

## EDITORIAL

What do we know about contemporary European theatre? Thanks to the city's theatres we get to regularly see relatively interesting productions by today's authors, especially from Germany and Britain, and more sporadically from other countries such as France, Ireland, Serbia or Norway, to name just a few. Discovering the "new contemporary author", the "new contemporary text", has become the official sport of theatre directors and programmers anxious to join the forefront of modernity or, and why not, those who are simply filled with the generous urge to share new outlooks on the real world and the artistic process with their audiences. And with what results? There is something here for all tastes. Over the last few years we have come to know texts that have helped us discover a stack of thematic and formal perspectives that we had so far ignored, plays that have generated fashions, plays that have become "models". And there are also others that have passed unnoticed – maybe because they were programmed more with novelty than with interest or quality in mind, maybe because they did not withstand the major test of relocation to another context (something which, needless to say, is also instructive). With this latest dossier of *Pausa*, in our small way, we have wanted to contribute to the debate. Not so much with the intention of proposing new models and erecting new altars, but with the desire to offer new ideas and stimuli. We also wish to flee from the encyclopaedic temptation of presenting

a complete evaluation. The articles in this dossier are merely partial reports and passionate reflections on some aspects of dramatic literature in the Europe of our day.

The current topicality of terrorism opens the dossier, with a reflection on the relevance of political theatre in Britain. We quote authors like Robin Soans, David Hare or the already "classic" Sarah Kane. In fact, the recognition that Sarah Kane has received in European theatres and academies alike – accursed author to some and ennobled by others – generates a valuable debate on the place of nihilism and aggression in today's texts and, in the last analysis, on the possibility of a new conception of "contemporary tragedy". This is followed by a summary presentation of current Irish theatre that leads to an analysis of the responsibility of tradition for the strong presence of "narrativity" in contemporary Irish theatre (a link, if you will, between Synge and current production by authors like Conor McPherson or Martin McDonagh). All things considered, the reflection is entirely appropriate in that "narrativity" gives an early connection between these authors' work and pieces by other current playwrights like Juan Mayorga, Neil LaBute or Roland Schimmelpfennig. It is precisely with a text the latter has sent us that we open the German section. "Germans always attempt to be pedagogical", says Schimmelpfennig, "German plays are always stuffed full of words in big letters. Holy Mother of God!" A topic?

A reality? What does this statement have to do with the, shall we say, rule-breaking production of new German directors like Castorf or Ostermeier? Rafael Spregelburd, who we have asked to write about his friend Marius von Mayenburg (who worked with Ostermeier), assures us that the young German author “does not write discursive theatre”. Furthermore, the Argentinean playwright’s article has a quite transparent title: “Is Germany *Really* the Centre of Western Theatre?” A good question to start off the season with. The dossier closes with a more wide-ranging view – regarding authors, texts and shows – of the theatre being created in three very specific places in Europe: Madrid, Greece and Serbia. The latter two, especially, are not very well known and we thought it worth the effort to provide information and recommend texts. The voids that remain, whether intended or not, we shall fill with further articles in the following issues of *Pausa*.

The discussion on whether Mayenburg creates discursive theatre or not leads us back to the fact of telling stories or not, of “relegating the fable to a subordinate function” (Sanchis *dixit*), which we broached in the last issue of the magazine. Along these lines, just as we promised, we publish the second part of the article on fragmentation in contemporary drama with brief analyses of five plays by five authors: Rodolf Sirera, Roland Schimmelpfennig, Martin Crimp, Lluïsa Cunillé and Caryl Churchill. We finish this issue with a reflection on this year’s Avignon Festival

(sent to us by the editor in chief of *Les Carnets du Rond-Point*), the publication of brief texts by two Catalan authors (Gemma Rodríguez and Guillem Clua) and the usual “Intersection” and “Files” sections. Thank you for your good will.

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DOSSIER

**EUROPEAN VIEWS.  
CONTEMPORARY TEXTS  
AND AUTHORS**

**Political Theatre:  
A Letter from London**

*John London*

You can probably see the subtitle is a pun, so an autobiographical introduction will not seem so out of place.

The office in our house is a tiny cellar, measuring about three metres by two and a half metres and packed with files, about a thousand books, a pile of old newspapers and a well-stocked wine rack. It has a chair and a table slightly bigger than a laptop computer. It is so low under the ground that I don’t have to strain my ears to hear the tube trains passing by every six minutes or so. When I first moved down here to work I found the noise rather irritating but, after a few weeks, it became a source of comfort. Up until just after midnight, I knew I was not alone and, after that time, the city officially closed down, thus giving my subsequent activity – however banal it

was in reality – a potentially subversive, illegal connotation.

For the last three weeks it has been impossible to hear the trains, because there are none. Between King’s Cross and Russell Square stations, beneath the area where our house is located, a bomb went off. The Piccadilly Line has been closed and all of my family have been aware that, for the first week after 7 July, somewhere under my office, corpses were being dragged out of the wreckage. One hundred metres away, the bus bomb exploded and a seven-minute walk takes you to Warren Street, the site of the botched terrorist attack which took place just last week, on 21 July.

Most Londoners now have their own stories of the bus or train they did not happen to take on 7/7 or the friends or friends of friends who were caught up in the events, as onlookers, helpers or victims. As is inevitable in situations such as these, aestheticized performance retires, as reality provides the most theatrical spectacle. Usually busy areas were blanketed in an eerie silence, broken only by the sirens of police cars and ambulances. And, on the night of 7 July, London theatres shut their doors to audiences.

English culture, often abused for its lack of political commitment (who are the English equivalents to Brecht and Sartre?), looked far from effete in the light of the attacks. In what seems like a supernatural coincidence, Chris Cleave’s novel, *Incendiary*, about an imagined al-Qaeda attack on London, was published

on the day of the explosions. The shows which re-opened the following day were not entirely escapist either. Most relevant in this respect is the production at the Royal Court, whose mere title now seems like a provocation: *Talking to Terrorists*. Based on a year-long period of interviews with those affected by or involved in terrorism, the script is delivered by the actors as if in conversation with the audience. Although there are plenty of collaged statements and background snippets, an argument lies behind the myriad voices, especially those of the terrorists. As author Robin Soans said (after 7/7): “One of the most contentious points of the play is the idea that we would act the same were we in their situation. [...] We are not that different from them.”<sup>1</sup> And so we listen to the way the Kurds have been treated to understand the activities of the PKK and the fate of an Ugandan child to see why she would become a supervisor of torture at the age of thirteen. There is also a balance of views: politicians, negotiators and the victims of terror have a voice as well. It is not profound ideological discussion, but its subtlety has brought plaudits from even the right-wing press.<sup>2</sup>

Robin Soans has another production on in London at the moment, the revival of *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*, again derived from conversations, this time with Israelis and Palestinians who talked to the writer as they cooked. Once more, the impact is humane and honest. Indeed, the venue for the show, the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, has been at the forefront of a new wave of what has come to be known as *verbatim theatre*, a

political style largely absent from recent Catalan drama. The emphasis is on delivering the actual words of those involved in important political events. The author's role is that of editor, arranging the speech of others, rather than inventing it. Last year, *Guantanamo*, by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, gave a one-sided indictment of the US policy of imprisonment, with the voices of prisoners, military men, legal experts and even Donald Rumsfeld, and a tone established at the opening by Lord Justice Steyn: "The most powerful democracy is detaining hundreds of suspected foot soldiers of the Taliban in a legal black hole at the United States naval base at Guantanamo Bay."<sup>3</sup>

The *Guardian* journalist, Richard Norton-Taylor, has been particularly successful in this genre, with his "tribunal" plays premiered at the Tricycle. He compiles evidence from public inquiries (sometimes as they are under way) and actors represent the most interesting parts. This year, *Bloody Sunday* attempted to define the precise details of 30 January 1972 in Northern Ireland, when thirteen civil rights marchers were shot dead by British soldiers. At stake are the loss of innocent lives, the name of the British government and the notion of a shoot-to-kill policy.

The script does make a gesture towards a theatrical setting: clapping and crying are indicated reactions from the public gallery.<sup>4</sup> However, when a witness is addressed in the following terms, it is easy to recognize that good-old Anglo-Saxon gestures towards empiricism are

paramount: "If we look at KD4.20, paragraph 29, what you say in that paragraph, about six lines down, 'Paragraph 4 of the note refers to (I will insert the letter X) who...'"<sup>5</sup> This is far from the immediacy of the US Living Newspaper projects of the 1930s or the rhetorical versification of Peter Weiss' *Die Ermittlung* (premiered in 1965). It is as if, in direct reaction to fashionable continental notions that reality is a construct, Norton-Taylor's text were boldly and baldly declaring its textuality as a reliable link to the outside world.

This kind of play, promoted by the Tricycle, may have an unashamed didacticism, but it tends to let statements speak for themselves, and therein lies its almost ingenuous charm. It is frightening to think that a much more prominent playwright, David Hare, has chosen, in contrast, a highly manipulative approach to docu-drama in plays produced at the National Theatre in the last two years. In *The Permanent Way* (2003), a text about the privatization of the British railways, based on interviews, he actually has some characters say "David" when they are speaking, thus making patent the dramatist as new author of the events.<sup>6</sup>

An even sloppier style pervades his *Stuff Happens* (2004), a script about the invasion of Iraq Hare pompously labels "a history play", with events "authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public", even though "when the doors close on the world's leaders and on their entourages, [...] I have used my imagination".<sup>7</sup> Of course, this allows for speculation as Bush, Blair, Chirac and

Condolezza Rice step on the stage. But there is nothing unexpected in the predictable standpoint voiced repeatedly. As a "Brit in New York" says: "On September 11th, America changed. Yes. It got much stupider."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, individuals seem to be wheeled on just to spout views and the narrative is held together by "An Actor" who continuously interrupts to introduce other characters and give a running chronology of political developments. It's like hearing a bad undergraduate essay dramatized by amateur actors who received the script the night before. If this is the opposition our Prime Minister has to face, he may as well put Iran down on his list already.

Yet, however clumsy these political plays may be, they all signal a significant trend away from personal obsessions and a corresponding hunger among audiences – both mainstream and fringe for big public issues. In this context it is relevant to remember how much of the in-ner-face, blood-and sperm drama of the 1990s toyfully avoided politics in favour of unexplained violence. The culmination came in Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*, premiered in 2000, the year after the playwright's death: "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy"; "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander."<sup>9</sup> The words, usually so drenched in historical resonance, lack a social frame and are effectively subsumed into the mental disorder of the surrounding despair. It is difficult to see how such phrases can avoid being obscene so soon after 9/11. If violence seems mindless it needs to be understood.

Nevertheless, Kane at her most adventurous contributed a sense of stylistic excitement from which current political drama could well profit. Perhaps a clue to the combination of form and content could come from the irony of recent Russian drama by the Presnyakov Brothers. The fragmentary style of German Rainald Goetz, although often lost in petty commentaries on fashion, may also have a role. That these writers have had work produced in London gives hope for possible future developments in British drama.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Foot, "Why Robin Plays with Fire", *Camden New Journal: The Review*, 14 July 2005, p. III.

<sup>2</sup> See Rebecca Tyrrel, "Tough Times for Jokes", *Sunday Telegraph: Review*, 10 July 2005, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, *Guantanamo: "Honor Bound to Defend Freedom"*. London: Oberon Books, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, ed. by Richard Norton-Taylor. London: Oberon Books, 2005, pp. 31, 89.

<sup>5</sup> *Bloody Sunday*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> David Hare, *The Permanent Way*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003, pp. 19, 26.

<sup>7</sup> David Hare, "Author's Note", in *Stuff Happens*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004, unpaginated.

<sup>8</sup> Hare, *Stuff Happens*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays*. London: Methuen, pp. 227, 231.

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## **The Theatre of Sarah Kane An Accursed Classic**

Esteve Soler

In the last few years everyone has heard speak of Sarah Kane. The violent, the controversial, the accursed Sarah Kane. Some have decided to oppose and dismiss her because they sensed significant doses of nihilism and aggression when they first approached her work. She has even become an icon of savageness, and there is always someone in a drama class who will be labelled the Sarah Kane of the course for showing a certain truculence in their style. But the superficiality with which some receive Sarah Kane clashes with a reality that, for the moment, persists season after season: the continual performance of her works all over the world and an acclaim that extols her as a new classic.

Sarah Kane committed suicide, at twenty-eight years of age, on 18 February 1999. Since then, her popularity and the morbid fascination with her life have grown, while her scant, yet jealously guarded, literary oeuvre<sup>1</sup> has received the prestige the author was denied in life. The latter fact, which stereotyped her as an “accursed author”, was the result of an open war with the critics of her home country. *Blasted*, her first text, received comments like the following: “not only is it repugnant, but also pathetic (...) it could make you believe that an ability to cause fits of

disgust is all that a playwright needs”, “A powerful experience, as is being mugged on the street”, “A load of disgusting crap”.<sup>2</sup> And all of it addressed to an author who merely wanted to speak of love. Two heavyweights, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond, responded to the critics, while for Stephen Daldry, the brilliant director of the Royal Court Theatre, which hosted the premiere, the experience reinforced his confidence in the promising, yet maligned, writer.

Was it necessary to make such a fuss?<sup>3</sup> Naked, extreme violence is one of the aesthetic and thematic options of Sarah Kane’s theatre and it was Edward Bond himself, one of the author’s champions, who legitimised its use. The prologue to the Spanish edition of *Lear* contains an enlightening comment by the author that had already stoned a child in *Saved* and perfectly helps one understand Kane’s view on the subject: “I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence.”<sup>4</sup>

The controversy was present. A contributing factor was that Sarah Kane often drew directly from her life history, and the most extreme work she wrote was *4:48 Psychosis*, a text found after her death and describing her state of mind prior to her suicide. Morbidity

confronts the curiosity to find out more about the author’s life and get to the bottom of a great deal of her points of view (as is the case of Kafka’s paternal rejection, HP Lovecraft’s marginalisation or Tennessee Williams’ homosexuality). In any case, we should also consider the opinion of David Greig, author of *Europa*, when he declares in the prologue to the complete works of Kane that we should not be reading her texts in search of her but ourselves.

In this respect, Kane was a playwright who, on account of her contemporaneity, had an extraordinary capacity to produce a result that provoked empathy in the audience. Her works seek and find a common minimum denominator, a state of mind that revealingly impregnates our society, with the same precision as the films of M. Night Shyamalan, the sensational video clips of Michel Gondry or the peculiar narrations of David Foster Wallace. Furthermore, Kane maintains this constant anxiety to also provide an answer to our time from a formal standpoint, an inheritance acquired from Caryl Churchill who she greatly admired. In contrast to the constants we find in Kane’s subjects and characters, the construction of her works would vary from one play to the next, each time acquiring greater risk to the point of attaining a solidity that is as cryptic, pure and poetic as *4:48 psychosis*.<sup>5</sup>

In conjunction with the modernity that we find throbbing in every line by Kane, the author was totally obsessed with synthesising tradition and absorb-

ing the classic canon. Sarah Kane’s style entails a true synthesis of endless influences and, on more than one occasion, she would describe herself as a kleptomaniac writer.<sup>6</sup> Her works contain hundreds of fragments of biblical text, with which they share a very personal sense of violence, of ancestral and primitive force, tied to human nature. A characteristic that likewise unites her to the early texts of William Shakespeare, whose outlines she also repeats in certain works (*King Lear* in *Blasted* and *Twelfth Night* in *Cleansed*).

The pessimism found in Kane’s work, especially the impossibility of attaining any form of emotional stability, adheres to the decadent epic of Ian Curtis and Richey James Edwards, the lyricists of Joy Division and the first Manic Street Preachers, respectively, two essential characters in British music who, curiously enough, also committed suicide. An influence declared on various occasions that desperately seeks beauty in horror and decrepitude. Obviously, the work of Sarah Kane does not attempt to please everyone and could be perfectly included by Howard Barker’s definition of theatrical art, which he distinguishes from plain theatre in his latest essay *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*. This book, published only a few months ago, draws to a culmination of his theories on a style of theatre that is in contrast to humanist theatre, theories which Kane adopted from her initiation as a playwright.<sup>7</sup> It was in those early days when she played the role of Bradshaw in one of Baker’s most famous plays, *Victory*, which

Kane considered a determining experience. Barker was, together with Pinter and Bond, Kane's favourite playwright and she showed no shame in speaking of him as the William Shakespeare of our time. From him she also seems to have acquired his physical, carnal vocabulary and the ability to individualise the spectator's perception, making him disagree and ready to defend his interpretation of the play. To understand the efficiency and repercussion of Kane it is essential to be familiar with the theatre and mentality of Howard Barker, as he is the model the playwright uses to fuse modernity with classicism.

Sarah Kane's work always revolves around the impossibility of achieving unity and fulfilment with the loved being. In *Blasted*, Ian and Cate clash because of their different ways of comprehending love, in the same way that Phaedra gives in to a bored Hippolytus who shows no desire for anything in *Phaedra's love*. *Skin* showed us some beings brought up to hate themselves (one a heterosexual skinhead and the other a black lesbian) who could not suppress their need for love. *Cleansed* shows the extreme disorientation of some adolescents who do not know how to express their emotions, while *Crave* confirms that adults suffer and make others suffer because of their remorse, all in all, an endless masochistic spiral that distances them from one another. 4:48 *Psychosis* is a double fight to conquer unity: one's own ("Wisdom is found at the centre of the convulsion, where madness is burnt by

the soul split in two") and the one that unites us to our lovers ("I'm dying for someone who doesn't care for me/I'm dying for someone who doesn't know me/you're breaking my heart"). A literary career dedicated to the impossibility of achieving fulfilment in love.

This emotional breakdown of the characters also affects other points of view. In *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, two lone, everyday and common spaces (a hotel in Leeds and a university) are invaded and torn apart by the surprising emergence of the Bosnian war and a concentration camp, respectively. It does not cease to amaze that in *Blasted* the conventional room of the British theatre is literally devastated by a bomb, especially bearing in mind Kane's admiration for Harold Pinter and the distorted strangeness that he had already applied to this often repeated space, and which Kane seems to want to destroy more than just metaphorically. From *Crave* onwards, the space that Kane presents us with consists simply of human physicality, a trait that brings her closer to Beckett's later productions. Here it is worth mentioning the staging of Xavier Alberti and Vicky Featherstone who made the characters the sole scenographic elements, sitting them next to one another but avoiding any form of visual or physical contact. This shows, in a literal fashion, how the emotional unity that the characters seek is impossible to attain.

The violent love that Kane shows, where power becomes decisive and there is never a relationship between

equals, helps us understand the other structure that is often used by the writer. In this case it is a sorting out that integrates the attitudes of the observer, the victim and the executor. This outline, which is reminiscent of certain political work by Pinter like *Mountain Language*, appears in all her work, often associated with the idea that the most hair-raising and savage aggression is not unique to any one race or social group but forms part of human beings, who react according to the environment in which they live. Accordingly, the crimes of the Bosnian soldier in *Blasted* are just as awful as Ian raping Cate in the middle of "civilised" England.

Kane takes on problems that have no answer. How to end with the causes of conflict, desperation or misguided desire if they form part of the human soul? It is no coincidence that one of Kane's favourite plays was *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner<sup>8</sup>. Kane's characters, like the main character in the play, do not find the means to adequately express themselves because words always lead to error and so, instead, they decide to show the incomprehension and the rejection they feel in the only effective way they know possible, namely, violence. So communication between Kane's characters is not produced through words or violence, but through other circumstances that tie them to one another: almost divine coincidences, inexplicable repetitions, imitative loves that secretly bind them together. It is as if Kane were saying that the nature of verbal communica-

tion was conflict and that our violent manner of dealing with it led us ever more distant, but that secretly, almost instinctively or spiritually, a communication was produced that we have yet to learn to take advantage of or develop to its full potential, thereby only becoming truly human unconsciously. Bearing this in mind, Sarah Kane gives a nihilist description of our nature, yet offers a powerful beacon to those of us who seek hope, even if we are just as blind and lost as the rest.

The success of Sarah Kane in only six years has been resounding. It is the name that comes up the most in conversations about new theatre and, in certain countries, it has entered the wildest mainstream. One sign of this is Björk and Tindersticks quoting the plays of Sarah Kane in some of their songs.<sup>9</sup> In 2001 the Royal Court decided to devote extraordinary attention to one specific writer and programmed an entire season of her plays, an idea that was repeated with equal success at the Festival of International New Drama organised in Berlin by the Schaubühne this March and which demonstrated the status of a phenomenon that Sarah Kane had achieved. When you read the new work hatched by European playwrights you get the nagging impression that a ghost has been whispering in their ears (or more likely biting their ears), as is the case with the young British authors Debbie Tucker Green (*Dirty Butterfly*) and Joanna Laurens (*The Three Birds*), even though, for some critics, *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill already showed symptoms of the influence that Kane

was having on veteran authors as well. In Catalonia, the spectre of Kane is upon a generation that has yet to appear on stage but is writing and presenting its work in competitions in this sector. One persistent rumour in these competitions is that the influence of Kane has opened the floodgates to rudely expressed emotions, yet has led to a loss of rigour, a judgement that is not far distant from that of the critics to the premiere of *Blasted*. Actually, talking of the critics, the mythical Michael Billington from *The Guardian*, in an article published last March, acknowledged his previous myopia and lack of appreciation for the work of Sarah Kane. The article carries the noteworthy headline “The best British playwright you’ll ever see”. What seems obvious is that Sarah Kane has established her authority by creating a style of theatre that is tied to tradition and which time silently demanded, thereby reconciling classicism and modernity. Edward Bond could not have said it better: “Sarah Kane is the first corpse of the 21st century.”

<sup>1</sup> Five of her plays have been published, though, at the beginning of her career, she also put on a show consisting of three monologues called *Sick*, in Edinburgh, which has never been published. The complete works, published by Methuen, also include the script for the short film *Skin*, which she wrote for Channel Four.

<sup>2</sup> These comments were made by the critics Charles Spencer (*Daily Telegraph*), Nick Curtis (*Evening Standard*) and Jack Tinker (*Daily Mail*), respectively.

<sup>3</sup> What painful corn did Sarah Kane tread on for the critics to want to sink her after her first play? Perhaps the same one on which Harold Pinter trod in 1958, with his second play *The Birthday Party*, which provoked the scorn of the cognoscenti of the British capital. Curiously enough, this summer saw the return of the play to the Duchess Theatre in London.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to observe that one of the film directors who has had the most influence on English playwrights of the nineties is Quentin Tarantino, especially on the popular Jez Butterworth (*Mojo*). Like Kane, Tarantino has been much maligned for his use of violence, especially in his first films. Kane’s violence has nothing to do with that of the creator of *Kill Bill*, but it still belongs to a generation that includes physical aggression in their creations, without it necessarily having to form part of the content. Perhaps this is the problem with which the reception of Kane’s work sometimes clashes, and violence often hides its virtues, as Dominic Dromgoole suggests in his book *The Full Room*.

<sup>5</sup> It is no mere coincidence that Dominic Cavendish in *Time Out* should describe the structure of this play as a diamond, due to its consistency and beauty.

<sup>6</sup> Behaviour confirmed by an idea that appears in *4:48 psychosis*: “The last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs (an old and revered tradition)”. Kane also shared with Tarantino one of his characteristic ideas: You can not simply “copy” other creators, you need to “steal from them”.

<sup>7</sup> The theatre that Howard Barker contrasts to humanist theatre is catastrophic theatre, the culmination of a set of ideas expressed in a compilation of articles and thoughts *Arguments for a Theatre*. Catalonia, unfortunately, has only seen one of his

works performed, *Scenes from an Execution*, directed by Ramon Simó in the Sala Petita of the Teatre Nacional.

<sup>8</sup> A play she directed at the Gate Theatre, London in October 1997.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of the Icelandic singer this occurs in the song “An Echo, a Stain”, from her album *Vespertine*, which adapts a fragment of *Crave*. The English group Tindersticks pay homage to *4:48 Psychosis* in the song *Waiting for the Moon*, from the album by the same name.

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## *The Theatre of Sarah Kane* Contemporary Tragedy

*Diana González*

Is there any point in speaking about the tragic genre nowadays? What is it that is essential to tragedy? What does the term “tragic feeling” mean? Tragedy, as brilliantly explained by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, was originally conceived in the West but the West is no longer the centre of the world. The philosophers who best exemplify postmodernity (Vattimo, Maffesoli, Baudrillard, Nebreda or Derrida, among others) have done their best to express the loss of this comforting centre of gravity that was Europe. In the words of Vattimo, “‘primitive peoples’, or so we call them, colonised by Europeans in the name of the true right of ‘superior’ and more advanced civilisation, have rebelled and have, *de facto*, made a centralised, unitarian history problematic.”<sup>1</sup> This reality is disturbing for our Western culture, always assisted

by the security of a centre that, to our days, had been underwritten by Judeo-Christian tradition and the certainty that a God, wherever He may reside, exists and weaves our fate. We therefore have Nietzsche, on the one hand, with his theories on the death of God and, bearing this in mind, the absurdity of conceiving history in a linear, evolutionary fashion; and, on the other, the return to the Greco-Latin concept of cyclical movement, where each instant dies within itself because there is no decisive beginning or end, but rather an eternal wandering that escapes our control, which, despite it all, we try to dominate. The contemporary tragic heart, therefore, cannot survive in the linear concept of progress, but in chaos, a certainty that compels us to banish the idea of “linear, guaranteed, monochromatic time, a time of the project”, and assume that we live in “polychrome time, essentially tragic, concerned with the present and which escapes the utilitarianism of bourgeois computation”.<sup>2</sup> Going by these words of Maffesoli, it would seem that *tragedy* consists precisely of using up the present and the human awareness that we possess nothing more than the here and now. But above all, even though we believe that we should enjoy and aspire to happiness despite all absence of the transcendent (“Life is but a chain of unchangeable, eternal instants from which we need to extract the maximum enjoyment”)<sup>3</sup> deep down, we refuse to see ourselves exclusively as chance beings standing between a birth and a death we have not chosen. Our margin of manoeuvre is concentrated within these instants where we can improvise.

The doubt is then the following one: Are we satisfied with this wisdom of knowing ourselves to be so insignificant? What grandeur can we aspire to once we stop fooling ourselves about our own power?

So, if today the theatre of Sarah Kane has been defended by such major playwrights as Howard Barker or Harold Pinter and is performed throughout the world, it must be because it expresses something that has much to say about ourselves, a snapshot of ourselves, and makes us confront our everyday conflicts. This something can be no other than accepting a neglect that we finally assume, given that we can no longer turn to a God who governs our lives. Contemporary theatre needs to be sufficiently wise before entering this dead end street. Kane's theatre is.

The torrent of words that make up *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis* arouses the consciousness of this eternal instant, of all it entails: the vital enjoyment of *carpe diem* and the disenchantment of realising that it is all we have. The salvation found in love and the impossibility of achieving salvation:

“don't say no to me you can't say no to me because it's such a relief to have love again and to lie in bed and be held and touched and kissed and adored and your heart will leap when you hear my voice and see my smile and feel my breath on your neck and your heart will race when I want to see you and I will lie to you from day one and use you and screw you and break your heart because

you broke mine first and you will love me more each day until the weight is unbearable and your life is mine and you'll die alone because I will take what I want then walk away and owe you nothing it's always there it's always been there and you cannot deny the life you feel fuck that life fuck that life fuck that life I have lost you now”

[*Crave*, 178]

Exactly the same behaviour that Rod adopts with Carl in *Cleansed* when asked to promise eternal love. In his wisdom Rod loves him here and now, all he can offer is this precise instant, anything else would be lying because the future is beyond his control. Hippolytus, who has spent his life eating, drinking, fornicating, watching television, wasting his life away till becoming an execrable being for the audience, who see him as a despotic nonentity without morals or ethics, finally raises himself above all this misery when he is about to die and thrills at the image of the vultures circling, stating words worthy of a tragic hero: “If there could have been more moments like this.” Suddenly, with the vision that comes with the imminence of death, he realises that if there had been more moments like this in his life, that if death did not occur only once, but many times over, he would have taken another stand on life. You get the impression that throughout *Phaedra's Love* he has been wasting his time away, scorning it, and losing sight of the fact that this time, in reality, would come to an end, compelling him to reconsider his entire existence when it is too late to change

anything. At this moment the character grows in stature and the audience perceives a form of contemporary ethics that the critic Ken Urban has called “an ethics of catastrophe”. When circumstances become so extreme and unfavourable as in the devastated hotel room in *Blasted*, the royal palace of Theseus and Phaedra's offspring, the perverse institution in *Cleansed*, the linguistic abyss of *Crave* or the desolation at 4:48 in the morning in *4:48 Psychosis*, there is still room for ethics. The theatre of Sarah Kane turns contemptible characters into heroes of our time by revealing this awareness of a neglect of the human being who, here and now, in the midst of the hell displayed for all to see, is capable of giving the best of himself. Ian's last words of gratitude to Cate are another example of how the vilest of human beings can become aware of the importance of affection between people and value it, even if it is for the first and last time. The same happens with Tinker. There are no Iagos in Kane's theatre, all the characters, from the first to the last, have their reasons for behaving how they do: the constant search for love.

However, for tragedy to manifest itself it is necessary to leave the door ajar to the supernatural. The characters that Kane created are sceptics, postmodern, irreverent to God, but they fear being wrong. And what if, in the end, even though you know it to be ridiculous and without irrefutable proof – quite the contrary in fact – it turns out that there is something longer lasting than this present? Here we find the entirety

of the author's conflict between religious transcendence and the most exacerbated pragmatism. Evil – considered as sin if you wish – is punished in Kane's theatre. Ian is torturer and victim at the same time, he receives his due from the Catholic moral point of view, just as Hippolytus or Tinker do, playing at being God but at the same time being incapable of stopping voices that come from above or from the deepest abyss and pass judgement on their actions. The voice or voices in *4:48 Psychosis* yearn for the final end, our rest from suffering, so there is no contradiction in their cry of “Christ is dead” [229] while also hoping to God “that death is the fucking end” [211]. Is death the final rest or is there some continuity afterwards? All Kane's plays show this dichotomy, and they have been constructed around it.

The essential in tragedy, therefore, what we should take from Aristotle, is the confrontation between the human being and his fate. What this fate is and how this human is, depends on each age. Sophocles, Aeschylus or Seneca's classic heroes debate between the will to escape what is written and their freedom as individuals. But a tragedy is, above all, an investigation of knowledge and a reflection on the pain caused by ignoring one's own identity. Chance and fate may be described as two sides of the same coin: before the *recognition* [Aristotle, *Poetics*, XI] the hero perceives fate as chance, because he does not yet know that his every action has been written down beforehand. In Kane's theatre the attention

also falls on this *recognition*, the difference being that a personal fate is not woven for each character. So there is no need to trace out the personal exploits of each character as in the case of Oedipus, Theseus, Phaedra or Medea, instead the idea that they/we will all meet the same end is extolled: the end of existence as we know it. The end to a hell that blurs the frontiers between the horror of the present and the punishment announced in the pages of the Biblical *Apocalypse*, which does not ease because there is always the possibility that something worse lies in store for Kane's characters.

The fact that it is no longer easy for most contemporary Westerners to believe in God does not mean that we do not continue to preserve a desire for transcendence, to run away from the random stupidity that seems to govern our lives: "Western materialism works on the hypothesis that the world is brute matter, subject to aleatory and disorganized movements. Our world's 'primitive scene' is that which would remain lifeless if some God did not come along to breathe soul, or sense, or energy into it; of a disorder upon which only God can impose order, wrenching the world from its original chaos."<sup>4</sup> Art is sometimes this god, as David Mamet so rightly says in *Three Uses of the Knife*, given that we use its logic and formal perfection as a balm for the blind enchainment of the scenes of our daily routine. Contemporary theatre from Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg and Maeterlinck, however, attempts – as Peter Szondi observes in *Theorie des*

*modernen Dramas (1880-1950)* – to give appropriate form to this new sensitivity of our times. The only alternative, given the scepticism of the audience of today, is to assume that if we cannot perceive a significant order in our lives then neither should it be reflected in art. Hence the distorted, chaotic and disconcerting structures found in contemporary performances, where a different kind of perfection resides but it does not aspire to express order, but rather chaos. In his theatre, Beckett managed to confuse beginnings with ends, starting and finishing, giving the sensation that the play achieved much more than we were allowed to see. Sarah Kane continues along this line of formality and meaning, conceiving structures that reject the linearity of classic setting, climax and outcome and discovers a form within the formless, chaotic and random, recreating a static present – the eternal instant vindicated by Maffesoli: the only thing we possess and which it is legitimate to cling to because, though we would like to, we don't know any other thing.

<sup>1</sup> Vattimo, Gianni, "Posmodernidad: ¿Una sociedad transparente?", in AA.VV. *En torno a la posmodernidad*. Barcelona, Anthropos, 1990, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Maffesoli, Michel, *El instante eterno. El retorno de lo trágico en las sociedades posmodernas*. Argentina, Paidós, 2001, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *Las estrategias fatales*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 1984, p. 158.

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## A Look at Irish Contemporary Theatre

*Julia Canosa i Serra*

### Hibernia Possesses a Theatre Industry

There is no better way to judge the health of a country's theatrical tradition than by looking at the figures. Seeing as I want to speak about the theatre being produced in Ireland, I thought it appropriate, first of all, to run through the consumption habits of its theatre-going public and then let everyone come to their own conclusions. Ireland is an example that I have found to be fitting, a small country, with two languages (its own and the coloniser's), a history full of martyrs and a culture that has survived the blows of its neighbours.

Ireland has a population of approximately 3.801 million people.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, 3 million went to see theatre and dance programmes. Of this 3 million, 80% paid the entirety of the admission price (an average of 19 euros per ticket) and 15% were invited. The remaining 5% refers to special tickets for schools, groups and other promotions. That same year, the performing arts (dance and theatre) generated an income of 82 million euros, of which 52% came from box office receipts, 38% from the administrations and the rest from sponsorship and other donations.<sup>2</sup> Approximate total spending on the performing arts in Ireland was of some 73 million euros. Of this total, 43% was spent on artistic programming,

40% on non-artistic tasks and 17% on promotion, public relations, construction and other spending.

According to the document published by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia in August 2005, our comparative figures would be the following: Catalonia has a population of approximately 6.813 million people<sup>3</sup>, of which 2,114,024 attended some form of performing art during 2003. 92% paid the entirety of the admission price and only 8% were invited (!). That same year, an income of 28.6 million euros was generated, of which 36% was raised by the box office, 48% came from the administrations and the remaining 15% from sponsorship, the hiring of facilities and co-productions. Spending was 124 million euros: 49.3% was spent on artistic programming, 28% on non-artistic areas and the remaining 21% on other spending.

It comes as no surprise that the Irish Theatre Forum should declare that "The Performing Arts in Ireland are not only vital for the artistic life of the country but also, in general, can make a significant contribution to the quality of life of all its citizens".

With a little data we have entered the theatrical panorama of Ireland: it is alive and productive. This investment in theatre, both by its citizens and the administration, helps its fruits to grow: strong, healthy competition and a large production of shows with original plays by contemporary authors, something which in itself does not necessarily

mean *good* theatre, but there is certainly a better chance to find quality.

### Producing Irish Contemporary Theatre

Irish authors can feel themselves appreciated. The administrations have created a system of annual subsidies that allows authors to write in total freedom and without need of commissions. To this important factor, we should add another, more important one: as we have seen above, not only does the government financially support its writers but audience figures for the performing arts in Ireland are very healthy also. Irish authors are writing for someone.

We have already heard of some Irish writers. Our country has seen the translation and performance of plays by Frank McGuinness, Brian Friel, Marina Carr, Conor McPherson, and a short etcetera. In 2004 Ireland premiered twenty-two pieces by contemporary authors<sup>4</sup>, and four adaptations – *Cyrano de Bergerac* adapted by the poet Derek Mahon, Sophocles' *Antigone* adapted by Nobel Prize laureate Seamus Heaney, *The Cherry Orchard* adapted by Tom Murphy and a new version of *The Green Fool* by Declan Gorman.

Of these twenty-two pieces, four opened in the Abbey Theatre and another four at the Project Arts Centre, both in Dublin.<sup>5</sup> Among the original plays to premiere were *Beauty in a Broken Place* by Colm Toibin, *Birdie Birdie* by Michael Harding, *From these Green Heights* by Dermot Bolger (winner of the ESB Irish Theatre Awards 2004),

*Shining City* by Conor McPherson and *Take Me Away* by Gerald Murphy.

All of the pieces mentioned, except two, were written for more than one character. Even so, Brian Singleton, lecturer in Drama Studies at the Samuel Becket Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, believes there is: “a recent plethora of dramatic monologues by our writers that indicates an attempt by young playwrights to do battle with form, and which controls the theatrical process. *Port Authority* by Conor McPherson and *Eden* by Eugene O’Brien, both directed by Conor McPherson, reveal an anxiety about theatre as a medium of communication. [...] The monologue form traps the characters in past time, keeping them frozen within a dark isolation”.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the words of W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, B. Shaw or Synge feel very distant, even though some of us, playwrights or not, experts or not, Irish or not, would like to see a certain tangible heredity in the new texts. Reading interviews and works by contemporary authors such as Dermot Bolger, Marina Carr, Alex Johnston or Conor McPherson, among others, we discover that, even though they sometimes perform radically different exercises, they all seem to question this supposed heredity, whether it is to escape from a clichéd identity or to try to recognise oneself as part of that identity. Irish drama has changed almost in the same way and at the same pace as the island itself, and the result is that the theatre being written since the nineties seems

to represent a different culture to that proposed or explained in plays written only two decades before. There is no need, therefore, to travel to the beginning of the century to notice the rapid evolution of its theatre, without judging the course it has followed.

The economic growth of the island (do not forget that it is due to this spectacular and unexpected growth at the beginning of the nineties that we have come to know of Ireland as “The Celtic Tiger”) has directly and indirectly benefited theatre production in the country. It should also be pointed out that it has been a nation that has shown a certain confidence in its cultural identity and that this self-definition crosses the border between north and south.

Irish theatre and the “Irish consciousness” are inextricably bound. In fact, it is no accident that the foundation of the National Theatre Society of Ireland should coincide with the foundation of the nation itself. Irish arts, in general, have taken advantage of this growth that, in part, they have been able to benefit from greatly. There is a cultural policy in place in Ireland that, even though it may be criticised for falling into the easy temptation of stereotypes, is also appreciated for still being very necessary.

However, the concern of playwrights and other artists and intellectuals with the dangers of art itself becoming a stereotype for major commercial profit is made obvious in the production of new dramatic texts that move away

from the traditional Irish world of mysticism and the countryside, to offer alternative realities that are equally, if not more, prevalent. And the task they have ahead is huge. The tourist industry and the government itself have long been guilty of selling a very childish idea of Ireland, a rustic postcard for those who seek their roots in the purity of the island, adorned with pennywhistles and druids or, when is best suits, converted into an example of a revolutionary and, subsequently, technocratic territory.

These are the concerns of some Irish writers with whom I have been able to speak recently and not so recently. In Ireland it is just like in Catalonia: evolution sometimes forces us to walk along the edge and ditch the classics in a supposed attempt to create a zone that is free from the past. It is clear that today's writers wish to escape this vindicating or rural cliché in order to talk of other things. Is what we have to explain now that is so different?

I asked Marina Carr (*Ariel, By the Bog of Cats, Low in the Dark, Meat and Salt, On Raftery's Hill, Portia Coughlan, The Mai, This Love Thing, Ullaloo, etc.*) and she agrees that Irish drama writing (though adding that she does not believe it to be an intellectual movement that is heading in the same direction or has the same will, but rather occurs individually and only with certain people) is coming out of this clichéd identity to begin to advance, once this possible identity has been assimilated or understood. Things have changed a great deal since the days of Brendan Behan, and the authors who

work and write in Ireland today are not alien to the new concerns that this change brings about. She adds that even though it is true that they are leaving behind, or trying to leave behind, the culture of the fields and potatoes, it is good to be conscious of this and read it anew, both to be able to turn your back on it when it suits or to turn to it when you need to go over what was expressed in different words in years gone by. "It is very pretentious to believe you will be writing about some new subject!", she says and laughs.

If anyone is interested in reading or receiving more up-to-date information on theatre in Ireland, I recommend you visit [www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com), where you can find a powerful data base on plays produced since 1950, with access to published pieces and contact information of theatres and professional companies.

<sup>1</sup> *L'Etat du monde 2004 : annuaire économique et géopolitique mondial.*

<sup>2</sup> According to the report published by Fitzpatrick Associates through the Irish Theatre Forum, September 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Figures published by Idescat (the Statistics Institute of Catalonia).

<sup>4</sup> Irish Playography, the Theatre Shop: ([www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com))

<sup>5</sup> [www.abbeytheatre.ie](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie), [www.project.ie](http://www.project.ie)

<sup>6</sup> "Am I talking to myself", article by Brian Singleton in *The Irish Times*.

## Driving out the Demons The Use of Narrative in Irish Theatre

*Victor Muñoz i Calafell*

Despite the fact that some of the most famous contemporary poets and novelists in the English-speaking world are Irish, the literary genre traditionally associated with Ireland is without doubt playwriting. It is, to say the least, surprising that a country that only began to develop a national culture a little more than a hundred years ago has produced, throughout the last century, playwrights of the stature of J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Brendan Behan, Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel or Tom Murphy. In fact, the list is interminable. The reasons for this success in the field of dramatics may be found, like so many other explanations of Irish actualities, in religion.

A great deal of what is generally considered theatre relies on the spoken word, i.e., theatre is an art that requires a performance where, usually, a dialogue written previously is presented to the public, who are only expected to listen and pay attention. If there is one thing that distinguishes Catholicism and Anglicism, it is precisely what each faith expects from its followers. The Catholics are expected to go to Mass at least once a week, and listen to what the priest tells them, since it is the truth and nothing else. Anglicism, on the other hand, expects its adherents to take the Bible and read it for them-

selves so that they develop their own ideas. This simple fact explains why, well into the 19th century, in England even the most underprivileged classes knew how to read (because the salvation of the soul depended on this), while in Ireland the rate of illiteracy was high, because to be saved they only had to listen and believe. So it's hardly surprising that the two genres that made more impact during the Irish literary renaissance were theatre and poetry, which are meant to be listened to rather than read.

This circumstance may also help to explain one of the peculiarities of Irish theatre: the presence of storytelling in many of the plays. The characters in the play live or act out a story, but likewise, in a given moment, they become the narrators of other stories which may be true or made up, but which equally well become literary material. So, in this way, the characters in a play become storytellers, like the playwright who wrote the play. Moreover, just as the playwright's final goal is to somehow exercise an influence on the public (whether it be simply by getting them to enjoy themselves, affecting them emotionally, or making them think about today's world), the stories explained by the characters in the plays also provoke changes in the storytellers themselves and the listeners. In this respect, Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh, two of the most successful playwrights on the international scene at the present time, and both with Irish origins, have resorted to this device in some of their plays. Though, as always

when discussing Irish theatre, it is necessary to go back to J. M. Synge to trace the origins.

Out of the six plays that John Millington Synge wrote, *The Playboy of the Western World* is without doubt his most popular and the one which has made him deservedly famous. Premiered in 1907 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, *The Playboy of the Western World* is a story of redemption and rebirth which, at the time, provoked serious disturbances outside the theatre because, according to the public, the play depicted the Irish in a very poor light. *The Playboy of the Western World* tells the story of Christy Mahon, a young man who turns up one fine day in a little village on the coast of Mayo. At once, all the inhabitants take a great interest in him, and Christy eventually tells them he is on the run from the police because he has just killed his father. Christy's brave and proud way of speaking causes admiration amongst both men and women, and the whole village decides to protect him from the law. The women hanker after him as if he was the most eligible bachelor, and the day after his arrival, Christy agrees to explain the circumstances of the murder of Old Mahon, his father:

"CHRISTY: It's a long story; you'd be destroyed listening. [...] We were digging spuds in his cold, sloping, stony, devil's patch of a field. [...] I was digging and digging, and 'You squinting idiot,' says he, 'let you walk down now and tell the priest you'll wed the Widow Casey in a score of days.' [...] She two

score and five years, and two hundred-weights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and the young. [...] He without a thought the whole while but how he'd have her hut to live in and her gold to drink. [...] 'I won't wed her,' says I, 'when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day with the tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse.' [...] 'God have mercy on your soul,' says he, lifting a scythe. 'Or on your own,' says I, raising the loy. [...] He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split the knob of his gullet." (Synge 1987:97/98)

The resolve with which Christy has rebelled against his father's dictatorial demands makes him, in the eyes of the villagers, who are always wary of any figure of authority after so many years of exploitation by the English, a hero to be venerated and respected. The motives for this veneration are further justified when he wins all the competitions in which he takes part, becoming in this way a genuine champion. However, the situation is turned upside down with the arrival of Old Mahon in search of his son. We get an idea of Christy that is radically different to what we have been led to believe up till then:

“WIDOW QUIN: It's a sacred wonder the way that wickedness will spoil a man.

MAHON: My wickedness, is it? Amn'tl after saying it is himself has me destroyed, and he a liar on walls, a talker of folly, a man you'd see stretched the half of the day in the brown ferns with his belly to the sun.

WIDOW QUIN: Not working at all?

MAHON: The divil a work, or if he did itself, you'd see him raising up a haystack like the stalk of a rush, or driving our last cow till he broke her leg at the hip, and when he wasn't at that he'd be fooling over little birds he had – finches and felts – or making mugs at his own self in the bit of glass we had hung on the wall.

WIDOW QUIN: What way was he so foolish? It was running wild after the girls maybe?

MAHON: Running wild, is it? If he seen a red petticoat coming swinging over the hill, he'd be off to hide in the sticks, and you'd see him shooting out his sheep's eyes between the little twigs and the leaves, and his two ears rising like a hare looking out through a gap. Girls, indeed!

WIDOW QUIN: It was drink, maybe?

MAHON: And he a poor fellow would get drunk on the smell of a pint. He'd a queer rotten stomach, I'm telling you, and when I gave him three pulls

from my pipe a while since, he was taken with contortions till I had to send him in the ass-cart to the females' nurse.

WIDOW QUIN: Well, I never, till this day, heard of a man the like of that!

MAHON: I'd take a mighty oath you didn't, surely, and wasn't he the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet, the way the girls would stop their wedding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon's." (Synge 1987:107-108)

However, it would appear that this is the real picture, because when father and son meet face to face and Old Mahon accuses his son of talking nothing but lies, Christy can think of nothing else to say except that it's all his father's fault for pretending to be dead:

“CHRISTY [*dumbfounded*]: It's himself was a liar, lying stretched out with an open head on him, letting on he was dead.

MAHON: Weren't you off racing the hills before I got my breath with the start I had seeing you turn on me at all?" (Synge 1987:125)

But on seeing that his cause is lost and he is doomed to go back to the dog's life he led in the past, Christy decides to rebel and, to everyone's surprise including his father's, he is capable of doing what he was incapable of doing previously:

“[CHRISTY] runs at OLD MAHON with the loy, chases him out of the door followed by crow and WIDOW QUIN. There is a great noise outside, then a yell, and dead silence for a moment. CHRISTY comes in, half-dazed, and goes to fire.” (Synge 1987:127)

What Christy experiences during the play is a transformation of his personality, becoming the champion of the western world that he himself had described to us. There is no comparing this Christy with the one described by his father, because as the action unfolds he becomes another person in a rapid but sure process of change. This evolution takes place at such a deep level in his being, especially after discovering that he hasn't really killed his father, that there is no going back. And his way of reaffirming his new self is to attack his father again, but like a real hero this time and in the way he himself had previously described to us. In other words, in *The Playboy of the Western World* the fictitious reality invented by the protagonist to portray himself becomes the agent that transforms his self and the surrounding reality. Somehow, the story ends up having a clearly therapeutic effect on the character. Ellis-Fermor insists on this point:

“Synge [...] sees that the genius for myth-making finds its supreme expression in creating the most satisfying myth of all, that of personality. [...] His evolution [Christy's] from what his father brutally but succinctly describes as a dribbling idiot, not merely into “a likely man”, but into a poet-hero, “the

only playboy of the western world”, is rapid but sure. So sure that when the reversal comes the new Christy is capable of ousting the original and perpetuating itself. [...] After the victory at the sports has given him incontestable proof, he grasps the new self so powerfully that it cannot be shaken even by the father he has dreaded all his life. “I’m master of all fights from now.” (1991: 464/5)

*The Playboy of the Western World* is therefore perhaps the first example of Irish theatre where the force of an imaginary story narrated by one of the very characters in a play prevails over the generally passive role reserved for the characters, and becomes an agent that transforms the actual circumstances in which it was created. In other words, it acquires a healing power that affects its narrator. This is not the only example, however. Two of the most renowned contemporary Irish playwrights have used this device, each of them in his own way, naturally.

After the successful premiere of *The Weir* in Broadway, the critic Scott T. Cummings considered Conor McPherson “as much storyteller as playwright” (1999). This association with both genres is not fortuitous and, in fact, is one of the crosses that McPherson has had to bear since the premieres of two plays, both acclaimed by the critics, at the Bush Theatre in London. The two plays, *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *St. Nicholas* (1997), are constructed around monologues addressed directly to the public. The

former, premiered in Catalonia in 2003 in a production by the old Centre Dramàtic del Vallès under the direction of Xicu Masó, consists of three alternating monologues during which the three protagonists explain the events that lead them to commit an armed robbery, with the aim of freeing the father of two of them from the clutches of a betting agent. *St. Nicholas*, on the other hand, is a story told in first person about an Irish critic who arrives in London on the trail of an actress he has fallen madly in love with, and encounters a group of vampires whom he accompanies on their nocturnal forays in search of victims. Thus, in both plays, the characters explain stories in which they take the main role. They do so, though, in the past, which opens up a gap between their present lives and what they narrate: they are the protagonists of the stories they tell, but the gap in time makes them immune to the events they describe, so there is no difference between before and after. The change experienced by the characters took place a long time ago, when the deeds they describe terminated. *The Weir*<sup>1</sup>, in this respect, represents a 180 degree about-turn.

After the premieres of *This Lime Tree Bower* and *St. Nicholas*, the key question asked by the critics was whether Conor McPherson was capable of writing dialogue. They got their answer in *The Weir* (1997), a play described as “a perfect example of the dramatist as storyteller” (Nathan 1997:872). Written for four actors and an actress, the author apparently distances himself in

*The Weir* from monologue as a dramatic device. And I say apparently, because, in practice, the play seems nothing more than an excuse to tell five ghost stories in the form of monologues. The plot is as simple as that. Three men get together in the local pub in a small god-forsaken village in Ireland where they warm themselves up with a few beers. One of them explains that a young woman from Ireland has just let a house in the village with a view to moving in there. Immediately, this generates a certain amount of speculation: Why would a girl from the city want to come and live in the back of beyond? A little later, the girl in question, Valerie, shows up accompanied by the neighbour who has let her the house. Introductions are made and the men compete to attract the girl’s attention by telling ghost stories. The first three stories apparently have no effect on the circumstances they occur in, although they do help to give us an inkling of some of the storytellers’ own fears. In the first story, Jack explains that the house Valerie has let is said to be situated right in the middle of a fairy path, and that on one occasion the fairies knocked on the door to be let through. In the second story, Finbar relates that in a house not so far from there a little girl saw the ghost of a woman who had just killed herself by falling down the stairs. Lastly, in the third story, Jim tells how he met the ghost of a paedophile determined to be buried in the same hollow as one of his victims, a little girl. This last story seems to especially upset Valerie, who excuses herself and goes to the lavato-

ries. On being left alone, the men reproach each other for having gone too far and promise to apologise to Valerie, but when she comes back she decides to tell her own story:

“VALERIE: I, em. Hearing about. All these... you know, stories. It’s...

FINBAR: Ah that’s the end of them, now. We’ve had enough of them old stories, they’re only an old cod. We’ve just been joking about it there when you were out. We’ll all be witless, ha? We won’t be able to sleep in our beds!

VALERIE: No, see, something happened to me. That just hearing you talk about it tonight. It’s important to me. That I’m not... bananas.” (1998:37)

And she tells them about her daughter and how one day her daughter went on a school outing to the swimming pool. Valerie was meant to go and watch her, but was late on account of her work. When she finally arrived at the pool she discovered that her daughter had drowned. Valerie went to pieces and her marriage suffered. Then, one morning, she had a phone call. When she picked up the receiver, she heard her daughter’s voice asking her to come and pick her up at her grandmother’s house, and although Valerie knew that she wouldn’t be there, she drove off to fetch her. This is the mystery behind her arrival in the countryside: the desire to bury old ghosts and start a new life. Thus, in a certain way, the three stories told up till then (and especially the third, the story of the little girl who falls into the

clutches of a paedophile) have affected Valerie to such a degree that she feels the need to explain her own ghost story, so as to somehow exorcise herself and make a full recovery:

“VALERIE: Stop. I don’t want... It’s something that happened. And it’s nice just to be here and... hear what you were saying. I know I’m not crazy.” (1998:40)

The suffering patient in this story creates a bond between the different listeners, who set aside any feelings of rivalry and offer to help Valerie in every way possible, establishing a rapport that seemed almost unthinkable a little earlier. Finally, when Jim and Finbar have already left, Jack tells Valerie and Brendan a last story, much more personal and poignant: how he lost the girl he loved because he didn’t want to follow her to the city and the loneliness he feels on account of that decision. Just as in Valerie’s story, then, the haunting is personal, although in this case the story takes a different slant and fantastic details are absent, a point which might lead us to conclude that the most terrifying stories are those where the haunting is personal and real. Thus, *The Weir* is a play, in the author’s own words, about “the need for community and loneliness – the way storytelling fills a fundamental human need” (Stratton 1997:140). Through these stories, persons condemned to lives of solitude and isolation find the companionship they have never had or have lacked for a long time. Although applied differently, this use of narrative

as a healing agent therefore links up directly with Synge. The prestigious critic for *The Times*, Benedict Nightingale, writing on the occasion of the premiere of *The Weir*, underlines the common ground that links it to the author of *The Playboy of the Western World*: “From Synge onwards, Irish drama has presented us with characters who escape from their drab lives by indulging fancy and exercising imagination” (1997:872). That is, just as Christy cures himself of his cowardice and idiocy by way of telling an untrue story about himself to the customers in the village pub, the protagonists of *The Weir* shake off the loneliness that oppresses them through these ghost stories. Because, in the words of Jim Norton in an interview (he played Jack in the original production), “storytelling is the only therapy Ireland believes in – it helps to deal with the demons” (Rawson 2000).

It is this idea of storytelling as a therapy which Conor McPherson applies directly in his latest work, *Shining City* (2004). The play tells two more ghost stories: one about a psychologist called Ian who, despite being racked by doubt throughout the play, finally decides to hide his homosexuality and continue living with his wife, and the other about one of his patients, John, who, by confessing the guilt he feels for the death of his wife, finds deliverance and is newly reconciled with himself. The consequences of these vital choices are clearly reflected in the play on account of the use McPherson makes of ghosts: By means of his confession (i.e., the

description of the facts) John stops seeing visions of his dead wife and comes to terms with all the harm he caused her when she was alive. On the other hand, Ian, on denying his homosexuality, seals his own fate and will be haunted by ghosts for the rest of his life, which is left quite clear by the final stage directions:

“*In the darkening gloom of the afternoon, we see that MARI’S ghost has appeared behind the door. She is looking at IAN, just as JOHN has described her; she wears her red coat, which is filthy, her hair is wet. She looks beaten up. She looks terrifying.*”

IAN has his back to her at his desk, going through some old post. But he seems to sense something and turns.

*Lights down.*” (2004:65)

Ghosts, therefore, are nothing more than the personal demons we conceal inside ourselves, and only by putting them into words can we exorcise them and begin to live our lives to the full.

While J. M. Synge used a father-son relationship as the dramatic impetus for *The Playboy of the Western World*, in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996)<sup>2</sup> Martin McDonagh focuses on the relationship between a mother and her daughter to explain a story of disillusion and frustration. Synge’s influence is notable throughout the play, even if the final destiny of McDonagh’s characters is diametrically opposed to what happens to the characters described by

Synge at the beginning of the last century. In point of fact, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is “a tragic, complementary inversion of the tormented Christy Mahon situation in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*” (Coveney 1996:288), a state of affairs clarified by McDonagh’s use of storytelling.

Maureen is a forty-year-old spinster trapped in a miserable nondescript village in the West of Ireland, where she finds herself forced to look after her seventy-year-old mother, Mag. The relationship between mother and daughter is based on mutual hate and resentment, so they try to hurt each other as much as they can. The arrival of Pato, an old flame of Maureen’s, on his way to the United States, fills the daughter with hope, because this is the first chance she has ever had to abandon her mother and live life to the full. However, Mag, terrified at the possibility of being left to fend for her self, thinks up a story to make Pato believe that her daughter has changed her mind at the last moment. When she finds out, Maureen rushes off to find Pato to try to tell him the truth of the matter before he leaves. Later, Maureen delivers a monologue explaining her future plans and giving the impression she has managed to speak to Pato before he embarks:

“MAUREEN: To Boston. To Boston I’ll be going. [...] Almost begged me, Pato did. Almost on his hands and knees, he was, near enough crying. At the station I caught him, not five minutes to spare, thanks to you. Thanks to your oul inter-

fering. But too late to be interfering you are now. Oh aye. Be far too late, although you did give it a good go, I'll say that for you. Another five minutes and you'd have had it. Poor you. Poor selfish ould bitch, ould you. (*Pause.*) Kissed the face off me, he did, when he saw me there. Them blue eyes of his. Them muscles. Them arms wrapping me. 'Why did you not answer me letter?' And all for coming over and giving you a good kick he was when I told him, but 'Ah no,' I said, 'isn't she just a feeble-minded ould feck, not worth dirtying your boots on?' I was defending you there. (*Pause.*) 'You will come to Boston with me so, me love, when you get up the money.' 'I will, Pato. Be it married or be it living in sin, what do I care? What do I care if tongues'd be wagging?' [...] 'Except we do still have a problem, what to do with your ould mam, there,' he said. [...] 'I'll leave it up to yourself so,' Pato says. He was on the train be this time, we was kissing out the window, like they do in films. 'I'll leave it up to yourself so, whatever you decide. If it takes a month, let it take a month.' [...] But if even a year it has to take for you to decide, it is a year I will be waiting, and won't be minding the wait.' 'It won't be a year it is you'll be waiting, Pato', I called out then, the train was pulling away. 'It won't be a year nor yet nearly a year. It won't be a week!'" (McDonagh 1997:50-51)

However, at the end of the scene the public discover that Maureen is talking to her mother's corpse. She has died from a heavy blow to the head presumably delivered by her daughter. The

play's last scene takes place months later while Maureen is packing her bags just after Mag's funeral (they've taken this long to bury her because there has been an inquiry). But Pato's brother arrives on the scene and upsets her plans. He tells her that Pato is about to get married and he reminds her that the night Pato left, she arrived late and wasn't on time to speak to him. It is at this point that the parallelisms with Synge's play become clear. Like Christy, Maureen also feels compelled to make up a story to escape from the misery of the world she lives in, but in her case, unlike the champion of the Western world who undergoes a change, the story doesn't consolidate itself and, ultimately, turns out to be nothing more than a pipedream. Here, as mentioned before, we have a situation which is the converse of Christy's. While the storytelling has therapeutic powers in *The Playboy of the Western World*, because it helped Christy to overcome his own fears and anxieties, McDonagh makes utterly subversive use of it in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, where the self-assurance and strength of mind that Maureen seems to transmit throughout the story crumbles away when Pato's brother explains what really happened. And in this fashion, not only does McDonagh leave Maureen without any hope of ever being reunited with Pato, but also, to make matters worse, he leaves her without her mother, i.e., she ends up in the most absolute solitude, without any possibility of escaping from the hell of Western Ireland. So while Christy is able to flee, Maureen, on the other hand, is doomed to stay

there for the rest of her life. Thus, the relation of the facts, whether they be fictitious or true, does not serve in this particular case to exorcise the character's personal demons, as occurs in Synge and McPherson. On the contrary, Maureen has conjured up yet more demons and goes completely mad. This subversive idea of the healing powers of storytelling reaches its maximum level of expression – and, in point of fact, explicitness – in the author's latest play, *The Pillowman* (2003).

In *The Pillowman*, a short story writer living under a totalitarian regime is arrested by the police on account of the strange coincidences between a series of cruel child murders and some of the murders he has described in the more than five hundred stories written during his career. The writer, Katurian, denies any connection with the facts, even when he is tortured. Later, though, during a conversation with his retarded brother Michal, he deduces that Michal is responsible for all these deaths and has directly implicated him in the facts. Katurian decides to kill his brother to save him from any suffering in the future and, immediately thereafter, confesses that he is responsible for the children's deaths. In the end, although the police discover the truth, Katurian is given no mercy and executed.

Hence, the protagonist of *The Pillowman* is explicitly a storyteller. However, Katurian thinks that his stories, in which children suffer terrible deaths, have no influence on the world he lives in. When his torturers ask him what he is trying to

tell in his stories, Katurian replies "I'm not trying to tell anything." (2003:17) So Katurian thinks that if there is no specific underlying intention, this excludes any possibility of a story having an influence on reality. This is Katurian's mistake because, as we have already seen in the other plays we've discussed, the story always has an influence in one way or another on the world in which the storyteller lives. And the storyteller is always responsible, as Michal makes clear to Katurian at a certain point in the play:

"KATURIAN: What did you do it for?"

MICHAL: *You* know. Because you told me to.

KATURIAN (*pause*): Because I what?"

MICHAL: Because you told me to.

KATURIAN (*pause*): I remember telling you to do your homework on time, I remember telling you to brush your teeth every night. [...] I don't remember telling you to take a bunch of little kids and go butcher them. [...]"

MICHAL: 'Butcher them'. That's a bit strong. And I wouldn't have done anything if you hadn't told me, so don't you act all the innocent. Every story you tell me, something horrible happens to somebody. I was just testing out how far-fetched they were. 'Cos I always thought some of 'em were a bit far-fetched. (*Pause.*) D'you know what? They ain't all that far-fetched." (2003:49-50)

The creation of stories affects reality and also, as we have seen above, the person who invents them. And in this case, on the same lines as in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh subverts the therapeutic function of storytelling, though here he goes much further. While in the first play the story contributes to Maureen's madness, in *The Pillowman* the stories contribute not only to the death of persons unconnected with the storyteller's world, but also to his own death, and leave a trail of brutal destruction in their wake. Thus, the regenerative effect of storytelling as seen in *The Playboy of the Western World* is transformed by Martin McDonagh, a century later, into a destructive influence that sweeps aside everything in its path. So storytelling now implies death and destruction, although it looks as if McDonagh refuses to completely rule out the possibility of redemption and at the end of the play, "for reasons known only to himself, the bulldog of a policeman chose not to put the stories in the burning trash, but placed them carefully with Katurian's case file, which he then sealed away to remain unopened for fifty-odd years" (2003: 103-104). Anything can still happen.

<sup>1</sup> The Catalan version of the play was premiered on 21 September 1999 at the Teatre Romea de Barcelona, under the direction of Manuel Dueso.

<sup>2</sup> The Catalan version of the play was premiered on 22 October 1998 at the Villarroel Teatre under the direction of Mario Gas.

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## What is there that is Special about Writing for German Theatre?

*Roland Schimmelpfennig*

Writing about writing is difficult – in the same way that plays on theatre are a very complicated matter. This is pro-

bably just as true wherever you live. What I like about writing for theatre is this: dramatic art tends to be tied to a place and its inhabitants, to a language, yet, despite this, some plays can be understood all over the world, regardless of their origin.

What is there that is special about writing for German theatre? Many things: a German parliamentarian for the Greens, the ecologist party, once proposed classifying German theatre as a "European cultural asset particularly worthy of protection", like a building, an old church. The idea is outlandish, as well as abominable, because when all is said and done nobody wants to be included in a list of monuments to be protected while still alive, though, in certain ways, it is also an understandable, almost romantic concept. To better understand this we need to take a journey (albeit very short) through history. Germany, or what today receives this name, was up to the 19th century composed of a confused conglomeration of duchies, counties and miniature kingdoms. In one day you could cross a few on foot. Each of these small states funded its own "State Theatre" and many of these stages continue to exist to this day as subsidised local theatre houses. Generally, the classics or "modern classics" are performed, but since the "turn around", that is to say, since reunification, or the mid-nineties at the latest, the scene has changed. After the dismemberment of the old blocks, a creative void seemed to appear. Germany had work for young playwrights and the demand for new plays was great. The

curious thing, though, is that the "peaceful revolution" that preceded the fall of the GDR, or reunification, did not lead to a new ideological inception. After reunification everything became, and continues to be, an issue of money, and the reality is that the political death of the old system in the East brought about the financial collapse of the West Germany that had survived. Despite it all, the demand is there, theatres (if they have not closed owing to a lack of funding) seek and promote new work, and there is a whole slew of people who proclaim themselves to supposedly be playwrights.

Somewhere, a short while back, I read that among writers playwrights are the bullfighters. That may be so, but my opinion of the art is that you need to take some risks. Self-satisfaction leads to its own end.

How do I live? I live in Berlin, where in winter the sky hangs very low. I have two small children and a Mexican wife who often despairs and is sometimes full of euphoria. There are those who say I write too much, I find I write too little.

A few years back I was asked to write something for an anthology that was to be called *Deutsche Dramaturgie 1969-99*. At the time I was spending a whole year in a log cabin in the mountains, in Big Sur, in a perpetually fog-covered California. There wasn't a soul within a sixty-minute walk. This was the result. The anthology, by the way, was never published.

### Mulholland Drive

Los Angeles spread out below us under the light of the last rays of the sun. We had sat on the ground and were looking at the millions of lights. There, far away, we could see the planes landing and taking off in the middle of a pool of sparkling light. The boy had fallen asleep in her arms. She was enchanting. The entire world knew her face.

“I liked that about the mosquito,” she said.

I had told her that in one of my plays I had written about an ambitious witch who had turned her housekeeper into a mosquito so she could suck some dance steps from the ear of a suburban beauty.

“Are all your plays like that?”

“It’s not so easy to summarise, I’m afraid.”

“They say that the major film studios always asked their writers to summarise their scripts in three sentences.”

“Do you think that’s why films used to be better?”

She smiled.

“Do you think that plays are better if they can’t be summarised?”

“No”, I said.

“So do you write German plays?”

“What do you mean?”

“Germans always attempt to be pedagogical, my father always said.”

“Is he Italian, your father?”

“My father comes from the North Pole,” she laughed. “Even so, he knew German playwrights well. They’re always attempting to be pedagogical. German plays are always stuffed full of words in capital letters. Holy Mother of God!”

We sat in silence for a while and we watched the planes there, far away. It had almost got dark.

“Good plays do not reveal all,” I said finally.

She looked at me. The child had almost disappeared among the folds of her Kimono.

“Even so, I’d very much like to know what happened to the mosquito”, she said.

“Really?”

And she said:

“Oh, daddy.”

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### Common Ground on Either Side of the Atlantic

*Victoria Szpunberg*

If in Catalonia you ever heard the names Marius von Mayenburg and Rafael Spregelburd you might think that these are two men from the same country, two Germans. You would not be so wrong, although only the first one was born in Germany. Spregelburd, like many Argentineans, bears the surname of someone who at some point crossed the ocean to live in Argentina, but he looks much more “Porteño” than German.

“Mayenburg wants to tell stories”, said today Rafael as he was leaving the theatre.

I should mention that I am writing from Buenos Aires, where the Inter-

national Theatre Festival is being held, and I have been able to exchange opinions with Rafael and another Argentinean playwright on a show directed here by Frank Castorf. I found it curious to hear them both criticising “the German way of doing things”, the extreme conceptualisation of theatre, intellectualisation and ideological theatre. Spregelburd was telling us that his friend Mayenburg did not create discursive theatre: “Mayenburg, instead, wants to tell stories.” Perhaps in an attempt to fend off Müllers ghost. I must admit that, for my part, I very much enjoyed Castorf’s work. Here in Catalonia this “German way of doing things” is still quite novel to us. Still, there are other ghosts that question the new trends in drama.

It is not just the similarity in surnames that marks these two playwrights. Spregelburd, in Argentina, also writes theatre that tells stories, not in a linear or “naturalist” fashion, but it is a theatre that is more concerned with portraying the dramatic situation than in expressing an opinion on the world or an ideology. At least not some pamphleteering ideology, although ideology is always generated if there is someone who is willing to interpret it as such. What would the Japanese have to say about Mayenburg beginning his article saying, “Rafael doesn’t like sushi”? And I add: “Nor does he like coffee or tobacco”. All assertions can turn into prejudice so long as there is some susceptible soul who wants to accept it as such. What is most interesting, for me, is that these are two per-

sonal voices that do not copy established formulas and that, from an intelligent and accessible theatre that works on “the specific”, they are creating new drama. Since meeting at the Royal Court Theatre International Residency in London in 1998, they have declared a deep mutual admiration and friendship. Below we publish an article by each of them.

I hope this encourages you to read their respective texts.

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### Possessing the Truth<sup>1</sup>

*Marius von Mayenburg*

Rafael Spregelburd doesn’t like sushi. In fact, there’s no way he’ll even consider eating any fish. And when someone innocently suggests that they go in search of a place that serves sushi he doesn’t refuse in the typically apologetic fashion of someone who’s an exception to the rule, who is unlucky enough to have a hang-up. Rather, he tends to consider with enormous tranquillity – endorsed by the inescapable weight of something self-evident – that the rest of humanity that do eat those scaly, cold-blooded sea creatures is perverse. Anyway, he’s an extremely sociable person. I met him in summer 1998, in London, at the Royal Court Theatre International Residency, and it so happened that one night our group decided to investigate a sushi restaurant that had just opened. The different fishy titbits are served up on coloured

saucers that come sliding by on a conveyor belt, so that the diners can choose according to the dictates of their appetites. Rafael's appetite obviously doesn't dictate anything to him, but he has come with us anyway, and he sits there completely immobile and looking discreetly disgusted while he watches his companions swallowing down those lumps of raw fish. Then his attention is attracted by a saucer piled up with fried seaweed, which is something more or less edible, seeing as it's not fish. Rafael decides to satisfy his appetite with that seaweed. And so as not to leave the dish half eaten and because you have to be quick, he makes a full frontal attack on the fleeing saucer. The net result is that he drops half a ton of this greasy green stuff on the slow-moving conveyor belt, and the pretty succession of coloured saucers, arranged with Asiatic precision, ends up in disorder. The seaweed piles up on top of the preceding nigiris and makis by way of a salad garnish, spread out generously on the belt, and Rafa's efforts – as if he were a strange part of this machine trying to put things in order – only make the situation worse. Clutching at the other diners he shoves his way over to side of the conveyor belt. At last he manages to seize the saucer of rolled-up fish splattered with seaweed from off the Machiavellian belt. In some measure he rearranges the food on the saucer, and then puts his own new culinary creation back on the belt – already loaded with dishes. The situation is already out of control: seaweed all over the place; the moving shoal of little

fish, now jammed; some ill-placed dishes begin to fall off as they take the bends, and smash to bits on the floor; sticky rice coats the shiny surface of the belt; the other customers look round and mutter under their breath – all in all, it's chaos. We pay up quickly and leave the place. Rafael shrugs his shoulders melancholically, as if the mayhem had nothing to do with him, but rather was the result of an implacable universal law that governs everything. He seems to know a lot about chaos, live in it; and it no longer surprises him very much.

It was there, in London, where he first told me about his project to reinvent the seven deadly sins: the *Heptalogy of Hieronymus Bosch*. Inspired by Bosch's apocalyptic painting, Rafael's idea was to create a series of seven works, each of which would be dedicated to a "modern" sin. *Lack of Appetite*, *Extravagance* and *Modesty* were the names of the first three.

When Rafael later visited me in Berlin at the beginning of the year 2000 he appeared with his head smothered by an enormous fur hat and he wondered how human beings could ever have decided to settle in these climes. He brought me a really original gift: a jigsaw puzzle of Picasso's *Guernica*. So every night we sat at the kitchen table in the lamplight to fit together the many black and white pieces, one by one. "Here's another little piece of bull", "Have you got any horse?", "I've just about got a couple of fingers here". On the table a new shiny universe grew

out of the pile of flat printed pieces, whose secret order was predisposed in the chaotic muddle in the cardboard box. That this occupation may well be absurd and obscene doesn't really matter. There's no way of knowing either how Picasso would have reacted on finding out that his grandiose anti-war painting had been cut into little pieces for the amusement of a couple of fellows who happily put them back together again in the right order.

Rafael came to Berlin in search of his ancestors. "Spiegelburg" is probably a German surname reinvented by the Argentine immigration authorities. The government of Buenos Aires has granted Rafael funding for life, so that he can live and produce theatre in his country, but, even so, the political situation is too unpredictable in Argentina to not want to look for one's roots abroad. Rafael speaks fluent German. He learnt it off the cassettes from the Goethe Institute. He doesn't make a single mistake and his grammar and pronunciation are correct to the point of being obscene. He is obsessed with languages. In his innumerable emails – I know of no one who writes as many letters as he does – he has even tried to teach me Esperanto. He learnt it because it's easy and has a logical structure, and he shakes his head in despair at the chaotic irregularities of the German language, whose rules he knows better than I do myself.

Down the years he has continued to come to Berlin, although the hunt for his ancestors has become of secondary

importance. In Argentina, meanwhile, he has become a recognized figure on the international theatre scene, and at the time of writing he is touring Europe with his company, which he writes plays for, also directs, and acts with when he gets the chance. On one of his trips he went into a second-hand shop and bought a bowler hat, which he had to wear all the way back to Buenos Aires because there was no room in his luggage for anything else. He would then use this same hat in his latest play, in the role of the dodgy art dealer Richard Troy.

The play is called *Stupidity* and is the fourth part of that heptalogy on the seven deadly sins. The idea for this play occurred to him during a series of meetings with a group of Argentine Trotskyites, whose unrelenting submission to the ideas of Trotsky impressed him deeply. "What can you do", wondered one of the activists, "when you hold the right doctrine, but the rest of the world is too stupid to adhere to it? All you can do is try to keep this doctrine alive, stash it like a treasure, and save it for future generations, in the hope that they won't be as stupid and will make good use of it at some point." This thinking lies at the heart of *Stupidity*: A physicist specialised in the theory of chaos has discovered an equation which can be used to predict the future. Afraid of what his contemporaries – basically stupid – might do with his discovery he tries to keep it secret and safeguard it for a possibly more intelligent, future epoch.

At the beginning of 2004 Rafael came to Berlin again, this time to organise a stage reading of *Stupidity* at the fourth Festival of International New Drama held at the Schaubühne Theatre. The reading was an overwhelming success and backed up our decision to present the play in the 2004/05 season, which would be its premiere in German. *Stupidity* is a comedy and an actors' feast: a cast of five play twenty-four characters. To play the multiple roles there is a system: the urgency of the actors, who in a matter of seconds must change their costumes to play the next role, is disguised by the urgency of the characters. The play is an infernal machine for producing chaos. Five storylines that unfold in different motels on the outskirts of Las Vegas become entwined: dodgy dealers try to sell a painting so faded it has almost disappeared – or rather it has completely disappeared – and with this aim in mind they attribute it to a fictitious artist. Corrupt police officers, who accidentally get their hands on a suitcase full of money, search in vain for their first night of forbidden love. A gamblers' syndicate has discovered an infallible method for winning at roulette, but it only yields exactly 151 dollars a night. An actor is on the point of being given a role which will be a turning point in his career, but has to look after his invalid sister. At the heart of the turmoil, our scientist looks for a disciple who meets up to his expectations, to entrust him with the equation that predicts the future. His son is in debt with the mafia and eventually sells a cassette containing the formula to a journalist, who confuses the cassette

with another which contains Italian pop songs. The stories and genres cross over and get tangled up, and the more the characters try to regain control over their lives, the more chaotic the plot becomes.

At one point during the reading rehearsals – Rafael was there trying to teach the actors deaf and dumb language for a specific scene, a language which he also masters, being the fanatic he is – at one point I began to think about the devastated sushi restaurant again, where my colleague who scorned fish fought his decisive battle against the unrelenting chaos caused by the seaweed. It would have been impossible to restore order on that conveyor belt because it was in constant movement and continued to unleash disorder, the same as the implacable mechanics of Rafael's play, which hardly give the actors time to take a breath, and where every time one tries to get an overview of the state of things the plot takes a new unexpected twist.

Apart from that, since the night in London I've stopped eating fish too. Our group spent the rest of the night with severe food poisoning caused by the fish. Only Rafael remained well, and unharmed. When he saw our faces tinged a shade of green the next morning he shrugged his shoulders once again, sunk in melancholy. The phenomenon is familiar to him: one feels very much alone knowing that one is in possession of the truth and it's obvious that no-one wants to listen. But maybe it *is* worth safeguarding this truth for future generations, and perhaps in the

end human beings will stop making the terrible mistake of eating creatures that come from the sea.

<sup>1</sup> Marius von Mayenburg, «Im Besitz der Wahrheit» Theaterheute, núm. 13. 2004, pp. 169-172.

## Is Germany 'Really' the Centre of Western Theatre?

### Notes from the Argentine on Marius von Mayenburg

Rafael Spregelburd

I met Marius in London, in the summer of 1998, when we coincided at the International Authors Residency organised by the Royal Court Theatre. The first thing I discerned was what he had brought with him – an unusual object, following the precise instructions of the Royal Court and which we all obediently obeyed – to introduce himself and his country. Or at least, some his country's more significant problems.

I must admit we were all feeling a bit disorientated with the mixture of languages, the Pakistani lunches, and the jet lag, but there Marius was, holding an enormous poster in both hands, an insert from an extremely well-known Berlin newspaper. The poster featured a photo of a cat together with a caption in huge letters, which with almost the same arrogance and appeal as Nazi propaganda, enquired: "Können Katzen wirklich sprechen?" Can cats really talk?

The poster gave no clear answer to this pressing question; but Marius did. He was far from worrying about the language used by cats, but much concerned about the problem of the language the Germans chose to use. What bothered him particularly, or at least this was suggested by the deep shade of crimson that suffused his pale face and indubitable ears, was the use of the word "really" in such a question. To be precise, the fact that the newspaper presumed (1) that, in effect, our common sense tells us we can take for granted that cats talk, and (2) that journalism excels itself by questioning this perhaps mistakenly extended belief.

Both "common sense" and "journalism" are two terms that we need to redefine if we want to understand anything about the phenomenon of contemporary German theatre.

Marius later talked about many other matters, and what's for sure is that with the passing of time, not only have we come to profess mutual, unspoken admiration but also we consider ourselves inseparable friends only separated by several thousand miles. Now, when I write about him, I can't help remembering that after my first impressions that morning in London I said to myself: "This guy is crazy. But he's got a good excuse: he's German."

Those were exhilarating years for Marius. After bursting onto the scene with unstoppable impetus together with the rest of Thomas Ostermeier's young team of artists at the Die Baracke am

Deutschen Theater, in 1999 they were offered the artistic direction of the prestigious Schaubühne, a theatre on a grand scale, one of the unchallenged marks of identity of Berlin theatre. Since then, Marius has worked there as both author and dramaturgist, the latter – in Germany – a strange Nordic profession that can only be understood in context (when it is sometimes necessary to contradict the idea that cats can talk). Text after text by Marius created a stir and brought many novelties: *Feuergesicht* (Fireface), *Parasiten* (Parasites), *Das kalte Kind* (The Cold Child), *Eldorado*, and the recently premiered *Turista* (whose Spanish title refers to the gastro-enteritis that commonly affects European tourists visiting Mexico). This last play is a dramatic incursion of unusual length with a multitudinous cast and, moreover, bilingual (Flemish and German).

For many Argentines, Germany has always been synonymous with good theatre and the avant-garde. The role model may have changed, from Brecht to Müller and from Müller to what exists today (a multiform and contradictory mixture of Pollesch, Jelinek, Richter, Lausund, Ostermeier and many others), but the model is German, whatever the case. As I got to know his plays, I found that Marius refuted each and every one of the clichés which I associated with his country (which, for some time now, I feel is a little my own country in some respects).<sup>1</sup> The fact is he belongs to a generation of authors who had to react – like an ever new layer of paint – to the legacy left by Heiner

Müller, a kind of label for German theatre “learnt” outside Germany. But in the case of Marius his plays bear no resemblance whatsoever to those of the previous generation, and although this is natural and happens in every country, in Germany it demands an explanation. Marius and his contemporaries have had to reinvent their lives in the theatre out of the ruins left by Müller, and like Beckett, like all great artists, they confront their art with basic questions on its very nature, and put the counter back to *zero hour*. Marius is a *rara avis* decidedly closer to Hitchcock than Müller; and closer to the Schaubühne than the Volksbühne, although he lives in Prenzlauerberg, in former East Berlin. His works are intensely narrative in style. They tell stories. What a nerve! Stories that, even if they are permeated by strange human atmospheres and populated by very particular families, lack for the most part a discourse, a teaching, a message, i.e., the alleged “political responsibility” (a regurgitated mass of obvious and rather uninspiring observations) that normally prevails in German theatre. This is a happy novelty on a scene completely dominated by the weight of the message, by seriousness, by the Germans’ urgent need to say something portentous: the world is in a terrible state! Seriousness, urgency and observations that are present in theatre everywhere anyway, without this meaning that such upstanding concern is a guarantee in itself of good theatre. The history of German theatre (unlike in Latin America, for example) has been interrupted on numerous occasions during the last century, so each new gener-

ation has had to rebuild on the ruins of the last and present a new set of principles – drawing on that enviable ability innate to the Germans (both artists and public) to put together a credible version of themselves. But the theatre propounded by Marius goes against the grain of any of those general trends. It is difficult to classify: it’s not high fashion; it doesn’t fall into kitsch; it disregards the poetic aptitude of the “postdramatic”; he prefers to explain complex relationships in a low voice, while many of his contemporaries only vociferate on stage the news of a world we all know: that capitalism is an awful alternative, that war is unlawful, that the German reunification brought grave problems with it; Marius fires his shots at the mainstays of German identity (the family, to start with), but instead of finishing them off with a sole verdict, with a self-sufficient and all-embracing metaphor, he limits himself to observing – puzzled – the fickle vital behaviour of his children.

*Eldorado* is a wonderful example. Anton works for a property developer recycling land devastated by war (the time and place are always vague, but our time – which explains everything – cannot help putting a name to the tragedy: Iraq, Afghanistan, or if you want to bite off more than you can chew, Dresden).<sup>2</sup> Anton is fired in complicated circumstances but, because he hasn’t the heart to tell his wife, who’s expecting a baby, he carries on selling land that doesn’t exist in war areas won during the frail attempts at peace. So for a while he and Thekla live this lie, and live on the money that Thekla’s own mother has paid to

buy an attractive residence that doesn’t even exist. The truth (there are many truths in this far from straightforward anecdote which is as German as it is universal) comes out at the end, and when everything seems to indicate a predictably tragic conclusion, Marius gives the story a twist as intelligent as it is ambiguous, and reveals, with scientific puzzlement, a strange creature, an unknown value: forgiveness. Contrary to all our expectations, Thekla forgives her husband. In the midst of such misery, forgiveness is to our eyes the most surprising detail, the most awkward, the most novel. It is a deeply emotional text that, in one way or another, finds its own personal niche within the tradition of German political theatre (*Eldorado* is the sum of many things bubbling away in real life) without Marius taking the easy way out like so many other authors, who simply leech on the seriousness of certain themes in order to create a discursive kind of theatre. Quite correct, but only a mere portrayal of the victims, and, all in all, boring to the point of exasperation, even if it does have a varnish of alleged importance and commitment to this epoch.

I’m afraid to say that Marius and I share a couple of inevitable fixed ideas: it’s not the play itself that has to present a discourse, a judgement of the world, but the audience who interprets it and give it meaning. When this public doesn’t exist, we are faced with theatre that is inevitably bad: hollow and dispensable. But there is very little theatre can do, given the lack of means, to raise the numbers of this kind of audience in

cities where it doesn't exist. Another thing: theatre is not such a big thing. Rather than trying to expose the culprits (who are obvious anyway) it aims to produce good theatre; it's something insignificant when compared with other human activities. Theatre isn't very important; what is important is *life*, and our culturally tame opinions on it. Because on the theatre scene today we are all bourgeois, whether rich or poor. The petit bourgeoisie has triumphed by imposing its point of view, just as contradictory as it is itself. And the misfits, the social outcasts, mostly have no voice or vote.

I have occasionally attended performances at the Schaubühne which are followed by a public debate where the public (bourgeois, naturally) ask the artists questions. The mere description of this phenomenon is worth an article in itself, which I'm not going to write. I am both entertained and considerably worried by these exotic events, this sort of staging of the spirit of democracy on such dodgy, private and dictatorial ground as art. On these occasions, sooner or later, some exalted member of the audience (never the first or the second interlocutor, but rather someone who waits patiently to see if his question will be answered without him having to ask it) bursts out with the expected question: "The scenography is great, but what are you trying to tell us in this play?"

Why the Germans suppose that going to the theatre is equivalent to listening to a speech doesn't concern me. I'll

limit myself to quoting Marius, who gives the following simple and amusing reply in these cases: "Look, it takes too long to write a play, and too much effort to put it together so it is somehow appealing, for someone to then ask me if I can sum up the whole experience in a single sentence".

And what's more: Who can assure us that this single sentence is worthy of consideration? Are authors perhaps officially authorised to explain the world to their fellow citizens? Have they perhaps become, as if by magic, *misfits with a point of view*? And the more pressing question is: Can cats *really* talk?

Do we go to the theatre to see *what somebody meant to say*, or to see *what they do say*, in a way that only good dramatic imagery is capable of truly expressing without it merely constituting an echo of what we already know?

Marius was born in a country where his profession is rather peculiar, and the impression that playwriting carries all the weight of a *profession* is deceptive. Unlike in England, where the authors seem to be the stars and the directors consult them almost excessively so as to be able to *interpret* their wishes in three dimensions; and also unlike in Latin America, where direction and playwriting are in the same hands so both professions are equally important, Germany – for reasons that are irrelevant – is the directors' exclusive terrain. This means that Mayenburg's plays have been staged with

very distinct results. For one thing, the fact of being so closely linked to the artistic direction of a theatre as important as the Schaubühne means that his plays are rarely staged a second or third time in Germany, while in countries such as the Czech Republic, Sweden, Poland, or in the former Soviet Union and Latin America, they are performed more and more often. This fact makes for a curious relationship between his playwriting and the professional scene. In Luk Perceval's singular productions of, for example, *The Cold Child* and *Turista*, the Flemish director takes for granted that the text is self-explanatory, and he dedicates detailed attention to "containing" the plays within a strictly abstract space which is theoretically independent of the plays. In *The Cold Child*, for instance, it was the naked bodies of the actors, surrounded, faceted, separated by unending mirrors and deep orchestra pits, that "told" the story, instead of performing it. Or take *Turista*, which I still haven't seen. It seems that the simple summer holiday camp where the story unfolds will be replaced by an enormous egg, the only notable object on an empty stage. Regardless of the effectiveness of these devices, the question that needs to be asked is what would a play by Marius von Mayenburg be like in an almost cinematographic world, i.e., without added symbolism. His child-murdering children (in *Fireface*), his horribly symbiotic couples who feed on mutual exploitation (in *Parasiten*), or the ambiguous dealings of family power and sexual domination (in *Eldorado*)

have more substance as specific objects or living organisms freed from the complexity of the rules that govern living things, rather than as intellectual abstractions which is how we almost always see his plays on stage, with the exception of Thomas Ostermeier's productions, with their feeling of *hausgemacht*.<sup>3</sup>

As it happens, the relationship between *realism* and *reality* in contemporary German theatre is particularly controversial. (In fact, both words are controversial in any theatrical context.) As the clear-headed dramaturgist Jens Hillje once explained to me when he was producing a play of mine at the Schaubühne, and in response to my desperation on seeing that the austere hotel room which – to my understanding – should contain my play had disappeared in an explosion of all kinds of props and furniture, "the production was still *realist*, because they had decided to keep the bed." Bed = room. I had to content myself with the bed, and I consider myself lucky in comparison with Marius, whose Belgian holiday camp was, as a matter of course, replaced with an oversized egg. Holiday camp = giant egg. The Germans adore this game. And it's not for me to be the judge. Neither have I any reason to be. The only thing that worries me about this symbolic process in theatre is that it stems from the fight for supremacy between text and direction, as if they were truly antagonistic elements that set the imagination rolling, and *poiesis*. I wonder. Especially in the case of subtle works, like Marius's,

where the texts themselves already contain a more interesting battle of values, deeper and more contradictory than the mere dispute between what one *reads* and what one *will see*.

Every time I meet him in Berlin and I ask him how he feels about his latest premiere, Marius tries to persuade me that this is the fate of the author. Personally, I can think of many other fates, and I argue in vain. Until we get tired of talking about the subject and, in general, mealtime comes round, invariably something Italian which puts everything back in order. I don't suppose it can be such a serious controversy if one forgets about it so easily over a plate of spaghetti. Probably, Marius – unlike me – *already knows* beforehand that his text is going to be manipulated, modified, cut and refocused by the directors. I ask him what weapons an author in Germany has then, to defend his work, or at least to prevent it from being transformed into something else more naïve or more run-of-the-mill. Marius shrugs his shoulders, and explains that he has no weapons: that he won't be there when the director decides the fate of the text, and when, loyal to what he thinks is his profession, the director adds, takes away, distorts and reshapes the original text. True, Marius has no arms, but he owns up to a secret: he tries to write his plays in such a way that if one sole detail is taken out of place, one sole reply cut out, one sole character mutated, the whole construction crashes to the ground. And crushes the culprits.

(Pausa.22) Traduccions

A risky occupation, being German.

A battle of wits on an ever-changing intellectual scene (from left to right, naturally, like reading in Japanese or, I'm afraid, like reading in almost all of Europe), where the very pace of the theatrical phenomenon is protected under the skirts of this kind of alleged and vague European postmodernism which nobody understands or is able to define. A strange and formidable country. The state theatres (which in Germany – unlike in other countries – lead the way in marking the general identity of its drama) *negotiate* with the public on the basis of what these steady taxpayers expect, both from the theatres and from their institutions, such as, to take an example, the Deutsche Bahn.<sup>4</sup> Punctuality, efficiency, modernity, how should I know what they expect? To my confused Argentine eyes, this pact, this sort of exacerbation of the system of representation in general, is as vicious as it is sensible. But be careful: it's sensible in the same way as it is to ask (in the newspaper's opinion – in the public interest too) if cats can *really* talk. What a horrible thought, Germany! Perhaps they only meow during their comfortable cat lives, in this way just about managing to get a mate, food, or the little things cats need, like balls of wool, attention or mice. And the Germans may have vainly believed, for a while, that behind each meow there lay something great and unnameable. Opening one's eyes is something else. Marius recognises this full well. And his plays recognise it too. Opening one's eyes is, sometimes, quite simply

listening to cats meowing and for the first time wondering about the lack of linguistic purpose that lurks behind such tame felines.

<sup>1</sup> Grandson of an errant Prussian, a complete unknown to me who ended up in Argentina, I work in Germany more often than I can easily explain, without getting used to anything.

<sup>2</sup> One of the current controversies of particular note is the argument that the right has managed to implant in the press and the public opinion which makes the bombing of Dresden in 1945 into the symbol of a novel Germany victim of the exaggeration and brutality of the Allies.

<sup>3</sup> Homemade.

<sup>4</sup> German railways.

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## In Praise of the Crash Helmet

Xavier Alberti

It is no longer news that contemporary playwriting is currently in quite a healthy state in the western world; even though some prominent militant clairvoyants had announced its demise.

A demise that, on the other hand, couldn't have been avoided if the verdict issued by those clairvoyants had proved correct. They believed – the poor dreamers – that the then so-called working classes would end up defending, consuming and contributing huge doses of culture, and that its produc-

tion could only be participative and popular.

For them – those prominent militant clairvoyants – theatre had to consist of action and ritual. It was necessary to make a definitive break with a tradition which during the death throes of the bourgeois cultures in the middle of the 20th century had produced written drama excessively poisoned by bourgeois theatre and its long roots, which go back in the main part to Baroque theatre.

Not long after, though, on this scene that Pasolini had described as shouting and idle chatter (the prominent militant clairvoyants shouted, the idle chatter defines the late bourgeois written drama), voices were heard that already began to suggest that the democratisation of culture is achieved through its banalisation – our cinema and TV. Consequently, they advocated the need to renovate playwriting and they pinned their hopes on the search for a new model of language expression – I refer back to Pasolini – and on accepting that the potential public for this new drama would be a social elite exactly like themselves, the new playwrights, to whom they gave the difficult role of propagating the new culture.

This group of new playwrights was made up of our theatrical procreators, and don't get too annoyed if, on mentioning a few, I mix up names as disparate as Beckett, Bernhard, Pinter, Benet i Jornet and Pasolini in the same list. It's just a matter of finding a starting-point.

(Pausa.22) Traduccions

From the beginning of the eighties a new generation from remarkably heterogeneous intellectual backgrounds decided to try its hand at playwriting. Some were looking for similar success to that achieved by a certain kind of independent cinema designed for mass consumption, others took over the role of formal experimenters in language or theatrical syntax, and others carried on with something that had never completely ceased to exist: popular theatre, whose inspiration was bourgeois and which assured good box office takings.

This phenomenon soon received institutional approval at the different types of public theatres around Europe. Some programmed what they preferred while others applied a genuine policy of support for new writing.

Seen in retrospect the results were much the same for the different genres: figures with talent and an undying vocation have survived – those who knew when to put on their crash helmets to protect themselves from the critics, the public, national theatres directors and other personalities with criteria – and have developed their own style of drama around their way of understanding the world, using their own language and abilities to invent narrative conventions. All things considered, nothing has changed very much, because theatre continues to be much the same as it was in Ancient Greece: people are represented by other people, things by things, situations by situations... proof that from theatre

we can derive a theory of the representation of reality.

An analysis of our public is easy to make – the savings banks that sell tickets by telephone see to that. These analyses are much the same in Catalonia, France or Germany. Cultural policies aren't.

Plays by English authors are very different to those by Germans or Catalans. This is something that mustn't change. While economic globalisation hasn't destroyed the particularities of different cultures for ever, it will be worth knowing what young authors from abroad are writing, and exporting our own. Even now it is the best way of understanding those neighbours of ours who are already wearing their helmets.

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### **Madrid, 2000-2005** *Creative Forms of Primary Interest*

*José Henríquez*

In Castile, the work of the last five years has produced fertile results in the world of authors and theatre themes. The integration of artistic forms and expressions, the participation of the players in the creative process, the collaborative writing, and the presence of playwrights on set with directors and actors are some of the characteristics of the more noteworthy pieces.

This article is basically a résumé, a theatrical memory jogger that deals with a

particularly sensitive moment in the cultural and political life of Madrid, when the independent schools of theatre had to combat extremely aggressive campaigns in the media in favour of rigid fundamentalist positions and even censorship, on account of the governmental participation in the Iraq invasion and war, and theatre was produced in the middle of one of the largest popular protest movements since the democratic transition.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Pioneers**

I'll begin with the latest works by two veteran artists, Carlos Marquerie and Antonio Fernández Lera. Their efforts during over two decades, either with their companies, or at the Teatro Pradillo (and in its journal *Fases*), or working independently, as well as their collaboration with other artists, have opened up Madrid to the establishment of a minimum of context which provides for the creation and acceptance of contemporary forms of dramatic expression.

Carlos Marquerie's latest play is *2004 (Tres paisajes, tres retratos y una naturaleza muerta, 2004* three landscapes, two portraits and a still life). It may be regarded as the last part of the tetralogy he premiered with Lucas Cranach, his current company. It focuses on a major theme, the contemporary artist confronted with the globalisation of stupidity, violence and war (together with *El rey de los animales es idiota* [The king of the jungle is a fool], *Lucrecia y el escarabajo disiente* [Lucrecia and the dissident beetle], *120 pensamientos por minuto* [120 thoughts a minute]).<sup>2</sup> In

*2004...* Marquerie uses a beautiful story and poem as the main thread, which two actor-dancers narrate facing the public. Shot through from beginning to end by the question of whether it is possible for an artist to create beauty in the midst of horror, the text alternates and contrasts the journey of a person through a Europe implicated in the Iraq invasion and resulting war, with the inner journey made by the author himself on contemplating the remains of the Spanish Civil War Battle of Brunete (1937) and its thirty-five thousand dead, in the very place where the artist lives and rehearsed this play.

The fragments of text alternate with the scenes of Emilio Tomé and Montse Penela's dance compositions: movement and stillness that symbolise the "the disasters of war" in unmistakable re-creations of Goya-like imagery. Using numerous stage sets, the *mise en scène* also incorporates images of the oak woods in Brunete, remnants from the battle found in the fields, and "the war film" filmed with matchsticks and toy soldiers, projected onto the stage. Careful attention is paid to all the dramatic elements, and this enhances the performance and its capacity to invoke reflection.

*Las islas del tiempo* (The islands of time) by Antonio Fernández Lera (2003) is another work of synthesis, also clearly meant to be presented as a performance. On the basis of a polished text, a drama about recognition written in short scenes and inspired in the reunion of the Argentine poet Juan Gelman with his granddaughter, who

was kidnapped after the murder of her parents by the military dictatorship, Fernández Lera establishes the counterpoint to the sequences of movements and dance that express in abstract forms what the text suggests: prison, torture, death. The performance also employs popular symbolism: the performers light and put out the candles on a large background mural, created by Rodrigo García. This is the only scenographic element.

There is yet another layer in this interleaved proposition: At the beginning of the play the actor Miguel Ángel Altet, and the dancers Raquel Sánchez and Marisa Amor – who play the old people (the grandparents in the story) – inform the public of the convention of “representing” them (“*My name is Raúl and I’m sixty years old...*”). Both of them, like the dancers Sara Martín and Ana López Erdozain, who play the adolescent characters, give performances focused on the explicit presentation of the text, and avoid playing the characters. The sum total of these nuances and twists confers on the play a disturbing combination of emotion and denouncement, indignation and lyricism.

Another interesting trait in the production of these two independent artists from Madrid is their constant joint collaboration in their own projects, and mutual collaboration with the choreographer Elena Córdoba or with Rodrigo García. In fact, in his collection *Pliegos de Teatro y Danza*, Fernández Lera publishes texts by García, Marquerie and Córdoba, and his own.<sup>3</sup>

For Rodrigo García, these last five years represent a paradox between his warmest and greatest contact with the Madrid public and his gradual disappearance, or quite simply his absence from the scene, on account of his constant tours and productions in Europe. His long cycle of grotesque about the “throwaway world” – from the series of monologues written for different venues *Haberos quedado en casa capullos* (You should have stayed at home, morons, 2000), to the period of more intense and more complex pieces, *After Sun* (2001) and *Compré una pala en Ikea para cavar mi tumba* (I bought a spade in Ikea to dig my grave, 2002), to events with musicians or using more audio-visual resources, such as *A veces me siento tan cansado que hago estas cosas* (Sometimes I just feel so tired that I do these things) and *La historia de Ronald, el payaso de McDonalds* (The story of Ronald, the clown from McDonald’s) – no doubt widened his reputation and made him more popular with the public, authors and theatre companies, as compared with other styles of stage writing and oral expression, of composing images, actions and rhythms.

Carlos Sarrió, who is also one of the pioneers of contemporary theatre in Madrid, has developed his own style and writing technique with his company *Cambaleo Teatro*. He combines reality and fantasy in drama replete with dialogues and philosophical and existential questions. He draws on irony and lyricism, black humour and the absurd, epitomised in the strange

encounters and delays in a small community of theatrical characters or beings (clownish Beckettian characters) who reappear in successive plays.<sup>4</sup> The treatment of themes such as the fragile dividing line between right and wrong, the relativity of knowledge and the conception of reality, the distortion to the point of absurdity of the values proclaimed by the welfare society, the ferocious criticism of war and modern-day fanaticism, the commitment to independent thinking, have made his shows from the last five years (*Trastornos* [Disorders], *A quien madruga... Para nada* [The early bird... Wasn’t worth it]) a unique opportunity for laughter and reflection.

#### From Personal to Public

After over fifteen years’ production, Angélica Liddell has found a meeting-point with her public in Madrid, no doubt thanks to her artistic individuality and also to the persistent efforts of other authors, such as those mentioned above, and theatres who have committed themselves to encouraging up-and-coming talents. Her work received a moment of major media coverage with her performances within the “Profile” section of the 2003 Festival of Contemporary Drama of *Triptico de la aflicción* (Tryptych of sorrow: *El matrimonio Palavrakis, Once Upon a Time in West Asphixia, Histerica Passio*), introduced by *Lesiones incompatibles con la vida* (Lesions incompatible with life). Angélica belongs to the fertile tradition of the all-round artist. In her company *Atra Bilis Teatro* she is the

author, actress, director, costume-maker, set designer.

In her *Triptico de la aflicción*, Liddell gives artistic expression to a ferocious dissection of human reproduction in modern society, from maternity and paternity to the upbringing and education of human beings. Using literary references from North American and European grotesque (from the worlds of Flannery O’Connor and Agatha Christoff, for example), from expressionist cinema and melodrama, the triptych relates the stories of murdered children, prophetic and avenging adolescents, adults who train and exhibit their elders. Among the disorientating devices used in her plays, the following stand out: the inclusion of the narrative and the narrative voice (a recording with images), which multiply the levels of performance and, in addition, create an atmosphere of seduction and menace, an initiation into the tradition of the “tale of wonder”; the predominance of poetic theatrical language; the juxtaposition of the texts with a script of symbolic actions with an independent meaning; the creation of artistic images on the basis of the accumulation of everyday objects (plastic dolls, toys, sweets); and the performers’ bodies as stage objects (Angélica herself and Gumersindo Puche, her habitual companion).

“As children we learn what evil is in fairy tales and horror stories, but, nonetheless, there are children who discover it from their own experience. I’ve tried to create a conflict between

these two ways of learning”,<sup>5</sup> Liddell remarked in an interview on her latest work, *Y como no se pudrió: Blancanieves* (And as she didn’t decay: Snow White). She also gave artistic expression to the subtle link and the line of continuity between the personal and the public, which is typical of her work: “It’s true that that I’ve taken a step from personal to public writing in my plays: Angélica in the midst of this world and this horror which is man on the earth, like a plague... the greatest revolution is to maintain the coherence between the personal and public domains.”

Using the same forms of expression, Angélica presented her two latest plays, *Y los peces salieron a combatir contra los hombres* (And the fish came out to fight the men, 2003), on the subject of the hundreds of immigrants who die trying to cross over from the African continent, and the aforementioned *Blancanieves* (2005), on the subject of ill-treated children in modern wars. These are poetic texts, with the presence of narrative voices in both cases and complex set arrangements. In *Y los peces...*, an operatic thread, both corporal and vocal, acted out by the actress, determines the course of the play, employing anything from lyrical arias to oratory to the grotesque representation of the paso doble. *Blancanieves* begins with the song “The End” by Jim Morrison and, as in *Apocalypse Now*, it sets the scene for the story of the “Soldier”, which relates how a girl is perverted by war. In *Y los peces...* the performance was deliberately “inter-

rupted” by another story, illustrated with images: the creative process, urban activities, a crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar, the censorship of the show at the Festival Madrid Sur. In *Blancanieves*, the play passes from the initial participation of a grandmother reading Snow White to a little girl to the final presence of girls and boys looking for sweets (booby traps?) hidden on the stage-battlefield.

### The Theatre of People and Figures

Another notable feature of these last five years is the playwriting born out of the actors’ own inspiration. This is a process where a director-author provides the guidelines, organises and coordinates the rehearsals and artists’ creations, and proposes the definitive stage production. In Madrid we have been lucky enough to follow the evolution of Ana Vallés and her company Matarile Teatro, from Compostela, which has made it possible to meet and collaborate with other artists and collectives in an atmosphere of mutual influence.

For Vallés, diversity means richness. Dancers and musicians with distinct origins and accents, from Germans to Galicians, have participated in her latest work. The same goes for the literary material and the music selected by both the director and the artists themselves for each production: texts by Ana Vallés, by her friend and regular guest writer, Javier Martínez Alejandro (usually letters), by Peter Handke, by John Berger, as well as contributions from the actors and actresses.

Matarile’s latest shows, *A brazo partido* (Tooth and nail, 2001), *Acto seguido* (Right away, 2003), *Historia natural (eloxio do entusiasmo)* (Natural (Hi)story [in praise of enthusiasm], 2005), are presented as encounters or reencounters centred around three or four major themes: theatre as an art form concerned with people, life, love and death, the present of the stage, and the act of looking. The first play is an immense stage-spread where theatrical artifice is created and destroyed, while the likeable and ridiculous members of the “troupe” fight for the limelight; the scenario of the second play is the arena of a poetic circus that presents the fragile performances, physical, remembering, oral, of its artists; the third, a rural festival with food, music and dance that celebrates the miracle of acting and looking. All the signs are stage-bound, fictitious, studied down to the finest details, but at the same time, they ironically and reflect on their meaning as “figures”, intermediaries in a personal relationship in the very moment of its consummation.

“I’m not interested in ‘character theatre’ or even in ‘text theatre’, because it seems alienating to me. I need to see those people who’ve come to the theatre and talk to them. I like the actors to place themselves at this point... what interests me is the presence of ‘figures’ who speak face-to-face. I think that theatre is the only place where you can find this direct relationship”, says Ana Vallés about *Acto seguido* (2003).<sup>6</sup> And concerning the actors, musicians and dancers in *Historia natural* she writes:

“We begin at the beginning: the description of a natural (hi)story and enthusiasm defined as the perseverance of sentiment. There are twelve people here. Moreover, twelve enthusiastic people who have chosen to be here, in front of the spectators in the stalls, although they could be in any other public space. Can we consider a theatre to be a public space? Perhaps we should only consider the space occupied by the audience as public: after all, their behaviour is public, but the look of the observer is personal.”

The latest plays by the veteran actor Alberto Jiménez, *Nada es casual* (Nothing happens by chance, 2002) y *Nada es casual 2* (2005), can be classified on similar lines, in the sense of a people’s theatre using “figures”. In the first play, he provokes an encounter with his father (who isn’t an actor), in a game of trickery and deceit, of life and death, based around a shamanic ceremony and the exorcism of recognisable monsters from our political and social stage. The second play is a radical proposition: Jiménez plays host to a group of friends and coordinates their actions and stories.

In their latest show, *Los días que todo va bien* (Days when everything goes well, 2003), Elisa Gálvez and Juan Úbeda, from the company El Canto de la Cabra, become doubles of themselves (Elisavidamia and Juan Cabra) to celebrate the inconclusive ritual of a performance, perhaps “made up only of beginnings”, which ironises darkly on their role as theatrical figures and citi-

zens in the midst of the ferocious crusade led by the Trio of the Azores and the absolute majorities.

With *Homo Politicus* (2004), the company La República has also taken a new turn in their style of composition by reintroducing the participation of the actors and actresses as “co-creators”, something they had already tried in *Estudio sobre la risa* (A study of laughter, 2002). *Homo Politicus* is a reflection on political theory and action during the last century. Its roots lie in the massive campaigns of lies surrounding the war in Iraq and the ecological disaster of the sinking of the *Prestige* off the coast of Galicia (2002). It consists of two parallel scripts: on the one hand, stories told by the authors together with texts projected onto the set, and on the other, a choreography of acting and fighting naked bodies. The company also evokes the person-figure duality. In passages of the play, which are alternated with actions and text, with videos and recorded interviews with old “comuneros” from Aragon and Catalonia, the four performers – a Hispano-French actor, two Spaniards and a Moroccan – relate their parents and grandparents’ political (hi)stories and the writer-director explains the object of his show.

### **Collaborative Writing**

Without doubt, the big event in the field of collaborative writing during these last five years was the creation of *Trilogía de la juventud* (Trilogy of Youth), by Cuarta Pared, a five-year joint venture by three authors – Yolanda

Pallín, José Ramón Fernández, and Javier Yagüe as author-director – and a large team of actors and actresses. Amongst the authorial merits of *Las manos* (Hands), *Imagina* (Imagine) and *24/7*, special mention should be made of their synthesis of presentation and performance (the performers’ constant exchange of roles, from narrators to actors to characters); the different narrative structures of the three plays; and their combinations of realistic and fantastic conventions (the introduction of poetic scenes, visions, dreams, parodies). The choice of three key moments during the transition of three generations to adulthood (the mechanisation of agriculture in the fifties; the struggles of the trade unions in the seventies; the institutionalisation of cheap labour at the turn of the century) has resulted in the advent of an extraordinary and unforgettable staging record on the Madrid theatre scene.

The authors and directors group Teatro del Astillero has tried out other forms of collaborative writing in the last five years, based on gathering together and assembling pieces or short scenes with a common theme by different authors. They’ve had mixed results on stage, but these propositions have opened up new and extremely valuable approaches to writing, especially bearing in mind the traditional idea of the author at his desk, cut off from the actual theatre and society. In this context, one should mention the joint work of research and production which resulted in *Guardo la llave* (I’ll keep the key), presented at the 1999 Festival Madrid

Sur. The theme is exile at the end of the Spanish Civil War, and the actors and authors are from municipalities in the south of Madrid. More recently, *Intolerancia* (2004) brings together pieces by six authors from the group. They deal with xenophobia, racism and intolerance, in the post Civil War period and the present day.

### **On Set**

Another approach to authorship which is bearing its fruits is “on set” writing, a modern re-creation of the founding traditions of contemporary theatre, where the author is involved from the start as the “biographer” of a journey and a process that takes place on stage and that may derive from a proposal made by him/her or be made by the actors themselves.

Laila Ripoll is a pioneer in integrated company work, both as a “biographer” and also as an actress and director, working on very difficult terrain, for instance, contemporary composition based on themes and plays from the classical repertoire. In 1999, drawing on her company Micomicón’s experiences with people in theatre from Central America when working on *Numancia*, by Cervantes, she wrote and directed *La ciudad sitiada* (The besieged city), a play rich in colours and shades – it employs drama, the grotesque and tragicomedy – that brings together the day-to-day lives and voices of citizens from America and Europe, the silenced victims of so many wars, in a succession of monologues, dialogues and choral assem-

blies on an empty stage. The play is a modern period classic. Two other plays by Ripoll, both premiered in 2001, should be mentioned. One is *Unos cuantos piquetitos* (A few small nips), a tragicomedy inspired in the writings and life of Frida Kahlo and written for the company Humor de Asalto, perhaps the first play to be staged in Madrid that tackles, in the quality of theatre, violence against women. The other is *Atra bilis*. *Cuando estemos más tranquilas* (Atra bilis. When we’ve calmed down), a re-creation of the grotesque, “a tragicomedy about country women”, which she wrote for her own company.

Among the most interesting works by Itziar Pacual is *Père Lachaise* (2002), a play written for the Madrid company Acciones Imaginarias, produced and rehearsed in the cultural centre run by squatters Laboratorio III (eviction and ensuing demolition the following year) before its premiere in various alternative venues. On the suggestion of the actors and the director of the company (Rubén Vejalbán), as result of the discovery in Extremadura of the common graves of murdered victims of the Civil War, Pascual proposed the story of a brother and sister’s journey to Paris in search of the grave of their grandfather, an exiled Republican and resistance fighter, interlaced with the appearance of ghosts from the cemetery of the same name (Père Lachaise). The play is performed with the public surrounding a completely bare stage. Drapes and rich choreography create the backdrop for the story: the world of the living, the statues and the dead.

One of the most noteworthy plays premiered by Juan Mayorga, *Animales nocturnos* (2003), is the result of eight months of fruitful cooperation, “give-and-take” and staging rehearsals with the director Juan Pastor and actors and actresses from the company Guindalera. It is based on a first scene already written by the author, *El buen vecino* (The good neighbour). This play has opened up a new way of approaching present-day xenophobia and racism, using a subtle and disturbing combination of drama and tragicomedy, realistic and symbolic sets, which dig deep into the underlying mechanisms of this kind of slavery fomented by the echelons of power in our societies.

Along similar lines, Ernesto Caballero (as director) and Ignacio del Moral and Verónica Fernández (as playwrights) offered their services to an end-of-career theatre workshop at the RESAD (Royal Drama School). Together with a score of actors and actresses, they have produced one of the revelations of the 2004/2005 theatre season, *Presas* (Prisoners), a play with an enormous range of nuances, realistic and fantastic slants, counterpoised by grand choral arrangements. It deals with a risky and difficult subject: the long wait for reprieve in a women’s prison during the Franco dictatorship.

<sup>1</sup> José Henríquez, “Madrid. Temporada 2003/2004. Emergencia artística y política”, *Primer Acto* issue no. 304, July-September 2004, pp. 143-154. “El teatro y la cruzada censora. Tiempo de manifestación ciudadana”, *Las Puertas del Drama* issue 19, Summer 2004, pp. 10-13.

<sup>2</sup> Óscar Cornago, “Las escenificaciones imposibles de Carlos Marquerie. ‘2004’: ¿Cómo se representa una guerra?”, *Primer Acto* issue 306, December 2004, pp. 62-67.

<sup>3</sup> Pliegos de Teatro y Danza. Published by Contextos: contextos@aflera.com.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Sarrió, *Trastornos (Diálogos). A quien madruga... Para nada (Diálogos)*. Published by Cambaleo Teatro, 2004; cambaleo@arrakis.es.

<sup>5</sup> “Seducir poniendo en evidencia al público”. Interview with Angélica Liddell, *Ubú* issue 18, January 2005, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> “En Compañía: Ana Vallés y Matarile”. *Ubú* issue 15, January 2004, p. 3.

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## The Latest News on the Neo-Greek Playwrights

*P. A. Angelopoulos*

*To A. who couldn't wait for Spring*

Greece is thriving, or at least certain aspects of a certain idea about Greece. The Olympics convinced the world with a show which, by the way, had an air of theatre about it even though it was directed by a choreographer. Then again, it was thought up for the “friends of Greece” and not for the Greeks (prime time has first priority). Then the national football side won the Eurocup out of the blue, and to round things off along came Eurovision. But as regards theatre, apart from the shameful business of Irene Pappas in

Valencia and the sporadic visits by the Terzópulos anthropological theatre company, the rest is silence. Either that or they are figures from long ago, not so much Greek now as Spanish, Catalan or Japanese. But Greek drama, despite Greek being the helpless language of a small minority, is vital and productive and worth further consideration. And although one of the main goals of Greek playwrights has often been, and still is, the search for the desired “Hellenism”, an approach which may seem inward-looking and over fond of “tradition” to outsiders, Greek drama also maintains a fruitful, engaging and sincere dialogue with European and American theatre, and the roots of this communication lie in the efforts made by Greek society to become more European. The result is plays that are contemporary not only in their aesthetics and their structure, but also in their ideology, thus making Greek playwrights both part of universal contemporary artistic movements and wholly representative of them.

Leaving aside the historical upheavals which coincide with certain moments of political importance in the construction of this relatively new country, modern Greece, this article will focus on Greek playwriting in recent years (on the understanding that it omits important historical figures who are still writing and whose plays are still performed), with a view to gaining a greater understanding of the history of Greek playwriting and the courses it has taken out of tradition and in the effort to become European. Hopefully,

we will have the opportunity on another occasion to expound the history of Greek playwriting throughout the last century.

It could be said that part of Greek theatre is characterised by a mimesis portraying local traditions and customs, where social conflicts and their related problems are put aside in favour of the representation of a sort of local colour. This style of theatre has been handed down through a long tradition which made a deep impression on the public, further increased by its use in comedy, and became even more popular due to the successful films that twisted and undermined the values of the system. In the same context we can also include variety theatre (*επιθεώρηση*), which in Greece has a clearly political nature, and theatrical genres which went out of fashion but are now being talked about again, such as “Karagiozis”, shadow theatre. On the other hand, and especially with the advent of the dictatorship (1967-1974), Greek theatre, under the influence of C. Cun (a name impossible to overlook when discussing Greek drama), came into constant confrontation with modern theatre movements, firstly with the so-called theatre of the absurd and later with a style that takes its references from metatheatre.

Thus, figures such as I. Cambanelis or D. Kejaidis, both still writing, become benchmarks for this change, which takes us from the famous patio of “neorealism” to the realm of the semi-detached or the metaphorical realm of

the mind, and also L. Anagnostaki who, although he didn't experience such a deep change in his writing, follows the evocative path of Pinterian silences.

Something similar happens to the heroes of the plays; who change from petit bourgeois gentry to the underprivileged and misfits from the city limits, and finally become contemporary characters, fairly European or Western in general, who share in the magma of euro theatre [Holt]. Characters who, in contrast to their "parents", who left the countryside in search of basic opportunities both for economic reasons and in search of freedom, live in that much sought-after anonymity, but without finding any meaning in it. They abandon the protective gaze of their fellows in places of open shared coexistence where agonism is unfolded and the catharsis might be consolidated, in favour of the cold touch of well-designed furniture where agonism is impossible because there are no longer any antagonists.

A. Staicos is possibly one of the most characteristic representatives of these metatheatrical interpretations. The playwriting of A. Staicos creates a place where the past and the present, local and foreign influences, the old and the new, tragedy and drama, are connected organically and make up a unit. Plays such as *The Little Finger of Olympias* (*Το μικρό δαχτυλάκι της Ολυμπιάδας*, 1992), *The Apple of Melos*, (*Το μήλο της Μήλου*, 1996) or *Caracurím* (*Καρακουρούμ*, 1985), in which, using

plays by Marivaux, such as *The Island of the Slaves*, as a starting-point, elements and characteristics of Beckettian theatre are amalgamated. Or *Clytemnestra* (*Κληταιμνηστρα*, 1987), where the mother-daughter relationship (Clytemnestra-Electra) is presented in the Genetian light of *The Maids*. In this play, performed by V. Papavasiliu's group *Época*, the author, using metatheatrical techniques, manages to set the glorious past of the House of the Atreidas within the framework of the sometimes dull, pedestrian neo-Greek actuality. The deteriorating relations between two failed actresses, mother and daughter, run their course in the context of a real love triangle, in parallel with the fictitious relations of another trio whose central scenario is Aigisthus.

On a similar footing, but with less attention paid to the production, we find C. Mitsotaki with his monologue *The Strange Reasons of Madame Bovary* (*Οι παράξενοι λόγοι της μαντάμ Μποβαρύ*, 1994), or D. Dimitriadis, one of the most atypical authors, and difficult to categorise. His plays, although they were written more than a decade ago and haven't had much success in Greece, have cleared the way for a type of theatre containing ritual elements, Artaudian echoes and poetic language. Examples are *As a Country I Die* (*Πεθαίνω σα χώρα*, 1978), *The Price of Insurrection on the Black Market* (*Η τιμή της αυταρσίας στην μαύρη αγορά*, 1956) and *The New Church of the Blood* (*Η νέα Εκκλησία του αίματος*, 1983). He is a philologist, and novelist

and translator of authors such as J. Genet, as well as the classics of Ancient Greek theatre. His plays have been more successful in France, where P. Chaureau directed *The Price...*

The following authors have worked on refractions from these dramaturgical trends: M. Virvidakis began as an actor and turned his hand to writing much later. His first play, and for the moment the only one that has been performed, is *On the Main Road with the Headlights On Full Beam* (*Στην Εθνική με τα μεγάλα*, 1997), a title which sounds strange in Greek too and is extracted from the conversations of its heroes, two brothers who live on a car scrapyard. Their past is turbid (very Sheppardian) and their future far from clear, because of their inability to adapt to the new times. Their lapsed dialogues *chez* Mamet or Pinter contribute to the lyricism of the play because they use a special code to understand each other, adding syllables to the words in a non sense game. Of the aforementioned plays, this is the one which owes more to neo-Greek tradition, because it reintroduces the figure of the marginal hero, aphasic speech, and triangular relationships.

The energetic actress J. Spilioti took the public by surprise with *Who Discovered America?* (*Ποιός ανακάλυψε την Αμερική*, 1997), where, in an exercise in style, two actresses play multiple roles. This is a play with a feminist and feminine viewpoint, which uses humour to criticise a still male chauvinist society. Spilioti has just premiered a new come-

dy, *Abra, Apri and Be* (*Αγκα, Σφι και Φι*, 2003), whose theme is also love and affection in human relationships.

A. Pegga is another notable authoress. She studied in the US and uses Bob Wilson, Richard Foreman, Caryl Churchill, Maria Irene Fornes, Tony Kushner, and also the home-grown maestro L. Anagnostaki as points of reference. Her playwriting is ironic and multidisciplinary and combines the latest approaches and movements, artistic themes, narrative and *clubbing*. The following plays are particularly noteworthy: *Waltz-Excitation* (*Βαλς Εξίτασιόν*, 1997), *Kate Kollvits Presents a Short History of Modern Art* (*Η Καίτε Καίτε Κολλβιτς παρουσιάζει μια σύντομη ιστορία της μοντέρνας Τεχνης*, 1998), *The Emperor's New Clothes* (*Τα καινούργια ρούχα του αυτοκράτορα*, 1999) and *3-0-1 Transfers/ Metaphors* (2000). She also writes in English: *Don Surrealism* (1991), *The Greek Alien*, *Poisons of the Sea* (1993), *Gorgi's Wife* (1999).

L. Jristidis is one of the youngest playwrights on the scene, with three plays to his credit. The first, with a Priestleyan air about it, although the author admits to Chekhovian influences, is *Another Wavelength* (*Άλλη Φάση*, 1991), where time bends and different generations are mixed up; the second has a self-explanatory title, *The Two Gods* (*Ταίλάνδη*, 2005). This play, surrealist and comic, and at the same time existentialist, is set in a not-so-distant future, where two patients locked up in a psychiatric hospital decide to rewrite

the history of humanity in a whimsical manner. The play was a great success with the public, by reason of the duo of protagonists (Guenatas, Mavromatakis) and its subject matter, which is very reminiscent of a videogame. L. Jristidis has just premiered his latest play, *Thailand* (Ταϊλάνδη, 2005), a country where he spends a lot of time living and diving. The subject matter is similar to that of his first play, the family as the scenario for misunderstandings and camouflaged strategies.

When discussing modern neo-Greek dramaturgy we should also mention – and not overlook – some extremely metamodern attempts to dramatise non-dramatic literature; the novels and stories and sometimes poems too, written by the great figures of Greek literature: productions by A. Kokinu (actress) such as *Figures from the Work of G. Viziinos* (1993), D. Abdeliodis (director) with *Karaguiozis* (1997), M. Marmarinos (director) with *The National Anthem* (2002), or T. Terzopoulos's work with his group Attis, which is notable for its theatrical physicality.

D. Kejaidis is an author with a sharp eye for new possibilities, and has produced some unforgettable examples of neo-Greek theatre. He still works in partnership with his wife, the professor of teatrology E. Javiara. The latest play by the duo is *With Force from Kifisiá* (Με Δύναμη από την Κηφισιά, 1994), where the characters are still portrayed with equal vigour as they are in the authors' previous works, but "transformed" into four women, a

transformation which includes a change of residence (from run-down houses in the countryside or marginalised districts of Athens to Kifisiá, one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Athens). This gives us a very revealing idea of the changes that have taken place in Greece over the last twenty years. This is well-illustrated by the characters' change of speech register and conversation themes. From after-dinner dialogues to snatches of broken up, poorly articulated sentences reminiscent of TV zapping.

L. Anagnostaki is an authoress who has good understanding of the messages of the theatre of the absurd. The existentialist trap and his characters' inability to communicate and connect to the outside world – the skylight or little window through which they observe in isolation what is happening in the city – reminds us of Beckett's *Endgame*. His latest play is a monologue, *The Crimson Sky* (Ο ουρανός κατακόκκινος, 1998), which was presented at the National Theatre by a great actress, V. Zavitsianu. The play, with autobiographical overtones, is a review of a life and a generation, the one known as the "defeated" generation, which lost the ideological battle after the Civil War. Anagnostaki is the widow of the eminent psychiatrist and man of letters G. Jimonás, and she has always been averse to interviews and publications and rather questionable about possible interpretations of her plays.

Another notable author, with a meandering theatrical career, is G. Dialeghmenos,

who started out as an actor. He is the author of several extremely naturalistic plays which also contain a certain amount of humour owing to their sinister focus on reality. His latest play, *The Night of the Owl* (Η νύχτα της Κουκουβάγιας, 1997), is on the same high level as his emblematic *I Kiss you on the Lips* (Σε φιλώ στη μούρη, 1984), which defined an era. The earlier play also owes its success to the extraordinary labour of L. Vogiatzis, in the role of both director and actor. It is full of tense atmospheres, poetic monosyllables, and conversations that stop out of time.

We have kept Cambanelis, father of the so-called neo-Greek dramaturgy (and still writing), till last. Plays such as *The Invisible Delegation* (Ο Αόρατος Θίασος, 1988), *The Street Passes Inside* (Ο δρόμος περνάει από μέσα, 1990), or *A Meeting in Some Other Place* (Μια συνάντηση κάπου αλλού, 1998) link him to M. Vinavert. He also reworked the two series, the House of Atreidas and the House of Labdacus, in his trilogy of short pieces entitled *The Supper* (Το Δείπνο, 1993). The play, split into three acts, was performed at the National Theatre. In the first piece, *Letter to Orestes*, Clytemnestra writes to her children to justify her acts, but in vain, because Orestes will come back to kill her. In the second, *The Supper*, he continues the myth of Euripides's *Electra*. During the family supper, the living members of the saga are unable to communicate with those who are dead, however hard they try. The

catharsis is provoked by Iphigenia, who poisons the rest of the Atreida family. In the last part, *The Parodos of Thebes*, he uses the House of Labdacus, making functional characters from *Oedipus* and *Antigone* into heroes: the shepherd who saved Oedipus's life, and the shepherd's son, the guardian who brought Creon the news that somebody had buried Polynices. The scenario is the tragedy of the day-to-day life of simple, unassuming people.

Cambanelis, who is indebted to Ibsen, also wrote the metatheatrical *In Ibsen's country* (Στην χώρα του Ιψεν, 1996), which was the basis of a work on Ibsen's Spectres.

It was Cambanelis, a survivor of the concentration camps, who made the opening speech at the 2001 International Theatre Day, where he affirmed: "I don't believe that theatre will ever cease to exist because I believe that men and women will always live in the agony of self-knowledge, with the existential necessity of becoming spectators of themselves and their actions; in other words, with those parts of human psyche from which the art of theatre emerged."

And with those words, which sum up his personal way of understanding the writing of drama – as a system of significances replete with references and affinities, we will bring this quick and lop-sided review of neo-Greek playwriting from the last fifteen years to a close.

## New Serbian Theatre

Igor Marojević

Considering the growth in nationalism, wars, political sanctions and all that occurred in Serbia and the Balkans since the end of the eighties, it is obvious that a situation of these dimensions would offer artists such an abundance of material that it would decide an aspect of their work beforehand. Therefore, telling the story of Serbia's new artists always and unfailingly means telling the story of how this radical situation has been dealt with by art. It is more than obvious, then, that theatre is no exception. The only exception, in the specific case, has nothing to do with the subject matter, but rather with the artistic process. This is because when it came to explaining this new situation, in contrast to writers or film directors, the authors of new Serbian theatre barely enjoyed poetic contemporary assistance from the country's corpus of plays. Apart from the dramas of Dušan Kovačević (1948), they found themselves practically without help. So it was not strange to see that the first reactions of young (and relatively young) authors in Serbian theatre to this new situation should be so conservative.

In his drama *Sveti Sava*, which opened in 1988, Siniša Kovačević (1954) was reacting to the growth of mystical and historical elements in the Serbian public discourse at the end of the eighties. He wrote a parody showing a family of

Serbian saints, the Nemanjićs, to which the lead character, Sveti Sava (Saint Sava), belonged. Once, though, while being performed at the Yugoslav Theatre (Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište), a group of Serbian nationalists entered the theatre who interpreted the play somewhat literally and interrupted the performance with threats to the cast. After the performance and because of the fear he had experienced, the lead actor, Žarko Laušević (1960), decided to buy a gun. From then on he always carried a weapon. After a while, with his nerves severely shaken, before he knew it, he got into a fight with two Montenegrins and killed them. I find this is a very expressive image – and, of course, cynical – of the close links between Serbian theatre and every day life.

Siniša Kovačević is one of the most audacious authors found in Serbian theatre in terms of his portrayal of subject matter: in his case this consists of AIDS, the lives of people from poor and rural areas who come to the relatively wealthy Vojvodina, to live in the homes of Germans who, after World War II, had been assassinated or expelled by Yugoslav partisans and communists. However, the scandals that the works of Kovačević provoke have more to do with the somewhat crude relationship they maintain with brutal reality than to any other form of poetic provocation.

In this same category (the unquestionable poetic influence of Dušan Kovačević, conservative writing, the generation of the fifties, the figure of the writer and university lecturer of dramatic

arts), Stevan Koprivica (1959) could be considered a “milder” version of Siniša Kovačević. His theatrical pieces are more “diplomatic” than those of Siniša Kovačević: Koprivica continues to deal with the political, but employs more allusions and often transfers the current-day problem to the historical past. The possibilities of wild receptions by the Serbian theatre-going public also decrease because the plays take place in Montenegro: for example, it is there where his drama on Balkan absolutism *Dugo putovanje u Jevropu* (1992) unfolds.

The passage from classic conservative poetics to newer trends may be observed in the works of Nebojša Romčević (1962), Uglješa Šajtinac (1971) and Milena Marković (1974). These three authors also deal with local mentality, but also apply various ways of establishing a distance from the subject matter.

The drama *Paviljoni...*<sup>1</sup> (2001), by Milena Marković, is apparently a naturalist documentary on life in a marginal suburb of Belgrade. However, as if the authoress had created a realistic base to later destroy it bit by bit, the whole while the work plays with form and the expectations of its audience. Above all, Marković achieves this using unexpected fantastic digressions. The element binding the two main characteristics of the play, the (neo)realism/naturalism and the fantastic, lies in an almost inexplicable element, very skilfully administered and almost lyrical: an element that has to do with the fact that Marković's other trade is that of a poet.

The way of dealing with marginalisation is noteworthy in the works of two other authors from this “poetic group”: Uglješa Šajtinac and Nebojša Romčević. In *Huddersfield* (2004), Šajtinac attempts to maintain a distance from the motives for war, poverty and joint psychic failure using, on the one hand, melodramatic elements, and on the other, a variety of viewpoints: that of a boy who decided to leave behind the brutal situation in Serbia by moving to England and that of the ones who remained, including a fifty year old gentleman and a sixteen year old girl. All this goes on in a town in Vojvodina. It should be pointed out that the play premiered in Leeds and, furthermore, has been translated into Italian and published in Italy in the form of a book.

Romčević also describes the marginalisation of society, which tends to be an almost traditional form of attempting to create a certain artistic distance, a Grand Narrative. In the case of Romčević, though, marginalisation raises the poetic risk. In his anti-populist *opera prima*, *Grobljanska* (1992), the characters are extremely marginal people, those who work in the cemetery. The presence of death, therefore, grows almost without pause. While in his most prestigious play, *Carolin Neuber* (1999), Romčević allows himself a certain experimentation – at a given point, the German writer interrupts the performance to quarrel with the audience – and his antagonistic obsession with the Serbian people is transferred to the Germany of the 18th century.

The combination of an anti-populist attitude and the western setting, used as the polar opposite to the previously described Serbian situation, formed part of the poetics of the early works of Biljana Srbljanović (1970). This strategy is found in her most prestigious work, *Beogradska trilogija* (1996), and also in *Pad* (2000), a play that, according to the author herself, is an antifascist pamphlet and that ends with a scene where a new Europe is born. The play *Supermarket* (2004) tells of “the limits of the former West in political transition to the liberal-capitalist West, which does not know what to make of it all” (Srbljanović). The author’s passage into plays that deal with totally Western subjects (for example *God Save Amerika*, 2005), as we can see, has its roots in the author’s prior works, even if the politics of these were against the Milošević regime.

Biljana Srbljanović has been awarded many prizes, both in Serbia and abroad. Among many others she has received the Ernest Toller prize and is the Serbian writer whose works have been performed abroad the most. It should also be said in passing that her first play, *Porodične priče*, premiered in Catalonia (*Histoires de famille*, TNC, 2002). Poetically, Srbljanović blends in a form of experimentation to the realist process: her plays tend to be narrated following the logic of a dream, which can sometimes be a nightmare. However, I believe that the unquestionable international success of Biljana Srbljanović is not so much due to the poetical games she plays but to the fact that ambitious authors who work in reduced artistic sit-

uations – and Serbia is a good example – cannot afford the luxury of devoting their plays to purely artistic concepts; they have to combine this with a sociological viewpoint as, in any case, its reception is also marked by a sociological viewpoint. When watching a Serbian film or play, the majority of the audience who belong to a large culture only seeks to recognise information, and nothing more. This is what should be born in mind not only by Srbljanović, but also the best known Serbian playwright and screenwriter Dušan Kovačević

And speaking of the domestic reception of new Serbian theatre, I should mention that some works that differ from the ones mentioned here, the majority based on dialogues that are not very critical with immediate situation and employing actors who overact and include as much strong language as it takes to make people laugh, are still guaranteed commercial success among local audiences. Young (and relatively young) Serbian playwrights can find their own infrastructural space among the relatively major interest of the conservative audience, the lack of values among professional critics and the relatively pro-Western sympathies of the Serbian government. When you consider a situation with these characteristics, you cannot deny that new Serbian theatre is successful. In the end, there certainly is something new going on in this part of national theatre, and it is demonstrated by the fact that two of its most successful authors are women.

<sup>1</sup> The lower part of new Belgrade.

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THEORETICAL MATERIAL

**Notes on fragmentation in contemporary drama (II)**

*From Theory to Practice*

*Carles Batlle i Jordà*

The first part of these notes appeared in the previous issue of *Pausa*. There I argued that the work of fragmentation in contemporary drama led to rupture, to the multiplication of viewpoints, to the breaking down of reality (or at least the perception of reality), to the enthronement of heterogeneity, to the blurring of the borders between reality and dream, and so on. All this, I said, seemed very appropriate when it came to dealing with a contradictory, relative world in a state of breakdown. In fact, modern exploration of fragmentation (in the well understood sense that the concept was neither new nor exclusive) was involved in a formal research that began with the *crisis in drama* at the end of the 19th century, which was based – in Strindberg’s words – on the following formula: new bottles for new wine; or, what amounts to the same thing, new forms for new contents.

Next I contended that as a consequence of the breaking down of the ahistorical (atemporal) form on which absolute drama was based, a default compositional strategy, that until then had guaranteed specific results of reception, also broke down. Questioning *form* meant

questioning this strategy and the resources of this strategy. And this, of course, led to a problem: how do you maintain interest – and I do not mean objective interest in the subject matter – and maintain tension in new concepts by modern and contemporary drama? The answer is simple: we need to design a new strategy, not a single strategy for all, not yet another conventional strategy, but rather one that is special and non-transferable for each concept and based on drama techniques and resources that have been tested through time. If we do not take on this strategy, we run the danger that theatre that attempts to be more experimental, more daring and more innovative will find its enthusiastic and passionate audiences leave by the score. This strategy is what reception aesthetics has called “implicit receiver”. In other words, inserting – activating – a hypothesis of reception into the writing process itself.

I also commented that it was an undeniable fact that satisfaction with the reception process had to do with the reconstitution or restitution of the story (fable) being told. Consequently, if the dramatic process of fragmentation participates in this contemporary tendency that, as Sanchis claims, “abdicates from the narrative function”, that relegates the “fable to a subordinate, if not practically irrelevant, condition”<sup>1</sup>, the question is then set: how do you guarantee tension – and as a last resort, satisfaction – in the receiver to a product with these characteristics? I came to the conclusion that we needed “some artistic principle of composition, some subtle

indication of architecture” that would help the receiver in his task of filling in the “empty spaces” in the text, a task that no matter how hard it may result had to be passionate.

The article finished by promising, after this theoretical dissertation, to give practical examples that would justify the theory, and here you have them. On the basis of a personalised challenge to each of five different people who collaborated in this second part, I have been able to obtain five very interesting critical analyses. Reading these we get a hint of the implications that lie in the theory behind the practice and are found in some theatrical texts from the last few years.

### ***Raccord.* Rodolf Sirera**

*Pere Riera*

In a brief note that acts as a portal to his latest play,<sup>3</sup> Rodolf Sirera sets out – with the clear intention of it serving the reader as a guide – the three senses/meanings he gives to the term *raccord*, the title of the play, on the basis of the context in which the word is found and the linguistic origin of who is pronouncing it. We therefore have the literal meaning of the Anglo-Saxon word (from the language of cinematography, in clear allusion to the author’s formal pretensions), “which designates the necessary adaptation between all the elements involved in a sequence – actors, wardrobe, set, etc. – and which need to be repeated in the following one in order for there to be a consistency

between them both”; on the other hand, and also in English, we can change the “a” to an “e”, and we obtain the verb *to record*; and finally, moving the stress to the end of the word, we come across our Catalan *record*, or recollection. Three references, three meanings which Sirera plays with when designing a piece full of parallel paths and games with smoke and mirrors, with a stage presence laid down by the omnipresent low continuum that, in the mouths of its characters, marks the recovery and evocation of past episodes; a complex and vague to discern score, which, with each step, obliges the reader to restore the *story* behind the three stories orchestrated in an apparent tangle, even if they are stuffed full of common elements and repeated locations.

In fact we find ourselves before a pile of scraps: pieces that, like bits of a single mosaic in three colours, we are given in deliberate disorder. Three torn up love stories, involving couples who share unsteady relationships, very often due to the political and social circumstances it is their lot to live through, in a framework of time and space that Sirera lays out and in which various crucial moments of our country’s past over the last century are recalled. A total of nine characters spread out over an arc of time that runs from 1929 to 2003, who share – or inherit – a lattice of adulterous relationships, lovers who fall out, treasons and defeats from generation to generation; beings who repeat and reproduce behaviour and anxieties, all clearly described in three

plot lines that, despite the evident interconnection, maintain their own exclusive dramatic identity. But there are many elements that the author uses to stress the agglomeration of turns in fortune and individuals, even to the point of running the risk of over-complicating a good understanding of the facts and situations being produced. Sirera chooses to combine plot lines, simultaneously exposing them to the audience, forcing the appearance of characters from distinct timelines in the same sequence. In the meantime, entering the terrain of staging, we also see how the author insists that four actors take on the responsibility of playing the nine characters in the piece, producing a constant game of parallel paths and forcing the audience to attempt to instantly identify to which of the three stories the character belongs – an audience who, let us not forget, finds itself immersed in the task of restoring the plot lines that continue to emerge, filled with ellipses and changes in timescales.

The justification for the idea, the author’s aesthetic will if you wish, seems obvious: in *Raccord*, Sirera wants to tell us about recollection, of this disconcerting flux of life images and reflections that accumulate in the memory and end up creating the traits of an identity, a life, an experience, very often sweetened or poisoned by imaginary chapters that establish themselves in the middle of real experiences, that end up shaping a history, a hybrid past, full of anecdotes, whether one’s own or of foreign creation. And it is precisely on the basis of this hell-hole of chap-

ters, whether real or stolen, that Sirera organises his torrent of episodes from different timescales, but which share congruent, reiterative and, evidently, cyclical elements – despite the chaotic line in which they are projected.

The tangled web of scenes, as well as the apparently arbitrary presence of the characters, helps the author accentuate the coincidences between events that each of the three story lines exploits, independently of the time space in which the actions occur. This formal element – and obviously thematic, as the fragmentation, the breaking into shreds, gives the text not merely an artful dimension, but also a semantic one too – around which Sirera erects the entire play is underscored, as we have seen, by the fact that there are only four actors who share out the nine characters that appear. Performers/reporters, each one embodies the four major archetypes: the old man, the woman, the man and the young girl. And thanks to this and other stage symbols, the audience will be able to understand that everything that takes place before its eyes obeys a model of actions and situations that is invariably reproduced throughout time, whatever the factors that cause these may be, and whomsoever the individuals who suffer them are. Individuals who, tying the knot, Sirera links to one another through family or sentimental ties, making some the direct descendants of others, and others someone’s lovers or loved by some.

The space shown on stage is always the same one: the coast by some “indeter-

minate” town, a section of sea and of a beach skirted by two old manors, and a tram stop. A unique landscape that the audience observes throughout the play from various viewpoints, thanks to the changes that the author proposes for the location of the camera lens – modifying the focal length of the lens and even the quality of the film. A multiplicity of perspectives that, in all, never affect the consistency of where any fixed object is placed, as well as the relationships between the individuals who move through them: applying “raccord”. A space through which a whole century flows: the sounds of war (1929), police repression (1969), fascist and xenophobic displays of intolerance (2003); episodes clearly contextualised in dates that, despite it all, are totally interchangeable.

For Sirera, this *Raccord* is the sequence of events condemned to perpetuate themselves in the hands of a variety of human beings, who in reality are mere ectoplasms of each other; events and changes in fortune that reverberate beyond time and history. A history that repeats itself; invariably and inevitably what used to be, what our grandparents lived through, will always have a similar impact on the experiences of those who come after us, our innocent descendants. Therefore, the major themes, illogical passions, family intrigues, jealousy, unrequited love, hopes and aspirations, are always reminiscent of those that also used to be or were discovered, even if they were framed in other historical coordinates. Therefore, whatever time frame they

find themselves in, the characters in *Raccord* tell us of breakdowns in marriage, of the solitude of the older woman (the unwanted mother), of the irrational love between an adult man and a cheeky young woman, of the revolutionary initiatives of skilled young men with talent, of the disasters of war and oppression, of the systematic unawareness and rejection of the other and, perhaps above all else, our capacity to surrender and conform which we all plunge into, even though it may only be to assure ourselves that, in certain ways, history needs to be repeated and others will come who will also back down.

***Before/After.***  
**Roland Schimmelpfenning**

*Ferran Dordal*

Within the so-called poetics of fragmentation, one of the main questions to bear in mind is whether we need to restore history. *Before/After* by Roland Schimmelpfenning<sup>3</sup> presents a particularly extreme case when it comes to considering this need, as the author plays with fragmentation right up to its last consequences. Schimmelpfenning constructs fifty-one micro-scenes that do not follow the logic of cause and effect. In it he introduces no less than thirty-nine characters, some of which, according to the author’s *dramatis personae*, only appear in one scene. Within this hotchpotch of pieces, the author uses various modes of enunciation: from the purely narrative, where didascalical text indicating who is speaking

makes no appearance (which, therefore, may be taken as some form of narrative annotation), passing through monologues with varying degrees of the epic, scenes that mix narration and dialogue, scenes that are fundamentally dialogue and one scene, number forty-eight, where the change in print makes you wonder whether we are dealing with an annotation in the pure state. The confusion brought about by so much stylistic change increases enormously on discovering that the subject matters, the characters and even the tone of the scenes also vary with great flexibility. You move through stories that have a certain continuity, but there are also others that are purely episodic and without an apparent relationship to the others.

Purely from the viewpoint of reception, I believe that the author has created a mechanism by which, to begin with, it is not possible to reconstruct a story. Firstly because there is not just one story to reconstruct. Schimmelpfenning tries to paint a multiple, polyhedral vision of the real world, the confusion residing inside the contemporary world, where all the elements gravitate around the binomial of dispersion/interconnectedness.

Therefore, we can confirm that, in the contemporary world, everything is isolated and connected to the rest at the same time. The author, conscious of the universe in which he lives, has decided to submerge the audience in this effect, creating a series of very different but interconnected stories in order to produce a micro-reflection of reality. The

mechanisms used to achieve this are in good part based on the alternation between continuity and novelty. The author presents some characters and situations that possess continuity and others that do not. It is on the classic alternation between what reappears – and hence is familiar to the audience – and what is new that the fundamental reception mechanism of the play is formed. The story of “the woman of some thirty years of age”, which begins just when she is about to cheat on her partner for the first time, will become – considering all its derivatives, mainly the story of the lover (“the man from another city”) and the partner (“the ex-boyfriend of the woman of some thirty years of age”) – not so much a kind of thread but a constant theme throughout the play that will help the receiver situate himself by returning to a familiar place. Schimmelpfenning’s skill lies in radical commitment when it comes to reflecting reality, while also creating the sensation of absolute dispersion, both because of the variety of stories and of the variety of enunciation, and an almost secret sensation of unity, that is almost involuntary.

***Attempts on Her Life.***  
**Martin Crimp<sup>4</sup>**

*Òscar González*

“Nobody directly experienced the true cause of events, but everyone will have received an image”. With this quote from Baudrillard, which introduces the play, the author provides us with a master key to the construction, or maybe it

would be more appropriate to say deconstruction, of the story, of the character, as well as the possibility of reception by the reader/audience. It warns us against trying to find a causal beginning to the play from which we can attempt to deduce with certainty the series of situations with which the character fits in, nor the relationship they may have with one another. Nor can we establish a clear nexus between the different episodes of the character's *curriculum vitae*. What we are offered, on the other hand, is the description of different situations (some long and intricate, others brief, that refer to different spaces/times) that result in a polyhedral perception of one same character.

What the majority of these seventeen scenes have in common is that they are constructed by an external gaze. Various characters (how many? are they always the same ones?) attempt to fill the supposed lead character with content, but their viewpoint is fragmented and dispersed. The "narrative" will be explicit in these characters, and the receiver deduces the intent, the effort, to construct a coherent whole out of an artefact that nevertheless arrives fragmented. The conclusion is clear: the external gaze at the other makes him an object, but the only thing obtained is a series of images that do not seem to have any relationship with one another (or at least not a clear relationship with one another). To the extent that, for example, in scene 7, Anne becomes Anny, the new car of the year (the "narrators" tell us of its

features and its exclusivity). Of course, in the scene before, the lead character had expressed her desire to be a machine and she described herself as a television screen (that transmits reality but is full of wires inside).

It is this attempt to construct the fragmented character/object by the external gaze that gives meaning to the form proposed by Crimp, quite a radical exercise in drama for an attempt to interpret reality. One example of this is the ability the author grants his characters/narrators (or playwrights) to question what they are constructing themselves, even to the point of spelling out in the text what their hypotheses of the audience's reception might be (that is to say, to bring the implicit receiver to the surface). In the middle of the development of some story, a change in point of view will be introduced. The external gaze becomes a critical internal gaze that observes and comments the very same act of explanation/narration. Reference is made, among other things, to identification processes or the expectations created by the reader/audience. For example in scene 5, which consists entirely of one of these meta-textual "story lines", we come across the following sentence: "[...] we want that what we see be real. We want to be crushed by a polyhedral character."

In Crimp's work we can also make out a visually inspiring composition, which constantly plays with the contrast of what is beautiful and what is ugly or monstrous. Another way of activating the constant play of identifying/distance-

ing with respect to different characters/narrators, with respect to Anne (in her polyhedral construction) or even with respect to the locations where the action being told about is supposedly taking place. Insofar as the latter is concerned, the author thinks that it is not just Anne who is polyhedral, but also the reality she inhabits. For example, in scene 3: "It's hard enough for us to understand that this sacred life, this feeling of completeness lies beyond our understanding, this feeling of astonishment makes us humble. But now devastation." Or in scene 10: "After so much time, after so many years, he finally returns to his mother's... Then comes the moment when she notices: Oh, my God, it's my own son." And they embrace, right there in the kitchen and, you know, it's so touching. I mean, it is simply so *touching* seeing that he's found that... that strength, to forgive his mother. That he has forgiven her *alcoholism*. That he has forgiven her for going out with other *men*. That he has forgiven her for destroying his father's faith in himself and driving him to commit *suicide*."

Some elements of content, spread out through various scenes, seem to indicate to the receiver – if he is in any doubt – that the same character is being referred all the time, beginning with the name, which is the same with slight differences, and continuing with a series of images, phrases and objects that repeat various times in different situations. We are dealing with mechanisms of textual consistency subtly doled out and spread. In scene 11, for

example, we are told about an artist who attempts to kill himself (tied to the title of the piece itself); this connects with scene 6, where we are told of Anne's attempts to commit suicide. We are also told that she did not use condoms when she made love to people who were HIV positive, something that takes us back to scene 2 (a sex scene) or sends us to the end, where reference is made to the same fact. In scene 6 the characters/narrators/playwrights comment that Anne must be a terrorist, in scenes 9 and 10 we are presented with the accomplished fact (though in one of them we are presented a person without scruples or feelings, and in the other one a good mother and wife who exercises fanaticism from the tranquillity of her conscience).

Conclusion: despite the difficulty of reconstructing the story, the interest generated in the receiver, the creation of expectations and its fulfilment or not (with the consequent emotional game it provokes), is studied with great care by the author, as a composer does with his music.

### ***Apocalipsi. Lluïsa Cunillé*** *Iban Beltran*

In *Apocalipsi*<sup>5</sup> Lluïsa Cunillé presents a text where the fragmentation becomes more evident as the story progresses. Formally, the play does not appear to be divided into numbered acts or scenes, and it is the development of the action itself – marked in precise moments by an annotation that demands "obscurity"

– that leads us to a universe that gradually disintegrates, like a snowflake.

In the first scene, four characters appear – two women and two men – inside an apartment. We do not know much about them because the information we obtain from each of these characters is superficial, on everyday events and, in any case, it always comes to us in a partial manner, through a free-flowing conversation that quickly passes from one subject to the next. In the second situation, the apartment has become a lift in which they go down a block of apartments to the street. However, it seems that the continuity with respect to the previous situation is clear: they have left the apartment to go to a restaurant. So far everything would seem to suggest causally logical parameters, were it not for a whole series of elements that distort reception from a realist viewpoint: a helicopter flies overhead quite close and they remain unconcerned, a mysterious woman calls, things and premonitions that are never explained. So, despite an apparently cause and effect development of the action (the reality of these four characters and the city in which they live), these two scenes come to an end loaded with numerous voids of meaning.

Arriving at this point, and with the information we have available, we begin to doubt the possibilities of restoring the story. Even so, the plot remains open and, so, the optimistic receiver may keep his expectations intact. From this moment on, though, the removal of references and other

contextualising elements increase, without which the narrative thread seems more and more like a tightrope walker's cord and we find ourselves advancing through a story that increasingly presents a larger landscape of voids.

Travelling in a taxi through the streets of the city, one of the characters seems to have changed and the affinities that united him to the other three have become more distant. He talks to them as if he did not know them, and the other three speak to him in the same way. It is obvious that something has happened for the logic to be undermined. But the author does not offer us any element that could make it possible for us to restore the facts. Is this some form of analepsis, or flashback? Is this the mental projection of one of the characters? We do not know. The reader/audience is forced to take a decision in order to restore the information that has been suddenly whisked away. Any satisfactory explanation will have to be found outside the text, because the disintegration of the text has begun precisely with those elements that bore basic information: the ordering of time, the relationship between the four characters, etc.

The fragmentation, though, increases further and in conjunction with this disintegration of the basic elements that provide meaning. The characters gradually disappear from the stage and the situations turn into dialogues between couples at first, and monologues at the last moment. The treatment of space also helps to enhance the disintegration

through the constant changes in location for each of the different situations. This is when we can say that the fragmentation is absolute. The elements that carried information have completely disappeared to give way to enormous “empty spaces”, only a chaos of information remains that the reader has to attempt to patiently restore. And here precisely lies the culminating point in the text: that the information that has been progressively whisked away has done nothing but pass onto the receiver the responsibility of recomposing, of restoring. It has made him actively participate in a story that, when it comes to the most critical moment with respect to the absence of meaning, has passed on to line the need to reach the end of it all, to know how to fit together all the pieces that he himself has been forced to generate. The interest of the receiver, therefore, has been guaranteed precisely by the chaos and the Apocalypse.

### ***Far Away.*<sup>6</sup> Caryl Churchill**

*Pastora Villalón*

A *Far Away* reality? A fragmented reality? Fragments of reality?

In *Far Away*, the *story* is presented in three fragments. Three fragments with three micro-stories. But the *story* is no longer understood as the development of a complete fable, because it is given to us without an explicit beginning or end. In the first act we can reconstruct the action because of a mechanism of intrigue that advances on the basis of two contrasting logics: truth and lies.

Joan, the girl, cannot sleep and tells her aunt, Harper, that she has seen a strange event involving her uncle. And the aunt corrects her version of the truth on the basis of her need to hide the event and the girl's questions. In the second act the story becomes fragmented due to the consecutive flow of days, one after the other. Joan, now a woman, begins a job in a hat factory where she meets Todd, whose basic concern is labour corruption. During this act both are making hats for a parade of death-row prisoners. The reconstruction of the story by the receiver has a parallel correspondence within the scene with a game of invention played by the characters. Therefore, it could be said that this act also contains two logics: invention as an act of creation of possible truths (a process transferred to the processes of reception) and the reality of the situation itself. In the third act the apparent meaning of the narration ends up leading to a semantic “meaninglessness”. Reference is made to a war on wasps and also to a universal war. The location in the first act appears again, but the expressive mechanisms are further away still. Joan's last reply is absolutely enigmatic. The attempt at narration is mined with broken chain links that do not connect the facts but rather the text, the words, the phrases, the metaphors. A dramatic resource to describe this increasingly unintelligible world.

So, the *formal* structure of the text is explicitly fragmented into three acts: the first and third in a single piece, and the second developed in six scenes.

The division into acts gives certain coherence to the unity of location and space in each one. What the fragmentation determines, though, is the disconnection, or non-succession, of the dramatic action between acts. The structure of three parts, therefore, basically constitutes a logical *temporal structure*: time is linear, linear in the sense of a progression towards a future. And, even so, it is a progression in time that could be called static, as the action in each act does not progress in any meaningful sense. The author thereby converts each part into a small interrupted presentation consisting of various moments in the future of certain characters that are gradually introduced. The first jump in time is produced from a fragment of a chosen present to a day some years later. In this second act time is presented as six consecutive days, which gives a more fragmented rhythm. The last jump, again a few years later, is produced in the passage to the third act. Conclusion: what basically connects all the interrupted fragments in *Far Away* is simply the presence of the same characters. Are these fragments of their lives that are presented? Maybe time is only a dramaturgic excuse to present a mirage of unity, that there is a *story* it is possible to restore.

The receiver has to make present that which is absent. He has to lose his way in order to find himself again later, without losing interest. This is why Caryl Churchill makes us lose our way holding her hand. She hooks us with the mystery of the first act, with a tasty

mechanism of intrigue, to leave us later somewhere else, in the second act, disoriented, immersed in a feeling that “nothing is happening” and where the mechanical activity of the characters (sold as artistic activity) hoards all the weight of the action. After this first stumble between acts, the author again supplies our dose of interest with the third, but now with a mystery that breaks up into the absurd (which, despite it all, has the ability to guarantee the need to continue listening, irrespective of whether we “understand” or not). The changes in direction, therefore, only point a path, even though the path may not lead anywhere, or to any specific place. The receiver has to fill in the empty spaces that the author leaves behind. He has to lay the stones that are missing to get to the other shore, but it all depends on the author, whether she wants to make you cross to the other shore or prefers to leave you in the middle of the stream. And it also depends on the receiver, whether to enjoy the soaking or not, or maybe he would rather turn back and follow his own steps.

Fragmentation and creative co-responsibility are extremely closely bound. All in order to better understand a world inevitably on the path to destruction.

<sup>1</sup> Prologue to Carles Batlle: *Tentación*, Madrid, SGAE, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Barcelona, TNC/Proa, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Available on the Goethe-Institut website. Translation by Eduard Bartoll, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Barcelona, L’Obrador de la Sala Beckett (*En Cartell*, 12), 2005. Translation by Víctor Muñoz i Calafell.

<sup>5</sup> Barcelona, TNC/Proa, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Available in Catalan at the Sala Beckett. Translation by Jordi Prat i Coll.

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### **Avignon 2005: Image Text**

*Anne Berest*

“There’s no theatre in the Courtyard of Honour of the Palais des Papes.” The 2005 edition of the Avignon Festival had yet to open and everyone already expected it to be surrounded by controversy. Ever since the programme was originally presented in the high Parisian circles of contemporary art of the Palais de Tokyo, critics and professionals from the world of live performance showed an intense reaction to a radical directorial line that granted prominent space to choreography and performance art. Rumours sprung up, here and there the newspapers vilified with nasty comments on how the bosom of Europe’s foremost theatre festival was being invaded by dance. Everyone had some reservation but, at the time, nobody thought that the controversy would come to take on the appearance of a full-blown revolt. Nobody suspected that the festival judges would call the French minister of culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabre as a witness to

remove the festival directors from their prestigious thrones. Nobody dared expect, at a time when the cultural hierarchy, with few exceptions, was considered an insipid talking shop, that the Festival of Avignon would occupy the front pages of national newspapers (*Libération* on Saturday 23 and Sunday 24 July, “The Avignon dispute”; *Le Figaro*, “The Furious Audience of Avignon”; *Télérama* magazine on 9 July, “Avignon, a Festival with a Scent of Scandal”). What a thrill! What joy to hear that the performing arts really are a living art.

But let us return to the new board of the illustrious festival, which celebrates its sixtieth anniversary next year. 2004 saw the nomination of Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudriller as co-directors, both having had experience as festival administrators under the direction of their predecessor, Bernard Faivre d’Arcier. In France, there is no need to deny, professionals feel a certain disdain for “administrators”, who are unjustly considered mere bureaucrats or salesmen of shows who dream of mixing with the higher echelons of creativity on the basis of state subsidy cheques. Therefore, the nomination of Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudriller in 2004 was considered a non-event that most thought of as an almost insignificant act. Nothing could be further from the truth!

For the first time ever in Avignon, the two newcomers proposed that an artist be associated with the festival programme every year, in order to exam-

ine aesthetic prejudices through important personalities. The German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier inaugurated this formula in 2004. This year it was the turn of the Belgian artist and choreographer Jan Fabre.<sup>1</sup> So this season the flamboyant Jan Fabre offered a programme based on choreography and performance art, with artists such as Roméo Castellucci, Josef Nadj, Mathilde Monnier, Christian Rizzo, Wim Vandekeybus, Groupov and also Marina Abramović.

So what could you read in the paper tribunes, day after day, from the pens of theatre critics suddenly aroused from the characteristic drowsiness of Avignon (Parisians are especially prone to the rises in temperature found near the Mediterranean)? That the theatre seats would fold up by the score at the extreme violence of the theatrical proposals, that the Wolf-Whistles would multiply at the systematic nakedness of the dancers and comic actors, that shredded programmes would be flying on to the stage and landing at the feet of astonished actors, that some theatres would empty as the stages filled with haemoglobin in the form of ketchup and that the audience would suddenly speak out, in the last recourse, challenging playwrights about to suffer nervous breakdowns.

Without doubt. All this is true.

But there was also applause, revelations, adorations, shared emotions, meaningful shivers, eloquent silences. As well.

Whether the proposed performances were avant-garde masterworks or impostures, I could not say. I was not able to watch all the performances, and of the ones I did see, some moved me and took me away from my earthly bounds, while others either irritated me or I found them to be boring and soporific. It doesn't matter. To ask artists to be modest and polite in a world full of horrors seems very odd. Should art cure our wounds or stigmatise them? It is an old question that has no answer. But beside my personal opinion, there is no doubt that, of the fifty shows put on, some had the irrefutable force of surprise, the astonishment of the new, while others unquestionably even deceived the Trissotins of culture! But this is not my purpose.

What interests me now is how a programme like this was received, from the viewpoint of the semantics it proposes. Because, in fact, there is nothing new about certain shows being received with Wolf-Whistles in Avignon (among others I could mention early choreographies of Maurice Béjart in 1967, Pina Bausch in 1984, Merce Cunningham in 1985, Antoine Vitez in 1987; one could even believe that whistles in Avignon may portend canonisation). But this year was special because the criticism was directed at a joint attitude, a proposal for programming, an artistic direction. (I should add here that Jan Fabre is, among the associated artists, the only one who is not in charge of a theatre company programme. Thomas Ostermeier, Josef Nadj and Frédéric Fisbach

direct one, so, for a while now, they have had to face the problems associated with directors: What role is the audience given? Should programming respond to an audience's expectations? Should it move them? How do you attain the difficult balance between performances that bring in the crowds and performances that investigate new trends? And all of it while trying to maintain certain coherence between all the various styles and concepts).

What from the outset shocks in the arguments put forward by those who feel that the festival's proposals are a true betrayal, is the knot that forms around the relationship between text and image. Exaggerating slightly, you could say that a radical opposition appears in the critical dialogue between the art of the dramatic text and the art of the stage. By opposing genres, after the debate about dance and theatre we tend to come across the debate about the image and the word. Among those who criticise Jan Fabre's approach, many reproach him for the absence of "true" text in his programming. It is as if one reproached dance (by *dance* I am referring to the various art and choreographic forms, to simplify) on account of it solely consisting of images – in contrast to words – and, therefore, pure emotion. It is as if the image, the living picture, was not capable of transmitting a concept that had been thought out and worked on by the intellect. As if the image could not be the result and means of a worked upon thought. As if, in the end, it represented an absence of thought.

When Serge Valletti, one of France's most famous authors, was asked about the festival programme, he said in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, parodying the vigorous and direct insolence of its characters, "I can only see one explanation: they're afraid of words! They're afraid that the stage should speak! Because when it speaks, it says something! And when it says something, it is comprehended! And they don't want it to be comprehended! Because if it was comprehended, they'd lose their positions!" Does it mean that if there are no words, there is nothing to comprehend? Georges Lavaudant, a major theatre director and director of the Odéon Theatre, explained himself in these terms to *Le Monde*: "The theatre of words has lost strength (...) It is a fact and I do not want to hide it from myself, it is difficult to involve people in complex texts that do not consist of this period café-theatre that is doled out by almost everyone. Is education, the omnipresence of images, how we should go about staging these texts? I don't know. But we can't carry on as if..." Does the theatre of the image mean the defeat of a complex approach to the world we live in? It is like saying that the image does not produce meaning, that only words can aspire to thought, that only they form signs and language.

Doubtlessly, some choreographers do not help much. The scarce written "text" in Jan Fabre's work, for example, is of a naivety, a simplicity, that is absolute and borders on idiocy. It is a

pity he does not limit himself to silence or to being accompanied by an author worthy of the name. Even so, the figures in *Je suis sang* have such force, a power of concept, that infallibly, they echo Michel Foucault's '*Stultifera Navis*': "Substituting the subject of insanity by that of death does not mark a breaking off, but rather a twist inside the same uneasiness. It is always a question of reducing existence to nothingness, but this nothingness is no longer recognised as an exterior and final term, both threat and conclusion; it is felt inside, like the continuous and constant structure of existence. (...) This link between insanity and nothingness is so strongly tied to the 15th century that it will live on a long time, and we will also find it in the centre of the classic experience of insanity."<sup>2</sup> The images of Jan Fabre, of Roméo Castellucci, contain an unfolding of symbols, a reflection that is not offered but suggested. It is the audience who has to invest its own thought. The audience is invited to create its own interpretation, it is the audience who, in Duchamp's sense, creates the work. It is, without doubt, a path already followed in contemporary art, in choreography, but in theatre, when all is said and done, we are not used to it. French theatre has been, and still is – and this is unquestionably one of its great strengths – a theatre that accompanies thought. A theatre that offers us this thought so that we listen to it, so we read it. A theatre that frames thought and defines it. The abundance of paratext in live theatrical creation is clear proof of this.

Perhaps we in the theatre do not have the vital tools to conceive these forms that are certainly not "new", but which are, and maybe this is the novelty, so abruptly entering our world. It is as if we are invaded by know-how – the overwhelming control of the theatrical space and the bodies that occupy it – that imposes itself on us. What to name it? I find it significant that there should be a lack of vocabulary in this respect. On the official pamphlet for the Avignon Festival, to describe and announce the genres of performances, you can read under each title, "theatre-dance-music", or also something which in no doubt is subtly different, "dance-music-theatre". What difference is there between "theatre-dance-music-video", "theatre-dance-film", "dance-theatre" and "theatre-performance art"? What do we detect beneath this almost nonsensical accumulation, if not a difficulty in naming the emergence of these new forms? In the leading article for the programme, Vincent Baudriller and Hortense Archambault write: "The body and the word are the raw materials for these theatre and dance artists, who often conceive their creations in an overall manner and feed their language with other art forms – film, arts and crafts, music, performance art – sometimes eliminating the border between genres." But once the borders have been eliminated, in what country do we find ourselves? This is a geographical question that, when not on the subject of metaphor, can cause real conflicts. Though it has been desired and idealised in a major way for many years, the suppression of

borders, as we have just found out in a radical fashion in France, can provoke specific and violent reactionary responses. And, while we're on the subject of metaphor, you could say that when you mix blue with yellow, it fortunately becomes something completely different to "blue-yellow" or "yellow-blue", according to the dominant element. We are certainly eliminating barriers, but can this be done without a vocabulary? We seek to destroy borders, to be iconoclasts. But what can we name this outbreak? In the end we wind up with a mixture, without being able to secure a transformation. Albert Camus once claimed that "naming things badly adds to the misfortunes of the world". And if people who work with text were to set themselves the challenge of suitably naming these new alliances? Would it not be useful to devote oneself to this difficult task and demand that our writers, playwrights and poets invent a vocabulary that knew how, at last, to say the unspeakable, in order to move towards a reconciliation of genres?

<sup>1</sup> The next two editions will be entrusted to the choreographer Josef Nadj (2006) and the theatre director Frédéric Fisbach (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. ed. Gallimard, 1972.

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TEXTS

***Boogie woogie bugle boy***

by Gemma Rodríguez

**Author's note:** This story is fiction, though based on real events. Its main source of inspiration is an article by Bernard-Henri Levy titled "Dinner with Franjo Tudjman", published in *El Mundo* on 14 August 1995.

*(The scene represents an exterior, the large balcony of a major ministerial building in Zagreb, Croatia. Also on stage is a "victim counter".*

*December 1992. Outside, on the balcony, Bernard KOUCHNER, Head of the United Nations Administration, vomits his dinner up on some empty flowerpots. It is night and cold. OFFICER Mark Klein steps out from the French windows that lead to the inside of the building. All wear long, large, blue coats with United Nations insignia on the lapels.*

*The counter starts to tick.)*

OFFICER: How do you feel, Sir?

KOUCHNER: Like an arse full of shit.

OFFICER: Would you like me to call the doctor?

KOUCHNER: Mark, did you eat the little green balls that came with the meat?

OFFICER: No, Sir.

KOUCHNER: Am I the only one to have eaten them?

OFFICER: I think so, Sir.

KOUCHNER: But I saw them eating them.

OFFICER: I can't speak for the others, Sir, but the French delegation always pretends to have eaten it all up, Sir, to the last morsel. *(The OFFICER holds out a piece of paper to KOUCHNER.)*

KOUCHNER: What is it?

OFFICER: The news has come from five different control points, the communications were released simultaneously. They're bombing central Bosnia.

KOUCHNER: What are you saying?

OFFICER: They're bombing central Bosnia, Sir.

KOUCHNER: I heard you. Who the hell is doing the bombing?

OFFICER: The Croats, Sir.

KOUCHNER: Who?

OFFICER: The Croats, Sir.

KOUCHNER: The Croats are bombing...?

OFFICER: Yes, Sir. The attack began ten minutes ago, Sir. All the communications speak of attacks on the civilian population. A massacre is being produced.

KOUCHNER: Tell that idiot to come out, I want to speak to him. *(The OFFICER does not react)* Didn't you hear me officer?

OFFICER: You want to speak to Mr Tudjman, Sir?

KOUCHNER: I want to speak to that damned, crazy, son of a bitch of a Croatian president that's inside, sitting on a table, eating a cut of veal next to the representatives of the United Nations while his army bombs Bosnia. Now, do you understand?

OFFICER: Yes, Sir.

*(The OFFICER turns and goes inside. On opening the door that leads inside we hear some music. Women's voices singing "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" by the Andrews Sisters. KOUCHNER again folds over the flowerpots. The OFFICER returns to the balcony. The counter continues to tick away.)*

OFFICER: Sir. *(KOUCHNER does not hear him)* Sir. Would you like me to call the doctor?

KOUCHNER: What the hell is that?

OFFICER: "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy". Are you alright, Sir? Do you want me to bring the doctor?

KOUCHNER: But who's singing?

OFFICER: It's the Andrews Sisters, Sir. The point is to make the meeting more pleasant. The music helps create an agreeable atmosphere that favours com-

plicity between the parties to a conflict, Sir. Three sergeants from the Armed Forces are parodying the Andrew Sisters. They're singing "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy", Sir.

KOUCHNER: Where's Tudjman?

OFFICER: He says he doesn't want to come out, Sir. He hasn't finished his dinner yet.

KOUCHNER: He hasn't finished his dinner yet?

OFFICER: No, Sir.

KOUCHNER: Very well. Have you got a gun on you?

OFFICER: Yes, Sir.

KOUCHNER: Give it to me.

OFFICER: I can't, Sir.

*(KOUCHNER looks at the OFFICER, who gives him the gun.)*

KOUCHNER: Is it loaded

OFFICER: Yes, Sir.

KOUCHNER: Very good. *(KOUCHNER gives him the gun back.)* Now go look for Mr Tudjman and tell him to come out.

OFFICER: With the gun?

KOUCHNER: With the gun.

OFFICER: Are you sure Sir?

KOUCHNER: Absolutely.

*(The OFFICER goes back into the building. The music is clearly heard. The OFFICER comes out again. Behind him is TUDJMAN, President of the Croatian Republic. He is happy and maybe a little drunk. He is humming Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy. The counter continues to tick away.)*

TUDJMAN *(Who is in an excellent mood)*: As your people would say, your temperament is becoming more "Balkanised", Mr Kouchner. I took you for a more polite person.

KOUCHNER: I reserve my politeness for civilised nations, Mr Tudjman.

TUDJMAN: And I suppose you think that France is a civilised nation.

KOUCHNER: They're bombing central Bosnia.

TUDJMAN: Who, the French? *(As if making a joke)*

KOUCHNER: No need for you to leave, officer. There's nothing I have to say that you don't already know. *(The OFFICER tries to leave.)*

TUDJMAN: This is why you made me come? To tell me this? I've left my dinner unfinished, Mr Kouchner.

KOUCHNER: No, it's not for this that I made you come. I made you come to stop the attack right away.

TUDJMAN: Come on, Mr Kouchner, I think that dinner has made you ill. Too strong for a Frenchman's taste?

KOUCHNER: I think you didn't understand me, Mr Tadjman, this is no personal favour, believe me. As head of the United Nations Administration I order you to stop the bombing.

TUDJMAN: We're at war, we have the right to defend ourselves.

KOUCHNER: You are attending a dinner to discuss the pacification of the zone in conflict!

TUDJMAN: And you have never understood anything.

KOUCHNER: You agreed to a cease fire!

TUDJMAN: So that you people could say you were doing something. Nobody expects anything from the United Nations, Mr Kouchner, so relax and enjoy the dinner.

*(TUDJMAN makes half a turn. He wants to go back to the party. But the OFFICER blocks his path.)*

TUDJMAN: What are you doing?

*(The OFFICER looks at KOUCHNER and takes out his gun. He points it straight at his head.)*

TUDJMAN *(Half scared and half furious)*: Croatia has been a country mistreated by History!

*(Pausa.22) Traduccions*

KOUCHNER: Don't talk to me about History, Mr Tadjman. I'm fed up to my back teeth of it.

TUDJMAN: Tell him to lower his gun.

KOUCHNER: You're right. Nobody expects anything from the United Nations. We could finish it all right here, and they would think it was all due to the Americans.

*(KOUCHNER gestures to the officer to lower his gun.)*

KOUCHNER: You have international recognition but we could still abandon you to your luck. You decide.

*(TUDJMAN goes inside. Silence. The OFFICER tries to break the ice.)*

OFFICER: They ate the little green balls, Sir. *(KOUCHNER looks at him without understanding.)* The Croats, Sir, they ate the little green balls, I noticed before. *(Silence. The counter stops.)* You did it very well, Sir. He'll stop the bombing. He'll do it.

*(TUDJMAN returns.)*

TUDJMAN: There you go, Mr Kouchner, I have given you a present. I just stopped the bombing.

KOUCHNER: Thank you Mr Tadjman.

TUDJMAN: Mr Kouchner, while I was having dinner, one of your fellow countrymen asked me why we don't fight alongside the Bosnian nation in this war

against Serbia. I was trying to cut the meat on my plate, it's not easy to find the sinews and then separate them to be able to cut the meat into little bits that can be chewed afterwards. "Alongside the Bosnian nation", he said. Bosnia is not a nation, Mr Kouchner. Explain it to your fellow countrymen.

KOUCHNER: I'll do so, Mr Tadjman. Now you can return to your table and finish your dinner.

TUDJMAN: I'm sorry, but we can't trust people who only pretend to eat when they sit at your table.

*(TUDJMAN leaves. The OFFICER too. The door remains ajar and we again hear "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy", this time sung by a group of drunk men. The counter, which had remained stopped till now, makes a strange noise and moves to count another victim. Afterwards it stops.)*

## **Goliath**

**by Guillem Clua**

*No matter how strong,*

*I'm gonna take you down with one little stone,*

*I'm gonna break you down and see what you're worth,  
What you're really worth to me.*

Rufus Wainwright. "Dinner at Eight"

*(Night-time.*

*Light shines on a bottle of Bombay Sapphire, on the floor. Its colour bathes*

*the room in nebulous aquamarine. A man is lying on a bed under the sheets. Clothes on the floor. A boy is drinking gin and tonic. He's had enough to be drunk, but not enough for it to show, and he's young enough for us to be very surprised that he's actually drinking gin and tonic.*

*The boy looks up out of the window, overhead, at a sky we can't see but whose weight we can sense.)*

Today in class they told us that the universe is expanding so fast that we can't even imagine it.

All the stars we can see are flying away from us, and from each other.

And the day will come, millions of years into the future, when they'll be so far away, that their heat won't reach the others, and they'll lose all their energy, go cold and go out.

In fact, some have already gone out. But we can still see them, because they're so far away that their light still hasn't finished arriving, even though they're dead.

*(He turns round. He looks at the man.)*

Are you asleep?

*(The boy makes the ice cubes spin round in the glass. The ice cubes are transparent.)*

Don't pretend to be asleep if you're not.

*(Pause.)*

*(Pausa.22) Traduccions*

Are you tired? Don't you want to talk?

*(Pause.)*

I'm disturbing you.

*(Pause.)*

Are you annoyed?

You can't be annoyed. It's me who should be annoyed.

It's my birthday and you haven't given me a present.

*(The boy picks an ice cube out of his drink while he speaks.)*

It's the first time you haven't given me anything.

You've always bought me things.

Without any special reason.

Things I didn't ask you for and you told me you liked giving me because nobody bought you anything when you were my age and I said ok, and thanks very much and they were great.

But now it's my birthday, and what do you do, you don't buy me anything.

I don't get it.

*(Pause.)*

Perhaps I should pick something myself. Whatever I like.

*(The boy looks at the piece of ice as if it was a diamond.)*

One of your ice cubes would do.

Anything would do if it was you who gave it to me.

And I like your ice cubes.

I like them because they're perfect cubes and they're transparent.

The ice cubes are white at home.

My friends' too.

I asked mum what you have to do to make them transparent, like in bars, but she didn't know.

Mum never knows anything.

How do you do it?

I like them better when they're transparent.

You can look through them.

*(He looks.)*

Everything is distorted through the ice. It's all mixed up.

*(He looks around and describes what he can see, pleased.)*

The door is mixed up with the floor...

The light with that painting over there, which I've never understood...

The bed with the tartan slippers...

Your clothes with my shoes...

My hand with the sheets...

My hand with your hair...

All mixed up.

When you look through the ice everything gets stuck together.

But then you only have to move a bit, and everything splits and gets mixed up with something else.

My hand with your face...

My hand with everything...

*(Pause.)*

Are you asleep?

Or pretending not to listen to me?

You're always pretending not to listen

to me.

You're always pretending things.

You pretend I haven't said things that I've said. You put the phone down on me and pretend you're in one of those meetings you say are so important.

You pretend I don't exist, and you end up believing I don't exist, because if I don't exist, you can be anything you like. Everything the rest of the world wants you to be.

*(The boy runs the ice cube slowly along his arm. All at once, he pops it in his mouth. He keeps it there, fighting the cold. He picks up the bottle of gin and pours himself some more. He drinks some. He spits the ice cube into his hand.)*

I found the bottle hidden in the toilet cistern.

You could have hidden it somewhere else, but I'd have found it just the same. I would have found it like I've always found everything you've tried to hide from me.

There it was, the bottle.

It stank of putrid toilet water.

Mum hides the chocolate biscuits in the washing machine, but you always choose disgusting hiding-places.

As if I wouldn't dare put my hand in there.

But I did.

I spotted its blue colour and I put my hand in, right down to the bottom.

I got wet up to the elbow.

I can still notice the smell.

I don't know how you do it, but every time I leave this place I've got some smell on me that I can't get rid of for days.

*(The boy drinks.)*

*(Jeering)* Look. I'm drinking.

*(The boy drinks some more.)*

I'm drinking gin.

No, sorry. You like people to be precise. I'm drinking Bombay Sapphire. You know how different it is, Bombay Sapphire.

It's not the same as Bombay full stop.

It makes you do things you don't want to do.

You always say that.

But mum says that's just excuses, that if you want to do something, you do it, and if you don't want to do it, you don't, and that blaming alcohol is just cowardly and lying, but she doesn't know what she's talking about, because she only drinks natural fruit juices and herbal potions in funny coloured tea bags.

But you're pretty clear about it.

Sapphire is serious business.

Sapphire isn't for kids.

And you're right.

*(He looks at the man.)*

You must be asleep.

If you weren't you'd have already taken the bottle off me, you'd have got all indignant and began one of your never-ending monologues.

That you don't know what you're doing, that alcohol can destroy your life, that these things are what ruin your future...

I hate your monologues.

I hate it when you start talking as if you thought you had an audience around you hanging on every word.

Nobody talks like that.  
Nobody talks in monologues.  
Except you.  
And people like you, who don't expect any answers.

*(Pause.)*

I deserve a good swig of Bombay Sapphire.  
On my birthday I'm allowed to do anything I like.  
This morning mum asked me what I wanted for dinner and I told her macaroni and meat in breadcrumbs, because on my birthday mum cooks me what I fancy and she gives me a present I never like. And I always tell her we'll change it later, and the Saturday after we go to the shop and change it for something she never likes.

*(The boy has another drink.)*

This year she gave me a pair of pyjamas. Pyjamas with stars and rockets on a blue background.  
She asked me to try them on, as if anybody cares whether something you wear in bed fits you or not. And I told her there was no need, that I didn't like them, that I've been sleeping naked lately.

*(While he talks, the boy covers the man's body up better, apparently taking care not to wake him up.)*

And she told me not to talk nonsense, that if I sleep naked I'll fall ill because when you sleep your body temperature drops and you can catch a cold without

realising it. And I told her I don't care if I catch a cold, that I wasn't going to wear some shitty pyjamas for kids, but I didn't say it nicely, I started swearing, and I can't remember if we ended up shouting and I insulted her, but I guess I did, because she started crying and said all that stuff about what have I done for you to treat me like this, and if your father was here it'd all be different, and I don't deserve this at all.

*(The boy has another drink.)*

Anyway, after dinner she told me that on Saturday we'd go and change them for something else. And I said ok and sorry, because that's what she expects me to say when we get like that, and then she smiled, she said good boy and brought me the cake.  
And I blew out all the candles.  
And she clapped, as if I'd managed to do something really hard, she looked at me and she said that stuff about how much you've grown.  
And that's all we said.  
While I was eating the second piece of cake, she squashed little crumbs with the fork, and on TV there were some cartoons where they couldn't stop laughing.  
I don't know what she was thinking.  
I was thinking about what you were going to give me.

*(Pause. The alcohol makes the boy get worked up.)*

But you haven't given me anything.  
And I don't believe you didn't remember, because you write everything in

your diary. And when you do forget something you've got a secretary who reminds you. And if she forgets, she's got an assistant who reminds her.  
But they never have to remind you about anything,  
because you never forget anything.  
You only forget what you want to forget.

*(Pause.)*

Like when we're here.

*(Pause.)*

You forget who you are.  
You undo my flies and you forget your speeches.  
You forget how old I am.  
You forget you have to use condoms.  
You forget that if you're not careful sometimes I bleed.  
You forget.  
For a few hours, you forget.  
You stick your whole life in a hole and you use me to cover up the hole, and the things inside push and push because they want to get out, and they hurt me because I struggle to keep them in, because they're sharp and they bite, and I keep repeating to myself that it's not you hurting me, but all those things that want to pass right through me, through my flesh, but they can't.  
And when you push me away from there, your whole life comes out of the hole, in an explosion of shit that gets onto everything.  
And I look at you.  
And suddenly you're yourself again.  
And I never know if I'm supposed to

like it when you become yourself again.  
Because everything comes back to you, and you want to go, and I realise that you're beginning to forget about me.  
And it's then that I scream at you, even though I know you don't like being screamed at, and I end up telling you all that stuff like what have I done for you to treat me like this, and if you stayed here longer it'd all be different, and I don't deserve this at all.

*(Pause.)*

And you never know how to calm me down.  
And you tell me I'm just a kid and I tell you of course I am, I know that, that I'm a kid and that's why you like me.  
And the more I say, the more you forget me, the colder you get, the more you want to run away to the other side of the city,  
the country,  
the planet.  
Light years away from me.  
And when you finally go, the only thing I want to do is fill a glass up with your ice, perfect and transparent cubes you can look through and mix with Bombay Sapphire,  
the only thing that makes you do things you don't want to do,  
apart from me.

*(The boy observes the ice cube in his hand. It's melted a little. He looks through it again. He squeezes it in his fist. The water runs down his arm.)*

But one day I didn't scream.  
Instead of screaming, I said just one

thing to you.  
 Can you remember what I said?  
 Don't pretend you're not listening to me.  
 Of course you remember.  
 No matter how strong you are,  
 I said to you.  
 I can take you down, I can take you  
 down any way I like, with one sentence,  
 with a photo, with a telephone call, with  
 something completely insignificant, as  
 insignificant as this lump of ice, this tiny  
 drop of water turned into one little stone.  
 Just with this I could take you down,  
 I said to you,  
 onto your knees, with your face on the  
 same level as mine, and your eyes  
 reflected in mine, and my breath on  
 your lips.  
 Then, when you begin to feel a tear of  
 blood trickling down your forehead,  
 finding its way between your eye-  
 brows, blinding your left eye,  
 then, when all the words of apology  
 appear clear in your mind, transparent  
 and unrestrained by shame, by meet-  
 ings, by what they might say,  
 then, when you've learnt to sing out  
 everything that for so long you've nev-  
 er dared to say,  
 only then will I pick you up off the floor,  
 will I hold you in my arms.  
 No matter how fucking strong, tall or  
 heavy you are,  
 I said to you.  
 I'll take you to the place you should  
 never have left,  
 I said to you.  
 I'll put you to bed,  
 I'll lick your wound,  
 I'll stain my teeth with blood,  
 I'll dry your eyes and I'll clean the dirt  
 out of your hair,

your brain,  
 and your heart.  
 I'll take off your grey clothes,  
 which suit you so badly,  
 and the tie that chokes you, which you  
 never knew how to match up with a  
 shirt.  
 I won't do any of the things you've  
 always asked me to,  
 I won't bite your nipples,  
 I won't let you put anything in my  
 mouth,  
 I won't leave you naked so you catch  
 cold.  
 I'll dress you in pyjamas  
 with a pattern of stars and rockets,  
 bright stars that went cold a long time  
 ago but still send us their light,  
 rockets that fly beyond the sky and  
 reach the stars in one night,  
 and are able to start them burning again.  
 I'll dress you in pyjamas.  
 And you'll fall asleep by my side.  
 That's what I said to you.  
 Don't pretend you can't remember.  
 Because when I told you, something  
 changed.  
 All of a sudden, you were afraid.  
 You were so afraid...  
 I was disappointed when I saw the fear  
 in your eyes.  
 It'd always been you who made the  
 others afraid.  
 Always.  
 You used to make me afraid.  
 You used to make me afraid when you  
 insulted me, you used to make me  
 afraid when you came, you used to  
 make me afraid when you told me we  
 wouldn't see each other for two weeks  
 because your daughter was coming to  
 visit from Boston.

But all of a sudden, it turned out that it  
 was me who made you afraid.  
 And you began to look at me in a dif-  
 ferent light.  
 I could see it in your eyes.  
 But before that I noticed it in your  
 kisses.  
 Even your cock began to taste different.  
 It tasted of fear.

*(Pause. The boy touches the man's  
 body lightly. His voice trembles.)*

Nobody will have seen what's hap-  
 pened,  
 but they'll know it was me,  
 they'll mention my name on TV,  
 and maybe they'll celebrate your fall.  
 Maybe the news will become a legend,  
 and the legend will become a myth,  
 maybe someone will see here that I've  
 done something really brave,  
 serious business,  
 a gesture that fills centuries of stupidi-  
 ty with some deeper meaning,  
 a miracle.  
 Maybe they will.  
 And they will be wrong.  
 They won't understand what there was  
 between you and me,  
 because they'll never know you're  
 sleeping by my side,  
 that I don't care if you haven't given  
 me anything,  
 that your chest moves,  
 for the first time,  
 to the rhythm of my heartbeat,  
 that I've dressed you in pyjamas with  
 stars and rockets  
 and that, although nobody has ever  
 known,  
 you love me.

*(The boy unclenches the fist he was  
 holding the ice in. It has melted away.)*

You love me. Tell me you love me.

*(The boy touches the back of his neck  
 with his frozen hand. And he's never  
 felt so cold in all his life.)*

*(Lights out.)*

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 INTERSECTION

### ***Nothing twice***

**Wisława Szymborska**

Nothing can ever happen twice.  
 In consequence, the sorry fact is  
 that we arrive here improvised  
 and leave without the chance to practice.  
 Even if there is no one dumber,  
 if you're the planet's biggest dunce,  
 you can't repeat the class in summer:  
 this course is only offered once.  
 No day copies yesterday,  
 no two nights will teach what bliss is  
 in precisely the same way,  
 with exactly the same kisses.  
 One day, perhaps, some idle tongue  
 mentions your name by accident:  
 I feel as if a rose were flung  
 into the room, all hue and scent.  
 The next day, though you're here with me,  
 I can't help looking at the clock:  
 A rose? A rose? What could that be?  
 Is it a flower or a rock?  
 Why do we treat the fleeting day  
 with so much needless fear and sorrow?  
 It's in its nature not to stay:

Today is always gone tomorrow.  
With smiles and kisses, we prefer  
to seek accord beneath our star,  
although we're different (we concur)  
just as two drops of water are.

From CALLING OUT TO IETI (1957)  
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FILE

### *The Shape of Things*

**Author:** Neil LaBute

**Published:** 2001

**Publishing house (or form of location):** Catalan Version (Sala Beckett)

**Translation:** Victor Muñoz i Calafell

**Characters:** Evelyn, student in Fine Arts; Adam, student in English Literature; Phillip, Adam's friend; Jenny, engaged to Phillip. All are 22 years old.

**Locations:** The campus of a small university in the US mid-west; museum, restaurant, flats, park, a doctor's surgery, cafeteria, auditorium and an exhibition centre.

**Time:** The present

**Time interval:** the action takes place over several months, though it is not specified exactly how many.

**Structure:** 10 scenes, unnumbered, though labelled by the location in which they occur.

**Plot:** Evelyn, a Fine Arts student preparing her doctoral thesis, takes on Adam, a student of English literature, as the subject of her study. She pursues the very clear goal of changing the

world through her art. With this aim in mind, and without the boy realising it, they strike up a sentimental relationship that Evelyn takes advantage of to gradually manipulate Adam and turn him into another person. Adam, unwary and in love, lets himself be led away by the girl's advice and suggestions. She takes advantage of any excuse to entice him to radically alter his physical appearance and even adopt new social behaviour. Phillip and Jenny, two of Adam's friends, are both spectators and participants of the young man's mutation process; a metamorphosis that affects them as much, if not more, than the boy himself.

**Annotations:** *The Shape of Things* premiered in London in 2001, and two years later LaBute himself directed the film version starring the same actors who performed the play on stage. In our country the film arrived with the title *Por amor al arte* (For the Love of Art), and now we have the first translation into Catalan signed by Victor Muñoz i Calafell, still awaiting publication. A text where, after *Bash: Latterday Plays* and *Your Friends and Neighbours*, the American author (Detroit, 1960) again follows an exercise in misanthropy, presenting us with characters who are seemingly inscribed into a dramatic structure close to a romantic comedy, with some scenes more appropriate to melodrama, but which ends up giving us a philosophical/moral jolt. Four young university students in a not very important city in the US mid-west sharing what at first may seem a game of intertwined emotional stories and which ends up turning

into a treacherous game of Mephistophelian machinations. Evelyn and Adam – names with Biblical connotations – are the two lead characters in a conspiracy that LaBute uses to offer a reflection on the limits of art, the concepts of ethics and aesthetics, that, as tends to be common with the author, sustains the presentation of characters who soon enough take on the appearance of vampires: in this case Evelyn, the manipulative woman, the motor of the action and the person responsible for the major wrongs that affect the other three.

Written with exemplary rhythm, full of brilliant, agile and completely rhetorical dialogue, and a chronological, dynamic and disturbing structure, LaBute again exhibits his main virtues as an author; merits that have followed him since he first successfully burst onto the international scene at the Cannes Festival of 1997, with the then controversial *In the Company of Men*. The author, a confessed Mormon – even though he has recently acknowledged to be immersed in a spiritual crisis – feels a special attraction for characters who, in the face of more or less exceptional circumstances, feel obliged to subvert the values with which they identify, allowing themselves to be dragged along by behaviour that steers them away to the opposite extreme of what they have always considered incorruptible. This is the case of Adam, a nobody project, an insipid youth who has the “good fortune” to cross paths with Evelyn, the cannibal praying mantis who helps herself to a made-to-measure Faust to show that

true power, the authentic force that is capable of overturning the superstructures that make our world turn on its axis, is in the hands of true artists. A messianic and revolutionary song topped off by a final speech that sparks off a discussion, perhaps obvious, that the reader/spectator has to resolve on his own when the curtain falls. What are the frontiers between art and provocation? What is more important, the essence of things or the appearance with which they are presented, and by which of the two do we dare judge them? What separates art with foundation from imbecility and opportunism?

**Pere Riera**

### *Proof*

**Author:** David Auburn

**Published:** 2000

**Publishing house:** Faber & Faber

**Characters:** Robert (of some fifty years of age), Catherine (twenty-five), Hal (twenty-eight) and Claire (twenty-nine).

**Location:** The porch at the back of a house in Chicago.

**Plot:** Catherine is a young woman who has spent the last few years looking after her father, a mathematician who was as brilliant as he was mentally unstable. However, now, with his death, she will have to come to terms with herself and find out to what extent she has inherited the characteristics of her father.

**Commentary:** *Proof* is the type of text that any playwright with any wits about him would want to write. And I am not

just saying this because it has been translated into pretty much every standardised language in the world and has achieved a handful of prizes. No, I am not just saying it for this reason.

*Proof* contains the synthesis of much narrative wisdom. Its efforts to raise expectations are a model of its kind, it shows surprising dramatic professionalism and its skill in creating characters and dialogues deserves thorough study. You can tell that Auburn is no simple journalist, actor or director who has switched to dramatic writing. Auburn is a playwright by trade and a very good one at that, probably of the same stock as Jessica Goldberg (*Refuge*). Sometimes it almost seems as if David Auburn had wanted to create the perfect text, a matchless work whichever way you look at it. As if, one by one, he had added all those components that the audience will be pleased to see, controlling the receptor at all possible levels.

*Proof* satisfies the audience's eagerness to discover a new and fascinating world, the world of mathematics, in the same way that Charlotte Jones introduces us to astrophysics in *Humble Boy* and Yasmina Reza plays with the subjectivity of artistic perception in the underrated but highly astute *Art*. Here we find the idea of illness, of the lead character's compassion with pain, in this case dementia, accompanied by a refreshing cynicism which we come across in *Wit* by Margaret Edson and *The Baltimore Waltz* by Paula Vogel.

*Proof* is also a text related to the idea of inheritance, of the past which reveals itself by claiming a role in the future. In the United States, perhaps because it has a tradition that is not as developed as in other countries, certain writers seem to want to balance this lack by bringing up the ghosts of a mandatory recent past. An idea shared with analyses of modern day North America like *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner and the television series *Six Feet Under* by Alan Ball, who is also a playwright.

Obviously, the problem with *Proof* would be that all these elements were not united, but it is precisely here where we find the principal virtue of the play: its apparent simplicity. *Proof* is a Frankenstein monster free of stitches, with impeccable skin and able to perform a double somersault on stage without falling to pieces.

The film adaptation of *Proof* premiered in the United States on 16 September, after being presented in the official section of the Venice Festival, where it received a discreet reception. The film, directed by John Madden (*Shakespeare in Love*), stars Gwyneth Paltrow, who headed the bill when the work played in London theatres. The imminent premiere on Catalan screens means a new opportunity to follow the difficult translation of theatrical texts into film, but also a reason to enjoy the talent of David Auburn, who co-signs the script alongside Rebecca Miller.

**Esteve Soler**