



Guardian Unlimited: Arts blog - theatre

Podcast: Howard Barker talks

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Playwright behaving badly ... Howard Barker. Photograph: Eduardo Houth

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"Challenging" is usually only a pejorative term when applied to disruptive children. With theatre it's almost always high praise, second only perhaps to "groundbreaking" and "tour de force".

Yet when British critics talk about the work of **Howard Barker** - whose complex, violent and morally ambiguous plays are about as challenging as art gets without pulling weapons on the audience - they often sound like they're talking about English drama's equivalent of an Asbo kid. In the Telegraph a few years back, Charles Spencer lamented the fact that a promising young playwright had "fallen under the malign influence of Howard Barker". Our own Michael Billington [has described him as a "frustrating](#)

* Indicates text unpublished. All others published by John Calder with the sole exception of Cheek by Eyre Methuen. Dates are of production opening nights. Dates in brackets indicate openings at particular venues.

Date Play Venue/Company Director

11.9.70 Cheek Theatre Upstairs William Gaskill Royal Court

19.11.70 No One Was Saved * Theatre Royal Court Upstairs Pam Brighton

15.2.72 Edward:Final Days* (Lunch-time show) The Open Space

15.2.72 Faceache* Recreation Ground

17.9.72 Alpha Alpha* Open Space Peter Watson

9.1.73 Rule Britannia* Open Space

12.3.73 Skipper, And My Sister And I* Bush Theatre

23.5.73 Bang* Open Space

30.1.75 Claw Open Space Chris Parr

14.10.75 Stripwell Royal Court Chris Parr

13.6.77 Fair Slaughter Royal Court Stuart Burge

28.7.77 That Good Between Us RSC Warehouse Barry Kyle

19.10.78 The Love of Sheffield Crucible David Leland
A Good Man

15.12.78 The Hang of The Gaol RSC Warehouse Bill Alexander

13.11.79 The Love of A Good Man Oxford Playhouse Nicholas Kent UK Tour

26.2.80 The Loud Boy's Life RSC Warehouse Howard Davies

8.11.80 Birth on a Hard Shoulder Royal Dramatic Theatre Stockholm Barbro Larsson

11.2.81 No End of Blame Royal Court Nicholas Kent Oxford Playhouse

1.12.81 The Poor Man's Friend* Colway Theatre Trust Bridport Ann Jellicoe

17.2.83 Victory Joint Stock/Royal Court Danny Boyle UK Tour

15.3.83 Crimes in Hot Countries Theatre Underground Charles Lamb Essex University

7.10.83 A Passion in Six Days Sheffield Crucible Michael Boyd

14.11.84 The Power of The Dog Joint Stock/ UK Tour Kenny Ireland Hampstead Theatre

?.?.85 Victory Rough Magic Theatre Dublin

7.10.85 Crimes in Hot Countries RSC Barbican Pit Bill Alexander

14.10.85 The Castle RSC Barbican Pit Nick Hamm

- 21.10.85 Downchild RSC Barbican Pit Bill Alexander
- 1.2.86 Women Beware Women Royal Court Theatre William Gaskill
- 23.2.88 The Possibilities Almeida Theatre Ian McDiarmid
- 8.3.88 The Last Supper Wrestling School Kenny Ireland
Leicester, Haymarket Royal Court UK Tour
- 31.8.88 The Bite of The Night RSC Barbican Pit Danny Boyle
- 4.11.89 Seven Lears Wrestling School Kenny Ireland
Leicester Haymarket, Royal Court, UK Tour
- 24.11.89 Golgo Wrestling School Nick Le Prevost
Leicester Haymarket, Royal Court/ UK Tour
- 11.1.90 Scenes from An Execution Almeida Theatre Ian McDiarmid
- 21.5.90 The Castle Moving Being Theatre Geoff Moore St Stephen's, Cardiff
- 15.2.91 Victory Wrestling School/UK Tour Kenny Ireland
Leicester Haymarket, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, Paris
- 3.3.92 A Hard Heart Almeida Theatre Ian McDiarmid
- 25.3.92 Scenes from an Execution Mark Taper Forum Los Angeles Allan Ackermann
- 10.6.93 Ego in Arcadia Sienna, Italy Howard Barker
- 14.2.93 The Wrestling School/ UK Tour Kenny Ireland
Europeans Leicester Haymarket, Greenwich, London
- 2.11.93 Scenes from An Execution Centre Dramatique de Solange Oswald Bourgogne, Dijon
- 8.3.94 Hated Nightfall Wrestling School/ UK Tour Howard Barker
Dancehouse, Manchester, Royal Court
European Tour:
(18.1.95) Hebbel Theater, Berlin
(7.2.95) Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris
(29.3.95) Kanonhallen, Copenhagen
(11.4.95) Théâtre de la Métaphore, Lille
- 1.6.94 Scenes from An Execution Württembergische Landesbühne, Beverly Blankenship
Esslingen
- 18.11.94 Seven Lears Théâtre de la Chamaille Nantes Catherine Hunault
- 11.1.95 The Castle Wrestling School Kenny Ireland Riverside Studios, UK Tour
(18.1.95) Hebbel Theater, Berlin
(1.2.95) Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris
- 28.2.95 Judith Leicester Haymarket Howard Barker
8/9.95 Revived for Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh Festival, Luxembourg, Battersea Arts Centre
- 20.10.95 The Europeans Escher Theater, Luxemburg Eric Schneider
- ?/?/96 Scenes from an Execution Théâtre de Saint Gervais Geneva, Ann Bisang

- 18.4.96 (Uncle) Vanya Wrestling School Leicester Haymarket, UK Tour Howard Barker
Revival for Copenhagen,
Limoges, Riga & Berlin
- 9.11.96 Scenes from An Execution Khan Theatre, Jerusalem Ofira Henig
- 17.8.97 Wounds to the Face Wrestling School Stephen Wrentmore
Assembly Rooms Edinburgh
- 17.1.98 Judith Théâtre de Songes, Paris Jerzy Kleszyk
- 17.3.98 Ten Dilemmas Drama Studio Sheffield University
- 20.4.98 Ursula Wrestling School Howard Barker Birmingham Repertory, Riverside Studios
- ?11.98 Seven Lears Théâtre de la Chamaille, Nantes.Claudine Hunault
- 6.3.00 The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo, Théâtre de Folle, Saint-Brieuc Tr Pensée Annie Lucas
. Mike Sens
- 17.6.99 Und Wrestling School Howard Barker Riverside Studios
- 22.9.99 Scenes from Execution Wrestling School Howard Barker
London Barbican Pit/ UK Tour
- 8.3.00 The Ecstatic Bible Wrestling School & Brink Productions, Adelaide Festival,
Howard Barker
- 1.11.00 He Stumbled, Wrestling School/Riverside Studios/UK Tour, Howard Barker
- 28.9.01 A House of Correction, Wrestling School Riverside Studios/UK Tour, Howard Barker
- 19.2.02 Brutopia Nouveau Théâtre de Besançon, Guillaume Dujardin
- ?4.02 Wounds to the Face, CDN de Montluçon, Jean-Paul Wenzel
- 10.4.02 Judith Theatre in Action, Glasgow Citizens, David O'Neill
- 30.4.02 Victory, Edinburgh Royal Lyceum, Kenny Ireland
- 7.11.02 The Europeans, Colchester Mercury, Janice Dunn
- 5.11.02 Claw, Comédie de Genève, Anne Bisang
- 15.10.02 Gertrude Wrestling School Howard Barker
Plymouth/ Tour
Riverside Studios
- 18.3.03 The Last Supper, Théâtre Mains d'Oeuvres, Saint-Ouen, Nathalie Garraud
Tr. Mike Sens
- 18.4.03 Claw Kazida Productions Jonathan Loe Greenwich Playhouse
- 3.10.03 13 Objects* Wrestling School Howard Barker
The Door, Birmingham, UK Tour, Riverside Studios
- 31.1.04 Und, Théâtre de la Source, Bègles, Marie Pourroy, Tr. Mike Sens
- 2.3.04 The Love of A Good Ma, La Comédie de Genève, Jean Paul Wenzel

18.1.05 Seven Lears, La Comedie de Agnès Bourgeois, Saint-Etienne Tr. Mike Sens

The Wrestling School is an Arts Council of England Project Funded company and a member of ITC. Overseas tours are supported by The British Council.

the wrestling
schoolHoward
Barkertheatre of
catastrophecurrent and
future workpast
productions

Theatre of Catastrophe

The achievement of Barker's work has been its exemplification of the obligation of choice or refusal for the audience and performers alike. This works by throwing their sense of experience into flux. Through drama which pursues to the boundaries of the tolerable and explodes them. The relentless refusal of the expected, and the excess of transforming experiences is the essence of dramatic experience, involving the bewilderment of the audience in the face of persistent dislocation. The sense of having witnessed too much is crucial. It leads not to a drunkenness or a reeling exhaustion but a roaring sense of possibility and a rinsing out of accumulated expectations. Barker's own title for this form of theatre is Catastrophism.

David Ian Rabey

Howard Barker; Politics and Desire

Published by Macmillan, 1989 +44 (0)171 881 8000

Theatre of Catastrophe takes as its first principle the idea that art is not digestible. Rather, it is an irritant in consciousness, like the grain of sand in the oyster's gut...

The Humanist Theatre

We all really agree.
When we laugh together.
Art must be understood.
Wit greases the message.
The actor is a man/woman
not unlike the author.
The production must be clear.

We celebrate our unity.
The critic is already on our side.

The message is important.
The audience is educated
and goes home
happy
or
fortified.

The Catastrophic Theatre

We only sometimes agree.
Laughter conceals fear.
Art is a problem of understanding.
There is no message.
The actor is different in kind.

The audience cannot grasp
everything; nor did the author.

We quarrel to love.
The critic must suffer like
everyone else.

The play is important.
The audience is divided
and goes home
disturbed
or
amazed.

Howard Barker

First published in 'Theatre en Europe', 1989

Reproduced in *Arguments for a Theatre*, Manchester University Press

Theatre of Catastrophe is not a discipline. This alone marks it out from the general world of theatre practice which masquerades as a market-place for competing truths but in practice just exchanges one moral imperative for another. In this instance of theatre, the audience is relieved of the infantile burden of being brought to the author's point of view - who cares about his point of view? - we ask him to be imaginative.

First Prologue to *The Bite of the Night*

They brought a woman from the street
And made her sit in the stalls
By threats
By bribes
By flattery
Obliging her to share a little of her life with actors

But I don't understand art

Sit still, they said

But I don't want to see sad things

Sit still, they said

And she listened to everything
Understanding some things
But not others
Laughing rarely, and always without knowing why
Sometimes suffering disgust
Sometimes thoroughly amazed
And in the light again, said

*If that's art I think it is hard work
It was beyond me
So much beyond my actual life*

But something troubled her
Something gnawed her peace
And she came a second time, armoured with friends

Sit still, she said

And again, she listened to everything
This time understanding different things
This time untroubled that some things
Could not be understood
Laughing rarely but now without shame

Sometimes suffering disgust
Sometimes thoroughly amazed
And in the light again said

This is art, it is hard work
And one friend said, *too hard for me*
And the other said, *if you will*
I will come again
Because I found it hard I felt honoured

Howard Barker

The Bite of The Night

Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker

By Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey

Fifteen varied essays discussing the style, language and vision of Howard Barker's plays. Fifteen international academics analyse the political, moral and historical aspects of his work, its poetry and eroticism, its depiction of the figure of the artist, and his writing in performance.

Published by Oberon Books in hardback at £40 and paperback at £14.99. Along with volumes of Howard Barker's plays and single editions of his latest work it can be ordered from oberonbooks.com or any good bookshop.

The Wrestling School is an Arts Council of England Project Funded company and a member of the Independent Theatre Council. Overseas tours are supported by The British Council.

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Howard
Barker

theatre of
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Howard Barker

Howard Barker's plays are known for their fearless exploration of power, sexuality and human motivation. His texts overflow with rich language, challenging ideas, history, beauty, violence and imaginative comedy, all brought together within the extremes of human experience to create a powerful and compelling theatrical experience.



Barker's texts are constructed on the premise that theatre is a necessity in society, a place for imagination and moral speculation, not constrained by the demands of realism or any ideology.

Barker describes his work with the term *Theatre of Catastrophe*. In Barker's work, no attempt is made to satisfy any demand for clarity or the deceptive simplicity of a single 'message'; each performance is like a public challenge in which actors and audience are inspired to find meaning and resonance from a multiplicity of interpretations.

Long considered the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British theatre and the subject of heated debate, whether loved or hated, his plays are impossible to ignore.

On the European mainland especially, Barker is considered one of the major writers of modern European theatre. In recent years, 19 of his works have been staged in five languages in 12 countries as far afield as Canada, New Zealand and Slovenia. Yet in Britain, his home country, he is largely unknown.

Barker has also written a number of volumes of poetry and a collection of essays on the nature of theatre, published as *Arguments For A Theatre* (Manchester University Press).

[Interview with Howard Barker by Nick Hobbes](#)
[Chronology of Barker Productions 1970 - 2005](#)
[Howard Barker plays in French translation](#)

Plays

- Claw
- Victory
- The Love of a Good Man

Poetry

- Don't Exaggerate
- The Breath of the Crowd
- Gary the Thief

- The Power of the Dog
- Scenes from an Execution
- The Castle
- The Europeans
- A Hard Heart
- Seven Lears
- The Bite of the Night
- The Possibilities
- Rome
- Hated Nightfall
- Judith
- The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead
- (Uncle) Vanya
- He Stumbled
- A House of Correction
- Ursula; Fear of the Estuary
- Gertrude The Cry

- Lullabies for the Impatient
- The Ascent of Monte Grappa
- The Tortman Diaries

All published by
Calder Publications
[as left]

Osborne)

Universal Edition

Essays

- Arguments for a Theatre (3rd Edition)
Manchester University Press
- Death, The One and the Art of Theatre
Published October 2004 by Routledge

Calder Publications
126 Cornwall Road
London SE1 8TQ
Tel: +44 (0)171 633 0599

The Ecstatic Bible
Published Aug 2004
Oberon Books

Howard Barker plays in French translation:

Les Sept Lears ISBN 2-905158-99-9
Tableau d'une Execution ISBN 2-905158-81-6
Les Europeens ISBN 2-87282-227-5
N'Exageres Pas ISBN 2-8774-4145

The following Howard Barker plays are published in French by Editions Théâtrales - Maison Antoine Vitez (Collection Scènes Étrangères):

'uvres choisies volume 1 : Tableau d'une exécution (translated by Jean-Michel Déprats) / Les Possibilités (translated by Sinéad Rushe and Sarah Hirschmuller)

'uvres choisies volume 2 : Les Possibilités (translated by Sinéad Rushe and Sarah Hirschmuller) / La Douzième Bataille d'Isonzo (translated by Mike Sens)