Contents

List of Figures vii
Acknowledgements viii
Contributors ix

Introduction 1
Karoline Gritzner

1. Some *Erōs–Thanatos* interfaces in Attic Tragedy 12
David Rudkin

2. Dying for love: the tragicomedy of Shakespeare's Cleopatra 28
Robert Wilcher

3. Desire and destruction in the drama of Georg Büchner 46
Karoline Gritzner

4. Labyrinths of the taboo: theatrical journeys of eroticism and death in Parisian culture 64
Richard J. Hand

5. The kiss of love and death: *Eros* and *Thanatos* in the opera 80
Dieter Borchmeyer

6. Eros/sex, death/murder: sensuality, homicide and culture in Musil, Brecht and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* 95
George Hunka

7. The living corpse: a metaphysic for theatre 109
Dic Edwards

8. Flirting with disaster 123
David Ian Rabey

9. Howard Barker's 'monstrous assaults': eroticism, death and the antique text 144
Graham Saunders

10. 'Welcome to the house of fun': *Eros*, *Thanatos* and the uncanny in grand illusions 160
Michael Mangan

11. Visions of Xs: experiencing La Fura dels Baus's *XXX* and Ron Athey's *Solar Anus* 178
Roberta Mock

12. *La petite mort*: erotic encounters in One to One performance 202
Rachel Zerihan

13. Saint Nick: a parallax view of Nick Cave 224
David Pattie

14. Afterword: The corpse and its sexuality 242
Howard Barker

Bibliography 246
Index 261

Introduction

Karoline Gritzner

'A space must be maintained or desire ends.' (Anne Carson)[1]

In his novel *The Golden Ass*, the second-century Latin writer Lucius Apuleius recounts the Greek love story of Eros and Psyche. Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans), the goddess of beauty, love and sexuality, is jealous of the beautiful maiden Psyche, and commands her son Eros (Cupid), the god of love, to strike Psyche with his arrow of desire and make her fall in love with the ugliest man on earth. Eros, however, becomes enamoured with Psyche himself. Aphrodite is enraged by this and curses Psyche never to find a suitable husband. Eros keeps visiting her in the darkness of the night and makes love to her, but leaves before sunrise so that she cannot see him. One night a drop of oil from the lamp falls on Eros's shoulder and wakes him. Psyche recognises him but Eros flies away, leaving her behind, abandoned and sick at heart. Psyche begins a long and painful search for her lover; enslaved by Aphrodite, she is forced to perform impossible tasks. Aphrodite wishes her to die but Psyche's desire for Eros, despite causing her pain and suffering, keeps her alive. Eventually she is reunited with Eros and becomes immortal. They have a daughter called Hedone (Voluptas) – the goddess of 'sensual pleasures'. According to the myth, Psyche experiences desire, love and sexuality in a context of conflict and danger. Greek mythology and art depict her with butterfly wings because in ancient Greek the word 'psyche' (soul) also meant butterfly. These details become significant when we remember that the Greek god Thanatos (death) is the son of Nyx (night) and Erebus (darkness) and a twin of Hypnos (sleep). He is often depicted as a winged god (like Eros) with a sword in his belt; or as a slumbering youth with a torch held upside down and carrying a wreath of poppies, or a butterfly.

Mythology tells us that love, sexual desire and death co-exist as conflicting yet complementary forces in the human psyche. Theatre and theory, from the ancient world to the present day, have explored the embodiments and conceptual constellations of sexuality, desire and death in a multitude of ways. Sigmund Freud, for example, was fascinated by the personifications and dramatisations of (unconscious) mental processes in Greek myths. In his groundbreaking psychoanalytic explorations of the human mind, formulated in studies such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), he distinguishes two classes of instincts which exist in an opposing yet complementary relationship: the life instincts (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). This is a refinement of his previous theory that the individual's instinctual needs are dominated by the pleasure principle, which rules our unconscious, the id, and aims for immediate wish-fulfilment. The pleasure principle is held in check by the reality principle, the ego's way of accounting for reality by means of repressing the id. But such a theory could not explain the origins of the destructive tendencies of the mind, such as the repetition of painful, traumatic experiences, which is not in the interests of the ego or the libidinal id. This led Freud to the discovery of the death drive. Eros is self-preserving and life-creating desire, and is often used as an umbrella term for sexual instincts (which create an energy known as libido). The sexual instincts are counterbalanced by the death drive, whose aim is destruction: to 'lead organic life back into the inanimate state'.[2]

Despite the dualistic presentation of both kinds of drive, Freud emphasised that they exist in a relationship of interdependence and fusion. 'We perceive that for purposes of discharge the instinct of destruction is habitually brought into the service of Eros'[3] – for example, in forms of aggressive sexuality such as sadism. But in his work after the First World War and in the face of personal loss (the death of his daughter), Freud no longer perceives the aggressive instincts merely as 'derivatives of Eros' but addresses the dominance of the death drive in modern society and culture. In his famous study *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) he draws our attention to the paradox that civilisation, in order to fulfil its aim to establish safe and peaceful conditions of human co-existence, has to repress and control individual instincts and desires. As a result of the pressures of evolution, the aggressive instincts have become externalised into the world

where they appear as forms of social and political violence such as war. The sexual impulses, too, are subject to control and repression by civilisation, which prevents happiness but, on the other hand, seems necessary for the maintenance of stability. For Freud, the conflict between civilisation and the human instinctual life is open-ended, but what cannot be denied is the marked tendency towards aggression in society – a manifestation of the death drive on a wider social and cultural level.

Cultural theorists after Freud have argued along similar lines. The Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, for example, argued that capitalist society was a system of repression and domination that produced pseudo-individuals with artificial needs and reified consciousness. He saw a revolutionary potential in the struggle between the pleasure principle and the reality principle (which he termed 'performance principle') if individuals consciously devote their lives to the pursuit of pleasure and the gratification of their sexual desires. Emancipated sexuality (the liberation of Eros) represented for him a radical critique of the 'surplus repression' resulting from capitalist discipline, control and manipulation of individual needs.[4]

According to the postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the capitalist order is no longer structured on the basis of contradictory forces of production (pleasure versus reality) but has become an overwhelming sphere of consumption: 'Today the whole system is swamped by indeterminacy, and every reality is absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and simulation.'[5] Furthermore, so-called 'liberated' sexuality has itself become a sign of reification and, like the other forces of production, economic growth and general rationalisation, it appears (or is socially 'staged') as an inverted manifestation of the death drive. Our system 'undertakes to abolish death and, for this very purpose, erects death above death and is haunted by it as its own end'.[6] Martin Heidegger, too, spoke of the necessity to arrive at an authentic relationship with death, and to recognise that death is finitude and nothingness and always already part of our existence. We can experience individual freedom only if we consider our existence as a Being-towards-death.

It seems that in modern society the Freudian 'repressed' returns in the form of repression itself – as the subjugation of individual life and experience under the 'monstrosity of absolute production'[7] and arrested consumption. In this globalised context of growing social and natural 'damage' (Adorno), any attempt to redirect the focus of attention to the sphere of individual

instinctual life may seem obsolete and ineffective, unpolitical even. Not so, however, if we acknowledge the labour of the *imagination* which is involved in our conceptualisations of and aesthetic responses to the drives and compulsions of the human body and psyche. In our attempts to 'make sense' of Eros and death we rely on the powers of our imagination; enter the worlds of drama, theatre and performance.

The embodiment of elemental and psychological forces in the mythological world of ancient Greece was carried over into Greek theatre where, especially in the aesthetic form of tragedy, the conflict between life/love and death is dramatised as an *agōn* ('struggle', 'battle') between the mortal hero or heroine and the gods. The transgression of boundaries is a key principle of tragedy, its primary motivating force, and recognisable in acts such as Oedipus (unknowingly) killing his father and marrying his mother, Antigone's defiance of the laws of the *polis*, or Electra and Orestes's murder of their own mother. What fascinated Nietzsche about ancient Greek tragedy was precisely its dramatisation of instinctual desires and urges in which pleasure and pain are intertwined. In an adaptation of Schopenhauer's dualism of 'will' and 'representation', Nietzsche proposes a vision of Greek culture as a battle between the gods Dionysus and Apollo – a conflict between the spirit of ecstasy, intoxication, irrationality and self-oblivion, and the principle of order, reason, creativity and beauty. It is significant that the Dionysian in Nietzsche's theory contains both life-affirming and destructive elements – Dionysian frenzy is excessive and boundary-breaking and can lead to death. Hence Nietzsche's qualification of the Dionysian as the primary instinctual force which combines Eros and Thanatos. The Dionysian is the irrational, transformational energy (the libidinal force of existence) which became restrained in later developments of Greek tragedy (according to Nietzsche, in the work of Euripides, which emphasised rationalism and the Apollonian *principium individuationis*). The aesthetic genre of tragedy reveals the powerful effects of desire, sexuality and death on the individual. Notwithstanding Plato's caution against the unmoral effects of theatre on the *polis* and Aristotle's attempts to 'defend' theatre by harnessing its 'dangerous emotions' in the process of *catharsis*: the form of tragedy has always attracted us precisely because it offers a glimpse of the unknowable and ultimately unrepresentable world of human desire, passion, love, sex, violence, pain and death.