

Chapter Three

Howard Barker: The Freedom and Constraint of the Artist's Imagination

During the 1980s, theatrical culture was liable to a variety of political and economic pressures that “produced an enormous sense of dislocation and dissatisfaction”.¹ Besides funding cuts, the aesthetic merits of artistic values did not seem to be understood by the politicians. So, theatre was not only subject to funding cuts, but also to censorship, as we shall see. Government interference in performance and writing led to a sense of insecurity. So, works which were economically unviable were threatened with being banned or cancelled. In doing so, the commissioning of artists began to depend entirely on the criteria of the ruling political party – the Conservatives – who ignored the artists' true feelings. In other words, the aesthetic value of artworks was ignored in favour of monetarism. Instead, the duty of the artist was to be devoted to espousing political ideals.

The dilemma of the artist, therefore, was how did artists enjoy a degree of freedom without being censored? And if the artist failed to match the criteria of the ruling political party, what was the price of free expression? All these questions suggest radical changes in the British theatre system which is very complicated ideologically in respect to democracy, sponsorship and how the artists responded to it.

Howard Barker is a writer who began to grapple with these questions when he became suspicious of the effectiveness of politically committed theatre at about the same time that Thatcher was elected as Prime Minister. Although he is marginalized in his country, Barker has remained a challenging writer who dismantled the strictness of Conservative values during Thatcher's time. Unlike his oeuvre in the 1970s, Barker does not use his plays to espouse a particular ideological viewpoint. His left-wing views as a propagandist became less evident in the 1980s. To keep this fact in focus I will investigate Barker's plays primarily through the most pervasive political and economic situation affecting British theatre in the 1980s. Specifically, this was the new philosophy which asked for “the interdependency of economics and the arts, of the responsibility of artists to speak out on matters concerning the national

¹ Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s* (London: Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012), p. 32.

wealth as well as the national health, of artistic achievement as essential to industrial development”.²

3.1 British Theatre in the 1980s

Unquestionably, Margaret Thatcher’s three terms as Prime Minister (1979-90) had a profound influence on daily life in Britain. Theatre was no exception. Her policy of measuring everything in purely monetary terms caused commercial British theatre to fall in the mire of materialism.

In his predictions for the future of British theatre, Benedict Nightingale, critic for *The Times*, gloomily dubbed the decade of the 1980s “barren”.³ This barrenness is partly ascribed to the marketization of theatre which led to the atomization of theatre audiences into ‘customers’, where the theatre building became a “classy cultural drop-in centre[...]: theatre-going was gradually transformed into an ‘experience’ to be consumed”,⁴ rather than an act of nurturing social and community values. In other words, the arts were reduced to economic and instrumental value controlled by market interests. By extension, the critical term ‘cultural industry’, coined by philosophers of the Frankfurt School⁵ is a true description of British theatre in the 1980s. In the same vein, Baz Kershaw adds:

The theatre became a new kind of emporium where products could substitute for performance, becoming props in a cultured lifestyle. Through all these processes the pleasures of theatre-going gained as much emphasis in the consumption of theatre as any enjoyment of the performance itself. The power of performance was being challenged by the peripherals of theatre as

² Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, *Theatre Journal*, v. 51, n. 3, Theatre and Capital (Oct., 1999): 267.

³ Benedict Nightingale, *Predictions: The Future of Theatre* (London: Phoenix, 1998), p. 17.

⁴ Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p. 276.

⁵ The Frankfurt School is both an institution and a mode of social thought which has been associated with ‘critical theory’. Historically, “the institutional basis upon which the school developed was the Institute of Social Research, officially established on 3 February 1923 by a decree of the Ministry of Education, and affiliated with the University of Frankfurt”, Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School and Its Critics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 7. The pioneering figures of the Frankfurt School are: Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. The main preoccupation of the Frankfurt School was the ‘culture industry’, the idea which was first propounded by Horkheimer and Adorno, in their essay, “The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception”, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 120-67. Here, consumers “feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them”. *Ibid.*, p. 167. Economically, “the cultural industry becomes an advertising industry by its nature, because maintaining the economic system depends on maintaining economic demand [which] can be maintained only by a transfiguration and control of the psyches of the masses of men”. Accordingly, “art becomes degraded to propaganda, without Benjamin’s redemptive possibilities.” In this way, there is “no room [...] for the critical impulse”. See George Friedman, *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 163-164.

it transformed into a service industry with subsidiary retail outlets, and the commodification of theatre was achieved by reshaping the theatre client in the image of the consuming shopper.⁶

The West End and commercial theatre became an arena which offered, besides theatre performances, other merchandising outlets such as bookshops, cafés and restaurants. There was also a remarkable proliferation of theatre sales lines: t-shirts, badges, posters and other commodities. These facilities within theatre became cultural magnets for those looking for lucrative investments in new industries. Accordingly, big musicals in the West End, which sold such merchandise, became highly popular. Many factors, of course, contributed to the development of musical theatres which are “always a lively component of [sic] West End theatres”.⁷ However, after it suffered a critical period during the recession years, from 1979 to 1981, there was a positive turn in its fortunes by 1982. This development of the West End was achieved “through governmental support for cultural tourism to the UK as a ‘heritage’ destination, and through the transfer of successful shows from the large subsidised theatres”.⁸ So, the West End opened with the global musical *Cats* in the New Theatre in 1981 through the collaboration of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh. In spite of its lack of plot line, the show achieved great success with 8,949 performances.⁹ Similarly, Lloyd Webber developed *Starlight Express*, which opened in 1984 at the Apollo. Other musical projects which were successfully developed included *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) for Sarah Brightman, and then the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, which was developed by Cameron Mackintosh in 1985.

As far as the British theatre crisis is concerned, many factors contributed to its decline in addressing a large sector of the audience. Beyond the economic difficulties, the theatre’s language passed through a crisis which manifested itself in its retreat into commercial entertainment. The language of the stage became “less confrontational, perhaps even conciliatory”,¹⁰ to use Peacock’s words. The quality of theatre performance and discourse was highly influenced by the materialistic side of the age. In an article entitled “The state of

⁶ Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Since 1895*, volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.313-14.

⁷ Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*, p. 42.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Janet E. Gardner, “Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties by D. Keith Peacock; Essays on Caryl Churchill: Contemporary Representations by Sheila Rabillard”, *Theatre Journal*, v. 52, n. 4, Women/History (Dec., 2000), p. 586.

reviewing today”, which first appeared in the *Royal Society for the Arts (RSA) Journal* in Spring 1999, Michael Billington, a theatre critic for *The Guardian*, strongly deplored the dominance of consumerism and celebrity within mainstream theatre culture, which became the criteria for measuring success. He argues that, “Profitability in the 1980s became a test of worth: popularity an index of quality”.¹¹

The other key issue which led to the crisis in British theatre during this period was the interference of political parties in the administration of the Arts Council, which is the main body for the arts. Their attempts to politicize arts institutions had a negative impact on distinctive waves of new plays to cope with new realities. In other words, funding these plays were conditioned by their correspondence with the policies of the ruling political party. Many historians, such as Robert Hewison, and theatre critics, such as D. Keith Peacock and Vera Gottlieb, have noted the increasing influence of [the Conservative] political party during the early 1980s not only in the running of the Arts Council and drawing up of its policy but also in appointing key personnel.¹² This is quite clear in the case of Richard Hoggart, the Vice Chairman of the Arts Council Board in 1981, who was removed and replaced with the Conservative sympathizer William Rees-Mogg.

However, since its inception in 1945, the main aim of the Arts Council has been to subsidize the arts and instil in people universal values which are far removed from market forces and state interference. Its policy originates from the modern liberal-humanist view that “the artist offers society works which transcend any particular political or economic regime”.¹³ In addition, those works of arts should be accessible to the Great British public.

Accordingly, following the Second World War, British theatre witnessed “a gradual increase in state subsidy for the arts”.¹⁴ This policy, adopted by the post-war Labour government, was meant to protect British theatre from the cultural dominance of the consumer and the market ethics which were rife in Western capitalism.

By contrast, the Conservative Party under Thatcher enforced its power by sanctioning a more interventionist role for the Arts Council to develop the subsidy system in a way that all subsidized theatres would slavishly meet the ‘free’ market requirements. This doctrine, later

¹¹ Michael Billington, “The state of reviewing today”, (ed.) Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich, *Theatre in Crisis? : Performance manifestos for a new century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 55.

¹² Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*, p. 38.

¹³ Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p. 271.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

called Thatcherism, is clearly summed up by William Rees-Mogg, an editor and Chairman of the Arts Council in 1981, as follows:

The qualities required for survival in this age will be the qualities of the age itself. They include self-reliance, imagination, a sense of opportunity, range of choice, and the entrepreneurial action of small professional groups. The state should continue to help the arts but the arts should look first to themselves, and to their audiences, for their future and their growth.¹⁵

As a result, the driver for growth became the marketplace. Thus, British theatre found itself in competition with other cultural attractions in the burgeoning media, tourism and related industries. Therefore, its worth was being tested by popularity and profitability as mentioned before. This view is summarized by Billington who states, in his commentary on British theatre in the 1980s that, “We live increasingly in a culture dominated by the two big Cs: consumerism and celebrity”.¹⁶

Although much criticism of Thatcher’s attitude towards the theatre comes from her encouragement of free market economics and, in turn, reducing theatre funding, this government policy succeeded in stimulating new sources for subsidized theatre and diversifying income streams to arts organisations. One justification for this policy, however, is to free “the arts from dependence on the state, and of giving audiences, through their spending power, greater control over the national theatrical agenda”.¹⁷ This is true, to some extent, but in effect it led to further stratification and segmentation of the market. To put it differently, the fulcrum of initiative was taken by the theatre-goers rather than the theatre producers. Their influence went beyond spending power to evaluation of theatre performance. To quote Rees-Mogg again, he argues that, “We are coming to value the consumer’s judgement as highly as that of the official or expert ... The voice of the public must ... be given due weight ... [and] the way in which the public discriminates is through its willingness to pay for its pleasures”.¹⁸ Consequently, this oxymoron in the commodification and marketization of art led officials to look at the consumer as an effective factor in the arts industry. Therefore, the patronage of art

¹⁵ Cited in Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p. 273.

¹⁶ Michael Billington, “The state of reviewing today”, (ed.) Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich, *Theatre in Crisis? : Performance manifestos for a new century*, p. 56.

¹⁷ Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p. 271.

¹⁸ Cited in Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p. 275.

was replaced by sponsorship, and state funding was granted only to those who supported commerce and industry.

Accordingly, British theatre was subjected to a fundamental shift not only in the ideology of funding but also in theatre discourse and its relationships with the public sphere.

If we look back to the 1970s, it is clear that there was an extraordinary amount of agitprop and Brechtian epic technique. In other words, dramatic discourse was drawn directly from Marxist doctrine, which focuses on political and social issues, encouraging social change. During the 1980s, however, the dominant discourses of drama and theatre were forced to adhere to Thatcher's ideals. As such, there was a shift back towards more traditional, well-made and realistic plays built upon a careful construction of narrative and entertainment. As Peacock observes, plays written in the 1980s were increasingly "focus[ing] on individual or even personal crises rather than public confrontation".¹⁹ In the same context, Billington argues that, for financial and political reasons, British theatre suffered from a "decline in big plays [which are] capable of addressing a large audience and tapping a vibrant community response".²⁰

By the end of the 1980s, British theatre had been completely refashioned by a monetarist ideology. This ideological shadow fell not only on the physical structure of theatre but also on its theatrical discourse. In his conclusion of *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990*, Innes refers to theatre's loss of status because of Thatcherite policy. I will quote it in full since it describes several important outcomes of that policy:

The close of the 1980s has the feel of the end of an era. The upsurge of English drama, which Shaw initiated almost exactly a century before, seems to be running out of steam. As the 1990s open, over 40 per cent of West End stages are filled with long-running musicals, while financial pressure is forcing the RSC – one of the three main sponsors of new work – towards a partial withdrawal from its London base. The number of revivals increasingly outweighs new plays; and the most distinctive voices have either become marginalized, or set in their vision. Even before Beckett's death in 1989, his minimalism had reached a terminal point. Although Pinter switched direction during the 1980s, he has almost withdrawn from the theatre, while Bond's growing didacticism sacrifices drama to ideology. Barker and Brenton have

¹⁹ D. Keith Peacock, *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties* (Westport: Greenwood, 1991), p. 191.

²⁰ Michael Billington, "Making a Drama out of Crisis", *Guardian*, 4-5 May 1991.

ceased to develop, and their plays do not measure up to their previous achievements; Shaffer has retreated into commercial entertainment.²¹

Looking closely at the quotation above, we see that a plethora of British playwrights were either marginalized or had taken a new direction that conformed to the spirit of the age.

Barker, however, is one of those playwrights who has paid the price for writing un-commercial plays that eschew mere realism. He is a radical individualist who does not believe in the usefulness of theatre to espouse any political or social message. Alternatively, he looks for a quintessentially revolutionary theatre which focuses on recreation, not a mere production of life, as we shall see in his theatre theory.

3.2 Barker's Theatre Theory

In his influential collection of essays, encapsulated in particular in his books *Arguments for a Theatre*²² and *Death, The One and The Art of Theatre*²³, Barker reveals his own powerful theatre theory. This theory evolved from his rejection of collectivism and Brechtian alienation that is typical in the early work of Caryl Churchill and David Hare. Instead, Barker believes in 'radical individualism' as a high value in which the theatre should be liberated. This is even more important than the moral and political imperatives. In short, the two prevailing themes of Barker's critical writings on drama and theatre are "first, a rallying cry to reject the implicit censorship of Naturalism, and its inevitable imposition of reality as a ring-fencing of imagination – and secondly, a call to reinvent forms of tragedy capable of restoring imagination to drama, and the primal powers of performance to theatre itself".²⁴

In his view of so-called 'Theatre of Catastrophe', Barker wishes to introduce "a brave theatre [which] asks the audience to test the validity of the categories it believes it lives by. In other words, it is not about life as it is lived at all, but about life as it might be lived, about the thought which is not licensed, and about the abolished unconscious".²⁵

Unlike Brecht and the naturalistic, Barker looks at theatre as a place for speculation where the audience is led into fantasy and imagination. Significantly, to Barker, the theatre is a

²¹ Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 448.

²² Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey (London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd., 1989).

²³ Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (London, Routledge, 2005).

²⁴ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), p. 20.

²⁵ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, p. 52.

sublime arena where the “public is *cleansed* of the detritus of familiarity, domesticity and recognition”.²⁶ (Emphasis in the original.) It is not a mere reflection of realistic life as Brecht said through the words of his philosopher in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*:

The crux of the matter is that true realism has to do more than just make reality recognizable in the theatre. One has to be able to see through it too. One has to be able to see the laws that decide how the processes of life develop. These laws can’t be spotted by the camera. Nor can they be spotted if the audience only borrows its heart from one of the characters involved.²⁷

For Barker, it is a kind of prejudice to see theatre as an imitation of life. In doing so, it will “be humiliated by rituals of reproduction”.²⁸ In an interview with Charles Lamb, a theatre director, Barker asserts that, “The naturalistic and the Brechtian projects seem equally false to me. I neither believe in reproducing the voice and manner of the social person nor in identifying the sources of self in economics, ideology etc. I am interested in character as speculation”.²⁹

Although British theatre was dominated by the influence of Brecht during the 1970s and 1980s, Barker, however, seems immune to this influence. In my interview with him, Barker insists, “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. [It] doesn’t interest me”.³⁰ Barker, above all other British dramatists, demonstrates in his plays and in his theoretical writings a most profound retreat from Brechtian political theatre. He writes in *Arguments for a Theatre*:

The real end of drama in this period must be not the reproduction of reality, critical or otherwise, (the traditional model of the Royal Court play, socialistic, voyeuristic) but speculation – not what is (now unbearably decadent) but what might be, what is imaginable. The subject then becomes not man-in-society, but knowledge itself, and the protagonist not the man-of-

²⁶ Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, p. 7.

²⁷ Quoted in Brean S. Hammond, “Is everything history?": Churchill, Barker, and the Modern History Play”, *Comparative Drama*, v.41, n. 1 (Spring 2007): 12.

²⁸ Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, p. 6.

²⁹ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (USA: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 44.

³⁰ My interview with Howard Barker, Brighton, 7 February 2015.

action (rebel or capitalist as source of pure energy) but the struggler with self.³¹

Unlike Edward Bond who states that “there’s no place in art for mysticism or obscurantism”,³² Barker takes these two traits as the inspiring motivation for his theatre. Thus, in the obscurity or ambiguity of Barker’s dramas lies their effectiveness. Similarly, Chris Corner, the administrator and producer of The Wrestling School says, “Barker, however, is ‘much happier with ambiguity and obscurity’, and characteristically directs without placing an interpretation upon the text for the audience”.³³

However, before we go into detail about Barker’s theatre theory, it is important to illustrate his motives behind writing increasingly on theoretical matters, namely theatre and its social function. Knowing these merits will, in turn, reveal the dilemmas of Barker’s artist characters.

As we have already indicated, Barker is against the politicization of theatre. Although his plays in the 1970s were classified as ‘political’, he never adopted the discourse of agitational propaganda or used his plays to espouse a particular ideological thought. On the contrary, he was doubtful of the efficacy of political theatre as a true developer of people’s perceptions. More than that he believes that a commitment to a particular ideological system will be detrimental to the aesthetic qualities of art. In this respect, Charles Lamb argues:

The view that the dramatist who eschews ideological commitment must of necessity be in the grip of an ideology is per se an ideological view. Where a dramatist is ideologically committed and feels the need to convey his/her views, then this will generally be the least dramatic part of the work; we are all familiar with those moments when characters obviously become mouthpieces – when there is not an equivalent element of contradiction in the drama.³⁴

But this does not mean that Barker’s plays are devoid of political awareness. Taking a short glance at Barker’s work during the 1970s, we see that it “generally recommended itself to directors on a ‘political’ level: this was because the plays were overtly concerned with political

³¹ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, p. 36.

³² Quoted in Charles Lamb, *The Theatre of Howard Barker* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 20.

³³ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker’s Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, p. 11.

³⁴ Charles Lamb, *Howard Barker’s Theatre of Seduction* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1997), p. 28.

figures and political questions”.³⁵ Earlier in the 1970s, Barker’s political thinking was that of a revolutionary socialist. His politics matured during that decade. Barker’s plays, such as *Edward, the Final Days* (1972), *Stripwell* (1975), *Fair Slaughter* (1977), *That Good Between Us* (1977), and *The Hang of the Gaol* (1978) reflect more political and ideological vogue.

In reality, these politics are clearly manifested in his view of the rottenness of the institutional life of England as an embodiment of the travails and failures of liberal democracy. In this respect, his work was a reaction to widespread anxieties during this period “about the inefficacy and decline of Britain’s institutional structures”.³⁶ For Barker, these institutional structures became a kind of constraint which isolated people from active participation in life. As David Ian Rabey, an author and artistic director who wrote extensively about Barker, puts it: “Barker’s plays of the late 1970s reflect the contemporary political climate in their fundamental sense of the disjunction between social institutions and the ideals which they ostensibly embody, of the individual’s alienation from the real and severance from the possibility of the ideal. His principal characters are shown in conflict with the institutions they encounter or represent”.³⁷

As his writing developed during the 1980s, Barker’s catastrophic plays also operated on a deeper political level. Barker’s shift in his work from socialist realism to catastrophe heralds new forms of artistic enquiry which involve challenges to social objectives. Now, the political message is covered by an aesthetic and poetic veneer which can seem ambiguous. This ambiguity is perhaps one of the reasons for the neglect of his plays, after his early professional success.

In his comment on Barker’s works during the 1980s, Rabey again affirms that

Barker’s work continues to be political and revolutionary, but not in the sense that it has an agenda or politics to prescribe; rather, it explores vulnerabilities in systems of (self-)fortification, and how forces of control, circumscription and immobilisation will always be (particularly) prey to anarchic upheaval.

³⁵ Charles Lamb, *The Theatre of Howard Barker*, p. 6.

³⁶ Chris Megson, “‘England Brings You Down At Last’: Politics and Passion in Barker’s ‘State of England’ Drama”, ed. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey in *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker* (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 2006), p. 127.

³⁷ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), p. 42.

‘Barker’s way as a dramatist is always to expose the public crisis through the personal agony of individuals’, as is noted on the back cover of the 2005 Oberon edition of his play *The Fence in its Thousandth Year*.³⁸

As mentioned before, Barker is not celebrated in his country, and most of his works during the 1980s were rejected by the major theatrical institutions on the pretext that they did not have a clear message or morality. More evidently, he was attacked by some critics, such as Michael Billington, because of this. In an interview given in October 2004, Barker reveals to Aleks Sierz, a British theatre critic, that, “I’ve run into flak from the beginning. I’ve always been disliked by the establishment critics, because the plays are not moral”.³⁹ Consequently, his theoretical views, which are expounded in a number of books, are a form of self-defence against those criticisms. In another interview with Charles Lamb, Barker points out:

Anyone who has worked consistently at an art form for a number of years has a theory of creation and production. It is only a matter of articulating it that separates ‘theoretical’ artists from others. In my own case I undertook it as a work of self-defence. Unlike most ostensibly ‘controversial’ writers, I had no critical support that was visible. Where it existed, chiefly among younger academics, and abroad, it couldn’t express itself in the public domain.⁴⁰

In the above mentioned interview, Barker also justifies his writing on a theoretical basis through his inclination to test the role of imagination in the artist’s life. He argues, “I am seeking to justify, in a post hoc way, what I arrived at imaginatively – that seems the only way an imaginative artist proceeds, blindly, wilfully, and chaotically, in the first instance, conceptually on reflection”.⁴¹ For Barker, the only authority in writing is the imagination. He thinks that this characteristic of imagination is what differentiates writers from other individuals. He stated to Sierz, in the same above interview, “I don’t believe writers have

³⁸ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death: An Expository Study of his Drama, Theory and Production Work*, 1988 – 2008 (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

³⁹ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

sounder judgements about politics than any other individual. All they have is imagination. That we trust. If you trust a writer's politics, you're a fool to do so".⁴²

However, one of the main oppositions to Barker's theatre is its lack of function. Barker repeatedly raises questions about the function of the theatre and the responsibility of the artist. To him, theatre is an end in itself. So, to give theatre a functional dimension is to belittle it. He repudiates all those who see theatre as "congenial". To him, "The art of theatre is constructed on the premiss [sic] that the creation of happiness is no part of its function. Nor does it have a function".⁴³ Thus, Barker rejects the theatre's collective and public function, which find expression in entertainment or enlightenment, and instead erects a creative theatre where the individual's thinking is stimulated by a mystical experience. Here, the dramatists appear "as priests in a sacred art".⁴⁴ This sacredness comes from his view of theatre as a visionary place where art is not polluted by the travails of life. So Barker's rhetorical question: "Is art not necessary for itself?" asserts his vision of art as a privilege, not a reward.⁴⁵ Therefore, being an artist requires particular talents through which the artist can communicate a visionary experience.

Against this theoretical background, Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe has been labelled 'elitist' by critics. In contrast, Barker sees this elitism as a privilege and a responsibility as well. It is a privilege in the sense that the writer, like the priest, is endowed with divine characteristics. His responsibility, above all, is to make the audience speculate. He argues that an elitist artist is one who "uses imagination to speculate about life as it is lived, and proposes, consciously or unconsciously, life as it might be lived".⁴⁶ In his essay entitled "Radical Elitism in the Theatre",⁴⁷ Barker declares that the privileged status of the writer "implies a shared privileged status for audiences whose primary role, as he sees it, will be to function as interpreters of obscurities".⁴⁸ So, his theatre is elitist in the sense that Barker does not assume that the audience are "a semi-educated mass in need of protection, and protection in particular from complexity, ambiguity, and the potential disorder which lurks behind the imagination".⁴⁹ On the contrary, in new theatre, the audience should take their responsibility to redesign a new

⁴² Ibid., p. 116.

⁴³ Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.38.

⁴⁵ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 29-35.

⁴⁸ Alan Thomas, "Howard Barker: Modern Allegorist", *Modern Drama*, v.35, n. 3 (Fall 1992): 441.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Brean S. Hammond, "Is everything history?": Churchill, Barker, and the Modern History Play", p. 21.

morality. The other reason for being elitist is Barker's rejection of commercial theatre. However, Barker's theatre may be difficult because it works within its own unique terms. Like any other theatrical form, his theatre is fundamentally "offering a particular set of problems which require creative solutions of some kind. If there is a difficulty, it occurs when the particularity of 'Barkerian' creative problems is not appreciated: the need to *wrestle* with creative problems is, of course, embedded in the company's philosophy through its name".⁵⁰ (Emphasis in original.)

To gain a fuller understanding of Barker's theatre theory, it is important to shed light on his intentions in creating such a hermetic theatre.

In her introduction to the second edition of *Arguments for a Theatre*, Amanda Price comments on those who study Barker's works:

For the spectator, actor or director approaching Barker's work, the task specified by the playwright is not one of acquiescence, acceptance or passive reception. The pact he forges demands rather an active engagement of intransigent will "grinding on the complexity of the text" until individual meaning is forged out of the exigencies of the struggle.⁵¹

Barker's dramaturgical framework represents a challenging task for the audience whose paramount involvement is needed in order to decode the text. It is thought-provoking. In Barker's theatre, however, the writer and the actor work together to lead the audience's mind into a new area which has not been visited before. Barker argues:

In my theatre, great responsibility is born by the actor in luring the audience into the unknown life that exists in the text ... the actor's skill, the writer's invention, together release the mind of the observer from the blockage of unfreedom which is characterized in the feeling 'I don't know what this is about, therefore I reject it.' Instead the writer and the actor conspire to lure the mind into the unknown, the territory of possible changed perception.⁵²

⁵⁰ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, p. 2.

⁵¹ Quoted in Liz Tomlin, "The Politics of Catastrophe: Confrontation or Confirmation in Howard Barker's Theatre", *Modern Drama*, v. 43, n. 1 (Spring 2000): 66.

⁵² Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, pp. 34-35.

Accordingly, such a theatre rejects the simple manipulation of the text. Instead it focuses on provoking “the individual will to knowledge which is elicited by the experience of contradiction in the theatre”.⁵³ And, as Barker reveals in the second prologue to *The Bite of the Night*, that all “ideology [is] on the cheap”.⁵⁴ As such, the responsibility of the dramatist should be devoted to “a higher truth than mere authenticity”. This truth, however, does not take its validity from the predominant ideology or a “spurious realism”,⁵⁵ but from imagination.

Therefore, the role of imagination becomes an urgent demand in Barker’s view of the responsibility of the artist. In *Arguments for a Theatre*, he argues:

The dramatist’s obligation becomes an obligation not to a political position ... but to his own imagination. His function becomes not to educate by his superior political knowledge, for who can trust that? But to lead into moral conflict by his superior imagination.⁵⁶

Consequently, it is not an easy task for the audience to comprehend Barker’s plays. So, there is no common ground for their reception. Each individual takes his or her own side. This is Barker’s vision of the new theatre in which:

The dramatist explores the terrain, half-knowing, half-ignorant. His journey is mapped by the actors. The audience participates in the struggle to make sense of the journey, which becomes their journey also. Consequently, what is achieved by them is achieved individually and not collectively, there is no official interpretation.⁵⁷

In such a theatre, the audience as individuals are responsible for making an ethical choice. In addition, due to the lack of utilitarian function, they sometimes have no Stanislavskian ‘truth’ to take home. In this sense, the audience’s mind will be enlightened by stimulating their curiosity.

Barker was questioned by the American director Dan Hefko about whether he infantilized his audiences. Quoting Barker’s writing in *Arguments for a Theatre*, “[...] the play is not a

⁵³ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 26.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

debate, it is literary ‘play,’ and like a children’s play it is ‘world-inventing,’ requiring no legitimation from the exterior”. Barker adds:

I do not attempt to infantilize an audience. On the contrary, I pay them the respect due not only to adults but to curious adults. I honour them by taking it for granted they do not want to be told what they already know; indeed, I take it for granted they do not want to be ‘told’ at all. I don’t posture with ‘truth,’ which it is my ‘duty’ to impart. I do not assume a higher status than the audience; I only present the meditations that obsess or stimulate me. They may find things here to arouse their own curiosity.⁵⁸

In doing so, Barker is opposed to all writers who overstate their intentions. In his speech about *Claw*, Barker said:

I dislike a play in which the dramatist overstates his intentions, making matters easy for his audience. It produces this rather unhealthy expectation that we should all know what it’s about by the interval. To continually undermine the expected is the only way to really alter people’s perceptions.⁵⁹

Thus, Barker takes the third act of the abovementioned play as a superb example of defying the audience. What separates Barker’s theatre from others, however, is that there is no tangible message or morality to be grasped. In fact, this truth poses a dilemma throughout the course of his career as a playwright. This dilemma can be summed up in the question: what is the value of the play?

Barker repeatedly rejects the usefulness of art. He thinks that art has no use. This justifies his opposition to English culture which values things according to their utility. In my interview with Barker, he argues:

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

⁵⁸ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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.⁶⁰

As stated previously, Barker is opposed to any message or utilitarian value of dramatic work. This moral refusal led to a negative reaction to his plays. The wall of resistance to his works went beyond marginalizing him towards making a stand against funding his company, the Wrestling School. In his comment on Barker's production of *The Last Supper* (1988) at the Royal Court, Chris Corner

dispels any sense that The Wrestling School was bedding in at the Court; the Court was, subsequently, much less supportive. There was a feeling there that 'the work was too specialized', and the audience for Barker 'was too narrow'. Perhaps consequently, 'they were not interested at all in co-producing *Seven Lears*' (1989), the company's next piece.⁶¹

In an interview with Elisabeth Angel-Perez et al, (2007) Barker commented bitterly, "My theatre company has almost been destroyed by the ethical judgement of the government. Ethics have continually attacked artists, and theatre artists in particular, in their space. The funding of English theatre is based on moral judgements about the content. That's what I call censorship".⁶² Accordingly, the writer has to serve the critical agenda. For Barker, the writers who are interested in meanings and messages want "the theatre to reiterate social propaganda within the framework of a governing social humanism, a compact of mutual celebration which had degenerated into message".⁶³ As such, the theatre is reduced to a function which is required by the market. It becomes like a factory for critical texts which determines what is relevant and irrelevant to society. So both message and meaning are denounced by Barker.

Accordingly, the relationship between Barker's theatre and its audience begins to depend entirely on moral speculation which is far from a mere entertainment. Barker insists on the

⁶⁰ My interview with Howard Barker, Brighton, 7 February 2015.

⁶¹ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, p. 9.

⁶² Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 147.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

inventive and imaginative dimension of the play which refuses the message. In doing so, it “creates new tensions in a blandly entertainment-led culture”.⁶⁴ The new theatre Barker calls for, is the one which rejects conventional politics or ideology. So, the writer’s responsibility is to avoid “the proper focus of meaning in a work of art”.⁶⁵ To achieve a real change, the audience should be guided to different possibilities by encouraging them “to discover meaning, and in so doing, begin some form of moral reconstruction”.⁶⁶ Refusing an explicit meaning of the play, Barker stimulates his audience to deeper imaginative experiences. In conversation with James Reynolds, Kenny Ireland, an actor, director, and the driving force behind the formation of The Wrestling School in the 1980s, describes his experience of directing Barker’s plays by pointing out that Barker “withdrew comprehension. [...] If there’s 200 people in a room watching one of his plays, Howard wants 200 different reactions. And he allows for that, by withdrawing comprehension”.⁶⁷

In *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, Barker clearly manifests, “Very great plays yield no meanings. They move like the mouths of the dead on the banks of the Styx. ‘Meaningful’ plays are soiled/spoiled by their *meanings*. What is the meaning of death?”⁶⁸ (Emphasis in the original.) This, in turn, reveals the hostility towards his theatre by the theatre critics such as Michael Billington. In an article, “Barker, criticism and the philosophy of the ‘Art of Theatre’”, Mark Brown asserts that

There is a perfect match between Barker’s characterisation of the prevailing ‘ideology’ of English theatre and the basis for the London critical fraternity’s hostility towards his theatre. The critics’ complaints centre precisely on demands for naturalism [sic], social realism, liberal humanism, functionality and, above all, *meaning*.⁶⁹ (Emphasis in the original.)

In contrast, Barker does not believe in the utilitarian value of the theatre which is extracted from meaning. Instead, he is “interested in how the individual reconstructs him or herself from an experience of catastrophe”.⁷⁰ However, in his speech about the crisis of theatre in the current

⁶⁴ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, p. 48.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker’s Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, p. 24.

⁶⁸ Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Mark Brown, “Barker, criticism and the philosophy of the ‘Art of Theatre’ (including ‘Twenty-one Aside on Theatre Criticism’)”, ed. David Ian Rabey and Sarah Goldingay in *Howard Barker’s Art of Theatre: Essays on his plays, poetry and production work* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 96.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

political and cultural climate, Barker considers the decline of theatre language to be the worst aspect of this crisis which has damaged the training of actors.⁷¹ This is besides the dominant ideology of socialist realism which focuses on the utilitarian value of theatre. So, using poetic language to communicate a particular thought becomes a visible feature of Barker's theatre. In her speech about directing *Slowly* (2010), Hanna Berrigan says, "The simplest way to express what it takes to act Barker perhaps, is that with Barker, as with Shakespeare, the thought is in the word. It is the word, in fact".⁷²

As a result of his perception for the importance of language, Barker created the Wrestling School to be a test bed for his writing. This company was established "to act as a focus for the work of Howard Barker, whose highly distinctive style of writing and its poetic and tragic character requires the investment and continuity of an ensemble and a developing performance technique to realise its full potential".⁷³ Barker himself took responsibility for directing it. It was at this point that Barker fully realized the needs of the theatre and actors together. His fascination with language and the feeling of ossification of current discourse resulted in the unifying of his role as writer and director.

Barker's ideas about theatre can be fully understandable in the deep analysis of his fictional characters about artists. Themes of free expression and the censorship of art⁷⁴ recurs in his oeuvre during the 1980s. This is particularly the case with the plays I wish to consider next.

⁷¹ David Ian Rabey and Karoline Gritzner, "Howard Barker in Conversation", ed. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey in *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker* (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 2006), p. 37.

⁷² James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.), *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, p. 53.

⁷³ Quoted by Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*, p. 110.

⁷⁴ To gain a fuller understanding of censorship, it is important to shed light upon the laws which were connected to it. Censorship is associated with the idea that the citizens of the UK should not be offended. As such, free expression is not an absolute right if it is connected with the sensibilities of people. In other words, there should be certain duties and responsibilities on the part of the artists towards society. Section 28, a law which became active in 1988, banned local authorities from portraying homosexuality in a positive light. It also prevented councils from spending money on educational materials and projects to promote gay lifestyle groups. See "Britain: section 28 opposed," *Off Our Backs*, v. 18, n. 7 (July 1988), p. 3. Although the law was debatable, "the government has consistently claimed that this piece of legislation is not intended to be an attack on literature or the arts", Adrian Fulford, "Clause 28: Misinformation and Discrimination", *Socialist Lawyer*, n. 5 (Spring 1988), p. 7. However, the law has been seen as a form of censorship and discrimination among people since it abolished the rights of free expression. Artists found themselves forced to go in line with the political system or else they would be censored.

3.3 The Price of Free Expression: *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* (1981)

In this section, I am first going to talk about the dialectical relationship between the artist and the state as it is represented by Barker's characters in *No End of Blame*. My second aim is to show the dilemma of the artist as he struggles for freedom of expression.

Beginning with the relationship between the artist and the state, we see that the tensions and conflict in the artist's relationship with the reactionary forces which are represented by the political system or state are clearly manifested in the play. And as Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe has demonstrated in *Biographical Plays about Famous Artists*, "The central artist character [is placed] in conflict with adverse forces".⁷⁵ Here, the adverse force is embodied by the political system of the state. However, the two poles of the state and the artist wield their power in two different directions. The political system tries hard to affirm its hierarchical privilege without paying attention to the suffering of the people. Meanwhile the power of the artist lies in the provocation of thought, that is, to open people's eyes to hidden corruption for the sake of revolution. This recognition is particularly important when the political system or state denies the rights of the individuals in society. So, the social and artistic upheaval evoked by the artists still represents a form of challenge to the state, which attempts to minimize or revoke their role in society by imposing different obstacles. This is sometimes done by censoring their works or silencing them forever. Writing on *No End of Blame* (1981), *Pity in History* (1984) and *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), David Ian Rabey argues that, "Though centring on the artist's dilemma, the plays have wider reverberations in their scenes of opposition, where the fetish of ownership pits its power against the reinvention of forms of life".⁷⁶

As in *Pity in History* and *Scenes from an Execution*, *No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming* (1981) is set during two world wars and their aftermath. It tells the story of two artists, with the most important one being the cartoonist, Bela, who goes on a journey to test his political art and the freedom of expression. Unfortunately, his belief in the freedom of the artist is always hindered by the tendencies of the political system which, as in artists in David Pownall's *Master Class* (1983), where the state opposes artistic freedom.

As mentioned before, the plot centres around two Hungarian artists who represent two trends in literary schools: the modern and the traditional. These are Bela Veracek, the politically committed cartoonist, and Grigor Gabor, a traditionalist painter who believes in a more

⁷⁵ Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Biographical Plays about Famous Artists* (Cambridge Scholar Press, 2005), p. 66.

⁷⁶ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 84.

traditional notion of high art. The development of the two characters “is supported by manifestations of their work”.⁷⁷ They are bound together by their intimate relationship. They, like the poets, Sassoon and Owen in Stephen MacDonald’s *Not About Heroes* (1983), face the anonymous power of war. Both artists are used symbolically to see what happens in the play. Whereas Bela serves as a political function of art which is always constrained and stopped by adverse forces, Grigor is an idealist who isolated from life.

When we first meet them, they are soldiers during the First World War. Their characters are rapidly distinguished by their reactions to the sight of a half-naked Romanian woman. Grigor is fascinated by her outward appearance which is completely harmonious with gravity. Her breasts “CONCEDE” in a curved way that “eliminates all tension”.⁷⁸ He tries to prevent her movement in order to observe and paint “the essential female line”, (1: 76). Bela, in contrast, is moved by his instincts which push him to want to rape her. This does not mean that Barker or his characters are being offensive or misogynistic towards the woman. On the contrary, they idolize her. Barker always wants to present his characters in an ordeal. He points out that “the characters onstage are not simply in unlikely situations but usually disastrous ones; perhaps just in the aftermath of a disaster. I don’t like the point of disaster itself, but what occurs after it”.⁷⁹ Similarly, Eléonore Obis states that “In Barker’s work, the characters are thrown into catastrophic situations. These extreme situations push them to the limit, which allows them to explore their identities and their capacities”.⁸⁰

Through their speech, Bela and Grigor are fascinated by the woman’s spiritual and physical beauty. But while Grigor is content with only observing, Bela responds physically and opportunistically. In other words, he has no interest in the aesthetic niceties that Grigor tries hard to draw. Instead, he wants art by which he can test individual human emotions. So, he gives up the poetry he writes for a form of creativity in favour of the cartoon, thinking that it is the art which is required for revolution or change.

From this brief summary, the play follows Bela’s journey from Hungary to the emerging Soviet Union to pre-Second World War London. At every stage, his savage work is censored

⁷⁷ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 36.

⁷⁸ Howard Barker, *Collected Plays: Volume One* (London, John Calder (Publishers) Ltd., 1990), pp. 75-76. All subsequent quotations to this play and Barker’s *Scene from an Execution* will be from this edition. Any bold words are in the original.

⁷⁹ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 45.

⁸⁰ Eléonore Obis, “‘Not nude but naked’: nakedness and nudity in Barker’s drama”, ed. David Ian Rabey and Sarah Goldingay in *Howard Barker’s Art of Theatre: Essays on his plays, poetry and production work*, p. 74.

by the political system either because of “its residual bourgeois thinking” or for criticizing Winston Churchill.

At the outset of the play, Barker doubts the usefulness or functionality of art. In this sense, he overshadows the role of the artist as a consumer in *Scenes from an Execution*. Barker argues that “art is not a product. It exists in your soul and your imagination [which] modern society hated”⁸¹ because it may dislocate society. Here, Bela draws our attention to the fact that art in the age of war loses its honourable mission. He says:

Grigor, we have just butchered two million Russians, a million Italians, half a million Poles, the same number of Roumanians, some Greeks, some French, a few thousand English, a division of Bulgarians by mistake, we have trod on babies’ brains and caught our boots up in the entrails of old women, yesterday we ate our breakfast on a table made of half a man, Grigor, I do not understand a morality which says we have to draw a line at petty theft! (1: 76-7)

This argument of the morality of art is taken further by referring to the situation of women being raped. Uniquely, Bela defines the quality of art and the identity of the artist. For him, the artist is a privileged person whose inhabited instinct works freely without external forces:

Bela: Goes – what is the value of an inhibition if it collapses under strain of opportunity? That’s the argument. Either it is incumbent on me not to rape women at all, or I should rape women under all circumstances. But that should equally apply to killing, shouldn’t it? **What in God’s name are we doing here?** (1: 77)

Thus the value of art lies in its spontaneous expression. It is not an opportunity. On the contrary, it is a gift which is divinely ordained. Bela eloquently connects art with human desire which comes out without constraints. Accordingly, to talk about morality or “a moral hero, in the midst of all this sin and shame and human vileness, where we eat our breakfast off a man’s divided trunk, to find an act of selfless purity is like-” (1: 77) searching for a straw.

As mentioned before, Bela decides to desert poetry in favour of the cartoon. He feels humiliated as a poet to address the minds of people. His poetry is out of tune. In other words,

⁸¹ My interview with Howard Barker, Brighton, 7 February 2015.

the recognition of metaphorical insight, uttered by the Officer when he says, “Poetry without rhyme is laying bricks without cement”, (1: 80) makes him realize that his poetry is not in line with the rhyme of human life.

Besides discussing the dilemma of the artist, Barker reveals the mentality of the politicians who always try to widen the gap among people by vile means. This view separates the artists, who are moved by human feelings, from the state. The first red soldier addresses Grigor:

Listen, Grig, there must be killing in this world, because we're angry, and we've our rights. Anyone who tells you killing is just killing tells you lies. There is all the difference in the world between a rich man's and a poor man's death. You must know this, Grig, or we will never build a better world ... (1: 81- 82)

The second scene takes place at the Institute of Fine Art, Budapest, where the instruction centres on classical idealism and the image of the artist as one who “thrill[s] to beauty” with the privilege of being ordained “the guardians of beauty, high priests in the temple Art”, (2: 84).

Billwitz, the Head of the Institute, sees that the main role of the artist is to seek “beauty everywhere”, whether it is in tears or pain. Such mystical conservatism is in contrast with Bela's cartoon, which is concerned with showing the contradiction between ideal and reality. Bela is “temperamentally attracted to the relation between impulse and action, cause and effect, as publicly demonstrated by the social range and purpose of the cartoon, rather than the ‘metaphysical’ rapture of the painting”.⁸² Bela wants to show the contemporary social hypocrisy without beautifying it. This fact makes Billwitz revolt against Bela's sketch, *We will Revive the Spirit of Hungary*, which grotesquely shows two soldiers beating a man to death.

For Billwitz, this cartoon is prejudice and a kind of humiliation. He addresses Bela:

It is not half as true as any life drawing you did for me ... **You will never be a great painter if you do not tell the truth!** (2: 85)

⁸² David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 86.

Unlike his creator, Bela rejects elitist invocations of the artist. Instead, he embraces the cartoon which has an immediate effect: “I hate oils, studios, manipulating colours inches thick. Give me ink, which dries quick, speaks quick, hurts”. His criterion for success is to make art truthful as much as he can. Bela reacts:

My art speaks, then! ... Did any single picture of yours win you such an accolade? A visit from the police! There is a diploma, there is a prize! Now I know I am a genius, now I hang in the echoing gallery of human art! I stirred the police, therefore, I touched the truth. (2: 85)

Bela’s view of truth is different from that of Billwitz. He looks for the truth which exposes the contradictions of the political system. He aspires to a freedom of expression which is not governed by censorship but in vain. So he is expelled.

Bela, unlike Grigor, is confident and resolute. To Grigor, he says: “**Me! And I am the best artist of the lot!**” (2: 86). Accordingly, he decides to leave Hungary where the artist does not enjoy freedom of expression. To him, Hungary is a “dead place”, where everything is manipulated according to certain vile political values, represented by the “national flag”, (2: 86). So, he urges Grigor to revolt against those who want to exploit their talent. He states, “What? ... Horrid silence ... Horrid, dirty little silence while the ego ticks”, (2: 86).

This in turn reflects Barker’s view that, “In an age of populism, the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence”.⁸³ Bela thinks that taking a course in “studying the human form” at the institute is “poisoning not yet affected vital parts”, (2: 86). Bela states, “A diploma? Shabby bit of paper for performing dog?” In his view it is connected to the behaviour of a dog which obeys all the time.

Bela’s speech about war then reveals the deception of the political system. In particular, it recalls Barker’s doubts about the philosophy of liberal humanist social democracy. This social democracy “create[s] fear whilst attempting to ameliorate pain, a dazzling contradiction. Fear of sickness and death is obsessive here, and the State, in its medicalization of all human experience, makes itself a body-snatching agency in the process”.⁸⁴

⁸³ Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 126.

The political and social agenda of the liberal democracy is to abolish pain and death. The best means to do so is to use a barrage of social propaganda about imminent death even if it is not real. The important thing is to subjugate people to follow its policy. So, they instigate war for something which is not genuine:

Bela: No! War is so childish! One says so many silly things with death next door! With death shoving its mouth against the sandbags, say a lot of babble, not from the head, just speaking from the bowels- (2: 86)

Bela's dilemmas continue when he and Grigor arrive in Russia with fellow ex-student Ilona. His cartoons of the figure of Lenin bring him into direct conflict with "the line Comrade Lenin is advancing" and a disciplinary tribunal of the Writers' and Artists' Union in Moscow.

A heated discussion about art and the responsibility of the artist ensues among the members of the Writers' and Artists' Union. The discussion begins with a lecture by the first comrade who emphasizes their attempts:

to evolve a different sort of art here. All right? An art which is not bourgeois. That is why you came here. Correct me if I'm wrong. That is why you came to Russia in the first place. Because although we have no shoe laces for our boots and no lenses for our spectacles, our art is free. By free I mean free of bourgeois constraints. By bourgeois constraints I mean the tying of the creative act to the demands of private ego. Individualism, I mean, all right?

(3: 91-92)

Historically speaking, one of the difficulties which surrounds all forms of political art in general and theatre in particular has been the dominance of the bourgeoisie. Because of its control over the economic and cultural system, the political artist finds himself in conflict with it. Although the first comrade denies the subjugation of art to a certain class, it should be in line with the political party. This view of the superficial freedom of art is reinforced by the speech of the fourth comrade who claims:

We're not bureaucrats. You know Anatol. Vasily is a painter. Roy's a first rate critic. I'm a graphic artist. Oleg's a poet and a sculptor. You know that, you know that artists grow enormously when they exchange ideas. Take

insights from each other. That's very good. A lonely artist withers, rots, dries up. We want to stimulate you. We are not bourgeois critics who see their role as destruction in the interests of maintaining existing cultural values. We attack existing cultural values. (3: 93)

The above lines reveal the state's fake discourse to subjugate people. Repeatedly, Barker

dramatises the ability of the state to assimilate and subvert fundamental criticism of itself through the ordering and representation of so-called 'facts', through fetishistic marshallings of information. Indeed, his plays show how political argument is increasingly displaced by terms of privatised realignment and adjustment to the (pre)assembled facts, leaving the fundamental rules of (dis)engagement finite and predetermined.⁸⁵

Though the committee proclaims to "attack existing cultural values" of the bourgeoisie, "they are in fact promoting a form of classical idealist values, as did the Budapest Institute, and allow no house-room to the grievance, sin, spit, wit and shit which constitutes individual imaginative insight".⁸⁶

So Bela is accused of residual bourgeois thinking. All members of the committee agree that there is a critical "tendency to criticize the line that Comrade Lenin is advancing. Which is – which is – unhelpful –" (3: 96). However, his case is taken further in their analysis. The first comrade distinguishes between two types of artists: the one who does wrong knowingly and the other who does it unknowingly. For him, both represent a source of threat to the party-line consensus since they have the power of words, through which they can address people's minds and hearts to stimulate them to revolt. Metaphorically, their dangerous power is associated with tanks and planes:

But you can do wrong unknowingly. Because he has power. Artists are very dangerous people. That is why they go to prison, that is why they have gags stuck on their mouths. They are more dangerous than tanks and planes. It's a terrible power, this power of addressing hearts and minds, articulating the unspoken will of peoples. What a treasure that is, Bela, a gift of the most massive kind, a power which in the case of the very greatest artists, may be beyond even the control of genius itself ... (3: 94)

⁸⁵ Ian Cooper, "Institutions, icons and the body in Barker's plays, 1977 – 86", ed. David Ian Rabey and Sarah Goldingay in *Howard Barker's Art of Theatre: Essays on his plays, poetry and production work*, pp. 54-55.

⁸⁶ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 86.

The first comrade does not completely abolish the right of criticism or engage in public judgment but the priority should first be to the ruling party. His fear of the artists comes from his wish to protect the experience, undertaken by Lenin, which “must be endorsed by all the people, and not undermined. I mean, there is a case for criticism, but it’s not now”, (3: 96).

The opposition between freedom and responsibility structures the debate between Bela and the members of the committee. In regard to Bela’s cartoon, the fourth member of the committee argues:

He is entitled to disagree with anyone he wants. That’s freedom, isn’t it? But he must be able to restrain his criticism in the wider interests of the people. That’s responsibility, isn’t it? (3: 97)

Accordingly, Bela may enjoy a certain degree of freedom. Yet this freedom should be within the domain of serving people. His responsibility requires protecting the whole fabric of society. Thus, “‘responsibility’ is invoked, like ‘maturity’ in *Downchild*, to cauterise dissent and ardour”.⁸⁷

Bela defends his cartoon by drawing the committee’s attention to the fact that the true artist should be loyal to his mission. Therefore, his freedom originates from the feeling of his responsibility to himself. It is far from being a commodity used by the state to achieve political ends. For the artist, freedom of expression is a high value which cannot be understood only by him:

Bela: Because to an artist, freedom of expression matters even more than nationality. I say that as a patriotic person, a person who loves his country and his people. Not as a lick of governments. I say it as a person who loves socialism and materialism. As a person who admires Lenin more than any other man alive. But to an artist freedom comes above all things, above – (3: 96)

In opposition to Bela, the second comrade states that “an artist is only free if his society is free. He cannot be free against the freedom of his society”, (3: 96). This barren argument between Bela and the committee ends with his acceptance of the verdict of the Soviet Writers’ and

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

Artists' Union that his anti-NEP cartoon was irresponsible. In his speech about this incident, Barker argues that through the play's subtitle, *Scenes of Overcoming*:

one of the things [Bela] overcomes is his own sense of self. For example, in that scene he thinks something passionately but he represses it in the interests of the overriding definition of the people's interests as defined by that committee. I think that's wrong and I don't regard that as a good form of overcoming.⁸⁸

As Bela fights to prove his politics dependent upon the destruction of grievance, Grigor finds his feet in a pastoral idyll with Ilona. For Bela, Grigor's withdrawal into what Bela terms "the woods option" is a kind of surrender or subservience to the political institution. Although Grigor and Ilona's surrender can be seen as self-defence against the demands of the institution, this cheap acceptance has nothing to do with human alleviation. Bela asserts:

I don't believe, in all honesty, given the complexity of the present social and industrial machine, the woods option is a wholly satisfactory response, since the deliberate rejection of experience contributes nothing to the alleviation of human pain, nor relieves you from its consequences, or to put it brutally – ... You don't miss the bullets by shutting your eyes! (4: 99-100)

Like Hacker in *The Love of a Good Man*, Bela wants Grigor to confront reality as an individual. Thus Bela focuses on the individual as a potential ground for renewal and revolt "not as stale and socially made".⁸⁹ This individuation process leads, in turn, to human sublimity.

Bela escapes Russia after defacing a floral tribute to Stalin. He is agitated when he sees the gardener praising Stalin with the names of plants. Bela thinks that when artists idolize politicians, they create from them tyrannisers. Through the benign intercession of the fourth comrade, Bela is dismissed with a promise that he can come back again after a holiday. The relationship between Grigor and Ilona ends tragically with Ilona's death by machine gun during the Nazi invasion, to Grigor's shock.

⁸⁸ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 50.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

In Act II, Bela is welcomed by the Brave New World Club, RAF Bassingbourn, as a guest speaker. Now he is known as Vera of the *Daily Mirror*, Bela outlines his convictions which reflect the crux of his art:

I was born in Budapest on January 15th, 1898. I lived in Hungary until 1922. I lived in the Soviet Union until 1936. I am a cartoonist. I believe the cartoon to be the lowest form of art. I also believe it to be the most important form of art. I decided in my twenty-fourth year I would rather be important than great. I decided this because I have always preferred shouting to whispering and humanity more than myself. The cartoon is a weapon in the struggle of peoples. It is a liberating instrument. It is brief like life. It is not about me. It is about us. Important art is about us. Great art is about me. I am not interested in me. I do not like me. I am not sure if I like us either, but that is private and the cartoon is not private. We share the cartoon as we cannot share the painting. We plunder painting for the private meaning. The cartoon has only one meaning. When the cartoon lies it shows at once. When the painting lies it can deceive for centuries. The cartoon is celebrated in a million homes. The painting is worshipped in a gallery. The cartoon changes the world. The painting changes the artist. I long to change the world. I hate the world. (2, 1: 107-108)

I have quoted this passage in full because it seems to me to illustrate a number of significant points about the cartoon.

No doubt, the art of the cartoon is one of the most effective forms of political discourse. Because of “the immediacy of events, personalities and causes visualised within the frame of the cartoon”, it becomes “central to an understanding of the political life of [any] nation”.⁹⁰

However, what Bela says about the cartoon is striking. The importance of this art lies not only in its shortness but also its ability to permeate human minds and hearts intrinsically. So it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, its satirical force offers an increasingly uncertain view of complacency or resentment, inspired in the minds of political commentators. On the other hand, a range of political and social subjects which are made into cartoons have an immediate impact on people’s lives.

Bela’s speech about the cartoon and its ability to change the world moves one airman’s sense of his own pathos: “I don’t like this fucking world either ... **Why are we dropping**

⁹⁰ Simon Popple, “‘The happiest dexterity’: Sambourne and the art of the political cartoon”, *The British Art Journal*, v. 3, n. 1 (Autumn 2001): 36.

phosphorous bombs on kids?” (2, 1: 108). In return, Bela’s theorization of his art as “the people’s art” and an embodiment of truth do not generate a positive response from the RAF audience who ask him to prove himself. They ask him to illustrate the social contradiction in the ‘real war’ of the English people beneath the war with Hitler. In doing so, Bela’s self-satisfaction and inspiration are criticised by the RAF audience whose outspoken airman reminds Bela: **“I could be killed tonight ... Don’t want it to be for nothing, see? ... Must have a little bit of truth to go with, please...”** (2, 1: 110)

Bela’s other cartoon of a profiteer strangling an English soldier from behind, who is struggling with Hitler, arouses the agitation of Bob Stringer, the editor of a newspaper which employs Bela. Stringer’s reaction is beyond reach with a threat that his paper will be banned:

You have done wrong, all right? I want a sort of atmosphere of shame. I want this room to feel tacky with humility, I want tangible regret. I ask you to do this, Bela, because they do not like me and they want to shut the paper down. They have this act, this thing called the Defence of the Realm Act and it means they can shut papers down and stick the editors in gaol, all right? It’s very like what Hitler’s got. Only they had it long before Hitler. And it means we can end up in a concentration camp. And they had that long before Hitler, too. I don’t want to end up on a draughty Scottish island nibbling sheep shit off the barbed wire, see? Highland cack for breakfast and galloping TB? No thank you. I don’t want that and nor do you. (2, 2: 111)

The above lines reveal the ostensible pretensions of freedom and democracy which Bela spends his life looking for. Although Stringer defends Bela’s cartoon as “an expression of democracy ... [which] is a plurality of political opinion within the –” (2, 2: 114) it is denounced by Churchill’s representatives, John Lowry and Frank Deeds, as a kind of abuse towards their leader. Their attitude to art is in contrast to Bela who embraces truth in art: “My politics are to look for the truth, and when you find it, shout it. That’s my politics”. (2, 2: 114)

As a form reconciliation between Stringer and the officials, and to avoid the banning of the paper, Bela finds himself oppressed into an association with the party line, whereby “in a sense we are at war with the USSR, even though we are on the same side”, (2, 2: 115). This is the price to be paid by Stringer to keep the paper open. By publishing fake news, the editor surrenders to the party’s demands at the expense of truth. Thus the public are misled by forgery. Even when Bela exclaims resentfully, “How has this wicked deception been permitted?”, he is threatened with gaol: “Under the Aliens Act, the authorities have special powers to place you

in detention if it is deemed you represent a threat to national security –” (2, 2: 115) The fear of a writer who dares to think the unthinkable has led the officials to stand against anything which threatens the political system.

Bela is accused of madness “because brain is kinked **will see through the flannel**”. So, Stringer begs the pardon of the officials:

for the divisive cartoon. On bended knee I acknowledge the error of sowing seeds of dissension in the British people, of undermining the national effort and breeding an atmosphere of doubt. I will publish a rebuke of Vera in the first edition. I will vet all future submission by this artist. I will arrange regular meetings at which we can discuss the paper’s line. (2, 2: 117)

Bela’s weary resignation is a bad sign of his submission to the demands of the political party. Bela comes to realize that he cannot confront the political current which is higher than him. Moreover, he begins to doubt the terms of freedom and truth over existence:

Supposing freedom’s not the truth? Have you ever thought of that? Suppose the truth’s somewhere else after all? ... I go about, I shove the thermometer of freedom in the great wet gob of humanity and I go, good, we’re healthy, when the mercury goes up, and bad, we’re ill, when the mercury goes down. The fever of truth. Suppose freedom’s nothing to do with it? Suppose it’s just a virus? Suppose the truth is love? (2, 2: 118)

Like Martello and Sophie in Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Bela wants art to ambush the mind. Its function is to get to the bottom of consciousness by the power of imagination. This is exactly the function of the cartoon, which differs from mere paintings of nature. This fact is depicted by Bela who argues:

On the function of a line. What the line does, Grigor. Line does not exist in nature. Line is an invention of mankind ... Line is the means by which we venture into the formlessness of nature, which guides us through the labyrinth. ... He who draws a line puts form on formlessness. The line describes unconsciousness. Draw me a little picture, Grigor. Draw me a picture of your mind ... (2, 3: 120)

The subject of Bela's next cartoons, which reflect a sense of impotence and doom, is a spectacular panorama of Europe in a nuclear fire: "They grew tired of thought". Upon the discussion of this cartoon with Mik, the newly appointed cartoonist whose zenith of insight centres around life as a non-stop comedy show, Diver, the manager of a daily paper, talks about Bela's creativity: "Vera, yes. I say a cartoonist, but he's more than a cartoonist. He's a visionary ... He is a genius". (2, 4: 122)

Diver attributes Bela's dismissal and rejection of his cartoon to the fact that Lord Slater, the owner of nearly every paper in the world, is more interested in laughs than genius. This in turn reveals the commercial side of society which Barker strongly denounces in his plays. Bela, like his creator, rejects the idea of art as a cheap means of laughter. In doing so, it serves those who look for political and material aims. Similarly, in his speech about dramaturgists in the contemporary British climate, Barker states:

They want to laugh at everything, because they are in the grip of a neurosis, as society is here. Whilst laughing, they think they can get the audience to swallow a few political ideas without noticing. It's a sordid practice, and infantilizes the public.⁹¹

Accordingly, the main reason behind Bela's refusal is his ability to diagnose the corruption which lies behind the beautiful form. Bela says with regret:

There's no safe place, there never was one. Look at that ceiling, smooth, ain't it, looks fine, looks perfect, but underneath the plaster, how many little parasites? Them great steel joists, how much metal strain? You go down the escalator, lovely shiny tiles and all them clean girls with the tits and bras, but just behind it, mud and clay, pressing, pressing to get in, wanting to burst through and stuff your mouth with earth. (2, 4: 124)

Bela is rejected because of his visionary spirit. He says to Diver:

⁹¹ Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 179.

Hate me because I see! Like a great snake of blindmen tapping sticks, heading for the cliff edge, **Hate the man who sees. I see, I got the vision and you hate me!** (2, 4: 125)

Although Barker repeatedly refuses to connect his characters with him, Bela's speech with Diver reveals, in one way or another, his personal situation in being ignored by the major theatre institutions. In an interview with Malcolm Hay and Simon Trussler, published in *Theatre Quarterly* (1981), Baker asserts that, "There's always the danger of libel because I've so often exploited the public's contempt for its heroes and governors. Attacking images, proposing alternatives, forcing revelations, is something the theatre does very well".⁹²

At the conclusion of the play, Bela has surrendered to the fact that an artist with visionary forces cannot be redeemed in the material world. Thus his search for the truth becomes a wish which cannot be attained. So, his "faith in himself seems at last overcome, and he is prepared to condemn himself, as well as the world, as mad".⁹³ This self-recognition is reinforced by Glasson, the nurse:

You build your little temple, somewhere in the bottom of your brain, put brass doors on it, and great hinges, burn your little flame of truth and genius and worship it, **What about us?** (She points to the cartoon.) **That don't 'elp us!** ... Assign the blame ... It's madness if yer don't. 'Cos that's how we but never say we're barmy, or will be ... (2, 6: 132)

Glasson's speech suggests that truth, like passion, is liable to change. Thus Bela's demands should be in line with the changeable atmosphere. In doing so, his struggle, which constitutes a sense of dignity, will continue. As such, the play "involve[s] not only an overcoming of brutalised power and its representatives, but an overcoming of the self: a resistance to not only temptations of gratification but also to self-imposed rigour".⁹⁴ Similarly, Rabey argues that "*No End of Blame* (1981) begins a trilogy of plays – with *Pity in History* (1984) and *Scenes from an Execution* (1985) – examining the ownership of art, the reclaimability of the artist, and

⁹² Ibid., p. 24.

⁹³ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 91.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

the fight against surrender of work and self to annexing assimilation, by which the state aims to defer, displace or digest criticism”.⁹⁵

As I have already shown, the dilemma of the artist is represented by a lack of freedom of expression. The artist finds himself in a virtually untenable position. Either he writes according to the limits imposed on him or his works never see the light of day. This is exactly the situation in Barker’s *Scenes from an Execution* (1984). In the next play, Barker uses a historical incident, the story of the Battle of Lepanto, to comment on different issues relating to art and censorship.

Again, it is reflected by showing the antagonistic relationship between the artist and the state as we shall see.

3.4 Public versus Private Vision: *Scenes from an Execution* (1984)

The enormous tension between the state and the artist is central to Barker’s radio play, *Scenes from an Execution* (broadcast 1984). Again, the subject of art and its function in society is reactivated by Barker to comment on the dilemma of the artist as he/she struggle to affirm his/her situation within the political domain.

However, what is striking about *Scenes from an Execution*, is the fact that it is a radio play. Barker, like Stoppard, employs this medium as a means of conveying experience to a wider audience. This is completely true in the case of Barker if we already know that he is not celebrated in his country. So, broadcasting on radio grants the play an opportunity to be heard by those who are unfamiliar with Barker’s work.

Although there is no substitute for a performance on stage, “production on radio of a stage play brings a [sic] clarity of focus on the text that sometimes can reveal the author’s purpose more directly than an elaborate theatre production”.⁹⁶ Moreover, a radio play releases the actor from the tyranny of physical appearance. In *Scenes from an Execution*, the voices of Galactia’s canvas and the Man-In-The-Next-Cell do not appear physically.

Set within a historical context, Barker’s *Scenes from an Execution* dramatizes the timeless conflict between artists and the state as they enjoy different preferences. It is the story of a famous female painter named Galactia who is commissioned by the state to paint the victory of the Republic of Venice over the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto. But as she works on it with

⁹⁵ David Ian Rabey, *English Drama Since 1940* (Longman: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), p. 185.

⁹⁶ Richard Imison, “Radio and the Theatre: A British Perspective”, *Theatre Journal*, v. 43, n. 3, Radio Drama (Oct., 1991): 290.

her two daughters, Supporta and Dementia, the canvas turns into a display of a massacre which reveals the atrocities of war. So, instead of commemorating the naval victory at Lepanto, Galactia chooses her own perspective on war to be in a different line with the demands of the governing state. Consequently, her dilemma is represented by the struggle between artistic freedom and the requirements of the two sisterly institutions: the state and the church. Her price is to be imprisoned, only to be freed at the end through a reconciliation with the doge, her sponsor. However, the historical dimension, which is represented by the Battle of Lepanto brings to mind Barker's belief in the potential of historical narratives for a new moral reconstruction. Rabey states that "In these plays such as *The Bite of the Night* (1988), *The Ecstatic Bible* (2000) and other plays, Barker re-visions foundational mythic and historical narratives in such ways that challenge notional inevitabilities and present, instead, a provocative range of moral alternatives and perspectives".⁹⁷

As the play opens, the argument about art is established between two creative painters: the classical idealist Carpeta and the passionate social realistic Galactia. Although both are linked by sexual attraction, they have "divergent philosophies".⁹⁸ Carpeta is known for his religious paintings, particularly of Christ among the flocks. He tells Galactia:

Carpeta: And I have painted Christ among the flocks eight times not because I cannot think of anything else to paint but because I have a passion for perfection, I long to be the finest Christ painter in Italy, I have a longing for it, and that is something an opportunist like you could never understand – (1:254)

Carpeta's speech overshadows his unique creativity as a painter of pity and his jealousy of Galactia's intellectuality. For Carpeta, Galactia gets the commission from the state because of her sensuality:

Carpeta: And you will never make a decent job of anything because you are sensualist, you are a woman and a sensualist and you only get these staggering commissions from the State because you – ... Thrust yourself! (1:254)

⁹⁷ David Ian Rabey, *Theatre, Time and Temporality: Melting Clocks and Snapped Elastics* (UK: intellect Bristol, 2016), p. 166.

⁹⁸ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 95.

Though Carpeta's words about Galactia are, to some extent, true, her creativity cannot be denied. From the very beginning of the play, we are told by a character named The Sketchbook that Galactia is preoccupied with drawing some sketches of a naked man in a studio in Venice:

The sketchbook: The sketchbook of a Venetian painter Galactia lying on her parted knees speak of her art, speak of her misery, between studies of sailcloth in red chalk the persistent interruption of one man's anatomy ... On every margin where she has studied naval history his limbs or look intrude, the obsession alongside the commission ... (1: 253)

The above lines reveal that Galactia is not only creative but has a wide knowledge of naval history which qualifies her to be the best painter in Venice. So, she wins the state and the church's investment for a 100ft canvas celebrating the triumph of the Venetians.

In contrast with Carpeta, who looks for pity in his paintings, Galactia "wants her audience to experience the pain of the sea-battle rather than be oppressed into association with the institutionalised reverence of national sacrifice, its icons of celebration and monuments to majestic absorption".⁹⁹ Like Barker's *Judith* and *The Europeans*, *Scenes from an Execution* becomes the ground for arguments on the struggle between the state and private will.

However, before examining the antagonistic relationship between the state and the artist, it is a well-known fact that the artist's dilemma springs from his sense of being committed to aesthetic truth on the one side and the demands of the political system on the other side. In *Scenes from an Execution*, Barker seems greatly influenced by Adorno in the sense that he "places emphasis on the notion of aesthetic autonomy and its interrelated concept of subjective freedom". For Adorno, "the significance of art and philosophy ... lies in their expression of a consciousness of suffering".¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, Galactia dedicates her creativity to depicting the truthful spirit of the artist which is quite different from that of the state. For her, the battle is a manifestation of violence and suffering. Thus, her use of the maimed ex-soldier Prodo testifies to her tendency for ruthless exposure. In this scene, Galactia hears and observes the testimony of Prodo as a witness to the degenerating power of war:

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰⁰ Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey (ed.) *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker* (London: Oberon Books Ltd., 2006), p. 86.

Galactia: I am painting the battle, Prodo. Me. The battle which changed you from a man into a monkey. One thousand square feet of canvas. Great empty ground to fill. With noise. Your noise. The noise of men minced. Got to find a new red for all that blood. A red that smells. Don't go, Prodo, holding your bowel in – (1: 257)

By insisting on the absurdity of war and the agonies it causes, Galactia, however, reveals to Prodo the tragic truth of his condition. In a conversation with Andy W. Smith about Staging Barker in America, Richard Romagnoli points out that “In *Scenes from an Execution* I think Galactia is a brilliant artist but a horrible person who manipulates others (such as Prodo) for a glimpse into their pain and to gain a visual angle with which to justify her general preconceptions, of war, authority, leadership”.¹⁰¹ So, she prepares for her paintings by taking live evidence, helping her to make the truth speak. Galactia is not only content with showing mere truth but its suffering. When she is asked by Prodo about her identity, Galactia asserts:

A midwife for your labour. Help you bring the truth to birth. Up there, twice life-size, your half-murder, your half-death. Come on, don't be manly, there's no truth where men are being manly – (1: 257)

Being a woman, one assumes that Galactia is not a suitable painter to depict violence or ruthless feelings. On the contrary, her belief in artistic creativity makes her reject beauty for the sake of truth. In so doing, she decides to challenge the political institution:

Galactia: I tell you I would not, I do not trust beauty, it is an invention and a lie, trust my face, I am a woman who has lived a little, nothing much, I have not been split up the middle like you have, but I have picked up a thing or two and I tell you I have never been at peace with life, I would not be at peace with life, there is no such thing and those who claim they have it have drugged their consciences or numbed their pain with futile repetitions of old catechisms, catechisms like your patter, oh, look at you. **Who did it to you, Prodo, and what for?** I will paint your violence for all the passing crowds who mock your daft appearance ... (1: 258)

¹⁰¹ James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith (eds.) *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*, pp. 190-191.

Galactia defies gender conventions. She takes on her shoulders the task of painting the truth of violence without paying attention to the inclinations of her sponsors.

Scene two establishes the character of one of the sisterly institutions, Urgentino, a state patron. His speech with Galactia overshadows the type of relationship between the artist and the state:

Urgentino: I like to be friends with everybody. It is a weakness of mine. But if we are to be friends I think we have to understand one another. I know you are an artist and I am a politician, and we both have all sorts of little mannerisms, turns of speech, beliefs and so on, which neither of us will be happy to renounce, but for the sake of easy communication may I suggest we stop the little dance of personal regard and concentrate on facts? Simple, incontrovertible facts? My brother is Admiral of the Fleet and he does not occupy a prominent enough position in this drawing. (2: 260)

In his speech about the relationship between the artist and the state, which is embodied in the aphorism, “artists have no power and great imagination. The state has no imagination and great power”, Barker argues:

It seems to me impossible that the State and the artist should enjoy anything but a fleeting similarity of interest, usually in the aftermath of a revolution when the artist mistakenly believes his imagination will be licensed as part of the cultural rebirth of a new order. The rapid restitution of economic and social priorities and the assertion of the collective, or its mediators, over the individual interpretation of society, make this inevitably short-lived.¹⁰²

Barker adds, “States are mechanisms of discipline, and perpetually involved in rewriting and reordering[sic] experience, annexing it and abolishing it in the interests of proclaimed moral certitudes. The artist, as long as he is in profound union with his imagination, inevitably finds himself opposing ideological imperatives and exposed to censorship”.¹⁰³ For Barker, the relationship between the artist and the state is impossible as they have their own ideologies.

Although Urgentino trusts Galactia’s art, he reminds her of the importance of the work she is commissioned for:

¹⁰² Mark Brown (ed.), *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 63.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Urgentino: Good! But listen, this is a State commission, an investment, an investment by us, the Republic of Venice, in you, Galactia. Empire and artist. Greatness beckons, and greatness imposes disciplines. Do you like these grapes? They come from Crete. We left two thousand soldiers dead there, but we have the grapes. Little bit of sand. Little bit of history. (2: 260)

From Urgentino's perspective, greatness and responsibility can complement one another. Similarly, as a representative of the state, Urgentino wants the artist to be responsible first to the political system. So, based on the state's investment in works of art, the artist is obliged to dedicate his creativity to the patron. In other words, the artist finds himself forced to comply with the investor's taste thereby limiting his creativity:

Urgentino: Signora Galactia! Would I do such a thing? You are the artist! I only remind you of certain priorities. A great artist must first of all be responsible, or all his brush strokes, and all his colouring, however brilliant, will not lift him out of the second rank. (2: 261)

Galactia, like Bela in *End of Blame*, wants every spectator to experience the event as if they are in it:

Galactia: I am painting the Battle of Lepanto. I am painting it in such a way that anyone who looks at it will feel he is there, and wince in case an arrow should fly out of the canvas and catch him in the eye – (2: 261)

As a consequence, the first draft of Galactia's painting is refused since the Admiral Suffici does not have a prominent place in it.

It is noteworthy that Galactia's sense of responsibility and truth has led her to carry out the work in a remote army barracks rather than in a museum. In so doing, she wants to be committed to her aesthetic truth by living with the warriors whom she wants to paint. Thus, when Supporta and Dementia wail about the place, Galactia states:

Galactia: It is absolutely the right smell for the subject. If you are painting soldiers, you should live among soldiers ... Live among what you are painting, among who you are painting. Look at their faces, the way they move. You will never be anything but drapery painters if you do not want to look. (3: 262)

Scene four sharpens the contrast between Galactia and Carpeta. However, although the play is mostly about Galactia, Barker also deals with Carpeta's creative traits. The basic information about him depicts Carpeta as a master of painting religious themes. His aspiration to become "the best painter in Venice" is entangled with his passionate nature. As mentioned in the play, married Carpeta has an illicit relationship with two women of the same name, Galactia. His erotic changeable mood makes him see only one side of life. This is exactly what Galactia tries to warn him about:

Galactia: Marvellous. But pity's got nothing to do with greatness. It's surrender, the surrender of passion, or the passion of surrender. It is capitulating to what is. Rather than pity the dead man I would say – there – there is the man who did it, blame him, identify. Locate responsibility. Or else the world is just a pool, a great pool of dirty tears through which vile men in boots run splashing. You paint pity very well, but you endure everything, and in the end you find Christ's wounds – enticing. You find suffering – erotic. (4: 265-266)

Galactia eschews stagnation in art. Instead, she maintains her faith in creativity as a flexible means of showing political argument. So, she boasts in her ability, "With one figure I transformed the enemy from beast to victim, and made victory unclean". (5: 266) Though Barker refuses to associate himself with any character, Galactia, in the above quotation, insists on art as an expression of political view and message which is against Barker's belief. In my interview with Barker, however, he states,

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.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ My interview with Howard Barker, Brighton, 7 February 2015.

Though Supporta and Dementia believe in their mother's creativity, they are also aware of her aspirations in dealing with the two sisterly institutions:

Supporta: ... you are still the best painter in Venice, and if you were not promiscuous, but severe, prudish and had no appetites at all, they would use that against you, they will always have to find something because you are brilliant and a woman ... You will offend, and when people are offended, they cannot see the brilliance, only the offence. (5: 267)

By referring to this inimical attitude towards women, Supporta sees the commission as an opportunity to promote the rights of Venetian women. She urges her mother to:

Give the people what they want, and they will love you. They will exclaim over you. And after that, no woman painter here will have to struggle against prejudice, because you have proved us. You see, I think you have a responsibility – not to the State, but to Venetian women. Paint your feelings, by all means, that is your power, but let the public in, share with them. The drawing of the Turk insults them. (5: 267)

For Supporta, celebrating the battle outweighs the responsibility, otherwise, they will look to the painting as one which scorns and mocks their sacrifice. Though the two daughters are anxious about their mother, Galactia seems resolute. She believes in her creativity. So she ignores her daughters' view of painting: "It is arrogant to compete with nature in painting a flower, or to challenge God by improving views. To paint is to boast, and if you don't like boasting you ought not to paint. Now, let me concentrate". (5: 268)

Barker highlights Galactia's confidence in her creativity in the conversation between her and Suffici. When Suffici asks her about the reason behind her decision to do the project, she arrogantly answers: "Because I do what no one else can. I paint realistically. Either that or the papers got mixed up". (6: 270) Her craft as a realist artist is to depict the absolute brutality of war, not to beautify it.

The heated argument over Galactia's painting continues in scene six through the introduction of an art critic, Gina Rivera, who works for Urgentino. Rivera begins her critique by adoring Galactia's originality in painting the battle. Then the relationship between the artist and the

critic is revealed by Urgentino who hints at the same relationship between the artist and the state:

Urgentino: It is absurd that the critic and the artist are not better related, absurd! You are utterly dependent on one another and yet you squirm with mutual suspicion!

Rivera: The critic is afraid of the artist and envies her power. She is ashamed of what she secretly believes to be an inferior gift, that of exposition. So instead of serving the artist, she humiliates her. (6: 272)

However, Urgentino seems unsatisfied with Galactia's product. So he insists that the commission "is not a private commission. It is the gold and silver of the Venetian people on your paintbrush, is it not?" (6: 273)

Galactia is repeatedly disturbed by the influence of the two sisterly institutions which appreciate fake glory over truth. A hallmark of her suffering is manifested eloquently in a monologue from scene seven. As such, Galactia's dilemma is represented by the loss of free expression. Apparently, the artist who tries to protest or speak the truth is accused of madness. Addressing Sordo on the need for the courageous expression of truth, Galactia blames those who hinder it:

Galactia: Why is it you cannot speak the truth without someone saying you must be drunk? That or barmy? They put Farini in the madhouse for saying the Pope could not tie his own shoelaces – (*Protests*) They did – **fact!** He recanted. (*More groans and complaints.*) I must get some fresh air. All this death worship is getting up my nostrils where's my lover? Oh, look at him, he has the face of – now I see it, Carpeta's Christ paintings are self-portraits! And half an hour ago he had his mouth – (*Shouts of protest.*) All right, I'm going! (*The door closes. Sounds of the street.*) A dead painter, claimed. The dissenting voice, drowned in compliments. Never happier than when lying in the gutter with a bricklayer, drunk out of mind. Human, warm, and round. And yet a frightful liar. Couldn't put a brush to paper without lying – the happy poor, the laughing rags of trams and scabby dogs pawing the dirt. Guilty old fornicator ... (7: 275)

The next scene provides the answers to Galactia's questions about the absence of freedom of expression. In a materialistic world where the struggle for personal benefit is on the wane, there is no place for truth. Although the critic Rivera shows her admiration for Galactia's painting,

she cannot come to terms with Galactia. Working for the state, Rivera's opinion is in line with it, admitting the violent truth of the canvas. Therefore, she visits Galactia to convey a message of resentment from the doge:

Rivera: The doge has taken an extraordinary risk in commissioning you. If you humiliate him, you aid his enemies and invite his fall. And if he falls, there will be a new incumbent, and I assure you, as someone who is interested in politics, none of the other candidates cares one iota for – (8: 278)

Unsurprisingly, the voices of the canvas that Galactia heard represent the source of agony and suffering inside her consciousness. Left alone, thinking about Rivera's speech leaves her feeling torn between her duty to reveal the truth and the demands of the authority.

The two poles of sisterly institutions come to agree that Galactia has become a threat to their authority. In fact, their "authority depends on the management of opinion and the suppression of the imagination".¹⁰⁵ Although Urgentino frequently praises Galactia as not being a 'spent' artist (10: 283), he does not hide his fear of her artistic power to instil revolutionary ideas in the public. Hence, they decide to exclude her:

Urgentino: The Cardinale, as you know, is Secretary of State for Public Education, which is to say he is very worried about Signora Galactia and so am I ... Art is opinion, and opinion is the source of all authority. (10: 282)

Again, Urgentino comes back to the suspicious relationship between art and the state:

Urgentino: ... And the Cardinale and I thought, decided between ourselves, we could not let Venice fail to celebrate her genius, because for an art establishment like us, a cynical clique of bureaucrats like us, who like to pride ourselves on taste, to let a great fish through the net of our sponsorship would be a lapse. (10: 283)

¹⁰⁵ David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire: An Expository Study of his Drama and Poetry, 1969-87*, p. 98.

As a church cardinal, Ostensibile shares with Urgentino the power to control the artist. They believe in the artist as the enemy of the people and, beyond that, artists as enemies of each other.

In practice, Ostensibile appears to be the cruellest against Galactia. In contrast with Urgentino, he is rude and more conservative. He believes that Galactia mocks not only history but its divinity:

Ostensibile: The battle is not – unwholesome – it is, rather, the highest moment of self-sacrifice. It is as divine – in essence – as the crucifixion –

(10: 285)

For both Urgentino and Ostensibile, the Venetians are humiliated by the painting since it depicts a slaughter at sea, not a moment of pride for their victory in battle. To Ostensibile, Galactia is irresponsible. Her responsibility is “only a mask, the posture of artistic freedom”. (14: 293) As a consequence, Galactia is accused of treason, and finally sent to prison. Ostensibile states, “... You are an enemy of the Republic. You wish to destroy its unity and its power for an end you will no doubt admit in time but the great thing is we are not fooled”. (14: 293-294) In Heiner Zimmermann, “Memories of paintings in Howard Barker’s theatre”, he states, “Denouncing the victory as unclean, she opposes the official glorification of the triumph and discredits patriotic self-sacrifice. In her sponsors’ eyes, her representation is a revilement of the Republic of Venice”.¹⁰⁶

Barker resists the audience’s inclination to see Galactia as a sentimental figure. On the contrary, Galactia’s confidence in the power of art to reveal truth persists, though they want to entangle it:

Galactia: ... like some great bomb smuggled under tarpaulins, and they will unload it and carry it into the palaces of power, and it will tear their minds apart and explode the wind in their deep cavities, and I shall be punished for screaming truth where truth is not allowed. (12: 288)

¹⁰⁶ Heiner Zimmermann, “Memories of paintings in Howard Barker’s theatre”, ed. David Ian Rabey and Sarah Goldingay in *Howard Barker’s Art of Theatre: Essays on his plays, poetry and production work*, p. 196.

Urgentino and Ostensibile, as two authorities from the state and the church, take advantage of the hostility among the artists to ask Carpeta to complete the painting. In convincing Carpeta, Urgentino gives a dark picture of Galactia's action which reveals the contradictions even between the two institutions:

Urgentino: Ostensibile wants to charge her with being an agent of the Sultanate. He likes to win an argument and she refused to argue with him, so now furious and says she is a Muslim. She is not a Muslim, is she? The exaggerated sense of mission is something I cannot stomach in clergymen. Since she is quite obviously not an agent of anyone except herself it will involve torturing her to a confession. I do think that is vile. Torturing and bribing witnesses. It is all extremely ghastly and has a lot to do with the fact of celibacy. (16: 296)

Though Carpeta accepts the commission, he soon realizes that he cannot fulfil the project without Galactia. Interestingly enough, in the play, we are told that Carpeta leaves his own wife for her. Carpeta pretends to despise her but in reality he cannot avoid his admiration of her. Consequently, he rejects the contract and appeals for her freedom.

Galactia's status as a painter is elevated by Rivera who reappears in scene 16 to criticize Urgentino's decision to substitute Galactia with Carpeta since the latter "is a very sound painter of religious subjects, he is not an epic painter –" (16: 298) Rivera tries hard to save Galactia and her work from being ignored. Her logic to convince Urgentino wins our admiration. She supports Galactia without forgetting her loyalty to Urgentino's party:

Rivera (to Urgentino): ... Now, listen to me, and I will tell you what I know, as a critic, and a loyal supporter of your party and your cause. In art nothing is what it seems to be, but everything can be claimed. The painting is not independent, even if the artist is. The picture is retrievable, even when the picture is lost ... (16: 299)

Here, Rivera endorses the independence of the artists which mirrors Barker's view of the artistic freedom. What is most important in Galactia's case is that the different interpretation of the painting has led to a different form of speculation. Typical of such speculation is a dialogue between two visiting hack male painters, Lasagna and Sordo:

Lasagna: If it had been painted by a man it would have been an indictment of the war, but as it is, painted by the most promiscuous female within a hundred mile of the Lagoon, I think we are entitled to a different speculation.

Sordo: It is very aggressive. You and I, we wouldn't have been so aggressive. A woman painter has a particularly – female– aggressiveness, which is not, I think, the same as vigour. Do you agree with that distinction?

Lasagna: Yes. It is coarse.

Sordo: Coarse, yes. Because she is so desperate to prove she is not feminine, a flower-painter, an embroiderer, she goes to the extreme and becomes not virile, but shrill.

Lasagna: It is shrill. It defeats its purpose by being shrill.

Sordo: She can paint, of course –

Lasagna: She can paint, but it's excessive. And so she is. (18: 302)

However, Galactia's originality is assured at the end of the play. Her originality lies in producing an agreement among the male artists and she trusts her art. The effectiveness of the canvas is a live example for the victory of truth which makes Urgentino shout:

Urgentino (wading in): Galactia comes, not to admire her work – she is not so vain – but to admire the admirers! The queue is fifty metres long and the man there has returned eight times, ask him, it is a fact, he kneels there and he weeps. Look, you have drawn tears from him, wrung water from his coarse imagination.! Do you feel powerful? I have such power, but no such power. I can make men weep, but only by torturing them, while you – don't resent me ... Enjoy your peculiar authority! It is a great nation, is it not, that shows its victories not as parades of virility, but as terrible cost? (20: 305)

As I have already shown, Barker's *No End of Blame* and *Scenes from an Execution* examine the dilemma of the artist within society. This issue is represented by the views of the characters in the plays, which are not necessarily those of Barker. In his speech about the two plays, Barker asserts that it is mistaken to assume that "because the artist speaks, it's Barker speaking". He adds that "the leading character in *Scenes from an Execution* and *No End of Blame* [are] not me ... I don't take sides".¹⁰⁷ However, in both cases, surrounding characters seek to define and possess freedom of expression. But every time their attempts are shattered by the pressure of the two sisterly institutions: the state and the church. Consequently, their art

¹⁰⁷ My interview with Howard Barker, Brighton, 7 February 2015.

is liable to censorship. Barker, like Stoppard discusses the freedom of the artist. But while Stoppard views it from communist point of view in that the freedom of the artist is constrained by the ruling political party, Barker concentrates on capitalism and the role of the market in refraining artist's freedom.

Drawing on the similarities and differences between the two plays, we see that Barker presents different perspectives on the artist. Both artists in the two plays suffer from a lack of freedom of expression. Both of them elevate truth as a high value in art. However, although Bela and Galactia are revolutionary, Bela does not succumb entirely to the demands of the political system. Galactia's crushing decision to dine with the doge at the end of the play is open to different interpretations. On the one hand, it can be seen as a surrender to the political agenda or ideology which Barker highly renounces. However, on the other hand, the artist is a human being who aspires to both material and spiritual elevation. This truth is uttered by Galactia in scene five:

Galactia: I will negotiate with the power because I have to. I will lick the Doge's cervices if need be, because he has power. I am not wholly an idiot and I like to eat and drink as well as you. (5: 268)

Galactia decides to negotiate with the political system at the end. She comes to realize that the idea of the artist's autonomy is always hindered by those who nourish him or her. Moreover, to be stick to particular values has nothing to do with artists' other needs. Galactia, like Fiona and Suzanne, in Wertebaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991) and *The Line* (2009) focuses on the professional and private needs of the artist.

However, Galactia's strong personality reminds us of the falsity of gender-based discrimination. On the contrary, we see a strong woman who works in a harsh atmosphere to prove her creativity. As we know, people's circumstances changed dramatically after the end of the Second World War with the arrival of the Labour government. The achievements in establishing "the Welfare State, the National Health Service and through the 1944 Education Act made it possible for the first time for everyone to be able to benefit from education at all levels".¹⁰⁸ There was even a major shift in gender-based employment.

¹⁰⁸ Michelene Wandor, *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 27.

In theatre, the issue of gender raises crucial questions about the role of female playwrights in dealing with politics and sexuality. Michelene Wandor argues, “There is a popular belief that women write domestic plays and men write political plays”.¹⁰⁹

As a consequence, issues of male identity and gender were not new in the 1980s. To quote Wandor again, she states, “During the 1980s issues surrounding sexual politics ... enter the fabric of the work, and yet the narratives themselves remain ‘public’ narratives, with the personal and domestic inserted into public spaces, and with a predominantly similar gender divide in the narrative drives of the plays”.¹¹⁰

In Barker’s *Scenes from an Execution*, Galactia, like Tanzi in *Trafford Tanzi* by Claire Luckham (1980), “challenges all the received stereotypes that women are just decorative, passive and weak”.¹¹¹ This is in particular the case with Timberlake Wertenbaker’s plays that I will discuss in details in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 201.