



**'Opera and theatre in Barcelona:
Catalan veterans, Spanish stars,
and international visitors'**

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages

Vol. 16, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 49-58.

ISSN: 1050-1991.

Available for download from
Maria Delgado's website
(www.mariadelgado.co.uk)
with friendly permission of the publisher

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center,
The Graduate Center of the
City University of New York.

For private, non-commercial-use only.

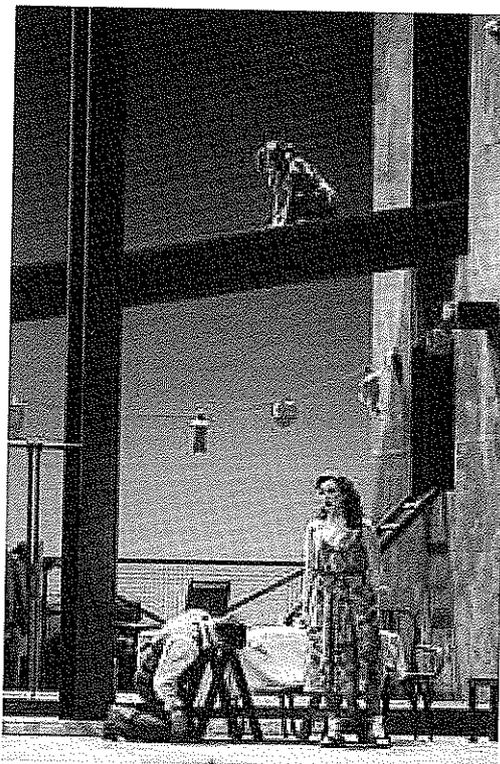
Opera and Theatre in Barcelona: Catalan Veterans, Spanish Stars, and International Visitors

Maria M. Delgado

Franco-Argentine director Jorge Lavelli has been an intermittent presence within Barcelona's theatre scene for over twenty-three years now. Nuria Espert tried to persuade him to work with her company during the Franco era but he steadfastly refused to work in Spain while Francisco Franco remained in power. His first collaboration with her company came in 1981, when he directed a luminous co-production of García Lorca's Chekhovian drama, *Doña Rosita la soltera* (*Doña Rosita the Spinster*), with the then-fledgling Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid. Their subsequent collaboration on *The Tempest*, again designed by Max Bignens, was presented in both Catalan and Spanish. Both productions were seen across the European festival circuit consolidating a reputation forged by Espert in the 1970s through her groundbreaking theatrical adventures with Víctor García and by Lavelli in his experiments with the Université du Théâtre des Nations in 1963 and subsequent work at the Odéon, the Avignon Festival and the Théâtre de la Ville. Lavelli's artistic directorship of the Théâtre National de la Colline between 1987 and 1996 established the theatre as an adventurous home for radical twentieth century dramaturgy which has never really been built on by his successor, the more conservative Alain Françon. Hispanic work especially had a strong presence within the program but Lavelli's continued presence within the Catalan landscape, as a director of Josep Maria Flotats' company with Copi's *Una visita inoportuna* (*An inopportune visit*) in 1989, and touring productions (*La Nuit de Madame Lucienne* in 1985 and *Comédies barbares* in 1991) which have played in the city have given him a profile within Catalonia that has not been enjoyed by other visiting directors. It is therefore perhaps a little peculiar that his operatic work has not been seen at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu until this year when Xavier Montsalvatge's *Babel 46* was partnered with Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.

This was a curious repertoire pairing by any standards. Catalan composer Montsalvatge originally conceived *Babel 46* as part of a competition convened by the Liceu in 1967 to commission a new opera for their upcoming season. The judges decided that none of the operas submitted were wor-

thy of production—much to the indignation of Montsalvatge, who went on to receive at least two premieres of his subsequent work at the opera house. The piece was finally premiered at the Cadaqués Festival in 1994, scaled down for a reduced orchestra, before being presented a short while later, with a full orchestra at the innovative Peralada Festival. Now, the Liceu's artistic director, Joan Matabosch, whose dynamic programming has turned this Catalan institution into one of Europe's most exciting opera houses, has decided to put matters right by including *Babel 46* within the Liceu's repertoire two years after this co-production was first seen at Madrid's Teatro Real. While Montsalvatge never saw the work on stage, dying some months before its premiere in 1994, it is perhaps fitting that one of the original jurors who rejected the work for production, is the current conductor, Antoni Ros Marba, who has since admitted that he and his colleagues made a mistake in not staging the work back in 1967.



Babel 46 at the Liceu. Photo: Antoni Bofill.

Given the checkered past of this opera, it's not hard to see why the judges back in 1967 might have harbored some concern. *Babel 46* deals with a group of European refugees incarcerated in an unspecified military transit camp shortly before their liberation and repatriation, and occupies an uneasy territory somewhere between intellectual debate and melodrama. Over the course of its eighty-minute duration, the relationships between the various inmates—the multiplicitous lies behind their explanations of who they are, their hopes for the future, desire and lust which wreaks its dangerous way to tragedy—are revealed. The key problem lies in the fact that the work lacks any real sense of dramatic momentum: the four scenes revolve around a singularly linear narrative that develops pedantically, and the love interest between two of the Italian inmates—each from a different province of the country—rotates clumsily between romance and high drama. Musically, the work borrows heavily from the work of Gian Carlo Menotti and consistently fails to deliver any real tension to the proceedings. Lavelli is a master of the baroque with an exquisite sense of stagecraft and he tries bravely to make something of this work but, much as the various characters are themselves underdeveloped, his own *mise en scène* rarely gets beyond a synthetic version of the transit camp. This was an interesting experiment which does much to redress the theatre's debt to Montsalvatge's legacy, but it's hard to make a case that the work deserves a stage future beyond its current incarnation.

By contrast, Lavelli's staging of Ravel's short masterpiece *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* proved highly inventive, witty and robustly enjoyable. After the dark monotony of *Babel 46*, Ravel's short opera dealing with the imagined revenge carried out by the domestic objects whom the bored *l'enfant* of the title has previously abused, offered a dazzling musical and visual experience. The curtain rose on a typical *fin de siècle* drawing room at the centre of which sits a bored, trouser-suited child. As if by magic, the armchair, stool, sofa, grandfather clock, birdcage, and even the shepherd figures on the wallpaper all come miraculously to life using stilts and other circus-like devices to create an ensuing optical spectacle which is both terrifying to the child and highly amusing for the audience. As the action proceeds outside to involve all the various animals that the child has tortured, the *mise en scène* assumes a pastiche on the classical ballet; something Ravel may have envisaged by engaging Balanchine as the

original choreographer. The sumptuous designs by Agostino Pace (with costumes by Francesco Zito) deliberately evoke the world of a classical *Giselle* or *Sleeping Beauty*, using cardboard cut-out flats for wings and a striking painted backdrop of nature in all its lush greenery. After a number of rather lack-luster productions of this work, such as Nigel Lowery's recent postmodernist staging for the UK's Opera North, here is a refreshing chance to see a rendition by one of the great European directors, that is both refreshingly aware of its production history while gently sending up any pretensions towards period authenticity within an aesthetic that deliciously juxtaposes vaudeville with the grotesque.

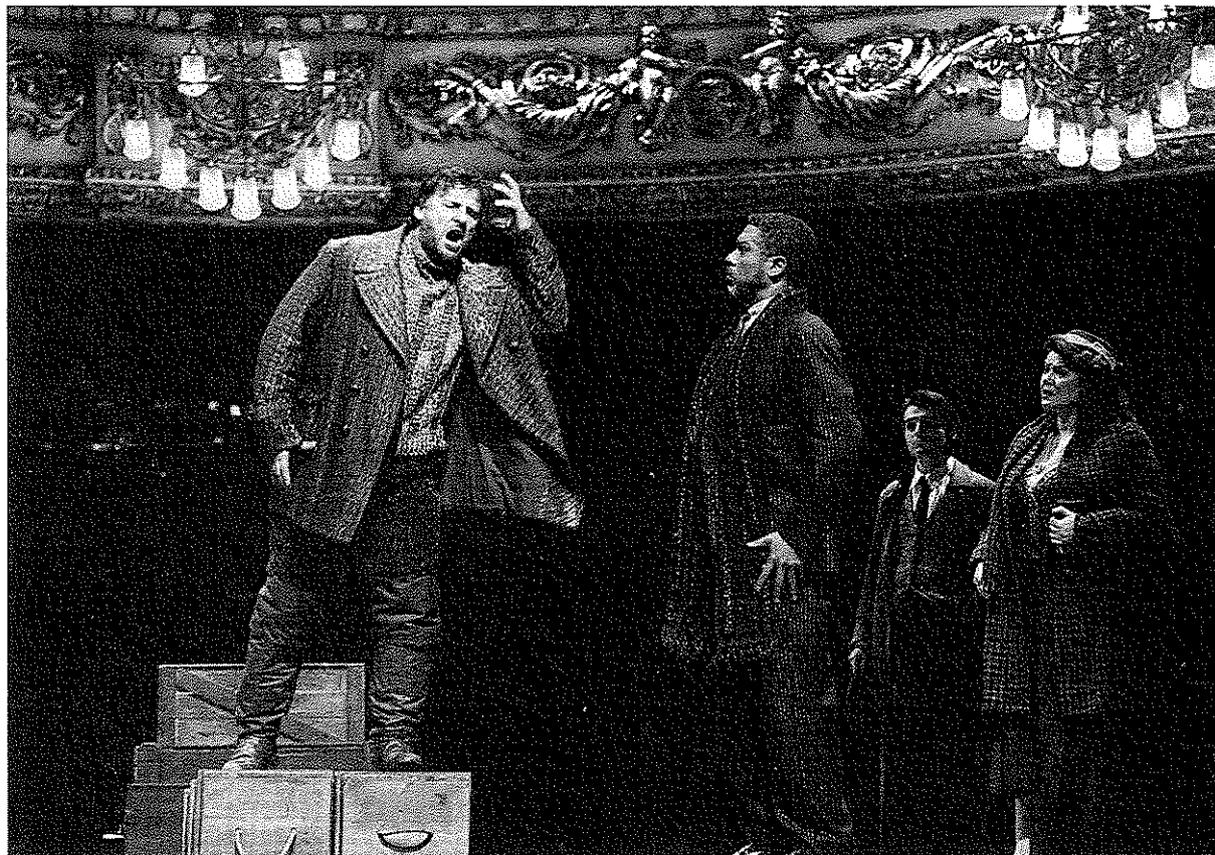
Another director who directed a French national theatre at the same time as Lavelli was at the helm of La Colline, Lluís Pasqual, the former director of the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, was also in residence at the Liceu this season. Pasqual's work has been seen at the Liceu in previous seasons: his *Falstaff* was seen during the 1983-84 season and *Samson et Dalila* played the following year. Nevertheless, despite a continued association with the Teatre Lliure—the theatre he helped found in 1976—until 2000, and a key role in the conception and realization of the Ciutat del Teatre in Montjuïc, he has chosen in recent years to work largely within the commercial sector. The pairing of Pasqual with Britten's *Peter Grimes* may initially appear odd, bearing in mind that it is the Liceu's first staging of the work. The opera was first announced for the 1953-54 season, but heightened British/Spanish tensions over Gibraltar led to a withdrawal of the proposed production. Fifty years later, Pasqual's choice to set Britten's gritty tragedy of social hypocrisy in a very specific Barcelona context proves an astute decision that re-envisages the small-town Englishness of the piece. The action takes place in the burnt out shell of the old Liceu—directly after the fire of 1994—with the broken-down shell of the theatre directly mirrored by its resplendent (identically restored) counterpart. At key moments—those dealing with the community's merciless hatred of the outcast Grimes, a character hellbent on improving himself within society—the house lights come on in the auditorium, highlighting the audience as complicit characters in Grimes' destruction.

It's no accident that at these points in the drama, the Chorus, upon whom much of the action turns, are dressed in full evening dress and seem to

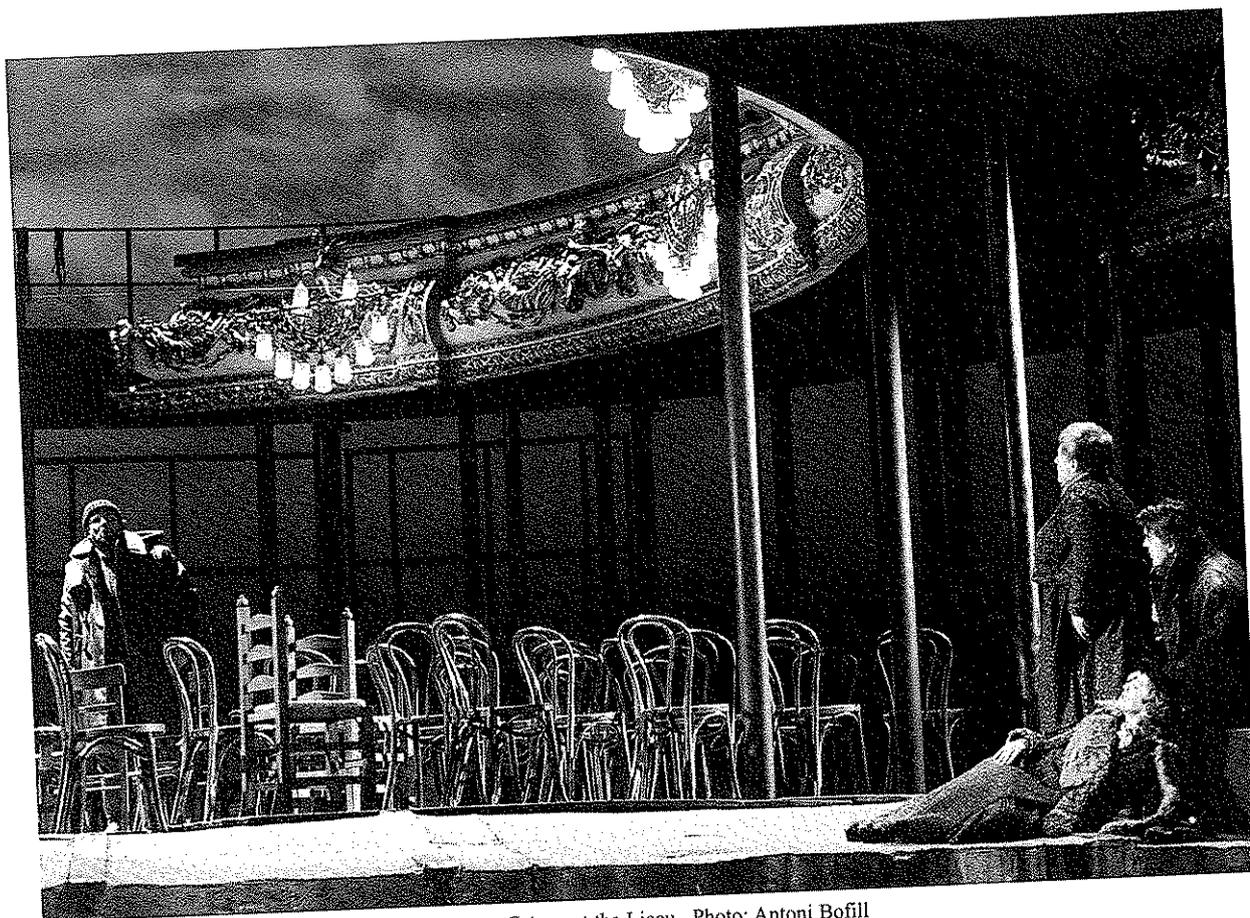
be deliberately placed on the Upper Level (dress circle) of the set, looking down both physically and metaphorically upon the protagonists below. Metatheatricality has often proved a potent staging device for Pasqual, evident in his groundbreaking productions of *El público* (*The Public*) and *Comedia sin título* (*Play without a Title*) for Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional in the late 1980s, *As You Like it* for the Teatre Lliure in 1983, and Genet's *Le Balcon* for the Odéon in 1991. Most recently in 2000, Pasqual's swansong to the Lliure's Gràcia building was a reading of *The Cherry Orchard*, staged against the detritus of an *ancien régime* marked by discarded suitcases and trunks. The company's new building, which they now occupy in Montjuïc, functioned as a powerful physical metaphor for *The Cherry Orchard*—an iconic prize which much be held onto at all costs—on display as a perfectly realized model in a corner of the stage [see *WES* 12:3]. Here too Pasqual employed an analogous theatrical device as a mode of speaking directly to the Catalan cultural *cognoscenti*. As with *The Cherry Orchard*, however, the striking visual simile might have proved more problematic for the visiting spec-

tator who failed to grasp the resonance of the stage imagery. Within the space itself, Pasqual employs a more specific production language to delineate the small, close knit community riven by internal mistrust and suspicion. Together with designer Ezio Frigerio, who seems to be working very much according to Pasqual's own visual agenda, the design is dark and murky and works as an appropriate foil to the more metatheatrical world of the whole.

Amidst the international roster of stars who have developed Peter Grimes as a central role in their repertoire, the name of Christopher Ventris should surely now be added. Both vocally and physically, his is a committed, dangerous, muscular performance. Singing the role for the first time, he offers a vigorous characterization and evidence of a vocal range suited to the part. He demonstrates himself capable of real vocal tenderness; the scene with Gwynne Geyer's Ellen culminating in his terrifying outburst "Then God have mercy upon me," is a revelation. Pasqual has wrought a strong performance that announces the emergence of a powerful new Grimes for the millennium.



Peter Grimes at the Liceu. Photo: Antoni Bofill.



Peter Grimes at the Liceu. Photo: Antoni Bofill

Pasqual's work with the rest of the cast is similarly focused. American baritone Robert Bork delivers a powerfully understated Balstrode while Jürgen Sacher similarly excels as the cool pastor, Reverend Adams. The success of any production of *Grimes* must be measured, in part, by the contribution of the Chorus, and here the Liceu's *Cor* show a commitment and drive which render their repeated cries of "Peter Grimes" at the end of Act Four devastating—an effect accentuated by Pasqual and lighting designer Vinicio Cheli's deployment of the houselights in the auditorium to ensure that the real audience are left feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

For any company, *Peter Grimes* is a huge musical challenge. Keeping the whole thing an entirely Catalan affair, the Liceu wisely engaged the services of twentieth century music specialist, Josep Pons, who has had a successful association with this orchestra as well as years with the Chamber Orchestra of the Lliure which he founded in 1985. Artistic Director of Granada's City Orchestra since 1994 as well as the new Music Director of Spain's National Orchestra, Pons is one of the most versatile

conductors in Spain. He conducts with huge drive and energy, driving the production forward at a relenting pace that heightens the imposing sense of tragedy.

On balance, it's hard to see how this angle on the staging is going to have a wide appeal beyond the Barcelona audience who have such strong allegiance to their own *Liceu de tots* (Liceu for all). But watching this compelling, albeit quirky, staging was an involving experience which confirms the work's, and Britten's, domination of the twentieth century opera repertoire, and points to staging strategies that move away from picturesque creations of tiny fishing villages that have dominated some UK stagings.

If *Peter Grimes* showed Pasqual's veritable strengths as a director, a production of David Hare's *The Breath of Life*, playing in the city the following month, demonstrated an altogether less assured theatrical register. The production clearly seeks to capitalize on the first run success of *Skylight* premiered in Barcelona last year, but whereas *Skylight* is one of Hare's tighter plays, *The Breath of Life* is an altogether flimsier dramatic vehicle. While its dynam-

ics may not be dissimilar to those of *Skylight*, the onstage tension is far more dependent on the rapport of its two protagonists rather than the concerns of the writing. While *Skylight* veritably tapped into issues around the loss of ideals within the wider context of mid-1990s Britain, *The Breath of Life* fails to capture the breadth of this earlier play. Howard Davies' 2002 production had Maggie Smith as the retired curator Madeleine Palmer, visited on the Isle of Wight by the ex-wife of her ex-lover, Frances Beale (a feisty Judi Dench) who is hoping to write about "their story" for her next book. Their encounter provides a way for histories to be retold with the absent husband Martin, now married to a younger woman, as significant a figure as the dead wife in *Skylight*. During a night of confessions, recriminations, regrets and resentments, each has a chance to narrate "her version" of what happened. The next morning Frances leaves for Blackheath, having abandoned her intention of writing up the narrative of their intersecting lives around the male figure they shared for a significant proportion of

their lives.

Nacho Artime's translation—his third of a Hare piece—understands the rhythms of Hare's writing, but the play seems to have been radically pruned for this production and as such many of the build-ups to particular moments of revelation are lost. The truncated version does what is already one of Hare's weaker pieces no favors, and the play passes as a series of memorable speeches linked in overly spurious ways. Pasqual, whose production of *Wit* with Rosà Maria Sardà remains on a nationwide tour, here assembles two other luminaries of the Spanish stage: Nuria Espert and Amparo Rivelles in the roles of Frances and Madeleine. Rivelles is one of the *grande dames* of the Spanish theatre, the daughter of two of the great actors of the pre-Civil War era. A significant film star, she played alongside Orson Welles in *Mr. Arkadin* in 1954, before going on to spend over 20 years in Mexico. Since her return to Spain in the late 1970s, her rich array of stage characterizations have included the dutiful wife in Benavente's *Rosas de otoño* (*Autumn*



Nuria Espert in *The Breath of Life*.
Photo: Pep Ros Rivas

Roses, 1992), the last production of Spain's great post-Civil War director José Luis Alonso, and the eponymous title role in *Driving Miss Daisy* (2001). At seventy-eight, hers is a physically fragile Madeleine who lacks the dexterity of Smith's younger conceptualization of the role. Her voice, however, is still as musical as ever and she delivers the brittle qualities of Hare's language with admirable verve and immaculate timing. As her antagonist, Nuria Espert is an altogether less homely figure than Dench's Frances. Hers is a professional elegance and assurance that lends itself more obviously to the role of Madeleine. Nevertheless, she conveys a tangible sense of Frances' awkwardness on entering Madeleine's home that captures the obvious discomfort of the situation. There are exquisite moments in the production (usually in the aftermath of one or other realizing that they have overstepped the mark). Both actresses are able to engage in the verbal combat that the text calls for, and the witty exchange of dialogue is always appealing. The overall effect, however, is curiously unsatisfying. Lluís Pasqual has always been one of the most exciting of the directors who emerged in the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship, but his strengths have lain primarily within an epic repertory (both Renaissance and twentieth century) where his playful imagination has securely transcended the bounds of mimetic realism. Here he appears problematically contained by the more limited discursive parameters of Hare's writing.

Pasqual's set provides an expansive living-cum-study area basking in the warm light that floods in through three tall back windows. While the room bears the traces of Madeleine's artistic adventures, the moving of items of furniture from scene to scene to provide different spatial configurations seems rather awkward and unnecessary. Pasqual has rightly recognized that this is an actors' piece and allows each actress to appropriate the stage in a delicate negotiation of power. One is left, however, with the impression that Espert would have made a more dynamic Madeleine and that the production would have benefitted from the energies of a younger adversary able to capture some of that remarkable sense of ordinariness that imbued Judi Dench's characterization of the resilient Frances adapting to the challenges of a new beginning late in life.

Espert and Rivelles are not the only veterans in town. At the Teatre Lliure, former home of Pasqual, Spain's oldest theatre company, the forty-

something Els Joglars, have been presenting *El retablo de las maravillas* (*The Marvellous Puppet Show*), a variation on Cervantes' short *entremes*, or interludes, first published in 1615. This single scene playlet concerns a pair of tricksters, Chanfalla and Chirinos, who are permitted to stage a puppet show as part of a wedding celebration. They confidently claim, however, that the luminous quality of their show resides in the fact that it can only be seen by those who are the children of a legitimate marriage or those who have no Jewish blood. While there may be nothing on display, the credulous, who are reluctant to expose themselves, marvel at the wondrous puppets seen before them. An outsider who stumbles on the show exposes the façade but is unceremoniously thrown out by the villagers who censure him as a new Christian. The playlet ends with the two tricksters preparing a second show to be played the following day.

Albert Boadella's take on the piece involves a wholesale re-envisioning of the context. The puppet show has been replaced by a painting and the biblical context of the intertheatrical play (Samson and Delilah, Judas and Christ, and Herod, Salomé and John the Baptist) is dispensed with in favour of a contemporary reworking that recreates analogous scenarios from present day Spain. And while the décor (twinkling panels to the side of the stage, a lit floor square tiles and a giant screen that mutates to create a fresco from the 16th century or the mindless drivel of contemporary television) may situate the production firmly in our era, the opening scenario serves to locate a performance vocabulary (both visual and physical) for the Golden Age repertory. As such we are given a court fooled by three charlatans, all variations on popular *Commedia dell'Arte* archetypes (Sr. Chanfällaz, Arbequino and Rabelín), picaresque entities who install a giant, invisible altarpiece to fool the court. The depiction of the court owes much to Velázquez's corrosive depictions of the Bourbon royalty of Spain with Minnie Marx's grumpy drunken count, teetering across the stage in pompous indignation and Ramon Fontserè (the dazzling Dalí of Joglars' 1999 *Daaalí*) excelling as his Basil Fawlty-ish mute son.

From this opening take, Els Joglars find a means of capturing the language of the past without seeking to obliterate either the technologies of the present or the theatrical developments between Cervantes' time and the present. Boadella envisages four further scenarios that illuminate the thematics of Cervantes' interlude all overseen by the lithe



Scenario 2 of Els Joglars' *El retablo de las maravillas*.
Photo: Jordi Bover

Arbequino (the masked Pep Vila) and maneuvered by the smooth-talking spin wizard who creates the variations on José María personified by Fontserè. The first of these variations emerges as a thinly disguised commentary on Opus Dei founder José María Escrivá de Balaguer (with Fontserè brilliantly capturing the idiosyncratic pitch of Escrivá's highly distinctive voice). As pilgrims enter to ask for his prayers and he faces a panic attack before the impending crowds, the clergy in black who surround him (personified by a media-savvy Father Felipe), conjure an invisible Monsignor José to answer their prayers. Xavier Boada captures the slick professionalism of the shadowy Felipe, who can manipulate any situation to suit his unholy purpose. As such the cruelty of façade means that he can conjure a levitating holy man whose presence/absence inspires the credulous to believe a miracle has occurred before their very eyes. The characterization of this motley crew of penitents owes much to the populist tradition of the *sainete* that also infuses La Cubana's performance work, larger than life prototypes that indicate the legacy of the Commedia in contemporary performance practice. Here the credulous aristocrats of the first scenario (the Counts of Daganzo) are reconfigured as the Daganzo family, who come to ask Monsignor to pray for their encephalic son, the José María Daganzo of Scenario 3, whose crude conceptual art is first thrown out by the fancy staff of a modern art gallery and then embraced on the recommendation of an influential art critic as the ultimate in avant-garde. The wise fool, a variation on the Peter Sellers gardener who rises to political prominence in Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979), is fêted and deconstructed, the ultimate commodity in a market dominated by the acquired jargon traded in the desire to possess the ultimate accessory. The gallery owner's name Rosina is not insignificant here, for it is a prominent nod towards the director of Arco, Madrid's contemporary art fair.

The showbiz element of modern art spills over into contemporary cuisine, the focus of Scenario 4, a culinary *retablo* as José María Daganzo metamorphoses into José Mari Daganzo, culinary *maestro* extraordinaire. Here, Ferran Adrià of El Bullí becomes the target of Boadella's corrosive humor as a group of Carrefour employees are treated to a competition-winning meal at a much fêted restaurant where dishes are conjured from the words of the marketing *Maitre d'* whose spin-doctoring would have you believe that dishes enter

through the ears and nose without a need to pass the lips. Once again Fontserè captures the recognizable characteristics of Adrià's voice while Xavier Boada takes on the smooth-talking Public Relations supremo who is prepping a BBC World Service reporter making a documentary about the celebrated chef recently labeled "best in the world" by the *New York Times*, an accolade recently bestowed on Adrià.

The final scenario turns to politics with Felipe Chanfállez and his wife Carmen hosting a dinner party for two friends at their Andalusian villa. The referents here are plainly the former socialist Prime Minister Felipe González and his astute wife; the former still a potent force in Spanish politics and evidently viewed by Boadella as the ultimate spin *maestro*. This Felipe's disillusion at the lackluster options at the PSOE or Socialist Party's door leads him to create a new successor in a pizza delivery man named, of course, José María, a clone of José María Aznar, the outgoing Prime Minister recently replaced as leader of the Partido Popular by Mariano Rajoy. In a month where the Spanish ventured to the polls to elect a new government, Boadella never hesitates to take aim at the vacuous policies of the major parties who see effective marketing and benign electoral appeal as the key factors in contemporary politics.

The sweep of *El retablo* moving from the church, to art, *nouvelle cuisine* and the national political arena sees all indelibly marked by the politics of spin. Boadella probes deep inside the psyche of contemporary Spain and the results are little short of soul destroying. As the giant image of Che Guevara, projected on the back wall of the politician's home in the final vignette makes clear, this is the generation radicalized by Guevara who now only pay lip service to past aspirations to make the world a better place. This world is now shaped by snobs, fools, and hypocrites, molding artisans into whatever society needs them to be. The production is a veritable collective feat of ensemble acting with the company of nine each taking an array of roles. Els Joglars have always favoured an animated performance style that combines physical dexterity with a playful, mercurial dramaturgy. More recently, as *Daaali* demonstrated, their caustic satire has drawn imaginatively on new vocabularies of theatre (as the multi-screen projecting images of the ideal body, and emblems of our post-modernity demonstrates) to examine a society where consumerism leads us to hunt out the latest fads whatever the price, as in our craving for the new celebrity, we



Scenario 4 of Els Joglars' *El retablo de las maravillas*.

Photo: Jordi Bover

exalt those that may not necessarily deserve it, creating demi-gods who serve our maligned purposes. Fontserè as the multifaceted José Marias of each vignette proves himself the consummate actor of *Daaali*, *Ubu President* (1995) and *La increíble historia del Dr Floit y Mr Pla* (*The Incredible History of Dr. Floit and Mr. Pla*, 1997), a chameleonic figure of alert agility, a Peter Sellers and John Cleese for the Hispanic world but with something of the lithe alertness of Geoffrey Rush. As the smooth-operating spin-doctor, Xavier Boada effectively captures the smug artistry and self-belief of each of his incarnations from the wily trickster of the opening vignette to the slick politician of the final scenario.

The Cervantine origins of the project may render it unlikely to achieve the international profile that *Daaali* enjoyed. The only planned dates outside Spain are those at Portugal's Almada Festival (15-17 July) and yet the concerns of the production, while rooted in contemporary Spain, easily transcend the immediate context of Boadella's landscape. The production may not tell us anything new but it speaks of the relevance of interludes too often relegated to the peripheries of Cervantes' body of

work. In a year that sees the UK's Royal Shakespeare Company stage a Spanish Golden Age season at Stratford-upon-Avon's Swan Theatre and four Calderón productions in Paris—*El gran teatro del mundo* (*The Great Theatre of the World*) and *El pleito matrimonial* (*The Matrimonial Dispute*) at the Comédie-Française [see Marvin Carlson's essay on Paris in this issue], *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*) at the Théâtre des Amandiers at Nanterre in January, and *Rosaura* (a dance version of *La vida es sueño*) at the Théâtre de la Cité—Els Joglars provide a timely lesson in performance vocabularies that present Renaissance texts in bold, new ways. The climate post-11 March, however, may render *El retablo* too cruel a spectacle for a nation coming to terms with the bombings that rocked the capital city on the eve of the country's elections. It will be interesting to see how the production is greeted in the aftermath of these tumultuous events and whether its cynicism proves inappropriate in the country's altered landscape. With public demonstrations of grief and anger spilling out into the streets across the nation, the production might find its impact blunted in a society preoccupied with a somewhat different set of concerns.

Barcelona seems to be following London in the desire to work up an audience for a show through the conspicuous marketing of film celebrities in theatre roles. At the Tívoli, Yasmina Reza's *Art* returns to Barcelona in a production by the former artistic director of London's Gate Theatre, Mick Gordon, with three Argentine stars including *Son of the Bride* (2001) and *Nine Queen's* (2001) Ricardo Darín. At the Teatre Novedades, Fele Martínez (the ephemeral Otto in Medem's *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*, 1998) takes on the celebrated Woody Allen role in a version of *Play it Again Sam* by Juan José Arteche titled *Sueños de un seductor* (*Dreams of a Seducer*). Meanwhile at the Romea Teatre Javier Cámara (the male nurse in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*, 2002), plays in another touring production, *Como en las mejores familias* (*As in the Best Families*). This version of Angès Jaoui and Pierre Braqui's play, revolving around a weekly Friday get-together that doesn't quite go as planned, receives a tight, sharp and wickedly funny production by Manel Dueso distinguished by superb ensemble cast led by Cámara and Julieta Serrano. It's not surprising that the production has been packing audiences in much in the way Joel Joan and Jordi Sánchez's *Excuses* did in 2001.

Como en las mejores familias followed a dazzling second run of David Hare's *Skylight* with Roser Camí (Lady Macbeth in Bieito's 2001-03 *Macbeth* seen at the Barbican's BITE in London last April) replacing Marta Calvó's Kyra and Josep Maria Pou reprising his magnetic Tom. Camí proves a more robust and prickly Kyra, able to rise formidably in stature to match Pou's assertive Tom. Director Ferran Madico leaves the actors center-stage and, as such, Camí and Pou create a palpable onstage chemistry, rendering the production even

more memorable than when I first saw it in March 2003. Plans for a Spanish-language version of the production are underway.

Pou is, along with Josep Maria Flotats, arguably the greatest Catalan stage actor of his generation. This summer for the international Forum Barcelona 2004 he teams up with the Romea's artistic director, Calixto Bieito [see *WES* 16.1, 71], for a staging of *King Lear*, the first in Barcelona for over a century. For those who've never seen this Michael Gambon of the Spanish-speaking world, the run of *King Lear* (from 29 June to 1 August) with Pou in the title role should give some indication of his remarkable stage presence and offer another fortuitous on-stage pairing with Roser Camí, who joins Bieito regulars Carles Canut and Boris Ruiz in the cast. While produced under the umbrella of the Forum, the production is another Romea/Focus venture. Bieito's ability to juggle a programme that appeals, age-wise, to a wide sector of the Catalan theatre-going audience is certainly a factor in making the Romea one of the most exciting venues in town. With the Romea co-production of *Homage to Catalonia* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds UK (15 March – 3 April), MC93 Bobigny France (14-16 April), Newcastle Playhouse UK (27 April – 8 May), and the Romea (20 May – 13 June), and Bieito at the Edinburgh International Festival this summer with an adaptation of Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina* (from 16 – 24 August) with Complicité regular Kathryn Hunter in the title role and the Hanover State Opera production of *Il Trovatore* (23 August) the international profile of the Bieito/Romea brandname looks to become as strong as export as the Catalan performance companies La Fura dels Baus and Els Comediants.