



'Barcelona: Revisiting the Classics, Rewriting the Present'

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona: Revisiting the Classics, Rewriting the Present

Maria M. Delgado

Sergi Belbel may not yet have officially started as Artistic Director of the Catalan National Theatre (TNC), but the director-elect has certainly created a real buzz around his appointment with a sparkling new production of Marivaux's *Les Fausses Confidences*, packing the notoriously unplayable Sala Gran. It is perhaps not surprising that Belbel, an accomplished translator of Koltès, should turn to a similarly dexterous playwright whose linguistic games are as brittle and elegant as the world whose conventions he chronicles and questions. Too often Marivaux is imprisoned within a Watteau-like pictorial field of aesthetic posturing and social hierarchies. Belbel moves away from period detail to a mythical world, part-movie kitsch, part-1940's screen culture. This is an environment fabricated from the imaginary of Hollywood's classic era. Although its look smartly references the design produced by Max Glaenzel and Ester Cristià for Belbel's operatic debut at the Liceu with *Il Viaggio a Reims* (2003), it is clearly indebted to the studio era. There are imposing marble staircases (a sly nod to Ricard Bofill's TNC building), lush red sofas, secluded gardens, a shiny Cadillac, and a polished Biscuter. Additionally, in the fashion of the feistiest farces (Belbel's production is infused with the spirit of the farces that followed Marivaux), the décor accommodates enough doors to ensure characters are concealed and revealed whenever the plot demands. This is Marivaux refracted through the lens of Preston Sturges (with elements of George Cukor and Howard Hawks thrown in for good measure). The results have proved an unexpected commercial and critical hit.

Belbel evidently sees Marivaux's intrigues and witty language (*marivaudage*) as a prototype for the screwball comedy. The wily Dubois's (Miriam Iscla) machinations to get the wealthy young widow Araminte (Laura Conejero) to fall for her poor but handsome ex-boss Dorante (Eduard Farello) are visually evoked within a costume register that critics have seen as indebted to *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). While Araminte's mother, Madame Argante, hopes that she will marry the powerful Count Dorimont, Dorante's uncle, Rémy, secures his employment with Araminte and then misleads her maid into believing that Dorante is actually infatuated with her. Araminte, however,

finds out that his amorous intentions lie elsewhere, and, despite existing hierarchies, can't help falling for the guy. As her mother prepares to sack Dorante, Araminte declares her intention to marry him. The man on the make is made.

There are echoes of Lope de Vega's *El perro del hortelano* (*Dog in the Manger*) in the play's treatment of class and hierarchy, and in the scheming servant's orchestration of the romantic liaisons. The shape of the play suggests Marivaux as a palpable influence on Jacinto Benavente, as well as a debt to *commedia dell'arte*. Here, however, as Marcos Ordóñez so astutely noted in his review of the play for *El País* (7 January 2006), echoes are refracted through a contemporary prism: Dorante as a great-great grandfather of Ripley, or the wily tennis coach played by Jonathan Rhys-Meyers in Woody Allen's recent *Match Point*.

The production has a sleek, seductive look, much like Farello's slick, suave Dorante. Laura Conejero gives a glamorous Araminte who floats across the stage in suitably star-like fashion (and boasts numerous costume changes), and Miriam Iscla imbues Dubois with an ever-so-slightly menacing air. There is something of Peggy Shaw's knowing butch protagonists here, watching over proceedings with a meaningful, complicit air. Indeed, she juggles the masculine and feminine characteristics of a role that may have been written for a male performer but that Belbel views as imbued with feminine wiles. Albert Guinovart's music is suitably atmospheric. Belbel juggles anachronisms knowingly and wittingly. His colloquial adaptation proves fast, furious and feisty. Belbel has often referred to Marivaux as one of his favorite playwrights, and the delight with which he stages *Les Fausses Confidences* suggests that another Marivaux may find a slot in Belbel's new TNC regime.

A new Josep Benet i Jornet play always has something of an event about it. The elder statesman of Catalan playwriting's last offering, the hypnotic *L'habitació del nen* (*The Boy's Room*), played at the Teatre Lliure's Gràcia venue in an imaginative production by Sergi Belbel in January 2003. Jornet's latest work, *Salamandra*, premieres at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya's cozy Sala Petita. Connoisseurs of Benet i Jornet's work will find

familiar terrain here: the elliptical narrative marked by the protagonist's metaphorical and physical journey; issues of inheritance and the legacy of the past; nationalism's shaping of individual and collective identities; historical memory, and the construction of an elusively unknowable past. There is, however, a shift, for the setting is now a mythical desert-landscape. This is the arid wasteland of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *Fool for Love*: an arena of isolated homes and derelict trailers where wandering nomads come to find solace and space where humanity negotiates a less hierarchical relationship to nature. This is the fabled frontier of our global century, a Southern Californian landscape where cowboys once roamed, now the space and place of a modern day mythmaker: a commercial film director, Claud (David Selvas) who has "escaped" the mad/bad Hollywood machine to see the mother that adopted him as a child, Emma (Àngels Poch), and attempt to redefine what his new project might be.

Here Claud comes face to face with his childhood friend and soul brother, Travis (Julio Manrique), a documentary filmmaker, and Travis's German girlfriend, Hilde (Christina Genebat) who are "passing by" while working on a new venture. The men's mutual resentment is evident. Although Emma tries to get them to look beyond recent disagreements to shared childhood memories, neither man can lay to rest the competitive anger that bristles around them, or Claud's burgeoning sexual interest in Hilde. As Claud leaves for Idaho to confront the traces of his biological father that remain in the trailer where he drank away his life, Hilde leaves to follow him. They embark on an odyssey that takes them from Milo to Mittenwald and finally to Barcelona where Claud will try and make sense of the untidy scraps of his biological family's life that were scattered through the tumultuous century.

This is a hugely adventurous play: conceptually bold and metaphorically sweeping. The relationship between Travis and Claud is presented on one level in entirely human terms as the tussle between two individuals who have pursued different paths with not entirely predictable consequences. These are men bound by a shared history and the pain of a supposed betrayal perceived by each in highly contradictory ways. Two guys, a girl, and a desert. It's the story of the American dream, of borderlands wrought by fratricidal conflicts, of a dream-machine built in the Californian desert that defined "the real," of the simulacra that dominates

our world of global advertising and multi-million dollar movies exported across the planet. Not insignificantly, as a fiction director and documentary filmmaker respectively, Claud and Travis are each positioned on conflicting sides of the reality/fiction debate. Their deliberations point to wider issues concerning the function of art and the possibility of any kind of partitioning of the real and the fictive in an age hypnotized by the banalities of "reality" television.

Toni Casares' production evolves on Anna Alcubierre's panoramic set dominated by a wide screen that projects images of the Santa Rosa desert, Emma's home, and the various European cities visited by Claud and Hilde. The photographs of the Santa Rosa terrain are all colored by the realm of an imagination popularized by Edward Hopper's interiors and exteriors: secluded houses, self-reflective symbolic windows, cropped roofs and frames. The European geography is self-consciously picture-postcard: German spires, grand apartments from the colonialist era that have seen better days, Paris's Pont Neuf, Barcelona's Padró Plaza. The giant screen certainly suggests something of the role of moving pictures in shaping our conception of landscape and identity; its widescreen format also points to the epic qualities of Benet i Jornet's play. For in Claud's odyssey is a tale of emigration, mutation and transfiguration, the story of the twentieth-century and its economic and civil conflicts. In weaving its way to Barcelona for the penultimate scene, Benet i Jornet also manages to link Spain's Civil War to the wider European struggles that followed. Here, Spain is no longer the distant "other" on the far side of the Pyrenees, but a part of a European psyche scarred by the trauma of protracted hostilities. Indeed, the brothers' conflict prepares the ideological way for the motifs around fratricidal war that emerge in the latter half of *Salamandra*. The terrors of colonialism rear their ugly head to mark the contemporary struggles of the characters and the landscapes they inhabit. It is a legacy that Claud comes to accept, and one that comes to mark how he proceeds to look towards the future.

There is something of Koltès's fascination with the American "other" in Benet's writing, but the tone here is more elegiac, romantic, and nostalgic than the French dramatist's visceral, vicious language, redefining the relationship between the global and the local. American popular culture has a palpable presence in the work. Manrique's Travis is clearly a nod to Harry Dean Stanton's Travis in Wim

Wenders's *Paris/Texas* (1983), a European's contemplation of alien America shot through cinematographer Robby Müller's unforgiving eye. There are also traits of Robert de Niro's now perennial outsider, the Travis Bickle of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), and the disagreements with Claud suggest something of the two brothers of Shepard's *True West*. Selvas' Claud sports a *Star Wars* t-shirt and dresses in the custom uniform of Banana Republic-cum-Gap. Ry Cooder-like chords punctuate (rather too obviously) poignant moments of the play. Whilst there is a superficial elegance to Casares' staging, ultimately the production remains too stilted and overly naturalistic for the broad brushstrokes of Benet i Jornet's writing. The performance register traps a play that requires a more forceful aesthetic. David Selvas never entirely convinces as the supposedly successful Hollywood director who has the world at his feet. Although Jorge Manrique's Travis has more of an edge, their relationship never quite takes off. Part of it may be to do with the part that Travis is displaced by Hilde around halfway through the play. The relationship between Hilde and Claud never possesses the same passion as the men's.

In addition, the details of Casares' staging always seemed a little off-target: Travis sporting a super-8 rather than the more portable digital cameras favored by the current wave of documentary wizards; the clean, wholesome wooden New England flooring of Emma's house. The play is dirtier than the production and there is a need for something angrier than the sanitized look shaped by Casares' ambling directorial rhythm, and the rather lackluster performances of the subdued cast. Benet i Jornet's ending also seems rather too farfetched, lifting the play into the terrain of melodrama that it had hovered around without ever quite occupying. Play and production never seem entirely matched in the TNC's *Salamandra*. Nevertheless, one cannot help but admire the audacity of a playwright who insists on probing buried histories and hidden chronicles as a way of understanding our tumultuous times.

There can be few figures in the contemporary European theatre scene who have polarized the Spanish critical establishment quite as decisively as the Argentine-born writer-director Rodrigo García. His productions' quirky titles appear provocations in themselves: *Haberos quedado en casa, capullos* (*You Should Have Stayed at Home, Jerks*) (2000), *Compré una pala en Ikea para cavar mi tumba* (*I*

Bought a Spade in Ikea to Dig My Grave) (2002), *La historia de Ronald, el payaso de McDonald's* (*The Story of Ronald the Clown from McDonald's*) (2003). García made his long overdue UK debut last summer with *La historia de Ronald* at the Brighton Festival. A denunciation of our fast food culture as poignantly agitational and brilliantly choreographed as Àlex Rigola's 2004 staging of *St. Joan of the Stockyards* [see *WES* 17.1], this was a consummate lesson in political theatre: ferociously witty, defiantly angry, theatrically thrilling, and always uncompromisingly opinionated. Food, as in the work of Bobby Baker, became more than an onstage weapon, but rather a way of commenting on our post-capitalist consumer practices and the extremes that they provoke.

García is not afraid to get his hands dirty, a Kantor for the twenty-first century whose *La Carnicería Teatro* (Butcher's Theatre) is as much a nonconformist pariah in Madrid's rather complacent theatrical culture as was Kantor's Cricot Theatre in communist Cracow. The two monologues seen at Barcelona's *Teatre Lliure* share much in common with *La historia de Ronald*: the protracted declarations to the audience that appropriate the confessional mode of reality television towards contrary ends; the fascination with the mythology of advertising and cultural consumption; a performance methodology that owes as much to Pina Bausch and Bob Wilson—verbally referenced in *La historia de Ronald*—as it does to Bill Viola, Bruce Nauman, MTV and Andrei Tarkovsky. For those who admire Forced Entertainment while longing for something of the cruelty and vigor of Goya's grotesquerie, García offers a paradigm for engagement that never eschews humor or theatre's often forgotten recourses to smell and taste.

Borges and *Goya* each engage contemporary myths: with *Borges* it is the legacy of the Argentine writer Jorge-Luis Borges, with *Goya* the allure of Disneyland. Each enacts a process of demystification that asks awkward questions about cultural legacies and artistic responsibilities. *Borges* was first seen in 1999, a commission to mark the Argentine icon's centenary presented at Madrid's Casa de América. The writer's widow, María Kodoma, was, allegedly, not exactly thrilled with the "homage" conceived by García but the piece is as much a reflection on García's own adolescence in Buenos Aires as it is a reflection on Borges's literary weight. This is no biographical study (we are given little information on Borges's

life), rather a contemplation of his times and his capacity to stand aside and remain aloof of the abuses then shaping Argentine society. This is a study of political detachment, of the writer as a figure apart, crucially disengaged from the society in which he lives and works; “the poet insignia who never got his hands wet for nobody or nothing.” It is also fiercely autobiographical. The Borges devotee who recounts the tale of an adolescent encounter with Borges and Octavio Paz conversing jovially at the city’s Café Tortoni draws on anecdotes from García’s own life. We recognize the butcher father, greengrocer mother, the voracious reader, and the aspiring writer who goes in search of a pull but finds two literary giants instead.

La Carnicería Teatro regular Juan Loriento enacts the alter ego with a distance that prevents easy identification. He moves with the slowest of tai-chi stances on a carpet of green grass adorned with rows of green apples, the perennial fruit of temptation. This is no recognizable human that can be easily traced to García, but rather a blue alien with bright orange hair, marked by pointed, Spock-like ears and pointed talons for nails that grip a fluorescent apple, bitten into at the end of the piece. The writing is exquisite, merging the political and

the sexual, the popular and the esoteric in imaginative and quirkily comic configurations.

The text has been expanded since 1999 and a video backdrop that juxtaposes the eponymous Borges with a nodding toy dog further serves as a commentary on García’s text. The video offers a catalogue of abuses ranging from Thatcher crowing over Las Malvinas/The Falklands to reminders of Maradona’s football glory days that masked the substance abuse within, or from Bush and Videla’s smirking politicians to close-up shots of anal sex that invade the privacy of the moment, stripping it of any semblance of intimacy. I’m not sure that García’s staging entirely works, for all Loriento’s technical brilliance it highlights the sophistication of the writing rather than challenges or offers counterpoint in any way. The intermittent spraying of pesticide into the air, punctuating the language whilst contaminating the apple held by Loriento, appears at once an ecological and a grammatical statement, as well as a potent metaphor for García’s theatre.

Goya, or to give it its full title, *Prefiero que me quite el sueño Goya a que lo haga cualquier hijo de puta* (*I’d Rather Goya Kept Me Awake Rather Than Any Other Son of a Bitch*) provides a less



Gonzalo Cunill as the Atlético Madrid supporting father in Rodrigo García’s *Goya*.
Photo courtesy of the Teatre Lliure

aggressive fusion between text and performance. The production emerges from a grainy video installation that bridges *Borges* and the second play. This is a poetic meditation of Goya's 1820's *Duelo a garrotazos*, one of the most celebrated of his "black paintings," and a harrowing metaphor for the fratricidal wars that plagued the country through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The various configurations of the battle till the death with clubs that García crafts, enacted also by Carlos Saura in his 1963 film *Llanto por un bandido* (*Lament for a Bandit*), go beyond the male-on-male warfare of Goya's painting. Here, there are children and women as well as men, who raise their clubs through the soil and mud in a darkened landscape that suggests a Balkan land marked by a secluded corner of shady trees that mask, hide and shelter. As the video fades, the mascot of Atlético de Madrid enters the stage, a giant bear in football gear stripping to Atomic Kitten's "I Really Want Tonight to Last Forever." Removing his weighty headdress, actor Gonzalo Cunill spins an engaging tale of a blue-collar father of two boys approaching middle-age. The father challenges his sons' desire for a weekend at Disneyworld with a plan to blow his savings, 5000 euros, on a night at the Prado, looking at Goya in peace.

The events leading up to the Goya sleep-over at the Prado are planned with meticulous consideration and financial acumen. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is enticed to Madrid on a promise of cured ham, croquettes, and a good wine, as well as a hefty fee. Picked up at Madrid's Barajas airport by Cunill, his two wily sons, and a contracted taxi driver, the odyssey involves the young boys articulating sophisticated economic statements and pining for Disneyland while their father attempts to pull off the evening's entertainment within the orchestrated budget and without any unforeseen hiccups. Cunill's Argentine timbre suggests a link with *Borges* and a past that is never alluded to. The past that is evoked here is the cultural legacy of Goya, a legacy that García's play seems to suggest is under threat from a culture that sees worth in exploiting individuals to wear inhuman costumes for prolonged periods in the service of "entertainment."

Cunill gives us a wily loser who knows that it's safer to contemplate the masters rather than hanker over a Volkswagen he can't pay for. His performance is hypnotic, an alluring blend of humor and candor. Whether regaling the audience with

tales of his sons' opinions, biting into a baguette, or plotting the nighttime assault into the Prado, his endearing openness and straightforward nature offers a veritable antidote to the tortured protagonist of *Borges*. For those who associate García's oeuvre with enraged collages, food fights, and a sensory performance language of kinetic exactitude, *Goya* is a less ferocious, but no less potent deliberation on cultural value, cultural icons, and that elusive something that goes beyond the monetary or cultural commodification.

Cultural commodification has also been a prominent motif in the recent work of the Teatre Lliure's artistic director Àlex Rigola. It is perhaps not surprising that the astute Rigola has provided a welcoming Barcelona home for García's La Carniceria Teatro and other practitioners/troupees whose work offers a fusion of the avant-garde, choreography, installation, and performance art such as Roger Bernat, Mal Pelo and Àngels Margarit. Rigola's also succeeded in programming what is arguably the city's hippest venue. This has been a year of conspicuous sell-out successes (as with Josep Maria Mestres' *Boston Marriage*). There is still a range of high-profile international companies (Ostermeier's Schaubühne, Jan Lauwers' NeedCompany, Les Ballets C de la B, Romeo Castellucci's Societas Raffaello Sanzio), as well as the presence of Catalan stalwarts Lluís Pasqual, the venue's former artistic director, and Albert Boadella's Els Joglars, to look forward to.

Rigola's most recent offering as director, *Richard III*, or as he titles it, *Ricard 3er*, sees a return to the Bard and, as with his *Julius Caesar*, Rigola renders a more compact acting version that prunes and crops the text. He dispenses with Act II, scene iii, Act III, scenes iii and vi, Act V, scenes ii and v. What we have is a lean compression, which in Salvador Oliva's deftly fluid translation, pulsates along to the rhythm of The Clash's "Spanish Guns." After the open, minimalist location of his *Julius Caesar*, Rigola and his habitual scenographer Bibiana Puigdefàbregas opt to situate the action in an altogether more concrete environment. This is a diner-cum-pub/club with more than a touch of the seedy about it. There's not a window in sight, rather a long red bar dominates the back of the stage; its shelves are piled high with a range of fortified alcoholic beverages. Lurid colors dominate. A mini-stage tucked in the corner stage-right announces the possibility of musical entertainment. Diner tables stage left and right allow for conspiratorial



Pere Arquillué as Richard with the two "puppet" princes in Alex Rigola's *Richard III* at the Teatre Lliure.
Photo: Ros Ribas, courtesy of the Teatre Lliure

reunions. A white fridge suggests ominous possibilities for imprisonment, and a tacky juke box that's seen better days provides a resting place for one of the two prostitutes that adorn the less-than-salubrious establishment. The British origins of the play are alluded to with a print of the Bard carelessly abandoned at the top of the stairs, the haphazardly pinned-up page-three poster girls framed by Union Jacks and the prominent WC sign.

This is a modern-day royal court, populated by two warring dynasties. The Houses of York and Lancaster are here mafia families. Although Rigola has located Scorsese's *Casino*, Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, and HBO's *The Sopranos* as tangible referents, the costume aesthetic, dominated by Stetsons, cowboy boots, and *Dallas-cum-Desperate Housewives*'s faded glamour, suggests that the US's current royal family may be another palpable influence. There is even something here of Alex de la Iglesia's spaghetti Western *Perdita Durango* and its filtering of a lawless world through the Spanish grotesque or *esperpento*. In addition, the set evokes the geometric form of Frank Castorf's *Gier nach Gold*.

For those who saw Bieito's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Threepenny Opera*, there are evident points of contact: the fast, furious pacing, the Mafioso world where power and prestige justify any and all abuses, and the utilization of musical interludes sung by the characters as a type of Brechtian commentary on the action. Here we have The Beatles' "Hey Jude," the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy

for the Devil," Boney M's "By the Rivers of Babylon," and Jacques Brel's "Ne me quitté pas." Rigola is also, as with Bieito, a forceful moralist. The play opens with a Kant quotation projected on the screen stage-right: "Man is what education makes of him." Here lies the association with *Bowling for Columbine*, and in the program notes, Rigola's asserts that we are living in an era defined by as much violence as that of Richard of Gloucester's youth. In an age where images of annihilation dominate our screens and media, and going to war is seen, as Iraq demonstrates, as an everyday occurrence, the production asks searing questions about how we are educating our families and what "following by example" might mean as politicians lie their way to waging wars whose human casualties are conveniently hidden away.

Pere Arquillué's Richard is no monstrous aberration but rather the product of a domestic set-up where loyalty to the family can only go as far as the bid for economic supremacy will allow. He has watched and learned. This is a family where the women exist as glamorous, virtually interchangeable objects of desire, elderly Barbie dolls, mannequins attired in heels, tight dresses, designer sunglasses, and peroxide wigs that stress the clone-like dimension of their lives. In a world where appearance is all, Arquillué's Richard has drawn the short straw. He has a limp, dragging a clubfoot behind him, a nervous tic, bottleneck glasses, bad skin, a propensity to sweat heavily and an incapacitated hand. He is a poor second to the snappy Clarence

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Oliva's translation with Rigola's lewd aesthetic. For all the technical brilliance of the choreographed sequences, and the enraged energy of the staging, I longed for Rigola to allow the text to breathe a little more. The production's register veers rather too heavily into farce. For example, the giant line of coke consumed with a comic-like Caixa credit card seems almost gratuitously unnecessary. The conception of the dying Edward IV as an invisible man of sorts wrapped entirely in medicinal bandages and cavorting with prostitutes as the kingdom falls apart beneath him seems rather crudely drawn, and the plethora of Shakespeares that increasingly occupy the stage as the play draws to an end appear a tad repetitive. The production is intelligently self-referential (a framed print of the Bard lies discarded across the stairs; a large book labeled "Marlowe" acknowledges the Marlowe-ish aesthetic of Shakespeare's play), but the saturation of multiple and overlapping actions left me thinking that less might in this case have proved more.

There are moments of utter luminosity in the staging, as with the confrontation of Richard and Elizabeth where the weary Elizabeth, Alicia Pérez, removes her wig in desperation, facing the all-powerful monarch as a grieving widow and mother seeking to keep hold of her only surviving child. Pérez certainly offers the most nuanced female characterization, and this is the production's most moving moment. Chantal Aimée's Margaret has a relentless pout and her frequent recourse to the Tarot cards never quite convinces; Ycolbazeta's Lady Anne seems to have too many points of contact with her 2004 Cordelia as an article of abuse staggering around the stage in a haze of alcohol or drugs. I missed the vulnerability and vocal dexterity of Rigola's Joanna Dark, Aurea Márquez. I admired the quick wit of the production (the young Princes of York, for example, are conceived as Harry Potter-like dummies who never quite grasp the Machiavellian world in which they have been reared) and its uncompromising political stance. Iraq War footage is juxtaposed with the faces of

Shakespearean offerings at Europe's subsidized venues.

I have always thought that Pere Arquillué, the backbone of Rigola's ensemble, would have made a terrific Hamlet. We get the next best thing here as he takes on the shady Claudius in Rigola's *European House—Hamlet's Prologue Without Words*, given a public rehearsal at the Lliure before opening at Girona's Temporada Alta in December 2005. Here Rigola provides a hypothetical contemplation of events leading up to the opening of Shakespeare's best-known work. This is an infinitely more mundane world than that of Rigola's *Richard III*. Old Hamlet is a successful businessman. The wake that brings his relations together in the family's three-story suburban house points to a telling and rather sordid sequence of events involving missing documents, modified wills, adolescent angst and sexual dalliances. Bibiana Puigdefàbregas provides a delicious box of tricks in her design of a compact family home, complete with gardens and bathrooms. A veritable fourth wall nurtures the spectator's most profound voyeuristic instincts. The action evolves in real time as we watch the characters go about their daily business. Two maids prepare for the family's return from the funeral service; Joan Carreras' lanky Hamlet leaves his mother and uncle to it as he escapes upstairs to his room, browses through some CDs, undertakes some push-ups and takes a shower; more family and friends turn up knowing not quite what to say, and the living room becomes a cramped hole where bodies stand awkwardly in dangerous physical proximity.

This is a delicious, droll sitcom enacted with compelling physical precision and humor; a silent movie of sorts with only the most partial of soundtracks. As Claudius and Polonius lead the dazed, chain-smoking Gertrude through the will, Hamlet and his friends listen to music upstairs. The simultaneous patterns of action comment on each other with smart, sharp panache. There are visual references to Marina Abramovic's *The House with the Ocean View* and Heiner Goebbel's *Eraritjaritjaka* in Puigdefàbregas' exposed set. The real time pacing suggested something of Forced Entertainment, but this work-in-progress has a freshness that makes it curiously engaging and, in veritable soap opera fashion, it keeps you hooked. I'm not sure the opening scene with the two maids tidying up the kitchen in anticipation of the family's arrival quite works, for the action significantly lifts

when Hamlet and his entourage tumble in. The cast is, however, excellent: all writhing bodies, furtive glances, awkward stances, and elusive gestures. Conceptually, I remain to be convinced that the teenage gesticular language of Hamlet and his gang is quite carried off by the twenty-and thirty-something performers. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating experiment: bold, beautiful, and smart fun. Rigola seems to be asking pertinent questions about what constitutes a theatre without words. This is neither mime nor dance, but a silent essay as potent as Brook's earlier reflection on the play, *Qui est la?*

Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who is Silvia?* is not an easy play. At its center lies the tricky premise of a prizewinning architect who falls inexplicably in love with a goat. It's a love story, but also the contemporary tragedy of a man whose life begins to fall apart on hitting his 50th birthday. Martin (José María Pou) appears to have it all: an elegant, articulate wife Stevie (Marta Angelat), a devoted son, Billy (Pau Roca), a spacious, tastefully decorated New York apartment, the Pritzker Prize for Architecture, and a comfortable income. When his old university friend Ross (Blai Llopis) arrives to interview him for a TV feature, a careless confession that he is involved in an extramarital liaison leads Ross to spill the beans to Martin's family. But this is no ordinary affair, for Martin is in love with a goat, a state of events that his wife and son simply cannot come to terms with.

Albee's play is an absurdist comedy with a bitter aftertaste, a drama of miscomprehension, intolerance, and fear that scratches uneasily beneath a pristine skin of social acceptability and respectability in the cosmopolitan city *par excellence*. The 2002 New York premiere had Bill Pullman and Mercedes Ruhl as the successful couple whose glossy surface cracks as the marital sitcom mutates into a full-blown Greek tragedy. There was a hard, cold element of Clytemnestra in Ruhl's impassioned performance that contrasted effectively with Pullman's effortlessly suave Martin. Bill Irwin and Sally Fields, replacing Pullman and Ruhl on Broadway, presented a more suburban couple: more nouveau riche than inherited wealth. The London premiere in 2004 brought the husband and wife team of Jonathan Pryce and Kate Fahy. Although Pryce was able to provide a bemused vulnerability to the role, Fahy never quite rose to the demands of Stevie's emotional journey.

At the Romea theatre, José María Pou provides a veritable contrast to Pryce's lean, angst-rid-

den architect. More superficially buoyant, he also has something of the awkwardness of a figure who would rather have his architecture speak for him. The preparations for the interview with Ross leave him somewhat ill at ease, making him easy prey. Ross alludes to their enduring friendship, but what he is after is vengeance from the university contemporary who outstripped him, a hostility that is masked under the veneer of supposedly idealistic intentions. While Llopis' Ross seems a rather watery characterization with a somewhat abrupt transition from jocular to vengeful, Pou's Martin and Angelat's Stevie provide a strong opening with a effortless banter of stylish wordplay that points to a marriage of minds where light repartée and sparkling conversation keep both on their toes.

Joaquim Roy provides a spacious room of high ceilings and imposing doors. There is something of the Greek temple in the grand doorway and distant stairway through which the characters enter and exit. The subdued décor, framed family photograph, grouped paintings, and tastefully arranged bookcases suggest a certain Catalan chic. The dramatic paintings of twisted bridges, barren landscapes, and blank faces foreshadow the damage that is to come. Their aesthetic is also suitably surreal, with a touch of the absurdist. This is New York

reflected through a discerning Catalan eye. Pou's translation is sharp, witty and imaginative. His direction is precise and careful, and his conception of Martin majestic: a giant who hunches, crouches and falls in on himself (as much literally as metaphorically) as the action progresses. As Angelat's Stevie begins to trash the impeccable apartment, Pou's Martin steps cautiously through the discarded books and ripped canvases trying slowly to find a place for items that have been destroyed beyond repair. In many ways, this is a metaphor for their marriage. Although Angelat's Stevie never quite manages the crescendo of devastating anger that marked Ruhl's brutal killing of the goat, she is able to confront Pou's Martin in ways that increasingly take on a more menacing dimension. Pau Roca's Billy is a suitably confused teenager whose collapse seems entirely plausible as the "perfect" family falls apart. The audience is suitably perplexed by the directions in which Albee's text shifts and turns, especially in the ending that builds to a terrible crescendo, only to be followed by a suitably long silence.

Two years after premiering *Mamá quiero ser famoso* (*Mommy, I Want to be Famous*) in Alicante and touring the show across Spain, La Cubana return to their home city. The show comes



Marta Angelat and José María Pou in the Catalan-language premiere of *The Goat or Who is Silvia?*
Photo courtesy of the Teatre Romea

not to the company's recent Barcelona venue, the Tivoli, but rather to its sibling establishment, the Novedades across the road. Things have changed since I caught the production on the Madrid leg of its tour [see Simon Breden's review in WES 17.2]. Jordi Milán has imaginatively recast it as a bilingual show that flows from Catalan to Castilian-Spanish. The perceptive comments on the Catalan/Castilian axis come at a time when the right-wing opposition, the Partido Popular party, is questioning the state's composition as a web of nations, each with their own governing body and language. The weekend I saw the production witnessed tens of thousands take to the streets of Madrid to question the legitimacy of the constitution's political autonomies. Indeed, La Cubana bring something of the language of the streets to the stage of the Novatats; characters jump from Catalan to Castilian-Spanish, avoiding the monoculturalism that so often dominates stage products in the city. Local products and references have substituted those that referred to Madrid; a new set of interviewees has been captured on celluloid debating, denouncing and/or embracing celebrity.

La Cubana's telling indictment of reality television is conceived in the form of a celebrity game show that allows a range of randomly chosen participants to experience fame for a day, bringing them into contact with veterans who share their

experiences of life lived in the bright glare of the camera. From savvy nuns who've swapped their tambourines for electric guitars and set the catechism to rock, to a prostitute who longs to be an agony aunt, or an ambitious mother and father placing their daughter before the cameras as she recovers from appendicitis in a local hospital to entertain viewers with stories of the crown jewels of Europe, to an aging ventriloquist who's thrown out of his wheelchair to boost audience ratings, this is a harsh and brutally funny indictment of our celebrity culture. Those who caught Jordi Milán's reworking of La Cubana's legendary 1989 hit *Cómeme el coco, negro, Nuts CocoNuts* at this year's Edinburgh Festival, will appreciate the metatheatrical dimension as a notable characteristic of the company's aesthetic. *Mamá quiero ser famoso* offers conspicuous opportunities for the audience to dress up in the company's array of plumes and participate in one of the show's numerous musical numbers. Joan Vives' witty lyrics and bright pastiche music remain a delight. There are few directors who know how to work a chorus quite like Milán. Here his 1970s dance numbers and executed choral sequences remain prototypes of how to deflate and interrogate ideological associations of musical forms. more corrosive potential than any of the tired musical products that are currently on display in London or New York might suggest.