



'Barcelona's Grec: A Change of Name and a Change of Direction'

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages

Vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 85-96.

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

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

For private, non-commercial-use only.

Barcelona's Grec: A Change of Name and a Change of Direction

Maria M. Delgado

Borja Sitja may not have programmed a memorable festival in 2005, but he's shown himself determined to go out with a bang in 2006 with a Grec Festival now strategically named the Barcelona Grec and marked by a theatre program that brings the great and the good of Catalan theatre (Calixto Bieito, Lluís Pasqual, Àlex Rigola, La Fura dels Baus, Carles Santos) together with international figures and companies who have proved regular stalwarts of the Grec in recent years (the Wooster Group, Javier Daulte, Cheek by Jowl). Once more Shakespeare is given a prominent profile—Pasqual provides stagings of *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*; The Wooster Group offer an iconoclastic *Hamlet*; Ferran Madico opens *A Winter's Tale*; and Pep Pla dismantles *The Merchant of Venice*. Catalan dramaturgy is also foregrounded with new pieces by Paco Zarzoso, Josep Julien and Pau Miro. Rosa Novell translates *Old Times* and Jordi Coca adapts Joan Maragall's posthumous work *Nausica*. Carles Santos is given a major retrospective at the Fundació Joan Miro and Spanish-language directors Enrique Vargas and Gerardo Vera bring their most recent productions *El eco de las sombras* (*The Echo of Shadows*) and *Divinas palabras* (*Divine Words*) to what has now become one of Spain's most important festivals.

With a prominent festival booth just off Plaça Catalunya, performance venues across the city, and banners positioned strategically through main thoroughfares, Barcelona's Grec now seems an indelible part of city life through the month of July. The naming of Sitja's successor, Argentine Ricardo Szwarcer, former director of Buenos Aires' Colón Theatre and Lille's Opera House, during the Grec certainly points to a strengthening of the international cultural import philosophy promoted by Sitja. Sitja converted the Grec from the city's summer theatre program into an international festival. The increased numbers and box office takings at this year's festival, up from 134,426 in 2005 to 135,399, suggests that there's a growing audience for the event. Sitja's own criticisms that he would have liked to ensure stronger connections with the visual arts and greater touring possibilities for productions generated by the festival may be read as a veiled indication to his successor of where he thinks the festival ought to be heading.

The outdoor, Epidauros-inspired Grec theatre from which the festival takes its name, built in 1929 for the World Exhibition, opened with Bieito's eagerly awaited reading of *Peer Gynt*. The production had premiered on 25 May at La Den Scene Nationale, the theatre in Norway where Ibsen opened many of his works, as part of the Bergen Festival. Written in Italy in 1867, the work has long been perceived as one of the theatrical canon's impossible ventures. At last year's Bergen Festival Robert Wilson orchestrated a dream-like world devoid of naturalistic referents. Yukio Ninagawa's 1994 reading proffered a futuristic universe for a mechanical age with a Welsh, Japanese, Irish and Norwegian cast. Now Bieito gives us his take on Ibsen's reworking on Homer's *Odyssey*, a smartly pruned reading that converts Ibsen's five-hour dramatic poem into a taut three-hour spectacle that firmly shakes off the shackles of the folkloric in favor of a hard, cold look at the psyche of an ambitious dreamer who lets nothing stand in his way.

Bieito's regular designer Alfons Flores provides a cold, metallic set made up of three structures of aluminum scaffolding that reach up high across the back of the stage. Stage right is a cramped stall that's seen better days peddling Norwegian flags, beer and other tourist commodities. Stage left, three portable latrines. This is no idealized landscape, but rather a wasteland of sorts where Joel Joan's Peer can be seen drunk on the floor behind the toilets. He staggers and stumbles, plastic cup in hand, tumbling into the latrine as his mother heaves beer barrels around him. Mont Plans's Aase is a no-nonsense bleached blonde with attitude, a capacity for hard work and a wayward son with a roving eye who doesn't think twice about tying her to a chair with sellotape and stripping her of her meager funds.

Peer's character is announced with a blistering rendition of The Rolling Stone's "Satisfaction." A restless soul, he struts dominantly across the stage. Sporting cowboy boots and a t-shirt whose design snarls at the audience like an ominous troll—one of many sly references to associations around the play made by Bieito—this Peer demands constant kicks and thrills. He sings of having "Faith"—a rough and ready rendition of the George Michael song—but his faith lies only in

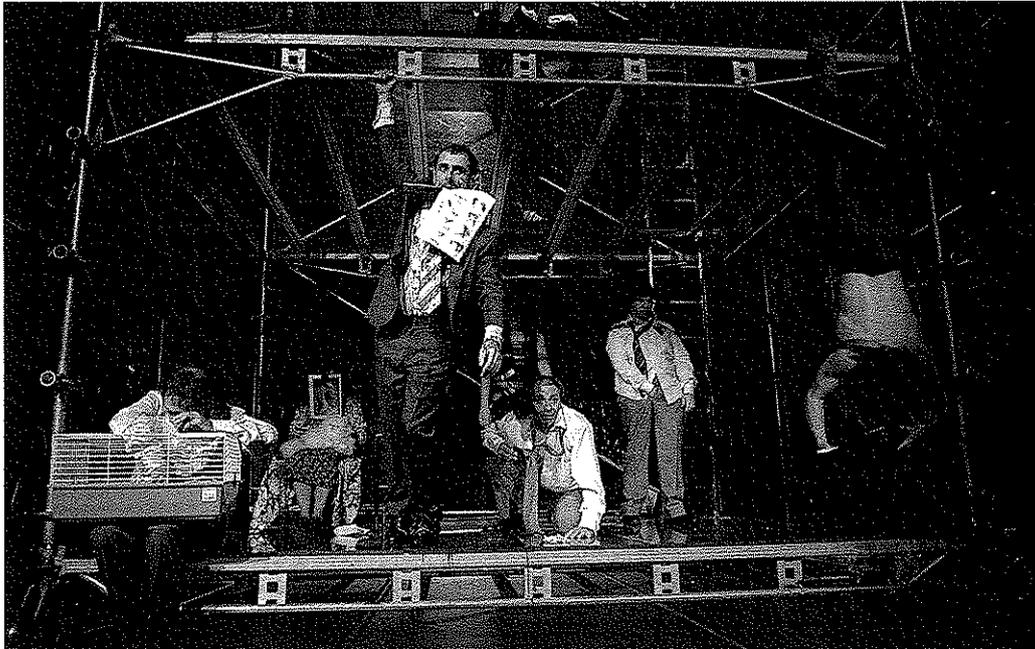
himself. He is a dangerous, amoral being who knows no limits and devours anything or anyone that dares impede him. He dominates the stage with his height and build, falling threateningly close to his mother as she toils around him and he drinks away the fruits of her labor. At the Haegstad wedding party, he hovers ominously around the action, seducing Victòria Pagès's giggling Ingrid in a brutal manner. This is rape conducted within the not-so-hidden walls of the latrine, and vengeance is swift as the men in her family dispense a brutal beating on discovering the crime.

Bieito's production begins at a breakneck pace. A band positioned across the different levels of the scaffolding provides dissonant chords and an accompaniment for the musical numbers. This Peer thinks nothing of charging into the audience to secure their complicity or dismay. The production brings the play close to home in more ways than one. The trolls, recognizable emblems of the Norwegian nation and prominent marketing tools in cultivating the national image, are here conceived not as folkloric mythical figures but rather as incarnations of our basest instincts. They are led by Boris Ruiz as a shady king in gold lamé trousers who doesn't think twice about masturbating—albeit with a prosthetic member—in front of all his lurid subjects. His daughter, the Green Woman, brilliantly incarnated by Lluís Villanueva as an alluring transvestite in a cascading blonde wig, thigh-high

boots and huge designer sunglasses, physically entraps Peer with a dog lead and collar. These trolls are sadomasochists whose magnetism is evident to the wayward Peer. The pregnancy is envisaged as a gross act, a surreal dream that haunts Peer's consciousness. There are, as Marcos Ordóñez pointed out in his review of the play for Spanish daily *El País*, echoes of Fassbinder, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and Dennis Hopper's menacing villain in Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in the portrayal of these trolls.

Bieito has spoken of his production as an acid look at provincialism and its limits, interrogating the narrowness of vision of small communities or nations who consistently look inwards rather than outwards. The deformity that ensues is evident in Bieito's aesthetic. While the iconography of the flag kiosk might suggest a Norwegian landscape in thrall to the caveats of tourism, the linguistic register of the production—Catalan—also suggests a thinly veiled commentary on events in Bieito's own nation as greater autonomy looms in the near future. The second part of the production opens with Act Three envisaged as a televised debate between the now affluent Peer and a range of fellow European entrepreneurs conducted on a raised platform of the Grec's surrounding gardens.

The interlude functions as a commentary on television's pervasive influence in contemporary life, partitioning and compartmentalizing the infor-



Calixto Bieito's *Peer Gynt* seen at the Grec Festival Barcelona, following its opening at Norway's Bergen Festival.
Photo: Vegar Valde

mation it processes and spits out for public consumption. Victòria Pagès's rendition of "Something Stupid" is followed by the debate, promoting a vision of individual aspiration that only recognizes an avaricious capitalist imperative. The suave, smiling Peer, who has swapped the clothes of his rebellious adolescence for a smart suit and designer tie, speaks the international lingo of commercial acquisition. This is Peer as global icon, a dodgy tycoon for the twenty-first century. English as a second language is the discourse of the negotiating table and Joan's parody of an English upper-class accent touched by American inflections provides an astute observation on where he sees himself. The debate is conducted through the direct translation of assistant director Josep Galindo's unperturbed, deadpan interpreter. References to the Greek-Turkish conflict have been replaced by others to Palestine and Israel. The assembled businessmen, all played by Romea regulars—Carles Canut, Miquel Gelabert, Boris Ruiz and Mingo Ràfols—represent facets of the new Europe. But it is a Europe whose economy is boosted by funds from the illicit sex trade and arms sales. The inside club see Joel Joan as a brash outsider; his "outsider" status is enforced by casting decisions that position the Romea's male company as a unit against the rampant, unscrupulous capitalism embodied by the blunt Peer. The conspicuous appearance of the Barça hymn at the end of the sequence may further serve to align Bieito's reading of the play with the more insular aspects of nascent Catalan nationalism.

Peer's travels in the play's final two acts are conveyed across the vertical axis of a three-tier metallic tower, brought forward from the back of the stage, to provide a sense of a journey upwards rather than the horizontal storytelling forms of much narrative. Like Lepage, Bieito favors the vertical realm of storytelling and his reading of the tale puts us in touch with Peer's demons and gods. The metallic structure is a modern-day Tower of Babel, and it is here that Peer finds his not-so-promised land as he and his evangelical devotees sing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" chorus. This is a Peer possessed, and his encounter with Ana Salazar's Anitra sees him in thrall to the exoticism that she represents. This is no Eastern temptress, but a flamenco dancer who strips him, ties him up and then takes his wallet. Ibsen wrote the play while in Italy and the issue of immigration and self-imposed exile looms prevalently in Bieito's reading. Amita is conceived as an imported sex slave who

gets her own back at the first possible opportunity.

Across the tower Bieito employs his multiple points of action. We never get the sense of a long physical journey, but rather the haunting of a latter-day Quixote battling his windmills. His business associates convey the trappings of Egypt by placing masks over their faces. The storm at sea is rendered through an ominous rattling of the scaffolding; men holding precariously to the bars as cries and screams convey the horrors of the tempest. Roser Camí's nomadic Solveig pursues Peer with her eyes blindfolded, grappling through the darkness in search of an elusive object of desire that perpetually evades her grasp. The lunatic asylum sees men clamoring to escape the structures of the tower, pulling at the bars like animals in a cage. The emphasis on a contained structure reinforces the sense of Peer's journey being metaphorical rather than physical: he returns to where he came having not aged visibly. There are no wigs here, or heavy make-up. Age is rather conveyed through the manner of moving the body, through a shrug of the shoulders and a turning of the head, fitting with Bieito's conception of the character as a person who refuses to grow up. Peer's return home takes place on an empty stage where the figments of the popular imagination battle to impose their vision of the Nordic landscape. This is a space that exists only in the realm of the mythical—a maiden dressed in formal national costume; Father Christmas bringing a contemporary take on the onion—endless layers of wrapping paper that peel away to reveal no central gift.

At the end of the play there is no satisfaction, just a group of hanging corpses that serve as poignant reminders of those Peer destroyed on the way. He never finds solace with Solveig. She wanders the stage like a lost ghost; her physical blindness a telling commentary on her obsession with Peer and Peer's fixation with capitalism's wares and wiles. Perhaps her spectral drifting is both a comment on our own obsession with the thrills of the buy-and-sell culture and a comment on the fact that when it comes to love, we're all to a greater or lesser extent, blind(ed).

Joel Joan's Peer is the lynchpin of Bieito's production, binding the different elements together with a central performance that moves from high-octave energy to the more subtle (and ominous) registers of his capitalist incarnations; there is no need for three actors here. Joan's imposing physical presence marks him out from the outset and he provides

an anti-romantic reading of the eponymous anti-hero. Both drunken and sober, manic and composed, fantasist and realist, he is able to take on any necessary personality to achieve the desired aim. He wants celebrity and in our celebrity-saturated age, who can blame him?

The Romea company provides the kind of outstanding ensemble support that's proved such a hallmark of Bieito's work. Roser Cami offers no lovely blonde Nordic Solveig, but rather a clumsy awkward woman, trapped in late adolescence with thick, unflattering eyeglasses and harshly clamped-back hair. Tied to the drum kit that she plays with a monotone rhythm, she is an emblematic reminder of a certain type of monotony that Peer fears and flees from. At the end of the play she does not lull him to sleep but rather staggers around searching in vain for her lost love. Mingo Rafòls is a blunt button-molder. Miquel Gelabert is convincing as the lad who graphically cuts his finger to avoid military service. Amparo Moreno and Mont Plans join the Romea company for the production and simultaneously impress as the widow of the man whose funeral Peer stumbles on, washing the corpse as she poignantly delivers the monologue given to the priest in Ibsen's text, and Aase. Plans's down-to-earth Aase is weary and wheezing, battered by a life spent scraping a living with a son who teeters around her drunkenly without offering assistance or solace. She is conceived as an asthmatic with little faith in what the future can offer. Her death scene (realized in Peer's arms) is one of the production's most expertly realized moments, a fusion of the earthy and the unreal as both appear to take off into the heavens.

Bieito needs no dazzling special effects. The sense of momentum comes through a furious performance language and a complex soundscape that dispenses with Greig's sugary score, using it only once fleetingly as an ironic commentary. The music played by the onstage band—from Sinatra to Verdi—supplies a sharp commentary on the action much in the manner of Brecht's *Baal*. There is something almost Brechtian in Bieito's production but the humor, anger and visceral energy of the reading ultimately offers a reading that moves beyond the paradigms

of Brecht's practice to something altogether less prescriptive and more disquieting.

Catalan daily *El Periódico* was to refer to *Peer Gynt* as 100% Bieito: a comment on the habitual elements of the maverick director's house style that were present in the production. The Wooster Group, playing at the Mercat de les Flors for the second year in succession, again offer a recognizable avant-garde house style that has been wooing audiences beyond its now legendary New York converted garage home for over three decades. Their work with classical texts has never been conventional, rather a process of cut and paste, of dismantling and reconstructing, of juxtaposing with and/or superimposing onto contemporary tales or reenacted moments. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was produced in fast forward format in *The Road to*



Joel Joan's Peer encounters the trolls in Calixto Bieito's reading of *Peer Gynt*.
Photo: Vegar Valde

Immortality (1986), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* represented as vaudeville in *Route 1 and 9* (1980), Chekhov's *Three Sisters* was reduced to occasional dialogue and plot summaries in *Brace Up* (1992) and Racine's *Phédre* irreverently reconceived as colloquial banter in *To You, the Birdie!* (2001).

Now the company turns their gaze to *Hamlet*, but the encounter with the play is strongly mediated by John Gielgud's 1964 production featuring Richard Burton in the title role. The staging premiered at Broadway's Lunt-Fontanne theatre was subsequently captured on film by Gielgud and Bill Colleran. Its status is legendary, no doubt accentuated by its accessibility as a preserved artifact. The preserved remains are broadcast in black and white on a giant screen at the back of the stage. The images are often grainy, the action blurred, and cuts and blackouts testify to the age of the recording. Once more "video streaming" proves a dominant organizing motif for the production. It is both referent and cue, a mode of measuring the action and a commentary on what is happening "live" as the actors begin an impersonation of what is occurring onscreen. The recorded image is startling in its imperfections, manipulated as moments are replayed while others lost in the recording process haunt us with their absence. Like a giant canvas, at once realist and abstract, it is startling in its contemporaneity. As the actors meticulously recreate the onscreen movements, the sound of Gielgud's production functions as a distant echo on which the live voices are superimposed. As the actors recreate the fast-forwards and the replays, we are given a sense of the palpable failure of any attempt to record, recreate or "capture" the ephemerality of performance. We are as deceived as Scott Shepherd's *Hamlet* by the images that flash before us, with the live presented as an illusion as contrived and mechanized as the recorded.

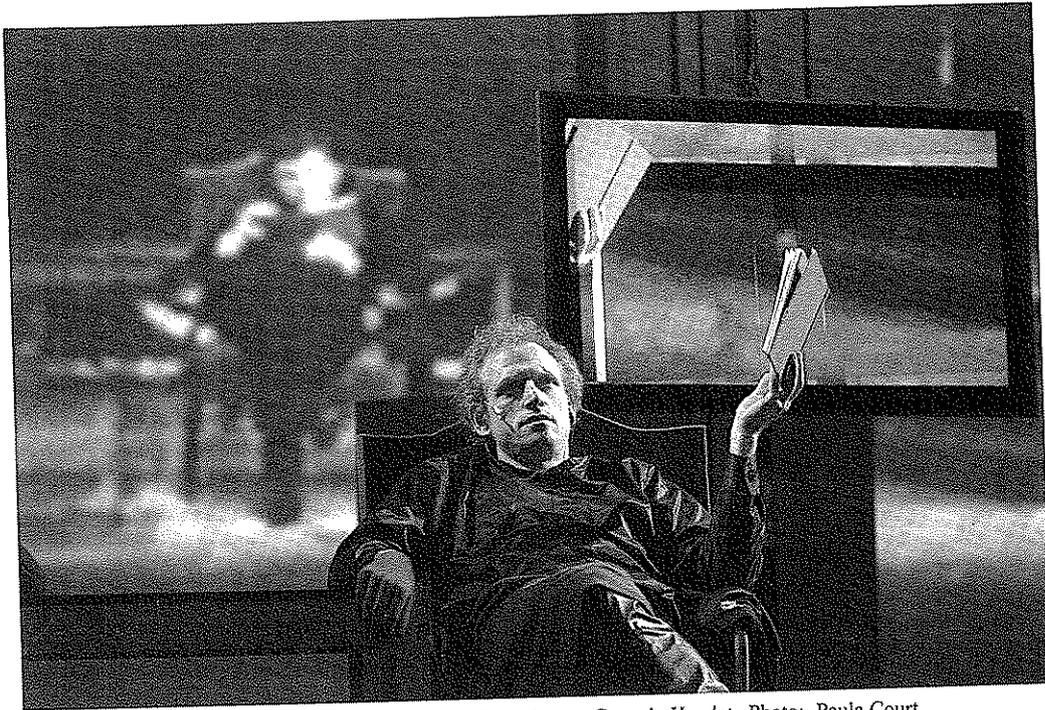
Those familiar with the company's trajectory will find ample material here. The intersecting soundscape was made up of live action, onscreen actors, the crackling film quality, and the sound of the film being forwarded and rewound. The trappings of technology litter Ruud van den Akker's stage design: smaller monitors, wires, actors partially framed in the wings—presence conveyed both in the sphere of the live and through the video monitors stage right and left. Offstage is as much onstage as onstage. A dexterous wheelchair, annexed to a metallic table is the only conspicuous prop, both throne and grave. It weaves its way

around the performers, a discordant reminder of an all too evident "difference" with the armchair of the projected film. Kate Valk is both a regal Gertrude and willowy Ophelia; the change of role conveyed by a different wig and a loose fitting pinafore as well as the shift in the vocal register to match that of the onscreen characters. But Gertrude's frock is forever present beneath the trappings of Ophelia's costume. Gertrude appropriates the wheelchair-throne, a prison that propels her around the stage like a bumper car. No attempt is made to present any kind of physical approximation to the onscreen actors. Lola Pashalinski's Polonius is a short, limping figure who walks across the stage aided by a firm walking frame. Casey Spooner provides a single Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the perennial double act personified in a lone performer. The cast of seven undertakes imaginative doubling that further fractures attempts to provide an equation between actor and role.

The production is a one trick-pony, brilliantly realized, but for many little more than a dazzling metatheatrical game, expertly choreographed under Elizabeth LeCompte's meticulous direction. A significant number of the audience chose to leave in the interval, but this may have been in part due to the misguided decision to dispense with subtitles. Did the Festival assume all the audience would know the play well enough—or have enough English—to work out what was going on? There is an amusing complicity demanded of us as audience members, and the in-jokes are a constant source of pleasure that may have been missed by those unable to follow the production.

The Renaissance is smartly referenced in the costume design. The thematic concerns of the play, issues of repetition and indecision, are also skillfully reinforced across the décor and costumes. We are perpetually reminded of the presence of past productions that haunt all stagings of the play. Here the ghostly remnants of the Gielgud-Burton production make themselves felt in a very direct manner. When digressions occur they shock, amuse and appall. Casey Spooner's Laertes bursts into song, mike in hand, on hearing of Ophelia's death. The gravediggers' scene is enacted in fast-forward, barely a word of the celebrated dialogue discernable. At the end the actors are silent, leaving the final words to the onscreen performers whose faint, crackling words echo through the silent auditorium, to devastating effect.

Lluís Pasqual's *Hamlet* begins with



Scott Shepherd takes the title role in The Wooster Group's *Hamlet*. Photo: Paula Court

silence. A night watch on duty prowls in front of a giant concrete wall stage right. Nooses hang from the upper level of the wall, an eerie reminder of the culture of punishment and fear that marks the location. Where the wall ends a luscious black curtain begins, occupying the remainder of the back of the stage. The curtain glitters and glistens adorned with silver slivers that shine alluringly. These are the two sides of Elsinore: the fortress and palace. The castle is conceived as a dual location, a place of irreconcilable differences. Pasqual begins by delineating the military dimensions of the play. Soldiers stalk along the fortress as Hamlet's father appears, dressed in fatigues and a green beret, his face streaked with paint as if in camouflage effect. Eduard Fernández's Hamlet hovers on the margins of the stage, a slight, edgy wisp of a lad. He appears as a quiet, gentle being, an outsider which is further confirmed by his Catalan accent. The court is a largely Castilian entity in more ways than one. The robes draped over his black suit bear heavily on him and he often seems to cower beneath them. As his father appears he hides his head beneath his cloak, and a panic attack ensues as his father leaves. This Hamlet may have worshipped his father, but his father represents a military ideal that he cannot possibly emulate. The relationship with his father, early scenes suggest, is somewhat based on fear and adoration from afar.

Marisa Paredes's Gertrude is also a distant

figure; queen first and mother second. The tension between these roles is evident from the start as she attempts to position herself between the sarcastic Hamlet and the suave Claudius (Helio Pedregal). As Hamlet falls apart, she reinforces by example the need to remain poised at all times, to keep up appearances and ensure that whatever's happening behind the scenes, a hair never falls out of place. The trophy wife of a military commander, she moves sideways to his all-smiling diplomat of a brother, floating across the stage in an attempt to appease the warring elements of her court. She is a woman no one ever says no to, a husky, smoke-tainted voice capable of seducing anything or anyone that crosses her path. Her semi-incestuous kiss with Hamlet elicits a response of shock before the glacial, almost spectral poise returns to take control once more.

There is much of the classic rebel in Fernández's Danish prince. He finds laddish amusement with the identically attired Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Javier Ruiz de Alegria and Alberto Berzal), and he comes alive when the actors come to town, relaxing in ways that are simply not possible with his own family. His rough and ready Hamlet is a veritable contrast to his poised elegant mother and polished, vaguely nauseous, uncle. The actors and the audience are his true confidantes. He leans forward to address us, a slight, mercurial figure that darts across the stage in watchful surveil-

lance. He orchestrates the actors with purpose, positioning his mother and uncle among the audience as he gives directions to Anna Lizaran's worldly company director. He never really appears to be in love with Ophelia; she seems more a distraction. It is with Lizaran's troop of actors where he feels at home, laughing and relaxing with an element of gay abandon.

While the pace may be a little slow to start, Pasqual's production soon gathers momentum, and orchestrates the second half with a strong sense of the story. A complex soundscape provides an almost constant underscoring and builds up the sense of an approaching military threat. There are echoes of Pasqual's celebrated *Julius Caesar* (1988) in the costumes conceived by Isidre Prunés and César Olivar as capes drape over contemporary suits. Paco Azorín's simple set offers a backdrop that masks and disguises in ways that comment on the themes of the play. There is some imaginative casting: Lander Iglesias gives a knowing Basque gravedigger complete with *txapela*; Jesús Castejón's portly Polonius is the quintessential bureaucrat, slightly pompous if well-meaning with an efficacious demeanor. His glasses are perennially waved around in a vaguely reprimanding manner. The production has one weak link, Rebeca Valls's blonde, wide-eyed Ophelia, who seems to do little more than regurgitate all the textbook traits of the put-upon love interest. Certainly Pasqual's shrewd adaptation has pruned her part, but she fails to rise to the challenges of the production, remaining little more than a drippy, post-adolescent infatuated by the older Hamlet who appears to never feel much more than irritation for her.

Valls is cast as the adolescent Miranda in Pasqual's *Tempest*, playing alongside *Hamlet* in a double bill linked by Pasqual through the theme of violence—violence executed with terrible consequences in *Hamlet*, violence deferred in preference to negotiation and forgiveness in the Bard's final stage work. Both are plays driven by sibling usurpation, but the ominous mood of *Hamlet* is replaced by a lightness of touch that marks Pasqual's playful treatment of *The Tempest*. The dramatic storm is ingeniously rendered with the curtain that forms the back wall of the stage—a more expansive version of the glimmering drape used in *Hamlet*—falling to form the body of a ship tossing and turning on the seas. This is conjured not by a Peter Pan-like nymph, but by Anna Lizaran's robust Ariel. Lizaran gives us Ariel as stage-manager, clad

in clownish dungarees and what look like foil wings attached rather precariously to the back of her outfit. Her crop of red hair further substantiates the clown-like associations, and her bouncing across the stage (with an ironic occasional skip thrown in for good measure) sets her up as a Sancho Panza to Francesc Orella's lithe, stately Prospero.

The Lecoq-trained Lizaran is a delight from start to finish, enjoying a sublime complicity with Orella's aristocratic Prospero. She peeps through the curtain with mischievous relish, feigning the drowning at sea of the Napolese court with all the charm of a pro at Charades. Her red-gloved hands conjure a wave of further Ariels to assist her in the set tasks, manipulating the hapless Fernando (Pablo Vilar replacing the indisposed Iván Hermes on the night I saw the production) like a listless rag doll, waving the lovers together, sparing Gonzalo and Alonso from their more treacherous courtiers. The characterization builds intelligently on her memorably animated Vladimir in Pasqual's 1999 *Waiting for Godot* and her dark blue cap and uniform-like attire clearly function as a nod to the earlier production. Here she is guided by Orella handling a baton as if conducting an orchestra. She has a vaudeville routine at the ready for all eventualities. The sparkling sequins that adorn her dungarees and cap suggest something of a circus routine and the shimmering curtain, mutating from pink to blue, further substantiates.

Jorge Santos's Trinculo has something of a different type of jester about him. He is part cross-dresser, part cabaret diva, an effeminate being in veritable contrast to the butch ship's cook Stephano: all tattoos and bravado. They are a double act to rival Lizaran's Ariel and Orella's Prospero, stepping over and across the discarded planks of wood that litter the front of the stage to evoke the inaccessible island. Aitor Mazo gives us Caliban as a dirty old man with a seedy laugh and a raging sexual appetite. Valls is a lackluster Miranda, all skips and smiles, and the scenes with Vilar's Fernando lack any kind of sexual charge. It is the metatheatrical associations of Shakespeare's text that Pasqual chooses to accentuate. Orella's rich, resonant voice is at once seductive and alluring. He is a siren of sorts, drawing all the different elements to him with the effortless skill of a master conductor. In the manner of the most accomplished ensembles the lead actors of *Hamlet* here have well-judged cameos; Eduard Fernández is a desperate sea captain, Jesús Castejón a hearty Stephano.

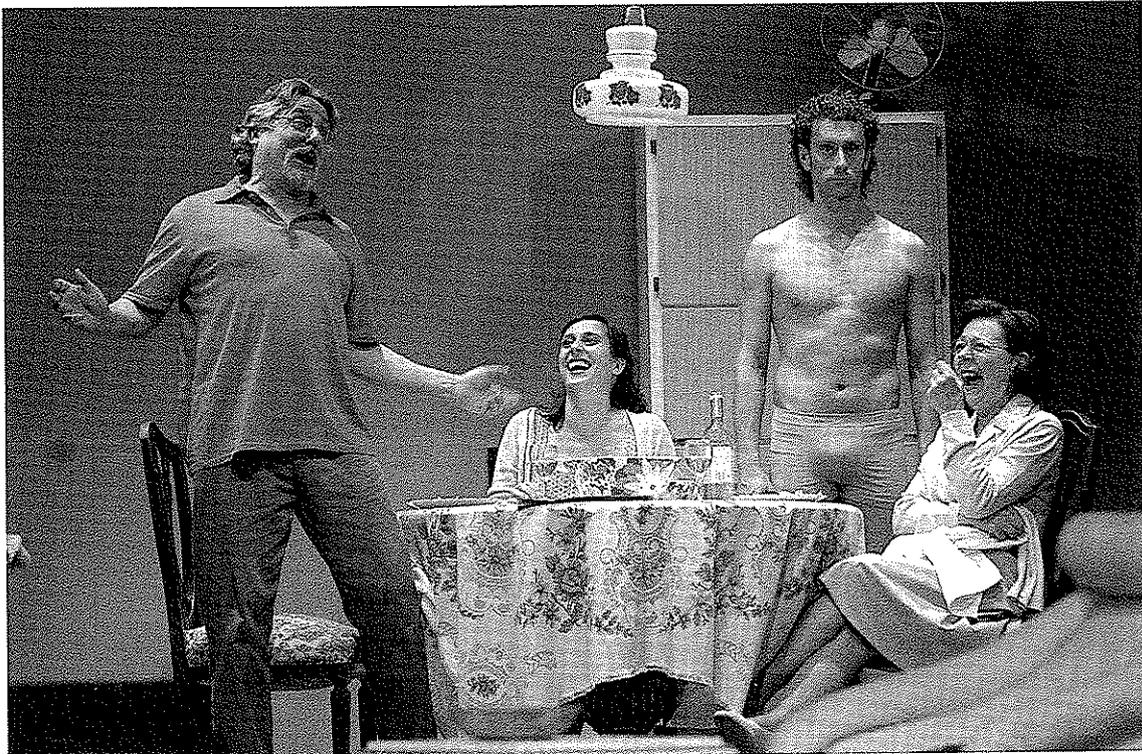
This is Pasqual's debut at the new Lliure, and in a city of such polarized affiliations it is commendable that the Lliure entered into the double bill as co-producers and hosts of the Barcelona run—the production is realized in association with the Grec, Madrid's Español theatre and Bilbao's Arriaga, of which Pasqual is now artistic director. As the former co-founder and artistic director of the Lliure, Pasqual's trajectory with the theatre is long and distinguished. He may be associated with the company's Gràcia home but the warm reception that both productions received at the Lliure's Montjuïc base suggests that many still recall the Pasqual-Puigserver glory days with strong affection. Anna Lizaran too saw the Lliure as her Barcelona home for over two decades. Her defiant stamping on the stage during the curtain call of *The Tempest* suggested a firm appropriation of the venue and a coming home in more ways than one for one of the theatre's past key players.

Argentine dramatist-director Javier Daulte has proved a regular feature of the Catalan stage in recent years. This summer he has two works at the Grec: *Metamorphosis*, a collaboration with La Fura dels Baus; and *La felicitat (Happiness)*, a co-production with the Romea, which builds on the success of *¿Ets aquí?*, seen with Clara Segura and Joel

Joan in 2005. For those that are familiar with Daulte's dramaturgy, *La felicitat* offers familiar terrain: a metatheatrical game that moves away from a realist premise to provide a fusion of the extraterrestrial, the supernatural and the mundane conjured from the day to day concerns of what appear to be "ordinary" people.

Rosa (Clara Segura) and Roger's (Jordi Roca) relationship is crumbling. Roger isn't in love with her anymore, but Rosa is not prepared to accept that and devises a plan, with the complicity of her parents Omar (Francesc Lucchetti) and Fina (Anna M. Barbany), to kidnap him and create a new existence that keeps him with her. Her happiness is the only imperative, but what she fails to realize is that happiness is an elusive entity, difficult to qualify and impossible to hold onto.

Daulte structures his play like a sitcom, echoing the formula of the TV show that plays in the background. But this sitcom has a rather nasty edge, as the opening sequence, featuring Roger's cries in the dark, demonstrates. The cinematic credits that follow have something of an eerily dramatic feel announcing that something rather ominous lurks beneath the shiny, happy veneer of the nuclear family. The benign father and the perpetually smiling mother provide a model of parental indulgence



Father (Francesc Lucchetti), Daughter (Rosa Segura), alien Christopher (Joan Negrié), and Mother (Anna M. Barbany) in Javier Daulte's production of *La felicitat*. Photo: David Ruano

that results in horrific consequences. For Rosa is thirty, but performs the tantrums of a teenager dishing up nasty punishments to those who dare double cross her. The android that comes to her assistance, Christopher (Joan Negrié), to drug and reconfigure Roger, is a compliant being, a servant to her wiles and wishes. Her enactment of fantasies through the prisms of the TV series that played in the first scene comments on the pervasive influence of a medium that comes to dominate how she manipulates her family. Segura is a persuasive actress whose open face gives little away. There is much of the screwball comedy performer about her, but it makes her all-controlling malice all the more frightening.

Ariane Unfried and Rifail Ajdarpasic's set has a fitting, retro-1970s feel. The swords on the wall suggest a certain danger, and the fading wallpaper and well-worn furniture give the room a Pinteresque air. The play wears its cinematic references somewhat heavily. The giant syringe used to inject the hapless Roger is straight out of Hammer Horror and a B-movie staple. The invasion that the team is fighting in the second half has points of contact with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and other studies of alien takeover.

Daulte's formula seems less convincing here than in his earlier plays. The superlative *Gore*, seen at the 2003 Grec has yet to be surpassed. The play also lacks *Gore*'s more compact quality. This is altogether more ambling, and pruning twenty minutes from the overall length would have made for a punchier evening. Nevertheless, there is much to admire here: the different performance registers that the characters shift to and from with admirable ease, the smart parody of TV action features, the move from the mundane to the ominous in the blink of an eye. Daulte has described the piece as a melodrama-cum-horror story, and he juggles the play's shifts of mood with an astute sense of pacing. The challenge now lies in seeing whether he can move beyond the established recipe to try out new configurations of the unreal that prove less predictable.

Álex Rigola, current director of the Teatre Lliure, has sometimes been compared to the marginally older Calixto Bieito. Certainly both like to dissect the classical texts they stage in imaginative ways, but Bieito's influences are more obviously Hispanic; his most discernible mentors Buñuel and Boadella. Rigola's mentors lie elsewhere. Castorf seems his most evident reference point, but there are traces of Chéreau also in the precision of his stage language. Certainly there is something of the gen-

tleman's toilets designed by Alfons Flores for Bieito's *A Masked Ball* in the bathroom setting designed by collective artists Cube for Rigola's latest production, *Arbusht*. But this is where the comparison ends. Here the setting is used to provide a metaphorical environment for rumination on the rise of George W. Bush. *Arbusht* marks a collaboration with contemporary Valencian dramatist Paco Zarzoso; a satire for our times with a target that proves far too easy for the liberal intelligentsia that haunt the Lliure. Take this play to the pro-Bush heartland and you might have had a tense evening. Here, it's preaching to the converted. As such, it never quite holds together.

There is something of Brecht's *Arturo Ui* in Zarzoso's telling of the rise of Bush from Texan clown to President, seduced along the way by religion in the form of Joan Carreras's devastating characterization of the icy pastor with piercing eyes and an answer to all Bush's failings. This reverend is all wide lapels, slick suit, fixed smile and a Bible that can be slipped across to offer solace to those seeking refuge in alcohol and the more obvious pleasures of this world. Pere Arquillué offers a second temptation in the form of powerful oil interests. Here a swagger, a Stetson and a bottle of bourbon effectively convey the machinations of this second puppet-master pulling the strings to maneuver the weak Bush into position. Carreras and Arquillué offer delicious characterizations, Mephistophelean figures who tempt the clown-like Bush into assuming the mantles of power. It's a high energy opening: funny, witty and smart.

Neither play nor production, however, really develops far beyond these first two sharp scenes. Bush's later encounters seem overly crude, and while Alicia Pérez offers an unperturbedly professional vice-president, the image of Condoleezza Rice is too pervasive to permit Rigola to replace the sidelined Cheney with a characterization that seems to have emerged from the conspirators in *Julius Caesar*. I missed the precision that is usually such a mark of Rigola's costume aesthetic. Here it was all just too anonymously drawn. Crucially, Julio Manrique remains a dithering fool from beginning to end; there is no character progression, no development, no sense of what it means to go from pampered boy to governor of Texas and then to president. Manrique's Bush encounters the reverend, the oil magnate and the cheerleader in a washroom where business is then conducted with his Presidential team. As Rigola demonstrated in *Julius*



Pere Arquillué represents oil interests tempting Julio Manrique's George Bush in Paco Zarzoso's *Arbusht* at the Teatre Lliure.
Photo: Ros Ribas

Caesar and *Richard III*, politics is a dirty business, and what more effective metaphor for the sewage that runs through contemporary governments than a bathroom that remains glisteningly white no matter what sordid business is conducted within its walls? There is a slickness to the staging that proves effective, for example, Bowie's "Young Americans" is a brilliant leitmotif used to punctuate and comment on the action at regular intervals, often accompanied by a country music dance routine, brilliantly executed by the cast. My reservations lie in what appears a disparity between text and production.

Peter Sellars demonstrated in *Being There* (1979) that any fool can rise to the Presidential office with a bit of strategic help and a willing suspension of disbelief. Satire needs something less easy and more dangerous. Rigola should take a look at Mark Ravenhill's corrosive *Product* playing at Girona's Temporada Alta festival in mid October, a far more disturbing portrait of contemporary political discourses that would offer a brilliant vehicle in a Catalan translation for either Arquillué or Carreras.

The gem of this year's Grec is hidden away at the back of the program, but it should be high on the agenda of anyone with any kind of interest in the development of Catalan theatre over the past forty years. Carles Santos is one of world theatre's gen-

uine mavericks, a composer, pianist, director, poet, and photographer whose interdisciplinary collaborations have been amongst the most exciting stagings of recent decades. A regular presence at the Edinburgh International Festival over the past ten years, his attempts to provide a visual language for music have generated thrilling baroque spectacles that move beyond the more Germanic austerity of Heiner Goebbel's or Christoph Marthaler's work in this area. Santos is a Mediterranean Kantor. A muse for Tàpies and Guinovart, the influence of Buñuel, Dalí and Miró is palpable in his iconography and this is well represented throughout the Fundació Joan Miró's retrospective of Santos's work presented until November. Entitled "Long Live the Piano," the exhibition offers both a look back at Santos's creative impulses and products, from the Cage-inspired compositions in the late 1960s that followed an important career as a professional pianist, to the sophisticated post-operatic music theatre pieces of the last decade. There is ample visual evidence of his collaborations with artist and poet Joan Brossa, which initiated the shift from performer to composer. The films made by or with Pere Portabella are projected in a designated room. Santos's own films again betray collaborations with other performers. The photographs, as with the twenty-four images of the "Sèrie Bach.

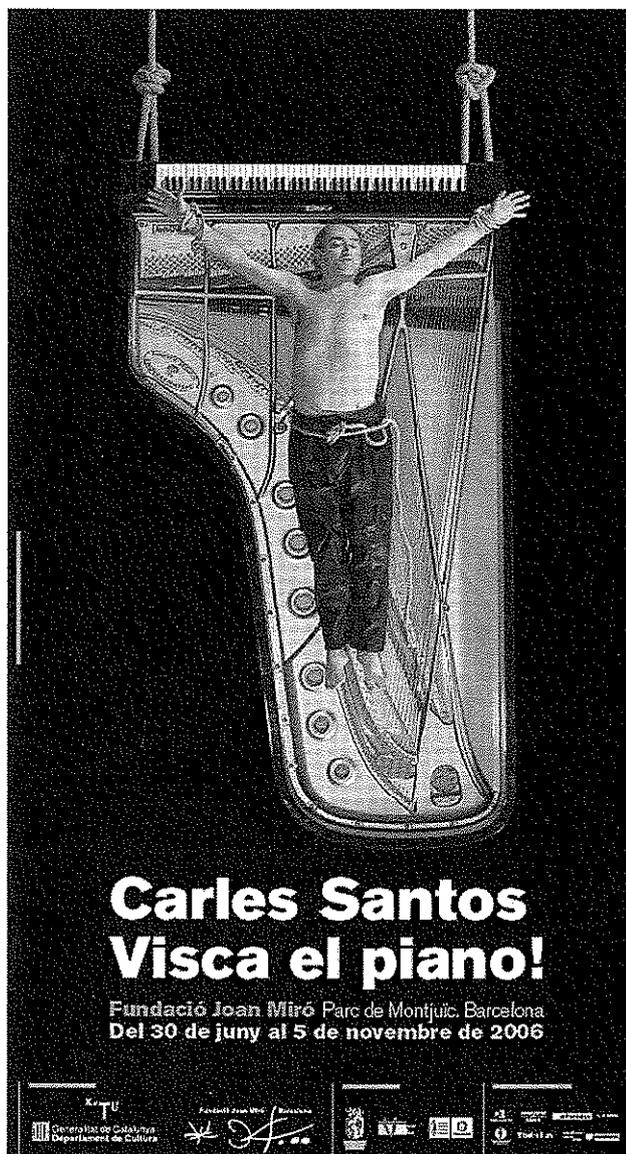
Tema amb variacions” (1997-8) are a commentary on his artistic process, how he interprets the work of other composers.

Crucially, the exhibition also looks forward with the series of pianos presented as “Pianos intervinguts.” These are pianos disrupted, perturbed or reconfigured by the presence of attached appendices: a propeller emerges from the keyboard of one; a ceramic hand resting gently on the keyboard of another catches drops of water falling from the light that illuminates it; giant ears resembling wings are attached to the sides of a third; a clamp is positioned across the keyboard and into the hammers of a fourth; a surfboard protrudes from the lid of a further piano, marked discretely by the fins of a shark. Could this be a design for a future show? Pianos are created from symbols of the Mediterranean, as the oranges configured as a grand piano show. These are pianos mutilated and reimagined, questioning the piano’s status as a passive piece of furniture lying decoratively in a corner of the room. The poster to the exhibition shows Santos crucified on the body of a concert grand piano frame. It is a brilliant metaphor for a life spent irrevocably linked to an instrument that governs the routines of his day. It is both prison and liberation, pain and pleasure, punishment and reward. The remnants of a massacred piano lie beside the life-size image of its previous incarnation. An errant pianola—seen in his 1997 *La Pantera Imperial (The Imperial Panther)*—wanders playfully around the exhibition, pursuing spectators and interweaving around the exhibits. A giant cross crashes down periodically on a grand lying in a gladiatorial pit. Santos’s own majestic grand, the Bosendorfer Imperial, stands in a protected space of its own, framed by the family paintings that formed the backdrop to his 2000 show *Ricardo y Elena*. The Balenciaga of grands, it is a majestic, panther-like beast that dominates the space. Transferred from his home to the exhibition it becomes a practice arena for Santos, who once more reiterates the importance of liveness, of hearing the music reverberating across a particular space.

Nothing, this exhibition constantly reminds us, replaces the thrill of the live. The ghosts of past productions are strategically positioned around the space. The giant foam busts of Bach (with more than a nod to Santos) of *La Pantera Imperial* bounce through open doorways, creating both a metronome of sorts and a curtain that reveals further props from earlier shows. The piano and chandelier from *La grenya de Pasqual*

Picanya (1991) remain in the red room of multiple doors that open and shut to almost comic effect as the performers come and go with the pacing of a French farce. The expansive undulating bed and costumes of *L’esplèndida vergonya del fet mal fet (The Splendid Shame of the Deed Badly Done)* demonstrate the pull of the Hispanic as references to the bullfight, fans, and the colors of the Mediterranean situate Santos within a complex web of cultural associations that are as much about deconstructing stereotypes as playfully recognizing their existence.

This is as much an exhibition about process as product. It’s about how Santos works



The promotional poster for Santos’s exhibition.
 Photo: courtesy Fundació Joan Miró

and the things that make him tick. Food is a constant reference point, as is Bach and the iconography of Catholicism. All intersect with the pianos and all cross with the collaborators that have shaped Santos's aesthetic. Crucial here is the Venezuelan designer Mariaelena Roqué who is co-director of the Companyia Carles Santos and has been working alongside him since 1985, when they first realized *Piedraperla*. Recognition of this comes in her own exhibition "Mariaelena Roqué undresses Carles Santos," presented at Barcelona's Textile and Clothing Museum, which functions as a companion-piece to "Long Live the Piano." Here Roqué's magnificent Baroque creations are given center stage. Observed up close, they still appear unique artifacts, studies in color composition and juxtaposed textures. Positioned against religious robes from the Renaissance, we are given a perspective into her own historical research and influences. If Santos is seen as an artist who submits his performers to extraordinary rigors and toils—singing suspended on a trapeze or immersed in a bowl of water—Roqué too asks them to move encased in ornate, exquisitely cut structures of cascading fabric that

almost take on a life of their own. The costumes are far more dexterous and flexible than they may first appear. They are almost like instruments, elements of décor that infuse and shape the choreography. Playful, elegant, and witty, they mask and transform. Not for nothing are motifs of dressing and undressing, disguise and revelation key to Santos's work. These are costumes designed in the rehearsal room, watching the performers work, and for all their visual splendor they have a pragmatism that testifies to Roqué's own extensive dance training and practice. The shape of the individual performer's body fuels the shape and line of the costume. While Roqué's vision may be testimony to the baroque theatricality of theatre, it is also a vision of the everyday that observes the detail of the textures and materials of our worlds past and present. Both "Mariaelena Roqué undresses Carles Santos" and "Carles Santos: Long Live the Piano" are perceptive deconstructions of artistic endeavor that look to the ever present tensions between the illusion created and concrete tools used to create that magic.