‘Barcelona theatre 2010: from Santa Teresa to Naples via Cambridge and Chicago’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Juan Mayorga. Photo: Courtesy Juan Mayorga.

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Barcelona Theatre 2010: From Santa Teresa to Naples via Cambridge and Chicago

Maria M. Delgado

It's Àlex Rigola's final season at the Teatre Lliure, and I am very sorry to see him depart. His innovative programming has seen the Lliure become a cultural powerhouse and the city's most exciting venue, hosting a range of European and Argentine productions—from Jan Lauwers to Daniel Veronese—promoting the work of genuine theatrical mavericks like Carles Santos and Heiner Goebbels, and offering a developmental space to "radicals" like Rodrigo García, Roger Bernat, and Albert Serra. Rigola has led through his own work as a director with a number of outstanding productions (including Brecht's *St Joan of the Stockyards* in 2004 and now *Rock'n'Roll* by Tom Stoppard). While the Lliure's associate director Carlota Subirós and Carme Portaceli (currently directing at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya) are spoken of as potential successors, it is Julio Manrique and Oriol Broggi who seem to be emerging as more credible figures. The Lliure needs an artistic director who can lead by example and, crucially, a figure that knows the international theatre scene and can ensure that innovative work from beyond Spain is seen and engaged with in Barcelona.

Rigola's remarkable production of *Rock'n'Roll* at the Teatre Lliure leads to a series of associations that are only possible when the play is being refracted through a language censored by Franco in Spain, a country that suffered the restrictions of his dictatorship for thirty-seven years. On one level *Rock'n'Roll* doesn't appear an obvious choice for Rigola who has tended to favor an epic repertoire—Shakespeare, Brecht, Koltès, and Mamet—rather than the more obviously realist

Tom Stoppard's *Rock'n'Roll*, directed by Àlex Rigola. Photo: Ros Ribas.

vocabularies of the urbane Stoppard. What Rigola's revelatory production shows us is that Stoppard's play can be read as a purely visceral metaphor: both a lament for an ideology that perhaps never existed beyond an ideal (torn, twisted, and warped into manifestations that passed for communism in the Eastern bloc in the post World War II era) and a celebration of the power of rock music to animate, revive, and inspire.

The play takes place in two cities, Cambridge and Prague, and across a twenty-two-year period, from 1968-90. It opens in 1968 in a lush Cambridge garden that proves the dominant visual motif for the production. Max Glaenzel (working with Estel Cristià) offers a traverse lawn of green decorated with a few worn benches and other scattered pieces of garden furniture. To one side, the back wall and door to Marxist academic Max's comfortable, genteel home, to the other a graffiti-strewn gray wall. These two spaces confront each other across the rural pastoral idyll, symbols of the two worlds that collide across the duration of the play.

Surtitles guide the audience through the changes in time and place. Jan (Rigola regular Joan Carreras), a Czech student in Cambridge, returns to Prague in 1968 and, despite his best intentions to keep out of politics, becomes embroiled in the consequences of the Soviet occupation. His Cambridge supervisor, Max Morrow (Lluís Marco), an old school don, remains inflexibly committed to an outdated Marxist idealism despite the evident atrocities that he hears of in Eastern Europe as the play progresses. Jan and Max remain in touch as their fortunes are repeatedly juxtaposed: Jan loses his record collection (destroyed by the secret police), his job, and his freedom but never his faith in and love of music—embodied in his affiliation with the Czech band "The Plastic People of the Universe." Max loses his wife to cancer and his daughter first to a commune and then to a marriage with an ambitious journalist, but he also rises above these trials. It is in the delicate interplay between these ideals that the play's narrative unfolds. There are romances and friendships—Jan and Max's daughter Esme, Max and his wife Eleanor, Max and Czech academic Lenka—, parental conflicts—Esme and Eleanor, Esme and her daughter Alice. There are tested friendships—Jan and Max, Jan and Ferdinand, Eleanor and Lenka. And there are ongoing debates on what democracy, freedom, ideology, and music mean in two societies tested in different ways by compromised political agendas. This is, however, no dry political debate but rather a tale of individuals caught up in circumstances they don't quite understand and of which they are never entirely in control. There is a sense of some relationship between Eleanor's fear of what her cancer means and Jan's friend Ferdinand's worry at what their supposedly harmless affiliation to the music of "The Plastic People of the Universe" might entail for their safety. Rosa Renom—a dead ringer for María Casares—presents Eleanor as a sharp wit and central force in the family, forever organizing, tidying, and busying herself. Her energy finds a match in Jan's comings and goings within the confines of a bedsit whose cramped interior offers a pertinent metaphor for an ideology closing in on itself. Renom was named Best actress by the Barcelona critics for her characterisation of the rasping-voiced Eleanor. Hers is a fierce, funny performance that captures the tensions of Eleanor's predicament.

Whereas Trevor Nunn's production at the Royal Court seemed to cram the action in front of Robert Jones' busy set, Rigola (through Glaenzel's long set) gives an expansive garden from which Jan's cramped Prague bedsit rises up to provide the sense of worlds operating at different levels of subterfuge. Rigola succeeds in evoking a palpable sense of fear as Jan's room is turned over by the secret police. Surveillance is repeatedly evoked as Jan (Carreras) and his friend Ferdinand (Fèlix Pons), are observed from on high by Milan (Oscar Rabadan) and his lackeys. They are trapped and, even if they don't yet know it we do, and our complicity is evident in the configuration envisaged by Rigola and Glaenzel for the design of the piece. Rigola never reduces Milan and the secret police to tin pot villains. Max, too, is never derided, never ridiculed. Lluís Marco may not have the sexual aura of Brian Cox but compassion and generosity dominate in a performance that evidences Max's emotional power and social hold over the Cambridge world of the play. We may not agree with Max's opinions but Rigola respects them sufficiently to ensure that he is not played as a bullying dinosaur. When Rosa Renom's Eleanor confronts him over the flirtations with Lenka (Sandra Monclús) across the length of the garden, Jan's apartment and what it stands for functions as a schism—both physical and emotional—between them. Joan Carreras's Jan is sometimes presented as bystander, sometimes observer, sometimes victim: a more languid presence than his more overtly political friend

Tom Stoppard's *Rock'n'Roll*. Photo: Ros Ribas.

Ferdinand. The complicity between Carreras and Pons lends their relationship a poignant warmth and camaraderie. Their body language suggests familiarity, bonds, understanding. Rigola provides scenes of startling beauty, humor, and vulnerability. Snow falls in the Prague winter of 1976 creating a sense of a city under a spell as characters come and go with the elegant rhythm of *Tanztheater.* Max's playful granddaughter Alice (a charming but never cloying Mar Ulldemolins) snatches a snog with her earnest boyfriend Stephen (Oriol Guinart) as Max walks out and stumbles on them at play in the garden. Max is placed discretely in the background as Jan and Ferdinand survey Jan's destroyed bedsit at the end of act 1. A glance between Eleanor and Max betrays a sense of the unknown that awaits both characters as act 1 comes to an end. The cast assembles on stage to sing "We'll Meet Again" as the action moves into the play's final scene—both a lament for lost youth and a faith in hope and the future.

There is a greater energy and visceral pulse in Rigola's production than Nunn achieved in his Royal Court rendition of the play. Rigola doesn't have a single actress play Eleanor in act 1 and Esme in act 2 as Sinead Cusack did in Nunn's production, but rather opts for two different performers. There are some drawbacks (as a rather unfortunate wig in act 1 used to identify the teenage Esme), but the benefits are far more substantial. Esme is here shown to be anything but her mother. Chantal Aimée offers an altogether less confident Esme, caught between the roles of mother and daughter :and unhappy with what remains of the late 1960s. Her performance in act 2 is able to capture the frustrations and uncertainties of a life defined by motherhood at a time when her twenty-something daughter no longer needs her. The rediscovery of new possibilities that the final scenes offer sees her literally soar—it is no coincidence that her final appearance with Carreras's Jan is on a balcony above the traverse playing area.

On one level, it is possible to see the play as a soap opera for the middle-classes, set against key events of the last forty years. Rigola's context stresses the shifting encounters between two worlds—the lush green of Max' and Eleanor's protected and priv-

ileged Cambridge society and the harsh, gray concrete of Jan and Ferdinand's Czech cityscape. The resonances of the Czech world reverberate loudly in Spain, a nation where censorship was the order of the day until 1977 and where any kind of negative engagement with Franco's regime had strict consequences. Rigola never forces these associations; on the contrary, he allows them to be made by the audience. The rich, associative soundtrack—deviating ever so slightly, but tellingly, from the numbers specified by Stoppard—pushes the play briskly along. The production is full of wonderful details: Patricia Bargallós's Candida bears an uncanny resemblance to Lesley Manville's Marlene in Stafford-Clark's 1991 production of *Top Girls*—serving to associate Alice's new stepmother with Churchill's vision of Thatcherite ambition—Alice's boyfriend Stephen's suitably 1990 pre-grunge black, and the awkward rubbing of Milan and his sidekicks' leather jackets. *Rock'n'Roll* shows Rigola's versatility as a director—the production proffers a different stage vocabulary from that of his Castorf-inspired *Richard III* (2005) or his *Tanztheater Julius Caesar* (2002), but the results are no less compelling.

Rigola first staged the play at the opening of the 2008-09 season; a critical and commercial success that won the Barcelona Critics Award for Best Production in 2009. Its return is part of a revival of numerous key productions from previous seasons, including Santos' *La pantera imperial* (first seen in 1997) and Rigola's adaptation of Roberto Bolaño's 1000-page epic *2666* (first seen in 2007). Bolaño's novel, published after his death in 2003, weaves together five intersecting tales. The first brings together four academics from Italy, Spain, France, and England who all work on a reclusive German novelist called Benno von Archimboldi. Their shared obsession leads them to attempt to track Archimboldi down, following a lead that he travelled to the Mexican border town of Santa Teresa (a thinly veiled Ciudad Juárez). The second section picks up on a Chilean-born academic at the University of Santa Teresa—briefly featured in the opening scene—who had moved to Mexico from Barcelona after his wife's death, taking his adolescent daughter with him. Here, the subject of the "killings" emerges: the rape and violent murders of young women who largely work in the *maquilladoras* (American factories) that litter the town and its bleak suburbs. The academic's fears for his daughter converge with the tale of his dead wife. The third tale is again set in Santa Teresa where a journalist from Harlem has come to cover a boxing match. In the fourth section, a catalogue of murders are forensically presented for the reader as policemen, lawyers, officials, and journalists examine where responsibility lies. In the final section, the life of Hans Reiter-cum-Benno von Archimboldi unfolds as a metaphor of a century blighted by war, fratricide, greed, exile, grief, and genocide, deftly linking the four previous sections in ways that belie that Bolaño died before completing the novel.

Rigola, working with dramaturg Pablo Ley, has sensibly kept the novel's five-part structure and proffers, in the mode of Lepage's *Lipsynch,* evenly matched dramatic scenarios that together make up a five-hour performance. Recollections merge with metaphysical contemplations, digressions are frequent, biography fuses with detective fiction, adventure stories, and forensic case studies. And crucially, the different modes of storytelling that Bolaño deploys are here reconceived through theatrical prisms. The production begins, as does the novel, with "The Part about the Critics: "Four critics, all single, all rather locked in their own world, each embodying something of their national stereotype. One by one we are introduced to the stylish French Pelletier (Joan Carreras), the Italian ageing, wheelchair-bound Morini (Andreu Benito), the more impulsive, heavy-handed Spanish Espinoza (Julio Manrique), and the pragmatic Brit Norton (Chantal Aimée). What begins as something of a conference paper (complete with whiteboard where the academics spell out key terms, Archimboldi's works, key concepts in his novels, important locations in his life) soon evolves into a tale of obsession, a *ménage à trois,* desire, and desperation.

There is a relaxed ease to the performances that captures the catchy conversational style of the novel. Four actors are perched on the edge of a rectangular table, chatting innocuously. We are drawn in to the growing friendship between the four, the affairs Norton juggles and then customizes with Pelletier and then Espinoza, and the ongoing relentless search for Archimboldi. At times, we move from narration to direct conversation, moments of intensity, of revelation, of change, of decision; and then the return to the effortless narration. It is these supposedly casual gestures that so shape the production: a nod by Carreras's Pelletier, a brief sulk by Manrique's Espinoza, Benito walking into the wheelchair to take the role of Morini. Rigola and Ley have understood that Bolaño is an exuberant

storyteller, a seductive narrator who weaves enticing tales only to then cut them off and then move elsewhere. Nothing is forced or labored. Even the brutal beating of a taxi driver is all the more horrific in its reporting. Rigola has learnt from the Greeks that it is often more powerful to tell than to show.

"The Part about Amalfitano" operates in a Hopper-cum-Lynch landscape. A picket fence closes in Amalfitano's (Andreu Benito) backyard. Daughter Rosa (Cristina Brondo) appears in black, bouncing through the garden in ways that defy easy containment. Her mother's ghost (Alícia Pérez) haunts the landscape, narrating her own tale of wayward desire, escape, and an early death from AIDS-related complications. This is a more menacing world than that of part one. The officious University Dean (Manuel Carlos Lillo) and his reptilian son (David Espinosa)—in ominous Tony Manero-like white suit—hover around the peripheries of the garden. A climate of palpable menace lingers over the stage.

The subsequent "Part about Fate" unleashes the horror as Santa Teresa comes to take on a more prominent role in the action. Here, Oscar Fate (Julio Manrique), the African American journalist who travels down to Santa Teresa to cover the match between the local boxer and a black brother, is trapped in a lime green florescent box, a metaphor for the manic squalor of Santa Teresa and the tawdry goods it churns out for Western consumption. Manrique's fate is literally thrown in with an array of characters from the town's fringes. The fevered effects do create something of the panic, the sense of danger closing in on Rosa. There is something less assured in the stage language here, however. The decision to play Manrique in black-faceseems unnecessary and problematic. The filmed conversation with Black Panther Barry Seaman (Pere Arquillué) projected above the performative box never really frames what follows and while Carreras dances across the landscape as a boxer in motion, the gestural vocabularies of Fate's companions seem

Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, directed by Àlex Rigola. Photo: Ros Ribas.

rather limited, fixing them as mere stereotypes. The aesthetic never really binds to suggest the escalating sense of danger that is palpable in Bolaño's novel. It's only when Chantal Aimée and Manuel Carlos Lillo enter as a journalist and FBI agent to investigate the murders that the simmering mood of menace and foreboding returns and effectively sets the stage for the fourth section.

The living and the dead coexist in the stage world Rigola creates (with the aid of a deceptively effective design by Max Glaenzel (again working with Estel Cristià). For "The Part about the Crimes" we are enclosed in a forensic tent of antiseptic white where truncated, parched plants pepper the desert landscape. The sound of flies disturbs the silence while the bloodied body of a dead woman lies across the front right of the stage like a gaping wound. The focus on the discovery of a single body, Rosita Méndez (Alba Pujol), the goodtime girl of "The Part about Fate," defines the enacted action. Misogynistic police come and go with weary indifference as Manrique's impotent policeman, Juan de Dios Martínez, wanders the stage like a lost ghost, trying to investigate what might have happened and why. But the authorities are convinced they have their man, Klaus Haas (Carreras), a rather awkward middle-aged German and outsider who conveniently fits the bill of serial killer. Carreras's extended monologue captures his dysfunctional need for attention and the dystopia of the authorities that mold him into a scapegoat. The never ending list of crimes recounted in the novel is projected onto the back screen against the amplified screams of the writhing corpse and the entry of all the cast covering the stage with crosses. This is a world where women are just dispensable orifices, objects to be enjoyed and dispensed with. The deafening screams are ignored as the stage transforms into a cemetery, a city of the dead filled with a garden of nameless crucifixes. A litany of offensive jokes—testament to the nonchalance of the authorities—follow in quick and horrifying succession until the curtain falls.

For the final "Part about Archimboldi," we are given a running track, a moving belt where Carreras's Reiter-Archimboldi narrates the tale for which the academics had been searching. He comes off to converse with his younger sister (Lotte Reiter), support his sickly wife (Chantal Aimee), negotiate with his publisher's wife (Alícia Pérez), and then moves back onto a track that he must attempt to keep up with and that sweeps him up into a cocoon away from the public eye. It is an effective device that renders the accompanying projections (of cabaret acts, of the Holocaust, of Soviet troops) superfluous. Reiter-Archimboldi is both running into the historical events that shape him and running away from them—a highly successful effect.

There is an audacity to *2666*, a theatrical ambition and scope that is all too rare in Spanish theatre. Rigola and Ley's adaptation offers an understanding of Bolaño's bitter, warped universe. The production is part *noir*, part postmodern flick, part travelogue, part detective fiction, part biography, part love story, part diatribe on First and Third World divide. And while the brilliance of the opening and closing scenes is not matched in parts two and three, the production never bores. The ensemble cast (all taking numerous roles) work to create a memorable array of characters with Joan Carreras excelling as the suave Pelletier, the incarcerated Haas, and the elusive Reiter-Archimboldi. In Castilian, Carreras's voice has a velvety resonance that contrasts with his more clipped Catalan; it is a performance that confirms him as one of the most nuanced actors in Spain. Rigola's decision to present the piece in Castilian rather than Catalan allows for Bolaño's labyrinthine language (with its jazz riff qualities) to provide the framework for the visceral and clinical hell he creates on the stage.

Julio Manrique's trajectory as a director is now threatening to eclipse his work as an actor. At the Lliure's studio space, he offers a taut, energetic thrust stage production of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*. Lluís Castells (working with Irene Martínez) offers a cluttered junk shop with every corner and crevice packed with the discarded detritus of our capitalist world. Mismatched chairs, bird cages, scattered records, the arm of a doll protruding ominously from a chair, a pink wig used by Teach to disguise himself, an array of potential weapons including golf clubs, a lampshade, and darts all vie for attention. A box of hats, including the three-cornered hat of the Civil Guard, an expansive sombrero, and a dainty bullfighter's cap, acknowledge the fact that this is Chicago refracted through a Spanish and Catalan imagination. The Indian headdress, the cowboy hat, and the soundtrack that filters through the radio—from Johnny Cash to Frank Sinatra—also ensure that the American West and American Dream function as concrete referents, effectively debunked by the tawdry memorabilia that litters the store. Manrique works to make the audience part of the world of the shop. We enter the auditorium and are greeted by "Dubrow and Sons"

David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, directed by Juan Manrique. Photo: Courtesy Teatre Lliure.

stencilled on the door. We are given time to familiarize ourselves with the dynamics of the shop and the piles of bric-à-brac both displayed and hidden from view. Don Dubrow is conceived by Ivan Benet in the mould of a louche Jeff Bridges who coolly dispatches orders to the naïve, keen-to-please Bob (the elastic faced Pol López). The nervy, manic Teach (Marc Rodríguez with something of John Cazale's Fredo from *The Godfather*) is a bundle of destructive energy, smoking edgily, throwing darts purposely at the dartboard, and punitively destroying Don's plan to get his own back from the customer that he feels cheated him out of the buffalo-head coin he was chasing.

Rodríguez's Teach is indeed a poison infecting the stage, weaselling in and out of the different corners of the shop, spawning ironic, paranoid dialogue that demarcates the gap between what he is and how he perceives himself. His destruction of the junkshop in act 2 brings down shelves of glass and nick-knacks. his bullying and beating of Bob is a terrifying act of frustration and intimidation.

While Rodríguez's Teach may, in one way, be the most demonstrative performance, it's Benet's laidback Don that effectively steals the show. Whether h is polishing the glass with a bit of spit, calmly reorganizing the scattered records, extolling the virtues of yogurt to the eager Bob, or physically lashing out at Teach in the play's final moments, Benet succeeds in suggesting that Don's more relaxed demeanour hides a series of competitive demons. Manrique presents Teach and Don as younger than is habitually the case, but this works to create a sense of rather pugnacious late twenty-somethings after a quick buck and the respect of their masculine peers.

Manrique's production is tough, pacy, and well-served by a Christina Genebat's pulsating translation. Crucially, Manrique is also not afraid of

allowing the play the time to breathe and switch register, as with Don's head falling wearily on the desk at the end of act 1, or Bob playing catch with his food. The staging is marked by a quirky and engaging attention to detail, as with the radio playing as the production opens switching to Catalan to ask us to ensure our mobile phones are switched off, and the antlers of the stuffed and displayed animal head lighting up as a warning danger sign.

Oriol Broggi's compelling minimalist *Hamlet*, featuring Manrique in the title role returns to the Biblioteca de Catalunya this Spring [see *WES* 21.3, Fall 2009], but first he's presenting the beginnings of a two-year project by Eduardo de Filippo that offers *Natale in Casa Cupiello* in early 2010 and *Questi Fantasmi* (in a coproduction with Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional, the Grec Festival, and the Italian Teatri Uniti) during July and October of 2010 before embarking on a tour through Spain and Italy. For *Natale* Broggi presents a traverse stage (designed by Paula Bosch) that we are invited to walk through as we grab a glass of white wine (on the house) before the Christmas festivities begin. It's a jaunty atmosphere—with jovial festival tunes, a program note in pseudo-Italian, and reminders to switch off your mobile phone, again announced in Italian. As with *Hamlet*, when the actors appear, they don't pretend it is anything but a theatre. Pep Cruz's patriarch Luca removes the signs to the toilet as he wanders on stage and crawls into the bed, covering his whole face and body with a sheet before commencing some theatrical snoring. Son Tommasino (Bruno Oro) is also like a corpse in the other bed in the room. Luca's wife Concetta (Marissa Josa) flutters in and out like a clucking hen clearing up and servicing the childlike needs of her husband and son. The play draws on the characters of *commedia dell'arte* and Broggi consciously weaves this into his orchestration of the action. The unhappily married daughter Ninuccia (Màrcia Cisteró) marches on stage in a fierce strop only melting when timid beau Vittorio (Joan Arqué) appears. Nicola (Carles Martínez) is her upstanding, cuckolded husband who is the last to know what's going on. Luca's brother Pasquallino (Ramon Vila) is the bumbling clown, always the butt of Tommasino's jokes, and always charging on stage wanting justice, revenge or some sort of solution to whatever bother Tommasino's landed him in.

The production is executed with high theatrics—daughter Ninuccia breaking crockery as she tells her mother she wants to leave her husband, wily Pasquallino charging on stage in search of Tommasino. There are also welcome lulls—

Natale in Casa Cupiello, directed by Oriol Broggi. Photo: Bito Cels.

Tommasino playing the piano, Luca working on the Christmas crib for display over the holiday period. At its most effective the production acknowledges its own playful artifice and complicity with this brings the audience into the festive celebrations. There is a clearing up of the set at the end of act 1 as the family prepares for the Christmas meal in act 2 and Cruz's Luca chats to the audience. Broggi himself also appears to help direct the movement of the furniture and props, and Tommasino excitedly wants to know if Sophia Loren is in the house.

While Cruz is rather uneasy in the play's opening scene, he grows in to the larger-than-life Luca. In act 2, with glasses perched on his nose, he appears as a chubby, rotund boy with an endearing childlike infatuation when it comes to unwrapping the *magi* for his crib. Marissa Josa wonderfully conveys the exhaustion of the pragmatic Concetta, trying to serve Christmas lunch while her daughter dallies away from home with the hapless Vittorio. Luca, Tommasino, and Pasquallino parade into the chaos dressed as the Three Kings, all displaying impeccable comic timing. The demise of Luca in act 3 gives Cruz the opportunity to shine through expertly executed moans and blessings for his daughter and her new beau. Broggi's presentation of a stage hand asking for a cup of coffee as Cruz's prolonged death continues its course is a well-timed recognition of the need to accentuate and interrupt the more languid pace of the final act. Certainly, some of the casting decisions seem rather odd—Noël Olivé as Concetta's neighbor and confidant looks too effortlessly willowy and elegant to convince us that she undertakes the hard labor and pragmatic chores of a Neapolitan working class housewife. Nevertheless, this is a stylish, playful production that confirms Broggi as a talent to watch.

An earlier Italian dramatist who also drew on the prototypes of *commedia* can be seen further down the street at the Teatre Romea. *El café*, based on Goldoni's *La bottega del café,* runs through 5 April and opts for an altogether more conventional approach with period costumes, high hats, and big wigs. Children have had their own morning and afternoon show at the Romea during January devised by Comediants. *Num3r@lia* or "100 Things To Do With Numbers" offers a take on the seven stages of man performed by three actors and an interactive screen. A lean, fifty minutes of storytelling, dance, and numerical games was warmly received by a young (if rather small) audience. While the show is presented in Catalan, the two non-Catalan-speaking English boys who accompanied me to the performance were gripped by the different production numbers for much of the show, with evident highlights including the different time zones presented on a colorful world map, musical notes, and onscreen xylophones. There is some *Jackanory*-type storytelling but it's all blended with physical energy and a seamless integration with the large onstage screen. Comediants draw on the techniques developed by La Cubana in *Cegada de amor* (Blinded by Love), 1994, as actors burst out from the screen onto the stage at various key moments. Directed by Joan Font with Roger Julià, it is a welcome reminder of a physical stage language that engages through short narrative bursts and a conceptual organizing motif.

Josep Maria Pou's Goya theatre has another hit on its hands with a stripped-down version of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* reworked by Jordi Sala and Josep Maria Mestres as a contemporary world of conniving politicians all trying to protect their careers from the dirty secrets hidden in the closet. Mestres directs an attractive cast led by Joel Joan as Arthur Goring who opens the production at the opera, sat up in the circle among the packed house as his mobile phone goes off. It is a compelling opening in a production where uneven performances—too many of the actors perform as if appearing in different productions—work to prevent any kind of coherent visual and gestural language for Wilde's play.

The production evidently speaks to a contemporary Catalan audience that responds with copious applause and loud laughs at the references that could be construed as criticisms of the avarice and priorities of twenty-first century politicians. This is never really followed through consistently but rather returned to sporadically. Quim Roy's antiseptic set—art deco meets 1970s' minimalism—always looks rather makeshift; new money rather than inherited wealth. The opening act party at the Chilterns' house has many comings and goings that always appear too forced with a slim cast of seven—there are no butlers, servants, attaches, or extra guests in the world envisaged by Mestres.

Anna Ycobalzeta's Mabel Chiltern (here renamed Gina) is conceived as a predatory and pouting party girl (complete with a riding crop in the final act) whose sharp retorts appear rather labored. Carmen Balagué presents Lady Markby as a sub-Almodóvar meddler—part Chus Lampreve's mother in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*

(1984), part Antonia San Juan's Agrado in *All About My Mother* (1999). Her role appears rather anachronistic in the refashioning of the play presented by Sala and Mestres. Abel Folk's Robert Chiltern is one-dimensionally slick while the Earl of Caversham (as played by Camilo García) is conceived as a bumbling aristocrat. Joel Joan gives a high-energy performance as Arthur Goring, complete with farcical entries and exits, mobile phone antics, and a range of elastic facial expressions. Sílvia Bel brings some Hollywood glamour to the role of Mrs Cheveley: stylish red or black outfits, dynamic heels, and alluring grooming suggest *femme fatale* danger on all metaphorical levels. There is a real rapport with Joan's modern day dandy, especially during her visit to his home in act 3 where the disappearing panels, wooden box of a study, and mobile phone misadventures create an entertaining scenario of mishaps and mistaken identities.

While Joan's energy lifts the production, Mercè Pons' Mrs Chiltern grounds it. She understands the rhythms of Wilde's language and consequently makes the rather dry and sometimes puritanical wife of Robert Chiltern a more attractive and less predictable character. She brings a stillness and a welcome savouring of the language to the production. In her willingness to apparently do less on stage she creates a discreet aura that serves as a constant reminder as to why her husband remains so enamoured of her. There are some nice observations in Mestres's production: the *muzak* playing at the party, the conspiratorial glances, the antics in the study. While the adaptation doesn't quite think through all the implications of updating to our times, the production's sell out success testifies to its resonance with contemporary Catalan audiences.

At the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) Carme Portaceli has joined forces with Pablo Ley to adapt Santiago Rusiñol's emblematic *L'auca del senyor Esteve* (The Tale of Mr. Esteve) from its nineteenth-century setting (the novel was first published in 1907, the play presented ten years later) to the Franco era, beginning more or less with the entry of Francoist troops to Barcelona in 1939. Rusiñol's comedy is here refashioned (with material incorporated from the novel) to offer a different take on what is seen as a Catalan classic—the play inaugurated the TNC in 1997 (staged then by Adolfo Marsillach) and was filmed for television in Pere Planella's production in 1984. It is a product you mess with at your peril and the critics have not been kind to Portaceli's reworking of the piece.

Paco Azorín presents a malleable set incorporating both the family haberdasherie, La Puntual, where much of the action is set, and a walkway that offers a sense of time passing by. There is something Brechtian in the aesthetic of the production—with a five-piece band providing an effective accompanying score to the action and projected titles for the many episodic scenes that make up the play. Boris Ruiz's grandfather functions as a Master of Ceremonies, introducing the action and hovering around its fringes as a confessor and mentor to the young Esteve (David Bagés), the Catalan Everyman of the play. This is a crib-to-coffin story, the life of an ordinary middle-class guy who would have liked perhaps to have pursued a different career but instead falls into the family business as is expected of him. Azorín's set is inventive: all shifting desks, disappearing screens, pop-out beds, and deck chairs floating on to suggest the burgeoning tourism that was to later explode in the 1960s. Historical shifts are indicated through a stylish costume register and imagery projected on a giant screen that wrenches the action away from Rusiñol's *modernista* world and into the Franco era, strikes, troops entering the city, Franco at work and at play, hand in hand with the Church that buoyed up his regime. In the end, for the technical wizardry of the set, and the effective musical score, the production seemed rather too busy, rather too forced to really allow the relocation of its own space to breathe. Bagés is less convincing as the child Esteve but captures more of the resigned weariness of the *paterfamilias* despairing of his son's choices and obliged to work with a complicitous silence during the Franco era. The earnest shopkeeper that emerges in the second half of the production functions more effectively as a symbol of the mercantile classes who shaped Barcelona's identity and culture. There are some misjudged 'in your face' moments (as the customer who removes her coat to reveal her overt fascist affiliation); and the walkway too easily allows for the idea of 'time moving on' with characters walking repeatedly up and down the length of the stage.

It's admirable to see the TNC grappling with Catalan classics and moving beyond the tame historical stagings that have become such a feature of the company's work. The production comes hot on the heels of artistic director Sergi Belbel's imaginative fusion of theatre and dance in Irene Némirovsky's *El ball* which played in the theatre over Christmas and early January. This however, is

Santiago Rusiñol's *L'auca del senyor Esteve*. Photo: David Ruano.

a more flawed experiment, bereft of humor and rather too earnest in its attempts to move the play into an era that remains a powerful part of the collective memory of a significant proportion of the TNC audience. Certainly amplification problems on the night I saw the production didn't help, and for all the developments undertaken on the TNC's Sala Gran, it remains a cold, cavernous space that the actors have to work to fill. Portaceli rightly recognizes that Barcelona is one of, if not *the* protagonist of the play. However, the Barcelona that is here presented never quite manages to develop a concrete, tangible identity of its own.

Sasha Waltz's choreography has often opted for the concrete and the tangible, as evidenced in her *Tanztheater* versions of *Medea* and *Dido & Aeneas*. Here using Schubert's *Impromptus* (from which the piece takes its title) and four further *Lieder* (songs) as the governing musical motif, she structures a choreography as lyrical as the German romanticism of the composer, with musical accompaniment by pianist Christina Marton and mezzo Ruth Sandhoff. Waltz's seven dancers move across a conceptual set by Thomas Schenk marked by a sliding wall at the back of the stage that moves across as stealthily as a knife. At moments the production has something of Handke's *The Day We Knew Nothing of Each Other*: bodies wandering through a landscape in almost automated fashion. A duet between two men negotiates pain, desire, and pleasure, at once evoking a cross, at once the merging of two into a single fused entity. There's humor here in abundance. Silence is punctuated by the sound of wet Wellington boots squelching as the performers move around playfully in them. Red paint elongates feet into flippers; patterns adorn the floor as the paint spills over and across the stage. Stains are washed away with the water in the gumboots but a trail of paint remains, like a bleeding wound dividing the stage. A pool of water sees a dancer immersed like an elongated Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*. Yet, while Beckett's protagonist only had her torso exposed, here it's the legs that protrude like giant scissors cutting through the air. Ultimately, it's a world as fragile and ephemeral as the whisper-thin costumes of Christine Birkle. As the music ends the dancers disperse, each disappearing into the darkness.

At the Villarroel, Carol López, the theatre's recently appointed artistic director, is back with a new play which she has also directed. *Boulevard* is a homage to the world of Cukor's *Philadelphia Story* (1940) and romantic comedies of the 1940s. As with her earlier *VOS* (2003), presented as a film by Cesc Gay in 2009, López displays a meta-theatrical world of performers where role and character become amusingly intertwined. Her previous play, *Germanes,* a bittersweet tale of three sisters in the aftermath of their father's death, proved a runaway hit in 2008. *Boulevard* is a less substantial affair but no less enjoyable. Max (Ernesto Collado) is staging a version of *Philadelphia Story*, taking the role of Dexter from his brother Guille's Gary (López regular Paul Berrondo). Both brothers are smitten with the engaging Anna (another López regular, Àgata Roca), contracted to take the role of Tracy much to the disappointment of ageing diva, Rosa María (Amparo Fernández), who is clearly not pleased at

having to make do with merely being mother of the bride—a role that she uses to upstage Anna at any possible opportunity. Faced with keeping the actors and their tantrums in check is producer Nati (Marta Pérez), who is called on to save the day when the actor playing the family maid pulls out.

This is a piece that plays with all the clichés in the business: the seductive leading man, the rival in the wings that the leading lady doesn't think is dashing enough, a bitter diva peddling old-fashioned acting tips and tricks, the timid actress who moves into the terrain of the seductress as the plot progresses. López moves the action back and forth, inserting scenes from the finished production.alongside the adventures of the bickering actors preparing the staging. There are some quirky observations on acting and actors (as Berrondo's Guille's obsession with having the "right" shoes), on timing (will Collado's Dexter ever make his entry on time?), and on casting and typecasting (why can't Guillem be given the role of a leading man?) López peppers the production with glorious excesses that demonstrate her panache for comic timing, for example, Rosa's appearance complete with large fan and Jackie O sunglasses and emphatic mannerisms.

The production looks sumptuous enough—with a functional chic set that moves between Tracy's comfortable house and the rehearsal studio. There is an attempt to think through the differing performing styles necessitated by the moves from the present to the 1940s production ethos. It is all very entertaining with endearing performances from the cast of five and an effortless swapping between Castilian and Catalan used to further accentuate the two intersecting worlds. Ultimately, however, it is so light and so silly that little remains when the final number has been performed. The showbiz world conjured by López presents the actors as vain beings, more concerned with upstaging and role rating than the craft of performing. *Boulevard* is as light and insubstantial as a soufflé. Pleasurable, yes, but probe too closely and the whole edifice crumbles before you.

Boulevard, directed by Carol López. Photo: David Ruano.