‘Barcelona’s Grec Festival and the Tail of the City’s 2008-09 Season’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona's Grec Festival and the Tail of the City's 2008–09 Season

Maria M. Delgado

There is always a period in late June and early July when the end of the theatre season spills into the city's annual summer arts festival, the Grec. It's also the time when theatres announce their new seasons, with *Frost/Nixon* opening the Lliure's season, Juan Cavestany's *Urtaín* the Romea's and Leo Bassi's Utopia the Villarroel's. Argentine writer-director Javier Daulte also pronounced his departure from the Villarroel at the end of the forthcoming season—Catalan dramatist-director Carol López seems to be the favorite to replace him—citing the problems of having his base in Argentina as the primary reason for handing over the artistic reins of the theatre.

The Grec this year provided a larger number of events than in previous years and consequently attracted a larger number of spectators: sixty-six productions bringing in audiences of 88,841. There was, however, a decrease in tickets sold—fifty-five percent to fifty-seven percent last year—and the festival's director, Ricardo Szwarcer, mentioned the cancellation of Amos Gitai's adaptation of Flavius Josephus's *War of the Jews* because of Jeanne Moreau's indisposition as a key factor in the percentage fall. The Grec had a strong focus on Italian work this year—both of established *auteurs* like Castellucci and Ronconi and lesser known companies and directors like Motus, Pippo Delbono, Santasangre, and Pathosformel. There remains, nevertheless, a marked emphasis on new Catalan work as well as a healthy quota of Spanish-language productions realized with theatres in Madrid and Bilbao.

In many ways the success story of the year in Barcelona has proved the new Goya theatre, opening fully renovated and refurbished under a new owner, Focus, and a new artistic director, Josep Maria Pou. While the opening production, Alan Bennett's *History Boys*, embarks on a tour of Spain [see the review in WES 21.2, Spring 2009], the theatre's second production, *La vida por delante*, an adaptation of Romain Gary's *La vie devant soi* (*The*

Xavier Jaillard's *La Vida por Delante*. Photo: Courtesy of Barcelona Grec Festival.

Life Before Us), is attracting packed houses. The novel won the Prix Goncourt in 1975 and was subsequently adapted for the cinema two years later. Translated into Catalan by Josep Maria Vidal and presented in an adaptation by Xavier Jaillard, the piece tells the story of Madame Rosa, an ageing Jewish former prostitute who has fostered a series of boys belonging to colleagues who are not able to take care of them. The only one remaining with her is the Muslim Momo, a naïve seventeen-year-old boy hopelessly devoted to the blowsy Rosa. As Rosa becomes ill, Momo is determined to take care of her and resists the efforts of her doctor to have her transferred into a hospital. She dies with Momo continuing to protect her from the ravages of the outside world.

The action takes place in Llorenç Corbella's attic apartment, filled with well-worn furniture with something of a Bohemian air. From the very opening the emphasis is on ensuring that the audience feels comfortable and is regularly brought into the action. Lines are overtly addressed to them and a spirit of complicity cultivated. Rubén de Eguia plays Momo larger than life, as a geeky teenager (a slight skip in his step and a healthy quota of awkward posturing) always appearing on the verge of bursting into song. Concha Velasco offers a variation on her highly popular stage and screen persona. There's an amusing shuffle across the stage, stockings perennially having to be pulled up and a range of risqué underwear peeping beneath the nylon petticoats that are her day-to-day attire. The play is laden with exposition to ensure that we have our fill of the characters' past histories. Nothing is left to the imagination. Momo and Rosa discuss their past and their present, and the play is in many ways a double act of banter and revelation interrupted by the outside world as represented by the kind Doctor Katz (a habitually solid performance by Romea regular Carles Canut) and Momo's father, the fanatical recently released murderer Youssef Kadir (all rolling eyes and manic energy from José Luis Fernández). Outside threats are dispensed with through elaborated fictions, verve, and gay abandon.

This is an unconventional love story in the vein of *Harold and Maude*: the tale of a shy boy and a forceful girl hopelessly devoted to each other. Concha Velasco swings on and off stage in a range of outfits and hats; her deterioration into senility is gleefully camp and conspiratorial. We are permitted to see her petticoats tucked into a corset as she attempts to run away, red stilettos and matching suitcase in hand. There is not much subtlety here, but none of the audience seemed to mind.

Indeed, the audience delights in the stage excess with wild applause for Velasco as she takes her curtain call. Velasco is a much-loved institution in Spain with a loyal following who have flocked to the Goya since the production opened on 28 March. With Madame Rosa, Velasco has given a larger than life Jewish mamma, who rises to the challenges that present themselves: her outwitting of Momo's obsessed father, in particular, is a lesson in enterprising thinking on your feet and a speedy delivery of lines. This production doesn't point to Velasco as a versatile actress in the way Rosa Maria Sardà evidently is—but it shows she can carry a line and take an audience along with her. This is a performance conceived in broad brush strokes, charting the ups and downs of one of life's survivors supported in death by the unlikeliest of friendships.

José Sanchis Sinisterra, founder-director of the Sala Beckett, one of Barcelona's most influential theatre spaces, has a new play at the venue. The Sala Beckett has proved resilient to fads, offering a workshop environment where playwrights in Catalonia can come into contact with writers from elsewhere in the world. It has proved a nurturing space for Catalan playwrights, producing the work of Sergi Belbel, Mercè Sarrias, Lluïsa Cunillé, Paco Zarzoso, and Carles Batlle (among others). It's impossible to discuss playwriting in Catalonia without referencing it. The venue's artistic director, Toni Casares, is now also in charge of the Catalan National Theatre's T6 strand of programming, commissioning work from emerging writers, that demonstrates the TNC's commitment to new Catalan writing. This summer sees Simon Stephens, Rafael Spregelburd, and Neil LaBute delivering workshops as part of the Beckett's summer program, while Sinisterra's *Vagas noticias de Klamm (Vague News from Klamm)* enjoys a month-long run at the venue as part of the Grec's official program.

The terrain of the play will be familiar to those acquainted with Galceran's *Gronholm Method.* A Human Resources office in what appears to be a large company (peddling unspecified wares) is conducting a job interview with a young woman, Carolina, who seems to have multiple qualifications. There's a plethora of degrees and experience at a wide range of institutions; but probe a little more deeply and it all seems rather irrelevant and insubstantial. It's the office manager's job to investi-

gate how prepared she is for a job that is never really defined. And this he does with dogged persistence, aided and abetted by a secretary who contributes some perplexing interventions to the interview. Nothing is quite what it seems. Valverde, the prim and proper employer-cum-office manager is too fastidious for comfort. He seems to be intent on catching the slightly awkward Carolina out as often as he can. He hides behind the protection offered by an expansive corporate desk, and Marc Garcia Coté plays him as a slightly geeky individual, parading his power in ways that never entirely convince. Ferran Audi plays his mysterious secretary, Geimírez, seen one minute typing at his desk in wig and kilt, the next receiving balls from his boss. Geimírez is played as a cross-dressing male, an indication that gender, like so much else in the play, cannot be pinned down.

The play is very much about protocol and appearances, about the need to say the right thing and assimilate the jargon of the workplace. Words are twisted, manipulated, and misused. The mysterious Klamm, evoked all too regularly by the pusillanimous Valderde, is a Godot figure, destined never to appear; a presence evoked by the characters as the ultimate arbitrator of all their acts. *Klamm* is not vintage Sinisterra. There isn't much substance to the play with conceits pushed into the terrain of excessive repetition. The verbal games between the three characters are entertaining enough for brief periods but they never really add up to a fully formed theatrical work. Quim Roy's set aims for a modish corporate feel but the action remains rather constrained and Sinisterra's own production rests too easily within larger than life acting and sly jokes to an all too knowing audience.

Marta Poveda's Carolina provides the best reason for seeing *Klamm*. Hers is an intelligent performance that retains an audience's interest in the play's uneven dynamics. There is something beguiling in her treatment of Valverde and her take on the assigned role-play suggests an enigmatic mystery that none of the other performances can match. Her comic timing makes something of the rather turgid dialogue offered by Sinisterra, but ultimately, however, she cannot save a disappointing piece of writing.

Sinisterra is one of a number of Catalan dramatists featuring at this year's Grec. Marc Martínez offered a contemporary take on *Look Back in Anger*, *Stokölm,* at the Borràs Theatre; Jordi Coca a reworking of *Iphigenia* at the Lliure; and Pau Miró turned to the family in *Girafes* at the Lliure. Again at the Lliure, Jordi Casanovas provided a version of

José Sinisterra's *Vagas noticias de Klamm*. Photo: Courtesy of Barcelona Grec Festival.

Look Back in Anger, Stokölm, directed by Marc Martínez. Photo: Courtesy of Grec Festival.

Miss Julie for the grunge generation that fuses Strindberg's tale with the tormented life of Kurt Cobain. *Julia Smells Like Teen Spirit*, certainly attracted a young audience but the onstage music and singing—Strindberg's original trio has now become a band with Julia as an unhappy rock star—fails to convince me that this is a carefully thought through transposition. The first half certainly sets up the situation between the three as the antics of the unstable Julia generate concern among her colleagues, but the play only offers more of the same, and the Brechtian comments to the audience fail to really gel with what is essentially a naturalistic structure. The 1980s feel is nicely conjured in Damien Bazín's crumpled stage—scattered records, battered sofa, strewn clothes—but ultimately too much is explained and seen, and too little left to the imagination.

This year's Grec also proffered a look back to key Catalan writers of the past. Joan Vinyoli's poetry opened the festival accompanied by the music of Eduard Iniesta in a one-off event conceived by actor Lluís Soler and director Antonio Calvo. Josep Pla's *El quadern gris* (*The Gray Notebook*), a diary written while a student in 1918–19 is adapted for the stage and given an imaginative production by Joan Ollé. Less successful is Josep Galindo's old-fashioned *La ruta blava* (*The Blue Route*), enacting the writer Josep Maria de Sagarra's adventures as he leaves Spain in 1936, at the beginning of the Civil War, for Paris and then Tahiti. Rifail Ajdarpasic offers an elegant set but the action seems rather turgid with lines delivered unimaginatively to the audience. The plodding storytelling is a world away from the imaginative wizardry of *El quadern gris*.

The Grec has also provided a fair quota of 'big' names. Castellucci's Societas Raffaello Sanzio presented *Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso* across three venues in the city. Ronconi offered what has generally been seen as a disappointing *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Lepage his collaboration with Sylvie Guillem and Russell Maliphant, *Eonnagata*, both at the TNC. Levaudant's *Oedipus* trilogy, produced in Eduardo Mendoza's Castilian-language translation of Daniel Loayza's adaptation of Sophocles' plays, split the critics while Lluís Pasqual's delicious double-bill of *zarzuelas* by Manuel Fernández Caballero was acclaimed as one of the Festival's highlights.

Another Catalan director, Calixto Bieito, returned to the Grec this year with his version of Schiller's *Don Carlos*, presented in a co-production between the Romea, the Grec, Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional, and the XV. Internationalen Schillertage in Mannheim. This is not the first time Bieito has handled *Don Carlos*. In 2006 he presented Verdi's opera for the Theater of Basel, but here he moves toward a reading that positions the play very clearly within Spain. Bieito has commissioned a new Castilian-language translation by Adan Kovacsis and undertaken some dramaturgical shaving with Marc Rosich to further condense the play within a compact seventy-five-minute frame: the Count Cordua, Prince of Palma, Duke of Medina Sidonia, and Count Lerma are all dispensed with in favour of a tighter focus on the father-son narrative. The production draws on a number of his past collaborators from the Romea—Mingo Ràfols playing the Great Inquisitor and the Confessor to the King as rigid clerics, Àngels Bassas, the superb Goneril of the 2004 *King Lear*, as the conniving Princess of Eboli, and Rafa Castejón, from *The Persians*, outstanding as the Marquis of Poza—but on the whole the production sees him opt for collaborators that have been more associated with his operatic work of late.

And indeed, Don Carlos is a return to the theatre for a director who has been increasingly opting for opera. Rebecca Ringst, the German designer who worked with him on a number of his most recent productions, *The Abduction from the Seraglio (*2004) at the Komische Oper Berlin and *Brand* (2008) at Oslo's National Theatre, here proffers an imaginative greenhouse set, a protected hothouse where Carlos Hipólito's King Philip II cultivates his many plants. The enclosed greenhouse provides a brilliant metaphor for Philip II's court: a sweltering space where no one can escape the watch of the regal apparatus. Indeed, Ràfols's confessor watches over the action, pacing across the different layers of this fragile conservatory. Nothing escapes his vigilant glance. With Josep Ferrer's Duke of Alba he creates an unholy alliance that steers the king's actions. Hipólito's Philip appears anything but an absolute monarch. A slight figure in casual chinos he shouts to reinforce his presence in a court that seems to escape his total grasp. This is a man who would rather be pruning his plants than dealing with people. His queen, Elizabeth de Valois, appears an irritating distraction and it is evident that he is in no way attracted to her. Even Bassas's scheming,

Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*, directed by Calixto Bieito. Photo: Courtesy of Grec Festival.

Schiller's *Don Carlos*. Photo: Courtesy of Grec Festival.

voluptuous Princess of Eboli, who throws herself before him, fails ultimately to distract him from his solipsistic existence.

The production seems to present many of the characters as pawns caught within a hothouse that dwarfs them. The Queen is a petulant girl who uses the first opportunity alone with Carlos to bare her breasts and declare herself in forthright ways. Bieito's reading does not enact the attraction between Violeta Pérez's Elizabeth de Valois and Jordi Andújar's Carlos. Rather both are presented as little more than children. Andújar, replacing the indisposed Rubén Ochandiano (the tormented Ray X in Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces*), conceives Carlos as a nerdish adolescent who'd prefer to be listening to his ipod and spraying red highlights in his hair than seducing his father's wife. Pérez's Elizabeth is a vulgar teen who can't wait to lift up her crinoline skirt at the earliest opportunity.

Costume designer Ingo Krügler has worked with Gaultier and Galliano in Paris, and boy does it show. The tight corsets and wide crinolines pay lip service to an earlier age, but are refracted through vocabularies that seem more Madonna than Marie-Antoinette. You have to know how to occupy an outfit, however, and Pérez never quite inhabits her costume in the way Bassas's lascivious Eboli manages. Begoña Alberdi as the Duchess of Alba (in a reworking of the role of the Duchess of Olivarez) provides a musical underscoring for the action, singing out a Gregorian chant that further fixes the action within clerical paradigms. She acts as if remote controlled or on automatic, entering and exiting with a mechanical efficiency. Attired in a variation of the corset and crinoline, she appears a severe, crow-like figure, looming ominously over and policing the court. While the women remain trapped within these costumes of the past, the men's attire is somewhat less constrictive: slacks for the King, shorts and baseball boots for Don Carlos, suits for the Duke of Alba and the Marquis of Poza. Castejón's Marquis, played with a hint of Andalusian accentuation, is in many ways the pulse of this production. His energy, the clear delivery of the lines, the avoidance of empty declamation—too often a part of Andújar's and Pérez's performances—serve to define the urgency and attractiveness of a character that we come to understand will risk

all for his close friend Carlos. In many ways it is the relationship between Castejón's Marquis and Andújar's Carlos that becomes the central axis of the production, and this is when it really acquires something of the energy and sexual charge of Michael Grandage's 2004 staging. Ultimately, however, Bieito never really follows this reading through and we are left to watch as Carlos pines for a Queen with which there appears little connection and no real chemistry.

This may in part be due to Andújar, an actor who doesn't really look at ease within the "heroic." Well cast in Pou's production of *History Boys* as the pompous Irwin, he finds it difficult here to embody Don Carlos's struggles. Only in the encounters with Castejón's Marquis do we get some sort of sense of how much is at stake. Rubén Ochandiano, who opened the production in Mannheim, specializes in the angst-ridden and the dangerous, and the production might have had a very different charge with his Carlos. Andújar certainly received a warm reception from the audience at the Grec for stepping in to replace the injured Ochandiano (who will return to the production when it opens in Madrid in the latter half of September), but the characterization never really gels. This has also to do with Bieito's reading. Carlos is infantilized as a gauche teenager: the production opens with him in a world of his own, dancing to his iphone at the front of the stage as the audience takes their seats. His giggly awkwardness with both his father—whom he confronts like a petulant adolescent—and Elizabeth—he drops his pants and chuckles as she flashes her breasts at him—ultimately leaves their relationships in the realm of the puerile. There is no sense of honor or decorum here, no sense of a love that dare not speak its name. Fumbling, groping, and testosterone fuelled are more the order of the game. Too often the actors deliver their lines as if rushing for a train. The production would have benefited from a more detailed attention to characterization to match the spectacular visuals.

This is not to say that the production is bereft of interest. Bieito's visual imagination remains in evidence with moments of fierce brilliance (as with Bassas's prostration before the King**,** the masking of Carlos under the Queen's ample skirts, the fevered encounters between the Marquis and Carlos). The props associated with Ràfols's confessor—rosary beads and fans—suggest an unholy association between church and state. Indeed, Bieito's point is precisely that Catholicism is one of the fundamentals of the nation state and bound up with the iconography of nationhood. Bieito's final image of Carlos, attired as a suicide bomber, clearly points to analogies with the present. The Queen's white suit (worn in the production's final scene) may suggest a breaking out of the constraints imposed by the more formal Court attire, but the design bears more than a passing resemblance to the suit worn by Princess Leticia on the announcement of her engagement to Prince Philip of Spain and may again serve to provide associations with the current climate in Spain.

The references are, however, never really embedded in a central defining concept or aesthetic that binds them within a coherent spectacle. The greenhouse design is spectacular, but the opening scenes appear rather cumbersome as the characters emerge from and disappear into the plastic sheeting that envelops the metallic structure. Only when the sheeting is pulled down do we really get a sense of the machinations and manoeuvres within the court. The giant iron doors at the back of the stage functions again to suggest a prison, and Philip's table has something of the operating or torture table about it: a cold, clinical object whose alternative purpose (as when he's curtly pruning plants) is all too evident.

Metaphors of torture abound. There's a cage at the front of the stage where characters are imprisoned and seek refuge like wounded animals. Carlos and his half-sister are perhaps its most conspicuous occupants. The corpses that emerge from the earth—reminders of the atrocities of Flanders perhaps or of Philip's murderous excesses—may evoke a traumatic past that the characters can never escape from: ghosts that haunt the nation's present. They remain an unnecessary distraction, however, from the main plot. And while the central narrative is beautifully enhanced by the eerie chant of the Duchess of Alba, the multiple spheres of action lend the production an overly busy aesthetic. I missed the clarity of Bieito's storytelling in *Macbeth* (2002)*, King Lear* (2004), and *Peer Gynt* (2006). Bieito has always proved a compelling narrator. Here I'm not entirely convinced he's clear about the tale he's trying to tell.

Eleven years ago I was dazzled by Bieito's inventive take on García Lorca's final play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Now Lluís Pasqual turns to the play with a production that couldn't be any more different but that similarly finds the pulse of the play. Where Bieito opted for vertical minimal-

García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, directed by Lluís Pasqual. Photo: David Ruano.

ism, Pasqual has turned to a horizontal landscape that operates within realist paradigms. Paco Azorín has provided him with an expansive gray-white tiled room: a space that reflects every stain, every speck of dust, anything that taints the brilliance of its surfaces. Pasqual has plumped for a traverse stage where the audience frames the action. The sisters' sense of imprisonment is evident: high tomb-like walls on two sides, the audience on the other two. The sense of suffocation is palpable.

The room is first seen through a fine gauze curtain. The impression is that of looking at a screen, or photograph. The curtain remains in place until after the neighbours—and Pasqual provides an astonishing twenty-nine of them—enter following the funeral mass for Bernarda's husband, Antonio María Benavides. When this curtain lifts (and the ceiling closes in like a detachable car roof) we begin to get a sense of the inner workings of the house that Rosa Maria Sardà's Poncia had alluded to in the opening scene. Without the gauze to mask it, Bernarda's jacket looks well worn from heavy ironing; her daughters look pale and rather sickly. In act 2, appearing first in white underwear, they blend in with the walls in an alarming fashion. In act 1, Pasqual shows Magdalena, Amelia, and Martirio dying clothes black in a large cauldron. Pragmatic economy is the order of the day. Forget the faded glamour of Howard Davies's 2005 National Theatre production, this is a world where imprisonment takes its toll and poverty is a not-so-distant possibility for the majority of the sisters.

Indeed, Pasqual's production is filled with memorable moments that highlight the increasing desperation of the sisters. Fans are used as both adornments and weapons, fluttering like a tiny chorus as the neighbours enter the stage in act 1. Chairs are removed effortlessly as the neighbours leave the stage minutes later. Magdalena weeps as the reapers march past the window in act 2 and then washes away their traces with water from the tap. Angustias kisses the photo of Pepe el Romano when it is returned to her from Martirio. The exclusion of Angustias is evident in act 2 as the sisters congregate on the other side of the stage as if about to face her in a gladiatorial conflict. The sickly Martirio suffers panic attacks that suggest asthma. The girls follow their mother like a herd of elephants as she enters the room to enquire about the noise in the village as act 2 nears its end. The sisters often give the impression of waiting by the door—listening and observing the action. Pasqual's production sets up a

concrete sense of vigilance and surveillance, of an enclosed environment where nothing escapes. Indeed, the small drain in the centre of the stage in act 2 is the only way anything gets away from the house.

While there is a definite period feel to the production—with clear 1930s costumes and hair—the performance vocabularies betray the influence of both Brook and Strehler. The economy of movement is pure Brook; the almost dance like aesthetic Strehler. Crucially, Pasqual follows both in opting for a grounded characterization of all the roles. Each daughter is carefully defined; their modes of walking, talking, posture, gestures all worked through to sustain the action of the play. Nuria Espert gives us a Bernarda that struggles with what's expected of her. Her attire betrays her conformity and respectability: mannish lace-up shoes, a long straight skirt, and buttoned up jacket. She whips Angustias like a horseman berating an errant mule who can't keep up to speed when she finds Angustias has been outside watching the men; she rubs lipstick across her face to render her a clown-like figure when she sees her wearing make-up on the day of her step-father's funeral. She confronts Poncia like a boxer ready to throw the first blow and arches her face knowingly to catch note of all the conversations around her. This is not a Bernarda that rules by shouting but rather by quiet coercion. She is also presented as a mother who collapses to the floor on hearing of her daughter's death. At the end of the production she watches impotently as her remaining daughters cling to the white walls like distended spiders, crumpling to the floor as the curtain falls. Only Angustias looks to the door, but it is a door that the production suggests is now closed to her. The final image is of the living dead, slowly suffocating corpses in a tomb.

Pasqual uses the width of the stage brilliantly, with characters hovering by the edges, sometimes watching or waiting, sometimes unsure as to whether to make an entry. The build up in act 3 is expertly handled, with thunder and lightning serving to conjure a storm-brewing mood that further unsettles the characters. Pasqual understands the architectural shape of the play and its echoes of gothic melodrama. The characters' comings and goings in the latter half of act 3 are almost farcical.

Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, directed by Lluís Pasqual. Photo: David Ruano.

Martirio attempts to strangle Adela and then fights with her aggressively as the latter boldly declares that she's been with Pepe. Angustias grabs Adela roughly by the hair as the truth of her relationship with Pepe is exposed.

The production expertly negotiates the different generic registers of the play—from gothic horror to symbolism, from the picturesque to realism. Rosa María Sardà's Poncia is an earthy plain speaker—she first appears stuffing her face with bread and ham. She's not afraid to get her hands dirty and moves with the pragmatic purpose of one of life's doers. Sardà's elastic face has always been a wonderful comic weapon, and here she uses it to full effect: there are disdained looks, firm reproaches, whispered suggestions, conspiratorial conversations. With Espert's Bernarda, she creates a double-act that speaks of a shared history that we can only begin to gleam. Indeed, for all the clarity of Pasqual's production, much is left unsaid: just suggested or implied. The play retains its mysteries. Pasqual is also not afraid to show the grubby nature of the world of the play. Teresa Lozano's María Josefa bathes her head in the cauldron of clothes' dye. The sisters cackle at each other like vipers. María Josefa in pink-white bodice—an image of distended femininity—with red cheeks has something of Angustias with make-up streaked across her face. She functions perhaps as a reminder of the fate that awaits the daughters. Her act 3 appearance, lamb in tow, portrays her as a grotesque Madonna, shawl enveloping her head like a shroud.

Presented at Catalonia's National Theatre, the TNC, the production opts not for a Catalan or a specifically Andalusian world but rather a more generalized Spanish rustic milieu. Flat espadrilles are the preferred footwear of most of the cast. Heat is palpably suggested through the lighting and posture of the characters. Water is flicked by the sisters to cool themselves down; clothes are dispensed with when possible in favour of undergarments; jugs of water are the most conspicuous adornment in the space. Pasqual has an impressive track record with García Lorca's impossible works—having staged the premieres of *The Public* and *Play without a Title* in 2006 and 2009 respectively. Here he turns to one of the playwright's most emblematic works and provides a compelling reading that refuses to tread the

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, directed by Oriol Broggi. Photo: Bito Cels.

all too familiar folkloric path of so many of his predecessors. A sell out two-month run at the TNC's Sala Petita has been met with rapturous reviews and the production now moves to Madrid where it plays at the Teatro Español from 10 September to 25 October.

Barcelona doesn't have a shortage of appropriated theatre spaces. The old flower market is now the Mercat de les Flors; the agricultural pavilion in Montjuïc the new Teatre Lliure home, a former factory the Sala Beckett (and this is to name just three). More recently, the Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya has served as a welcome theatrical venue for Oriol Broggi's and Carlota Subirós's inventive Laperla 29 company. After their majestic *King Lear* last year, there's a return to Shakespeare with an ambitious production of *Hamlet* in the stark stone-walled interior of the nave of the library. In a year where Spain has had a plethora of *Hamlets*—the most recent featuring *Broken Embraces*'s Blanca Portillo in the title role—Broggi gives us a take that reminds us how indebted he is to the holy and rough theatre of Peter Brook. The sand floors, a hallowed environment, the simplicity of a décor enacted through and across the bodies of the actors—save for a row of coat pegs on the back wall and a bench and platform brought on as necessary—is all basic Brook. The focus is on telling a story, and the staging is bereft of distractions that might get in the way of this storytelling. We begin with a prologue by Horatio that frames the tale as theatre. There's a row of black jackets across a back wall, ready to be appropriated by the actors. Bernardo and Marcellus appear with staffs in hand, recalling Sotigui Kouyaté's Prospero in Brook's *Tempest.* Fire and water make their way in to the production and a carpet is rolled out for *The Murder of Gonzago*. The characters climb up to high windows as if ascending battlements. Props are carried on and off as part of the ensuing action. A cast of seven move across characters; donning a jacket or a pair of glasses to suggest the move to another role. Nothing is forced. We are simply asked to accept that when the costume is picked up the transition has taken place.

Broggi's accomplished production cultivates our complicity. Hamlet talks to us as if we were seated in the corner of a café with him. Old Hamlet's Ghost wanders into the auditoria through the same door as the audience previously entered. This is the disruption, the 'thing' that enters from a different realm, sword in hand, to turn the world of Elsinore inside out. We are witnesses to this act and so become implicated in the culture of fear and retribution that Hamlet is a part of. Hamlet is certainly in mourning but the mourning is only part of who he is. We see him hugging Laertes as the latter leaves for Paris and engaging in banter with Horatio. With his father he speaks in English—a reminder of the English original strikingly reworked by Joan Sellent into Catalan and a suggestion of the complicity between father and son. This is a boy's world. Polonius hugs his son while his coy, fresh-faced daughter looks by embarrassedly. Aida de la Cruz looks a frail Ophelia, even her flimsy dress offers little protection in this determinedly masculine court. She's brought on by her father to perform what she knows about Hamlet in front of the worried King and Queen. Carme Pla's more robust Gertrude, clad in weightier red velvet tunic, is better able to deal with the intrigues and protocols of the kingdom, but even the geeky Rosencrantz and Gildenstern (memorable performances from Marc Rodriguez and Jordi Rico in tails) show themselves unable to survive in such a wily world. Ramon Vila's Claudius displays the ravages of age on a weather-beaten face, and Carles Martínez's Polonius walks with hunched shoulders that suggest a career worn down by responsibilities and guilt.

Julio Manrique's Hamlet has something of the lost adolescent about him. He struts across the stage, notebook in hand, and we are never entirely sure if he's authoring the story of his life or writing down exercises to perfect his English. There's something refreshingly ordinary about him. He's no matinee idol Hamlet in the vein of Juan Diego Botto or Jude Law. Rather we have an earnest young man, a frenzied smoker swamped by the circumstances in which he finds himself. He fights Laertes because he is given no choice. He kills Polonius awkwardly and then wrestles to get rid of the body. Thrust into a situation, he struggles through it. By the final act he appears exhausted, too tired to really contemplate a life beyond revenge.

This is a production that evokes the spirit of the early Lliure. There is nothing superficial here; indeed, the set might have been designed by Fabià Puigserver or Cheek by Jowl's Nick Ormerod. The projections on the back wall—moving from a dreamy sky at the opening to storm clouds as Ophelia is buried—may be reminders of twenty-first century scenography, but they are there to assist in the telling of the story. At times the Ghost is nothing but a series of projections on the wall, words bereft of a voice; dismembered commands to a

grieving son.

There is a rich attention to detail in Broggi's production. And while not all of it quite works—as with the players performing in Italian and a rather laboured dialogue between father and son in English—the production demonstrates a wit and intelligence that lifts it above the more earnest *Hamlets* seen on the Spanish stage this year. This Hamlet talks to the stage manager, puffs pensively on a cigarette while delivering "To be or not to be," and closes curtains in preparation for the performance. The production also manages to ensure that humor retains its place. As *The Murder of Gonzago* begins, the recognizable theme tune from the Indiana Jones films bursts out. The Gravediggers dart around the stage, preparing the space for burial with minimal fuss. Throughout, an intelligent score—both onstage guitar and recorded tracks—further aids in the telling of the tale. We end with Tom Waits's "Goodnight Irene," a veil of melancholy enveloping the play's finale. The characters fall—an array of corpses strewn on the sand—and then they stand again and go: both actor and role leaving the stage at the end of the performance.