

Challenging Conventions

An Interview with Howard Barker

by Gilles Menegaldo
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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 testified 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

*Romanous in 1917 was staged by the author at the Odéon in Paris in 1995.
Howard Barker now lives and works in Brighton.¹*



*How did you start writing and, more specifically,
for the stage?*

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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.

Was there any particular event or performance or reading of a play that urged you to write?

None. My relationship with the theatrical form is entirely instinctive. My background was working class and whilst not philistine, completely detached from all serious art forms. Even at university I had no connection with drama groups. If anything, I entertained a prejudice against them.

Had you seen performances on stage?

Pantomimes.

No production of Shakespeare?

Possibly at school there may have been visits to amateur theatres. Our set Shakespeare text was *King Lear*. I might have been taken to see a version of that.

1. Selected Bibliography: *Victory* (1984), *Scenes from an Execution* (1985), *Crimes in Hot Countries*, *Downchild*, *The Castle* (1985), *The Last Supper*, *The Bite of the Night* (1988), *The Seven Lears*, *The Europeans*, *Judith* (1990), *Hated Nightfall* (1994); *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989). In French (Éditions de l'Atalante, trad. Philippe Regniez): *Tableau d'une exécution* (1993), *Les sept Lear* (1994).

You are both a theoretician and a writer of plays. Could you explain why you felt the necessity at one point in your career to write theory concerning the theatre?

I was compelled to articulate my position in theatre because I was in danger of suffocation. It was a desperate flinging off the deadening weight of critical ignorance and hostility. Whilst I had allies in the universities (and many enemies there also) I had none with access to print. These attacks continued and continue today, with increasing vehemence. People find this rage incomprehensible. Why are they so apoplectic? I have my own views on this. But certainly, in daring to articulate a theory I drew down even more fury on my head. One gets used to this. The English hate theory. They think it is presumptions. And one must not forget that the theatre is a national propaganda. There's nothing at all puzzling about why, to take one example, my work has been banned from the National Theatre of this country for 25 years.

What form does your own particular theorising take?

As a poet, I took first to the aphoristic form in *49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre*. I then developed a taste for longer pieces, and theoretical poems. I was never an academic, so these interventions rarely reproduce arguments as such, and there is a deliberate irony in calling these books *Arguments for a Theatre*. They are impassioned, spontaneous, assertive. Their style is as important as their content. Perhaps it *is* the content.

I think that for me an aphorism is an easier form than an essay. I have since then learnt how to construct quite elaborate arguments in prose. Sometimes I write scenes almost in aphoristic form, it comes quite naturally to me. It's also a very unfamiliar way of expressing yourself in English culture and therefore immediately troublesome and irritating.

It tallied with your aim of provoking the reader?

I have never wanted to provoke anyone. But they carry in them the same immunity that a poem carries. They can't be taken unawares, or refuted, any more than a poem can.

You use the term "catastrophe" to define your theatre, could you explain that?

My attempt to construct a tragic theatre needed a theoretical articulation of some kind because I knew I was not simply reproducing the Aristotelian or the Shakespearian model. Tragedies have always been

assumed to be a social necessity. The community was able to redefine and support its values through the theatrical practice of tragedy. I knew that it was not something I was able to do since my own attitude to art was that it was a morally chaotic experience and not one of order. The catastrophic form of tragedy is one in which hugely painful endurance and ordeal is inflicted upon one or two characters. This ordeal does not lead to any particular resolution whereas tragedies always resolve. Resolution is always a key in English Shakespearian tragedies for instance as are reconciliation or apology. None of this affects the catastrophic theatre at all, it is open-ended and continues... All that the audience can expect to gain from it—which is a great deal I think—is a sense of human complexity.

You obviously connect catastrophe with tragedy and you intend to write a contemporary kind of tragedy. Why do you consider tragedy as a necessary aspect of the theatre?

I think the absence of modern tragedy from the English scene has its origins in a number of causes. Probably the serious upheaval in the English theatre occurred in the fifties when a naturalistic socialist critical theatre emerged, partly under the influence of Brecht but also quite English in origin thanks to people like Wesker, Osborne, apparently politically committed people. This entailed a change of style as well as a change of subject matter. None of that was in any way tragic. It was entirely due to what was considered exposure to social conditions. There are things outside the drawing-room we should see what these things are. I began to think this so-called exposure and activation of political thought was already redundant to what was happening; it had become televised, it had become the daily material of television, it then was domesticated and ceased to be dangerous. There was a necessity to move on from that because it had become stagnant. My own inclinations towards painful experience in drama clearly contributed to that. It was not enough to show people lived in certain conditions. The function of the theatre is not to stimulate revolution but to engage with the individual soul of the audience at a different kind of level, a level beneath the political.

The dominance of a non-poetic discourse in the theatre and the hypervaluation of comedy is an aspect of a political populist democracy position. The tragic play is an act of liberty for each member of the audience whereas the comic experience is one of unification and subordination. The form of tragedy that interests me is not one in which, in a classical sense there is a restatement of moral values but one in which morality is discarded and the ending of the work is open. This kind of tragedy emphasises the freedom of the individual to make up his or her mind on matters of morality. This is not a traditional form of tragedy at all

since traditional Shakespearian or Greek tragedy is a reemphasis of moral certainties. It is also, it seems to me, within a tragic form that a poetic language is possible. The theatre is the last site, the last space in which a creative language can be developed in a public sphere. One of the political conspiracies of populist democracy is the elimination of complication and it follows from this that language must also be debased. A new tragic theatre is in essence a revolutionary form but at the same time as it is revolutionary, it is also traditional. In certain times in history, the tradition is revolutionary.

You said writers like Wesker wanted to take the theatre out of the drawing-room and chose their subject matter among the working class. Pinter, though, is different; there is also a metaphysical dimension in his work. Do you feel in any way close to him? I am thinking in particular of your own interest in violence, not only verbal but also in terms of bodily expression.

Pinter is a writer for whom I have a considerable respect. He has also, partly through his relationship with Beckett, a very profound interest in language and the rhythm of language. So his theatre is not, in the way that most sixties' realism was, an attempt to recreate the real, it has no realistic pretension.

Your theatre involves a certain challenge of conventions and you emphasize the rejection of two cardinal notions: clarity and realism.

My hostility to clarity is a hostility to a form of conventional wisdom about production values. Through Stanislavski but more through Brecht, the Royal Court theatre developed a governing notion in these productions of transparency and clarity. This is initially a political impulse: the need to educate an audience. There has always been a vulgar enlightenment instinct in Royal Court theatre practice. When one talks about the Royal Court, one talks about the main power house for the English theatre, textual theatre. This form of clarity consists in the fact the audience must always know what's going on at any given moment, know the direction of the scene. The actors must also be totally in control of their material as well. This is a powerful inheritance from the Stanislavskian practice that the text has a single meaning called the intention of the author. Authors don't know what they are doing at all, we are driven by some impulse, which is quite internal, psychological... The Royal Court never addressed with that, never allowed the ambiguity of the moment to occur. When a character meets another character in a Royal Court production, he knows—this is pure Brechtianism—what he is intending, what the intention of any action

is. When two characters meet in life, they do not know what 's carried on between them, there are many levels of debate, emotional recoil, ambition, seduction. They can do this both by surrendering or by being provocative, aggressive. That seems to me a much more complex way by which the theatre can operate.

You once said that you wanted to create a sense of division in the self of the spectator. Could you comment about that?

The enterprise of the kind of theatre I am engaged in entails a change in the habits of the audience. Frequently the effect of my work on the audience is to send them away in a state of division, in a sort of despair, a creative despair, one in which there is no ability to turn to one's neighbour and know you have experienced the same thing he or she has. The audience should be atomised rather than unified by what they see. Thus at a moment when comedy releases laughter, this laughter should create embarrassment among individuals, some will laugh and some won't. The practice of uniting the audience in pursuit of a morality is redundant. This morality is located in types of narrative, of course. So by both disrupting narrative *and* permitting a regime of ambiguity to exist in theatre, you effectively dethrone morality from the experience. This is necessary simply because the theatre is expiring from its own ethical vacuity. It is repetitive. It staggers like a dying ideologue frothing dead slogans. It is a lethal combination of entertainment and political message. What is the use of it, I am asking for an audience that is prepared to expose itself to the risk of inventing morality for itself. Who are authors, anyway? Are they gods? Do they know more than any other man? They have one power only, one claim to authority. They imagine. This imagination is by definition anarchic, unreliable, bad testament. But you must trust human beings to judge their feelings and act or not act on them. I am called an elitist. I have called myself one. But it is a typical irony of our time that I, an elitist, trust human beings more than the entire liberal-humanist dispensation, which can't resist its appalling impulse to educate others. To get back to what I stated about clarity, you say to the audience this is not a clear scene because neither the author nor the actors themselves are clear about it. Therefore there is confusion but you must accept and enjoy that. The audience must also expect to find a work difficult and complicated. When a play is working effectively, the actors are working properly, many meanings may be deduced from any single moment. The fact that people often return to see the plays two or three times suggest to me that if there is any alienation from what they are seeing, it also means they are really engaged in the play. This experience is a consequence of my belief that the play exists in the first instance between the writer and the actors. As a writer I do not

think of the effects of what I am writing on an audience, I think of it as a practice between actors. This is a serious transgression in English theatre where everything is geared towards the satisfaction of the audience.

Do you challenge realism in your plays?

I don't challenge realism because there are always arguments to be assembled which would prove I am profoundly more 'realistic' than Brecht or the entire English Royal Court school. They merely confuse realism with—in Brecht's case—"The actual truth about society..." or in the Royal Court's case, 'the representation of the real world through naturalistic aesthetics...' Both utterly dubious propositions. We can't use the word 'real' any more. But is there a word to replace it? I would insist that poetry and passion is as authentic to human life as any naturalism dares claim for itself. One might talk of layers of authenticity. The imagination is authentic, is it not? Nothing that occurs in any play of mine is a literal impossibility. They are not fantasies. They reside always within the possible. I wrote a series of plays called 'The Possibilities' and that title might describe the entire oeuvre. My challenge to *naturalism* however, is located in my commitment to a poetic discourse. A densely metaphorical, indeed rhythmic form of speech is something important to me. I always like to quote Nietzsche: "If you don't understand the rhythm of the sentence, you can't understand the meaning of it." For an actor, that's an instinct. For me rhythm is crucial. When I hear an actor grasp the rhythm, I know he is almost certainly in control of meaning. In the Royal Court practice, this would not be important, they would only be interested in what the meaning was. It would dominate the entire production.

Do you feel close to any particular theatrical tradition in terms of either theme, motive or even language?

I recognise my connections to a sixteenth-century theatre, not only for its language practice but also for its understanding that if theatre was not located at the extremes of human experience, it could not exist as a theatre at all. Theatre is emotion, an archaeology of emotion. This emotion, even at its cruellest, must be perceived as a thing of beauty—that is its profound psychological disturbance—and this disturbance, this chaos, is the purest moment of theatre, occurring in a dark place which is immune from the traffic of everyday life (even though it is intimately connected to it). How is this done? Through poetry. Poetry is the means to enable an audience to interpret its own collusion with murder and death.

Could you tell us about your interest in rewriting myths or classical masterpieces of the theatre?

I have now done this four times—with Middleton, Shakespeare, Chekhov and Lessing. Each time the function of the interrogation was different, but never did I attempt to *modernise* the texts, which would be a futile and chic enterprise. I was engaged rather in a quarrel at the ethical level with aspects of the writing... sometimes the result of a rage at an apparent (apparent to me) absence... or a dispute with a moral convenience... what seemed to me a flinching on the part of the author, often for very comprehensible reasons... things like that... and it will happen to my own texts at some point. It is a good practice, to turn over the ground of these classic texts. It's unforgivable, of course, for the pantheon has to stand for all sorts of national reasons. But I never belittled a text I treated in this way. It is an honouring.

One illustration of the mingling of tradition and modernity is the part played by the chorus in your work.

The chorus is a very clear statement of intention. It immediately discards the naturalist aesthetic, just as a prologue does. (I have done this in *Bite of the Night*, *The Last Supper*.) It also, in my hands, overturns its own history, for the chorus has always represented the polis, the public, the moral. In my plays (I'm thinking of *Golgo*, *The Last Supper*) it stands for the *new public*, the public of the contemporary hyper-democracy, where instead of standing for good opinion, it is shrill, populist, sloganwielding, and itself a suspicious source of clamour. Do you trust it or not? Again, this is the Catastrophic Theatre's dislocating practice.

In the French production of The Seven Lears,² the chorus was not present on the stage...

Claudine Hunault chose to view the chorus as an aspect of Lear's own unconscious. That is a legitimate interpretation. But the speaking voice is never fascinating only as voice. The voice requires a body. That is a law of the stage, in my view.

2. The play was staged by Claudine Hunault at the Théâtre de La Chamaille, in Nantes, in November 1994.

You often mingle comic or grotesque elements with tragic ones. This is quite perceptible in The Seven Lears for instance. This is something already present in Shakespeare, but you push it a bit further.

I have always had a powerful comic instinct, I have always found to some degree that within the worst tragedy, there is an element of comedy, there is a possibility of seeing it as at least absurd if not funny. As you suggest, Shakespeare knew that very well too: King Lear on the heath is a spectacle of ridicule as well as passion. The highest moment of dramatic experience always contains a potential for humour. It's inevitable.

Isn't there a risk of erasing the metaphysical dimension if there is too much distance?

Yes, certainly there would be, and distance is the last thing you would expect from a dramatist like me. I dislike alienation, I never seek the objectification of an action. What I do ask for is the torrent of confusion that follows on action which might originally have been seen simply as say—a necessity, or excusable because of certain conventions of morality. Look at the oral disorder that surrounds the murder of the Bad Bishop in *Seven Lears*. But why be specific? That confusion (which is not a *dilemma*, incidentally) attaches to all the striking events and it occurs because the politics of situations is complicated by the instinct...

This play is also an example of the way you challenge other rules. You seem to break the linearity of the temporal frame. By juxtaposing different time sequences there are several loci of action on the stage which belong to different temporal frames. What are you aiming at by doing this?

To try to be perfectly truthful, a number of my practices are the result of boredom and impatience. I simply don't find lengthy narratives tolerable. I like long theatrical experiences (I have just finished a text which will require 24 hours playing) but I continually dislocate them, I flood the stage with my own restlessness. The contemporary audience has been well tutored in moving its focus, so much so I wonder how the boulevard play has survived at all... obviously it's a fragment of nostalgia...

The idea given by the French production in Nantes was that every thing takes place in Lear's head, that he is the only living being. Do you agree with this interpretation?

It's not a matter of agreeing with an interpretation. I think a text becomes a public property almost at the moment it leaves the author's

head. It cannot be protected from seizure. However, with regard to this particular seizure, that it functioned as an experience for an audience was clear to me. It possessed great integrity, almost throughout. For my own taste, however, the idea that the narratives occurred inside Lear's head makes the proposition that the real world was a different place and that subsequently this Lear is ill. For me *lie is* illness, certainly in theatre it is illness. It is intoxication, fever, disorder. Thus the world is absolutely real and the actors must believe in every action and every speech. No one at all is crazy. If they are crazy, the audience is let off the pain of its own collusion with this world.

There is however a certain dream-like quality in your play.

However dreamlike it may appear, it is in the real world always. Nothing is impossible in the real world.

Why did you concentrate on the invention, the aeroplane?

The aeroplane is the manifestation of escape. You always have the option of escaping the world if you find it intolerable. That option is suicide, a gift to man, from God or somewhere. But it's the last option. One is forever seeking excuses not to take this option. Lear's flight to the clouds, which he believes may be solid enough to walk on, is a stage on the road to his own extinction.

That explains the way you play with different dimensions of space, the fact that Lear is mostly secluded...

Lear in my play is not mad, Lear in Shakespeare's play is mad; I try to explain how he came to that madness. His madness could not have been the result simply of pain but of the fact that he had indeed a most subtle mind. He is someone who is burdened, beset by too much perception, too high a level of sensitiveness. It occurred to me that Lear was born intellectual and so great was his sensibility that he attempted to become mad in order to protect himself from the pain of his own perceptions. In my play I study the history of Lear from a child up to his middle years. In the obvious sense, it is not a political play at all because Lear has no political conscience. In fact one could argue that conscience is missing from every text I've written.

Since you also stage your plays, could you tell us something about your work as a director? How do you proceed with your actors for instance?

I must have a certain kind of actor around me. He or she has to above all possess a musical sense for speech, its patterns, its rhythms. My texts contain long, disrupted, doubling-back, speeches. Only a skilled voice-user, an actor with a passion for his own voice, can lead us through these exotic groves of poetic idiom. With these I can lift the text to the power of a musical experience. As for working on the text, I refuse all research or outside material. The work is entirely within the room of the rehearsal. If these actors can imagine, they can play the text. But do they need to understand it? No. Because I don't understand it myself. We are playing with fluid. We try to form it. I am the source but not the knowing source. I have an ego, it goes without saying. How could I have survived 25 years in the English theatre without one? But I claim no knowledge of the world. I do not assert the truth. It's all speculative. And the actor has a massive contribution to make. A director is there to release and to employ that creative energy brought by the actor. But we only look to the text. It is a deep pool, whose meanings emerge only by profound immersion.

I was struck by some recurrent, almost obsessional motives in your work, for instance the motif of the prison. Why do you concentrate on that specific motif?

The gaol horrifies me. I write of my horrors. One practises, one rehearses one's horrors if one is a sincere artist. But yes, things occur again and again. When I have conquered my fears I shall cease to write.

The power of the prison motif seems to lie in its aesthetic and emotional impact rather than in terms of its symbolic and metaphorical significance. Do you agree?

Yes, but we must not separate these things. The emotion is the beginning of politics, is it not? My plays exemplify that. Things are felt and then because the feeling is so vast, rendered into torrents of speech. Fear drives the characters. They speak to live. The same with desire. It compels articulation.

In Scenes from an Execution, why does Galactia the painter want to remain in jail?

She feels she has earned it as a privilege. She appears to be a heroine, an exemplary artist, but in fact there are flaws in her character.

She longs to be persecuted, it's her badge, it's her authority. The more I upset the police force, the greater a hero I must be. Her jailing, her incarceration is a proof of the greatness of her painting.

She is recuperated by the political power.

She is, but instantly her work has subsumed her. She knows this, which is why her final 'yes' is sad, the confession of a lost struggle. She, the name Galactia, is a structure of the state, and the personality Galactia has no function. If she continued to rage she would become a quaint object. She understands that. The play's tragic in that regard, though not a major work of mine, I think. The tragedy comes from her elimination by her own talent.

How do you see the relation between the artist and political power? There is another illustration in The Europeans with the painter on the battle field. To what extent does it apply to your own situation, do you feel that sort of relationship between your work and some kind of political power?

The apparently aesthetic struggles experienced by artists—all serious artists—conceals the political warfare raging underneath it. For form is as political as content. Why are my texts the site of such violence in the critical/managerial world of the theatre? You would think the poetic nature of them would seem innocuous. But the contrary is the case. If theatre is released from its bond, the animal let out of the cage—the bars of which are made of socio-critical responsibility—it might inflame the audience. Now no one wants the audience inflamed. Poetry can't be dealt with. It's fugitive. Naturalism is safe. It's inert. The state (in its modern form, i.e. the press and the media) has invested in a silent theatre, either boulevard or the apparently critical, apparently because socio-critical theatre is only part of the empty clamour of populism. Thus to challenge this is to provoke a savage response.

Do you think that Galactia loses her identity at the end of Scenes from an Execution?

Yes. The work, as all work, has been separated from the artist. And this is inevitable, must and will occur. Either the market or the museum will incorporate it. She herself can only become a legendary figure. These legendary figures litter critical history. So what? They are mummies.

Another important aspect is the relation between sex and politics as exemplified for instance in The Seven Lears and Judith.

This is the hardest aspect of my work to discuss. The body, both as totem and object of sexual possession, dominates every play. These bodies are frequently dismembered. Pieces are collected, lost again. They travel the world. They are used as authority, and consequently they are trodden into obscurity in an attempt to abolish their mystical power. Leaving aside Judith, we could speak of Helen of Troy. The play deals with her return to Sparta, she becomes an object of contempt, she is constantly punished by the state. The body is a symbol of liberty, of disorder. Free sexuality, the liberty of desire is a threat to political power, to the order of the state. The human body is the object of all political power. It is the control of each body that is the object of the state. This control extends particularly to sexuality. Desire is the great enemy of order. In the state of criminality and moral decay that exists in England for example, it's not surprising that the government talks of the family as the sole solution to this crisis, because the family is anti-sex, it is the domestication of sexuality, the control of sexuality. In the same way as the sexuality of the body is the enemy of order, the body as a consecrated object is also a totem for authority, the tomb of Lenin for instance. When Khrushchev wished to destroy Stalin's reputation with the soviet public in 1953, it was Stalin's body that he destroyed. So for me as a historian and as a poet, the body will always be the main focus of my work.

More specifically, how do you use the motif of the dismembered body, what significance do you attribute to it?

I cannot pretend to know. I perhaps do not wish to know the source of this kind of imagery, which as you indicate, is frequent, nearly obsessive. It's a fetishism, but more than a fetishism. It extends to the level of the political metaphor in many plays. There is the hand of Trotsky's engine driver in *Fair Slaughter*, and an even earlier example, the corpse of the Unknown Warrior in *The Love of a Good Man*. The whole body is the object of Bradshaw's search in *Victory* and in *The Castle*, Skinner, the lover of female flesh, is bound to the corpse of a male, to be borne about her whole life long. There are aspects of my work I prefer to maintain a silence about, for superstitious reasons.

There is also a tension between sexual desire and the political “superego” that lies behind—that is, the will to carry out a political project. There are also divided selves at that level.

What happens in my play *Judith* is that the woman has a mission, to seduce, but she has no control of her body and its seductive power. She is seduced by her own seduction. A theatre is at its most exciting when nothing is stable, nothing is known. When I write a play, I do not know what I am writing, I don't accept that when two people meet, they have a project which they understand. Stanislavski, Brecht say when two meet, both possess a project, a plan That is not my experience of life at all. What is interesting is that individuals do not know what the result of their seduction will be. Thus a political intention is denied by the ungovernable chaos of sexuality.

I was struck by differences in the way you handle language. Some of your plays are fairly easy to read, but others such as Ten Dilemmas in the Life of a God for instance are much more difficult: the lack of punctuation and the highly rhythmic poetic quality of your style makes reading a challenging task.

Yes, on the one hand, because there is a literary quality in these plays and their content is complex. But on the other, no, because always I find that to stand with other actors and simply read the text out loud, is to illuminate them at once. They are for speaking, after all. As for the punctuation and bold print, these are my own emphases, and not incumbent on any performer to reproduce. *Ten Dilemmas* is rather a simple play, about the passion of a man and a woman who find no physical means of expression. This passion they refuse to allow to die, as many would, believing it a misunderstanding of the body. They become outcasts from the ordered world, much as Starhemberg and Katrin do in *The Europeans*. This delicacy of sentiment requires a form such as I give it. It insists on its own poetry.

Don' t you think these devices render the meaning of your plays a bit obscure?

Obscure? Yes. I have never denied obscurity. But that is to open the entire question of the theatre experience again. Why should the theatre not be obscure? Is life so dazzling in its clarity? And if it is not, as indeed it is not, is it an artist's job to clarify it? What are we? The health service, you see, many think artists *are* the health service. We have to grow up.

You have been called a “modern allegorist”: would you agree with that statement and if you do, how do you conciliate allegory and obscurity, two terms that seem to me antinomic?

I don't see that I am an allegorist. Perhaps I do not understand allegory, but my stories are not pretexts for other stories. How could they be when I am so rarely in control of my own story?

You seem to favour extreme, paroxysmic situations such as the one you develop in Victory. You also exploit all the possibilities of language, even the excesses of language. Would you say that your theatre is an exploration of the limits?

Yes. And only the limits interest me, and only the limits seem to me the landscape of theatre itself. The actor must live at the limits, his courage in inhabiting that terrible territory is his claim on his own mystical power. The live actor, as opposed to the film or television actor, is an extremist. The cold blast of his solitude, his bravery in confronting himself in situations of horror, and his success in finding another to endure it with him, is the profoundest hope of the art form.

More specifically why this violent use of language? What purpose does it serve?

Sometimes it is violent. Sometimes it is tranquil. The two states coexist. But the violence of the tone is only a reflection of the passion of the character to discover his or her freedom in a world which is insufficiently gratifying for modern man... which is in fact, shrunk. This cry of violence is a cry for more authentic experience than is available, not only from society, but possibly—horror of horrors—from life *itself*.



