



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
Faculty of Arts, Charles University

Opponent's Report

Elizabet Kovačeva, "Abjection in Selected Plays by Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, and Tim Crouch" (MA Thesis)

Elizabet Kovačeva's thesis project is an ambitious one, bringing together some of the most complicated works by Kane, Churchill and Crouch and addressing them through the prism of the complex post-structuralist concept of abjection. Ms Kovačeva's undertaking is largely a successful one: she provides numerous original insights on the plays under discussion, and her writing is always lucid and elegant. The particular strengths of her Master's thesis are in her reading of Kane's *Blasted* and *Crave* against each other, her poignant close reading of Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Churchill's *Far Away*, and her imaginative discussion of Crouch's work in the context of contemporary visual arts.

Indeed, all of Ms Kovačeva's chapters make for engaging stand-alone essays that often add considerably to the current state of research in the selected playwrights' work. There are only minor corrections that would be required, such as a reconsideration of the phrasing when the candidate asserts that the focus on the work of new playwrights at the Royal Court Theatre in the mid-1990s amounted to a shift away from politics (p. 16). Similarly (and this is a formal issue only), the overview of the work of Caryl Churchill on p. 38 fails to summarise the nature of her work in the last two decades (which has been rather different from her early dramas), and the overview of the work of Tim Crouch, promised in a chapter heading, is lacking entirely.

What is problematic, however – at least in the view of the present writer – is that the candidate fails to define her use of "abjection" and "the abject" clearly. The rather nebulous summary of Kristeva's original version of these concepts triggers a question: why not simply conclude, as the candidate mentions in passing, that the abject concerns the body and is "a synonym for disgust and filth" used in a broadly political context (p. 13)? This would provide a lucid critical tool that could then be usefully applied to the material under discussion. Such a move may be perceived as inappropriate simplification of course; however, the wide disagreement amongst later commentators, which is so deftly outlined by the candidate on pp. 14-15, begs the question whether Kristeva's concept may perhaps be too elusive to be useful at all for a discussion of any other material than that covered in her book. Be it as it may, Ms Kovačeva's understanding of "abjection" and "the abject" often differs based on the context in which she uses these terms. One example for all: the character Tim Crouch in *The Author* is described as turning into "an abject figure" (p. 52), while in the same chapter, the widow in Crouch's *ENGLAND* is also said to "become abject" (p. 59). In the first instance, the candidate seems to mean that the character is revealed to be despicable, degenerate perhaps; but that is hardly what is meant in the second instance. Moreover, it is not clear to what extent these notions of the abject stem from Kristeva's work (if at all). This could perhaps be clarified at the thesis defence.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as "excellent" or "very good", based on the result of the defence.

Prague, 2 August 2017

Prof. Ondřej Pilný, PhD