

Introduction: the ultimate matter of style

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Since 1969, Howard Barker has written over a hundred dramatic works (primarily for theatre, but also for radio, television and film), six published volumes of poetry, two books of philosophical and aesthetic theory (*Arguments for a Theatre*, third edition 1997; *Death, The One and The Art of Theatre*, 2005) and a third-person autobiography/reflection on practice (*A Style and its Origins*, 2007, co-credited to 'Eduardo Houth'). He is also a prolific visual artist, whose paintings and drawings have been exhibited internationally. Since the early 1990s he has directed his own writing for the stage, in a series of unforgettable productions; and he has also (under a series of aliases) extended his distinctive vision into the scenographic design (set, costume, sound) for those productions, primarily staged by The Wrestling School, a theatre company founded (in 1988) specifically to invent and refine appropriate ways to stage his texts. In France, during the season 2009–10, his drama was the subject of a major retrospective season, which comprised no less than seven theatrical productions – four of which were staged at the Odéon, the French national theatre. Barker's work has provoked shock and outrage, but also inspired passionate appreciation and unique manifestations of commitment and support. In whichever medium he works, Barker insists on the disintegrations of familiarity, in both content and methods, to yield an event which is hypnotic, and perhaps more subconscious in its intimations; where the audience member is directed back to their own compulsions to make meaning from what they experience. In the theatre, this involves a profoundly disorientating but seductive orchestration of voice, body, movement and visual design. Barker's formal experiments, distillations and transformations distinguish him as our most restless, precise and uncompromising theatrical innovator since Samuel Beckett.

This volume brings together a range of voices, including those of theatre practitioners, scholars and civilian enthusiasts from a range of nations, ages and

backgrounds, to analyse Barker's astonishing range of imaginative ambitions and practical achievements. The initiative for this collection was prompted by the occurrence in 2009 of two notable manifestations of enthusiasm. In July of that year, Aberystwyth University hosted a three-day international conference on Barker's works, which drew the attendance of delegates from ten countries, and was further honoured by the constant attendance of the artist himself. Further, in October 2009, the twenty-first anniversary of the foundation of The Wrestling School was marked by a unique undertaking by Barker enthusiasts across the world: the *21 for 21* international theatre initiative of synchronised performances of Barker works on four continents, in seven languages. This volume collects some essays and testimonies provoked by those two events; but also it extends to incorporate the expression of some arguments for Barker's importance which have occurred in their wake.

An approach to Barker's Art of Theatre

Barker distinguishes his objectives from those of the conventional theatre by terming what he pursues the Art of Theatre: a felicitous term for an artist holistically engaged with so many facets of theatre artistry (writing, direction, design), and who also produces highly theatrical and interrogatory visual art. Barker compulsively speculates into the innately theatrical workings of the human consciousness: particularly at historical junctures when social catastrophe and personal crisis drive people to discover within themselves, and to express, voices (*personae*) which are new and strange, impulsive and contradictory: at odds with their usual, dominant, conventionally sensible 'selves' and rational(ised) terms of existence. The expression of such voices most often compels and provokes actions and consequences. At such moments, to borrow the words of the poet W. B. Yeats, a terrible beauty is born.

What is at stake, and what are the fundamental questions, in Barker's Art of Theatre? A first response might be: how to live, and how to die; but these terms are too general. More precisely, in Barker's own words: 'What is the style that will carry us through the times in which we live?';¹ and, to use a resonant phrase from Barker's play *Hurts Given and Received* (staged 2010), how do we 'earn our grave':² on what (and whose) terms do we engage with death, that of others and the prospect of our own: which is, perhaps, the ultimate matter of style. It is significant that Barker's deceptively slim autobiographical volume is titled *A Style and its Origins*: its method is to trace the development of a personal mode of being and expression (and being *through* expression), in navigation of, and negotiation with, the surprising challenges of the world, in order to arrive at a *personal* form of authority, as distinct from the political, social, institutional forms of authority which seek to inform – both set the terms for, and seek to give shape to – one's personal mode of being and expression. This further informs the ways in which

characters, and people, try to gain what they want, in various situations: the dynamics of power.

Barker's writing and direction combine to create theatre events which will often (and deliberately, purposefully) create a sense of *plethora* for the audience: a sense that IT'S ALL TOO MUCH (more than we can digest, immediately or readily). This is not because Barker is incapable of disciplining his imaginings and propositions: indeed, the essays in this collection are concerned to identify and demonstrate the remarkable care with which Barker's physical, linguistic and scenographic imagery is delineated; how it subverts familiar culturally received forms and presumptions, and delves into disturbing but compelling imaginative depths which often resonate on uncomfortable emotionally instinctive levels, rather than on other more limited, immediately identifiable or entirely graspable, terms. Barker's route to the vitality of chaos, and of a philosophical anarchy, is achieved through scrupulous attention to order of detail, in order to make that sense of chaos more vivid and profound. His writing, direction and design consciously and deliberately offer more than can be analysed in the moment, or taken in on one sitting. It may provoke the reactions: THIS IS INTOLERABLE; WE CAN'T DEAL WITH IT; IT HAS NO APPARENT RELEVANCE TO ANYTHING (indeed, some details and developments may have an *evident* irrelevance, not only to the familiarities of life as we readily recognise it, but even to what the play or production have previously established). Barker:

Rather, the work expresses a (literally) diabolical sense that life isn't enough, in the terms on offer; and because of this, the characters subject themselves to a terrible extremity; and possibly a critique of existence, not just of society, lies under this. Tragedy involves the fracturing of moral values, presenting unexpected scenes which cause disquiet. On the one hand, this sort of theatre presents itself as a laboratory in which propositions are tested out (and indeed, the walls and doors are in full operation; what you do or feel in this place, the theatre, does not, or need not, *literally* carry through directly to what you do in another [though it may inform it imaginatively]). On the other hand, this sort of theatre has an affinity with prayer: the (possibly and probably forlorn) hope that things will be made different. I actually believe that you are born knowing a great deal; however, culture conspires to obscure and conceal some of what you know, through social conditioning; hence, people sometimes recognise *and* despise what they see in the work, what the work confronts them with.³

When reading or rehearsing, the first encounter with a Barker text immediately throws you back onto your own resources, with questions: not least, how to BREATHE in this unfamiliar element: how to navigate and make sense of words and their arrangement on a page, how to speak them out loud. The language is purposefully defamiliarised, often taking the form of a series of incomplete utterances which are not obviously conversational. Barker:

The punctuation is removed from my drama (as it is in the writing of Céline, the

great stylist of the twentieth-century novel) because the writing has so much internal rhythm that it will lead you into movement – only language *this contrived* will force an action upon you. It offers the gift of anxiety to the performer and the audience, offers the opportunity to live in a state of tension, where the actor's exploration of his/her own limits echo the character's.⁴

The actor and director Gerrard McArthur offers the following observations on the performance of Barker's drama, and how its layout on the page offers guidance for breathing, initiative and action:

The vocal performance is a performance of the *sound contour* of the text, which also helps to present the *stage figure* in all its aspects: each character is a *per-sona* ('*through sound*') and the language is a plastic force you have to feel as you speak it. Being *torn* is a crucial sensation for the characters, but they don't lose focus when they speak. Their speech is clear because it is a weapon; none of the characters ever splutters (except psychologically), they are completely and artificially articulate, and *everything is incredibly significant* for them. Everything is manifested in the way the words are spoken: a speech may begin with the intention, 'I am going to analyze you, explain you, patrol your area'; however, each moment is a whole new level of event and response; if you stop, physically or imaginatively, you weaken the strength of your movement; the character is often feeling and expressing the question, 'What is this new HIM/HER that is happening to HIM/HER?'. In performance, you are working through this feeling and trying it out. The actor must mould the extra-linguistic elements accordingly: it may be helpful to root yourself in a speech physically through pressure against, for example, a wall or an object, and fight against that thing with a physical counter-pressure to ground the language.⁵

Barker expounds further on this sense of pressure:

In performance, it is useful to ask yourself, 'What is the *pressure* this character is under?' The capitalised words, or bold type, often express a sense of this pressure: a painful thought, which it hurts, to some extent, to articulate. Nevertheless, the characters must **HAVE** their pain, **LIVE WITH** their pain, and **EMPLOY** their pain. They become energised by the scale of the problem.⁶

It may be helpful to identify some examples of such pressure(s) from Barker's drama. This is the opening speech in Barker's play *Victory* (1983):

A field. A man enters.

SCROPE: I know I swore. I know I promised. On the Bible. And because I can take or leave the Bible, got your child in and told me put my two hands on her cheeks and looking in her eyes say I would not disclose this place. No matter what the madness, what the torture, leave you underneath the nettles, safe. I did. I know I did.

(He points to a place. SOLDIERS enter with spades.)

(OP1, 11)

Here, *what is done* overturns *what is said*: this establishes the keynote for a play which is, to an unusual degree, even for a Barker play, about the distance between the two, and their difference. As in a judo throw, which turns the opponent's conventional strength of body mass and weight against them as a weakness, the *unspoken* overwhelms *the spoken*. Nevertheless, Scrope needs to speak: to give himself a *mode of expression* – more so than a *means of communication*. The speech is addressed to a dead man, his former employer Mr Bradshaw. The soldiers who proceed to dig up Bradshaw's corpse ignore him, except for some subsequent taunting. Scrope's opening speech is a *sounding*: as when mariners dropped weights to determine the depth of the sea, river or lake below them. The speech sounds the depth of his loyalty to Bradshaw: it will determine the leverage involved in his betrayal of Bradshaw. He is trying to work out, through word and gesture, how he has come to where he has; to negotiate some meaning in or out of his life. It is this impulse that gives Barker's characters their philosophical dimension – not philosophical in the sense of abstract contemplation, but in the sense of trying to negotiate some meaning out of an upsurge in emotion triggered by a change in their environment, and in their selves, by crisis: the start of a new sense of time (what the protagonist of Barker's play *I Saw Myself*, staged 2008, calls 'crushed time'), which represents the end of what was formerly known, and requires decisive action, also likely to be surprising and unpredictable. It is likely to make the characters reassess and redefine what it is to be a societal being, and even to be human (as when the tapestry makers in *I Saw Myself* continue in their labours in the face of impending war).

Scrope's betrayal is expressed through a gesture. It is the speech and the gesture together that constitute the dramatic event, which starts the play: is it Scrope's fearful capitulation? His subsequent mixture of self-reproach and self-pity tries to characterise it as such. Or is it a subconscious victory, overturning former loyalties? This is the dynamic that will more fully characterise the adventures and overcoming of the play's protagonist, Susan Bradshaw.

'It is the speech and the gesture together that constitute the dramatic event' – in *this* instance. However, sometimes in Barker's work the sounding of the speech will in itself create a hinge moment, which will be further explored or expressed by an action, such as this succinct utterance and juncture from Barker's *The Ecstatic Bible*:

I shall miss my wife profoundly. She was the greatest companion of my life and a perfect lover. Everything will be downhill from now on.

(*He goes to leave, with a bitter twist of his body*)

(EB, 46)

There is a wonderful Barker work which focuses entirely on a succession of such moments, *The Forty* (written 2006). This is a compendium of forty short plays, exploring the ways that words and gestures provide a currency for negotiation: moments of extreme emotional tension which provide, through physical balance

and imbalance, an excavation, and a crystallisation, of an agony. Many of these short plays show the characters trying to remake themselves, through representing themselves – or else the unsuccessful attempts to fracture previous definition. These characters are caught in moments which ask of them: are they as independent, as separate, as they want to be? Are they as close to, as secure with, others as they want to be? One way or another: the dramatic event is often about an uncomfortable or surprising discovery, which speech and action combine to make manifest.

Here is a speech by Claudius from Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry* (staged 2002). Again, the actor has to chart a course through this: to make manifest a process of self-discovery:

He made me feel turned on a wheel and dirty as if some oily rain fell on a mask a grinning thing a fairground object brass or peeling paint my life and my desires
HOW I WISHED TO SAY THIS BUT I NEVER DID are REAL (OP2, 163)

The speech *sounds* different levels of self-awareness; it manifests how Claudius develops an idea, an image, to plumb fully, and give shape to, his predicament and feelings, which leads him to a discovery of awareness, repudiating the sensed diminishment of his self and his capacities to something reducible: it enables him to sense and say something he wished to say but never did, before now: the terms on which his life and his desires are real – although he does not explicitly identify *here* what these might be. But he expresses, and thereby discovers, a determination that they should not be reduced to images of things which can be dismissed as insubstantial. And that is his first step, in trying to repossess himself.

Gerrard McArthur writes in his essay, 'Barker, the Actor and Indeterminacy',⁸ some words which I suggest you try to speak out loud:

The actor needs to contain
and express
this sense ...
that as certain as he is
of the necessity
to speak in seeking definition,
that very definition
is
fundamentally
insecure;
'In Barker,
words aren't a way of emoting,
or a demonstration of feeling,
they are an exposition of unsettled possibilities,
where even the deepest of convinced feeling is
riven with the ambiguity,
and then

increasingly,
the expectation
that nothing is a settlement,
and that to seek settlement
is itself
false'

Here I have given McArthur's words a spatial layout which is different to their original rendering, in order to remind myself, and you, to give each detail its full weight and sounding:

So that each detail properly becomes
an additional
further
discovery

Barker's arrangements of words on the page are sometimes separated in this way to help the performer avoid generalisation. Even in the unpunctuated sections, which are driven by one specific emotional motor, it is possible to experience and express breakthroughs to new levels of awareness and contradictory feelings: Claudius's speech indicates this through the use of capitals; sometimes it is bold type instead which indicates this. Barker identifies this process in terms of the dynamics of catastrophe:

The catastrophic moment, in history or in personal life, liberates another ego that exists within the ego. We all have a public ego, but within, there is another voice, perhaps even several other voices, speaking at the same time. When a crisis emerges in the world, this other character can appear, more beautiful, or perhaps more dreadful.⁹

No chaos, no knowledge

History is the truth that becomes a lie, whereas myth is a lie that in the long term becomes the truth.

Jean Cocteau¹⁰

Marina Warner has described William Blake as a 'Counter-Enlightenment' champion of the imagination; 'Counter-Enlightenment' being 'a term coined by Isaiah Berlin, adopted by E. P. Thompson and others, to characterise heterogeneous opposition from the mid-seventeenth century' onwards, to 'the cult of reason'¹¹ and to forms of authoritarianism which claim to be based on rational calculation. John Gray writes: 'If Euripides is the most tragic of the Greek playwrights it is not because he deals with moral conflicts but because he under-

stood that reason cannot be the guide of life';¹² both Warner's and Gray's terms might be extended appropriately to include Barker.

Gray notes, in his book *Straw Dogs*, how scientific promises of progress and religious promises of salvation both 'deny the experience of tragedy', the dignity of confronting tragic contingencies, or even normal unhappiness; and it is significant that Gray includes an epigraph from one of Barker's favourite philosophers, E.M. Cioran:

The certitude that there is no salvation is a form of salvation, in fact it is salvation. Starting from here, one might organize our own life as well as construct a philosophy of history: the insoluble as solution, as the only way out.¹³

This is, indeed, the point from which many Barker characters try to determine their own lives. Compare Barker's Preface to the BBC radio production of his dramatic compendium, *The Possibilities*: 'We fail to think correctly / There is the hope / We persist in our blindness / There is the hope / We are intransigent at the wrong moment / And capitulate at the wrong moment / There is the sole chance of deliverance'.¹⁴

John Michael Greer notes how, according to the 'myth of progress', 'all of human history is a grand tale of human improvement';¹⁵ and how Christian myths of sacred history are echoed by Marxist theories which replace 'the transcendent dimension with forces immanent in ordinary history'.¹⁶ This Utopian mythic route has since been followed by other proponents of inclusive (totalitarian) ideologies that convinced themselves that 'the world was about to be transformed into what they wanted it to be'; however, the cost of these theories, when implemented, not uncommonly 'includes a tumbled heap of human lives'.¹⁷ Gray puts this bluntly:

Progress and mass murder run in tandem. As the numbers killed by famine and plague have waned, so death by violence has increased. As science and technology have advanced, so has proficiency in killing. As the hope for a better world has grown, so has mass murder.¹⁸

This is because any fixation on a single solution will encounter 'unexpected consequences' which 'make a mockery of simplistic attempts to predict effects from causes',¹⁹ and those 'who cling to faith in progress ... are all too likely to go looking for scapegoats when the future fails to deliver the better world they expect'.²⁰

In Barker's work, we encounter various invocations and self-styled forces of 'History': dramatisations of the controlling impulse to impose a linear scheme of social progress on untidy human passions, eventually by force. The *contrary* manifestations of the insistent unruliness of individuals constitute examples of what Barker terms 'Anti-History'. He invents a different form of mythic history, diffuse, ambiguous, immanent, defiantly unresearched, defying objectivity: a

'counter-enlightenment' initiative of the imagination (Elisabeth Angel-Perez's essay in this collection develops this characterisation of Barker's work). This 'Anti-History' is presented through the frankly illusory medium of theatre and the (self-)conscious artifice of dramatic character, in ways which nevertheless work to expose the fictionality of the dominant terms of so-called 'everyday life', and momentarily suspend these terms (which are exposed as limitations, obstacles to personal knowledge; and sometimes to love). Barker:

The liberating of pain from its social subjects, and from its so-called objective conditions, is possible only in a theatre which is essentially promiscuous in moral terms, and, far from becoming what is inevitably described as 'pessimistic', affirms the individual's right to chaos, extremity and self-description. (*AT*, 123)

As the examples which I have cited indicate, Barker's characters characteristically pursue their journeys, aspirations, desires; they demonstrate openness and frankness in their pursuit of what they believe is right, even if, at other junctures of the 'crushed' times in which they live, they have recourse to deceit (like Bradshaw in *Victory*) and demonstrate themselves to be untrammelled by conventional obligation. In Barker's *The Europeans* (written 1987), Katrin provides a particularly striking example of how Barker's protagonists frequently, and purposefully, defy appeals to guilt and duty by which Christian myths, Catholic constructs and other institutionalising forms of social inclusivity offer redemption through self-sacrifice; rather, the prime responsibility of Barker's protagonists is to their individual will, and they notably demonstrate a vital clarity of thought and emotion (it is Barker's more comic characters who do not: their confusion, and strenuous desperation in seeking simplification, become ludicrous). Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry* offers one of Barker's finest dramatisations of this: Gertrude declares and repeatedly demonstrates herself to be free of conventional moral constrictions (which supposedly make us 'human'), questioning standard notions of 'kindness' (which are shown to be fundamentally envious forms of control and coercion, through the actions of Isola and Ragusa); further, Gertrude defies the ways that forces of government (such as those set up by Hamlet) seek to subdue and neuter individual power and potential, because it wants power to be located exclusively in its own centralised forms. Gertrude, like other Barker protagonists, challenges the audience's appetites for a protagonist who is readily or consistently sympathetic, but instead offers and demonstrates a freedom and courage which may be surprisingly admirable (and, like other Barker protagonists, Gertrude exposes the province of the conventionally 'sympathetic' as that of impotence, pathos and inertia). Gertrude seeks neither consolation nor forgiveness, and therefore requires no external vindication in the hope of these things, preferring the more thoroughly inquisitive promise of the possibility of free action.²¹

From the erotic space of theatre to wild time (via the spoken body)

In Barker's drama and theatre, a principal means of resistance to institutionalised and centralised power (and its associated constructed promises of time, priorities, consolations and relief) is through eroticism, which is delineated as an imaginative process involving the appeals to the imagination made by body and word, sight and sound, together. Barker argues in a particularly fascinating and provocative recent essay, 'The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard',²² that our present 'Utopian society' ('a despotism which, because it is humanist, exercises its violence in the name of liberty and love') purveys the body as 'transparent, a hygienic substance ... no more than a mobile *accumulation of the facts*'. However, if 'the body has forfeited its authority on-stage and off',

the spiritual *injury of nakedness* can be restored by one thing only – the quality of the spoken word applied to it, for a public immune now even to the most exotic manifestations of the flesh can be lent the privilege of anxiety only by an attitude to nakedness and not nakedness itself.²³

Indeed, Barker proposes that the fully dramatic and catastrophically erotic 'restoration of nakedness – its recuperation from the withering Utopian gaze – is possible only through description, that what is *said of it* is crucially more affective than the *sight of it* alone, no matter how violated, dismembered or flayed' (adding: 'We luxuriate in the paradox that the exhaustion of *visibility* implores the word to restore *perception*').²⁴

I wish to make a link here with Anne Carson's analysis of erotic dynamics, and the emotional paradoxes associated with related experiences, in her book *Eros the Bittersweet*. Carson explains how the Greek word *eros* denotes a (previously unsuspected) lack, a desire for that which is missing, and how 'its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them'; and how 'the third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by *eros*'.²⁵ It is precisely this fraught and freighted, heat-conducting space *between* lovers, the 'ruse of heart and language'²⁶ manifested in the dance of desire, which Barker's theatre so often amplifies and delineates in its verbal-and-physical explorations of passion: the reach of desire 'defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time)'.²⁷ Barker's play *The Fence in its Thousandth Year* (staged 2005) is a pre-eminent dramatisation of the realisation that *eros* 'is an issue of boundaries',²⁸ it exists because of certain boundaries (which may invite their broaching). The entangled attractions in *The Castle* (staged 1986: for example, Stucley's homecoming speech, but also Skinner's obsession, and Ann and Krak's longings – delineated by Ian Cooper in his essay later in this collection) show how the trajectory of *eros* moves, in Carson's terms, 'out from the lover towards the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed

before' ('Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole':²⁹ one of the discoveries in Barker's *Dead Hands*).

This further prompts the characters' examination of their own tactics, with a heightened awareness of the personal impoverishments of a socially valued self-control, on the edge between the apparently actual and the apparently possible. They find themselves in a 'narrative texture of sustained incongruence, emotional and cognitive',³⁰ where the immediately chosen words do not entirely fit their experiences (recalling McArthur's formulation, 'What is this new HIM/HER happening to HIM/HER?') as their imagination (which enlists that of the audience, differently but also similarly) reaches out from the known to what is beyond. This suspends lovers in what Roland Barthes terms 'the present, that difficult tense': 'a pure portion of anxiety',³¹ an ambiguous time of vertiginous recurrence and torturous waiting, distinguished and electrified by a 'reach for something else than the facts' (to which the Utopian society would reduce the body): the reach of the erotic imagination which may carry you beyond the dominant terms and vocabulary of actions and values, 'beyond this city' and perhaps 'beyond this world'.³²

This links with aspects of Barker's ambition for 'distinctly theatrical' medium and project:

In order to seize back the injury of nakedness from the benign and supervisory Utopian regard, we recognize the body must be mediated through the distinctly theatrical nature of characterization. The anxiety created by the actor *naked* – in contradistinction to the bathos of the actor *undressed* – is substantially the creation of text delivered by performers with whom she shares the stage, a condition shaped by longing, contempt, the entire repertoire of erotic disorder, a condition which serves to disobjectify the flesh such that beauty or its converse is ascribable from the application of speech to the surface of the body and not discernible in the body itself.³³

Significantly, Carson also suggests that 'Eros is the ground where *logos* takes root between two people',³⁴ in the moment which Socrates describes as 'a shaft sunk deep into time and emerging into timelessness'.³⁵ It is important to note what Barker claims is at stake here, aesthetically, culturally and politically: 'The war fought over the meaning of the body in contemporary theatre is no less desperate than the battles waged in Homer over the hero's corpse'; 'Dead or alive, the body drives us mad, and ... only the word can shield our gaze from Utopia's dazzling and obliterating light'.³⁶ I have earlier linked this idea of erotic 'madness', a vivifying dislocation from conventional priorities, with what Alphonso Lingis calls 'catastrophic time',³⁷ in which ordinary time limits are transcended: what Jay Griffiths alternatively calls 'wild time', sometimes manifested in 'a resurgence of sexual energy even or especially at the point of death'.³⁸ This is the experience of time associated with excess, plethora, 'the resplendently unnecessary',³⁹ chance, flux, risk, immersion in the moment, the rawly alive, the seriously subversive play of creative energy (a 'play ethic'

which Griffiths argues is far more and deeply 'ethical than the work ethic'⁴⁰). This helps to describe the oscillating, disruptive, mesmeric, unfocusing, refocusing, shocking, arousing, intoxicating and profoundly ethical 'wild time' – properly and profoundly questioning conventional social and individual priorities, and promises of order – to which Barker's theatre acts as a gateway.

Accumulative textures

It is only appropriate to consider what has constituted Barker's most recent trajectory of experimentation, at the time of writing. His characteristic exploration of language as a form of *expression* rather than *communication* has led Barker to explore the twin poles of 'Plethora' and 'Bare Sufficiency' (the themes of his Creative Fellowship at Exeter University, 2009–12). This consciously develops Barker's interest (discernible in earlier stage works such as *Wounds to the Face*, *Found in the Ground* and *The Forty*) in unfolding 'an assortment, rather than a sequence, of images that cascade, replacing narrative with accumulation: images that do not necessarily *connect*, although the onus on those who present them is to do so with a cogency (which might be alternately comic and disturbing)'.⁴¹ *BLOK/EKO* (staged 2011) presented extreme events (such as the ordained systematic massacre of all representatives of the medical profession) and poetically excessive speeches of internally broken narrative and surreal imagery which were designed to test the limits of what actors could cope with, in delivery. In fact, as Barker observed, the core actors of *The Wrestling School* proved that this material could indeed be delivered compellingly, but the audience were offered 'language as plasticity', 'received as music and texture – rather than as history, narrative or information – because of its density'.⁴² However, audiences, like most human beings (and dramatic characters), are compulsive seekers for, and makers of, meaning, though in this case (as in other Barker plays), the meanings derived are likely to vary. *BLOK/EKO* was not devoid of narrative event and process, depicting as it did intensely complex cataclysmic personal and social upheavals which were developmental and/or degenerative, comic and/or tragic, depending on one's (ever-shifting) perspectives, but Barker (as director, scenographer and dramatist) and his actors worked to minimise the possibility of any single reducible message being derived from the traditional (naturalistic) audience standpoint of analytical superiority over events presented. In compensation for the confusion associated with the refusal of immediate analysis or message, Barker aimed to offer seductive alternatives of bizarre beauty and strange elevation ('generating an aura reminiscent of the Catholic mass and the medieval church'), an impressionism 'in which the colours are not mixed by the artist but assessed individually by the audience, breathing like an anemone in the tide'.⁴³

In partial contrast, Barker's *Charles V* (written 2012) incorporated not minimal language (in the style of *The Forty*) so much as language as disaggregated

sound, in which a single resonant word – ‘inequality’ – becomes menacingly broken, ‘used instrumentally’ by Barker, and ‘placed against a number of visual scenarios, to move the onus of meaning into the audience, without foreknowledge as to the full effect’.⁴⁴ Barker orchestrates a number of intensely grotesque scenes in which the Holy Roman Emperor (who became fascinated by automata in his secluded abdication) is surrounded by the rhythmic impulses of dead sailors and fading whores, to uneasy and curious effects: the moral authority and coercive menace of the sole word accrues increasingly surprising and interrogatory resonances when dis-integrated and replayed across various actions and tableaux. Gerrard McArthur memorably described this distinctively Barkerian form and effect as a ‘framework’ for introduction to the perception that ‘we don’t – and can’t – know what we think we know’; a point of radical scepticism and uncertainty where ‘words, like bones, prove brittle’.⁴⁵

Salient indications

This collection comprises a series of complementary essays on different facets of Barker’s remarkable body of artistic work, in and across different media. The actress Melanie Jessop precisely identifies the technical challenges and performative pleasures and tactics of both the Barker character and the Barker actor; and how one set of demands and initiatives can inform the other, in terms of what she identifies as ‘challenges of consciousness’, in ‘the balancing act required when the actor and the character both “act”’, in different and similar senses. From her own professional and artistic experience, Jessop analyses this profoundly self-conscious process of ‘intricate tension’, in which ‘energy is achieved by the continued assessment of its effect on its target’: a matter of anxiety, risk and choice. She deduces how both character and actor are driven to ‘look into the abyss’ of a continual self-fashioning in order (not to deny but) to maintain the purposeful theatricality of their situation, embracing the vulnerability and beauty experienced in this ‘mirrored world’, in order to enhance (rather than constrain) the sense of creative possibilities.

James Reynolds continues the exploration of the role of the actor in terms which are specific to Barker’s form of tragedy: how the performer must discover effects of report and repetition, which serve to amplify meaning whilst the spectator experiences ‘the power of speech to produce and replace the fictional constructions of stage reality at speed, becoming subject to a particular, vertiginous effect which may be characterised as *Barkerian*’. Reynolds notes how both report and repetition constitute structural markers, motifs which ‘indicates key moments of change in the onstage reality’; and moreover how Barker’s catastrophic theatre denies and subverts the Aristotelian conventions of drama, reversing ‘the dominant reading-order of theatrical narrative’, by designating ‘suffering as a pre-condition of narrative, rather than its result’. In consequence, ‘Barker’s characters can follow non-traditional models of dramatic causation, as

their experience of suffering frees them to create reversal and recognition for themselves'. This reversal of the Aristotelian pattern 'refuses not only its organising capacity, but also its movement towards moral consensus'; for 'repetition, while facilitating a deeper exploration of time's expressive potential, necessitates a break away from the organising capacity of chronological time'.

Elisabeth Angel-Perez also takes care to identify how Barker's work can be distinguished from the theatrically fashionable but facile dismissal of the structural principle of narrative; indeed, Barker works with a critical awareness of how narratives traditionally and importantly provide ostensibly 'all-encompassing abstract patterns, made of different myths or stories federated by one ideology and thought to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience and knowledge'. However, 'in this rethinking of foundation myths, Barker's artistic ambition exceeds the mere will to debunk' or discard; rather, his 're-visioning' is more subversive: 'Barker revisits the small narratives that build up the grand narratives: not to buttress the enlightenment myth that their interpretations more conventionally foreground' but rather to counter the dominant claims and promises 'that reason and scientific discovery lead towards enlightenment'. Barker characteristically 'rephrases or develops themes, so that the apparent meaning of the original narratives is radically subverted'. Moreover, Angel-Perez brilliantly characterises what is at stake in the poetic reach of Barker's language: how it strives to express 'the previously unspoken', 'that place of irrationality ... which is also home for desire': the moment when, in the terms of Barker's essay, 'The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard', '**The body makes us mad**'. Angel-Perez argues that it is this experience of enigmatic dislocation (available to all, yet defying generalisation) which continually creates the subject anew. Indeed, Angel-Perez notes how Barker's plays offer powerful stories, 'of desire and of pain, of ecstasy and agony', which testify to a faith in language and in the subject's triumphant, if painful, expression of an 'essential and sublime dislocation'.

Ian Cooper chooses to focus precisely on Barker's drama 1977–86: work neglected in a climate of theatrical cowardice, but work which nevertheless offers remarkable presages: both of the play of national and global power, and of Barker's distinctive artistry. Cooper's writing is startlingly politically incisive in tracing the forms and implications of these plays, how they show state power mobilising 'linguistic technology' and recognisably English cultural institutions (and ostensible characteristics) to annex and limit the potentially disruptive image, and iconic power, of the body – a national political process of coercive historical conditioning, no less, promoting 'an intentionally cohesive structure formed to perpetuate hierarchy and social stasis'. However, Cooper also marshals evidence of Barker's contradictory impulse to 'exhume' images which 'offer a series of delimiting constructs', chaotic events of extreme crisis, 'which provoke storms and upheavals in which characters can engage in the construction of

personal histories': events and crises which are profoundly political in their reverberations.

Cooper's essay identifies a thematic fulcrum in Barker's work: the competing claims of state institutions, and the individual body, to iconic power. It also provides a *salient* indication (in the military sense, of the projection of a forward line into enemy-held territory) of directions for further meditations on Barker's distinctive deployments of the motif of the spoken body – as a form of (self-) expression invariably in collision with the terms of what George Hunka identifies as 'the post-capitalist culture industry'. It is not easy to contextualise Barker's work (meaningfully rather than reductively), and even more difficult to do so in a way which refreshes the way we might regard other artists. Hunka's essay is properly ambitious in its succinct delineation of a post-World-War-II theatre tradition which offers an alternative to the dominant conventions of social realism: Hunka posits a theatre in which the condition of the speaking body becomes the focus for dramatic exploration, 'in its status as both subject and object, as both autonomous consciousness and as a spiritual artifact for the spectator's meditation and contemplation'. Hunka identifies this lineage (of contrary instinct rather than conscious influence) as beginning with Beckett's theatrical theory and practice, which offers a 'triangulation of theatrical experience, from character to character to spectator, as the lyrical depiction of suffering, desire, and love become, through the fracture of both social realism and collectivity, a means of poetic compassion'. Hunka notes how Beckett presents both language and body as disconnected fragments that 'remain to be experienced and reassembled by an individual auditor'; in his theatre, 'words become experiential, riven by anxiety and catastrophe, fragmented and unable to contain physical experience' (a description which significantly predicts some aspects of Barker's *Charles V*). Hunka compares and contrasts the project of the American dramatist Richard Foreman, who aims to 'reconstruct' the body through an emphasis on 'ordeal', a tension sensed and amplified between performers and spectators, involving consciously 'difficult and uncongenial' rhythms. Barker similarly presents and explores language which 'is no longer an avenue towards intelligibility', but does so from a consciously European perspective, in which suffering offers 'no reconciliation or redemption', but a possible aperture of self-definition outside the terms of the authoritarian state.

Eléonore Obis develops the formal and thematic enquiry, by focusing specifically on Barker's theatrical orchestration of nakedness in his later work: the provocative ambiguity and instability of the naked (as opposed to 'nude') body as a theatrical sign that creates anxiety in its artful confusion of the body of the actor with that of the character s/he plays. Obis considers how nakedness puts into question the oppositions between the **presentation** and the **representation** of the body, between a theatrical experience that is experiential, based primarily on the senses, and one that is mainly intellectual. Its contradictory bewildering power thus becomes the precisely (spatially and temporally)

deployed occasion of a 'suspension of meaning', 'which, no matter how overwritten, still has the power to be discovered **differently**'.

Our collection then appropriately pivots, to further considerations of institutional power: its claims and contentions, its premises and promises. Michael Mangan examines the underlying ideologies of systems of surveillance and punishment which would literally claim, frame, and thus contain the transgressive individual (body), and how Barker's theatre exposes the fears to which such social and political mechanisms strategically appeal. Mangan provides an explication of how 'emotion, rationality and the law' are spatially regulated by state ceremony, through further institutions and mechanisms of separation, exclusion and elimination; he further notes the persistence of 'the authoritarian edifice which dominates the psychic as well as the scenic landscapes' of Barker's plays, and how these plays are drawn to explore what Foucault termed the 'relationship between rationalisation and the excesses of political power'.

Theatre criticism may be regarded as another form of institution, or institutionalisation: the public rhetorical extending of terms and claims which locate (or separate, to elevate or dismiss) a play or dramatist. Mark Brown provides a valuable perspective, as a professional theatre critic who is prepared to analyse the presumptions and ideologies which underlie the evaluations (and therefore the power) of British newspaper theatre critics, and why their encounter with Barker's work often testifies, overtly or implicitly, to a sense of offence. As Brown points out, 'any observer of theatre trends internationally can see clearly that Barker's theatre is received with enthusiasm in many parts of the world, and faces more hostility in England than anywhere else'; importantly, Brown presents a persuasive and thoughtful analysis of why this is the case, which leads to some significant deductions about the latent terms of English culture and society. Barker may derive some wry satisfaction, at how his work is so (properly) disturbing to the general consensus of the day (the most vital way for theatre to operate, I suggest); though it is unfortunate that the institutional(ised) aesthetic (and therefore political) myopia which Brown identifies may limit a wider appreciation of Barker's work, and its distinctive qualities of imaginative courage. Brown's '21 Asides on Theatre Criticism' offers a tribute to Barker's 'Fortynine Asides for a tragic theatre' by appropriately challenging and extending the terms of theatre criticism in thoroughly Barkerian style: where wit is at the service of a purposeful seriousness.

Christine Kiehl presents a critical history of several Barker productions which have recently occurred in France, with careful consideration of their proximity to, or distance from, Barker's own sense of aesthetic style. As ever, the compulsive provocations of Barker's works throw into stark relief the assumptions (or presumptions) of those approaching them, and Kiehl pertinently asks: can his Theatre of Catastrophe be requisitioned to support such diverse dramatic and aesthetic (and therefore ethical) conceptions? Kiehl identifies what she would nominate as instructive initiatives, both misplaced and appropriate.

We then move to a series of readings of specific Barker plays, in terms which nevertheless resonate through the wider *oeuvre*. Mary Karen Dahl presents an argument (to my mind, both welcome and overdue) for establishing *I Saw Myself* (staged 2008) as a modern masterpiece, and Barker's 'most elegantly developed probe' into one of his recurrent themes, 'the ways that creative acts and actors go to work' in the world, and the associated confrontation, negotiation, self-scrutiny and sacrifice. Barker's most renowned dramatic meditation on such themes is *Scenes from an Execution*, but Dahl's reading supports the case for the superiority of this later, more complex play, not least in its analogies and oppositions, between seeing and representation, creative processes and historical narratives, existential truthfulness and readily discernible meaning. Vanasay Khamphommala carefully considers the details of the dialogic relationship between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry* (Barker's other major play of that decade) and observes how the subversion of expectation and 'the refusal of identification appears as a governing principle', in Barker's drama as in his paintings; rather, his work characteristically suggests meaning but refuses its revelation (at least in readily limited, and limitable, terms): an impulse and project of *delimitation*. Following on appropriately, Jay Gipson-King turns to *The Bite of the Night* (staged 1988, and perhaps Barker's most formally innovative and ambitious play of the 80s) to open questions of 'a politics of time', and examine how Barker manipulates time 'at multiple levels of the theatrical experience in order to upset conventional habits of viewing and attack the political-moral system embedded within linear realism', and suggests what may be at stake here: that 'unconventional depictions of time do nothing less than create a theatrical-political system that empowers its spectators'. Then Elizabeth Sakellaridou engages with Barker's recent 'chamber work' *The Dying of Today* (staged 2007, 2008) to discern notable depths in a play 'about historical narration – more precisely the recounting of world calamities'. Sakellaridou demonstrates a classicist's awareness in explaining how Barker offers 'a masterful conflation' of two stories from ancient Greece into 'a new fabula' which provocatively 'encompasses various cognitive activities in culture, including historical thinking, philosophical contemplation, psychological analysis and art theory'.

This matrix of imaginative life provides the ground from which all of Barker's works flourish, and Michel Morel opens up a full examination of what he terms Barker's 'triple excavation' – his mutually informative work in paintings, poems and plays – in a final section which aims to indicate the full range and depth of Barker's achievements across the three different media. Morel brilliantly identifies 'ambivalence' at all levels of Barker's works, 'inbuilt contradiction' effected through 'insistent return of the oxymoron': a figure of speech by which contradictory terms are used in conjunction, and term originally meaning 'an exquisiteness of thought belonging to a kind of madness', which produces the crisis of 'an unfathomable quandary between two opposite issues', and the effect of an 'agonising but knowing distance'. This is one of the distinctive achieve-

ments of Barker's 'total aesthetic', which constantly pushes 'the theatre nearer the poem and the poem (and the picture) nearer the theatre'. My essay, 'The Substrata of Experience' (coincidentally but significantly) echoes Morel's imagery of the excavation to identify both points of contact between Barker's poems and plays, and some of the distinctive divergences in the themes and styles of (the four volumes of) his poems.

Charles Lamb extends our sense of the power of the visual, and its complements and challenges to the limits of language, focusing on Barker's paintings and drawings, as forms of original visualisation which, on the one hand, inform Barker's theatre practice, and, on the other, projects its spirit into new dimensions. Heiner Zimmermann's essay provides a further expansion from this, by identifying a highly literate visual rhetoric at work in Barker's drama, consciously informed by his 'interrogation or contradiction' of European paintings, which involves the re-visioning of formative cultural myths. Zimmermann's closing deduction testifies to the constantly startling depth of discipline at work in Barker's disturbing effects: 'any hermeneutic privileging of the word over the image (and vice versa) goes against the genius of Barker's creations in pictorial and dramatic art and thus fails to promote their just appreciation'. Hence the need for as varied a consideration of Barker's work, as this multifaceted collection offers, in order to appreciate the many means and levels in Barker's initiatives, which question all answers, and offer their characteristic and uniquely *haunting* capacity: a troubling, engaging, estranging companionship.

Notes

- 1 Howard Barker, lecture at The Wrestling School Summer School, University of Exeter, 20–22 August 2009; notes transcribed by Rabey.
- 2 Howard Barker, *Hurts Given and Received* (London: Oberon, 2010), p. 31.
- 3 Barker, lecture at The Wrestling School Summer School.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Gerrard McArthur, at The Wrestling School Summer School; notes transcribed by Rabey.
- 6 Barker, lecture at The Wrestling School Summer School.
- 7 *The Forty* provides actors and audiences with a series of what Phillip B. Zarrilli identifies as 'active images' which (akin to Beckett's work) demand an unusual concentration on inhabitation of the moment, manifesting an 'iterative ambiguity' which is nevertheless a 'palpable experience': 'Actors cannot act ambiguity; however, they can define, embody and enact a precise set of psychophysically charged and energized actions for which there is no conclusive single referent for themselves or for the audience': Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 126, 116.
- 8 Gerrard McArthur, in D.I. Rabey, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death. An Expository Study of his Drama, Theory and Production Work, 1988–2008* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 258–60 (259, 258–9).
- 9 Howard Barker, from an interview with E. Angel-Perez and V. Khamphommala, 2 February 2009; published as 'Imagination and a Voice: On Writing Tragedy, Resisting

- Political Dogmatism and Avoiding Success', in *Études Anglaises* 63/10–4 (2010), 464–72 (467).
- 10 Quoted in Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time* (London: Flamingo, 1999), p. 55.
 - 11 Marina Warner, *The Inner Eye*, quoted in *Marina Warner* by Laurence Coupe (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006), p. 115.
 - 12 John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 98.
 - 13 Cioran, quoted in Gray, *Straw Dogs*, p. 117.
 - 14 Reproduced on the dedication page of Barker's poetry collection, *Lullabies for the Impatient* (1988).
 - 15 John Michael Greer, *The Long Descent* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2008), p. 36.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.
 - 18 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, p. 96. Griffiths goes so far as to propose that 'the abstract idea of progress depends, and has always depended, on first, the rejection and then, the destruction of place'; whilst noting how devotees of progress can be 'sneeringly contemptuous of anyone who would dare speak against it', dismissing them as 'ridiculous, backwards and reactionary' (Griffiths, *Pip Pip*, p. 185).
 - 19 Greer, *The Long Descent*, p. 53.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
 - 21 Thanks to Charmian Savill for assistance towards these paragraph's observations.
 - 22 Howard Barker, 'The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard', in *Gamma/Gamma* Volume 17, 'The Text Strikes Back: The Dynamics of Performativity' (2009), pp. 15–16.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 - 25 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 1998), p. 16. My thanks to Karoline Gritzner for the gift of this book.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
 - 31 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 117.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
 - 33 Barker, 'The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard', p. 16.
 - 34 Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 145. Note also Carson's disquisition on spoken words, and how consonants mark the edge of sound: 'As eros insists upon the edges of human beings and of the spaces between them, the written consonant imposes edge on the sounds of human speech' (p. 55). This links with Kristin Linklater's observations on how vowels provide the emotional inspiration, breath and "motor" of words, which consonants form and direct, in her book *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* which I have always found valuable in teaching the speaking of Barker's texts.
 - 35 Quoted in Carson, *ibid.*, p. 157.
 - 36 Barker, 'The Spoken Body and the Utopian Regard', p. 16.
 - 37 See Rabey, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death*, particularly pp. 15–17.
 - 38 Griffiths, *Pip Pip*, p. 265.
 - 39 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
 - 40 *Ibid.*, p. 281; especially when, as Griffiths notes, those who repeat 'time is money' never quite answer the question of 'whose money is made from whose time', p. 165.

- 41 Howard Barker, Exeter University workshop on *Charles V*, Northcott Theatre, 26 June 2012; notes transcribed by Rabey.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.* Again, Zarrilli's words on Beckett are pertinent to Barker's radical subtractions: 'In this process of reduction, Beckett appears to require the actor to overtly do less', to concentrate on simplifying and honing a specific action (such as a variant delivery of a single word), specified by the text's score for performance; 'however, what Beckett demands is that the actor does more' (Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting*, p. 123). Barker demands a similar precision and extreme elimination of extraneous action and behaviour.
- 45 Gerrard McArthur, Exeter University workshop on *Charles V*; notes transcribed by Rabey.