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‘Barcelona: Making Theatre at a Time of Crisis’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona: Making Theatre at a Time of Crisis

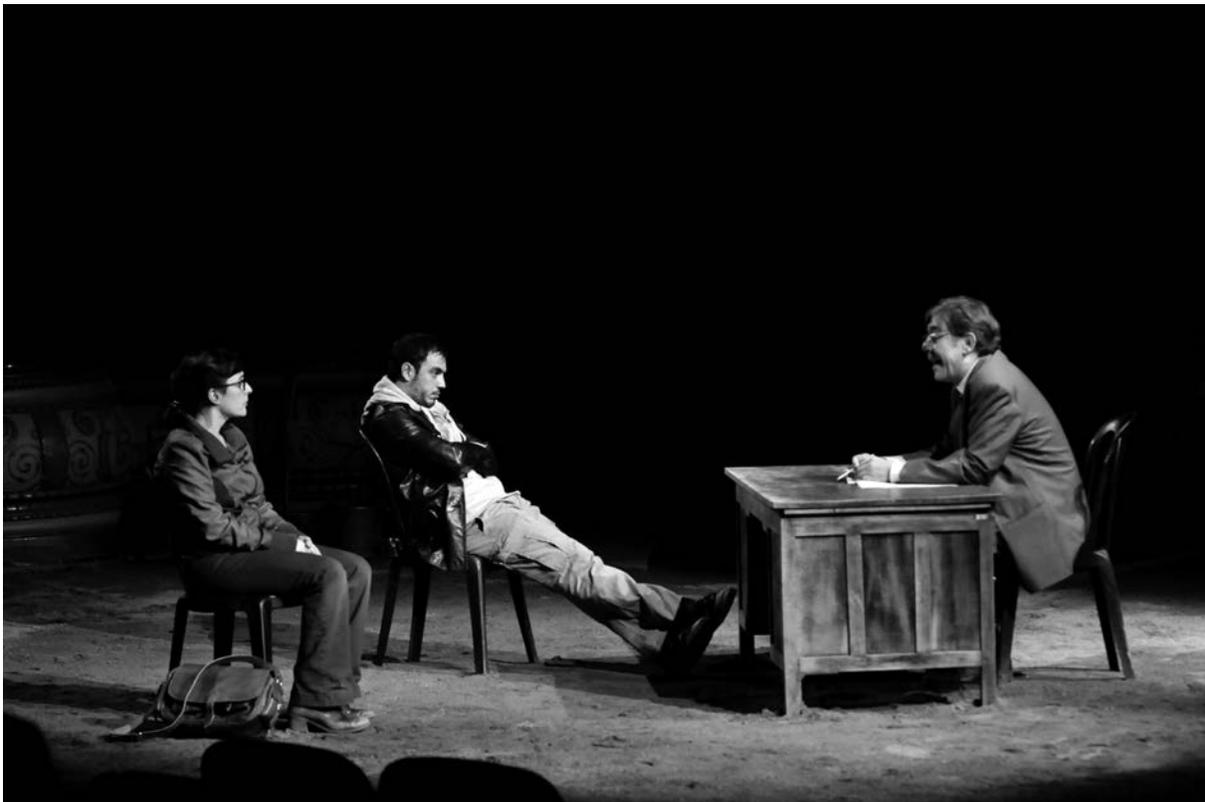
Maria M. Delgado

Scorched has been doing the rounds on the world festival circuit for a decade now. The Lebanese Canadian Wajdi Mouawad's play is a contemporary *Oedipus Rex* refracted through the prisms of globalization and conflicts in the Middle East. Oriol Broggi, director of La Perla 29, has chosen to present Cristina Genebat's taut Catalan-language translation of the three-hour version first seen in Spain at Madrid's Matadero theatre in a French-language production by Mouawad in 2008. While the former production boasted a cast of nine—and that still involved a fair degree of doubling—Broggi makes do with just seven who, with the exception of Clara Segura in the dual role of the mother and daughter, each take on a plethora of characters.

The tale gravitates around the twin children of Nawal Marwan, Janine and her brother Simon, who are told by their dead mother's solicitor, Lebel (Xavier Boada), of the task she has set them. Janine is charged with finding their father and Simon their brother—both figures they have never known—to

hand them letters written by their mother before her death. And so begins the siblings' quest into the family's past. For only by understanding their past can they begin to come to terms with their present. Their mother had spent the final five years of her life in silence. The play tries to understand where this refusal to speak came from. By finding its roots they can give her the headstone that she currently lacks.

Scorched (*Incendis* in Catalan) begins as a thriller that sees the twins as unwilling detectives going back to their mother's homeland to dig around the past. The narrative shifts from past to present across two narrative streams that converge at the play's end. The first is effectively set up by the opening scene as the siblings meet with their mother's solicitor. It focuses on Nawal's past from adolescence to grave. We see her as a teenager full of idealistic hopes and dreams; we witness her politicization by the difficult social and religious climate, as an adult prisoner caught in the horrors of what we presume is the Lebanese Civil War of the 1970s. There is no



Oriol Broggi's *Scorched* at the Romea theatre. Photo: Bitó Cels/Romea theatre.

specific mention of Lebanon but the dramatist's past and the events recounted tellingly position the play within this fratricidal conflict. Janine discovers that her Christian mother gets pregnant by her Palestinian lover who later perishes, and then gives birth to a child who is given away. She vows to find him but instead is imprisoned in Kfar Ryat for fifteen years. Here she is referred to as the Woman who Sings—a voice of hope in a wilderness of despair. Tortured and raped by Abou Tarek, she gives birth to twin children who survive in this compromised environment. She later discovers, when testifying at an International Criminal Tribunal into War Crimes, that Abou Tarek is her son Nihad. When this is revealed she turns to silence as a mechanism for coping with this terrible revelation.

The second story follows the siblings as they try to find their father and brother. Further stories tumble around these two central tales until the narrative links converge into a central chronicle as stark and terrible as any Greek tragedy. For their brother Nihad, who Nawal was never able to locate, is also the twins' father. His rape of Nawal results in the birth of the twins. At the production's end, as the siblings confront their father-brother, the remainders of the cast look on from the sides. Like the audience they are witnesses to this terrible drama where *Oedipus Rex* converges with *Antigone*.

Broggi understands both the traces of Sophocles that shape the play and the thriller element manipulated by Mouawad. His production opts for an economy of gesture and decor. The floor is bare earth; the costumes deceptively simple with a change of jacket or bag, or the putting on of a pair of glasses, sufficing to point to a shifting role. We are transported from place to place in the blink of an eye. Mouawad's epic tale takes in a range of locations: a bus, camp, classroom, gym, cemetery, and prison. These are realized by Broggi through an aesthetic that draws on the fluidity of storytelling that defines Mouawad's fellow Canadian Robert Lepage as well as the bare minimalism of Cheek by Jowl.

Broggi's staging is presented at the Romea theatre but this elegant venue is reconfigured to resemble something of Broggi's habitual theatrical home, the crypt of the Biblioteca of Catalunya (Catalan Library). There is a gravelly sandy floor, minimal props—a table, a few chairs, bare planks—brought on as required. A sheet functions as a makeshift screen for projections, a clapped out piano sits at the side of the stage. Every piece of furniture looks worn as if it has seen better days and has a tale or two of its own manifest across its shabby features.

The audience confronts the horrors of the tale enacted before them but also themselves. The Romea's habitual configuration has been refashioned. At times, it appears that we are at the Bouffes du Nord. There are seats on the stage with part of the stalls converted into the set. In a tale where nothing is quite what is expected, the audience is plunged into the unknown as the Romea forms part of this strange, unsettling world. At one point Simon comments on the phone to his sister that "we have no option but to forget," but the play seems to implore its Catalan audience to decisively forget the pact of silence that followed Spain's transition to democracy. Using the distancing device of a play ostensibly set in a society far removed from Catalonia (Canada and then the Lebanon), Broggi seems to have found a mechanism for tackling the horrors of his country's domestic past without recourse to direct confrontation. This is a production that asks Spain to face up to its own scorched earth and tackle the demons that haunt its past. It is perhaps not surprising that Nawal's ghost (Clàudia Fons) hovers across the margins of the stage. Until her children discover the truth about her past, the ghost cannot be laid to rest.

On two occasions a stage manager has to come on to clear the debris from the stage. Broggi's focus is always on finding your way through the obstacles—both physical and emotional—that litter the way. Janine and Simon have to wade through the mess left behind by civil conflict and exile. The solution may present itself rather too neatly at the end—a victory that rings hollow in a Spanish nation still bitterly divided by the 2007 Law of Historical Memory—but the production nevertheless pulls a punch, in part because it openly acknowledges the play's mythical elements.

The use of sound is particularly effective: The boxing ring of an early scene allows Simon to let out his anger and frustration; the sounds of insects in the desert speak to an environment where one is never alone; the layers of music from John Lennon's "Imagine" to Bruce Springsteen's "Sherry Darling" position the production within the 1970s and its aftermath and speak of the idealism of Nawal and its destructive refraction across Nihad. Julio Manrique takes on the role of Simon and his brother/father Nihad, embodying the resentment of the former and the frenetic uncompassionate madness of the latter. Further roles include Nawal's teenage love Wahab and the nurse who painstakingly records 500 hours of silence as a way of working through the legacy of the past. Nawal is often enacted by three performers, but here Clara Segura takes the role from idealistic



The opening scene of Alfredo Sanzol's *Aventura!* at the Teatre Lliure. Photo: David Ruano/Teatre Lliure.

teenager to silent pensioner. She is the woman who sings and the devoted friend to Màrcia Cisteró's illiterate Sawda. Putting on a pair of glasses and a red leather jacket she also takes on the role of Nawal's daughter Janine. Cisteró is superb across multiple roles including Nawal's mother Jihane. Xavier Ruano is able to find nuances in each of his roles: as Simon's trainer, Chamseddine, the leader of the resistance movement and Abdessamad, the village elder who functions as the repository of memory. Xavier Boada is memorable as the quirky middle-aged notary-cum-storyteller who opens the play. While the production may be accused of playing down the particular Lebanese context that informs Mouawad's play, it doesn't shy from showing the painful decisions that civic conflict forces humans to make: a soldier demands a mother save only one of her three children; children forcibly removed from parents; mindless assassinations in the name of patriotism and political expediency. *Scorched* reinforces the need to remember at a time when the politics of forgetting seems to be the most convenient method of dealing with a problematic past.

Alfredo Sanzol has never shied from looking at Spain's refusal to come to terms with the crimes of the Franco era. *En la luna* (*On the Moon*) was a brilliantly acerbic examination of the compromising silence that governed the transition to democracy.

Delicades a bittersweet look at the post-Civil War Spain. Now with *Aventura!* (*Adventure!*) he opts to turn his eye to a contemporary Spain devastated by twenty-six percent unemployment where his six thirty-something generation protagonists find their hopes repeatedly frustrated. Six business partners hope to sell their unnamed and possibly ailing—although we cannot be sure of this—company to the Chinese. All are uncertain of what the future holds and contemplating what the sell might offer. All yearn to get as much from the deal as possible and hope to outwit their Chinese buyers. At some point they each contemplate a plan to escape, flee, leave, or run away. Marc dreams of an ambling life in the country but won't convert dreams into action; Elisa won't compromise by learning German but talks of immigrating to Germany. Àngels wonders about the difference between the dictatorship and democracy—the latter has failed to deliver on all it promised. Across a number of successive days the group of six gathers at work and at play to look at their options. Marc notes that the world in which they are living is sinking. He fears his wife, Núria, will leave him; she simply suggests they drink less. Marc can't even take care of Àngels's bonsai—what hope does he have for taking care of himself and his family? Àngels fears Marc might have neglected the tree as some kind of revenge. Elisa hopes that by

moving closer to nature when things are going badly she might find redemption.

This a play of characters who are not quite sure of their place in the world. Globalization and economic collapse have fractured Spain's sense of self and other. When Lee, the potential Chinese buyer of their company, arrives in Madrid, their dinner plans to woo him all go wrong as Sandra slips in the kitchen and they end up as casualties—with Lee and his translator Oriol insisting on coming along. The friends hope to win Lee over with the women as attractive bait. Only while Lee is soon infatuated with Sandra he is nevertheless not prepared to compromise on price—offering them just a half of his previous proposition. Sandra is unsure of whether to join Lee back in China while Pau pines for a life in rural Extremadura that Elisa doesn't want to share. She doesn't want a job cleaning holiday homes for a living, thinking it beneath her. Pau reminds her that this is how his mother paid for his education. "At times where normality is jettisoned, we do things that lie outside the normal," says Marc. The women plot on a weekend break to Ibiza in the hope that their womanly wiles might just be able to win Lee over. Desperate times call for desperate actions. When Sandra returns from her first trip to China her proposal that each of the associates gets 200,000 euros extra out of the sale if she moves to Shanghai to live with Lee meets with the quick approval from the rest of the group. She may be their colleague and friend but when it comes to money they'll jettison her for a quick buck.

Sanzol's production—its short, snappy scenes punctuated by jaunty music with something of a Wild West theme—moves at a brisk pace. Scenes flow effortlessly creating the sense of a society that doesn't want to stand still but doesn't quite know where to go. The cavernous office space, designed by Alejandro Andújar, embodies a culture of waste. The characters rattle around in the yawning room and yet are simultaneously trapped by oppressive low ceilings. There is less of the episodic format of the vignettes that made up *Delicades* and *On the Moon* and a stronger element of screwball comedy—in the vein of Alan Ayckbourn. Fernando Velázquez, a habitual collaborator of Sanzol's who recently composed the music for Bayona's Tsunami film *The Impossible*, crafts a pulsating soundtrack where the Spaghetti Western meets Indiana Jones: an ironic comment on a generation caught in a rut that struggles to act with bravery or vision.

Ágata Rota is superb as the dreamy Sandra—unsure of whether to follow Lee or remain

in Spain to a less than certain future. She also has a delightful cameo as the nurse who takes care of the hapless Sandra at the hospital. Albert Ribalta plays it straight as Lee while also doubling as the passive Marc. His elastic face brilliantly conveys the shifting moods of the play. Jordi Rico also doubles up as the patient Pau—whose answer to everything involves staying put—and Lee's prim translator Oriol. Marta Pérez is the haughty Elisa who thinks she has control of her working life while her domestic life falls apart around her. Carmen Pla portrays Núria's underlying frustration and resentment. Mamen Duch is the calculating money-driven Àngels who always has a plan for everything although precious little ever comes to fruition. The company T de Teatre have collaborated previously with Sanzol and it shows. The actors understand his dialogue and deliver it with little fuss. It is the matter of factness of even the most extraordinary occurrences that make the piece so effective.

While I didn't quite buy the Sandra and Lee "connection," this remains an audacious play where Sanzol demonstrates his ability to put his pulse on the mood of the nation. Few Spanish dramatists have his ear for dialogue and his innate sense of absurdist humor. In Sergi Belbel's idiomatic translation, the play races along with a precise sense of purpose. It may lack the bittersweet brilliance of *On the Moon* but it nevertheless confirms Sanzol's position as one of Spain's most audacious writers and a director of expert precision.

The Lliure may have suffered a twenty-five percent cut to their annual budget since 2010, which necessitates closing the venue for three months during the summer of 2013, but its director Lluís Pasqual has programmed a punchy season of work where Sanzol sits alongside Pasqual's own compelling production of David Harrower's *Blackbird* and a towering production of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* by Josep Maria Mestres with a stellar cast including Carmen Machi—soon to be seen in Almodóvar's new movie—in the role of a mother who cannot face up to the terrible news that the two soldiers have come to tell her about her son. These may be hard times—with a hugely unpopular twenty-one percent VAT imposed on all theatre tickets by this government—but the Lliure appears determined to continue its tradition of adventurous programming that speaks to the political, social, and cultural issues of the day.

There have been many productions of *Rusalka* over the years. Few have matched the harrowing intensity of David Pountney's 1983 staging

set in an Edwardian children's nursery. Here the events appear as part of Rusalka's imagination—her wheelchair-confined grandfather as the water gnome Vodnik, her sisters as the nymphs, her governess as the sorceress Jezibaba. Melly Still's recent and less satisfying production for Glyndebourne in 2009 refashioned Dvorak's opera as a fantasy-underwater-little-mermaid tale, contrasting strongly with Dvorak's stark obsession with human self-obsession. Now Stefan Herheim's production for Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu (first seen at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in 2008) resituates the early twentieth-century opera from an enchanted forest to a resolutely contemporary European city. For the overture willow trees sway in the evening breeze alongside a lamppost as commuters make their way home, tumbling in and out of an underground station. An endless stream of individuals run through the rainy street past a boarded up shop, church, and flickering ice-cream parlor "Lunatic": a family with a little boy, a woman carrying a violin, a blind man tapping his stick along the road, a flower seller (later shown to be Jezibaba) peddling her wares. A woman appears at a balcony. The same scene is played out as if on an endless reel, a groundhog day in which Vodnik appears trapped.

Inflatable manikins bob frenetically in the window of his apartment like a terrible vision that appears and then disappears once more from human view. There is something of George Tsypin's hellish urban landscape for Peter Sellars' Harlem-set *Don Giovanni* (1987) in Heike Scheele's busy street scene set. Graffiti marked shutters, a fifties style diner-cum bar, the mouth of an underground station, a grand church, an apartment block where a bridal shop mutates into a peep shop parlor in the bat of an eyelid all sit cheek by jowl in this heaving metropolis. A mirror reflects the audience—a reminder that this is a world of our own making and, in essence, ourselves. The stage world is at once alluring and ominous—an urban environment where appearances are deceptive.

Herheim's reading makes Günther Groissböck's Vodnik the central protagonist of his production. He first appears as a businessman en route home; his umbrella knocked inside out by the lashing wind and rain. Later, thrown out by his wife—the woman on the balcony—he wanders the streets where he is approached by Rusalka; here configured as an alluring siren-like silver-suited prostitute with a peroxide wig. He mistreats her but she returns again to his abusive treatment. Camilla



Stefan Herheim's *Rusalka* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. Photo: A. Bofill/Gran Teatre del Liceu

Nyland's Rusalka appears to have few options available to her. She wanders the streets like a ghost, craving human "respectability" and escape from a life of sexual slavery.

She delivers the "Song of the Moon" surrounded by dazzling TV satellite dishes. Positioned on a cyclical advertising hoarding with a mermaid's tale swishing below as a reminder of past readings of the opera, she surveys a mad world that positions women as either bridal angels or whores selling their bodies for sex. Herheim wittily places a poster promoting his production on the hoarding. He recognizes his own implicit role in the oppression chronicled on stage. Ildikó Komlósi's Jezibaba is the homeless woman seen hovering around the underground entrance in the opera's overture. She explodes from a television screen thrown out of Vodnik's window at the end of act 1 like a terrible genie. The three nymphs frolic off in fifties attire like demented Doris Days with three sailors while a fourth, the Prince (perhaps a younger version of Vodnik), is observed by Rusalka dressed in a wedding dress. The elder Vodnik wanders the streets in search of some part of himself that appears lost to him. In his pajamas he looks like a lost spirit, a senile old man destined to wander the streets like a lost Orpheus.

Rusalka, in turn, is less his Eurydice than female temptation in its many forms. First seen as a prostitute in alluring silver she later appears in a virginal wedding dress. This is the duplicitous female of the male imagination who can take on any guise as required. Herheim appears to position her within a long line of artistic protagonists whose role lies in falling into temptation, suffering, and then paying for her waywardness in death. Herheim's conception of Rusalka leaves room for her to be an ex-lover of Vodnik's, but it is primarily as destructive muse that she is presented in Nylund's persuasive characterization. In act 2 she appears in the same attire as the Foreign Princess. And this Princess visits the opera with the Prince where they appear to watch "the Rusalka show"—perhaps a comment on the opera presented before the audience at the Liceu. Meanwhile Vodnik competes with his own spectacle: a glorious underwater extravaganza with a giant octopus which he aggressively spears in the climax.

Act 3 sees Jezibaba cloning Rusalka in an identical silver sequined gown. She is a kindred spirit, an outsider like Rusalka who at the end of the production appears equally isolated and alone. The tormented Vodnik murders his wife and tries to

destroy the memory of Rusalka but this defies him. In the world that he has conjured nuns transform into prostitutes. Women may be stereotyped as whores or saviors but for the tortured male imagination they always resemble a threat. As the snow falls, a police cordon surrounds the house from which Vodnik is taken away to prison while the drunken Jezibaba hovers around the edges as a homeless tramp rejected by society.

At the production's end a new Rusalka appears ready to take her place on the streets. The show will begin again. Another *Rusalka* "performance" for an audience ready to devour a new tale of a woman tried and tested and ultimately failing. Herheim's production is smart and witty. There are times when it's somewhat baffling including an episode when an array of cartoon like figures of octopuses, starfish, and other sea life swarm through the auditorium but it's consistent in its novel vision of Vodnik as the protagonist of the piece.

At the Tívoli theatre La Cubana continues its hit run with *Campanades de boda* (*Wedding Bells*), coming up to its first anniversary. Over 200,000 spectators had seen the show between March and October 2012. Recent estimates now suggest that by the time the show hits the road on a tour across Spain that will close in Madrid at the end of 2013, it will have reached over a million spectators. Its participatory tale of the trials and tribulations of an intercultural wedding realized across the oceans through the wonders of virtual technology continues to offer a feel-good tonic in an age of austerity. The wedding serves as a celebratory experience—with audience members donning brightly colored hats as they are invited to join the wedding celebrations being held at the Tívoli in act 2. From the farcical screwball comedy structure of the first act's chaotic wedding preparations to the grand ceremony of act 2 replete with audience members acting as bridesmaids and witnesses, this is, as with all La Cubana's previous productions, a loving homage to the labor involved in putting on a play. Jordi Milán offers a backstage musical where family and friends put their differences aside to come together to make the wedding happen: a telling lesson for a nation governed by bickering politicians beset by corruption scandals and unable to revive an ailing economy.

At the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona), one of the city's most emblematic art museums, Xavier Albertí, the incoming director of the Catalan National Theatre, has co-curated a terrific exhibition on the city's El



Carmen Machi in Josep Maria Mestres's production of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* at the Teatre Lliure.
 Photo: Ros Ribas /Teatre Lliure.

Paral.lel Avenue. This avenue was once the center of Barcelona's entertainment industry where café theatres and circuses stood next to more conventional proscenium-arch venues. The exhibition focuses on the period 1894 to 1939 when it was the hub of the city's intellectual culture as a meeting point for writers, artists, and social activists seeking improved working conditions for the emerging proletariat. The exhibition opens with a spectacular black and white panoramic image that captures the theatrical eclecticism of the avenue, moving through rooms of photographs, posters, projected films, paintings by artists like Ricard Urgell—the Toulouse Lautrec of the Paral.lel—showing stage spectacles, designs by Josep Castells Sumalla and computer-generated maps of how the theatres sprung up during these years and what now lies in their place. (At one point an incredible seventy-eight percent of the avenue was made up of theatrical establishments.) The exhibition links the Paral.lel's role in the political conscience of the city to its position on the fringes of the city's more established venues. But it is this emphasis on the Paral.lel as a frontier, a place where "alternative" entertainments flourished, a transgressive site where habitual class schisms were temporarily collapsed

that makes this such a fascinating exhibition. Albertí and co-curator Eduard Molner show the differences with Montmartre and Broadway—indefinitely more bourgeois—and map how the middle-classes eventually flocked to the area as singer-performer Raquel Meller (later to grace *The Times's* cover) and other *cupletistas* occupied its stages. "El Paral.lel 1894–1939" is as much a history of the city's shifting demographic as it is a theatrical culture that was effectively dismantled in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Albertí's and Molner's aural and visual materials come from a range of the city's archives but special mention needs to be made of the Institut del Teatre that provides a significant proportion of the exhibits.

Regular readers of *Western European Stages* will have remembered the many reviews of work by the Catalan actress Anna Lizaran which I have contributed over the past decade. Lizaran, who died at the age of sixty-seven on 12 January 2013, had had something of the playfulness of Judi Dench, the wit of Maggie Smith, the down to earth humanity of Pauline Collins, the steeliness of Helen Mirren, the vocal intensity of Fiona Shaw. Lizaran was a "doer" who worked tirelessly to improve the

conditions of Catalan theatre. She was a founding member of two of Catalonia's core companies: the physical theatre company Comediants (1972) and the Teatre Lliure (1976). With the latter she worked to create a theatrical culture marked by the civic responsibility and high professional standards of Milan's Piccolo theatre. Here, she performed many of her most emblematic roles under the direction of Fabià Puigserver and Lluís Pasqual. I was fortunate enough to see the revival of Fabià Puigserver's 1978 staging of Per Olov Enquist's *The Night of the Tribades* in 1999 where her characterization of the lesbian writer Maria Carolina David offered a brilliant embodiment of defiant agency. Her stillness was utterly compelling and profoundly unsettling. Her Ranevskaya in Pasqual's 2000 *Cherry Orchard* was a portrait of flighty indecision, a butterfly-like figure unable to grasp the severity of her situation. Her weeping beside the upstage model of the Lliure, as the company was preparing to move out of its legendary venue in the working class area of Gràcia, offered a metatheatrical embodiment of the company's situation on the eve of a historical relocation.

Lizaran's roles were varied; indeed, she refused to be typecast. She could embody sexual desire—as with her obsessive Miss Julie (Teatre Lliure, 1986); she could play arched comedy and Oscar Wildish wit—as evidenced in her delicious Anna in *Boston Marriage* (Teatre Lliure, 2005); and had a panache for highly wrought drama, as in her mischievous characterization of the rancid, pill-popping matriarch of Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (TNC–Catalan National Theatre, 2011). At

a time when too many actors are positioned within an ever more narrow repertoire of roles, Lizaran was defined by her audacity and breadth, playfulness and humanity. She was an actress for all seasons with over thirty different stage roles to her name. While associated with the Lliure she had worked regularly at the Catalan National Theatre [TNC] under the direction of playwright and director Sergi Belbel. She was in rehearsals with Belbel for David Hirson's *La bête* at the Catalan National Theatre when she first became ill in October 2012.

The Spanish stage lost another actor in early 2013. Fernando Guillén, probably best known for his role as the philandering suave Iván in Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) died at the age of eighty on 17 January. The Catalan-born actor was a key force in the Spanish theatre of the 1960s and 1970s—first working with Fernando Fernán-Gómez and Conchita Montes's companies before forming his own company together with his wife, the actress Gemma Cuervo. He oozed sophistication with a silky smooth voice, penetrating eyes and classic good looks that set him up well for a range of leading roles. Guillén had great breadth as an actor. He began with Mihura's and Sastre's plays in the 1950s but could move between the melodrama of José Zorilla and the epic theatre of Brecht with ease. He retired from the stage five years ago but continued working in television and film. He came to cinema during the transition to democracy but went on to collaborate with many of the key directors of post-dictatorship Spain including Álex de la Iglesia, Imanol Uribe, Carlos Saura and, of course, Pedro Almodóvar.