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Kipp, Lara

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
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Brides and Widows: Iconic Dress and Identity in Howard Barker's Costumes

University of Derby

ABSTRACT

One of the strongest recurring motifs in the work of contemporary British playwright Howard Barker is women's marital status: brides and widows abound in his work. Their status as such is often crucially configured, but also subverted through their costumes (in a Western cultural context). This paper considers the central role that brides and widows play in a variety of Barker's dramatic texts and identifies some core working principles with regard to his use of costume. It explores the notion of the iconic garment (cf. Hannah 2014) and its influence on these characters' identities. Drawing on aesthetic discourse, in particular that of the sublime, I analyse how Barker proposes a reconsideration of stable subject identity through these recognisable, yet ambiguous and unstable female figures.

KEYWORDS

costume

scenography

Howard Barker

iconic dress

The poetic, dramatic and directorial work of contemporary British playwright Howard Barker has received extensive academic attention; it is therefore somewhat surprising how little analysis has focussed on his scenographic endeavours. Since the late 1990s, Barker has provided detailed stage designs to be realised by technically trained Wrestling School Associates; in the early 2000s he expanded his conceptual specificity to costume, sound and lighting. It is the express aim here to analyse the ways in which Barker's costumes engage spectators' individual and collective imagination in a Western European cultural context whilst denying conclusive meaning-making. The ephemerality of costuming, animated as it is through the living body of the actor (cf. Monks, 2010, Barbieri, 2013, and Maclaurin/Monks, 2015), offers a very particular set of scenographic functions to the overall theatrical production: it creates bodies and – by extension – relations on stage; it attests to geographical location, historical period and to the status of its wearer. In addition to such semiotic markers, it functions phenomenologically, through colour, texture and materiality (Blau, 1999: 20-21). The study of costume, though developing rapidly, is still a 'nascent area of research' (Barbieri 2013: 282). As Barbieri details, it holds the potential to transcend semiotics and interrogate costume's dramaturgical and performative functions whilst acknowledging and actively engaging with materiality (2013: 282).

The analysis I present here serves to establish some core working principles of Barker's costume design as an example of scenographic practice that privileges uncertainty, layering and allusion, and actively foregrounds the performativity of identity through the material object of costume. I approach this analysis through the lens of aesthetics, in particular drawing on the discourse of the sublime as proposed by postmodern theorists such as Julia Kristeva (1982), Jean-François Lyotard (1989 and 1991) and more recently by David B. Johnson (2012), among others. Notably, Barker's own theoretical writings and those parts of the academic community focussed on his work share a certain vocabulary that is based in aesthetics, centring on ideas of the sublime and related terms. These include notions of infinity, indeterminacy, ambiguity, possibility and many concepts prefixed with "un": the un-speakable, un-representable, unconscious, un-knowable, and so on (cf. Rabey's discussion of this regarding Rudkin's work, 1997; Carney 2013; Rabey, Angel-Perez, and Dahl all 2013; among others). The discourse of the sublime therefore offers a suitable vocabulary for the discussion of Barker's scenography in general, but his use of costume in particular, as it addresses notions of subjectivity, identity and the limits of representation. These concepts, central to Barker's playwriting and the postmodern sublime (Johnson, 2012: 131), are distinctly at play in his use of costume, as I hope to demonstrate here. I engage in particular with the incongruent coding of Barker's onstage world through costumes that subvert the notion of stage space and costume as an immediately comprehensible visual sign-system, in which the different elements serve to support the audience's understanding of it. I furthermore draw on contemporary theories of costume and fashion as developed by scholars such as Herbert Blau (1999), Aoife Monks (2010), Donatella Barbieri (2013) and Dorita Hannah (2015). I use the play texts as well as archival materials of Wrestling School productions under Barker's direction to analyse how the playwright explores the expressivity and performative potential of costume, specifically that of brides and widows.

This article draws on aesthetic theory, in particular the discourse of the sublime, in analysing Barker's costume since it provides a well-established example of critical discourse that is coherent, rigorous, yet non-reductive in its discussion of the subject matter. Theories of

the sublime, from rhetorical device to descriptor of natural phenomena, and ultimately of human experience beyond reason, offer attempts at critical discursive engagement with an elusive, non-rational and experientially founded subject matter. Rachel Zuckert observes that ‘an object is sublime not independently of human beings but only insofar as it arouses human affective response’ (2012: 65) and proposes to consider it not as a ‘single, unified category’; instead she offers the possibility of ‘a pluralist and open-ended associative account of the sublime’ (2012: 74). As such, a postmodern understanding of the sublime as an experience that takes place beyond the limits of rational thought (Johnson 2012: 118) posits the object of aesthetic analysis (costume in this case) as an attempt to ‘evoke the unrepresentable in its presence to form, and not merely its absence from content’ (Johnson on Lyotard 2012: 122). The frequent references to boundaries and their transgression seek to approximate the necessary failure of immediate presentation, and instead engage in negative presentation (Johnson 2012: 123) of the inexpressible (Lyotard 1991: 93). The postmodern sublime as a concept that addresses both the material and immaterial, considers the relationship between the tangible, the conceptual and that which exceeds both, and foregrounds the experiential encounter with objects that point beyond themselves, is closely aligned to contemporary thought on the functions of costume. These include the interrogation of subject identity and its processual nature¹ through the ephemerality of costume and the body that it temporarily produces².

The 1998 Wrestling School production of *Ursula* offers the earliest example of Barker’s scenographic work, though costumes appear to have remained largely the province of Lucy Weller (where credits are recorded) until Billie Kaiser’s first appearance in 2000 with *He Stumbled*. It is important to note that Billie Kaiser, like Tomas Leipzig, Caroline Shentang and Eduardo Houth, are all aliases for Barker himself, and have appeared regularly in the programme credits since then. Though Barker was not directly involved in the costumes for *Ursula*, the particularity of the play’s characters, dominated by the nine identically attired ‘virgins’ (Barker 2008a: 85), and the climactic scene featuring Placida’s unusual wedding gown offer an early example of Barker’s visual imagination and the motif of brides, that is recurrent throughout his work dramatically and theoretically³. The play tells a reimagining of the myth of St. Ursula and the 11000 virgins, in which the title character travels with her fellow nuns and the charismatic Mother Superior, Placida, to her betrothed’s castle to reject his hand in marriage. It offers contemplations on truth, virginity, jealousy and sexuality through a large ensemble cast.

The uniformity of the nuns in different shades of white and off-white in the 1998 production⁴, with a carapace-like top layer, high-necked and without immediately visible fastenings suggested through its formality the ordered nature of the nuns’ everyday life from the outset, resulting in a sense of constriction, precision and subordination to rules. In juxtaposition to this, the close fit of the garments also hints at what lies beneath, suggesting

1 Or as Monks phrases it: ‘a series of practices that are ongoing’ (2010: 20).

2 This has been discussed by various scholars, including Monks (2010), Barbieri (2012) and Maclaurin and Monks (2015).

3 Brides and widows are central to other Barker plays, such as *The Fence in its Thousandth Year* (2005), *I Saw Myself* (2008b), and appear repeatedly in *The Forty (Few Words)* (2014).

4 <http://www.thewrestlingschool.co.uk/ursula.html>, accessed 15.09.2015 and artvideotv ‘Howard Barker: Ursula’ available at <https://youtu.be/BFDIbreNIYU> at 1:35, accessed 15.09.2015

from the very beginning the thematic challenges to order, purity and sexual abstinence that the play explores. Without high-quality video records showing the garments in movement, it is difficult to discern their particular materiality; however, photographic records seem to suggest a thicker and stiffer, material for the off-white vests in contrast to the softer, flowing materials of sleeves and skirts. One should note here that Barker very consciously engages with the different aspects of costuming, especially materiality:

HB: I want the actors to look beautiful, so when they move properly, the costume moves with them [...]. Actors are not ordinary people, on stage. Offstage they are very ordinary, but onstage they are not to be ordinary. That is why I insist they look very exciting, whether they are dressed or undressed. [...]

I like wool on men and women. If you can't get wool, make it look like wool, because wool hangs properly. It's not light, it doesn't flap around [...] especially on a woman who walks well, like Victoria [Wicks] does, [...] you get that movement of the body and it is tremendous. That is what clothing should do, I think, it should enhance the body.

[...]

I try to break down, or maybe rather enhance the traditional shape of men's clothes. To remove them from a specific time period. [...] The trousers are nearly always very full. I don't like men's trousers to be tight; then again, the trouser material should move with their bodies. In that way my designs are not dissimilar for the two genders.⁵

These principles are already apparent in The Wrestling School's production of *Ursula*. The formality and seeming historicity of the costumes concentrates the audience's attention on the action of the play, as time and place are established as "not here, not now", precluding any instinct for immediate, concrete relation to individual spectators' personal lives. As such, there is a dual activation of distancing, by being unlike real, everyday life, and a pulling in through a recognisably Western European cultural aesthetic.

In *Ursula*, the vertical shoulder seams and stiff-looking high collars on the nuns are reminiscent of fencing vests due to their slightly padded appearance and visible vertical parallel seams (Figure 1). This lent the virgins' appearance a more martial aspect in addition to the immediate association of white with purity and innocence. The arrival of 'a vagrant' (Barker 2008a: 85), Leonora, in 'ragged dresses' (92) disturbs the neatly attired ranks of the virgins.

⁵ Private interview extracts reproduced with kind permission of Howard Barker.



Figure 1: Claire Price (Ursula) and Jules Melvin (Leonora) (l-r) in *Ursula* (The Wrestling School, 1998). © Stephen Vaughan.

The notion of nuns as Christ's brides that is referenced repeatedly in the play (Barker 2008a: 104, 120, 163) is also reflected in the shades of white in their attire. All the more in contrast is then the 'bridal gown of scarlet' (2008a: 163) that Placida wears at the end of the play, colour-coded for passion, blood and revolution (Butler-Greenfield 2006: 253 ff.). She resolutely refuses the myth of the virgin bride (Barker, 2008a: 162), instead embracing and openly displaying her sexuality. The beginnings of this are already apparent in the frivolity of Placida's 'little hat' (148) that singles her out among the nuns upon arrival at their destination; notably though, the Wrestling School's production appears to have costumed all the nuns in simple hats and capes⁶. However, Placida's hat, a small curvette, clearly served more as a fashion statement than practical head covering, indicating a deviation and possible attachment to worldly values of attractiveness. This suggested worldliness is in stark contrast to the unadorned modesty of the virgins' loose hair (137; see also Figure 1 above) and, in production, their large, rather shapeless wide-brimmed hats. In this case, concealment or cover of the head speaks of a conscious construction of self-image and consequently of vanity (153).

Placida's bridal gown in the 1998 production consisted of a tight corset of a shining material, like leather, and a sleek sheath skirt, low on the hips (Figure 3). In combination with a high choker with straps on her neck, this attire highlighted and shaped actress Victoria Wicks's bodily contours⁷. This extreme movement away from pious modesty becomes, as Trigg explores in her work on costume and gender, a process of '[u]nfolding the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage' (2014: 128). Placida stages herself and her newfound

6 cf. <http://www.thewrestlingschool.co.uk/ursula.html>, accessed 15.09.2015

7 The effect of different necklines on perception of the body has been discussed in great detail by Koda (2001: 20), which I point the reader towards should they desire more in-depth analysis on the matter.

sexuality and harnesses ‘the seductive power of the image’ in which the ‘construction of the image is, at the same time, the construction of the body’ (Calefato in Trigg 2014: 130). Here this body is sexual, female and fecund, a repudiation of the values of the convent. The figure of the bride in *Ursula* is therefore a challenge to traditional conceptions of the role with the accompanying associations of ideal matrimony. Placida stages her bridal self as self-determined, sensual and sexual; she may lift the sword to kill the virgins where Lucas may not (Barker 2008a: 163) and he stumbles in the wake of her radical literal and figurative self-fashioning as a terrible and seductive bride.



Figure 2: Victoria Wicks (Placida) in *Ursula* (The Wrestling School, 1998). © Stephen Vaughan.

This subversion of the image of the innocent, virginal, blushing bride is similarly at play in *Gertrude – The Cry*, though it is heightened and complicated by Gertrude’s simultaneous status as widow. In this re-writing of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the queen witnesses her husband’s murder, and unapologetically and relentlessly pursues her personal desires in spite of social conventions. The intensity of her passions is such that it drives the men around her to ever more extreme actions in a bid to possess or control her. Their failures to do so have disastrous consequences for the kingdom and themselves.

In *Gertrude – The Cry* the titular character's attire is crucial⁸: it is openly referenced by other characters, but Gertrude herself also engages with it consciously. Her particular clothes are not specified at the beginning of the play, but since she tears them off after a few lines (Barker 2006: 83), it is her nakedness that becomes a performative expression of body and self before she is 'enclosed in the gown' (89) that her servant Cascan brings. The next time we see her, she is 'in mourning' (88), though the severity of her appearance is not entirely within social propriety; after all her 'skirt says everything to those who can read skirts' (92). The script suggests a skirt at below knee-length; however cut and fabric may highlight bodily contours and highlight sensuality through material. The ways in which costume may engage contradictory semiotic content here draws attention to the layering of roles Gertrude unifies in her person: queen, widow, lover and woman. The body personal and the body politic collide and demand a curious double vision of the audience in which they are confronted with both/and: the simultaneous appearance of multiple identities that are grounded in, yet also destabilized through costume.

As Monks discusses (2010), the distinction between the body and its costume is one that is ambiguous: after all, it is the body that animates the clothes, but it is the clothes that shape the body (3). This shaping is both visual and external regarding the spectators' interpretation, and physical and internal in its tangible effects on the wearer. Barker consciously harnesses these performative qualities and thus engages costume dramaturgically: the characters' appearance is as integral to the dramatic plot as it is to the visual appearance of the scenography on stage. One might argue that the characters on Barker's stages, especially the women, become all surface, inscribed with social function through immediately recognisable attire. However, this 'displacement of subjectivity' (Blau 1999: 105) does not equate to its disappearance: instead, Barker's brides and widows play with the roles they are placed in, constructing sequential iterations of self with the same ease with which they change into one *haute couture*-style outfit after another.

Gertrude for example consciously engages with her status as newly widowed bride; however she refuses to properly uphold sartorial markers of her positions. Throughout the play, she toes the line of socially appropriate attire, consequently 'what is on the outside surface as appearance is juxtaposed with what is beneath as potential disruption' (Hannah 2014: 23; in describing *Tongues of Stone*). This principle of a fundamental tension between the surface and the depths, the outward impression and the contrasting actuality of characters in Barker's work, is supported by the mutability of their appearance in costumes that facilitate their play with and subversion of social norms and expectations. Gertrude explicitly refuses the neat compartmentalisation of either/or, instead holding on to both/and in an affirmation of cumulative personal history and simultaneity. She is not restricted to the conceptual boundaries of her surface appearance; instead the multiplicities of self that sit alongside one another in her costuming offer a coexistence of potentially conflicting concepts. The layering of roles and selves that appear out of her multiple incongruent appearances offers an immense excess of sensory and conceptual content that demands an imaginative and experiential engagement on the audience's part. In consciously positioning herself both beyond, and between, distinct, socially recognisable categories, the conception of self that Gertrude presents through costume

⁸ as is her nakedness; the importance of nakedness as a dramaturgical and scenographic device in Barker's work warrants its own detailed analysis at another point

extends the destabilisation of boundaries from the tangible, spatio-temporal to the intangible, conceptual. It does this in terms of the active reshaping of the body through clothes and the concurrent process of restructuring its edges as well as through the construction and interrogation of the notion of subject identity contained in this reshaping and restructuring. The instability of boundaries of body and self that are thus highlighted bring to mind Kristeva's writing on the abject and the sublime: 'when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first' (1982: 141). The destabilisation of social narratives regarding proper behaviour (of a widow, a queen, a mother, a bride) that we see play out across Gertrude's radically self-determined body thus situate her in the realm of the postmodern sublime.

Such a conscious performance, and subsequent subversion, of a particular role through socially recognisable dress is also a key element in the next example, *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*. The titular character in this case is the eleven-time widowed, ancient and (possibly) blind man Isonzo who meets his latest bride-to-be, Tenna. The play charts their first meeting as they seek to test out each other's resolve and gauge their mutual suitability as spouses. The opening stage directions specify 'a blind bride seated' (Barker 2012: 55), an exposition which – in order to be recognisable to the spectators as such – in all likelihood has to be achieved through costuming. Tenna's state as bride in the 2001 production was established through a Billie Kaiser design: a cream-coloured vinyl corset top with twisted straps and a full tea-length skirt of multiple tulle layers. This was complemented by short white gloves and a round white hat with a white satin band, perched on a large chignon at the back of her head. Immediately, the colour symbolisms of bridal attire – purity, virginity, innocence – were at play, despite the distinct lack of other common markers, such as a veil. Furthermore, the contrasting textures of the corseted top – stiff, largely unyielding, sleek and certainly not a common fabric in bridal attire – and the tulle skirt – soft, light, buoyant, commonly and commercially used in bridal wear – enabled an interesting tension: though recognisably a bride, Tenna was also immediately identified as an unusual one, not just by virtue of her sightlessness. Additionally, the particularities of Tenna's appearance refused a conclusive identification of geographical location and time period, whether historical or contemporary.

Before Isonzo's entrance, Tenna speculates about the function of her own matrimonial state: 'THE BRIDE WHAT IS SHE SOME WOULD SAY THE GROTESQUE RELIC OF ARCHAIC PRACTICES A TESTAMENT TO MANKIND'S REVERENCE FOR SYMBOLS' (56). Tenna embraces this symbolism, though in the play the characters' appearance is arguably for the benefit of the audience, as both she and Isonzo are blind and consequently 'make no distinction any more between the surface and the depths' (58). This brings to mind the 'dissolution of all distinctions' (Guyer 2012: 116) that Nietzsche considered conditional to the sublime as 'experience of the dissolution of rationality' (116) which follows the breakdown of concepts that usually exist by virtue of definition against one another (inside is "not outside", and vice versa). It therefore once more becomes a question of both/and rather than either/or resulting in a coexistence of potentially contradictory concepts.

In this transcendence of distinct categorisation, the materiality of costume and the performing body features centrally. Tenna masterfully conjures the sensation of tactile engagement with her clothes, for example when she describes her quest for the perfect undergarment: 'The Heaven of Unworn Underwear/ [...] pools of petals/ Scented/ Cool/ [...] I

sifted for you one solitary and weightless pair' (72). These allusions to physical sensations, even to a sense of smell, expand the visual appearance of the characters; their costumes become markers that attest to these other, invisible, qualities and thereby draw the audience's attention to the instability of visual and conceptual boundaries. Despite this ostensible relegation of visuals in favour of other senses, Isonzo nonetheless insists on the importance of Tenna's undergarments' appearance, in particular regarding colour: 'SHELL PINK/ OR/ IVORY [...] GOD HELP YOU IF THEY'RE BLUE' (73). This 'unexpected/ [...] /unpredicted/ [...] agony of colour' (76) may be considered with regard to the intimate relationship between clothing and its body and by extension between body and subject identity. Hann and Bech consider it thus: 'costume as *object* is complicit within the body as *event*. The two constitute a reciprocal performance' (2014: 5). In order for their impending wedding to fully constitute that specific rite of passage, Isonzo's and Tenna's appearance must be in accordance with social expectations regarding their respective performances as bride and groom. The tension between the dismissal of visual appearance on the one hand, and the insistence on its crucial importance on the other, indicate a deep uncertainty regarding the reliability of such seemingly stable markers of identity.

In *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, Tenna's recognisable appearance as bride through the iconic white dress highlights 'the experience of the costume as a provocative sign-object' (Fensham 2014: 57): it carries with it expectations of particular behaviours; both Tenna and Isonzo refute these repeatedly over the course of the play. The costumed body of the bride in this play is therefore a visual smoke screen that generates the potential for surprising and unexpected actions to take place on stage (e.g. the sudden, apparent demise of the groom; Barker 2012: 105). In the words of Hannah, costume appears as a 'spatial body-object, disrupting and charging social environments to reveal their "evental" nature: calling up monumental moments [and] productive aesthetic encounters' (2014: 15). This is also apparent at the very end of *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*, in which Tenna, an unwed bride, simultaneously appears as already widowed in a strange doubling of roles.

This particular play offers a deeply complex engagement with the conception of self through clothing: on the one hand, the primacy of visual content on stage is relegated through the characters' blindness; on the other hand it highlights the non-visual aspects which foreground the relationship between costume and its wearer, between object and the subject. It further draws attention to the constructed nature of subjectivity by way of the object, which, in the case of costume, does not sit separately from the subject, but in fact alongside it, an integral part of its construction. This deliberate and sustained attention on the unstable boundaries of the performing body offers an immediate connection to postmodern theories of the sublime that prioritise instability, placelessness and proliferation of possible meanings (cf. Lyotard 1991: 33, 186-187 and Johnson 2012: 130-131). Interestingly, Kristeva asserts that the unstable subject/object dichotomy – which I here identify in terms of costume – only holds together by visual means, through representation (1982: 46). The dramaturgical deployment of costume in Barker's playwriting, and in its realisation on stage, plays with the limits of representation through the seeming adherence to cultural visual coding that is deliberately incomplete and often incongruent with characters' behaviour.

The next play I discuss here, *Dead Hands*, presents an excellent example of such incongruent visual coding. It follows two brothers at their father's wake; they are both obsessed

with the late patriarch's mistress, Sopron. Over the course of the play, a strange web of relations develops between the brothers, the "widowed" mistress and the perpetually present corpse of the father. Sopron's first appearance is striking: 'A woman enters, naked beneath a coat' (Barker 2004: 11); at her next entrance, she is 'exquisitely dressed in mourning' (19). The visual oscillation between her naked body, with its accompanying associations of sensuality and sexuality, as elaborated upon both by herself and the older brother Eff, and her immaculate, socially appropriate mourning attire (Figure 3) triggers a double vision⁹ for the audience: Sopron is both naked and clothed, she is both seductive temptress to Eff, lover to his younger brother Istvan and like a widow to the men's deceased father. As such, she confounds all binaries, particularly through the unstable 'deep surface' (Warwick/Cavallaro 1998: xxiii) of her changing costumes. An immediate connection can be made here to Schneider, following Patraha, and the notion of 'binary terror' (1997: 18) that accompanies the dissolution of clear distinctions. This in itself connects crucially to the aesthetic category of the sublime in which terror and elation coexist in the moment where reason fails and we move beyond fully comprehensible representation.

Notably, the audience encounters Sopron through Eff's description first: 'Your mistress what a look she has I met her on the stairs this little mouth and hands which dart from here to there her neck her thighs her hair hands like an infant's old but infantile' (Barker 2004: 7), before she then appears, high heeled, distant, yet vulnerable under the coat. As such, the image of Sopron that is conjured by Eff is very quickly contrasted by her appearance 'in the flesh', as it were, which itself sits uncomfortably between categories: she presents the grieving widow, the passionate lover, the old crone and the young temptress all at the same time. In her confounding of all notions of propriety, especially those of sexual taboo¹⁰, Sopron becomes one of 'those females who can wreck the infinite (Kristeva, 1982: 157 ff.). The layering of seemingly recognisable, socially-sanctioned functions, atop and through her body's different iterations, and the necessary failure to contain and categorize all the associations called forth, result in a 'spree of perceptions [...] that expands memory boundlessly' (12). As such, the encounter with her multiple selves, chiefly constructed through costume, can be described as sublime.

Figure 3: Redacted due to exclusive copyright agreement with Donald Cooper/Photostage. The image can be found in the published journal article.

Sopron's appearances conflate the traditionally distinct roles of lover and widow and claim a truthfulness of personal passion beyond social norms that is potentially as inflammatory and confounding to the live audience as it is to the men she encounters. Where Tenna in *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* uses the surface of her appearance to contrast it with her socially incompatible desires, Sopron is more closely aligned with the nuns of *Ursula*: in order to perform her grief, she utilises sartorial convention. Where Gertrude in *Gertrude – The Cry*

⁹ This idea of double vision in which spectators have to contend with multiple bodies – the actor's, the character's – and the roles these are inscribed with, has been discussed in great detail by Aoife Monks (2010: 2-3, 14).

¹⁰ The sexual relations between Sopron and her deceased lover's sons is conceptually akin to incest, which is 'considered as transgression of the boundaries of what is clean and proper' (Kristeva 1982: 85).

repeatedly toes and crosses the line of proper attire to distinguish herself and personal desires from the roles she fulfils as a body politic, Sopron embraces and then subverts these rules to define herself outside of her relationships to the men in her life.

The final play I discuss here, *Found in the Ground* again sees a doubling of roles in which rites of passage – specifically marriage and mourning – are layered on top of one another. Spanning several timelines and planes of reality, this challenging piece charts the burning of a former Nuremberg judge’s library in the wake of the Second World War. In it, Burgteata, the nymphomaniac daughter of the crippled judge Toonelhuis, has an ongoing affair with the nineteen-year-old librarian Denmark (Barker 2008b: 135) and manipulates him into marriage (134). The wedding ceremony per se is not shown; nonetheless she appears as a bride (183) and refers to the librarian as her husband (190). In the 2009 Wrestling School production with designs by Billie Kaiser, her bridal attire consisted of a white half-bust corset with a low, pointed busk front reminiscent of Elizabethan fashions, with a matching white skirt with a substantial train and panniers that echoed the shape of a *robe à la française* on a relatively small scale. In addition, Burgteata’s wedding attire included white opera gloves and a large headpiece of white tulle hovering like a cloud over actress Suzy Cooper’s head (Figure 4). The collagist nature of her appearance is decidedly anti-historical by combining elements from various periods into a newly whole that cannot be assigned to any specific place and time. Consequently, the costume invites spectators’ repeated engagement with this seemingly familiar, yet ultimately strange, bride. Just three scenes after Burgteata’s entrance as bride, she is on the brink of widowhood and being orphaned: still in her wedding dress, she mourns her ‘Dying husband/[and]/ Dying dad’ (190).

Figure 4: Redacted due to exclusive copyright agreement with Donald Cooper/Photostage.
The image can be found in the published journal article.

The multiplicity of roles that converges in Burgteata at this point is juxtaposed by her costume that seemingly reduces her to merely one function. Simultaneously, this simplification of her character to an archetypal bride is exposed as performative through the almost ridiculous theatricality of her wedding attire: her bridal self is blatantly constructed and insufficient in conferring the complexities of all the aspects that constitute her individual subjectivity. In a play as complex as *Found in the Ground*, in which cyclical, Beckettian repetitions of simultaneously mundane and absurd activities are juxtaposed with sequential developments on at least three planes of reality¹¹, costume becomes an essential spatio-temporal marker for the audience. In offering them a visual exaggeration that is culturally recognisable, yet incongruent with a character’s actions, Burgteata’s attire in particular highlights not only the performative qualities of stage costume, but also illustrates the unreliability of seemingly stable, socially constructed meanings attached to it.

Barker’s costume design engages in an active theatricality that renders traditional meaning-making processes insufficient. I refer to theatricality in this context in the same

¹¹ The first is the main thread, the gradual burning of Toonelhuis’s library and related events; the second is the repeated appearance of Knox, the spirit of a war criminal, who insists on recounting his atrocities (Barker 2008b: 130 ff.); the third is the interjections of Macedonia, the headless woman perambulating through the catastrophic landscape of the play (123 ff.).

manner in which Hannah discusses in her analysis of the ‘evental nature’ (2014: 16) of a red dress as example of iconic garments. She positions theatricality not as ‘in opposition with the concepts of the natural, true, sincere and authentic, [but instead] it connotes a merging of the political and social within the power of an image that is aware of spectatorship and stagecraft’ (Hannah 2014: 16, following Davis/Postelwait 2003: 29). Whether it is the red dress of Hannah’s analysis, or the wedding attire and mourning garb so plentifully present in Barker’s plays, the conscious engagement with the performativity of costume reinscribes the notion of theatricality in such a way that acknowledges the self-awareness with which it is designed and subsequently engaged with on stage. This holds true for characters across Barker’s works, but in particular his many brides and widows. Their conscious and often playfully subversive engagement with these roles, their relationships to men (dead or living husbands of all tenses), and their self-aware performativity within the frameworks drawn through costume, expose the artifice of their respective social situations which they confidently transgress in their radical reassessments of subject identity.

If indeed costume serves as ‘the means through which an imagined historical authenticity can be accessed’ (Monks in Maclaurin/Monks 2015: 3), in Barker’s case this consists of an imagined authenticity and offers a materially grounded historicity that is, within the context of the play, part of the ‘visual coherence within a scenographical logic’ (3) that, in the context of the play, becomes truthful¹². The work of costume, in conjunction with the actor’s body, to ‘create a cultural and historical world for the audience’ (Maclaurin in Maclaurin/Monks 2015: 37) is always decidedly fictional in Barker’s work, yet aesthetically closely enough related to offstage historical events as to evoke their presence within the world of the play, placing it ‘in the midst of in-between-ness’ (Gregg/Seigworth 2010: 1). This is particularly apparent in the ambiguous doublings that surround Barker’s brides and widows that are often combined within one person. Barker’s brides and widows exceed the narrative frameworks that their marital status might impose upon them. Whether it is Placida’s loving sacrifice of the virgins, Gertrude’s insatiable and destructive seductiveness, Tenna’s ultimate refusal to perform her role as bride to Isonzo’s expectations, Sopron’s remodelling of grief after her own fashion or Burgteata’s terrible and often self-destructive pursuits, these women exceed and redefine their roles beyond their relationships with men. They move beyond socially imposed rules of appropriate behaviour, rejecting the ‘closed correspondences between external appearance and social order’ (Calefato 2004: 2). Instead their performances of self become a ‘gesture of profound joy and delight, of pleasure in masquerade, and sensual enjoyment. A synaesthetic game’ (Calefato 2004: 2). This game takes place through heavily, yet incongruently coded visuals in costuming that resonate with the decidedly ambiguous stage spaces in which these women explore their sense of self by playing with the appearance of roles conventionally imposed upon them. The iconic qualities implicitly at work in an audience’s reading of Barker’s many brides and widows fragment the particularity of the characters across multiple times and places: both distinctly unique and potentially generalisable, the costumed bodies of Barker’s figures are consciously and notably theatrical.

¹² cf. Sleev’s assertion that ‘[her] tapestry is true’ (Barker 2008b: 56)

Costume always extends beyond the simple materiality of its existence. It is more than fabrics of a certain colour and weight: ‘as intrinsically corporeal objects, they contain hidden implications that dynamically charge social settings as well as the stage itself’ (Hannah 2014: 16). Costume is imbued with memories, collective and individual, and cultural associations of cuts and colours that can be harnessed into reconstituted and mutable meanings that offer audiences seductive glimpses of something familiar that suddenly becomes more, strange, and exciting. This is particularly tangible with iconic garments, such as a wedding dress or mourning attire, or the ‘universally beguiling red dress’ (15) that Hannah analyses. Such clothes invariably evoke ‘multiple readings particular to other times and places. Simultaneously iconic and banal they abound with abstraction and specificity, looking to both the past and the future: their meanings constantly morph through societal memory and unrealized potential’ (17). My argument is therefore that the seemingly comprehensible world that Barker’s costumes attest to in each of his pieces actually actively invite an overwhelming multiplicity of potential meanings. These are historically, socially and individually constructed and the costume’s initial appeal as something real, tangible and recognisable is exploded into fragments of likeness. Discourse on postmodern conceptions of the sublime, which takes the construction of subject identity and the irreconcilability between the tangible presentation of materials and the immaterial concepts these attempt to attest to, lends itself to the discussion of costume, which similarly exists both materially and conceptually. Consequently, the costumes, and the characters, perpetually elude complete comprehension. As such, the transgressive nature Barker’s playwriting provides these brides and widows with is rendered tangible to the audience through the heightened expressivity of their costumes and the characters’ deliberate engagement with costume’s performative potential. Simultaneously, the costumes’ denial of concrete spatio-temporal markers that would allow a distinct relation to everyday life demands that spectators encounter these subversive, self-inventing women on their own, radical and changeable terms.

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