



'Madrid: The Catalans are in Town!'

A review by Maria Delgado

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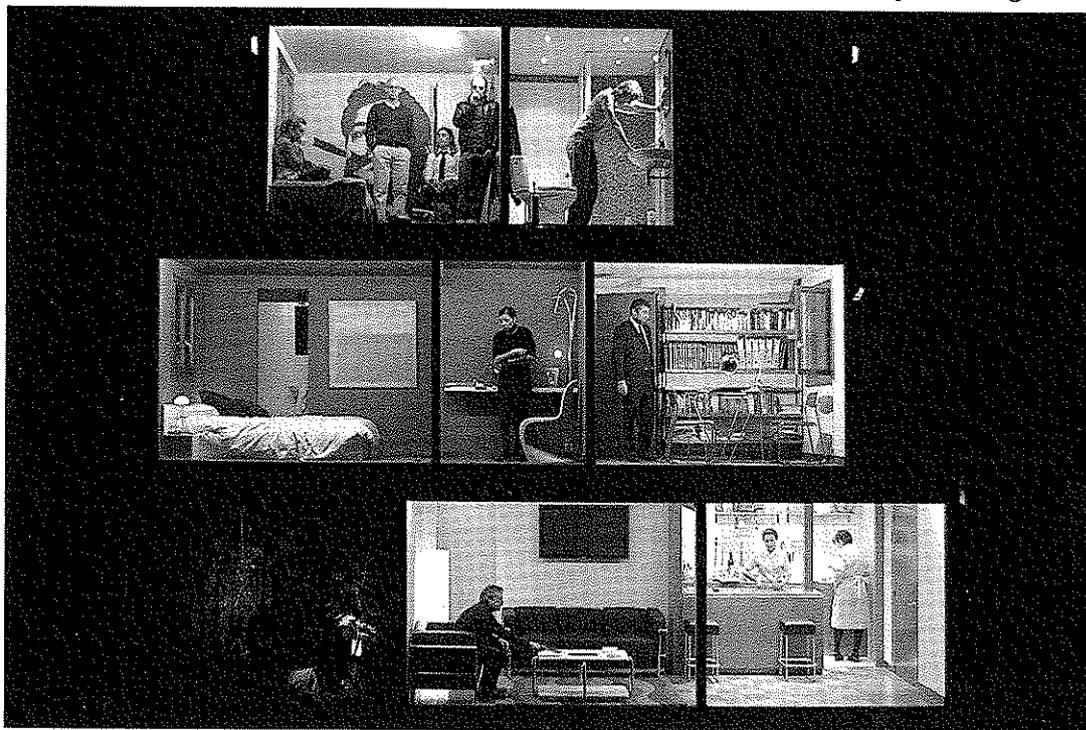
Madrid: The Catalans are in town!

Maria M. Delgado

The Catalans are in town! At the Español, Madrid's municipal theatre now under the inspired directorship of Mario Gas, the Lliure are in residency over the Christmas period with Rigola's *European House* and *Richard III* and Carlota Subiros' *Othello*. Seeing *European House* a year on from its Girona premiere (reviewed in WES 18.1 Winter 2006, p. 62), the production now seems much less a *danztheater* experiment than a choreographed symphonic work. Rigola's wordless prologue to *Hamlet* is a bold, witty essay on our fascination with voyeurism. In the cross section of a bourgeois home, we watch the activities of a household coming to terms with a death in the family. It builds up from the inauspicious opening of the live-in maids preparing to receive the family and guests in the aftermath of old Hamlet's funeral: phones being answered, dishes being washed, glasses being prepared. As the family arrive—the lanky, taciturn Hamlet, his poised mother, his watchful uncle—the dynamic shifts. Friends and lawyers come to sort out the estate and the action gradually shifts beyond the ground floor to the two upper levels. Rooms

light up as the action shifts across and along. Multiple spheres of action allows for patterns of contrasting behavior that comment surreptitiously on the ensuing narrative. At moments of intense tension a fleeting squeal, scream, or dance captures the sense of a life where the public and the private are not always compatible. The sexual tension between Alícia Pérez's Gertrude and Pere Arquillué's Claudius is palpable from the moment they walk into the house and their bestial kisses are a far cry from Joan Carreras' Hamlet and his more awkward fumbling with Sandra Monclús' schoolgirl Ophelia.

I articulated doubts when I first saw the piece on Carreras' enactment of the teenage Hamlet but his performance now seems a convincing portrait of adolescent angst. He wanders like a trapped animal through the various rooms of the house, unable to articulate in gestural or verbal terms the various conflicts and demons that plague him. His grief is palpable and disturbing. Pere Arquillué's Claudius remains a majestic creation consolidating a collaborative relationship with Rigola that has



The cross section of Hamlet's home in *European House*, conceived and directed by Alex Rigola at the Español Theatre Madrid.
Photo: Ros Ribas

seen both produce their finest work to date. He surveys the house with predatory expectation, following Alicia Pérez's Gertrude with both eyes and ears. In contrast to the more measured responses of Pere Eugeni Font's Ghost, his Claudius is a more restless being: fidgeting, smoking, pacing, in ever-ready pursuit of his prey. Crucially Rigola understands that we have to grasp why Gertrude allows herself to be seduced by him. There is a palpable sexual charge that resonates through the space. This is no stage villain but rather a figure that takes control in a range of persuasive ways, the ominous implications of which are never immediately apparent.

While I have singled out Carreras and Arquillué—arguably the two best actors of their generation in Spain—this is effectively an ensemble piece; entries and exits are orchestrated with musical exactitude and an acute sense of bodies occupying a space in patterns that move beyond the parameters of naturalistic acting. Watching the piece again I was reminded of the austerity of Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* and its similar interrogation of memory, loss, self and other. The ghosts of post-war Germany resonate through *Café Müller*, here it is the spectres of Shakespeare's play and the individualist ethos of our contemporary society that shape Rigola's production.

Mario Gas's imaginative programming at the Español has lifted the theatre from the terrain of conservative entertainment to an altogether more exciting and vibrantly international plane. His creation of a second studio space has effectively given the venue the opportunity to provide a wider sphere of events. Alongside the Abadía, it can now claim to be arguably the city's most interesting venue. Gas has long been a champion of English-language dramas that too rarely cross the Channel and his decision to programme Brian Friel's delicious two-hander, *Afterplay*, serves as a welcome introduction to the playwright's work for a city that has not often encountered it. *Afterplay* is a feather-light imagining of an impromptu meeting, twenty years on, of two of Chekhov's most heartbreaking secondary characters—the hapless Andrei from *Three Sisters* and lovelorn Sonia from *Uncle Vanya*. Time has moved on for both but their aspirations and expectations have not. Sonia still harbors amorous thoughts towards Astrov who is now married to her stepmother. Andrei has been abandoned by his wife and struggled to bring up his children with help from his two surviving sisters—Masha having committed suicide fifteen years earlier. Andrei accepts

what happened but weaves fictive lies to envelop the pain of the present. Sonia looks forward without ever accepting the reality of a life playing second fiddle.

Their encounter in a Moscow café is a delicate affair. Crucially Friel chooses not to focus on Chekhov's protagonists but rather revolves around heartrending secondary characters who are given the chance to occupy center stage, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Neither can rise to the challenge for different reasons and here lies the play's tragic foundation. Paco Leal provides an anonymised environment where there is no unnecessary clutter and character is rightly allowed to be the defining factor. The fine gauze curtain that envelops the characters in a hazy light, however, is less than effective and serves as a potent metaphor for the problems of José Carlos Plaza's labored production. This is a play embedded in the bittersweet throwaway lines of Chekhov's dramaturgy. In Plaza's staging all is emphatically underlined in the hope that we don't miss a trick. Both characters are dressed in black with white trimmings but these are anything but black and white entities, rather shifting shades of grey that glisten at least expected moments.

Blanca Portillo is one of Spain's most gifted stage performers—a luminous presence with a voice as rich as a full-bodied rioja. She is not a beautiful actress, but as Almodóvar so effectively realized in *Volver*, where she played the cancer-ridden village neighbor, Portillo possesses a radiance disarming in its intensity. She can suggest both strength and vulnerability and moves from one to the other in largely unperceived ways. Here she provides a melancholy Sonia whose open smiles and busy activities hide quiet desperation and a vodka dependency. As she becomes progressively drunker, her laugh wobbles mischievously and she moves more adventurously around the café openly clutching the vodka bottle hidden surreptitiously in the earlier sections of the play. Her face crumbles in despair as she confesses her lasting love for Astrov and then she composes itself once more as she prepares to face the outside world.

Helio Pedregal gives a less nuanced Andrei. He shuffles in, violin in hand, in ways that undermine his self-effacement. His awkwardness is overplayed; the pauses overstretched; the lines overstated. The scuffling is just too apparent, too attention seeking. We are only too aware of the secrets he holds and the revelations don't have the poignan-



Luis Homar as Kurt, Nuria Espert as Alice and José Luis Gómez as Edgar in Dürrenmatt's *Play Strindberg*, directed by George Lavaudant at Madrid's Abadía Theatre. Photo: courtesy of Teatro de la Abadía

cy of those of Portillo's Sonia. There is an affecting demeanor here but the balance between the affecting and the affective isn't as carefully drawn as it needs to be. The attraction to Portillo's Sonia is palpable and moving and there is an evident pull between the couple but it is not enough to really lift the production into the terrain of the touching and tender. The play required something less emphatic, to ensure that it somehow catches us unaware rather than ram home its message.

Desire and its discontents are also prominent in George Lavaudant's staging of Dürrenmatt's *Play Strindberg*. Dürrenmatt's 1969 reworking of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* is a consummate lesson in dramaturgy, an exercise that stands alongside Brecht's reworking of Marlowe's *Edward II* in its pruned dialogue and conceptual rigor. Strindberg's play is here reshaped as a twelve round boxing match whose protagonists work without boxing gloves or the other paraphernalia of the ring. Edgar (José Luis Gómez) and Alice (Nuria Espert) are a long-married couple living on a secluded island where Edgar has a military posting. She resents his less than illustrious military career. He resents her aspirations of grandeur and her constant harking back to the "good old days" when she was, supposedly, a much courted actress. Their existence is driven by empty rituals and constant bickering; a marriage of convenience where each is disgusted by the other but too obsessed with the importance of "keeping up appearances" to countenance separation. The appearance of a mutual friend, Kurt (Lluís

Homar), Alice's old flame, puts their sham of a marriage defiantly on show but also points to the ominous qualities of a marital arrangement where disgust and dependency are mutually and destructively intertwined.

While Lavaudant has worked previously with Lliure veteran Lluís Homar at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, this is his first venture with Espert and Gómez. The Lecoq- and Grotowski-trained Gómez turns in a performance of technical brilliance and marked precision. Attired in a military uniform tellingly bereft of decorations, he marches through the family sitting-room with a misplaced sense of purpose. When the façade falls occasionally, we are made aware of the weariness that underpins his behavior. Espert's Alice saunters around the stage in a sparkling sequined housecoat that blinds with its repetitive patterning. It is an effective metaphor for her own character governed by a misplaced sense of self-importance. Immaculately made up with not a hair out of place she presents a constant all-smiling mask, soaking up her husband's comments on their marriage with wry pleasure. Alice is one of a long list of bitter actresses that Espert has made a feature of her stage and film career over the past 15 years and it is a characterization that stands alongside her Arkadina in Flotat's *Seagull* (1997) and her insufferable diva, Glòria, in Ventura Pons's *Actresses* (1996). Espert's performance also recalls her Martha in the late Adolfo Marsillach's production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. But Martha has aged and the

onslaught of old age brings further resentment and irate recriminations. Alice is no longer sure why she hates her husband; she just knows that she does.

Edgar and Alice's marriage has gradings of nastiness. As Edgar asks his wife if they can be nice to each other, just for one evening, she retorts that they are being pleasant. The pleasing is shown to be subjective in every sense of the word. Divorce, however, is not a possibility for Edgar, marriage is simply an intolerable state that must be borne with stoic fortitude. His slight Andalusian lilt points to a past life curtailed and contained by the demands of military and marriage. His hang-dog expression belies a more Machiavellian mind and the oscillating power shifts between the couple give the production something of the air of a less than benign tennis match.

Edgar's narcolepsy is beautifully handled. Gómez falls like a dancer, crumpling on the floor or sofa in unexpected ways. Alice can barely bear to touch him in these vulnerable states and it is left to Homar's Kurt to make him comfortable. Homar's Kurt has something of Tennessee Williams' gentleman caller, with faded matinee idol looks that he is still able to effectively deploy. His debonair air and smooth talking leads to a temporary truce. His awkwardness is all too evident as Edgar and Alice resume their attack through and around him. His effortless charm and easy manners allow the sinking couple to sink their talons into him and while he may think himself in control, power is shown to be a highly slippery concept, falling from one character's grasp to another's with unexpected results. Lies are constructed to make the day-to-day pain palatable. Truth is an elusive concept in the play, bound up and imprisoned within discourses of bribery and blackmail that all used whenever necessary to devious ends.

Jean-Pierre Vergier's set is a deceptively simple affair that recalls the austere interiors of Bergman's studies of domestic angst. This living space has a slightly spectral, claustrophobic quality, untouched by the passing of time. It proves the perfect setting for a drawing-room drama that takes the conventions of the genre and twists them into frightful configurations of domestic dysfunction. Projections on the back wall as Alice shows Kurt the family album point to past lives uncontaminated by the accumulated hate of the present. Realism is alluded to but emphatically transcended as the characters mime the actions of drinking tea, reading letters and signing documents. These are individuals

trapped by rituals and routines that are enacted with a meticulousness that suggests mechanization. Lavaudant juggles the fascinating and the terrible with mordant efficacy and the result makes for a compelling theatrical event.

After its Edinburgh dates this past summer, Calixto Bieito's adaptation of Michel Houellebecq's infamous 2001 novel *Platform* arrives in Madrid for a month-long run at the Bellas Artes theatre. Bieito has collaborated with Marc Rosich on the stage version, compacting Houellebecq's novel into a 110 minute contemplation of an unconventional love story played out in a space between the vacuum of western capitalism and a problematic utopia created from the industry of Thailand's sex tourism. What Bieito crucially realizes is that you don't have to show sex to treat sex. Sex surrounds the work; the characters masturbate covertly, feign sex with blow up dolls, watch and comment on it but its practice remains also deferred beyond the stage sphere. This is a discursive piece—Bieito has tellingly subtitled the production, a "dramatic hyperrealist poem for seven voices and a Yamaha"—and it is through the intersecting narratives of the different wanderers whose stories intersect with Michel's that the moral of the tale emerges.

Michel (Juan Echanove) is a cultural bureaucrat bored by his job in the Ministry of Culture. Escape comes in the form of a bequest that enables him to visit Thailand where he finds a new purpose to his life in the sexual pleasures gained by sex with local prostitutes. A burgeoning friendship with one of the members of his tour party, Valérie (Marta Domingo) develops into a full-blown affair when they both return to France. As the affair develops Michel decides to leave Paris and accompany Valérie to Thailand where she plans to set up package tours tailored to the voracious market for sex tourism. A terrorist explosion at the hotel base of their new activity kills Valérie and devastates Michel leaving him in a nihilistic state of abandon and anger.

Bieito does not shy from following Houellebecq's example of featuring extended descriptions of sexual encounters. The opening scene features Michel in a booth watching penetrative sex. He remains isolated from the figures behind him equally trapped in their individual booths, silently and voyeuristically soaking in the on-screen sex. It is a potent metaphor for a Western culture that advocates material gain, individual pursuit and sexual liberalism but that frowns on the

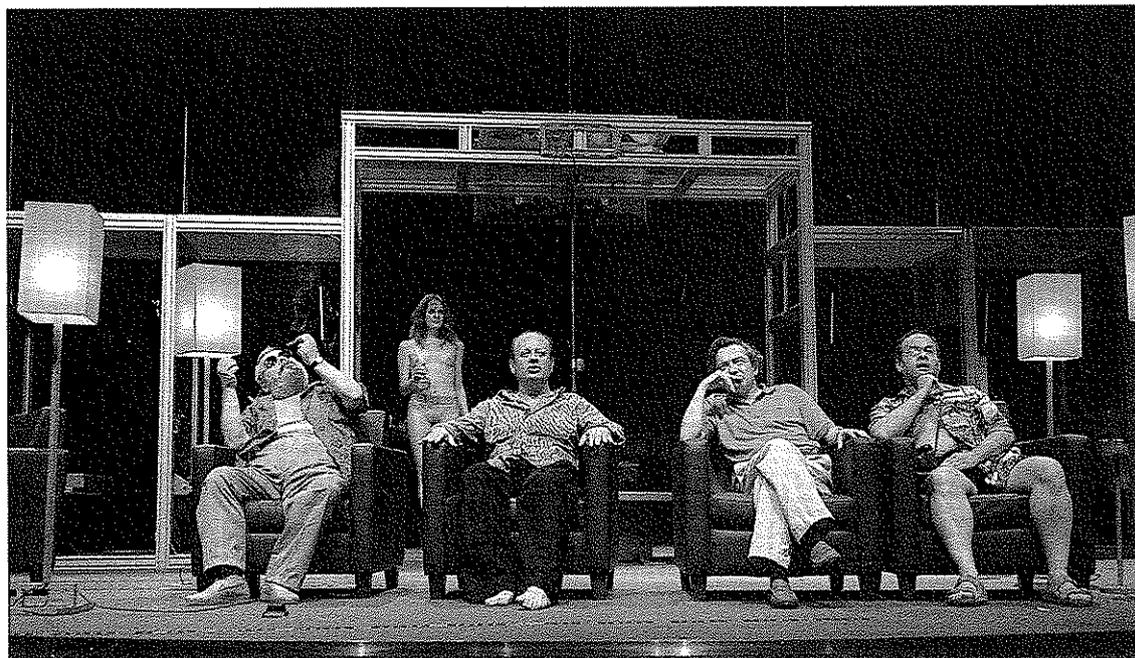
more extreme manifestations of these quests. This is a world where advertising shouts at us to stay young but that castigates those that play out their endless youth in liaisons with those younger than themselves.

Crucially, however, the juxtaposition of the distended on-screen genitalia with images of Thailand, which sells itself as a tropical virgin paradise ready for Western penetration, points to the more surreptitious forms of pornography that fill our media-saturated lives. The play provides a social world where sex is just one mode through which the relationship of the first and developing world can be measured. Like Koltès, Bieito comprehends that economic structures are built on commercial imperatives that taint and shape all human relationships. Bieito takes the deal that underpins Koltès's dramaturgy to a more extended conclusion. This is a world where Michel's reliance on the pleasures of prostitution with young Thai women is part of a broader metaphoric study of Western consumerism. The phantoms of religious extremism haunt the play, hovering over the action until they pounce with horrific consequences in the final scene.

Alfons Flores's gyratory set spins around in near-constant fashion. It is an effective comment on the chaos present in Michel's head, spinning constantly from a seedy cocktail bar with tiger striped

piano, to a hotel or airport lobby, to a peep show. The television screens spew out endless porn to the point when it no longer shocks or offends. It is just part of the landscape. The set is littered with the vestiges of our commercial existence—consumables are scattered around, obstacles to the characters' passage, remnants of their past, pointers to their future. Boris Ruiz builds on his track record of rather seedy lowlife characters for Bieito. Here he is the world-weary Daniel, a nightclub owner for whom women are interchangeable with blow-up dolls. No-one, he realizes, is happy with their lot, and he makes a living from those in search of pleasure in Thailand's tourist mecca. Mingo Ràfols is the eternally cheerful Lionel, a gas-board employee looking for love in aftermath of an industrial accident that lost him an eye. Carles Canut's Robert is the canny math professor who recognizes that we are all tourists now and that sex is as much of a legitimate commodity as artworks, alcohol, cars, or houses. Lluís Villanueva's Jean-Yves is the bored married man, Valérie's business associate, trapped in a marriage that irritates him, exploiting his kids' au pair for sex, unhappy, unsure, and frustrated. The search for capital gain brings nothing but discontent and despair.

The interactions between the men take place in a realm where the sexual boasts are paramount. This is a masculine world where money



Carles Canut as Robert, Juan Echanove as Michel, Boris Ruiz as Daniel, Mingo Ràfols as Lionel and Belén Fabra as Marylise in Calixto Bieito's adaptation of Michel Houellebecq's *Platform* playing at the Bellas Artes theatre, Madrid following its Edinburgh Festival premiere. Photo: David Ruano

buys and women are predominantly exchangeable and interchangeable commodities. Marta Domingo's Valérie shifts the dynamics of the group with her lithe presence, providing a visual and aural dexterity that sees her float around the stage like a spirit between the men. In her pale green dress she is almost like an ephemeral being. Belén Fabra's naked Marylise is part-nightclub hostess, part-cabaret singer, part-ghost of all the female bodies who have passed through Michel's life. She wanders across the stage constantly, her tottering heels both a gesture of fetishisation and a platform for the pedestal on which the men place both the angels and whores in their lives.

Juan Echanove gives the performance of a lifetime as the bored civil servant who moves from routine masturbation to the affair that will change his life and renew his sense of purpose and worth. He brings with him a star presence associated with playing good guys, the put upon friend rather than the romantic lead. His ordinary appearance—slightly overweight, bald, drab dresser, grating tone—is inspired casting for it provides the sense of an Everyman, a figure undistinguished by looks or temperament that has given up on life and finds salvation—in every sense of the word—when least expecting it. The production is framed around his tale; his adventures with Thai prostitutes; his gorging on mini-bar miniatures; his frustration at the denial of pleasure from most aspects of his life in France; his camaraderie with fellow sex tourists and the torrid affair with Valérie. There is something of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) to the mode in which Michel and Valérie's affair is conducted but Bieito's contextualization of their affair in a society adorned with reminders of the simulacra of our post-modern world makes this a blisteringly political and devastatingly moral reading. For those that would see the piece as nihilistic contemplation of the void of contemporary Western life, Bieito shows, through the tenderness and unadulterated passion that defines which Michel and Valérie's affair, that redemption is possible through love. But it is a love, as Valérie's simultaneous masturbation in a chair and Michel's sex with a blow-up doll indicates, that will be forever contaminated by the drive towards self-gratification. It is the relationship between self and other, the individual and the group that *Platform* interrogates and the prioritization of individual desire

above all else ultimately goes against the mutually satisfying pleasures of a shared life.

Bieito's reading makes *Platform* in many ways a meditation on intolerance and the ways in which different views can coexist in a world that demands the solidity of absolutes. There is a moving humanity to the production; this is as much the story of a Western society imploding on its own solipsism and avarice as it is Michel's and Valérie (mis)adventures in love. Moments of pulsating energy and deafening karaoke that point to the chaos in Michel's head are followed by contemplative monologues of near existentialist doubt. There are visual echoes of Lynch's work here—*Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) are the two most evident referents but the elegiac tone of *Platform* has something also of Michael Winterbottom's *9 Songs* (2004) and *Wonderland* (1999). The final image—a nod to Hopper's most celebrated work—is a parting comment on a life as lonely and bereft as that of Hamlet or Chekhov/Friel's pained Sonia and Andrei.

José María Pou's production of *The Goat, or Who is Silvia?* comes to Madrid following a year-long tour that has seen the production move from its Catalan-language origins to a new Castilian-language version, again by Pou. There have been shifts in the casting since its Romea opening (reviewed in *WES* 18.1), with Mercè Aránega replacing Marta Angelet as Stevie and Juanma Lara replacing Blai Llopis as the old university friend Ross. The fact that Pou has won this year's National Theatre Prize for the staging—which as well as directing he also performs in—bodes well for his appointment as artistic director of Barcelona's Goya theatre.

Finally at the Blanquerna Cultural Centre, an exhibition dedicated to actor-director Adolfo Marsillach features posters from his productions, video interviews, production photographs of his most celebrated productions and a witty collection of his trademark hats collected in a discrete corner of the room. An exhibition catalogue collects a series of compact assessments of his work from collaborators (Nuria Espert, Jaime de Armiñán), family (his actress wife and daughters), critics and politicians, concluding with a useful bibliography and filmography.