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SERGI BELBEL'S THEATRE OF PAIN

Dins la seva memòria ("Within his Memory"), a Catalan play written by Sergi Belbel in 1986, begins in total darkness, an imprecise empty void in which the spectator hears only the deep, rhythmic gasps and sighs of the anonymous protagonist.¹ As the stage lights slowly rise during this "preliminary" scene, Ell (or, "He," as the protagonist is generically called) is depicted on his knees, masturbating with his back to the audience. At first glance, his violent, self-inflicted pleasure may be interpreted as an ultimate affirmation of life; yet, his autoerotic gestures are also imbued with memories that carry with them tremendous pain and torment, for as he gazes at his reflection in a mirror hanging above the stage, he "sweats blood" (according to the stage directions) and is reminded of the tragic death of his identical twin brother in an automobile accident some years earlier. It is a gaze that induces an overwhelming sense of anguish: feelings of guilt for having lent his brother the keys to his car after buying him several drinks at a bar, disgrace at the thought of confronting his sister-in-law with the identical face – in effect, the mirror image – of her dead husband, and a disturbing blend of desire and shame as he recalls the uncommon "sentimental education" that was his first incestuous encounter with his twin (Castellanos 12). He can gaze into the mirror and try to relive that dangerous love affair, but his hands and, in essence, his entire body, are now stained with blood.

This powerful game of mirrors and incestuous doubling may at first sound like melodramatic excess or, perhaps, a perverse reinscription of the story of Cain and Abel, but the tale that I have just told is actually situated prior to Scene One (or even, "Scene Zero") of Belbel's play; that is to say, the action in this play precedes the word (or the diegetic space/time of Belbel's play), alternating in time between one month and three years prior to the manifestation of spoken language on the stage.² The precarious identity of the anonymous protagonist hence becomes visible to the spectator in subjective fragments and shreds; not through a naturalistic psychological portrayal (though, one might hasten to impose upon him a psychoanalytical interpretation), but through the use of three other characters, or voices, that emerge in the darkness. Generically numbered 1, 2, and 3, they are the exterior projections of his severed conscience and interior anguish, the inner voices of an enigmatic dissected memory. With a frugal, repetitive mode of expression reminiscent of the theatre of Samuel Beckett and a poetic, rhythmic form of linguistic phasing evocative of the monologues of Bernard-Marie Koltès, the three voices persuade and compel the protagonist to remember, to traverse multiple levels of space and time, despite his resistance.

¹ *Dins la seva memòria*, one of Belbel's earliest works, was awarded the "Ciutat de Granollers" theatre prize ("ex-aequo") 1987. It is one of only a few of his plays that to date has never been staged.

² See José Sanchis Sinisterra's lucid preface to *Dins la seva memòria*, "Sergi Belbel: la passió de la forma" and Eduardo Galán, "Sergi Belbel: artífice de la renovación escénica."

- 3: Ara.
 1: recorda't del passat dins la teva memòria;
 2: ja ha arribat el moment.
 3: És ara el moment.
 1: Quan aquest temps
 2: ja t'ha paralytitzat
 3: I consumit.
 2: Molts dies!
 3: Tants dies!
 1: Pots comptar-los
 3: Tants dies.
 2: Molts.
 3: Tants dies. (22)

The action of the play, which on the surface appears static, shifts back and forward in time throughout the process of remembrance, and as a result, Belbel is able to construct a theatrical universe that is, as José Sanchis Sinisterra notes, “compact yet expansive, reiterative and progressive” (“Sergi Belbel: la passió” 11).³ With this play, Belbel engages in a formal exploration of identity, subjectivity, memory, and the dramatic monologue, transferring to the context of the theatre what would be the equivalent in narrative writing of an interior monologue. It is an exploration that situates him within a significant cluster of modern (and postmodern) playwrights – among them, the aforementioned Beckett, Koltès, and Sanchis Sinisterra – who have confronted, often through monologue, the traumas of remembrance and forgetting.⁴ Belbel’s continued interest in monologue – a preference for narrativity over action – is reflected in successive works, such as *Elsa Schneider* (1987),⁵ which is composed of three contiguous monologues, and is symptomatic of his ongoing preoccupation with the theatrical word; not only its potential during a period in Catalan, and Spanish, theatre history in which text-based drama is enjoying renewed prestige, but also the extent to which verbal language is essentially ineffectual in apprehending reality.

The notion that subjective, psychic realities – thoughts, emotions, desires, and passions – can garner material presence on stage is a principle of theatri-

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴ See Jeanette R. Malkin’s *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*, in which she observes that “an important group of theater texts written since the 1970s exhibit an exceptional preoccupation with questions of memory, both in terms of their *thematic* attention to remembered (or repressed) pasts, and in terms of the plays’ ‘memoried’ *structures*: structures of repetition, conflation, regression, echoing, overlap, and simultaneity” (1). Malkin pays particular attention to the work of Beckett, Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Thomas Bernhard. Cf., also, Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Belbel was already quite familiar with contemporary memory drama when he wrote *Dins la seva memòria*. During the 1985-86 academic year, he participated in a mini-course offered by director Joan Ollé at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and, as a result, staged his own versions of Müller’s *Hamlet-Machine* and *Quartet* with the other students of the Aula de Teatre. See Jordi Castellanos’s informative preface to *Elsa Schneider* for a detailed bio-bibliographical profile of Belbel and his work during the early years of his career. See, also, Maria Delgado and David George’s overview of Belbel’s work in *Modern Spanish Dramatists*.

⁵ The year of composition is given in parentheses.

cal representation that has informed the work of numerous playwrights and directors, from Shakespeare and Calderón to David Mamet and Peter Brook. For Mamet, our response to drama is a function of the extent to which it corresponds to our dream life. "The life of the play," he tells us, "is the life of the unconscious" ("A National Dream-Life" 8). Brook has emphasized on more than one occasion that the theatre is a place where the invisible, unknown side of reality can unexpectedly materialize, making itself visible and known to the spectator (*The Empty Space* 42).⁶ As for Belbel, the role that verbal communication may play in bringing forth these realities has always been a matter of investigation and even a point of contention. In essence, his theatre is about pain, for it is within the realm of anguish and affliction that the fissure between the visible and the invisible, sign and referent, becomes most unmistakably apparent.

For all its richness and rhetorical twists and turns, verbal language can only begin to offer a partial, momentary impression of the experience of pain. From the grand-scale trauma that was the Holocaust, to the intimate drama that is the doctor-patient relationship, those who have contemplated the erratic inexpressibility of pain have observed how it universally triggers an abundant use of rhetorical strategies of substitution and avoidance.⁷ As David LeBreton observes, in his "anthropology" of pain, "Las metáforas propuestas al médico o a quienes le rodean, la riqueza adjetiva de las palabras procuran aislar con pequeñas pinceladas los destellos de un dolor cuya imagen es la insuficiencia del lenguaje" (45). In his "archeology of medical perception," Michel Foucault expresses a desire to uncover the vestiges of a pre-discursive moment when "seeing and saying are still one" (xi). For Foucault, the doctor-patient relationship is thwarted by a persistent gap between the visible and the invisible: "the presence of disease in the body, with its tensions and its burnings, the silent world of the entrails, the whole dark underside of the body lined with endless unseeing dreams, are challenged as to their objectivity by the reductive discourse of the doctor" (xi). Both LeBreton's anthropology and Foucault's archeology remind us that pain is not just physical and emotional, but also spiritual, cultural, social, and political, capable of signifying an "unmaking" of the world, such as that described by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*.

It is, of course, also the quest of the artist, the poet, the painter, the dramatist, the *metteur en scène*, to express pain. Indeed, Scarry is quick to invoke the reminder offered by Thomas Mann's Settembrini that "there is virtually no piece of literature that is *not* about suffering" (11). Belbel expresses through his theatre an implicit desire to return to that pre-verbal point in time that Foucault describes, to liberate himself and his dramatic personages from the burdens of verbal language and create a phenomenal space where the Cartesian categories of perception – body, consciousness, and world – would flow into a coherent whole. His plays, in an ironic way, *speak* to the inarticulate nature of pain: a pain that is symptomatic of our contemporary culture, a pain that invokes the presence of death and reminds us of the finitude of our existence. In *Elsa Schneider*, he intertwines the lives of three female protagonists

⁶ See, also, Brook's *The Shifting Point*.

⁷ See, also, for example Cristóbal Pera and Dominick LaCapra.

with the common thematic thread of suicide. In *Carícies* ("Caresses," 1991), he stages within multiple contexts the painful lack of communication between human beings that presumably love each other. In *Morir* ("To Die," 1993), he contemplates the inexpressibility of death and the impossibility of staging the process of dying. In *La sang* ("Blood," 1998), he offers an uncommonly non-moralistic approach to the theme of terrorism and torture. In the musical melodrama *El temps de Planck* ("Planck Time," 1999), he situates much of the dramatic action within an infinitesimal fraction of a second located between life and death. Finally, in *Forasters* ("Strangers," 2003), he portrays the pain of cultural displacement and migration, within a family melodrama that vacillates between two centuries. In the pages that follow, I shall offer a descriptive account of the essential elements of Belbel's artistic trajectory. I shall then turn my attention to three representative plays – *Elsa Schneider*, *Carícies*, and *El temps de Planck* – to demonstrate how his investigation of the rapport between visibility and invisibility, between what is representable and what is not, comes to light in his work as a dramatist and director.⁸

* * *

Born in Terrassa in 1963, Sergi Belbel is presently at the forefront of his theatrical generation. He is a highly accomplished playwright, director, translator, and educator, who has injected the Catalan (and Spanish) stage with a strong dose of originality and vitality while continuing to cultivate his profound interest in classical authors. His most recent achievements include the *mise en scène* of his own translation/adaptation of Eduardo de Filippo's *Sabato, domenica e lunedì* ("Saturday, Sunday, Monday") which premiered at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) in November 2002. The show was so well received during its two-month run (winning the Ciutat de Barcelona Prize 2003, eight "Butaca" prizes and packing the 900-seat Sala Gran each night), that it was reprogrammed for the winter of 2004. Belbel began to garner widespread critical attention in Spain in 1985 when, while completing his studies in French literature at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), he received the first "Marqués de Bradomín" prize for *André Gide/Virginia Woolf, calidoscopios y faros de hoy* ("André Gide/Virginia Woolf, Kaleidoscopes and Lighthouses of Today"). The play, originally written in Spanish, loosely recreates segments drawn from the lives of the two historical figures named in the title. It then posits a romantic encounter in a more contemporary setting between two fictitious characters, Alfred Geis (AG) and Veronica White (VW), who function as "reflections," or possible reincarnations, of the past.⁹ Since *Calidoscopios y faros*, Belbel has authored more than twenty plays and has

⁸ I wish to express my gratitude to Sergi Belbel for his continued support and generosity in sharing with me unpublished manuscripts, press clippings, video recordings, and his thoughts with regard to the creative process.

⁹ *André Gide/Virginia Woolf, calidoscopios y faros de hoy* premiered at the Festival de Cabueñes, Gijón, in September 1986 by the Taller Central de Madrid, under the direction of Juanjo Granada (coproduced by the Centro Nacional de Nuevas Tendencias Escénicas and the Instituto de la Juventud).

received a seemingly infinite succession of theatre prizes. Critics and spectators who follow the Barcelona theatre scene still recall with a curious combination of nostalgia and disbelief the so-called "Operation Belbel" of January 1989, in which two of Belbel's plays premiered almost simultaneously: *En companyia d'abisme* ("Deep Down"), which he directed himself, at the Sala Gran of the Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona, and *Elsa Schneider*, directed by Ramon Simó, at the Teatre Romea. Concurrently with these premieres, the Institut del Teatre organized a Belbel "retrospective." Devoted solely to the work of a playwright who was, at the time, only twenty-five years old, it included round-table discussions, the performance of Belbel's translation of *L'augmentacion* ("The Raise"), by George Perec, play readings, and video projections. The "operation" as a whole prompted one journalist for the Catalan daily *Avui*, to declare, "El teatre català es diu Sergi Belbel."

It was an auspicious beginning that would augur well with regard to the future, for since that time, Belbel, who also teaches workshops in playwriting and translation at the Institut del Teatre and the Sala Beckett, has played a leading role in reinvigorating the tradition of text-based drama in Catalan on stages throughout Catalunya. This is a theatre community that has witnessed since the 1990s a hysterical outpouring of new playwrights and new plays.¹⁰ In 2002, in conjunction with his work on the advisory board of the TNC, Belbel initiated along with Simó (one of Barcelona's most accomplished directors) a project known as "T-6," a theatre laboratory designed to nurture and stage the work of six young dramatists per year, mainly from Catalunya. Belbel, the son of immigrants from Andalusia and Castile, also operates without geographic or linguistic borders and has seen several of his works garner success in translation throughout South America and Europe – especially France, Germany, and Austria. It would appear that his presence on the international theatre scene is unrivaled by that of any other living playwright from Spain.¹¹

* * *

¹⁰ Carles Batlle ("La nueva dramaturgia catalana") and María-José Ragué-Arias, *¿Nuevas dramaturgias?* and *El teatro de fin de milenio en España* offer inventories of the new playwrights in the Catalan-speaking communities of Spain.

¹¹ He routinely translates his own works into Spanish. In the spring 1999, Marion Bierry's Parisian production of Belbel's *Després de la pluja* ("After the Rain," 1993), which premiered at the Théâtre de Poche-Montparnasse in November 1998, won the "Molière" prize for best comedy produced in France during the 1998-99 season. (There was even an off-Broadway production of this play, titled *After the Rain*, which went largely unnoticed.) In 1996, Belbel was awarded the Spanish National Prize for Dramatic Literature for *Morir*, and, soon afterward, Catalan film director Ventura Pons adapted two of his plays for the screen: *Carícies* ("Caresses," 1997), and *Morir* (1999). In July 2000, Belbel received the National Theatre prize from the Generalitat de Catalunya for his mise en scène of Carlo Goldoni's *Trilogia della villeggiatura* ("Holiday Trilogy," 1761), adapted into Catalan by Jordi Galceran as *L'estiueig*, which premiered at the TNC in November 1999. In the spring of 2002, he received the Premio Max (the Spanish equivalent of a "Tony" award) when *Després de la pluja* was designated the play with the largest international presence. His musical *El temps de Planck* (*Die Zeit der Plancks*, in German) premiered at the prestigious Burgtheater in Vienna during the spring of 2003.

The theatre of Belbel in general echoes the concerns of the European and North American theatrical avant-gardes with the process of communication (the degree to which language determines dramatic action) and the phenomenology of theatrical space (the relationship between physical space and invisible, subjective, psychic realities). In keeping with the minimalism and economy of expression that many have come to associate with Beckett and Mamet, as well as Harold Pinter, Belbel's characters employ a paradoxical brand of verbal discourse, marked by frequent elliptical clauses, *doubles entendres*, and misinterpretations. These linguistic tendencies are coupled with a seemingly magical ability to transform verbal detritus into lyrical poetry and a fine-tuned capacity to detect and reproduce the rhythms and syncopations inherent in ordinary daily speech. However, what seems like everyday, prosaic language also acquires an unexpected plasticity; it is converted into a work of art in which the expression of a fixed meaning is not always a primary concern. Eduardo Galán has underlined the way in which Belbel's plays stress the musical and acoustic qualities of language: "Belbel juega con las palabras: forma y sustancia, significante y significado, son las dos caras de una misma moneda, que B. se empeña en separar artificialmente para jugar con los valores de las palabras" (84). In his prologue to *Després de la pluja*, Carles Batlle, correspondingly, observes in Belbel's theatre "una sensibilitat aguda per transitar àgilment, irònicament, a través de registres idiomàtics variats."

For Batlle, Belbel's theatre has succeeded in restoring the word to a level of "prestige" that it had seemingly lost: "Una paraula que és poètica sense ser retòrica, que és oral sense ser trivial, que és densa sense ser tensa" (10). It is a return to the word in which, paradoxically, silence and the dramatic pause acquire strong subversive powers capable of dismantling any realist mechanisms that are already at work in the *mise en scène*. Indeed, silence, as Pinter himself has noted in an essay titled "Writing for the theatre," is not just a situation in which words are not spoken; silence also occurs when there is "a torrent of language," a violent explosion of verbiage in which the speech we hear functions as a "necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen" that is used to cover nakedness or vulnerability (14-15). Pinter's observations are equally applicable to Belbel's work, for communication (or a lack thereof) is a theme that surfaces obsessively in his plays. Quite often Belbel's characters gush "torrents" of language, but these torrents are not mere noise. His dominant rhetorical strategy is a variation on *aporia*, the trope of doubt and communicative ineffectualness. This is the term used by Toby Silverman Zinman when she speaks of the (Jewish) rhythm of talking in Mamet's drama. One might also say that this strategy of *aporia* is, in effect, a component of what José Sanchis Sinisterra has termed, in speaking about the theatre of Lluïsa Cunillé, a *poètica de la sostracció* ("a poetics of subtraction") ("Una poètica" 7). Opaque, perplexing, and enigmatic, Belbel's characters, accordingly, run verbal circles around an absent referent that seems to have fallen into a semantic void. The result is a kind of contemporary aphasia, or an inability to express verbally the conditions of a culture that has become morally bereft, ethically corrupt, spiritually dispossessed, and wholly void of compassion.

The typical Belbelian characters are often solitary beings, generic and anonymous, who find themselves victims, thrown into a space that is not at all

hospitable. In such plays as *Carícies*, *Després de la pluja*, and *La sang*, they inhabit an urban landscape of harsh, aggressive realities reminiscent of the theatre of Bernard-Marie Koltès: opulence and prostitution, consumerism and corruption, illness and decadence, moral ambiguity and brutal violence. As Belbel explains, “Mis obras analizan sobre todo el horror cotidiano, un tema que, por supuesto, ya han tratado antes los escenarios; es la forma de enfocarlo, de plantarlo sobre las tablas lo que me interesa . . .” (quoted by Armiño 24). Central to this “quotidian horror,” is, as Batlle notes, an investigation of the violence hidden, yet implicit, in our most mundane actions (“La nueva dramaturgia” 42). Often this violence gives way to aphasiac inexpressibility.

Part of Belbel’s eclectic education in the theatre began at the UAB, where, in 1983, he and Toni Casares helped found the Aula de Teatre. At the UAB Belbel also had the opportunity to study under playwright/director José Sanchis Sinisterra and eventually became a key participant in the activities of the Sala Beckett, the experimental theatre laboratory that Sanchis founded in the late 1980s and which is, today, under the artistic direction of Casares, one of Spain’s most prominent and prestigious alternative theatre venues.¹²

One of the most significant experiments to grow out of Belbel’s association with Sanchis and the Beckett was a spectacle titled *Mínim-mal Show* (1987), which Belbel created with Miquel Górriz and the Teatro Fronterizo.¹³ *Mínim-mal Show* was composed of a series of twenty-three sequences, or vignettes, portraying situations taken from everyday life that, when placed within the representational frame of the theatre and subjected to the scrutiny of the spectator, were suddenly “made strange,” imbued with absurdity or awkwardness. The spectacle, which emphasized gesture and movement, was reminiscent of the “visual poetry” of Joan Brossa, or the visual theatre of Peter Handke. More concretely, though, it reflected Belbel’s fascination with dance-theatre, especially the work of Pina Bausch and her Tanztheater Wuppertal (Interview with Feldman 74).

Following the experience of *Mínim-mal Show*, Belbel went on to search for ways to articulate his interest in the rapport between textuality and physicality, between discursivity and spatiality. Indeed, his work as both a playwright and director has displayed an increasingly intense awareness of the possibilities engendered by creating intriguing relationships between plot and space, and between space and spectatorship. In his work as a director (in the past, in collaboration with designer Quim Roig and, more recently, with the design team of Glaenzel/Cristià), he has shown a penchant for selecting a significant aspect or anxiety present in the plot, which he then superimposes upon the theatrical space or elucidates through a spatial configuration. The *mise en scène*, for Belbel the director, is always a direct function of the text; it is conceived in such a way that it is placed at the service of the text. In Belbel’s staging of his own translation of French Canadian dramatist Normand Chaurette’s *Fragments d’une lettre d’adieu lus par des géologues* (“Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by

¹² Casares continues to serve as artistic director of the Aula de Teatre at the UAB.

¹³ *Mínim-mal Show* was written and directed by Belbel and Górriz. It was first staged at the Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona in May of 1987 and again at the Teatre Romea/Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya in December 1987.

Geologists,” 1988) at the Sala Beckett in 1999, the characters were seated around a circular table, which slowly revolved at a speed that was nearly undetectable by the audience – until, that is, the spectators realized, to their surprise, that the characters had become repositioned.¹⁴ It was a spatial strategy that subtly underlined the issues of perspectivism imbedded in Chaurette’s text. At the end of *El temps de Planck*, which premiered under Belbel’s direction at the Teatre Romea in June 2000, the character of Maria (through the use of two actresses) appeared to be in two different places at the same moment. This was one of several spatial devices that served to express the anxiety of time that underpins the plot. In Belbel’s staging of *La dona incompleta* (“The Incomplete Woman”), by David Plana, at the Sala Beckett during the spring of 2001, the audience was seated upon a diverse group of chairs and sofas, which were set on wheels. Between – and even, during – scenes, the actors maneuvered the spectators (by rolling and manipulating their seats) about the theatrical space, thus allowing them to view the space, and Plana’s play with fiction and reality, from a variety of vantage points. Similarly, in his production of Josep M. Benet i Jornet’s *L’habitació del nen* (“The Thirteenth Hour of the Night”), which premiered at the Teatre Lliure de Gràcia during the winter of 2003, Belbel incorporated a play with theatrical space whereby the spectators’ seats were set on two large sets of risers, which, in turn, were set on wheels. The show began with a frontal stage format and no visible gap between the risers. In the darkness between scenes, however, the stagehands were charged with pushing and dragging the risers and thereby creating a fracture down the center of the theatrical space. The spectators confronted each other in the darkness from opposite ends of the room, faced with the task of searching for the truth that lay somewhere in the spatial void. It was a spatial metaphor that reflected the confrontation that transpires in Benet’s play between two opposing versions of reality.

Through the process of *mise en scène*, and in productions such as those described here, Belbel skillfully creates a distinct tension between image and word, which serves to augment the semantic power of text and underline its most meaningful points of conflict.

* * *

Elsa Schneider is an early reflection of Belbel’s deep-seated preoccupation with structure and with the relationship between content and form. The play, which was awarded the Premi Nacional Ignasi Iglèsias in 1987, premiered in January 1989 at Barcelona’s Teatre Romea (at that time, the seat of the Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya [CDGC]) under the direction of Ramon Simó, with a set design by Quim Roy and costume design by Mercè Paloma.¹⁵ It is composed of three monologues that are thematically interlaced. Roy employed the same minimalist design, with a wood-paneled backdrop, for

¹⁴ All descriptions of the productions herein referenced, except where otherwise noted, derive from my personal experience as a theatre spectator.

¹⁵ Commentary with regard to the production *Elsa Schneider* is based on my viewing of a video recording of Belbel’s production at the Romea.

all three scenes, creating variations through the use of different lighting techniques.¹⁶ The first part, "Elsa," is derived from Arthur Schnitzler's 1924 novella *Fräulein Else*. Here, as in *Calidoscopios y faros*, Belbel uses a work of literature as a source of inspiration.¹⁷ He based the second monologue, "Schneider," not on literary fiction, but on the tragic life of Austrian-born actress Romy Schneider (Vienna 1938 – Paris, 1982), a woman whose "larger than life" tale very well might have been a work of literature. Finally, the third part, a brief epilogue titled "Elsa Schneider," represents a sort of archetypal fusion of the two previous monologues. Again, as in *Calidoscopios y faros*, the character of Elsa Schneider is a possible "reflection," or reincarnation, of the past; but she also represents the future lives that are part of a repetitive cycle. As in *Dins la seva memòria*, Belbel conceives memory as a subjective, creative act. The events of the past are resuscitated and re-created in the present, in the "here and the now." *Elsa Schneider* presents three women whose destinies are marked by tragedy and misfortune; three women whose lives become undone, and who disintegrate upon the stage, before the spectator's eyes. The stories that they recount and represent are tales of exploitation and objectification. Pain traverses their lives; it even replaces them.

Belbel intertwines the lives of all three protagonists with a *leit motif* that is a glass of champagne. The image of champagne appears for the first time in scene 2 of Elsa's monologue, "Cambra d'hotel núm. 77," in which she declares, "Ah, quin vespre més meravellós. 'L'aire sembla xampany', . . . sí, l'aire sembla xampany i respirant-lo m'embriago" (31). She will refer to this air, or ambience, of champagne several times, and as the play progresses, the metaphor becomes more than merely a way of characterizing an ebullient or effervescent atmosphere; it is a connecting thread that refers to the cycle of pain and suffering that all three women will experience. The champagne is a harbinger of self-destruction and suicide. To drink from the glass is to convert one's private life into a public spectacle, to surrender to a seemingly inevitable fate, and to become caught up in a cycle of exploitation that ultimately will lead to death.

¹⁶ In reference to his work on the production, Roy offers the following observations regarding the differences in lighting among the three monologues: "En el primer monòleg era més aviat il·lusionista, en el cas del segon volia ser expressionista, i per al tercer era tan sols llum frontal que explicava que allò que havíem vist era un pur dispositiu, que ja no pretenia dir res, però que des del seu mutisme empenyia implacablement Elsa Schneider al suïcidi" (193).

¹⁷ This is not the first time that Schnitzler's novella has left its mark on Catalan culture. Castellanos points out that, in 1929, Catalan writer Carles Soldevila (Barcelona 1894) was influenced by the structure and form of *Fräulein Else* in creating his novel *Fanny*. Shortly after, according to Castellanos, Schnitzler's work was translated into Catalan by Joan Alavedra and published in the "Col·lecció Univers" series (13). It was also widely adapted and read throughout France. Carlos Hugo Christensen adapted *Fräulein Else* for the screen with his *El àngel desnudo*, which premiered in 1946, and substituted Rio de Janeiro for the backdrop of San Marino. In 2002, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre presented the world premiere of *Fräulein Else*, a dramatic adaptation of Schnitzler's novella by Francesca Faridany, in co-production with the La Jolla Playhouse. As a curious coincidence, Steven Spielberg's 1989 film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (posterior to Belbel's play) contains a character with the name Dr. Elsa Schneider, who was played by Alison Doody.

Part one, Belbel's theatrical adaptation of Schnitzler's novella, follows the original work quite closely. Elsa (played by Laura Conejero in the debut production) is a sexually inexperienced, nineteen-year-old woman, vacationing in San Marino with a wealthy aunt at the Hotel Fratazza. While there, she receives an urgent letter from her mother in Vienna explaining that her father is, once again, in a humiliating state of financial debt. Having exhausted all possibilities of a loan from family members, her mother insinuates that she would like Elsa to offer her body (and, by extension, her soul) to an old family friend, Herr Von Dorsday, a sixty-something man with an intimidating, lecherous gaze. In exchange, Elsa is to receive 30,000 florins, a sum of money that, in a subsequent letter, will increase to 50,000. The pressure is especially strong as Elsa is told that her father will be sent to prison if he is unable to pay his enormous debts. Elsa may be sexually inexperienced, but she is nevertheless quite aware of the power of her sexuality: "Potser no m' enamoraré mai... Tot i que crec que estic bé... que sóc... sensual... Sensual" (30). As the monologue progresses, a feeling of disgrace and betrayal comes over her while she begins to comprehend the demeaning and corrupt implications of her parents' request. Elsa would rather die than suffer the humiliation of prostituting herself for her parents' solvency and, in an effort to maintain her dignity, she finds herself propelled toward suicide. The monologue is, in reality, an exterior manifestation of Elsa's tormented interior stream of consciousness, reminiscent of the Joycean Molly Bloom, as Castellanos notes in his preface (13) and Marcos Ordóñez observes in his review of the debut production ("Elsa Schneider" 81).

In scene 7, "Saló de l'hotel," the action reaches a tense climax and an emotional denouement. Here one finds an early manifestation of Belbel's interest in spatial strategies and metaphors that implicitly invite the audience to be involved in the spectacle. In an atmosphere described as "de xampany" (49), and with the gradual crescendo of Schumann's "Carnival" for piano heard in the background, Elsa, clad only in a coat, walks slowly downstage with her hands folded across her lapels. She smiles as she descends a staircase leading down from the stage to the space occupied by the audience. Her demeanor is described in Belbel's stage directions as "provocativa, salvatge." Finally, she exclaims "Ah, senyor von Dorsday!" (as though she were greeting him) and casts off her coat, letting it fall to the ground, revealing her nude body. "*La música para en sec. Elsa es posa a riure històricament, una bona estona, i es desmaia damunt les escales. Fosc sobtat*" (49).

Following this fainting spectacle, as indicated in Belbel's text, the remainder of the scene takes place in complete darkness. With the exception of the voice of Elsa, all voices that are heard have been previously recorded. The audience listens to the interior voice of Elsa, who, in a state of feigned unconsciousness is, for the time being, still quite aware of what is happening. The darkness, with its suppression of visual imagery, creates the impression that Elsa's body (exterior world) and voice (interior consciousness) have become two separate entities. Her cousin Paul and some of the other guests transport her up to her room, where a glass of water containing an overdose of veronal still sits upon her nightstand, waiting to be consumed. A dim light comes on and, for a moment, the audience sees Elsa in her bed, as she drinks the glass of veronal and then lets it drop to the floor (54). The rest of the scene is a deliri-

um of voices in the darkness as Elsa drifts away towards death, less conscious with each passing moment of her surroundings and what is happening to her. Finally, she smells the aroma of candles and hears the organ music that has begun to play. As she bears witness to her own funeral, her only desire is to fly and sleep and dream "...volo... somnio... dormo... somn... somn... vo..." (56). At the end of this first monologue, a single beam of light focuses upon an empty chair that remains on an empty stage. Its presence is a reminder of Elsa's absence.

The eight scenes that comprise the second monologue (performed by Rosa Novell in the debut production) are organized according to the dates that they portray in the life of Romy Schneider. Belbel depicts a series of emblematic moments in her life, as though he were capturing snapshots from the past. Some of these images are not unlike those that would have been taken by the *paparazzi*. He offers the spectator a series of photographs and then, through Schneider's interior monologue, answers the question of what the actress might have been thinking at the moment in which each image was captured. On other occasions, he provides the spectator with the voyeuristic opportunity to "spy" upon Schneider, as she contemplates herself in front of a dressing-room mirror. These are moments of self-introspection and despair, in which she reflects upon some of most difficult episodes of her life. Belbel is thus able to portray the process through which Rose Marie Albach-Retty, who was born into a family of actors, gradually assumes the celebrity persona of the European cinematic luminary known as "Romy Schneider." As her monologue makes clear, Schneider is not only an object of affection, but also of avarice, exploitation, and the ambitious desires of others.

The eighth and final scene takes place on the day of Schneider's death ("29 de maig de 1982"), which Belbel, in keeping with widely held views, imagines as a suicide. Schneider occupies a chair on an empty stage (the same chair that had remained on stage at the end of Elsa's monologue), and in her hand is a container of pills. She invokes the memories of the men whose presence in her life has left her with an empty void, and she swallows the pills, one by one: "Ombres... dels homes... que han dit... que m'estimaven... i no... m'han donat res." After she walks upstage and vanishes into the darkness, a light that falls once again upon the empty chair functions as a sign of her absence.

The epilogue of *Elsa Schneider* is a monologue that might be characterized as more "exterior" than "interior." The character of Elsa Schneider (played by Imma Colomer in the debut production) is sitting in what was the empty chair, facing the audience, with a glass of champagne in her hand. In effect, the glass of champagne whose presence the other two women had invoked with only words has now materialized upon the stage. Behind her, in the shadows, are the two actresses who performed the previous monologues. Each appears to be hiding something behind her back. Elsa Schneider addresses the audience directly, self-consciously referring to the role that she is supposed to play at the end of this three-part drama; however, she is at a loss for words: "se'm recargoli encara més dins el cap, llavors les paraules se'm bloquegen i ve el moment de dir-vos que, senzillament, realment, no sé què dir-vos, que tampoc no és veritat, o millor dit, que no sé per on hauré de començar, per on començaré..." (81). She knows that she needs to tell the audience something, but she cannot

find a way to express what she has to say. She also wonders about the meaning of the glass of champagne in her hand, calling attention to its significance. After much ado about what seems, at first glance, to be a trivial matter, she realizes that in order to begin, it is only necessary to tell the audience that her name is "Elsa Schneider." In effect, that is all that she needs to say, for, as she puts it "el principi és el final!" (84).

The stage lights come on and they seem to beckon for Elsa Schneider to introduce the other two figures situated behind her. Both Elsa and Schneider then reveal what they have been concealing: Elsa holds the glass of water containing the veronal and Schneider holds the container of pills. Without speaking, they repeat the suicidal gestures that the spectator has seen them carry out earlier, as though they were beckoning and enticing Elsa Schneider to follow their cues. Elsa Schneider, in the end, understands that it is her fatal destiny to drink the glass of champagne that she holds in her hands. After she falls to the ground and dies, Belbel's play acquires an even more ironic, metatheatrical tone. She opens her eyes and declares, "QUE NO HO HE FET TOT JA, POTSER? QUIN AVORRIMENT! VOLEU APAGAR ELS LLUMS D'UNA VEGADA, JA? QUE NO HO HE FET TOT, POTSER?" She stands up and stumbles. The final image that the audience sees is that of the empty chair that has been toppled over on its side (87).

Elsa Schneider's ineptness of expression can be interpreted, within the theoretical context that I have proposed, as an inability to articulate her pain. Upon enunciating her name, she is converted into what Castellanos calls a *personatge síntesi*, for she is summary of all three characters (16). As Joan de Sagarra puts it in a review titled "Elsa al desnudo," she is "el fantasma, la síntesis, el espejo de las dos suicidas." With this final speech act, Elsa Schneider's pain becomes that of all women who have suffered under circumstances of exploitation and/or objectification. Simó, in the eloquent description that he offered in the program notes accompanying his *mise en scène*, proposes the possibility that the three stories might really be viewed as one: "No obstant, sempre ens hem preguntat si, realment, Elsa Schneider no era la història d'una sola Dona. D'una sola persona." Accordingly, Joan-Anton Benach titled his review of the play "Tres mujeres y un destino." In effect, Elsa Schneider's presence suggests that she might be a kind of "everywoman."

Throughout the duration of the play, each of the three protagonists maintains a strongly self-conscious sense of her own theatricality, as each of their lives in varying ways has been converted into a public spectacle. A sense of voyeurism permeates the play and their monologues, as the spectator is offered the opportunity not only to listen to their most intimate thoughts, but also to witness their most personal and private moments. Elsa, for example, is seen masturbating as she becomes increasingly aware of her sexuality, while Schneider's private tragedies are exposed to the eye of the camera and, hence, the world at large. For Elsa Schneider, in her "synthesizing" role, this element of theatricality is expressed in the most literal sense: her world is the stage and the stage is her world. The line between the individual and the world at large has become completely eroded. She is thus overtly conscious that her primary function – her *raison d'être* – is to engage in a process of theatrical representation. Her pain, as well as that of her two predecessors, emerges as a result of this process of theatricalization, of an inability to escape the prison of repre-

sensation. Simó, similarly, observes that “Elsa Schneider neix de la combinació de l’ús interior i exterior de la paraula, de l’intent de col·locar en un mateix nivell expressiu l’audible i l’inaudible, de travessar la frontera que separa el món i l’individu.” Simó’s focus on the role of verbal language is significant, for while verbal communication dominates throughout the play (the word, quite often, *is* the action), at the same time, Belbel’s three monologuists transmit an implicit awareness that the language of the stage, as natural as it may seem, is forever weighed down by a lack of authenticity.

Pain, like the theatre, creates an “as if” structure; it establishes a metaphoric substitute for reality (Scarry 15). Yet, in the realm of the theatre, the notion of performance is underpinned by a desire to remove the “as if,” to “resist” the binary structure of representation under which all theatrical illusion operates. The aversion to theatricality, a frustrated desire for “the real” (quite often, juxtaposed with the concept of performance), is a recurring preoccupation on the contemporary Western stage – not to mention a widely debated issue in contemporary theatre studies.¹⁸ Belbel’s work displays an overt consciousness of this representational dilemma: the notion that, in the realm of theatrical illusion, it is virtually impossible to undo the tyrannical hold of the “as if.” In Herbert Blau’s aphoristic words, “There is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated” (165). To avoid the “as if” – that is, to avoid metaphor – is to traverse the barrier between the individual and the world at large, to go beyond the threshold of pain, and that of the stage, to a space of pure presentation.

* * *

Carícies continues Belbel’s investigation of the capacity, or failure, of verbal language to seize hold of reality. It is a text that strives to uncover the pain and violence implicit in the most mundane actions and human relations. Here, violence gives way to aphasiac inexpressibility. The premiere of *Carícies* in February 1992 under Belbel’s direction at the Teatre Romea inspired great interest and expectation on the part of the Barcelona theatre community and press. First of all, the event coincided with the unveiling of the million-dollar renovations of this historic locale.¹⁹ Belbel was granted the honor of inaugurating the Romea’s newly rehabilitated space, which, in its contemporary function as the Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya, was then regarded as the cradle of the Catalan stage, intended to preserve the historical repertoire and nurture the work of new playwrights.²⁰

¹⁸ Cf. Carlson, “The Resistance to Theatricality,” included in a special edition of *Substance*, edited by Josette Féral, which was devoted entirely to the notion of “theatricality.” Poststructuralist theory (in particular, Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive readings of Artaud, as well as the work of Herbert Blau and Roger Copeland) has already cast several layers of doubt upon any idealistic claims to theatrical immediacy, presence, and authenticity. See my study “Scenes from the Contemporary Barcelona Stage” for a discussion of the issues of immediacy and authenticity as they relate to the work of Catalan performance group La Fura dels Baus.

¹⁹ See Santiago Fondevila (“Sergi Belbel estrena su última obra”).

²⁰ The CDGC was founded during the democratic transition in 1982 and dissolved in 1998 with the inauguration of the TNC (which began to function in 1997). The

The title of *Carícies* is an ironic allusion to an unfulfilled desire for human contact and intimacy, symptomatic of contemporary (urban) society. The play is composed of ten scenes and an epilogue, each containing a pair of generic, nameless characters. Together, they portray eleven different variations on the theme of human relationships, in which no type of liaison is taboo. The scenes are arranged in a linear, “chain-link” format, reminiscent of Schnitzler’s *Reigen* (“La ronde”),²¹ whereby one character from each pair moves on to the subsequent scene, in such a way that each successive scene incorporates a new character. In the final epilogue, the circular format is brought to closure as the woman from the tenth scene (“Dona”) shares the stage with the young man (“Home jove”) from the first scene.

Once again, as in the case of *Elsa Schneider*, Belbel’s reading of Schnitzler appears to have left a significant imprint upon his theatre; although, Belbel has credited Benet i Jornet with helping him conceive the structure of the play (Program Notes. *Carícias* 3).²² What unites the characters of *Carícies* is not only the structural linkage, but also the existential void that they share. Enric Gallén describes their lack of understanding, their inability to communicate, and their overwhelming loneliness as the fundamental axes upon which their relationships revolve (8). An additional unifying aspect, I would add, can be found in the setting, which the stage directions describe as “Diferents espais d’una ciutat” (13). It is a contemporary urban anyplace that, while lacking in any specific cultural references, is nevertheless a shared *locus horribilis*, what Gallén describes as a cruel, violent, dehumanized space into which the characters find themselves hurled (8). Unlike the literariness of *Calidoscopios y faros* and *Elsa Schneider* or the abstraction of *Dins la seva memòria* or *Tàlem* (“Fourplay,” 1989), *Carícies* comes closer to representing a contemporary urban reality that the spectators might be able to identify or recognize as their own.²³

In the opening scene of *Carícies*, a nameless young man (“Home jove”) tells his female lover (“Dona jove”): “És estrany... Tinc la sensació... L’estranya sensació... És com si ja no tinguéssim... Res a dir-nos” (15). He has the impression that there is nothing left for them to say to each other. With all possibilities for verbal expression exhausted, it is as though, with a single metatheatrical speech act, Belbel were able to bring to a screeching halt an entire cycle of tumultuous love affairs on the Western stage: from Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1608) to August Strindberg’s *Dodsanssen* (“The Dance of Death” 1900), to Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). What follows is quite literally a “torrent” of language, a veritable Pinterian “silence” composed of empty words, in which she also gives him several violent physical blows and

Romea, soon after, shifted into the private hands of the Fundació Romea and Focus, a production company with a large stake in the Barcelona commercial theatre sector.

²¹ David Hare titled his “freely” adapted English version of Schnitzler’s play *The Blue Room*.

²² Cf., also, Fondevila (“Sergi Belbel estrena su última obra”).

²³ In his film adaptation of *Carícies*, Pons situated the action in a more specific cultural space, making use of the urban scenery of the city of Barcelona. In the rapid transitions between scenes, the director offers glimpses of the city – not just as the backdrop but, perhaps, as an additional dramatic personage – creating the point-of-view effect of a camera speeding through the streets.

kicks him in the groin as she sends him off to borrow some olive oil from a neighbor so that she may finish preparing a salad.

In a culture already numb from the overwhelming presence of analgesics, pain and suffering ironically have infiltrated the most banal and seemingly trivial scenes of daily life; they serve as ways of affirming human existence and identity, of filling the void engendered by the absence of love and affection. As in the theatre of Mamet and Koltès, language in this play becomes a weapon. Batlle accordingly underscores the function in *Carícies* of words as instruments of power and seduction, “car, quan es dialoga, és més important obtenir allò que volem dels altres que no pas intentar comunicar els nostres desigs. La paraula, com a últim refugi de l’home insegur i desencisat, és l’únic mitjà capaç de crear una il·lusió de domini del món i dels altres, també de nosaltres mateixos” (“La mentida”). If the characters live in a culture that is dominated by pain, verbal language, then, becomes a means through which they will endeavor – through a series of frustrating attempts – to seize hold of their reality, to objectify their world, and thus make sense of their existence.

In the eighth scene, a young woman (“Dona jove”) has an encounter with an older man (“Home gran”) in his kitchen in what is, perhaps, the most brilliantly written segment of the play. As he prepares a lunch of filet of sole, their real relationship – that of father and daughter – is not immediately revealed. The true motives of their conversation (or confrontation) – anger, passion, frustration, and fury with regard to failed relationships, loss of love, and feelings of abandonment – remain hidden beneath layers of commonplace domesticity. The older man has a penchant for cooking, while his daughter (like her mother) does not. Near the end of the scene, she asks him about his interest in gastronomy:

NOIA: Per què t’agrada, a tu?

HOME GRAN: Una herència.

NOIA: Perduda. Perduda. No et suporto. Una herència perduda. Jo no la tinc, no l’he rebut, no l’he volgut aprendre.

HOME GRAN: No es pot aprendre, en el fons.

NOIA: Per tant, sé que no t’he fallat, com penses tu.

HOME GRAN: Són tan petites, les patates.

NOIA: No t’he fallat.

HOME GRAN: Costen tant de pelar.

NOIA: La teva herència acaba amb tu.

HOME GRAN: Crec que arriba la mare.

NOIA: Acaba amb tu.

HOME GRAN: No sents el soroll de les claus al pany de la porta?

NOIA: Absolutament res.

HOME GRAN: Notes ja el seu perfum?

NOIA: Estàs sol.

On the surface, it may seem as though they are engaged in a conversation about cooking, potatoes, and filet of sole, but in this allegory of existential anguish, one must read between the lines, in the communicative cracks and fissures, to find the true referents. The theme of inheritance, which emerges concretely in reference to the older man’s cooking skills, may be taken, on the one hand, as a subtle insinuation that the daughter is ending her relationship

with her father and thus rejects any sort of legacy that she may have inherited from him. It may also be her way of telling him that she does not plan to have any children (hence, her reference to the fact that she has somehow “failed him”). Stated another way, the older man’s pain stems from his own failure and frustration with regard to his capacity to transcend his own immediate present. In a sudden rage, he sweeps all the kitchen utensils and recipients onto the floor with a paroxysmal gesture that Belbel describes as a *gran estrèpit*. The stage subsequently is imbued with silence. Reality, as Carles Batlle observes, does not exist as an *a priori* in relation to the spoken word; rather in Belbel’s theatre it is the words themselves that endeavor to construct reality (“La nueva dramaturgia” 45). But here, the violence inherent in this reality resists language and gives way to aphasiac inexpressibility, a metaphorical “unmaking” of the contemporary world, analogous to that described by Scarry. Language is “shattered” and the silence that we are left with calls attention to the insufficiency of the spoken word. Pain, as LeBreton tells us, “assassinates the word” and, with its eradication, brings about a destruction or suppression of identity (44). The older man’s identity, his own sense of self, is reduced to a minimal essence of oneness. With no possibility for transcendence, he is a single mortal individual, and his image on the stage becomes the figure of isolation and aloneness.

In the tenth scene, a lonely woman (“Dona”) receives a visit from her son. As it happens, the woman is also the neighbor of the young couple who appeared in scene 1. In the epilogue that follows, the young man from the first scene, bruised and battered, arrives at the woman’s apartment to ask for the olive oil. In joining these two characters, one from the first scene, the other from the last, Belbel brings together the entire circle of relationships, creating an effect of spatiotemporal simultaneity. It is an aesthetic illusion, or structural joke, that implicitly tempts the spectator to try to situate scenes 2 through 10 in the brief interval of time that has elapsed between the moment that the young man left his apartment at the end of scene 1 and the moment that he appeared at the door of his neighbor in the epilogue. An alternative interpretation would be to imagine that scene 1 and scene 10 correspond to the same moment in time and that the other scenes form a circular progression that begins and ends with that moment.

The woman’s maternal instincts awaken as she notices the young man’s wounds and, thinking that he has had an accident on the stairs, she offers to clean his bleeding face. She then gives him the only genuine caress of the entire play. As they offer each other gestures of tenderness and affection, the meaning of the play (and the title) crystallizes upon the stage. The circular structure of deferral, whereby meaning is held in suspension from scene to scene, is revealed as a signifier of the problem of communication, as well as the existential void that the characters share. Just as each signifier pursues a corresponding signified, a corresponding resolution of meaning, each character aspires to a human need for love, affection, sincerity, and authenticity. Belbel postpones the fulfillment of this desire until the final scene; hence thematic content coincides with form in a single instant, a single human caress.

It would be difficult to call this a “happy ending,” although the structural-thematic denouement may provide the spectator a sense of relief and resolu-

tion. The ending, as well as the play in general, eludes any sort of slick categorization, and it is perhaps in this ambiguity that one can locate the power of Belbel's theatre.²⁴ In his program notes for the 1994 Madrid production of the play at the Sala Olimpia (Centro Nacional de Nuevas Tendencias Escénicas), director Guillermo Heras observes Belbel's ostensive interest in creating hybrid theatrical forms that avoid fixed definition:

Más allá de los golpes, las bofetadas, o los exabruptos, existe un tejido metalingüístico que enciende la pasión de las relaciones bajo la apariencia gélida de un desierto polar. Fuego y hielo en una extraña mezcla que continuamente coloca a esta obra en el desconcierto de los estilos. ¿Es una tragedia, una comedia satírica, o un melodrama? Quizás un retrato realista de una sociedad que nunca quiere asumir la enfermedad de la soledad y el desencanto.

This ambivalent blend, or "odd mixture," of "fire and ice," a keen ability to find humor and absurdity in the most desperate of situations, cruelty and despair in the most comical of circumstances, and melodrama and quirkiness in the most prosaic dimensions of reality, would become a defining characteristic of Belbel's theatre. Tragedy, comedy, and melodrama intersect and intertwine in such a way that members of the audience may easily find themselves laughing and crying in the same sitting. Belbel has spoken on occasion of his pursuit of an indescribable aesthetic-emotional effect: "Creo que hago teatro porque viendo teatro, buen teatro, he recibido impactos emocionales y estéticos difíciles de explicar y eso es mi sueño: llegar a que tan sólo un espectador llegue a sentir eso" ("Perspectivas dramaturgias" 6).

* * *

El temps de Planck, one of Belbel's most artistically mature and ambitious accomplishments, premiered under his direction at Barcelona's Teatre Romea on 26 June 2000 during the "Grec" summer festival. Vibrant and emotionally moving, it is an iconoclastic piece of musical theatre, written entirely in verse, which he created in tandem with composer Òscar Roig. The brilliantly lyrical musical score and unforgettable melodies, performed at the Romea by a live pit orchestra under the direction of Dani Espasa, serve to enhance the ironic blend of melodrama and metaphysics embedded in Belbel's words and lyrics.

On the occasion of the premiere of *El temps de Planck*, Benach, who was referring to the uniqueness of Belbel's provocative vision, called the playwright "an island":

Nuestra isla, creo, más visitada. . . . Y es que en el archipiélago que se otea con esa inspección no se advierte un autor teatral menos acomodaticio y más regularmente provocador que ese dramaturgo que nos sorprendió hace ya años con un premonitorio y efervescente "Minimal show" (1987). . . . Antes de hoy sólo era una sospecha. Ahora sabemos que Bel-

²⁴ I use the term "dramaturgy" in the Catalan sense, to refer to the art of writing plays and/or the textual organization and design of the *mise en scène*.

[Cuánto cuanto 3]), *El temps de Planck* appears to be quite timely in light of its thematic parallels with a string of contemporary operas, musical theatre productions, and dramatic works that offer original hybrid blends comprised of scientific subject matter intermingled with the universals of love, life, and death. Examples include composer Michael Nyman's *Facing Goya* (2000), an opera about the possibility of manipulating human genetics, which was premiered in Santiago de Compostela; Chaurette's aforementioned *Fragments d'une lettre d'adieu lus par des géologues*, staged by Belbel, about the search for the truth regarding a failed geological expedition in the Mekong; Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998), which re-imagines a 1941 war-time meeting between physicists Neils Bohr of Denmark and Werner Heisenberg of Germany; and David Auburn's *Proof* (2000), about the relationship between scientific genius and mental instability. In the realm of the Barcelona stage, a curious precedent that explores the possibilities afforded by science with regard to new configurations of time and space can be found in Sanchis Sinisterra's *Perdida en los Apalaches* ("Lost in the Appalachians"), which is curiously subtitled a "juguete cuántico" and which was staged at the Beckett by the Teatro Fronterizo in 1990 under the direction of Ramon Simó.

In structuring the text, Belbel and Roig made apt use of the numerical value designating the notion of Planck Time as ten to the negative forty-third power. The play is thus composed of forty-three scenes, numbered "Coma zero" through "U" (although, within the text, a number is given in parenthesis alongside each "zero" for guidance). The "Planck" in *El temps de Planck*, however, does not merely allude to a metaphysical concept; it is also echoed in the surname of one of the play's central characters, as well as in that of his family. "Planck" (played by Pep Cruz in the premiere production) is the humble owner of a frame shop, whose "time" or days – as in the common refrain – are numbered. He is a man on the verge of death, who agonizes in bed throughout most of the show as his wife Sara (played by Mont Plans) and his four unmarried daughters struggle with his imminent passing and with the inevitable pain, grief, and emptiness that they anticipate it will bring. There is an ironic echo of Shakespeare's *Lear* in the character of Planck, who expresses concern for the future of his daughters: "Si tingués béns diners propietats / ara us diria / digueu-me com m'estimeu / i us els repartiré / segons la magnitud / del vostre sentiment" (36). Yet unlike *Lear*, Planck does not possess any significant possessions to be shared out, aside from the frame shop, which his daughters have not expressed an interest in inheriting.

As Belbel indicates in his program notes, the musical is about the life of a family and the difficulty of overcoming the pain that comes with the passing of a loved one: "d'aquelles minúscules fraccions de segon que determinen les seves existències i que són tan inexplicables com irreversibles. . . . La idea de la nostra pròpia mort ens causa un temor difícil d'assumir; la mort d'un ésser estimat ens causa un dolor difícil de comprendre. La religió, la fe, o la filosofia, ens poden compensar aquest temor i aquest dolor. Però per què no també la ciència?" Hence Belbel explores the extent to which science might provide a series of solutions for easing the pain of death. The role of science in this musical melodrama is enhanced by the presence of a next-door neighbor, a young student whose name happens to be "Max" (played by Frank Capdet in

the premiere production) and who also happens to be a physics prodigy. Although, ostensibly, Max lives alone (his parents were killed in a tragic car accident), Planck and Sara regard him as a kind of adoptive son, the male offspring that they had always desired but were never destined to have (a relationship that is somewhat complicated by the sexual attraction that Max feels toward two of Planck's daughters, Rosa and Anna).

Each of the daughters (and Max, as well) confronts in varying ways a common feeling of anguish and uncertainty with regard to the future, but it is Maria, the fourth and youngest sister (played by Pili Capellades in the premiere production), who proposes the most intriguing solution to this condition. She is a thirteen-year-old girl whose precocious imagination is broadened and nourished by the scientific notions of time and space that she learns about through her contact with Max. A misunderstood preadolescent, Maria's overactive imagination causes her mind (and, in a sense, her body) to drift far away from the ordinary prosaic dimensions of everyday life. Indeed, Maria is also the character most often at the center of the most intriguing scenes, for she is the hinge through which Belbel is able to establish a series of bridges between the realm of reality and that of fantasy. Maria's metaphysical musings (with the help of Max) open the way to an internal imagined cosmos of enigmatic phenomena, where time travel is possible and conventional spatiotemporal dimensions and relationships are reconfigured according to the unconventional laws of quantum physics.

El temps de Planck opens with a song presented by Maria that introduces the primary musical theme of the show, a hypnotic and memorable melodic rendering of Planck Time. Roig's "zeros" will become a *leit motif* that is interwoven and reprised in varying forms and musical keys throughout the performance:

Zero
 Coma
 zero
 zero zero
 zero zero zero
 zero zero zero zero zero
 zero zero zero zero zero zero
 zero zero zero zero zero zero zero
 zero zero zero zero zero zero
 zero zero zero
 zero zero
 zero
 un
 segons
 El temps de Planck (15)

On the page, the song has the look of concrete poetry, and with these opening lyrics, it seems as though Belbel were, in effect, mocking those critics who had once labeled him a minimalist. Maria, who is confronting her father's moribund state, decides that as a way of prolonging Planck's life – or, at least, of creating the illusion of prolongation – she will cease to measure the passage of time in terms of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years, but

will instead quantify his remaining time in the material world according to units of Planck Time (42-43). Hence the metaphysical notion of Planck Time becomes a means of overcoming pain and evading or delaying grief and sorrow. Maria contemplates the seemingly infinite number of tiny fractions of a second situated between life and death and consequently re-imagines Planck's remaining time as an elongated process.

Maria wonders aloud what will transpire in the space of temporal disjuncture situated between the death of the body (matter) and that of the mind: "què passarà o millor dit què et passarà pel cap / quines imatges quines sensacions / quins sentiments / què passarà en la teva ment / entre el segon zero coma quaranta-dos zeros i u / abans que tu moris / i el segon zero de la teva mort" (42). Is it possible to be intellectually cognizant of one's own death as it is taking place? If we were to prolong the moment of death by contemplating it through the lens of Planck Time, would it be possible to establish with precision the exact instant in which a life comes to an end? Could one possibly pinpoint the infinitesimally small lapse of time between the moment in which the heart stops and that in which all psychic or cerebral activity ceases? "Quan morim / quant tarda la ment a morir / On se'ns en va la consciència" (124). These are the underlying questions that emerge in Maria's musical-metaphysical musings, and with them, Belbel appears to be pondering from new perspectives the questions regarding the representation of pain and death that he has asked throughout his entire artistic trajectory. Maria's questions, in effect, point to the ever-present aspiration inherent in the theatre to dissolve the boundaries between the immaterial, interior realm of the psyche and the external material realm of the body.

It is thus fitting that Rosa (played by Rosa Galindo in the premiere production), the actor in the family, would situate this body/soul dialectic within the context of the theatre. In scene "Zero (13)," she engages in a seductive dialogue with Max about her work as an actor. In a song that begins with the words "No sóc cap prostituta," in which she performs a revealing striptease for Max (and the audience), she speaks of acting as a demanding process that involves stripping away all pretense in order to reveal her true inner self: "mostrar no el cos sinó l'ànima / nua / no hi ha res més difícil / Però jo ho aconseguiré" (83). She is not alone, for as Planck's death approaches, it becomes clear that each member of his family is immersed in a process of uncovering and confronting her true feelings and of facing the difficulty of verbalizing the anxiety surrounding his impending departure. In scene "Zero (27)," Anna (played by Ester Bartomeus) poignantly confesses that she has never really told her father that she loves him: "No sé realment si t'estimo / si t'he estimat / si continuaré estimant-te" (142). She refuses to articulate her love with words for fear that such a gesture might be hypocritical. For her, it is as though concrete words would somehow betray the authenticity of her innermost feelings. Thus, one could say that embedded in Rosa's struggle as an actor to reveal her inner spirit (to exteriorize that which is interior) and in Anna's refusal to exteriorize with words her deepest emotions is Belbel's own endeavor as playwright to make visible that which is invisible, to create a confluence of mind and matter and a place where body, consciousness, and cosmos would flow together.

The set design for this production, conceived by Glaenzel and Cristià, reflected Belbel's interest in the confluence of reality with fantasy, mind with matter, interior with exterior – notions that emerge principally through the play of Maria's imagination. The set was designed in such a way that the audience was able to view several actions, spaces, and fictional planes simultaneously, such as the kitchen, Planck and Sara's bedroom, and Max's apartment. Planck remained on stage in bed throughout nearly the entire show, up until his death. His death, therefore, constantly loomed over the space, in a thematic and even a physical sense. The stage was placed at an incline, sloped toward the audience at a slight angle in a manner that facilitated the spectator's ability to take in the full view of spatiotemporal simultaneity. It also created a sensation of slightly skewed perspectives, injecting the stage with an air of illusion and disequilibrium.

Images such as the night sky, the cosmos, and multiple 0's and 1's were projected on a screen hung strategically at an incline above the stage. Several lighting effects contributed, as well, to the play of fiction and reality. Colored neon tubes of light both upstage and downstage formed a frame around the scenic space and were illuminated each time a fantasy/dream sequence emerged as a function of Maria's psyche. These lighting effects thus signaled for the spectator a shift from quotidian space and time to the elusive metaphysical space of Planck time. These dreamlike sequences, by far the most visually spectacular moments of the show, included the striking scene in which Maria imagines her own death and emerges on stage in a coffin amid a background bathed in red light; the gruesome scene in which she imagines herself murdering her own family members, hoping that they will be able to describe their thoughts and sensations at the moment of death; the startling scene in which she re-imagines Anna's miscarriage and her sister suddenly appears on stage dripping with blood as the result of a vaginal hemorrhage. There are also the scenes in which Maria envisages herself as able to visit the past and the future and to travel backward and forward in time at the speed of light. She observes, for example, a typical Sunday morning in the household, several years prior to her own birth, in which the entire family gathers blissfully in Planck and Sara's bed. In a scene representing a leap into the future, Maria gives birth to a child, who is humorously "played" by Planck.

Planck eventually does experience death, after which he is depicted in a state of existential limbo, perpetually counting, as he is trapped in the moment between the death of his body and that of his mind. As Maria levitates in the background, he continues to rattle off a series of infinitely small quantities: "zero coma zero zero zero zero zero zero..." (170-71). The final scenes of the musical are comprised of a succession of rapid leaps in time whereby the spectator is offered several glimpses into the past as well as the future. Time continues to move forward and the inevitable moments of joy alternate with those of sadness, pain, and mourning. Such is life in its unrelenting momentum, as Belbel would seem to imply. Accordingly, the penultimate scene of the musical closes with the complete cast on stage singing a full chorus of zeros in full, uplifting, energetic harmony.

Reality and fiction merge in *El temps de Planck*, for, as Maria suggests, anything is possible in the realm of the mind (180). In effect, it is never entirely

clear to the spectator whether all or merely some of what has been depicted on stage is a product of her imagination. The musical concludes with a final meta-physical feat, which she performs. As she stands alone on stage, in the midst of experiencing her own death, she announces that she is about to travel faster than the speed of light. Through the use of a second, nearly identical, actress ("Maria bis," in the text), Belbel creates a spatial joke, having it seem as though Maria has traveled to her destination before leaving her point of departure. In the magical space of delay and suspension that Maria has entered, it seems as though seeing and saying are one, as though the gap has been closed between invisible, subjective, psychic realities and the concrete visible world. Maria's inner dream life has become a tangible physical reality on the stage, and even the pain of death, when viewed through the prism of Planck time, is seemingly objectified and embodied.

Pain, as LeBreton comments, signals the contingency of one's existence. "Sufrir es sentir la precariedad de la propia condición personal, en estado puro, sin poder movilizar otras defensas que las técnicas o las morales" (208). In the painful moments that emerge in Belbel's curious concoctions fusing the tragic, the comic, and the melodramatic barriers between human beings are shattered, spatial boundaries are ruptured, and layers of time are traversed. It is, paradoxically, through pain and through death that Belbel's characters are able to find continuity and plenitude.

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