new man” who achieves (often through personal sacrifice) a morally superior form of existence. This new life will not be the result of revolutions or political maneuvers but will—such was Kaiser’s hope—eventually spring from an inner metamorphosis of the individual.

**The Citizens of Calais**

One of Kaiser’s best-known expressionistic plays is *The Citizens of Calais*. Kaiser based the plot of the play on the historical siege of the French city of Calais by English troops under Edward III in 1346. The king promises to spare the city and its recently completed harbor if six citizens present the city’s key to him and are willing to be executed. The elder citizen Eustache de Saint-Pierre offers himself and asks for other volunteers. When six others volunteer, Eustache first proposes to draw lots in order to eliminate one of the seven volunteers. Having second thoughts about this procedure, however, he changes his mind and makes all seven lots equal. Then he declares that he who appears last on the market square the next morning will go free. The next morning, all the others appear except Eustache. They accuse him of deception. Moments later, his corpse is brought to
the square on a stretcher. It is revealed that Eustache killed himself in order to spare any of the other six the embarrassment and shame of arriving last. Presently, a messenger from the English king appears, announcing that the king will not demand the sacrifice of the six, since that night a son was born to him. Eustache’s father praises his son as the “new man” who leads the way toward a new ethic. Like Christ’s death on the cross, Eustache’s supreme sacrifice has set a noble example that inspires those who survive him.

The seventh volunteer and the construction of the harbor are Kaiser’s inventions. They are not found in the well-known chronicle by Jean Froissart (1337-1410) that tells of the historical siege of Calais and of the king’s stipulation. It is likely that Kaiser consulted Froissart’s work.

The play can also be read as an antiwar text. There are those who urge the defenders of Calais to continue the hopeless fight against the English troops to the bitter end, but they do not prevail. The new harbor takes on a symbolic significance as an achievement of humanity, which has conquered the irrational—symbolized by the ocean—in itself. The old values of martial heroism, honor, and power will be replaced by love and humility.

HÖLLE WEG ERDE

In 1919, Kaiser published the play Hölle Weg Erde, in which the expressionistic call for a new, morally superior human being and a new society cleansed of all the inequities and injustices of capitalist society is heard in a contemporary setting. In typical expressionistic fashion, the play blends a relatively realistic portrayal of society with a presentation of a Utopian world of love in which greed, crime, and egotism are superseded by brotherhood.

The artist Spazierer tries to raise money for a friend in need who threatens suicide. He approaches Lili, a rich lady who is about to purchase some costly earrings from a jeweler. Spazierer wants to sell his drawings to her, but she refuses. Enraged, he stabs the jeweler, whom he holds responsible for a society in which a man in need does not get help. Spazierer also plans to sue Lili for the “murder” of his needy friend. The attorney whom he approaches declines to take the case. Spazierer then agrees to go to prison for the stabbing. His fellow inmates claim that they—as human beings, disconnected from the socioeconomic structures imposed on them—are not guilty: It is the social structure that breeds crime. At this point in the play, a miraculous change in the entire society takes place. This is where the Utopian vision begins to replace the relatively realistic mode of presentation. As a reflection of humanity’s predicament in modern industrial society, all confess their “guilt” and at the same time plead innocent. Lili, the attorney, and the jeweler now recognize that they wronged Spazierer. The gates of the prison are opened, never to be closed again. The prison guards refuse to work and join the inmates in a proclamation of the new humanity and a new society. This proclamation condemns the notion of “achievement” calling it an enslaving social norm. A sense of purification pervades all classes of society, coupled with a belief in a new beginning (“Aufbruch”) that characterizes many of Kaiser’s works. In the last scene of the play, there emerge the vague outlines of a new social order in which all are equal. Spazierer is asked to accept the position of a leader but refuses, since he wants to be nothing more than an anonymous member of the crowd.

The play demonstrates Kaiser’s belief that modern industrial society perverts the basic goodness of humanity. It fails, however, to provide a blueprint for a new society. The change that takes place in society happens abruptly and without any apparent motivation. If there is a general weakness or flaw in expressionist literature, it lies in its attempt to give artistic shape to a vision that—in spite of its sincerity—lacks the expertise and factual knowledge of the politically inspired social reformer. Nevertheless, Kaiser’s Utopia remains a moving document of the social plight of his time and of his yearning for a better world.

FROM MORNING TO MIDNIGHT

Kaiser’s play From Morn to Midnight uses a dramaturgical structure typical of many expressionistic dramas: a mode of presentation that shows the protagonist in a sequence of selected stages or exemplary situations in his life (the German term for this mode is Stationendrama). A scene or an act of the
play no longer follows logically or psychologically from the preceding one. Instead, their nexus is based on an underlying idea common to all the scenes, which thus become variations of a theme. The scenes and acts still constitute an ordered string of events, but there is no stringent adherence to sequentiality.

The protagonist of the play is a petit bourgeois cashier who feels stifled by the monotony of his uneventful life. He embezzles a large sum of money in order to buy for himself the excitement and the deep inner satisfaction that life has withheld from him. He quickly learns, however, that money cannot buy true love. At a bicycle race, he attempts to stir up the passions of the racers and of the spectators by offering exorbitant sums for the winners. The appearance of the emperor, however, drowns the aroused passion of the spectators in sudden silence and in an attitude of devout subservience. Deeply irritated and disillusioned, the cashier leaves the arena. He ends up at the Salvation Army, where he hopes that a complete confession of his sins, the radical gesture of laying bare his soul and its most intimate desires, will bring him a long sought for and yet elusive sense of fulfillment. He is disappointed again when a girl denounces him to the police. When he throws the remainder of his money on the floor, pandemonium breaks loose. Everybody greedily rushes forth to pick up the bills and coins. Religious feelings succumb to primitive instincts and drives. Acknowledging his fiasco, the cashier shoots himself. His body slumps into a curtain onto which a cross has been sewn. “Ecce homo” are the last words he utters. The Christ symbol is—as so often in the writings of the expressionists—secularized and stands for the sufferings endured by humanity.

**The Coral, Gas, and Gas II**

Kaiser develops an equally pessimistic view in his trilogy *The Coral, Gas, and Gas II*. This time, he focuses on the working class and its struggle, not only against capitalists and their allies the politicians, but also against the anonymous powers of technology and industrialization. In *The Coral*, the protagonist, a billionaire, owes his riches to the horror with which he remembers his poverty-stricken youth. He has worked his way up in order to forget his past. The memories of his working-class background still haunt him so much that he kills a man who looks exactly like him in order to assume this man’s identity (he had a happy, sheltered childhood). The billionaire’s son decides to become a worker in his own plant, although he still maintains a position of spiritual leadership. The plant produces gas. Its profits are shared among the workers according to a scheme based on seniority and age. Once again, Kaiser projects a Utopian image, this time of a socialist system that allows for equal distribution of wealth (without truly enhancing the quality of life of the workers). A giant explosion caused by a mistake in the production formula (a mistake that is beyond detection) forces the workers to interrupt their relentless work for seventeen days. This break gives the billionaire’s son a chance to persuade his workers to start a new life, to leave the plant in shambles and to become farmers. This move “back to nature” is supposed to generate a spiritual renewal. Technology and industrialization are rejected by the humanist and idealist as a misguided effort in humanity’s struggle with nature.

The workers, however, reject the billionaire’s son’s proposal. They know no life other than work in the factory. Besides, the leading industrialists of the country urge the billionaire’s son to rebuild the plant. In the meantime, the workers begin to realize to what extent they have become merely an extension of their machines. Their lives have been reduced to the function of a hand that pulls a lever, eyes that watch a sight-tube, or a foot that presses down a pedal. Their existence is indeed a fragmented one. Technology deprives them of the wholeness and the potential richness of human life. For a brief moment, they decide to abandon the plant. Their chief engineer, however, talks them into returning to work by conjuring up a heroic and glorious image of technology and by downgrading the life of a “peasant” proposed by the billionaire’s son. Furthermore, the military high command and the government of the country simply order the reconstruction of the plant because a war seems imminent.

The last play of the trilogy is set in the plant, where the production of gas has resumed while war
has indeed broken out. Once more, the workers have the opportunity to evaluate their lives critically when a mechanical failure in the system causes a brief interruption of production. For the second time, the workers realize that they are slaves, and they begin to envisage a better life that would allow them to control their own destiny as free men. These dreams come to an abrupt end, however, when the enemy takes over the plant. While the workers continue to slave in their plant (profits are no longer shared), their chief engineer reveals that he has invented a deadly poisonous gas that he wants to use against the enemy. When the workers enthusiastically embrace the idea of revenge, the billionaire worker exhorts them to refrain from any act of violence. They should, so he argues, willingly accept the rule of the enemy and yet be free in spirit. This new inner sense of freedom is the freedom of the martyr based on the Christian virtue of humility. Once again, the workers reject the lofty proposal of their idealistic leader. At this point, the billionaire worker feels entitled to take fate into his own hands. He snatches the capsule with the poisonous gas from the engineer’s hands and smashes it to the ground, destroying himself and all his fellow workers. Even the enemy is drawn into total annihilation. Technology and war have brought about the self-destruction of a humankind lacking the desire and the maturity to break out of its self-imposed prison (industrialized society). The “new man” remains a noble specter whose realization seems remote if not impossible.

This trilogy shows Kaiser at the height of his expressionistic skill. Its characters are types, not individuals (“The Daughter,” “The Officer,” “The Engineer,” “First Workman,” “Second Workman,” and so on). The two parties at war are distinguished by color (“Figures in Blue” versus “Figures in Yellow”). Kaiser’s language is abstract and highly metaphorical. Furthermore, he revives and refines the ancient tradition of the chorus. Groups differentiated by profession, age, or sex (“The Workmen,” “The Girls,” “The Women,” or simply “Voices”) speak in alternate order to individuals who in turn represent a collective or group. In some scenes, the dramatic dialogue approaches the form of the liturgy. Certain lines are repeated over and over again, as in a responsory or an oratorio. Such collective speeches conform with the antimimetic aesthetics of expressionism. The characters speak according to preestablished patterns and not in a quasi-spontaneous fashion because they represent ideas or typical social positions and are therefore stripped of individualistic psychological features.

Kaiser’s trilogy can also be interpreted as a portrayal of the antagonism between the masses and the leader. It is one of the ironies of German cultural history that many expressionists struggled with this problematic theme long before National Socialism provided its own answer to the question: How do the leader and the masses relate to one another? In the Gas trilogy, the masses repeatedly refuse to follow their leader, who seeks no elevated social status but merely stands apart intellectually from his fellow workers. In the end, the leader annihilates himself as well as those who would not be led.

In a brief sketch entitled “Die Erneuerung: Skizze für ein Drama” (the renewal), written in 1919 for a planned (but never completed) play, Kaiser deals once more with the problematic relationship between the leader and the masses. On one hand, the leader figure of this sketch wishes to abandon his role. His aim is to become totally absorbed into the anonymous collective. On the other hand, the masses need the leader. They insist on giving a “name” to the one they have chosen for this elevated social position. The designated leader argues that the individual, once he emerges from the collective, becomes utterly self-centered and egotistical and loses all instincts of brotherly love. Man can be good only if he fuses with the masses. Because the collective insists on giving the leader a “name” and thus sets him apart from all the others, the only way out of the dilemma for the individual is to commit suicide and thus initiate the spiritual “renewal” of the collective. The most striking issue in Kaiser’s abstract dialectical sketch is his positive image of the masses, in stark contrast to the views of Friedrich Nietzsche or Gustave Le Bon, who described the masses as dangerous plebeians who lack a sense of responsibility, as a herd with the potential for destruction (although Le Bon also counted
dedication and self-sacrifice among the virtues of the masses). Kaiser, like many of his fellow expressionists, interpreted the masses as ethically superior to the individual. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich expressed similar views in some of his writings of the early 1920’s.

As far as the fate of the masses is concerned, the contrast within Kaiser’s own work between the Gas trilogy and “Die Erneuerung” is quite obvious. The workers in the trilogy intermittently glimpse a more dignified and humane life, but they fall prey to the instincts of greed and violence. Their leader, the billionaire worker, who does not attempt to relinquish his role as a leader, finally destroys the masses as well as himself in an act of both supreme despair and punishment. He fails to bring about a “renewal,” and the workers fail to understand his vision of a better life (regardless of its practicality and validity). In “Die Erneuerung,” however, the designated leader sacrifices himself, thus bringing about a positive ethical transformation of the collective.

**Noli me tangere**

Kaiser takes up the theme of renewal once more in his play *Noli me tangere*. The play has two protagonists, both prisoners, identified by numbers only. Prisoner “16” has been imprisoned by mistake. As soon as his innocence is established, he is told that he can leave, yet he decides to help his fellow inmate “15” escape by giving him his coat so that “15” (whom the prison guards now take to be “16”) is able to regain his freedom while “16” stays behind. Before the escape takes place, however, “16” and “15” have a highly significant conversation. Prisoner “15” declares that he is the prophet and forerunner of a new humankind. Like Spazierer and the billionaire worker, he proclaims the dawn of a new (yet undefined) social order and a “new man.” Prisoner “16,” however, criticizes the flaming rhetoric and the revolutionary impetus of “15” by telling him that he wants too much too fast. History, so “15” is told, moves at a much slower pace than he anticipates. It will not be accelerated by untimely prophets but advances at a slow pace, controlled by God. Thus, a Christian philosophy of history takes the place of a pseudoreligious revolutionary concept of historical change. Indeed, prisoner “16” turns out to be Christ himself, who shows “15” the wounds on his hands while speaking the words: “Noli me tangere.” It seems as though Kaiser, in this play, found fault with the all-too-stormy prophetic thrust of the social philosophy of expressionism and created in the character of prisoner “15” almost a caricature of the expressionistic leader-prophet. Far from abandoning the ideal of a social and moral renewal, Kaiser’s message in *Noli me tangere* is that no revolutionary fervor (least of all one inspired by Marxism) will force into existence the new order. God as the supreme social engineer will—in the course of history—bring about the desired change. Kaiser’s play is one of the few texts within German expressionism that presents Christ as a truly divine being—as the Son of God. In most expressionist texts, Christ (or a Christ-figure) is a secular symbol for the sufferings of man, as in the last scene of *From Morn to Midnight*.

**Die Lederköpfe**

In some of his postexpressionist plays, Kaiser takes up once more the theme of war. Plays such as *The Citizens of Calais* and the Gas trilogy had already denounced war as a cruel, inhuman, and meaningless endeavor. World War I demonstrated to the young generation of artists and writers in Germany that war was the ultimate expression of a social and economic system that cultivated greed, national megalomania, and brutality.

In *Die Lederköpfe*, Kaiser launched his strongest attack against the ruthlessness of the military authorities and the degrading impact of war on human beings. The city commander is supposed to recruit a new army for his general, The Basilius, but the mutinous soldiers threaten to kill the commander, who evades death only by offering them The Basilius’s daughter. At that moment, The Basilius himself returns after having taken a city that belonged to the enemy. He owes this victory to a spectacular ruse. One of his soldiers mutilates his face, slips into the enemy’s camp, and pretends that The Basilius disfigured him and that he is therefore offering his services to them in order to avenge the cruel treatment he received at the hands of his general. His plight seems to vouch for his honesty, and the enemy believes him.
At night, this soldier opens the city gates so that The Basilius can take the city. The general rewards his soldier by appointing him field commander and giving him his daughter. The new field commander has to wear a leather hood over his head to hide his disfigured face. When The Basilius learns of the mutiny, he decides to punish the mutineers by having their faces disfigured in the same manner in which the field commander mutilated himself. He wants to build an entire army of faceless human beings wearing leather hoods. The field commander (who is deeply shocked by his general’s preposterous hubris and by his extreme brutality) offers to execute the proposed punishment himself. His true intention, however, is to incite his troops to kill The Basilius. Before the general is whipped to death by his outraged troops, he kills the field commander who has refused to mutilate his soldiers. The play ends, though, on a hopeful note: The destroyed city taken earlier by The Basilius will be rebuilt.

A grim picture of war is painted by the characters who are involved in it. The city commander calls war an all-devouring monster with “the mouth of a crocodile.” The sole purpose of war is the expansion of power of those who are already in power. Humankind becomes a faceless animal in war—this is the meaning of the symbolism of disfigurement and of the leather hood. Once a human being wears the hood, he is “everybody and nobody”; he loses his individuality and with it his human dignity. Even The Basilius seems to realize that war brings out in him only the faceless destroyer and the raging animal. He knows that there are “voices” in the depth of his soul to which he must not listen if he wants to be an effective general. He must look on his soldiers as if they were a swarm of ants.

The Raft of the Medusa

One of Kaiser’s last plays, The Raft of the Medusa, also known as Medusa’s Raft, focuses once again on the theme of war. The setting is a lifeboat on the ocean. During World War II, a passenger boat has been sunk by enemy torpedoes, and thirteen children, ranging in age from ten to twelve years, are crammed into the lifeboat. The youngest and weakest child of the group is a red-haired boy whom the others name “little fox.” Out of superstition, many of the children think that one of them must be sacrificed because the number thirteen spells doom. The leader of the group, Allan, finally agrees that they all draw lots in order to determine who will have to leave the boat. When Allan realizes that the girl Ann, whom he loves, will draw the lot that calls for her death, he quickly snatches up all the lots and throws them into the water. There is a happy interlude during the grim voyage of the shipwrecked children: Allan and Ann celebrate their “wedding” with imaginary pomp and circumstance. They place a report about the wedding in a bottle that is then committed to the waves. While Allan is asleep, the others throw the “little fox” (who has been protected by Allan) into the water just before a rescue seaplane arrives (a patrol boat found the bottle). Outraged because of the fate of the “little fox,” Allan refuses to board the plane. He stays in the lifeboat and is later killed by an enemy airplane that makes a strafing attack on the boat. As so often occurs in Kaiser’s plays, the figure of Christ is evoked to demonstrate the ideal of the supreme sacrifice. Allan’s death in this case atones for the sin of the other children, just as Christ atoned on the Cross for all the sins of humankind.

Other major works

Long fiction: Es ist genug, 1932; Villa Aurea, 1940 (Vera, 1939).

Bibliography

Bibliography and index.
Lambert, Carole J. The Empty Cross: Medieval Hopes, Modern Futility in the Theater of Maurice

Christoph Eykman

Kālidāsa

Born: India(?); c. 100 b.c.e. or c. 340 c.e.
Died: India(?); c. 40 b.c.e. or c. 400 c.e.

Principal drama
Mālavikāgnimitra, c. 70 b.c.e. or c. 370 c.e.
(English translation, 1875)
Vikramorvāsīya, c. 56 b.c.e. or c. 384 c.e.
(Vikrama and Urvasī, 1851)
Abhijñānāśākuntala, c. 45 b.c.e. or c. 395 c.e.
(Šakuntalā: Or, The Lost Ring, 1789)
The Dramas of Kālidāsa, pb. 1946

Other literary forms
Apart from the three plays, two epic poems and two lyric poems are commonly ascribed to Kālidāsa. Most critics agree that the lyrics—Rtusamhāra (c. 75 b.c.e. or c. 365 c.e.; English translation, 1867) and Meghadūta (c. 65 b.c.e. or c. 375 c.e.; The Cloud Messenger, 1813)—are earlier compositions, and the epics—Kumārasambhava (c. 60 b.c.e. or c. 380 c.e.; The Birth of the War-God, 1879) and Raghuvamśa (c. 50 b.c.e. or c. 390 c.e.; The Dynasty of Raghu, 1872-1895)—appear to be contemporaneous with the plays, among Kālidāsa’s later work. In addition, many scholars over the years have attributed numerous pieces of doubtful authenticity to Kālidāsa. These apocrypha span the literary gamut from religious hymns to astrological treatises to erotic verses, but their authorship remains questionable on stylistic grounds.

As in the plays, love is the unifying passion in the lyric poems of Kālidāsa. Rtusamhāra paints in its six cantos the six Indian seasons as perceived through the eyes of one in love. The depiction of lovers in union in that poem is countered by the theme of lovers separated in The Cloud Messenger, which has as its central metaphor one of the most charming romantic conceits of all literature: a cloud personified as the go-between carrying a message from lover to beloved, who pine away for each other, parted by vast distances. The epics, however, are of a somewhat different temper. The Birth of the War-God treats the mythological union of Śiva, the Hindu god of destruction, and Pārvatī, his consort, representing the principles of Good and Beauty respectively. Their son Kumāra, the god of war, symbolizes the power born to crush evil in the world. The elaborate, quasihistorical The Dynasty of Raghu presents the ideal virtues of legendary Indian kings and heroes, perhaps as an implicit guide to rulers of Kālidāsa’s own time. Despite their more conventional elevated approach, both epics are infused with Kālidāsa’s characteristic poetic style.

Achievements
Kālidāsa is unanimously recognized as India’s national poet, the foremost literary exponent of the Indian consciousness. Since his own lifetime, his works have signified the zenith of literary accomplishment in India, unrivaled in every genre that he attempted. His life also conveniently marks a turning point dividing old and new, serving as a watershed between the classical and romantic periods in Sanskrit literature. Most important, perhaps, by distilling abstract virtues into human form he converted Vedantic philosophy into easily comprehensible literature with more success than most of his predecessors and virtually all of his successors. Consequently, many of his couplets or quatrains have passed into the popular vocabulary as proverbs and maxims, and he has attained
cult stature among average Indians, arguably as much as his precursors, the epic poets Vyāsa and Vālmīki, becoming, like them, the much-beloved subject of several folktales.

According to tradition, “Of literary forms drama is the most pleasing; and of dramas Śakuntalā; and in Śakuntalā the fourth act; and in that act four verses”—alluding to Kanva’s valedictory remarks to the heroine before she leaves his hermitage. Kālidāsa made significant changes in Sanskrit drama, especially introducing the note of the delicate and often heartrending lyricism that has enchanted commentators ever since. The strict norms of Sanskrit dramaturgy in no way inhibited him. Working for the most part within their boundaries, he did not discard the prevailing austere tone but raised it to a level of dignity. He did not ignore conventions but rather crystallized each into diamonds. He developed the art of characterization and simultaneously introduced a heightened intensity as well as a relative realism. Above all, he explored in depth the śringāra (erotic) rasa as no one had before him, exhausting its possibilities. His poetry won for him as much fame as did his drama. Although both of his epics are incomplete, critics acknowledge them as models in their genre (the courtly, or “art,” epic), conforming to all rules of construction. Kālidāsa also invented the long lyric poem in Sanskrit, and his two compositions in this mode remain among his most popular works. They pioneered the move toward romanticism and individuality in Sanskrit poetry.

Kālidāsa’s style attracts the highest encomiums. Even the severest Sanskrit purists maintain that his defects are more poetic than other poets’ successes. Kālidāsa presented Sanskrit, one of the most precise of languages, in its mature perfection. His creativity manifested itself in his uncanny choice of the correct word and his innovative construction of compounds, yet his writing epitomized economy. He was the uncontested master of similes, his nature imagery exemplifying his originality and minute observation. Kālidāsa’s descriptions of nature are a byword in Sanskrit scholarship, regularly cited in discussions of poetics. He displayed consummate artistry in the powers of subtle suggestion and internal assonance, the hallmarks of excellent poetry according to Sanskrit theoreticians. His use of rhetoric showed little trace of cliché, artifice, or hyperbole. The harmony of his writing—technique perfectly allied with meaning—was always evident.

**Biography**

Unfortunately, nothing is known concerning Kālidāsa’s life. The folk stories about him that have survived are almost certainly fictitious, and recorded Indian history does not offer any verifiable accounts. Therefore, scholars turn to internal evidence and scattered references to Kālidāsa for clues to date him, but these, too, are often nebulous or ambiguous. Critical opinion has narrowed the plausible time frames for Kālidāsa to either the first century B.C.E. (the traditional view) or the fourth century C.E. (the modern hypothesis). The dates indicated in this essay come from K. Krishnamoorthy’s conjectural chronology, based on these two commonly held theories.

Reconstructions of Kālidāsa’s life are generally founded on the ancient legend that he was the court poet of King Vikramāditya, a patron of the arts whose capital was Ujjain, in west-central India. The existence of such a king in the first century B.C.E. has never been confirmed historically, whereas it is known that the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II of the fourth century C.E. assumed the title Vikramāditya (admittedly a common honorific) and cultivated artists at court. Whatever Kālidāsa’s period, it seems obvious that he served as a court poet. Moreover, his writing reveals a rigorous education in every conceivable field of study and a thorough knowledge of Indian geography that points to extensive travels, perhaps in royal service. He definitely lived at some time in Ujjain, because he describes the city in loving detail. Scholars of Kālidāsa have also inferred from the tone of his works that he lived in comparatively peaceful and prosperous times, possibly during what is now considered to be the golden age of the Gupta empire.

Krishnamoorthy reconstructs Kālidāsa’s literary career as follows: The poet wrote the relatively immature Ṛūsmahāra at the age of twenty-five, then at-
tracted notice with *Mālavikāgnimitra* at court. Possibly *The Cloud Messenger* alludes to a separation from his wife while he was away in southern India on royal business. Afterward, *The Birth of the War-God* may have celebrated the nativity of his patron’s heir (Chandragupta II had a son named Kumāragupta, who eventually succeeded him); in its title, *Vikrama and Urvaśī*, may have been intended to honor the king himself, identifying him with its hero. In full maturity, when he was fifty years old, Kālidāsa began *The Dynasty of Raghu*, but he stopped abruptly after nineteen cantos, his last portrait that of a ruler who was effete, dissolute, and corrupt. Kālidāsa recovered from this vision of steady degeneration to attain the serenity that enabled him to compose *Śakuntalā*, and died soon after.

**Analysis**

If any writer deserves the title of “poet’s poet,” it is Kālidāsa. The pure beauty of his language has prompted many poets over the centuries—both Indian and Western—to compose tributes to him. Notable among Western devotees is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who saw in Kālidāsa the poet’s “highest function as the representative of the most natural condition, of the most beautiful way of life, of the purest moral effort, of the worthiest majesty, of the most sincere contemplation.” In the West, critics have consistently placed Kālidāsa among the ranks of Sophocles, Vergil, Dante, and William Shakespeare, giving proof of his universal appeal.

**Sanskrit Drama**

To appreciate Kālidāsa’s plays, one must first understand the fundamental concepts that underlie Sanskrit drama. The essence of Western dramaturgy has always been conflict; a play usually traces the development and resolution of a particular set of opposing forces. To Indian dramatists, however, conflict is only a secondary consideration; their actual aim is the opposite, to depict harmony in their plays. They do this by evoking *rasa* in the audience, presenting the nine basic emotions (desire, laughter, anger, sorrow, pride, fear, disgust, wonder, and peace) in perfect balance during the play so as to produce at the end an illuminating revelation of oneness, in which for the moment the spectator is vouchsafed a dispassionate insight into the life of things. Ideally the drama therefore functions as an art that enlightens the spirit, instructing while entertaining.

Therefore, by Western standards, an Indian play is bound to be more or less deficient in action (etymologically, too, the Greek root of “drama” meant “action”). Onstage, the Sanskrit drama revealed other distinguishing features. It was a courtly entertainment, more often than not produced on special occasions in the presence of the king. It was metatheatrical by convention—at the beginning of each performance, a benedictory hymn would invoke the gods for their blessings, and the director (often with an actor) would introduce the play to the audience. There was no attempt at creating an illusion, picture-frame or otherwise. Although commentators emphasize the equal importance of the visual and audible portions, the visual spectacle did not depend on sets or scenery, but on costumes, makeup, and the art of acting, which relied on a codified system of stylized gestures and movements to represent everything: gods and goddesses, natural objects, human actions, abstract ideas, and subtle feelings. Not the least important among the audible elements was the poetry, which amply sufficed to suggest the settings of the various scenes. The Sanskrit drama was also a Gesamtkunstwerk synthesizing all the performing arts—music and dance commonly accompanied the play, act 2 of *Mālavikāgnimitra* and act 4 of *Vikrama and Urvaśī* providing typical examples.

Kālidāsa’s plays deal with the *rasa* of erotic desire. On a superficial level, they appear to center on similar, if not identical, circumstances: A heroic king falls in love with a beautiful girl who reciprocates the passion, external forces oppose or thwart their permanent union, and they are reunited after a period of suffering. Yet critics recognize each of the three plays as a prototype in its own fashion, each of them being much imitated by Kālidāsa’s successors. The five-act *Mālavikāgnimitra*, its characters historical, is a light courtly piece that introduced the spirit of happy comedy to Sanskrit drama. Also in five acts, *Vikrama and Urvaśī* is based on mythology, a romantic comedy with a supernatural flavor that examined the consum-
The poet's tour de force in seven acts, Šakuntalā, also derived from mythological sources, transcended the form of a romantic play to become a sublime drama against a cosmic backdrop, offering a unique vision of the spiritual bliss and fullness attained by ideal love.

**The Plots**

Given the close similarities among the plays, the best approach to Kālidāsa's dramatic œuvre might be to follow the development of his treatment of the same theme. Take, for example, the three plots. Mālavikāgnimitra has a fairly complicated plot that unravels quite swiftly, befitting a love intrigue, but the plot seems to be imposed on the characters—character by no means makes destiny. Two devices appear, though, which Kālidāsa would use to greater effect later: Mālavikā's incognito stay at King Agnimitra's court and Queen Dhārini's signet ring. The plot of Vikrama and Urvāsi is transitional: As in the preceding play, the king's affair with the heroine is hindered by his jealous queen, but as in Šakuntalā, the lovers are separated for a long period and are ultimately reconciled, the king seeing his son for the first time in the last act. Meanwhile, Urvāsi has fallen prey to a curse, and a magic gem has been given a significant part in assuring her reunion with the king. The curse of Durvāsas gets prime importance in Šakuntalā, becoming the crux of the plot (in Mālavikāgnimitra there was no malignant curse, only a neutral prophecy) together with King Dushyanta's ring, so crucial to the plot that it finds a place in the title of the play. Added irony attaches to the curse because Šakuntalā has no knowledge of it. What is significant, however, is that the curse and the ring are no longer mere devices, as in the other plots. Their seeds lie in the characters of the protagonists: Sakuntalā was so engrossed in love thoughts that she neglected her duty and virtually courted the curse. Šakuntalā shows otherwise a relatively simple plot developed without any hurry. Kālidāsa's priorities have clearly changed.

**Heroes and Heroines**

The heroes and heroines provide another basis for comparison. Agnimitra's virtue is debatable. With a son old enough to be a victorious general, he himself would probably be middle-aged, and his fascination for a teenaged maidservant unbecoming, if not ludicrous. Physical attraction draws him to Mālavikā, or at best a sensuous appreciation of external beauty. He commits no heroic deeds and cannot even further his own love-cause; the portrayal suggests an indolent aesthete rather than a valiant king. Purūravas, of Vikrama and Urvāsi, reveals much greater depth of character. He is courageous in rescuing Urvāsi, passionately in love with her, and dignified in his dealings with other people. Like all ancient kings, he has many wives, but he displays deep respect for his chief queen, Auśānāri, and seems a chivalrous husband. For a hero, however, he is perhaps too emotional. His poetic imagination unsettles his equilibrium when Urvāsi leaves him out of jealousy. In Dushyanta, of Šakuntalā, Kālidāsa pictures his ideal hero, not merely possessed of conventionalized kingly traits but an ideal man as well. Handsome, brave, and virtuous, he is also sensitive, cultured, a romantic. Neither vain nor despotic, he is humble and religious. He respects the opinions of others and appears to be a stable, thoughtful person who places duty and righteousness above all else. Kālidāsa needed a flawless monarch for his magnum opus; therefore, Dushyanta does not possess the slightest blemish, unlike the dramatist's previous heroes.

If the heroes develop toward an image of the perfect king, the heroines grow away from sophistication and artificial refinement and toward natural goodness and simplicity. Although Mālavikā is timid, fearful, and submissive, she is still a well-bred princess, an accomplished singer and dancer. Critics argue that she rarely displays her royal upbringing, but they forget that she must suppress these qualities so that her disguise as maid may succeed. In fact, she almost betrays herself on one occasion, questioning the steadfastness of Agnimitra's love. In contrast, Urvāsi is a much stronger and more active figure, more mature, bolder, and more sensual. She takes the initiative in the plot more readily than does Purūravas, returning from Heaven of her own accord to see him again. A possessive woman, she is also unnaturally selfish in her love, deliberately keeping their son away from
Purūravas’s sight so that she does not have to leave him, as decreed by Indra. On the other hand, Śakuntalā has neither the urban polish of a princess nor the sophistication of a celestial nymph. Brought up in a hermitage, she is relatively innocent of life but is naturally graceful. She embodies the idyllic natural surroundings of the ashram. Love awakens her dormant beauty, and her passion obscures her sense of duty. In the second half of the play, the audience observes her devotion and nobility, too. Kanva’s message to Dushyanta reads, “Śakuntalā is womanly virtue incarnate”; no doubt the message speaks for Kālidāsa as well.

**Secondary characters**

Kālidāsa’s deployment of secondary characters also indicates the development of his dramatic art. In *Mālavikāgnimitra* he depicts two of Agnimitra’s queens, Dharinī and Irāvati, both of whom occupy important roles in the play. Both are incensed by their husband’s infatuation with Mālavikā, but the head queen Dharinī typifies wifely devotion after some initial resentment of her newest rival, resigning herself to the idea that a king, after all, will remain like a bee, ever seeking fresh honey. Irāvati, vehemently against Agnimitra’s newfound affection, indirectly presents a problem to the discerning spectator. She is Agnimitra’s erstwhile favorite, as beautiful and as talented as Mālavikā, but nothing in the play suggests that Mālavikā, in her turn, will not be replaced by a newer object of the king’s transitory emotions. The self-sacrificing older queen is a stereotyped figure, recurring in *Vikrama and Urvaśī* as Asūnāri, who, like Dharinī, plays a significant part but is much more dignified. She, too, eventually succumbs, exemplifying the self-surrender of the all-suffering wife in order to indulge the husband’s latest fancy. By including the king’s wives in the earlier plays, Kālidāsa inevitably diverted sympathy toward them, which unhappily leads to some polarization of interest, especially since neither of the two pairs of lovers is totally attractive. In *Śakuntalā* he removed this difficulty. Dushyanta, too, has a harem; Vasumati is referred to and Hamsavatī is heard singing offstage, but none of the queens actually appears, purposely leaving that aspect of Dushyanta’s life almost unnoticed.

In every way, Kālidāsa tried to dispense with stock characters as he matured. The best example is that of the Brahman court jester, a familiar figure in Sanskrit drama: gourmand, confidant to the king, and source of general merriment. Gautama is present in every act of *Mālavikāgnimitra*, and on his machinations pivots the entire plot. He is perhaps the most important Sanskrit jester as regards dramatic construction, a troubleshooting Machiavelli or Chāṇakya, to use an Indian analogy. Mānavaka in *Vikrama and Urvaśī* is as gluttonous as Gautama but less shrewd. He gives away Purūravas’s secret affair the minute he is first asked about it and loses Urvaśī’s love letter, which predictably reaches the queen. Even in his bungling, therefore, he furthers the action of the play. Significantly, however, he figures in only three acts. In *Śakuntalā*, Dushyanta himself calls his friend Mādhavaya a “blockhead.” This jester is of no help whatsoever to either the king or the plot. He, too, appears in only three acts; moreover, he does not even get to meet Śakuntalā, and Dushyanta does not trust him to keep his mouth shut. Kālidāsa has successfully relegated the role of the jester to incidental comic relief, thereby focusing the undistracted attention of the audience on the predicament of the two lovers.

Similarly, he disposes of other secondary agents engaged in helping the plot along, or at least individualizes their portraits. In *Mālavikāgnimitra*, the heroine’s companion, Bakulāvalikā, works almost as hard as Gautama to advance the cause of love, as does (more surreptitiously) the nun Kausikī, who knows Mālavikā’s actual identity. Chitralekha, Urvaśī’s friend in the second play, has hardly any such function, while Priyamvadā and Anasūyā, Śakuntalā’s helpmates, also do not directly affect the plot. Instead, Kālidāsa gradually individualizes his characters. Thus the garrulous and playful Priyamvadā and the correct and practical Anasūyā are not merely stereotypical confidantes but distinct individuals with their own personalities. In like fashion, Kālidāsa differentiates the three sages—the wise Kanva, the irascible Durvāsas, the majestic Kaśyapa—and juxtaposes the natures of the two disciples who escort Śakuntalā to the court. Every character in *Śakuntalā*...
exists not on account of convention but as a portrait from life. The episode of the fisherman who discovers the ring and the policemen who apprehend him best illustrates this point.

Besides the intensified concentration on the lovers, there is one other role in Kālidāsa’s drama that receives greater attention in the process of the playwright’s development. Mālavikā and Agnimitra do not have a child during the course of the play, and the crown prince Vasumitra, son of Dhārini, is mentioned but remains unseen. Urvasī does bear Purūravas a son, Ayus, who appears in the last act. He is much younger than Vasumitra, but what is most striking is that this last scene resembles its counterpart in Šakuntalā so much that it might even have served as a rough draft. Younger still is Bharata, the son of Šakuntalā and Dushyanta, crucial to the conclusion of the play because Dushyanta, like Purūravas, was childless. The birth of Bharata continues the dynastic line. Bharata also has a special significance for Indians, as the eponymous figure in the national epic the Mahābhārata, after whom the country was and still is named “Bhārata.”

Šakuntalā

Šakuntalā demands separate consideration on two other counts: its structure in the light of Indian aesthetics, and its expression of Kālidāsa’s view of love. While the entire play is an exercise in the erotic rasa, to achieve comprehensive harmony, the Sanskrit drama must also evoke the other eight emotions in the course of enactment. Šakuntalā resembles an extended symphony, with each act one movement, and many variations within each act. Thus, the overall rasa of the first three acts is the erotic, and that of the next three acts is the pathetic. Tranquility is the rasa of the last act. These major sentiments must be compatible; of the nine emotions, desire, sorrow, and peace are obviously most attuned to the theme of love. Within each act there are suggestions of a secondary rasa—for example, the fear in the hunted deer of act 1, the laughter produced by the jester in act 2, the anger of Šakuntalā at Dushyanta in act 5, the disgust shown by Šakuntalā’s escort in act 5, and the wonder at the supernatural effects of act 7. Commentators always single out the fourth act for unstinted praise because of its evocation of the acute sadness when a daughter leaves the home in which she has grown up, in order to get married. The sentiment is not peculiar to Indian hearts, but one must empathize with it in order to appreciate the play fully. It also points out that Kālidāsa’s concern was not solely with erotic love. Fatherly and sisterly love, and love of Šakuntalā for animals and plants—all receive full and touching treatment in this act.

The clue to Kālidāsa’s conception of ideal love lies in the two visions that Dushyanta has of Šakuntalā. In the first act, he is overcome by Šakuntalā’s physical beauty: “Her lips glisten like new leaves./ Her arms are shoots./ and her youth sprouts a glory of glittering flowers.” When his eyes see clearly in the last act, he observes “the pure-minded one./ Wearing saffron, her face thin with penance./ Forced to separate from a heartless husband.” He sees at last what had eluded him all along: that internal beauty must be cherished above external beauty. Dushyanta may have been blinded by the curse on Šakuntalā, but the curse also expresses metaphorically his own blindness to the true nature of love. Rabindranath Tagore wrote of two unions in Šakuntalā, the physical first and the spiritual at the end, although he was incorrect in attributing Šakuntalā’s suffering to his belief that she had sinned. Physical and spiritual love are not incompatible in Indian thought; on the contrary, both are essential in fulfilling the human experience of love. Neither would be complete without the other. Kālidāsa implies that the lovers’ suffering makes them arrive at a full understanding of the sacred bond between husband and wife; he may also be implying that reunion after a period of separation strengthens the ties of love.

An optimist, Kālidāsa had complete faith that the powers of good will triumph in the end, but he was also aware that happiness and sadness share equal portions in the lives of men. Šakuntalā is Kālidāsa’s mature vision of life: Humankind will celebrate, it will suffer, and it will comprehend. The play presents a panoramic span covering heaven and earth and, as Goethe put it in his poem, “the flowers of early years and the fruits of age advanced.” In
the end, however, if one has to choose between them, it would seem that the ascetic ideal holds sway over Kālidāsa’s mind. He shows a clear preference for life in the country as against life at court. It is no coincidence that two hermitages figure prominently in this play. Their atmosphere seeps into the consciousness of the audience. Kanva predicts that the lovers will return to his ashram in their old age, and the final lines of the play, spoken by Dushyanta, also appear deliberate: “May I be released from further lives.”

**Other major works**

Poetry: *Ritusamhāra*, c. 75 B.C.E. or c. 365 C.E. (English translation, 1867); *Meghadūta*, c. 65 B.C.E. or c. 375 C.E. (*The Cloud Messenger*, 1813); *Kumārasambhava*, c. 60 B.C.E. or c. 380 C.E. (*The Birth of the War-God*, 1879); *Raghuvaṃsa*, c. 50 B.C.E. or c. 390 C.E. (*The Dynasty of Raghu*, 1872-1895).

**Bibliography**


**Sarah Kane**

Born: Essex, England; February 3, 1971
Died: London, England; February 20, 1999

**Principal drama**

*Sick*, pr. 1996
*Phaedra’s Love*, pr., pb. 1996
*Cleansed*, pr., pb. 1998
*Crave*, pr., pb. 1998
*4.48 Psychosis*, pr., pb. 2000
*Complete Plays*, pb. 2001

**Other literary forms**

Sarah Kane wrote exclusively for the theater, with the exception of *Skin*, an eleven-minute film first broadcast in June, 1997, for England’s Channel 4, for which she wrote the teleplay.

**Achievements**

Sarah Kane received no major literary awards during her brief lifetime. Critics in England were divided about her work, many deriding it as shocking and disgusting, others defending her as a poet and an important new dramatic voice. After her arrival on the pro-
fessional London theater scene with the opening of *Blasted* in 1995, her plays have been widely performed and acclaimed in Europe, and all of her major plays—*Blasted, Phaedra’s Love, Cleansed, Crave,* and *4.48 Psychosis*—have been published both separately and in collections in English, French, German, and Italian. In 1996, she served as playwright-in-residence for Paines Plough, a prestigious London theater company dedicated exclusively to the presentation of new work.

**Biography**

Sarah Kane was the daughter of Peter and Janine Kane, both of whom were English journalists. Peter was a reporter for London’s *Daily Mirror,* and the family members, for a short time during Kane’s teenage years, became fervent born-again Christians. Kane renounced her Christianity in her early twenties but admitted that the violent imagery she found in the Bible inspired her work as a playwright. Kane joined local drama groups as a teenager and directed plays by William Shakespeare and Anton Chekhov. For a time, she skipped school altogether to work as an assistant director for a production at a school in London’s Soho district.

Kane attended the University of Bristol, acting in school plays and directing a number of student productions, including Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (pr. 1606) and Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (pr., pb. 1982). After graduating with top honors in drama, she enrolled at the University of Birmingham, where she received her M.A. degree. While at school, Kane gained a reputation for nightclubbing and having affairs with women, though her work does not contain noticeable lesbian themes.

In 1996, her first full-length play, *Sick,* composed of three monologues (*Comic Monologue, Starved,* and *What She Said*) was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre in Edinburgh, Scotland. However, it was her play, *Blasted,* which she had written in 1994 while at Birmingham University and which was presented at the students’ end-of-year show, that brought Kane to the forefront of the New Wave theater scene.

The first professional production of *Blasted* opened at London’s Royal Court Theatre in January, 1995, in a secondary theater that held sixty-two seats, forty-five of which were occupied by critics. No more than a thousand people saw *Blasted* during its short run, but the virulent critical response to Kane’s violent imagery and language splashed her name not only across newspaper arts sections but also across the pages of the British tabloids and made her the topics of television gossip shows as well. The play did have its share of admirers—among them, playwright Harold Pinter, whose hand-delivered fan letter to Kane shortly after seeing *Blasted* was among her most cherished possessions. Before Kane’s death, *Blasted* had already been produced in Germany, Austria, France, Australia, Serbia, Belgium, and Italy.

In 1995, Kane also wrote the teleplay for *Skin,* a short film about a black woman who comes into contact with a skinhead and the unexpected twist as to who will be the victim. During her season at Paines Plough, Kane wrote *Crave.* Because of the critical outrage over *Blasted* and because Kane wanted theatergoers to judge the play on its own merits, *Crave* was first presented under the pseudonym Marie Kelvedon.

Critical outrage and accusations of what was perceived as a childish attempt to shock depressed Kane but did not deter her from continuing her work, and actors, directors, and producers with whom she worked—as well as fellow playwrights Pinter, Caryl Churchill, and Steven Berkoff—continued to defend her as a thoughtful, brave, and angry poet.

Kane battled mental illness and depression throughout most of her adult life, each new bout of depression affecting her more seriously than the last. In the two years before her death, she checked herself into mental hospitals several times and was treated with a number of antidepressant drugs. After her death, Tom Fahy, a psychiatrist who treated Kane in 1997 at Maudsley Hospital in London, told British reporters that Kane had told him she expected to be dead by the time she was twenty-seven.

On February 18, 1999, at the age of twenty-eight, Kane left a short note on her kitchen table (“I have killed myself”) and took an overdose of antidepressants and sleeping pills. She was discovered and taken to King’s College Hospital in south London,
where she was resuscitated. Kane had been scheduled to be moved to a psychiatric ward at Maudsley Hospital, but on February 20, before she could be transferred from King’s College, she committed suicide by hanging herself on the back of a lavatory door.

Her final play, 4.48 Psychosis—so titled, Kane said, because she awoke many mornings at that time filled with extreme clarity alongside thoughts of suicide—was produced posthumously at the Royal Court Theatre, where Blasted had made such an impact just five years earlier. Shortly before her death, she had been working on an adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774; The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1779), in which the love-stricken hero kills himself after failing to gain what he desires.

Analysis

Like the deaths of playwright Joe Orton and novelist Sylvia Plath before her, Sarah Kane’s early death forced many critics to reexamine her work. Some felt that her plays, especially her final play, 4.48 Psychosis, were merely reflections of her own suicidal depression. Critic Charles Spencer of the London Telegraph suggested that Kane’s work owed more to clinical depression than to artistic vision. Admirers such as Pinter and Kane’s brother, Simon, however, have refuted these statements, insisting that to treat Kane’s plays as suicide notes is to do an injustice to the playwright’s talent and motives. British drama anthology David Tushingham agreed, insisting that as a mental patient, Kane was far less exceptional than as a writer and that the most extraordinary thing about her was not her illness but her talent.

Kane’s plays relied more on classical than contemporary structure and technique. She was more influenced by the scope of Shakespeare’s large dramatic conflicts than by the work of her peers in the London theater scene. The body of her work tackled human and political issues by placing those issues onstage in violent, distorted, and extremely personal situations. Her raw language and graphic visual images were particularly disturbing to theatergoers because she left conflicts unresolved and perpetrators unpunished, although, as in the works of Samuel Beckett, she continually showed the basic human impulse to connect with another even in the most hopeless of circumstances.

Kane was certainly one of the most controversial voices in a decade that was filled with controversy. The self-titled “in-yr-face” theater in Britain began in 1991 with Philip Ridley’s The Pitchfork Disney, shocking audiences with its scenes of cockroach eating, and continued in 1994 in Glasgow, Scotland, with Trainspotting, playwright Harry Gibson’s adaptation of the novel by Irvine Welsh, which in 1995 became a critically acclaimed film.

The “in-yr-face” movement of 1990’s theater reached its zenith with Kane’s Blasted in 1995 and continued in 1998 with Cleansed, which Kane had originally conceived, along with Blasted, as part of a trilogy. After Cleansed was produced, however, Kane stopped work on the trilogy and turned instead to Crave, a play for four voices. Not until Crave premiered at Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre in 1998 did Kane overcome the vitriolic early critical response to Blasted.

Kane’s work is an ongoing influence in British theater and continues to be acclaimed by an ever-increasing number of British dramatists and by critics and audiences in continental Europe. Her body of work follows an ever-narrowing path, from the gory conflicts of civil war in Blasted to the destruction of the family in Phaedra’s Love, into the fragmentation of the self in Crave and further into a singular mind in 4.48 Psychosis, always chipping away at the naturalistic boundaries of modern theater and charting a lonely internal world of darkness, violation, misuse of power, and frequently, a reaching out for love.

Blasted

Kane’s first professional production was both the most malign and acclaimed of her short career. Blasted, which was the playwright’s response to the war and human atrocities taking place in Bosnia in the early 1990’s, opens with the young, mentally handicapped Cate and middle-age tabloid journalist Ian, who enter a hotel room in Leeds, England. The setting immediately suggests the type of relationship piece with which audiences are comfortable, but from the opening bit of dialogue, it becomes clear that this
is no ordinary bedroom drama. Ian is obnoxious and perhaps amoral, but Kane does not provide a moral framework to comfort either Cate or the audience, and the rape of Cate by Ian, coupled with the later appearance of a soldier who joins them from a world fraught with its own terrors, only adds to the disturbing and violent world in which the characters find themselves trapped.

The play’s structure also fueled the audience’s discomfort. Although the first half of *Blasted* provides a naturalistic setting, the second half flouts theatrical convention with its eerie, nightmarish qualities and symbolism, ending with the destruction of all Ian holds dear, with the character reduced to a base shadow of what he once had been. The symbolism is more evocative of King Lear as he roams the heath facing his own self-imposed destruction than of the confines of most contemporary drama.

**Phaedra’s Love**

Kane was commissioned by London’s Gate Theatre to write her next play and chose *Phaedra’s Love*, a contemporary retelling of the Greek myth of Phaedra and her fatal love for Hippolytus, her spoiled stepson. Kane also directed the piece, which was the first of her plays to deal explicitly with the desire for love—a theme that runs throughout the remainder of her work. *Phaedra’s Love* contains some of Kane’s Wittiest dialogue, set against the bleak backdrop of a situation fraught with taboos and impossible desires.

Phaedra, wife of Theseus, has fallen in love with her stepson, the prince Hippolytus, who is threatened by the ideas of real love and emotion. His sex drive, which would normally draw him into relationships with others, is abhorrent to him, and the desire of his stepmother to submit herself sexually to him is therefore an unbearable threat, leading to the violent destruction of the royal family.

**Cleansed**

Dealing with drug abuse, amputation, and sex changes, *Cleansed* is considered the bleakest of Kane’s plays—and the most difficult to stage, due in part to the inclusion in the cast of a family of rats. Set in a bizarre university/concentration camp under the rule of brutal Tinker, a drug dealer and doctor, the play reveals an ongoing attempt by Kane to find new structures to fit the context of her writing and offers stripped-down narrative and dialogue in an attempt to discover the limits of love. When the lead actress was injured, Kane herself took on the role for the final performances.

**Crave**

Expanding a technique she had used less successfully in her first play, *Sick*, which she wrote as a student and which debuted after *Blasted*, Kane’s characters in *Crave* are four voices, known only as A, B, M, and C. As in *Sick*, each character’s part in the play is essentially a monologue, but here the monologues are combined so the voices speak together, four bodies making up one life. These voices speak seemingly without a defined narrative, describing their loves and losses as each character moves emotionally into the boundaries of the next.

Influenced by music throughout her life, Kane uses the characters almost as a symphony, with each monologue rendered meaningless without the concurrent monologues of the others, as the individual voices move into a combined but fragmented whole.

**4.48 Psychosis**

Kane awoke at 4:48 on many mornings during her periods of depression and felt she found clarity in the predawn hours, paradoxically at a time when, according to her research for the play, the psychotic delusion is strongest. Here Kane wrote with dry humor and a bleak outlook, still churning out lines of poetry about the fragmentation and final despair of the self, a prisoner by now of her own mental illness but determined to share her last weeks and months with an audience. In attempting to give voice to a mostly silent condition, Kane explores the depths of her own despair and emerges with a witty and eerie artistic success, though early audiences and critics understandably found it difficult to separate the finished product from the recent death of its author.

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**TADEUSZ KANTOR**

**Born:** Wielopole, Poland; April 6, 1915  
**Died:** Warsaw, Poland; December 8, 1990

**Principal drama**  
*Umarła klasa*, pr. 1975 (*The Dead Class*, 1979)  
*Niech scenę artysty*, pr. 1985 (*Let the Artists Die, 1985*)  
*Nigdy tu już nie powróczę*, pr. 1988 (*I Shall Never Return, 1988*)  
*Today Is My Birthday*, pr. 1991

**Other literary forms**  
Tadeusz Kantor was best known in the West as a theater director because of his avant-garde, highly unusual and individualized productions. His career, however, touched on many other aspects of the arts. He originally studied painting and achieved a reputation as a painter; he then gained extensive recognition as a creator/director of “happenings” in the 1960’s and 1970’s and wrote several free-verse tracts or “manifestos” on his theories of the theater. In addition to the areas of expertise already listed, Kantor’s work in graphics, stage design, and costume design was internationally recognized.

**Achievements**

Throughout his long career, Tadeusz Kantor remained an uncompromised force in the postwar avant-garde in the theater and in other creative fields, such as painting. As a disciple of the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig, he achieved an extraordinary integration of all the different art forms that compose the theater’s *mise en scène*, from innovative notions of acting and the treatment of dramatic literature to the imaginative redefinition and selective reduction of the theater’s auditory and visual elements.

Kantor was twice appointed to the faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, in 1948 and in 1968. On both occasions, the professorship was revoked within one year because of his unwillingness to follow government orthodoxy concerning the arts. He was, however, awarded a Polish State Prize for his work in 1962. Kantor received two Obie Awards for Best Play, the first for *The Dead Class* and the second for *Wielopole/Wielopole: An Exercise in Theatre*. An introduction to the areas of expertise already listed, Kantor’s work in graphics, stage design, and costume design was internationally recognized.

Significantly, Kantor’s theater company, Cricot 2, never received support from the Polish government, despite its enormous international success. That success is a mark of the high regard in which Kantor’s work was held among both theater artists and the theatergoing public in Poland and elsewhere. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of his theatrical career is the visceral and intellectual impact of his later, intensely personal productions, such as Wielopole/Wielopole.

**Biography**

Tadeusz Kantor was born in 1915 in Wielopole, a small town in southern Poland. His father, a teacher, was killed in World War I, and therefore, Kantor grew up in the house of his great-uncle, a priest. He took an early interest in the theater but decided instead to become a painter, learning drawing and painting under the influence of the Polish Symbolists: Stanisław Wyspiański, Witold Wojtkiewicz, and Jacek Malczewski. From 1934 to 1939, he attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, where he studied scene design with Karol Frycz, who was himself a highly innovative stage designer as well as a painter, theatrical director, theater manager, and follower of the ideas of Gordon Craig and Wyspiański. Frycz’s and Kantor’s careers are in keeping with the twentieth century traditions of Krakow, a Polish center for the avant-garde both in the visual arts and in stage design, where visual artists often became theater directors and managers.

In 1942, Kantor and a group of young painters formed the underground, experimental Independent Theatre during the German occupation. In 1946, Kantor began his career as a scene designer, creating sets and costumes for theaters throughout Poland until he went to study in France in 1947. He returned in 1948 to organize the first postwar exhibition of modern Polish art in Krakow and was appointed to the faculty of the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts.

Poland fell under the control of Joseph Stalin in 1949, and the authorities officially imposed Socialist Realism on the arts and artists. Kantor’s professorship was revoked, and he began to collaborate with Maria Jarema, a widely recognized painter and sculptor who had done scene design for Cricot 1, an important Krakow avant-garde theater between the world wars. Kantor continued designing in this manner until the collapse of Stalinism under Nikita Khrushchev in 1956.
1956. With the increased independence of Poland, at least in areas of culture, Polish theater began to flourish. During this time, Kantor’s style began to intensify and vary. It was also in 1956 that Kantor opened Cricot 2, which would eventually be housed in the basement of the Gallery Krysztofory in the old city of Krakow. Cricot 2 became Kantor’s base of operations and a homing point for actors, painters, and poets who sought to explore new dimensions in the arts.

During the late 1950’s, Kantor mounted productions at Cricot 2 while traveling and exhibiting his painting in various parts of Western Europe. In 1961, he published the first of his theoretical works on theater, *Teatr Informel* (1961; *The Manifesto of the Informel Theatre*, 1982), which dealt with the concept of a fluid theater composed of “shapeless matter” in which the substance of the performance lay in the artist’s struggle with the material, not in the aggregate result of the performance. Kantor was, in the early 1960’s, a professor at the Akademie Kunste in Hamburg, where in 1961 he published “Ob die Ruckkehr von Orpheus moglich ist?” (is Orpheus’s comeback possible?).

In 1962, Kantor wrote his *Emballage Manifesto*, which propounded the creation of art objects from the lowliest of wrappings, such as discarded sacks, bags, and envelopes, which, from their despised position as disposable receptacles, acquired an autonomous but utterly empty existence. The *Teatr Zerowy* (1963; *Theatre Zero Manifesto*, 1982) followed, and it argued that a play ought not to be enacted but commented on by the performers; its text was to be destroyed and replaced by a theatrical universe of humdrum, discarded objects that are transformed in performance and interact with the actors in a struggle with them for presence on the stage.

From this point on, Kantor continued to create productions in which the text—in many cases the plays of Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz—had been radically altered. He also continued to mount happenings, to paint, to design, and to write. By the mid-1970’s, Kantor was working away from the texts of others by combining parts of other works and adapting them to his special theatrical form, as in the case of *The Dead Class*, until he began on his two major autobiographical pieces, *Wielopole/Wielopole* and *Let the Artists Die*. Also during this time, he published his *The Theatre of Death Manifesto* (1975), in which he argues that life can only be expressed in the theater through reference to death.

Throughout his career, Kantor traveled extensively to the major international theater festivals with his productions. Long recognized in Eastern and Western Europe, he first gained attention in North America when he presented *The Dead Class* in Mexico and in the United States at La Mama in 1979. His subsequent tours of *Wielopole/Wielopole* and *Let the Artists Die* secured Kantor’s position as a world-class director and one of the creative forces in the twentieth century avant-garde theater.

**Analysis**

Tadeusz Kantor’s theater could be characterized to a large extent as a theater of objects, a description that applies to both his actors and himself. In his later productions, Kantor was sometimes the subject of his own work, and he appeared onstage as a visual element of his own productions—giving directions to the actors and technicians, musing over the action, and playing the role of Tadeusz Kantor in his black jacket and trousers and tieless, plain white shirt. His stage presence was greatly enhanced by his long, gaunt face, which he set in a mask of haunted contemplation briefly interrupted with small bursts of irritation or humor.

Kantor’s work reflected such an imaginative and insightful ability to transform objects and people into complex, unique performances in large part because of his background in the visual arts. He clearly subscribed to Craig’s notion of the total theater artist and, as such, personally designed and shaped every aspect of his productions. His dramatic works employed virtually none of the conventions of traditional theatrical staging, and his scenography was completely composed of discarded, worn-looking objects and clothing, which he altered to bring them into his special theatrical universe and put to ingenious, surprising use. The colors in his productions were predominantly flat, pale grays, bone, and black, with accents of purple and red.
The other cause of his theatrical inventiveness has been necessity. His early productions with the Independent Theatre had to be staged in secret because artistic activity of any sort was prohibited by the Germans under penalty of death. In the case of Wyspiański’s Powrót Odysa (pb. 1907, pr. 1917; The Return of Odysseus, 1966), Kantor staged this brooding and sinister play as a modern story of a soldier returning home from the front. Performed in a room of an apartment that had been partially destroyed by the war, without benefit of a stage or set, Kantor transformed the space through the use of objects into the metaphoric waiting room of a train station. Odysseus returns to find his homeland under Nazi domination. Partly as a reaction against the then fashionable school of constructivism, Kantor employed objects such as a decayed wooden board, a muddy broken cartwheel, a mastlike object, an object that looked like the barrel of an old rifle, large, anonymous parcels covered with dust, and a soldier’s uniform to create a total environment. In this way, he meant to overwhelm the text with the historical circumstances and the style of performance into which it had been thrust.

After the war, Kantor went to Paris, where he became familiar with Surrealism and abstract expressionism, both hitherto unknown in Poland. He was appointed to the faculty of the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts but subsequently lost his professorship after he refused to participate in official cultural life after the imposition of Socialist Realism. His paintings continued to be exhibited underground, and he made his living as a scene designer. With the collapse of Socialist Realism and the onset of the “thaw” in government cultural repression in the late 1950’s, Kantor tried again to insinuate his theatrical aesthetic into the official theaters.

When this proved impossible, he limited his work to the Cricot 2 Theatre, which had been in the planning stages for several years. In 1960, Kantor staged the first postwar performance of Witkiewicz’s Matwa: Czyl, Hrykaniczny światopogląd (pb. 1923, pr. 1933; The Cattlefish: Or, The Hycrkanian World-view, 1970), which had previously been banned. This production, which was staged as a happening, illustrated Kantor’s concept as described in Teatr autonomiczny (1963; The Autonomous Theatre, 1986) in the following manner: “The theatre which I call autonomous is the theatre which is not a reproductive mechanism, i.e., a mechanism whose aim is to present an interpretation of a piece of literature on stage, but a mechanism which has its own independent existence.”

Kantor’s ideas continued to evolve throughout his complex career. Although these shifts often ran parallel to current trends in the arts, Kantor was not a follower of movements. For example, when he visited the United States in 1965, he met people who also made happenings. He would later remark that he had been staging happenings since the end of World War II, lacking only the popular name given these events. He would eventually reject happenings because of their necessary physicality, preferring an increasingly reduced theater of essential images. His production of Witkiewicz’s Nadobnisie i koczkodany: Czyl, Zielon pigułka (wr. 1922, pb. 1962, pr. 1967; Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes: Or, The Green Pill, 1980) in 1973 paralleled his new theory espoused in Le Théâtre impossible (1972; The Impossible Theatre, 1973). Audience participation, used in the happenings, was abandoned, and the actors performed the play in a cloakroom in which, bereft of their humanity, they hung like lifeless objects. Through these methods, Kantor hoped to work beyond the borders of art into an aesthetic space so rarefied and charged with an extraordinary theatrical reality that art would be impossible.

The Dead Class

Kantor’s work as a director also was a struggle against illusion in the theater in the service of reality. Thus, for example, he often used dummies in his productions, as in The Dead Class. In this play, dead schoolboys wander between This Side and That Side, sitting again in the benches they had filled during their school days. The principal character, an old man, has decided to return to school at the end of his life. He carries a wax dummy that mirrors his appearance but in a cheap, debased form, a problem that Kantor finds with all imitation in the arts.
WIELOPOLE/WIELOPOLE

His autobiographical works—Wielopole/Wielopole and Let the Artists Die—are representative of the essence of Kantor’s theatrical structure. It has been said of his work that it is as much musical as it is theatrical. Images and themes are presented not through narrative chains of causation, as in most conventional drama, but rather through varied repetitions and recapitulations.

Wielopole/Wielopole deals with Kantor’s memories of his early life between the wars. In this play, Kantor rebuilds a village from before the war and peoples it with nothing but the ghosts of his memories. These ghosts move with a mechanical, repetitive, constant motion. The play begins with Kantor entering and moving the onstage objects, including a bed, wardrobe, chair, and table. After the actors enter, Kantor takes the audience through the historical events that held importance for him.

LET THE ARTISTS DIE

In Let the Artists Die, Kantor depicts the interaction of the worlds of death and life in the “Poor Room of the Imagination.” In this play, the cast appeared again and again repeating a pattern of movement or series of actions that had already been performed with minor variations. These become reexaminations of these themes and images for the audience and for Kantor, who both watches and participates in the production. The effect is not so much one of the musicality of harmonics as one of juxtaposition through contrasts. For example, several times in the production a general, reminiscent of Józef Piłsudski, is wheeled onstage riding a comic-grotesque skeleton of a horse. With each turn, depending on the actions surrounding each circuit, the feeling the general evokes is enriched and slightly transformed.

OTHER MAJOR WORKS


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Steven Hart