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‘Art is a Problem. The Man or Woman who exposes himself to art exposes himself to another problem’

majeed mohammed midhin
university of essex, uk.

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ABSTRACT

The impact of changing economics on British subsidized theatres, during Margaret Thatcher's time raises crucial questions about the role of theatre in society and the relationships between the artist and the ruling political party. Because of the encouragement of the marketplace, British theatre finds itself in a competition with other cultural attractions in the burgeoning media, tourism and related industries. Therefore, its worth is being tested by popularity and profitability. The other key issue which led to the crisis of British theatre in this period is the interference of political party in the administration of Arts Council which is the main body in art affairs. The party politicization of arts institutions for subsidy and administration has a negative impact on distinctive waves of new plays to cope with new realities.

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Introduction

In such cultural atmosphere, the artists were forced to incorporate into a service-oriented economy, which meets the needs of the market out of the realm of everyday life. Intrinsically, their dilemma is embodied by confronting the materialistic attitude of the age, on the one side. On the other side, they should compromise between their personal needs as artists and the political demands imposed on them. To survive, the artist finds him/herself obliged to follow certain standards which had mostly been rejected by leftist dramatists of earlier decades. So, as a theatrical strategy, the artist resorts to the ambiguity of the message. In doing so, he/she hopes to address his/her audiences without being censored.

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

Howard Barker is one of those writers who had begun to grapple with these questions when he became suspicious of the effectiveness of politically committed theatre at about the same time Thatcher was elected as a Prime Minister. Although he is marginalized in his country, Barker has remained a challenging writer who dismantles 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. The above provocations are the main reasons which led me to interview Howard Barker at his home in Brighton on 7 February 2015.

Majeed M. Midhin: First of all, I really appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Howard. As you know I'm from Iraq. Currently, I'm a PhD student at the University of Essex. I am writing about 'The dilemma of the artist as a Character in Contemporary British Theatre.'

Howard Barker: Lovely, good! Okay.

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

HB: Ah.

MM: As related to social dilemma, I concentrate on the two concepts of 'Art for Art sake', and, 'art for society's sake.' In other words, the dialectical relationship between aesthetic and politics.

HB: Yea.

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

HB: The Materialistic side?

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

HB: Yes.

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

HB: Well! There is, is it a dilemma, I'm not sure it's quite what I would call a dilemma! There is certainly a problem...It's quite a problem. For somebody like me. To survive at all in English theatre. Because you may be aware, that most of my work is

produced in Europe. Rather... little here... It's quite difficult for me ... for me to get a play on here. So, it's a problem and I know there. I know there are many reasons for these problems. But I've now lived with these problems for thirty to forty years. And nothing changes. That's the amusing thing is nothing changes, the same situation exists, as it did when I was a rather young writer. Though I was not developed in the forms that I am now. Because I'm now a Tragedian. I write tragedy, and I've written tragedy for twenty years. But when I began I was not particularly tragic. So the first short period of my life was quite easy, then it became more difficult, and it's difficult now. Even though I have an international reputation it makes very little difference in English theatre. So!

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

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

MM: Okay?

HB: But speaking for myself. English Society, English culture, we go back, right back to the 16th century, the Reformation Catholicism goes...we have Protestantism okay. This is the beginning of when English society becomes very, very utilitarian. Idealism, the Soul, these are less important. So as we move on we go to the English Civil War, another example of Utilitarian Culture. We move into the Eighteenth century with Rationalism, John Stewart Mill, utility again. In the nineteenth 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 because art is not useful. It has no use. It exists. It gives problems to people. It refines their soul, but it doesn't really have a use value. So, to take a theatre like the Royal Court Theatre, all of its programming is about usually political, usually left wing, radical left-wing, but always it engages with, what is happening in society. As observed, the writer must observe and reproduce what he observes in the theatre. Now me, I'm not like this. I live in my imagination all the time. I believe the greatest artists are imaginative artists. They imagine the world. They don't copy the world. In this I think I'm Shakespearean. I'm the heir of Shakespeare. He was not a utilitarian. There is nothing utilitarian. What use is King Lear? What use is Hamlet? Use (It) hasn't got a use so my origins go back there which means I'm always in conflict with the theatre as it now.

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

HB: Of course, of course, Of course!

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

HB: It's quite true, Certainly (sighs). Let's talk about the state, the state's fund. Most theatre here that's, you know serious theatre is paid for by the state. But, you may not know this but it's interesting if you study the application forms on which you may apply for funding for your plays and for your theatre. The categories of entitlement are all, nearly all political and social. At no point in the forms, does it say, 'how good is the art? The word art, never appears on the form, the question is if you can tick all these boxes. Let me tell you, it's like the Soviet Union used to be in 1930 under Stalin. The artist has to serve society. So you tick the boxes. Do you help people? Do you help asylum seekers? Do you help disabled people, the poor? if you go, yeah! yeah! yeah! you get the money! But me, No. None of these boxes applies to me.

MM: So, the artist should be free.

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

MM: You mean, there is no necessary to have message?

HB: No, for me no message, but in every other play yes if you go to the theatre. do you? Every time you go in there is a message, Okay. What is the message?

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

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

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

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

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

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

MM: To himself?

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

MM: There is no other responsibility?

HB: No other Responsibility! Otherwise you will never create great art. If I go and I think I will write a play or a poem, and I think how does this help the world? It's not the same poem if I go, 'how does this help me', it's a different poem, this is a greater poem! Here's a poet! A really good poet. You know there is nothing about the world in that. It's all about him, that's good. So when we come to put the play on, it's my play. I work with the actors, the actors and I, we produce this thing, it's perfect. We put it on the stage. Some people say, 'I don't understand,' they go ...others go...' I don't know why, but this excites me', but that's the deal. You can't please everybody.

- MM: So the responsibility as you said, is the artist to himself? Is this issue or this responsibility reflected by the fictional characters?
- HB: I don't know. I'm not sure is it reflected, but by the way I must say, you must be responsible to yourself only is difficult, a difficult thing to do. It's not easy, all the time you are being led by politics. It's always leading you away. It's very hard to be responsible to yourself. In terms of what's in the play, do these characters speak for me? Hard to say, perhaps?
- MM: Perhaps?
- HB: I don't know. I don't think of it like that. I don't say this character is Barker. It's not Barker speaking. It has its own life. Let me give you the word, and the word dominates all my work autonomy. I am autonomous, the characters are autonomous. They do what they have to do because they are who they are.
- MM: But the characters are actually a product of imagination.
- HB: Of course of imagination, yeah.
- MM: Of the artist's imagination. So I think, in one way or another they represent the artist himself?
- HB: They must a little bit, yeah, of course a little bit, how can you say otherwise, of course they must do, but they don't speak for him. You see if you go and see a play by a very successful English dramatist David Hare. Okay left- wing, political establishment. Yeah, the characters speak for David Hare, yeah! I know that! Yeah. I can hear the voice of David Hare. You can't do that with me. If you read a play of mine. Who is Howard Barker here? You can't find him; you say 'he must be there somewhere?' Maybe, let me say, I don't educate people; it is not my idea of theatre to educate people. I'm not Stanislavski, you understand.
- MM: Okay, lovely. Howard, although you answered this question, you said, 'you are responsible to yourself'. Is it to actors or to your company?
- HB: Well. No. I'm not responsible to the actors. They are responsible to me.
- MM: Not to the company?
- HB: The company, my own company, yeah!
- MM: Yes.
- HB: Well, of course I care that the company produces my work perfectly as no one else can. So, we together, me and the actors must refine the work to the highest production value. So, of course we are all responsible for the reputation of the company.
- MM: Which is the play or plays that represent the dilemma of the artist? Well, your plays I have chosen for my study are No End of Blame: Scenes of Overcoming and Scenes from an Execution.
- HB: 'No End of Blame,'... they're about artist.
- MM: Yeah they're about artists!
- HB: The first one, yeah! Of course.
- MM: This one is the radio play?
- HB: Well, yeah. 'Scenes from an Execution' is, was a radio play but now it's a well-known theatre play
- MM: Yeah!
- HB: 'No End of Blame', is just a theatre play. Yeah, they are both about artists.
- MM: Is there, are there other plays?
- HB: Which touch on the subject Well, interestingly there is a play called 'The Europeans' which you may have you heard of it? In which there is a big argument inside the play. At a committee meeting in which they speak about what art should be doing in the culture. There's a quarrel so this issue comes up. Yeah, now this play, you'll be amused.
- MM: If we talk about the characters in 'The Europeans', Are there any character who's an artist?
- HB: There's a small role just one, a small painter.
- MM: What about the argument of the artist or the dilemma of the artist?
- HB: It's all in the play. Inside the play, but there's one scene in which they talk about the artist. You see it's set a long time ago. It's set in Vienna at the time of the Turkish invasion. The Turks were thrown back. Vienna was freed, and the people argue about what sort of artistic life they want to live in the new country. So! There is a debate inside it.
- MM: Yeah. What about my choice?
- HB: The other two? There, they're fine, they're good because the character who is the leading character in Scenes from an Execution is not me. I don't like her! So don't, don't make the mistake assuming that because the artist speaks, it's Barker speaking, it's not.
- MM: Okay. But what about, 'No End of Blame'?
- HB: 'No End of Blame', no, that's not me either. Because there are two artists: one who is a political artist and one who is a sort of a spontaneous natural artist. I don't take sides.
- MM: Howard, can you explain your background? And why and how you started writing plays?
- HB: What's your background? Are you poor or rich?
- MM: No. I mean your decision to write plays?
- HB: I was just wondering. I'm from a very poor background, London and working people. I don't really know why I went into the theatre. I never saw plays. I have no family connections with theatre at all. I don't remember how I got there. Somehow, I don't know how it happened. Anyhow there I am, and there I stayed. So I had no natural relationship with the theatre at all. I don't think, and to tell you the truth I don't go to the theatre now. It bores me.
- MM: How would you describe your work? What have you tried to say in your plays?
- HB: I've tried to talk about human pain. Because I'm a tragic writer, let's be clear, I had to say this yesterday to some students. What is sad, is not tragic. Tragedy is not sad. What is tragic is not sad, you see sometimes they say here, they love Chekhov! Oh Chekhov! they love Chekhov, he's everywhere here. You could think he was English not Russian. Chekhov is sad, it's not a tragedy. In tragedy, the individual, the protagonist exposes himself to death, and he always dies, that is always the end. He has to die. Because what he does, what he chooses, it's his choice bring him into conflict with the world, and the world destroys him.

This is the same in every tragedy this is what interests me but you understand to go back to the beginning, anyone who writes about death is not socially useful. Understand? Go and ask them at the National Theatre, or the Royal Court Theatre, what is the use of tragedy?

MM: It has no use.

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

MM: And this is the aim.

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

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

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

MM: In talking about Brecht, there is no influence on you as a writer?

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

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

HB: Poets! Not stage people, poets. I'll tell you Attila Jozsef, Hungarian Poet! (sighs) Who else do I read, Celine, Paul Celine. These are wonderful people. Not political.

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

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

MM: Both

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

MM: So now the problem is with the form.

HB: Of course, it's the problems everywhere. The form is in politics, it's in society.

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

HB: The content?

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

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

MM: Without social content!

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

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

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

MM: Why do you write plays?

HB: Instead of driving a bus do you mean?

MM: (chuckling)

HB: Do you mean, that to do you why?

MM: Yeah.

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

MM: For money?

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

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

HB: Well! that's a good one, that's a big question. I don't let people direct my work, I direct it. What they say I'll tell you what they say the logic they have they say. Well, the play is fine, it needs another eye, my eye, and I say to them no it doesn't need your eye. The play is there. You don't add anything directors and things the play doesn't need adding. It needs a director to interpret

simply what is there on the page. In the stage, I don't need his contribution. I think directors are by and large, they cannot help interposing themselves the text and the public. I don't need that.

MM: Is this the reason behind directing the work yourself?

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

MM: Do you think the new technologies, represented by cinema and other means, has a negative influence on theatre?

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

MM: There are only ten!

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

MM: What kind of dilemma the playwright may find first in the plays staged in theatre and the ones which broadcast on radio? What is the responsibility of the artist for both?

HB: In radio do you mean?

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

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

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

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

MM: Yeah, elitist, sure!

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

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

HB: Of course.

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

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

MM: Like Iraq (chuckles)

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

MM: So what about democracy?

HB: Well.

MM: Do you think there is no democracy?

HB: It's weak.

MM: It's weak!

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

MM: Barker, you said in Arguments for a theatre "In an age of populism, the progressive artist is the artist who is not afraid of silence."¹ What do you mean?

HB: Well, it means that sometimes you must expect that an artist must expect to be outside on the margins all the time. Great artists don't live in the Centre of affairs you take the artists who are very successful here. They are people whose opinions are closely aligned to the opinions of the state. when I mean the state I mean the media. I mean the BBC, the 'Guardian' newspaper, the whole apparatus of liberal humanism. Those who are successful, I think David Hare is a good example are bang in the middle, people like me. It's two years since I had a play in England, so I have to accept that you're not gonna be heard. Some of my favorite writers are never heard Paul Celine. Look how long it took Paul Celine, fifty years to be heard. So you have to accept the possibility of being outside.

MM: And also you said art is a problem?

HB: Yes! Thank God! t should be a problem!

MM: It should be a problem!

HB: Yes. It should be because I remember when I went to Poland. I went to Poland quite soon after the fall of Communism. And I spoke to an audience and they said, 'we require writers to tell, to point the way for us.' And I said 'Well I can't do that, there will be artists like that who will.' I say, but I can't do that. For me a work of art does not simplify the world, it complicates the world. So, if you think life is too difficult, don't go and see my plays. But you know, if you are curious about the world then you want to see it. It complicates it.

MM: The artist complicates it!

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

MM: So, he must be strict and serious.

HB: Serious subjective.

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

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

MM: To follow certain choices.

HB: Choice is the word.

MM: Barker you said in an interview with Vick Hobbes, 2004, in your speech about morality, saying "the English people are moralistic. Shakespeare was the last English writer who was not a moralist. Do you think that the morality of the writer is an urgent need for his/her popularity?

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

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

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

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

HB: I think I've done that really. Artists must be independent, to use that word 'autonomous'. To be autonomous, they cannot serve society.

MM: I already ask this question. In 1994, you yourself directed Hated Nightfall for the wrestling school (company) Do you think the playwright should direct his work? What is the relationship between the director and writer?

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

MM: Lovely, you said in Arguments for a theatre, "A braver theatre asks the audience to test the validity of the categories it believes by. In other words, it is not about life as it is lived at all, but about life as it might be lived."²

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

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

MM: You said in your speech about politics; "The dramatist's obligation becomes an obligation not to a political position... but to his own imagination."³

HB: That's where we started!

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

HB: Well, that's a political question.

MM: Yes, a political question.

HB: You see I'm not answering it.

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

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

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

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

MM: How?

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

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

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

MM: And you mean this value.

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

MM: Do you have anything to add?

HB: No, I haven't.

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

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

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

Notes

¹Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, intro. David Ian Rabey (London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd., 1989), p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 52.

³Ibid, pp. 48-49.