Rodolf Sirera

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Rodolf Sirera (1948) is undoubtedly the most important dramatist in contemporary Valencian theatre and one of the most consistently inventive playwrights in Catalan theatre. With a creative career spanning more than 40 years, his oeuvre is characterised by great stylistic and thematic variety.

Trained within the independent theatre, Sirera originally began staging anti-Francoist plays in Spanish during the 1960’s but, when he turned toward representing the reality of Valencia and began writing plays in Catalan, he created a compelling kind of theatre in which his political opposition was evident. A History graduate, Sirera emphasises the social aspect of his work. Based on the original Aristophanes’ plot and in a firmly Brechtian style, La pau (retorna a Atenes) (1970-1972) (Peace (Returns to Athens)) uses humour to condemn modern militarism and achieved wide general appeal.

Homenatge a Florentí Montfort (1971) (Homage to Florentí Montfort), co-written with his brother Josep Lluís, is a virulent satire of provincial Valencia which presents a series of events related to an invented author. His most innovative work from a formal point of view, Plany en la mort d’Enric Ribera (1972), subtitled Assaig simfònic de documentació biogràfica (Lament for the Death of Enric Ribera: A Symphonic Experiment in Biographical Documentation), was prohibited from being published by Franco’s censors and published later, in 1977. It uses fragments from policy statements, poetry and conversations in Catalan and Spanish to construct the fictitious author of the title. Sirera’s ideological attitude had personal consequences and he was prohibited from owning a passport until after the end of the Francoist regime.

The first phase of his creative output ended with Memòria general d’activitats (1976) (General Report of Activities), a work that affirmed his disappointment at the closing of El Rogle, the most important theatre company with which he worked during the dictatorship. It is a collective work, coordinated through Sirera’s playwriting. An allegorical work concerning a group of actors who arrive to stage a play in Flemish Belgium, it reveals how unimportant theatre is in society: in the end it does not really matter what language the actors perform in as the audience – made up of English tourists – understand neither French nor Flemish and therefore cannot understand a word of the performance.

Another approach to the realities of Valencia is seen in the historical works which Sirera wrote with his brother. Their La desviació de la paràbola trilogy looks at the period 1868 to 1902: In El brunzir de les abelles (1975) (The Buzzing of the Bees) a church candle and votive manufacturer shows the changing role of the church and of workers in the capitalist system; El côlera dels déus (1976) (The Rage of the Gods) focuses on three days during the cholera epidemic of 1885, with dramatised...
corruption reminiscent of Ibsen’s ‘An Enemy of the People’; The final book in the trilogy, El capvespres del tròpic (1977) (The Twilight of the Tropic), criticises the new bourgeoisie of the end of the 19th century.

His second big collaborative project with Josep Lluis, La trilogia de les ciutats, takes place primarily in the 20th century. In the 21 ‘sequences’ of Cavalls de mar (1986) (Sea Horses) Valencia’s early cinematographic industry serves as a background to narrate a personal story as well as analyse the process of the country’s modernisation. La partida (1989) (The Game) plays in a sophisticated way with metatheatre and different languages and dialects (Valencian, Murciano, Catalan, Spanish) whilst juxtaposing two historical moments in Alicante: the Bourbon restoration and the end of the Spanish Civil War. Playing with chronology is a technique which also dominates La ciutat perduda (1993) (The Lost City) which takes place in a provincial town in 1964 and 1971. However, the text deliberately confuses the reader as it involves the manipulation of possible radio broadcasts with the novel. The Sirera brothers have worked on other genres — for example, the opera libretto El triomf de Tirant (1991) (The Triumph of Tirant) and continue developing historical plays: Silenci de negra (2000) (The Quarter Rest) recounts an episode from Vichy France and El dia que Bertolt Brecht va morir a Finlàndia (2003) (The Day Bertolt Brecht Died in Finland) begins with the German author’s exile, also in World War II.

Whilst the work he wrote with Josep Lluís often makes use of the theatre within the theatre and chronological interruptions in a historical framework, Sirera has always shown an — at times almost abstract or whimsical — interest for theatrical conventions in order to investigate the limits of the theatre. His short pieces — some of which are impossible to act — are testimony to this, published in Tres variacions sobre el joc de mirall (1975) (Three Variations on the Mirror Game) and the cabaret numbers in Bloody Mary Show (1979). However, El verí del teatre (1978) (The Audition) is the work which plays most extensively with the boundaries between reality and performance. It has been successfully performed in many countries, undoubtedly because of the intellectualised suspense in the dialogue between an actor and a marquis in Paris five years before the French Revolution.

Sirera continued to experiment with different dramatic genres during the 1970’s and 1980’s: L’assassinat del doctor Moraleda (1978) (The Assassination of Doctor Moraleda) is a study of the thriller and film noir and Arnau (1978) is a non-naturalistic narrative on the Catalan mythical figure, whilst Funció de gala (1985) (Gala Performance) could be described as a mysterious comedy in homage to playwrights such as Pedro Muñoz Seca and Enrique Jardiel Poncela. Concurrently, Sirera continued developing his analysis of his characters’ personal and emotional issues in work such as La primera de la classe (1984) (Top of the Form) — a conversation between two women — and Indian Summer (1987), about a group of Spaniards working at a North American university.

From 1985, Sirera began to write television scripts in Catalan and Spanish. Of these Herència de sang (1995) (Blood Lines), the first Valencian soap opera, and Amar en tiempos revueltos (2005-) (Love in Difficult Times) are particularly noteworthy. Another aspect of his contribution to the Catalan theatre must also be noted: the translations and adaptations which he has produced since his first contact with the stage. From the 15th century French text La Farce du maître Pierre Pathelin (1972) to works by Pirandello, Cocteau, Ibsen and Chekhov, Sirera’s adaptations have always exposed an awareness of the spirit and staging potential of the original text. The influence of Chekhov is evident in many of his pieces, particularly in Raccord (2004) (Continuity), one of his most interesting in recent years. Here, the sophistication of the proposed scenery, juxtaposition — at times simultaneity — of different dramatic time frames and the treatment of 20th century Spanish history through the characters’ personal experience create an exceptional musing on memory, age and personal and political betrayal.

Rodolf Sirera continues to write. At the time of writing he has just finished another play, Trio.