

Special Section:  
Howard Barker

*Hyperion*, Volume V, issue 1, May 2010

**HYPERION**

On the future of aesthetics

**S P E C I A L S E C T I O N**

# Howard Barker

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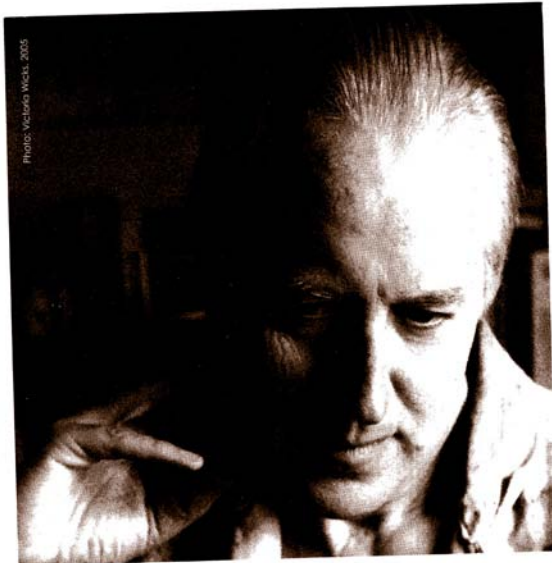
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theatre minima and the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center  
celebrate

# Howard Barker

with the Playwright in Attendance!



screenings • readings •  
panel discussion • and  
'A Conversation with  
Howard Barker'

On Monday, 10 May 2010, theatre minima and the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center at the CUNY Graduate Center will welcome legendary British dramatist, theorist, director, and poet Howard Barker in a rare visit to New York. Join Mr. Barker, actress and frequent collaborator Victoria Wicks, and critical champion David Ian Rabey of the University of Aberystwyth for a day of screenings, discussions, and readings, including Barker himself reading from his recent poetry.

The all-day event is free. More information about the program is available at the Segal Center Web page for the event (<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/MESTC/events/s10/howard-barker.html>), or email curator George Hunka at [geh@panix.com](mailto:geh@panix.com).

**Monday, May 10, 2010**

**1 PM – 8:30 PM**

**The CUNY Graduate Center**

**365 5th AVE, NYC**

## INTRODUCTION: CRUELTY, BEAUTY, AND THE TRAGIC ART OF HOWARD BARKER

**RAINER J. HANSHE**



What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually [informing] and filling some other Body . . .  
—Keats

**E**ven though Howard Barker is not well known in America and although he himself acidly professes to be little more than a rumor in his own country, after Beckett, he may be one of our most significant as well as profound writers. In fact, his very refusal of his standing, or the silence that largely surrounds him, indicates that his vocation is truly that of writer, and as did Beckett, he disdains the prizes most covet and take as signs of value. What is vital to him is “to desire tragedy, to experience tragedy as a need,” and his works bears this mark as well as the silence of a resisting solitude.

Since the production of Barker’s first play in 1970, he has remained a prolific writer, producing a daunting body of work that includes stage plays, radio plays, television plays, marionettes, opera libretti, poetry, and theoretical tracts. He is also a visual artist and his work, which is held in national collections in England and in Europe, evokes a mood of violence, death, and eroticism. Despite this prodigious body of work and writing for a period of over 40 years, he is hardly as well known as Beckett and, lamentably, even in the finer independent bookstores here in New York City, none of his books is available. If the reasons for this may be manifold, it in part seems due to the ferocity of Barker’s artistic vision. As the founder of what he calls the Theatre of Catastrophe, which “takes as its first principle the idea that art is not digestible” but is instead “an irritant in consciousness, like a grain of sand in the oyster’s gut,” Barker actively cultivates cruelty, a quality all too few are ready to endure. But this is a cruelty that produces a lasting beauty and which, free of mawkish sentiment and humanistic delusions, recognizes that some form of cruelty underlies all significant human endeavors. There is no knowledge without it, nor without it is there any art. This lucid, fearless knowledge is evident in Barker’s *Arguments for a Theatre*, which, even if one

remains opposed to the views espoused in the book, is an indispensable tract for any theater practitioner for it raises crucial questions that demand meditation—not to engage with the polemic is not to think, to refuse an exigent confrontation that gives rise to necessary uncertainties, to a skepticism that brings one face to face with the darkness that many seek to evade or neutralize with a numbing pharmakon so as to remain happy, affirmative, and optimistic, like the enslaved children of talk shows and sitcoms or the uplifting products of the industry of commerce that masquerade as art. But the tragic prevails; it is the inevitable crucible; the dark matter that continues to surface and reveal to us the profundity of a surface that is as enigmatic as any depth. For art is not meant to comfort. If one goes to it for comfort, one is seeking but the same consolations once offered by metaphysics, and that is to reduce art, to make it into a diversion, a mere palliative. It is to quiet the tremors. If Nietzsche first said in *The Birth of Tragedy* that it is “only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence is eternally justified”—and this is perhaps one of the most abused quotes in his corpus—he soon abandoned such a consoling view. In *Human, All Too Human*, where Nietzsche is more scientifically minded and extremely critical of art, he focuses on perception itself and states that art is what “makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking.” In *The Gay Science*, art’s role as a mechanism for helping us to endure existence will receive yet another transformation; there, it enables us to turn ourselves into phenomenon, but this *morphosis* is done with a good conscience as opposed to imprecise thinking. In shattering the youthful naiveté that to pierce through a shroud is to discover truth, surfaces and veils are praised by Nietzsche as necessary and profound. There is nothing behind the mask but yet another mask—surface, depth, layer, chasm, these are all entwined. Similarly, as Deane Juhan notes in *Job’s Body*, “Skin and brain develop from exactly the same primitive cells. Depending upon how you look at it, the skin is the outer surface of the brain, or the brain is the deepest layer of the skin. [...] The skin is no more separated from the brain than the surface of a lake is separate from its depths. [...] The brain is a single functional unit, from cortex to fingertips to toes. To touch the surface is to stir the depths.” In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche achieves the ultimate tragic height and having long left behind or transfigured the oft-quoted pronouncement on the eternal justification of existence, he proclaims that it is *only reality* that “justifies” the human—*there is no catharsis*. To Nietzsche, that is Aristotle’s fallacy, a distortion of the tragic sensibility. Instead, “beyond ruth and terror,” what the tragic entails is “[*realizing*] *in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*.” The ethicists will balk at this, but it is the hard and tragic truth that has been imparted to us from Pindar to Nietzsche and Barker: joy and suffering are inextricably interwoven. That is the reality that ‘justifies’ or better, to confront the exacting thought of the eternal return, which is the only thought that honors existence in its absolute sense, that is the reality that one must learn to love, and this is ultimately an erotic

question, the predicament of *amor fati*. Thus, true joy cannot exist for those who refuse suffering—joy is *infused* with suffering, and suffering with joy, just as creation is infused with destruction, and destruction with creation. *La petite mort*. The joy that is devoid of suffering is but a facile happiness and Barker is painfully aware of what, from our anthropomorphic perspective, is the terrible and questionable aspect of existence. Both his poetry and his plays convey this sting. Tragedy sensitizes us to it; our task is to remain sensitive to it. And it is not since Artaud's *Theater and its Double* that we have had a critical manifesto as incisive and challenging. In it, the sting of the tragic resonates and echoes in our flesh as we incorporate its questions. Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe has its lineage in Artaud's Theater of Cruelty and in the future, Barker's theoretical works will come to be as important and as influential as those of Artaud. If he has remained and will remain largely untimely, to those serious-minded artists and practitioners of the body, there is something posthumous here, something future-minded that must now be confronted in order to be of the very future that we are.

Barker has essentially etched out a niche of his own and in 1988 he formed The Wrestling School, a company designed to produce his own seldom-performed plays, works which, it seems, escaped even the finely tuned radar of Susan Sontag. While there have been other seminars on Barker's work, to speak of some recent events, in 2008, 20 years subsequent to the founding of his Wrestling School, the RSAMD in Glasgow held a symposium on his work and in the following year, there was an international conference on his theater work at Aberystwyth University of Wales. Months later, 21 for 21, a global celebration of the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday of his theatre company that spanned four continents and 18 countries, honored Barker through performing his plays and reciting his poetry in seven different languages. Currently, London's Riverside Studios is producing two of his plays, *Hurts Given and Received*, and *Slowly*, while they are also presenting *Wonder And Worship In The Dying Ward*, a rehearsed reading of his latest work, directed by Barker himself.

If largely inaudible and invisible to many, if even absent in St. Mark's Bookshop and Book Culture if not other similar bookstores in the cultural bastions of Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, clearly, Barker has remained an indelible presence in the world and his work is a testament of his devotion to writing and of an ever-questioning mind fearlessly in pursuit of the catastrophic. Now, in cooperation with George Hunka's theatre minima, the Martin E. Segal Theatre (CUNY Graduate Center) is presenting a daylong series of events including screenings, readings, panel discussions, and a one-on-one conversation with the dramatist, who will be making a rare visit to New York. It is rumored that, like Paul Bowles, Barker only travels by boat, thus, in an epoch of instantaneity and immediate gratification, Barker's presence in the city is indeed a special occasion bespeaking a different temporality altogether, a sensibility alien to the very tempers of our time, to the convenient fallacy of

identity politics, to the still pervasive ethical and moral laws espoused by those caught in a 19<sup>th</sup> century time warp as the real purveyors of the future wrestle with the darkness of what is beyond good and evil and the easy panacea of hope and change is fiercely refused. This tragic sensibility is concentrated in the following aphorism from Barker's forthcoming *These Sad Places*:

<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, this is not yet available in English but was first published in a French translation.

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The tragic character's visceral contempt for the law. His self-willed repudiation of all obligation. His euphoric rupture of the disciplines of cohabitation and compatibility, as if he sliced through his own artery and watched wild-eyed as the blood burst out of darkness, ecstatic, fatal, half-divine. If there is pity in this excess of wounding, it is pity only for himself. Yet this is self-pity which the chorus—uncompromising in extracting its revenge—cannot disdain, for the tragic character is first and foremost a sacrifice whose destruction is proof—a proof perpetually required—of the inexorable fact of limitation, a fact so disabling and humiliating it enables us also to let go of life.<sup>1</sup>

It is upon the unique event of Barker journeying to New York by ship, upon a moment that is truly decisive—and it is fitting that this comes after our own long convalescence—that *Hyperion* is publishing a series of writings on Howard Barker that include George Hunka's "Access to the Body: The Theatre of Revelation in Beckett, Foreman, and Barker," excerpts from Barker's *DEATH, THE ONE, AND THE ART OF THEATRE*, which features an introduction written expressly for this occasion by Barker scholar Karoline Gritzner, and "The Sunless Garden," a new essay of Barker's that was presented in public for the first time at the conference in his honor in Wales. Here, David Kilpatrick, who has written on Hermann Nitsch, Mishima, and Bataille amongst others, prefaces it. What we wish to consecrate with this selection of material is the work of a serious tragic writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> and now 21<sup>st</sup> century who recognizes along with Genet that beauty resides in the wound and that, hence, there is no reconciliation, only the anguish and the ecstasy of living with one's fate, a fate that one must encounter erotically and to which one must sacrifice oneself, for our worst transgression is the one we commit against ourselves, the transgression of leaving our conscience in the lurch and seeking a forgiveness we can never achieve and that, ultimately, is a crime against the body, of the secret knowledge of the relationship between beauty and cruelty, of a sacrificing solitude.

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