

Catalan Dramatists, To and Fro: A New Cosmopolitanism

par Sharon G. Feldman

Travel and translation have typically served jointly as barometers of the vitality of the Catalan theatre scene. In Catalonia, mobility is often synonymous with prestige, and success in the theatre is frequently measured as a function of international range and reputation. Moreover, for dramatists writing in Catalan, ever conscious of the precarious condition of their language and cultural identity, their paradoxical position of both political distance and proximity in relation to Spain has, perhaps, accentuated their yearning to belong to a larger global sphere.

Given Catalonia's current status as a stateless nation, it may not come as a surprise that plays emerging from this area of the world repeatedly appear to advocate a type of cosmopolitan European identity, one that actively embraces otherness and difference, overlapping citizenships, and the broad complexity of relationships among the global, local, national, and regional. It is brand of cosmopolitanism -reminiscent of the work of social theorist/philosopher Jürgen Habermas- that seeks to move beyond the confines of the nation-state to encourage new paradigms of solidarity and interconnectedness among citizens, one that accentuates cultural pluralism and linguistic transference. While translation has often played a crucial role in the dissemination of international drama within Catalonia, it has also enabled Catalan playwrights to satisfy their desire to transcend the local and the particular, to travel and reach beyond their most immediate geographic space and disseminate their work beyond local borders.

So strong has been the concern among Catalan dramatists with regard to international prestige that many have dreamt of a triumph overseas, be it on Broadway, the West End, or the Avenida Corrientes. Several contemporary playwrights -Carles Batlle, Sergi Belbel, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, Marta Buchaca, Guillem Clua, Lluïsa Cunillé, Jordi Galceran, Josep Maria Miró, Pau Miró, and Esteve Soler, among them- have fulfilled the dream of seeing their works staged to great acclaim in cities that include Athens, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Copenhagen, London, Milan, or Paris. The creative team of director Calixto Bieito and playwright/librettist Marc Rosich has likewise been applauded throughout Europe and even in Chicago for their adaptations of plays and operas drawn from an international repertoire. Bieito is scheduled to make his directorial début at the Metropolitan Opera during the 2017-18 season with a new production of Giuseppe Verdi's *La forza del destino*. Àlex Rigola and Lluís Pasqual have established their directorial reputations throughout the European continent, as well, and the multidisciplinary productions of Carles Santos have ventured as far afield as the Sydney Opera House. History, however, has only seen one Catalan dramatist, in the figure of Àngel Guimerà (1845-1924), arguably the most prominent Catalan

playwright of his time, succeed in captivating a Broadway audience, when, just over one hundred years ago, two of his most celebrated plays, *Maria Rosa* (1894) and *Terra baixa* (*Marta of the Lowlands*, 1896), ventured across the Atlantic and enjoyed a continual presence in English translation on North American stages.

In the more recent past, two Catalan plays, in particular, both originally produced in Barcelona, represent milestones in terms of the reverberation of Catalan text-based drama abroad: *Després de la pluja* (*After the Rain*, 1993), by Sergi Belbel (1963) and *El mètode Gronhölml* (*The Gronhölml Method*, 2003), by Jordi Galceran (1964). When Marion Bierry's Parisian production of Belbel's play, staged under the title *Après la pluie* at the Théâtre de Poche-Montparnasse, was awarded the Prix Molière in 1999 for best comedy staged in France, it signaled a defining moment for text-based drama in Catalan. International success came to be perceived as a more attainable prospect for playwrights engaged in the creation of the «new Catalan dramaturgy». Soon after, Belbel would earn a Premio Max (from the Spanish Society of Authors and Editors) in 2002 for his extensive international presence throughout Europe, Latin America, and even Israel, with translations into at least sixteen languages. It was ten years later, in 2003, that Galceran's *El mètode Gronhölml* premiered at the Sala Tallers of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya under Belbel's direction. It went on to play for three seasons at Barcelona's Teatre Poliorama, garnering a string of prizes and a level of international success in at least forty countries –Australia, Island, Russia, and South Korea, among them– that is, to date, unsurpassed by any Catalan playwright of Galceran's generation.

Belbel and Galceran's numerous triumphs beyond Catalan borders have no doubt been an inspiration to successive theatrical generations; yet, their work represents merely one ingredient in a sequence of conditions that have set the stage for the appearance of the latest crop of Catalan playwrights whose work has begun to circulate within the global sphere. *El mètode Gronhölml*, in effect, was one of the first plays to emerge from the «Projecte T6» of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, a theatre laboratory created by Belbel in 2002 (along with director Ramon Simó and the TNC's then-artistic director Domènec Reixach) with the intention of cultivating new work by Catalan playwrights and directors. The T6, tragically, was dissolved in 2013. Several other key institutions, venues, and programs fostering the creation of contemporary Catalan drama have, nonetheless, managed to withstand an extremely challenging economic and cultural climate. From the Sala Beckett (with its Obrador workshop), to the Teatre Lliure (with its residency program), to the Barcelona conservatory known as the Institut del Teatre (with its curriculum in dramaturgy and direction), to the Temporada Alta (the fall festival based in Girona), to private locales in Barcelona and Girona, such as the diminutive Sala Flyhard, the larger Sala Planeta, or the even larger theatre known as La Villarroel, all have dedicated space and energy to nurturing the work of emergent playwrights from Catalonia. In addition, the Institut Ramon Llull has been instrumental in underwriting translations and promoting Catalan theatre abroad, as has the Sala Beckett in supporting and expediting translations and disseminating them through its web portal www.catalandrama.cat. There is, thus, a necessary groundwork in place in the home domain, in large part laid prior to the current economic crisis and capable of stimulating the increasingly frequent exportation of Catalan drama. There is also a lingering fear, nevertheless, is that this groundwork, will become unsustainable if public funding for the theatre in Catalonia continues to diminish.

Four award-winning playwrights, in particular, whom I shall profile here, all born in the 1970s, have benefited from the aforementioned mechanisms of support. They have been progressively traversing new boundaries and engaging in an artistic dialogue with international theatre traditions and tendencies. They are Guillem Clua (1973), Josep Maria Miró (1977), Pau Miró (1974), and Esteve Soler (1976).

Guillem Clua

Guillem Clua's creative output is so multidimensional that it defies categorization. He has experimented with and collaborated in many artistic disciplines, including text-based drama, musical theatre, and dance theatre, in addition to his ongoing endeavors as a screenwriter. His versatility also spans many theatrical genres, from the intimate, yet epic, drama *Marburg* (2010), to the musical thriller *Killer* (2011), to the wildly popular romantic comedy *Smiley* (2012).

Clua's initial contact with the Barcelona stage began at the Sala Beckett, where he was enrolled as a student in 2001. Prior to immersing himself in the theatre, he enjoyed a career as a journalist, an experience that, it would appear, has nurtured his imagination and interest in issues of global concern. The clash of Eastern and Western cultures and systems of belief, global epidemics, the dilemmas of nationalism, and even climate change have all occupied pivotal thematic roles in plays such as *La pell en flames* (*Skin in Flames*, 2004), *Gust de cendra* (*Taste of Ashes*, 2006), and *Marburg*. While many of his works are rooted in the international headlines of the daily press, Clua always finds a place in his theatre for exploring the poignant stories of individual characters and for portraying their emotional lives with enormous subtlety and authenticity. It is perhaps for this reason that the award-winning *Smiley*, a contemporary love story between two men, written in the style of a classic Hollywood romance, has had long runs in both Barcelona and Madrid, as well as a production in Santiago de Chile (2014). *Smiley*, in addition, is currently slated to debut in Germany, Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay.

Clua's cosmopolitan view -that is, his penchant for looking beyond his immediate surroundings and for sipping from a fountain of international influences- has been enhanced in part by the experience of living in London (where he studied drama at the prestigious Guildhall School), New York, and Madrid. *Taste of Ashes*, which is situated in Jerusalem, has at its center an East/West dichotomy that is played out to ironic effect through an encounter between three Jewish tourists from New York and two Palestinians. The play, which, in 2006, earned Clua a Premi Crítica Serra d'Or (one of Catalonia's most prestigious cultural accolades), received, that same year, a staged reading in New York City at Repertorio Español, several years prior to its first Barcelona production, at the Institut del Teatre (2012). *Skin in Flames*, furthermore, has been staged in numerous cities throughout the United States and Latin America, in addition to London and Athens. The productions in St. Louis (2006) and Philadelphia (2007) garnered awards for the female leads and extensive approval from local critics.

Marburg, Clua's most ambitious work to date, debuted on the Barcelona stage in 2010, at the Sala Petita of the TNC under the direction of Rafel Duran. The production, nominated by Barcelona spectators for four Butaca prizes, continues to occupy a significant place in this city's collective theatrical memory. The English translation, by Marion P. Holt, which appeared the following year in the international theatre revue *TheatreForum*, received staged readings in New York at Repertorio Español (2013) and the New York Theatre Workshop (2014). Thus far, the play has had one full-fledged production abroad, in Caracas (2013), under the direction of Juan José Martín, at the Asociación Cultural Humbolt.

When *Marburg* premiered at the TNC, it immediately inspired comparisons with Tony Kushner's two-part epic *Angels in America* (1993). As Holt observes in his insightful introduction, «No longer were Mamet and LaBute the principal transatlantic influences on young Catalan playwrights but another distinctive voice from the United States», in the figure of Kushner, had appeared on the scene. Thematically, both Kushner's play and that of Clua contemplate the effects of a virus, or modern-day plague, which serves as a metaphor for a leveling, cataclysmic occurrence that makes evident the open wounds and injustices of history. Although the comparison is certainly valid on an anecdotal level, what is perhaps even more compelling is how Clua -like Kushner, two decades earlier- has succeeded in blurring the lines delineating time and space, creating a kind of continuum between the real and the imaginary and, as Marcos Ordóñez notes in his review, between the living

and the dead. Kushner, himself, has offered the culinary metaphor of an Italian lasagna as a way of understanding the heterogeneous richness of his theatrical texts, which are «overwhelmingly exhaustive and exhausting». With *Marburg*, in a similar «overwhelmingly exhaustive and exhausting» manner, Clua engages in a dialogue with Kushner's text, enhancing our perception with regard to the richness of both plays and inserting his work within an international theatrical tradition.

Josep Maria Miró

There is an enticing air of mystery that flows throughout much of the theatre of playwright/director Josep Maria Miró i Coromina. In a manner reminiscent of the «relative» dramaturgy of Catalan playwrights Carles Batlle, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, and Lluïsa Cunillé, or of the cryptic realms conjured in the works of Harold Pinter, Miró's characters are complex and yet habitually sketched with delicate, imprecise lines. They often inhabit tenuous and indeterminate landscapes, spaces upon which they are able to project their innermost fears and desires. In *La dona que perdia tots els avions* (*The Woman Who Missed Every Plane*, 2009), a woman who regularly lives out of suitcases finds herself alone in the capital city of the tropical island; in *El Principi d'Arquímedes* (*Archimedes' Principle*, 2011), a municipal swim center serves as an ironic backdrop depicting cultural sterility; in *Fum* (*Smoke*, 2012), two married couples are trapped in a hotel in a far-off land during an uprising; in *Nerium Park*, a couple find themselves nearly all alone in their newly purchased apartment, situated within a real estate project still under construction. Within these provisional spaces, Miró coaxes us into viewing his fragile beings from varying angles, thereby engaging us in a play of perspectives that, at times, acquires cinematic dimensions. Indeed the title of Miro's play *Fum* (*Smoke*, 2012) appears to allude to the elusiveness of the very notion of the truth that underpins much of his work. When confronted with his plays, the spectator is compelled to search for a tangible semblance of meaning among the abundant smoke and waves of doubt that emerge continually.

Although the aforementioned plays have obtained numerous awards within Catalonia and Spain - including the coveted Premi Born on two occasions, for both *The Woman Who Missed Every Plane* and *Archimedes' Principle*- they have also enjoyed an impressive degree of international success in many countries and many languages. *Archimedes's Principle* is, thus far, Miró's most widely produced text abroad. The title, which refers to the physics of buoyancy (i.e., the proportional relationship between a submerged body and displaced fluid), serves here as metaphoric allusion to the unfortunate predicament of a swim instructor, who is accused by one child of inappropriately touching another. The circumstances require the audience to engage, alongside the characters, in a pursuit of the truth amid waves of parental hysteria. The spectator is thus jarred into recognizing the semiotic fragility inherent in even the most seemingly inoffensive gestures, which, depending on certain contextual nuances, are bound to inspire an infinite number of interpretations.

After premiering in 2012 at the Sala Becket in Barcelona, where it was nominated for four Butaca prizes, *Archimedes's Principle*, went on to be performed and published throughout the Spanish state (in Catalan, Spanish, Basque, and Galician), in addition to San Juan de Puerto Rico (2013), Saint Petersburg (2013), Buenos Aires (2014-2015, with several nominations for the Premios ACE), London (2014), Mexico City (2014), Split (2014), Athens (2015), Montevideo (2015), and Tübingen (2015). It has received staged readings in Moscow (2012), Caen (2013), Paris (2014, as part of series organized by the Comédie Française and by the Théâtre du Rond-Point), and Rome (2014), in addition to a radio performance on France Culture (2013). On the occasion of the premiere of Justin Langan's English translation at the Park Theatre in London (under the direction of Marta Noguera-Cuevas), Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* called the mise en scène «a cleverly executed and slippery little thing», in which «you can almost smell the chlorine». The Argentine production of *Archimedes's Principle*, translated by Eva Vallinés Menéndez and directed by Corina Fiorillo,

premiered at the Teatro San Martín in Buenos Aires in March of 2014 and remained there for nearly an entire year, prior to touring the country. Catalan theatre thus arrived and was in full bloom along the Avenida Corrientes.

Pau Miró

Pau Miró is a kind of poet of the everyday, often revealing in his theatrical works an unexpected, and even magical, dimension of daily life. Several of his plays –*Plou a Barcelona (It's Raining in Barcelona, 2004)* and the trilogy composed of *Búfals (Buffalos, 2008)*, *Lleons (Lions, 2009)*, and *Girafes (Giraffes, 2009)*– are situated in the ever-changing Raval quarter of Barcelona, long a source of inspiration for writers such as Jean Genet and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. In Miró's literary imagination, the Raval is immortalized as an urban landscape populated by ordinary, rather than extraordinary, characters, whose creativity, invention, and imagination become ways of resisting authority. Much like the concept of the everyday theorized in the writings of Georges Perec, Miró's characters navigate the mysterious spaces that often go unnoticed, remaining hidden in the margins, or among the ruins, of our modern urban experience. In the trilogy composed of *Un refug indi (An Indi Refuge, 2012)*, *Els jugadors (The Players, 2011)*, and *Dones com jo (Women like Me, 2014)*, Miró engages in an existential exploration of the consequences of the economic crisis across varying generations and genders, using elements of dark comedy to paint a series of unlikely portraits of the lives of so-called «losers». He thereby reveals what happens in everyday lives when aspirations for stability and mobility have been compromised, and when the future becomes increasingly uncertain.

After graduating from the Institut del Teatre in 1999, Miró, a playwright, actor, and director, founded his own company, Menudos, which was based at Barcelona's diminutive and now disappeared Teatre Malic. As an actor, he has worked in television and theatre with directors that include Lluís Pasqual, Oriol Broggi, Calixto Bieito, and Carlota Subirós. His plays have been staged –often, under his own direction– at emblematic Barcelona locales, such as the Teatre Lliure (where he was playwright in residence), the Sala Beckett, and the TNC. Miró is perhaps best known, however, for *Plou a Barcelona*, which premiered at the Sitges Teatre International festival (2004) under the direction of Toni Casares and subsequently moved on to the Sala Beckett. In the ten scenes of daily life that compose the play, Miró offers fleeting glimpses of the Barcelona landscape inhabited by his protagonist Lali, a prostitute who loves to read aloud the canonical verses of poetry –Gimferrer, Rimbaud, Shakespeare, Baudelaire– inscribed inside her bonbon wrappers. Her words float through the air of a tiny apartment in the Raval, intermingling with the smell of hot dogs, French fries, and cheap shower gel. The realm of everyday mundaneness is thus converted into a domain of creativity and invention, a place where anything is possible.

Nominated by Barcelona spectators for five Butaca prizes, *It's Raining in Barcelona* has since been translated into several languages and has had considerable international success. Indeed, it would seem that Miró's portrait of the Raval is easily transferable to certain neighborhoods in Athens, Naples, Buenos Aires, London, Paris, or Toronto. The Italian/Neapolitan version, *Chiòve*, translated by Enrico Ianniello and directed by Francesco Saponaro, was staged to great acclaim at the Teatro Nuovo di Napoli (2007) and the Piccolo Teatro di Milano (2008). In Italy, it was awarded the national Premio della Critica (2008), which resulted in film and radio versions of the play. In 2009, the Italian-language production traveled to the Paris Region and played at the MC 93-Maison de la Culture de la Seine-Saint Denis in Bobigny. That same year, Saporano was invited to direct a new production in Spanish at Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional, which earned Miró a nomination for a Premio Max in the category of best Spanish-language author (2010). Several productions throughout Latin America followed. The English translation of Miró's play received a staged reading at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York City (2009), toured the Canadian Fringe summer festival circuit (2010), and had its London premiere at the Cock Tavern Theatre (2011).

Miró's *The Players* has enjoyed comparable success in Spain and Greece, as well as Italy, where it was awarded the prestigious Premio Ubu (2013) in the category of best work of international drama. More recently, *Buffalos* and *Giraffes* received highly elaborate mises en scène under the direction of Radu Afrim at the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu (2014), one of the leading stages in Romania. Curiously, it would seem as though that the critical acclaim for Miró's work and the sheer sumptuousness of the productions of his drama abroad have, on occasion, eclipsed those of Catalonia.

Esteve Soler

In a recent article published in the Catalan weekly *El temps*, journalist Lluís Bonada called Esteve Soler «El darrer ambaixador del teatre català al món» («the latest ambassador of Catalan theatre in the world»). Soler is, indeed, out there, in the world. His «Against Trilogy», a theatrical triptych composed of *Contra el progrés* (*Against Progress*, 2008), *Contra l'amor* (*Against Love*, 2009), and *Contra la democràcia* (*Against Democracy*, 2010), has traveled a long road that began in Berlin and includes Athens, Avignon, London, Milan, Munich, New York, Prague, Santiago de Chile, and Sibiu. Soler initiated his career in the theatre as a student at Barcelona's Institut del Teatre. He also has significant ties to the Sala Beckett and to the T6 program of the TNC, where he premiered *Jo sóc un altre!* (*I'm an other!*) in 2006. The international notoriety and reception of Soler's work within a relatively short span of time has been remarkable: the plays in the trilogy have been translated into at least fourteen languages and performed on several continents by over seventy directors. Soler was also a recipient of the Premi Crítica Serra d'Or in 2012 (for *Against Democracy*) and the 2013 edition of the Prix Godot in France (for *Against Progress*), awarded annually by a group of students in conjunction with the Université de Caen. *Against Democracy*, furthermore, recently inspired the award-winning short film, *Interior Família* (*Interior. Family*, 2014), which Soler wrote and directed with Gerard Quinto.

With the «Against» triptych, a kind of «trilogy of nihilism», Soler has created his own form of engaged theatre, having placed his finger on the pulse of a significant moment of social and political change. It is possible, for example, to see in these works an allusion to the veritable collapse experienced in recent years of hallowed institutions in Catalonia, Spain, Europe, and elsewhere, a crisis that has engendered economic, social, cultural, and even moral ramifications. Soler appears, therefore, to have touched upon a resounding chord of pessimism, distrust, and indignation that has infiltrated the air and resonated with audiences far beyond Barcelona, in places such as Athens, or even New York.

In Soler's surreal universe, relationships literally shatter into pieces, like shards of broken glass, people are born out of gigantic spider webs, and the disturbing image of a starving child in the developing world pops out of the television of a bourgeois living room. Hence French critic Armelle Héliot observes that she finds in Soler's plays «beaucoup de cette folie catalane si corrosive et beaucoup aussi de ce surréalisme acide qui n'appartient qu'aux catalans» («a lot of that very corrosive Catalan madness and also a lot of that bitter surrealism that only belongs to the Catalans»). His work, nonetheless, is also redolent of many international theatrical traditions. Each play is composed of a series of seven vignettes whose disturbingly dark aesthetic of grotesque realism, and whose overlapping layers of humor and horror are, at times, evocative of Tadeusz Kantor's «theatre of death», Ionesco's «theatre of the absurd», or the shadowy, dreamlike landscapes created by the Andalusian troupe La Zaranda.

In July 2014, Soler was present in New York City for a marathon staged reading of the entire trilogy, performed under the direction of Tamilla Woodard and Ana Margineanu. The event was held within the context of the Between the Seas Festival, which, with its focus on the performing arts of the Mediterranean region, served as an especially fitting milieu, in which the relevance of the trilogy

was readily apparent. Perhaps, with his landscape of fallen idols and of societies overcome with outrage and frustration, Soler has indeed found an extremely apt way of capturing the spirit of the times.

Clua, Miró, Miró, and Soler have become prominent voices from Catalonia who have conquered the international theatre circuit, signaling a new degree of cosmopolitanism for the Catalan stage. One can only hope that the network of cultural institutions in their homeland that has thus far helped to launch their international success will continue to sustain their artistic efforts, as well as the endeavors of future dramatists.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BONADA, Lluís, «Esteve Soler, El darrer ambaixador del teatre català al món», *El temps*, 21 maig 2013, p. 49-52.

CLUA, Guillem, Marburg, trans. Marion P. Holt, *TheatreForum* 39 (2011), p. 72-114.

GARDNER, Lyn, «Archimedes' Principle review - a cleverly executed, slippery little play», *The Guardian*, 28 April 2014.

HABERMAS, Jürgen, «Toward a Cosmopolitan Europe», *Journal of Democracy* 14.4 (2003), p. 86-100.

HÉLIOT, Armelle, «Le gran théâtre du monde», *Blog Le Figaró*. 28 August 2009.
<http://blog.lefigaro.fr/theatre/2009/08/>

HOLT, Marion P, «Guillem Clua, Marburg, and Barcelona's TNC», *TheatreForum* 39 (2011), p. 66-71.

KUSHNER, Tony, «On Pretentiousness», *Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness: Essays, a Play, Two Poems, and a Prayer*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

ORDÓÑEZ, Marcos. «Los virus de Marburg», *El País/Babelia*, 12 de juny de 2010.

PEREC, Georges, *L'Infra-ordinaire*, Paris: Seuil, 1990,