

Harley Granville Barker's *Waste*
Philippa Burt

Of all the plays written by Harley Granville Barker, *Waste* is the most significant and the most notorious. Described by *The Athenaeum* as “the most important event of our recent theatrical history”, part of its significance comes from its role in the battle against theatre censorship in Britain, where it highlighted the inconsistencies and inadequacies of the system (n.a., 1907). The play was originally written for Barker and J.E. Vedrenne’s 1907 season at the Savoy Theatre. However, a month before the scheduled opening, the pair were informed that its licence was refused. A lengthy debate over the pages of many national newspapers followed, where *Waste* became a rallying call for the campaign against theatre censorship that resulted in the formation of a Select Committee Enquiry in 1909. The play was finally licensed in 1920, but did not receive a public performance until 1936. In keeping with his usual practice, Barker revised the play considerably in 1926, and it was this version that was performed in 1936 and in the majority of subsequent UK productions, including the 2015 revival at the National Theatre.

Waste occupies a similarly central place in Barker’s oeuvre as a playwright and director, giving form to many of the ideas that underpinned his work. The political and moral questions at the heart of the play, for example, are a perfect illustration of Barker’s desire to create a serious theatre that addressed the social problems of the time honestly and, in this, the play is also a prime example of the emerging ‘New Drama’. A searing critique of the cynical workings of Parliament, in *Waste* Barker portrays a British political class made stagnant by its obsession with self-preservation, cronyism and an unwillingness to change. Importantly, he saw this same stasis in the British theatre establishment. Indeed, in many ways protagonist

Henry Trebell is a dramatic counterpart to Barker and, just as he became disillusioned in his failed attempt to reform British politics, so Barker became disillusioned with his own failed attempt to reform the British theatre, where the continued controlling presence of the Lord Chamberlain provided an acute example of this failure. In both instances Barker used his platform to challenge the hypocrisy of the British establishment.

Played over four acts, *Waste* examines the intersections of public duty and personal desire within the sphere of politics. Trebell, a young, idealistic and uncompromising politician, has drafted a bill for the disestablishment of the Church of England, bringing with it a radical educational reform that would see teachers properly trained and paid and thus transform the teaching profession from “a trade into a calling” (Barker, 1909: 269). Elected as an Independent MP, Trebell offers himself to the Conservative party, who are on the cusp of regaining power, in exchange for a Cabinet position and governmental support of the bill. At the end of the play’s opening act, which takes place at a weekend party to fortify the alliance, Trebell meets the married Amy O’Connell and the pair spend a passionate night together.

Three months later, and as Trebell’s political plans are about to be realised, Amy reveals that she is pregnant and, living apart from her estranged husband, asks Trebell for his help in disposing of the unwanted child. When he refuses, Amy opts for a backstreet abortion that ultimately costs her her life. Fearing that the scandal will compromise the new government, Act III sees the incoming Prime Minister Lord Horsham call an informal cabinet meeting to persuade Amy’s widow, Justin O’Connell, to remain quiet about the paternity. Despite securing his silence, the Cabinet members realise that the inflexible Trebell and his bill are now a liability and

decide to throw both over. Trebell receives notice of this decision in the play's final act and, seeing his political ambitions destroyed, commits suicide.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Amy's abortion was singled out as the play's most shocking element. George Redford, the Lord Chamberlain's Reader of Plays, told Barker to "moderate and modify the extremely outspoken references to sexual relations" and "demanded that I eliminate entirely all reference to the criminal operation" (Barker in n.a., 1909: 72). Prominent theatre critics who attended the Stage Society's private performance of it at the Imperial Theatre on 24 and 26 November 1907 drew similar conclusions. E.A. Baughn, for example, observed: "If such matters are to be treated on stage, they need not be underlined and emphasized" (Baughn, 1907).

Including an illegal operation like this was, of course, controversial, but, as Barker rightly observed when giving evidence to the Select Committee, other plays had done so and still been licensed (Barker in n.a., 1909: 72). This included Elizabeth Robins's *Votes for Women!*, which Barker staged at the Court Theatre six months before *Waste* was banned. This suggests that it was not so much the references to abortion that were deemed problematic, but the context in which it took place.

Of particular significance was how Barker implicated members of the establishment in the matter. *Waste* breaks with the habit of presenting unwanted pregnancies and abortions as afflictions of the poor and instead shows the upper classes to be similarly susceptible, thus questioning the presumed moral superiority of the latter. Further, he showed that individuals at the pinnacle of British society would be willing to assist in the abortion or, at least, to cover up the scandal. During Act III's conference, Horsham questions whether the cause of Amy's death could be kept secret to which prominent

doctor Sir Gilbert Wedgecroft admits that he would have “risked penal servitude” and written a false death certificate to avoid a public inquest (Barker, 1909: 280). Shortly after, when recalling how she approached him as a doctor for help, he declares:

Wedgecroft: Well, if she'd told me the truth!... No, anyhow, I couldn't. I'm sure there was no excuse. One can't run these risks [...] There are men who do on one pretext or another.

Farrant: [*Not too shocked to be curious.*] Are there really?

Wedgecroft: Oh yes, men well known... in other directions. I could give you four addresses... but of course I wasn't going to give her one. Though there again... if she'd told me the whole truth! (ibid: 281)

The suggestion that a well-respected doctor would be prepared to conduct an illegal operation, or that the Prime Minister, no less, would behave dishonourably to prevent a scandal, was clearly anathema to Redford, who that insisted such lines be removed (Barker, 1907).

The character of Amy was similarly controversial, especially with regards to the amount of agency she has. In contrast to Vida Levering in Robins's *Votes for Women!*, Amy chooses her abortion, as she makes clear during her confrontation with Trebell in Act II. In the face of Trebell's protestations that she “has no choice now... no reasonable choice”, Amy asserts her right to renounce motherhood:

There's no child because I haven't chosen there shall be and there shan't be because I don't choose. You'd have me first your play thing and then Nature's, would you? (Barker, 1909: 261)

Importantly, Amy's choice is not made to avoid scandal; rather, she is claiming authority over her own body and resisting the social pressure for her to bear the child.

Barker created in Amy a thoroughly modern and subversive woman who was unashamed of her sexuality and unwilling to sacrifice her own desires. This point was made even more acute in the 1926 revision, in which Amy declares:

When I was a girl... and no more than a girl... I said to myself... and I didn't need to say it... that never, never, would I have a child. [...] I was a fool to marry Justin. He found out... after a bit. He thinks it's a sin. I said I'd a right to choose. What do women's rights come to if it's not their right? So I left him. [...] Love's beautiful... this is beastly (Barker, 2015: 46).

Questioning motherhood in this way was radical yet perfectly in keeping with Barker's own political views. Both he and his first wife were committed to the socialist and suffragist causes and, as Susan Carlson argues, many of his productions should be seen as "artistic extensions of suffrage activism" (Carlson, 2006: 138). This includes Euripides's *Medea*, which was "deliberately performed against the upsurge of public interest in the movement for women's suffrage" (Hall and Macintosh, 2005: 511). It opened at the Savoy Theatre on 22 October 1907 and was thus intended to be seen in dialogue with *Waste*, providing a classical and contemporary depiction of female emancipation.

Barker used other means of challenging gender stereotypes. Significantly, his play opens with the female characters discussing the complex political machinations ahead of the coming election and the growing issue of disestablishmentarianism. Far from reproducing the reductive view of women as either passive wives or alluring distractions, Barker presents a group of women of varying ages who are fully cognizant of politics and, further, are active in facilitating change. On the one hand, this includes Lucy Davenport and Trebell's sister Frances, both of whom are willing to sacrifice their own

ambitions to facilitate the furthering of the men in their lives. On the other, Act I's hostess Julia Farrant is shown to exert considerable influence over Horsham and, one feels, most of the Conservative Party, using her social gatherings to engineer meetings and push her own agenda. Barker exaggerates this point further in the 1926 version:

Julia Farrant: Did they get on any sort of terms, d'you think?
Farrant: I daresay. There's often more gained by not talking about a thing than just talking.
Julia Farrant: We really ought to have got one step further.
Farrant: Don't scold me... I did my devil-most. Why didn't you ask His Eminence Charles Cantilupe down? [...]
Julia Farrant: Yes... just what we didn't want at this juncture.
Farrant: Oh! Sorry I'm not subtle. [*Grumbling contentedly.*] I'm sick of politics. Nothing but a safe seat and a devotion to my country... (Barker, 2015: 11)

While her husband is the MP, it is clear that Julia is more knowledgeable, powerful and politically strategic, highlighting also the absurdity of the conventionalised gender roles.

The men of the play represent a political establishment that operates as an old boys' club, where social connections and self-preservation are placed over national interests and socially beneficial political reforms. This is demonstrated clearly in Act III, in which Barker "most effectively lays bare the cynical machinery of Edwardian politics" (Kennedy, 1985: 86).

Horsham initially calls the meeting on which the Act centres to prevent the abortion scandal from breaking and thus ensure that Trebell can still be included in his Cabinet. However, once O'Connell's silence is secured, Trebell's fiercest critic, Russell Blackborough, seizes the opportunity to cast doubt over his inclusion and to show the danger he would pose to the Party's authority:

Blackborough: Horsham... here you have Cantelupe [sic] who won't stand in with the man, and Percival who won't stand in with his measure, while I would sooner stand in with neither. Isn't it better to face the situation now than take the trouble to form the most makeshift of Cabinets, and if that doesn't go to piece, be voted down in the House by your own party? [...] if we pursue a thoroughly safe policy and the bye-elections go right...there need be no vote of censure carried for three or four years. (Barker, 1909: 308-10)

By the end of the Act, even Trebell's closest allies are willing to turn their back on him. Thus, despite warning O'Connell that he "has the life or death of a man's reputation to decide on", Farrant is quick to turn Trebell over in order to protect his own position (ibid: 288).

Barker shows here the tendency of the establishment to close ranks and protect itself and thus calls into question the seemingly disinterested motives of the ruling class, which Barker believed was a key factor in the Lord Chamberlain's decision to ban the play (Barker in n.a., 1909: 71). Such practices meant that any real political change was practically impossible unless it served the interests of the elites, which is something that Barker discovered first hand on the issue of theatre censorship. None of the recommendations made by the 1909 Select Committee became law or were considered seriously. Rather, the Lord Chamberlain's Office invoked its royal prerogative and, with interventions from the Home Office and the Director of Public Prosecution, stopped the recommendations from being debated in Parliament. A similar fate met other reforms that Barker sought throughout his career, including the creation of a fully subsidised National Theatre, a permanent ensemble and the creation of repertory seasons.

This perception of change as unattainable adds further nuance to the play's title. Yes, the 'waste' to which Barker refers almost certainly denotes the death of the

mother and child, as well as the premature end to Trebell's political career. However, I believe that he is also speaking to the profound sense of loss and frustration that comes from seeing an opportunity for real change squandered. As Trebell's protégée Walter Kent laments in the last lines of the play: 'Look at the work undone... think of it! Who is to do it? Oh... the waste...!' (Barker, 1907: 342) Such wasted opportunities for reform are arguably the real tragedy of the play and of society as Barker saw it.

Works Cited

Barker, Harley Granville (1907) *Waste*, Revised Text Submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, December, LCP 1907/31 [The Lord Chamberlain's Plays Collection, British Library, London].

----- (1909) *Waste in Three Plays*, London: Sidgwick and Company.

----- (2015) *Waste*, London: Bloomsbury Methuen [1926].

Baughn, E. A., (1907) "'Waste". Granville Barker's Prohibited Play at the Imperial. The Censor Justified', *Daily News*, 27 November, p. 8.

Carlson, Susan, 'Politicizing Harley Granville Barker: Suffragists and Shakespeare', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (May 2006), pp. 122-40.

Hall, Edith and Fiona Macintosh (2005) *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1600-1914*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kennedy, Dennis (1985) *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

No Author (1907) 'The Week. Imperial (Stage Society) – Waste: A Tragedy in Four Acts', *The Athenaeum*, 30 November, p. 699.

No Author (1909) *Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on the Stage Plays (Censorship) Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Evidence and Appendices*, London: Wyman & Son for HSMO, 1909.

Recommended Critical Readings

Chambers, Colin and Richard Nelson, eds. (2017) *Granville Barker on Theatre: Selected Essays*, London: Bloomsbury Methuen.

Kennedy, Dennis (1985) *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press.

Shellard, Dominic and Steve Nicholson (2004) *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets... A History of British Theatre Censorship*, London: The British Library.