



## **'Barcelona: From Copi to Kinshasa'**

A review by Maria Delgado

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## The Barcelona Stage: From Copi to Kinshasa

Maria M. Delgado

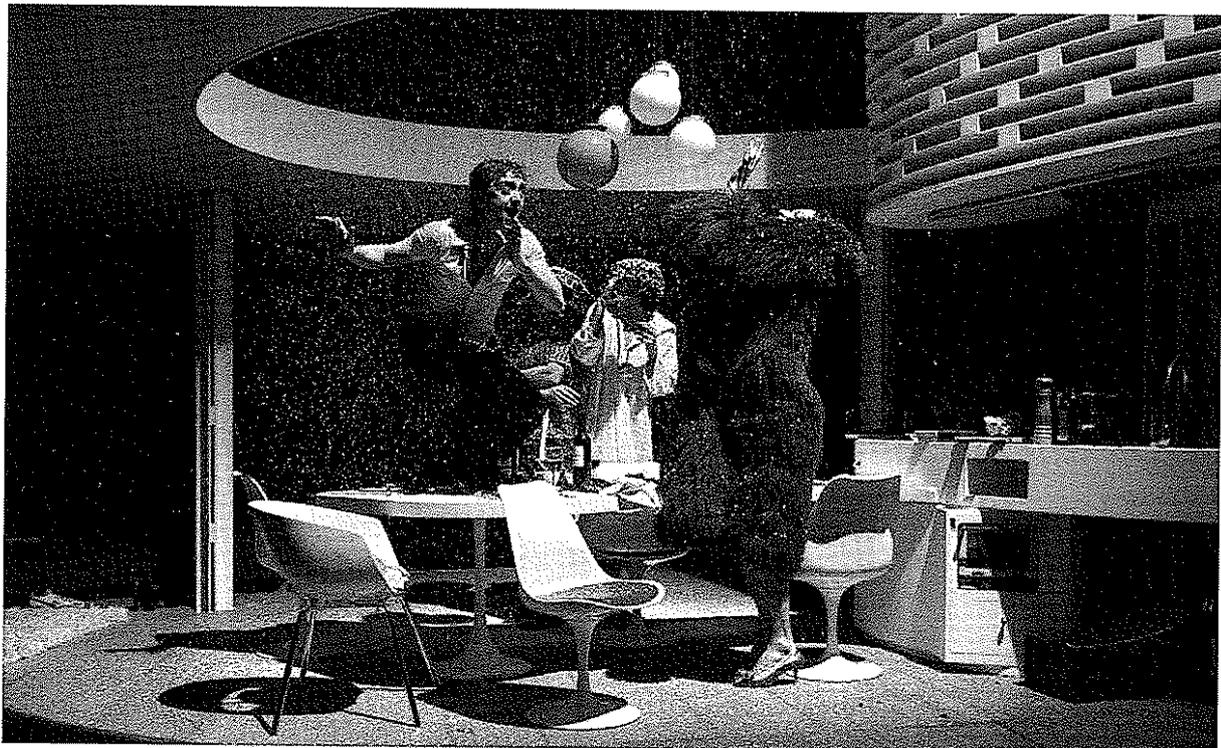
Copi is back, although some of his diehard fans might claim he never really went away. The Argentine writer Raúl Damonte, known as Copi, died just over twenty years ago, a master of the absurd refracted through the horrors of contemporary kitsch. He's never really found favor in the English-speaking world, but as a comic strip writer for *Nouvelle Observateur* and favored dramatist of Paris-based fellow Argentine Jorge Lavelli, he located a niche in Paris. The periodic revivals of his plays seen in the city over the past two decades demonstrate a body of work that owes as much to surrealism as to the excesses of the 1970s.

Now a further Argentine who has made France his home, Marcial di Fonzo, has introduced Copi to new generations across Europe. *Evita Perón* and *La torre de La Défense* (*The Tower of La Défense*) have been seen in Avignon alongside a trio of shorter Copi pieces. Now *The Tower of La Défense* comes to the Lliure but staged not in French but in Catalan with the impressive resident company that Rigola has assembled in the building over the past few years.

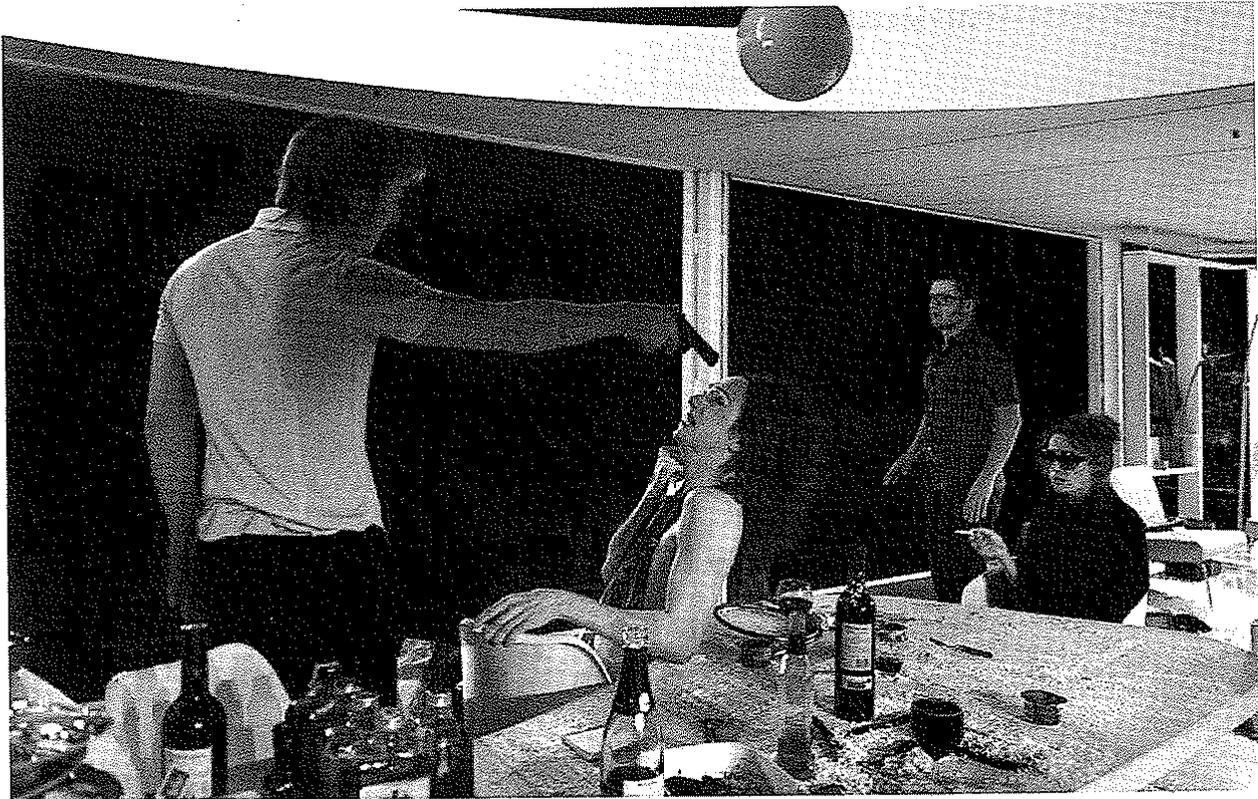
Di Fonzo never tries to "update" the play.

From the moment the lights come up on Luc and Jean's Mod apartment in La Défense we know that we are in the mid-1970s. Vincent Saulier's compact set is a delightful box of tricks, a studio replete with micro-kitchen where not-so-tasty treats are prepared for the frenetic New Year's Eve dinner Luc and Jean are hosting. Here everything is on display. The bedroom, that supposed den of bourgeois secrets, is in plain view, with a leopard print blanket serving as primary décor. The ensuite bathroom allows for all encounters to be observed and surveilled. Nothing is left to the imagination. Saulier's set is a brilliant metaphoric conceit for Copi's play: a world where revelation eventually self-implodes. The apartment begins as a fitting symbol of Parisian chic and ends like a chaotic battleground where the horrors of bourgeois domestic warfare have scattered their dangerous debris.

Copi's play takes the drawing room drama and inflects it through the discourse of vaudeville. There is, however, nothing sanitized about Copi's vision. Rather, bitterness bubbles beneath the veneer of respectability that testifies to lives conducted beneath the glare of a morality that can be



Copi's *The Tower of La Défense*, directed by Marcial di Fonzo. Photo: Ros Ribas.



Copi's *The Tower of La Défense*. Photo: Ros Ribas.

twisted to the demands of any situation. Jean (an unusually restrained Julio Manrique) and Luc (the chameleonic Joan Carreras) are on the verge of splitting up when their neighbor Daphne (Chantal Aimée) arrives. She is evidently high on drugs and claims to be missing her daughter Katia who is currently with Daphne's estranged husband John. Daphne is infatuated with Luc who merely sees her as one of the many diversions in his life. Into this frenetic mix comes Micheline (Ruben Ametllé), a transvestite with potential beau Ahmed (Tony Corvillo) in tow. As the proposed lamb dinner is jettisoned for baked snake—one of the play's very funny pseudo-vaudeville routines—and the whereabouts of Katia becomes all too clear to the assembled cast, the group prepare for the arrival of John (Andrew Tarbet) and the consequences of Katia's death. John arrives, a plan is put in motion, and then a helicopter crashes into the tower unleashing a different kind of mayhem.

In a plot that transcends rational explanation every character is, to a lesser or greater extent, a meditation on excess. The wealthy Daphne is trapped in a spiral of self-loathing that depends on drug abuse and casual sex to numb the pain. Aimée trips (in both senses of the word) across the stage in search of a daughter that she has alienated and the

possibility of a new thrill that might allow her to temporarily forget the emptiness of her life. She teeters in and out of Jean and Luc's apartment like a crazed Medea, veering between hysterics and comatosed slumber.

No character is spared Copi's acerbic gaze. Ametllé's Micheline is a variation of the tart with a heart but the extremes to which she is willing to go to secure "love" and the dependency that she craves ultimately render her a coward whose life is as deranged as that of Daphne. Ametllé's performance avoids easy stereotyping—there is something of Lepage's Madeleine from *Tectonic Plates* in his conception of a character that could too easily fall into facile clichés.

All the central performances demonstrate an acting register that oscillates between high theatrics and deadpan naturalism. Di Fonzo is able to conduct the proceedings with something of the skill of Pina Bausch's *Tanztheater*. The extreme incidents that intrude and rattle the friends are choreographed like agitated dances. The farcical routine to subdue the snake, the manic antics to feed and nurse a wounded seagull, and the revelation of Katia's corpse are handled with the precision of a Marx Brothers sketch. There is something of John Cleese in Carreras's Luc as he runs like an animated pair of

scissors around the cramped interior. Manrique's Jean is more the wounded puppy dog clinging to the vestiges of a relationship that has little future. In the end all are tainted by the need for self-preservation. The finale has an apocalyptic feel, something of a moment of reckoning. The strength of this production lies in its ability to ensure that the bizarre events onstage never appear ridiculous or unrelated to a wider social framework. Some may have been quick to pigeonhole it as a gay play but Di Fonzo's production indicates concerns that move beyond sexual politics. The lessons of the past reverberate all too clearly in a production that deconstructs the rituals and routines of comfortable bourgeois existence in consistently disconcerting ways.

Joan Font's love of the carnival-esque has always been in evidence in his wild and wacky productions with Comediants. His recent operatic ventures have shown how he can transfer this vision to more contained structures without losing the sense of playfulness that so distinguished Comediants's aesthetic. Now he follows the color-saturated *Magic Flute* he realized for the Liceu in 2002 with a reading of *La Cenerentola* (co-produced with Welsh National Opera and Houston Grand Opera) that offers a seasonal tale for Christmas. Rossini's rather leaden opera is here given the puppet treatment. The characters act like painted wooden dolls with high wigs and rigid movements that announce the predetermined nature of the tale being told before us. As we have come to expect from Font, the stage is all bold colors and stylized action. The two ugly sisters are delightfully grotesque creations in white padded underwear and a yellow and pink wig apiece that each hide a multitude of sins. Each retreats into their room where ball gowns in combinations of white, green, pink, and purple beckon to be tried on.

Itxaro Mentkaka and Cristina Obregón are impressive as the two dastardly sisters, terrible twins determined to stop Cinderella/Angelina in her tracks. Joyce DiDonato's Angelina is a delightful creation, playing with the assortment of mice who pepper her living quarters. These watch over her like guardian angels and her interaction with them is certainly one of the production's stronger visual elements. She enters into the playful nature of the production, waving an apron marked with flashes of yellow and sporting an asymmetrical, patchwork dress that harks back to cubism as much as *commedia dell'arte*.

The geometric lines of Joan Guillén's costumes create some delicious patterning which is mirrored in the movements of the characters. Font creates a court of pomp and high ceremony in love with its own self-importance and little of this ethos that rubbed off on Juan Diego Flórez's Prince Ramirio. Flórez sounds divine, hitting the high C's in "Si ritrovarla, io giuro" in breathtaking fashion, but those expecting characterization in the manner



La Cubana's *Nuts CocoNuts*. Photo: Josep Aznar.

of DiDonato's tender Angelina were gravely disappointed. By contrast, her rendition of the great final aria ("Nacqui all'affanno") is both touching and genuinely moving: a fiesty comment on the action presented before us. Flórez appeared to have been "flown" in from another production, a largely static figure within Font's busy staging. Flórez sounds divine and what he does with his top-of-the-range vocal fireworks is a feat or possibly a freak of nature, but those expecting his witty Tonio in Covent Garden's *La Fille du Regiment* will feel that this performance doesn't quite amount to that. There's no doubt that Flórez has the most exciting bel canto voice in the world at this moment but that won't be enough to carry him through productions where you are expected to do more than stand at the front of the stage and belt out your arias to an eager audience.

Font's sugar-coated approach brings an element of playfulness to the stage that serves to propel the production along but ultimately it is the opera itself—that lacks the wit, bite, and narrative pulse of *Barber of Seville*—which defies all attempts to position it within a workable stage register.

Those who have adapted silent films for the theatre have often found themselves defeated by a cinematic energy that cannot easily be transposed to the stage. At the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Font has been brought in to find a theatrical language that binds Jordi Sabatés's silent film scores. The result, *Tren de somnis* (*Train of Dreams*), is an uneven fusion of scenes from silent cinema and sequences that celebrate the power of silent cinema—as with the projection of Ana Torrent's haunting eyes in Víctor Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973)—with enacted sketches that seem to have more in common with heritage set-pieces in museums. In the end we are left wishing that the music could merely accompany a filmic collage untainted by stage interventions that never succeed in commenting on what is happening musically. The stage moments that do work are unanimated by actors—as with a miniature train running across the front of the stage. There is a charm to Sabatés's scores that needs no illustration. By inserting a further "live" presence between Sabatés as performer and the screen, the resulting mediation serves only to dissipate the focus of the event. *Train of Dreams* is unsure as to whether it is celebrating Sabatés' music, the silent screen, or a particular concept of vaudeville entertainment that filtered through from

stage to screen.

Vaudeville is certainly the order of the day in La Cubana's metatheatrical stage outings. One of Spain's most commercially successful companies, they have provided some of the most sparkling theatrical entertainments of the past twenty-five years. Their work may not be as familiar to international audiences as the more pyrotechnical practices of Comediantes or La Fura dels Baus, but Brian McMaster at Edinburgh ingeniously found a way of bringing two of their most resonant productions, *Cegada de amor* (*Blinded by Love*) and *Cómeme el coco, negro* (*Black Like a Coconut*—reworked into English as *Nuts CocoNuts*), to the Edinburgh Festival in 1997 and 2005 respectively. Now the English-language version of *Cómeme* appears to have led to a full-scale Spanish- and Catalan-language revival, produced to celebrate the company's twenty-fifth birthday. Now playing at the expansive Coliseum theatre, it takes as its starting point the music-hall revues of companies like el Teatro Chino de Manolita Chen's (Manolita Chen's Chinese Theatre) and the popular theatres of Barcelona's Paral.lel, El Molino, and El Arnau that brought together magic acts with tangos, *cuplés*, antiphonal comedy sketches, interrupted monologues, jugglers, ventriloquists, and well known numbers from *zarzuelas* (Spanish operettas).

Using variety as a framing device, La Cubana is reimaged as the Teatro Cubano de Revista (The Cubana Vaudeville Theatre), a musical review company now past their prime. As audiences arrive for what they believe is a 10:30 start, they are told by an aggravated company manager (La Cubana's artistic director Jordi Milán) that the show had actually begun at 9:30. Diffusing audience discontent while shepherding spectators into the auditorium, he lets them believe that there is only half an hour of the show left. On a tired set that's seen better days, the vaudeville show is seen to be in full swing parading a diverse assortment of variety acts. A cast of twelve appears, disappears, and reappears while presenting over forty different characters in a stage world of swaying painted backdrops and well-worn curtains.

For those who saw the production's first outing in 1989 the familiar numbers are still there albeit sung by performers whose names are somewhat changed. Martín España's "Soy Minero" ("I'm a Miner") is now sung by Pepe Iberia but this is still a role envisaged as a version of Antonio Molina. There are, however, also new routines and jokes. A terrific swinging rendition of *Chinatown My*

*Chinatown* (replete with a larger-than-life drag queen) has been imported from *Nuts CocoNuts*. Led by the comic *vedette* Piluca Sotomayor, the sketch, about a conventional Spanish family about to meet their daughter's Kenyan boyfriend, now features a reference to Viagra in gazpacho that clearly recalls the celebrated sleeping pills liquidized into gazpacho from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1989). The revival also negotiates copious references to internet access, life coaching, and celebrities of the moment like Baroness Thyssen and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall. The political emphasis of the production has certainly somewhat shifted. The blackface actor—a corrosive denouncement of the institutional racism in Spain linked to the colonial expansion in Spanish America where vaudeville companies peddled their wares—has now been substituted by a black Cuban actor in exile from a political and economic situation that no longer allows him to make a living in his own land. The racist assumptions that underpin Western society are still in evidence.

It's when the variety show ends that the dynamics of the production really become evident for this is ultimately a show about the process of making theatre. At first the cast and crew peer through the curtains to see if the audience is leaving but the audience remains fixed in their seats. The variety theatre company, however, cannot wait indefinitely: there's an exit to be negotiated. And so the company starts moving into the auditorium, packing up the set and costumes ready to load up the lorry and head to their next destination. The theatrical façade is slipped away as delectably as it was seventeen years ago: curtains are pulled down and folded with the audience's assistance, props are passed through the aisle as an array of characters come and go with rapid abandon, gossip and sandwiches are shared among the audience, wardrobe mistresses reveal the secrets of shopping for ornate frocks and other tricks of their trade. From the aging star Mimi Lumiere who thinks clearing up is beneath her to the Valencian girl who babysits Mimi's miniature dog, the audience is shown a world where individuality threatens the dynamic of the team. This is a theatrical community that comes together not to put on a show but rather to dismantle it. Metatheatrics allow entry for the audience into a backstage world whose glamour and fame are effectively dissected.

The show remains as delicious as it was in 1989. The Coliseum is arguably a better venue for it, wider, longer, and deeper. Three cast members

remain from the earlier production but the new members fold into the aesthetic as if they had always been part of it. The vaudeville tradition remains a popular one in Spanish culture—witness its treatment in José Sanchis Sinisterra's *Ay Carmela*, Tábano's *Castañuela 70*, as well as Bardem, Berlanga, and Fernán-Gómez's features—and here Jordi Milán's tight, slick production serves both as a homage to the dying art form and an interrogation of its politics and legacy.

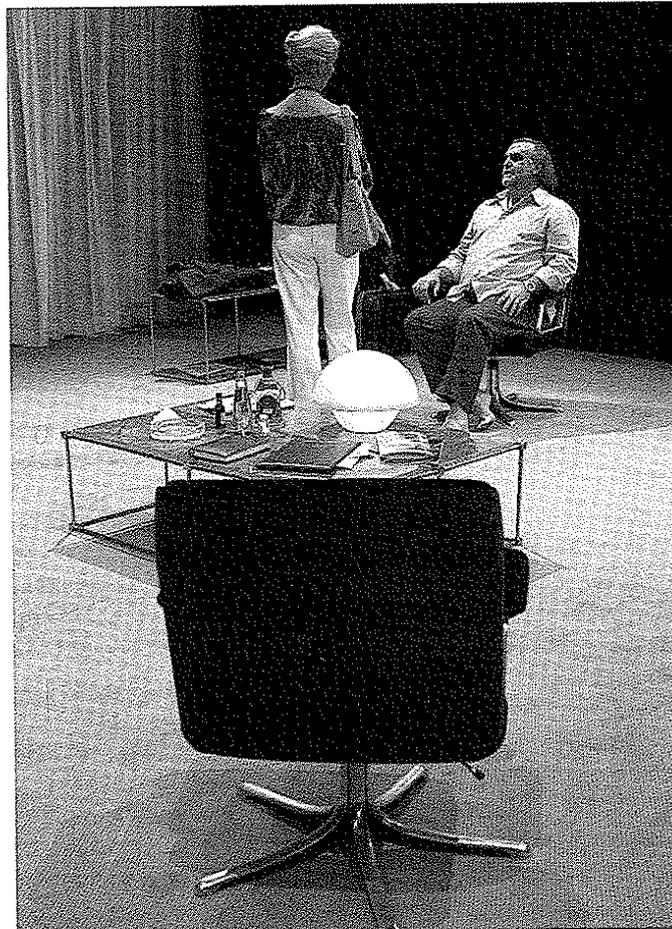
Over the last ten years Lluïsa Cunillé has established herself alongside Sergi Belbel and Juan Mayorga as one of the preeminent dramatists of her generation. While her early work was marked by a minimalist, absurdist streak—a veritable descendent of Beckett and Pinter—there has been sufficient variety in recent years to suggest that this is a playwright intrinsically concerned with the implications of form rather than the need to deliver any kind of social message. Her newest work *Après moi, le déluge* (*After Me, the Deluge*) is as different from her last production at the Lliure—an interrogation of the *zarzuela* realized with in 2007 with Xavier Albertí as *El dúo de la Africana*—as it's possible to get. The previous work was baroque intertextual commentary set in a playfully imaginary nineteenth-century romantic operetta and this is a bland hotel room in Kinshasa, a non-space where two characters evade communication through dialogue that appears more about concealment than revelation. The hotel room—realized as a quintessentially anonymous space in Max Glaenzel and Estel Cristià's effective design—serves as a transitory space bereft of markers of identity. It is populated by two characters, both Westerners who live and work in the Congo. He (referred to as Man) is a businessman who has made a conspicuous fortune from a mineral used in everything from weapons to mobile phones. She is an interpreter who claims to work across a multitude of languages. They attempt to bond through jokes but the contact is minimal. We are never clear as to what kind of deal has brought them together or what exactly they want from each other. How far is what each says true? Has he really had heart surgery? Has she really had a miscarriage? Has her husband left her? How long has she really been interpreting for him? The language is precise but opaque with the end bringing no real resolution.

The evident referent here is Bernard-Marie Koltès. The location, the situation, and the dialogue suggest both *In the Solitude of Cottonfields* and *Black Battles with Dogs*. At one point the Man

delivers a line that could have been lifted from the former play: "If you have something to offer do it now, or go." There is much of the imaginary Africa of Western imagination here that Koltès deconstructed in *Black Battles*. There is something of the world-weary Horn in the character of the Man whose business deals are ultimately thwarted by his insularity. The interpreter is here to mediate, to try and broker a conversation with an unseen black man whose voice she takes on and who wants a new life for his son away from Africa.

In many ways this is Cunillé's strongest play, as tightly constructed and carefully plotted as *Barcelona, Map of Shadows* (recently released as a film by Ventura Pons). Vicky Peña is outstanding as the bronzed interpreter—the tan serving as a mask of sorts—who is taken over by the spirit of the elder who seeks out the Man. She is the voice that speaks on the behalf of the troubled man and her position as a go-between suggests a metaphorical link with a

wider colonialist role that is further underlined by the echoes of Koltès. Whereas Koltès was served by Chéreau's urgent stagings, here Carlota Subirós renders a lethargic, plodding production that leaves the play within a rather tame register. Subirós's referent seems to be *Apocalypse Now* with parallels drawn between Andreu Benito's Man and Brando's Kurtz. But this is a play that cannot rely on the cinematic power of montage; we miss the gaze of the watchful camera that can linger on that which remains unspoken. Despite the curt arches of Cunillé's writing, the result is a rather unsatisfactory affair. The underwriting with lighting of the Interpreter's transitions further inscribes an aesthetic that wishes to laboriously etch the importance of each pause. The urgency of the play is hampered by a listless production that never quite allows for any of the disconcerting shifts of mood present in the writing. *Après moi, le deluge* is a compelling play left swimming in ponderousness.



Lluïsa Cunillé's *After Me, the Deluge*. Photo: Antonio Bofill.