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## Op-Eds :: Think of the Possibilities

A superb play by a tragically neglected dramatist comes to town.

by **Bill Marx**

Boston, MA - March 02, 2006 - Thankfully, the "Boston Globe" published a perceptive notice of a staging of "The Possibilities," ten short plays by British dramatist Howard Barker. The critic rightfully calls Barker "the greatest playwright you have never heard of." Alas, this was the only major review that [the production](#), which runs through March 4, has received.

During my twenty-five years of reviewing theater in Boston I have noted only three productions of Barker -- two university presentations of "Scenes from an Execution" and now "The Possibilities." Over the same period universities in other cities have produced his work, but Barker rarely receives professional productions in America. What's more, he has been pretty well ignored in his homeland since the '80s, when there was a brief vogue for his plays among major troupes, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company. Today, Barker's dramas are regularly produced throughout mainland Europe but the playwright had to establish his own company, [The Wrestling School](#), to tour his plays in England.



Scene from the Whistler in the Dark Theatre production of "The Possibilities"

If Barker is so good, why isn't he staged here? Because his anarchistic moralism, conveyed through what he calls the "Theater of Catastrophe," challenges theatrical timidity. His plays are political and sexual, violent and unpredictable, chaotic and historical. Barker's casts are often huge and his language, in his words, "is as luscious and spiteful as love, of which it is an expression." His theater "takes as its first principle the idea that art is not digestible. Rather it is an irritant in the consciousness, like the grain of sand in the oyster's gut." I can vouch for that: I discovered Barker in 1988 with the RSC's staging of his play "The Bite of the Night," an epic phantasmagorical time warp in which a modern scholar meets Helen of Troy amid the barbarities of the Trojan War. I didn't always understand what was going on, but the production, whose central image was a flaming trash can into which were tossed severed limbs and guts, is cemented in my mind.

Given Barker's usual demands in terms of cast and audience concentration, "The Possibilities" is a modest endeavor. Seven performers enact ten

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parables that hinge on decisions that must be made -- by persecutors and persecuted -- in extreme, even horrific, circumstances. Some of the pieces take place during or after a war; others are set in an authoritarian society. Barker has been compared to Brecht, but the latter wants the audience to think its way to a common conclusion -- change is desirable and possible. Barker riles individuals into reaching their own tentative understandings of what they have seen. Unlike political dramatists, such as David Hare, Barker is not interested in delivering a message so much as messing with our minds, hoping to push them into new directions.

The debut production of the Whistler in the Dark Theatre sometimes settles into ham-handed student flailing -- Barker's intensity, the psychic meltdowns of his characters, come swaddled in actorish preciousness. Still, the staging is good enough to convey the dark beauty of Barker's vision. Like fellow Brit Edward Bond, Barker has fallen out of favor with the myopic theater establishment by remaining true to the ambiguous energies of the drama. May other companies have the courage to stage other Barker possibilities.

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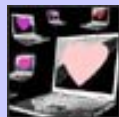


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