



## **'An Ambitious Grec for Barcelona in a Year of Austerity'**

A review by Maria Delgado

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## An Ambitious Grec Festival for Barcelona in a Year of Austerity

Maria M. Delgado

Who says there's a recession in Spain? Whatever the doom and gloom statistics (a budget deficit at eleven percent of GDP), strikes, and five percent cuts in public sector salaries, the Grec Festival in Barcelona seems to have had a boom year. With audience figures of over 120,000 and an average occupancy of sixty-five percent its Argentine director Ricardo Szwarcer has good reason to be pleased. Certainly, despite the wobbly opening production, Carme Portacelli's bombastic *Prometeu* (Heiner Müller's version of Aeschylus' *Prometheus*), there has been much to admire in this year's program. Japan has been the featured nation with eleven productions (including collaborations between Catalan and Japanese artists, as with Cesc Gelabert and Frederic Amat's hypnotic *Ki* and Joan Ollé's *Nó*, adapted from Yukio Mishima's Noh theatre). Certainly the Japanese work appealed to Catalan audiences, playing to an average eighty-one percent capacity over the different venues. Next year France is the selected nation, but cuts to the budget may be more difficult to survive.

Catalan practitioners once more enjoyed a central position in the program with new Catalan plays and Spanish-language works translated into Catalan; and Austrian, Irish, Italian, and North-American dramaturgy continued to resonate in the city. The festival has seen actors directing, directors associated with non-textual dramaturgies turning to dense modernist texts, and an established writer-director turning a new play over to an emerging director. While some of the city's most innovative directors (as with Calixto Bieito and Àlex Rigola) have not premiered new stagings, each has loaned their theatre (the Romea and Lliure respectively) to key productions visiting the Lliure. With Lluís Pasqual returning to the Lliure as Rigola's successor next year—he was one of the theatre's co-founders in 1976—and Carol López beginning to make a mark on the program at the Villarroel, things are looking promising in a bleak financial climate.

Two of the festival's strongest productions came from actors who are increasingly forging directorial trajectories, and both were offered in



Sergei Bebel's *Fora de Joc*. Photo: Josep Aznar.



Neil LaBute's *Helter-Skelter*, directed by Julio Manrique. Photo: Courtesy of the Grec Festival.

taut, precise translations by actress Cristina Genebat. David Selvas' imaginative reading of *The Seagull* at the Villarroel, using Martin Crimp's crisp reworking, proved a lithe dynamic staging, full of quirky details and a performative tone that owes something to Argentine Daniel Veronese's contemporary readings of the naturalist canon. Julio Manrique too offered assured imaginative direction in his treatment of Neil LaBute's tryptich of short plays, *Romance*, *The Furies*, and *Helter-Skelter*. This is familiar LaBute territory but Manrique's elegant, stylish production links the American playwright's hermetic world to the wider landscape outside the Sala Beckett—Japanese restaurants feature prominently, playfully referencing the thematic strand of this year's Grec. Manrique's cast register a humanity that is sometimes absent from LaBute's menacing writing.

*Romance* charts the recriminations of a couple who split up a year earlier. A (Andrew Tarbet) is the adulterer who has happily moved on. B (Norbert Martínez) is struggling to get over him. Their "chance" encounter brings to the fore A's cruelty and seductive compulsion and B's damaged psyche. It is a bleak landscape where accusations fly and the line between truth and lies is anyone's guess. Is B as vulnerable as he first appears? Has A been

propositioned by B's sister? Will A visit B later as he states he will? No answers are forthcoming. What remains is the tension between A's indifference and B's lingering hope. Character A alternates between English and Catalan, a ploy that works well in Tarbet's characterisation of a drifter who doesn't want to stay in one place (either physical or emotional) for too long. The use of Roxy Music's "Slave to Love" and "Jealous Guy" expertly captures B's state of mind. As the play ends Tracy Chapman's "Baby can I hold you" articulates a world where words don't always convey a character's journey.

In *The Furies* too, characters articulate extreme positions. Paula (Mireia Aixalà) is meeting her boyfriend Jimmy (Xavier Ricart) for a drink but when he turns up with silent sister Jamie (Oriol Guinart), Paula is in for a rough ride. We think she's about to end the relationship with Jimmy but her revelation of a serious illness shocks the audience, bemuses Jimmy, and visibly angers the passive-aggressive Jamie. Jamie follows her brother like something out of a bad fifties B-movie or, as the play's title evidences, a Greek drama where bloodlines are anything but clear. Jamie may have polyps on her throat but this doesn't impair her manipulation of the hapless Jimmy. Is she Jimmy's other half in more ways than one? Are they really two sides of

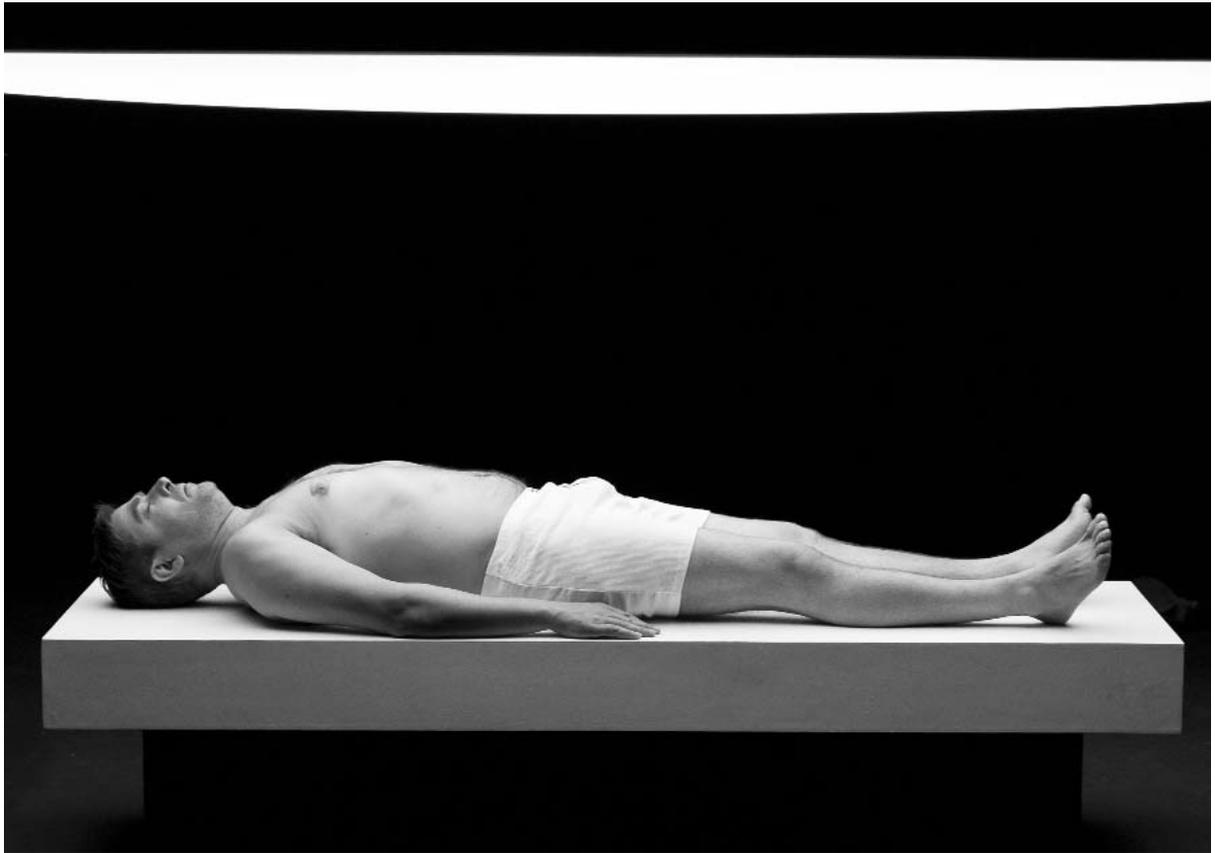
the same person? Her threats to Paula mark her out as a Medusa-meets-the Furies, armed with tequila shots and lemon to fortify her resolve and a scratchy, hoarse voice that terrorizes.

*Helter-Skelter* uses *Medea* as its reference point as a heavily pregnant woman (the play's translator Cristina Genebat) meets her wealthy husband (Ernest Villegas) for dinner. He has been sleeping with her sister and as she gradually reveals that she knows what's been going on, his fears that this will turn into "one of those Greek dramas" becomes a reality. Her coral dress becomes a palette of blood as she aborts her fetus with a steak knife before her husband's very eyes in this most public of spaces; a terrible revenge enacted by a wild-eyed laughing Medea unable to rationalize the events that have befallen her. As the play ends she stands stiffly like a doll on a wind-up musical box as the high hysterics of the operatic score resonate through the auditorium.

Characters from each play spill into the fringes of the others, providing a unifying visual motif. Jamie and Jimmy hover outside the restaurant where the husband's secret will be revealed. A cou-

ple (that includes B from *Romance*) sit in the same restaurant and play out their own silent romance as a backdrop to the bitter battle raging in front of them. It is at once a reminder of the dreams that have now turned sour and an engagement with a wider landscape beyond LaBute's insular tales. This layering and the links between the scenes demonstrate Manrique's superb attention to detail. Ultimately, it raises the production from the merely bitter to the acerbic, recognizing that the stories told form just a part of the complex worlds that intersect across the stage of the Sala Beckett.

Samuel Beckett's short story, *First Love* was first seen on the Catalan stage in 1986 in a version by José Sanchis Sinisterra, the founder of the Sala Beckett—the alternative new writing theatre that takes the Irish writer's name. Opening at the Villarroel in a new Catalan translation of Sanchis Sinisterra's adaptation by Anna Soler, the piece is re-envisaged by La Fura dels Baus' Àlex Olle working with a co-director, Miquel Gòrriz. Catalan actor Pere Arquillué, one of Rigola's regulars at the Lliure during the mid-eighties, here takes the role of the homeless outsider who is befriended by Lulu, a



Samuel Beckett's *First Love*, directed by Àlex Olle. Photo: Josep Aznar.



Thomas Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, directed by Joseph Maria Mestres. Photo: Josep Aznar.

prostitute on a park bench. The relationship that emerges is tainted with a bitter misogyny that doesn't seem too distant from LaBute's dramas. Indeed, the marriage proves anything but a romantic affair, rather a bristly tale of woe, need, an unplanned pregnancy, and the narrator's erratic bowels. In 2007, Ralph Fiennes offered a lean, priggish, formally suited narrator, sat on a lone park bench in what appeared to be a graveyard. Arquillué is a portly, far more exposed figure, first appearing as a semi-naked corpse on a slab of white marble in a cold room that looks all too much like a mortuary. The cold light that envelops the space adds to the sense of refrigeration. It could almost be a laboratory with Arquillué's narrator an object ripe for clinical dissection. The eerie soundscape—a dog barking, a child crying, haunting music—adds to the uncanny mood. Emerging from this dead space, this cemetery of the soul, Arquillué shares his tale of warped lust and revulsion. Listening to it, I alternated between fascination and repulsion. The venom that emerges from Arquillué's matter of fact tone demonstrates a repulsion of what humanity represents; its odors, foibles and routines come in for par-

ticular detestation. Characters come and go, introduced and then dropped. Only the large Lulu lingers, like a bad smell that hovers over the unlucky narrator. Arquillué oscillates between a certain pathos, indifference, anger, and offence. Rather Ollé and Gorriiz's cool, clean production exposes his own shortcomings and fears, his paranoia and misogyny. The production is bleakly funny while never romanticizing the misogyny that fuels the protagonist's fear of the female. Arquillué negotiates his absurd condition with a cheery stoicism that often slips into the menacing stammer of a classroom bully. Whether fully clothed or in plain white underwear, this is a man whose vulnerabilities and excesses are all too clearly exposed.

Thomas Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, was an early success for Calixto Bieito in 1993. His prickly, passionate production signalled both a raw aesthetic and a preference for works that grapple with the realities of the contemporary European psyche. Now Josep Maria Mestres has offered a thoughtful if rather stolid production of the play in Miguel Sáenz's respectful translation. Ludwig Wittgenstein (Mingo Ráfols) returns home from

time away at a sanatorium but his relationship with his two sisters is anything but straightforward. The elder (Carmen Machi) is a controlling mothering figure who wants things run her way and expects order to be observed at all times. The younger sister (Àngels Bassas) may appear less stiff but is soon revealed to be far more needy, playing games with her brother in a more ominous battle with her elder sibling. Designer Pep Duran offers an imposing dining room where aged furniture and dour family portraits suggest the parents' presence still hovers over the three children. Indeed stern relatives look down on the threesome without respite and even Ludwig's attempts to move them out are frustrated by the commitment to maintaining the family's legacy demonstrated by his elder sister.

The performances are uniformly good. Machi, here cast against type, offers a prim official figure with sensible shoes, plainly cut dress and hair neatly tied back. She takes her time over all domestic chores and lays out a tablecloth with almost military precision. Her voice rises and falls with an almost unnerving poise. It's a very watchable characterization of a role that doesn't give much room for development.

Bassas is paradoxically both wilder and more languid. Hers is a more modern dress and mischievous shoes that suggest a good time girl caught in the

"gilded cage" of the family house. She talks in terms that recall both Beckett and Pinter's wayward protagonists: of wanting to leave for Rome and Paris. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot* and Davies in *The Caretaker*, however, it is only talk and she seems incapable of moving anywhere. Ràfols is a baby-faced brother, petulant, angry and frustrated. He looks at the family portraits while discussing his parents, overwhelmed by what they represent in his life. He marches, struts, sulks, and rages. His sisters both fuss around him and try to placate his outbursts. Pulling the tablecloth into a giant bib, his infantilization is all too clear. This is a boy who was never allowed or never able to grow up.

My reservations are with the pacing of the production which remains rather one-dimensional; it is as if Mestres wants to reinforce every moment of the writing, every phrase is expertly articulated and reflected on. The raw danger of Jacques Rosner's 1991 Théâtre de la Colline production is here substituted by a more considered although no less impressively acted reflection on Bernhard's meandering (and at times frustrating) play.

Sergi Belbel has proved one of Catalonia's most resilient dramatists, working across a minimalist formula to explore contemporary malaises and dilemmas. His is a recognizably postmodern world but one that characters are never quite able to



Thomas Bernhard's *Ritter, Dene, Voss*. Photo: Josep Aznar.



Alfredo Sanzol's *Delicades/Delicate Women* of T de Teatre. Photo: David Ruano.

negotiate with ease. His latest play, *Fora de joc* (*Offside*) turns to the themes of his 2004 *Forasters* (*Strangers*), exploring immigration, bourgeois discontent, and the changing face of the Catalan capital. The tone is slightly more frantic than *Forasters* as an animated mother, wife, and daughter (Anna Azcona) negotiates relationships with her student daughter, Elisa (Queralt Casasayas); her cantankerous wheelchair bound father (Toni Sevilla), her husband Pol (Francesc Lucchetti) who fears losing his job, and the football-mad South-American home help, Ricky (Jordi Andújar) who cares for her elderly father.

The production never really finds a theatrical vocabulary for the play. Anna Azcona appears trapped within a hysterical soap-opera register, forever tottering in heels that render her kitchen antics rather incredible. Toni Seville's aging patriarch is clad in a false chest that looks close to falling off through the play and seems totally unnecessary. Sevilla is a hugely experienced and accomplished actor and the role never moves beyond cliché. Ricky's accent seems rather inconsistent and his budding romance with Elisa never really convinces. There's a bizarre scene where Ricky becomes the mother of his child, informing him that his son has suffered an accident and will never play football

again. Enrich Planes' plywood set looks as if it was knocked together in an hour and gives the staging the look of a rather makeshift amateur dramatics show. Cristina Clemente's production opts for speed, big gestures, and in-your-face acting, playing the plot like a French farce. The writing, however, pulls the play in another direction. Certainly, the football motif is topical but it needed more considered treatment. It seems a little like a dramatic afterthought. Belbel might have been better off directing the piece himself. It needed the hand of a more confident or experienced director able to find an appropriate scenic register for the writing.

Bebel's work as a translator was also on show at the Grec. Indeed, one of the festival's hits showcased the work of the Navarre-born writer, Alfredo Santo, here working with the inventive T de Teatre. The play *Delicades (Delicate Women)*, beautifully translated by Belbel, assembles a compelling number of short scenarios that hang together as a delicately woven elegy to the generation of his grandparents. The piece resembles a tapas menu: small morsels of delight that are easily consumed, very digestible and highly tasty. This is not to say that the episodes evade difficult subject matter. The piece is set largely in the 1930s and 1940s with a few select scenarios set in the present. The absence



Alfredo Sanzol's *Delicades/Delicate Women* of T de Teatre. Photo: David Ruano.

of war, the schisms of the post-Civil War years where the "them" (Republicans) and "us" (Nationalists) mentality prevailed, religious indoctrination, and sexual conformity all feature but the play skilfully evades demonising the Nationalists or imbuing the Republicans with idealized virtues. There is something Chekhovian about both the tone of the play and the production. Lorca's *Doña Rosita* also comes to mind as a reference point as characters appear to communicate with flowers more effortlessly than with their fellow human beings—perhaps a telling indictment of a society marked for generations by a fratricidal civil war.

A woman serves breakfast to a soldier while extolling the virtues of the twin stalwarts of her toilette: rubbing alcohol and Nivea crème. A gardener sees her prize rose cut as a gift to the girlfriend of the family's son. Two sisters do battle over a crucifix on a wall that has been cemented in place so that visiting militants don't remove it. A father wants to be friends with his daughter on Facebook but she is having none of it. Four sisters prepare to wave their brother off to the Civil War. Two male friends reflect on how their friends categorize them as Batman and Robin, Bert and Ernie, and Starsky and Hutch, opting for strategic measures to address the homophobia that is generated by their shared

walks. A couple fears that its dog has been run over by a train and the situation unleashes a series of recriminations that expose the fragility of the relationship. A painter persuasively tries to sell one of her art works to a client. A woman attempts to get a friend to persuade her husband to kill the mouse that's lurking in her kitchen. A nanny is quizzed by her employers on why she has told their son that God's existence cannot be proved. A woman discusses the things she hoards in a sparse economic climate. A musician plays the cymbals to an assembled family but only one audience member seems able to appreciate what he is offering and envisage the military band alongside him. A woman is approached by a photographer friend of her Republican aviator husband, as the latter wants a naked photograph of her to carry with him. A grandmother picks plums with her two grandsons aware of the fact that she's losing her memory. The desire for fresh fish and the need to keep up appearances in a difficult economic climate leads a housewife to the measure of sleeping with the fishmonger. A young man wants his grandmother to tell him the story of her life: a story which the audience is led to believe is a starting point for the play.

The cast of six each take on an assortment of roles in the eighteen vignettes. A cyclorama

across the back wall of the theatre mutates with the mood of each scene. Décor is largely written across and through the actors' bodies. Props are minimal and brought on and off by each of the performers. There's a swift pace to the production but also a lightness of touch that ensures scenes are not weighed down. Costumes expertly suggest both the Civil War years and the present, and are cut with a simplicity that is evidenced in the entire aesthetic of the production. Marcos Ordóñez of *El País* has referred to the production as having something of a photograph album; and the lighting of the production does envelop the stage in sepia tones. There are some exquisite moments: the pilot and his wife staring at each other separated by an impossible abyss; a conspiratorial contemplation of the virtues of a particular toilette regime; a litany of items saved and hoarded, a moment of silence as characters try to make sense of the events before them. Sanzol has crafted a memorable play that offers a new paradigm for thinking through the relationship between historical memory and the personal and the political in Spain's checkered past.

The post-war era is also the setting for Eduardo de Filippo's *Questi fantasmi*, directed by Oriol Broggi for LaPerla29 at the Biblioteca de Catalunya as part of an ongoing project on the play-

wright realized with Italy's Teatri Uniti. Broggi's earlier *Natale in Casa Cupiello* had a Catalan cast, whereas here two Italian performers join the company. It's a brave idea that tries to examine performance vocabularies across different nations and different acting traditions. *Natale in Casa Cupiello* demonstrated a strong understanding of de Filippo's narrative arcs, drawing together the bittersweet strands of the writing in an ensemble production that further reinforced the sparse aesthetic evidenced in his earlier bare-boards *Hamlet*. *Questi Fantasmi* follows some of the ideas pioneered in *Natale in Casa Cupiello*. Popular entertainment opens the production, with jugglers and trays of chilled wine welcoming the audience. The cast emerge with the elegant directness of a Cheek by Jowl cast, taking the stage to set the mood of the piece.

Cash-strapped Pasquale (Tony Laudadio) and his wife María (Marta Domingo) move to an old building which they hope to do up in order to make some money renting rooms out to guests. The building is supposedly haunted and this rumor is used by the porters, Raffaele (Jordi Martínez) and Piero (Giampiero Schiano), to remove items from the house. It also means that María's lover, Alfredo (Xavier Boada), can come and go without attracting



Eduardo de Filippo's *Questi fantasmi*, directed by Oriol Broggi. Photo: Courtesy of the Grec Festival.

suspicion. But the ghosts seem to be multiplying as Alfredo's wife Armida (Pilar Pla) turns up, looking for a husband she wants back home with the children. Gastone (Pau Miró) seems willing to intervene to keep the peace.

Designer Paula Bosch provides an open central performance area that allows for multiple entry and exit points and a balcony where Pasquale is able to wave at his absent neighbor. Characters come and go with speedy ease and the different items of furniture that create Pasquale's family home area swiftly deposited. It's a lively production full of delightful details; characters walk out of wardrobes, hide, steal and improvise as the plot demands. A rendition of "Nessun Dorma" at the beginning of the second act as Pasquale and María grandly open their guesthouse brings the cast and technical team together in one of the production's most brilliant moments. There's an engagement with the audience whose presence is acknowledged at numerous key points in the narrative. Broggi is able to make the production "speak" to a local audience. The guesthouse takes the name of Pension la Perla—after Broggi's own theatre company. Jordi Martínez's Raffaele asks "what's wrong with Catalans?" at a time when Catalunya's demands that

its autonomy be respected are hotly contested at parliamentary level.

There are some nice performances too. Xavier Boada presents Alfredo as an aging gigolo whose looks have been somewhat ravaged by time. Pilar Pla's Armida comes over as a ghostly femme fatale who belongs in an Italian melodrama accompanied by two burly adolescent boys and a mother who is all hat, scarf, and teeth. Jordi Martínez and Giampiero Schiano make an attractive pair of porters; the former wily and cautious, always ready to pick up on the mistakes of others; the latter darting in and out, following his sharper partner's commands.

The interplay of languages comes once more to the fore, only now, in addition to Catalan and Castilian there's more than a smattering of Italian with Neapolitan entering into the linguistic palette. Broggi attempts to create the space for different gestural registers to intersect but this proves more problematic in that the stylistic incongruities sometimes stagger the pacing. Laudadio appears rather wooden when speaking in Castilian. Gastone's Argentine accent is never really contextualized or explained. As such the production is less confident than *Natale in Casa Cupiello* and while



*Questi fantasmí.* Photo: Courtesy of the Grec Festival.

the space offers a veritable box of tricks to accommodate the characters' comings and goings and the musical underscoring effectively reinforces mood, the production is never quite the ambitious sum of all its parts.

At the Lliure, Antoni Parera Fons's new opera, *Amb els peus a la lluna* (*With Their Feet on the Moon*) from a script by Manuel Maestro and Paco Azorín juxtaposes a young boy's fascination with the first landings on the moon with the activities of the scientists working behind the scenes to co-ordinate the shuttle's path. Azorín is a resource-

ful and imaginative scenographer and this production marks his directorial debut. The set presents a wonderfully detailed Kubrickesque world that suggests the sixties as envisaged through the lens of Tim Burton. For all the visual candy, however, the score never comes alive and dramaturgically the piece never holds the audience's attention. The performances are all rather rigid, delivered full on to the audience. It may have been marketed as a piece for children but it occupies an uncomfortable space between the cartoon graphics and adult conceits.



Antoni Parera Fon's *Amb els peus a la lluna* (*With Their Feet on the Moon*), directed by Paco Azorín. Photo: Courtesy of the Grec Festival.