



## **'Report from Barcelona'**

A review by Maria Delgado

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## Report from Barcelona

Maria M. Delgado

At last summer's Grec Festival, Sergi Belbel's *Forasters (Outsiders)* demonstrated the strength of the contemporary writing scene in Catalonia. Belbel's impact on Catalan dramaturgy is not only present in the impact of his own writing—brought to a wider audience through the film adaptations of *Caricies* and *Morir* by filmmaker Ventura Pons—but also through his championing of Catalan dramaturgy in his own directorial choices. Belbel's work with Josep Maria Benet i Jornet has, over the past fourteen years, seen the latter produce arguably the most impressive works of his career. Belbel's production of Jordi Galceran's *El Método Grünholm (The Grünholm Method)*, currently enjoying an extended run at the Poliorama theatre, serves to confirm Galceran as a major player on the Catalan new writing scene. Galceran takes his place alongside Belbel, Luïsa Cunille and Benet i Jornet as one of a select group of key figures whose work resonates outside Catalonia with a presence both on the Madrid stage and beyond.

Galceran's *El Método Grünholm* first emerged through the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya's new writing initiatives with twelve performances in May 2003. A high profile Castilian-language production, directed by Tamzin Townsend, has been playing at Madrid's Marquina theatre since September 2004, with 70,000-plus spectators having seen the play to date. At Barcelona's Poliorama theatre, Belbel's deft directorial hand has also generated a sharp, acerbic production with a similarly top-notch cast that has been running since 15 September with no sign of an imminent close. Already 95,000 spectators have passed through the theatre's doors and it looks likely to surpass 100,000 with plans to continue the play through to the summer of 2005. Galceran's play follows on from his 1995 *Paraules encadenades (Chained Words)* and 1996 *Dakota* in its fascination with linguistic games and the boundaries between criminality, capitalism and the ethics of storytelling and role-play. Galceran is a superb dialogist, the debt to Mamet is not difficult to locate in his writing, but it is Yasmina Reza's *Art* that emerges as the most palpable influence on *El Método Grünholm*. The play is in many ways an *Art* for the new millennium. As with Reza's play, the premise is simple and the execution deadly, with wicked fun to be had for the audience along the way. Four candidates turn up for the final

stages of a job interview for a senior position at a multinational company, Dekia. Waiting to be called in for interview, they come to realize that this interview will not take a recognizable format. Rather, the four candidates have to compete in a series of tests where little can be anticipated and all rules exist to be bent or broken. Ferran (Jordi Boixaderas) is ambitious, savvy and hard headed, with a strong belief that whatever the personal crisis, you always wear a smile to work. The plump and awkwardly jovial Enric (Lluís Soler) appears to have fallen on difficult times and is seeking new challenges in a corporate world where compassion has little place. The casual Carles (Jordi Diaz) is looking for a change and this job might just fit the bill while the ambitious Mercé (Roser Batalla) is professional, prepared and unwilling to allow the men to think they've got an advantage.

As the four "contestants" are slipped notes of instruction by the mysterious personnel department, resourcefulness coupled with deceit increasingly proves the crucial key. For Dekia has set them a number of unusual tasks that call each one of their "roles" into question. Is one of them a mole planted by the organization? Are the revelations true or further layers of fiction? Are they performing secrets or lies? If any of them don't feel up to the assignment they have the option of leaving the room but cannot then re-enter. The moment they leave, they are, in effect, disqualified. Each has to fulfill the demands without being caught out and the ever-shifting parameters of the exercise render this a difficult task.

The play, like the characters, negotiates each situation with cards held close to its chest. There is a strong visual reference to *Art* in the production's imposing painting, a twinkling surrealist eye staring wickedly down at the anonymous space where the "guinea pigs" enact this experiment. Paco Azor's lobby is at once a functional space, complete with imitation Le Corbusier chairs and the customary scattering of mineral water bottles.

Lluís Soler gives Enric a nicely juggled degree of forced friendliness; he is the quintessential last guest to leave a party, with an irritating habit of repeating the final word of the previous speaker's sentence, and a packet of mints at the ready, the solution to any given problem. Jordi Diaz imbues Carles with an appropriate degree of vulnerability

while Roser Batalla is an icily cautious Mercé. As the impatient, ambitious Ferran, ready to maneuver any situation to his advantage, Jordi Boixaderas veers towards the repulsive but it always ensures that we never entirely lose all sympathy for this audacious go-getter. Galceran fashions some wonderfully cruel twists and turns in the plot and Belbel negotiates these and the play's humor with an exquisite sense of timing: the scene where all are forced to enact a "who is forced to jump from the plane" scenario in the fancy dress outfits of a bullfighter, a clown, a bishop and a politician is brutally funny. The ending too has a palpable force that both shocks and surprises.

The origins of the play lie in a story that reached Galceran of documents found in a bin from the Human Resources department of well-known supermarket chain where an employee was found to have written a list of negative comments about interviewees for a cashier's job. And it is the dehumanized climate of nascent corporate capitalism that functions both as the play's target and propeller. While *Art* may function as the play's most evident sibling, there is something of Sartre's *Huis Clos* in the suffocating claustrophobia that the four trapped characters generate. This is a contemporary purgatory, and however much it hurts, it is also simultaneously a drug of sorts that they can't let go of, for fear of what it may say about them. As far as I know there is no current *El Método Grünholm* in operation when it comes to job recruitment, but one of the play's strengths lies in suggesting that it may only be a whisper away.

Catalan theatre has generated some of the most memorable Chekhovs of the past thirty years. The Teatre Nacional de Catalunya's imposing three-auditoria building was inaugurated with a stunning production of *The Seagull* directed by Josep Maria Flotats, with Nuria Espert as an impatiently restless Arkadina and José María Pou (currently taking the title role in Bieito's *King Lear*) as a sympathetic and observant Dorn in 1997. Now eight years on, TNC has invited French director Ariel García Valdés back (following his 2000 production of Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*) to stage a version of *Three Sisters* for the company as part of the Chekhov centenary celebrations. In a new version by poet Narcís Comadira, García Valdés has conceived the play as a resolutely modern piece. No turn of the century landscape here but rather a world trapped within the ethos of post-communism. The timbre is explicitly Beckettian. This is a production shaped by the fall

of the Berlin Wall that seeks to stress the contemporary resonances of the play. Certainly García Valdés eschews frilly frocks and high hair in favor of an emphasis a dowdy, monotonous palette of dreary greyness. There is a drained tone to the staging reflected in the color scheme chosen by García Valdés and his designer Jean-Pierre Vergier. There is also a strong emphasis on vaudeville, rather than the naturalist melancholy through which Chekhov is often conceived. While the critics have not been won over by García Valdés' approach, Laura Conejero is a beguiling Olga and Ramon Madaula a watchable Vershinin. The production runs until 20 March.

Within the Catalan theatre landscape it has, however, been the Lliure that has affiliated itself most significantly to Chekhov. First there was an outstanding *Three Sisters* directed by Lluís Pasqual in 1979, realized in tones of muted sepia and dominated by an expansive cyclorama stretching across the back of the stage that served to provide the impression of examining a canvas. Pasqual returned to Chekhov in 2000 with a swansong to the company's Gràcia venue (currently closed for renovation) that also featured Anna Lizaran (Natacha in *Three Sisters*) as an emotional Liubov. The production served as an open commentary on the then impending move to the Palau de l'Agricultura with models of the new Lliure onstage as Jordi Bosch's Lopakhin discussed the sale of the orchard [see WES 12:3]. The newest Chekhov, a production of *Uncle Vanya* directed by Joan Ollé, occupies the Fabià Puigserver auditoria of the new Lliure and reconfigures it in ways that poignantly recall the company's old Gràcia home.

Ollé's production seeks to present the intimacy that so marked the company's earlier Chekhovs. The audience surrounds the action looking down onto a space that serves both for compact interiors and the grand outdoors. Jon Berrondo's set is dominated by a giant haystack in which characters seek comfort, solace or an escape. It is also a constant reminder, despite Serebriakov's pretensions, of the agricultural basis of the family's income. It is the land that puts food on the table and subsidizes the estimable professor's literary work. Benches, tables and chairs in shades of a deep autumnal green grouped across the stage serve as the gathering posts for the cast. Toti Soler's guitarist, providing a lyrical underscoring to the onstage action, functions both as an observer and commentator. His stark music is poignant and

melancholy and captures beautifully the enigmatic mood of the on- and off-stage traumas and passions.

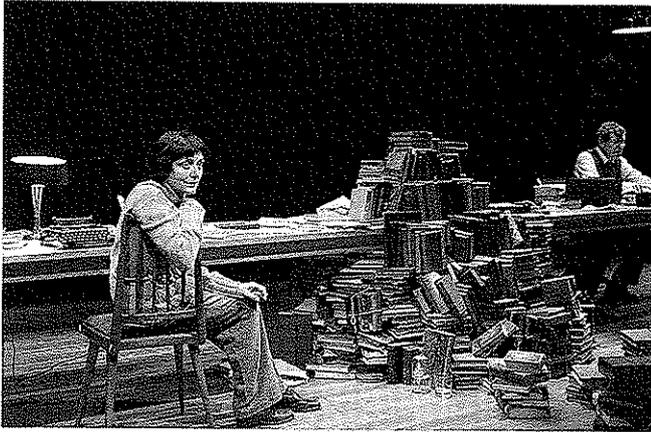
The reading out of the opening stage directions of each act as a pre-recorded voice-over sets the production within the register of impressionistic realism that dominates Chekhov's writing. Here the enigmatic Helena (a glacially beautiful Monica López) floats onto the stage, wheeling on her cantankerous, wily husband. Enric Arredondo's Serebriakov is a tetchy, irritable character whose crabby pomposity does lead one to wonder how his crone-like mother-in-law and generous daughter suffer him for as long as they do. He sinks deep into his wheelchair when playing the suffering intellectual and rises up to confront his antagonist(s) when probed in ways that he doesn't think appropriate to his lofty standing. There is much in the first half of Ollé's production to suggest that the characters exist largely through Vanya's conception of them. López's svelte, ephemeral Helena, clad in shades of delicate beige, is an almost ghostly figure in her sylphlike perfection. As she sits on the swing above the hay we are presented with a pastoral vision of the unreachable. Lit by candlelight she appears as a fleeting apparition sent to taunt Vanya. Suffering verbal abuse from her husband, she evokes a Madonna with her head bowed in supplication. As the production develops, and she meddles in Sonia's affairs of the heart, the halo tumbles and we get a palpable sense of her unhappiness and her inability to control her feelings for Astrov.

Many of the other characters are also presented, at least in the opening two acts, as if they are Vanya's visualizations. Enric Arredondo's professor remains so dislikable that one is left wondering what Helena ever saw in him. Georgina Cardona's mother is a wizened cackler masked in a giant ceremonious hat and layers of black gauze and silk. She speaks exclusively in what appears to be Russian, a testimony both to the hold of the past that threatens to smother and destroy Xicu Masó's haunting Vanya and to a theatrical register that is often erased by the more conventional languages of realism. Andreu Benito is a large bear of an Astrov who struts across the stage with a rather aimless sense of abandon and only comes alive in Act III when sharing the secrets of the heritage of his landscape with Helena. In the first two acts he is a rather oafish guest, a companion to Vanya and Sonia but hardly the material that would be expected to steal the heart of the elusive Helena. Again this is a characterization that stresses the "ordinary" about him and presents him as if

through Vanya's tortured eyes. María Molins' Sonia is open and generous but overly dependent on delineating her emotions as if "reporting" her secrets to the audience. There is something of the awkward teenager about her and she proves a telling "other" to López's floating Helena. The opening seems a little forced in trying to "present" all the characters and cultivate an atmosphere of "intimacy" with the surrounding audience, but as the performers stop trying quite so visibly and take their lead from Xicu Masó's outstanding Vanya, we settle into a world marked by the pain of reaching out for that which is always elusively outside of one's grasp.

Masó's Vanya holds the delicate threads of Ollé's production together. Toti Soler's musical accompaniment enacts his moods, secrets, fears and obsessions. Watching Astrov and Helena kiss in Act III, Vanya's face crumbles in agonized shock. Lifting Sonia off the floor as she registers Astrov and Helena's passion, we are given a palpable sense of his recognition that her predicament echoes his. His confrontations and encounters with López's Helena are marked by the awkward embarrassment of infatuation and a reluctance to give too much away. His eyes dart unperceived across the stage, observing the action from furtive corners of the stage. As Astrov recites the final stage directions and he and Sonia settle down to work in the murky candlelight we are left with a devastating portrait of profound loneliness and inescapable grief. Ollé is not afraid to let the unspoken resonate as Vanya and Sonia's silent tears fall down on their logs and accounts.

Less is also more in the Teatre Romea's November-December offering, *84 Charing Cross Road*, an adaptation of Helene Hanff's correspondence with a London bookseller, reworked as a 1986 film by David Jones with Anthony Hopkins and Anne Bancroft. The work's theatrical history, with West End and Broadway runs in 1978 and 1982, has been eclipsed by its successful screen outing. And indeed whereas Jones' film was able to effectively juxtapose a sober post-World War II London with an altogether more buoyant New York that reflects on each of the protagonists' condition, Isabel Coixet, making her stage debut, has to rely on James Roose-Evans' adaptation to convey much of this through strictly literary means. Coixet is an accomplished filmmaker with a significant trajectory of smart, sensitive films behind her. Her 2003 feature *My Life Without Me* (a Spanish-Canadian co-production), executive produced by Pedro



Carme Elias as Helene in *84 Charing Cross Road*.

Photo: courtesy Teatre Romea

Almodóvar, presented a moving portrait of a blue-collar mother who discovers that she's dying and movingly prepares her daughters to live on without her. As with her second feature, another English language film, *Things I Never Told You* and the historical drama, *A los que aman* (*Those who love*), Coixet demonstrated a veritable eye for detail, pictorial composition and sense for telling stories about the "little people," lives which are all too often deemed insignificant. These are all qualities brought to bear on her production of *84 Charing Cross Road*. Jon Berrondo has given another atmospheric set of two long desks separated by a high pile of books. Books are collected in makeshift shelves and bundles tied together with string. This is a bibliophile's world of reading lights and leather clad volumes. Berrondo's set and José Luis López Linares' evocative lighting conjure a magical space of palpable tension and erotic charge. The back wall mutates from blue to orange to lilac to reflect the mood of the characters and there is a lovely contrast between the dreamlike space and the delightful enactment by Carme Elias' Helene Hanff and Josep Minguell's Frank Doel of their day-to-day rituals around the world of books. The dramatic premise may be established early but Coixet's elegant production, using all corners and surfaces of the desks, is inventive and delicately paced. Books fly from one character to another, are lovingly fondled and voraciously consumed. Shared interests are conveyed through the flicking of books simultaneously. Elias' Hanff falls asleep surrounded by blankets of books while Minguell's Doel watches, surreptitiously slipping a book to her that will await her awakening. Friendship seeps across the desks, through the printed words and annotated margins and imbues their narrated correspondence with a warm-

ness that effectively juggles an affection that transcends the literary whilst refreshingly never entering the all too familiar terrain of the sexual.

The script lacks the luminosity of the film but Minguell convinces as a staid, prim and proper bookseller whose life unfolds through the revealing correspondence. The positioning of his umbrella on the coat stand, the straightening of his jacket and the adjustment of his glasses, all serve to present a beautifully rounded character existing both in the present of post-War London (the sounds of a busy London street echo in the background) and through what Hanff gleans and imagines through his letters to her. Elias' Hanff is less the Jewish New Yorker than a visual evocation of Coixet (replete with black rimmed glasses and compact dark brown bob). Minguell's Doel inhabits the world of Marks and Co antiquarian booksellers, but Elias' Hanff might just be in a studio apartment in Barcelona's trendier quarters penning a television series. There is a quaint eccentricity to the production that convinces despite these reservations and while the dramatic material might be slight it is convincingly presented. Having left a damp autumnal London for a brighter sunnier Barcelona, the ninety minutes spent in the Romea effectively transported me to an imagined London that existed between book and theatre, play and film, molding past and present worlds in chic configurations. Two days after the Prince and Princess of Asturias paid an unannounced visit to the theatre, there wasn't an empty seat in the house. Coixet has shown that she can move her observant eye from cinema to theatre, I look forward to seeing her pushed by the demands of a classic or a piece of new writing and the orchestration of a larger cast.

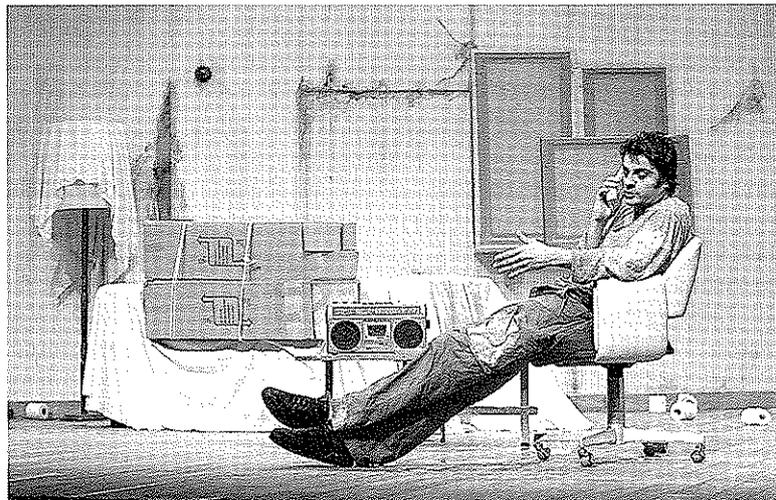
The Argentines are in town at the Romea in 2005 with a production by writer-director Javier Daulte as the centerpiece of a season that brings lectures, readings, and recitals to the theatre during between January and March. Daulte has been a regular feature of the Catalan theatre scene for a number of years now. He first came to attention through the Sitges theatre festival about six years ago, with Barcelona's Grec festival and commercial producers in the city then picking up on the Sitges' stagings. His 2000 piece, *Gore*, played at the Grec in 2003, the outstanding success among that year's international imports. Staged in a backstage area of the city's Principal theatre, the play—both written and directed by Daulte—tells the story of two extraterrestrials who come to earth in an attempt to save

their race. Here they meet a group of down and outs—squatters, drug addicts, women battered by alcoholic partners—living on the fringes of society. While the play echoed the visual and verbal language of B-movies, the production was shaped by controlled, emotive, visceral, performers and an inventive use of the simplest of objects as telling scenographic elements. Heralding a certain musicality that went beyond scripted dialogue, this was “rough,” “poor” theatre—to appropriate Brook’s terms, but theatre that consistently surprised its audience through its inventive energy. Daulte’s meticulous attention to details conjured magical stage moments from what appeared to be the detritus of our consumerist world. While admiring the work of his I have seen since, it has, in my view, lacked the edge of *Gore*. This may in part, be the choice of actors.

*4D*, presented in association with the Lliure and the Sala Beckett in 2003, was set in a physics lab where experiments in virtual reality created two parallel universes of intersecting lives and loves. Suffering from over-exposition, its initial premise took rather too long to set up, with the Catalan cast lacking the quick-fire delivery of his habitual Argentine performers. *Ets Aquí? (Are You Here?)*, first presented in Catalonia in Castilian in Gerona in November 2004 as part of the “Alta Temporada,” has undergone numerous changes since its initial outing at the Fronteras festival at the Old Vic London in May 2003. While the first draft was a play for six characters presented by a single performer, it is now a two-cast play revolving around a magician, Cesc (Joel Joan), who is haunted by an invisible poltergeist Martí. Martí is not seen by the audience but is a palpable presence in the apartment Cesc shares with his girlfriend Anna (Clara Segura), an ophthalmologist. Martí is a troublesome being who creeps into the bathroom and wrecks havoc with the shower and the toilet rolls. Much of the first act’s banter comes from Cesc’s hapless attempts to control and/or communicate with the elusive Martí. Cesc sees a magic wipe board as the answer to the solution but neither that nor the whiteboard that appears on the back wall in Act II render interaction a straightforward activity. Cesc goes off in search of Anna on hearing of an acci-

dent that she might have been involved in; her entry into the apartment confirms that she was indeed involved in a motorway catastrophe, what is not apparently clear, however, is the fact that she dies in the accident. Her presence is thus that of a specter, seen by the audience but not by Cesc. In Act II, six months on, she remains a part of Cesc’s life, a crucial accomplice in his repertoire of new magic tricks. The impending arriving of a new assistant for Cesc, Renata, throws Anna into a jealous frenzy and she goes about entering Renata’s body to maintain her presence within the home. But the infiltration doesn’t quite go as planned (despite many amusing jaunts along the way) and at the end she leaves Cesc to a future without her. Her parting gift consists of a brief message written on the whiteboard through which she communicates to Cesc throughout the second act.

While the premise of Daulte’s play may suggest *Blithe Spirit*, there is actually much of Anthony Minghella’s 1991 film *Truly, Madly Deeply* in *Ets Aquí?* Anna and Cesc hover around each other without ever meeting: the former a ghost with a presence that the latter cannot tangibly touch. Daulte’s play is like a theatrical game rendered on a magic board like that used by Cesc and Martí to communicate. There is a pleasure in watching characters whose presence is as elusive as that of the markings on the board: here one moment, gone the next. As a metatheatrical reflection on representation, it also argues that theatre exists only through disappearance: an act as elusive as Cesc’s magic tricks. The play asks some of Daulte’s habitual questions around identity, performance and the self. Language becomes a controlling mechanism, a bar-



Daulte’s *Ets Aquí?*. Photo: courtesy Teatre Romea

rier, a weapon and the only means of attempting to come to terms with both self and other. It is never, as the ambiguous markings on the board make clear, a simple process of "writing" your identity. Interestingly Cesc's relation with Anna is shown to be as fractured and as problematic as that with his mother and Martí. Relationships, whether in the past, present, virtual or real spheres, are haunted by the ghosts of our earlier encounters. Anna and Cesc's relationship is one of non-consummation, of never quite meeting; a smiling photograph of the couple in Act II placed strategically on a sideboard serves a pressing reminder of a connection that existed only in space we have not been privy to. This is one of the factors that gives the piece its poignancy and has had audiences leaving the venue in tears.

Joel Joan gives a stirring performance as the frenetic Cesc. Joan is an impressive actor who dazzled in 2003 as the avaricious Roma in Rigola's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Here he is almost too impressive for a role that it might be argued needs a rather more ordinary stage presence. Part of me just doesn't quite buy Joan as the unfortunate Cesc. There's something just too assured, jocular and confident about him. Nevertheless, Joan's penchant for comedy allow for an entertaining performance that is apparent from Daulte's opening scene as the exhausted magician contorts his eyes and body in the hope of making contact with the mystifying Martí. Joan's manic performance style gives the production a particular energy and the various run-ins with Martí are amusingly handled.

Segura is an altogether mousier figure and it is something of her ordinary quality—captured so well by Alejandro Amenábar in his recent film *Maradentro (The Sea Inside)*—that renders her performance so luminous. She offers both an anxious, panicky Anna in Act I coming to terms with the trauma of her death and a hysterical Renata (all stilettos, tiny shoulder bag and skimpy red satin dress) in Act II trying to shake off the tenacious Anna. There is a precision in the detail of her contact with Martí that continually impresses. Segura has something of Emma Chambers' wide-eyed goofiness and it is put to good use by Daulte here. Alicia Leloutre's dilapidated set of aged lampshades, peeling wallpaper and a strategically located mirror, give a suitably run down feel to the proceedings that suggests something of the haunted house of earlier lore. While this may not be vintage Daulte, one cannot help but admire a playwright

who likes to deal with the "big" issues in life and avoids the well worn territory of kitchen sink realism in favor of extraterrestrials, poltergeists, and sci-fi virtual realities.

While the robust audience figures for *Ets Aquí?* suggest a possible transfer to a larger theatre may be imminent, the Romea continue their tour of Bieito's *King Lear*, set to complete its extensive tour across Spain with dates in Valencia in late April. Joan Sellent's new Castilian translation has seen important chances being wrought to the play's final two acts prior to the production's dates at Madrid's Albéniz theatre (4 -14 November). The deaths of Edgar and Edmund are now rendered more swiftly, with the chain saws sensibly disposed of as Edgar dispatches his brother with a single round of gunfire. Mingo Ráfols replaces the raffish Francesc Garrido as Edmund. The suave wily charm that so dominated Garrido's characterization is now reconfigured as a more brutish attraction and there is an element of Ráfols' thuggish Macbeth in his conception of the wayward brother. Àngels Bassas' Goneril no longer indulges in necrophilic activities with Edmund's corpse and as such the onstage duel of death with Victòria Pages' Regan is swifter and more brutal. The stage is set more effectively for José María Pou's moving rendition of Lear's demise. For the Madrid critics who didn't get unnecessarily caught up in castigating Bieito for the *grand guignol* through which he conceives the piece, this has proved a memorable production dominated by Pou's magnificent and alluring despot and a dazzling ensemble cast pushed and pulled in a series of controversial directions.

But a five minute walk from the Romea, at the Gran Teatre del Liceu, images of local soprano Victoria de los Angeles, who died on 15 January vied for attention with those of Plácido Domingo, the lead in Nikolaus Lehnhoff's *Parsifal*, rehearsing at the time of de los Angeles' death. Since taking over the artistic directorship of the Liceu in 1996, Joan Matabosch has consistently pursued a policy of integrating the opera house within the city's cultural landscape. This has involved both the inviting Catalan directors and companies to work at the theatre—as can be seen with this season's presentation of *L'elisir d'amore* (March to June 2005)—and a more imaginative recognition of the city as both the subject as well as the location for the material presented within the auditorium. The commission of Catalan composer Joan Guinjoan's new opera *Gaudí*, set to a libretto by Josep Maria Carandell, is

such a venture, based upon the life and work of the eponymous architect whose iconographic designs and philosophy have served as one of the city's foremost tourist attractions.

Guinjoan and Carandell's new opera follows an innovative dramaturgical path, veering from biopic naturalism in the first act to a more introspective conceptual language in the second. Director Manuel Huerga, in collaboration with designer Lluís Danés, deliberately emphasises the contrasts with a very literal portrayal of Gaudí's studio with the emerging Barcelona landscape behind. Amidst Gaudí's own outburst against the social injustices of early-twentieth century Catalan society, the first half concludes with a stunning *coup de théâtre*, when the entire setting literally disappears into the basement to be replaced in the second half by a very abstract *mise en scène* which explores Gaudí's own tortured inner conflicts as he moves towards the reclusive hermetic lifestyle that characterised his final years.

The evening features some fine performances, chief among these from the American baritone Robert Bork as Gaudí (whose sung Catalan is as vernacular as the rest of the native cast). Catalan conductor Josep Pons delivers a committed account of Guinjoan's score which emphasizes the lyricism of this music. While Gaudí is unlikely to resonate with a non-Catalan audience, it is an important signpost in the Liceu's successful journey which not only preserves its reputation as one of the top-ranked European opera houses, but also forges rich partnerships with the best of the city's artistic infrastructure and heritage.

In late 2002 I first saw Àlex Rigola's vibrant *Julius Caesar* at the Gràcia venue of the Teatre Lliure and fervently hoped that, after a number of lackluster years, the Lliure might choose to contract Rigola to undertake further projects at the theatre. Two years on Rigola is now the theatre's Artistic Director, having overseen a radical overhaul in the company's fortunes. While the Gràcia venue is now closed for extensive renovation, the two Montjuic auditoria are providing a lively base for the company. Already there has been Lepage's *Celestina*, Rodrigo García's *Jardineria humana*, Ollé's *Uncle Vanya*, and Ostermeier's *Nora* with Lluïsa Cunillé's *Ocasió* to come in March 2005, Xavier Alberti's version of Bernhard's *Der Theatermacher* (30 March-3 May) and a new show from maverick composer-director Carles Santos (19-25 May). The centerpieces of the season are

perhaps not surprisingly two of Rigola's own productions: *Julius Caesar*, returning now to the Sala Fabià Puigserver for the Christmas period following a two year tour that has encompassed dates in Palermo, St. Petersburg and Toulouse, and *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (*Santa Joana dels excorxadors*) at the Sala Fabià Puigserver for two weeks in January before continuing a tour that finishes in Valencia in March 2005.

There have been changes to *Julius Caesar* since I first saw it. The production has certainly grown into the larger stage of the Sala Fabià Puigserver where Salvador Oliva's translation of Shakespeare's brutal study of political rivalries in ancient Rome continues to sparkle. Bibiana Puigdefàregas renders a long shallow stage area marked by a huge white sign announcing the location: ROMA. A set of four doors line the dark wooden wall at the back of the stage, a simple metal balcony hangs over the set, with a row of chairs downstage facing into the performance space. A large ladder stage right and a wide door stage left provide a further sense of symmetry and balance. This is Rome envisaged as a sparse, modern milieu where Joan Carreras' Brutus—replacing David Selvas—and Alicia Pérez's Cassius—replacing Julio Manrique—are twenty-something politicians, bloodbrothers clad in the uniform of black suits and white shirts. The fellow conspirators are band of similar twenty-somethings, mechanically focused on the task at hand. Their plotting is carried out across a long office table where each cites their views with alert zeal. These conspirators make their Act II, Scene i entrance with eye masks, raising Brutus to the skies as he agrees to enter the conspiracy. Pleasure is articulated through kick-boxing. And even the cross-gender casting of Angels Sánchez as Metellus and Alicia Pérez as Cassius fail to threaten this masculine ethos. This is a boy's world and the actresses' pulled-back hair and suited attire further accentuates the harshness of the male world presented by Rigola. There is no room here for the performance of weakness or vulnerability. The ladder Brutus climbs up in desperation leads nowhere. All are trapped within the values of a society of oratory where performance is all. Rigola astutely employs the carefully positioned microphone stage right, as characters deliver soliloquies and comments on the ensuing action. This is the age of the orator and the microphone is a potent symbol of the presence of oratory in all its many political forms within the play.

Pere Arquillué's performance as Antony remains revelatory. His Antony is a gruff, solid figure, the elder of the political court who warily observes the action of the spoiled boys who pass as the conspirators. His first appearance is that of a soldier in civilian gear returning home after a night on the town. His presence suggests a military man and in the final act he is the only actor who is able to convey a sense of military machines in armed conflict. None of the conspirators succeed in presenting themselves as credible military men, simply boys increasingly out of their depth, playing with revolvers in the deadly game of civil war.

This is an adventurous staging, with a performance aesthetic of lithe dexterity. The width of the stage is well used by Rigola to skillfully convey the gulf between the characters. Portia and Brutus' Act II, Scene i encounter sees Matilda Espluga's fearful Portia cling desperately to the back wall moving across like an anxious lizard as she and Brutus face each other across the breadth of the room. The performance language owes much to DV8 and Pina Bausch's Tanztheater with bodies hurtling into walls, the stylized removal of Caesar's clothes as he is murdered, and the scrappy dance-like infighting of the conspirators. The armed conflict that rages between the forces of Antony and the boy Octavius and the conspirators in Acts IV and V is conceived in highly formalist terms as a dance of death with the intrusion of Caesar and Portia's ghosts hovering ominously around the conspirators. The corpses of the battlefield increasingly litter the stage, with conspirators falling to a resounding thump across the chest with the microphone, both the agent of communication for Antony, Octavius and Lepidus and the weapon with which they kill.

Some moments fail to convince, such as the misguided decision to present the citizens in Act III as an anonymous thuggish mass of six in boiler suits, heavy woolen hats and dark glasses positioned on the balcony above the stage. The reference point seems to be Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, but the conception sits uneasily within an otherwise intelligent production. Maria Doméch's lighting, conceived in cold tones of grey and yellow paints a stage bathed in the dour dusk colors and the effects created as the back doors open and close with the conspirators machinations, offers flashes of white light that announces a world beyond the closed political circle of Rigola's Rome. Rigola's smart editing of Oliva's translation imbues the text with a sense of dangerous urgency and a varied soundtrack

effectively underscores the escalating action. For those who might have dismissed the early Rigola as a pale imitator of Bieito, this production points to the emergence of a director with an increasingly distinctive aesthetic.

*St. Joan of the Stockyards* is further evidence, were any needed, of this consolidation of an aesthetic. The production builds on his Julius Caesar—with eight of the same cast and the same design team of Puigdebàbregas (scenography), Doménech (lighting) and M. Rafa Serra (costumes). Crucially there are also traces of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, especially in the prominent design metaphor of the giant perspex fish tank into which meat magnate Pierpont Mauler and his cronies slip as they do business. On first consideration, *St. Joan* seems an odd play for Rigola to tackle. Only presented on radio in a truncated version in Brecht's lifetime, it has always appeared a work situated rather awkwardly between his *Lehrstücke* and his later epics like *Mother Courage*. Written in the immediate aftermath of the Wall Street crash, this fable has something of the energy and forcefulness of *Threepenny Opera*, but in our post-communist era, its politics seem at best naïve, at worst irresponsible. Rigola demonstrates through his production that the class conflict presented in the play is only one way through which *St. Joan* can be read. Rigola takes the play's confrontational directness and plays around with it in revelatory ways. As such he moves beyond the literal to exploit the gaps and fissures that the text presents. The production is thus never didactic or sermonizing, allowing the different viewpoints to co-exist within the onstage collage. This is a resolutely contemporary interpretation that consistently juxtaposes the visual with the verbal, providing a prism through which to interrogate egotism in the age of globalization.

While Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans*, Hauptmann's *Happy End* and Shaw's *Major Barbara* may have been Brecht's most direct source texts, Rigola's influences are more expansive. They move from Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) to protest singer Billy Bragg, Bob Dylan, rock, contemporary dance, breakdance, and the music theatre of Christoph Marthaler. The musical premise does not come from Weill's political cabaret but rather hip hop band Black Eyed Peas whose single "Where is the Love?" functions in the director's words as the production's "leitmotiv," appearing at certain key moments in a variety of stylistic modes. The action evolves on a wide horizon-



*Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. Photo: Ros Ribas, courtesy Teatre Lliure

tal stage, dominated by a giant vertical screen stage right. This is more the arena for a concert than a theatrical set, with a drum kit, electric guitar, speakers and a part-canine part-human bust scattered across the floor. Oriol Rosell's DJ has a workstation through which he orchestrates the production's rich musical soundtrack. Indeed there are few references to the Chicago slaughterhouse over which Mauler presides. A model cow is perhaps the most graphic pointer to Brecht's location but it is as much a reminder of a pop art culture in which objects from contrasting worlds are decontextualized and thus habitually depoliticized. The brown leather armchair that defines Mauler's empire may be another allusion to the meat market but it is also a comfortable seat from which he surveys the onstage protests. A transparent tank stands center stage as both a prison and a retreat. When occupied by Mauler and his mob it is a stark metaphor for a shark infested workplace where business means tearing the competition apart.

The dog-eat-dog ethos is further reinforced by the images of prowling sharks that are projected onto the screen. The screen is a reminder of the ubiquitous nature of screen culture—from computer to cinema—and a constant reminder of how the real is shaped by representation. Images flash on the screen in a busy patchwork film against which the play is enacted. These are taken from the 1930s and

from the present and go across the US and beyond. From overpopulated soup kitchens to the collapse of giant skyscrapers, from scenes of protesters in conflict with the police to workers gathered in huddles outside factories, from a child's open face staring out at the audience to the image of Dreyer's Joan that fills the screen as the play draws to a close, from the eponymous global logos of our consumer world (McDonald's, Coca-Cola) to those of the local marketplace (that of Spain's emblematic department store, El Corte Inglés) that are emblematic of our brand-obsessed culture, there is a continuous visual track through which we can read the onstage action. Above the stage a surtitle screen presents prices from the stock exchange, statistics on the Enron scandal, the control of Gates' Microsoft empire, the human cost of the Argentine crisis, and the economic exploitation of the developing world. These intersecting commentaries all provide a crucial sense of distancing while reinforcing the immediacy of the stage moment.

A cyclist peddling on the spot throughout the duration of the performance is both a reminder of De Sica's *Bicycle Thief* (1948) and Bardem's *Death of a Cyclist* (1955), two key political films of the era with clear "messages" about the ethos of exploitative cultures where humans are expendable commodities. These are the workers at their machines toiling at repetitive daily tasks. Rigola

takes a play about the exploitation of the working classes and turns it into contemplation of human trafficking. Mauler and Slift box to "The Tide is High" as the economic stakes rise. Here any human is dispensable in the interests of the hard sell. You're only as useful as your last deal. The speculators here all destroy each other in the tank against the projected images of circling sharks, a battle for survival conceived around the stylized removal of the emblematic suit and tie.

Márquez provides a grunge Joana Dark clad not in a black straw hat of the Salvation Army uniform but in the costume of our present day eco-crusaders. Her humanism, articulated through her open encounters, her direct responses and her focused sense of purpose, is hijacked by those who need it to protect their wealth, position and rank. She strides the stage with both tenacity and bewilderment and her speeches to the microphone serve both to reinforce the play's premise that a culture of charity is always complicit in the workings of a capitalist economy but crucially as moments of contemplation in a production whose frenzied pace is in itself a comment on the graphic consequences of globalization and our buy and sell economy. Even in death she is absorbed and sanctified to satisfy the demands of the conflicting patrons that exploited her good will. This Joan of Arc waves the UN flag strategically placed in her hands as she dies.

Pere Arquillué is subliminally good as the slaughterhouse tycoon. This is a modern day gangster, a shady multinational executive in slick designer suit and accompanying accessories. There is something boyish in his rounded face and close-cropped hair, a vulnerability in the eyes that is not shared by Alicia Pérez's lean Slift or Joan Carreras' angular Graham. Mauler and his associates are all camouflaged in the same uniforms, a corporate identity that masks the criminality that passes itself off as "good business sense." Arquillué captures the paradoxes of Mauler: a butcher fawning over the mottled cow as he declares his love for animals; a

businessman willing to be persuaded by Joana to commit corporate suicide by buying up all the tinned meat held by the canners only to have the gesture backfire on him. There is something of the tough combatant about Arquillué's Mauler but it is matched by what *El País*' Marcos Ordóez brilliantly classified as something of the melancholy oxen. He's not as quick on his feet as the wily Graham and Slift; not as thrusting as Nathalie Labiano's Lennox, as smarmy as Ivan Benet's Cridle, as obnoxious as Anna Roblas' Mulberry. It is that momentary self-questioning that Arquillué so fiercely captures. *St. Joan* shows that he is arguably the most resonant performer of his generation.

To single out Arquillué and Márquez, however, perhaps fails to take into account the remarkable collective effort of Rigola's young ensemble cast. The sixteen performers weave together the clusters of over-spilling action around which the stage is organized. There is an element of Seven Deadly Sins in the choreographed sequences where the characters' alter-egos perform a physical commentary on the spoken text. Racing tumbling bodies are both a metaphor for a boom and bust culture and an embodiment of the violence that spills out from this pressured environment. This is a multidisciplinary, multilayered production marked by the aggressive pace of a rock concert. The different registers are handled almost as if they were a symphony moving through the piece's diverse movements. The production may last a taut 1 hour and 45 minutes but I certainly left the theatre feeling I had watched a bona fide marathon. *St. Joan* has always seemed to me a lesser Brecht, bereft of either the irony, narrative pulse or the poetic impulse of his best dramas. Rigola's ingenious staging, winner of the Max Reinhardt prize for Young Directors at last year's Salzburg Festival, speaks to the here and now in ways that never efface or negate the play's period of composition. This is agit-prop for a new century, conceived in and through the performance languages of our time.