‘A Contentious Production of Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s *Barbaric Comedies*’

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages
Vol. 12, no. 3, Fall 2000, pp. 61-70.
ISSN: 1050-1991.

A Contentious Production of Valle-Inclán's *Barbaric Comedies*

Maria M. Delgado

> Spain's not a realistic country and *Barbaric Comedies* are not realistic plays. My intuition for Valle-Inclán is not realistic. I don't like realistic theatre. I may like to see English actors in a naturalistic play but that's not what I like to do. The Spanish language is not naturalistic. I think that this may be why the critics in Britain have not really understood Valle-Inclán. He can't be sanitized or pinned within the languages of naturalism. He's uncomfortable to read and has no compassion or sentimentality for his characters. His is a theatre of sarcasm where irony has no place. He was a man of the theatre who grew frustrated at the failure of his attempts to modernise the theatre. That's why he came to say that his was a theatre to be read rather than staged. He is still very modern and in this dramatic poem he speaks to us of very real if unpleasant things.
> (Calixto Bieito, from an interview with the author)

While Federico García Lorca has become a relatively well-known figure within twentieth century drama, his contemporary Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) has languished in his shadow. As one of the first martyrs of the fratricidal Civil War which was to tear the nation apart, García Lorca evidently creates a romantic subject for exploitation. Celebrated and marketed as a majestic life cut short, García Lorca's attractive eternally youthful image has been preserved in grainy black and white photographs as a fetishized object of elusive allure. His best known dramatic works, rooted in the Andalusian landscape of his birth, have been read rather too exclusively through accessible folkloric cliches and populist myths of the region as a land of fiery flamenco and guitar-strumming castanet-clicking gypsies, providing a recognisable point of contact for a foreign readership. García Lorca's Andalusian located work has thus been read and marketed through potent stereotypes which may not be applied with the same ease to the work of Valle-Inclán.

It is perhaps unfortunate that García Lorca reached the English-speaking world before Valle-Inclán, for Valle's work is as idiosyncratic and radical as anything produced by his younger contemporary. If anything the work is more subversive in its flaunting of established norms and it is perhaps for this reason that directors have tended to shy away from his drama. Only a few of his plays were actually staged during his own lifetime with the three plays that make up *Comedias bárbaras—Cara de plata (Silver Face), Aguila de blasón (The Eagle Scutcheon* or *Eagle of Honour)* and *Romance de lobos* (previously translated as *Ballad of Wolves*)—premiered as late as 1967, 1966 and 1970 respectively. Ironically plans had been made for *Romance de lobos,* to have been premiered in Paris in 1914, but the sudden outburst of World War I cruelly halted all plans and we are left contemplating what the play's impact might have been had it been seen closer to the time during which it was written.

Even in recent years, productions of *Comedias bárbaras* have been rare. They were only staged in their entirety for the first time in 1974 at the Stadt Schauspielhaus Frankfurt in a production by Augusto Fernándes. It wasn't until 1991, however, that alongside Jorge Lavelli's Théâtre National de la Colline production, opening at the Avignon Festival in July of that year, José Carlos Plaza, then director of the Spanish National Theatre (the Centro Dramático Nacional), gave the trilogy its Spanish language premiere. Directors have tended to prefer to tackle the trilogy as individual works. This may have to do with the fact that the final two plays *Aguila de blasón* (1907) and *Romance de lobos* (1907) were written at an earlier stage in the dramatist's career than *Cara de plata* which is often grouped alongside the grotesque tragicomedies (or *esperpentos* as Valle-Inclán termed them) published between 1920 and 1921. Directors wishing to see the plays as a single homogenous entity have often felt frustrated by the fiercer less romantic mood of *Cara de plata.* Certainly the opening play of the trilogy is characterised by the same systematic distortion with regard to characters' gestures and appearances which was to dominate Valle-Inclán's 1920 play *Luces de bohemia* (*Bohemian Lights*).

Valle-Inclán, precursor of Ionesco, Arrabal and Genet in his bold, relentless exploration of the relationship between stage, actor and audience, and icon of Pedro Almodóvar, who has cited him as a marked influence on his own aesthetic, has long been acknowledged as a key figure in twentieth century Spanish theatre. Valle-Inclán's international profile, however, has largely been limited to the occasional stagings which seminal directors like Ingmar Bergman, Roger Blin, Víctor García, Lluís Pasqual and Jorge Lavelli have accorded his work. Although Pasqual's Centro Dramático Nacional production of *Luces de bohemia* was warmly received by the French critics when it played at Giorgio Strehler's Odéon Théâtre de l'Europe in 1984, an altogether more hostile reception faced Lavelli's *Comédies barbares* at the Avignon Festival in 1991. As Lavelli himself anticipated, French critics found it difficult to accept the conventions of a dramaturgy which disarms the spectator with its harsh episodic structure and melodramatic excess.

Rooted in the lush Celtic landscape of Valle-Inclán's native Galicia, which has closer associations with the terrains of western Ireland and Scotland than with the more familiar heat-saturated tourist-friendly panorama of southern Spain, *Comedias bárbaras*, like the dramatist's better known *Divinas palabras* (*Divine Words*), is located in a rural society on the cusp of great social change. A grand epic dissection of domestic insurrection, *Comedias bárbaras*'s theatrical audacity has long held a fascination for Brian McMaster, director of Edinburgh's International Festival. His championing of radical composer-director Carles Santos (whose *L'esplendida vergonya del fet mal fet* [*The Splendid Shame of the Deed Badly Done*] and *La pantera imperial* [*The Imperial Panther*] were seen at the 1996 and 1998 festivals respectively) and Catalan director Calixto Bieito (whose English language debut production, a fast and furious abridged version of Calderón's *Life is a Dream* for the Royal Lyceum Company, was presented as part of the 1998 festival), has indicated an attraction towards the more baroque tendencies in contemporary Spanish performance.

McMaster's decision to co-produce an audacious, macabre trilogy of plays, largely unknown in the English speaking world, always looked like a daring piece of programming. Teaming Calixto Bieito with Dublin's Abbey Theatre Company and writer Frank McGuinness, McMaster sought to refocus *Comedias bárbaras* through the prisms of a Spanish/Irish encounter. Condensed into a four-hour adaptation, McGuinness's compression of Valle-Inclán's dramatic triptych, translated as *Barbaric Comedies* rather than the more literal 'Savage Plays', chooses to explicitly focus on the narrative of Don Juan Manuel Montenegro, a feudal nobleman whose authority is repeatedly challenged by his errant sons: Don Pedrito, Don Farruquiño, Don Mauro, Don Gonzalito, Don Rosendo and Don Miguel, otherwise known as Silver Face. The first play in the trilogy, *Cara de Plata*, here literally translated as *Silver Face*, although the last play to be written, concerns itself with Don Juan Manuel's relationship with Silver Face. Silver Face offends the local Abbot when he refuses to let him pass over the bridge of Lantañon—renamed Lantaño by McGuinness who is to apply a similar strategy of name reworking to many of the characters. Disgruntled local herdsmen and tenant farmers join the malicious Abbot and his idle sacristan, Blas de Mígues, in plotting revenge against Don Juan Manuel Montenegro who refuses to condone Silver Face's decision. Father and son come into conflict as Silver Face realizes that his father's new mistress is Sabelita, the Abbot's niece and Montenegro's goddaughter whom Silver Face had hoped to marry. Silver Face's departure at the end of the play signals an irreparable break between Montenegro and his favorite son.

Aguila de blasón, rendered by McGuinness as *Eagle Rampant*, sees the Montenegro household in an increasing state of disorder as the seigniorial home is ransacked by Don Pedrito masked as a brigand. As the father's relationship with his sons deteriorates further, Silver Face leaves to join the Carlist cause. Usurped by his father's new mistress Liberata, the Miller's wife, and shamed by the arrival of Montenegro's estranged wife, Doña María, Sabelita leaves the estate. Doña María finds Sabelita, close to death, and forgives her. She asks Montenegro to leave the family estate so that she can remain there with Sabelita. He leaves with Liberata and his fool Don Gallant into the stormy night.

Romance de lobos, conceived by the translator as *Romance of the Wolves*, begins with Montenegro confronted by a chorus of holy souls while returning drunk from a local fair. As news reaches him of the illness of his wife, he prepares to depart to see her but a storm at sea delays him. He is saved but the entire boat crew perishes at sea and he returns to the ancestral home to find Doña María dead and buried and the house ransacked by his sons. Finding solace amongst the beggars who

roam the countryside around the estate, he returns to storm the house. The final confrontation is violent and brutal.

McGuinness's adaptation delivers roughly two-thirds of Valle-Inclán's trilogy, as the plays are perceptibly compressed with expository detail cut in favor of a swift acceleration of action. While *Silver Face* is played almost complete, the production's main omission is the loss of a conspicuously comic late scene where the sacristan feigns death before his dysfunctional family, a scene which Bieito plans to reinstate for the production's Dublin run. *Eagle Rampant* and *Romance of the Wolves,* however, are more markedly pruned. In *Eagle Rampant,* scenes with local peasant-women (who form an alternative chorus to the disruptive sons) are cut as the focus narrows to the disintegrating *pater familias* and the increasingly dispersed family unit. In *Romance of the Wolves,* there is no chorus of household servants, only the loyal Michaela la Roxa, the fool Don Gallant and the chaplain Don Manuelito, as vestiges of a once abundant coterie of domestic attendants. The chorus of beggars who accompany Montenegro on his final journey now remain the significant 'other' to Montenegro's unruly sons: two angry crowds which do battle in the trilogy's final moments.

The world Valle-Inclán conjures in *Comedias bárbaras* is richly evocative and epic in the grandest sense, populated by a vast array of characters from a range of social classes: wily beggars, decadent feudal aristocrats, crafty fairground peddlers, hypocritical clergy, herdsmen, millers, and loyal servants. Characters come and go, sometimes reappearing from play to play (as with Pichona, Silver Face's mistress), sometimes dominating a scene and then disappearing for the remainder of the play taunting us with what might have been (as with Blas de Mígues's lazy family). The challenges faced by dramatic works which feature characters on horseback, snoring cats, mooing cows, frightened owls, prowling dogs, broody hens, singing birds, and crowing cocks may perhaps account for the fact that the plays are so rarely staged. Dispensing with naturalistic detail, Valle-Inclán paints his rural landscape with broad brush strokes, so the emphasis falls on sweeping gestures and multiple settings from indoor taverns to hilltops, grand dining halls to cemeteries, ruined castles to rectories, haystacks and moonlit roofs to mills, bedrooms to greasy kitchens, ransacked chapels to deserted streets. Fragrant cypress and lemon trees perfume the air. Mice run under the floorboards of Montenegro's ancestral home, cats and dogs roam across the landscape, horses carry the characters across the picturesque vista of rustic villages. Taste and smell are as intrinsic to Valle-Inclán's stage world as the visual and aural and our attention is constantly drawn to a world beyond the two-dimensionality of the habitual set. Weaving together a rich tapestry of sounds, from the noises made by the animals that roam across the rural landscape to the religious and pagan outbursts which govern the characters' behavior, we are presented with a world of imaginative excess where myth and reality, the physical and the spiritual, the epic and the insular defiantly coexist in a manner which Tennessee Williams was to unconsciously emulate in his 1953 play *Camino Real.*

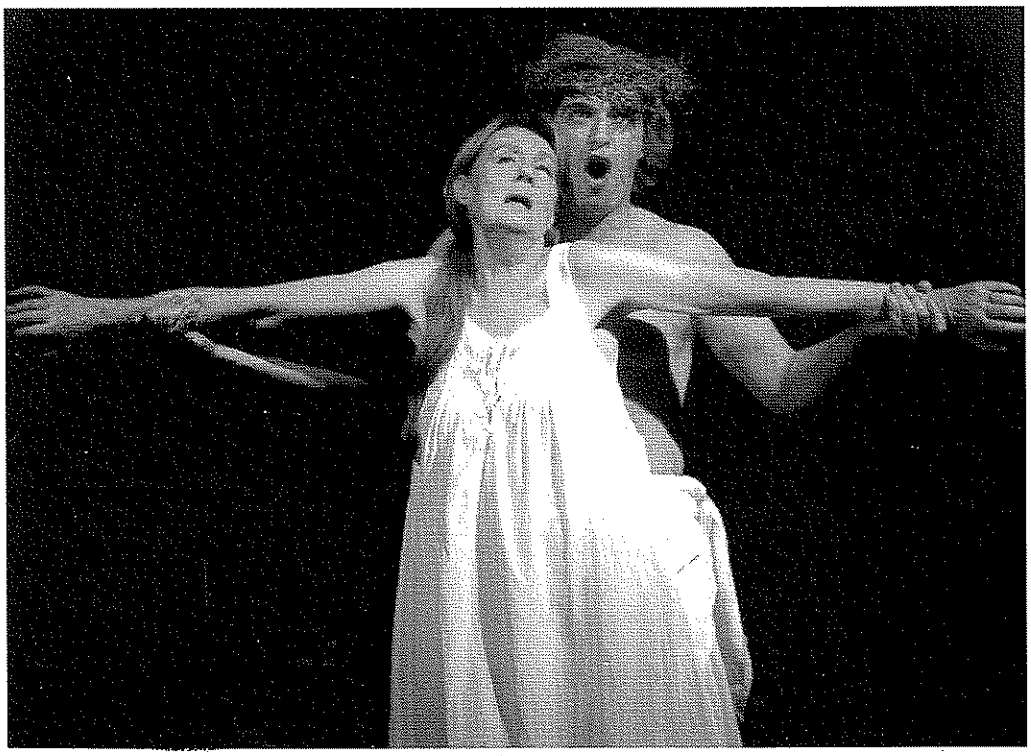
Using the stage directions as an way into the play, Bieito has avoided the type of literal recreation of the playwright's effects that marked José Carlos Plaza's production. Rather the emphasis is on offering the tangible sense of a sensorial theatre where smell, taste, sight and sound are all resolutely present—what Bieito sees as trying to provide a scent of Galicia rather than a realistic depiction of rural life. As such the stage is filled with the smell of incense as Abbot seeks to cross the Lantaño bridge to administer last rights to the supposedly dying Blas in the final scene of *Silver Face.* In *Romance of the Wolves* Farruquiño evokes the pestilent stench of Doña María's decaying body by covering his nose and mouth, overcome by the smell as he assists Don Manuelito and his father in removing the tombstone to the grave in the family chapel. In an earlier scene, Doña María's naked body, stretched out on the metal frame of a bed, is washed for burial by her niece Doña Moncha (Catherine Mack) and Benita the Seamstress (Eleanor Methven) who rub her down as they discuss the putrid decomposition of her body. In *Silver Face* Montenegro's sons are seen swilling large quantities of the wine whose virtues they extol as they order drinks at the fair. Bieito provides a world of conspicuous consumption where the excesses of the body serve to highlight the trilogy's animal imagery. Indeed the characters often resemble the wild animals and birds alluded to in the plays. As such Tonia Chauvet's Liberata cowers under the dining-room table like a ravenous dog devouring the oysters she has been thrown by Montenegro. Montenegro's loyal fool Don Gallant (Eamon Morrissey) is a canine figure given to outbursts of barking, clearly substituting the dogs which roam the ancestral home. Des Cave's Abbot lurks around the stage like a giant predatory vulture. His nervy sister Jeromita, accorded an asth-

matic cough in Kate O'Toole's characterisation, flutters agitatedly like an inept raven.

Set designer Alfons Flores has recognized Valle-Inclán's cinematographic eye in providing Bieito with an ostensibly simple physical landscape where dark metal railings hover menacingly above the characters as a metaphor for an institutional church whose palpable presence hangs over them. Opening up to allow minimal but significant items to be flown down on giant, solid pseudo-medieval chains—a long table for Montenegro's dining-room, a grand bed under which Don Gallant can hide, a giant inverted crucifix suspended as Sabelita is wracked with guilt contemplating the Friar's sermon in the opening scene of *Eagle Rampant*—it serves to simultaneously evoke church, cemetery and prison. This is an exposed stage where the God which Doña María, the Abbot, Sabelita, and Don Farruquiño call forth remains palpably distant in the realm beyond the metal grid. On this black box of an empty stage, the action opens with the reciting of Valle-Inclán's initial stage directions by the actor playing Don Gallant:

> The clouds are full of joy. On the mounts of Lantaño are large communal lands used for grazing. There is a ruin of a castle on the rocks. . . A troop of cattlemen camp in the shelter of these famous stones. Horses spread themselves among the men, nibbling the sacred grass of these Celtic burial mounds. On the height, an enraged mountain cow moos for a calf that is being taken to the fair.

The detailed, allusive nature of the trilogy's lyrical, indeed at times almost musical stage directions—which function both as a poetic guide to the surrounding dialogue and an intrinsic component of the dramatic text—has often led to a perception of the plays as failed cinema scripts rather than works for the stage. José Luis Alonso's premiere production of *Romance de lobos* in 1970—whose notes Bieito has consulted in preparing his own staging—featured the play's stage directions read out by three actors. Director Adolfo Marsillach also almost yielded to the temptation to have a narrator read the stage directions in his earlier 1966 production of *Aguila de blasón.* Bieito's opening may suggest that further stage directions will be addressed aloud to the audience, but the production offers only select recitals of tiny segments of the



Joan O'Hara and Karl Shiels. Photo: Douglas Robertson

stage directions. These function, especially in *Silver Face,* as a means of immediately grounding the audience in the hyperbolical world of the trilogy. Visually, as Bieito has claimed, it may prove impossible to stage the vastness and detail of the playwright's multiple settings and these certainly present logistical challenges for would-be directors. With *Life is a Dream* designer Carles Pujol's gray sandy set, overlooked by a giant suspended mirror, provided a dazzling image of an elusive world which can never be entirely controlled and where the audience were as implicated as the performers. Here the set is similarly minimalist with scenes blending into each other as boundaries are blurred, and the remnants of one scene (petals, water, beds, tables, tin drums, piles of empty fruit crates creating a makeshift card table) spill out into another. Valle-Inclán's short, self-contained scenes, often contrast in mood and language with those preceding or following them. As scenes bleed into one another the aggressive, frantic pace of Bieito's production is impressively sustained.

Bieito's production visibly recognizes that the trilogy renders a world of unstable categories. Valle-Inclán's theatre openly evokes its cinematic, pictorial and novelistic resonances, simultaneously looking back to Boucicault's nineteenth century world of spectacular stage directions and forward to Genet's disturbing fusion of ritual, pageant, subversive eroticism and treacherous role play. Bieito has acknowledged the presence of Beckett, Buñuel—with whom Valle-Inclán planned to make a film on El Greco—Shakespeare and Spaghetti Westerns in his reading of *Barbaric Comedies.* Beckett is noticeable in the tramp-like characterisation of Don Gallant and there is something of Sergio Leone's westerns in the swaggering antics of the outlaw band of brothers.

Bieito's emphasis is resolutely on the pictorial. He is ably served by his lighting designers Xavier Clot and Keith Yetton, who create pools of shadow in the King's Theatre's deep cavernous stage. Playing areas are decisively appropriated by the characters. As such, Pichona's home (and role as Silver Face's prostitute) is simply defined by a metallic bed adorned with bright fairy lights which she speedily wheels on and off. In *Silver Face,* Ludovina's tavern is conjured by Derry Power's world weary transvestite pushing on a Wurlitzer juke box which he rests against as the inebriated Silver Face, rejected by Sabelita, pays the hearty drinking establishment a visit. For Viana del Prior's Corpus Christi fair, a medley of shrewd peddlers address the audience with trinkets and wares displayed around their neck on a portable stall. Here again a cropped segment of Act Two's opening stage directions is excitedly related by actress Catherine Mack clutching a bunch of wild flowers which are thrown to the audience as the peddlers and penitents move to the front of the stage. Once again place is conjured aurally and then suggested visually. Óscar Roig's layered soundscape, featuring galloping horses, the echo of empty churches and other evocations of rural life grounds the production in a particular rustic milieu.

Not that this environment is ever idealized. Bieito's landscape is far from a pastoral idyll. From the combative encounter between the angry handkerchief-masked local tenant farmers which opens the dramatic triptych, we are given a unnerving portrait of a society in uneasy transition. Ominous shadows are thrown across the stage as the cast, clad in shades of ochre, red, clerical mauve, brown and black, dance across its parameters. Valle-Inclán once cited El Greco as a painter whose compressed use of space finds an analogy with his own abstract notion of temporal development, and there are clear echoes of El Greco, Velázquez and Goya in the pictorial images conjured by the playwright. Here Bieito takes the dramatic lighting effects advocated in Valle-Inclán's striking stage directions—flashes of lightning, lit lanterns, twinkling stars, handkerchiefs which whitewash the darkness—and employs them as the visual pivot of the production. This is a world which appears never quite night and never quite day. It is in the twilight periods around dawn and dusk, as day and night merge, where so much of the key action of Valle-Inclán's trilogy occurs. Bieito's production resolutely occupies this dim and gloomy terrain. Consciously avoiding blackout, but lingering around its shadows, this is a world of impending darkness where the characters dart, fumble and hide.

As night falls, Pichona and Jeromita discard their daily disguises and their white nightwear exposes them both physically and emotionally. As such the Abbot's avaricious sister, clad in a skimpy beige nightshirt, begs her brother to allow her to pick up the bag of money, the Abbot's crooked card winnings, which Silver Face, seeking to make peace, has brought to the Abbey. Pichona's white slip serves as the uniform in which she greets the drunken Silver Face when he comes to her house in search of comfort following the disappointment suffered at Sabelita's hands. Her vulnerability is made clear as she confesses her affections to him while he lies in a intoxicated stupor.

The palette of color in Mercè Paloma's richly textured costumes against the black box of a set creates the effect of gazing at one of El Greco's mannerist works. In Act One, Scene Five of *Eagle Rampant* as Don Juan Manuel Montenegro disperses the thieves from his home, we are told in the stage directions that the "bluish glimmer of the flash illuminates his countenance like an antique portrait." Bieito takes such notes as guides towards a reading where the action flows like a seamless moving painting. In *Silver Face* both Goya and Valle-Inclán's theory of the *esperpento* (a systematic distortion of mimetic realism as grotesque tragicomedy), are clearly alluded to in the distorted faces pulled by the lascivious Blas de Mígues and Fuso Negro, the irreverent beggar-come-fool who wanders the countryside as a constant reminder of the unleashed unconscious and all that which Catholic propriety ensures remains hidden. In *Romance of the Wolves*, Bieito offers a homage to Buñuel's parody of the Last Supper in *Viridiana* (1961). Evoking Goya's disturbed Black paintings, this sequence accompanies the beggars rampage of the family kitchen, functioning as a self-reflective commentary on a style of grotesque excess which has served a range of twentieth century Hispanic artists: Valle-Inclán, Buñuel, Arrabal, Francisco Nieva, Pedro Almodóvar, Bigas Luna and Ripstein—the latter evoked as a point of contact for Bieito's cruel, baroque and sardonic aesthetic by the Spanish newspaper *El País*'s critic, Marcos Ordóñez (16 August 2000).

Bieito's pictorial resonances, however, appear to go beyond the Spanish tradition that the playwright drew on. For the combination of light and shade and the palpable presence of varied sources of artificial illumination creates clear analogies with the work of Dutch master and Rembrandt pupil Gerrit Dou. And in the interplay within light and darkness which both conceals and reveals, Bieito frames the narrative strand around Sabelita whose pursuit by Silver Face, attempted rape by Fuso Negro, abduction by Montenegro and later departure from the family estate, running across the three plays, is positioned as a spiritual journey through the turmoils of adolescence.

Although the play is set in mid-nineteenth century Galicia, Bieito avoids pinning the production to a particular historical moment. Archetypal fans serve, along with the resolutely Hispanic names, to fix the production within the Hispanic although the Irish accents strive to indicate connections with the Celtic world of western Ireland. There are echoes of 1950s Spain in the cheap-looking tawdry white nylon skirt and stilettos of Montenegro's mistress, Liberata. Pichona's colourful skirt and blouse also suggest the Franco era but the formality of Montenegro's black suit which becomes increasingly dishevelled as the trilogy progresses, harks back to the pre-Civil War epoch. The sound of Julio Iglesias's kitsch crooning emerging from Ludovina's Spanish flag-adorned jukebox serves to suggest associations with the latter years of the Franco era. These self-conscious anachronisms serve to ensure the production inhabit a mythical space which defies naturalistic specificity.

In the clergy's black heavy cotton cassocks and Abbot's sister's austere coarse dress, the production invokes an institutional church trapped in the past. Fuso Negro's ragged and torn cassock serves to emphasise his role as the Abbot's 'other', appearing to haunt the dissolute clergyman as he is conjuring Satan in a bid to avenge himself on the Montenegros and setting in motion the chain of events that lead to Sabelita's abduction. Fuso Negro's dirty dishevelled appearance and unveiled flesh exposes that which the Abbot seeks to keep under wraps. But as *Silver Face* unfolds and the Abbot can no longer control his arrogant pride, we watch as Blas de Mígues administers leeches to his shoulders. Valle-Inclán's stage directions make clear the menace the Abbot represents through the darkness that he throws on the action, describing the dark doorways of his house and his black cassock as an ominous shadow over Silver Face's light coloring. Here this is rendered through the expansive shadow cast by his cap and cassock as he sweeps onstage. An incestuous relationship between the Abbot and his sister is suggested by her kissing and clawing of his chest in an attempt to sway him to let her keep Silver Face's money. In the Abbot's cumbersome thick-soled brown boots and riding spurs peeping beneath his cassock we have an image of rampage which links him to Montenegro's dissolute sons from whom he seems so keen to disassociate himself. Supping wine from a leather wine flask, as he settles down for a game of cards with Silver Face, further parallels are propounded with Montenegro's boys. This is a masculine world of bitter rivalry and unhealthy competitiveness where the only woman present, a whore, exists only to service the men's needs.

Montenegro's sons are characterized as a prowling pack of wolves, lolloping on stage in a predatory group led by the gruff Don Mauro (Aidan Kelly) and the angular Don Pedrito (Anthony Brophy). Don Gonzalito (Owen

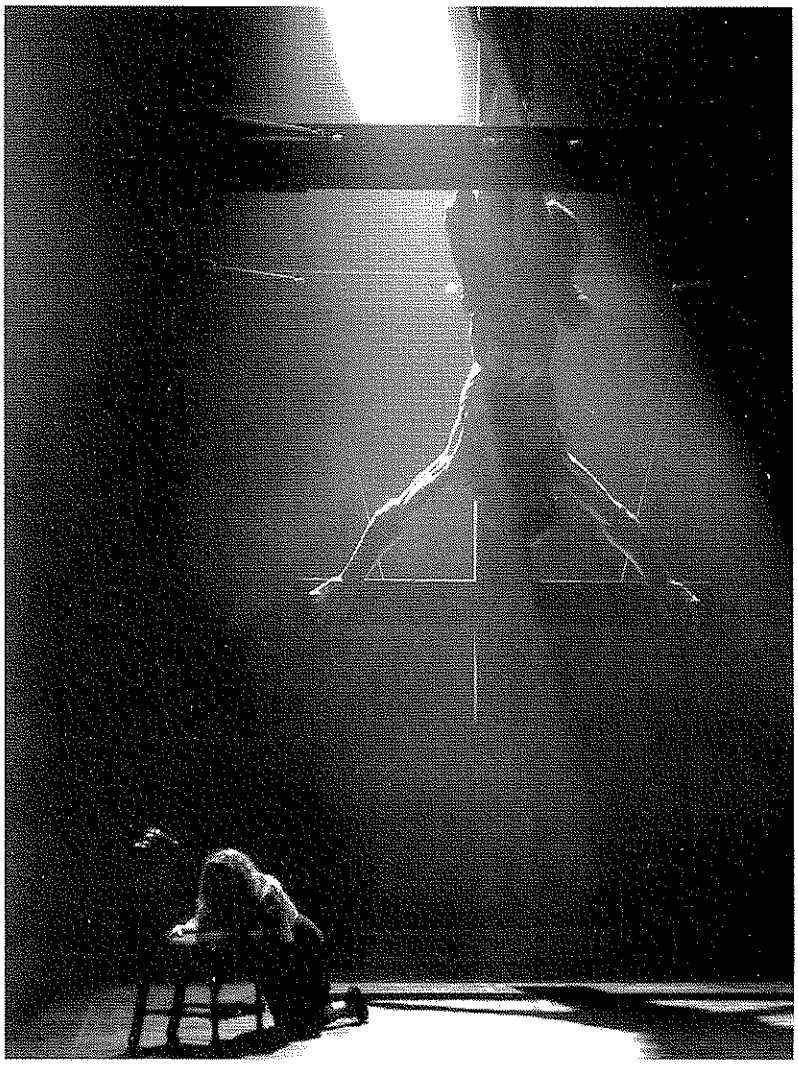
McDonnell) and Don Rosendo (Robert Donovan) appear as smaller, wilier versions of the elder brothers and all four are dressed similarly in uniform shades of brown and robust riding boots. Our attempts to differentiate them are continuously frustrated as they are blended together to form a dangerous entity only fragmented as the trilogy progresses and greed drives a wedge between them. Don Farruquiño (Owen Sharpe), studying for the priesthood at the local seminary, darts between them, encouraging them in their worst excesses whilst always keeping a wry eye on making a quick profit. His tight cassock and boyish looks may serve to position him as the innocuous and saintly younger brother but as his mother's chaplin Don Manuelito astutely points out, he's the worst of the lot. His rapacious materialism is evident in *Eagle Rampant* as he solicits Silver Face's assistance in digging up a skeleton from the local cemetery which he can then sell on to the seminary. As he frantically tries to boil off remaining flesh from the bones while his brother Silver Face makes love to Pichona, we see him titillated by both activities occuring simultaneously, and he begins a quick masturbation—one of the graphic sex scenes which had British critics pondering who was responsible for such disgusting moments: Valle-Inclán, McGuinness or Bieito? In this case it is both Valle-Inclán—who stipulates that Pichona and Silver Face are making love before Farruquiño—and Bieito, who uses the dramatist's indication that Farruquiño is aroused by the ensuing action to physicalize the masturbation.

In *Romance of the Wolves,* when Don Farruquiño and Don Pedrito ransack the chapel of the ancestral home following their mother's death, Don Pedrito is increasingly haunted by fear and superstitious thoughts of his mother rising from the dead. As Farruquiño continues to climb the ornate altar lowered through the railings, steadfast in his greed, Pedrito clings to the side of the stage in fright. Caught red-handed by his father and the kindly chaplain, Don Manuelito—the only compassionate representative of the clerical establishment presented in the trilogy—Farruquiño boldly concocts a web of lies about coming to protect the chapel against his brothers' avarice in order to mask his sacrilege. Pushed to the floor by his distraught father to confront his mother's tomb, he defiantly continues with his blatant falsifications. Farruquiño's resolute impish laughter closes Bieto's production; a gesture of defiance in the face of the heinous crime of patricide which the audience has just witnessed. For Mauro breaks his father's neck before the eyes of his siblings and Montenegro's new family of beggars; perpetrating a crime which has haunted the history of theatre since Oedipus mistakenly killed his father at the place where three roads meet.

Although Silver Face is habitually seen as an attractive antidote to his more grasping brothers, Karl Shiels's broadshouldered characterisation of Silver Face reconceives this role. Clad in a red suede jacket, tan leather trousers and riding spurs, his is an altogether more disarming (anti-)hero. In the opening play's second scene, he is locked in affectionate combat with his rifle wielding father. While he ostensibly shows his father respect, their competitive relationship is marked out as Montenegro grabs him roughly by the neck tempering affectionate words with brawling gestures. Bieito points to the rivalry between father and son which is to surface over Sabelita as Montenegro boasts of his physical grip over his son addressing Sabelita with his eyes as he verbally responds to Silver Face. Swaggering across the stage in an attempt to win Sabelita's affections, he comes across as an eager and rather innocent boy, seeking on one level to emulate his father while recognizing his many faults. Seeking solace in alcohol and Pichona when he is spurned by Sabelita, his frustration turns to anger and clear parallels are suggested between father and son in their dismissive treatment of women.

Janet Morgan's Sabelita is an awkward and plump adolescent with tumbling blonde curls framing her pale creamy complexion. She seeks solace in religion while unable to articulate her sexual feelings for Montenegro. Cathy White's Pichona is an intriguing antidote to the gawky Sabelita. Her cropped hair, feisty pose, sexual energy and faith in the tarot serve to distance her from the devout Sabelita. Both however are audacious figures who defy the ugly terrors inflicted on them by the tyrannical patriarchy embodied by Montenegro. Sabelita may be referred to in the stage directions in terms which stress her youth, humility and passivity but her open defiance of her uncle, the scheming Abbot, in *Silver Face* and of Montenegro in *Eagle Rampant* indicate a spirited refusal to accept the cruel ill treatment meted out to her by the family patriarchs.

Joan O'Hara's Doña María presents a measured contrast to her fiery husband. In *Eagle Rampant* she ironically comments on the fact that she had been led to believe that he was on his death bed as Mark Lambert's Montenegro stands impertinently on the bed with Eamon Morrissey's Don



Janet Moran as Doña Sabelita. Photo: Douglas Robertson

Gallant parading at the foot of the bed. While her soft tones and angular stoic features point to a life of humble suffering, her poised expulsion of her estranged husband from the family home, suggests a steely determination. While she lacks the gentle affection towards Silver Face that marked María Casares's magnetic performance in Jorge Lavelli's 1991 Avignon production, Bieito's staging of the dream sequence in *Eagle Rampant*, when the Baby Jesus appears to chastise her for not forgiving Sabelita, allows O'Hara's Doña María to hold her own. Here the child of Lavelli's reading has been replaced by her darling Silver Face, with whom she has just had a tearful farewell as he informs her that he is to leave to go to war. Bieito leaves imprecise—could it be the Civil War?—what is explicit in Valle-Inclán's text: the fact that Silver Face is seeking escape from the law of the father to fight for the Carlist cause which sought to preserve the male line of succession. Silver Face enters in a loin cloth with a crown of thorns, a terrible vision of the death which Pichona's cards have predicted awaits him. It is Sabelita as the Virgin Mary, leading him off-stage, which we are led to believe finally spurs Doña María to seek out her missing god-daughter to reinstall her in the family home.

While Bieito grants significance to these many conflicts which drive the action, it is Montenegro, a legendary Don Juan like his namesake, who remains the dominant pivot on which all three plays hinge. His interrelationship with the wider society in which he exists (and where his power and dominance is waning) forms the narrative thrust of the trilogy. Mark Lambert's stout *pater familias* struts the stage in his opening appearance. Rifle casually thrown over his shoulder, he surveys the landscape with a hawk-like proprietorial eye. As the trilogy progress, he is increasingly defied by his rapacious sons who devise a series of plans to strip the ancestral home of its remaining objects of wealth. Bieito has talked of seeing the trilogy as "Don Juan meets King Lear" and strong inflections of Shakespeare's Lear are clearly present in the Catalan director's reading of the plays as the epic narrative of a family patriarch bought to the edge of madness by the covetous greed of his children. Lacking the obvious charisma of José Luis Pellicena's Montenegro in José Carlos Plaza's 1991 staging, Mark Lambert gives us a quick-tempered energetic figure, a stocky bullish landlord whose bitter narcissism and lewd desire makes a mockery of the values he purports to maintain. In *Romance of the Wolves* the Shakespearean associations of the work see the conflict between father and sons increasingly mirrored in the struggle between body and spirit waged by Montenegro as he attempts to atone for his past sins. Battered by the invisible chorus of holy souls which come to him in the

voices of his sons as a warning of Doña María's death, salvaged after a sea wreck (effectively staged by Bieito with a simple rope and the unforgiving sounds of a stormy sea), and tormented by his bestial children, he seeks to make penance. His wretchedness and vulnerability are brilliantly conveyed by Lambert's raging patriarch, lashing out in anger, frustration and ultimately despair. Shedding his formal attire along the journey to remain as physically exposed as his irreverent fool Don Gallant and the itinerant prophet which Fuso Negro increasingly becomes in *Romance of the Wolves,* Lambert's Montenegro ages before our very eyes, reaching his family home a tired wounded old man.

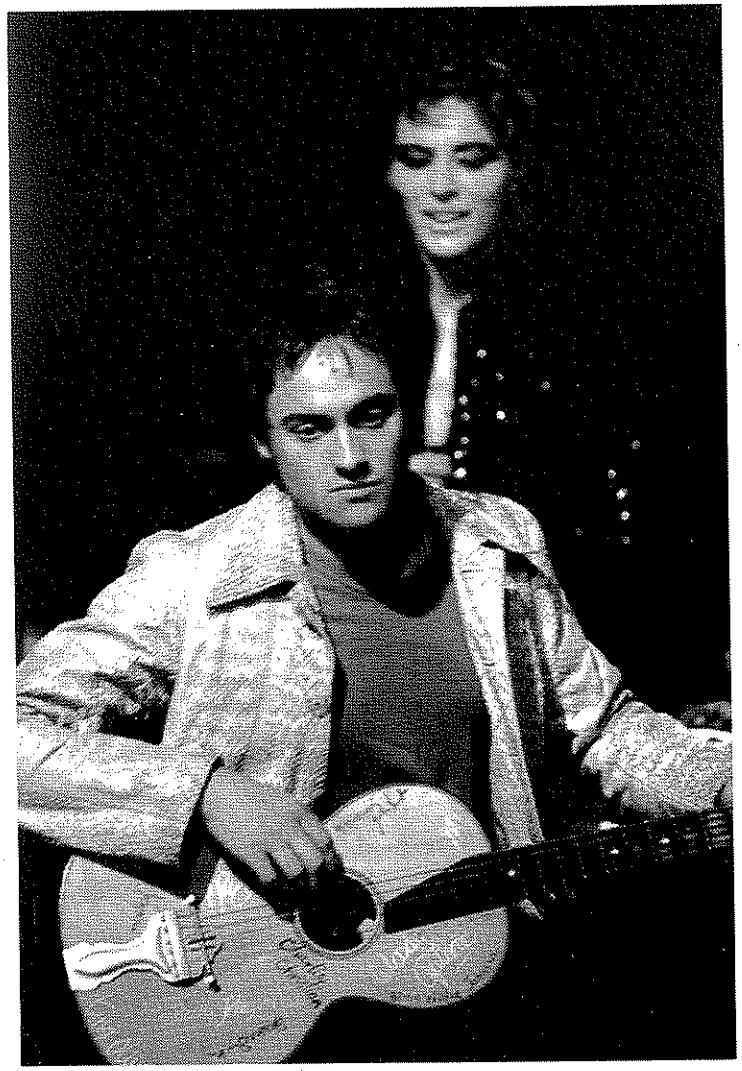
While the British critics were almost unanimous in their praise for Lambert's performance, the production itself received a far more tepid response. *The Scotsman*'s Joyce McMillan set a trend which others were to follow in overtly questioning McMaster's decision to program the production for a three-week run at the 1,300 seat King's Theatre. Her comments that she had "never seen a show which contained so many explicit and prolonged rape scenes, or which seemed so perilously close to enjoying them" was latched onto by the more conservative elements of the cultural press corps. *The Daily Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer denounced the production as "a parody of all that is wrong, and rotten, about the Edinburgh International Festival's drama program," locating clear parallels between "the all-but-forgotten playwright" and "the entire, lamentable oeuvre of the most dreaded of English dramatists, Howard Barker" With headlines like "Sex, violence and ranting" (*The Financial Times*), "Grand Guignol for ghastly Galicians" (*The Sunday Telegraph*) and "The Pervert's Progress" (*The Independent*), it's hardly surprising that the reviews were swiftly succeeded by such articles as "Festival's brutal sex shocker empties seats" (*The Times's*), and "Epic tale of perverted priest has the critics in a frenzy," (*The Independent*).

Certainly Bieito's decision to have only one interval, two hours and twenty minutes into the production at the end of *Eagle Rampant* was problematic. Lavelli made a similar decision in choosing to have his one interval almost three hours into the staging following Sabelita's departure from Montenegro's home in Act 3, Scene 4 of the second part of the trilogy. Certainly in an age where both conventional dramas and radical performance works increasingly fit within the ninety-minute formula, Michael Billington's question about drama being always translatable but not always transposable poses interesting questions about the Galician world of Valle-Inclán's trilogy. For Billington, "there is nothing in Anglo-Irish drama that matches Valle-Inclán's delight in violent grotesquerie," and the more McGuinness "strives to forge a connection between Galicia, and, say, Galway the more distant the plays become." While I would argue that the implied parallels between Galicia and Ireland serve to root the plays within a particular rural milieu dominated by feudal landlords, a corrupt oppressive church and the lingering vestiges of pagan superstition, McGuinness's adaptation is perhaps too dependent on the rhythms of urban Dublin speech patterns. And it may have been this linguistic strategy which served to alienate the works for certain sectors of the audience.

While the Spanish title *Comedias bárbaras* literally translates as "Savage" or "Barbaric Plays," it might be considered misleading for this adaptation to be titled *Barbaric Comedies*. For as Bieito himself noted, the title may have led the critics to anticipate a firm comic component. Perhaps, as Almodóvar's success has indicated, the strong grotesque strand which runs through Spanish culture, is only easily digested with large doses of humor. It seems perhaps perplexing that in an age where television and cinema render images of mutilation, graphic sex, masturbation, lechery, and adultery that the critics should have protested so puritanically at the subject matter of *Barbaric Comedies*. It is possibly an indication, in the summer where Julie Taymor's *Titus* is released in Britain to minimal outrage, that audiences have become rather anesthetized to the excesses chronicled in Shakespeare, Ford and Marlowe. As in Shakespeare's historical dramas, the disintegration of a particular family in Valle-Inclán's trilogy functions as a metaphor for impending social chaos and moral disorder. Bieito chooses to stage the violent acts of rebellion and transgression enacted by Montenegro and his sons with a graphic protracted clarity which dispels all possibilities of titillation. Spanish accounts of the production admired the stark simplicity of Bieito's radical staging, contextualizing *Barbaric Comedies* as part of a theatrical journey begun with *La Tempestad* (*The Tempest*) at Barcelona's Grec Festival in 1997 and continued with the English and then Spanish-language productions of *Life is a Dream* over the past two years. Seeing it as a tour de force and pushing for a Spanish-language version, they reported with some bemusement the hostile views of the British press. The British critics' misgivings were seen as not so much about Bieito's staging as about Valle-

Inclán's aesthetic, which uncannily elicited a similar response from the French critics in Lavelli's Avignon production. What Valle-Inclan prescribes may not necessarily be what Bieito delivers, but as with Víctor García's *Divinas palabras* this writer-director combination renders provocatively compelling results.

Valle-Inclán has never served as a palate for all tastes. His dramatic output, pushing at the very boundaries of what we understand as theatre, places on stage that which is often banished to the realms of reported action. Valle-Inclán has always polarised the critics as any overview of the press response to the premiere production of *Divinas palabras* by Margarita Xirgu's company in 1933 makes achingly clear. Perhaps a strength of Bieito's production is the fact that in a world of ever-increasing indifference, this is the one adjective which cannot be applied to this staging. Certainly the production will not serve to popularise Valle-Inclán in the English-speaking world but it may play a further part towards the reappraisal of the dramatist's work begun by directors like Víctor García, Lluís Pasqual and Roger Blin and offer strategies towards a relocation of *Comedias bárbaras* in a consciously fictional space which is neither the Galicia in which they are ostensibly set nor a tangibly mid-nineteenth century milieu but rather the "tramoya en sueño, ambulismo en acción" (theatrical machinery of dreams and tightrope in action) which Valle-Inclán and now Bieito locate as the key to the trilogy.



Saskia Reeves and Stuart Townsend in *Orpheus Descending*. Photo: Donmar Warehouse