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# Homage to Catalan Theater: Introduction

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# HOMAGE TO CATALAN THEATER

## INTRODUCTION

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The Catalan stage is presently experiencing one of the most exciting, dynamic, and extraordinary periods in its modern history. Following decades of contentiousness, there is finally a harmonious rapport between the visually oriented theater of images and the textually oriented theater of the word, between the theater of collective creation and that in which the role of the author is essential. On the whole, the theater of contemporary Catalonia is characterized, not by the provincialism often ascribed to regional minority cultures, but rather by its cosmopolitan, international, and even transnational proclivities. Barcelona, the cultural and political hub of this region, aspires to become a European theater capital, often looking toward London, Paris, Berlin, or Milan in search of new artistic paradigms. Correspondingly, the most innovative segments of the Barcelona theater scene are unceasingly engaged in an artistic dialogue with international theater traditions of both past and present. Performances in Catalan as well as original-language versions of works by Beckett, Bernard, Brecht, Chehov, Kushner, Mamet, Molière, Pinter, and Shakespeare are now routine occurrences throughout the season and, as recent statistics attest, these theater events are well attended. During 1997, the number of spectators who visited forty-two different performance venues in the city of Barcelona increased by eleven percent, peaking at 1,903,610 (Sesé).

Catalan performance groups such as Comediants, La Cubana, La Fura dels Baus, Els Joglars, and El Tricicle—which evince the enduring legacy of the *Teatre Independent*—continue to garner a following on several continents. Comediants, which just celebrated its twenty-sixth anniversary as a company, has performed in at least thirty-five different countries. In the summer of 1997, La Cubana interrupted a prolonged tour of Spain in order to participate in the Edinburgh Festival where it performed its bilingual piece *Cegada de amor*, complete with English subtitles. La Fura dels Baus, perhaps the most transnational of performance troupes, has multiple touring groups that simultaneously circle the globe. In keeping with the pattern of some of the most progressive European companies, La Fura—founded during the late 1970s by three young Catalan performers from Moià—now features a multinational roster of artists from France, Germany, Morocco, Italy, and Portugal, as well as Spain. The company has even begun to experiment with the possibility of performance via Internet, in a cybernetic space, *sans frontières*.

Yet, it is perhaps in the realm of text-based drama where the real revolution is taking place, for Catalonia is witnessing a veritable “boom” in play writing and play productions. Individual Catalan playwrights, like the above-mentioned theater collectives, are enjoying a level of international visibility that they have never before experienced. Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, Sergi Belbel, Lluïsa Cunillé, and Beth Escudé are just some of the contemporary dramatists whose names have begun to resonate far beyond the borders of Catalonia and Spain. A whole new wave of young and talented dramatists has emerged in and around the city of Barcelona—not to mention an equally talented wave of young directors and actors. Concurrently, there are several production companies and official cultural institutions whose recent programming decisions indicate a renewed interest in reevaluating the work of playwrights from previous generations, such as Benet i Jornet, Joan Brossa, Salvador Espriu, Àngel Guimerà, Santiago Rusiñol, and Rodolf Sirera.<sup>1</sup>

The essays featured in this special edition of *Estreno* offer an array of perspectives pertaining to the historic, aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, generational, and political issues that inform this revolution in textual drama. These essays, together with the featured play texts by Sergi Belbel and Ignasi Garcia, corroborate the intense level of energy, creativity, and even controversy that now characterizes theater in Catalonia. In preparing this special issue, I found myself obliged to consider several compelling questions. I wondered about the factors and reasons governing this contemporary renaissance on the Catalan stage. Should we attribute it merely to an expansive sweep of the pendulum, occurring in Spain and in other parts of the world, that has prompted many theater practitioners to reconsider the merits of the author and the dramatic text? What are the distinctive political, economic, and artistic features that are specific to the case of Catalonia? To what extent do issues of language, geography, cultural identity, and even ethnicity come into play? And what, exactly, are the parameters that define Catalan theater as a concept and as a concrete entity? In a personal interview, Benet i Jornet voiced the predominant belief that the Catalan language, intricately intertwined with the culture of this region, is the distinguishing feature of Catalan theater: “If we were to imagine that all nationalisms were to disappear, what would be left are the cultures. I, myself, pertain to the Catalan culture, and what is that? It is a language.” It is a view that is echoed

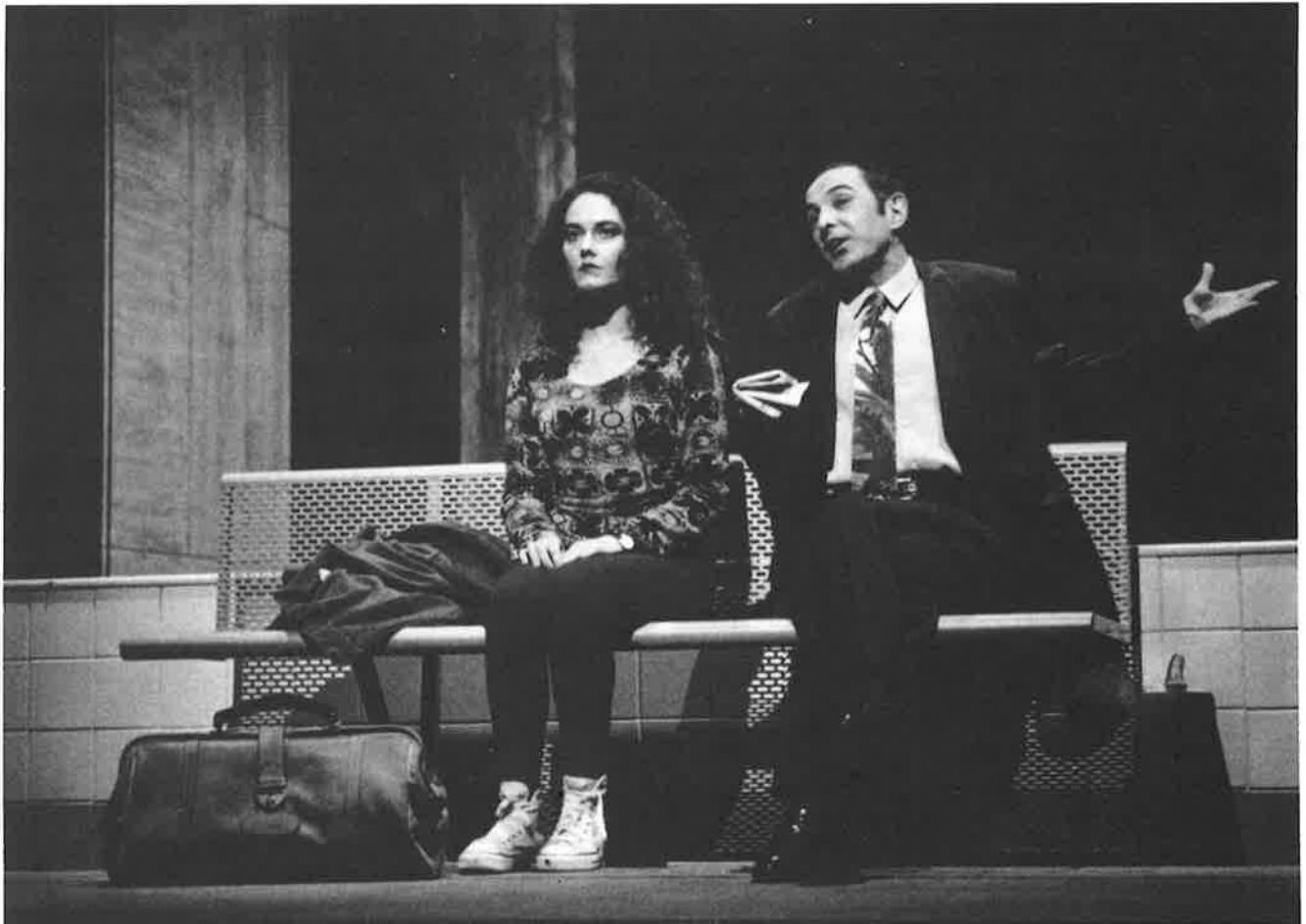
by Ricard Salvat and questioned by John London in their respective essays.

Benet i Jornet has played a leading and paradigmatic role within the context of this renaissance. His own creative trajectory, marked by a constant process of aesthetic evolution and renovation, has allowed him to traverse and close the gap between generations. If his first points of reference were Buero Vallejo, Brecht, O'Neill, and Miller, today they are Manet, Koltès, Beckett, and Pinter. Benet i Jornet's plays have been staged regularly since 1970, and in 1995 he received the Spanish National Prize for Dramatic Literature for *E.R.* At the same time, his unfaltering interest in the future and continuity of a Catalan theatrical tradition (a theme he foregrounds in *E.R.*), has inspired him to assume the role of mentor, along with José Sanchis Sinisterra, to the younger generation of playwrights in Barcelona.

Ignasi Garcia i Barba (Barcelona, 1964) belongs to the coterie of young dramatists who received a crucial part of their training at the Institut del Teatre and the Sala Beckett under the tutelage of Sanchis Sinisterra.<sup>2</sup> The première of *Marina* at the Beckett in 1994 was certainly an auspicious

beginning for Garcia, in that the play, staged by Calixto Bieito, one of Spain's most promising young directors, also featured three extremely fine actors: Carles Canut, Anna Güell, and Àngels Poch. *Marina*, which was subsequently adapted for Spanish national television, represents Garcia's most successful effort to date. It was followed by productions of *El bosc que creix* (for Spanish national radio), *Preludi en dos temps* (Teatre Tantarantana), *Les nits de la lluna plena* (at several workshops for children), and *L'altre estrem de l'oceà* (Sitges International Theatre Festival). Garcia never shies away from polemical themes. Most recently, *A trenc d'alba*, a play that boldly confronts the disturbing realities of African immigration and racism, premièred at the Sala Beckett in June 1997.

In a recent survey conducted by María-José Ragué-Arias, Garcia characterized his own theatrical language as "comprometida," "cotidiana," and "humana"—three adjectives that are easily applicable to *Mares de hierba*, the text that is featured here. *Mares de hierba* is Garcia's Castilian translation of the original Catalan text, *Mars de gespa*, which received a series of staged readings in 1995 at the Sala Beckett, the Sitges Festival, and the Barcelona



Sergi Belbel's *Carficies*. Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya (Teatre Romea), February 1992. Directed by S. Belbel. Photo: Courtesy of CDGC.

*Ateneu* (with Canut and Joan Borràs in the principal roles). It is a play in which two elderly men, Álvaro and Faustino, inhabit a space that is situated between reality and reverie, where old age represents a curious return to childlike innocence. Garcia is a master of the art of authenticity, always treating his characters with enormous tenderness and comprehension as he captures the subtleties imbedded in the puzzling nature of human identity. His drama, a discreet combination of tradition and experimentation, is marked by his ability to find shades of intense lyricism as well as baffling absurdity in the most "quotidian" and "human" of moments.

Sergi Belbel i Coslado (Terrassa, 1963), a playwright, director, and translator, has injected the Catalan stage with a strong dose of originality and vitality, while continuing to cultivate his profound interest in classical and established authors.<sup>3</sup> A true man of the theater for the next millennium, Belbel operates without geographic or linguistic borders and has already seen several of his works garner success throughout Europe and South America. Most recently, in 1996, he was honored with the Spanish National Prize for Dramatic Literature for *Morir*, and 1998 marked the première of the cinematic version of *Carícies*, directed by Ventura Pons.

*Oh, San Francisco*, the text that is featured in the present issue, is illustrative of Belbel's minimalist aesthetic, of poetic and political subtleties and ironies, silences filled with meaning, and words that sometimes create a semantic void. It is also a theater of existentialist tonalities, shaded by the influence of Beckett and other representatives of the European theatrical vanguard. Like "I'Home," the protagonist of *Oh, San Francisco*, the typical Belbelian characters are often solitary beings, generic and anonymous, who find themselves victims, thrown into a quotidian space that is not at all hospitable. They inhabit an urban landscape of harsh realities: opulence, prostitution, consumerism, corruption, sickness, decadence, moral ambiguity and brutal violence. It is dream-like version of a contemporary reality that disconcertingly resembles what many of us might take to be the truth.

In his featured essay, Ricard Salvat, one of the most prominent and influential theater directors in the contemporary history of Catalonia, speaks with conviction about the theater's potential role in the revitalization of Catalan cultural identity. The issues of cultural pluralism, linguistic politics, and nationalism that have come to shape the everyday drama of democratic Spain have undoubtedly left a lasting imprint upon the evolution of theater in Catalonia. I allude not only to the theater of political platforms, confectioned and promoted by public institutions—such as the "monumental" and "sumptuous" Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC), which officially opened its doors in September 1997—but also, to the theater that has blossomed and continues to flourish in small "alternative"

spaces such as the Sala Beckett, the Artenbrut theater, and the village of Pruitt in the mountains of Catalonia, where Albert Boadella and his Joglars live and work during a large part of the year. Salvat refers to the polemic surrounding Josep Maria Flotats's directorship of the TNC, and there is an interesting coda to his essay that deserves mention here: In September 1997, Catalan Minister of Culture Joan Maria Pujals removed Flotats from office, effective July 1998. At the time of this writing, Domènec Reixach, director of the Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya, is scheduled to take Flotats's place as the new director of the TNC.

Today, when one speaks of a pluralistic Spain, it is perhaps equally appropriate to speak of a plurality of theaters. For if it is indeed true that the artists featured in this issue belong to the world of Catalan theater, to a cultural minority, it is also true that they belong to much larger cultural communities: Spain and Europe. It is my hope that the articles included in this special issue of *Estreno* will begin to answer some of the above-mentioned questions and contribute to the dialogue between the theater of Catalonia and that of the rest of Spain, Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

I wish to express my gratitude to Martha Halsey and Phyllis Zatin for inviting me to prepare this issue. A special thanks also goes to the contributors—especially Ricard Salvat—whose continued generosity, kindness, and enthusiasm made this issue possible.

#### NOTES

1. On the work of Joan Brossa, see the essay by Eduard Planas.
2. For a more extensive overview of Garcia's work, see the essays by María-José Ragué-Arias and Carles Batlle.
3. For a very complete bio-bibliographic description of Belbel's work, see the Prologue to *Elsa Schneider*, by Jordi Castellanos. On Belbel's theater, see also the articles by Carles Batlle, John London, María-José Ragué-Arias, Ricard Salvat and, especially, David George.

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