



Barker: Plays Seven (Oberon Modern Playwrights)

Howard Barker

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Und, a play for one woman and six trays, is a moving study of dignity and self-delusion. When a guest, perhaps a lover, fails to appear for an appointment, his hostess invents excuses for his neglect, even when ill-manners degenerate into barbarity. The hostess is Jewish, the invisible guest a Nazi officer.

The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo is the twelfth marriage of a very old man to a young woman a fraction of his age. Their mutual fascination is intensified but also rendered ambiguous by the fact that both are blind. The intellectual and erotic manoeuvres conducted between them are akin to a dance, and what begins as a hypothesis becomes a painful exposure of the many meanings of intimacy.

12 Encounters with a Prodigy concentrates a theme Barker has explored over many plays – the solitude of the precocious child. Kisster, an adored orphan, has been taught to exploit the pity of the world for his own advantage. From inside his fortified personality, Kisster manipulates a host of predatory characters, keeping at bay angels and vagrants in his struggle to survive.

In *Christ's Dog* the dying Lazar, arch-seducer and bigamist, treads out a journey he feels compelled to undertake to reach accommodation with his past. At every stage of his search, a different version of the untold story of Christ's dog is proposed to him. Lazar understands that his seemingly worthless life – akin to the mongrel that howls at the foot of the cross – is a critical element of human morality.

Learning Kneeling is perhaps the most terrible of Barker's works, a play of apparently unredeemed extremity, relieved by a wit and a scrupulous intensity of thought that renders it a tribute to human persistence and imagination. Sturdee, a legless man of property, finds his home and his mistress seized by terrorists, the leader of whom, Demonstrator by name and instinct, leads him into a nightmare of ambiguities.

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