



'Grec 2008: Between the Local and Global'

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages

Vol. 20, no. 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 53-56.

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WESTERN EUROPEAN STAGES

Volume 20, Number 3

Fall 2008

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ISSN # 1050-1991

Grec 2008: Between the Local and Global

Maria M. Delgado

There's been a fair bit of soul-searching in the Catalan press about the role of the Grec this summer. Whether it's to do with a lackluster opening event (Nigel Lowery and Amir Hosseinpour version of Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*) or suffocating temperatures that had critics craving an autumn festival like Madrid's that might prove kinder to the spectator, can't quite be pinned down. Perhaps the city wants its own Avignon or Edinburgh but this just isn't possible on the kind of budget that the Grec has. Avignon and Edinburgh also have long track records that Catalonia's "new kid on the block" can't yet boast. This didn't, however, seem a "poor" Grec. There were a range of visiting companies and practitioners including Sasha Waltz, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and Emanuel Gat. The British theme bought Cheek by Jowl's *Troilus and Cressida* and Complicité's *A Disappearing Number* to the Teatre Lliure's Sala Fabià Puigserver and ATC's *The Brothers Size* (returning to London's Young Vic Theatre this Fall) to the Lliure's Espai Lliure. Manel Dueso's production of Michael Frayn's *Benefactors* also enjoyed a month-long run at the Sala Muntaner. At the CCCB, one of Barcelona's most exciting gallery spaces, Simona Levi curated a program of alternative performance and dance theatre bringing together Lone Twin, Tim Crouch, and Blind Summit Theatre (among others).

While some of the city's most auspicious directors—Àlex Rigola, Lluís Pasqual, and Calixto Bieito—were conspicuous by their absence, it was good to see Catalan maverick Roger Bernat bringing his new show to the city. *Rimuski*, seen already at the Vienna Festival, is an imaginative performative journey undertaken across the city that moves from the geographical to the virtual. Seen already in Cairo, Lisbon, Moscow, Rabat, and Vienna, the production, presented in association with a group of local taxi drivers, offers an alternative guide through the city's landscapes. Our perspective of taxi drivers may all too often be limited to their shoulders and the backs of their heads but here they take center stage: sharing their stories, their travel tips, and their (mis)adventures with an audience that even has the change to take a ride if so inclined. Bernat has always demonstrated a strong interest in the boundaries between acting and non-acting and here his cast of taxi drivers further probes the relationship between storytelling and theatre, between the spon-

taneous and the scripted. The action evolves on a bare stage marked only by a row of computers operated by Bernat and his team. The taxi drivers congregate to one side, sharing their "time out" with us before being sent on a series of jobs across the city.

We follow the taxi drivers' journeys across Google Maps projected on a giant screen. The show is as much about the metaphor of the journey, of what it means in physical, emotional, and ecological terms as it is about our fascination with the "live." This is "reality" theatre but far removed from the excesses of "reality" television. For the premise of the show is based on labor, on work, and on what it means to know the cracks and crevices of a city. The different personalities of the taxi drivers emerge, showing a cross-section of the city and its inhabitants that links up to wider global concerns. This is a little show in many ways but one which encourages the audience to think about "big" concerns: crucially how the economy of labor is part of a wider global economy. *Rimuski* is hugely entertaining, witty, smart, and humanistic. It is based on respect: for the drivers, for what they do, and for the audience who have come in to watch them at work for an evening.

Oriol Broggi's *King Lear*, presented by laperla29 at the Catalan National Library, offered a refreshingly low-key treatment of the play that avoided the bombast of Gerardo Vera's recent reading at Spain's Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid.

Javier Daulte at the Villarroel presented his own direction of a play first seen in Buenos Aires a number of years back. *Nunca estuviste tan adorable* (*You were never more adorable*) we are told is rooted in the dramatist's own family circumstances. We watch over an extended middle-class family sharing a flat in the Olivos area of Buenos Aires whose comings and goings are keenly observed by the matriarch Blanca (Anabel Alonso), a modern day Mother Courage-cum-Lucille Ball. The action begins in 1955 with Blanca keeping control of a house populated by a husband working all hours to fulfill his wife's material expectations, her adolescent children, a close friend, and an alcoholic neighbor. The second part of the play moves forward to the 1970s with the children married and the baby Javier Daulte staying with grandmother Blanca. We are left to wonder how much of what we have seen



Javier Daulte's *Nunca estuviste tan adorable*. Photo: Alberto Nevado.

already is imagined or real; memories of a distant childhood or fiction conjured from a partially remembered past.

While Joan Ollé's adaptation of Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (seen at the Teatre Grec) was not judged a successful excursion into surrealism, José María Pou, soon to open the Goya Theatre with his own production of Alan Bennett's *History Boys*, enjoyed a summer hit at the Romea with Esteve Riambau's production of Richard France's rather creaky compilation of Orson Welles anecdotes, *Obediently Yours, Orson Welles*. The title comes from Welles' own signing off from his regular radio show in the late 1940s. France is an academic and acknowledged expert on Welles's work and is able to pull together a web of Welles tales that go from the sublime to the glorious extremes of Hollywood absurdism. A portly seventy-year-old Welles is in the studio recording a series of commercials, his only companion a technician, Mel (Jaume Ullé), obsessed with *Citizen Kane* and working to ensure that the magic of the Welles's voice remains for whatever products he is selling. For Welles this is a means to an end: the possible completion of his *Don Quixote* project. In between takes he reflects on his early stage work, his checked career as a director, Rita Hayworth, his radio

shows, and the projects he had to abandon through lack of finance.

The script relies rather heavily on the interruption of phone calls that carry news of whether Welles can finally secure the funding to complete his *Don Quixote* venture. Steven Spielberg has organized a surprise 70th birthday party for the man who doesn't like birthdays but while Welles sees this as a way of raising money for his *Don Quixote* film, Spielberg evidently has other priorities. The call from Steven Spielberg—the new boy wonder on the block—finally comes (after some painful prompting from Welles) but it doesn't bring the news Welles had hoped for and he is left to reflect bitterly on what might have been. There are some very funny observations—Pou's Welles, for example, notes wryly that John Houston never offered him Ahab in *Moby Dick* because there was no room for two whales in the film! Pou pitches the performance perfectly, finding a voice for Welles that draws on the particulars of the actor's intonation without going for easy mimicry. Spain runs through the monologue as a theme—from ruminations on first visiting the country in the early 1930s to the obsession with *Don Quixote*.

This is a play about the Hollywood Studio system that both made and destroyed Welles's work



Richard France's *Obediently Yours, Orson Wells*, directed by Esteve Rimbau. Photo: David Ruano.

as a director. It is also a commentary on an American society that restricted civil liberties with the rise of McCarthyism. Welles delineates the compromises he was never willing to make and as well as the consequences of refusing to pander to political pressure. Pou presents him as a melancholy maverick, a larger-than-life figure whose erudition and wit sits rather uneasily in a Hollywood driven by big bucks, media interests, and easy entertainment. There is no attempt to gloss over the actor's impatience—the young technician recording the commercials is often treated with disdain by Pou's Welles. But we are also made aware of the fact that Welles was hunted by William Randolph Hearst's press interests and that a radio commentary on racial injustice brought him a swift punishment and media ostracism.

Pou balances Welles the raconteur in the first part of the show with a more subdued second half performance as he anxiously awaits news from Spielberg. In the first half we are given ample evidence of the sheer overwhelming personality that cajoles and charms his way into projects. We share the euphoria of the voodoo *Macbeth*, his magic routines, and the Mercury Wonder Show with the captive Mel (a veritable audience substitute). The tone in the second half is altogether more jittery and

uneasy as the ravages of age demonstrate their impact on Pou's Welles. It's a beautifully judged performance that avoids easy clichés in providing some sense of the contradictions and enigmas that made up George Orson Welles.

There wasn't too much enigma in Jean-Christophe Sais's much touted production of Euripides' *Andromache*. Sais brings together a Franco-Arabic cast with the Trojans speaking Arab and the Greeks French. It is a good metaphor for the play's thematics of non-communication but frankly that's about all the production relies on to make its impact felt. The expansive stage of the outdoor Grec theatre swamps the actors who rely rather too heavily on rigid poses to convey the sense of impending doom. While Sais may have denied a direct comment on East-West relations in the piece, the casting decisions suggest more than a simple aesthetic endeavor. Hala Omran's *Andromache* switches from Arabic to French, tellingly speaking to her captors in the language of the colonialist oppressors while monologues and conversations with her son are rendered in Arabic. Gilbert Gandil's atmospheric score helps evoke a sense of mood but frankly not even Jean Tartaroli's atmospheric lighting and a few rather lovely Brook-like moments of magic conjured with a wooden pole, could disguise the fact

that there were few ideas at work in this production. There was something curiously old fashioned about Saïs's staging; this *Andromache* was too self-conscious, too interested in promoting its own monumentalism. For those who have admired his work with Koltès in the past, Saïs's production, playing to a half-empty theatre on the night I saw it, proved a real disappointment.

What a great idea to present Barcelona's biannual showcase for Catalan theatre during the Grec. Hosted by the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, promoters were able to see snippets of a range of products and productions. These included Carme Portaceli and Toni Martín's musical take on fairy tales, *Fairy*, Mario Gas and Sol Picó's stripteases (currently playing at the Borràs), which offered an imaginative variation on a well worn formula, and La Fura dels Baus's presentation of a twenty-minute segment from their recent TNC production of *Boris Godunov*.

La Fura were also in action for *la nit blanca*, the city's white-night celebrations on 5 July. Here they teamed up with Comedians, returning for

the first time to the Olympic Stadium of Monjuïc where they had presented the opening and closing night ceremonies of the Olympic Games in 1992.

With the box-office figures of this year's Grec announced as the 2008 festival came to a close what did director Ricardo Szwarczer have planned for 2009? A co-production with Avignon is on the cards, as well as a continued commitment to classical music concerts rather than the large scale "pop" affairs that marked the Grec in the 1990s. There was a fall in audience numbers in 2008—perhaps inevitable in a country in the grip of a recession but nevertheless over 80,000 tickets were sold with 48,652 of these related to the festival's various theatre offerings. The challenge remains finding a way of ensuring the festival promote and play a role in generating the innovative work in Catalonia while ensuring a place for the "best" in world theatre. At a time, however, when the international festival circuit relies on a ever more restricted number of well-worn products, and every theatre programmer remains in avid search of "the new," this may not quite result such an easy task.



La Fura dels Baus's *Boris Godunov*. Photo: Grec Festival.