



## **'Theatre in Valencia: looking back and moving forward'**

A review by Maria Delgado

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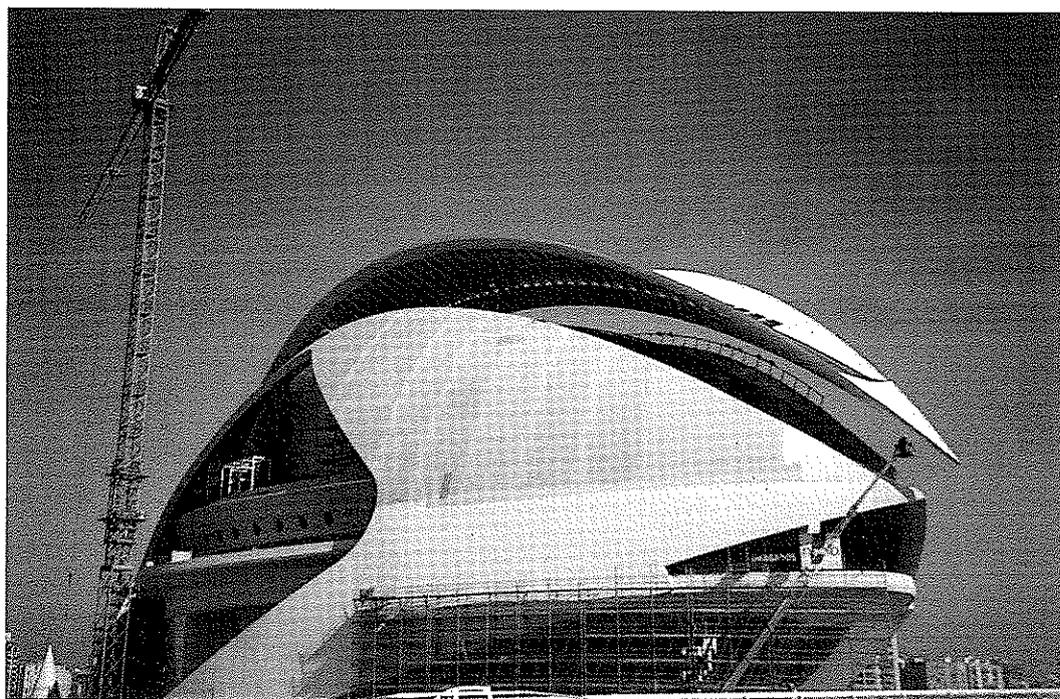
## Theatre in Valencia: looking back and moving forward

Maria M. Delgado

Valencia is Spain's third city, a Mediterranean metropolis 470 kilometers further down the coast from the Catalan capital. While it shares close ties with Catalonia—with Valencian often claimed to be a dialect of Catalan—the capital city of the Comunidad Valenciana has never attracted the visitor numbers of either Barcelona or the Spanish capital Madrid. Certainly the city has not been without conspicuous attractions, but theatre has never been at the forefront of its cultural identity. There is a vibrant performative characteristic to the city's landscape and nowhere is this more evident than in Valencia's annual *falla* festival. Between 1 and 19 March the conurbation is overtaken with parades, concerts, parties and giant *paella* cooking competitions—the city is the home of *paella* and awash with restaurants offering imaginative variations on the national dish. The city becomes a giant stage for a range of events where the *fallas*, eponymous *papier-mâché* figures propped on giant stilts that offer satirical commentaries on the latest celebrities, fads, or frustrations, vie for attention and dominance before going up in ceremonious flames at the end of the celebrations.

Nevertheless, despite its well-preserved

old city centre—a warren of *plazas*, winding streets, picturesque churches and charming modernist glass market, the *mercado central*, the city has played second fiddle to the more baroque Andalusian cities of Granada and Seville or the Guggenheim-invigorated Basque port of Bilbao. That may all be about to change as local architect Santiago Calatrava, responsible for Bilbao's dove-shaped Sondica airport, brings his sculpture-infused structures to the city in the City of Arts and Sciences complex that bind the city centre to the port. The diversion of the city's curving Turia River out of the city to prevent further flooding following the devastation of the 1950s has created a winding path of playgrounds—including a giant Gulliver children's park designed by Ricardo Bofill, architect of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya—sports facilities and gardens that circle the city. As the path meanders its way to the Gulliver park and past the concert hall, the Palau de la Música, unsuspecting visitors come face to face with a giant configuration of concrete and stainless steel structures that presents a vibrant alternative to the gothic and early modern splendor of the old city. The City of Arts and Sciences houses the already open Hemisfèric, a planetarium, laser dome and



The armadillo-like Palau de les Arts Valencia under construction.

Photo: Maria M. Delgado

IMAX cinema whose configuration suggests something of a heavy eyelid bathed in glass and vibrant metal. The Príncipe Felipe Science Museum housed in a pristine concrete structure that evokes a vast ribbed skeletal animal shell presents a busy interactive venue with great appeal to the young—including a play center for the over fours. Waves of expansive arches and restful pools of crystal clear water give a sense of tranquility despite the soaring visitor numbers. L'Umbracle's garden, housed within an arched canopy of intersecting frames, provides a balance to the cathedral-like Science Museum and ingeniously conceals the underground car-park and public transport links. The aquarium and marine park of L'Oceanogràfic, designed by Felix Candela to fit within Calatrava's overall design, presents another mini-metropolis marked by undulating pathways that link the tunnels, igloos, globes and folding tulip configurations that house Europe's largest complex of marine life. While there is something of Gaudí in the prominent use of tiling fragments, Calatrava's training as a civil engineering, evident in the mathematical symmetry of the configurations and their relationship to his sliding-roof Olympic stadium for Athens in 2004, give his designs a character that evokes the bold grandeur of Gehry. The arts venue that will in many ways form the centerpiece of the City of Arts and Sciences, is the Palau de les Arts, bathed in scaffolding, workmen and cranes as it seeks to make its end-of-year completion deadline, has something of the circular smoothness of L'Hemisfèric. The colossal structure's giant curved roof has much of the solid grandeur of a oversized cruise-ship, and will house three auditoria that will host opera, theatre, ballet and music concerts offering more variety than the existing theatrical provision spread across the old city.

At a time when programmers struggle to find products that will fit into the gigantesque moments built to the greater glory of the arts, the productions seen in Valencia did not fill me with hope that there was either an audience to fill such an ambitious venture or an artistic infrastructure in place to support it. Yes, there are local companies and Valencia is a prominent member of the circuit for large- and middle-scale touring ventures but it already has theatres that can comfortably accommodate such ventures. There's no indigenous recent history of an opera house in the city, nor any local opera performing infrastructure, and the well-regarded Valencia Symphony orchestra is currently

resident in the relatively new Palau de la Música. It remains to be seen if the two Palaus will be able to operate side by side without splitting the audience.

I also wonder about the Palau de les Arts' ability to compete with the giant outdoor stage provided by Calatrava in the City of Arts and Sciences. Valencia has certainly had its fair share of theatrical innovators and players—Rodolf Sirera, José Sanchis Sinisterra and Carles Santos, for example in recent times—but their most resonant works have often been produced outside the region, playing only in the city as part of a larger tour. The city's largest theatre, the nineteenth-century neo-classical Principal, having recently undergone a major refurbishment, is the main venue for large-scale touring productions. Bieito's *King Lear* closed its eight-month tour here in April 2005 and *The Price*, Miller's 1968 work, opening at the Romea in this production before undertaking a major tour, spent 12 days at the venue in late March at early April. *The Price* negotiates familiar Miller territory: two brothers bound by blood and separated by resentment brought face to face by their parental inheritance. Víctor, a fifty-something policeman approaching the possibility of early retirement is handling the sale of his parents' furniture as the family apartment is being emptied to prepare for demolition. The sale brings Víctor in touch with his elder brother Walter, a successful surgeon with whom he has lost touch. As the play progresses we are privy to Víctor's anger at the sacrifices he and his wife had to make to take care of his elderly parents, financially wrecked by the depression, while Walter enjoyed an increasingly privileged and distanced life. And "the price" paid by Víctor to do the right thing by his father is shown to have consequences for all aspects of his life and psyche.

The action evolves on a cluttered set that pays serious lip-service to realism while functioning within the realms of the metaphorical. The city landscape of brownstone tenements can be seen through the tall windows. Inside the attic room, piles of heavy wooden furniture hide traces of parents' lives in the home. Chairs are piled on top of each other; china crockery is placed precariously across dusty surfaces; tied-up clusters of books lie abandoned in corners and crevices. Into this physical and psychological chaos enters Víctor (Juan Echanove), who has arranged to meet the wily Gregorio (Gregory) Salomon (Juan José Otegui), an elderly Jewish furniture dealer who has come to appraise the bulky wares that clutter the room. This

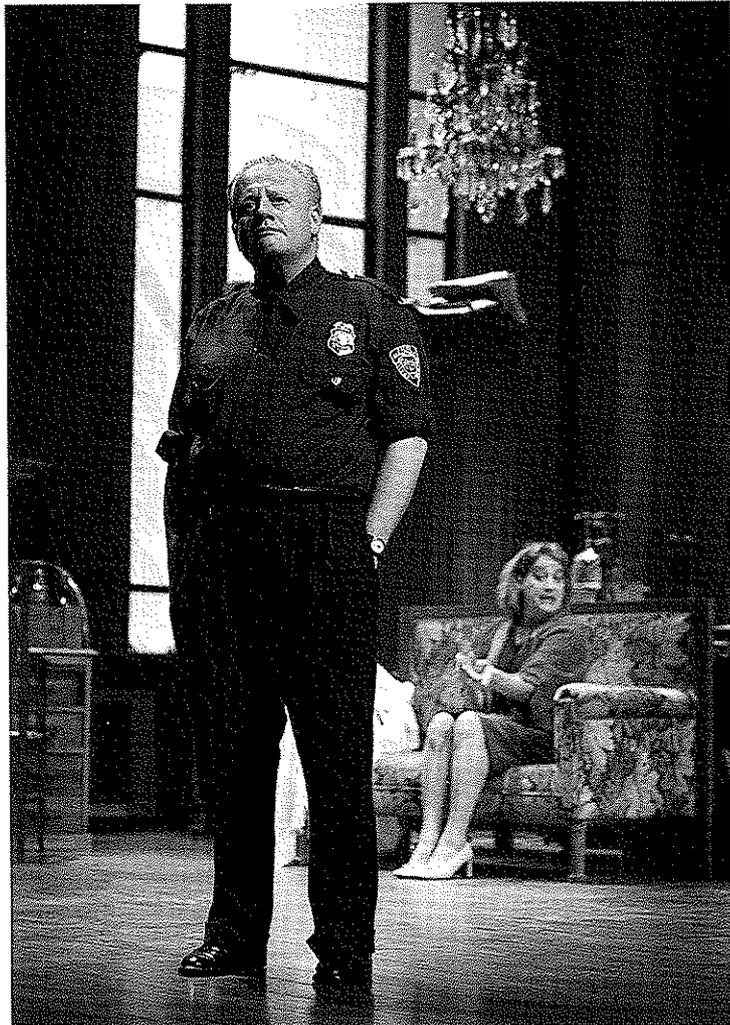
is a space where the light is dim and dust clusters the atmosphere, no one can see clearly and truth is not so easy to locate. Echanove's Víctor complete with habitual hangdog expression and weary stance conveys well the dilemmas of a man for whom decision-making is never an easy process. While the early section of the production borders on the excessively languid, Echanove does give us the sense of Víctor's fragility and misguided sense of self-preservation. He is an uncomfortable businessman, an awkward negotiator who resists confrontation and breaks into a sweat when pushed or prodded. Rosa Manteiga's Esther is an astringent wife torn between loyalty to her husband, the bottle—which she caresses on numerous occasions—and the wish for a more comfortable life. When fortified by whiskey she confronts her husband, as a lifetime of compliance and sacrifice rise to the surface. Resentment and alcohol fuse to leave a bittersweet taste in the mouth with a palpably tense stage atmosphere as husband and wife spat, despite Víctor's attempts to placate the edgy Esther. Helio Pedregal's renegade brother, Walter, occupies the terrain of the slimy rather than the suave. While his narration of the plummet into madness doesn't convince, there is a tangible tension in the confrontation

of his brother's sense of martyrdom as he argues for a version of the family's past history that questions his father's alleged penury. Echanove is able to suggest the possibility that he remained with his father out of a pressing need that he can't articulate with any degree of verbal clarity, and his confrontation of Walter over the latter's allegations that he sacrificed his education to awaken a sense of guilt in Walter appear ominously possible. They do physical battle over their father's armchair, a pertinent reminder of the *paterfamilias'* legacy. There are no reconciliations here, however, and no happy endings; Walter leaves in a fury and Víctor is left to deal with his own complicity in the decisions he made for his wife and son.

The production ends with Otegui's Gregorio Soloman, shaking hands on the deal with Echanove's weary Víctor. Otegui's Salomon is a feisty creation; tottering along the stage, walking stick in hand, he presents an answer and anecdote to all of the characters' observations and suggestions. Walter's aggressive bartering doesn't faze him; Esther's abrupt comments are met with judicious flattery. He lifts the show every time he makes his way precariously across the crowded room to continue the negotiations and his humor, wit and sage



Watched by Víctor's wife Esther (here Ana Marzoa, replaced in the Valencia run by Rosa Manteiga), Walter (Helio Pedregal) and Víctor (Juan Echanove) tussle for control of the wily Soloman (Juan José Otegui) in Jorge Eines's production of Arthur Miller's *The Price*. Photo: courtesy Teatro Romea



Juan Echanove as Victor Franz in Jorge Eines's production of *The Price*, touring at Valencia's Principal theatre. Photo: courtesy Teatro Romea

wisdom present a veritable antidote to the family's convoluted webs of distrust and suspicion. His eyes narrow as he surveys the furniture before him and we are left wondering whether it is indeed as unfashionable as he claims or whether he is mentally calculating how much profit it will yield. Otegui's characterization gives us a figure that represents the hold of the past, a symbolic vision of the father, a link to a pre-Depression era that seeps into the apartment and bathes the characters in its melancholy memories.

While the work with Otegui, Manteiga and Echanove is to be commended, director Jorge Eines handles some of the other elements of the *mise-en-scène* in a less assured manner. The impending storm marked by claps of thunder only serves to hammer home the sense of looming doom. It's almost as if he doesn't trust the writing and needs to

further underline the Ibsenesque symbolism that hovers in Miller's play. Music too functions rather too obviously and we are left wishing that Eines might have trusted silence to allow the audience to process what remains unsaid.

Having said this, Eines and his cast negotiate the gaps in the play well and there is a veritable sense of mystery to the patchy information provided. We never learn, for example, about how Victor funded his early years at university or who owned the brownstone block in which the parents' apartment is located. The ghostly pallor of the room certainly plays a palpable role in cultivating this sense of ambiguity and Eines balances the different "truths" put forward by the characters, implicating them all to a greater or lesser degree in the culture of escapism that pervades the piece.

At the gloriously art-deco Rialto theatre, Valencian-born writer José Sanchis Sinisterra "comes home" with a play first seen at Barcelona's Sala Beckett, *Flechas del angel del olvido* (*Arrows from the Angel of Forgetfulness*). Cultural memory has proved a resonant motif in his work, as his best known plays, *¡Ay, Carmela!*, and *El cerco de Leningrado* (*The Leningrad Siege*) plainly indicate. Here there are remnants of his earlier dramas in the ways in which four visitors to a hospital attempt to "hijack" an amnesiac, X

(Marta Poveda), who they each claim "belongs" to them. Each recounts a tale of a shared past with a persuasive attention to detail. Selma (Marta Domingo) alleges X is her younger sister who "disappeared" some months back. The *machista* Efrén (Hernán Zavala) calls her his girlfriend Veronica, a hairdresser that that he's been supporting (and more than possibly abusing) through what seem to be less-than-ethical business deals. The village lad Erasmo (Marc García Coté), who has headed to the city as messenger for an elderly, sick neighbor Juana, proffers that the amnesiac is her beloved granddaughter Margarita. The lesbian over-the-top artist Dora (Velilla Valbuena), claims to be mentor and teacher to the woman she appropriates as Celia. Dora's tale of excess and woe is nothing short of the flamboyant exposition Almodóvar crafts for his

wayward protagonists. The narrative she provides of Celia's past involves an abandoned child—conceived with a former priest—various colorful ex-partners and a pinch of decadent romanticism.

The clinical set provided by Quim Roy is all transparent screens and long plastic sheets hovering like giant shower curtains to mark out "forbidden" areas. Stools wrapped in cellophane testify to the sanitized environment where X has found refuge. Shadows of medics and staff can be made out through the frosted glass panels and a forceful nurse (Anna Briasó) hovers around the proceedings watching and interrupting the four claimants as they each make their case to the withdrawn X. There is some intrigue to the proceedings as we ponder the possibility that X may have lead four lives simultaneously, but the florid language finally proves the play's undoing. For the "game" set up by Sinisterra is rather laboriously handled and while X may "choose" to begin again, the points around controlling and making sense of a past that were never entirely yours are hammered home. Briansó's nurse certainly suggests more than meets the eye and an audience are given enough clues to remain deeply suspicious of her supposedly altruistic purposes. While there is something Pinteresque in Sanchis Sinisterra's evocation of the sinister within the mundane, the characters' language always appears too

self-consciously mannered to truly surprise or menace. As such García Coté's Erasmo has too much of the comic awkwardness of the hapless rustic to really move beyond the formulaic. Zavala's Efrén too rarely rises above the *macho* bore and Valbuena's Dora is a problematic pastiche that reinforces tricky stereotypes. Marta Poveda's X, does bring an element of enigma to the proceedings as she takes control in Act 2 and Sanchis Sinisterra is able to avoid weighing down her language with the affected literary deference that marks her stage antagonists. Even Poveda's lively performance, however, can't lift this play beyond its creaky premise and execution. The sterile setting and ostentatious language reminded me of Buero-Vallejo's *La Fundación* (*The Foundation*); indeed both are largely one-idea plays that meander along to predictable endings. There is a mawkishness to Sanchis Sinisterra's staging of the final moments that fails to convince. I was left wondering whether Sanchis Sinisterra was the most appropriate director for the piece and whether the play may have profited from a less emphatic approach. The opening-night audience was certainly appreciative but I was far more taken by the gilded décor of the lush auditorium's arched seats and intimate acoustics. Sanchis Sinisterra clearly has something significant to say about consumerism, cultural memory and the erosion of our sense of self



José Sanchis Sinisterra's production of *Flechas del ángel del olvido* at the Teatre Rialto, Valencia. Dora (Velilla Valbuena), Erasmo (Marc García Coté), Selma (Marta Domingo), and Efrén (Hernán Zavala) locked in verbal combat for possession of X.

Photo: courtesy Sala Beckett

in *Flechas del ángel del olvido*, a piece the dramatist has delineated as part one of a proposed trilogy on the human mind. One can only hope that in the second and third parts—which are to deal with

autism and multiple personalities respectively—he matches form to ideas in more theatrically vigorous ways.