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Faust in Barcelona: Catalonia's La Fura dels Baus

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Faust in Barcelona: Catalonia's La Fura dels Baus

By Sharon G. Feldman

Total darkness. Garbled electronic sounds gradually build into a thundering roar, reminiscent of a plane veering down the runway. An orgasmic explosion fills the theatre with a big bang and a sudden flash of light. Following the chaos, what emerges in the darkness is the phantasmal image of two rotating human heads fixed at opposite ends of a single body. It is Faust, fastened to a revolving metallic "bed" evocative of Leonardo da Vinci's armillary sphere. The heads spin like two satellites in a never-ending cosmic orbit, creating a subtle allusion to the Faust/Mephistopheles duality that later in the performance becomes more explicit. "I am Faust," he groans, as he contemplates self-destruction. "I am forty-seven years old, and I am tired ... of everything, tired, of life, of myself.... I know that I will never find happiness ... never be free! Nothing I know is of any value."¹

These are the opening moments of *F@ust versió 3.0*, a contemporized version, or *vision*, of Goethe's two-part dramatic poem, conceived by the Catalan theatre company, La Fura dels Baus. In La Fura's modern-day recreation of *Faust*, the protagonist's dissatisfaction with life is tinged with shades of imminent millennialist catastrophism. His feelings of ennui and solitude derive from his growing frustration with the unremitting saturation of information that pervades our contemporary technological culture. Shortly after this initial scene, he is depicted alone at a computer in his study, bemoaning his isolation, traveling through cyberspace via the internet, when he inadvertently summons the presence of his antithetical double Mephistopheles, whose image appears on a large screen upstage. [Photo 1] Wagner, Faust's assistant, interrupts with a pizza.

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Photo 1: Faust (Santi Pons) summons Mefist (Miquel Gelabert, upstage, on video screen).

Photo: Fotos del Teatre Nacional de Catalunya. Ros Ribas

La Fura dels Baus emerged as a theatre collective in 1979 amid the political tumult, cultural renewal, and frenzied activity of Catalonia's—and, by extension, Spain's—post-Franco democratic transition. La Fura has come a long way since their early years of radical street theatre in rural Catalonia. During the early 1980s, they made their way to Barcelona, the cultural and political epicenter of this “autonomous” region, where for several years they subsisted, barely, on the margins of institutional support and became key players in the avant-garde “alternative” theatre scene associated with this city's young urban youth culture. Their status as an “off-off” group showed significant signs of change in 1992, when they presented an outdoor spectacle titled *Mar Mediterrània* at the opening ceremony of the Barcelona Olympic Games. The performance, televised worldwide, featured a giant imaginary hydra, which engaged in an allegorical battle against progress and civilization (Saumell 122-23). La Fura has since evolved into one of Spain's most provocative and successful performance groups, receiving the new “Max” award in 1998 (the Spanish equivalent of a “Tony”) for the most extensive international visibility of any company from Spain. They now have multiple touring groups that perform around the world, and in several countries—including Argentina, Brazil, and Germany—La Fura enjoys a “cult” following comparable to that of a rock band.

F@ust versió 3.0 premiered in Barcelona, in Catalan, on 28 April 1998 as part of the inaugural season of the new, controversial, and colossal National Theatre of Catalonia complex. The production was showered with subsidies from public institutions, including Spain's central government and the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, as well as private corporations (Mercedes-Benz, Iberia, Freixenet), and has toured throughout Spain and Europe. In July 1998, La Fura staged *F@ust versió 3.0* at New York's Lincoln Center Festival, where it received an uneven reception (Baker; Marks; Solomon); the last time the company played in New York was 1991, when they presented *Suz/o/Suz* in a performance space in Astoria, Queens. Despite mixed reviews, *F@ust versió 3.0* represents a significant moment in La Fura's artistic trajectory, confirming a crossover from the alternative theatre scene to the broader mainstream. From an artistic standpoint, this spectacle proceeds along many of the same aesthetic lines that have shaped the development of La Fura since its inception. At the same time, the production contains several elements of rupture that signal new beginnings for this Catalan company.

La Fura's main body of work comprises two trilogies: *Accions* (1983), *Suz/o/Suz* (1985), and *Tier Mon* (1988); and *Noun* (1990), *M.T.M.* (1994), and *Manes* (1996). These are ambitious multimedia spectacles that interlace poetic primitive ritual (an allusion to the company's rural Catalan-Mediterranean origins) with futuristic urban iconography. The use of dialogue is minimal; instead, visual imagery, the plastic arts, and music (both live and computer-generated)

occupy privileged roles. Dance, mime, elaborate sadistic-looking machinery, nude bodies that perform impressive feats of athleticism, video, mobile sculptures and lighting, recycled materials, slide and laser projections, and pyrotechnics are frequent features of La Fura's aesthetic language—or, *llenguatge furero*, as it is often called. It is an energetic theatre of Artaudian inspiration that attempts to fracture boundaries, disrupt the spectator's tranquil passivity, confound expectations, jar sensibilities, and even incite fear. Their performances tend to appropriate alternative, “found” spaces (a sports arena, a nightclub, a fish market, a public park, the shipyards) that are uncontaminated by theatrical connotations, so that the spectacle itself is able to enter into a dialogue with its surroundings. The role of the audience in these environmental pieces is intensely participatory; the spectator often has the sensation of being immersed in a barrage of activity.

Suz/o/Suz, the company's most successful work to date (it was awarded the prestigious “Ciutat de Barcelona” prize and has remained on tour for several years), is a spectacle that partakes of a collage format and underscores La Fura's continued fascination with ritual. The premiere at Barcelona's Mercat de les Flors, in January 1986, was heralded by an “action,” derived from the production itself, in which performer Jordi Arus, covered in grease from head to toe to protect himself from the cold, was suspended, nude, from a crane, forty-five meters high, between the two “Venetian” towers on the Plaça d'Espanya (a prominent urban landmark). After approximately thirty minutes, he was dunked into a tank of water (“Cronologia” 20). In the performance of *Suz/o/Suz*, the human figure is subjected to violent aggressions: dangled like a puppet from sadistic-looking pulley systems; stripped naked and exposed; placed in bondage; carried around on racks normally used for dried cod; immersed in paint, blood, and water. In the hands of La Fura, images that may seem shocking or disturbing acquire, at the same time, an extraordinary aesthetic value. The human body is converted into a piece of living sculpture, dehumanized at times, and yet bordering on the sublime or the profoundly beautiful. In one visually stunning ritual, nude male performers in fetal positions, with the help of scuba gear, are immersed for several minutes in transparent cube-shaped human aquariums.

In June 1996, at the Granada Festival of Music and Dance, La Fura staged a contemporary interpretation of Manuel de Falla's operatic poem *Atlántida* in front of Granada's seventeenth-century baroque cathedral. Computerized projections and video images created for the audience a sensation of immersion in the sea among the lost civilization of Atlantis. This spectacle marked the beginning of La Fura's experimentation with opera and also with the use of a proscenium stage architecture, which they would later employ in *F@ust versió 3.0*. The company premiered its second operatic production, Claude Debussy and Gabriel d'Annunzio's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, during

the summer of 1997. Shortly after this premiere, Gérard Mortier, director of the Salzburg Festival, commissioned La Fura and Catalan sculptor Jaume Plensa to stage their own interpretation of Hector Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* at the Salzburg Festival in 1999. The production will commemorate the 250th anniversary of Goethe's birth. Mortier also invited them to prepare a special performance in celebration of the solar eclipse that will coincide with their presence in Salzburg (Fondevila 70; Porter 38).

As groundwork for *The Damnation of Faust*, La Fura engaged in a preliminary creative-analytical exercise intended to deepen their knowledge of the Faust myth and provide them with new perspectives (Ley). *F@ust versió 3.0*, the end result of this endeavor, is a theatrical experiment that recasts Goethe's text, imagery, and fictional characters within a contemporary, urban, postindustrial context, appealing to the audiovisual sensibilities and technological proclivities of the late-twentieth-century spectator.

F@ust versió 3.0 also departs from La Fura's usual organizational style in its inclusion of several stage actors from outside the company: Miquel Gelabert ("Mefist"), Santi Pons ("Faust"), Anabel Moreno ("Feminine Spirit"—a condensation of "Martha" and several other female characters from Goethe's text), Jordi Puig, *kai* ("Valenti"), and Sara Rosa ("Margarita"). The character of the "Disk-jockey" is played by Jorge Flores (a.k.a. "Dr. Flo"), a well-known disk-jockey from the Barcelona club scene. The remaining cast members, Moroccan-Belgian actor Younes Bachir-Lafritz ("Student" and "Witch") and Carles Figols ("Wagner"), are Fura regulars. This is not the first time the company has worked with "outsiders"; the production of *Atlántida* employed over two hundred actors, singers, and musicians (including the National Symphony Orchestra of Catalonia), and for the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, Spanish pop singer Miguel Bosé was cast in one of the lead roles. In effect, it would seem that as the members of La Fura have garnered artistic and financial success, their self-perception as an ensemble has continued to evolve and the limits of the company have been repeatedly transfigured. The seven creators who comprise the nucleus of the company and who once performed regularly in La Fura's productions (Carlos Padrissa, Pere Tantiñá, "Miki" Espuma, Pep Gatell, "Hansel," Jürgen Müller, and Alex Ollé) now most often

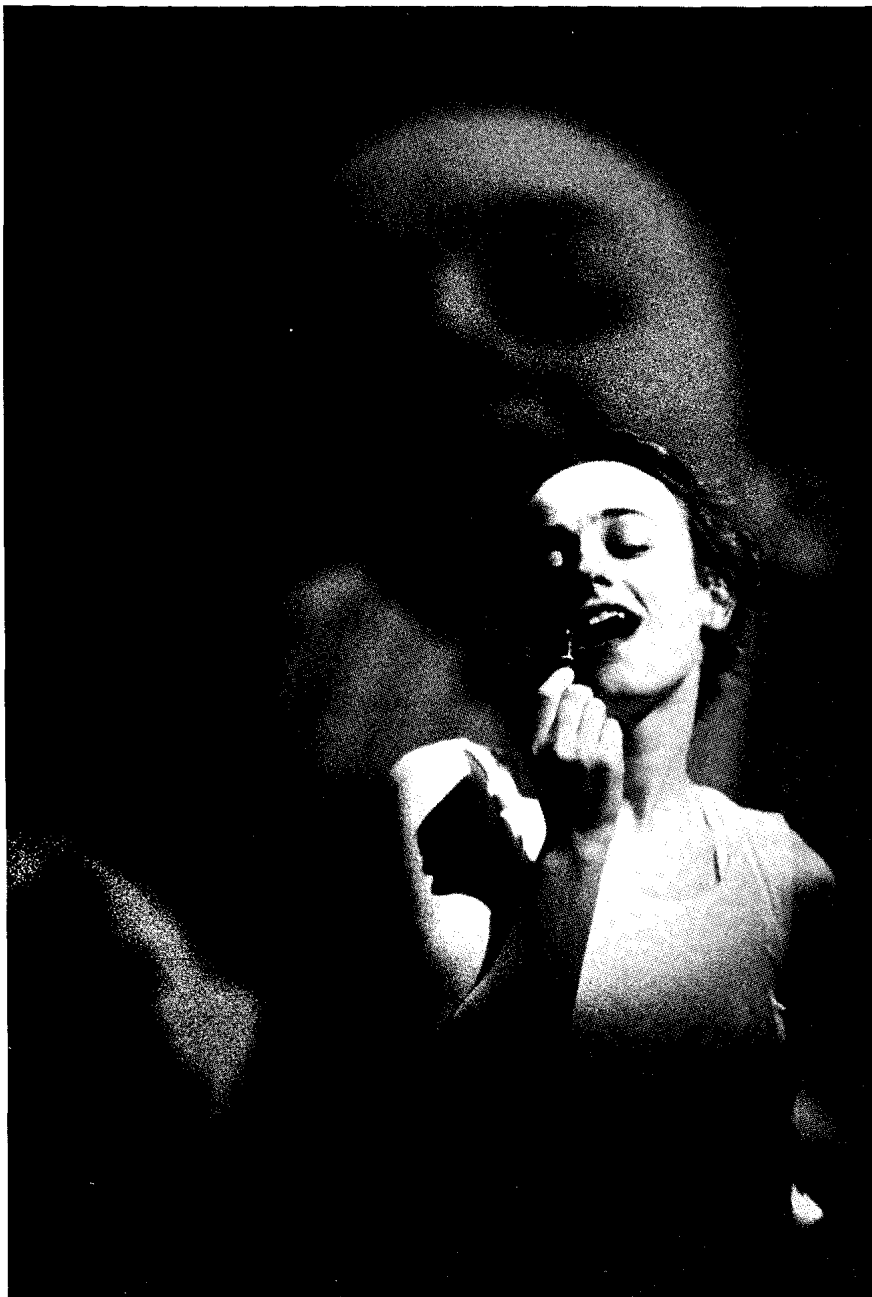


Photo 2: Margarita (Sara Rosa).

Photo: Ros Ribas

work behind the scenes in supervisory roles: directing, designing, composing music, training actors, and generally overseeing the conception of new projects. Padrissa and Ollé have signed their names to the *mise en scène* of *F@ust versió 3.0*, and Magda Puyo, currently one of Catalonia's most successful female directors, was called in from the "outside" to direct the actors.

Why did La Fura choose to cast *F@ust versió 3.0* with actors (not to mention, a director) drawn from outside the company? The answer is perhaps a matter of acting style. The company's "inside" members have been trained according to a physically demanding, intuitive, improvisational style of "nonmatrixed" performance (Kirby 7), reminiscent of the avant-garde happenings of decades past, whereby the performer's body and movements take precedence over verbal communication and character development. Indeed, in



Photo 3: Mefist (Miquel Gelabert, center) and a Feminine Sprit (Anabel Moreno, in bathtub, left) help Faust (Santi Pons) to discover his sexuality.

Photo: Ros Ribas

La Fura's prior work, each dramatic figure was usually treated as little more than an abstract allegorical reduction; psychological depth was a matter of minimal concern—hardly a welcome domain for the “method” actor, so prevalent a breed in Spain. In *F@ust versió 3.0*, as in previous works, visual imagery continues to be lavish, but never before has a Fura production contained such complex characters. Furthermore, the operatic productions notwithstanding, never before have so many words been spoken on stage in a Fura piece. Consequently, *F@ust versió 3.0* demanded not the typical Fura performer, but rather, a different type of actor—one accustomed to more conventional stage work, able to convey the subtleties of complex characterization, and able to handle a massive foray into the realm of text-based theatre that is derived from the poetic and ideological richness of Goethe's original play.

For Ollé, La Fura's contemporization of Goethe's *Faust* is, most fundamentally, a function of the *mise en scène* and its aesthetic significance (Fondevila). Faust's tale is told through the use of contemporary audiovisual media and cybernetic environments. Music plays a constant role throughout the performance, alternating between Mozart's *Requiem* and electronically synthesized sound. These futuristic tunes and rhythms were composed on the Internet by a long list of contributors from around the world who logged onto a special web site called *F@ust Music on Line* (<http://www.sgac.es/fmol>); there are also a few sequences in which La Fura recycles some of the haunting sub-Saharan

tribal music from *Manes*. The multimedia stage design takes its inspiration from modern advertising, television, and computer technology. Upstage, a large and sophisticated metallic grid of scaffolding, similar to structures that appeared in earlier performance pieces such as *Noun*, evokes a giant web page. Video images—and, at times, the actors themselves—emerge in eight different opening and closing rectangular “windows” (four across the top; four across the bottom), whose dimensions are seamlessly modified and resized from scene to scene through the use of specially crafted devices resembling Venetian blinds.

From an aesthetic point of view, the production seems to represent a grand departure from La Fura's previous and most characteristic work in that their audience, typically compelled to move about the performance space on foot, is this time seated in rows facing a proscenium stage. However, a key element of La Fura's environmental aesthetic is maintained. In La Fura's environmental performances, the inner workings and machinery of the spectacle—mobile lighting panels that are wheeled about the space, elaborate pulley systems, or scaffolding erected in strategic places—are plainly visible to the spectator. In *F@ust versió 3.0*, La Fura found a way to echo this prior aesthetic practice. It is as though the *mise en scène* were turned “inside out,” revealing all its jagged seams and entrails in such a way that the spectator is able to contemplate scenic elements that traditionally would be masked. Bachir-Lafritz and Figols, for example, step out of character at specific moments and

appear to act as visible stagehands in clear view of the audience. They either use handheld spotlights to illuminate the other actors' faces or video cameras to offer both real and virtual perspectives of the live action taking place on stage. The image of the live actor is often combined with video projections in poetically suggestive ways, such as in the scene in which Margarita (portrayed as a petite, rather androgynous adolescent with raging hormones) is positioned downstage, smearing her lips with seductive red lipstick, [Photo 2] while being simultaneously "projected" upstage, in an enormous close-up of her face on the video screen.

Most significantly, *F@ust versió 3.0* marks the first time that La Fura has worked with a full-length dramatic text in the creation of a spectacle. In conceiving the text, inspired by Goethe's play, the company enlisted the help of Pablo Ley, theatre critic for the Barcelona edition of the daily *El País* and an award-winning playwright in his own right; he received the prestigious Marqués de Bradomín prize in 1990 for *Paisaje sin causa* (*Landscape Without a Cause*). According to Ley, the essence and spirit of Goethe's text actually have been preserved and respected more than one might imagine at first glance. "It is a faithful version of the first part and an extremely unfaithful version of the second. What happened is that Goethe's second part is so tremendously rich and complex, so charged with varied levels of meaning, that it was impossible for us to condense it down to what amounted to twenty minutes."

The word "faithful," as employed by Ley, should be understood in relative terms, for although he appropriated some of his dialogue directly from Goethe, La Fura's uninterrupted 100-minute performance is far from a direct staging of the nineteenth-century text. It is, nonetheless, no surprise that the members of this company would feel an affinity for the aesthetic precepts of the Sturm and Drang movement and the Rousseauian/Romantic plea for a return to nature that underpin Goethe's work. In La Fura's theatre, which seeks visceral and emotional responses rather than intellectual reasoning, the image of the human being (sensual, exuberant, organic, carnal, irrational, natural) is continually juxtaposed with the presence of the machine (metallic, robotic, contrived, intellectual, rational, industrialized). Their work often expresses an implicit yearning to return to myths, to a primitive iconography of violent pri-

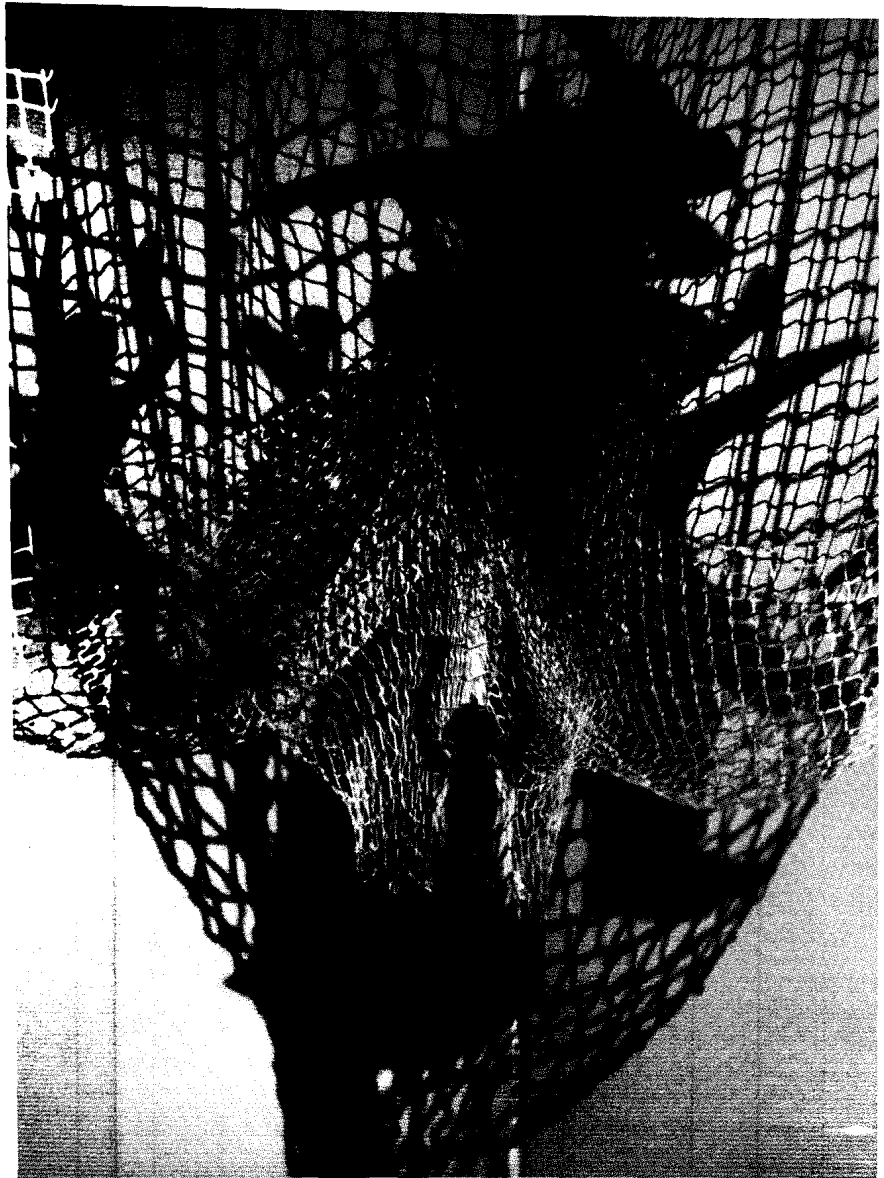


Photo 4: Like insects caught in a web: La Fura's rendition of Goethe's "Walpurgis Night" episode.

Photo: Ros Ribas

mordial impulses and erotic desires, in order to recover essential truths that existed prior to rationalization and (post)industrialization. The mythical figures of Faust and Mephistopheles, as conceived by La Fura, represent a dialectic of rational intellect and primal passion, incarnated within a single contemporary being. After traveling across time, space, and the cosmos, they have landed upon a post-modern landscape in which the notion of the sacred has lost its authoritative hold, thus invoking curious moral ambiguities and bringing a new (secular) meaning to the fantastical notion of a pact between a human being and the devil. As the program notes elucidate, the Mephistopheles that is portrayed here is not the devil of Christian tradition; rather, he emerges from the shadows as Faust's alter-ego, "the dark being, and interior devil of instincts, capable of twisting reason into the delirium of passion and death."

Faust is portrayed as an individual thoroughly besieged by the obligations and dilemmas facing contemporary Man



Photo 5: Faust (Santi Pons) and Margarita (Sara Rosa) as she is lifted away by a pulley.

Photo: Ros Ribas

or Woman. Ley summarizes: “More than an external demon, it is an internal demon who emerges from within. In the disequilibrium of instincts and reason, Faust emerges, leaves behind his world of intellectual thought, and destroys everyone and everything that crosses his path,” including himself. He denies and represses all irrational impulses, primal urges, temptations and longings, until they explode on the stage. Like other contemporary mortals, he is a man who has much less time on his hands than is necessary for him to fulfill all his aspirations, and when his internal “demons” finally do gush forth, personified in the figure of Mephistopheles, they erupt with the kind of force that comes from years, even centuries, of repression. The character of Faust, then, as conceived by La Fura, is an allegorical figure of uncertainty and instability in whom pure emotion struggles with instrumental reason. Like the protagonist of Goethe’s idealist tragedy, he manages to proclaim his right to self-realization and self-expression within a specific sociocultural context. The exterior world is conceived and represented as a projection of his internal torment, perhaps even of his dreams. However, the external landscapes of La Fura’s *Faust* are urbanized, industrialized, technologized, and subjected to an aesthetic of debasement. This Faust’s overall “malaise” is not a form of Romantic rebellion carried out in the name of some lofty, sacred ideal; rather it is a function of the isolation and seclusion—the lack of human contact—that derive from his post-modern experience. In La Fura’s version of *Faust*, this lack of human contact and repressed feelings are rendered in the most fundamentally profane sense: an urge for sexual expression, pleasure, and fulfillment. [Photo 3] Hence, when emotions and passions do finally gush forth, the explosion is often quite literally orgasmic.

Faust’s first encounter with his alter ego Mefist (“pleasure, desire, fire, destruction, shadows, saliva, sweat”) and the corresponding world of primordial passion, takes place in his study, in the above-cited scene, which bears obvious parallels with Goethe’s “Night” episode. Following the visit from the pizza-toting Wagner, there is an explosion, and the audience’s attention is drawn to an enormous video screen displaying a series of clips from commercial advertisements for products such as Freixnet’s *Cordon Negro*, the well-known Catalan sparkling wine (lest we forget that Freixnet is one of La Fura’s sponsors). Subsequently, there is a video advertisement for dog food: a typical domestic canine runs across a tranquil pasture (an ironic *locus amoenus*) as a voiceover narrates, “Spring is here, the sunshine fills the countryside with life.” The dog, who surprisingly speaks with the voice of a human—that of Miquel Gelabert/Mefist—interjects, “But I continue to run along happily because I know that my food...contains all the calories, proteins, and vitamins that my body needs.” In this sequence, La Fura has selected a key scene from Goethe’s dramatic poem and filtered it through the contemporary aesthetics of advertising: an expanding poodle transforms itself into Mephistopheles. As Ley observes, “It seems to be a joke, but it is also an intentional critique or reversal of nature as conceived by Goethe.”

Moreover, the spectator is led to believe that this is not the first encounter between Faust and Mephistopheles; on the contrary, it appears as though they have met before. Faust asks, “Why have you come back to me? I thought I had expelled you or even forgotten about you because you no longer exist.” Hence, La Fura’s (post)modernization of *Faust*, unlike Goethe’s text, is conspicuously and self-con-

sciously ghosted by previous versions of the myth. This is not just Goethe's Faust, this is Marlowe's, Berlioz's, La Fura's, and all others. We are given the impression that Faust and Mephistopheles have met before and that they will indeed meet again, once this "show" is over, forever condemned to a series of repeat performances throughout history.

The notorious blood pact occurs early in the performance: Mefist promises that he will restore Faust's strength and youth and take him "toward the light." Faust, in turn, promises that if any moment, however brief, brings him so much pleasure that he longs for it to endure, then he will be obliged to die and serve the devil forever. Shortly after the pact, a "window" in the scaffolding opens up (top, stage right) and Margarita is seen with her friend Marta. While in Goethe's play, "Martha" serves as a worldly contrast with the pure and chaste Gretchen, here, La Fura exaggerates the polarity between the two women: Marta gives the virginal Margarita her arm—a surrogate phallus—and graphically coaches her friend in the art of fellatio. As Kit Baker observes in his review of the Lincoln Center production, the language in this scene, and others, is "coarse, violent or flip-

pant, and only very occasionally funny or tender," and the performance contains a "torrent of words and rapid-fire succession of images" (511). The Romantic ideal of love, as well as Faust's pursuit of a singular instant of beauty or pleasure, is reduced to a fusillade of physical/sexual impulses.

The audience is subsequently confronted with the commanding image of a drag queen, dressed in high platform boots and a form-fitting psychedelic cat-suit. It is an erotic metamorphosis of Goethe's "Witch," who offers Faust a magical love potion. In La Fura's production, the drag queen's incantations are a sexually explicit song of seduction, performed *a cappella* in English, French, and Catalan: "Touch me, feel me, don't you want to play with my pussy." Standing high above Faust, the Witch sprays him with an ejaculatory "elixir" and tells him that soon he will see "Helens" everywhere (Goethe's text refers directly to Helen of Troy). Faust runs off to meet his object of desire in the nocturnal atmosphere of a modern discothèque. There is a quick transition to the next scene, in which the audience sees several performers (male and female) in blond Marilyn Monroe-style wigs dancing to a driving disco beat, beneath

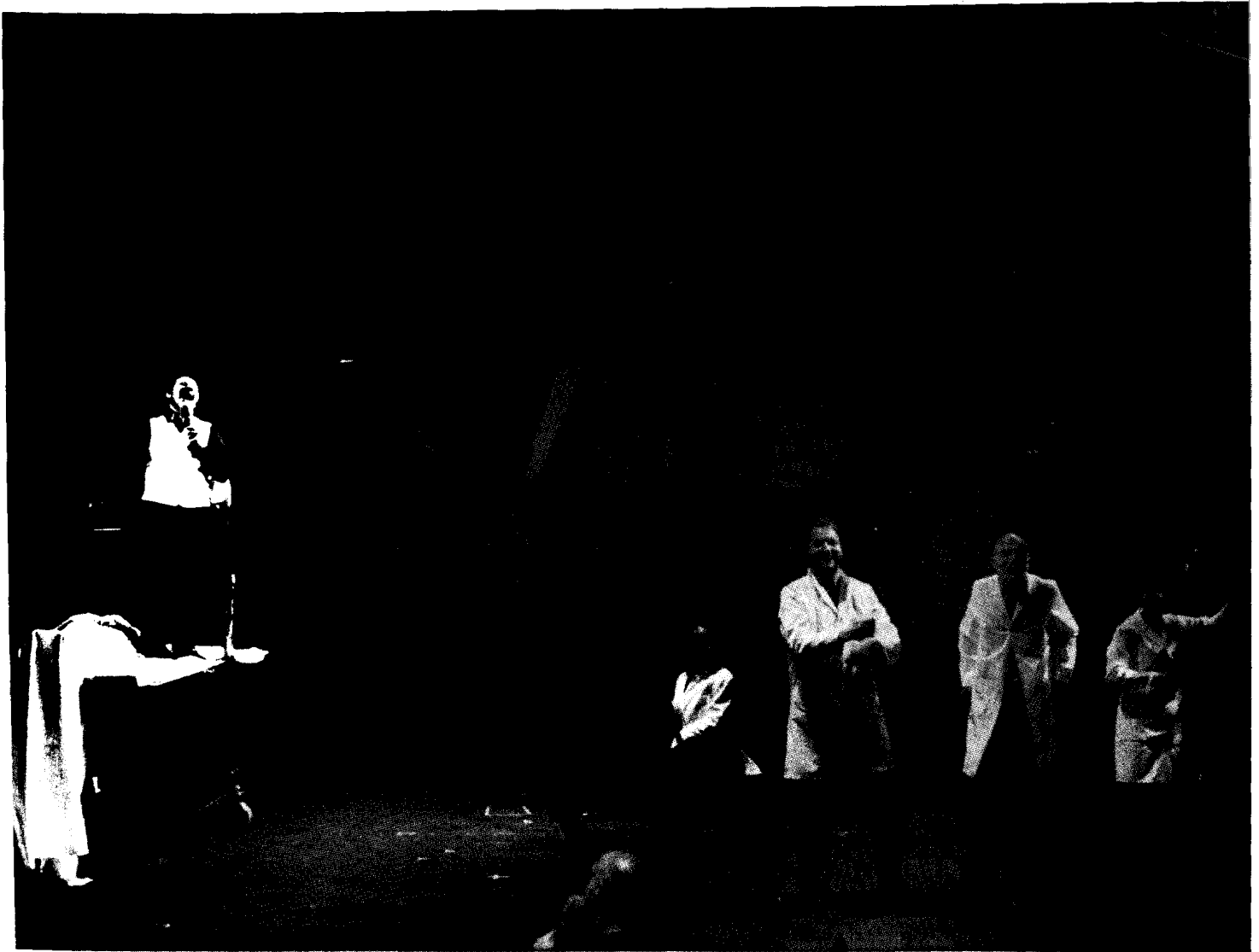


Photo 6: The hospital scene.

Photo: Ros Ribas

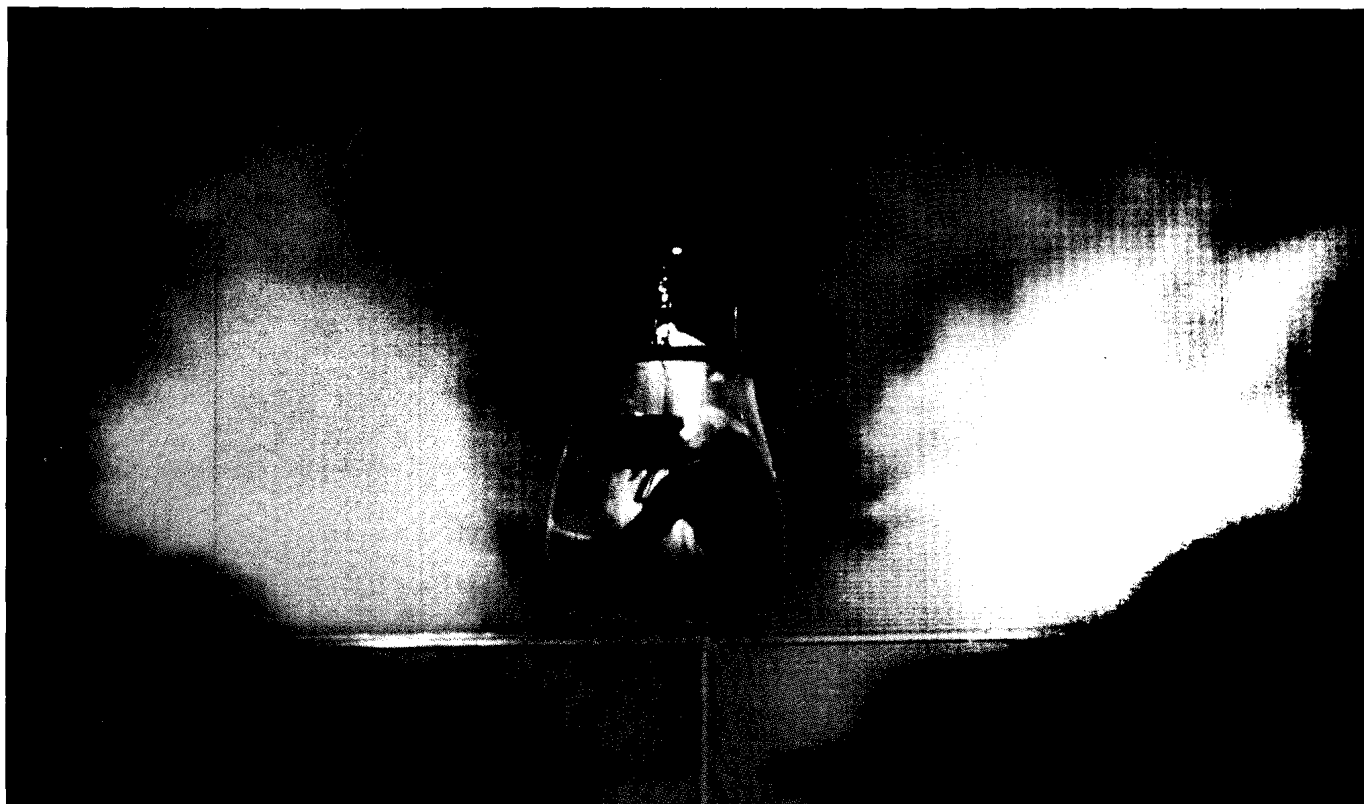


Photo 7: Faust (Santi Pons) enclosed within the giant embryo from which he will emerge in ironic resurrection.

Photo: Ros Ribas

flashing lights. Shouting over a microphone, the disk-jockey calls out a roster of famous males from Greek mythology—Ulysses, Achilles, Apollo—and tells them, “Search, search, search for your Helen!” This is the high-tech setting in which Margarita, wearing one of the blond wigs, meets Faust. The first tantalizing line she mutters to him, as she places a phallic cigarette in her mouth, is, “Got a light?” Faust, under the seductive spell of the Witch’s potion, is immediately overcome with sexual desire and tells Mefist that he “must have her.”

Before long, the audience, positioned in the role of Orwellian “Big Brother,” is shown on the large screen upstage a video sequence capturing an intimate moment in which Margarita lies asleep in her bed. The awkward intrusiveness of the scene might easily cause any spectator to feel a disturbing sense of voyeuristic shame. Mefist (who, in Goethe’s drama enters her house accompanied by Faust) describes in a cold, crude manner Margarita’s sexual fantasies, thoughts, and actions as she masturbates and imagines herself in a sexual encounter with Faust. The spectator, who continues to play the role of intruder, is subsequently compelled to watch Margarita take a shower in one of the “windows” upstage. The voice of Marta is overheard as Margarita’s real image is exquisitely superimposed against a video backdrop of virtual flowing water, creating one of the most fascinating optical events of the performance. Margarita’s shower can be interpreted as a symbolic ritual of purification, but Marta is overheard telling her friend that she knows an “ideal place,” and that it will only take “three,

four, five sleeping pills” for Margarita’s mother to lose consciousness. She is referring to Margarita’s impending sexual rendezvous with Faust and the plan to insure that her mother remain unaware of her secret aspiration to lose her virginity. The plan not only will leave Margarita pregnant, it will also cause the accidental death of her mother from an overdose of barbiturates. The spectator is apprised of the details of the tragedy in a later sequence, which presents a video collage depicting Margarita’s mother as she sits at her kitchen table and ingests the pills.

One of the best-known episodes in Goethe’s play takes place “In Martha’s Garden.” Faust courts Gretchen, Mephistopheles courts Martha; the couples enter and exit as they stroll through the garden, and we overhear bits and pieces of their dialogue. In La Fura’s version, the couple Faust/Margarita is captured by Mefist in a giant net, or spider web, that stretches across the length of the stage. Mefist and Marta look on as sexual voyeurs, while Faust and Margarita’s love making is reduced to a savage act of copulation between two insects caught in a web (perhaps, a reductive reference to the insects of Goethe’s “Walpurgis Night” episode). [Photo 4] Whereas in Goethe’s text, Gretchen inquires about Faust’s religious beliefs, La Fura’s audience hears the prerecorded voiceover of Margarita, who transmits through an interior monologue her thoughts as she engages in sex with Faust: “Religion ... Do you believe in God?... Listen to me, little one ... Don’t stop!... in God?... I love you, I do, I do!... It’s a mystery ... Fornication ... The heart, love ... God!... I love you, yes, yes, yes!” Goethe’s

religious transgressions are taken to the limit. The sexual and religious oppression of Margarita's childhood, surfacing in memories that appear to echo the words of her mother, are intermingled with thoughts of her own sexual fulfillment and the love, or lust, she feels for Faust. As the scene concludes, Margarita's orgasmic cries echo throughout the theatre and she is left alone, dangling from the web.

Valentí, Margarita's brother, appears in the scenes that follow. Having heard the town gossip about her pregnancy and sexual promiscuity, he is furious with his sister and calls her a whore. Eventually, Faust shoots Valentí, and Margarita, crazed and hysterical, is lifted away by a pulley. [Photo 5] "Forget about her," Mefist advises Faust, "Stop beating yourself up over this. She is pregnant, Valentí is dead because of her, and her mother is dead, too." But La Fura's Faust, in contrast with Goethe's, does not listen to the advice of his inner demonic voice and lets his despair drive him to suicide. As part I ends, he places a revolver in

his mouth and pulls the trigger. It is a highly disturbing scene, whose shockingly graphic dimensions are augmented through the use of video images showing blood spewing from the back of Faust's head.

Part II begins with a light-hearted, entertaining moment that contrasts with the darker elements of the tragedy. A parody of the television talk show genre, internationally ubiquitous in the contemporary culture of mass media, serves as a means for pondering the implications of the Faustian pact. Mefist emerges as the corrupt host of "program number 666 of the *Mephisto Show* ... the television show that converts dreams into reality," and that "live, from the bottom of the mental abyss of Faust himself," asks the question, "Why would you sell your soul to the devil?" Implicit in Mefist's discourse is the suggestion that all the hallucinatory images that the audience has been witnessing are exterior projections of Faust's imagination, filtered through the chasm of his anguished and tormented con-

sciousness. As a dead Faust lies on a gurney in the hospital (the antithesis of Goethe's bucolic topography), his erotic adventures with a nurse (the Feminine Spirit) that are the product of his delusional imagination are portrayed behind him on the video screen. [Photo 6] Mefist tells him, "Faust, you are dreaming. Have a good trip."

Before the journey is over, the audience witnesses the rebirth of Faust as he emerges, with the help of "stagehands," from a large plastic embryo, suspended above the stage. [Photo 7] The embryo is trademark image that La Fura has used in other spectacles, such as *Accions* and *Noun*; in this case it serves to reinforce the notion that Faust's story is, indeed, an endless cycle of eternal return. Following his rebirth, he is given prosthetic wings, made of recycled metal and plastic, so that he can journey "toward the light," of redemption and immortality. [Photo 8] In his journey, his soul meets up again with that of Margarita, now dead, who also tells him that he is dreaming, but he does not recognize her. At the end of the performance, as Mozart's *Requiem* evokes images of apotheosis, Faust is seen spinning in his metallic "bed," just as he was at the beginning of the performance. His final and fateful words, "Linger a while! Thou art so fair!" are punctuated by an explosion and the spectator is left to wonder when his story will reemerge once again.



Photo 8: Faust (Santi Pons), wearing prosthetic wings, ascends toward the light of redemption.

Photo: Ros Ribas

A perusal of the press coverage and reviews of *F@ust versió 3.0* leads one to conclude that La Fura's contemporary recontextualization and vulgarization of Goethe's classic text may have injured the sensibilities of some. Their performance in Castilian Spanish (translated from the original Catalan by Ley) at the Lincoln Center Festival inspired Peter Marks of *The New York Times* to refer to the piece as "muddled, smutty, and juvenile." However, the Lincoln Center audience was also given the option of listening with headphones to a simulcast in English, and it is possible that some of the meaning of La Fura's dialogue may have been lost in the translation.

Also during July 1998, La Fura performed (in Castilian) at the prestigious International Festival of Classical Theatre in Almagro, Spain. According to Rosana Torres of *El País*, the director of the festival, Luciano García Lorenzo, scheduled La Fura's production at the Asunción de Calatrava Convent, in a Dominican cloister that dates from 1534 and has served as a festival performance venue for more than a decade. Don Agustín, one of the convent superiors, was apparently concerned that La Fura's interpretation of *Faust* might, in some way, cast the devil in a virtuous light. In the end, he confessed that what little he *did* see of the performance was "absurd" and "awful"—especially the scenes portraying homosexuality and lesbianism (which he did not see, but heard about from the convent's cleaning women). Defending La Fura, co-director Padrissa alluded to the recurrent image of the devil in the art of all the great cathedrals of Europe and aptly suggested that his company's performance, in effect, might be viewed as a modern-day *auto sacramental*, or mystery play, which allegorizes the notions of good and evil. *Faust versió 3.0* nevertheless played to a sold-out crowd in Almagro; the controversy may well have incited curiosity and contributed to an increase in attendance.

The members of La Fura base their work on the idea of transferring radical provocation into an aesthetic form. Their emergence during the period of Spain's democratic transition was, in some ways, a response to the release of political, cultural, and linguistic pressure following the demise of the Franco dictatorship—a release that is habitually referred to as the *destape* ("denuding" or "uncorking"). In present-day, democratic Catalonia, issues of linguistic and cultural identity remain daily concerns, indelibly intertwined with the notion of freedom of expression and memories of Spain's relatively recent dictatorial past. With their startling and stunning visual and acoustic images, La Fura has perhaps managed to maintain a semblance of the energetic jubilation and insane ingenuousness that characterized their early years as a company. If they have been able to preserve this youthful vitality even within the context of the official, political, bourgeois institution that is the National Theater of Catalonia, then epithets referring to "juvenility" and "smuttiness"—especially when pronounced by a North American critic—may be considered an insignificant encumbrance.

NOTES

1. I quote from my notes on the Catalan script performed at the "Teatre Nacional de Catalunya" in June 1998; my descriptions of the production are also based on these performances. All translations in this article are my own.

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