

Access to the Body:
The Theatre of Revelation
in Beckett, Foreman, and Barker

by George Hunka

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On the future of aesthetics

Access to the Body

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Beckett, Foreman, and Barker¹**



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The speaking body on stage as the irreducible condition of theatrical experience is a trope so general as to verge on the meaningless. It is applicable to any theatrical event from a play by Neil Simon or Alan Ayckbourn to the farthest reaches of the work of the Complicite company, Jan Fabre, or Romeo Castellucci. In some theatre of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, however, it is this condition which itself becomes the focus for dramatic exploration. The speaking body's status as both subject and object, as both autonomous consciousness and as a spiritual artifact for the spectator's meditation and contemplation, becomes the basis for imaginative possibility. Schopenhauer's concept of the individual body as the "immediate object," the source for all that can know and is known for the subject, acquires new significance with the threat by politics and culture to its autonomy.² Especially after the catastrophes of the two world wars, the decline of the nation-state in the years following and the rise of a corporatized post-capitalist ideology, the speaking body becomes a special issue of theatre as an art. As individuals themselves have been subjected to a catastrophic fracture of their autonomy in the community, the theatre has now become a self-conscious locus of individual redefinition.

This theatre represents an alternative post-World-War-II theatre tradition, a tradition that exists parallel to both the social realism that arose on English-language stages in the wake of that war and the collectively conceived and politically progressive work exemplified in the United States by the Becks, in the United Kingdom by Peter Brook and Joan Littlewood, and in continental Europe by Artaud and Grotowski. Beginning with Beckett's mature theatrical theory and practice, this theatre posits a unique 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. As this tradition develops through the work of the British dramatist Howard Barker and the American dramatist Richard Foreman, contemporaries in the English-language theatre, the body as autonomous perceptual and erotic object, known inwardly by the performer and outwardly by the spectator, is celebrated as the site of imagination. In the wake of the catastrophic twentieth century, the individual is encouraged to seize once again his or her body for him or herself, a body that has become a possession of the state under both totalitarianism and the post-capitalist culture industry.

¹ Originally written for the conference "Howard Barker's Art of the Theatre," University of Aberystwyth, Wales 10-12 July 2009.

² I cite Schopenhauer here with quite deliberate intent. The three dramatists under consideration in this paper are frequently discussed in connection with contemporary continental philosophies such as those of Adorno, Lacan, Bataille, and Badiou, but it seems to me that their work clearly emerges not from the Hegelian strain of post-Cartesian and especially post-Kantian thought, but from the alternative strain that leads from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche (despite Adorno's dismissive comments on Schopenhauer). Most contemporary continental philosophy, such as Zizek's, emerges from a closer emphasis on the Hegelian rather than the Schopenhauerian stream of influence. In the avoidance of a discussion of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, these critics it seems to me offer an incomplete—and occasionally blinkered and narrow—consideration of the European aesthetic tradition that lies beneath these plays. (I also urge that, apart from Beckett, Foreman and Barker may or may not agree with this assessment of a Schopenhauerian

Front image:
Howard Barker,
Winter landscape : gynaeocologists dining off an actress
oil on board

Below:
Howard Barker,
Study of an actress with an unloved child
oil on board

Neither Foreman nor Barker, in their theoretical writings, explicitly point to Samuel Beckett's plays as a pervasive influence. Foreman's early work was based in an aesthetic borrowed from Gertrude Stein and Bertolt Brecht;³ discussing the literature and music that informs his own practice, Barker cites Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, and as more contemporary influences he names the composers Bela Bartok and Karlheinz Stockhausen, as well as the writers Paul Celan, George Oppen, and especially Louis-Ferdinand Celine.⁴ And indeed, Foreman and Barker's work little resemble Beckett's pre-1962 dramatic writings. But they share with Beckett's post-1962 work a codification of the body as physicalized language, an explicit concern with the physical body in metaphysical space. It is not *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, or *Endgame* to which the plays of Foreman and Barker look back, but to *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Not I*, and radio plays such as *Cascando* and *Words and Music*—works that owe both form and content to a specific acknowledgement of theatrical metaphysics.

The body in Beckett's late work is not, at first, presented full-blown but as a series of fragments. The bodies in his early plays, as innovative as these

plays were, still existed in a recognizably quotidian world: the two tramps on the road, four figures in a post-apocalyptic landscape. *Happy Days* of 1961 ends with Winnie buried to her neck in sand, only her head visible. *Play* of 1962 begins with these speaking heads, disembodied, rehearsing the memory of an extramarital affair. It is only with *Play* that Beckett's dramatic and theatrical practice seizes upon the innovations of his fiction. The man and two women of *Play* are wrested from any recognizable realistic



context and trapped now in urns, in some non-realistic, unspecified locale.

What draws the spectator's attention, more radically than before, is the condition of the body and the speed, inflection, and vocabulary of the expressed spoken word. Language, like the body, is a series of disconnections, fragments that remain to be experienced and reassembled by an individual auditor. *Play's* spotlight, a self-consciously theatrical technology, becomes a fourth character in the performance, the object through which the suffering of the characters is brought forth to consciousness. If the light is a ray of recognition, of consciousness, what then lies within the darkness that surrounds both the figures and the shaft of illumination?

Light sculpts the disembodied heads in *Play*, as well as the hands of *Come and Go*, the mouth of *Not I*. But it also sculpts the negative space of the darkness that surrounds these speaking heads. In his later plays like *Footfalls* and *That Time*, words emerge from this darkness as well, rendering the body on the stage itself an auditor. The space in which these plays transpire is not a crossroads, or an underground bunker, or a searing desert, but the theatre auditorium itself. The second half of the theatrical subject/object equation, the spectator, is now consciously assumed in the theatrical experience. The fourth wall is not so much broken as moved to a place behind the spectator as well.

Bodies in a darkened space, perhaps conceived as an unconscious. But not, it is important to note, as a collective unconscious. As extraordinary as *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Endgame* were, the notion of audience as collective was still an element of Beckett's dramaturgical practice, and elements of popular entertainment such as the music hall and the silent film shaped the structure and performance of these plays. As Beckett explored the more profound implications of the speaking body as primary element in theatre, however, these popular cultural accretions were shorn away from his practice, leaving mere presence and physicality as the severely restricted palette for his theatrical explorations.

Language, the means by which Beckett's characters tell their stories in the late plays, is no longer an avenue towards intelligibility. Instead, words become experiential, riven by anxiety and catastrophe, fragmented and unable to contain physical experience. Nonetheless, in the theatre, these words are the only means by which his bodies can define themselves, can present themselves to the spectator. The mouths sputter their words out ceaselessly as if driven by a need to define the bodies that express them. One is reminded of his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun:



It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own

dimension in their work; I'm unaware of any specific reference to this philosopher in their theoretical writings.) For more on Schopenhauer's metaphysics and aesthetics, see *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts*, edited by Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and for Beckett's specific indebtedness to Schopenhauer, see Ulrich Pothast's *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It* (London: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008). A dreadful subtitle, and the book unfortunately lacks extended consideration of Beckett's post-1962 drama.

³ Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos* (New York: NYU Press, 1976). See especially editor Kate Davy's introduction.

⁴ Interview with Howard Barker, *Private Passions*, BBC, 11 June 2006. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/privatepassions/pip/5591s/>

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984): 171.

⁶ Richard Foreman, "Interview with Ken Jordan" (1990): 6. Accessed 20 June 2009 at <http://www.ontological.com/RF/RFinterviews/ForemanJordan1990.doc>.

language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. [...] At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the word, through words. In this dissonance between the means and their use it will perhaps become possible to feel a whisper of that final music or that silence that underlies All.⁵

Ultimately, I suggest, the theatrical body was that means by which, though language, language was undermined to feel the whisper of that silence: a tactile conclusion that assumes a spectator, a bodied consciousness that sees and listens.

The written text serves as origination for Beckett's theatrical work, as it does for that of American dramatist Richard Foreman. In both his written plays and his directorial and design work for his Ontological-Hysterical Theatre founded in 1968, Foreman's explorations of the dynamics between two bodies begin in his work with the word. Most instructive in terms of the body in the theatre and the triangulation of desire is Foreman's description—perhaps better described as an epiphany—that led to his theatrical practice:

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I saw a particular static moment from my seat in the Circle in the Square where I watched a rather dreadful production of *The Balcony*. And I remember seeing [Shelley] Winters, on one side of the stage, and Lee Grant on the other, and it was just a moment of stasis, and a moment of a kind of tension between them, and I just wanted to make a whole play that had nothing except that unresolved tension between them. And I wrote out of that. I said that's what I want in the theater, just that moment, and it doesn't develop into any of the other awful stuff, the psychological stuff, the narrative stuff, the adventure stuff that it always develops into. But it's just that.⁶

If Beckett fragments and deconstructs the body in post-war Western culture, Foreman attempts to reconstruct it, particularly within the politically progressive culture that surrounded his downtown New York theatre in 1968. Further, Foreman's presentational rather than representational practice—his performers often face squarely towards the audience, their dialogue often

pre-recorded and played through loudspeakers (by which means, Foreman said, he frees his non-professional actors from the rigors of memorizing his elliptical dialogue to concentrate on stage placement and movement)—serves explicitly to triangulate what he refers to as “tension” between performers and spectators. Within a few years, his stage work was eroticized with the appearance of Kate Manheim, Foreman’s second wife, who frequently appeared nude, tension then gaining the additional quality of erotic desire, which dynamic then entered the performance space.

As the name of his theatre suggests, Foreman’s primary concern is the nature of reality as constructed by a subject, particularly within the context of emotional, physical, and psychological extremity. His project is to introduce, through the bodies onstage and his own gnomic, lyrical language, a fracture between the world inside and the world outside the theatre. Seemingly hermetic, Foreman’s work also has a cultural dimension that he does not disclaim:



My plays are an attempt to suggest through example that you can break open the interpretations of life that simplify and suppress the infinite range of inner human energies. [...] The strategies I use are meant to release the impulse from the straitjacket tailored for it by our society. Character, empathy, narrative—these are all straitjackets imposed on the impulse so it can be dressed up in a fashion that is familiar, comforting, and reassuring for the spectator. But I want a theater that frustrates our habitual way of seeing, and by so doing, frees the impulse from the objects in our culture to which it is invariably linked. [...] It’s impulse that’s primary, not the object we’ve been trained to fix it upon. It is the impulse that is your deep truth, not the object that seems to call it forth. The impulse is the vibrating, lively thing that you really are. And that is what I want to return to: the very thing you really are.⁷

If Beckett theorizes the body as a site of expressed suffering, Foreman restores to the experiencing body a creative and imaginative function. The body-as-object, as a physical thing to be contemplated in Beckett’s work, reacquires a consciousness that reconstructs and, more important, can act upon the world that surrounds it. A case in point is Foreman’s 2003 play *Panic! (How to Be Happy!)*, in which four characters, two men and two women, find themselves in a forbidding natural landscape as they attempt to scale a mountain.⁸ Three of the characters hopelessly hurl themselves against the given landscape with little success; only one, a woman given to

⁷ Richard Foreman, *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theater* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992): 4.

⁸ Richard Foreman, *Panic! (How to Be Happy!)*. In *Bad Boy Nietzsche! And Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005).

⁹ Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos* (New York: New York University Press, 1976): 74.

physical stillness, is granted any sort of peace, a peace generated not from understanding but from an ability to reconceive her surroundings. Her body is just as real, just as challenging an object, as the given mountain. We can take the mountain as a metaphor for the theatrical work itself (and why not, given the perspectival freedom that Foreman seeks to encourage in his audiences?). The ordeal of the Beckettian body leads to the imaginative freedom of Foreman's female bodies:

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The artistic experience *must* be an ordeal to be undergone. The rhythms *must* be in a certain way difficult and uncongenial. Uncongenial elements are then redeemed by a clarity in the moment-to-moment, smallest unit of progression. [...] But CLARITY is so difficult in the smallest steps from one moment to the next, because on the miniscule level, clarity is muddled either by the “logic” or progression (which is really a form of sleepwalking) or by the predictability of the opposite choice—the surreal-absurdist choice of the arbitrary & accidental & haphazard step.

Of course

ORDEAL

is the only experience that remains. And clarity is the mode in which the ordeal becomes ecstatic.⁹

This experience of ordeal is shared by the character with an individual auditor or spectator, a specifically theatrical experience that confronts the performing body with the perceiving body, the object with the subject. It is necessarily a challenge. In Foreman's theatre the challenge is presented by the performer exhibiting his or her body as a site of imaginative speculation, inviting the audience to share in that imaginative journey, not knowing its outcome. Foreman writes:

“

Only one theatrical problem exists now: How to create a stage performance in which the spectator experiences the danger of art not as involvement or risk or excitement, not as something that reaches out to vulnerable areas of his person,

but rather

the danger as a possible decision he (spectator) may make

Opposite:
Howard Barker,
*Knowing him imprisoned, I was overcome with sex
oil on board*

upon the occasion of confronting the work of art. The work of art as a contest between object (or process) and viewer.¹⁰

¹⁰ Foreman, *ibid.*, 70.

The performer's body, as well as the spectator's, remains inviolate—the work of art does not “reach out to vulnerable areas of [the] person,” but invites speculation that the process of perceiving the work of art itself originates.

Foreman's theatrical project restores to Beckett's bodies under siege the individual's ability to imaginatively remake the world and the culture that has led to this siege, and simultaneously redefines comic possibilities of theatrical form. In his three mid-career plays that inaugurated his Theatre of Catastrophe, *Victory*, *The Castle*, and *The Europeans*, Howard Barker explores the same imaginative remaking of the body in the world, this time however restoring to it a tragic consciousness, perhaps more Europeanized, it could be said, than Foreman's brighter, more optimistic American perspective. Indeed, these three plays arguably form a tragic trilogy of the European body, specifically the female body (and it must be noted that of the three dramatists of whom I speak today,

the female body is far more central to their work than the male: females are protagonists in most of Beckett's work for solo performers and Foreman's character Rhoda led the casts of nearly all of his early and mid-career work). At the same time, Barker's characters find in confronting and performing their suffering a path to reconstitution and freedom.

In *Victory*, the first of these three plays, the reconstruction of the human body is the explicit subject



¹¹ Howard Barker, *Victory*. In *Plays One* (London: Oberon Books, 2006).

¹² Howard Barker, *The Castle*. In *Plays Two* (London: Oberon Books, 2006): 67.

¹³ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire* (New York: Macmillan, 1989): 167.

¹⁴ Rabey, *ibid.*, 166-167.

matter of the play.¹¹ Bradshaw roams Restoration England in an attempt to collect the body parts of her late husband, a Republican who is arrested, tortured, and finally decapitated by the King's soldiers in the final days before the Restoration. For Scrope, her husband's assistant, this journey is a mere act of mourning for a death, but for Bradshaw herself it is this and more: the reconstruction of her husband's dead body leads to a reconstruction of her own living identity. Indeed, by the end of the play, she has the justified audacity to physically lash out at Milton, an exemplar of the Republican ideology.

The risks are greater in *The Castle*. In the aftermath of a war, male soldiers return home to find that women have created a matriarchy based in compassion and collectivity, a situation that Stucley responds to with the construction of an impossible fortification against the natural world itself. The architect Krak is associated by Barker with an expertise in rectilinear engineering and defense. Rationality and hierarchy are specifically male interests in this play. Krak's rectilinear imagination is threatened when he falls in love with Ann, Stucley's wife, whose very body has introduced chaos into his own expertise. "Where's cunt's geometry?" he exclaims. "The thing has got no angles! And no measure, neither width nor depth, how can you trust what has no measurements?"¹² Nonetheless he has become obsessed, and the obsession is a threat to the continued stability and construction of the castle. As David Ian Rabey notes in his discussion of the play:

“

Krak is engulfed in new drawings, shunning calculation of angles, bending himself to pursue new form: "Drawn cunt [...] In 27 versions." Even Stucley is swayed momentarily from his course: "The representation of that thing is not encouraged by the church. [...] It's wrong, surely, that— [...] I have never looked at one before." This recalls the [...] authoritarian tendency to separate, designate something a polar opposite and then to proceed in denial of confronting its existence, inevitably [producing] the counter-pressure of upheaval, making war necessary.¹³

Of the women in the play, the witch Skinner bears the suffering of genital mutilation and torture, finally condemned to have the rotting corpse of Holiday, whom she has killed, tied to her own body for the rest of her natural life. In this grotesque bonding of dead body to mutilated body, however, "Skinner finds a strength and freedom," Rabey says. "Placed outside the community and normal boundaries of human experience, she is free of desire for Ann, recognizes her vanity and rediscovers an autonomy, if only to accept punishment and remain where she pleases, claiming, 'I belong here. I am the castle also.'"¹⁴

It is simplistic to say that Barker's women "embrace" bodily suffering, despite this explicit embrace of death and life in Skinner's punishment. Instead, as for Beckett's and Foreman's women, this suffering—often associated with the marginal status of women in a paternalistic and authoritarian society, whether it's the seventeenth or the twentieth century—offers an avenue to imaginative autonomy and freedom. Skinner finds it in a newly acquired wit and individuality. What makes this treatment tragic, however, is that there is ultimately no sure redemption in freedom or autonomy. Skinner's condition is a condition of recognition, not reconciliation. Beckett's heroines may be left to their status as objects trapped within memory or trauma, Foreman's find themselves somehow redeemed and encouraged. Neither is the case with Barker's speaking bodies.

¹⁵ Howard Barker, *The Europeans*. In *Plays One* (London: Oberon Books, 2006).

Even the possibility of love as experienced by Katrin in *The Europeans* is not necessarily redemptive—though love provides new possibilities and new imaginative worlds, it does not for that reason redeem tragic experience.¹⁵ In large part this lies at the heart of Barker's conception of tragedy. Katrin is the most theatrical of the female protagonists in these three plays, self-consciously exhibiting herself in childbirth in the public square, an exhibition which attracts Starhemburg, her future lover, to her. Read, again, as a metaphor for the theatrical experience itself, the co-optation of Katrin's exhibition by Leopold when he names the child (who is a product of Katrin's rape by the Turks) Concilia, a co-optation of the imaginative offering Katrin makes to her audience. Her child can become a property of the state if she herself cannot. It is her own suffering physical body to which Katrin ultimately lays claim even in the trauma of the abandonment of the child at the end of the play. This suffering, and the new imaginative freedom it has engendered, is beyond Leopold's and the culture's reach. In her suffering is no reconciliation or redemption, but there is in it a freedom from the authoritarian state, and finally a freedom to love.

This alternative theatrical tradition reunites the two halves of the Cartesian human being, joining body

Howard Barker, *Untitled*
ink and watercolor on paper



¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986): 458.

to spirit once again. And it was from a rejection of this Cartesian thought that Beckett's work most notoriously sprang. In one of his final plays, Beckett took on the theatre itself—not merely as metaphor but as explicit subject matter. A theatre director and his assistant arrange the body of an aged, pale, voiceless man for public exhibition. The director and his assistant are busy, crude, and self-important; the director is in a hurry for he has a meeting to attend (what's more, a government meeting: "Step on it, I have a caucus," he exclaims).¹⁶ But the body around which they scurry remains, at center stage, raising its head only at the very end to stare the applauding audience in the face. The applause stops; the man keeps staring, though he remains silent. Barker and Foreman's project is to re-equip this suffering body with a voice and movement, to start out from this individual human body without which there can be no theatre whatsoever. Beckett's play *Catastrophe* came at the close of his career, though it comes as an opening to a new theatre for the next century.

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