PLAYWRIGHTS WRITING
Procedure and Polemic

George Hunka


Academics write about theatre for other academics. When playwrights write about theatre, their audience is simultaneously themselves and the general public: a view from the inside, as moles underneath their aesthetic ground, examining the soil from which the art of drama springs. In his Short Organum and The Messingkauf Dialogues, Brecht told theatre practitioners how to make theatre and audiences how to receive it, as did Shaw in his early theatre reviews and prefaces. The form of this polemic was straightforward: the essay, expository prose that had the air of practical utility. Among recent English-language playwrights, Suzan-Lori Parks’s and Tony Kushner’s writings on theatre share this same strategy.

But there are other more playful, suppler forms. It’s not surprising that these forms, rather than the essay, have especially appealed those playwrights who take language in and of itself as the subject of their dramatic work. Two recently issued book-length polemics on theatre, one from Mac Wellman in the United States and the other from Howard Barker in Europe, break free from the essay form to present evolving ideas about drama and theatre, and in doing so they demonstrate a variety of contrasts: between America and Europe, the comic and the tragic, the narrative and the aphorism. These books share, however, a goal of seeing theatre as a part of culture, both reflective and transformative of society itself. Wellman’s avenue is towards cheerful satire, Barker’s towards tragic apocalypse.

Having written many essays about theatre and drama in the past, Wellman turns in Q’s Q to the novel to present his anatomy of contemporary American drama: a satiric allegory of the current state of the art. The story is set in the bucolic Sweet Thumb River Valley among individuals in a non-profit community theatre company: Chris Name, a New American Playwright (or NAP, as Wellman’s characters abbreviate it: there are so many of these NAPs that this mere abbreviation can stand in for...
all of them), is assigned by the Great Wind Repertory Theatre’s artistic director, Van Rensselaer Board, to adapt a massive, hopelessly convoluted myth from the Central European country of Perfidia for the stage. Dramaturgs and assistant dramaturgs all have their say, actors and directors push and pull Name’s text into something resembling a piece of theatre—a staged reading that provokes a riot, leading ultimately to the death of the artistic director at the hands of Great Wind’s board of directors when he has the effrontery to suggest that the play be added to the theatre’s next mainstage season.

Wellman’s target here is the identity politics which infests contemporary American theatre, and for a writer as obsessed by the slipperiness of language as Wellman, identity is manifested in words—words, however, which in their protean power have magical qualities. As well as the name of the novel, Qi’s Qi is the name of the Perfidian national epic Name is asked to adapt, translatable to the eerie Weird’s Weird. In working with the play (rearranged by Constantine, an irritable Perfidian invited by the artistic director to intern at the company; Constantine’s main responsibility, however, seems to be to empty out the trash cans and run minor errands), Name manages to unleash and even to embody the strange violent lusts the myth evokes—lusts which, at the staged reading, provoke the novel’s comically violent denouement.

The American drama that the Perfidian epic disrupts is a paltry thing, though; Wellman suggests that it’s the novelty of these unleashed forces that ultimately testifies to the power of the art, an art that in the United States has become desiccated over time. One of the most delightful aspects of the book is Wellman’s parodic twisting of American dramatic tropes. Tennessee Williams and his brand of lyricism, especially as practiced by lesser writers, is exemplified by A Burnt Angel Called Tempt Me: “Everyone in the play swerved and swore and sweated a lot; drank iced tea, wine in wine coolers and rye whiskey in jars. They tore open their greasy tee-shirts to reveal the remarkable wounds they had gotten in the War and show how much they loved the girl who was called ‘Tall Yaller,’ had been a nightclub singer before she lost all her teeth in a fight and her leg to a disease too terrible to name. . . . [They] worked the old emotional marimba like a son of a gun. It was very impressive, like watching a gorilla knot a necktie . . .” Theatre academics themselves are parodied in the character of Pooh, the feminist dramaturg assigned to Name’s play, who pledges allegiance to a bizarre mélange of academic PC-speak: “[the theory] allows for a ubiquity of grievance within the universal color-blind panopticon for unobstructed viewing of abuse, harassment, molestation, brutalization, rites of exclusion, silencing and erasure as a strategic mask-play in the oppositional grid that is the postmodernist’s response to Phallocentric Patriarchy.” This is a good set of words with which to construct a self-serving academic identity; not so good when it comes to putting a play on a stage.

And despite the PC identity politics that Wellman satirizes as a weakness of the contemporary American stage, ultimately this PC language serves not so much the community and collabora-
tion, but the self. In using this language to protect their own self-image and self-importance, the characters—playwright, adapter, dramaturg, performer, director—send the collaborative process necessary to theatre-making to spinning: as a result of the centrifugal force of all this spinning, the art itself flies apart.

The last word in the novel belongs to Luna, the moon: the light which oversees Sweet Thumb River Valley, the light which shows the way to the front door of the theatre for the 8:00 p.m. curtain. Despite the awful state of American theatre, the moon hopes for the best: “To behold me is to become aware of the truly sublime; that is to say, there is a kind of drama that is wholly alien to that of the torn tee-shirt, that of the stunning revelation that has been so ham-fistedly foreshadowed . . . that the revelation usually feels more like an instance of the stunningly obvious . . . ; than what is more rare and marvelous, the species of drama that is like stillness and quiet, but is not stillness and quiet; . . . the variety of drama that is always approaching, approaching the inexpressible but never quite arriving at that place, just as the human heart approaches but never quite reaches the place called love, called hate, called home. . . .” Wellman seems to share the hope of his anthropomorphized satellite (Luna “ends it all on a note of lightness and hilarity”), his vision of the condition of the American theatre still a comic vision, ripe for his satire and parody, and possessed of the capacity for rebirth that the spirit of comedy represents.

This is an optimism for culture itself; Wellman’s subject is not merely theatre, but the self and the world, as is Howard Barker’s. While the ostensible subject of Death, The One and the Art of Theatre is drama and theatre, theatre for Barker is also all-encompassing: “All I describe is theatre even where theatre is not the subject” is a mantra that runs through the book, a Nietzschean collection of aphorisms that depends for its power upon its cumulative effect. And like Wellman, Barker is an extraordinarily productive dramatist (more than 40 plays over the past 37 years). But there the resemblances stop.

Howard Barker’s work has been slow in coming to American stages, and even in his own country it is very rarely produced by institutional theatres like the National Theatre or the Royal Court. However, recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in his plays; Oberon Books is now publishing a uniform edition of his plays, and several volumes of criticism have been published, with a volume of interviews with Barker scheduled for publication in the near future. His career, from the premiere of his 1970 play Cheek at the Royal Court to his more astringent recent productions with his own theatre company, The Wrestling School, is an attempt to revive the spirit of tragedy for a 21st century post-ideological philosophy based upon desire and seduction. Where Wellman’s book is of the present of the theatre, Barker’s book is of its future.

And this future must be wrenched from the roots of the art form, a radical reclamation. Barker differentiates between existing “theatre” and his vision of an “art of theatre,” a divorce of the commercial and the artistic. “The theatre purports to give pleasure to the many. The art of theatre lends anxiety to the few. Which
is the greater gift?” he asks early in the book. In emphasizing the present theatrical body as a dying body, Barker sees in contemporary theatre a violent attempt to deny the unique truths about the human spirit, its dynamic of pain and pleasure staged in full knowledge and awareness of mortality: a knowledge and exploration that the performer seeks to share with the audience.

Barker’s metaphysics is not a playful metaphysics, as is Wellman’s metaphysics of language; instead, playfulness constitutes a refusal of theatre’s essence, which, in Barker’s vision, is an awareness of the pain and violence inflicted by individual human beings upon each other. This is far from an identity politics or PC ideology. Indeed, it refuses both explicit politics and ideology through the sensual enactment of language, an enactment beyond the critical eye. “To stage death,” Barker writes, “we must—let us admit it, and affirm it—abolish the critical regard—a regard so fissured and cataracted as to have become in any case a condition of the blind . . . .” For the aphoristic polemicist like Barker, this doesn’t lead to the abolition of criticism but an abolition of its traditional interpretive function, its use. It defines theatre and criticism as experiential rather than interpretive, a more pliant brand of Sontag’s erotic attitude towards the work of art.

This renders criticism and polemics of theatre themselves more nuanced and imaginative in the manner of Cixous. A new art of theatre requires a new art of theatre criticism, of theatre writing. The forms of Barker’s past critical and theoretical work, particularly in his landmark *Arguments for a Theatre* (originally published in 1989 but now in its third edition), owed more to Brecht than to, say, Cioran: straightforward essays and speeches were interspersed with occasional dialogues and poetry. In *Death, The One . . .*, the volume of aphorisms supplants the anthology of related but loosely arranged expository prose as an attempt at expressing a theatrical aesthetic. The fragmented nature of these aphorisms leads to a more imaginative approach to the criticism on the part of the reader. Like Barker’s theatre, his theory is now provocative of a reader’s response and encourages an immersion in the arrangement of the aphorisms on the page, similar to an immersion in the fragments and images of Barker’s theatre practice itself.

*Death, The One . . .* is a logical extension of Barker’s recent poetics. He only began publishing his verse in 1985, 15 years after the premiere of his first play and at about the time of *The Castle*, his first major tragedy. More recently Barker seems to have honed his aesthetic to a more ascetic practice, as evidenced in this book (published to coincide with the premiere of his 2004 play *Dead Hands*, which marks a movement away from his former epic practice and more towards a chamber theatre, from *The Castle’s* ensemble of more than 15 characters and 11 scenes to *Dead Hands’* three characters and one unbroken act). The evolution of Barker’s theoretical style runs parallel to the evolution of his theatrical style, as Wellman’s language-based identity politics in *Q’s Q* runs alongside his examination of language’s contribution to identity in his plays. As their theatres suggest a radical reconstruction of theat-
rial possibility, Wellman’s and Barker’s polemics suggest a radical reconstruction of the critical perspective through which these theatres can be experienced.

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