

Appendix: Interview with Howard Barker

‘Art is a problem. The man or woman who exposes himself to art exposes himself to another problem.’¹

With Majeed Mohammed Midhin

Majeed Midhin (MM)

Howard Barker (HB)

MM: First of all, I really appreciate your cooperation, Mr Howard. As you know I’m from Iraq. Currently, I’m a PhD student at the University of Essex. I am writing about the dilemma of the artist as a character in contemporary British theatre.

HB: Lovely, good! Okay.

MM: Mr Howard, thematically, the structure of my thesis is divided into three sections according to the type of dilemma the artist confronts. I propose that there are many dilemmas. Among them, there are social, economic and cultural dilemmas.

HB: Ah.

MM: In relation to the social dilemma, I am concentrating on the two concepts of ‘Art for art’s sake’ and ‘Art for society’s sake’. In other words, the dialectical relationship between aesthetics and politics.

HB: Ahem.

MM: Concerning the economic dilemma, I am focusing on the materialistic side of society.

HB: The materialistic side?

MM: The materialistic side, yeah, of society. And the public subsidy the theatre receives from the government.

HB: Yes, yes.

MM: For the cultural dilemma, I am concentrating on the paucity of a good number of people who have the appetite to go to the theatre and see plays. So, first of all, what is your opinion about my subject ... and is there really a dilemma?

HB: Ha, ha ... Well! ... There is. Is it a dilemma? I’m not sure it’s quite what I would call a dilemma! There is certainly a problem ... It’s quite a problem ... For somebody like me to survive at all in English theatre. Because you may be aware that most of my work is produced in Europe. Rather ... little here ... It’s quite difficult for me ... for me to get a play on here. So, it’s ... it’s a problem and I know there ... I know there are many reasons for these problems.

¹ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd., 1989), p. 12.

But I've now lived with these problems for 30 to 40 years ... and nothing changes. That's ... ha, ha ... the amusing thing is nothing changes. The same situation exists, as it did when I was a rather young writer. Though I was not developed in the forms that I am now. Because I'm now a tragedian. I write tragedy, and I've written tragedy for 20 years. But when I began I was not particularly tragic. So the first short period of my life was quite easy, then it became more difficult, and it's difficult now. Even though I have an international reputation it makes very little difference in ... English theatre. So!

MM: Can you actually sum up what is the dilemma? Because I, I feel confused, even ...

HB: I can tell you. Well, I can tell you. It's only me ... I can't speak for others who may have problems.

MM: Okay?

HB: But speaking for myself ... English society, English culture, we go back, right back, to the 16th century, the Reformation Catholicism goes ... we have Protestantism, okay. This is the beginning of when English society becomes very, very utilitarian. Idealism, the soul, these are less important. So as we move on we go to the English Civil War, another example of utilitarian culture. We move into the 18th century with Rationalism, John Stewart Mill – utility again. In the 19th century we have socialism – utility again. And in this century we live in now we have what we call the welfare state. Okay, so, everything is about value and usefulness. This penetrates every aspect of our culture. So, when you ask a theatre to produce your plays or you ask the government to give you money for your plays they ask the question, "What is the use of this play?" This is very, very, barbaric in my opinion ... ha, ha ... because art, is not useful. It has no use. It exists, it gives problems to people, it refines their soul, but it doesn't really have a use value. So, to take a theatre like the Royal Court Theatre, all of its programming is about, it's usually political, usually left wing, radical left wing, but always it engages with what is happening in society. As observed, the writer must observe and reproduce what he observes in the theatre. Now me, I'm not like this. I live in my imagination all the time. I believe the greatest artists are imaginative artists. They imagine the world. They don't ... copy the world. In this I think ... I'm ... Shakespearean. I'm the heir of Shakespeare. He was not a utilitarian. There is nothing utilitarian in ... What use is King Lear? What use is Hamlet? Use. It hasn't got a use, so my origins go back there which means I'm always in conflict with the theatre as it is now.

MM: So, Mr Howard, you want to say that the intervention, I mean there is a conflict between the two concepts of 'Art for art's sake', and 'Art for society's sake?'

HB: Of course, of course, of course!

MM: And what about the state? The intervention of the state and you, you talked about utility?

HB: It's quite true, certainly (*sighs*) ... Let's talk about the state, the state's fund ... Most theatre here that's, you know, serious theatre, is paid for by the state. But, you may not know this but it's interesting if you study ... the application forms on which you may apply for funding for your plays and for your theatre, the categories of, aaah, entitlement, are all, nearly all, political and social. At no point in the forms does it say, "How good is the art?" The word art never appears on the form. The question is if you can tick all these boxes. Let me

tell you it's like the Soviet Union used to be in 1930 under Stalin; the artist has to serve society. So you tick the boxes. Do you help people? Do you help asylum seekers? Do you help ... disabled people, the poor? If you go, "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!", you get the money! But me, no. None of these boxes applies to me.

MM: So, the artist should be free?

HB: Ah! Should be. Of course he should be. His only criteria, the only criterion for supporting any artists ... is the art good? Never mind the politics!

MM: So, there is no message?

HB: Ah! No. For me, no message. But in every other play, yes. If you go to the theatre do you? Every time you go in there is a message, okay. What is the message?

MM: So, what is the value of literature, if there is no message? So why, why do we study literature?

HB: That's functionalism. That is pure functionalism. Art is not a product. It exists in your soul and your imagination. Modern societies hate imagination. They hate it. Why? It's dangerous. It – imagination – can break you up. It may (dislocate) society. Now if you're asking me is my work valuable? Of course it is! Because it is very good theatre, and good theatre is good, even if you don't know why it's good.

MM: Even if I don't know why it's good?

HB: You don't know why it's good, but you know it's good because you can tell; because the language is good; the structure is good; the staging is good. But what it means ... You don't know what it means. It may mean nothing. It doesn't have to have a function, and I repudiate this. I repudiate the whole idea of functionality. Look at Bertolt Brecht. All his plays are about functions. To make the working class recognize the proletarian nature of the revolution ... you know ... doesn't interest me.

MM: Lovely. If we talk about the responsibility of the artist. What is the responsibility of the artist? In what way it is represented. Is it represented by the fictional characters in the play? If so, do they reflect their creators?

HB: The responsibility of the artist? Well ... in my opinion there is only one responsibility in the artist – that is the responsibility to himself!

MM: To himself?

HB: To express the truth of himself and his imagination. That's it. That's the end of responsibility.

MM: There is no other responsibility?

HB: No other responsibility! Otherwise you will never create great art. If I go and I think I will write a play or a poem, and I think, "How does this help the world?" It's not the same poem if I go, "How does this help me?" It's a different poem; this is a greater poem! Here's a poet! A really good poet. You know there is nothing about the world in that. (*Barker lifts a book up and slaps it on the table.*) It's all about him. That's good. So when we come to put the play on, it's my play, I work with the actors. The actors and I, we produce this thing. It's perfect.

We put it on the stage. Some people say, “I don’t understand.” They go ... others go ... “I don’t know why, but this excites me”, but that’s it. That’s the deal. You can’t please everybody.

MM: Mmm, good. So the responsibility, as you said, is the artist to himself? So is this issue or this responsibility reflected by the fictional characters? Or by ...

HB: No, I don’t know. I’m not sure is it reflected. But, by the way, I must say, you must be responsible to yourself only is difficult, a difficult thing to do. It’s actually a very difficult thing to do. It’s not easy. All the time you are being led by politics ... something, something ... it’s always leading you away. It’s very hard to be responsible to yourself. In terms of what’s in the play, do these characters speak for me? Hard to say, perhaps?

MM: Perhaps?

HB: I don’t know. I don’t think of it like that. I don’t say, ah, this character is Barker. It’s not Barker speaking; it has its own life. Let me give you the word, and the word dominates all my work autonomy. I am autonomous, the characters are autonomous; they do what they have to do because they are who they are.

MM: But the characters are actually a product of imagination.

HB: Of course, Of imagination, yeah.

MM: Of the artist’s imagination. So, I think, in one way or another, they represent the artist himself?

HB: They must a little bit, yeah, of course a little bit. How can you say otherwise? Of course they must do, but they don’t speak for him. You see, if you go and see a play by a very successful English dramatist – David Hare. Okay, left wing, political establishment, yeah, yeah. The characters speak for David Hare, yeah. I know that! Yeah. I can hear the voice of David Hare. You can’t do that with me. If you read a play of mine, who is Howard Barker here? You can’t find him. You say, “He must be there somewhere?” Maybe. Let me say I don’t educate people; it is not my idea of theatre to educate people. I’m not Stanislavski, you understand.

MM: Okay, ah lovely. So, Mr Howard, although you answered this question, you said, “You are responsible to yourself.” Is it to actors or to your company?

HB: The responsibility?

MM: Yeah.

HB: Ah well. Ahem ... no, I’m not responsible to the actors. They are responsible to me, so ...

MM: Not to the company?

HB: Aaah, the company. My own company, yeah.

MM: Ah yes,

HB: Well, of course I care that the company produces my work perfectly as no one else can. So, we together, me and the actors, must refine the work to the highest production value. So, of course we are all responsible for the reputation of the company. Yeah.

MM: Yeah. Ah, so which is the play or plays that represent the dilemma of the artist? Well, your plays I chose for my study are *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* and *Scenes from an Execution*.

HB: *No End of Blame* ... they're about the artist.

MM: Yeah, they're about artists!

HB: The first one, yeah! Of course,

MM: This one is the radio play?

HB: Well ... yeah ... *Scenes from an Execution* is, was, a radio play, but now it's a well-known theatre play.

MM: Yeah!

HB: *No End of Blame* is just a theatre play. Yep, they are both about artists.

MM: Is there, are there, other plays?

HB: Which touch on the subject? Well, interestingly, there is a play called *The Europeans* which you may have heard of, in which there is a big argument inside the play ... ah ... at a committee meeting ... in which they speak about what art should be doing in the culture. There's a quarrel so this issue comes up. Yeah, now this play ... ha, ha ... you'll be amused.

MM: If we talk about the characters in *The Europeans*, are there any characters who are artists?

HB: There's a small role – just one – a small painter.

MM: You talk about the characters.

HB: One, but it's a small role – a small part – he's a painter.

MM: What about the argument of the artist or the dilemma of the artist?

HB: It's all in the play.

MM: Yeah, inside the play?

HB: Inside the play, but there's one scene in which they talk about ... the ... you see it's set a long time ago. It's set in Vienna. It's at the time of the Turkish invasion. The Turks were thrown back, Vienna was freed, and the people argue about what sort of artistic life they want to live in the new country. So, there is a debate inside it.

MM: Yeah. What about my choice?

HB: The other two? They're ... they're fine, they're good, because ... understand me ... ahem ... the character who is the leading character in *Scenes from an Execution* is not me ... I don't like her ... ha, ha, ha. I don't like her! So, don't ... don't make the mistake of assuming that because the artist speaks it's Barker speaking – it's not.

MM: Okay. But what about *No End of Blame*?

HB: *No End of Blame*, no, that's not me either. Because there are two artists – one who is a political artist and one who is a sort of ... spontaneous, natural, artist ... I don't take sides.

MM: Yeah. Okay, okay. Yes.

HB: Ha, ha, ha, ha. You can find some more questions?

MM: Ah ... Mr Howard, can you explain your background and ... and why? And how you started writing plays?

HB: What's your background? Are you poor or rich?

MM: No, no, no, not about your ... your decision to write plays?

HB: I was just wondering. I'm from a very poor background. London, working people. I don't really know why I went into the theatre. I never saw plays. I have no family connections with theatre at all. I don't remember how ... I got there somehow. Hmm! I don't know how it happened. Anyhow, there I am, and there I stayed. So I had no natural ... relationship with the theatre at all. I don't think ... and to tell you the truth I don't go to the theatre now. It bores me, yeah.

MM: Ah ... The other questions. How would you describe your work? What have you tried to say in your plays?

HB: I've tried to talk about human pain. Because I'm a tragic writer. Let's be clear, because I had to say this yesterday to some students. What is sad is not tragic. Tragedy is not sad. What is tragic is not sad. You see, sometimes they say here, they love Chekhov! Oh Chekhov! They love Chekhov. He's everywhere here. You could think he was English, not Russian. Chekhov is sad, it's not a tragedy. In tragedy the individual, the protagonist, exposes himself to death, and he always dies; that is always the end. He has to die. Because what he does, what he chooses, it's his choice bringing him into conflict with the world, and the world destroys him. This is the same in every tragedy. This is what interests me but, you understand, to go back to the beginning, anyone who writes about death is not socially useful. Ha, ha, ha! Understand? What's ... go and ask them. Go and ask them at the National Theatre, or the Royal Court Theatre, what is the use of tragedy?

MM: It has no use.

HB: It doesn't have a use. So it's a great artform, a great artform, but it does not have a use. It tells us we are alive, and I refuse every time somebody says to me, "Your work is pessimistic." I say, "That's not a value; that is not a criticism." The fact of the matter is, on the stage, in a play of mine, there is so much life being lived. That is its own reason and people leave these plays excited.

MM: Good. And this is the aim. Good.

HB: It's not my decision to ... to make them unhappy, because I don't have a target, I don't have an aim. I just express who I am.

MM: You said, “I am not an optimist. I have no intention to change the world or improve mankind. I am no Brecht. This is not my project.”² What is your project then?

HB: My project is to ... I’m not interested in social justice. Social justice doesn’t interest me. I’m interested in the soul of man. I’m interested in developing the soul of man, that’s what I’m doing. Ah, helping, helping this process. As a good poet, a good poet helps man to develop his sensibility and his soul. That’s all we can do.

MM: Mmm. So, ah, in talking about Brecht there is no influence on you as a writer?

HB: As a writer, no, none at all. I don’t ... no influence at all. It seems to me Brecht’s whole imaginative life – and he did have a good imagination – which is the thing I admire above all things ... He puts this to the service of a political project. (*Brecht*) he’s a socialist, a communist, so the plays are all about drawing the audience to ... some rational conclusions about society ... to me society ... not rational ... is all about ... and I don’t wish to organize society, I don’t want to contribute to that, after all. You know very well there are hundreds of writers doing this (*chuckles*). Do I have to do it as well? Everybody is doing this! Go to the National Theatre – they’re all about the poor, you know, the class war. Da, da, da, da ... I’m not interested in that. There are too many people doing that.

MM: Lovely. Then who are the writers who influenced you as a writer? Are there any writers?

HB: Poets! Not stage people, poets. I’ll tell you: Attila József, Hungarian poet! (*sighs*) Who else do I read ... Celan, Paul Celan. These are wonderful people. Not political.

MM: So how do you describe yourself? Are you a poet? Or a dramatist?

HB: Ah, now listen, that’s the whole point. This is a terrible problem with this terrible country. Poets belong in the theatre. What was Shakespeare? Was he a poet or a dramatist? Well, both!

MM: Both.

HB: At the same moment ... and me. I’m a poet and I’m a dramatist. Who else is, I ask you? Who else? Nobody. But the theatre is a place for poets. Because it must speak its own language. It does not speak the language of the street. Leave the language of the street to the social realist, thank you. Me, I speak poetry.

MM: So now the problem is with the form.

HB: Of course, it’s the problem everywhere. The form is in politics. It’s in society.

MM: So, if the problem is the form, what is the social content of the play? What about the content?

HB: The content?

² Olivier Py, “An imagination and a voice”: on writing tragedy, resisting political dogmatism and avoiding success”, A conversation between Howard Barker and Olivier Py, trans. Vanasay Khamphommala, v. 63, n. 4 (2010): 466. This conversation took place on February 2, 2009 at the Odéon—Théâtre de l’Europe, on the occasion of a conference dedicated to Barker organized by the University of Paris-Sorbonne and the Odéon and supervised by Élisabeth Angel-Perez and Vanasay Khamphommala. Howard Barker was invited by the French theatre for the entire season, with four plays by three directors.

MM: Yes, about the relation between the form and the content. So the problem is with the form? The artist should be concerned or focus on the form?

HB: Form and style; form is everything. Style is everything.

MM: Without social content?

HB: The social content arrives when you have done the form ... I know you don't agree. I know you don't agree with any of this! The form dictates the content. The style dictates the content. Listen. When people come to a play of mine they don't know my work. They come, "Who's this Mr Barker?" Okay. They go, "The language, the sound, the musicality in the speech, it's not what I speak, it's not what I hear in the street." They know they're in a different place. All social realism you can be in the street, or in the theatre sounds exactly the same. Not with me ... in the theatre a special speech ... actors who can only speak in this way, it's magic. Speech, poetry, so. There is content even there, never mind what they are saying. When you're in a different space, your ... the content ... is defined by that.

MM: Lovely. Mr Barker I want to ask you some more questions. Why do you write plays?

HB: Why? Because I'm a genius at writing plays.

MM: Yeah, yeah ... Why do you write plays?

HB: Instead of driving a bus do you mean?

MM: Ha, ha! (*Chuckling*).

HB: Ha, ha, ha, ha! Do you mean that? Why?

MM: Yeah.

HB: Why, why do I? ... I love the theatre. I love the theatre!

MM: For money?

HB: There's no, no ... money in it. I've no money. Listen ... There's nothing in the world so ancient or so beautiful as an actor speaking live – not film – a living actor speaking ... beautiful ... speaking beautifully crafted language with a voice which is trained. He becomes a god, okay? You know what it's like – a great actor – ahh! Mesmerizing, hypnotizing! This is a great thing. It never changes. It was the same with the Greeks and it was the same with the Romans. Still the same and it doesn't change.

MM: So, can you describe the relationship between the playwright and the director? And do you think that the director interferes – I talk about theatre – with the playwright's decisions?

HB: Well that's a good one. That's a big question. I don't let people direct my work – I direct it. Ahem. What they say, I'll tell you what they say, the logic they have, they say. Well, the play is fine, it needs another eye, my eye, and I say to them, "No, it doesn't need your eye." The play is there ... you don't add anything ... directors and things ... the play doesn't need adding ... need a director to interpret simply what is there on the page ... the stage ... I don't need his contribution. I think directors are by and large ... they cannot help interposing themselves ... the text and the public. I don't need that.

MM: So, this is the reason behind directing the work yourself?

HB: I can do it. I've no problem with directing. Some writers can't direct. They know they can't. But I can do it. I work with an ensemble, you know, of actors who know how to play, perform, work.

MM: Good. The other question: do you think the new technologies, represented by cinema and other means, have a negative influence on theatre?

HB: I ask you how many good film directors are there? Ten.

MM: Are there only ten?

HB: Ten great film directors, since time began. Ten great film directors. That's it. So, no. Most film is rubbish, complete rubbish – most. Theatre is rubbish, of course it is, but not anything of a threat to the experience. It's quite, quite, different. In film the camera is everything, it seems to me, because the camera chooses precisely what you will see. In theatre that doesn't happen. In theatre the actor is in the space and you ... you decide where you want to look. You could look at the ceiling if you like, you know, so they're so different. I don't think they affect each other. As for the other things like video, no, it's insignificant.

MM: What kinds of dilemmas might the playwright find in the plays staged in the theatre and the ones which are broadcast on radio? What is the responsibility of the artist for both?

HB: In radio, do you mean?

MM: In radio and theatre. Is there a difference?

HB: No, no. Precisely for me, I write radio plays, I write stage plays ... I do it exactly the same. There is no difference in my method or approach. Radio, possibly, the audience is bigger, but that's irrelevant to me. It doesn't change.

MM: About the people's reception of the two yeah ...?

HB: Okay of the management. Well, let me say the BBC, which is a political organisation ... ha, ha ... of course, some has been good to me. But always I'm put on a station, on a programme, Radio 3, which has a very small number of people. Radio 4, which has a big, big audience, I can't go there, they don't let me go there. So, there's this feeling Mr Barker is a very good writer – we have to have him – but, you know, we won't have too many people listening. I tell you what they think. Do you know the word? You hear it all the time: 'elitist'.

MM: Yeah, 'elitist'. Sure!

HB: They say Mr Barker is elitist. Who says ... who says I'm elitist? People out there cannot understand my work. Of course they can. But they say no, he's elitist. He must go over there to Radio 3 ... ha, ha.

MM: Mr Barker, you said something very interesting. You said the BBC is political.

HB: Of course,

MM: What do you mean? Do you mean the artist doesn't have free will to talk freely because it is run by the state?

HB: Yeah, sort of. It's not like, it's not like some countries ... ha, ha.

MM: Like Iraq. (*Chuckles.*)

HB: I guess not ... there's ... We don't have fascism here, but, but, let's be clear (*sighs*). There is a political agenda in this country, as in any, and it's called ... we know what it's called. Liberal humanism. We call it liberal humanism. Okay, everything the BBC talks of or demonstrates is done through the spectacles of liberal humanism. Now I don't particularly disagree with that. I don't want to kill people. I'm not a fascist, but everything they do has this on it. So, if you don't quite fit, that I just said to you didn't ... I'm not interested. But liberal humanism is very interested in social justice. They talk about it all the time.

MM: So, what about democracy?

HB: Well.

MM: Do you think there is no democracy?

HB: Ha, ha. It's a ... it's weak.

MM: It's weak!

HB: It's ... it's in danger. It's in its last days I think, probably.

MM: Ah, Mr Barker, you said in *Arguments for a Theatre*, "In an age of populism, the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence".³

HB: Yeah.

MM: What do you mean?

HB: Well, hang on, sorry ... (*sips his tea*). Well, it means ... sometimes you must expect, an artist must expect, to be ... outside on the margins all the time. Great artists don't live in the centre of affairs. You take the artists who are very successful here. They are people whose opinions are closely aligned to the opinions of the state. When I mean, the state I mean, the media, I mean the BBC, *The Guardian* newspaper, the whole apparatus of liberal humanism. Those who are successful – I think David Hare is a good example – are bang in the middle. People like me ... it's two years since I had a play in England, so I have to accept (ahem) that you're not gonna be heard. Some of my favourite writers are never heard. Paul Celan – look how long it took Paul Celan – 50 years to be heard. So, you have to accept the possibility of being outside.

MM: And also you said art is a problem?

HB: Yes ... ha, ha. Thank God! It should be a problem!

MM: Should it be a problem?

HB: Yes. It should be, because I remember when I went to Poland – I went to Poland quite soon after the fall of Communism – and I spoke to an audience, and they said, "We require writers to tell ... to point the way for us." And I said, "Well I can't do that. There will be artists like that who will, but I can't do that." For me, a work of art does not simplify the world; it

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

complicates the world. So if you think life is too difficult don't go and see my plays but ... you know ... if you are curious about the world then you want to see it. It complicates it.

MM: Does the artist complicate it?

HB: Yes, he complicates. He does not simplify it and that's a responsibility in my opinion. You mustn't tell lies, ha, ha. No, he must never tell lies. That's what he can't do. I don't think writers shouldn't tell lies in order to make people happy.

MM: So, so, he must be strict and he must be serious.

HB: Serious subjective.

MM: You describe your work as 'Theatre of Catastrophe'. Can you talk a little about that?

HB: Yeah, well ... no one has written tragedy in England since Shakespeare. It's me ... till now 500 years nothing, then it's me. I write tragedy. So ... but of course the world changes but it's not the same as in Shakespeare's time ... so in my sort of tragedy not all my plays are tragedies but some are. Some element in the world ... overthrows society, society is tipped over and in that chaos ... individuals make choices. Now, a good example of this is *Victory*. This one you may like to read. The English Civil War has just ended, the regime has replaced the king with a Republic, then this regime is turned over, okay, and the king comes back and all the Republicans are dug out of their graves and hung up on chains on the street. So this is what happened in the 17th century. In my play this woman who is the widow of one of these Republican intellectuals decides, "This is an incredible crisis in my life ... Shall I stay loyal to the ideology of my husband? Or shall I join the new world? Shall I forget that and recreate myself? This is the tragedy in the piece. She struggles against all of her thoughts to become a different person. So that's an example. It's catastrophic because what launches her, what forces her into that decision, is not her choice, but it's the world, which I'm sure many people in Iraq woke up to find. There was a war on so something suddenly forces you to make decisions. This is what happens in my tragedies. It's external force, breaking down values and forcing you ...

MM: To follow certain choices.

HB: Choice is the word.

MM: Lovely. Mr Barker, you said in a number of interviews that you are against morality in theatre. You said, "I'm not a moralist. This is what separates me from nearly every other writers operating in the English theatre".⁴ Do you think that the morality of the writer is an urgent need for his or her popularity?

HB: You ask difficult questions. Yeah. Well, it's very easy to live with a moralist because you know what they think. Most writers are moralists, so you go to see the play and you get what its message is, which is a moral thing, and you go home with it. I don't do messages and I don't do morals so of course my plays are difficult.

MM: Do you have very strong political views? Can you explain what they are and how they inform your work?

⁴ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (USA: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 113.

HB: No. Ha, ha, ha. I don't have strong political views. I just have ... and my work is governed by instincts not by politics.

MM: You are known for having very strong views on art and culture. Can you explain them?

HB: I think I've done that really, yeah. To me, artists must be independent, to use that word, 'autonomous' – to be autonomous. They cannot serve society.

MM: I've already asked this question. You are a director as well. In 1994, you yourself directed *Hated Nightfall* for the Wrestling School (company). Do you think the playwright should direct his work? What is the relationship between the director and writer?

HB: Yeah we did. I don't say they should direct their work. Some can't do it. But I live here a very solitary life. It's quiet. Suddenly you're thrown into the theatre; you have to work with people like actors who are quite difficult people. It's difficult. It's a difficult transition from when the show's done. You go back to the silence of your house again. It's difficult. I think I can do it. I understand some people can't do it.

MM: Lovely. You said in *Arguments for a Theatre*, "A braver theatre asks the audience to test the validity of the categories it believes by. In other words, it is not about life as it is lived at all, but about life as it might be lived".⁵

HB: Yes, quite so. I wrote about the collection of plays about the possibilities ... the only. I got a play translated into Arabic as a matter of fact. That is ... and that title is very ... that title is very critical. It's not about what it's about, what ... might be. So in fact all my plays are in speculations, imaginative ... moves towards what might happen. I don't say it does happen. Do you see?

MM: Yeah. What about history? If you want us to live life as it might be lived.

HB: About the past? I know a lot of history. The sad thing about the English – they don't know any history. I know a lot of history. It influences all my thinking all the time. I can't say how it does, but I'm aware of it happening – it does. Many of my plays – *The Europeans*, *Scenes from an Execution* – many of them are set in historical periods. At university I was a historian, not a literary person. So, I know a lot about history and it influences me. But I don't entirely trust history as a discipline, you know, as an intellectual discipline. So, when people say history proves this or this and history says that's one history there's another history, there's a history we don't know yet. From the other side, the victims as well as the history of the winners.

MM: Good. You said in your speech about politics, "The dramatist's obligation becomes an obligation not to a political position ... but to his own imagination".⁶

HB: That's where we started!

MM: Finally, Mr Barker, what is your future vision of the world? I mean, what type of responsibility should the artist, the playwright, take in the age of terrorism?

HB: Ah well, that's a political question.

⁵ Ibid., p.52.

⁶ Ibid., p. 48-49.

MM: Yes, yes. A political question.

HB: Ha, ha, ha. You see I'm not answering it.

MM: So, what is the function of the playwright now in this age?

HB: It's to keep imagination alive against those who would kill imagination. That is the same problem they had in the days of Euripides and the days of Shakespeare and now it never changes. We must protect imagination against those who would kill imagination, i.e., the state. Mmm.

MM: Mr Barker, even in my country, in the Middle East, we call for dialogue between civilizations. So, in your vision, what is the solution?

HB: In this particular moment, in this particular moment, you don't want me to say a lot of clichés, do you? I could say ... it's a cliché. I could say we must understand each other. It's easy to say this. That's why I don't speak on this.

MM: How?

HB: Yeah, how? I don't want to say something which is meaningless.

MM: Mmm.

HB: I don't want to say. I respect your culture and you respect my culture, yeah? Obviously, but that is a meaningless ... I don't know.

MM: Mmm.

HB: I don't know!

MM: So, what is your opinion about the use of religion? Religion is used in a bad way.

HB: I don't know it. Religion is so unstable. It's no different than politics – so unstable. We've had this in the Western church all the time continually. We have heresy outbreaks of anathema. It can go anyway. The church, at the moment, is extremely tolerant. It's like Jesus ... it's like as if Jesus was reborn. Never been like that before ... it's quite new. We've never had this. The church used to be militant. It's not militant now. This must go for your church I guess – surely you're Muslim? Your church could be this or it could be that. The difference between now and the Crusades I suppose is one side has atomic bombs and soon both sides will have. Only the imagination will save us from ideology.

MM: And you mean this value.

HB: No, I don't. By ideology I mean systems of thought: Communism, Fascism.

MM: Do you have anything to add?

HB: No, I haven't.

MM: Well, I really thank you for your time and hospitality.

HB: Well, it's very nice to see you.

This interview was conducted at Barker's home in Brighton on 7 February 2015.