Sarah Kane didn’t write prefaces for her plays. She said that if they were any good they would stand alone. But in her case it was never going to be that simple. When, in 1998, she committed suicide at the age of 28, she caused the kind of literary sensation that had not been seen since the death of Sylvia Plath nearly forty years earlier. Just as the posthumously published *Ariel* had seemed to predict Plath’s suicide, so *4.48 Psychosis*, written only weeks before Sarah Kane desperately hanged herself with own shoelaces, reads like a staged farewell, a riposte to her doctors and a last cold word on the subject of herself.

Even five years later the matter seems no clearer. As Plath was taken up by literary ghouls romanticising the link between creativity and self-destruction, Sarah Kane has become the morbid focus for those who see her death as a vindication of the writing.

No-one can watch *4:48 Psychosis* and not know that the author killed herself, and that the play documents not her struggle, but her doom. But does the suicide authenticate the work? And what then is the place of the imagination if it does? So much for the power of fictional drama to conjure the torments of Lear or Medea or Willy Loman if we have to have the “real” thing? And such voyeurism has other implications. A suicide, they say, always kills two people. Perhaps *4:48 Psychosis* is intended to kill whole audiences.

I raise these questions because they seem to pre-empt a response to the play itself - even though, I must emphasise, in their excellent co-production in the Queens Theatre, Brink Productions and Budgie Lung approach both the text and the author’s notoriety with complete integrity. Director Geordie Brookman and his four performers diligently attend to their task, leading us directly into Kane’s work.

Review by Murray Bramwell  Archived at – http://dspace.flinders.edu.au
Taking its title from the dark hour before the dawn when many die, both of natural causes and by their own hand, 4:48 Psychosis is as much a poem for voices as a developed play. The speakers include a patient suffering depression and despair, a doctor who is treating the patient and a range of other voiced perspectives perhaps also from within the patient. I say ‘patient’ but Kane wants to give agency and power to her subject/victim/antagonist - after all, she knows her very well. As John Berryman used to say of his poetic alter ego, Henry Bones: “he only has vision, I have supervision.” While elucidating her desolation Kane is also supervising her own justification.

Warmly lit by the very capable Geoff Cobham and surrounded like a wrestling pit with two rows of seating, Geordie Brookman’s performing space is a square of coarse sand where the performers scratch and prowl and upon which a fine, continuous spray of water falls. It is a soothing rain but also relentless and gathering. The actors dressed in layers of t-shirts grow gradually sodden and wretched as, for just over an hour, the playwright examines every type of psychological endgame. All the strategies of therapy are rehearsed to engage the isolate soul. “You have friends,” for instance, the old social contract trick. But the writer is enumerating catalogues of hopelessness. There is anger and derision, particularly at the detachment of the therapist and the crude approximation of chemical remedies - drugs each listed with clinical precision, annotating failure.

Actors Ksenja Logos, Cameron Goodall, Lizzy Falkland and Michaela Cantwell throw the text between each other like cats with a half dead mouse. There is hypnotic energy to Kane’s invective and also some of the languor of Eliot in his Waste Land phase. The performances are crisp and interrogating as the narrative dredges past loves, past hopes and past despairs. Interestingly Brookman has chosen four players, not three, as in its first performance in the UK. Four voices seem to more readily find stalemate, where a pair within three can form intense, temporarily hopeful alliances. But, either way, there is a sense of fateful inevitability that makes the flesh shiver: “At 4:48 I shall sleep.”

Brink and Budgie Lung have made a memorable success of this vexing work with lucid staging, disciplined performances and a good ear for the rhythms of the writing. But with its fading final lines - “watch me, watch
me …vanish” - 4:48 Psychosis, for all its flashes of brilliance, cannot shed the toxic narcissism that weakens the magnificent drama it might have been. This is not a poem to give a life for, when so much life could have been given to it.