‘Barcelona: Revisiting the Classics’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona: Revisiting the Classics

Maria M. Delgado

¡Ay Carmela! is back (although the visibility the play has enjoyed since its premiere twenty years ago makes you question if it ever went away). The first production featured the Lecoq- and Grotowski-trained actor José Luis Gómez in the role of the hapless vaudeville entertainer Paulino, while the beguiling Veronica Forqué, then one of Pedro Almodóvar's favorite performers, played the feisty Carmela. Gómez also directed the production with a close attention to creating a stage world that was able to conjure the slightly tawdry aura of the music hall. Considering it two decades on I remember the impeccable timing of the vaudeville numbers, the sexual chemistry between the two performers, and the bittersweet homage to a world of itinerant theatre that appeared all so forgotten in the "anything's possible" heady days of Spain's socialist government.

The play concerns two music hall performers entertaining Republican troops during the Spanish Civil War. A foggy night leads to a mistaken crossing of enemy lines and suddenly both are captured and held with a range of prisoners including a group of Polish International Brigade soldiers. Temporary freedom comes at the hands of an Italian officer who sees them as a theatrical pageant for both the Nationalist forces and the political prisoners who will be executed the following day. While Paulino encourages Carmela to go along with the routine that the Italian Ripamonte has put together, Carmela finds herself unable to perform the role of the besieged Republic in the arch propagandist sketch cobbled together by Ripamonte and her onstage protest leads directly to her murder at the hands of a Nationalist officer watching the performance.

While José Sanchis Sinisterra relies on an array of characters in crafting the story of *¡Ay Carmela!*, most are conjured solely through what Carmela and Paulino say about them. The tale is effectively recounted in flashback as Carmela's ghost comes back to haunt the grief-stricken Paulino. The reminiscences in the bleak post–Civil War present are juxtaposed with scenes showing the couple preparing and then and playing out the vaudeville show that will lead to Carmela's murder. In a nation haunted by the ghosts of the Civil War, the resonances of Carmela's appearances struck a pertinent chord and the play became one of democratic Spain's most conspicuous theatrical successes. Carmela became an icon: an embodiment of the Spanish spirit that refuses to compromise and of the need to remain firm and committed in the face of totalitarianism. In addition, she functioned as a reminder of the need to deal with an unresolved past and learn to live with the many specters that remain in the nation's consciousness. *¡Ay Carmela!* paid homage to the victims of the Civil War without resorting to facile generalizations and easy stereotyping.

Carlos Saura's 1989 film opted for Carmen Maura in the role of Carmela and popular TV comic Andrés Pajares as the opportunistic Paulino. Now Miguel Narros has opted for a production that does little service to the play, conceptualizing it as an outdated relic. Forqué reprises the role of Carmela but she's not quite as lithe or as fresh-faced as the Carmela that burst onto the stage twenty years ago. She relies on the gestures and movements that underpinned her performance then but these are positioned within a lazy production that substitutes precision for generalizations. Santiago Ramos never provides a credible Paulino. From the moment he steps onstage with exaggerated cough and feigned drunkenness, the intimacy that the play is capable of conjuring is jettisoned. The result is a stagy production filled with pertinent asides to the audience, heavy-handed routines, and the kind of production values that make a mockery of the troupe's less than affluent status.

Narros goes for high production values with Carmela sporting a range of dresses that hardly look like the makeshift outfits she makes reference to. The pacing seems forced and never really allows the play to build up momentum. While there are some amusing moments in the vaudeville routines, the staging never really moulds the varied vignettes into a cohesive whole. The result is a patchy, inelegant affair that reeks of opportunism. At a time when Spain's Law of Historical Memory, introduced by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero late last year, argues for the need to come to terms with the past, the opportunity to show how one of the Spanish stage's most resonant authors offered a model for such a process has effectively been replaced by cheap thrills and clumsy theatrics.

There have been a number of dramatists to emerge in the footsteps of Sanchis Sinisterra both in

Catalonia (Lluïsa Cunillé, Sergi Belbel, Pau Miró, and Jordi Galceran) and beyond (Juan Mayorga especially). Over the past couple of years a new face has joined the crowd: Carol López. What distinguishes López is her complete faith in comedy as a preferred idiom and a marked inflection towards the demands (but never the depths) of commercial theatre. López spins tales that aren't afraid to probe life's big issues and tells compassionate stories that avoid easy laughs and banal generalizations. *Germanes* (*Sisters*) is a case in point. The Villarroel's artistic director, Argentine Javier Daulte, has given the play an extended run and a month after opening it was playing to packed, appreciative, and very diverse audiences.

The play is framed by death. It opens with the demise of a father that brings together his widow and three daughters at the family home. As the audience enters the theatre his daughters and widow create a tableaux of the mourning family receiving those who wander by to pay their respects. This prologue is followed by projected credits announcing the cast appearing before us. The cinematic device is not accidental, for it feeds into a range of filmic appropriations—including a poster that functions as a direct homage to Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), dialogue that provides a curious mix of Eric Rohmer and Todd Solondz, situations that juggle something of the wacky premises of Almodóvar**,** and a pop soundtrack that marks the pulse of the action.

The play is also shaped by Chekhov's *Three Sisters*—as the title and the play's opening line make clear. The sisters are each given a strong personality. The eldest Inés (an acerbic María Lanau) is an elegant control freak defined by her designer frocks and "grander than thou" attitude. What the sisters don't know is that her marriage fell apart when her wealthy husband sought solace in the arms of a younger woman. Irene (Montse Germán) is the middle sister, a single mother bringing up a teenage son, Igor (Marcel Borràs), and in a new relationship with the kindly Alex (Paul Berrondo). The irresponsible younger sister Ivonne likes to play hard (in every sense of the word) and avoids responsibility at all costs. The sisters are watched over by their glamorous martini-guzzling mother Isabel (Amparo Fernández), a merry widow, determined not to grow old gracefully.

The play moves from the immediate aftermath of the father's death to the situation a year on; the audience witnesses how the sisters and their mother have coped with the new family dynamics. López creates a series of extremely funny situations—from the sisters forgetting the funeral speech on the kitchen table to Inés's pained conversations with her estranged husband. There are also glorious excesses—as with Inés's resort to making gazpacho as she mourns the demise of her marriage, a device that evidently harkens back to the use of this Spanish dish in Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1989). The characters step out of the narrative at selected moments (as with the high-energy rendition of Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" or Isabel's diva-esque "Non, je ne regrette rien" as act 1 comes to a close), permit-

Carol López's *Germanes*. Photo: Villarroel Theatre.

ting moments of reflection, contemplation, and critical distance all realized without the need for glib pontificating.

López is not afraid to play with taboos—there are some very funny scenes involving Igor's loss of virginity and Isabel's relationship with her plastic surgeon. The play doesn't shy from looking at desire in its multiple forms. While indicative of a generation of Spanish women who saw themselves as wives and mothers first, the play shows that widowhood in a democratic forward-looking country and a supportive family structure creates possibilities and liberations.

Bibiana Puigdefabregas's set is a delicious rustic kitchen with enough cupboards and doors to allow for the many comings and goings that propel the plot. López's production spares the play of unnecessary distractions and uses an acting style not afraid to juggle theatricality with naturalism. The play may function within the paradigms of a classic structure—prologue, two acts, and an epilogue—but within these rules the flashbacks, pauses, and reflections allow for a refreshing and unpredictable malleability. While alluding to a range of theatrical texts, *Germanes* never appears a mere echo of them. López is not afraid to acknowledge her sources, molding them into a theatrical work that engages both the head and the heart. Her cast is nothing short of excellent. María Lanau's Inés moves from poised professionalism to disheveled wreck without ever resorting to parody; Montse Germán gives Irene a luminosity that never appears one-dimensional or facile; Aina Clotet imbues Ivonne with both exasperating irresponsibility and an infectious *joie de vivre.* Amparo Fernández as the newly widowed mother of the clan brings something of the icy elegance of Catherine Deneuvre tempered by the pragmatism of Frances McDormand. Marcel Borràs balances sullenness and curiosity as the teenage Igor and Paul Berrondo gives an understated performance as the family outsider trying to provide support without ever appearing intrusive. The play moves effortlessly from Catalan to Castilian in ways that speak to the fabric of Catalan society. *Germanes* deserved its extended run at the Villarroel. It also deserves to be seen outside Catalonia and Spain.

At the Romea theatre another Catalan dramatist reshaped a classic. Pau Miró teamed up with Calixto Bieito to re-envision Aeschylus's *The Persians*, resituating it in Herat, Afghanistan, where Spanish troops have been deployed to maintain the peace. The action is reconceived as a requiem of sorts, played out by a rock band (both actors and chorus/commentators) who depict the horrors of the war in which they are trapped. Xerxes is here a female soldier whose death is feared and at once foretold by her father Dario (Roberto Quintana). Bieito sees this adaptation as a requiem to a dead Spanish soldier, any one of the casualties lost over the past five years. The recontexualization, however, isn't as well thought through as in Bieito's other reworkings: the massive Persian army defeated by the Greeks is here conceived as the Spanish defeated in Afghanistan and, while the arrogance that marked the Persians may well be attributed to the Spanish, the parallels don't appear terribly solid.

The production lacks the sophisticated critical framework of Bieito's *Peer Gynt* or *Don Giovanni*. Here Darius is a live but ghostly figure driven mad by the absence of a daughter he knows will not return. He opens the play wandering through the auditorium like a homeless vagrant. There is no Atossa and here the chorus of Persian elders is the army band that comments on Xerxes predicament in Afghanistan. The Spanish flag flies prominently across the stage leaving no one in doubt about the targets of the diatribe. The production is high on atmospherics—with intertitles flashing on a strip across the stage, smoke, fireworks, and the live band presenting a pulsating soundtrack to the action. The music is in itself a type of choral accompaniment with Edwin Starr's "War" making a conspicuous appearance. Bieito doesn't shy from showing the violence of armed conflict and Gurutze Beitia especially gives a moving performance as the vulnerable soldier. Bieito and Miró are relentless in their antiwar sentiments. War remains for both a legal mode of justifying rape and pillage. The dolls scattered around the stage are a potent image of the carcasses of children: war's most innocent victims.

Nevertheless the gusto and energy of the production certain appealed to the school audience at the Romea when I saw the piece. They screamed, shouted, commented, and cried. Nothing is left to the imagination in the staging but frankly this audience didn't seem to mind at all.

At the Gran Teatre del Liceu Joan Matabosch continues his policy of collaborating with Catalonia's theatrical mavericks. La Fura dels Baus's previous venture with the Liceu was a new take on Don Quixote, *D.Q. Don Quijote en Barcelona* realized with composer José Luis Turina. This new venture, a co-production with the Opéra National de Paris, presents a double bill of Janáček's

Aeschylus's *The Persians*, directed by Pau Miró. Photo: Romea Theatre.

Diary of One Who Disappeared and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle,* both directed by company members Alex Ollé and Carles Padrissa. The former begins in striking fashion with intertitles rising up from the ground in a vertical line. The dismembered Beckettian head of Lanik emerges from the ground. Michael König gives us a Lanik that never becomes more than a bobbing torso eerily lit on the black empty stage. If this is a Lanik that seems very distant from established characterizations, so La Fura's vision of Zefka moves away from the habitual gypsy temptress. This is more a hooker than a folkloric wayward maiden—all red hotpants, high boots, and Louise Brooks's bob. Marisa Martins's Zefka is a feline figure, hovering around Lanik as if scratching his face with her talon nails. The parallels with John the Baptist in *Salomé* appeared evident from the production's opening moments. The almost naked bodies that roll in from the sides in the latter part of the staging are both the figments of Lanik's imagination and an embodiment of temptation in its most forceful and antagonistic forms. From a distance they appear a mass of writhing worms: a statement on death, putrefaction, and the all-too-transitory pleasures of the flesh.

It is temptation that also appears the governing thematic in *Bluebeard's Castle.* The castle is here a mirage of reflections and projections of the Liceu itself, the doors mere mirages of light. Willard White's imposing Bluebeard proves an alluring figure; his larger-than-life shadow hovering over the stage like a ghostly apparition. Katarina Dalayman's Judith appears as a mass of configurations, each perhaps a manifestation of past loves, past wives. White's Bluebeard gives nothing away, a stoic presence whose secrets remain the ultimate enigma. There is something in La Fura's staging that restores the piece to its expressionistic origins. Nothing distracts from the tasks Judith has set for herself. The hands that emerge from the bed to caress her, like the worm-looking bodies of *Diary of One Who Disappeared*, suggest forces from beyond the grave that drive the characters' actions. Finally trapped in the inner recesses of the castle, the wives come out to claim the newest addition to the tribe but Judith runs towards the giant projection of Bluebeard and runs into it as the rain beats down relentlessly. Love and death united in the opera's final moments.

Considering that La Fura made their name with furious spectacles that blended the pace of a rock concert with acrobatics and pyrotechnics, there is something contemplative and measured in their approach to this double bill. Here time is stretched out in leisurely configurations that play with our concepts of the real and the imagined. Both pieces take place in a twilight zone that hovers between multiple textual spaces. The stage space is designed by Jaume Plensa, the company's regular collaborator. Plensa provides an open, expansive arena that functions as the site of both dreams and nightmares. La Fura have never been afraid to play with the audience's imagination. Here they indicate that even with canonical operas, playfulness and risk always have a role to play.