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# Introduction (Special Cluster on the Catalan Stage, Modern and Contemporary)

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## INTRODUCTION

SHARON G. FELDMAN

At an international symposium devoted to the contemporary Catalan stage, which was held at the Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona in 2005, director Toni Casares observed how the Catalan theater scene in its post-Franco evolution had already endured a decade aimed at clarifying its cultural politics. “És l'època del teatre institucionalitzat o en vies d'institucionalització,” he declared, referring to the decade comprising the years 1985 to 1995. It seemed an almost ironic observation at the time, as any attempt at institutionalization was certainly not a new endeavor for the Catalan theater scene; yet, Casares was also quick to make clear that the decade in question comprises the period in which Catalan theater finally was able to attain a long-awaited degree of government sponsorship and “normalization” (“Teatre públic” 275). By the decade of 2000, Casares's vantage point, the Catalan cultural landscape, in effect, had witnessed the culmination of several large-scale theater projects, both within Barcelona and beyond city limits. They include the Teatre Lliure (in its newest incarnation), the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, the Centre d'Arts Escèniques de Salt/Girona, and the Centre d'Arts Escèniques de Reus—all public institutions that stand as emblems of a once unimaginable level of professionalization achieved through the collaboration of several administrations. As we begin the second decade of the present century, it appears as though the question of normalization gradually has been giving way to a prevalent preoccupation with Europeanization, with how the Catalan stage positions and defines itself *vis à vis* Europe and *vis à vis* European production models and aesthetic practices. The ten essays featured in this special cluster of the *Catalan Review*, written by scholars based in Europe and North America, present an array of snapshots representing a range of historic, aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, and political concerns that have defined the Catalan stage, both modern and contemporary. They serve, furthermore, as confirmation that the issues of normalization and institutionalization, as well as the question of Europe, while far from recent, are now perhaps as timely as ever.

The cluster opens with two articles that examine in detail early efforts to modernize, normalize, consolidate, and institutionalize the Catalan theater scene.<sup>1</sup> In uncovering some of the hidden facets and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., also, Enric Gallén, “Sobre la institucionalització,” who chronicles the early attempts at normalization beginning during the modernist period.

precedents that have informed the process of modernization, Núria Santamaria examines in her contribution to the cluster the endeavors and “insurreccions frustrades” of Josep M. Millàs-Raurell (1896-1971), a vital intellectual figure, who, during the 1920s and 1930s, worked to bring the Catalan stage in line with European literary and institutional models, only to fall silent with the advent of the Spanish Civil War. Santamaria underscores the role of projects such as the *Vetllades Selectes del Teatre Català* Romea, which represented an attempt to cultivate the support of members of the Barcelona bourgeoisie and introduce them to European theatrical tendencies. Francesc Foguet’s piece, “La política teatral de la Generalitat republicana,” appears to intersect with that of Santamaria, in that he provides a detailed overview of the unfulfilled aspirations, difficulties, and setbacks suffered during the period of the republican Generalitat (1931-1936) in the myriad of undertakings to institutionalize the Catalan stage—be it through the establishment of a national “Theater Committee,” a National Theater, the Ignasi Iglésias Prize, or the pedagogical *Institució del Teatre*. Through a meticulous reading of historical documents from the 1930s that include the cultural reviews *Mirador*, *Teatre Català*, and *La Veu de Catalunya*, as well as several installments of the *Butlletí Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, Foguet chronicles the activities in support of the theater carried out by cultural figures that include Josep M. Millàs-Raurell, Alexandre Plana, Josep Pous i Pagès, Joan Puig i Ferrer, and Josep Maria de Sagarra.

John London’s essay, “Catalan Theater without Catalan,” sets out to demystify commonplace assumptions about the suppression of the Catalan language as a theatrical idiom. The time frame that serves as the focal point of his analysis is the early part of the Franco dictatorship, the years 1939 to 1945, in which performance in Catalan was banned in an official sense. Considering performance in exile, as well both amateur and religious performances (such as Passion plays and *miracles*) in Catalunya and the Valencia region, London charts new ground in demonstrating how, in a linguistic sense, the theatrical landscape during this period was far more complex than prior historical accounts may have led us to believe. The use of Catalan in much of the theater of the period, as London demonstrates, was neither oppositional, nor clandestine, nor resistant in its rapport with the Franco regime.

London’s work on theater during the earlier years of the dictatorship functions as an apt point of transition for the next two contributions to the cluster, which examine the theatrical works of two post-Civil War writers who were indeed oppositional in their views of the regime: Salvador Espriu (1913-1985) and Josep Palau i Fabra (1917-2008). Jennifer Duprey’s piece, titled “*Anagnòrisis*, Political Recognition, and Justice in Salvador Espriu’s *Antígona*,” offers a detailed analysis of the way that

Espriu, in his rewriting of Sophocles's *Antigone* (written 1939, published 1955, premiered 1958), exploits the mechanisms of classical tragedy in establishing numerous political/poetic resonances and evocations of postwar Catalunya. In her contribution to the cluster, "From Essay to Stage: Documenting Guernica in Palau i Fabre's *Homenatge a Picasso*," Elena Cueto Asín shows us how the phantom images of the 1937 bombing of the Basque town of Guernica, which were documented by Picasso in his mural painting, continued to haunt the work of Josep Palau i Fabre even decades later, most notably in his play *Homenatge a Picasso* (1971). Cueto Asín's understanding of the play is enhanced by her readings of Palau i Fabre's essays on Picasso and informed, as well, by her recognition of the influence of German Documentary Theater upon Palau's scenic language.

The second half of the cluster treats contemporary tendencies in Catalan drama. It begins with a theoretical essay titled "Perplexitat, perspectiva: la relativitat en la identitat europea," in which Barcelona playwright Carles Batlle reflects on what it means today to write a European play. Is it indeed possible to perceive in contemporary European drama a series of defining aesthetic features? Batlle suggests, for example, that in the play of perspectives that is especially characteristic of European drama there may lie an artistic rendering of the situation of decentered subjectivity and of complexity (or, "perplexity") that characterizes contemporary European identity. If we read between the lines, we may arrive at the conclusion that Batlle is also speaking about contemporary Catalunya.

In "Belbel Rescues a Forgotten Guimerà," the next essay in the cluster, David George fills in the background details surrounding the production of *En Pólvora*, a play by Angel Guimerà (1845-1924) that was staged by Catalan director Sergi Belbel in 2006 at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya. Here George describes the contemporary production values that Belbel incorporated into his *mise en scène* and asks compelling questions concerning the reasons why Belbel, one of Catalunya's most prominent living dramatists, would choose to stage one of Guimerà's more obscure works. George additionally delves into an analysis of the uneasy reception and critical reaction to Belbel's production. In the subsequent essay, Helena Buffery also treats a play by Belbel (*Forasters*), in addition to contemporary works by Manuel Molins, Lluïsa Cunillé, Rodolf Sirera, and Carles Batlle. The title of her study, "Les altres catalanes," which represents an allusion to the work of Paco Candel, reflects Buffery's interest in how these dramatists have portrayed the experience of those ("other") Catalans who do not speak the Catalan language. In her examination of the plays, she traces the depiction of issues of identity as they emerge in relation to language, culture, and gender. Moreover, she brings an additional nuanced layer

of meaning to her concept of “othering” by centering her gaze on the representation of immigrant women on the stage.

The final two articles featured in the cluster offer transnational approaches to the reception of contemporary drama. In “Pinter a Barcelona,” Carlota Benet Cros gives an overview of the repercussions and influences resulting from the performance of plays by British dramatist Harold Pinter on Barcelona stages. Benet’s research closely follows the various phases in Pinter’s rapport with Barcelona—including his appearance, subsequent disappearance from, and then reappearance in the Barcelona theater scene—and the paradoxical reception of his works. Referring to decades of play reviews culled from the popular press, she demonstrates that, if during the 1960s Pinter’s drama was apt to inspire bewilderment among critics, during the present decade his work is regarded as being thoroughly relevant and influential. The cluster closes with an article titled “La recepció del teatre català contemporani a Polònia,” in which Agnieszka Stachurska presents a case study of what happens when Catalan theater crosses European borders. Writing from the vantage point of contemporary Poland, Stachurska offers us a glimpse into the publication, performance, and reception of Catalan theater in this country, which, at times, have been fraught with absurdities and contradictions. Her study touches on the work of playwrights Carles Batlle, Sergi Belbel, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, Lluïsa Cunillé, Jordi Galceran, Pau Miró, Josep Pere Peyró, and Rodolf Sirera, in addition to companies such as La Fura dels Baus, Comediants, Els Joglars, and the Companyia del Teatre Lliure.

The origins of this special cluster can be traced to the Twelfth Colloquium of the North American Society, which was held in Halifax (Nova Scotia) in 2007. Early versions of many of the articles included here were presented at the colloquium at a series of sessions devoted to Catalan theater and performance that included the presence of playwrights Carles Batlle, Sergi Belbel, and Pau Miró. I am grateful to all ten contributors and to the editorial team of the *Catalan Review* for their kind and thoughtful assistance in the preparation of this cluster.

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