

Aberystwyth University

“What Is this Place...?”

Kipp, Lara

Published in:
Journal of Contemporary Drama in English

DOI:
[10.1515/jcde-2018-0024](https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2018-0024)

Publication date:
2018

Citation for published version (APA):
Kipp, L. (2018). “What Is this Place...?": Howard Barker’s Spatial Scenography. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 6(2), 249-264. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2018-0024>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

‘What is this place...?’ – Howard Barker’s Spatial Scenography

Lara Maleen Kipp

University of Derby

Contact: Department of Media and Performing Arts, Markeaton Street, Derby

DE22 3AW, UK.

Mobile: 07554764749

E-mail: l.kipp@derby.ac.uk

Biography: Dr. Lara Maleen Kipp is a scenographer, visual artist and theatre practitioner. Her Ph.D. at Aberystwyth University engaged in an aesthetic analysis of Howard Barker’s scenography. Previously, she completed a Master’s degree in Practising Theatre and Performance and a joint BA (Hons) Scenography & Theatre Design and Drama & Theatre Studies. Work experiences include Vivienne Westwood Studios and the Salzburg Opera Festival. Research interests range from scenography, vocal performance and contemporary European theatre to performance philosophy and feminist theatres. She is currently a lecturer in Performing Arts (Drama) at the University of Derby.

Abstract

This article seeks to identify some key scenographic principles that govern contemporary British playwright Howard Barker's stage spaces. The influence of Barker's dramatic work is widely recognized and has been the subject of sustained academic study for a number of decades. Despite Barker's scenographic engagement with his own playwriting since the late 1990s, the corresponding academic engagement with this aspect of his work remains scant. This article therefore offers the first sustained consideration of Barker's spatial scenography, engaging in a detailed analysis of select examples of Barker's drama from the late 1990s to mid-2000s. It also draws upon archival materials of productions by The Wrestling School company to compare the implicit scenography as evident in the play text to its realization in production. The analysis approaches Barker's spatial scenography through the lens of aesthetic discourse, with particular focus on the notion of the postmodern sublime as postulated by Lyotard and Johnson, among others, in order to discuss the subject matter in a suitably non-reductive, yet critical manner.

KEYWORDS

scenography

Howard Barker

space

placelessness

both/and

grades of likeness

Contemporary British playwright Howard Barker's dramatic and directorial work has been the subject of sustained academic attention for many years. However, his scenography, as developed since the late 1990s, has yet to receive the same level of attention. I propose that Barker's work presents a significant contemporary example of the practice of scenography as a fundamentally constitutive part of performance in theatre making. The different principles by which his scenography operates are manifested in all aspects, from sonic to visual content, from the musicality of spoken text to costume, light, set and properties. I have discussed the dramaturgical properties of Barker's costume elsewhere (Kipp 2017); in this article I focus on space and place. I seek to establish some key working principles of Barker's spatial scenography, taking into account the emphasis on instability, fluidity and ambiguity that is central to his playwriting in which "[t]here is no official interpretation" (Barker, "Arguments" 35). This is also apparent in the prevalence of related aesthetic terminology in existing academic research on his work, especially that of Gritzner (2006, 2007, 2012 and 2015) and Rabey (1989, 2009 and 2012). Consequently, I approach the analysis of Barker's spatial scenography through aesthetic discourse, in particular drawing on the notion of the postmodern sublime as postulated by theorists such as Lyotard (1989, 1991), Kristeva (1982) and more recently Johnson (2012).

Aesthetics, Space and Place

Aesthetic discourse offers a suitably established, critical yet non-reductive theoretical framework for the discussion of Barker's spatial scenography. This allows me to address the frequently incongruent coding of his onstage worlds, in which the different scenographic elements serve to multiply possible meanings, rather than present the audience with a singular, clearly accessible interpretation. Such a foregrounding of individual experience beyond the confines of rational thought also lies at the heart of postmodern theories of the sublime, in which the unrepresentable is present through an ongoing process of suggestion, association, and crucially, negative presentation (Johnson 122). As such, this framework is uniquely suited to an analysis of Barker's stage spaces, in which imaginative limitlessness and the conceptual upheaval of boundaries coexist with the necessarily limited, and physically defined stage space, and the dramatic locales that arise within it. In addition to the theoretical writings identified above, I draw on recent publications in the field of scenography, such as Eke, Haß and Kaldrack's 2014 edited collection on "space-building processes in the theatre"¹.

The fundamental importance of space and spatiality in discussing theatre is self-evident: it is “a space of spaces”² (Waldenfels 24; my translation) which contains in its conception the potential to be anywhere; naturally, the physical dimensions of any stage offer some necessary actual constrictions, but imaginatively, stage space offers the possibility for infinite places to be created. These exist by their very nature alongside and within the physical space in which they arise. Waldenfels phrases it thus: “The action on stage circles something that withdraws itself from direct depiction”³ (in Hinnenberg 329; my translation). This movement of withdrawal, and subsequently implicit presence of that which cannot be represented brings the theatrical stage towards Lyotard’s conception of the sublime: the presentation of the unrepresentable (1989). Tatari describes the emergence of these places on stage as “an opening-up of places that are not given places nor can they become given, absolute, which also means inequivalent places as pulsing openings of space-times”⁴ (95; my translation). This irresolvable, inconclusive quality that Tatari highlights as a fundamental and productive aspect of stage space is one that finds immediate meeting points with Barker’s spatial scenography.

For the purposes of this article, space is understood as a three-dimensional area in which material objects are located and events occur. Place on the other hand refers to a part of space, an area in space with boundaries either definite or – in the case of Barker more importantly – indefinite. Place does not necessarily have to be tangibly rendered, but might arise out of suggestion and association; similarly, the boundaries that define it may be conceptual and changeable. As such, place becomes part of space and shares its temporal three-dimensionality. Where space denotes the underlying physical situation in which the drama is placed, I use place as specific descriptor for dramatic locale in alignment with Schellow (140) and Downing (169). The plays I analyse are *Und* (2012), *A House of Correction* (2010), *Found in the Ground* (2008), and their respective productions by The Wrestling School under Barker’s direction in 1999, 2001 and 2009. I supplement these with other examples where appropriate.

A Domestic Wasteland of Unclear Proportions: *Und*

In *Und* the titular character supposedly awaits a gentleman caller. In time, it is disclosed that he “gathers Jews” (Barker, “Und” 11) and that she is “not an aristocrat” (21), but Jewish. As the pretence of a romantic teatime meeting slowly crumbles, so does the spatial stability of Und’s parlour. We encounter Und in “an interior” (9), a sparse description at best, barely alleviated by the presence of a laden “tea tray” (9). These objects, with their

connotations of genteel propriety and everyday structure, in conjunction with the protagonist's attitude of waiting, create a sense of place for the audience: an aristocratic woman's parlour. Consequently, the expectations are for the spatial conventions of such a place to be upheld. However, this seemingly domestic and realistic space is disturbed within the first 18 lines of the play by the "swift descent of a mirror" (9) that intrudes upon the stability of the parlour by its sudden and unexplained appearance. As the protagonist does not register its arrival as strange, it becomes an accepted part of the onstage world, though the mirror remains somewhat uncanny to the audience by its inexplicable and intrusive appearance. Additionally, it upsets the notion of a fourth wall as it reflects "her face to the audience" (9), troubling notions of visibility as the stage image is doubled, deepened and extended beyond the confines of the onstage space. The visual depth and reflected image of Und's face in the mirror confront us with the fallacious stability accorded to visible spatial boundaries. This physical destabilisation of conceptual distinctions produces a sense of discomfort, as the process draws attention to their socially constructed nature. By extension then, the porousness of space in *Und* points toward the dependence of any boundary on its recognition as such through a social consensus.

In the 1999 Wrestling School production of *Und*, co-produced by Derby Playhouse, Sheffield Crucible Theatre, and Plymouth Theatre Royal, this was exacerbated by *chiaroscuro* effects created through light that rendered even the visible spatial boundaries onstage fluid⁵, and skewed spectators' depth perception. Still confronted with the troubling presence of the mirror, our understanding of space is further troubled by the invisible servants that Und bids "Go away/ I did not ring" (10). These unseen addressees of – as the play progresses – increasingly contradictory commands evoke an imaginary offstage space that is nonetheless part of an interior where the play takes place: a logical extension of the spatial expectations raised at the very beginning.

The mirror also serves to distance Und from the audience; it offers only an indirect glimpse of her face, framed in darkness. As she gradually revokes and re-characterises her identity before the audience, admitting that she is "not an aristocrat" but "a Jew" (21), her surroundings simultaneously distort; her unseen personnel desert her and we remain confronted, as Battersby phrases it in her discussion on the sublime and its "others", not with "the constancy of the self, but its disappearance" ("Reader" 17). Battersby's statement can be productively connected to Lyotard's conception of the sublime that hinges on a "kind of cleavage within the subject" (203), offering in its stead worlds between and apart⁶ (202) in which monstrosity and formlessness are part of the realm of the sublime. The dark expanse of

the auditorium, reflected in the mirror, presents opportunities for such formless worlds to arise in spectators' imaginations, which in turn generate an ongoing sense of placelessness. Additionally, the gradual disintegration of Und's surroundings from something recognizably familiar into something uncanny and unstable echoes the dissolution of stable subject identity that she performs over the course of the play. Crucially, however, this process does not lead to a complete estrangement. Rather, it conjures a sense of co-existence, a situation best described as both/and: Und is both aristocrat and Jewish, just as her parlour is both familiar and uncanny. In the multiplicities of content that arise from the both/and principle, there are spectres of the recognizable. Barker's spatial scenography denies spectators immediate and concrete comprehension, instead inviting a process of interrogation and repeated re-inscription. Alan Thomas has described this as "an atemporal world where familiarity and strangeness exist together" (436), even though he does not specifically consider the role of scenography in the creation of this world. No one place and consequently no one meaning is stable or persuasive enough to override all others; instead they overlay one another, offering seductive grades of likeness.

In *Und*, this is particularly apparent in the ongoing reconstruction of stage space. The binary of inside/outside space initially appears to correspond to onstage/offstage space, yet is upset by increasingly frequent intrusions by set pieces. This simple dichotomy is quickly expanded from the extended interior of Und's supposedly grand house to include the outdoors of the "rural districts" (Barker, "Und" 17) of her descriptions. The relative stability of this conceptual spatial understanding that conflates onstage with 'inside' this particular room and offstage with 'outside' it is infringed upon by the non-naturalistic appearances of set pieces and objects such as the mirror, and subsequently the appearances of flying trays. These bear more and more absurd and disturbing contents, ranging from a letter to yellow flowers covered with stained cloth, and a heap of fresh earth. As the spatial boundaries grow weaker, the strangeness of the situation is heightened by these increasingly unsettling objects that intrude upon the protagonist. This is particularly apparent in the "deluge of sordid fluid" (42) that suddenly drenches Und near the end of the play. Her initial interaction with the space as "an interior" (9), despite the intrusion of the flying trays – which could conceivably be considered a non-naturalistic image for a dumb waiter – and the mirror, misleads the audience's perception into a false sense of spatial stability which is increasingly troubled as the play progresses until it is questioned in its entirety. The play concludes with rain falling "steadily, heavily" (48), which ultimately unravels the spectators' initial and intuitive reading

of the stage space according to theatrical conventions: onstage is inside, but also not; offstage is inside as well as outside, whatever that may be in the world of the play.

A Broken Labyrinth of Uncertain Dimensions: *A House of Correction*

A House of Correction similarly sets out certain spatial premises, only to dismantle them over time. The play traces the interactions of Godansk, a courier delivering an important message to a warfront, with the inhabitants of a strange, labyrinthine estate that are subjected to repeated leaflet bombings by passing planes. Again and again his actions and those of others delay the continuation of his urgent journey. Faced with the confusing building and strange behaviour of other characters, he puzzles “What is this place...?” (Barker, “Six” 113), a question that remains without definite answer.

The vertical expansion of the stage space beyond the visible to a possibly infinite, open sky is comparable to the spatial principles developed over time in *Und*, yet in *A House of Correction* this notion is established at the opening by the “storm of leaflets” that cascades into “a damaged room” (89). The repeated intrusions of the “dense clouds” (90) of leaflets into the visible, limited stage space continually upset the stability of inside and outside, which is – in opposition to *Und* – challenged from the outset: what might have formerly been inside, and therefore protected from invasion is now “damaged” (89), open and consequently vulnerable. The physical and conceptual boundaries by which such differences are commonly defined are literally broken, but not completely vanished, resulting in an uncanny overlap. This is particularly apparent in the juxtaposition of the “snowfall of leaflets” (92) with the “haggard, pale” (90) figure of Hebbel in his bed. The presence of a character that is visually coded as physically fragile in an environment that is potentially hostile to that fragility heightens the sense of something gone awry: logic dictates that they belong to separate spaces and yet they are presented as elements in a single, coherent but certainly unsettling environment. It compounds a sense of peril that has no concrete object to fix upon as the source of this perceived threat. In *A House of Correction* this sense of intrusion is intensified by the leaflet raids and the repeated appearances of the courier Godansk. This physical dismantling of borders echoes the “dissolution of all distinctions” that Guyer discusses in relation to Nietzsche (116). Nietzsche considered it 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 becomes once again a question of both/and rather than either/or, resulting in a coexistence of potentially contradictory concepts.

The well that Hebbel is thrown into later in the play provides a similar, yet in this case offstage and consequently entirely conceptual scenographic device that recurs throughout Barker's theatrical works, most notably in *In the Depths of Dead Love* (2016), as well as his paintings. It is an imagined extension of space downwards, bringing to mind Aronson's assessment of the stage as an abyss, and one that "returns the gaze" (1). Though located offstage, the well intrudes onto the stage through characters that report back their interactions with it. The premise of the (in some Barker plays explicitly named) bottomless well challenges the limits of imagination; in the words of Kristeva it pulls the subject "toward the place where meaning collapses" ("Powers" 2)⁷. The excess of depth and darkness that the audience is invited to consider can be set in relation to theories of the sublime that make such qualities the attributes of a sublime object: its existence engenders "a lack of referentiality for the whole set of experiences" (Lyotard, "Reader" 188). Particularly by being offstage, and thus intangible in every way, these interruptions of the imaginary landscape draw attention to the active engagement of an individual's imaginative facilities, and their limitations. These run up against the idea of limitlessness, which necessarily cannot be contemplated in its entirety, even as it can be conceptually understood. The deliberate removal of these unthinkable spatial occurrences, such as a truly bottomless well, from the visible, and audible, grasp of the audience forces a displacement of the encounter with the thing from the stage world into an individual's imagination. There the impossibility of its existence in the physical world and the simultaneous possibility of its existence in imagination expose a fault line in the constitution of subjectivity that is predicated on being able to set out clear rules by which its boundaries, and thus its being, are established. This, as Kristeva phrases it, results in these imagined spaces and places to be "situated outside the domain of meaning", turning them into "an external essence...a sublime object" (Kristeva, "Powers" 203). In refusing conclusive meaning, and instead forcing audiences to repeatedly attempt to make sense of the overwhelming strangeness of the places presented on stage, in particular those aspects that are invisible and/or imaginary, Barker offers a sequence of potentially sublime objects (endless courtyards, bottomless wells, porous walls) for the individual spectator to contend with. At the same time, their near-familiarity invites spectators to engage with the spatial premises on a moment-by-moment basis, drawing on individual personal recognition, even if the resulting meanings remain fragmented and fluid.

The locale of *A House of Correction* is further complicated by frequent references to the "puzzling nature of the courtyards, none of which are connected to another except in a wholly arbitrary way" (Barker, "Six" 114). This suggested labyrinthine nature of the play's

setting expands the imagined place far beyond the confines of the visible playing area. The vague but supposedly vast place of the play's action offers the audience spatial uncertainty for contemplation: while the dramatic locale is constant (the entire action takes place in the same "damaged room"; 89), its boundaries are perpetually shifting as the offstage world is expanded not only beyond the spatial boundaries of the acting area, but also supposedly beyond the realm of physics (for example through the bottomless well). This destabilisation of the limited and limiting frame of the visible performance area is a driving force in the increasing uncertainty that the characters face.

Though *A House of Correction* does not offer an audience the same false comfort of seeming spatial stability that *Und* initially does, its characters accept the intrusive leaflet bombings as normal, framing them as regular parts of the onstage world. However, as the play progresses and various characters get lost in the maze of courtyards (supposedly like the one that is visible before the audience) there is an increasing sense that this acceptance is a desperate attempt at making sense of something that is beyond understanding. This culminates in the discovery of the well, the attempted murder of Hebbel in it, and the subsequent failed attempt to fill it up with rubble. The strange but benign fall of poetry is shortly thereafter replaced by gunfire (183), a further threat of and to the space, this time deadly. The strange and frail logic that the place of the play initially appears to follow is destroyed: whatever that place is, it operates not just outside of conventional logic and predictability but also outside any logic its characters may have attempted to impose upon it. As such, the grades of likeness that spectators identify in the encounter with the stage space – it is like a bombed convent, like the British landscape during the Blitz – are in continuous flux, accumulating personal and collective cultural meanings infinitely. In this, the initial place spectators identify is subsumed in the successive layers, resulting in a sense of placelessness.

Pervasive Placelessness as Underlying Spatial Principle

Placelessness is a recurring strategy in Barker's work, where his stage directions and their realisation in production provide just enough to draw the audience in with something recognizable – it is 'like' a strange vestry in *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* (2012), it is 'like' a manor house in *Und* (2012), the clifftop is 'like' Beachy Head in *The Forty* (Barker, "Eight" 320) – without ever giving them concrete or finished signifiers; even when reasonably explicit stage directions appear (for example the recurring park scenes in *The Forty*; 308, 331, 332), the circumstance of the characters' situations and their actions serve to make something

familiar strange again, cutting loose meanings so that they float and multiply in each new iteration. Additionally, even such precise directions contain an implicit placelessness by virtue of their banality. Multiplication of possible meanings is instigated through the figures on stage, in the ways in which they refer to and interact with the “imagined spaces, which are [...] limitless in their scope and scale” (Reynolds 153). This is further extended through an integrated scenography in which lighting and sound function primarily evocatively, not descriptively. Consequently, the space is perpetually shifted and re-focussed into multiple possible places that co-exist at the same time.

Similarly, Barker uses indicators of domesticity – a chair in the production of *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo* (“Seven” 55) a tea tray in *Und* (9), a bed in *A House of Correction* (“Six” 89), to name but a few – and isolates them in an ambiguous environment, highlighting the constructed nature of meaning that depends on socially agreed cross-referencing of signifiers, insofar as a park bench is usually associated with outside whereas a bed is commonly understood as belonging to a domestic, inside realm. By stripping away other reference points, Barker forces the audience’s imagination into a state of free play, with meanings emerging and morphing as the events of the plays unfold. The spatial scenography of both *Und* and *A House of Correction* is essentially entropic in the sense that they begin in a seemingly stable state, only to decline into chaos as they run their course – though the latter opens a little further along the descent into disorder. The final play I discuss here is distinctly further removed from everyday life than the previous two, and offers a very particular example of the simultaneous and reciprocal destabilisation of space and time in Barker’s work.

Nowhere and No-when in Particular: Post-Holocaust Limbo in *Found in the Ground*

As one of Barker’s most challenging plays, *Found in the Ground* (2008) presents several timelines and planes of reality that chart the burning of a former Nuremberg judge’s library at his behest, to simplify in the extreme. The exordium of *Found in the Ground* already establishes an excess of sound and imagery that is subsequently multiplied throughout the play: to the soundtrack of an unceasing industrial process, a naked, headless woman perambulates through an unidentifiable landscape (123) as images of bombed out cities are projected onto hanging screens behind her. Immediately we are confronted with multi-layered imagery: high-heeled and graceful, Macedonia is not without a certain erotic appeal; however, coupled with the images of war-torn civilisation and, more importantly, by

virtue of the fact that she is headless, which effectively de-individuates her, any possible effect of sexual arousal is complicated by her positioning as part of the catastrophic and anonymous wasteland of the projections.

The complexity of the subject matter, a deeply critical post-World War 2 engagement with the Holocaust, ambiguously presented and amplified by the equally complex scenography, confronts and overwhelms its audiences by the simultaneous existence of different planes of reality and timelines. These are sometimes presented simultaneously, sometimes successively, and complicated by the juxtaposition of figures that are recognizably from different timelines, for example the octogenarian former Nuremberg judge Toonelhuis and Adolf Hitler (196). The excess of conceptual content and actual imagery on stage is exacerbated by the deliberate absence of concrete spatial boundaries. The 2009 Wrestling School production at the London Riverside Studios saw the stage stripped back to the bare wall of the theatre, necessitating a long approach for the actors, visible to the audience. In this, Barker engaged with the recurring image of “the longest possible entrances” (Barker/Houth writing on *Gertrude – The Cry*; 73) that foreground changing perspective and the experience of duration.

In the 2009 production, the stage space was nearly empty, broken up only by the diagonal tracks of the mechanical dogs from upstage right to downstage centre, and the open trapdoor with the smouldering fire downstage right. One of the key lines of approach for characters was through an upstage trench, gently sloping upwards to stage level on the right. High vertical metal bars on both sides and one crudely draped swathe of fabric, like a broken curtain, at the centre back served to generate an unsettling environment by virtue of their materiality and textures: the metal gleamed cold and dull, uninviting and reminiscent of prison and military or mental institutions. The fabric appeared patch-worked and of a dull, nonspecific colour, indicating ageing and neglect. The screens descended on wires when needed, to disappear again thereafter, their existence precarious and transitory (thewrestlingschool, 2010). Another crucial aspect of the spatial arrangement and the visual impact of the staging was the contrast of the materiality of the actors’ bodies, in particular that of Macedonia, so much more vulnerable in her nakedness, with the brutality of the set’s materials, for example the jagged metal of the mechanical dogs, the clinical steel trays and the gaping maw of the fire pit that replaced the original stage direction of a pyramid of smouldering books (Barker, “Four” 123). The spatial indeterminacy of the near-empty stage was intensified through the few select objects and set pieces that served mainly atmospheric rather than locational functions on a physical as well as a conceptual level. The gap between

the tangible realisation of the stage space and the imaginary space created by an audience's engagement with the fully realised piece is a productive one; the oscillation between what is actually on stage and what is present through suggestion only engages the imagination actively, yet without resolution. In this, Barker's spatial scenography engages a fluidity of boundaries that Lyotard ("Inhuman" 33) and Kristeva ("Powers" 12) see as constitutive of the sublime, and which Johnson identifies as a postmodern condition of "becoming-unbounded" (122) in which "new and unfamiliar forms" (122) are perpetually sought out. Though Johnson specifically addresses avant-garde art in this particular passage, I would argue that the principles hold true in terms of the ongoing and repeated reinvention of stage space into multiple places.

The repeated return to key scenes, such as Toonelhuis' recounting of observing a woman urinating in the woods (a line that becomes a sonic as well as a visual leitmotif without offering any concrete suggestions for interpretation) and the eating of the earthly remains of Nazis he sentenced to hanging do not become any clearer over time, despite or perhaps even because of the slow introduction of further details. Furthermore, all of these take place in the same space, which ostensibly suggests the same place to the audience, too. Consequently it is likely that the recognition of preceding materials, visual and aural, seduces the audience into repeated attempts at meaning-making, even though they will be frustrated.

The place of the play is evocatively 'like' other places (libraries, concentration camps, war-torn cities), but it is also not always like them. As in *Und* and *A House of Correction*, *Found in the Ground* utilises the principles of both/and as well as grades of likeness. By textually referring and visually alluding to recognizable places, the stage space of *Found in the Ground* is thoroughly evocative yet decisively indefinite, refusing an easy conceptual completion by spectators. This repeated layering of associative content in imagery contributes to the overall imaginative excess in Barker's spatial scenography. This is further exacerbated by the soundscape, but also by the projections that bring the desolate landscapes they depict onto the stage; whether they are read as actual context of the play – the action of which never moves from the strangely multi-dimensional estate of Toonelhuis – in the sense that they appear to surround the onstage action or present historical context, or whether they are perceived as an evocative visual component of the complex stage images. Space as indicated in the play text, as well as in production, lacks definite boundaries and clear identifiers, creating a sense of limbo, an uncertainty of location, without sacrificing a sense of *somewhere*. As Lyotard puts it, it engenders "a lack of referentiality for the whole set of experiences, an impossibility of making them topographically contingent" ("Reader" 188).

Nonetheless, the spectatorial instinct is to piece together what little information is given; in this case, it is particularly rich in evocative references that draw on a collective sense of history (in a Western European cultural context). In their incompleteness, and in the case of *Found in the Ground* also their inconclusiveness in terms of rational thought and conventional narrative, Barker's spatial scenography draws on "untameable states of matter" (Lyotard, "Inhuman" 186) to engage the spectator with "an excess of presence" (187) that Lyotard considers conditional to landscape. The notion of landscape as he proposes it, demonstrates a notable affinity with the ways in which Barker's spatial scenography operates, namely "beyond the realm of form [...] produc[ing] an inner feeling of being outside [...]" (186-7); it is processual, cumulative and decisively unfixd.

Some Conclusions on Barker's Spatial Scenography

The circularity of each of the plays' developments and the instability of their stage spaces – both physically and conceptually – may serve to seduce the audience into a drifting state in which the previously mentioned "dissolution of all distinctions" (here/there, now/then, offstage/onstage, inside/outside, etc.) serves as a trigger for the "dissolution of ordinary reason itself" (Guyer 116). The juxtaposition of evocative and strangely familiar imagery (that nonetheless refuses recognition) with fragmented action, and figures that defy traditional characterisation confront us with an "erasure of support" (Lyotard, "Inhuman" 189). This support would serve traditional modes of meaning-making, but severance from it leaves us stranded in contemplation of the catastrophic landscape of the play instead. Barker's work highlights ways in which scenography can be employed, as Brejzek phrases it, as a "practice of [...] constant making and re-making of time-space" (23). Coupled with Aronson's notion that the stage is an abyss that looks back at or into us (1), there really is nowhere to hide for an audience in the face of the violent sensory and conceptual onslaught that *Found in the Ground* presents.

It should be noted that the discussion of any one aspect of scenography, or even theatrical production as a whole, is of course limited, as the interactions between elements, contrasting as well as complementary, are fundamental to the overall impact of a piece. Bearing this in mind, it is nonetheless valuable to consider the particular contributions that individual elements of scenography make in order to better understand the ways in which these engage in a continuous, fluid and ideally productive interplay throughout a piece. In the case of stage space, place and set in Barker's playwriting and productions, it is the perpetual oscillation between what is initially presented as a recognizable space, and the "formal

estrangement” (Rabey, “Hell” 16) that follows over the course of the play by way of “denaturalizing imagery” (Barker in Gritzner/Rabey, “Crisis” 124). The fragmented and cyclical nature of Barker’s exordia⁸ undermines a conventional understanding of stage space at the outset to some extent and instead foregrounds an experiential and largely image-based mode of theatre spectatorship. Nonetheless, the opening scenes of Barker’s work frequently offer up a deceptively simple spatial arrangement (an interior in *Und*, a damaged room in *A House of Correction*, “an orchard at Elsinore” in *Gertrude – The Cry*; Barker, “Two” 83), reduced to very few set pieces, which are frequently evocative rather than representational.

Scenographically, Barker’s stage spaces operate on a few distinct foundational principles: the deliberate absence of concrete spatio-temporal markers (placelessness), the invocation of seeming familiarity through grades of likeness, and an excessive proliferation of potential meaning due to cumulative layering (both/and). The absence of concrete markers refuses a recognizable identification with a particular time and place; there is no “immediately, readily or completely recognizable world” (Rabey, “Hell” 13). This becomes particularly apparent in pieces such as *Found in the Ground* (2009) and *The Forty* (2014). The latter, a collection of forty very short plays, offers a fragmentation of location that resets to yet another similarly unfamiliar place at the beginning of each play, as I have discussed elsewhere (in Rabey, “Gallery” 235). Furthermore, Barker always seeks a deliberate historicisation in his work, to increase his imaginative freedom, though the plays are “clinical in their absence of direct historical context” (McCarron 69). Instead they seduce the audience into a moment-by-moment engagement with the pieces on their own, theatrically specific terms. Indications of (fictional, ambiguous and non-naturalistic) time periods are more prominent in costuming (Barker in Gritzner/Rabey, “Crisis” 124); the stage space is kept as empty as possible, with few structural elements that usually lie at the core of each piece, such as the fence in the play of the same name (Barker, “The Fence”), the tapestry in *I Saw Myself* (2008), and the thrones in *Slowly* (2010).

The indeterminacy of Barker’s “essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic” (Kristeva, “Powers” 8) onstage spaces is achieved by employing few, select set pieces. The materiality of these foregrounds their tangible, physical qualities, emphasising their texture, structure and weight rather than attesting to any particular time period or geographical location. This effect is furthered by conceptual and physical intrusions of the offstage space into and onto the visible playing area. By refuting spatial identifiers that audiences might use to concretise a sense of recognizable location, Barker’s spatial scenography evokes precisely the effect that Johnson identifies as central to the postmodern sublime, namely that it

“negatively presents the idea of a reality absolutely different from our own” (Johnson 123). By extension, the plays’ imagined locations become “contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable” (Kristeva, “Powers” 18) and therefore fundamentally placeless. If the “postmodern resurrection of the aesthetics of the sublime is ultimately an attempt to represent [...] the properly unimaginable complexity” (Johnson 130) of contemporary human existence, then Barker’s scenographic engagement with stage space – consciously incomplete, indeterminate and in its imaginative overabundance beyond rational comprehension – is an artistic manifestation of this development. In refusing illustrative spaces on stage, Barker’s plays “conjur[e] spectres of known times and places” (Kipp in Rabey, “Gallery” 236) in which the “layering of a social, collective memory as construed by dominant historical discourses with individual memory gives a sense of incomplete recognition, inviting the spectator to identify the known, yet thwarting the process of that recognition” (236). Instead the plays stand “emancipated from any settled placement” (Dyble-Kitchin in Rabey, “Gallery” 237), inviting the spectator to encounter them as such. Barker invites audiences’ imaginations, “*cleansed* of the detritus of familiarity, domesticity and recognition” (“Death” 7; original emphasis), to continually construct meanings for themselves.

The guiding principles and physical manifestation of Barker’s spatial scenography – indeterminate place through conceptually and physically unstable space, juxtaposition of contrasting textures, particularly with regard to the performers’ bodies, and estrangement through use of unusual or ambiguous stage objects – aim towards a dissolution of concrete spatio-temporal markers and engage a “total aesthetic” (Barker/Houth 41) that springs from a single, unified and as far as possible uncompromising imagination. What is on stage and shown is equally responsible for the evocation of space and place as that which is not: Barker’s scenography decidedly lies between the visible, tangible and the invisible, intangible. The seemingly opposing principles of emptiness (in spatial rendering) and excess (in an ongoing layering of associatively rich content), amplified by spatial instability (physical and conceptual), result in theatrical stage spaces that contain a “multiplicity of current times” (Lyotard, “Reader” 186) and places. In the face of this, the visible stage space and its imaginative extension beyond by other scenographic means (such as light and sound) becomes a site of infinite possibility that is repeatedly inscribed with individual spectators’ meanings, yet remains tantalisingly indeterminate.

1 My translation of the title *Raumbildende Prozesse im Theater*.

2 “einen Raum der Räume”

3 “Das Bühnengeschehen umkreist etwas, das sich der direkten Darstellung entzieht.”

4 “Eröffnung von Orten, die keine gegebenen Orte sind oder werden können, absolute, d.h. auch inäquivalente Orte als pulsierende Eröffnung von Raumzeiten. ”

5 Unfortunately, archival materials for this production are exceedingly limited; the statements here are based on production photographs Howard Barker generously shared with me when I interviewed him in January 2016.

6 “*eine Zwischenwelt [...] eine Nebenwelt*”

7 One might also argue that (offstage) roads fulfil a similar function, for example in *A House of Correction* Godansk describes it as “a ribbon of white chalk not only visible but compelling” (Barker, “Six” 112); the titular road in *The Road, the House, the Road* (2008) similarly and inevitably pulls characters and the events of the play along.

8 Since the 1990s, audiences enter The Wrestling School’s productions to find movement sequences, wordless but usually with a rhythmic sonic counterpoint, which offer a thematic outline and evocative mood to pre-set happening on stage prior to the play proper.

Works Cited

- Aronson, Arnold. *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. Print.
- Barker, Howard. *Arguments For A Theatre*, 4th ed. London: Oberon, 2016. Print.
- . *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year*. London: Oberon, 2005. Print.
- . *Death, The One and the Art of Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- . *Plays Two*. London: Oberon, 2006. Print.
- and Houth, Eduardo. *A Style and Its Origins*. London: Oberon, 2007. Print.
- . *Plays Four*. London: Oberon, 2008. Print.
- . *Plays Six*. London: Oberon, 2010. Print.
- . *Hurts Given and Received / Slowly*. London: Oberon, 2010. Print.
- . *Plays Seven*. London: Oberon, 2012. Print.
- . *Plays Eight*. London: Oberon, 2014. Print.
- . *Plays Nine*. London: Oberon, 2016. Print.
- Battersby, Christine. *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Brejzek, Thea. "Scenography or: Making Space." *The Disappearing Stage: Reflections on the 2011 Prague Quadrennial*. Ed. Arnold Aronson. Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute, 2012. 14-23. Print.
- Downing, Richard. "Setting the Fractal Clock(s): The Coordinates of a Spatial Expression." *Performance Research*. 18:3 (2013). 169-178. Print.
- Dyble-Kitchin, Emily in Rabey, David Ian. "'A Gallery of Images': From the Aberystwyth Students." *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling With Catastrophe*. Eds. James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. 225-240. Print.
- Gritzner, Karoline. "Towards an Aesthetic of the Sublime in Howard Barker's Theatre." *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*. Eds. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey. London: Oberon Books, 2006. 83-94. Print.
- Gritzner, Karoline. "Adorno on Tragedy: Reading Catastrophe in Late Capitalist Culture." *Critical Engagements*. 1.2 (Autumn/Winter 2007). 25-52. Print.
- Gritzner, Karoline, Rabey, David Ian and Barker, Howard. "Crisis is the Essential Condition for Art Forms." *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe*. Ed. Mark Brown. Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2011. 123-130. Print.
- Gritzner, Karoline. "Poetry and Intensification in Howard Barker's Theatre of Plethora." *Studies in Theatre & Performance*. 32:3 (2012). 337-345. Print.

-
- Gritzner, Karoline. "Tragedy, Immanence, and the Persistence of Semblance." *Performance Philosophy*. 1 (2015). 126-132. Web.
< <http://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/9/26>.> (Date of access: 10 August 2015).
- Guyer, Paul. "The German sublime after Kant." *The Sublime From Antiquity to the Present*. Ed. Timothy M. Costelloe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 102–17. Print.
- Hinnenberg, Meike. "~~Ausstreichung~~ der Bühne: Überlegungen zum Ort der Bühne im Anschluss an Derridas *Chōra*." *Bühne: Raumbildende Prozesse im Theater*. Eds. Norbert Otto Eke, Ulrike Haß, and Irina Kaldrack. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014. 329-344. Print.
- Johnson, David B. "The postmodern sublime.", *The Sublime From Antiquity to the Present*. Ed. Timothy M. Costelloe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 118–31. Print.
- Kipp, Lara Maleen in Rabey, David Ian. "'A Gallery of Images': From the Aberystwyth Students." *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling With Catastrophe*. Eds. James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. 225-240. Print.
- Kipp, Lara Maleen. "Brides and Widows: Iconic Dress and Identity in Howard Barker's Costumes." *Studies in Costume & Performance*. 2:1 (2017). 27-42. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: University of Columbia Press, 1982. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Time and Sense*. Trans. Ross Gubermann. New York: University of Columbia Press, 1996. Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Lyotard Reader*. Ed. Andrew Benjamin. Oxford and Cambridge (MA): Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989. Print.
- *The Inhuman*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. Print.
- McCarron, Ace. "Amplifying Catastrophe." *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling With Catastrophe*. Eds. James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015. 63-78. Print.
- Rabey, David Ian. *Howard Barker: Politics and Desire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- Rabey, David Ian. "Raising Hell." *Theatre of Catastrophe: New Essays on Howard Barker*. Eds. Karoline Gritzner and David Ian Rabey. London: Oberon, 2006. 13-29. Print.
- Rabey, David Ian. *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.

-
- Rabey, David Ian. "Chasing the ellipses: Staging Howard Barker's *The Forty (Few Words)*." *Studies in Theatre & Performance*. 32: 3 (2012). Bristol: Intellect. 285-304. Print.
- Reynolds, James. "Going Underground." *Howard Barker's Theatre: Wrestling with Catastrophe*. Eds. James Reynolds and Andy W. Smith. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 149-168. Print.
- Schellow, Constanze. "In Actu Negotiations of the Stage as a Spectrum of Im/Possible Movements Grounding Alternative Spatio-Temporal Experience in Philipp Gehmacher's Series *Walk Plus Talk*." *Performance Research*. 18: 3 (2013). 135 – 143. Print.
- Tatari, Marita. "Bühne des Dramas: Primäre Exposition und Raum Ästhetischer Erfahrung." *Bühne: Raumbildende Prozesse im Theater*. Eds. Norbert Otto Eke, Ulrike Haß, and Irina Kaldrack. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014. 85-96. Print.
- thewrestlingschool. "Found in the Ground by Howard Barker" (2010). Web.
< https://youtu.be/zxS_qfiaQGY > (Date of access: 8 May 2017).
- Thomas, Alan. "Howard Barker: Modern Allegorist." *Modern Drama*. 35:3 (1992). 433-443. Print.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard. "Die Bühne als Brennpunkt des Geschehens." *Bühne: Raumbildende Prozesse im Theater*. Eds. Norbert Otto Eke, Ulrike Haß, and Irina Kaldrack. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014. 13-26. Print.