

# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

51



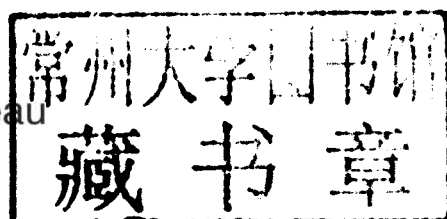
# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied  
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

**VOLUME 51**

Lawrence J. Trudeau  
Editor



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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

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## Preface

**D**rama Criticism (DC) is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, DC seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in DC offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism* (SSC) and *Poetry Criticism* (PC), which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), DC directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC).

### Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, DC assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately three to five entries are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to a playwright's work, an individual play, or a literary topic pertinent to the study of drama. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from critics whose work has been translated into English. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a DC volume.

### Organization of the Book

A DC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the playwright most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Also located here are any name variations under which a playwright wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises dramatic works or works by the author about dramatic theory. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been



translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.

- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; usually, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All plays and works of dramatic theory by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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# Howard Barker

## 1946-

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Eduardo Houth) English playwright, poet, and drama theorist.

### INTRODUCTION

In a theatrical career spanning over forty years, Howard Barker has established himself as an important playwright, though he has endured barbed attacks from critics and sometimes found himself at odds with mainstream theaters, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the Royal Court in London. He has gained the respect of actors and audiences despite his belief that theater should be neither entertaining nor educational. His outsider position led to the founding of the Wrestling School, a company dedicated to the study and performance of Barker's work.

Barker's early plays, including *Claw* (1975) and *Stripwell* (1975) explore political, social, and economic themes in a postwar English setting, typically from a socialist point of view. Later plays are colored by his theory of a Theatre of Catastrophe, his vision for an authentic and powerful tragic drama, exemplified in plays including *The Bite of the Night* (1988), *Scenes from an Execution* (1990), *The Ecstatic Bible* (2000), and *Gertrude—The Cry* (2002). Barker's plays are often violent, dealing with rape, murder, and dismemberment, but they also feature poetic, non-naturalistic dialog and moments of beauty.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barker was born 28 June 1946 to Sydney Charles Barker and Georgina Carter Barker. His family lived in Norwood, south of London, where his father was a factory worker and union steward and his mother was a housewife. His father instilled in him the importance of class politics and education. His parents encouraged him to look past his working-class background and pursue his interest in literature. In 1958, he enrolled in Battersea Grammar School, and in 1964, he entered Sussex University, where he majored in history. Throughout these years, he wrote poetry, short stories, and novels, but he had not yet expressed an interest in the theater. After graduating with a BA in 1967, Barker stayed on at Sussex to obtain an MA in 1970. In 1972, he married Sandra Mary Law; the couple had two sons, Thomas and Joseph, before their divorce in 1980.

Barker began his professional career writing radio plays. In 1970, he saw a production of Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965)

at the Royal Court Theatre. The play promised to depict working-class life in London, but Barker considered it unrepresentative of his own experience, so he wrote both *No One Was Saved* (1970) and *Claw*, both produced at the Royal Court, as correctives. His first play to be staged, however, was *Cheek* (1970). Barker earned praise for his early work and received an Arts Council bursary, or stipend, in 1971 to support his ongoing work. With satirical works including *Alpha Alpha* (1972), *Bang* (1973), and *Stripwell*, he took his place alongside Howard Brenton, David Hare, and David Edgar as a left-leaning political playwright. Barker served as resident dramatist from 1974 to 1975 at the Open Space Theatre in London, where he premiered *Claw*, one of his most important early plays, and then developed a relationship with the RSC Warehouse Theatre, where he produced *That Good between Us* (1977), *The Hang of the Gaol* (1978), and *The Loud Boy's Life* (1980).

Barker was not satisfied with satirical leftist political theater, however, and his relationship with both the RSC and the Royal Court theaters began to change. The RSC commissioned *Crimes in Hot Countries* (1983) and then initially refused to produce it, presumably because it was too unconventional. He found it increasingly difficult to stage his works, leading to the creation of the Wrestling School, a theater company established by actors from both the RSC and the Royal Court committed to staging Barker's plays. His work was also championed by the actor Ian McDiarmid, who offered Barker his Almeida Theatre in London as a venue.

During this time, Barker developed his conception of the Theatre of Catastrophe, which, as Charles Lamb (1997; see Further Reading) explained, "enables him to detach his characters from the normalising structures of social and economic interdependency" because "his plays are set in catastrophic circumstances either immediately before or immediately after fairly massive social breakdowns." Barker began writing about his theory of the theater in essays published in London newspapers, which were later collected in *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989). From 1988 to 2013, the Wrestling School produced at least one new Barker play each year, with plans to continue, although the company lost its Arts Council funding in 2007. Initially, Kenny Ireland was the Wrestling School's primary director, but soon Barker himself was directing, beginning with the shows *Hated Nightfall* (1994) and *Judith* (1990). Barker's plays remained on the fringe of English theater, however, and over time, he became more popular in the rest of Europe than he was in his own country. In 2002, he contributed the play *Gertrude—The Cry* to the Elsinore Hamlet Summer

Festival, held in Kronborg Castle in Elsinore, Denmark, to great acclaim. Barker later called it his greatest play.

In 2012, Barker's play *Scenes from an Execution* was staged at the National Theatre in London. It was the first time the company, the most prominent in Britain apart from the RSC, had ever produced a play by Barker, more than 40 years after his first play was performed. In addition to his work as a dramatist, Barker is a poet and a painter. He lives in Brighton, England.

## MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Barker's first plays focused on the subject of class conflict, featuring working-class characters and flouting middle-class mores related to work, crime, violence, and sexuality. Bill and Laurie, the protagonists of *Cheek*, revel in their refusal to get jobs and in their sexual perversions, culminating in a grotesque scene in which Bill has sex with Laurie's mother while Laurie compels Bill's dying father to watch. The twin brothers of *Alpha Alpha* are cheerful murderers, while Noël of *Claw* acts as a pimp and a thief. Criminal behavior is not limited to the working classes, however; the twins of *Alpha Alpha*, loosely based on the notorious London gangsters the Kray brothers, mix with Lord Gadsby, and Noël works for the Home Secretary. Other early plays, including *Stripwell* and *That Good between Us*, focus on figures from government and the judicial system connected to corruption, whether by choice or through apathy.

Heiner Zimmermann (2002) described Barker's *Downchild* (1985) as the last of his "state of the nation" plays that portray the interaction of the working classes with the economic and political forces of contemporary Britain. While Barker wrote from a leftist perspective, drawing heavily from Marxist and socialist ideas, by the mid-1980s, he was no longer writing with a socialist agenda. *No End of Blame* (1981) dramatizes the unsuccessful search for a just political system, and some critics read *Victory* (1983) as a signal that Barker had abandoned political commitment. In *Victory*, Susan Bradshaw, the widow of a Puritan revolutionary during the English Civil War, travels around London picking up pieces of her husband's corpse, which at the restoration of the monarchy were exhumed and put on display. Confronted with a failed revolution and a monarchy drained of power, Bradshaw no longer recognizes any authority—political, or, especially, moral—other than the individual.

At this point, Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe emerged. His earlier plays were connected with the school of leftist social realism, dominated by the Modernist theory of Bertolt Brecht, which sought to engage audiences intellectually rather than emotionally. Plays were to be didactic, valuing reason and clarity as a means of uncovering and expressing truth. Barker steadily moved away from this model, eventually rejecting the premise that theater ought to be educative, morally or politically coherent, or driven by the playwright. As Barker described it in *Arguments for a The-*

*atre*, the Theatre of Catastrophe presents extremes of experience that take characters beyond reason and morality, where, potentially, both they and the audience will be liberated from a conformist culture and freed to define their own identities and desires. Rejecting a coherent message, Barker called for a theater that would fragment and alienate the audience in their reactions rather than encourage a collective response of either laughter or sadness.

Barker's plays increasingly came to focus on moments in history, as in *Victory*, rather than contemporary class conflict. *The Castle* (1985) is set during the crusades, *Scenes from an Execution* in postwar sixteenth-century Venice, *The Europeans* (1990) during the 1683 Turkish invasion of Vienna, and *Hated Nightfall* during the Russian Revolution. The omnipresence of war provides a fitting context for the frequent theme of human cruelty in Barker's plays and for the presentation of the body in pain that marks the Theatre of Catastrophe. Many of these plays also feature an artist or author figure trying and failing to come to grips with what he or she witnesses, a pattern that, as Eric Mottram (1993) suggested, illustrates the impossibility of imposing meaning or order through art.

Barker has also written several adaptations of earlier stories and plays, including *Women Beware Women* (1986), from Thomas Middleton's play of the same name (c. 1621); *Seven Lears* (1989), from William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606); *Minna* (1994), from G. E. Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767); *Judith*, from the biblical story of Judith; *Uncle Vanya* (1996), from the 1898 original by Anton Chekhov; and *Gertrude—The Cry*, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600). Graham Saunders (2010) observed that Barker holds a special affinity for early modern tragedy, especially violent and grotesque Jacobean revenge tragedy, and Barker acknowledged in an interview with Gilles Menegaldo (1994) that such theater resonates with him because of "its understanding that if theatre was not located at the extremes of human experience, it could not exist as a theatre at all."

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Dominant themes in scholarship on Barker's plays include the portrayal of sexuality and desire, his emphasis on the individual, and the subversion and shock his works elicit from the audience. Writing about Barker's early plays, Tony Dunn (1984; see Further Reading) observed that blunt, sometimes brutal, expressions of desire burst forth shockingly from criminals as well as bishops, portraying characters at their most basic level, unconstrained by social mores. For Dunn, Barker's emphasis on the insistent nature of desire distinguished his plays from other leftist drama of the 1970s and 1980s, as it could not be incorporated into leftist intellectual analysis or even liberal sexual morality. Discussing Barker's *Women Beware Women*, William Hutchings (1988) quoted critic Jonathan Dollimore's



program notes describing the contradictory functions of desire in the play: “desire at the mercy of power, desire as subversive of power.” Desmond Gallant (1997) suggested that Barker’s exploration of power through sexuality was influenced by Brecht. Where Barker diverged, Gallant argued, was in his use of desire to maintain ambiguity and diminish the primacy of reason. Barker himself said in his interview with Menegaldo, “Desire is the great enemy of order.” As Saunders (1999), Clare Finburgh (2008), and Steve Chinna (2008) noted, Barker’s interest in desire has also brought about heightened attention to the relationship between women and power, particularly in his female characters adapted from earlier works.

Karoline Gritzner (2005) argued that Barker’s focus on sexuality also underscores his concern for individual rather than collective experience, both in the text and in performance. In Zimmermann’s definition of the Theatre of Catastrophe, he wrote that the playwright’s “characters put the individual’s desires, the individual’s claim to self-fulfilment above the welfare of society.” Writing about Barker’s use of the dramatic chorus, Jens Peters (2012; see Further Reading) cited Barker’s opinion that the conflict between the individual and the collective was a central concept in European art, across centuries and genres. Both Liz Tomlin (2000) and David Barnett (2001) questioned Barker’s emphasis on the individual, with Tomlin contending that Barker’s individualism merely confirms the beliefs of his current audiences, rather than challenging them, while Barnett suggested that Barker’s notion of the individual is a romanticized Nietzschean version. Responding to Barnett’s criticism, Sean Carney (2013) argued that Barker’s individualism is not represented so much by the individual will or the romantic solitary hero as it is by the unconscious, released from both social and internal suppression. This liberation is also the effect Barker has said he wants to give his audience: in an interview with Olivier Py (2009; see Further Reading), Barker said theater is obligated to overwhelm the audience. Throughout his writings, Barker has repudiated the idea of enlightening, educating, entertaining, or even pleasing an audience. As Thomas Freeland (2011) observed in a discussion of *The Ecstatic Bible*, Barker often calls upon his audience to be a witness to pain, even to the limits of their endurance. Even Barker’s admirers have acknowledged that some Barker plays can be hard to tolerate, leading David Ian Rabey (2006) to speculate that it “may be that the audience for this theatre does not yet go to the theatre.”

Shaun Strohmer

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Plays

*Cheek*. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London. 11 Sept. 1970. London: Methuen, 1971.

*No One Was Saved*. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London. 19 Nov. 1970.

*Edward: The Final Days and Faceache*. Open Space Theatre, London. 15 Feb. 1972.

*Alpha Alpha*. Open Space Theatre, London. 17 Sept. 1972.

*Private Parts*. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. 1972.

*Rule Britannia*. Open Space Theatre, London. 9 Jan. 1973.

*Skipper and My Sister and I*. Bush Theatre, London. 12 Mar. 1973.

*Bang*. Open Space Theatre, London. 23 May 1973.

*Claw*. Open Space Theatre, London. 30 Jan. 1975.

*Stripwell*. Royal Court Theatre, London. 14 Oct. 1975.

*Wax*. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 1976.

*Fair Slaughter*. Royal Court Theatre, London. 13 June 1977. London: Calder, 1978.

*That Good between Us*. RSC Warehouse Theatre, London. 28 July 1977.

*Stripwell and Claw*. London: Calder, 1977.

*The Love of a Good Man*. Sheffield Crucible, Sheffield. 19 Oct. 1978.

*The Hang of the Gaol*. RSC Warehouse Theatre, London. 15 Dec. 1978.

*The Loud Boy’s Life*. RSC Warehouse Theatre, London. 26 Feb. 1980.

*Birth on a Hard Shoulder*. Stockholm National Theatre, Stockholm. 8 Nov. 1980.

*The Love of a Good Man and All Bleeding*. London: Calder, 1980.

*That Good between Us and Credentials of a Sympathiser*. London: Calder, 1980.

*No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming*. Oxford Playhouse, Oxford. 11 Feb. 1981. London: Calder, 1981.

*The Poor Man’s Friend*. Colway Theatre, Colway. 1 Dec. 1981.

*The Hang of the Gaol and Heaven*. London: Calder, 1982.

*Two Plays for the Right: The Loud Boy’s Life and Birth on a Hard Shoulder*. London: Calder, 1982.

*Victory: Choices in Reaction*. Royal Court Theatre, London. 17 Feb. 1983. London: Calder, 1983.

*Crimes in Hot Countries*. Theatre Underground, University of Essex, Colchester. 15 Mar. 1983.

*A Passion in Six Days*. Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. 7 Oct. 1983.

- The Power of the Dog*. Hampstead Theatre, London. 14 Nov. 1984. London: Calder, 1985.
- Crimes in Hot Countries and Fair Slaughter*. London: Calder, 1984.
- The Castle*. The Pit, Barbican Theatre, London. 14 Oct. 1985.
- Downchild*. The Pit, Barbican Theatre, London. 21 Oct. 1985.
- The Castle and Scenes from an Execution*. London: Calder, 1985.
- A Passion in Six Days and Downchild*. London: Calder, 1985.
- Women Beware Women*. Adapt. from *Women Beware Women*, by Thomas Middleton. Royal Court Theatre, London. 1 Feb. 1986. London: Calder, 1986.
- The Possibilities*. Almeida Theatre, London. 23 Feb. 1988. London: Calder, 1988.
- The Last Supper*. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 8 Mar. 1988. London: Calder, 1988.
- The Bite of the Night*. The Pit, Barbican Theatre, London. 31 Aug. 1988. London: Calder, 1988.
- Pity in History and Women Beware Women*. London: Calder, 1988.
- Seven Lears*. Adapt. from *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 4 Nov. 1989.
- Golgo*. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 24 Nov. 1989.
- Scenes from an Execution*. Almeida Theatre, London. 11 Jan. 1990. London: Oberon, 2012.
- The Europeans and Judith*. London: Calder, 1990.
- Seven Lears and Golgo*. London: Calder, 1990.
- Collected Plays*. 4 vols. London: Calder, 1990-98.
- A Hard Heart*. Almeida Theatre, London. 3 Mar. 1992.
- Terrible Mouth*. With Nigel Osbourne. Almeida Theatre, London. 10 July 1992. London: Universal, 1992.
- A Hard Heart and Early Hours of a Reviled Man*. London: Calder, 1992.
- The Europeans*. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 14 Feb. 1993.
- All He Fears*. Moving Stage Theatre, London. 2 Mar. 1994. London: Calder, 1993.
- Hated Nightfall*. Dancehouse Theatre, Manchester. 8 Mar. 1994.
- Minna*. Adapt. from *Minna von Barnhelm*, by G. E. Lessing. University of Leeds Workshop Theatre, Leeds. 13 Apr. 1994. Leeds: Alumnus, 1994.
- Hated Nightfall and Wounds to the Face*. London: Calder, 1994.
- Judith*. Haymarket Studio, Leicester. 28 Feb. 1995.
- (Uncle) Vanya*. Adapt. from *Uncle Vanya*, by Anton Chekhov. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 18 Apr. 1996.
- The Gaoler's Ache for the Nearly Dead*. London: Calder, 1996.
- Wounds to the Face*. Haymarket Theatre, Leicester. 6 May 1997.
- Ursula*. Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham. 20 Apr. 1998.
- Und*. Derby Playhouse, Derby. 26 May 1999.
- The Ecstatic Bible*. Adelaide Festival, Adelaide. 8 Mar. 2000. London: Oberon, 2004.
- He Stumbled*. Gardner Arts Centre, Brighton. 29 Sept. 2000.
- A House of Correction*. Riverside Studios, London. 28 Sept. 2001.
- Gertrude—The Cry*. Adapt. from *Hamlet*, by Shakespeare. Kronborg Castle, Elsinore. Aug. 2002. London: Oberon, 2002.
- 13 Objects*. Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham. 16 Oct. 2003.
- Dead Hands*. Riverside Studios, London. 2 Nov. 2004. London: Oberon, 2004.
- Animaux en paradis* [may be translated as *Animals in Paradise*]. Compagnie Mala Noche/Wrestling School, Théâtre de l'Ephémère, Le Mans. 22 Mar. 2005.
- The Fence in Its Thousandth Year*. Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham. 2 June 2005. London: Oberon, 2005.
- The Seduction of Almighty God by the Boy Priest Loftus in the Abbey of Calcetto, 1539*. The Door, Birmingham. 2 Nov. 2006. London: Oberon, 2006.
- Plays*. 7 vols. London: Oberon, 2006-13.
- I Saw Myself*. Jerwood Vanbrugh Theatre, London. 9 Apr. 2008.
- The Dying of Today*. Arcola Theatre, London. 21 Oct. 2008.
- Found in the Ground*. Riverside Studios, London. 1 Oct. 2009.

*Hurts Given and Received*. Riverside Studios, London. 29 Apr. 2010. London: Oberon, 2010.

*Blok/Eko*. Northcott Theatre, Exeter. 9 Jun. 2011. London: Oberon, 2011.

*Lot and His God*. Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth. 30 May 2012.

*The Forty*. Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth. 11 Apr. 2014.

### Other Major Works

*Aces High*. With William Hughes. London: Futura, 1976. (Screenplay)

*Pity in History*. BBC. 4 July 1985. (Teleplay)

*Don't Exaggerate*. London: Calder, 1985. (Poetry)

*The Breath of the Crowd*. London: Calder, 1986. (Poetry)

*Gary the Thief/Gary Upright*. London: Calder, 1987. (Poetry)

*Lullabies for the Impatient*. London: Calder, 1988. (Poetry)

*Arguments for a Theatre*. London: Calder, 1989. Rev. ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993. Rev. ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. (Essays)

*The Ascent of Monte Grappa*. London: Calder, 1991. (Poetry)

*The Tortmann Diaries*. London: Calder, 1996. (Poetry)

*Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2005. (Essays and poetry)

*A Style and Its Origins*. London: Oberon, 2007. (Biography)

## AUTHOR COMMENTARY

### Howard Barker and Gilles Menegaldo (interview date 1994)

SOURCE: Barker, Howard. "Challenging Conventions: An Interview with Howard Barker." Interview by Gilles Menegaldo. *Sources* 3 (1997): 157-71. Print.

[In the following interview, conducted in 1994, Barker discusses responses to his plays, including his rejection by established theatrical institutions and audience reactions. Explaining his philosophy of dividing rather than uniting the audience, Barker maintains that fragmenting the audience is a means of rejecting shared morality, freeing individuals to construct morality and authority for themselves, if they are willing to take the risk. Barker also talks about his connection to earlier theatrical traditions, especially Renaissance tragedy, proposing that he

shares with those earlier playwrights a desire to talk about human experience at its extremes.]

Howard Barker was born in South London in 1946. The son of an industrial bookbinder, he read history at the University of Sussex. His career as a dramatist began with *Stripwell* staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in 1970. He shot to prominence in the Seventies, with plays such as *Claw* (1975) which give a dark uncompromising portrayal of British society and challenge conventional morality, provoking the Royal Court public. He has written since then about thirty plays, a book of theoretical essays in which he develops, among other things, his concept of a "catastrophic theatre." He has also published collections of poems and has written plays for both radio and television. Howard Barker has had a privileged relationship with the Royal Shakespeare Company which has staged several of his productions, notably *The Castle* (1985) and *The Bite of the Night* (1988). Another company, The Wrestling School, regularly stages his works.

One specific aspect of his theatre is the revisiting of classic authors such as Shakespeare in *The Seven Lears* (1990) or Chekhov in his own version of Uncle Vania (1991). He also frequently chooses myth and legend as a basis for his stories, as in *Judith*. He is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, with the moral responsibilities of the artist in society as testifies *Scenes from an Execution* (1985) whose main protagonist is a woman painter in the Italian Renaissance in Venice. His theatre is violent and provocative, probing into the dark sides of the human psyche, exploring the complex issues of power and sexuality. His language is highly theatrical and striking, using a variety of styles, ranging from the raw and crude to the utmost poetic and lyrical. One of his latest and most brilliant plays, *Hated Nightfall*, which depicts the last days of the Romanovs in 1917 was staged by the author at the Odéon in Paris in 1995. Howard Barker now lives and works in Brighton.

[Menegaldo]: How did you start writing and, more specifically, for the stage?

[Barker]: I wrote from a very early age. As an adolescent I wrote voluminous novels. On leaving university I wrote some stage plays. One of these I sent to the BBC Radio, which then had a good reputation for encouraging new writers. They performed *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great*, which as the title indicates was a satirical/historical piece. Following that I sent plays to the Royal Court, the obvious destination for an aspiring writer. Despite its icy atmosphere and its peculiar snobbery, a snobbery mingled with a high-minded liberalism and a voyeuristic fascination with working class culture, I wrote a number of plays for the Royal Court, and whilst my whole approach to theatre ruled me out as a 'Royal Court writer,' I have continued to see my work played there.