

## Sergi Belbel

Visat núm. 9

(abril 2010)

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Sergi Belbel was born in Terrassa (Barcelona) in 1963. From a young age he began acting. Whilst he was studying French and Romance Languages and Literature at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, he became the founding member of the university's theatre group before finishing his studies in 1986. In addition to this, he directed and translated some of the shows which were performed there. At that time he even started to write his own pieces for theatre including *Calidoscopis i fars d'avui*. It is worth mentioning that the first edition of the book received the Marqués of Bradomin prize— a prize aimed at authors under thirty who want to promote dramatic writing amongst other young people and create a generation of authors who have not lived through the Franco period.

Thus Sergi Belbel was the leading light of the first generation of theatre enthusiasts born after the Franco dictatorship. This gives way to two opportunities: a political one and also an aesthetic one which allowed Catalan theatre to recover in a textual sense, in addition to, at that time, not so popular text based theatre. Obviously Sergi Belbel is a talented playwright. After winning the *Marquis of Brandomin Prize* in 1987, he obtained the *Granollers City Prize* in the same year for *Dins la seva memòria* (Within His Memory) and the prestigious *Ignasi Iglesias National Prize* for *Elsa Schneider*. As a result of his success, his works were promoted in "Operació Belbel", which gave him the opportunity to debut three of his plays in just one season in well-respected venues: *The Romea Theatre*, the *Adrià Gual Theatre* and *The Mercat de les Flors Theatre* in Barcelona. In 1988 he became a professor at the *Institut de Theatre*. In the 1989-1990 season, the theatrical institutions pushed for Belbel's *Operació Belbel* which in hindsight was a great success. We can say that Belbel is theatre in human form. He is an important author, but also a fantastic translator, superb screenwriter, wonderful stage director and good manager, as demonstrated in the 2006-2007 season when he was appointed as artistic director of the National Theatre of Catalonia.

Sergi Belbel's theatre style is characterised by his concern for form and also for traditions concerning intertextuality. His work is based on dramatic structure and making textual design processes containing production and reception of the senses. This method has created a type of scholarly feeling amongst the authors emerging from the end of the nineties.

However, questions of staging, time and various important works must be addressed. Belbel's career started with a world changing and exceptional event: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the break-up of the USSR and the world economic crisis resulting in a crisis of ideologies, new methods of communication, changes in the scientific domain, etc. Confronted with this situation, Belbel stated

that he did not desire to transmit any type of message in his theatre and showed more concern with form, which served as an answer to the perplexed attitude of young playwrights emerging at the end of the 20th century.

Throughout Belbel's work we can trace three main tendencies: works based on intertextuality, like his early works such as *Calidoscopis* and *fars d'avui, A. G. / V. W* and *Elsa Schneider*. Then there are more reflective works such as *La sang, Morir, El temps de Planck, Foraster*, and above all his works are entertaining such as *Tàlem* (Fourplay), *Caricies* (Caresses), *Després de la pluja* (After the Rain) or *For a de joc* (Offside). They are, however, trends that do not imply a succession of time, but rather they occur alongside as a timely coincidence. In Belbel's work there is always a desire to offer a formal textual structure, to build a small or large maze where periods of dramatic periods of action interact in time, and there is even a kind of willingness to even transcend reality.

Intertextuality, the meta-theatrical game, the sounds of words and the repeated textual fragments that give structure to his works are characteristic of the author's first creative phase. (*A.G./V.W., Elsa Schneider, La nit del cigne*, unedited), but with a lesser leading role throughout his works. The following phase offers entertaining works which are built on probability games, which is the case in *Fourplay*. A combination of mathematical scenes are used to depict the emptiness of relationships between couples, and we could also include *Caresses* in this phase, as it is an implicit erotic game which starts as a simply constructed piece of symmetry which is used to link scenes through the continuity of its protagonists. In addition, one of Belbel's most successful works, *After the Rain*, an urban workplace comedy could also be included in this section, but here the action space also occurs in important places: in some peaks near the sky, the terrace of a forty-nine floor block of offices where the characters go to smoke. This action is a metaphor of individual freedom. It is a collective situation, a parable of loneliness and emptiness that is yearning for the rain to come and nourish it. We cannot talk about stages, but indeed about some frequent constants in Belbel's theatre. Apart from the previously mentioned works, in Belbel's other works a concern for death features and is furthermore explicated in *A Moment Before* where two narrative levels offer us a series of structured situations divided in two parts—To die or Not to die—, which can lead to death or not. We find the same trend in *Planck Time*, the relativity of time faced with mini fractions of seconds which determine our existence.

Although it is not one of Belbel's best works, *La Toscana* was Catalonia's signature theatre piece at the Frankfurt Fair dedicated to Catalan literature. This work is about a couple's dream to get back together, to go back to Tuscany where they experienced their romance. Sergi Belbel has also penned works that we have not mentioned, some of which like *Mòbil* (Mobile) have not received the recognition they deserve. Belbel's most recent piece of work until now *Offside* (2010) starts off with some light-hearted fun then we find out about the author's concerns: family, immigration, crisis, frustration, old age and luck...

Sergi Belbel still has plenty left to do and say, but we must take heed of the fact that in the last twenty years he has brought such a personal style to theatre, making it different and pushing it beyond that unchangeable value that other Catalan authors have brought to it. Regardless of its undeniable quality, his importance is reflected in how his texts have been internationally accepted....

Alongside Guimerà, Belbel is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated Catalan authors who has enjoyed important international recognition. His works have been performed and translated across many countries and in different languages. They include: Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Uruguay, USA, and Venezuela.

Translated by Christina McGown