‘A Grec of Transition’

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages
Vol. 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 53-56.

A Grec of Transition

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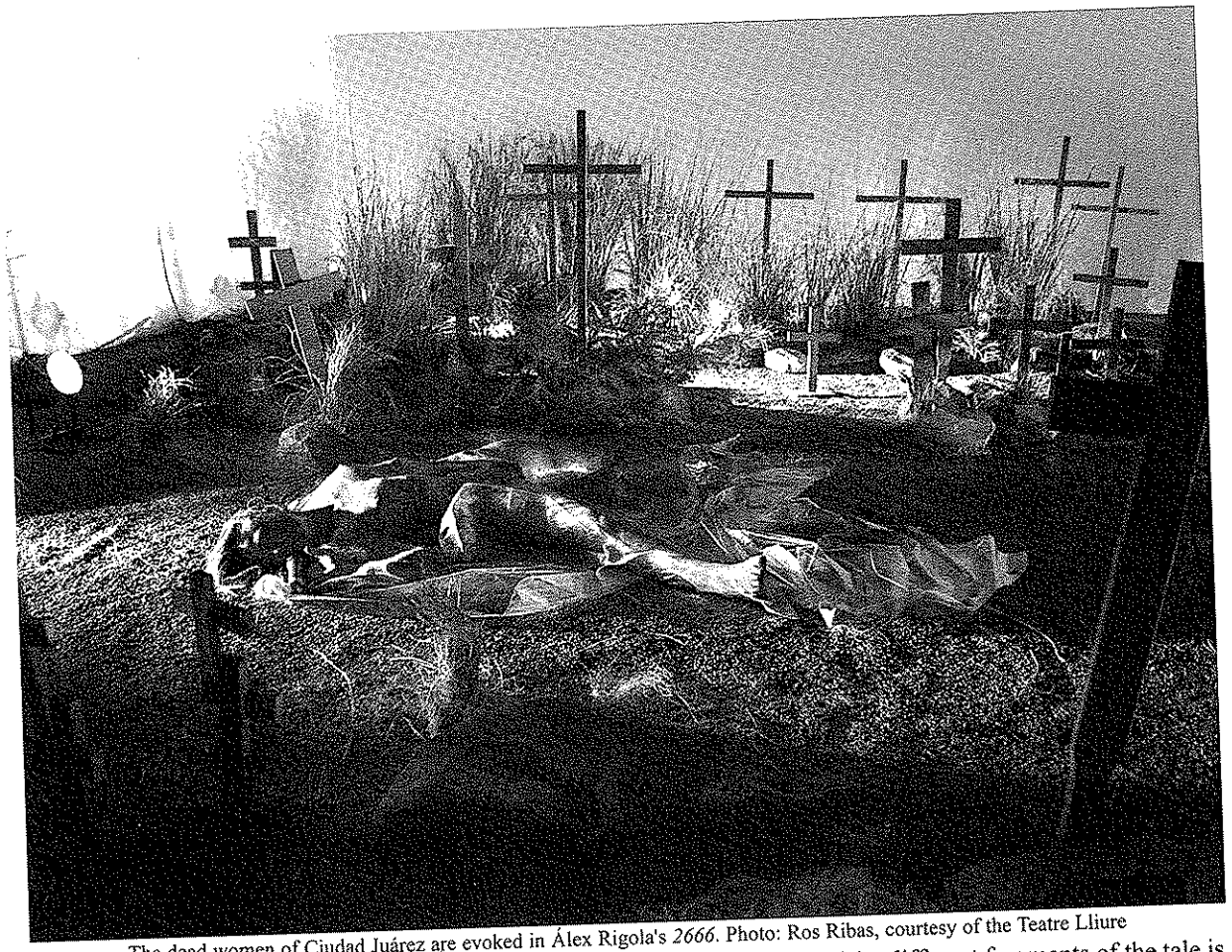
There's been a lot of discussion about the Grec, Barcelona's annual summer festival, in the Catalan press. The Grec's previous director, Borja Sitjà, was a Catalan, born and bred, who had cut his teeth at Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional and the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe during the late 1980s and 1990s. At the latter institution he was appointed by Lluís Pasqual but continued under Georges Lavaudant. He showed himself a wily survivor in more ways than one. During his seven years at the Grec, he attracted over a million visitors, with his final festival enjoying a number of sellout shows and a healthy average attendance of just under seventy percent.

His successor at the Grec is not a Catalan, but the Argentine producer Ricardo Szwarcer, who came to the Grec via the Opéra de Lille and Buenos Aires's Colón Theatre. Szwarcer has shown himself to be an astute promoter whose consultancy work on previous Grec festivals under Sitja's direction demonstrated a strong visual sense, impeccable musical credentials, and an excellent knowledge of the Argentine performing arts scene. As Jonathan Mills has found out this year at Edinburgh, it's never easy taking over an international festival. You inherit commitments and projects that might not be part of your new vision for it; you are faced with tight deadlines; you are eagerly observed by those who supported your appointment and suspiciously regarded by those who had hoped for other candidates.

This has been a tough festival for Szwarcer. The knives appear to be out from part of the Catalan critical establishment, and for the life of me I can't work out why. Is it personal grievance? A particular vendetta? Is it because they favoured a Catalan candidate for the job? Give the guy a chance! From the outside, it appears to me that the festival has much in common with those promoted by Sitja over the past seven years. Szwarcer has encouraged imaginative co-productions and programmed the work of Catalan locals. As such, Lliure associate director Carlota Subirós came together with actor Gonzalo Cunill on an adaptation of John Berger's novel *King* (at the Catalan Library, the Biblioteca de Catalunya); Ferran Madico brought Reus's Centre d'Arts Escèniques to the Grec in a co-production of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* with Pere Arquillué heading the company as Leontes; Jordi Coca directed *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Sala Beckett, Barcelona's premier new writing venue that, not insignificantly, takes the Irish playwright's name; Josep Maria Mestres premiered *Handbag* at the Catalan National Theatre's Sala Petita in a new translation by Joan Sellent; La Fura dels Baus brought their own brand of "in-yer-face" theatre to the Mercat de les Flors with *Imperium*; and Álex Rigola premiered his version of Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* at the Teatre Lliure.

Over the past couple of years Rigola's productions with the Lliure company have proved amongst the most exciting work premiered at the Grec. While much of it has gone on to play at a later date and for a more extended run at the Lliure, the Grec has proved a fertile training ground for Rigola, much as it was for Calixto Bieito before him. Whereas *Arbusht*, his 2006 collaboration with Paco Zarzoso, was not vintage Rigola—despite some outstanding performances from Arquillué and Joan Carreras—*2666* shows an impressive return to form. Based on a set of five novels that Chilean-born writer Roberto Bolaño was working on when he died in 2003, and published posthumously as a single work, Rigola and co-adaptor Pablo Ley have kept the same title for their stage version of the novel. Presented in Castilian Spanish, it gravitates around the murders taking place in a border Mexican town, and at five hours is as epic as Bolaño's own narrative work. This is ensemble theatre on a large scale. *El País*'s Marcos Ordóñez drew parallels with Lepage's *Seven Streams of the River Ota* (14 July 2007), and *2666* certainly shares the ambition of both this work and Lepage's *Dragon's Trilogy*. The five parts of *2666* respect the different sections of the novel: in the first, a band of critics dissect an enigmatic German writer, Beno von Archimboldi; in the second, the surreal Mexican border town of Santa Teresa, a dead ringer for Ciudad Juárez, provides the location for an academic philosopher to encounter his ghosts and demons; in the third, a reporter is sent to cover a boxing match in the town but is marked by the seemingly arbitrary murders of women taking place there; in the fourth, the dead women of Juárez rise up to haunt the landscape; and in the final section, the German writer returns along with a past marked by the spectres of Nazism.

When Rigola first mentioned the project to



The dead women of Ciudad Juárez are evoked in Álex Rigola's *2666*. Photo: Ros Ribas, courtesy of the Teatre Lliure

me I thought it a practical impossibility, a venture that could only ever partly succeed in finding a theatrical language that might make sense of a sprawling narrative that is never easily contained or controlled. The closest analogy might be an adaptation of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* or García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Ley and Rigola have defied the odds and found a structure that allows the fevered madness of the novel to find a stage language. It is a language marked by excess certainly, but each of the five parts presents the events through a particular visual discourse that distinguishes it from the sections that frame it. It is thus five plays, each lasting around an hour, composed into a larger quintet.

The pseudo-conference of the first section meets its antidote in the fierce kitsch of section two—which Rigola has defined as having something of David Lynch about it. The film noir of section three meets with the oratorio of section four. The cast moves across the forty-something different characters with ease and without resorting to easy stereotypes, so often the problem with *Arbusht*. The interweaving of the different fragments of the tale is beautifully realized, and the result is a canvas as striking as Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Rigola is never one to forget about a production once it has opened, and when it returns to the Lliure in November (and from there goes on a tour of Spain) there will be shifts and changes, fine-tuning and rethinking. *2666* made an auspicious debut at the Lliure; I look forward to catching up with it later in the autumn on the next stage of its journey.

The international productions brought to the Grec this year may not be as starry as in previous years but there was certainly a sense of wanting to bring some hidden gems from less dominant theatrical cultures to Barcelona. Perhaps not surprisingly there were some Argentine offerings: Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, directed by Luciano Cáceres in a translation by Argentine dramatist Rafael Spregelburd, and Théâtre des Lucioles's treatment of Copi's texts including *Eva Perón*. The New Theatre of Riga brought *Long Life*, a piece about old age, and Chekhov's *Seagull* was deliciously

reworked by Brazil's Enrique Diaz and Daniela Fortes. Lluís Pasqual revisited Goldoni—he'd staged *One of the Last Carnival Evenings* in 1985 with the Lliure—with a production of *La familia dell'antiquario* (*The Antiquarian's Family*) realized as a co-production of three Italian theatres.

This is one of Goldoni's most acerbic comedies and here Pasqual tells the tale of an aristocrat falling on hard times who marries his son to the daughter of a prosperous bourgeois gentleman in the hope of guaranteeing the family's future. Needless to say, the snobbish mother-in-law does not approve of her new daughter-in-law, and the battle that ensues proves both entertaining and exhausting for all concerned. Pasqual makes the production as much about a shifting society as about the fortunes of the two families and their coterie of servants. There is much to admire here: the commedia dell'arte touches in the gestural language of the production, the deft movement and lively pacing, and the witty Venetian dialect exquisitely delivered by the experienced cast.

The production may have been commissioned to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Goldoni's birth, as it had its premiere at the Venice Biennale a week before opening in Barcelona, but it is a comment also on Pasqual's earlier Goldoni production for the Lliure realized over twenty years ago and now acknowledged as one of the company's most emblematic stagings. Pasqual shifts *The Antiquarian's Family* from its eighteenth-century location to a time frame that moves from 1780 through nine different periods including the present day. There are masks and overt commedia dell'arte for the opening scene, high romanticism for part 2 (1820), melodrama for the third part (1870), fin de siècle culture for part 4 (1900), high antics for part 5 (1920), austerity meets Hollywood noir in part 6, the advent of pop culture for part 7 (1960), punk into grunge for part 8 (the 1980s), and the discourses of high technology and reality television for part 9 (the present). These changes happen in the most delicate of ways, providing a game with time that operates through scenic moves, shifts in performance vocabularies, subtle costume changes, and a score that moves from harpsichord to hip-hop. By the end of the production we have shifted from commedia dell'arte to the horrors of confessional reality television that La Cubana dissected in *Mamá quiero ser famoso* (*Mummy, I Want to be Famous*) (2005).

Last year Pasqual returned to the Grec with *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, presented at Lliure's new Sala Fabià Puigserver. Here too the subject of time passing becomes a central organizing motif for the staging. Pasqual makes *The Antiquarian's Family* as much about theatrical time and staging conventions as about historical time that ages and withers. Pasqual's fluency with the Italian culture and language is evident in the games of the performers and the production marks a superb return to form for a director eclipsed in recent years by the international success of his one-time assistant Calixto Bieito.

Bieito—absent from this year's Grec—chose to present his version of Aeschylus's *Persians*, adapted by dramatist Pau Miró, at the outdoor festivals in Mérida and Perelada. Another classic opening at Mérida, *Phaedra*, adapted by Madrid-based dramatist Juan Mayorga from the treatments of the myth by Euripides, Seneca, and Racine, closed the theatre program of this year's Grec. With singer-actress Ana Belén in the title role, expectations were high. José Carlos Plaza's production, however, failed to deliver on a number of fronts. The set design by Plaza and Francisco Leal provided a blood-red backdrop to the action, where the shadows of gnarled trees bode of the dangers to come. There was nothing subtle here, nothing left to the imagination. The mood of doom was spelt out in all too obvious ways.

Belén's Phaedra begins huddled in pain and embarrassment, unable to face the outside world as her nurse Enone (a wizened Alicia Hermida) attempts to dispense comfort and advice. This is no matronly Phaedra but an attractive woman hopelessly in love with her stepson Hippolitus. Belén's Phaedra has large emotions: there is much sweeping of the gown, grand hand gestures, and spectacular changes of attire. She never looks less than immaculate, hair perfectly groomed, whatever the emotional challenges. The production is overly dramatic, wanting to underline, very forcefully, every change of mood. Fran Perea is a darkly handsome Hippolytus, but one that lacks bite. His father Theseus, played by Chema Muñoz, is placed in a very unflattering wig and Demis Roussos-type gown, and struggles to achieve any real sense of authority. There is not much of the warrior about him as he preens and prances across the stage. Indeed, *El País*'s Begoña Barrena made the observation that he looked as if he had arrived not from war but from a performance as a human statue on Barcelona's Ramblas Avenue (3 August 2007). This is not a production that makes the myth—in an age where families are regularly com-

posed of step-children and step-siblings—at all contemporary. Rather, Plaza and his performers position it as reverent theatre, to be observed from a distance and witnessed with something approaching awe and terror.

So if the highs of the festival included Rigola's *2666* and Pasqual's return to Goldoni, there were also novelties that announced Szwarcer's desire to attract new audiences. A circus night had a plethora of small acts across the Grec's surrounding gardens where clowns, trapeze acts, and puppeteers played to the intimacy of small numbers. The later show in the Grec auditorium, bringing the audience together, may have been pitched at adults, but the pleasures of seeing different generations in the 2000-seat house showed the possibilities of the Grec speaking beyond its usual base. The hip-hop night brought a breakdance championship to the venue as well as urban poetry in both Catalan and Castilian. *Romeo and Juliet* was realized with puppetry and Prokofiev, and other circus events merged popular Catalan vaudeville with street arts, trapeze, and clowning.

There were imaginative partnerships in the music program—Maria del Mar Bonet and Miguel Poveda, Peter Greenaway and DJ Radar—as well as stars of world music from Omara Portuondo to Hossam Ramzy, and performance artists/musicians who defy generic pigeonholing, such as Laurie Anderson and Vinicio Capossella. Sylvie Guillem and Akram Khan proved the hit of the dance program with a collaboration that demonstrated a rich partnership between these two artists that wasn't fully realized in their previous collaboration.

This has been a Grec of transition: trying out new ideas, bringing back veteran acts and directors, forging eclectic partnerships, and thinking through how the Grec might reflect and comment on the changing face of the city. It has had its highs and its lows, but attendance numbers are up—an encouraging sign—and an investment in home talent has reaped ample rewards.

Finally, running alongside the Grec at the MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) was an exhibition that examines the relationship between theatre and the visual arts. "A Theater Without Theater" traces this relationship through particular performative, paratheatrical, and metatheatrical acts. There are street manifestations and protests, minimalist performance acts, and interrogations of modes of perception. The usual culprits of twentieth-century performance are here: Antonin Artaud and Tadeusz Kantor, Vsevelod Meyerhold and Samuel Beckett. The exhibition interrogates the primacy of the text, but it does so in rather obvious ways. Visual documents are presented without proper contextualization. This is a rough guide to performance that jumps from futurism to Dadaism without appropriate explanation. There is some terrific material here, but without apposite contextualization it becomes largely decorative, a supermarket shop through live art's links to the visual arts.

There is no real justification for the artists chosen. Why Dan Graham and not Carles Santos? Why Bruce Nauman and not Bill Viola, whose collaborations with Peter Sellars offer fertile examples of the interdisciplinary links that purport to be at the heart of the exhibition? The lack of criteria for selection thus serves to further obfuscate the lines of the exhibition. When I saw "A Theater Without Words" in late July there was no exhibition catalogue. A full two months after the exhibition's opening, and just six weeks before it was due to close, it was rather problematic to see no sign of the catalogue and no indication from staff at the MACBA as to when it might be published. There are some gems in this exhibition, as with the late Juan Muñoz's *The Prompter* (1988) and Daniel Buren's *Photo-souvenir* (1996), but they are gems suspended in a rather undefined environment.