‘Barcelona: Mime, Music and a Return to School’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Ralph Fiennes. Photo: Courtesy National Theatre.

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Barcelona: Mime, Music, and a Return to School

Maria M. Delgado

The Liceu Opera's current season continues artistic director Joan Matabosch's intelligent policy of ensuring internationally recognized Spanish directors have a prominent place within Spain's most important opera house. At a time when Madrid's Teatro Real seems embroiled in a daily soap opera about its next artistic director with Gerard Mortier cast as the protagonist waiting in the wings to take center stage, the Liceu demonstrates an artistic maturity that has evaded Madrid's more volatile venue. This year has already seen the premiere of Lluís Pasqual's elegant *Le nozze di Figaro*, a co-production with Welsh National Opera, due to open in Cardiff on 7 February. There's also Enrique Lanz's version of Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de Maese Pedro* opening in January 2009, and Espert's *Turandot* coming at the end of the season in July 2009. José Luis Gómez, the Grotowski and Lecoq trained actor-director of Madrid's Teatro de la Abadia, has never previously directed opera in Spain and made his Spanish debut at the Liceu with a clear, visually striking production of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*.

Unfolding in an expansive horizontal set by Carl Fillion, Gómez's staging suggests a world beyond that which we first see, an interior universe that might be synonymous with the contained, credible performance of Anthony Michaels-Moore, making an impressive debut in the role of the titular corsair. Simon Boccanegra is elected to power on the basis of his bravery and military strategy; he can bring both aristocratic and popular factions together. There is something of a box of tricks about Fillion's set. The idea of conspiracy and intrigue is suggested in the production's opening moments as a sliding door opens up at the front of the stage to then reveal a buzzing world beyond where Boccanegra is being put forward as the successor to Jacobo Fiesco, whose daughter he happens to be in love with.

Gómez chooses not to set the production either in fourteenth-century Genoa or in the late nineteenth century and instead opts for what could be read as an early twentieth-century world of impending change, with a chorus of workmen in

Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra,* directed by José Luis Gómez. Photo: A. Bofill.

grey suits that have something of the proletarian uniform about them. The fragility of Boccanegra's position is reinforced by a set that appears almost shimmeringly transparent; a high gray imposing structure of misty windows where indiscernible shadows wander past. This is presented as an introspective world where characters look inwards rather than outwards. The impression is of Boccanegra living in something that resembles a lava lamp: beautiful but ultimately brittle (and shatterable). Boccanegra is allowed inside the hallowed edifice, but the giant doors that open and close suggest that the walls of the establishment have only let Boccanegra in to a limited degree.

Boccanegra's daughter Amelia (a luminous performance by Krassimira Stoyanova) is presented as a bird in a gilded cage surrounded by the oppressive institutional structures that similarly contain and in the end destroy her father. The glass set mutates to reflect and comment on the moods and emotions of the characters, shifting in different configurations to suggest both interior and exterior spaces. Marco Vratogna is a suitably menacing Paolo Albiani, Amelia's jilted suitor, who takes terrible revenge on Boccanegra. Vratogna gives a performance that avoids the cartoon villain, opting instead for plausible psychological torment. Neil Shicoff, however, is not a convincing Gabriele. And while this is a role that he has made unique, here he failed to render a dashing romantic aristocrat. He was evidently unwell on the date I saw the production and had to stop in an act 3 aria but his was a rather wooden performance. Gómez did present his aged Gabriele as an alternative father figure to Michaels-Moore's youthful Boccanegra. He conceives the death of this just ruler as a tragedy and visually composes a death scene marked by giant steps (a homage to Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*) where Boccanegra's physical demise is enacted with a chorus of the fallen paying homage to his wisdom and greatness. He is held up by the community as he dies, a Christ-like figure brought down by the avarice of others to save the society he has governed.

Certainly the languid conducting of Paolo Carignari did not help what perhaps becomes a rather slow staging and the tempo would certainly have benefited from a little more dynamism to help propel the production along. Nevertheless this is a thoughtful, measured staging that demonstrates Gómez's eye for detail and a flawless technique in the composition of stylish stage pictures.

I wasn't entirely sure how *The History Boys* would work in Catalan. Would the particular English grammar school context speak to a Spanish education system that revolves around the public versus private (clergy educated) models? Served by a clear, idiomatic translation by Joan Sellent, actor Josep Maria Pou's decision to open the Goya theatre with Alan Bennett's very English play, *Els nois d'història,* appears to have paid off and is now playing to full houses. Closed since 2003 for major renovation, the Goya had been a major landmark of the Catalan theatre scene—for example, premiering Lorca's *Mariana Pineda* in 1927 and providing a venue for the Moscow Arts Theatre during its 1932 visit. It is now under the management of the Focus Group, also responsible for the Romea, under Calixto Bieito's artistic directorship, and the Villarroel, under the artistic directorship of Argentine dramatist Javier Daulte. Its tired interior has been replaced by a sleek five hundred–seat auditorium and a bar-cum-studio space under the stalls of the new theatre.

The production is very different from Nick Hytner's 2004 National Theatre production. Paco Azorín's set offers an open space framed by high red brick walls and church-like windows. The space suggests a particular hallowed venue, at once church and the red brick universities of the post-war era. A row of red lockers runs across the back wall, all adorned with images suggesting the cultural influences that shape both the students and staff. Posters of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, The Clash, and The Doors are positioned alongside a portrait of Shakespeare, black-and-white photos of Marlene Dietrich, and even Bennett himself. The space is both classroom and staff room, with the desks moved into a range of different configurations as the action demands.

Pou gives the production a brisk pace that sweeps the story along. Sellent's translation cuts specific references to the UK education system, particular English-language works (as with the discussion of Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge"), and the evolution of the monarchy that might be lost on a Spanish audience. The resulting version is in no way a truncated version of the play but rather thinks through how and why it might speak to a local audience. As such the staging opens not with a Sheffield reference but with the sound of Big Ben echoing through the darkness. It is a cultural marker that speaks of the UK and functions to ground the production in the particularities of "another" country.

Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, directed by Joseph Maria Pou. Photo: David Ruano.

Pou's lithe staging is marked by a wonderful ensemble cast of boys that bound onto the set in the production's early moments and remain there in various configurations during most of the production. They hover around the lockers, gather around the piano, and float in pairs or trios at the peripheries of the conversations among the staff. The cast lacks the multicultural dimensions of the National Theatre production. Akthar (Oriol Casals) is not Muslim; Crowther (Xavi Francès) not Afro-Caribbean but rather discernibly Valencian. Dakin appears visibly older than the other boys but it's a performance that reinforces the character's position as the clear leader of the pack and evident object of Posner's affections. Nao Albet's frail Posner plays the role for vulnerability and effeminacy rather than the shyness that marked Samuel Barnett's characterization. But the strength of Pou's production lies in recognizing that the individual roles shift through the interrelationships between the boys and that it is these that propel the action forward. Javier Beltrán is a lissome, alert Rudge full of a restless energy that finds its outlet in sporting prowess. Ferran Vilajosana has none of the boyish clowning of James Cordon in the role of Timms but offers a different kind of grounding to the role.

As with Edward Albee's *The Goat, or, Who is Silvia?* [see the review in *WES* 18.1, Winter 2006], Pou is both performer and director (although not translator and producer). His Hector is less camp than Griffith's creation. Rather, the focus is on a melancholy man aware in many ways that the world that he has helped nurture has its days numbered. While the impeccable bow tie speaks to pride in his appearance, the disheveled biker's jacket and well-worn tweed coat tell a different story, and Pou never allows Hector to fall in to the terrain of easy caricature. The battle with Jordi Andújar's wooden Irwin always looks one-sided. Irwin looks too prim at all times to really convince in what should be a seductive role. His vision of education as a means of strategizing, as a way of passing exams, resonates with an audience finding their own education system all too often at the mercy of reactive politicians. The intellectual battle between Hector's view that knowledge, in itself, is something worth passing on, and Irwin's position that it's ultimately about finding an intellectual position (often opportunistic) and defending it, still dominates the play but it never quite seems an even contest. Yes, the play is about the formative relationships with teachers and mentors that help define who we are and about threats to

education as something of value in and of itself rather than a means of passing exams. But it also becomes in Pou's production a study of masculinity and adolescent desire in its many confused forms. Maife Gil's Mrs. Lintott seems something of an arbitrator. She is a decidedly feminine presence, all glamorous shawls and slick coordinates, and seems more a prim headmistress than a class history teacher.

Is this a lament for a lost world? Perhaps in our results-driven world, the opportunism of Josep Mingull's headmaster—another rather stilted one-dimensional performance—is increasingly the norm. Hector is never idealized. The production never tries to evade his problematic "games" with the boys on the bike en route to his home. His imagination, however, is celebrated as is his flexibility and willingness to recognize that culture takes many forms—from Hollywood to Mozart. It is the power to think outside the box that is ultimately commended in the production.

The play takes place in the 1980s but Pou is less specific about the time of his staging. Certainly it could be the present, more of a time of crisis for Spain than the 1980s when the euphoria of the socialist government propelled the state forward on a course of institutional change.

The musical numbers, including "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," and "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," are all performed in English. They add something of a musical energy to the production: interludes that reflect and/or comment on the drama at moments of high action or emotional shifts. They might also be, in part, a Brechtian device—hence their rendition in English rather than Catalan—or perhaps function as a way of reinforcing part of the "otherness" of the world presented in the Bennett/Pou project. Indeed this is the strength of the production; it is an English world intersected with the Catalan eye through which the play is refracted. There is something very Spanish about the preppy blazers and polished loafers; and it is a delight to hear the French of the Parisian brothel scene—practicing the subjunctive—refracted through the prisms of Catalan rather than English accentuation. What Pou realizes is that school is a definitive shaper of us all, for better or for worse, and the audience's warm reception, a hundred performances after the production first opened, indicates how it is speaking to spectators in the city.

His own performance may, following the success of his staging of Albee's *The Goat*, in part explain the success of the production. Certainly there is something of the outsider about both Pou and Hector. Pou is the Catalan who cut his teeth as an actor in Madrid. And while he has been a prominent presence on the Catalan stage in recent years, he is very much a figure whose trajectory has been associated with the Madrid stage and Madrid directors. He is the actor turned director; someone now occupying a role associated with the *metteur en scène*. It's as if the maverick teacher has taken over the school and audiences evidently approve.

Since opening in October, *History Boys* has been doing very good business with a run extended into March with a Catalan-language tour to follow. Spanish-language tours are also in the pipeline with the production set to roll on through 2009 and into 2010. This is an intelligent production and one which announces the mandate of a new theatre in the city.

The Catalan performance group Tricicle has brought their particular brand of slapstick and mime to the Poliorama theatre with its latest venture, *Garrick*. For those expecting a show about the eighteenth-century British actor, the show might prove a disappointment. The premise may come from Garrick but it's based on what seeing Garrick in action could do for audiences: doctors recommended his performances as a therapy for maladies and ailments. So this is, in Tricicle's words, "a tribute show" that encourages its audience to laugh as loudly and as often as possible in the spirit of Garrick. The cast dons white coats in an amusing nod to Garrick's therapeutic abilities. This is Tricicle as "doctors of humor" in a show that is as much conference presentation as it is performance. *Sit* (2002–06), their previous production, was a more cohesive, structured affair, offering a witty contemplation on the history of the chair from the beginning of time to the present. *Garrick* is rather a series of sketches that draw on familiar situations in the locations of our daily world, reviewing them through the prisms of an almost absurdist humor. The influences come as much from silent cinema and screwball comedies as they do from classic mime, *commedia dell'arte,* and Catalan performance, and the fusion has proved a hugely successful formula for the company. *Garrick* is thus, in many ways, a study of the mechanics of humor, a ways of bringing together tricks and treats that display the techniques of the company and the ways in which gags are structured and delivered.

Joan Gràcia, Paco Mir, and Carles Sans,

the three veteran company members responsible for writing, enacting and directing all the shows, perform with their usual elastic aplomb. There are some delightful sketches: "A Hundred Ways of Saying Hello" had the many children in the audience in stitches. A sketch in a museum sees the three performers trying to outwit each other in stealing the loot in front of them and it could well be titled "A Hundred Ways of Playing with a Pair of Tights." There is a wonderful extended scenario set in a lift that plays on our current obsession with and (over-)reliance on the mobile phone. Some of the other "actions" rely on rather well worn formulas—as with the variation on the "fly in my soup" sketch and the magician and his accomplice routine where tricks are conjured with a Breville sandwich maker. There is a fair amount of lavatory humor and some of the sketches are rather long—as with the fairy story–cum–warning on global warming enacted by Paco Mir while Carles Sans creates the sound effects on a table filled with rudimentary instruments and household items. Nevertheless this is a show that is not afraid to prod the obsession with our advertising culture and the excesses of masculinity—as in the park trip that shows three pregnant men unable to rid themselves of a range of dodgy vices. *Garrick*—the title evidently playing on the company's penchant for shows that gravitate around the ic/it verbal formula: *Manicomic* (1982), *Exit* (1984), *Slastic* (1986), *Terrific* (1992), *Sit* (2002)—is currently playing to packed houses, confirming that the company's contemporary take on classic mime continues to speak to audiences across a range of ages.

Tricicle's *Garrick*. Photo: Courtesy of Tricicle.

Dance Umbrella's *Transports Exceptionnels*, choreographed by Dominique Boivin. Photo: Jennifer Parker-Starbuck.