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EDITORIAL

The Catalan Theatre Scene. A Story of Survival

Sharon G. Feldman, *William Judson Gaines Chair and Professor of Spanish and Catalan Studies, University of Richmond*

The past four decades have been an exciting time for the Catalan stage. Barcelona has come into its own as a vibrant international theatre capital, and theatrical offerings in Catalonia are richer and more diverse than ever before. The process of recuperation, relegitimization and institutionalization of Catalan theatrical life that began during the period of transition from dictatorship to democracy has reached an impressive state of fruition and maturity. The situation is all the more astonishing when viewed in light of an historical context replete with political and economic constraints that have threatened to overwhelm and submerge, time and again, the language, cultural life and intellectual spirit of this autonomous community. The Spanish political landscape continues to be inhabited by the retrograde ghosts of Francoism, and, as recently as September 2012, the central government delivered a crippling blow to theatres throughout Spain when it abruptly increased the VAT rate from 8 to 21%. To be sure, the Catalan stage has made enormous strides and continues to survive – even thrive– despite, and not because of, the aforementioned difficulties, which by any European standard are far from advantageous.



For dramatists writing in Catalan, ever conscious of the precarious condition of their language and cultural identity, the paradoxical position of both political distance and proximity in relation to Spain has perhaps accentuated their cosmopolitan yearning to reach beyond local borders and belong to a larger international sphere. Several contemporary Catalan playwrights –Carles Batlle, Sergi Belbel, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, Guillem Clua, Lluïsa Cunillé, Jordi Galceran, Pau Miró and Esteve Soler, to name more than a few– have fulfilled the dream of seeing their works staged to great acclaim in cities that include Athens, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Copenhagen, London, Milan or Paris. The creative team of director Calixto Bieito and playwright/librettist Marc Rosich, likewise, has been applauded throughout Europe and even in Chicago for adaptations of plays and operas drawn from an international repertoire. Alex Rigola and Lluís Pasqual have established their directorial reputations throughout the European continent, as well, and the multidisciplinary productions of Carles Santos have ventured as far afield as the Sydney Opera House. History, however, has seen only one Catalan dramatist, in the figure of Àngel Guimerà, fulfill the dream of captivating a Broadway audience, when his works traveled throughout the United States and Latin America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Catalan theatre professionals in democratic times have been largely motivated by a utopian vision of the theatre as a public service for “the people”. The democratic period has consequently seen the realization of previously unimaginable levels of professionalization and the establishment of an impressive system of publically subsidized theatrical infrastructures (the Teatre Lliure, the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, the Mercat de les Flors, the Institut del Teatre, El Canal - Centre d’Arts Escèniques de Salt/Girona, the Centre d’Arts Escèniques de Reus, the Centre d’Arts Escèniques de Terrassa and others), all of which situate the Catalan theatre scene on a par with many advanced European nations. Even when in private hands, there are some theatre spaces, such as the one hundred fifty-year-old Teatre Romea and the Sala Beckett, both in Barcelona, that often behave as public showcases. The Grec summer festival of theatre, dance, music and circus, which began in 1976 as a post-Franco vindication of the alternative Catalan theatre scene, today, in the talented hands of director Ramon Simó, occupies a prominent position in the European summer festival circuit. Other recent initiatives in Barcelona, such as the Sala Flyhard and the Nau Ivanow, have contributed to the cultural revitalization of the Sants and Sant Andreu neighborhoods, respectively. The Sala Beckett and its artistic director Toni Casares, innovators in nurturing the work of emergent playwrights, will soon have a newly renovated space in Poble Nou, and La Seca-Espai Brossa, guided by Hermann Bonnín, has brought theatre in all its multiplicity of forms to a corner of the old quarter that is only steps away from the new Born Cultural Center. The Catalan theatre scene, as one can gather from this sampling, remains quite Barcelona-centric, despite a concerted effort on the part of government administrations to disseminate theatrical activities throughout a consolidated network of regional cultural centers. Major platforms, such as the Festival de Temporada Alta, held in and around the city of Girona, and the Fira de Tàrraga, a festival devoted to street theatre, represent noteworthy exceptions.

The question that has endured within the collective psyche, stirring continual debate within the theatre profession throughout the process of recuperation and so-called normalization of the Catalan stage, is that of theatrical programming and repertoire: the issue of what will go on inside the aforementioned infrastructures. Should programming merely reflect the tastes and inclinations of an artistic director or, to what extent should it be driven by a mandate to uphold the cultural-political imperative of safeguarding the Catalan theatrical legacy and a subjectively determined canonical culture? Does the nature of public theatre and public subsidies allow for a considerable margin of aesthetic risk or artistic daring, or should public institutions cater to the popular or bourgeois tastes of their citizenry? What is the role of international drama (the so-called universal repertoire) staged in Catalan in the process of relegitimization and institutionalization of the Catalan stage? Is it still possible or desirable today, in this historically heteroglossic literary space, to construct a predominantly monolingual national repertoire?

Public theatres in Catalonia are spaces that often exhibit international drama, as well as autochthonous work,

and where text-based drama (even in the form of original musical theatre, such as that of the professional company Dagoll Dagom) thrives alongside circus, dance and experimental forms of performance. The democratic period has produced new opportunities for safeguarding the Catalan historical repertoire (which includes the work of Joan Puig i Ferrer, Santiago Rusiñol, Josep Maria de Sagarra and Salvador Espriu), along with new mechanisms –workshops, prizes, festivals and subsidies– for cultivating the work of emerging Catalan dramatists, directors, choreographers and other theatre professionals. Are these opportunities sufficient, and are they on a par with European standards? Many would insist that they are not (at least, not yet).

It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that national theatres have quite often predated the establishment of the nation states whose interests they would come to represent. And so, it would seem that Catalonia, at least from a theatrical perspective, is on the right path in its quest for sovereignty. In recent seasons, the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, currently under the direction of Xavier Albertí, has featured on its main stages momentous works by young playwrights that include Guillem Clua's *Marburg*, Jordi Casanovas's *Una història catalana* ("A Catalan Story"), Pere Riera's *Barcelona*, and Josep Maria Miró's *Fum* ("Smoke"). In recent seasons, we have also witnessed the consolidation of a new crop of dramatists who quite often have chosen to direct their own plays, thereby imposing their unique artistic visions upon the *mise en scène* and creating what can be described as a *théâtre d'auteur*. It is a phenomenon that, while already apparent during the late 1980s in the figure of Sergi Belbel, has culminated during the current decade with a sizeable cluster of names: Nao Albert and Marcel Borràs, Marc Angelet, Carles Be, Marta Buchaca, Jordi Casanovas, Marc Crehuet, Jordi Faura, Llätzer Garcia, Carol López, Carles Mallol, Albert Mestres, Josep Maria Miró, Pau Miró, Iván Morales, Josep Pere Peyró, and Pere Riera. Many of their works are the result of opportunities emerging from the now discontinued "T6" program of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya or from the Obrador workshop space of the Sala Beckett. In this contemporary landscape, women's voices have acquired an increasingly innovative tone and thus an increased measure of protagonism, expressed in the work of playwrights Marta Buchaca, Cristina Clemente, Lluïsa Cunillé, Daniela Feixas, Carol López, Mercè Sarrias, Victoria Szpunberg and Helena Tornero, or that of directors Lourdes Barba, Glòria Balañà, Carme Portaceli and Magda Puyo.

The vibrant tradition in Catalonia of image-based theatre and collective creation, practiced by companies with legendary historical trajectories (La Cubana, Comediants, La Fura dels Baus, Els Joglars and El Tricicle) continues to enjoy significant prestige both within and beyond Catalan borders. It is in some ways indebted to the innovative groundwork laid by experimental Catalan artist Joan Brossa, who, through his scenic poetry and paratheatrical activities, lent new meaning to the relationship between text and image in the twentieth century. Moreover, multiple hybrid artistic forms have emerged in Catalonia as a result of contemporary intersections between theatre and dance. In particular, the Barcelona locale known as the Mercat de les Flors (or "Flower Market"), under the artistic direction of Francesc Casadesús, has affirmed its interdisciplinary orientation as a space for cutting-edge work by international and Catalan choreographers and companies that include Àngels Margarit, Maria Muñoz and Pep Ramis, Ramon Oller and Sol Picó.

Yet, perhaps, during these post-dictatorial years, the mere gesture of writing or staging a play in the Catalan language has served as the most blatant, crucial, or even politically charged, marker of identity. In its nearly forty-year history, the Teatre Lliure, in particular, currently under the artistic direction of Lluís Pasqual, has granted Catalan spectators access in their own language to the richness of the universal repertoire, creating a sense of collective identity among its spectators through the staging of an international gamut of plays. In the present era of globalization, a national culture, such as that of Catalonia, needs to be understood in relation to other cultures in order to survive. To stage a play in Catalan –even if it is a translation or adaptation of a text originally composed in another language– is, in effect, to inscribe and reclaim a specific cultural space. Thus, when two Barcelona companies, currently all the rage, *Les Antonietes* (under the direction of Oriol Tarrasón) and *La Perla 29* (under the direction of Oriol Broggi), offer imaginative revisions of plays by authors that vary in range from Shakespeare to Ibsen, and from Valle Inclán to Friel, they are still, in a sense, speaking about Catalan culture.

The micro-theatre format, popularized in Madrid, is now beginning to take hold in Barcelona. *Àtic 22*, *MiniTea3*, *Sala Fènix*, *Teatre d'Estrangis* and *Terrats en Cultura* are among the projects and places where brief works are staged in reduced (and, sometimes, even miniature) spaces or unconventional places, thereby lending new meaning to the intimate rapport between actor and spectator. While some have suggested, unconvincingly, that this minimalist phenomenon may be a function of the economic crisis, what matters is that it represents a sign of vitality and innovation, a signal that, no matter the circumstances, the Catalan theatre scene will no doubt continue to thrive, for it is a story of survival.

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