



**“A lot of work and a flicker of intuition”: Calixto Bieito stages *Hamlet*’**

A review by Maria Delgado

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## "A Lot of Work and a Flicker of Intuition." Calixto Bieito Stages *Hamlet*

Maria M. Delgado

Spanish director Calixto Bieito has been a regular fixture at the Edinburgh International Festival since 1997 when his staging of the 1894 zarzuela (populist Spanish operetta) *La verbena de la paloma* (The Festival of the Dove) was seen at the King's Theatre. The brash, energetic production presented a vibrant reading of one of Tomás Bretón's best-known zarzuelas, stripping the piece of its habitual saccharine sweetness and opting instead for a visceral approach where actors seized the roles that have, of late been taken by opera singers. This served not only to highlight the narrative focus of the piece, prioritizing character and movement, but gave the piece a faster pace as the sung and spoken sections were linked together seamlessly. The emphasis on meticulously choreographed action, vibrant physical performances, the open metaphorical set and the sense of reading against the grain of the contemporary production history of the piece all served to announce Bieito's decisive style as a director.

Bieito's English-language debut came at the following year's Festival with a production of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 1635 play *Life is a Dream* which evolved on a sandy lunar landscape watched over by a giant suspended mirror hovering ominously above the characters. While Calderón's repertoire has been a stalwart of the Spanish state subsidized Compañía Nacional de Teatro since the company was founded in 1985, his philosophical dramas have not enjoyed a marked presence on the British stage over the past thirty years. Bieito's production swept away associations of theological heavy-handedness and leaden dramaturgy, paring the play down to provide a fiercely paced exploration of the tensions between self and other personified by its central character Segismundo's dilemma. Indeed when the production was then seen in Spain two years later, re-rehearsed with Spanish-language actors, it provoked fierce debate about what playing traditions for Calderón and the Golden Age repertoire might be, with Bieito replacing the habitual slow rhetorical delivery of the text with a more urgent dynamism propelling the language forward.

While *Life is a Dream* received exhilarating reviews from the British critics, his 2000 return

to Edinburgh with Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Barbaric Comedies* proved a far more problematic proposition [see *WES* 13:3]. Bieito's staging of Frank McGuinness' four-hour adaptation of Valle-Inclán's trilogy on the fall of the Galician feudal aristocrat Don Juan Manuel Montenegro failed to ignite the same degree of approval. While the critics ostensibly questioned the raw, aggressive performance style, their ambivalence towards the piece may have partly been to do with an inability to accurately position Valle-Inclán's abrasive tragic-comedies. These plays had not hitherto been professionally produced in their entirety in the English-language. The translation from the Spanish, opting for *Barbaric Comedies* — closer to the Spanish *Comedias bárbaras* rather than the literal "Savage Plays," tended to lead the audience to expect a comedy but Valle-Inclán's plays are not comedies in the traditional sense. Their acerbic vision, brutal linguistic game-play and savage anticlericalism were dismissed as a theatrical extreme with little resonance for a UK audience. By providing an interval only half-way through the second play, Bieito's splitting of the three plays may have failed to preserve the dramatic tone of each of the three works which were only grouped as a trilogy after the completion of the first play of the tryptich, *Silver Face* in 1921.

While Bieito's work has continued to polarize the British critics — *Don Giovanni* and *A Masked Ball* were produced by English National Opera in 2001 and 2002 respectively, *Così fan tutte* and *Die Fledermaus* by Welsh National Opera in 2000 and 2002 respectively and the Romea theatre production of *Macbeth* was seen in both Catalan and Castilian at the Barbican Centre, London in April 2003 — Bieito has not returned to Edinburgh until 2003 when the Festival produced a new staging of *Hamlet* with Birmingham Repertory Theatre. The production, like the earlier *Macbeth*, reenvisioned the play through markedly contemporary prisms. Self-consciously juggling an array of filmic references from Pedro Almodóvar to Nick Ray, Bieito reshaped both pieces into compact two-hour ventures more in line with the length of a film feature than the four hour epics that frequently result from "director cut" theatrical Shakespeare. Whereas Bieito had located

*Macbeth* within a mafia world of disposable consumables avidly devoured by the modern gangsters and molls conceptualized through the prism of popular TV iconography, *Hamlet* is positioned within a contemporary cocktail bar announced to the audience on entry to the theatre through the suspended fluorescent pink neon sign at the back of the stage spelling out "Palace." The white wipe-clean sofas of *Macbeth* are here replaced by sleek black armchairs and a long drinks counter to fuel the decadent court's incessant partying and guilt-ridden mourning rituals.

As the audience entered, Horatio (Karl Daymond), resplendent in a dapper cream suit, sat at a white grand piano, the consummate entertainer preparing for the show's opening number: Claudius, leading the court in a crooning rendition of the Hollies' "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."— here significantly rendered as "he *was* my brother."— and thus setting the tone for a rhetorical mourning that may convince the queen but not Hamlet or the audience. Indeed Hamlet's soliloquies are fuelled by alcohol and pills, the delusions of a grief-stricken son unable to come to terms with the sudden death of his father. George Anton — a restless Segismundo in *Life is a Dream* — here provides a volatile Scots prince for whom not even the endless foolery with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can provide appropriate solace. Ophelia — Rachel Pickup's characterization giving a glamorous, anxious blonde attired in designer wear — may break through the armour of his black suit on occasion, but her own traumas — there is a clear suggestion that she is a 'daddy's girl' in more ways than one — lead her to spiral into a hole of self-loathing, alcohol abuse and eventual suicide.

Hamlet too while seeking to alienate himself from the hedonism of the court simultaneously allows its excesses to fuel his imagination. As such Bieito conceives old Hamlet's ghost as little more than a figment of Hamlet's drug- and drink-fuelled mind brought chillingly to life by Horatio's eerie magnified voice and echoing thumps on the piano. There are no palpable spectres in this vision of the play, merely the subjective horrors conjured by an aggressively tormented psyche. In dispensing with the soldierly dimension of the work, and thus effacing Hamlet's military aspirations, not in favour of metaphysical concerns, as in Peter Brook's recent reading of the play, but towards a paranoid neurosis embodied by the vulnerable Anton, Bieito offers a bleak portrait of contemporary angst, where cere-

monies are enacted which offer no palpable solution to the characters' dilemmas. With no Fortinbras to breathe hope into the proceedings and Horatio remaining little more than a possible figment of Hamlet's deranged mind, this is a portrait of both domestic and institutional paranoia that speaks to a collective neurosis and corruption at the heart of our most basic familial relationships.

While Bieito had repeatedly admitted that "I think maybe *Hamlet* is not a piece for children" (Nick Curtis, *Evening Standard*, 1 August 2003), he seemed perplexed as to the Festival's marketing of the Bieito brandname with the publicity carrying warnings of "graphic interpretations of some scenes" and a suggested minimum age of 15. While Bieito may not position himself as a moralist, the work does engage with a court that is in a state of moral decay, presided over by Diane Fletcher's voluptuous and giggly Gertrude and George Costigan's coldly abrasive Claudius — a veritable bouncer to Rupert Frazer's wily and dapper Polonius. This is an environment where narcissism knows no bounds — the *Hello!* celebrity magazines that are inertly flicked through on stage point to a dramatic void at the centre of this court; a world bereft of purpose where Lex Shrapnel's Laertes returns from Paris armed with Eurostar bags full of goodies to continue the endless spiral of partying. Marcellus' line "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," significantly cut from Bieito's version which dispenses with both Marcellus and Bernardo, resonated through its absence. As with *Barbaric Comedies* and his UK operatic ventures, *Hamlet* divided the UK critics with the *Evening Standard*, the *Herald*, the *Financial Times* lining up firmly behind Bieito's "astonishing roller-coaster ride into the black heart of the play" (Neil Cooper, the *Herald*, 21 August 2003) and *Scotland on Sunday*, the *Independent*, and the *Guardian*, generally lambasting "this self-consciously cartoonish garbage" (Mark Brown, *Scotland on Sunday*, 24 August 2003). Bieito was certainly prepared for a critical onslaught, as he articulated in an interview in the Spanish daily *El País* on the day of the opening, when discussing a press campaign that he viewed as setting up the audience to judge what they were about to see as decidedly *not* Shakespeare (Anon, *El País*, 20 August 2003). Bieito's *Hamlet* is certainly in the radical European tradition of commenting on the text through a radical dramaturgical reworking. Indeed Bieito's work with the Hanover State Opera of late has seen a shift towards a German collabora-

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tive team with designers Ariane Isabell Unfried and Rifail Ajdarpasic and dramaturg Xavier Zuber — Swiss born but a member of the theatre’s artistic team — who had all collaborated with him on the 2003 staging of *Il trovatore* (invited to the 2004 Edinburgh Festival), a collaboration set to continue with the 2004 Hanover production of *La Traviata*. While continental Europe may gravitate towards what Dennis Kennedy views as a movement “to deconstruct Shakespeare’s plays, or to revise their representation by radical visual methods.” (*Looking at Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 288), in the UK a tradition where reverence to the Bard still dominates staging traditions tends towards a sanitation of the political within the aesthetic of pleasing costume dramas. As such the defiant tampering that Bieito subjects the text to, trimming it down to a two-hour chamber piece for a cast of 9, may have not met with universal acclaim but its anatomizing of the action, to borrow Dennis Kennedy’s phrase, recognizes ‘the vast distance the

text has traveled to reach us, and to become, at least in one sense, traitors to our own time’ (*Looking at Shakespeare*, p. 207).

The following interview (revised and now updated for publication) took place at the Edinburgh International Festival on 21 August 2003, on the second day of the production’s run. The production has subsequently played at the Birmingham Rep theatre (9-20 September), at Barcelona’s Teatre Romea (30 September – 5 October) and at the Dublin Festival (9-12 October). In October and November 2004, the production will be seen in Michigan, Minneapolis and Los Angeles. It is hoped that other US dates will be confirmed in the next three months. [Editor’s Note: The reader should note the absence of New York in this list. *WES* deplores the ongoing situation in which major European (or other international) directors like Bieito and Castorf are no longer invited to The Brooklyn Academy, or any other New York venue. As far as international theatre is concerned, New



Matthew Douglas as Rosencrantz, George Anton as Hamlet, and Nicholas Aaron as Guildenstern in Calixto Bieito’s production of *Hamlet*, for the Edinburgh International Festival with Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Photo: Robert Day

York is no longer a significant venue, a truly deplorable state of affairs].

*WESTERN EUROPEAN STAGES:* This may be the first Shakespeare that you've directed in English but you've been directing the Bard's work for over fifteen years in Catalan, French, German and Spanish. How different is it working in English? Is your relationship to the language different?

CALIXTO BIEITO: It's really the same process that I've always used with the text. Of course I was aware of the fact that it was in English but it was still governed by the need to be totally free in the same way as if I were working with a Shakespeare play in Catalan, Spanish or German. It's always about being comfortable with the text. The weight of tradition is something you have to engage with, especially with regard to the actors who are very concerned with what each sentence means. But I come from a different practice. Of course when you're working in English you have to work harder with regard to the associations of the text, with what is expected. When I staged Calderón's *Life is a Dream* in Spanish in 2000, people kept asking why the characters were talking so fast as this stopped them from understanding the text. My answer was that it's impossible to understand the text because even if you're reading it you can't really understand it as you need a dictionary close by to really comprehend the meaning of the sentences. It's the same with Shakespeare. The sound of the words is like a song; it's like music. You can't ignore this and just concentrate on what each word means.

The work with the actors involved a lot of deconstruction. We separated the scenes out and then reconfigured them to create something fresh and different: a new piece called *Hamlet*. It's not because I don't "trust" the text. It actually has to do with presenting the text anew for an audience. It's about the audience listening to the words as if for the first time. It doesn't make sense to repeat and recycle what others have done before me. And the actors understood immediately that this was a different approach, that they could stop and breathe in different places. Pauses can be created in different areas so as to create a new music with the text. Indeed I never felt that the text was against me or that I was reading against it or in conflict with it. Rather I felt that it was a pliable text that I could do

what I wanted with. There are no limits to the freedom with which I approach it. It's why I direct. The rehearsal room must always be a space of freedom where everything is possible. The director is not a surgeon performing an operation.

*WES:* The production seems to be part of a longer term cycle of Shakespeare's works presented by international directors which Brian McMaster looks to present at the Festival over the next few years.

*CB:* This is the future. An English director doing Lope de Vega in Spain; a Russian director working with French actors on a Molière play. The future is multicultural. I believe in small communities and identities. This is important. But we are part of a multilingual culture and this needs to be reflected in the theatre we make. I am using different traditions to make something new. And renewal sometimes needs traumas. This production will play at the theatre where I am artistic director, Barcelona's Romea in October. I think audiences will find it "liberating" to watch the play in English even if they don't understand it. This is the future.

*WES:* One of the most striking features of your directorial aesthetic is the way in which you rewrite the text through the visual. You have a concrete scenic environment, this private bar that the royal family frequent and here you have a world of endless night, of ceiling fans that never stop spinning. It's very *film noir*. In a conversation earlier in the day Rick Fisher the lighting designer talked about the development of a scenographic language for the production "reshaping a simple stage shape using darkness as an extra piece of scenery because lighting it in a particular way you create darkness to surround the characters". This seems particularly appropriate in a play about masking, hiding, and deception.

*CB:* You can never do 100 per cent of this play. It is such a big account of the anguish of the human condition. This is like a dark thriller. The costumes are modern and smart, what royals who have money might wear. It is like a *film noir* and a surreal, unreal *film noir*.

I have left the story as it is. But I am manipulating the words — this gift that Shakespeare gives us — to talk about human beings. There is so much pain in this play. Gertrude and Ophelia are victims. This is a misogynistic play. Both are vic-

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When I manipulate the play I move things around so that the actors and characters can own it. The audience may not recognize it because the context is unfamiliar. The main soliloquies are there but just reallocated. We had undertaken a version of the play before rehearsals began. But then obviously things changed as the actors began to work on it. Shakespeare worked with actors and I'm sure that the actors he collaborated with "wrote" sections of the scenes or changed lines. I'm doing the same thing. Firstly, it's a question of checking with the actors that the basis of the script seems solid and then things are altered and fine-tuned. It would have been too difficult to mould the shape of the play in rehearsal. We needed a structure to bring to the rehearsal. It's a bit like new Catalan cuisine, like Adrià Ferrà at "El Bulli," we're reinventing the omelette! And this involves actor input. Decisions are made in rehearsal that therefore alter the structure of the play. So, for example, rehearsals placed the "To be or not to be" later in the play even though my intuition had suggested that it needed to go earlier.

Of course, the actors you work with are so important here. I have actors who work *with* me. We're all on a journey, so it's not about just my vision and my voice.

*WES:* You often work with a regular group of actors at the Romea theatre in Barcelona. You've used a repertory of performers to stage both *Macbeth* in Catalan and Castilian-Spanish and *Threepenny Opera* in Castilian-Spanish in 2002-03. Here too you are returning to work with George Anton with whom you'd collaborated in *Life is a Dream*. He was also your assistant director on the Castilian-Spanish version of *Life is a Dream*, which was staged in 2000.

*CB:* Whenever I stage a piece I am only one part of the production. It's always a team effort that brings together the designers, assistant director, lighting designer and of course the actors. George Anton is my favourite actor. He's my alterego on stage. People always think that it's because we are both bald, but that's not the reason! I didn't watch the production on opening night and George came up to me after Act 4 and told me that he was trying new things in response to the audience. And that's wonderful because it's evidence of an actor who is working *with* the audience. He's discovering things

and isn't scared to try something new. He's always willing to change things. George is effectively my captain in the company. With the actors you always have to ensure that the extreme situations of *Hamlet* or *Life is a Dream* are credible to an audience. It's as if this *might* be us.

*WES:* There is this sense of the audience as confidantes in the production, co-conspirators who *Hamlet* embroils in the games of deception that mark out the play. This is a play about deception and masking and you realize these motifs in highly visual ways through the production, often through a recourse to dramatic lighting effects that seem to suggest an influence of anti-realist film directors like David Lynch and a heightened, highly physical performance style.

*CB:* Everybody has to work with a high level of energy. There is an investment in the project and this involves a willingness to try out other theatrical registers. Theatre is not like real life. I'm not anti-realist but that which is understood to be realist theatre belongs in the past century and not in the present one. I think that actor-audience interrelations are the most important thing. You can't pretend they're not there.

*WES:* This production of *Hamlet* involves both dramaturgical reworking and a clear scenic location. You've played around with the order of the play, relocated certain scenes and speeches: "To be or not to be," for example, is addressed by Hamlet to Polonius' corpse that he's slumped into a chair opposite him. You take this epic sprawling world and position it within what seems to be ostensibly a single location, it's almost as if you've reframed the Bard's epic narrative within the classical unities of time and place.

*CB:* My style has evolved. I don't "do Shakespeare" the way that I first approached it fifteen years ago. I've tried the epic approach in the past. When I staged *King John* in 1995 it was epic, in an open setting. Now however, I think you have to be specific in locating these plays. So I think it works well if you have a contrast between the text and a very specific world on the stage. You have to be clear about the world you want to convey to an audience. A lot of productions aren't clear. They recite the text but the environment and costumes are a mixture of modern and the old-fashioned and you're not sure as an audience whether it's now or