



# 'Not Nude but Naked'. Nakedness and nudity in Barker's drama

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The theatre is, etymologically, what makes us see; more precisely, the theatre exposes what is usually hidden. In Peter Brook’s words, the theatre makes visible the invisible (Brook, 45). In this sense, the representation of the naked body is highly theatrical: the stage can reveal the body without clothes in public, although society, conventions and morals forbid it in “real life”. The naked body is a *leitmotiv* in Barker’s plays. It is a crucial moment of the theatrical experience for the playwright: ‘The anxiety created by nakedness is intensely theatrical in the ways in which it arises both sides of the curtain: tension on the stage is so swiftly transmitted by an empathy that can’t be found in, say, film. The self-consciousness of the naked actor is electrifying, and the spectacle of her nakedness wounds us in some way, even where it is erotic in intention, and perhaps effect’ (Barker, letter to David Ian Rabey, 12 March 2010).

In his plays and essays, the words ‘nude’ and ‘nudity’ are hardly ever used, while ‘naked’ and ‘nakedness’ are recurrent. This could be surprising considering the influence of painting and visual arts in Barker’s works: while ‘naked’ and ‘nude’ both refer to the unclothed body, the word ‘nude’ refers more specifically to the world of art, and is more generally used for an artistic representation of a human figure (usually female and especially in sculpture and painting). Barker gives us a number of clues to understand this choice in his works and essays, but when it comes to representation, a tension arises between nakedness, “the body unclothed” and nudity, “the body clothed in art”. First, I will develop the protean meanings of ‘nakedness’ for Barker so as to address, in a second part, the representation of the naked body in some productions. The tension between nakedness and nudity echoes an ancient debate in art history, which I will briefly develop in this second point.

### **Nakedness in Barker’s drama**

‘Naked’ comes from the archaic verb, ‘to nake’, which means ‘to strip’<sup>1</sup>. This active, verbal meaning of the term can be opposed to the more stable meaning of ‘nude’, which is both adjective and noun referring to the nude in art, the unclothed body stabilised in a way, or

even controlled through art. Hence Barker's choice of the word 'nakedness', privileged over 'nudity', can be defined as a sort of iconoclastic gesture that can be applied to four different fields: characters, actors, the audience and finally language.

## Characters

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. One of these situations is when the body is naked: the body can exist, be present through the gaze of others, and be released from the moral and political powers that suffocate the individual. In an interview, Barker claimed that 'The body is a symbol of liberty, of disorder. Free sexuality, the liberty of desire is a threat to political power, to the order of the state. The human body is the object of all political power. It is the control of each body that is the object of the state' (Sources 3, 1997, Interview with Gilles Menelgado, 169). Echoing here the theories of Michel Foucault<sup>ii</sup>, Barker places the body at the centre of his aesthetics as a disruptive element of all pre-established order. Being naked is a 'revolutionary' act, as Queen Caroline illustrates during her trial at the end of *The Gaoler's Ache*. Loosely based on the life of Queen Marie-Antoinette during the French Revolution, the play describes the incestuous relationship between Queen Caroline and her son who are in jail during the French Revolution. At the end, when the queen has to go before the court, she shows her breasts as an act of defiance. She then says: 'To be naked is to reveal which was yours. And these breasts were never mine for the simple reason that I don't exist' (242). Through nakedness, the character can find herself again through her own body and her desires as a woman instead of as queen. Caroline no longer exists as a queen because of the "ordering" forces associated with History and the Revolution - but also, moreover, because of her history and revolution against order, as an individual who privileges her private life and desires.

Nakedness is also a part of the characters' quest for knowledge. Whether the characters are trying to undress another or unclothing themselves, the same message can be derived from the gesture: to undress is to look for some revelation about either the self or the other. In *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, the nakedness of Tenna is the main thread in a battle where two characters try to assess each other's powers through a ritual of seduction. Nakedness is an ordeal for both: for Tenna, as Isonzo stresses, 'Nakedness / It's not just no clothes is it... It's pain / it's fear / it's horror' (266). The ordeal also affects Isonzo, who is 'stretching the pleasures of anticipation to their breaking point' (270). One cannot help but think this undressing is metaphorical. Indeed, although it is ambiguous whether Isonzo is

blind or not - for he says: 'I'm not blind/ I merely shut my eyes' (269) - to undress leads to the real encounter with the other, or at least makes this encounter possible, because Isonzo and Tenna may perceive beyond outward appearances, even beyond the surface of the skin, thanks to their heightened senses<sup>iii</sup>. 'Is it not the virtue of our sightlessness that we make no distinction any more between the surface and the depths' (242).

The desire to penetrate, to look inside the other's body is taken to the limit in *He Stumbled*. At the end, Doja, a famous anatomist, cuts himself open for his lover Turner. Turner uses her nakedness to manipulate Doja until he has to die by dissecting himself. Doja seems to have an inkling of this when he sees Turner naked, for he says: 'And nakedness... far from being... a testament to truth is... further - [...] manipulation' (293). In this particular play, nakedness is not enough for lovers, because it reveals nothing; rather it excites the desire to look for what lies underneath the flesh. Barker has suggested that 'the act of exposure enervates itself and therefore demands the discovery of another area of exposure : in the end, this destroys life, I think it's self-destructive' (Kiehl, 453). In this perspective, nakedness often reveals itself as a dead end to the quest of knowledge in his work.

When the naked body appears, it becomes the driving force of the *agon*, a main dynamic in the underlying conflict that defines the relationship between characters and presides over the way they communicate: nakedness implies both the vulnerability of the naked character as well as its power on others. Characters hesitate between modesty and shamelessness. In *The Bite of the Night*, Gay puts it this way: 'If I am naked and you are not, what then? One of us has the advantage but who?' (97). While the word 'naked' often means 'vulnerable' or 'defenceless' in Barker's plays, it can also turn into an instrument of power, as in *Gertrude - The Cry*, scene 19. When Gertrude and Claudius poison Hamlet, Gertrude lets her dressing gown fall in '*a gesture of self-assertion*'. While naked, she orders her son to drink the poison. Hamlet cannot but obey, repeating: 'So many things I do not understand' (158). The nakedness of Gertrude, symbolising her passion and desire for Claudius, belongs to the irrational for Hamlet. He cannot understand this nakedness but it imposes itself on him and makes him die.

## Actors

In *A Style and its Origins*, Barker's alter ego Eduardo Houth stresses that 'Barker thought seriously about nakedness in theatre and used it cautiously, with discretion and never to humiliate' (*A Style*, 38); on Victoria Wicks playing Gertrude, for instance: 'the demands he made on her lay as much in what he caused her to say as in the actions she so skilfully

demonstrated, words which, spoken in nakedness, might lacerate an actress' (*A Style*, 67). The sense of danger in acting naked is part of the demands made on the actors of The Wrestling School, along with the physicality of the acting. David Ian Rabey notes how the characters can frequently be "explicit body performers", dramatically fictional but at least to some degree authentically theatrically manifested by the courage of the performer, as in efforts of will involving speech, action and physical disclosure (such as nakedness) which throw notions and criteria of authenticity into play' (Rabey, 20). Indeed, while nakedness is a sign of both vulnerability and power for the characters, it is also a disruptive sign in the acting since it blurs the frontier between fiction and reality, between the stage and the real world.

When the naked body of the actor is exposed, it reveals what makes the theatrical experience so essentially different from any other: the body of the actor is present, and as Roland Barthes reminds us, the spectator could try to touch it if he/she dared. It is what he calls '*la vénusté*'<sup>iv</sup>, the fact that the theatre presents us with a body that is both the body of the actor and that of the character he plays (Barthes, 81). It is this ambiguity, this instability of the body as sign that allows for the creation of anxiety: "in theatre the living body has a hazardous potential unavailable to the makers of film, and nakedness is its crisis point" (*A Style*, 108). Nakedness is therefore the epitome of the catastrophic state of the body since it disturbs the relations between the characters and the relations between the actors and the audience.

## The Audience

The naked body can still shock, and disturbs the audience. In our western societies, the influence of biblical taboos concerning nakedness is still valid. The shame of Adam and Eve when they discover their nakedness in the book of Genesis, or the taboos listed in Leviticus still have an impact on the structure of society nowadays. Leviticus emphasises: 'None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness' (Lev, 18:6).

Barker constantly plays with these taboos, reinterpreting Genesis in *I Saw Myself* or multiplying the dangerous liaisons in the same family (in *Dead Hands*, *The Fence in its Thousandth Year*, *Gertrude - The Cry*). In addition, since it is still forbidden to be naked in public, and since the audience has to look at the naked body, the experience is one of anxiety: the spectator has to participate in a voyeuristic game, where his own gaze is questioned, while the morality and the legality of the act are suspended in the plays. Nakedness puts into question the oppositions between presentation and representation of the body, between a theatrical experience that is experiential, based primarily on the senses, and one that is mainly

intellectual. It partakes of the creation of ‘moments of loss’ (*Arguments*, 53) and of an art of theatre that is an art of secrecy; to quote Barker again, ‘nakedness is the great secret of the stage, and the stage an art of secrecy’ (*A Style*, 110).

## Language

Nakedness can also apply to the way Barker handles language, since it must be stripped of its “ethical garments”, just like the audience. Barker writes that ‘*the art of theatre* aspires to moral nakedness. It is the antithesis of education, which is clothing, which is a suffocation in *ethical garments*’ (*Death*, 33). Through this allusion to Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*<sup>v</sup>, Barker suggests the need to find another poetical language, stripped of all stable meaning so as to create anxiety. The repetition of words or sentences in the plays makes for the unclothing of language so as to endow it with a plethora of meanings, making the very notion of meaning itself unstable. For instance, the repetition of the phrase ‘bad news’ in *The Dying of Today* can be stripped of its ethical garments, in that it is the meaning of the expression, what is behind those words, which is the target of constant speculation for the two characters of the play. ‘Bad news’ is the subject of the play as well as its object, what it is trying to define.

Barker’s aim is also to make his characters speak “nakedly”, to borrow an expression used by Hippolito in *Women Beware Women* (162)<sup>vi</sup>. ‘Since what cannot be expressed cannot exist dramatically, the attempt to abolish the word becomes an attack on the body itself – a veiled attempt to remove the body from dramatic space’ (*Arguments*, 30). Barker tries to take off the ethical garments of language and to bring the body back to language through obscenity for instance. The most emblematic example is a word like ‘cunt’ which Barker uses in his plays.

## Nakedness in Representation

### A Debate in Art History

Barker’s focus on nakedness in his aesthetics is fascinating because it revives an ancient debate on nakedness and nudity in art history. The main reference on the subject of the nude in art is Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude, A Study in Ideal Form*, which dates back to 1956, and where the author makes a clear distinction between the naked and the nude:

The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude. To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed. (Clark, 3)

Nakedness implies a sense of anxiety and instability that, of course, suits Barker's purpose much better than the concept of nudity as defined by Clark, which is associated with stability and conventions. Clark's analysis was later revised by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972): for Berger, 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. [...] Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display' (Berger, 54). Here, an ambiguity arises: for while the characters in theatre tend to reveal themselves through nakedness, as it is associated with a catastrophic situation most of the times, they are also objects placed on display on the stage, hence always potentially nudes according to Berger's definition.

Finally, Lynda Nead reopened the debate with her book *The Female **Nude**: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* published in 1992, where she addresses, more specifically, the question of the representation of the female body:

To formulate a feminist history of the female nude (in response to Clark for instance) the representation of the female body within the forms and frames of high art is a metaphor for the value and significance of art generally. It symbolizes the transformation of base matter of nature into the elevated forms of culture and the spirit. The female nude can thus be understood as a way of containing femininity and female sexuality. (Nead, 2)

According to Nead, the procedures and conventions of art are one way of controlling the unruly female body and placing it within the securing boundaries of aesthetic discourse. Barker's iconoclastic aesthetics seem, at first, to go against the idea of transforming the female body into a nude, a body controlled through art.

‘Not nude but naked’?

Barker’s potential awareness of this debate appears very clearly in *Terrible Mouth*. In this opera, Alba has to agree to being raped by a character called the Captain in front of the painter Goya, her lover. While undressing herself for the rape, she states that she will be ‘not nude but naked’ (12). The sentence conveys a double meaning, in the light of the definitions given by Clark, Berger and Nead: first, she is no longer Goya’s model during the rape but a defenceless, exposed woman. Secondly, her body is put into a catastrophic situation that enables her to escape from the control of art and hence to be herself. In order to escape from any sort of control, be it artistic or political, the female character has to go through a rape, which is very extreme, so as to reach a kind of ecstasy, taken literally as to be “outside oneself”. But one could point out that although she is naked, she is still an object for the Captain. However, it is the experience of such catastrophic moments that Barker advocates so that the subject can escape the rules and constraints imposed on him/her to remain a “nude”. One is tempted to say that the quote from *Terrible Mouth*, ‘not nude but naked’, could be applied to all the scenes where the naked body appears, in accordance with Barker’s choice of nakedness over nudity. However, two elements contradict this idea.

First, the treatment of the naked male body is different from that of the naked female body in Barker’s plays. The later plays show a resurgence in dramatisations of male nakedness, in *Ursula*, *Animals in Paradise* or *I Saw Myself*<sup>vii</sup>. This could be understood as another iconoclastic trend in Barker’s aesthetics: since nakedness is more often linked to women in our society (in advertisements, on television but more generally in the visual arts), having naked male bodies on the stage could be a new shock tactic to go against the grain of the audience’s expectations.

But the male body is never as disruptive as the female body in the context of the plays. In *I Saw Myself*, the naked body of Modicum, imprisoned in the closet, is never attacked or in a position to be threatened. It is limited, as his name literally reveals, and is not as central to the play as the female heroine Sleev. In the production of *Ursula* that was staged at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in June 2009<sup>viii</sup> for the Barker season, the actor playing Lucas naked was full of confidence and his nakedness was not disruptive at all: there was no sense of shame or danger. In *Animals In Paradise*, the naked body of Practice, the old servant, contrasts with Tenna’s. His nakedness is a symbol of decline and only disturbing in the contrast. Hence, these naked males are not disquieting to the audience, because they are not main characters and their nakedness is not a main step in their own catastrophic situations. In *Gertrude – The Cry*, *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* or *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* on the contrary, female



nakedness stresses the charisma and potential of the women as heroines. In Barker's theatre, female nakedness is usually very powerful and it is acted out by physically attractive actresses so that nakedness is at the height of its visual power. In this way, although the female naked body still seems to be an object under the gaze of the male spectator, an effect discussed by both Berger and Nead in the field of art history - where the representations of female nakedness is usually interpreted in terms of subordination to social and artistic male conventions -, Barker manages to upset these conventional power relations by making his heroines' nakedness triumphant.

Finally, a second element hinders the 'not nude but naked' strategy on the stage. It is Barker's (and other directors') great sense of pictorial stage composition. Because the naked body is stylised, staged with particular light effects and above all, framed by the stage itself, all the naked bodies turn into "nudes" in Clark's sense of the term. This is true for instance of the Wrestling School production of *I Saw Myself* in 2008 where frames kept recurring in the play: the closet where Modicum stood was a kind of frame, while the tapestry itself was represented by frames on the stage and the architecture of the theatre seemed to frame the characters. In Giorgio Barberio Corsetti's production of *Gertrude - The Cry* in the Théâtre de l'Odéon, the naked body of Gertrude was also in a way "clothed in art": the first scene, where Claudius and Gertrude appear and make love was staged in a kind of shadow, at the back of the stage. When Gertrude is naked in front of Hamlet to poison him, blue and red lights stylised the exposed body of the actress, which was on the far left side of the stage. Of course, this can also be interpreted as a safeguard against a naturalistic representation. The architecture of the theatre, which is that of the Italian theatre, also framed the characters. In the picture frame formed by the proscenium arch, the characters cannot but be nudes, as in a painting.

However, when nakedness is frontal and/or in full light, just like that of Algeria in the final scene of *The Fence*, or that of Tenna in front of Taxis in the French production of *Animals in Paradise* in Rouen in 2005, the white body of the actresses first attracts the voyeuristic gaze of the audience. Nevertheless, nakedness can be achieved because the audience senses the danger for this exposed body on the one hand and on the other, because the naked body is like a screen: the image of the dazzling white naked body remains a mystery, a secret. It exists at the frontier between the naked, the body exposed, and the nude, the body clothed in art, since its stillness and whiteness remind of a sculpture and flesh becomes stone, as Clarissa reveals in *Seven Years*: 'nakedness can be so cold. Can be so granite' (139).

Perhaps the tension between nakedness and nudity is a sure sign of Barker's concern with the particular, not to say almost sacred, condition of the actor. The sometimes sculptural quality of the bodies on stage also remind us of the Pygmalion myth, the body at times coming to life, at times becoming a statue<sup>ix</sup> as Isonzo remarks: 'I know how hard it is/ To be adored / To stand unflinching under scrutiny / As statues washed by fountains' (259).

Barker has remarked how the naked body 'commands silence' (Kiehl, 454), just like a work of art. This silence embodies the suspension of meaning lying at the heart of the representation of the naked body, which remains a mystery. The unveiling of the naked body on the stage is the act of revelation itself and does not reveal anything. One could call it an 'immaculate suspension' along with Isonzo (276). Barker's fascination with the naked body probably lies in this suspension of meaning: 'it is such a mobile surface of concepts, the unclothed body, a surface which, no matter how overwritten, still has the power to be discovered *differently*' (*Theatre of Catastrophe*, 34); and, one could add, whether naked or nude.

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<sup>i</sup> A late use of the verb appears in Cyril Tournear’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Act V, scene 1, 60: “Lussurioso: Come, be ready; naked your swords...” I am grateful to Charles Lamb for finding this quotation.

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<sup>ii</sup> See Michel Foucault's three volumes *The History of Sexuality*. (Introduction, *The Uses of Pleasure*, and *Care of the Self*) Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1988-90.

<sup>iii</sup> For much more on this subject and the meaning of 'nudity' in Levinas's philosophy, see Elisabeth Angel-Perez's article, 'Facing defacement: Barker and Levinas', in Gritzner, Karoline and David Ian Rabey, eds. *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*. London: Oberon, 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> Here is the quote: 'la fonction érotique du théâtre n'est pas accessoire, parce que lui seul, de tous les arts figuratifs (cinéma, peinture), donne les corps, et non leur représentation. Le corps de théâtre est à la fois contingent et essentiel : essentiel, vous ne pouvez le posséder (...) ; contingent, vous le pourriez car il vous suffirait d'être fou un moment (ce qui est en votre pouvoir) pour sauter sur la scène et toucher ce que vous désirez. Le cinéma, au contraire, exclut, par une fatalité de nature, tout passage à l'acte: l'image y est absence *irréversible* du corps représenté' in Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. Paris : Seuil, 1975, 81

<sup>v</sup> See *The Gay Science*, Book V, §352: "With morality the European dresses up". Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York : Vintage Books, 1974.

<sup>vi</sup> "Duke: Respect? Respect? Nay, stuff respect. It's violence. Pageantry and violence. Hippolito: You phrase it nakedly".

<sup>vii</sup> Male nakedness occurs in the early Barker plays *That Good Between Us* (1977), *Downchild* (written 1977, staged 1985) and *No End of Blame* (1981) – as well as female nakedness in the first and third of these – as a significantly reversible index of power and vulnerability.

<sup>viii</sup> It was directed by Nathalie Garraud and Olivier Saccomano.

<sup>ix</sup> I am very grateful to Heiner Zimmermann for this particular insight on the Pygmalion myth in relation to my paper. See Heiner Zimmermann's article on the Pygmalion myth in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.