



'Forum 2004 Barcelona: A Summer of Stagings in Spain's Theatrical Capital'

A review by Maria Delgado

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Fòrum 2004 Barcelona: A Summer of Stagings in Spain's Theatrical Capital

Maria M. Delgado

Just when you thought that London's Millennium Dome had put an end to these giant showcases conceived by politicians to celebrate the diversity of our glorious age, Barcelona dreams up an event to lure more tourists to the city and point out to Catalans just how innovative and cutting edge their glittering metropolis is. "Fòrum Barcelona 2004" is a theme park with new conference centers, exhibitions, auditoriums, a peace park, a 16-hectare esplanade, a giant 15,000 square meter tent (or "Haima") and an arts festival. Running from May 9th to September 26th, this expo programmed a plethora of political, cultural, leisure and social events that confirm Barcelona as a happening place politically, geographically, architecturally and culturally. The centerpiece Fòrum building, designed by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, the Swiss team responsible for London's Tate Modern and Laban Dance Center, stands as a powerful blue concrete triangular bridge between the new developments along the northeastern area of the city around the Olympic Port and the sea.

However, neither the Fòrum nor its Arts Festival, with a program confirmed only weeks before the opening event, have been met by local enthusiasm. Instead escalating costs, steep ticket prices, and an undefined relationship with the city's summer arts festival, the Grec (which has been swept into the Fòrum program), have kept responses rather muted. The temporary closure of the Fòrum building in early August, due to the flaking off of anti-inflammatory materials used to cover the edifice's interior iron beams, further served to question the project's aspirations to provide long-term economic investment in the city's lesser known or invisible quarters. While the Fòrum's program gravitates around the thematics of cultural diversity, sustainable development, and conditions for peace in our time, with figures from the worlds of politics, economics and culture debating a range of key issues, its designated arts festival moves beyond the Fòrum complex to embrace established venues across the city. Borja Sitjà, the Fòrum's arts programmer, has put together a dazzling array of artistic products, shipping in predictable purveyors of festival fare (Lepage, Wilson, Bausch, Brook, Sellars, Frank Castorf, The Wooster Group) to

deliver brand products alongside the cultivation of local fare (Sergi Belbel, Ramon Simó, Xicu Masó, Roger Bernat, Àlex Rigola) while ensuring the one figure that moves effortlessly across both worlds—Calixto Bieito—is given the key Shakespeare slot, with a production of *King Lear* that opened on June 29th.

There have been few theatre artists in contemporary Spain who have so relentlessly pursued an artistic policy that probes what theatre might mean (linguistically, culturally and politically) in a new Europe of ever shifting boundaries than Calixto Bieito. At the Romea, *Homage to Catalonia/Homenatge a Catalunya* may not have been directed by Bieito, but he is cited as one of the "artistic directors" of the project (alongside Northern Stage's Alan Lyddiard). The project has been at the back of his mind for the past ten years, and while he has not proved to be the director responsible for bringing it to the stage, it bears many of his hallmarks. Realized in Catalan and English with moments of French and Castilian-Spanish, it shares the refusal to be pigeonholed within just one of the languages of Catalonia that marks much of Bieito's past work. His workshops with the Union of Theatres of Europe have given him a taste of what's possible when you bring performers together from different cultural traditions. Here the dramaturgical framework allows for an Anglo-Catalan onstage dialogue, and this is a valuable prototype for what European theatre co-productions that try to move beyond the monolingual pragmatics of placating the lucrative festival circuit might be.

The production arrives in Barcelona for the city's Festival de les Arts del Fòrum celebrations, following dates at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Newcastle Playhouse, and MC Bobigny Paris, with its exemplary co-production credentials evident across all the publicity. Directed by Josep Galindo (Bieito's assistant on *Macbeth*), it juggles a multilingual cast of Romea regulars (Miquel Gelabert, Chantal Aimée, Mingo Ràfols) alongside members of Northern Stage's repertory company (Craig Conway, Alex Elliot, Tony Neilson). Adapted across 18 months by Allan Baker and critic Pablo Ley, with palpable actor input from the cast of ten, it shares something of Out of Joint's approach to

performer research and dramatic construction. Bieito has spoken of the need for theatre to engage with the historical past and the ways in which Spanish drama has failed consistently to do this (*La Vanguardia*, February 3, 2004). *Homage to Catalonia/Homenatge a Catalunya* is certainly an attempt to achieve this, but the antitheatrical nature of Orwell's novel may have proved too strong a hurdle for a team battling with material that may make sound political sense while defying an evident dramatic logic.

Homage to Catalonia is both a portrait of a search for the idealized "other" and a chronicle of disillusion and the death of a political dream. Bieito sees both the novel and the project as an homage to a utopian Catalonia (*El Periodico de Catalunya*, February 3, 2004), and indeed for this very reason it appears a particularly appropriate production to open the Fòrum's cultural program. Indeed the Catalonia presented is both mythical and intertextual—moments seem to evoke those of Genet's 1930s experiences in *A Thief's Journal*. Carles Caparrós' grainy black and white film, projected along the steel wall, provides footage that evokes the suffering, pain and sense of loss of a civil war that in many ways set the scene for World War II. The visual images that flash before us on the giant screen, however, have a doubly resonant edge in view of the events in Madrid of March 11th, as we see families searching for loved ones. As the curtain falls with the dedication "Als morts/To the dead," and the sound of "El cant dels ocells" (Pau Casals' resonant hymn to peace heard in the wake of March 11th) echoing across the auditorium, significantly both opening and closing the production, the ghosts of the victims of the bombings at Atocha Station rise up as past meets present in ways that could not have been conceived by the artistic team when preparing the show.

Indeed it is in many ways the film (and vibrant musical underscoring) that determines the pace of the production, and the performers sometimes seem dwarfed by an emotive visual landscape and aural soundscape that effectively delineates the horrors of war in the most potent of terms. The film (expertly edited by Carles Caparrós) presents both backdrop and commentary, and theatre seems unable to compete or enhance the sepia images that flicker on the giant screen.

When he arrived in Barcelona, in the first few months of the Civil War, Orwell was only in his early thirties. This adaptation begins with his entry

into the Trotskyist POUM (which Craig Conway's Orwell emphatically recounts) and effectively captures something of life in the trenches on the Aragon Front. The tone is lyrical but marked by a vein of palpable fear and disorder. The first half ends with the neck injuries suffered by Orwell and his return to Barcelona where his wife awaits him. The second half focuses on Orwell's return to a bourgeois Barcelona in May 1937, where the possibilities of a workers' revolution seem an all too distant past. We witness the annihilation of the POUM as chaos hits the streets and anarchy reigns.

The production is conceived in a non-realistic register that consistently recalls Brecht's political theatre. *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera* both seem significant antecedents but there is also a touch of the music hall formula of Littlewood's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* in the treatment of the historical material. Javier Gamazo's percussive musician has something of Billy Bragg and Joe Strummer about him and the "When will we attack" number of Act 1 evokes The Clash's immortal "Spanish Guns." The stand-up comedy and audience interaction clearly form part of this political vein but they are not handled quite as surely as Bieito managed in his brash 2002 *Threepenny Opera*. This may in part be to do with the environment in which designer Neil Murray chooses to locate the action. Murray's set is resourcefully used but too often seems unnecessarily cluttered. Beds are wheeled noisily off- and onstage in Act 1, waltzing around the piano and tin bath, books, bottles and discarded uniforms in patterns that convey something of the chaotic disorder of the war. In Act 2 a giant chandelier functions as an emblem of a bureaucracy determined to proceed with the party as if nothing were happening in the world beyond the Continental Hotel. Orwell's commander Georges Kopp's point that the conflict, bereft of appropriate weapons and maps, may have been more comic opera than military operation proved a key concept for this staging, and there is a real sense of the disarray and disaffection of the Republican coalition. Nevertheless too often the décor appears something that the characters have to overcome rather than an intrinsic part of their environment. Indeed in moments when the stage is littered with less and the characters move more fluidly, Galindo and his cast achieve something of the poetic simplicity of *Complicité* in *Street of Crocodiles*.

The introspective, diary-like passages of Orwell's novel, both personal testimony and politi-

cal manifesto, are here realized through monologues narrated by actors, and while Craig Conway's romantic Orwell provides a link of sorts between the different vignettes, this is not always enough to ensure that the audience are able to follow the action effectively. The cast of ten effectively convey the linguistic confusion at the front populated by enthusiastic volunteers from a range of countries. Theirs is a fiercely energetic, vibrant performance style that thrusts the piece forward and all (with the exception of Conway, who remains as Orwell throughout) resourcefully convey a range of animated characters from Soviet spies to POUM militia, politicians and transvestites, tourists and policemen. The range of acting styles—a common feature of Bieito's work—is here adopted by Galindo, but the aesthetic doesn't quite seem to gel, lacking a strong enough framework to contain such diversity. Mingo Ràfols often looks as if he's been transplanted from *Casablanca* or *The Manchurian Candidate*, prowling the front of the stage like a 1940s villain: all very entertaining but bereft of the subtlety of his previous collaborations with Bieito. Conway's Orwell veers towards a passionate crusading hero rather than the more detached, ironic observer of the novel, while Sasha Pick never provides sufficient differentiation between her different roles.

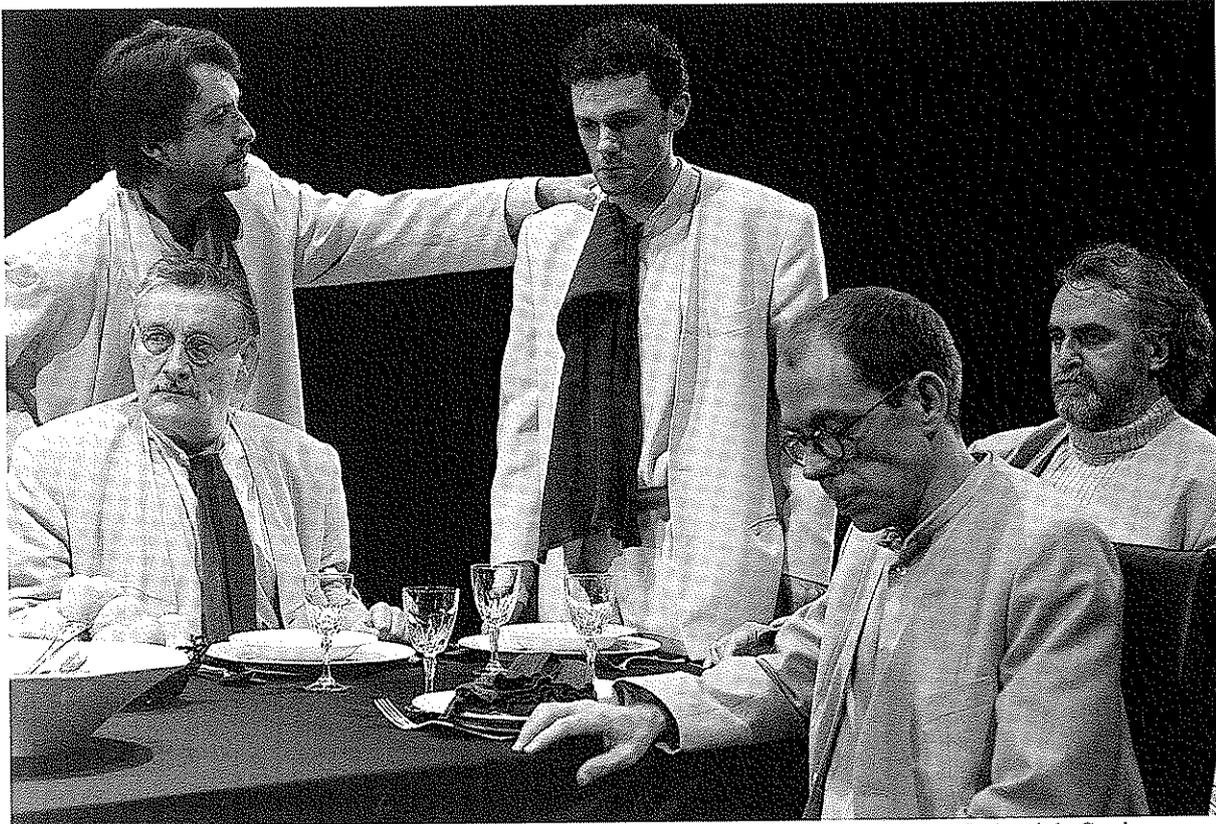
The rapid pace of this kaleidoscopic montage, however, sometimes leaves the audience bemused as to what was happening and who was who within an obtuse political situation that is never sufficiently clarified. Perhaps Galindo, Ley and Baker's point was precisely that this was a war whose politics were impenetrable but there is always a fine line in conveying a sense of chaos while ensuring that the audience's attention remains engaged. The production doesn't quite manage to juggle this fine line at all times, but there is no doubting its integrity and sense of purpose. At a time when political theatre may be judged an antiquated form of the past, Galindo and his cast point to the deceptions and manipulations used to justify armed conflict with a sharp post-modernist edge.

Through the *bricolage*, there are memorable stage images that remain, vignettes that allow the ensemble cast to capture the emotive, ideological and fratricidal bedlam of the war: the evocation of Gila and his calls to the enemy; the nod to Buñuel—it's no surprise to note that Galindo is as much a fan of Buñuel as his Romea mentor—through the operating table on which Orwell is placed as the Catalan bourgeoisie dine indulgently

around him; the books that double as barricades put in place by the cast kicked away by the police who visit Eileen Orwell; Orwell's journey into the depths of Catalan bureaucracy to liberate his commander Georges Kopp.

In view of his past experience in bringing *Animal Farm* and *1984* to the stage, one is perhaps left wondering why Northern Stage's Alan Lyddiard didn't direct the production. He may have been a more logical choice to present an impressionistic collage of Orwell's outsider view of Catalonia's internal struggles and revolutionary fervour as the counter-nationalist resistance fractured and collapsed. The project has certainly shown Josep Galindo's promise, even if the whole is not quite the sum of its parts. But crucially, it presents a model for European co-productions that goes beyond canonical classics to a really exciting interrogation of what it actually means (pragmatically, ideologically, and politically) to produce multilingual theatre in a multilingual Europe.

The Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) has provided an unexpectedly vibrant venue for some of the most dynamic work programmed for the Festival de les Arts del Fòrum. Visiting companies have included Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Tanztheater with *Für die Kinder von gestern, heute und morgen* (May 25-30), Philippe Decoufle's *Iris* (June 8-13), and the Volksbühne Berlin with a Vienna Festival co-production of *Forever Young*, Frank Castorf's adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth* (June 28- July 1). The two "local" productions produced by the TNC in association with the Fòrum couldn't be more different, but they display astute programming on the part of a company that has struggled to define its place within a Catalan landscape that has seen the emergence of some distinctive directorial figures in recent years. Sergi Belbel's eagerly awaited new play *Forasters* opened in a production by Belbel, with Lliure veteran Anna Lizaran on September 16th (running until November 21), but it is Ramon Simó who scored a veritable coup with a dazzlingly simple production of Camus' existentialist early play *Caligula* in the Sala Petita of the theatre (running from April 29 to June 20). Written on the eve of the Second World War but not staged until 1945 at the Théâtre Hébertot, with Gérard Philipe in the title role, this allegory provided a significant embodiment of nihilism taken to an extremity, with the figure of Caligula functioning as a symbolic metaphor for Hitler and the horrific logic of Nazi ideology.



Ramon Madaula's *Caligula* tormenting his senators in Ramon Simó's *Caligula* at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya.
Photo: courtesy TNC

After decades of being seen as more philosophical argument than dramatic text, the past couple of years have seen a number of high profile productions across the European stage. In 2003 Michael Grandage announced his vision for the Donmar Warehouse with a memorable production starring Michael Sheen as the crazed Roman emperor. Christopher Oram provided a stark, minimalist environment dominated by a back wall of dappled gold where issues of perspective, illusion and surveillance came prominently into play. Ramon Simó chooses a similarly austere environment for the action, designed by Àlex Rigola's regular collaborator, scenographer Bibiana Puigdefàbregas. Puigdefàbregas provides an open stage marked by a shimmering back wall that mutates from orange to black, reflecting the moods of the play, and a gnarled tree bereft of leaves that protrudes from an ornately tiled floor. While the tiles may provide a visual reference to ancient Rome, on the whole Simó constructs a decidedly contemporary milieu where senators drink coffee and chain smoke while waiting for news of the absent Caligula. While the opening may position them more as contemporary

spindoctors than injured prey, Simó brilliantly conveys the palpable sense of fear that invades the stage as Caligula's anti-hero neurotically enacts his wave of terror.

Whereas Michael Sheen gave us a pallid, camp, tight-curved emperor with a broad, disconcerting smile and sudden terrifying movements, Ramon Madaula is an altogether more disheveled figure. First seen as a ghostly apparition with heavy eyes, unshaven face and in a drugged stupor, he appears, at least initially, to be a less evidently controlling ruler. Seemingly overwhelmed by grief, he trails his cream coat behind him, and it is only gradually that the smug senators realize that this young emperor that they had anticipated controlling will actually control, manipulate and ultimately, if allowed, kill them. While Madaula's rationale may not appear as clinically thought out as Sheen's, he is ultimately a more terrifying figure. He stumbles through the madness of grief at the death of his sister and his mistress Drusilla into a realization that in a world where death is inevitable and can strike when least expected, what meaning can there possibly be to life? As such there can be no point in

being constrained by morality, and humanity should just do as it pleases. He finds a liberating pleasure in this excess of freedom, leaving a bequest of meaninglessness to those around him through acts of random murder. As he lunges from deed to deed, arbitrarily killing and raping the loved ones of his patricians, they are frozen in fear like discarded toys scattered around a room.

There is an effortless, glacial elegance to the production, with chairs configured on stage throughout the four acts in patterns that can never quite trip up Caligula. While the language may sometimes veer towards melodramatic excess, Simó keeps a tight rein on his performers. Carme Elias is a cool, controlling Caesonia, floating around the court in a voluptuous red dress distinguished by a taffeta petticoat with a color to mirror each act of the tragedy. In the final act, visibly aged and fearful, she still clings to the belief that she can orchestrate the proceedings around her and control her lover's whims. Only at her moment of death at Caligula's hands—an embrace that mutates effortlessly into a strangulation—does her face betray the realization that even she is not safe from his despotic nihilism. Jordi Martínez's Helicon functions as a shadow to

the emperor, a father-figure and protective minder who watches over his charge with an alarming instinct for self-preservation. Madaula's matinee idol looks may at times give his Caligula a benign appearance but it is precisely this that makes his acts of random violence so brutally terrifying. His is a sexy, cruel and at times very funny despot. Simó never masks the philosophizing rants of Camus' play, rather he allows them the dramatic space to unfold. As such Caligula's musings both fascinate and repel. Simó and his artistic team's achievement lies in taking a flawed play and allowing it to speak for and about our time while never erasing what it meant in the climate of a France ravaged by Nazi occupation.

Indeed, while the clean cut of Maria Araujo's costumes may have a 1940s feel, the zither-dominated music positions Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy as another potent referent. Caligula's entry, marked by the smashing of a coffee cup (a dissonance that heralds the disruption that is to ensue) recalls John Cazare's jittery Fredo, even if as the production progresses he seems to have more in common with Pacino's Michael Corleone. Indeed there is much of the thug about Madaula's



Ramon Simó's *Caligula* Photo: courtesy TNC

Caligula. He swigs from a jug rather than the cups or wine glasses used by the senators. His are not the boyish looks of Sheen but something closer to the angst of middle age. He ought to know better, ought to have the experience to ensure that this doesn't happen, but he couldn't care less.

Simó's last staging for the TNC was a Catalan version of Michel Vinaver's *11 Setembre 2001/Les Troyans* in 2002. Watching the production both against this earlier staging and in the aftermath of March 11th and the repercussions of Spain's involvement in the Iraq war, it is impossible not to turn to contemporary politicians as reference points. In 2002 the Lliure's artistic director, Àlex Rigola, gave us a vision of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (again designed by Puigdefàbregas) that referenced our dissonant times. The murder of Caligula by patricians led by Andreu Benito's Cherea, recalling that of Caesar in *Julius Caesar*, points to Camus' neglected work as a potent filter through which to examine both Camus' dramatic legacy and the excesses of absolute power and idealism. It is also the finest "in house" production that the TNC has staged for a very long time.

With the cancellation of Lluís Pasqual's *Hamlet* (due to be performed with Eduard Fernández in the title role), it is Bieito's *King Lear* (presented as *El Rei Lear*) that has stood as the sole Shakespeare of the Fòrum. While the staging was grouped by critics alongside Bieito's previous stagings of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* (seen in the city in 2002 and 2003 respectively), as the third part of a Shakespearean trilogy engaging in a very direct dialogue with our contemporaneity and the disintegration of the family unit; its significance proved far more monumental as the Catalan-language premiere of the play. The production also marked the Shakespearean debut of one of Catalonia's most renowned performers, Josep Maria Pou; here working with Bieito for the first time. The production works as an effective bridge between the director's early "open" Shakespeares, staged in variations of "the empty space," and the more concrete environments of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, each situated in a variation of the contemporary bar: a metaphor of sorts for our society of avid consumption. Here, the setting provided by German scenographers Ariane Unfried and Rífael Ajdarpasic, was a bare stage marked by raked seating upstage. These were not the lush leather seats of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* but rather anonymous brown plastic chairs. For this is a minimalist court, bereft of servants and courtiers.

The focus, as with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, is on the family as a dysfunctional unit. The kingdom Pou's Lear rules over is a dictatorship; with the cut of Mercè Paloma's costumes pointing to the late 1980s and early 1990s as the East European dictatorships fell in quick succession. Bieito's setting is a stadium of sorts, a venue for torture and imprisonment where surveillance is all-pervasive. Bieito may have avoided pinpointing its specificity but Pou's bearded Lear had something of the Saddam Hussein whose image stared out from the world's press in the aftermath of his capture by U.S. forces. The fur coats in which the daughters were clad pointed both to the pagan roots of the play and to a brutally cold Eastern bloc, and may even perhaps have been a nod to Brook's similarly pruned and bleak 1962 reading of the play. Searchlights beaming down from the hard ceiling spared no one the watchful glance of those that hold power and execute it with terrible discrimination.

Pou's Lear is a resolutely contemporary figure. He first bursts on stage dressed as a pastry-cook, wheeling a giant birthday cake that he cuts into pieces to give to the daughters that agree to play his game. Àngels Bassas' self-assured, abrasive Goneril easily gains her slice, Victòria Pagès' Regan—replacing Roser Camí after press night—is a less confident figure who has to be encouraged to "perform." Ana Ycobalzeta's Cordelia is very much the favored younger sister in pigtails and grunge clothing, whose monosyllabic answers fail to impress her larger than life father. She trembles with fear as she is forced before the microphone, and her father's wrath is consequently shown to be violent and unforgiving. Lear pushes her face into the icing of the cake so that she emerges as a ghostly, inanimate mask, a terrifying premonition of her later death.

This Lear may attempt to cajole his daughters into rendering declarations of love through groping, kissing and cuddling, but these gestures make all the sisters profoundly uncomfortable. For indeed the implication seems to be that the father-daughter relationship may have veered into the territory of the incestuous. Goneril's later behavior towards her father is thus presented as a form of revenge for the years of abuse suffered at his hands. Nothing is explicitly stated but the suggestion is planted. Lear rules through cultivating a climate of terror where all obey unquestioningly. Kent's protests at the king's disinheritance of Cordelia are met with a menacing gun. The message is clear:

flee or die.

Once more, as with his previous Shakespeares, Bieito moves beyond what the text states or narrates to examine *why* characters behave in particular ways. Where *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* radically refigured the text, Bieito's interventions with *King Lear* are not as marked. Certainly a range of characters have been dispensed with (Burgundy, servants, the doctor, courtiers) and others have had their roles substantially reduced (Mingo Ráfols' France delivers only a single speech, his declaration of marriage to Cordelia), but it is the tone of the piece where Bieito's strategies—the dramaturgy was undertaken with *Hamlet* collaborator Xavier Zuber—are most evident. For there is little compassion in this reading. Ycobalzeta's Cordelia returns to her father, we sense, out of a sense of duty rather than love. Her tears and tremors as she appears in Act 4 suggest a filial obedience that it is hard to break free from. Her naked, mutilated corpse wrapped in plastic is wheeled on by Lear in the final scene; the suggestion is that she is the brutal victim of Edmund's lust for power.

While a significant proportion of the Catalan critics may not have warmed to the produc-

tion, viewing its transgression as overly dependent on noise and fury (e.g. *ABC* July 9, 2004; *La Vanguardia* July 9, 2004), Bieito's reading has a palpable charge that propels the action with a force that rarely accompanies the sanitized Shakespeare of too many companies in the English-speaking world. Certainly moments like Edgar and Edmund's Act 5 duel, realized with chain saws, and Edgar's masturbation in the storm scene may have tended towards the gratuitous but, on the whole, the aesthetic of violent gore that often shapes Bieito's productions is here beautifully realized. The deaths of Goneril and Regan are not banished offstage but rather follow Edmund's unrepentant demise at Edgar's hands. Goneril suffocates her sister with a plastic bag, and then blows her own brains out with a handgun. The shock of this moment allows for Lear's "quiet" death, a scene of exquisite understated simplicity as the mad monarch "falls asleep" beside the trolley that holds Cordelia's corpse. The final image is one of utter desolation: dead bodies in states of undress and mutilation strewn across a stage littered with paper; the remnants of a corrupt bureaucracy that has met a timely end.

As with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the produc-



Josep Maria Pou as Lear and Ana Ycobalzeta as Cordelia in Bieito's *King Lear* (*El Rei Lear*) at the Teatre Romea Barcelona. Photo: David Ruano, courtesy of the Teatre Romea.

tion was distinguished by a high level of physical energy from the Romea regulars joining Pou in the cast. Boris Ruiz, hobbling along in a cycling jacket and helmet, is a picaresque Fool, a nimble entertainer and tactile companion who fits into the crevices and corners that spring up around his master. Pep Cruz's Kent is a jovial "buddy" who, disguised as a car mechanic, never hesitates to use force if that'll help get Lear out of a tight corner. Bassas is a magnificent Goneril, sexual, dynamic and devastatingly in control from the moment Lear bestows half the kingdom on her. She proves a veritable contrast to her more edgy, lascivious sister Regan. Santi Pons is a suitably sadistic Cornwall and Pep Ferrer, a lily-livered Albany who joins Lear's camp not out of any sense of indignation but rather in frustration at his wife's adultery and disobedience. Francesc Garrido's Edmund turns on the charm whenever it's needed and his early anonymity—hovering unnoticed along the fringes of the stage—is soon replaced by a persuasive sexuality that has both Regan and Goneril in hot pursuit. Carles Canut's Gloucester is a portly gentleman whose early sense of angry offense at Edgar's suspected betrayal is later matched by a palpable angst which proves compellingly moving. Dani Klamburg's Oswald is an opportunistic go-between whose resemblance to ex-Prime Minister José María Aznar (whose Partido Popular was resolutely ousted in March's elections) can't have been lost on the audience. But it is ultimately the performance of Lear through which stagings are primarily measured and Pou provides a multilayered reading of the role. He is a playful despot at the production's opening, teasing his court willfully. For *El País'* critic Marcos Ordóñez he begins as Vincent Price, continues as Montenegro, the protagonist of Valle-Inclán's *Comedias bárbaras/Savage Plays*, a feudal aristocrat with a taste for blood sports, and ends as the mad Quixote (*El País*, July 24, 2004). Under a relentless storm of water that drips down onto the stage for over fifteen minutes, Pou's Lear loses his strength and his sanity. The figure that emerges from the storm is a homeless nomad, dressed in a tired green military jacket that evokes the warrior he once was. His torn socks, soiled underpants and lopsided knee guards announce a vulnerable battle-worn man. His concentration is poor, his attention span short, his capacity for understanding what is going on around him severely diminished. He sits on a row of chairs like a destitute down-and-out on a battered park bench. He feeds the blinded

Gloucester from a soup tin that's seen better days (one of the production's most poignant moments), and musters up his final reserves of might to push Cordelia's wrecked corpse through the auditorium onto the stage. In a production where sibling rivalries often threaten to push the father's narrative to one side, Pou consistently ensures that we remember why Shakespeare titles the play *King Lear*. Catalonia may have had to wait for almost 400 years for its first Catalan-language production of the play, but Pou's extraordinary performance, the Romea's dynamic ensemble cast, and Bieito's audacious *mise en scène* make this a *Lear* that won't easily be forgotten.

August is usually a quiet month in Barcelona's theatrical calendar with a few Grec events spilling over from late July onto 1 August, and occasional commercial productions scattered across some of the larger theatrical venues. This year the Fòrum/Grec axis has seen theatrical activity programmed throughout the month of August, but the fact that these venues have traditionally closed by August 1 has effectively meant that should you happen to see productions in theatres that have habitually remained dormant at this time, refreshments are out of the question. There was certainly something of a sleepy air around the Mercat de les Flors when I saw Peter Brook's *Tierno Bokar* on August 3rd. The bar was closed with a similarly quiet Teatre Lliure across the way at Montjuïc. Wandering around in temperatures of 30°C plus with no open bar across the "city of theatre" (as Montjuïc's cluster of theatres once aspired to be known) it would be hard to believe that this was a bustling festival atmosphere; or that the organizers showed much concern for the well-being of their paying audience.

Brook's *Carmen* and *Mahabharata* had visited the Mercat de les Flors in the 1980s and this was certainly an evocative nod to both the visual worlds created there and the metaphysical encounters and debates which grounded the Indian epic adapted by Jean-Claude Carrière. Here it is another collaborator from *The Mahabharata*, Marie-Hélène Estienne, who has provided the dramatic shaping for Amadou Hampaté Bâ's 1957 book, *The Sage of Bandiagara*, a fusion of biography and teachings composed by Bâ from observations of his master Bokar. The theatrical premise may appear slight, but Brook weaves a tangible dramatic landscape where simplicity remains the key. The stage begins bathed in light, a bright space shaped by three straw

screens and layers of straw mats. A bare tree trunk stands stage centre, an emblem of both the characters and the landscape they inhabit. The rhythm is effortlessly tranquil, the costumes bright and light in texture, the music almost soothing: the pacing of Carmen and *Mahabharata* is here replaced by a world of almost holistic tranquility that is gradually shaken by what initially appears to be a minor religious dispute that proves to have far-reaching consequences.

Bokar (a compelling Sotigui Kouyaté, Brook's Senegalese Prospero) is in disagreement with Hamallah (Djenaba Koné) as to whether a Sufi prayer should be recited eleven or twelve times. Bokar believes tradition dictates that it's the latter; for Hamallah, it is the former and there is no room for negotiation. From this private disagreement emanates a very public dispute as a community take sides and enact recriminations. The violence escalates out of control with grim consequences and Bokar loses his life.

While the tale takes place against the backdrop of World War II, with France occupied by German forces, Brook maps out an African nation shaped by the discourses and practices of French colonialism. Colonialism is the specter that haunts the stage and provides the context that allows the disagreement to become a tragedy. Its presence provides both the source of some of the production's funniest moments, as with the opening scene as a group of children earnestly inspect feces in the hope of discerning whether that of the white man differs from their own, and a school where one's ability to recite nationalistic French verses earn promotion from the back of the room to the front. British actor Bruce Myers, one of Brook's longest CIRT collaborators, is a suitably priggish French school inspector who strides across the stage with an almost music-hall sense of his own self-importance and pompously preaches to the gathered students. Myers' pliable gestures are indicative of a cast that moves across characters, negotiating generational difference with the slightest of movements and the most minimal of props. This is a cast that shifts from children to warriors, to mystics and farmers, with a musical score provided by Toshi Tsuchitori and Antonin Stahly to punctuate, ground and comment on the action. The various philosophical and narrative strands are expertly woven together by Habîb Dembelé's narrator while Kouyaté offers a luminous Bokar, his long fingers opening like withered branches across his stick, tenaciously defending a truth where the conviction of belief is all.

The piece may not be graced by the theatrical coups of some of Brook's previous work, but it is quietly compelling. As with *The Mahabharata* we watch lessons being enacted before us without a didactic propeller. Truth, we are told by Bokar, is a multiple entity, for there are always three truths "My truth, your truth and the truth." Truth here becomes a conviction rather than a tangible entity. As such it is a perfect fable for our times, beset by an intransigence born of colonialist vestiges and an intolerance that can only read difference through tokenistic gestures and motifs. *Tierno Boker* substitutes action with reflection and while it never pleads for us to do similarly, the space and silence it offers speak volumes.

Post August, with temperatures falling, a vigorous publicity campaign and appealing ticket offers attendances at the Fòrum picked up. The Fòrum's September theatre offerings also marked a veritable strategy that attempted to go out with a bang. Unlike the majority of the offerings by the theatrical luminaries "imported" in to the Fòrum, Robert Lepage's take on the Spanish classic *La Celestina* is a co-production realized by Ex-Machina with Valencia's Ciutat de les Arts Escèniques, the Fòrum, the Teatre Lliure, Salamanca 2005 and the Cuyas theatre in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. This is a year of *Celestinas*, with Bieito's kitschy, fast-moving production at the Edinburgh International Festival. So while a Spanish director opens with a British cast (with Complicité regular Kathryn Hunter in the title role) at the UK's premier arts festival, a Quebecois director closes the Fòrum with a French language adaptation retranslated into Spanish, with Spain's premier actress Nuria Espert as the wily matchmaker, reflecting something of the journey that this project has taken since Lepage first commissioned the translation over ten years ago. Bieito's reading provided a contemporary take on Fernando de Rojas' 1499 dramatic pre-novel set in a seedy cavern bar. Lepage's longer production (almost 4 hours to Bieito's 2 hours and 20 minutes) is set in a wooden edifice that shifts and slides to create the multiple worlds that shape de Rojas' narrative tale.

Celestina is one of those roles that has been mentioned in relation to Espert for decades. She came close to being involved in a production at the National Theatre in 1990 (the adaptation by John Clifford has now been reworked to provide the textual base of Bieito's production) but the piece had somehow always just eluded her. This is Lepage's second staging; the first was seen at Stockholm's



Celestina (Núria Espert) and Calixto (David Selvas) in Robert Lepage's *Celestina* at the Teatre Lliure, part of the Fòrum Arts Festival. Photo: Fòrum Barcelona 2004/Andreu Adrover

Dramaten Theatre in 1998 with a luminary cast including Anita Bjork, Erland Josephson, and Elin Klinga. Michel Garneau's French version has been kicking around since Lepage was at Ottawa's Centre National des Arts in the early 1990s. The tale of star-crossed lovers Calixto and Melibea, from which de Rojas original title for the piece is taken, presents numerous dramaturgical problems. While realized for the stage by directors for centuries, it is neither a play nor a novel, written before public theatres existed in Spain. The couple are secondary figures in many ways to the machinations of the wily procuress that Calixto engages to help him win over the wealthy Melibea. And it is Celestina's adventures and misadventures with Calixto's servants Sempronio and Pármeno, and her close associates Areusa and Elicia, that provide the tale's most colorful scenes. For Lepage the piece is an *alma máter*, the origin of modern dramaturgy, a work that presents itself as impossible, a cinematic script of sorts that breaks all the rules as its central protagonist dies just over halfway through the work (Ordóñez, *El País*, September 11, 2004). Lepage's staging never seeks to mask the work's idiosyncrasies, but rather makes them the central facet of

his reading. And while Lepage may not quite pull off the perennial challenge directors face in keeping the audience engaged when the narrative pivot, Celestina, is stabbed, his decisions point to an intelligent staging of a work that defies easy readings

Lepage's *mise en scène* realizes his conception of the piece as the product of a transition between the medieval and the Renaissance worlds, where morality hides behind grand words and survival is the only law (Lepage in Ordóñez, *El País*, September 11, 2004). The music that underscores the opening and punctuates the production, played by Silvy Grenier as an onstage minstrel who wanders through the action, evokes both the Arabic and Jewish roots of de Rojas' late fifteenth-century Spain, haunted by forced conversion to Christianity, the expulsion of the Moors and the pervasive presence of the Inquisition. Unlike Bieito, who chose an abrasively contemporary setting, Lepage opts for a visual aesthetic that suggests an Early Modern world. The costumes are cut to provide period flavor, although the fabrics appear resolutely contemporary. The production develops on a set of giant walls, wooden panels that rise and fall, and slide and drop, to shape the three houses in which the various

protagonists reside. High windows with shutters that slam shut and heavy doors that swing open allow for oppressive, enclosed environments that point to a culture where appearance is paramount and clandestine activities need to be hidden from prying eyes and wagging tongues. The set's shape is configured and reconfigured. This is a monster contraption in the same vein as the machinery for *Elsinore* (1996). There is something also of the versatile wooden trucks of Víctor García's 1976 staging of *Divinas palabras/Divine Words*—a collaboration with Espert. But whereas those moving trucks created a sense of a rural space that compresses the individual, here the outcome is somewhat different with the effect that of a high, walled prison where class distinctions keep the strata of society apart and desire is contained and controlled.

Whereas Kathryn Hunter (Bieito's Celestina) gave us an androgynous procuress in a sharp pinstrip suit and gravelly voice, Espert is an earthier figure: warm and sexual with a rasping laugh and a roving eye. Clad in layers of fabric that further mask and camouflage her intentions and deeds, she emerges as a knowing, canny anti-heroine. Lepage has classified Celestina as more sorceress than witch, and it is her capacity to bewitch those she comes into contact with into parting with their money, their principles and their sense that is the key to this production. Hers is a larger-than-life figure who demonstrates to the audience precisely how she gains Melibea's trust. We are seduced by her promises and abilities (none more impressive than the means of allowing girls to be "born again" as virgins). Indeed, the production never quite recovers from her wonderfully choreographed demise. While Bieito simply called his version *Celestina*, Lepage's subtitle "Cerca de las tenerías, a la orilla del río" ("Close to the tannery, beside the river bank") denotes the place where Celestina lives, suggesting something of the element of the transgression involved in entering the world that she represents beyond society's official or legitimized spaces.

The Early Modern world that de Rojas chronicles in *La Celestina* is dirty, ruthless and opportunistic, marked by emerging virulent commercialism. Carl Fillion's shiny, pristine wooden set may just be too clean for de Rojas' piece. The costumes, in fabrics that resemble crinkle-cut pleats of Issey Miyake, again reinforce a rather sanitized visual aesthetic. For this is a world marked by sexual deception and sexual favors sold to opportunis-

tic bidders. The temperate golden lighting too often renders the copious copulation a rather soft and compositionally elegant affair. The choreography of Centurio's (a robust Manuel Puchades) bath bedding of the frothy Areusa (Nuria García) and lithe Elicia (Núria Moreno) is a fun piece of slapstick, but it takes the edge off de Rojas' bawdy tale. There is much to admire in the production from Carmen del Valles's sumptuous Melibea, whose verse speaking is a revelation to Espert's stellar Celestina and Silvie Grenier's haunting music. Other characterizations seem less focused. Pep Molina's transition from Sempronio to Sosia is a case of rather forced doubling and Núria Moreno's Elicia sometimes looks as if she's been imported in from a Lindsay Kemp production. David Selvas—a brilliant Brutus in Alex Rigola's recent *Julius Caesar*, never demonstrates the versatility that Rigola was able to elicit, but his Calixto is a decent performance of what has always seemed to me a rather lackluster role.

Watching the production I was struck by the fact that it bears few of the usual Lepage hallmarks. This is a more subdued and less magical Lepage: more his National Theatre *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992) than the touring *Needles and Opium* (1991) or *The Far Side of the Moon* (2001). The set, while dazzling in many ways, is not quite as effortless or versatile as his earlier scenographic machines. The staging veers rather excessively towards a static delivery of lines and would benefit from further pruning (20 minutes were shaved off between opening night and the end of the run at the Lliure's Teatre Fabià Puigserver). Too often periods of enacted action are followed by further narrations of the action, as characters spread the news of what has happened. There are some vintage Lepage moments. The opening where Melibea's body is mourned by her father presents her as a figure in white surrounded by six veiled black bodies enacting Catholic rituals of pre-burial. Melibea then moves from corpse to angel as she floats through the air, providing the vision that Calixto, lying down on a bed below, falls desperately in lust with. The ending too sees Melibea fall from a wall, replacing the balcony specified by de Rojas', and float through the air. The transformation of Celestina's table into Melibea's bed again provides a brilliant visual metaphor for the equation of sex and death that runs through the piece. The hoisting up of a human body to provide the giant crucifix in the church where Celestina tells Calixto of her success in gaining Melibea's trust offers a further reflection on the the-

matics of human trafficking and a stark reminder of the imposition of Christianity on the Jewish populations of Early Modern Spain. Calixto's emergence from beneath Celestina's bed following her murder by his greedy servants too provides a suggestion of his implication in the culture of procurement from which he tries desperately to disassociate himself. It is these moments that ultimately remind us that despite the fact that the staging looks more like solid work of Georges Lavaudant it bears the magical traces of Lepage.

The trajectory of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya has seemed to me rather shaped by a lack of vision; a living testament to the problems of lavish subsidy and an agenda shaped by political compliance rather than artistic courage. For those who have been largely unimpressed by the TNC's profile since Josep Maria Flotats' forced departure, the summer's Fòrum offerings at the TNC may just force some pronounced rethinking. The main auditorium remains an acoustic disaster and cavernous folly, but the 500-seat Sala Petita, which housed Simó's impressive *Caligula*, proves the perfect environment for Sergi Belbel's latest excursion as

writer-director *Forasters (Outsiders)*, a bold and beautiful new play that provides further evidence of Belbel's status as Spain's premier living dramatist.

Forasters is the chronicle of a family marred by illness, resentment, an alignment to a past that they cannot let go of and a future that they fear and want to hold back. The play evolves across two parallel time planes in a city that may not be named as Barcelona but is constantly positioned as such. The family in the 1960s has a mother dying of cancer, a father trying to placate her, two teenage children trying to forge their own path, and a grandfather loathed by the mother. The outside world impacts through the presence of a family in the flat upstairs who look to be economic migrants from Andalusia. While the Catalan family try to keep them away, they come to effect the course of events in ways none could have anticipated. Forty-something years on, elements of the family remain in the flat. The father of the 1960s is now a grandfather being cared for a live-in-housekeeper from the Americas whom he has married. The son lives elsewhere with his gay lover. His sister has returned to the family home with her youngest son after a long



Jordi Martínez as the visitor and Francesc Lucchetti as the son in Sergi Belbel's production of *Forasters* at the TNC, Barcelona. Photo: courtesy TNC

absence. She too is dying of cancer and hopes that the family's disownment of her decades earlier, following her elopement with the young Andalusian from the flat upstairs can be forgotten. He has now left her and she attempts to make peace with her father and brother. Scenes from each era are juxtaposed as the dying mother and daughter, separated by a forty-year time-span, battle against the ravages of a death that hangs over them across the duration of the play.

This is vintage Belbel territory: a cruel, harsh mother eaten up by bitterness and rage at a life shaped by domestic concerns, and offspring who have only ever disappointed and dismayed her. The play succeeds in providing the sense of a world closed in and destined to repeat the mistakes of the past without ever appearing repetitious. The clear antecedent here is Antonio Buero Vallejo's landmark 1949 play *Historia de una escalera* (*Story of a Staircase*), which similarly juggled two time frames to chronicle the economic and moral despair of the post Civil War years. But whereas Buero kept chronological time in check with each act discretely located in a single era (pre Civil War for Act 1 and post for Act 2) Belbel is far more audacious. Here past, present and future interlock in two narratives that are irrevocably bound up. There is no neat distinction here. *Forasters* is the *Glengarry Glen Ross* to *Historia de una escalera's* *Death of a Salesman*. The twenty-first century family is all indefinably shaped by their history (as represented by the domestic unit in the 1960s). Children are destined to repeat the mistakes and suffer the misfortunes of their parents. The son follows the advice of his cantankerous, unhappy mother and marries a girl from a good family, despite being gay. The daughter marries the upstairs' neighbor who beats her and then leaves her. She becomes as embittered as her mother and her disappointment in her children, telling the youngest she'd have aborted him had she been able, echoes that of her mother. The casting reinforces such patterns with imaginative doubling commenting on the play's ideological values. As such the actor who takes the mother in the twentieth century is also the daughter of the twenty-first century; the grandfather of the twentieth century is the father of the twenty-first century; the son of the twentieth century is the brother of the twenty-first century.

The circular structure certainly owes much to Ibsen's *Ghosts*, the specter of our past returning to haunt us however we may try to escape it, and there is much of Eugene O'Neill's tormented fami-

lies in the family's abusive communications. Echoes of Chekhov are also perceptible, as the play is framed by the sale of the family home. It is, however, Bernard-Marie Koltès who is the most palpable presence. For this is a Catalan *Retour au désert* (*Return to the Desert*). Belbel, an accomplished director and translator of Koltès, uses the narrative framework of Koltès' 1988 play in mapping out a domestic situation shaped by links with property and inheritance. This is the family as a site of dissent but the space to which errant characters return in search of both self and other. As with *Retour au désert*, Belbel's family saga is both the story of a family and the story of a nation coming to terms with the legacy of immigration, the realities of globalization and shifting ideas of cultural and linguistic identity. By the twenty-first century, the migrants from Andalusia that formed the noisy neighbors in the 1960s are immigrants from an unnamed country in the Arab world. Homophobia, racism, and misogyny are as present in the 1960s as they are in the present. *Forasters* is a play about contemporary Catalonia, about the mentalities that have shaped cultural identity and the vestiges of a concept of place that remains contested. Those fleeting encounters that take place in the play between characters that meet for an instant above the acrimony of failed lives are poignant and leave a pressing legacy. For those who witness these encounters there is only a sense of isolation at their own exclusion and the pain of rejection that they displace onto a future that brutally echoes the past. The twenty-first century grandson tells his cousin, the daughter of his gay uncle, that they're both in purgatory, and that their parents' lives were a shitty lie. The housekeeper also articulates an image of Europe that may suggest a picture postcard, from afar but is altogether more putrid and dangerous when examined from inside.

Belbel directs this symphony with a patient pictorial eye. Estel Cristià and Max Glaenzel's set provides both a concrete environment—a living room leading into a bedroom—and a mythical space where the worlds of each century eventually blur and can no longer be easily demarcated. The heavy antique furniture testifies to the force of the past, while the fashions of the present impose themselves on a landscape where characters sometimes wander like hesitant guests. The set is tilted to the left or right to delineate the stories of each century with the action reflected in the mirrors positioned in the wings stage-left and stage-right.

The final scene's game of mirrors, with each mirror spinning around as characters watch themselves and each other across the corpse of the dead mother/daughter, is a veritable theatrical coup and a luminous embodiment of the play's thematics. Belbel has never been afraid to play with his audience. This is a game where all are trapped in a hall of mirrors that deflect and distort the levels of reality around which the characters exist.

Teatre Lliure veteran Anna Lizaran, in the dual roles of the cancer-wracked mother and prodigal daughter, leads a superb ensemble cast. Lizaran's cruel bruiser of a mother is a fierce fighter, all vitriol and bile to her children and father-in-law, whose only gestures of compassion are reserved for the small boy from upstairs. As the daughter, her rancorous relationship with her teenage son is tempered by a burgeoning friendship with her niece who she hopes will not make the same mistakes as she did. She clutches her stomach, pressing down onto her rotting entrails, and hoists herself up to walls and doors to listen in on fragments of snatched conversations which come to torment her further. This is a performance that juggles both antipathy and compassion, building effectively on her Mathilde in Carme Portaceli's 2003 Teatre Lliure production of *Le Retour au désert*. Francesc Lucchetti gives a beautifully understated performance as the dutiful husband of the twentieth

century and quietly responsible if hypocritical son of the twenty-first century. Jordi Banacolocha presents a comically absentminded grandfather, banished from the family home by the resentful mother in the twentieth-century and a crabby father in the twenty-first century, whose primary pleasures lie in the possibilities offered by Viagra to liven up the monotony of his day to day life. Sara Rosa and Ivan Labanda as the siblings of the twentieth century and cousins of the twenty-first century are similarly impressive, capturing both the vulnerability of teenage angst and the competitiveness of the desire to "make a mark" and break away from constraining family structures. Patricia Arredondo (as beaten neighbour and immigrant housekeeper), and Pau Poch, Andrés Herrera and Jordi Martínez as the upstairs family shrewdly never allow the performances to veer into caricature.

The Fòrum may have imported theatrical jewels from across the globe to show off the prestige of its Arts Festival, but it has arguably been the homegrown products like *Forasters* and *King Lear* that have proved the most resonant successes. Both productions have served to demonstrate the vibrancy of a Catalan cultural space that is engaging with the past in staging works for the present that point to a theatrical future at the forefront of Europe's arts scene.