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The Freedom of Expression and the Dilemma of the Artist: A Thematic Study of Howard Barker's '*Scenes from an Execution*'

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my mother and father; who help me to advance in my life and in my career ... Allah bless you and protect you.

To my sister and brothers ... I love you all and I ask Allah to safe and protect you. Everywhere you go, I wish you the success.

To my lovely Noora ... I ask Allah to protect you and I hope that one day we might be a good family.

If this research is a success, I dedicate it everyone who taught me even a single letter, or simply a word ...

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Abstract:

British dramatists in the 1980s found themselves in a struggle with the newly applied political and economic laws that change the whole atmosphere of the British culture as well as to the theatre. One of those dramatists is Howard Barker (1946), who in his *Scenes from an Execution* (1984) re-establishes the struggle between arts and politics. Dramatists and artists were in a dilemma that made them lose their freedom of expression since the freedom of expression is not a right for everyone in the essence that the newly applied law prevents a female artist from acting on the stage. If an artist fails to play a political party, he or she will lose the freedom of expression.

This research paper is divided into two chapters and a conclusion. The conclusion sums up the final findings of the study, that each time an artist attempts to get the freedom of expression, he or she is likely to be censored.

Keywords: Howard Barker, dilemma of the artist, freedom of expression, Barker's theatre theory, *Scenes from an Execution* (1984).

Introduction

When Margaret Thatcher (1997) became Britain's first woman Prime Minister, new policy has been applied to the British theatre as well as the Britain's daily life had changed.

Theatrical culture was forced by political and economic changes which created "an enormous sense of dislocation and dissatisfaction".¹ However, for Thatcher's policy, everything is monetary that it later led to materialism, and at the same time; there was no exception for the theatre.

Since 1979, the development of the British theatre did not arise with aesthetics, but instead, with ideology and economics.² Language for arts workers, artists, and academics was the "language of crisis".³ Governmental attack on the arts beyond the economic difficulties, was a characteristics of 'language of crisis'.

The interference of political parties in the management of the Arts Council, which is the cornerstone of the arts, was an issue which led to the crisis in British theatre. One of the central themes of conservative rule from 1979 up to 1997, was the reshaping of the relationship between Public and the Private domain of the economy. So, politicians did not know the worth of the artistic values. For theatre playwrights, theatre companies, and directors, they all return to William Shakespeare's times, and plays should be acted and performed in front of the audience. By using this way, they will get their work resumed and also provide them some money for their income.

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

²Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Since 1895, volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.459.

³Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*, p.49.

However, ‘Partnership’, was a shift of arts financial support for private sector funding arts as well as for government. Due to the funding cuts, some companies vanished from the Arts Council’s books, while others saw an increasing number of their income. The relationship between arts and government and the change from public subsidy to the private one, did not occur at once, nor its success was good. The term ‘Sponsorship’ hides a different kinds of forms of private sector involvement, which required different forms of policies from governments. To make new activities available in theatre, the government-Arts Council attempted to rise the private patronage by sponsorship, more particularly, by corporate sponsorship. However, by the rise of corporate sponsorship, an individual playwright and playwriting did not change. Like bookshops and restaurants, theatre became a place for shopping and trade. At this time, the chairman of Drama at the University of Bristol, Baz Kershaw comments:

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 pleasure of theatre-going gained as much emphasis in the consumption of theatre as any enjoyment of the performance itself. The power of the performance was being changed by the peripherals of theatre as it transformed into a service industry with subsidiary retail outlets.⁴

Robert Hewison, a writer, actor, historian, and the professor of Literary and culture studies, and John Bull, the professor of Film and Drama at the University of Reading, have all noted the increase of party political influence in the running of the Arts Council in the early 1980s, both in the appointment of key personnel.⁵ The Arts Council’s policy established

⁴Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Since 1895*, volume 3, pp.313-14.

⁵Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s*, p.38.

from the modern liberal-humanist view which “the artist offers society works which transcend any particular political or economic regime”.⁶

This means an artist’s work might be stronger than any political or economical system. In other words, any simple literary work might exceed the limits of politics and economics.

Later in the 1980s, British theatre had totally been reshaped via a monetarist ideology. This reshape was not only the theatrical discourse but also in its structure.

Therefore, the dilemma of the dramatist was how did the dramatist enjoy a level of freedom without being censored⁷ and what was the value of free expression towards the dramatist as if he or she fails to play a political party.

To keep these in mind, I will shed the lights on Howard Barker as an influential British dramatist, his theatre theory, then, I will discuss his *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), which is the objective of the study.

⁶Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics, 1979-1999”, p.271.

⁷Free expression is not a right if it is connected with the sensibilities of people. In 1988, law banned authorities from sexuality. See “Britain: section 28,” *Off Our Backs*, v.18, n.7 (July 1988), p.3.

Chapter One

1.1 Howard Barker as an influential British playwright

Howard Barker was born in London in 1946. “Howard Barker has been acclaimed as ‘England’s greatest living dramatist’ in *The Times* and as ‘the Shakespeare of our age’ by the late *Sarah Kane*.⁸ Howard Barker wrote over 70 plays for theatre, television, and for radio drama – including six volumes of poetry.

However, most of his early works have been refused by well-known theatre companies, “most notoriously by the National Theatre”.⁹ Like other famous ‘political’ playwrights, such as Howard Brenton, David Hare; an English playwright, screenwriter, theatre and film director, and Caryl Churchill; a British playwright, known for dramatizing the abuses of power, Barker’s early works in the seventies are similar to them. *Edward, the Final Days* (1972), is an example of Barker’s work in the 1970s which most of it unpublished and “is a responsive to the political retrenchment of the left at a time of intensifying industrial crisis and class conflict”.¹⁰ However, Barker’s works were not influenced by political perspective. After Barker’s works have been rejected, Barker found himself in a need to direct his own plays. In his *Arguments for a Theatre*, he asserted “I have been encouraged to join the actors Kenny Ireland and Hugh Fraser to set up a new company whose function is the production of Barker’s plays, The Wrestling School”.¹¹ Have its own administrative offices in London, The

⁸David Ian Rabey, *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death: An Expository Study of His Drama, Theory and Production Work, 1988-2008* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.3.

⁹Mary Luckhurst (ed.), *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880-2005* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), p.498.

¹⁰Ibid., p.490.

¹¹Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2016), p.48.

Wrestling School made great efforts that its primary aim was – as previously mentioned, to reproduce Barker's plays.

Later on, Howard Barker with Howard Brenton and Peter Barnes, were tagged 'New Jacobean'.¹² In 1994, and as a director and playwright, Barker directed numerous productions of his own, especially in Europe and Australia. Barker's playwriting from the early experiment in social realism and satire, isolates him from politics of the state institution to a special belief of tragedy involved with metaphysical evaluation that "finally attest to the transformative possibilities of sexual desire".¹³

Moreover, his ability to comprehend sense and his linguistic skill which found an early gap in satire; is the tension between 'the ambiguous state of power, its mediation, [and] the complicity of victims' that is calibrated in much of his early playwriting. Some elements included in Barker's plays such as "complexity, ambiguity, visual images, poetic language, scatological comedy, narrative cohesion, and monologues".¹⁴ The insistence reach for protagonists' self-definition lies out the social and 'conventional morality' – which it is a theatrical force in Barker's plays.

The strategies of 'naturalism' broken because of Barker's "poetic dialogue and his unusual choice of settings".¹⁵ In theatre, 'naturalism' refers to an attempt to make an illusion of reality through a range of dramatic and theatrical strategies which it is developed with the French playwrights. In Barker's theatre, 'naturalism' is no longer used because Barker's plays contain a poetic language of his own as well as his style of scenes in a play is not united. Howard Barker wrote many works for

¹²Helen Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted* (London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p.30.

¹³Mary Luckhurst (ed.), *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880-2005*, p.488.

¹⁴Ibid., p.491.

¹⁵Ibid.,

theatre, radio plays, and television including *Check* (1970), *Edward, the Final Days* (1972), *Claw* (1975), *That Good between Us* (1977), *The Love of a Good Man* (1978), *No End of Blame* (1981), *Victory* (1983), *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), *Gertrude, The Cry* (2002), *A Wounded Knife* (2009), and etc.

Audience are subjected to a shift that happens when one's engagement with an action, encounters with "habitual moral or ideological prohibitions of liberal humanist society".¹⁶

However, before moving to his *Scenes from an Execution* – his theatre theory needs to be expanded.

1.2 Barker's theatre theory

Howard Barker's reputation started as a thinker and a performer of his own plays when he publishes his two appreciated works *Arguments for a Theatre*¹⁷ and *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*¹⁸. Barker has coined the term 'Theatre of Catastrophe' which stands for his theatre theory. Barker's 'Theatre of Catastrophe' is a new model in expressing the tragedy in the contemporary history, which in his view, "aims to include a state of anxiety in the audience".¹⁹ Therefore, it is a theatre for pain and transgress.

This theory developed from his denial of collectivism and Brechtian isolation that exists in the early work of Carlyl Churchill and David Hare. Bertolt Brecht, a playwright, theatre director, and poet who is one of the most appreciated figures in the 20th century theatre, argued

¹⁶Ibid., p.489.

¹⁷Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*(London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2016).

¹⁸Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁹Mary Luckhurst (ed.), *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880-2005*, p.489.

that: “theatre should not seek to make its audience believe in the presence of the characters on the stage. But should rather follow the epic poet’s art”.²⁰

In doing so, the audience can comprehend what is on the stage is only for the past. The “unknown territory of death, the individual against collective, seduction, eroticism, and violence are some of the characteristics of Howard Barker’s art of a theatre.²¹

For the theatre to be liberated, Barker trusted the idea of ‘radical individualism’ as a high value. According to him, in his *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker claims that: “Art is a problem. The man or woman who exposes himself to art exposes himself to another problem”.²² What is striking about his ‘Theatre of Catastrophe’ is that “a brave theatre [that] asks the audience to test the validity of the categories it believes it lives by”, was the idea that Barker attempted to present.²³ In doing so, he enlarges his involvement within tragedy in order to recognize its power along with death.²⁴ For Barker, the essence of experience, is the tension between the audience and the play is an aesthetics, as well as, theatre is medium for “assessment and potential reconstruction”.²⁵

For Barker, the theatre is an area in which “public is cleansed of the detritus of familiarity, domesticity and recognition”.²⁶ In an interview dated on 7 February 2015, Barker said, “Look at Bertolt Brecht. All of his

²⁰Gaither Stewart, Bertolt Brecht: Collectivism and Dialectical Materialism in Practice, (October 31, 2017). Retrieved from www.countercurrents.org.

²¹Ramin Farhady, and Mohammed Amin, “Self-Fashioning in Howard Barker’s Scenes from an Execution: Artistic Imagination vs. Political Authority”, Education Research Journal, v.7, n.6 (June 2017), p.134.

²²Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2016), p.11.

²³Ibid., p.52.

²⁴Howard Barker, *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.2.

²⁵Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2016), p.16.

²⁶Ibid., p.7.

plays are about functions. To make the working class recognize the proletarian nature of revolution. [Which] doesn't interest me".²⁷

During the 1970s and 1980s, the British theatre was affected by the Brecht, but instead, Barker seems to be excepted from this effect. However, in spite of that Barker's early works of the 1970s categorized as 'political', such as *Edward, the Final Days* (1972), and *That Good between Us* (1977), but Barker political thoughts were a revolutionary socialist. In 1980s, Barker's writing is improved on a high range of political degree and his plays reflect the same thing. Changing from social realism to catastrophe ensures new forms of artistic enquiry that imply challenges to social objectives.

As previously mentioned, that the Brechtian theatre was full of functions, but Barker's theatre lacks this feature. To him, "the art of theatre is constructed on the premises that the creation of happiness is not part of its function. Nor does it have a function".²⁸ In this way Barker denies collectivism and public function, and in that way an individual's thinking is motivated by a spiritual knowledge. In his view, the playwright seems "as a priests in a sacred art".²⁹ Here, the artist is like the priest who leads people and responsible for them, but this time is at the theatre in which an artist leads the audience to discover what is going on the stage.

Howard Barker has a rhetorical question: "Is art is not necessary for itself?" This suggests that theatre as privilege but not a reward in his

²⁷Majeed Mohammed Midhin's interview with Howard Barker, 7 Feb 2015, Brighton.

²⁸Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2016), p.33.

²⁹Ibid., p.38.

view. According to him, for one to be an artist he/she should have specific ability in which an artist can share his/her experience.

However, in his theatre, both the dramatist and the performer work together in order to make a shift in audience's minds into something new which it is not known before. Here, in his famous *Arguments for a Theatre*, he 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 ... Instead the writer and the actor conspire to lure the mind into the unknown.³⁰

The lines above suggest that the responsibility in Barker's theatre is something essential. The dramatist, actor, and characters represent something have not been visited by the audience yet. All those figures lead the audience to discover the next.

However, in order to get full understanding of Barker's theatre theory, I will discuss his *Scenes from an Execution* in the next chapter.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 34-35.

Chapter Two: *Scenes from an Execution* (1984): A Critical Study

Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* (1984) is a radio play, broadcasted by B.B.C radio in 1984. Later on, *Scenes from an Execution* was performed in the National Theatre in 2012. However, for Barker to reach a wide range of audience and to extend his reputation, he used the radio for this purpose as well as to let people who have not been heard about him before since there was no stage for the play to be acted on. So that "production on radio of a stage play brings a clarity of focus on the next that sometimes can reveal the author's purpose more directly than an elaborate theatre production".¹

Furthermore, this type of production frees the artist/dramatist from the physical appearance in front of the stage. *Scenes from an Execution* (1984) shows the struggle between the artist and the state as they have different characteristics. However, its story is about Galactia; a female painter who is appointed by the state in order to draw the victory of the Venetian against the battle of Lepanto. As Galactia in her way to draw, the picture changes into a massacre which shows the savagery and the crimes of the battle. In this state, the female painter prefers her unique style in order to be questioned by the state itself instead of celebrating the marine victory of Lepanto.

Galactia's dilemma is defined by the conflict between artistic freedom and the state of the church. Her value is to be in jail, and finally to only be freed by establishing an adjustment with her sponsor, the doge of Venice.

¹Richard Imison, "Radio and the Theatre: A British Perspective", *Theatre Journal*, v. 43, n. 3, Radio Drama (October, 1991), p.290.

However, from the very starting of the play, art is made by the two painters: ‘CARPETA’ and ‘GALACTIA’. Both of them were inspired by sexual desire, they have “transformative possibilities of sexual desire”.²

Carpeta tells Galactia:

CARPETA: And I have painted Christ among 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.³

These lines above show us that Carpeta is a well-known painter who paints for religion. According to Carpeta, because of Galactia is sensual, she was commissioned by the state.

CARPETA: And you will never make a decent job for 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)

Accordingly, Carpeta may be right in the sense that the story opens and told by The SKETCHBOOK’s character in a studio in Venice:

THE SKETCHBOOK: The Sketchbook of a Venetian painter Galactia lying on her parted knees speak of her art, speaks of her misery, between studies of sailcloth in red chalk the persistent interruption of one man’s anatomy ... when every margin where she has studied naval history ... (1:253)

²Mary Luckhurst (ed.), A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama: 1880-2005, p.488.

³Howard Barker, *Scenes from an Execution* (Oxford: Oberon Books Ltd, 2012), p.254.

This indicates that Galactia has great knowledge about the naval history which may classify her creativity as the famous one. At this condition, she gets the state and again, celebrates the victory of the Venetians. The doge of Venice, Urgentino, the state's and Galactia's sponsor, tries to dominate the relationship between the state and the artist:

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 ... (2:260)

The above lines suggest that for both the artist and the state, they do not have power nor imagination. Barker asserts:

It seems to me impossible that the state and the artist should enjoy anything but a feeling 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.⁴

However, as the play continues and the struggle between the state and the artist is rising, the dilemma of the artist is now illustrated by Galactia's loss of free expression. The artist who attempts to utter the truth is summoned by foolishness.

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 – (*Protest*) They did – **fact!** ... (7:275)

⁴Mark Brown (ed.), Howard Barker *Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*, p. 63.

When one's benefit decreased, truth has no value. Rivera, the critic, expresses her love for Galactia's painting. She comes to Glactia in order to tell her about the sponsor's anger. Also, scene eight supplies the answers to the questions about Galactia's loss of freedom of expression:

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 fails, 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)

In the above lines, there is a struggle between someone who needs to utter the truth and the permissions of the state which make Galactia worried.

As the play progresses, and up scene fourteen, Galactia sent to jail because her painting does not glorify the battle, but instead, it reveals a massacre, "you are an enemy of the Republic. You wish to destroy its unity and its power ...". (14:293-294)

After Galactia has been sent to jail, now Carpeta believes that he cannot complete without Galactia. Because of he cannot prevent the truth that Galactia is admired him, he calls for her freedom.

Finally, Galactia's creativity is confirmed at the end of the play. An adjustment between her creativity and that of Carpeta's. This is a perfect picture of victory which made the doge of Venice cry in the final scene of the play.

URGENTINO (Wadding in): Galactia comes, not to admire her work – she is not so vain – but to admire the admirers! ... 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. (20:305)

However, in his *Scenes from an Execution*, the artist's dilemma is with the society. This case is performed throughout the characters in the play. Howard Barker claims that it is an enormous fault to consider "because the artist speaks, it's Barker speaking" and he verifies this point when he interviewed on 7 February 2015, "the character who is the leading character in *Scenes from an Execution* is not me ... I don't like her".⁵

⁵Majeed Mohammed Midhin's interview with Howard Barker, 7 Feb 2015, Brighton.

Conclusion

In his *Scenes from an Execution*, Howard Barker shows that characters' intention is to get their freedom of expression but each time their attempts are cracked by the state and the church, their art is likely to be censored. Barker focuses on capitalism and on the task of the trade in holding the artist's freedom of expression. He introduces different views on the artist. The artist suffers from an absence of freedom of expression. However, the artist promotes truth as a high worth in art.

In respect to Barker, this kind of theatre refuses the text to be fully analyzed. To sum up, Barker's theatre has no moral message to be comprehended. This seems to be the dilemma.

At the end of the play, Galactia's smashing judgement with doge of Venice initiates another contracts. The first contract might reflect the political ideology which Barker greatly denies. The other one, the artist is one who attempts to both material and spiritual promotion.

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