‘Opera, Operetta and Ibsen’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona: Opera, Operetta, and Ibsen

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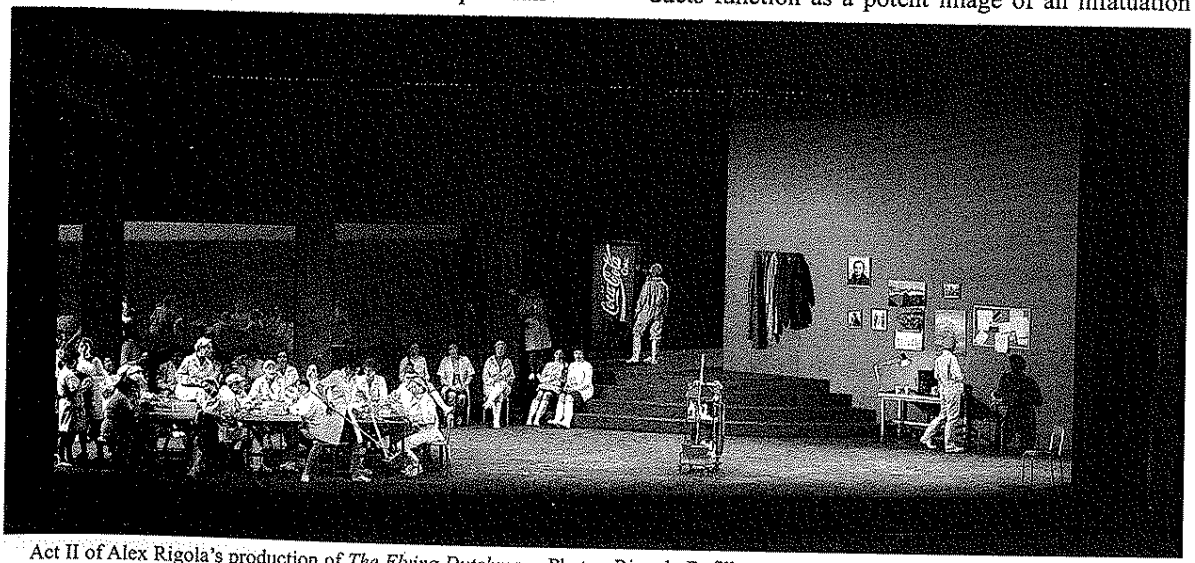
The Gran Teatre del Liceu, Spain's premier opera house, has proved a receptive base for Catalan practitioners shifting their attentions from theatre to opera. Comediants' Joan Font, La Fura dels Baus, Núria Espert, Calixto Bieito and Lluís Pasqual have proved regular stalwarts of recent seasons. For those expecting the Liceu debut of the Teatre Lliure's artistic director, Àlex Rigola, to be an aggressive "in-yer-face" treatment of *Der fliegende Holländer*, his sombre, introspective reading of Wagner's 1843 opera will prove a telling surprise. Rigola's work at the Lliure has demonstrated an interdisciplinary approach to performance that merges the tanztheater of Pina Bausch with the intrusive technological eye of Frank Castorf. His company of actors, now as strong as that of Bieito's Romea, have proved willing accomplices in a theatrical journey that has moved from Julius Caesar (2002) to Paco Zarzoso's satirical *Arbuscht* (2006). And while the rhythms of contemporary rock have often proved a dominant organizing motif for Rigola, here the more languid pacing of Wagner's take on the myth of the ancient mariner provides a more awkward entity. Rigola's contemporizing approach doesn't always sit happily with the symbolist credentials of a work that often appears to have the dramatic rhythm of an oratorio.

Rigola opts for a patent realism, evoked by the wide horizontal set of his habitual scenographer, Bibiana Puigdefàbregas. This a run-down port dangerously exposed to the elements where a translucent screen evokes the torrents and travails of the sea in muted shades of aquatic blue and pristine ice white. The crests of the waves rise and fall to provide an alternative musical accompaniment, an almost rhythmic presence to the action. The sea is omniscient and omnipresent, a constant foreboding backdrop, as potent as the Suffolk coast of Britten's *Peter Grimes* in Peter Stein's 1999 production for Welsh National Opera. The stage is bathed in a light that is eerily abstracted creating the sense of a contaminated space suspended between the world of the living and the dead.

Rigola situates this mythical work in a highly specific setting, away from the suggestive space station of David Pountney's 2006 Welsh National Opera staging. This is the remote Norwegian coastal port specified in Wagner's libretto. In Act I the boat of the Daland & Co. canning factory meets that of the Dutchman. The former is an Anselm Kieffer-like post-industrial structure, a tarnished remnant of the Soviet era and against its gargantuan proportions the crew of sailors resemble matchstick men. Alan Titus' Dutchman is a weatherworn mariner, displaying the ravages of age and a nomadic existence at the mercy of the elements. Daland looks up to him in every way mirroring the relationship between the bourgeois merchant and his wish to sell his daughter in marriage. Their duets function as a potent image of an infatuation



Act II of Alex Rigola's production of *The Flying Dutchman*. Photo: Ricardo Bofill, courtesy of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona

with the "other" as obsessive as that of Senta and the Dutchman. While Daland never appears cash-strapped, the allure of the wealth that the Dutchman represents offers him the chance to catapult his daughter into a different social sphere.

In Act II the action shifts to the factory's austere canteen, which looks out into the empty sea. The canteen is the central socializing space where characters trapped by the mundane rituals of the present gaze out to what the landscape beyond may bring. Susan Anthony's blonde Senta appears attracted by what the Dutchman signifies: a way out of the drudgery of the present. This Senta is no siren but rather a naïve local who never fully grasps the implications of her actions. She is in love with the idea of love, and the tangible routines offered by Kurt Streit's Erik can never match up to the unknowns represented by Alan Titus's Dutchman, who she sees as the romantic manifestation of the stranger of her dreams. In Act III, Erik's pleas to Senta are matched by a taciturn acknowledgement and sly flirting. This is a Senta whose constancy leaves something to be desired—perhaps a comment by Rigola on the gendered romanticist paradigms of the work. It is perhaps for this reason that her suicide never really strikes a believable chord. It seems rather a hasty afterthought.

The production is marked by the gestus of Brechtian performance. Projected titles common to documentary film announce the different acts, and performers sing out to the audience with a heavy, knowing melancholy. The choral work is robust and Sebastian Weigle draws some fine playing from the Liceu orchestra, which has improved out of all recognition in recent years. There are some staging decisions that never quite gel—the cyclist that rides past the sea, the barking dog, the scarlet mermaids that announce the forthcoming denouement, the long static arias that betray the characters' introspection but necessitate a more vigorous stage realization. This is nevertheless an intelligent staging and one that demonstrates that Rigola is anything but in thrall to the scenic languages of the Germanic theatre.

At the Tívoli, the Spanish National Theatre, the Centro Dramático Nacional, are in town for two months with *Marat/Sade* and a solid if rather lackluster staging of *An Enemy of the People*. Dramatist Juan Mayorga offers a dramatic pruning of Ibsen's 1882 play that resets it in a recognizable present where the spa town is haunted by the power, not of a local paper, but of an abrasive TV channel that will stoop at nothing to protect its own interests. Mayorga's adaptation is crisp, tight and forceful. It sweeps the action along with an urgency that is not often seen in Ibsen. But this shift of pace has both advantages (propelling the play along in ways that demonstrate how circumstances leap unexpectedly out of control) and disadvantages (the journey of Francesc Orella's Thomas Stockmann encompasses no time for doubt or reflection).

Orella is a hard, elegant, unbending Stockman who negotiates a different path between idealism and absolutism. It is a controlled performance where a fierce glance is often followed by a tender touch that betrays some sort of understanding of the implications of his actions on his immediate family. His mildly grainy voice and slight Catalan accent suggest something of an outsider that sits well with the thematics of the piece. His performance embodies the wider debates on the mechanisms of compromise and idealism and the ways in which both are bound up with systems of power.

Mayorga's reworking serves to foreground a number of the roles that play second fiddle to Stockmann in Ibsen's text. As such Stockmann's wife Kat (Elisabet Gelabert) and daughter Petra (Olivia Molina) are presented as more than the family stalwarts who stand by their man. One of Stockman's sons, the role of Eilif, is cut and Morten becomes a more solitary being and an evident victim of circumstances he never really comprehends. The women's support of Stockmann represents active decision-making on their part, but Morten appears confused by the ensuing events. Veteran Uruguayan performer Walter Vidarte negotiates the charming and the cantankerous in his characterization of Stockmann's father-in-law Kal. His wily presence, weaving in and out of the action like a restless ferret, is a majestic lesson in character acting. He lends both humor and severity to the actions, a distorting mirror of sorts for Stockmann to see the consequences of his actions reflected.

Gerardo Vera is, like Tom Cairns, a scenographer-turned-director and his impressive mutating set is dominated by hues of blue and grey. This is a world drained of color where the contaminated water of the spa that Stockmann brings to public knowledge appears to pollute the textures of Vera's set. While the production functions on one level as a decisive condemnation of the media's manipulation of public opinion and reality television's shaping of information to suit the need for the sensational sell, it uses the tools of technology

branded by the TV crews that scurry across the stage to similarly allure and seduce the audience. The cast members are introduced as a high projection hovering over the opening action. The emphasis is on mutating scenery that shifts to demonstrate the slippery nature of truth and righteousness in the play. Nothing is ever quite what it seems.

The production, however, does frequently look as if it's trying too hard. The scene where Stockmann attempts to tell the town about the contamination is hijacked by a mob captured on TV. The images have too much of an amateur TV look to really convince, and the rent-a-crowd tries a little too hard to be angry and menacing. Paul Berrondo's conception of Captain Horster, the loyal family friend, appears to have been transported in from a production of *Popeye*. Ester Bellver's Billing is here a female associate to TV chief Hovstad, but her conception as the perennial Woman in Red leaves little to the imagination.

The version of Manuel Fernández Caballero and Miguel Echegaray's zarzuela or operetta, *El duo de la Africana* (*The Duet from L'Africaine*), realized by Lluïsa Cunillé and Xavier Albertí at the Teatre Lliure, is brimming with imaginative energy. This is a witty metatheatrical take on a backstage operetta that references a well-known mid-nineteenth century French opera, Mayerbeer's *L'Africaine*. Echegaray and Caballero took a jibe at the mannered conventions of Italianite opera with a plot that relocated the numbers from Meyerbeer's populist opera within the dramas of a pragmatic stage-manager, trying to put a production of the opera together despite the pretentious excesses of an Italian impresario, Queribini, who is keen to save money and cut any unnecessary corners. But when his wife appears to be falling for the new tenor in the company and he, Giuseppe, appears to be equally smitten, Queribini needs to act quickly and attempts to marry his daughter off to the tenor who, in turn, is plotting to elope with her stepmother. Giuseppe is not interested in the daughter, who is herself being hotly pursued by the company bass. The appearance of a mysterious noblewoman in search of her son Pepe who she fears has run off to join an opera company further complicates matters. Then Guiseppe is shown to be Pepe and the show does go on with Queribini increasingly frantic at the implications of his wife and Guiseppe/Pepe's onstage duets.

That Cunillé, one of the emblematic dramatists of the new minimalist Catalan drama, should have rendered a piquant homage to the zarzuela is an unexpected treat. This is a reflection on a Castilian genre and is surrounded by framing mechanisms that run through the gauntlet of Castilian-language dramatists from Moratín to Mihura. There are nods to Valle-Inclán's convoluted phrasing, to the arch artifice of Echegarary's Nobel Prizewinning brother José, the linguistic games of Gómez de la Serna and the *espagnolade* of the Álvarez Quintero brothers. Cunillé knows her dramatic canon and here dashes through them with breathtaking audacity as she contextualizes the zarzuela and the *sainete*, the dramatic genre in which it is grounded.

The plotting echoes that of Echagaray's libretto. Here a touring Catalan company find themselves in a Central American banana republic, Nueva Peñaranda, facing an imminent revolution. They need permission from the republic's governor, or in his absence that of his flirtatious wife (a delicious Chantal Aimée), to stage their version of Meyerbeer's opera. Here the affected Italian impresario is adorned in Chico Marx-like curls, stepping through the stage with a firm Groucho Marx gooseestep. Joan Carreras is the lanky love-interest lead actor/tenor sporting a lopsided, foppish fringe that is flicked artfully away from his face in near constant fashion. There is something Daliesque about his profile but it is a Dalí inflected through *Brideshead Revisited*. Alicia Pérez is the bothered daughter unhappy at the burgeoning friendship between her stepmother and the affected actor-cum-tenor. The company needs to persuade the Governor to let the show go on and the numbers from the operetta staged for his star-struck wife provide a delightful homage to the mechanisms of theatrical illusion.

This is metatheatrical vaudeville, with painted backdrops rolled on and off for the relevant numbers. Trunks and chests are opened and closed like box of tricks. Clothes fly across the stage. Actors move through roles with a nod to the importance of the ensemble where actor and role are not necessarily equitable and performative virtuosity is to be celebrated. Xavier Albertí takes an onstage role as a droll piano accompanist to the action; María Hinojosa a suitably buxom soprano. The chorus of locals who hover in the distance comment on the problematic racist assumptions that govern theatrical conceptions of the foreign "other" in Spanish dramas and operettas of the nineteenth century.

The action seems more pre-Civil War

Joan Carreras' dapper aspiring tenor attempts to seduce the Governor's wife (Chantal Aimée) while the company impresario (Pere Arquillué) looks on in Lluïsa Cunillé's *El dúo de la africana* at Barcelona's Teatre Lliure, directed by Xavier Albertí.
Photo: Ros Ribas, courtesy of the Teatre Lliure

Spain than the late-nineteenth century, and this may well be a comment on the demise of the zarzuela, which came to pass with the commencement of the Civil War. Certainly the play makes some astute observations on political intervention in theatrical endeavors—still a potent issue in a state where national theatre directors are hired and fired by politicians, and the trajectory of Albert Boadella indicates that it may not be beneficial to your chances of receiving government support to meddle too conspicuously in the political arena. While the fictional Catalan touring opera company may insist on a "no politics" policy, politics saturates the texture and theatrics of the piece. There are reflections on patriotism and what fidelity to the monarchy and allegiance to the political order mean. The popular rising that breaks out at the end of the show also points to the legacy of empire that haunts the zarzuela.

This is a production rooted in the veneer of popular theatre forms: there are stand-up gags involving a burnt dog and a rampant tarantula, and a drawing room set of mirrors with enough doors to allow for the ins and outs of French farce. The affair struck me has having much of the dynamism of a Morecombe and Wise comedy sketch; it is governed by the same sense of timing, of running gags and of a knowing audience willing to enter into the joke. Parallels with La Cubana's 1989 show, *Cómeme el coco, negro* (*Black Like a Coconut*)—currently commencing an anniversary tour—also come to mind. The audacity of *El dúo de la africana* should not be underestimated. It points to the willingness of the Lliure to program Castilian-language work, where appropriate, in recognition of the language's legacy on Catalonia's dramatic and theatrical heritage. The piece is not afraid to work in the most biting tradition of political satire and points to Cunillé's influences as more expansive than the absurdist minimalism in which she is often positioned.

This is a production that shows the Lliure actors at their imaginative best. Joan Carreras is a terrific suitor, suitably pretentious and absent-minded with a demeanour that never loses sight of his amorous target. Arquillué, soon to temporarily leave the Lliure company, is a larger-than-life-impresario, marching across the stage with showy indignation and a range of entertaining tics. Alicia Pérez mutates from an exotic barefoot dancer to the put-upon daughter and the frightful aristocratic mother of the aspiring tenor. This is a production that deserves to be seen beyond Catalonia.