



HOWARD BARKER'S THEATRE OF SEDUCTION

CHARLES LAMB

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HOWARD BARKER'S THEATRE OF SEDUCTION

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Transferred to Digital Printing 2003

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lamb, Charles

Howard Barker’s theatre of seduction.—(Contemporary theatre studies; v. 19)

1. Barker, Howard, 1946—Criticism and interpretation
2. Dramatists, English—20th century
3. English drama—20th century—History and criticism
I. Title
822.9’14

ISBN 0-203-99010-2 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 3-7186-5884-4 (Print Edition)

Cover illustration: ‘Put this on, please...’ *The Castle*, Act I, Scene 1.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

Franc Chamberlain

LIST OF PLATES

1. The home-coming of the Crusaders. *The Castle*, Act I, Scene 1.
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PREFACE

My point of departure for this study took the form of a practical problem: none of the contemporary performance theory that I knew was of any real use whatsoever or provided the least assistance in staging Howard Barker's plays. This conclusion was based on my own experience of directing and acting in Barker plays as well as a wide acquaintanceship with major professional productions of his work. I felt somehow that the full dramatic potential, especially of the later texts, was not being realised in performance. On the other hand there was throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties an unprecedented interest in and awareness of theatre as theatre: theatrical performance was no longer seen as a simple 'fleshing out' of the dramatic text but rather as a craft in its own right quite separate from literary fiction and from film. This period witnessed the widespread dissemination of Theatre Studies in Universities and Colleges, while in schools drama was established as an independent subject within the curriculum. There was, consequently, a considerable new interest in theoretical approaches to performance.

Barker, however, seemed to be increasingly at odds with the current theatrical climate of the seventies and eighties. He appeared to be pursuing a more classical and perhaps more conservative aesthetic—though his plays did not demonstrate the 'accessibility' that such an approach might suggest; on the contrary they became increasingly 'difficult'. There is a sense now that directors have very little idea of how to 'cope' with these texts. I think this is in no small measure owing to the lack of any kind of theoretical basis on which to proceed with them. My starting point for this exploration was the problem—the challenge—that Barker's plays posed to contemporary performance theory.

While working on this study, I was fortunate in being permitted to observe rehearsals of professional productions of Barker's plays. It was at one of these—during the RSC's work on *The Bite of the Night*—that I devised the strategy which informs this study. The director was having difficulty working on some scenes in the third act and I noticed that a consistent pattern was emerging. A scene would be built up logically, with a pattern of clear and consistent

motivations. At a certain point, however, an action would occur which violently broke with the foregoing 'rationale'. Discussion between actors and director yielded no more than that this was an 'irrational' moment. Whereupon the action was proceeded with along the same lines as before, i.e. every effort was made to put the previous 'logic' back together again. I don't think anybody found this particularly satisfactory—the resultant dramatic structure providing a basic pattern of rationality spotted with isolated and inchoate irruptions of 'the irrational'.

This gave me the idea of reversing the procedure: instead of working through the scene and elucidating it with an a priori set of 'rational' assumptions, what would happen if one started with the 'irrational' moment? If, instead of treating it as a wholly inscrutable aberration, one posited it as the key to everything else? What if—as Heidegger might have put it—one chose to 'dwell' in the irrational moment, making that one's theoretical ground? How does one theorise the irrational? It was this chain of thought that led me to seduction. Clearly, it would be quixotic to hope to discover a coherent 'logic' in seduction but it might nevertheless exhibit characteristic processes which could be described or even adumbrated. In Chapter Two, I advance certain theoretical postulates relevant to seduction—for which I am particularly indebted to the writings of Jean Baudrillard. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Danny Boyle and the RSC company of *The Bite of the Night*, Kenny Ireland and the Wrestling School company of *Victory*, David Thomas, David Ian Rabey and Roland Cotterill for reading and commenting on my work. Particular thanks are due to Howard Barker for being most generous with advice and assistance.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of being widely recognised as ‘a major voice’, Barker’s relationship with British theatre has not blossomed as one might have expected. In the seventies, his career developed initially along lines similar to a number of other ‘political’ dramatists such as Brenton, Hare and Churchill. Having achieved a degree of success and recognition at The Royal Court with *Stripwell* (1975) and *Fair Slaughter* (1977), his work was taken up by The RSC Warehouse Company which staged *That Good Between Us* (1977), *The Hang of The Gaol* (1978), and *The Loud Boy’s Life* (1980). These plays were received as part of the Warehouse’s programme of politically committed work. Howard Davies, the artistic director of the Warehouse, said of *That Good Between Us*:

*I was keen to do a play by one of the writers who were linguistically orientated and belonged to the tradition of, if you like, intellectual socialists—Howard Brenton, David Edgar, Howard Barker.*¹

The overt and consciously political slant of this company tended to obscure for many critics other less immediately categorisable facets of Barker’s plays. So, Ronald Hayman could write of *The Hang of the Gaol*:

*What is ultimately stultifying for the audience is the inescapable feeling that each confrontation is being rigged to serve as an illustration for a thesis about class-war, that the dialogue is being written not to penetrate more searchingly into the theatrical reality which the fiction is generating, but to vent a spleen that existed in toto before Howard Barker began to concern himself with these characters or this situation. His interest in people and behaviour is secondary.*²

Slightly more perceptive leftist critics, however, voiced the suspicion that Barker’s work was not essentially informed by conscious political commitment. W.Stephen Gilbert, in a review of *Fair Slaughter*, compared the play unfavourably with the Brechtian style of Bond:

*The trick in Bond's plays is that the analysis percolates the theatricality, that the latter is a precise manifestation of the former. FAIR SLAUGHTER is not as clear and eloquent. It's a nicely judged pageant history of British Communism, but I'm not sure that Barker's unprecedented engagement with his characters doesn't finally fudge his conclusion—*³

At the same time, there was a growing complaint about the lack of authenticity and realism (see Hayman above) which led James Fenton to dismiss *The Loud Boy's Life* in contemptuous terms:

*The play...knows nothing of Britain and nothing of politics. It doesn't want to know. It merely caters sycophantically to the prejudices of a pseudo-political milieu.*⁴

This kind of blinkered and at times violent critical response to the plays, reflecting more the political or ideological prejudices of the reviewer, did little to assist a balanced assessment of their more unique and artistically radical qualities. As I have already indicated, Barker's work in the seventies generally recommended itself to directors on a 'political' level: this was because the plays were overtly concerned with political figures and political questions. Besides, it was clear that Barker's sympathies lay on the left. The political overview, however, served for some time to mask a shift in Barker's interest away from the political to the personal, from the stereotype to the individual. The vogue for political theatre had, however, facilitated a general formal and stylistic diversification—with satiric caricature being particularly favoured. Indeed, Barker himself admits that, for a time early in his career, he allowed the satiric impulse to dominate—as in *Edward, The Final Days* (1972):

*I placed the characters in EDWARD, THE FINAL DAYS squarely in their social context, but only as subjects of lampoon, because I hated them and was offended by them. I am still deeply offended by society, and still hate as much, but the habit is no longer iconoclastic, as it was automatically then.... In that period I was further from any feeling of involvement with my characters than at any time before or since. I began to feel that being involved with my characters at all was a weakness.*⁵

Claw (1975), however, marked the end of this tendency and constitutes a landmark in Barker's artistic development. The action begins in familiar 'knockabout' style tracing the career of an ambitious working class youth from a background of deprivation. Noel Biledew is born, the illegitimate son of Mrs Biledew, a munitions worker, while her husband languishes in a German POW camp. When Biledew returns home his anger at this unanticipated 'son' is

compounded by the fact that he has meanwhile been rendered sexually impotent through a violent encounter with the boot of a camp guard. Biledew, a brooding idealist, is presented as inflexibly and intensely ‘moral’ in the cause of communism. Mrs Biledew, on the contrary, is thoroughly pragmatic and prepared to brush aside moral scruples when these might conflict with her own material comfort or social advancement. Accordingly, when the infant Noel returns home from school with thirty coronation mugs which have been traded for ‘a look’ at Joan Preston ‘behind the lavatories’, maternal disgust rapidly gives way to approbation and his enterprise is compared favourably to his unemployed father’s torpor. To an extent, Noel’s subsequent career can be seen as his attempt to reconcile the conflicting imperatives of this genealogy—on the one hand Biledew’s moralised class loyalty/class hatred and Mrs Biledew’s amoral selfish pragmatism.

Apart from this, Noel’s poor eyesight has made him an object of hatred and derision:

NOEL: I’m used to being hated. From the first day I went to the Infants school they had it in for me. Because of these. (He touches his glasses).⁶

NOEL: Serve who? The sods who hid my glasses so I wandered round the playground with my hands outstretched, calling out ‘Boss eyes’ and ‘Blind git’ and making me fall on my face?⁷

Noel’s personal response to a cruel world is hatred and a desire for vengeance. Although he is the central character in the play, he is not thereby accorded any privileged moral status.

He follows up his coronation mug success by embarking on a career as a pimp with his first employee being a fellow comrade in the Young Communist League. The way he secures Nora’s services is typical of a series of crucial moments in which Noel recreates himself in his new, self-styled identity of ‘Claw’. He persuades her—appealing to her desire for a better life while simultaneously neutralising the moral taboo by presenting prostitution as a form of class war:

NOEL: This is political action! (She stops, her back to him) This isn’t theory. This isn’t arguing the toss for the millioneth time in the Battersea cell of the world revolutionary party. This is action, this is carrying anthrax into their woolly nests.

(Pause. She turns, looks at him for some seconds.)

NORA: And what’s my share?

NOEL: Halves.

NORA: No.

(Pause)

NOEL: All right. 60–40.

(She grins)

NORA: *Rip their soiled knickers down!*

NOEL: *Hero of Labour!*

NORA: *How do we start?*

NOEL: *Right here. Tonight. Start small and local, then spread our wings.*

NORA: *There aren't any bourgeois in this street.*

NOEL: *Of course not. This is just for the experience.*

(She takes a deep breath)

NORA: *All right.*

NOEL: *First geezer comes along, I proposition him.*⁸

What happens here is typical of a process which, I will argue later, lies at the heart of Barker's dramatic method. Noel's proposal, contravening as it does the moral taboo, provokes, initially, simple outrage. Persuasion, however, arouses curiosity and the proposal becomes a challenge. When Nora takes up Noel's suggestion, both are exhilarated through accepting the notion of transgression and proceed to escalate theory into action. In the event, Noel has to face the challenge of importuning a policeman (the 'first geezer') and though in strictly material terms he comes out a net loser, he is both rich in experience and launched in his career. It becomes clear, however, as the play progresses that Noel's success in selling Nora the idea of prostitution as class war was no mere cynical casuistry deployed solely for immediate material gain: in convincing Nora, he has, simultaneously, convinced himself. He rejects his communist father's posture of a fruitless but 'moral' political defiance and attempts to achieve the private satisfaction of undermining the hated establishment from within; eventually he rises to the dizzy heights of supplying prostitutes to the Home Secretary. This provides the ideal opportunity in Act Two for the bulk of the play's savagely humorous political satire.

Noel's crusade is complicated, however, when he falls in love with his distinguished client's wife, a turn of events which leads him into confrontation. The moment he is perceived as a real threat to the political establishment, he is detained in a mental hospital and liquidated; his murder comprises the third act of the play. Of this scene, Barker has said:

I knew when I'd written CLAW...that I'd made a definite advance, largely because of the third act, which I regarded as a triumph. It was almost a new form for me: in prose with very long speeches—even longer to begin with than they are in the final text.

There was a withdrawal from the action on my part, too: it is less insistent. Nothing in the act relies on the shared assumptions that I have expected audiences to respond to in other acts. It was the beginning of a confidence to remove myself

from a common ground. I dislike a play in which the dramatist overstates his intentions, making matters easy for his audience. It produces this rather unhealthy expectation that we should all know what it's about by the interval. To continually undermine the expected is the only way to alter people's perceptions.⁹

Act 2 ends confrontationally with Noel wrestling psychologically and physically with Clapcott, the Home Secretary, as a special branch officer armed with a machine gun bursts in through the window. Act 3 is set in 'an institution' where breakfast is about to be served to a single diner. Lily and Lusby, attired as waiters with white jackets and napkins, address the audience in turn with lengthy monologues of reminiscence which gradually reveal that one is an ex-terrorist, the other a redundant hangman. Both men are phlegmatically psychopathic and the leisurely and reflective pace of these speeches serves transitionally to wean the audience from expectations of hectic comic action towards a change of style.

Noel enters in 'a battered grey suit' and they serve him breakfast. Apart from its sacramental implications, the eating of food upon stage can be a very significant theatrical action—here fruit juice, bacon, eggs, and tea; this consumption is physical—and, in itself, real. By extension it serves to emphasise the reality of the character and—further—the situation, acting as a device to alter our focus on Noel rapidly and economically; cartoon characters aren't substantial in this way. There is no 'human' contact between the waiters and their client. As Noel eats, the reflective monologues carry on, with occasional lengthy pauses, specified by Barker as lasting up to ten seconds; these serve to increase the tension already created by the lack of onstage communication.

When Noel first speaks he is 'tense and desperate', —a startling contrast to his two gaolers, and his speech is a plea for help, an expression of his feelings of impotence and terror; here Barker makes use of a device which he frequently employs to create a powerful emotional effect swiftly—the cry:

(Long pause. Then with a cry of despair) My home! My ordinary nothingness! I would fall down on the grass and kiss it no matter how many dogs had shit on it....¹⁰

After another pause, Lusby resumes his monologue and the audience are finally given to understand how both men were recruited to form 'a handpicked team to deal with a special category of criminals'. Their impassivity and casual conversation about the sexual proclivities of various pop singers contrast with Claw's desperate desire to live. In this extremity he summons up the hitherto despised figure of his father now dying in the geriatric ward of a hospital 'in the

stench of urine and terminal flesh'. After a moving colloquy in which father and son show tenderness for the only time, Old Biledew advises Noel to—

*Win them with your common suffering. Find the eloquence of Lenin, lick their cruelty away... Don't despise them, win them Noel!...Be cogent, earn their love...*¹¹

then leaves him alone with his gaolers. After a pause, the son follows this advice in a speech of some sixty lines, an appeal to their humanity and sense of class loyalty which accumulates an enormous emotional charge. Barker's stage directions read:

*(This speech must begin clumsily and brokenly. By the end it is eloquent and delivered with conviction. It is the significant transformation of the play.)*¹²

For the audience, who know Lily and Lusby, Noel's task appears hopeless but the quality of this speech is such that by the end there should be real suspense as to its effect. Noel transforms himself and has possibly transformed his situation. After a long expressionless pause, their decision is signalled by Lily's switching on his transistor radio which is playing 'Hungry for Love' and a bath is lowered in. The horror of the execution is emphasised in the details of the stage directions:

*(Lily and Lusby rise to their feet and roll up their sleeves. After some time, Noel begins slowly to undress, removing first his jacket, then his shirt, then trousers, shoes, socks, and finally pants, he goes slowly to the bath and climbs in. With a single thrust, Lily and Lusby force his head beneath the water.)*¹³

The theatrical impact of Noel's stripping, apart from its symbolic aptness, serves to reinforce the tragic intensity of this moment; we are a million miles from the cartoon style of Act One, yet Barker has managed successfully to link these two apparently incompatible extremes and forge an artistic whole with a unique integrity of its own. Such was the 'definite advance' which he felt he had made in this scene:

*When I wrote CLAW, I was vaguely aware that I was getting on a helter-skelter of satire and I wasn't being at all engaged with my characters. It was only with CLAW that I managed to drag myself back from what might have been a fatal precipice. The last act which I still think is rather a fine piece of writing surmounts and overcomes the satirical emphasis of the previous two acts. So I was led off and recovered. (Laughs)*¹⁴

Retrospectively it is possible to see how the satirical impulse leading to the development of a style employing rhetoric, exaggeration and the grotesque ultimately helped Barker to forge his own non-realistic style of fantasy in which the satirical element has now all but disappeared. More recently he has stated:

*The time for satire is ended. Nothing can be satirised in the authoritarian state. It is culture reduced to playing the spoons. The stockbroker laughs and the satirist plays the spoons.*¹⁵

*The sense of caricature has been increasingly marginal, has been located in minor characters. In the centre of the plays complexity and contradiction have replaced it. Partly this reflects moves away from class stereotypes.*¹⁶

The incident of Noel Biledew attempting persuasion in an apparently hopeless situation both exemplifies and symbolises a shift in Barker's interest; it manifests several preoccupations to which he was to return repeatedly in later plays. Firstly, there is the catastrophic scenario:

*Under ordinary circumstances character remains unexplored,—unexposed; the nerves are quite concealed. But in order to force that exposure on the characters, I always set them within catastrophic situations. The characters on stage are not simply in unlikely situations but usually disastrous ones... I'm attracted to those circumstances because at times like that people are disorderly. They cease to be the predictable product of social forces—not simply workers or bourgeois or rentiers; they are dislocated from those classic roles by the social struggle.*¹⁷

Secondly, there is the individual attempt to produce an alteration in the apparently inevitable—solely through speech; Noel's effort is mirrored in the climactic confrontation of *Stripwell* (Royal Court 1975): in *Claw* a working-class rebel pleads with establishment assassins; Stripwell, high court judge and pillar of the establishment, begs for his life at the hands of an anarchic criminal who is about to shoot him. In *Fair Slaughter* (Royal Court 1977), the plot of the play turns upon the prisoner, Old Gocher, succeeding in persuading the gaoler, Leary, to help him escape. In *Crimes In Hot Countries* (1983), the magician and rabble-rouser, Toplis, recounts how he persuaded guards to let him escape from custody the night before he was due to be executed for desertion; two successful permutations of *Claw*'s dilemma. In *The Power of the Dog*, Ilona tries desperately to persuade Stalin to spare her lover, the corrupt Sorge. There are numerous similar instances of attempts at persuasive speech in extremis. At a more profound level, Barker seems fascinated by the power of language to effect the social event and the individual. This exploratory impulse tends to supersede the simple polemic consistent with satire, and *Stripwell*, premiered in the same year

as *Claw*, left some critics who had found the latter play 'legible' as political satire, confused as to where Barker's sympathies lay.¹⁸

Just as the predominantly conventional forms, even though disrupted, in *Claw* and *Stripwell*, maintained the accessibility of the plays—in the eyes of theatre managements at least—so the political/satirical elements of the Warehouse plays and Barker's very considerable comic gifts ensured their appeal to a contemporary appetite for political drama. It was becoming increasingly evident, however, that his writing was growing in complexity with far fewer concessions being made to conventional expectations. The RSC's commitment to staging Barker (albeit this commitment had extended only as far as studio spaces) faltered when they rejected *Crimes In Hot Countries*—a script which they themselves had commissioned. At that time, this was, arguably, the most densely written Barker text to date. The drama was not really satire, nor clear political allegory—and it certainly wasn't realism.

The eighties evidenced a growing rejection of Barker's work by the major theatrical institutions. The National Theatre had never shown any real interest. The RSC staged a 'season' of Barker plays in the Pit but the productions were notoriously meagre while the company channelled all its institutional energies and resources into launching *Les Misérables*. *The Bite of the Night* was staged in similar circumstances. *The Europeans*, written for the RSC, was rejected by them. There have been productions of Barker plays at The Royal Court but these have frequently been promoted as collaborations by actor-led companies such as Joint Stock and, latterly, The Wrestling School. *The Bite of the Night* was originally submitted to the Court and eventually rejected by them. Outside London, Barker has had occasional commissions from more adventurous regional theatres such as Sheffield Crucible (*The Love of a Good Man* (1978) and *A Passion in Six Days* (1983)).

As Robert Shaughnessy indicates in an essay which purports to analyse 'the Barker phenomenon'¹⁹, Barker's main supporters within theatre have been actors,—a state of affairs which culminated in the formation of a company devoted exclusively to performing Barker's work—The Wrestling School. This grew out of earlier Joint Stock productions (*Victory* (1983) and *The Power of the Dog* (1984)) and it is interesting that this particular company, dedicated to democratic self-organisation should have abandoned its characteristic process of company-evolved drama in favour of a text-based approach. In the essay cited above, Shaughnessy develops his argument by claiming that the actor Ian McDiarmid is 'a sort of spokesman for the author' and by drawing upon McDiarmid's conceptions of the essential qualities of the plays. His conclusion is:

*Actors, then, enjoy performing Barker's work because it presents them with the opportunity consciously and ostentatiously to display their skills as performers.*²⁰

Shaughnessy, although he admits later that Barker's dialogue does contain 'a radical disruptive potential', continues this theme by suggesting that Barker's poetic 'style' is essentially an attempt to promote Barker in the role of the 'unique authorial figure', a project in which he is abetted by actors who wish to 'show off'. This somewhat threadbare formulation does not really address what one might perhaps be forgiven for regarding as the key issue—the quality of the actual plays. Regarding this, however, Shaughnessy's analysis of 'the Barker phenomenon' extends only to a single speech from the first page of *The Castle*.

The fact that it has been left to actors to champion Barker is no accident but reflects the inadequacy of current theoretical orthodoxies relating to the production of plays. The key figure in this respect is the director, who carries final responsibility for transferring text to stage and establishes the philosophical/theoretical approach of the company. Actors tend through the nature of their work to function more instinctively. The emergence of the director as a pivotal figure has been well documented in modern theatre studies and this canon (Brecht, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook etc.) has become a significant element in the educational mythology of the contemporary director. A concomitant movement has been the downgrading of dramatist and text. In the words of Jean Mounet-Sully—'Chaque texte n'est qu'un prétexte'. The extreme instance of this tendency towards creative control by director is to be found in the case of the film auteur who will instruct a writer to produce text for predetermined scenarios. In the theatre, a corresponding authority has, to an extent, been exercised by directors, who have had a considerable role in shaping the final performance text of new plays. While it is now the norm for theatrical practice to make demands upon text, there seems to be little expectation that text should make demands upon practice—other than in the case of purely technical ('special') effects. Barker's texts, moreover, are not only very demanding intellectually, but run completely counter to most of the orthodoxies of received directorial wisdom.

For a considerable period during the seventies and eighties, progressive theatre in Britain was dominated by the influence of Brecht. Though this has begun to wane somewhat with the collapse of the Eastern European regimes, it remains a powerful element in that nothing has appeared to challenge or indeed replace it. While it is true that there were other countervailing forces such as Artaud and indeed a huge range of theatrical experiment, no particular element of this sustained and developed itself as consistently and pervasively as the Brechtian thematic. There are many reasons for this but by no means the least significant must be that Brecht's theatrical ideals were closely linked to the