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## Post-Franco Theatre

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## Post-Franco theatre

SHARON G. FELDMAN

In the multiple realms and layers that comprise the contemporary Spanish theatrical landscape, “crisis” would seem to be the word that most often lingers in the air, as though it were a common mantra, ready to roll off the tongue of so many theatre professionals with such enormous ease, and even enthusiasm, that one is prompted to wonder whether it might indeed be a miracle that the contemporary technological revolution – coupled with perpetual quandaries concerning public and private funding for the arts – had not by now brought an end to the evolution of the oldest of live arts, or, at the very least, an end to drama as we know it.

In 1996, José Ramón Fernández, a playwright based in Madrid, went so far as to underscore the presence of a curious inclination toward self-destruction in the theatre profession in Spain, where grim prognostications and dismal portrayals of the current theatrical panorama are surpassed only by the horrors of Francisco de Goya’s black paintings.<sup>1</sup> In the year 2000, Barcelona playwright/poet Joan Casas (1950–) dared to pose the provocative hypothesis that the often-cited “new Catalan dramaturgy,” in effect, might be merely a “mirage.” (“Dramaturgy,” in Spain, generally refers to the art of writing plays and/or the textual organization and design of the *mise en scène*.) Furthermore, during the past decade, the tempestuous cultural-political *milieu* surrounding the construction and reconstruction of several architecturally striking and ostensibly lavish public theatre venues – which include, in Barcelona, the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, the new Teatre Lliure, and the Gran Teatre del Liceu, and, in Madrid, the Teatro Real, the Teatro Olimpia, and the Teatro María Guerrero (the historic home of Spain’s Centro Dramático Nacional [CDN]) – has spawned a hallucinatory display of melodramatic moments, impassioned accusations, and hysterical outbursts, witnessed both on and off the stage.

Yet, history has shown that in Spain, as well as other Western societies, crisis is perhaps not only a necessary condition, but also a *raison d’être* for

<sup>1</sup> José Ramón Fernández, “Quince años de escritura dramática en España: un camino hacia la normalidad.” *ADE Teatro* 50 (April–June 1996), p. 80.

the theatre, for it implies an essential attitude of risk and rupture, a sense of being on edge or on the verge of collapse, that underlies its dynamic drive toward survival. Only complacency – not crisis – could lead to death, or to what Peter Brook calls “deadly theatre.” The Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), for whom the stage was always a place of provocation, once declared that the theatre has meaning only “if it allows us to transcend our stereotyped vision, our conventional feelings and customs, our standards of judgment.” Imbedded in Grotowski’s theory of acting is the implicit paradox that only after having cast aside all masks and relinquished all pretense, can the actor “unveil” and then embrace, “in a state of complete defenselessness,” the process of self-discovery and transcendence that is the experience of performance.<sup>2</sup> It is a method that may be painful, shocking, or polemical, and that, when superimposed onto the broader context of the Spanish stage, would seem to be the very same process that underpins the arduous evolution of theatre history subsequent to the death of Francisco Franco. One need only recall the forty-year period of Civil War and dictatorship, in which censorship and multiple manifestations of exile and diaspora meant the disappearance, obstruction, or severe limitation of the work of those theatre professionals who refused to succumb to the aesthetic–political–linguistic norms of the official culture, in order to begin to understand that the Spanish stage has come a long way since 1975.

Since the transition to democracy, the theatre of Spain has evolved into a cacophonous state of aesthetic heterogeneity, cultural diversity, and linguistic plurality that is truly unprecedented in modern times. While cynicism may be a long-established premise, it may also be tempered by existing signs that contemporary theatrical life in Spain, far from languishing upon its deathbed, in fact may be enjoying at this new turn of the century relatively good health. In stark contrast to the years of dictatorship, a situation of synchronicity exists whereby several generations of dramatists, directors, designers, and performers are able to lead parallel lives, writing and working side by side within the Spanish state, offering a broad range of performance practices and theatrical traditions intended to garner the interest of diverse and overlapping groups of spectators. A commercial theatre of bourgeois sensibilities, conventional comedies, and the so-called “aesthetic of the boulevard” (from Juan José Alonso Millán [1936– ], Ana Diosdado [1940– ], and Santiago Moncada [1928– ] to Neil Simon and Stephen Sondheim) continues to thrive, and no doubt always will, but it exists alongside a gamut of Avant-Garde, and multilingual, alternatives.

<sup>2</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, “Statement of Principles.” In *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*. Ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 188.

In the realm of experimental theatre, the hierarchical distinction between text-based drama and pure performance is no longer valid, and all possible amalgamations and variations of the theatrical spectacle co-exist: from the multimedia “actions” of companies such as La Fura dels Baus, Sèmola, and Comediants, enormously physical and highly visual in conception; to the plays of Carles Batlle (1963–), Lluïsa Cunillé (1961–), Ignasi Garcia (1964–), Juan Mayorga (1965–), and Borja Ortiz de Gondra (1965–), in which the word is action and action is word; to the hybrid language of Rodrigo García (1964–) and Sara Molina (1958–), at once profoundly rooted in both the aesthetic tendencies of installation art and the exploitation of the text. Catalan dramatist and director Sergi Belbel (1963–) aptly summarized this cross-disciplinary, eclectic sensibility when he declared, “if I like both La Fura dels Baus and Molière, it’s not a contradiction.”<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the contemporary obfuscation of distinctions between high and low, the phenomenon of “crossover” – in Madrid and Barcelona, as on Broadway – is no longer a taboo necessarily synonymous with “sell-out.” This situation can at times lead to beneficial effects of aesthetic hybridism and intellectual cross-fertilization. Such is the case of the tremendously popular adaptations of canonical works of literature by the Barcelona musical theatre company Dagoll Dagom, under the creative supervision of Joan Lluís Bozzo and Anna Rosa Cisquella. Their *Antaviana* (1978/1985) was based on the short stories of Pere Calders, while *Mar i cel* (“Sea and Sky,” 1988) was derived from the eponymous play by Àngel Guimerà. *Cacao* (2000), with cast members from both Spain and the Caribbean, and music by rock icon Santiago Auserón, was inspired by a short story written by Gérard Lauzier. It is a musical that revealed, beneath its uplifting rhythms and comic episodes, a serious political engagement with issues of immigration, identity, uprootedness, and the plight of those living in Spain without legal documentation. Another telling example of this phenomenon of crossover is the Catalan musical *El temps de Planck* (“Planck Time,” 2000), written by Belbel and experimental composer Òscar Roig, an unconventional and compelling blend of metaphysics and melodrama, whose unforgettable melodies resonate with an energy comparable to that of any Broadway show.

Curiously, the common tendency among many contemporary playwrights to cross over from drama to television screenwriting – Álvaro del Amo (1942–), Belbel, Josep M. Benet i Jornet (1940–), Fermín Cabal (1948–), Toni Cabré (1957–), Jordi Galceran (1964–), Garcia, Rafael González (1966–), Ignacio del Moral (1957–), Antonio Onetti (1962–),

<sup>3</sup> Sharon G. Feldman, “Si me gustan La Fura dels Baus y Molière, no es una contradicción: Conversaciones con Sergi Belbel.” *España Contemporánea* 13.1 (2001), pp. 71–86.

Josep Pere Peyró (1959–), David Plana (1969–), Sergi Pompermayer (1967–), Jordi Sánchez (1964–), Paco Sanguino (1964–), Mercè Sarrias (1966–), Rodolf Sirera (1948–), – has created intriguing relationships between the stage and the small screen. Beginning in the 1990s, Benet i Jornet transformed the face of Catalan language television, and by extension, Catalan theatre, with his popular serial melodramas. The enormous success of television series such as these has helped fuel the rise in theatre spectatorship in Catalonia, not only because audiences have become more likely than ever before to recognize the name of the author, but also because the crossover has engendered a “star system” composed of some of Spain’s finest stage actors, who move regularly from the television screen, to the stage, and back, enticing spectators and “fans” to move with them.

As the foregoing descriptions suggest, the history of theatre in Spain is no longer a tale of just one city; rather, the ontological limits that define the contemporary Spanish stage extend well beyond the geopolitical borders of Madrid. The same issues of self-determination, national identity, and cultural legitimacy – the often-cited forces that stem from both the center and the periphery – that have left a lasting imprint on the history of the modern Spanish state, have likewise informed the cultural-political backdrop of post-Franco theatre. The CDN was established in Madrid in 1978, and subsequently, throughout the 1980s, a vast shift toward decentralization ensued with the emergence of several national “drama centers,” funded by local governments in Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, Valencia, Extremadura, and the Balearic Islands. These generally well-endowed public institutions (some of which were only short-lived ventures), created according to varying principles of international projection, nationalism, and protectionism, were established, in theory, to promote and showcase autochthonous theatre from distinct historical repertoires, as well as the work of contemporary playwrights.

The employment of a language other than Spanish on the stage has been a crucial marker and affirmation of identity, and even a sign of resistance; of course, this was also the case during the dictatorship. As director Lluís Pasqual (1951–), founding member of Barcelona’s Theatre Lliure, has affirmed, “Catalan theatre and the Catalan language were strangled, but they were not able to suffocate or kill us . . . To speak Catalan at that moment meant: communist, separatist, whatever!”<sup>4</sup> Raúl Dans (1964–), a playwright with ties to the Centro Dramático Galego, has remarked that his use of the Galician language in post-Franco times is “a way of reclaiming one’s own space . . . when faced with the strong thrust of

<sup>4</sup> Interview in Ytak, *Lluís Pasqual: Camí de teatre*. Trans. Albert de la Torre (Barcelona: Alter Pirene / Escena, 1993), p. 36.

more powerful dramaturgies.”<sup>5</sup> In plays such as *Lugar* (“Place,” 1994), and *Derrota* (“Defeat,” 1998), Dans has shown how being “on the edge of the world” is not only a geographic situation, but also an existential condition, which translates into a “geopathological” meditation on the relationship between place and theatrical space.

In effect, a sweeping view of cultural activities in contemporary Spain reveals large and small enclaves of substantial theatrical undertakings in peripheral locations that are often far detached from the bravado of grandiloquent public or commercial infrastructures. Such is the performance garage in Santiago de Compostela known as La NASA (Nave de Servicios Artísticos), established in 1992 as a center for Avant-Garde artistic endeavors and home to the Galician theatre company Chévere. On the island of Menorca, each November since 1970, the Cercle Artístic de Ciutadella has granted the coveted Born Prize, one of Spain’s most revered and lucrative theatre awards, to a play written in either Spanish or Catalan. The Basque town of Rentería is home to the awarding-winning Ur Teatro (1988), whose influential director Helena Pimenta has gained international notoriety for her contemporary stagings of Shakespeare. Although the list of playwrights who create Basque-language drama is small (Yolanda Arrieta [1963– ], Bernardo Atxaga [1951– ], Aitzpea Goenaga [1959– ], Xabier Mendiguren [1945– ], Xavier de Soto, Patxi Zabaleta [1947– ], Ramón Barea [1949– ], among others), there was a fleeting attempt, during the late 1990s, to establish a Teatro Público de Guipúzcoa with a stable company performing in both Spanish and Euskara. Ignacio Amestoy (1947– ) and Xabi Puerta (1959– ) have taken up issues of Basque identity in plays written in Spanish.

Since its founding by Salvador Távora in 1971, La Cuadra de Sevilla has unfailingly displayed – with spectacles such as *Quejío* (“Moan,” 1972), *Andalucía amarga* (“Bitter Andalusia,” 1979), and more recently, *Don Juan de los ruedos* (“Don Juan of the Bullrings,” 2000) – a commitment to deconstructing the mythologized images of Andalusia that were perpetuated by the culture of the dictatorship. Jerez de la Frontera is center of operations for La Zaranda (1978), a theatre company whose dark, brooding visions, depicted in *Perdonen la tristeza* (“Forgive the Sorrow,” 1992) and *Cuando la vida eterna se acaba* (“When Eternity Comes to an End,” 1996), are evocative of the canvasses of the Andalusian Baroque painters.

A key showcase for contemporary drama in Spain is the Muestra de Autores Contemporáneos, held annually in Alicante since 1993, under the

<sup>5</sup> Raúl Dans, “Un dramaturgo en el fin del mundo.” In “Les darreres generacions teatrals del segle.” Special issue of *Assaig de Teatre: Revista de l’Associació d’Investigació i Experimentació Teatral* 24 (September 2000), p. 140.

direction of Guillermo Heras (1952–). This is one of numerous theatre festivals organized each year throughout the Autonomous Community of Valencia, where theatre in post-Franco times has grown steadily in keeping with the cultural resurgence of its capital city. One of the watershed plays of the democratic Transition, *Plany en la mort d'Enric Ribera* (“Lament for the Death of Enric Ribera,” 1972), was written by coveted Valencian playwright Rodolf Sirera. This “biographic symphony” takes the form of a complex impressionistic collage, with visual projections and text interwoven in both Spanish and Valencian Catalan. Sirera’s experimental play, which finally premièred in 1977, was an explicit vehicle for expressing his preoccupations with issues of Valencian identity and the future of the Valencian stage. Perhaps, years later, upon contemplating the growth of the theatre in this community, he was able to experience a sense of recompense for his enormous efforts on behalf of its survival and revitalization.

Director Carles Alfaro (1960–) and his Valencian company Moma Teatre (1982) have received national recognition for their stagings of Pinter and Camus. The operatic spectacles of Valencian director, composer, and pianist Carles Santos (1940–) – *L’esplèndida vergonya del fet mal fet* (“The Splendid Shame of the Deed Badly Done,” 1996), *Ricardo i Elena* (2000), *Sama Samaruck Suck Suck* (2002) – have presented audiences at international venues including the Edinburgh Festival with an uncanny, Surrealistic blend of the sacred and the profane. Playwrights Pasqual Alapont (1963–), Carles Alberola (1964–), Chema Cardena (1963–), Roberto García (1968–), Rafael González, Alejandro Jornet (1956–), Manuel Molins (1946–), Carles Pons (1955–), Paco Sanguino, and Paco Zarzoso (1966–), part of a veritable “boom” in theatrical writing in Valencia, are gradually gaining ground and national prizes. Zarzoso, who regularly writes in Spanish, has revealed in the minimalist brushstrokes of *Umbral* (“Threshold,” 1997), *Valencia* (1977), and *Mirador* (“Lookout,” 1998) a sharp sense of the relationship between liminal exterior spaces of transgression and the interior torment of his characters.

In post-Franco Spain, Barcelona and Madrid have emerged unequivocally as the two major axes of theatrical creation, production, and exhibition, creating what Pimenta has termed a “bipolarización” of the Spanish stage.<sup>6</sup> Along with cultural, political, social, and economic factors, the magnetic draw that these cities have had with regard to the evolution of theatre during the democratic period is also a consequence of their role as pedagogical centers. They are home to the two principal conservatories, the RESAD (Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático) in Madrid

<sup>6</sup> Helena Pimenta, “El euskara, ¿una ausencia teatral?” In “Les darreres generacions teatrals del segle,” p. 117.

and the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona, as well as numerous workshops, seminars, university groups, and publications supervised by a long inventory of established playwrights and theatre “gurus” that includes José Luis Gómez (1940–) and Guillermo Heras in Madrid, and Ricard Salvat (1934–) in Barcelona. In 1995, Gómez founded the award-winning Teatro de la Abadía in Madrid, an experimental theatre laboratory devoted to intellectual reflection, social debate, and the pursuit of “el placer inteligente” (“intelligent pleasure”). José Sanchis Sinisterra (1940–), a Valencian dramatist, director, and theorist, has been a decisive pedagogical force and inspiration to many playwrights in Madrid and Barcelona, as well as Latin America.

Significantly, the dramatists and theatre practitioners who have come of age during the democratic period have had a level of academic training in the theory and mechanics of writing *and* staging plays that has never before been seen in Spain. Many of these playwrights have strong ties to one or more of the nearly thirty *salas alternativas*, or “alternative venues” (similar in conception to the performance spaces located “off-off” Broadway or on the London “fringe”), which are scattered about the Spanish State (e.g. La NASA and the Sala Beckett). A phenomenon that emerged during the mid 1980s, these generally small ovens of creativity (approximately nine in Madrid, seven in Barcelona) are today dynamic spaces of Avant-Garde energy, where banality and reckless expenditure are replaced with risk, commitment, experimentation, research, and pedagogy, and where the artists are hardly impervious to international recognition.

Stemming from the *salas alternativas* are pioneering cadres of theatre artists such as the Grupo El Astillero (composed of playwrights José Ramón Fernández [1962–], Juan Mayorga, Luis Miguel González [1965–], and Raúl Hernández [1964–]), with connections to the Sala Cuarta Pared in Madrid. Javier Yagüe, artistic director of the Cuarta Pared and its resident company, created, along with playwrights Yolanda Pallín (1965–) and José Ramón Fernández, the immensely successful *Trilogía de la juventud* (“Trilogy of Youth,” 1999–2002), which was seen in more than fifty cities. In Barcelona, the Sala Beckett and the initiatives of Sanchis Sinisterra and director Toni Casares (1965–) have nurtured the careers of Àngels Aymar (1958–), Carles Batlle, Sergi Belbel, Lluïsa Cunillé, Manel Dueso (1954–), Beth Escudé (1963–), Ignasi Garcia, Enric Nolla (1966–), Josep Pere Peyró, David Plana, Sergi Pomper Mayer, and Mercè Sarrias.

As was suggested earlier, the long road from the democratic Transition to what Fernández and others have termed the “normalization” of the Spanish stage has hardly been devoid of episodes of anguish. For the group of dramatists commonly known as the “new Spanish theatre,” which emerged during the *apertura* (gradual “opening” of Spain to foreign

influence) of the 1960s, the transition was a time of disenchantment, as they were forced to contend with a persistent denial of historical memory, a rejection of the allegorical evocations of injustice that had been constants in their theatre. Born in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Luis Riaza (1925–), José Ruibal (1925–), Ramón Gil Novales (1928–), Antonio Martínez Ballesteros (1929–), Miguel Romero Esteo (1930–), Jesús Campos (1938–), Manuel Martínez Mediero (1938–), Luis Matilla (1939–), Jordi Teixidor (1939–), Angel García Pintado (1940–), Alberto Miralles (1940–), María-José Ragué-Arias (1941–), Carmen Resino (1941–), Jaume Melendres (1941–), Jerónimo López Mozo (1942–), Manuel Lourenzo (1943–), and Roger Justafre (1944–) were part of a long list of playwrights who, in general, were known to employ anti-Realist/anti-classical modes of representation (absurdist allegory, Expressionism, collage, *esperpento*) as a seemingly innocent mask for an intensely critical subtext whose sphere of reference remained, but was not limited to, authoritarian Spain. These *nuevos* were branded with epithets that included “underground,” “Symbolist,” “prohibited,” and even “the most prized and the least staged.” This last appellation certainly held true, for, during the political Transition, a so-called “Realist” playwright, such as Antonio Buero Vallejo, whose long career culminated with the historic *mise en scène* of *La Fundación* (“The Foundation,” 1974) at the CDN in 1998, was much more likely to see his works staged than any of the *nuevos*.

Amid frequent bouts of historical amnesia on the part of audiences, producers, and national drama centers, the Transition was also a period marked by several uneven attempts to rescue the quintessentially Spanish anti-Realist traditions of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, the Surreal, and the *esperpento*. Several productions of Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s theatre (which had already seen the light of day during the *apertura*) were met with success, but, as Enrique Centeno noted, the effort to return to the recent past in order to settle matters that the dictatorship had left unresolved was fruitless in the case of Rafael Alberti (1902–1999) and that of Fernando Arrabal (1933–).<sup>7</sup> (Arrabal did finally receive the National Theatre Prize in 2001 for Juan Carlos Pérez de la Fuente’s *mise en scène* of *El cementerio de automóviles* [“The Automobile Cemetery,” 1977] at the CDN.) In 1979, Centeno speculated in the pages of *El País* that audiences during the Transition were generally unwilling to decipher a series of codes that were no longer relevant to their immediate reality of democracy and freedom.

The case of Francisco Nieva (1927–), however, was different. Nieva, who had worked extensively during the 1960s as a set designer and

<sup>7</sup> Enrique Centeno, “Cambio y comunicación en el teatro posfranquista.” *El País* (16 September 1979): VIII (“Arte y Pensamiento”).

director in both Spain and abroad (especially France), did not see his plays reach the Madrid stage until 1976, with the première of *Sombra y quimera de Larra* ("Shadow and Chimera of Larra"). From then on, throughout the 1970s and on into the 1990s, he was a regular presence on the Madrid stage. Perhaps Nieva's delirious, Baroque, "gothic," "furious," "calamitous" sense of farce, his derisive critique of the establishment, and the transgressive nature of this theatre, which was largely influenced by the plastic arts, was especially attractive to the culture of the *destape* and, later, that of the *movida* (terms that encapsulate the atmosphere of indulgence, permissiveness, and decadence that characterized the culture of the political Transition). What is undeniable is that plays such as *La carroza de plomo candente* ("The Carriage of White-Hot Lead," 1976), *Coronada y el toro* ("Coronada and the Bull," 1982), *El baile de los ardientes* ("The Dance of the Raging Flames," 1990), and *Los españoles bajo tierra* ("Spaniards Underground," 1993) have established Nieva's place in Spanish theatre history as one of the most original voices to emerge during the post-Franco period.

Among the politically engaged playwrights who struggled against oppression, the case of Agustín Gómez-Arcos (1933–1998) represents an extraordinary paradox. Like Nieva, and in keeping with the tradition of Valle-Inclán's *esperpentos*, the theatre of Gómez-Arcos is a place where defiance and dissent are converted into an aesthetic. Censorship prompted his voluntary exile to France in 1968, making him a kind of phantom figure of the Spanish stage. His subsequent publication of several novels, written in French, earned him international acclaim. His rebellious cries were long forgotten in his native Spain, until the early 1990s, when the revival of three of his plays at the hands of director Carme Portaceli – *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* ("Mrs. Dead Smith's Interview with her Phantoms," 1972), *Los gatos* ("The Cats," 1962), and *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas* ("My Dear Friends, It's Time We Get Certain Things Straight," 1966) – at publicly funded theatre venues in Madrid, re-established overnight his prestige as a Spanish dramatist. Hence, his life had come full circle in that the Spanish Ministerio de Cultura that once denigrated his work, with the advent of democracy was finally promoting it.

It is those artists who, like Nieva and Gómez-Arcos, have displayed a daring and defiant ingenuity that enables them to transcend generational groupings and slick categorization who are also the best expression of a theatrical Avant-Garde. Indeed, the Avant-Garde theatre of the post-Franco period did *not* spring forth from a cultural void; rather, it represents the culmination of a trajectory of experimental theatre in Spain that began in Barcelona in the late 1950s. Concurrent with the emergence of the "new" Spanish theatre, Spain's theatrical landscape witnessed

the genesis of a variety of workshops, pedagogical environments, and communitarian performance troupes that were conceived as non-official and non-professional “underground” alternatives to commercial and government-subsidized theatre. Throughout Spain, the so-called “independent” theatre movement explored the implications of collective creation and opened its doors to the most experimental tendencies and repertoire of the twentieth-century international stage. The Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona, the Escola d’Art Dramàtic Adrià Gual, Els Joglars, and Comediants in Catalonia, Tábano and Los Goliardos in Madrid, Teatro Geroa in the Basque Country, and La Cuadra in Andalusia are among the most prominent examples. Liberated from the shackles of the official culture of the dictatorship and inspired in large part by the parallel activities of performance troupes such as the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Bread and Puppet, the independent theatre groups embarked upon an interrogation of the conventional hierarchy of artistic invention that had once subordinated the theatrical to the literary, the *mise en scène* to the author, and the theatre to life itself. Their questions seemed to echo Artaud’s influential struggle against logocentrism, textual authority, and the notions of repetition and representation that are embodied in that struggle. They approached the value and integrity of linguistic structures from a perspective of ambivalence, giving preference to the construction of visual *tableaux* that would accentuate the pictorial, sculptural, and spatial features of the performance.

It will always be a curious and absurd paradox that, during these post-Civil-War years, the denial of freedom of expression, in a sense, seemed to fuel creativity and change, and that the confining socio-cultural, and linguistic, circumstances surrounding the independent theatre movement became a catalyst for aesthetic innovation. Following Franco’s death, the majority of the independent theatre troupes eventually reached an impasse, or suffered a crisis of identity, as they were forced to re-examine their *raison d’être* when their main cause for rebellion had suddenly ceased to exist. The independent theatre, however, can be considered the most decisive turning point in the history of contemporary drama and performance in Spain, and its considerable legacy continues to be felt in the twenty-first century, for it served as a breeding ground for some of the most dynamic members of the post-Franco theatre scene: José Luis Alonso de Santos (1942– ), Josep M. Benet i Jornet, Albert Boadella (1943– ), Fermín Cabal, Jesús Cracio (1946– ), Mario Gas (1947– ), José Luis Gómez, Guillermo Heras, Anna Lizaran, Josep Montanyès (1937–2002), Joan Ollé (1955– ), Lluís Pasqual, Fabià Puigserver (1938–1991), Ricard Salvat, José Sanchis Sinisterra. Moreover, on an aesthetic level, the experience of the independent theatre engendered in Spain a new,

post-Franco theatrical identity (or identities) vis-à-vis its transnational transactions and intercultural associations. In Grotowski's terms, it was a vehicle through which the post-totalitarian face of Spanish theatre was able to transcend stereotyped visions, conventional feelings, customs, and standards of judgment.

A crucial cluster of Catalan groups, collectives, and performers – Els Joglars (1962), Comediants (1971), Dagoll Dagom (1974), Albert Vidal – which originated in the margins of Francoist oppression and censorship, continues to thrive today, having achieved an impressive degree of commercial success and/or professional consolidation in democratic times. These groups essentially paved the way for the appearance of a new generation of Catalan companies established during the post-Franco period: Teatre Lliure (1976), La Fura dels Baus (1979), Sèmola (1978), El Tricicle (1979), La Cubana (1980), Vol Ras (1980). On the whole, these groups have continued to investigate the aesthetic precepts of the independent theatre movement; namely, the Artaudian interrogation of the borders situated between performer and spectator. As they seem to suggest, if we are able to locate a place where representation is completely denied, then we will have uncovered “the real”: pure presence in its most untainted state and a place where theatre truly does equal life.

In the tumultuous *curriculum vitae* of the eminently insolent Albert Boadella and his company Els Joglars, the moments in which real life has been confused with spectacle have emerged with extraordinary frequency. Court martial, imprisonment, a dramatic escape from jail, flight into exile, subsequent amnesty, gun shots fired at a theatre, knife wounds inflicted upon an actor, bomb threats, and public remonstrance by a group of bishops were just some of the entries in this CV, which landed on the pages of the daily press during the political transition. Over time, Els Joglars have modified their aesthetic values (gradually incorporating the word into their theatre) and adjusted their point of attack in accordance with the most ardent political issues of any given moment. If there is a provocative question that surfaces throughout their entire forty-year trajectory, it is the role that art can, and should, play in the articulation of a cultural identity and the construction (and deconstruction) of a national culture.

Under the direction of founding-member Joan Font (1949– ), Comediants may be one of Spain's most international, well-traveled theatre companies, but they have never had to stray very far in order to find their most important source of inspiration: the culture of the Mediterranean and its festive iconography. Faithful to a 1960s Utopian ideal, their hedonistic, Epicurean, carnivalesque spirit, their anarchistic appropriations of pagan celebrations, and their recuperation of street theatre (a performance genre that was expressly prohibited during much of the

Franco period), become elements of rebellion, capable of affirming and stimulating a Catalan historical memory.

La Fura dels Baus emerged as a collective during the period of political paradox, cultural renaissance, and frenzied activity that characterized the democratic transition and the *movida*. This “urban tribe” has recontextualized the Mediterranean rhetoric of its origins within a contemporary technological environment, employing a multimedia aesthetic of collage in presenting its delirious obsessions. According to La Fura’s radically extended concept of *mise en scène*, poetic primitive ritual of the past intermingles with urban iconography of the present, audacious pyrotechnics clash with futuristic machinery, and circus-like acrobatics overlap with recycled industrial refuse.

The independent theatre had opened the way to a shift in emphasis to director-centered productions (de-emphasizing the role of the playwright). This, combined with the success of “visual” theatre (de-emphasizing the role of the literary text), created a period of profound difficulties for many dramatists during the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of whom sought refuge in television and film. It did not help matters that many theatres, such as the Lliure, one of the most vital cradles of repertory theatre in Spain, had been inclined to privilege a “universal repertoire” in lieu of the work of autochthonous playwrights. Toward the mid 1980s, the pendulum began to shift, and theatre in Spain, as in Europe and North America, began to witness what has been dubbed “the return of the word.” New prizes, such as the Marqués de Bradomín (1985), granted by the Instituto de la Juventud, were established with the intention of encouraging young people to create dramatic literature. Competitions for grants established by national drama centers, were among the other incentives that have since contributed to the process of recuperating and reinvigorating Spain’s national “dramaturgies.”

The theatre of the word returned with renewed energy, force, and prestige; however, once it “returned,” it was not the same. Whereas the points of reference for previous dramatists had been Antonio Buero Vallejo, Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, or Josep Maria de Sagarra, now they are Samuel Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Edward Bond, Bernard-Marie Koltès, Tony Kushner, David Mamet, Heiner Müller, Harold Pinter, Sam Shepard, and Botho Strauss. In the experimental strain of text-based drama, there are no thematic limits. In terms of aesthetic construction, quite often, the action not only precedes the word; the action *is* the word. Monologue is often employed as a way of confronting the traumas of remembrance and forgetting. Plot and characterization are frequently established through subjective fragments and shreds, not through objective/naturalistic/psychological approaches. Theatrical space is more apt to portray interior realities than exterior landscapes. Meaning

is established elliptically and enigmatically, “relatively,” or “in relation to” as Carles Batlle puts it, through silences, pauses, and gaps, or through strategies of repetition, regression, conflation, and simultaneity.<sup>8</sup>

In intricately structured plays that include *¡Ay, Carmela!* (1986), *Crímenes y locuras del traidor, Lope de Aguirre* (“Crimes and Madness of the Traitor, Lope de Aguirre,” 1986), *El cerco de Lenigrado* (“The Siege of Leningrad,” 1989–1993, which premièred in 1994 with Núria Espert), and *El lector por horas* (“The Hired Reader,” 1996), José Sanchis Sinisterra demonstrates that it is still possible to create a compellingly valid, politically committed theatre in democratic times. His investigation and inquiry with regard to the “borders” of metatheatricality (he founded a company named El Teatro Fronterizo in 1977) appear to be guided by a relentless desire to call attention to the creative processes at work in the construction of the theatrical text, as well as the theatricalized body, and thereby expose the performance practices that underlie the inscription of historical memory.

Fermín Cabal, like Sanchis, is not apt to shy away from political engagement, and some of his most mature works to date, *Ello dispara* (“It Shoots,” 1989), *Travesía* (“Passage,” 1991), and *Castillos en el aire* (“Castles in the Air,” 1995), express a less than subtle air of disenchantment in reaction to the landscape of fallen idols and shattered Utopian ideals that was left following the decline of the social-democratic government of Felipe González. Here, an implicit commentary on the Post-modern crisis of authority, on the evaporation of monolithic cultural discourses, is invoked in Cabal’s portraits of frivolous expenditure, escalating corruption, and government scandals (with references to the morally ambiguous “dirty war” against Basque terrorism). It is a crisis that is also played out in a subtle interrogation of the notion of theatrical representation, the relationship between sign and referent, and the word as the traditional locus of authority in the theatre.

Juan Mayorga, one of the most intellectually sophisticated of Spanish playwrights, appears to be well aware that performance, as Joseph Roach reminds us, hinges in essence upon a tenuous rapport between the living and the dead.<sup>9</sup> In plays that display an innovative sense of temporality, such as *El traductor de Blumemberg* (“Blumemberg’s Translator,” 1993), *El sueño de Ginebra* (“Geneva Dream,” 1996), and *Cartas de amor a Stalin* (“Love Letters to Stalin,” 1998), he creates a “theatre of ideas” that engages in hypothetical creations and recreations of history, and of struggles between artists and power, stretching the borders of reality and

<sup>8</sup> Carles Batlle, “El drama relatiu.” In *Suite* (Barcelona: Proa / Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 2001), pp. 17–23.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

fiction, and inviting us to reflect upon the subjective construction of the past and the violence implicit in our words and actions.

Josep M. Benet i Jornet is a Catalan playwright whose ability to rise above generational gaps has made him one of the most influential and internationally recognized contemporary dramatists. The première of *Desig* ("Desire," 1989) at Barcelona's Teatre Romea in 1991, under the direction of Sergi Belbel, was a defining moment in the evolution of text-based drama in Spain, considered a revelation by playwrights in both Madrid and Barcelona. In this play, as in *Fugaç* ("Fleeting," 1992), *Testament* ("Legacy," 1995), and, most recently, *L'habitació del nen* ("The Thirteenth Hour of the Night," 2001), an atmosphere of mystery encloses a poetic transcription of physical space, revealed as an immanent, interior, immaterial, psychic reality. Benet's theatre reveals a yearning for continuity, transcendence, and immortality, a concern with projecting oneself beyond what is our mundane, quotidian existence. His interest in perspectivism, subjectivity, and perception has evolved in conjunction with his creative complicity with Sergi Belbel.

Belbel, who is presently at the forefront of his theatrical generation, and whose reputation abroad garnered him a French Molière prize, has played a leading role as a playwright, director, and translator in revitalizing the tradition of text-based drama in Spain. In plays that include *Elsa Schneider* (1987), *Tàlem* ("Fourplay," 1989), *Carícies* ("Caresses," 1991), *Després de la pluja* ("After the Rain," 1993), *Morir* ("To Die," 1994), *La sang* ("Blood," 1998), and *El temps de Planck*, he has offered original approaches to formal construction and design. For Belbel, the role that verbal communication may play in apprehending reality has always been a matter of investigation and even a point of contention. In essence, Belbel's 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. "Cultural aphasia" would seem to be the governing metaphor here; an inability to express verbally the conditions of a culture that has become morally bereft, ethically corrupt, spiritually dispossessed, and wholly void of compassion. Belbel's pain is capable of assassinating the word, of shaking language to its very foundations, or, in the words of David Le Breton, "it slices up language and liberates anguish."<sup>10</sup>

It is this same type of cathartic awe that in the theatre of Rodrigo García is converted into provocation, into a flood of images. With his own company *La Carnicería* (1989), García grounds his work in the plastic arts: installations, environments, and collages made with recycled materials,

<sup>10</sup> David Le Breton, *Antropología del dolor*. Trans. Daniel Alcorba (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1999), p. 42.

which disturb and unnerve, as well as incite curiosity. "Autism," a concept that has likewise emerged in the work of Robert Wilson, perhaps would be an apt metaphor for works that include *Notas de cocina* ("Notes on Cooking," 1994) and *Conocer gente, comer mierda* ("Meet People, Eat Shit," 1999): abnormal introversion and egocentricity, an acceptance of fantasy rather than reality. García dares to venture into the most vulgar dimensions of daily life; however, within the most prosaic of realms, he is also capable of revealing a hidden poetry and even a sense of the spectacular. And just when García leads us to believe that image is everything, and that everything is transparency and visibility, he uncovers a textual dimension to his theatre of extraordinarily lyrical and rhythmic beauty.

Finally, in the untamed sea that is the "new Catalan dramaturgy," Lluïsa Cunillé, who writes in both Spanish and Catalan, is undoubtedly the most prolific, and, along with Belbel, the most consolidated of playwrights. Her enigmatic theatrical universe, created with minimalist lines, subtle shadings, and hidden meanings, is what Sanchis Sinisterra has called "a poetics of subtraction." In *La venda* ("The Sale," 1994), *Privado* ("Private," 1996), and *Apocalipsi* ("Apocalypse," 1998), an atmosphere of uncertainty reigns, and Cunillé's tenuous and circumstantial landscapes seem disquietingly devoid of action. Paradoxically they are also so disquietingly real (or hyperreal), so devoid of referentiality, that she seems to have erased the barrier between art and life.

Perhaps Cunillé, as well as the other playwrights described here, have in effect "unveiled" realities that many may not wish to see, for each reveals through varying methods the traumas, the violence, and the wounds that permeate our contemporary existence both within Spain and without. The question that lingers, however, is the extent to which the contemporary unification of Europe and its inherent ambiguities and indeterminacies, coupled with new conceptions of the relationship between the local and the global, will have a significant bearing on how we perceive Spain's contemporary theatrical identity.