

Two Against Nature: Rehearsing and Performing Howard Barker's Production of his Play *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*¹

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The English dramatist/director Howard Barker has, through a unique combination of style, content, theoretical argument and mise-en-scène, persistently countered conventional presumptions and propositions of the supposedly 'natural' diminutions or 'inevitable' restrictions whereby one might think, feel, speak, act, love and exist. His work offers a purposefully anti-naturalistic expansion of vocabulary: of language, terms of experience, scenic and physical expression, and being. This article presents an actor's account of preparing and playing a role, under Barker's direction, in a two-hander play, and offers a reading of the play's strategic dynamics based on these experiences, and of the characters' uses of self-conscious performances in order to sustain and subvert artifice, with references to Greenblatt's theories of theatrical charisma and eroticism, and Baudrillard's theories of seduction.

Introduction: the enchanted world of erotic complicity

As Stephen Greenblatt reminds us: the theatre is 'a fraudulent institution that never pretends to be anything but fraudulent, an institution which calls forth what is not, that signifies absence, that transforms the literal into the metaphorical, that evacuates everything it represents'.² And Greenblatt characterizes Shakespeare's unique absorption of imaginative energy in terms of the 'representation of a self-undermining authority' and a concentration on the impact of strategies, so that characters may fleetingly but unforgivably reveal 'the emptiness in the world' around them.³ They do so by demonstrating 'a theatrical acquisition of charisma through the subversion of charisma', and in tragedies 'an acquisition of religious power through the evacuation of a religious ritual'.⁴ 'Charisma' is here used in the sense of an demonstrable awesomeness which breaks through the routine into the extraordinary, occluding conventional religious authority to invoke and command other sources of 'legitimacy, authority and sacredness'.⁵ However, in tragedy's rejection of values which a society claims to be fundamental, Greenblatt reminds us that 'the theatre elicits from us complicity rather than belief'.⁶ It asks: who wants the so-called truth of incontrovertible power and meanings, when one might have the game which plays with appearance and absolute meaning and which demonstrates their reversibility, the game centred on what Baudrillard calls 'the body in its passion separated from truth'⁷ which is at the centre of the domain of the dangerous theatre, where 'The seductive form prevails over the productive form'.⁸

Greenblatt also claims that 'Shakespeare's discovery... entailed above all the representation of the emergence of identity through the experience' of a Promethean 'erotic heat'⁹. Contrary to the conventional notion that sexual heat 'takes place internally, out of sight, in the privileged intimacy of the body', Shakespeare represents erotic heat through wordplay – 'indeed at moments the plays seem to imply that erotic friction *originates* in the wantonness of language and thus that the body itself is a tissue of metaphors or, conversely, that language is perfectly embodied'¹⁰ – and through scenarios in which conventional fulfilment encounters frictive obstacles and tantalising deferrals. My own favourite expression of this latter principle is that of the god Jupiter in *Cymbeline*: 'Whom best I love, I cross/To make my gift, the more delay'd, delighted.' This is intriguingly close to Baudrillard's vision of 'seduction as an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance';¹¹ 'The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends';¹² 'It is a circular, reversible process of challenges, oneupmanship and death'.¹³

Charles Lamb has noted how Baudrillard's reflections on seduction offer 'a way of describing the world that focuses on elements which 'rational' social discourses marginalise or suppress'; and established how his theories are pertinent to Howard Barker's plays, in which self-consciously performative characters often play 'teacher and pupil' in a duel 'where the participants attempt to drive each other mad',¹⁴ as part of an investigative, and frequently erotic, exploration beyond the realms of social normality. These ideas provide a particularly apt foundation to develop in relation to Barker's *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, a play written in 1998 which received its English-language premiere¹⁵ directed by the author in Dublin in 2001, followed by other Irish and Welsh performances in 2002. The play depicts the first meeting of Isonzo, a very old man (avowedly one hundred years old), and his prospective twelfth bride, Tenna, a very young woman (avowedly seventeen): and both proclaim themselves completely blind. Their probing, challenging, enticing and dramatic self-fashioning in relation to each other must therefore be conducted, not through sight, but through words and other ritualized forms of sensed proximity. Like other Barker plays such as *Women Beware Women*, *The Europeans*, *The Last Supper*, (*Uncle*) *Vanya* and *Gertrude*, *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* depicts a man and a woman in the sexual heat of an erotic *duel*, which is also a *dual* or joint project to defy the conventionally socialized prospects of the world.

This particular play initially shows Tenna awaiting the first arrival of her betrothed, with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. Isonzo initiates a series of tests and mutual challenges: he details his own history of sexual encounters; he physically deceives her as to his whereabouts, but also becomes distraught when he thinks she may have suffered a fatal asthma attack; he delineates his aesthetics of women's garments and the process of undressing, insisting that Tenna remove her underwear, and later discard her bridal dress for him to 'see' or sense her nakedness. She deceives him in return; their mutual challenge is a poeticizing friction through which they keep correcting their inventions of alternative possibilities. She artfully pretends and delays her self-disclosure; but when she decides to comply, he tells her that he is 'not blind', but that his sense of eroticism depends on elaborated description and proximity in preference to conventional

sexual consummation. She feels humiliated and outraged, but talks her way through to her own appreciation of his perspective, in ways that elicit his delight, but then his disappointment. Suddenly, Isonzo falls dead or dying; Tenna pursues a sense of her self-dramatization as a 'widow' struggling to incorporate the legacy of her experiences with Isonzo, a dramatization which he (as a prone and possibly posthumous presence) continues to interrupt, undercut, subvert and instruct, until she exits the room, drawn by the sound of church bells.

The play was staged in a co-production between my own Lurking Truth/Gwir sy'n Llechu Theatre Company, Íomhá Ildánach and the Irish Touring Company.¹⁶ At the start of rehearsals I was first introduced to Antoinette Walsh, the Irish actress Barker had selected to play Tenna following auditions in Dublin.

Approaching the text: circumventing reality

Our rehearsals began with a strategically concentrated series of readings of the script, with Barker monitoring and correcting the breathing and energy patterns in our intonations of the lines, and the physical and imaginative locations of crucially specific words. For example, the unpunctuated sections of the text were to be rendered, not literally without pause for breath, but rather as being animated by a single specific conceptual engine of excitement; the bold sections of the text being foregrounded, not by additional volume, but by a differing quality of intentness (I personally find Kristin Linklater's exercises in her book *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*¹⁷ the most useful means to locate physically, then distinguish, infuse and channel the energies of specific words and phrases with the precision required by Barker's drama). Antoinette and I prepared for daily work by experimenting with physical games, such as manipulating each other's movements through imaginary hooks placed in specific parts of the anatomy, and blind man's bluff. The latter was particularly useful: I do not usually have a strongly developed sense of smell, but I learnt to detect whilst blindfolded Antoinette's physical presence by the trail of her perfume, and to distinguish gradations in that scent in different contexts of work. The initial concentration on vocal work around the table had the (doubtless strategic) effect of making us hungry to physicalize the play in some form of initial, provisional movement. When we embarked on this on the third afternoon of rehearsal, we opted to work in dark glasses. Having encountered and refined the intensity with which we could deliver specific lines directly to each other, the dark glasses provided a 'mask' of character behind which we could push for further vocal and physical intensity; moreover, the dark glasses gave us the opportunity to experiment with playing literally blind (our eyes closed behind the glasses) in order to concentrate on appropriately precise and forceful animation of language and also to develop an authentic basis to inform a physical choreography between two blind characters. The most enigmatic moment came when Barker asked me if I thought Isonzo was truly blind. I had presumed not; he says 'I'm not blind/I merely shut my eyes' when Tenna finally capitulates to his insistence that she undress, and he briefly removes his glasses. Barker replied that his ability to see was one possibility; but so was the scenario in which he was truly blind, and claiming sight in order to compound strategically her sense of exposure and confusion. This comment necessarily exploded my sense of my character's possibilities.

Our physical choreography developed through particularly precise attention to balance: its placing and loss. Tenna and Isonzo contact each other almost exclusively through words (in our first run of performances, their only physical contact was her slap to his face). Antoinette's training in professional ballet assisted her achievement and invention of some arresting transitions into compelling attitudes of transfixion and strenuous yearning, which Barker composed or montaged meticulously. My own challenge was to develop an unnatural contortion of the body, suggesting great age and infirmity had rendered Isonzo's physicality to be so restricted as to be described by Tenna (appreciatively) as residual; nevertheless, I had to be able to respond to verbal and sartorial details with an unnerving speed and agility. Again, Barker challenged me to explore and extend my previous limits of physical balance, so the spatial relationships between us often aimed for a dance-like delicacy and synchronicity within the overall pictorial frame of a resonant metal set. This set visually evoked a harshly predatory entrapment and audibly resonated to our every movement, however minute: through sight, sound and touch, it emphasized the cruelty of the play.

Isonzo is spiritually animated by a project: '*if the world is poor, you have to reinvent the world*'¹⁸ by frustrating conventional dynamics; he knows this, and Tenna has an inkling of it. Isonzo, for all of his advanced age, is still searching: his anger can come out of the sheer delicacy of what he is trying to reach, his laughter can issue from his enjoyment of pedagogical triumph over Tenna, the pupil whom he is attempting to induct into the project. Tenna is deliberately pushing herself into an area she does not know, and is thus more daring than the norm (or the conventional presumptions of the audience, who should nevertheless be drawn into the astonishing demands of this joint ordeal by odyssey, compelled even as they are forced to reflect '*I never thought I could feel or believe that*'¹⁹). Isonzo is attracted by what she will later recognize, proclaim and verbally flourish as her 'infinite capacity for abstraction'. He is undertaking a desperate attempt to resist the limitations of conventional sexual 'nature' through artificiality, sensing something beyond the purported end-stop of sexual 'climax', namely the possibility of a sublime infinite prolongation. He wants to achieve the power of sexual domination without the banality of the act of intercourse (the limitation of sex to intercourse, or even of eroticism to sex, being a misapprehension, if one characterizes sex as 'part of the happiness racket'²⁰). Similarly in *The Europeans*, Katrin and Starhemberg undress and describe themselves and each other but do not touch; their contact is through gaze and words, refined and developed, poetically and politically, into caresses of imagination ('politically' in that this represents a joint dislocation and unlocking from, and resistance of, received socialized aesthetics and state ideals of gratification and order). Isonzo is also proposing an erotic ordeal based on looking and speaking, '*resisting the body to keep it in a state of tension, thereby defying and teasing Mother Nature by resisting her terms; shamelessness is the method, the end is spiritual*'²¹. Like Lvov in Barker's *The Last Supper*, Isonzo is looking for the perfect handmaiden – to help him to die, although neither he nor Tenna are aware of this ultimate objective. Isonzo is a 'collector' of women,²² a seducer in the familiar sense of a man compelled to besiege sexually a succession of women; for him, marriage has been the ritual execution of a form that consumes its subjects (taking on what Baudrillard calls 'the aesthetic form of a work of art and the ritual form of a crime'²³). However, in this instance the exercise becomes mythical and demands sacrifice,

not just of Tenna, but also of Isonzo himself. The play depicts a seduction in Baudrillard's sense of the process: a mutually enveloping and dislocating imaginative vertigo. When Isonzo has tried to crack the resistance of his previous wives, they have all withdrawn from him at some stage of his project, and withdrawn into conventional objections, values and demands. However, the further Tenna responds to the punishment of his imaginative trials the way she does, the further Isonzo adores her. When her will does not falter, his does (and on some level wants to, though '*the pain of this is manifest*'²⁴), in seeking closure; it is possible that she will continue their search further, with other men ('*probably in vain*'²⁵).

The process of the play: creating a labyrinth in which to lose oneself

If sex has a *natural law*, a pleasure principle, then seduction consists in denying that principle and replacing it with a rule, the *arbitrary* rule of a game. In this sense, seduction is *perverse*. The immorality of perversion, like that of seduction, does not come from abandoning oneself to the joys of sex in opposition to all morality; it results from something more serious and subtle, the abandonment of sex itself as a referent and a morality, even its 'joys'.
Baudrillard, *Seduction*²⁶

The process of the play is marked by a tense determination, a momentous commitment and desperation within the gamesmanship, with the characters self-consciously aware, and suggesting to the audience, that '*the process begins now; we don't leave until we've gone through it and beyond*'.²⁷

Barker directed Tenna to enter, audibly tapping her white stick to find her seat, and then to break her stick across her knee, discarding it with an amplified crash, signalling her irrevocable commitment to the here and now of her first meeting with Isonzo, divesting herself of pragmatic assistance to independent social orientation as if in artful foreshadowing of the discarding of her clothes. She then embarks on a list of her own existential transgressions in order to challenge the audience's presumptions and status. In the posture of exposition and confession, this young, beautiful and potentially pitiful woman proudly proclaims her defiant commitment to something more challenging than 'normal' sexual preferences, aesthetics and sensibility. She is dedicating herself to a man who is very old, humourless and painfully devoid of irony. She is insistent on her unregenerate infringement of social codes (she proclaims 'I am a winter' – not spring or summer – 'of anticipation') and provocatively pleased with herself at having vaulted conventions to live an adventurous life of existential danger. However, she is not merely



FIG. 1 Antoinette Walsh as Tenna awaits the arrival of Isonzo.

smug or petulant in her contempt for conventional habit, fiction and relief. For the audience, as for Isonzo, she is mesmeric in her visible effort to be unforgivably decided and particular in her embracing the initiatory role of 'bride'. Tenna determines to break through the routine into the extraordinary, evacuating the conventional religious authority associated with marriage to invoke and command more transgressive sources of authority and sacredness. Tenna's assumption of the role of bride is itself seductive; it is a choice of means whereby she might '*die as reality and reconstitute [herself] as illusion*'.²⁸

The gothically ominous sounds of Isonzo's approach may evoke associations of Bluebeard or *La Belle et la Bête*, which are subverted by his narcissistic belief in his own 'Beauty'. Isonzo redesignates age and blindness as not obstructions but aids to concentrated acuteness of perception and appreciation; he is delighted that 'We are so different' (rather than 'we have so much in common', as is the sentimental ideal). He scrutinises the paradoxes of Tenna's alluring apparel. Then, whilst expressing awe at her longed-for proximity, he shatters the impulse to contact by flinging down his sticks. Tenna rightly interprets this as a ruse, and a test; Isonzo joins in her laughter, pleased by her unsentimental perceptiveness. He may even be intrigued by her adolescent relish of Gothic fantasies whereby men, boys and women crawl abjectly towards her, but he resists her superiority in offering to collect his sticks. Isonzo knows this gesture of pity to be a condescending infliction, and turns the tables again: 'I don't require the sticks/They were an affectation', designed to lend him a 'Peculiar/Authority'. He begins to instruct her in the strategic reversibility of every thing, where notions of authenticity can be subverted and trumped by poetic artificiality, a superior achievement in which he implicates her: '**Our passion never was susceptible to truth.**' Whilst she falteringly avows that 'dissimulation is . . . My . . . Ecstasy', Isonzo enjoys a wicked demonstration of his own superiority: he only pretends to obey her in collecting his sticks. Tenna alluringly proclaims her will to subordinate herself to his superior invention: 'Lie if you wish to.'

Isonzo then adds a further refinement of his status as unfathomable sexual connoisseur by claiming that appeals to odour, sight and touch have been surpassed by 'the rumour', the activation of the imaginative speculation. Tenna performs innocence and self-abasement; Isonzo keeps up the pressure with a further test, tricking her into thinking him 'dead or dying' by issuing a series of unearthly noises; Tenna is distraught that he has not touched her, nor 'Consummated/In any form as yet'. Isonzo claims the right to surprise her repeatedly, both physically (as when he unexpectedly divulges his location by craning forward and resting his chin in her hand) and imaginatively (in his enticing but menacing assurance that 'There'll be a form'). However, Tenna adeptly challenges Isonzo on a detail of his wartime reverie. He insists on the inescapable, irredeemable horror of his wartime experiences, whilst claiming the right to aesthetic fabrication, unravelling the baroque image of Truth as a malicious serpent: a harshly compelling performance by Isonzo which proclaims a fierce and determined pride at refining an aesthetic of lying and artifice to keep the truth at bay. He unpredictably moves to another refinement, commanding 'Describe your pants.' Tenna grasps that he wants her to develop his relish of the jointly embroidered narrative, and they share the discovery and development of a delicious intricacy in the conjured epiphany of the lingerie



FIG. 2 David Ian Rabey as Isonzo enters the space, on sticks.

department. This section demonstrates Isonzo's refutation of the so-called 'deeper order' of sexuality and substitution of 'the charm and illusion of appearances . . . not in the least frivolous, but occasions for a game and its stakes, and a passion for deviation'.²⁹ When Tenna breaks the mood by laughing, Isonzo angrily snaps back to

his role and status as pedagogical instructor, claiming a delicacy which involves physical nausea at inappropriate details. When Tenna finds a ludicrousness in a blind man's valorization of colour, Isonzo ripostes with an eccentrically philosophical investigation of the situation which impressively insists on the importance of the 'frail poems . . . She draws over her hips', and persuades Tenna to remove them. Again, but this time inadvertently, she breaks the mood, and is abject: Isonzo threatens her with his ability to take back his love from those unworthy of it; but then reconstructs the moment as a performance of his own 'agonised devotion'. She starts at his word 'gaze': hastily, he recharacterizes the word as a sensitivity not limited to the merely visual, but his skill in conjuring surprising metaphors is severely tested. Isonzo reiterates his frustration at Tenna's demanding and uninventive predecessors who lapsed into a literal and mean-minded dependence on 'truth': this begins another rhetorical trajectory to persuade her that her bra 'must also be/Unhooked' and her shoe replaced. Tenna voices her terrified veneration, only to be shocked and alarmed by the deftness with which he replaces her shoe.

Now she surprises him, by launching into an intense performance of a soliloquy which feverishly anticipates sexual consummation. The soliloquy alternates between locating the sex act in pictorial domesticity (lawn and summerhouse) and sordid urgency (gravel pit and railway yard), but demonstrates a rapaciousness for both sexual and aesthetic triumph which silences him briefly. But he insists that the sensation of yearning is precisely what should be cultivated and extrapolated:

TENNA: . . . **I ache to be**

ISONZO: Ache

(She lifts her hands in a gesture of pain)

As for the bra

TENNA: I am not wearing one *(Pause)*

ISONZO: Feel free to cross your legs.³⁰

Challenging his deferral, Tenna indignantly unfurls her own (possibly fabricated) sexual history; he hungers for evidence of the spiritual poverty of his predecessors, and she delights him by acknowledging the performative and fictionalizing aspects of such itemizations. The following utterance may represent their most perfect equilibrium of mutual respect:

ISONZO: Did

Ever

Anyone

Place more of their life's hope in this one act

Than

You? *(Pause)*

TENNA: Only you *(Pause)*

ISONZO: Only me *(Pause)*



FIG. 3 'Extend your foot': Isonzo replaces Tenna's shoe.

His admiration of her impels him into a frenzy of impatience, '**Undress I have to see you naked**', even as he acknowledges 'What's bride but the apotheosis of delay' and halts her compliance to specify the correct sequence ('Shoes last'), rhapsodizing about the 'breaking and cascading seas' of the bridal finery from which she must emerge. Like Tenna, Isonzo locates the erotic charisma of the bride beyond social custom and religious authority: the bride can represent language as perfectly embodied, combining the promise of wantonness of utterance with a body which is simultaneously a tissue of metaphors. The momentousness of the hiatus induces a cardiac spasm in Isonzo, which he struggles to contain through metaphor, before she proceeds. Her teasing subterfuges comically stretch even his sense of deliberation to breaking point; she demonstrates 'Exquisite trickery' when she draws down a zip, then '*shakes her clothing without however exposing herself further*'. This combines, for characters, performers and audiences, a sense of game, and also the tension of potential disclosure within the game. Isonzo out-manoeuvres Tenna by his fantastic proposition that he can detect her refusal of nakedness by ear ('Blood flows faster in the naked obviously'). He is right to identify nakedness as anything but a neutral state when it occurs in the company of another: it is full of cultural shocks, trepidation and tension. The proposition that, on this basis, he can discern her state is far-fetched, but his metaphors triumph strategically where logic would not, particularly when they are rapidly succeeded by the correct deduction of her 'resentment' of his accuracy as well as her acknowledged fear. However, Tenna suffers an asthma attack, and Isonzo is pathetically scared that she has, like the other eleven wives, predeceased him. When she audibly recovers, Isonzo cuts short her explanation by a sudden insistence that she carry on undressing: his *performance* of lack of sympathetic concern is so extensive that it makes her laugh, momentarily freeing her from her own self-preoccupation. She accepts what he proposes as the inevitability of her nakedness and the 'relief' it might offer. Notwithstanding the '*tension*' which '*suffuses her*', she determines to play her part through to the hilt, and undresses.

However, the promised 'relief' is, characteristically within this play, neither given nor sought. Isonzo issues a '*terrible wail*' at how his blindness denies him the revelatory sight and the appreciative gaze. He affects a grief, a romanticization of her youth,³¹ and the posture of despairing sordid *roué* whose irredeemably jaded inspection she is spared. But then he makes his most surprising strategic reversal, removing his glasses and proclaiming 'I'm not blind'. In performance, this was the one occasion when I removed my dark glasses to reveal my eyes, but I kept them unfocussed and slightly crossed, suggesting a possible blindness in contradiction of Isonzo's words. Here and elsewhere in performance, I developed, with Barker's encouragement a sending of mixed but inconclusive messages as to whether or not Isonzo might be truly blind.³²

Triumphantly, Isonzo claims a charismatic transcendence of God, Paradise and Death in this worldly apotheosis of erotic revelation. However, Tenna is surprised when he does not respond to her invitation to him to kiss her arse. Breaking this posture of sacramental erotic entreaty, she fluctuates between fear of his desertion and a self-undermining sarcastic indifference (physicalized under Barker's direction by Tenna performing a stately but comic naked goose-step behind the bars of the set); she expresses anxiety and indignation at his 'Stretching the pleasures of anticipation to their breaking point', and disappointment in her unreciprocated abandon.³³ When she scrambles for

her dress, Isonzo insists that she 'Stay naked . . . Because I have to suffer you.' Isonzo repudiates the banality and limitations of conventional climax, the finality of a sex that exhausts itself in orgasm, preferring to extrapolate and refine the agony of yearning in a precarious but graceful balance. He also catches himself out through his chosen image, an echo of an earlier erotic occasion which propels him into recollection of nostalgic wonder and then disgust at the reductive sarcasm of a woman who found his insistent deceleration 'more than she could bear'. Isonzo rhetorically monumentalizes his own resistance to 'Mother Nature': the 'School Miss' whose authority he would defy and whose wrath he would compulsively provoke. This is a soliloquy of consciously, insanely Promethean self-fashioning. When Tenna deduces that none of his marriages were consummated, she is horrified at the extent of his labyrinthine abstraction, even as he is possessed by vengeful disappointment. However, Isonzo has not stopped *trying* to find a woman capable of receiving, elaborating and extending his concept of linguistic friction and erotic heat; even as he waited for them to fail, he has retained the hope that one exists (and she will; she will extinguish him, and he will die of her).

Isonzo demonstrates the viciousness of a wounded beast, lashing Tenna with the suggestion that her nakedness is only the '**Down payment on a deal**'. Tenna interprets his goal to be humiliation: she lashes back with the propositions that '**Rape is better . . . Appetite/Frankly/Is/Preferable**'. In our production, Isonzo cringed at her words, but in injured disappointment at her self-righteous misapprehension. His goal is **not** humiliation, but rather an unusual adoration: he may be bitterly if silently distraught when Tenna recoils into proclaiming a defiant kinship and solidarity with the 'broken women' she never knew and traditional, prescriptive notions of legitimacy, epitomized by her invocation 'Thank God': this is the ultimate rejection of his idiosyncratic project to distil a proud divinity with/in and through human sexuality. This point of the play represents the highest pitch of antagonism between Isonzo and Tenna.

A turning point occurs when Tenna realizes 'And now I sound like them': whether in 'Pleasure or complaint', she is expressing the same feelings and values as her eleven predecessors. Therefore, she says she failed '**The test I set myself**'. She recalls her initial determination to fly in the face of conventional sexual appetite, practice and aesthetic sensibility. She has wished to distinguish herself from Isonzo's previous wives and demonstrate them to be '**Sodden with conventionality**' in contrast to her own 'Infinite capacity for . . . Abstraction'. Isonzo listens to this transition with a growing sense of wonder, and rewards her recovery of pride in difference with further revelations from his always-surprising encyclopaedic sexuality. He explains that he is not a virgin, indeed was a frequent visitor of brothels and connoisseur of sexual detail in many countries and contexts, and that he is 'pole hard' in his erect longing for this new proudly transgressive Tenna. She is bewildered, but then appreciates that his project involves the extrapolation of the ache of sexual longing rather than summary of its satisfaction, a reductive diminution akin to the scratching of an itch. She realizes that their mutual 'contemplation' represents a joint triumph. In her exultation at vaulting '**the turbid pool of intimacy**', however, Tenna becomes indiscriminate and reductive about her own nakedness: 'It's being without . . . Clothes'. For Isonzo, however, nakedness is of sublime importance, and he, disenchanted, checks her self-satisfaction with the statement: 'They

all said that'. Tenna is outraged. Isonzo tries to draw her from her retreat into petulance with a compliment, that the others said it 'In less exquisite words', and by presenting his precise identification and vision of 'The agony of age': that every door opened reveals something '**Precisely the same**'. Barker directed me to be exasperated but contemplative in my delivery of this speech; Isonzo should still include Tenna, rather than retreat into a soliloquy; he is still working to draw her in and educate her, not just **describing** but **teaching** his distinctive sense of melancholy. He further compliments her, that one of her sensibility is likely to have sensed already that the world is not rich enough. Tenna grasps his argument: this sense of graduation into a new imaginative level is developed by her initiative 'I'll kneel on you'³⁴, suggesting that she will release him from life into death. 'Her triumph challenges him to go where he has to go, to die; she tells him *'I'm a suitable way to die – are you up to dying? Are you ready to go through that door?'*³⁵

Her acquisition and playing with the word 'prone', as a poetic substitute for 'dead', demonstrates the linguistic refinement which Isonzo appreciates, but even he struggles against acknowledging the full import of the word: when Tenna insists that as he does so, he '*goes down like a dropped sack*', faints and, according to Barker, dies.³⁶ The rest of the play is a posthumous dialogue of Tenna and Isonzo's imaginative challenges to, and claims on, each other, played out in a different form of emotional reality. This transition was suggested in production by a sound cue of a choral note and the fall, from the wings, of a piece of black material (termed 'the widow's weeds' in production). Tenna used this cloth to adorn her naked body,³⁷ as she narrates and performs '*a scene Isonzo would like to watch but can't*',³⁸ her apotheosis in another form of ritualized and paradoxical erotic allure: the widow in mourning at her husband's funeral. This is conventionally a view of the bride that all husbands are denied, and Tenna taunts him with the loss of this new phase of her eroticism, whereby she compulsively challenges men to console her sexually and beat back mortality in the defiant sexual quickening which often follows a bereavement. Antoinette memorably performed this poetic aria by reaching forwards and upwards in breath, pitch and tone in a rhythm which reflected the release from breathless yearning into sexual abandon on the phrase 'her cry made rooks lift off', only to slam downwards in harsher tone and downward intonation '**Rage/Rage at your loss.**' Even now, Isonzo refuses to be outdone; he undercuts her performance by claiming his own enactment of the same scenario as the male partner to a widow in Lisbon. This sexual encounter is a formative revelation for him: the spirit of frantic conspiracy led him to unhelpful impatience and fumbling until the widow emphasized the pleasures and importance of exploration. He anticipates how Tenna will attract male mourners in transgressive, but familiar, negotiations and compulsions. Tenna finds herself unexpectedly emotionally overwhelmed, and strives to support his (and her) sense of his uniqueness.³⁹ Isonzo insists on the incontrovertible '**sheerly/Ordinary/Nature** of all things' which she, at seventeen, is still to experience.⁴⁰ He orders her to 'Suffocate' him, in a final fatal kiss, performed 'With/[Her]/Arse'. He wants her to overcome his inadvertent spasms of resistance, and finally characterizes himself as 'An/Inquisitive/Child', who has demonstrated a strange innocence in his incessant explorations. '*Tenna seems poised to accede to Isonzo's request but stops suddenly*': despite the power of his intellectual argument, the '*cultural pull*' of the wedding bells, the sound of life, '*draws her magnetically*'.⁴¹ Isonzo is frustrated in his



FIG. 4 Tenna: 'Lie prone now' (a rehearsal photograph, as are the others. In performance, Tenna would be naked at this point.)

bid for his 'aesthetic orgasm': however vehemently I performed the line, his desperate exasperation in the cry '**I'm on the threshold of oblivion**' frequently provoked audience laughter, which was astonished but not unsympathetic. Tenna denies him this ('*Why satisfy the weak?*'⁴²), not only out of the insistent splendour of her own vanity ('**A bride must be observed**'), but also out of recognition that '*In asking for completion, he's breaking his own rules; in wanting perfect closure, he is betraying his own system of deferral and abstraction*'.⁴³ When she collides with the objects and boundaries of the room, Tenna is '*surprised but not horrified*'⁴⁴ by the bathos of her nosebleed; and whilst the printed script (in Barker's *Collected Plays 5*, London: Calder, 2001) might suggest that she is too contaminated by his pessimism to escape the room, literally or metaphorically, in

rehearsal Barker decided to direct the ending so that Tenna persisted, despite collisions with the chair and walls of Isonzo's room, and finally escaped from the room, albeit bruised and bleeding (Antoinette devised some horrific looking and sounding collisions with the sharp and rusty metallic set which she nevertheless managed to execute without major injury). Sound and lights faded on Isonzo, kicking his legs against the metal set, winding down in the darkness like a desperate but fading mechanical doll.

On reflection: beyond belief

Thus, *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* is a *pas de deux* through the incessant explorations of sexual enquiry, to the sporting aspects of death, suggesting that '*The only proper way to arrive at death is through having exhausted all possibilities*'.⁴⁵ As in other Barker work, the potential starkness and gloominess of the proposition, wherein Isonzo instructs Tenna in the elegance of melancholy and the 'agony of age', is offset by the characters' tightly-wound nimbleness of initiative and invention (even Isonzo's belief, that he is beyond belief, is challenged). Indeed, Isonzo and Tenna – like many other Barker characters – repeatedly attempt to dislocate and mesmerize each other into a self-destructive sense of purpose, and beyond. Barker emphasized that the characters should connect, even when rhapsodizing or being dismissive – their purpose and direction is always to have a seductive effect. They should also demonstrate a care for detail and its effect on the other, particularly in cruelty: Isonzo and Tenna have (like the audience) chosen to be in this space together, not been forced, and when under attack, they should be visibly emotionally moved, often with painful delicacy, as they move their rhetorical chess pieces to enjoy brief victories and suffer defeats, but also discover ways to push and expand jointly constructed imaginative initiatives. Isonzo's vulnerability as well as his authority must be apparent – as must hers. My less successful performances were those in which I was insufficiently precise to perform all three qualities, of being cruel, sexually excited and emotionally moved, equally. A loss of the sense of ordeal for Isonzo might reduce aspects of the play to a melodramatic demonstration of Tenna's ordeal. If I lost contact and delicacy in an essentially self-preoccupied bid for intensity, my performance degenerated into mere callousness and stridency, which threatened to unbalance the play by making Tenna seem merely pitiful. The sense that Tenna is caught in Isonzo's web must be complicated by manifestations of his own sense of the pain and poignance of what he instigates and provokes: such manifestations, when achieved, would draw in the audience, whilst the ubiquitous cruelty of the play's demands prevented any sentimentality in this engagement.

Our rehearsals gave us a rigorously precise 'score' and structure for performance, in which the technical challenge was for us to play for maximum contact and maximum nuance, hitting the beats and raising the energy of the line endings with consistent intensity. The instructional and initiatory aspects of Barker's direction aptly (deliberately?) paralleled both the Rule of Isonzo's game and Baudrillard's reading of Kierkegaard's process of seduction: 'an ascetic form of a spiritual, but also pedagogical ordeal: a sort of school of passion, a simultaneously erotic and ironic maieutics'.⁴⁶ Amongst other things, I found the play generated – and also, fortunately,

conducted – a rage at the inescapability of my own ageing and mortality. Its geography remains constantly internally surprising, and blackly incandescent in its development of a Promethean erotic heat beyond the limits of conventional fulfilments. The very artificiality of the play, when approached with the requisite spirit of fierce determination, propels the performer into the realm of the dangerous: like Baudrillard's vision of seduction, it is an uninterrupted ritual exchange in which the players constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends, and 'cannot end since the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible'.⁴⁷

NOTES

- 1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented on 29 June 2003, at the Wrestling School's first Summer School, 'Wrestling with Barker', 21–9 June 2003, at Stoke Rochford Hall, Grantham, with the gracious assistance of Melanie Jessop in reading extracts from the text.
- 2 Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 127.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 42.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 10.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 9 Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 88.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 11 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 21.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 14 Charles Lamb, *The Theatre of Howard Barker* (London: Routledge, 2005) pp. 2, 63.
- 15 A French-language translation of the play was staged prior to Barker's own production, in Saint-Breuc, 2000.
- 16 Barker's production of *Isonzo* was entirely funded from Ireland (after the Arts Council of Wales declined to support the project). This constituted Barker's first direction of the premiere of one of his works outside of his own company, the Wrestling School. It also featured the design work of Tomas Leipzig (set) and Billie Kaiser (costume), regular contributors to Wrestling School productions.
- 17 *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* (New York: TCG, 1992), particularly pp. 52–72.
- 18 Barker, in rehearsal, July 2001.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Barker, *Don't Exaggerate* (London: Calder, 1985), p. 23.
- 21 Barker, in rehearsal, July 2001.
- 22 Isonzo's predatory quality was reflected by one of Leipzig's design details: three white high-heeled shoes were suspended, in separate metal cages, above the rusty metal grill floor of the acting area.
- 23 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 100.
- 24 Barker, in rehearsal, July 2001.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 125.
- 27 Barker, in rehearsal, July 2001.
- 28 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 69.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 30 In our second rehearsal period, Barker directed Tenna to begin but then refuse the action of crossing her legs at this point, as an expression of fractiousness.

- 31 And Tenna's reply 'I'm seventeen' can be coquettish: though she is certainly younger than Isonzo, she may exaggerate her youth, and he may exaggerate his age, for the purposes of heightening, for a blind partner, the appeal of contrast between them.
- 32 In performance, his insistence 'I'm not blind . . . I merely shut my eyes' often provoked audible gasps from the audience – as did the second shock of the revelation of my unfocussed eyes.
- 33 Contrary to the stage direction '*He observes*', in our production Isonzo preferred to listen, only turning to her to insist she 'Stay naked.'
- 34 In performance, Antoinette's assured stateliness in naked movement in her approach towards Isonzo on this line was prefaced by her execution of a suggestion of mine, accepted by Barker, that she remove her hat and let down and tease out her hitherto tightly bound long hair, to signify Tenna's further transition.
- 35 Barker, in rehearsal.
- 36 There is a parallel with *Und* here, when Und finally reports her dying at the sight of the machine designed to exterminate her: the confrontation is itself fatal. There is a further parallel here with the last movement of Sarah Kane's play, *Blasted*, in which Kane definitely insisted that the character Ian literally 'dies', although the play extends into a dialogue of bleak but significant reconciliation between him and the woman he has abused. Kane described how her character Ian 'dies, and he finds that the thing he has ridiculed – life after death – really does exist. And that life is worse than where he was before. It really is hell' (in Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 64). Barker had previously featured characters who spoke posthumously, in *The Bite of the Night* and *Rome*, which may have influenced Kane.
- 37 Antoinette draped this long rectangle of black cloth around her neck, in a way which partly concealed her frontal nakedness but also seductively redramatized it.
- 38 Barker, in rehearsal.
- 39 In our second run of performances, this section was redirected to permit contact between the performers: on the line '**Always another me**' Tenna embraced the prone Isonzo, who caressed her cheek on the line 'At 17'.
- 40 If Tenna is not literally seventeen, then this is a final affectionate reconfirmation of her role-play.
- 41 Barker, in rehearsal.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 112.
- 47 Ibid., p. 22.

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