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Contemporary Theatre in Catalonia: A Story of Creative Struggles

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The term “normalization” is typically employed within Catalan political and linguistic circles to refer to the process of recuperation, revival, and relegitimization of Catalan cultural and intellectual life that ensued following the period of the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). Here, to be “normal” is to move from the periphery to the centre, to be regarded as valid rather than illicit, and to be visible and vociferous—even obvious and everyday—instead of obstructed, silenced, or relegated to the margins of exile, the recesses of memory, or the darkness of invisibility. The path along which the contemporary Catalan theatre scene has struggled to recover and reconstitute the professional legitimacy and visibility that it lost during the dictatorship has been a complex and polemical process, for there would be concerns with regard to the distribution of public subventions for the theatre, the diminished support for the figure of the playwright or author (in favour of the director), and the privileging of image-based performance over text-based drama. Josep M. Benet i Jornet, one of Catalonia’s most prominent dramatists, who began staging his works in the 1960s, has likened the “normalcy” of the current period of Catalan theatre history to the arrival of the Jewish people at the Promised Land following their Exodus from Egypt and their subsequent desert crossing. Benet’s focus is the situation of text-based drama in Catalan; that is, the literary genre that, during the post-war period of the dictatorship, was perhaps most vulnerable to censorship. Once the desert was crossed, however, as he observes, the path to “normalcy” was still not complete, and new challenges would ensue.

In democratic times, as was the case during the Franco dictatorship, the presence of the Catalan language as a vehicle of theatrical expression has continued to hold symbolic value as a crucial marker of identity and a vindication of Catalan culture. For many contemporary Catalan dramatists and theatre practitioners, innately conscious of the oppressive realities of the past, the linguistic distinction appears to have taken precedence above all other thematic or aesthetic indicators of national identity. To write and/or stage a play in Catalan is, in effect, to inscribe and reclaim a specific cultural space.

Within the complex space of contemporary Catalan cultural identity, there has been great difficulty, as Helena Buffery as observed, in characterizing with precision the idea of a national stage, for it is a notion whose meaning fluctuates according to “diverse claims to legitimacy,” as well as a varied range of political, historical, geographic and/or social perspectives. Despite varying contemporary connotations, Catalan theatrical life throughout the twentieth-century was, nevertheless, largely underpinned by a desire for normalization and institutionalization, derived in part from the nationalist dreams of the noucentista movement, which was named for the year 1900. Such aspirations surfaced during the early part of the century in the voices of key figures, such as Josep M. Millàs-Raurell, a vital intellectual force, who, during the 1920s and 1930s, sought to bring the Catalan stage in line with European literary and institutional models. Likewise, during the period comprising 1931 to 1936, the Republican Generalitat (government of Catalonia) articulated a cultural policy advocating the creation of a National Theatre of Catalunya. Its goals, which, under
“normal” circumstances, would have been considered worthy of any modern industrialized nation, would fall silent with the advent of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent censorship practices of the Franco Regime.\textsuperscript{iv}

Significant precedents with regard to normalization and institutionalization emerged during the period of the dictatorship, though not without severe difficulties and constraints. Enric Gallén recounts the attempt to create a public Teatre Municipal de Barcelona in the 1940s, and how, in 1949, the formation of the Patronat del TeatreCatalà (Advisory Board of Catalan Theatre) of Barcelona’s Teatre Romea represented an effort to devote programming to Catalan drama and to promote, in large part, the work of author Josep Maria de Sagarra. Other dramatists, such as Ferran Soldevila, Frederic Soler, Àngel Guimerà, Adrià Gual and Ignasi Iglesias were included in the Romea project; yet the Patronat died a precipitous death in the early 1950s, the result of economic, conceptual and organizational failures.\textsuperscript{v} Gallén calls attention, in addition, to the activities of the Capsa Theatre, a platform for the Catalan independent theatre groups, and to the failed, short-lived project that was the Teatro Nacional de Barcelona (1968-74), a theatre devoted to Spanish-language productions, officially-sanctioned (and imposed) by the Franco Regime under the auspices of the Spanish Ministry of Information and Tourism.\textsuperscript{vi} While the non-professional, non-official, and sometimes furtive activities of the Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona (1955-63) and the Escola d’ Art Dramàtic Adrià Gual (1960-76), critical components of the Catalan independent theatre movement, constituted a renewal of the Catalan theatre scene, they also, in effect, laid the foundation for what would become, in the future, the repertoire of a national theatre.\textsuperscript{vii}

During the democratic period, the renovation of Catalan theatrical life has entailed the construction and restoration of theatrical infrastructures in Barcelona (and, more broadly, Catalonia) whose existence had been thwarted by the dictatorship. It has also included the remodelling of non-theatrical spaces and the recovery of locales that had been transformed into cinemas. The year immediately following Franco’s death, 1976, represents a key moment, in that it marked the establishment of the Assemblea d’Actors i Directors (Standing Conference of Actors and Directors). With its creation, the Catalan stage embarked on the road to normalization. Inspired by European paradigms that included Jean Vilar’s Théâtre National Populaire and Giorgio Strehler’s Piccolo Teatro di Milano, Catalan theatre professionals during the democratic transition were motivated by a seemingly utopian and equalitarian view of the theatre as a public service.\textsuperscript{viii} They did not regard culture as a luxury; instead, it was considered a necessity for ensuring the overall wellbeing of society. Emphasis was thus placed on “an aesthetic and ethical commitment,” rather than commercial and economic interests.\textsuperscript{ix} It was with these concerns in mind that the Assemblea launched an appeal in 1976 for the creation of a Teatre de Barcelona, a Teatre de Catalunya, and a Lleidel Teatre (Theatre Law). Although these demands were initially denied, the Assemblea did succeed in inciting public debate and establishing, that same year, the Grec summer festival under the auspices of the
Barcelona municipal government. It was an event met with resounding public enthusiasm, whose opening night each June continues to serve as a reminder of past struggles. Shortly after the creation of the first Assemblea, an alternative group with more progressive political tendencies broke away to form the Assemblea de Treballadors de l’Espectacle (Standing Conference of Theatre Workers). Its activities were based at Barcelona’s Saló Diana until 1979, and it is still remembered today for its stunning production of the classic romantic work *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844), by José Zorrilla (1817-1893), at the historic Born Market in November 1976.

The year 1976 also marked the creation of the Teatre Lliure, Catalonia’s most stable, accomplished and distinguished repertory company. The Lliure was founded by Lluís Pasqual, Pere Planella, Fabià Puigserver, and Carlota Soldevila as a private collective with public aspirations. Its original performance space, still in use, is located in the Gràcia district of Barcelona in a late-nineteenth-century building that once belonged to the Catalan workers cooperative La Lleialtat. Faithful to its name and to its establishment during the democratic transition, the Lliure—both the building and the resident company—has stood since its beginnings as an emblem of freedom of expression, a vindication of Catalan-language theatre productions, and a laboratory for experimentation. Its unique view of the creative process has emphasized the notion of artisanship, as opposed to authorship, in its innovative interpretations of classic plays drawn from an international repertoire. The Lliure has functioned as a formative training ground for many talented Catalan actors; yet it has also been a site of contention. During the late 1970s, for example, the theatre was criticized by several Catalan dramatists for privileging the so-called “universal” repertoire rather than encouraging the creation of original Catalan-language plays.

In 1988, the Lliure became a public entity, the Fundació Teatre Lliure—Teatre Públic de Barcelona, with the support of the Barcelona municipal government. In 1989, through the perseverance of director/scenic designer Puigserver, the Barcelona City Council granted the Lliure its dream of creating world-class theatre space: plans were begun to renovate a building known as the Palau d’Agricultura, an historic building situated along the slope of Montjuïc, originally constructed for the Barcelona International Exposition of 1929. During the late 1990s, the Ajuntament (municipal government) and Diputació (provincial council) also began converting the lower part of Montjuïc into the Ciutat del Teatre, a multi-space “theatre city” that would contain the new Lliure, along with the Mercat de les Flors, the Teatre Grec (centrepiece of the Barcelona summer arts festival), and the new headquarters of the Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona (the conservatory of theatre of dance). Motivated by cultural-political aspirations to transform Barcelona into a European theatre capital, the Generalitat and Spain’s central government also provided funding for the new Lliure and the Ciutat del Teatre.

In 1997, Pasqual, who had garnered notoriety throughout Europe for his directorial work, returned to Barcelona from his position as director of the Théâtre de l’Odéon in


xii. Lluís Pasqual, Projecte Ciutat del Teatre.


xvi. Gallén, “Catalan Theatrical Life,” 32-4


xxviii. See Helena Buffery’s adept deconstruction of the rhetoric of Flotats’s Projecte in “Theater Space and Cultural Identity,” 199.


xx. “El mètode Grönholm’ baja el telón trasasños de éxito en el Poliorama,” La Vanguardia, 15 June 2007. A simultaneous premiere took place in Madrid in Spanish, under the direction of Tamzin Towsend at the Teatro Marquina (with Carlos Hipólito, Cristina Marcos, Jorge Roelas, and Elezor Ortiz), where it ran for two seasons.

xxi. See “Domènec Reixachdeja el TNC con ocupaciónequilibrada en lastrressalas,” La Vanguardia, 29 June 2006.

xxii. Clua, Guillem, Marburg (Barcelona: Proa/TeatreNacional de Catalunya, 2010).