‘Relocations, Reworkings, Reopenings: Catalans in Madrid, Argentines in Barcelona’

A review by Maria Delgado

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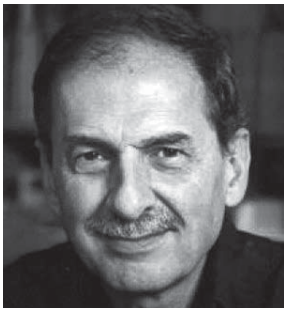

Benet i Jornet
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Relocations, Reworkings, Reopenings: Catalans in Madrid, Argentines in Barcelona

Maria M. Delgado

The mythical Gràcia venue of the Lliure has reopened. Barcelona's Teatre Lliure came to symbolize the excitement around the transition to democracy. A flexible venue, it allowed for many different configurations and presented classic plays in stark uncluttered fashion that broke with the labored stagings of the Franco era. Now it boasts a 736-seat auditorium in Montjuïc (Sala Fabià Puigserver named after its founder and director) as well as the 350-seat Gràcia venue. The 200-seat Espai Lliure in Montjuïc will now close. Artistic director Àlex Rigola has chosen to open the refurbished Gràcia venue with a new production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* presented in Catalan in a co-production with the Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid. Rigola has made some drastic cuts to the play. There are no minor characters here, just the dysfunctional family whose tortured relations are played out during the play's duration—Rigola's version runs at a compact hour and a half.

Rigola makes some intelligent dramaturgical decisions: Mae (Ester Cort) and Gooper (Santi Ricart), so often presented as cardboard caricatures are here given more prominent roles, presented as symbols of 1950s affluent complacency and middle-class manners. (Mae's outfit in particular presents a pastiche of the Audrey Hepburn look.) Joan Carreras offers a sullen awkward Brick unable to communicate with Chantal Aimée's poised Maggie. But it is Andreu Benito's Big Daddy who steals the show. He is not a loud man but dominates through sheer physical bulk and an authoritative stalking and control of the stage. He controls his world effortlessly, offering a note on the piano as he walks past, pulling up the cotton plant in a vain frustration. He orders the pianist out of the room when he wants privacy and expects compliance and obedience. His wife (Muntsa Alcañiz) is a mere shadow that follows

Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, directed by Álex Rigola. Photo: Ros Ribas.

him, devoid of spirit and character and it is evident that Carreras' Brick is conceived in her image. He opens the production against the back wall of Max Glaenzel's set, a languid being in a burgundy-patterned dressing gown that accentuates his pasty complexion.

Rigola creates a production poised between the realistic—as with a 1950s costume design—and the conceptual. Glaenzel offers a cotton field—evoking (at least abstractly) Koltès's seminal play—where a marital bed sits under a sparse, shrivelled tree, its outstretched arms offering neither shade nor protection: just the image of a barren landscape that can bear no fruit. Beside Brick a pianist (Raffel Plana) tickles the ivories; Brick sings gently; on top of the piano a makeshift bar. Up above, a neon lit sign asks "Why is it so hard to talk?" It is this that Rigola makes the leitmotif of his reading. Brick and Maggie talk to each other across the width of the stage, gulfs of silence and misunderstandings. Brick is more comfortable hovering around the bar than close to his wife. She evidently disgusts him and he freezes when she is close to him. But Rigola chooses to have them as far apart as possible for long chunks of the action. It's almost like a stage tennis match—a methodology used literally by The Wooster Group—with words catapulted from speaker to speaker across the void and is a device he has employed to productive effect in his previous productions. This proves problematic in never allowing a variation of pace. Carreras plays Brick as a sozzled, comatose alcoholic, existing on the margins where release comes through alcohol or the soothing tunes of the discreet pianist.

The pianist works well, underscoring as well as observing the action and providing an ambience and mood for the production that is not always matched by the actors. Chantal Aimée is particularly uncomfortable as a poised Maggie whose anxiety and fears are never palpably conveyed. Ultimately, even when she strips for Brick there is an element of disdain rather than desperation or desire. It's a frigid performance; she walks out indignant when he rejects her and remains naked to greet her sister-in-law as if wanting to proffer the image of a couple for whom sex in the middle of the day is a way of life. But for all her aggressive advances and abrasive attempts to give her husband a blow-job, he resists her, pushing her away violently as she kneels before him or turning his head when she attempts to kiss him on the lips. In many ways it is a tame production; there are no sexual fireworks here. Rigola acknowledges the referents that he is dealing with when Aimée and Carrerras openly state that they are neither Elizabeth Taylor nor Paul Newman. The production would have benefitted from more such moments of rupture.

Mother and son are rarely without the prop of alcohol. Muntsa Alcañiz's mother also seeks relief in cigarettes. It's a world where appearances are prioritised and the façade of propriety must be maintained by Brick's family whatever the consequences for those who fall into their orbit. Rigola offers an intelligent reading of the piece but ultimately it's too cool, too clinical, too composed, too clipped and too cut to really animate. It's been greeted by excellent reviews and full houses but ultimately I wouldn't categorize this as vintage Rigola.

At the Sala Fabià Puigserver, maverick musician-director Carles Santos has presented his new work, *Chicha Montenegro Gallery*, premiered at Girona's Temporada Alta festival a week earlier. The production is a collage of individual scenarios that are almost like stepping into different rooms of an art exhibition or installation, all thematically conceived but differing in execution and tone. Santos has composed an original score, executed by four singers (a tenor, baritone, mezzo, and soprano), a dancer and an actor. There is no narrative, although Santos states that each have, at some moment and in some way, had a relationship with the mythical Chicha Montenegro. Some of these relationships have been amorous, some platonic, others involved rejection rather than that acceptance. Chicha is the absent other that haunts the piece, a larger than life being that looks to be the alter ego of the composer.
The production begins by suggesting a conjuring trick: a cloud of smoke from which emerges a puppet-like body in white dominated by a vast mane of hair. Two figures in black drag the woman in white from one side of the stage to another. The mane of hair is shaken and stirred. The two puppet masters stop her from rising, trapping her like an insect in a web. She ends in a heap on the floor with her two masters looking down at her and is then swept up into the heavens, disappearing with the same sense of thrilling magic that governed her appearance. Both the *a cappella* structure and vertical register of the production are set up in the opening scene. *Chicha Montenegro Gallery* has characters falling from the heavens, flying from the wings, and crawling on the floor. Earth, water, and air feature as conspicuous organizing elements. It's a battle between the horizontal and the vertical where characters meet in a suspended space in between where they rise and fall like bouncing balls at the

Chicha Montenegro Gallery, written and directed by Carles Santos. Photo: Courtesy of Sala Fabià Puigserver.

mercy of an overexcited child.

Four figures identically dressed in colourful Chaplinesque music hall suits with a magnificent embroidered long jacket of solid and rich mauve move like trapeze artists across opposite metal walls stage left and right. As they fly across their feet bang across the metallic surface, creating an echoing bang that offers a rhythmic pulse or a metronome of sorts—a favorite device in Santos's work. When the singers rest on the wall, they look like Humpty Dumpty figures suspended precariously before what we anticipate will be a fall. Beckett's clowns also come to mind, destined to return to their starting point in the search for a Godot that never arrives. The Chicha Montenegro song—her name repeated in a layered chat in quick succession by the four singers—is almost like a machine gun firing across the auditorium.

A mysterious box in the middle of the stage holds a secret. The box is cut open from the inside: a brilliant white line of light emerging as the fissure appears. Out of the finished hole a woman appears in a neat black skirt and white jacket. She proffers a formal address to the audience at a breathtakingly rapid pace. Her forty-two ways of killing a priest includes offering him high concentration bleach, dynamite in the prostrate, sticking his head in a pool of water containing a communist piranha, substituting anis—specifically Anis del Mono, Joan Brossa's favourite drink—for blood in a transfusion—and the placing of three scorpions in his mouth. At the end she falls into a vomiting fit, spraying a trail of bodily fluids across the floor, trapped in the stream of vomit like an insect caught in a web of its own making.

Scenes follow in quick succession. Four performers jog up and down on harnesses performing liturgical chants; their skirts swish like the movement of the bell. Ropes fall and a desk, music stands, leaves, boats and fish follow like mobiles floating through the air. On planks, suspended from the metallic side walls, two male performers are flown down as if they are swimming through the air. At times they resemble crabs with pincer-like movements capturing some invisible substance in the air. A humming accompaniment serves as the percussive pulse of the scene.

A field of microphones glisten through the darkness. Into this space the performers fall like spacemen. Two corseted female performers push their way through a field of microphones, the echoing sound of the microphones pushing against each other reverberating through the auditorium in a percussive symphony of sound. From the wall above a large woman appears as a parody of femininity. As

George Bizet's *Carmen*, directed by Andreu Bieito. Photo: A. Bofill.

she flies through the air, her giant prosthetic breasts squirt copious streams of milk over the performers below.

The four singers attempt to sing hooked to a supply of blood. Between adrenaline rushes, they splutter the red viscous liquid across the stage. As with so much of Santos's work, sound and song comes through (and in spite of) the impediments. Physical obstacles are there to be overcome and the singers work over, across, through, and with the elements they are presented that form part of the stage world created by Santos and designer Montse Amenós. Elements go as swiftly as they appeared. The microphones are raised as quickly as they appeared. Costumes appear to be put on. Performers bounce up and down on a flexible lead from the top of the stage. Recoiling like wispy floating vampires, they sing with impediments in their mouths. Their legs are lost in a costume that ends in a tail of wispy fabric.

A dancer falls upside down while a counter tenor (Flavio Olivier) sings a version of Ecclesiastes offstage– part of what was to have been a project for the Grec festival. She resembles a round stuffed olive—one of numerous food motifs in the production. The characters only really touch the ground at the beginning and the end of the production, before that they are suspended up in between; a musical quartet trying to find each other (or Chicha?) across the abyss of the stage. Witty, amusing, and engaging, *Chicha Montenegro Gallery* delivers the thrills of the para-theatrical with an understanding of how instants of desire and endeavour can be structured to offer short, sharp vignettes on the power games that govern social and sexual relations. Tenor Antoni Comas, baritone Toni Marsol, soprano Begoña Alberdi and mezzo Claudia Schneider—all Santos regulars—perform with agility, commitment, and humor. Queralt Albinyana and Ana Criado writhe, spit, splutter and support with gusto and drollness as the actor and dancer. The pulley operators who control the show from the wings received warm applause on opening night, recognition of their own contribution to the effective running of this box of tricks. *Chicha Montenegro Gallery* is a cacophony of sounds, textures, and colours that defies any attempt to impose linear order. Watch, submit to the experience, don't ask how or why, and enjoy.

First premiered in 1875 at Paris's Opéra Comique, *Carmen* has been used by numerous *auteurs* to comment on both the construction of signifiers of Spain in the popular imagination

(as with Carlos Saura's 1983 dance film) and on the destructive paradigms of male obsession (as with Peter Brook's 1983 *La Tragédie de Carmen*). Brook's reworking shaved the chorus and conceived the piece for a cast of four singers and three actors, imprisoning the characters in bleak and lonely scenarios that highlighted their sense of exclusion and marginality. The backdrop of folkloric Seville—all castanets, fans, and polka dot dresses—was also dispensed with in favor of a sparse arena of earthen sand. Certainly there has been a move, in recent years, to eschew the picturesque approach, as David McVicar demonstrated in his 2002 version with Anne Sofie von Otter dispensing with the Latin temptress in favor of a raunchier dirtier gypsy whose mucky milieu was more nineteenth-century Paris than eighteenth-century Andalusia. Jonathan Miller's production for the English National Opera in the mid-nineties was informed by Cartier-Bresson's black and white photography while David Pountney's 1986 staging for the same company provided a world that was less Spain and more the tin pot dictatorship of a South American nation, a cemetery of discarded cars that evoked something of Fernando Arrabal's world of the absurd.

Those who admired the thrusting energy of McVicar's production will find points of contact with Bieito's treatment of the piece (adapted from an earlier outing for the Perelada Festival eleven years ago with the same design team and Roberto Alagna in the role of Don José). Bieito understands that you can't strip *Carmen* of its "greatest hits." Like Don Giovanni, Carmen is an icon of Spain constructed through the foreign imagination. For his 2001 *Don Giovanni*, Bieito set the action in an empty Olympic village where predatory forces operate their clandestine deals. *Celestina* also, realized for the 2004 Edinburgh International Festival, resituated the procuress of Fernando de Rojas in a tacky bar replete with football flags, sangria, and fusion *flamenco rumba* where the fictional archetype was interrogated through performance. With *Carmen* too, Bieito opts to dissect the iconography surrounding the archetype. This production takes place in a border space: it could be the area between Ceuta and Morocco in north Africa—the last bastion of Spain's long defunct empire—or it might be somewhere between Spain and France in the Catalan border town of La Jonquera where prostitutes can often be spotted on their deckchairs by the side of the road waiting for customers. Indeed Bieito's production demonstrates an awareness of how Franco appropriated the iconography of Bizet to offer a neutered image of Spain as the land of passionate happy-go-lucky *señoritas* and swarthy bullfighters. Not insignificantly the action takes place in the nineteen seventies—in what might be the dying days of the Franco regime or the early years of the transition to democracy. As in his 2004 *King Lear*, the concept of the border serves as a powerful trope for the production.

Abdel Aziz El Mountassir's Lillas Pastia opens the production performing an elementary magic trick for the audience. All bling and tacky white suit, he appears less the jovial barman than a canny entrepreneur. His ethnic difference—as an Arab man within a Spanish military unit—is signalled, presenting the embodiment of "otherness" that marks the world of Bieito's staging. A soldier runs across the space in repetitive circular motions: his state of undress—he is clad in underpants, rifle in hand —suggests a punishment. For those that refuse to tow the line, punishment is public and performed as a way of defying further disorder. There is no respite: the soldier runs until he collapses with exhaustion and only leaves when dragged off stage.

It is into this world that Marina Poplavskaya's Micaëla appears. This is no prim local girl but rather an attractive young woman embracing the possibilities of hippie culture: her sequined psychedelic boho gypsy top, dangling earrings and long hair gathered loosely at the back suggest a middle class woman in search of an adventure with altogether seedier company, who ultimately will return to her bourgeois life. This is a Micaëla not afraid to kiss Don José. We first see her taking photos with a small camera and she visibly poses with Don José's cap when telling him of his mother. The military camp, presented as a stage where she has come in search of thrills, is in itself a no-go zone. The beggar woman who approaches the audience tin in hand appears at its peripheries. The women who work at the tobacco factory hover around its margins. The soldiers prowl and spy on the women. On duty they are ordered in regimentalized lines, models of instruction and restraint. Off duty they drool, watch and wait. When Carmen makes a call from the phone box stage right—one of the few decorative items on Alfons Flores's sparse set—they climb on the box like animals trying to access a cage they have been locked out of. Carmen first appears imprisoned in a glass box, a display "peep show" item which the men would fondle and paw but for the protection of the telephone box. When she leaves decorating the wall of the stage with her lipstick, they vandalize the box, an image of masculine aggression un-tempered

and un-moderated, and a sign of the violence later unleashed on Carmen by Don José. This is a world where the women dispense sexual favors as a way of surviving: the "Chanson Bohéme" sees Mercedes performing oral sex on Morales. Brought up in a society where women are commodities to be bought and sold, it is perhaps not surprising that abuses prevail: Zuniga, for example, seems worryingly besotted with Mercedes's small daughter, suggesting wider, more ominous malaise generated by this culture of abuse.

The open circular set created by Alfons Flores is part bull-ring, part beach. In act 1 a tall central flagpole stands center stage. It is climbed by Sergeant Morales as he escapes the factory women harassing him about Carmen. It is hugged by Don José in an image of loyalty to *la patria* and used as a prison when Carmen is tied to it: the image of the women tied at a stake recalling the virgin martyr Joan of Arc. The Spanish flag—itself a contentious symbol in Catalonia—is hoisted up during act 1. It reappears at the beginning of act 4 as a kitsch towel stretched out by a bikini-clad tourist as she prepares to apply her sun cream. The recognizably Spanish phone box, situated stage right, functions as the link with the outside world for the soldiers who populate the stage, threatening to tip into the orchestra pit in a further image of masculine excess.

Lillas Pastia's tavern is no rickety bar but rather a 1970s Mercedes car that appears on stage with passengers spilling out of its windows. Eliana Bayón's Frasquita falls out—all white boots and mini dress swigging from a bottle of gin. Itxaro Mentxaka's buxom Mercédès is her partner in crime. Two pimps—Marc Canturri's black-suited Dancaïre, a lean bundle of energy, and Francisco Vas's more ostentatious Remendado in a shiny gray, ill-fitting outfit—present the faces of crime on the coastline, leaving Carmen on a deck chair soliciting customers for her pimps's profits. The military are complicit in the corruption. A drunken soldier is seen dancing with his trousers down. Josep Ribos's imposing Zuniga is bound up with the crooks, criminals, and reprobates that represent Carmen's coterie. Even Escamillo in Erwin Schrott's characterization comes across as a seedy raconteur milking the attention he receives from the adoring soldiers who follow him like devoted puppies.

Bizet's *Carmen*. Photo: A. Bofill.

Lillas Pastia hovers around the action busying himself with the creation of a *hispanidad* that can be marketed and sold to the interested shopper. He sets up the roadside deckchair in which Carmen—preparing to tout her wares—will sit. A Christmas tree adorned with miniature Spanish flags announces a forthcoming celebration. The gaudy polka dot dresses that he expects Frasquita, Mercédès and Carmen to wear are unpackaged from giant laundry bags. Frasquita and Mercédès willingly attire themselves in the folkloric outfits but Carmen refuses (despite having a knife held to her throat), pointing to a defiance that further comes into play in act 4. This is the packaging of Spain for tourist consumption that marked the boom years of the 1960s. Carmen the gypsy refuses to willingly submit to this exploitation. The young gypsy girl that opens act 2, scolding her doll, provides an indication of the fate that awaits women who don't or won't do what they are told. The threat of violence and the financial exploitation of women for sex pervades the whole staging. Carmen's position,

lying still on the sand as Don José sings his act 2, aria offers a premonition of a death foretold. As Don José lies beside her, the shadows on the wall behind them point to the culture of surveillance that underpinned Franco's dictatorship.

This is a production where the minimal items of decor have multiple functions. Lillas Pastia's car is the space of seduction for Don José and Carmen and her act 2 duet "Je vais danser en votre honneur" is undertaken across the car door. The chorus create pockets of action when Zuniga is beaten by the brigands and bandits during the act 2 finale. Circles proliferate through the production as the arena of the bull-ring is created across the four acts through different chorus configurations. Early in act 4 Lillas Pastia appears to paint a simple white circle that suggests the ongoing imprisonment of Carmen within ever decreasing circles. A rope hung across the front of the stage keeps the crowds from dropping into the orchestra pit. The manic flag waving with crowds scrabbling for the best view and flashing cameras evokes something of the celebrations through Madrid that marked Spain's 2010 celebrations at winning the World Cup. They may be looking out for a brief glance of Escamillo but he appears from within the mass: a lonely figure in a suit of lights remaining in the middle of the ring when the crowds have pulled away. The culture of celebrity renders Escamillo as much a victim as Carmen and indeed the analogy in act 4 is implied through Carmen's own attire: a pink dress adorned with sequins that becomes her own shroud. The crowds stalk Escamillo and Don José stalks Carmen, watching her from the aisle of the theatre stalls as she enters with Frasquita and Mercédès and blissfully waves them off.

Osborne's bull, a once familiar sight across the plains of the country, dominates the stage in act 3, and significantly it is pulled down by the soldiers at the beginning of act 4**,** dismantled perhaps into scrap metal to be bartered and/or sold. Just over two months after bullfighting was banned in Catalonia with effect from January 2012, this very visible pulling apart of such a potent image of Iberian culture remains a resonant (and some might argue, contentious) gesture. It is here under the watchful eye of the *toro*—itself an image of masculine libido—that ten aging Mercedes cars are driven on stage creating a tapestry of undulating metal that provides a mountainous surface for the brigands—who emerge from the cars—to clamber over. It allows for different levels for the ensuing action: Don José chases Escamillo over the cars after pulling a knife on him. Don José grabs Carmen on the car as he tries

Carmen, directed by Andreu Bieito. Photo: A. Bofill.

to force himself on her. Micaëla pulls him away. The cars also provide spaces for concealment, as when Micaëla hides in the back of a car with a blanket over her as she awaits the arrival of Don José. An array of contraband goods emerge from the cars, passed from felon to thief in a sequence choreographed to provide a potent image of illegal imports and smuggled goods negotiated across the border space that the camp creates. The camp is moved on as quickly as it is created.

There is a stark simplicity to the production that proves hugely effective. The chorus's movement is fluid and cleanly choreographed. Décor and place created across the bodies of the performers in a manner that evokes Brook's compressed *La Tragédie de Carmen*. The woman lifted onto the flag-pole at the end of act 1 recalls both Paca la Roseta—the "loose" woman visited by the male villagers in *The House of Bernarda Alba*—and Mari Gaila, the wayward protagonist of Valle-Inclán's *Divine Words*. A soldier strips at the beginning of act 3 and undertakes a dance by moonlight emulating the lithe moves of Escamillo. As the brigands approach he hurries off—perhaps a further comment on the bullfight ban that will turn the balletic bullfighter into a criminal.

Béatrice Uria-Monzón's mellow *Carmen* is less the fiery firebrand and more a streetwise whore who moves from man to man as much through necessity as desire. Her clothes are more functional—blouses that can easily be untied, skirts that can be raised without too much effort—than sexy. Sensuality prevails because it is understated. This Carmen disdains her suitors, rather in the manner of one of Salvatore Rosa's portraits. She bluntly removes her red underwear as she prepares for sex with José. Her quest for freedom is less about extolling the nomadic, itinerant way of life of a supposed gypsy way than an escape from the sexual slavery into which she is bound. She sees Don José as route to a better life and can't disguise her bitter disappointment when he fails to deliver. She then pragmatically turns to Erwin Schrott's vain *chulo* Escamillo, but he is presented as a self-obsessed narcissist, toying with her for his own pleasure. He is indeed part of (rather than an escape from) the sordid underbelly of petty crime and prostitution represented by Lillas Pastia, Dancäire, and Remendado. At the end of the opera, balancing precariously on one shoe she is an image of vulnerability and fear: knowing that the end is nigh and that she cannot physically escape the enclosed space. Desolation is conveyed through the bleakness of the location as well as the desperation that governs the characters' moves.

Both the "legitimate" military and the clandestine bandits are implicated in and feed off the corruption. Moralès (Àlex Sanmartí) is all aviator glasses and smarmy smiles, looking out for a quick bargain and a vulnerable being he can pick on. Josep Ribot's Zuniga is as much of a thug as Vas's Remendado. Schrott's Escamillo (while not vocally as exciting as Alagna's Don José) captures the egotism and arrogance of a minor celebrity milking any attention in the pursuit of self-promotion. The "Toreador's song" of act 2 fixes him as a vainglorious self-obsessed egotist. In act 3 he taunts Don José, enacting a bullfight with Don José as the latter approaches. He provocatively kisses Carmen's neck with Don José in full view; the latter charging towards him like a raging bull to put an end to the flirtation.

Roberto Alagna captures the psychotic desperation of the rather cumbersome Don José. This is less a lithe gigolo than a socially awkward bruiser with something of the nightclub bouncer about him. Brute force is the answer to opposition as demonstrated in his fistfights with Zuniga in act 2 and Escamillo in act 3. In act 4 he surveys Carmen like a furtive predator. He places shoes on her in act 1 as if dressing a doll. Alone in the bull-ring in act 4 he clutches at her legs like a desperate child and then sulkily kicks the contents of her handbag across the stage like a child in a tantrum. He pounces on her and puts a hand on her crotch as if about to rape her. He cuts her throat it is as if he were slaughtering an animal, then dragging her corpse off stage as if it were a carcass about to be skinned. Vocally powerful and physically agile, this is a Don José that intimidates.

His performance is underpinned by a strong musical energy led by Frenchman Marc Piollet in the pit. Don José is a role which suits Alagna down to the ground and he produces some thrilling vocal fireworks in his confrontations with Carmen at the end of acts 3 and 4, contrasted with some beautifully pianissimo singing in the act 1 duet with Micaëla. The French is enunciated with precision and accuracy across the board and Bieito's decision to use (and further trim) Ernest Guiraud's adapted recitatives keeps the pace sprightly. Broadcast in over 300 cinemas worldwide on 13 October from a live transmission at the Liceu, this is a production that confirms Bieito's status as a superb director of singers—Alagna has never been more credible, Uria-Monzón offers a Carmen whose tragedy is all too palpable—and reaps rewards in the emotional

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage Country* (Agost), directed by Sergi Belbel. Photo: David Ruano.

intensity of the performances realized across the visual economy of Flores's open stage.

Sergi Belbel has created a range of monstrous mother figures in his own dramaturgy: the senile pensioner who confesses to her daughter in *Caresses* that she wishes she had aborted her; the bitter matriarch in *Strangers* who unleashes venom at her husband and children; the obsessive motorcyclist's mother in *To Die (A Moment Prior to Death)*. His staging of Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* serves up a further mother eaten up with self-destructive venom and bile. Violet Weston is a mother who hovers between the drug-addicted Mary in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night,* the nagging Halie in Shepard's *Buried Child,* the abusive Martha in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* and the grotesque Southern belle Amanda Wingfield of Williams's *Glass Menagerie*. Only this is an American vernacular refracted through the prisms of television soap operas. This Oklahoma reworks our myths of the American Midwest offering a landscape as harsh, relentless, and excessive as anything *Desperate Housewives* or *Twin Peaks* might offer—albeit with a sensibility that owes more to melodrama than surrealism.

Max Glaenzel and Estel Cristià design a three-tiered house where much is exposed to a voyeuristic public. Part haunted house part doll's house this is the family home where the drunken poet and professor Beverly Weston (Carles Velat) lives with his pill-popping wife Violet (Anna Lizaran). The former drinks to excess; the latter takes an array of drugs to assuage the pain of tongue cancer and the demons that haunt her. Beverly's disappearance merely exacerbates the problem and mother Violet continues on the downers until elder daughter Barbara confronts her mother and confiscates all her pills.

The play might have been called an "American *Three Sisters*" for Chekhov's Olga, Masha, and Irina are here reimagined through more extreme prisms. Barbara (Emma Villarasau) is separated from her husband Bill (Abel Folk) with a teenage daughter Jean (Clara de Ramon) hooked

on weed and beginning to play around in ways that suggest an unhappiness that her parents are largely unaware of. The shy mousy Ivy (Rosa Renom) is secretly involved with her cousin Charlie (Albert Triola) who she doesn't yet realize is her half-brother. Pushy Karen (Montse German) has flown in from Florida with new fiancé in tow—the smarmy businessman Steve (Òscar Molina). Karen has found her Moscow, only this isn't the paradise she envisaged. Barbara left her childhood beau (Deon, the current Sheriff) for brighter shores elsewhere only to find that husband Bill plays with his students and has now left her for a younger woman. The painfully shy Ivy thinks she has found love with cousin Charlie only the sins of the father mean that her planned escape to New York can only remain a dream cruelly taken away from her by her family's revelations.

Beverly's disappearance offers the narrative mechanism to bring the extended family together; his wake throws further complications into the mix as drink, accusations, and recriminations combine to proffer a veritable power tussle between Violet and her eldest daughter Barbara. Even Violet's sister Mattie Fay (Maife Gil) has her own secret battles as her hen-pecked husband and son receive dismissive comments from her venomous tongue.

Letts provides all the ingredients to ensure a volatile wave of confrontations. Beverly's opening prologue, rocking gently on the porch as he calmly confesses to the new home help he has hired that his wife takes pills and he drinks—"that's the bargain we've struck." Already there is something of the living dead about him as he bobs up and down on the chair like a puppet. Violet first appears falling out of an upstairs window, cigarette dangling in hand; it's a telling image of a woman on the precipice. As Beverly walks off stage at the end of the prologue, the house appears to follow him stage left, opening out to show the hidden innards that he was just describing. At the end of act 3 it closes again, giving something of a circular structure to the play: the sense of nothing having moved on that befalls so many American family tragedies.

Joan Sellent's taut translation offers Belbel and his cast a solid base for the family histrionics that ensue. Pepe Bel's soundscape (offering crickets, approaching cars, and a soulful blues lament) further adds to the atmospherics. Even if the lighting by Kiko Planas is not as shadowy as that created by Ann G. Wrightson for the Steppenwolf premiere in 2007, it ably demarcates the different zones of the house. Ultimately, however, this is a production that rises and falls by the quality of its cast and the tensions that these create as the family dramas unravel. Here Anna Lizaran builds on the obnoxious mother she created for Belbel's *Strangers*, creating a compelling Violet. This is a woman who always has to have the final word. She craves attention and simply can't deal with coming second. She cruelly mimics her daughter, shows no discernable interest in her granddaughter, and offers coarse remarks to anyone who dares disagree with her. There are moments when Lizaran's complicity with the audience threatens to destroy the tone of the production: "Watch me," her performance seems to suggest, "I am Anna Lizaran playing the crazy Violet." These moments of playful connivance transport the play into a kind of vaudeville and I am not entirely convinced of the pathos of her drug-addled state. More effective are her less showy performances at the dinner table as she throws out curt, cruel replies to her family's questions and observations. She laughs with demented pleasure bringing up every taboo topic to the displeasure and discomfort of her family. She meets her match in Emma Vilarasau's earthy Barbara, struggling to keep hold of her errant husband (an excellent Abel Folk) and an increasingly unhappy, bored daughter (a trying too hard to be moody and overly nuanced Clara de Ramon). Indeed, the scenes with Folk betray a nervous exhaustion that expertly charts the demise of their marriage.

Montse German draws the short straw in that Karen is the least delineated of the three sisters. She is at her best when drinking with Ivy and Barbara at the beginning of act 3 and less convincing in the scenes with Steve who is drawn as a two-dimensional letch. We know what is to come in act 3 if he can't keep his hands off Jean's knees in act Two. Rosa Renom is able to suggest the pathologically shy Ivy without recourse to easy theatrics; it's a moving performance of a middle-aged woman whose stab at love is cruelly thwarted by the family's revelations. Albert Triola is not able to move beyond the stereotype in his Little Bo Peep characterization of the boyish Little Charlie. Jordi Banacolocha imbues Violet's brother-in-law and Little Charlie's father, Charlie Aiken with a stoic compassion that belies his supposedly bumbling nature. Maife Gil, replete in white-rimmed glasses and matronly kitsch, offers a compelling Mattie Fay whose constant nagging belies a deeper unhappiness with her own self. Almudena Lomba as the Native American home help Johnna functions as an effective audience substitute: the outsider who witnesses the self-destructive implosion of this American family.

There are times when the production fails to really convince. Little Charlie is too much Barcelona boho with his Camper *pelota* shoes. Violet's cold turkey appears too brief: blink and you might miss it. The final act tries to do too much and the brief pithy scenes that replace the languid development of acts 1 and 2 suggest a writer struggling to determine how to end his play. Nevertheless, Belbel once again demonstrates that he's a director who knows how to handle multiple-character narratives. The dinner party scene in act 2 is up there with his finest work, handled with a symphonic attention to pacing and tone. Vilarasau and Lizaran's battles are angry, vicious confrontations defined by a force that never falls into facile histrionics. This is a production about families at war—resonant in the climate of contemporary Spain where memories of the Civil War and its aftermath still linger. *Agost* has proved the hit of the season, packing audiences into the cavernous Sala Gran of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya. An antidote to the saccharine Christmas fare on offer on Spanish television, *Agost* offers a take on the unhappy dysfunctional middle-class family in emotional freefall that clearly strikes a chord in Catalonia.

Josep Maria Pou has brought one of the hits of the Buenos Aires stage, Maria Goos's *Cloaca* (here presented as *Baraka*) to Barcelona, presenting it for a ten-week run at the Goya Theatre. After a two-year run at Buenos Aires's Metropolitan theatre, expectations were high. For those of us who remember the turgid production of this Dutch writer's play that opened the Old Vic's first season under Kevin Spacey's artistic directorship, Javier Daulte's production is a pleasant surprise. The four Argentine actors who play the old friends coping with the trials and tribulations of middle-age race through the play at a cracking pace but not even their sparkling performances can mask the play's creaky construction and predictable characterization. Pedro (the suave Dario Grandinetti) is smart, good-looking and gay and having problems with his employers: a disgruntled civil servant, he's helped himself to a number of unwanted art works in the city's art collection that he's now being asked to give back. Needless to say he's not terribly pleased by the prospect—especially as he's sold a couple to pay for his apartment—and his three friends offer advice and assistance as he attempts to hold on to them.

First up is the ambitious and self-interested Juan (Juan Leyrado), a politician with a mistress whose wife has finally seen the light and thrown him out. Juan hopes that lawyer Tomás (Jorge Marrale) might be able to help but Tomás has been in a psychiatric hospital following a breakdown and, while willing to take the case on, has little practical

Baraka, directed by Josep Maria Pou. Photo: David Ruano.

guidance to offer. And then there's the slimy Martín (Vando Villamil replacing Hugo Arana who pulled out of the Barcelona run), an aging theatre director who is sleeping with Juan's eighteen-year-old daughter who has a small role in his new production.

The first act establishes the situation (albeit through a clumsy phone call) and sets up the relationships between the four men. All are nicely delineated. The tall Grandinetti creates a stylish Pedro who diligently services his three friends—all ostensibly there to help him. He first appears in his underwear—undressed so to speak and exposed—when Leyredo's silver-haired Juan appears looking for a place to stay as his long-suffering wife Conny has thrown him out. Juan is obsessive, persistent and tenacious and only interested in his friends when he needs them. Leyredo conveys the vanity of a man who is unable to deal with the onslaught of middle-age or the possibility of coming second to anyone. Marrale is all ticks, quivers and shudders as the ex-cocaine addict currently in the fragile state of post-rehab. It's a performance of great technical virtuosity. It is, however, stretching the imagination to conceive that Pedro would hire him as his lawyer when so much is at stake.

But then credibility is not really the play's forte. The characters are too broadly drawn and rarely move (however amusing the dialogue) beyond the stereotypical. Certainly there are laughs to be had along the way–the scene with the Russian prostitute sent by the friends to service Juan on his birthday is funny with a menacing twist as the mean Martín tries to have his way with her. Ultimately, however, it's a temporary distraction in a piece that never really adds up to the sum of its parts. The plotting leaves a lot to be desired as awkward exposition gives way to melodrama. Tomás's further lapse into addiction and Pedro's suicide appear too easy an option for ending the play. The two most compassionate characters disappear so to speak, leaving the self-centerd duo of womanizers, Martín and Juan, to inherit the earth. It's a pessimistic state of affairs. Goos's play lacks the lithe energy of Yasmina Reza's *Art* or the brutal poetics of Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Alicia Leloutre's set (bringing together a bar-cum-living room where the men eat, drink, and play) is effective if rather too much like an IKEA showcase space. Javier Daulte's pacy production speeds through the play; its effervescence is infectious and even if the four actors don't quite sparkle as they did when the production first opened in the city, *Baraka* (the title coming from the men's greeting to each other) serves as a telling reminder of the technical skills and vocal dexterity—Spanish spoken at breakneck speed and with a musical precision—of Argentina's current crop of acting talent.

Lluís Pasqual used his 2000 production of *The Cherry Orchard* to bid farewell to the Teatre Lliure's Gràcia home; ten years on Julio Manrique has used it to announce his appointment as Calixto Bieito's successor as artistic director of the Teatre Romea. While Manrique has realized some taut productions of contemporary dramatists—Ravenhill's *Product*, Mamet's *American Buffalo* and LaBute's tryptich of short plays, *Romance, The Furies* and *Helter-Skelter,* he has come a bit of a cropper with Chekhov. Certainly the play has a different rhythm to the cinematic pacing and zippier language of the aforementioned dramatists. And while he has opted for Mamet's sparse version of the play, directing *The Cherry Orchard* as if it were a Mamet piece throws up a number of serious problems. Cristina Genebat's translation is both appropriately sparse and poetic but the actors race through it with a hysterical energy that never really gels. The approach is not unlike that Sean Holmes took for his *Three Sisters* at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2010, only Holmes's production was more elegant, more choreographed and ultimately more coherent.

This is not to say that the production is an unadulterated failure. Lluc Castells offers a glass house where the outside world is never too distant, a fragile space that never appears too robust. The suitcases in the lobby are brought on by Ranevskaya and her entourage and feature a framed portrait of Chekhov—a witty meta-theatrical nod—as well as a reminder of a world in transit. It's a world that at once suggests the late nineteenth-century and as well as a more modern landscape and Maria Armengol's costumes similar opt for a classical design given a contemporary twist. The production's acting register, however, never quite finds a way of enacting this fusion of epochs as rushed encounters give way to droopy posing.

There are nevertheless some interesting casting decisions. Oriol Vila is a persuasive Trofimov bringing the right balance of fervour and idealism. David Selvas is a bright young Lopakhin whose furious energy offers an antidote to Ranevskaya's languid, directionless pacing. His arrival in act 3 from the auction in an intoxicated state merges a degree of incredulity with drunken revelry. It is both dangerous and vulnerable: like a boy who has overdosed on fizzy drinks and can barely contain his enthusiasm. This is a Lopakhin who appears infatuated with Ranevskaya even if he can never

Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Lluís Pasqual. Photo: David Ruano.

fully articulate it and who barely registers the dowdy Varya (Genebat). There's little of the course merchant about him, rather he appears more poised and genteel than Ranevskaya. Montse Guallar's Ranevskaya is a mannered artiste who draws on a limited repertoire of gestures. It's a limited performance that traps the piece within an irritating, affected aesthetic. Mireia Aixalà's Anya is similarly one-dimensional: a giggling teenager playing at the innocent girl on the cusp of womanhood. Eyes wide open as if looking at the world with intense wonder, her performance never moves beyond cliché. Dunyasha (Gemma Brió) also appears to be trying too hard to play the infatuated servant stealing glances at the indifferent Yasha (a credible characterisation from Xavier Ricart). Sandra Monclús is similarly overemphatic as the German governess Charlotta with forced routines that never strike the appropriate, playful tone. Ferran Rañé is a moving Gaev, unable to really come to terms with the changing world around him. He always appears lagging behind, snooker cue in hand—an inappropriate figure in the world he now finds himself in. Cristina Genebat's Varya is passable but appears more a sour-faced party pooper than a frustrated woman seeing her dreams slip away from her.

There are three major problems with the production beyond the casting issues delineated above. Firstly, the pacing: the actors give the impression that they are in a rush to make it to the pub before last orders. There's no variation, no time for the play to breathe. Everyone is rushing to catch the last train in the first act. Lines are hurried without distinction. It fails to give the production a sense of urgency or pathos and merely bemuses and irritates for all the wrong reasons.

Secondly, the set loses its way. A huge cherry tree falls into the room in act 2 and proves an impediment to the actors. (It appears also in act 4 to unnecessarily reinforce the metaphor of loss.) In act 4 curtains are drawn around the glass house, only the characters fail to use them in a meta-theatrical way. Rather they are awkwardly pulled apart for entrances and exits giving an ungainly tone to the production. The idea could have worked well but it needed further elaboration and a more precise choreography from the actors and director.

Finally, the small boy who appears on stage intermittently as the ghost of Ranevskaya's dead child really grates. The movements appear very

forced—as if he's not quite sure where to go. In the final scene he appears with the abandoned Firs and functions as an unnecessary distraction at the front of the stage.

The captions flashed against the back glass again point to the meta-theatrical emphasis of Manrique's production without really being followed through. The music (Leonard Cohen makes a pronounced appearance) delineates a melancholia that is overly inscribed. Less would have been more—an approach used to brilliant effect in the LaBute trilogy. I have been a fan of Manrique's work as an actor (especially in Oriol Broggi's *Hamlet*) and his three productions as a director to date have been very fine indeed but here he's painfully out of his depth. Perhaps the production will serve to point to the kind of repertoire he should opt for—especially in his new role as Artistic Director of one of the city's most emblematic spaces (an inspired choice by production company Focus who run the Romea). Perhaps it will point to the need to allow for extended rehearsal time for certain types of works. One simply hopes the lessons will be learned in time for his next production.

Look at what's on in Madrid and there are a number of Catalan practitioners presenting work in the city. At Madrid's Español theatre (under the invigorated artistic directorship of Mario Gas) both Nuria Espert and Josep Maria Flotats are playing in the studio space and the main theatre respectively while La Fura dels Baus are in town playing at the Teatros del Canal, currently under the artistic direction of Albert Boadella, the artistic director of Els Joglars (once stalwarts of the Catalan performing arts scene).

It's obviously exciting to note that a Sasha Guitry play that has never previously been seen on stage is getting its premiere at Madrid's Español Theatre under the direction of Josep Maria Flotats. The French-trained Flotats has presented a range of French works with his own company (as with Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* 1985, Molière's *Misanthrope* 1989, Reza's *Art* 1997-2000, Jouvet's *Paris 1940* 2002-03, Brisville's *The Supper* 2004-05, and *Meeting between Descartes and Pascal Joven* 2009). Guitry is in many ways a logical choice for Flotats as the plays offer many of the characteristics he has favored in his directorial choices to date: verbal flair and pleasurable wit in the writing; a focus on plays where characters speak thoughts, emotions, and desires; overt theatricality and meta-theatricality; heightened sexual politics through the pairings of mismatched couples; master-servant foibles and frivolities.

Perhaps it is the cynic in me but I am always slightly concerned when a play has lain dormant for fifty years. There is usually a good reason for this and in the case of Guitry's *Beaumarchais,* the writing (while boasting the playwright's habitual wit) is not vintage stuff. It's not surprising that a dramatist who wrote 124 plays should have the odd dud work in the pile and *Beaumarchais* should, if nothing else help turn attention to his more pliable works that are all too rarely staged in twenty-first century Europe.

Beaumarchais is a biography of sorts, crafted in short scenes that move, in veritable epic style, from early career to death. Flotats offers a framing device that sees Flotats/Guitry assemble the company in 1950 to present the premier of the work. It's laborious as an opening because it overstates its case—presenting the perfect company that looks too good to be true and offering a level of discursive engagement that moves beyond the requirements of such a meta-theatrical mechanism.

Indeed, the play would itself have benefitted from some trimming. A number of scenes are overly written with characters explaining their position to the point where nothing is left to the imagination. As such, a potential biographer who calls on Beaumarchais indicates at length what he wants, setting up a further overly creaky literary device to set up the play's flashback structure. The play is prescriptive and predictable—an old man looking back at the "greatest hits" of his life—and the need to ensure the audience are orientated and aware of who is where means that nothing is really left to the imagination. The inventor of the guillotine is introduced with laborious explanations. Napoleon articulates his position with prosaic pedestrianism. Prison scenes are repetitive and fail to effectively move the action on. Beaumarchais too fails to develop as a character. A bit of a rogue with the ladies is as far as dramatic tension really goes. This is a figure that's just too good to be true; a rose-tinted idealist standing up for the values of freedom and free speech in autocratic times.

There is, however, much to admire in the production. The new translation by Mauro Armiño is fluid and droll. Flotats's technique as a performer is impeccable. Timing is perfect—especially in the comic scenes—and there is a tangible rapport with the audience. The French accent that he uses to create the Guitry character in the opening moments occupies a place between the understated and pastiche that works to conjure the mood of the production. Flotats brings a slightly impish, camp

quality to the larger than life role of Beaumarchais and orchestrates some delightful comic moments. A mistress is revived with champagne. The valet and footman search for their master as he is threatened by his mistress's irate, aristocratic husband. A double act of deadpan servants comment on the action through their gestures rather than words. "God Save the Queen" plays on a music box as the action relocates to London and a catty housekeeper sees to the Gentleman of Eon and his French guest.

There are a number of scenes that defy the pompous tone of much of the writing and these are stylishly directed by Flotats. The encounter with the transgendered Gentleman of Eon is a wonderful study in restraint and suggestion with Raúl Arévalo's superb Eon and Flotats's Beaumarchais delicately pacing the room to the frequent interruptions of a male servant in amusing drag turning up her nose at the goings on in the house. The meeting with Benjamin Franklin (Constantino Romero) is again understated as both feign ignorance of the other's language—to the bemusement and confusion of the translator who accompanies them.

The problem is that these scenes are few and far between. The elegance of Ezio Frigerio's sumptuous set realized as images that flash on the screen creating the sense of a luminous e-book presented on a giant ipad at the back of the stage, further reinforces the meta-theatrical vein of the production. The projections offer a high window for a prison cell, modish chandeliers for a drawing room, opulent doors and décor that suggest the splendor of Versailles, and bookshelves that conjure Beaumarchais's library. Franca Squarciapino's costumes are similarly gorgeous—and interminable as characters switch attire with great frequency. Frocks, coats, petticoats, cloaks in sumptuous silks suggest decadence and excess. Pacing, however, is sometimes affected by the need to accommodate the costume changes. Scene changes have to allow Flotats to switch through a dizzying array of costumes that take the viewer from Beaumarchais in prison to Beaumarchais as man of leisure at home.

There are some strong choral moments from the cast of thirty-two. Characters sweep in and out and gather in groups, almost dancing on and off stage in elegant configurations that suggest the busy aristocratic-cum-mercantile world in flux that Beaumarchais's plays capture so effectively. Vinicio Cheli's lighting is similarly evocative and works to convert the grand stage of the Teatro Español into smaller pockets for the more intimate scenes. Nevertheless, the production never quite manages to suggest that the play is worthy of the lavish treatment that Flotats bestows on it in this grand staging. Particularly problematic is the ending, which sees Beaumarchais received in heaven by cranky academics and a luminous Molière in pristine, glowing white. The masked, grotesque characterizations of the out-dated members of the French Academy never really gels with the inflated language and ends the play on an unconvincing and excessively mannered note.

In the Español's smaller studio venue, another veteran performer turns to a canonic writer. Again here, it's a work that's often relegated to the "oddity" corner of the author's repertoire and has never previously been presented in Spain. *The Rape of Lucrece* has been a long cherished project of Nuria Espert's. It's just taken her a while to bring it to the stage. This is no mean feat when you're seventy-five and you propose taking on all of the roles yourself. It would have been a much easier feat to just undertake a recital of the poem but Espert's trajectory has never been about taking the easy option.

Collaborating with Madrid-based director Miguel del Arco—whose *La función sin hacer/The Performance not yet Presented*, an adaptation of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* has proved one of the most impressive (and resonant) productions of the past three years—Espert opts for a bedroom scenario for the action. It is, however, a space of secrets and mysteries. A four-poster bed is hidden behind the curtains that enclose it, the delicate fabric swaying provocatively in the light breeze that runs across the stage. A table and chair offer refuge to the narrator who begins the story, sharing with the audience and a mysterious phone caller the fact that the recital is about to begin. Tumbling over the words of the opening of the poem, it is as if she is trying to get her mouth around its poetry, a form of warm up before the "performance" begins. The mechanism of inserting a DVD into its player creates the sense of an opening; the narrator settles into her chair and enters into the narrative.

At first the pacing is hesitant and cautious, as if she herself is trying to work out what is happening. The sound of a neighing horse plunges the audience into Lucrece's world and suggests the imminent danger of a masculinity personified by the errant horse—an image all too present in Lorca's world too.

In the early stages of the poem, Espert watches over the story that emerges: it is as if the performers are in front of her and she is observing Collatinus boasting over the chastity and loveliness

The Rape of Lucrece, directed by Nuria Espert. Photo: Courtesy of Teatro Español.

of his wife Lucrece before the duplicitous Tarquin. She makes her way to the bed as the action moves closer to the rape and finally pulls the curtains away as if to have a better look. The bedspread becomes Tarquin's cloak; and she lowers her pitch and widens her mouth to create a piercing image of the feline stealth that defines her characterization of Tarquin. Returning to the narrator the tone is higher, the delivery faster. On the bed the curtains create Lucrece's violated body, shielded from Tarquin's imposing figure, looming over her like a giant winged bat. The sounds of a struggle are evident as Lucrece tries to get him to move away. The narrator places her hands over her ears to shut out the sounds of the rape.

Espert darts from role to role with effortless ease. A slight move of the shoulders or the donning of a single prop indicates a change of character. A black cape brings on Tarquin, a shimmering cloak of violent hues creates Lucrece. The maid responding to Lucrece's call and Lucius Brutus rallying Collatine to action are the briefest of moments but she is able to indicate the shift that has taken place through the tiniest hand gesture and shift of the upper torso. After the terrible deed, she makes her way shakily to the table to take a glass of water to settle her after: the shock of what she has witnessed is all too evident.

Lucrece emerges from the curtains, her face and body hidden in shame beneath the layers of cloth; her voice a mass of rage, shame, and anger. For Lucrece's suicide, Espert climbs onto the bed beside the shimmering cloak that she has removed. With a petrifying stillness, she lies beside the cloak that takes on the role of the now dead Lucrece. It is an image of emptiness, of life draining away, of the ritual of mourning.

José Luis Rivas's translation avoids excessive rhetoric, opting instead for a directness that recalls Homer's *Iliad.* The story is here narrated with the same sense of urgency that so marks Homer's warring Trojans and Greeks. The language also signals an affinity with Shakespeare's better known works: Tarquin's lack of control points to the excesses of *Titus Andronicus, Measure for Measure,* and *Othello.* Lucrece's sense of honor is not a million miles from that of Desdemona; her insistence on sacrifice recalls the forceful Isabella of *Measure for Measure.* Sandra Vicente's sonic landscape offers a tangible sense of fear—slamming doors, a key in a door, a horse in the distance, the wind that encircles the characters. It is itself a further character in the action.

Espert rehearsed the piece with del Arco for two months, describing it as "the most difficult

thing that I have ever undertaken on stage." Her gnarled hands and weathered face certainly point to the ravages of age, but her move across the different characters and moods of this dramatic poem intimate an understanding of theatre as transformation. Nuria Espert becomes the other in *The Rape of Lucrece,* transcending the all too prevalent equation of performer and role. Espert reminds her audience of the power of storytelling and the ways in which stories are shaped through the very process of the telling. Del Arco's production is both swift and sharp, patient and urgent. He has described the poem as a horror film that reminded him of a Tarantino screenplay when he first read it but he stages it with admirable simplicity and a lack of gore on Ikerne Giménez's functional but brilliantly effective set.

Simplicity is not the order of the day in La Fura dels Baus's treatment of *Titus Andronicus,* which opts for excess in all the corners and crevices of the staging. The play is stripped down to the bare narrative and tossed at the audience in aggressive fashion. You catch what you can as you are pushed, prodded and shoved across the cavernous space of the Teatros del Canal's Sala Verde. The auditorium is conceived as a giant pit where the audience is thrown in with the warring factions of Tamora (Diana Bernedo) and Titus (Ramon Tarès). Bernedo's Tamora is an angry punk with dramatic eye make up extended across the width of her face. She prowls and watches; she jumps and pounces. Words are spat out as venom. Her two sons Chiron (Raúl Vargas) and Demetrius (Darío Ese) hover around her like brutish bodyguards.

Director Pep Gatell opts for an excess of violence—and in this case more is definitely less. The speeches are overly rhetorical and enunciated as if volume were the only priority. The raped and maimed Lavinia moans as she is wheeled across the performance space with blood falling across her face. Her arms flail around mercilessly, with branches tied to the stumps that were once her hands. Knives are a conspicuous part of the stage picture, used consistently by chef Javier Ahedo who works through the production putting together a range of aperitifs as well as the final meal where Tamara devours the flesh of her children. Celebrated Basque restaurant Mugaritz has collaborated in what is termed the "gastronomic direction" of the

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, staged by La Fura dels Baus. Photo: López de Zubiria.

production, putting together the dishes that are made and consumed during the duration of each performance.

Pockets of snacks are handed out to the audience on giant poles dangled by the characters: the audience jump up like performing dogs to pick up the titbits on offer. From crispy seaweed to candy floss, the foods offer a taster of the feast that is to come. A select number of audience members are chosen to sit at the high table through the production's website. They are both participants in and witnesses of the feast prepared by Ahedo as Tamara is fed the flesh of her sons. There are plenty of takers but watching the participants smile their way through dinner, a part of me wonders why they would wish to partake of a meal that is ostensibly presented as human flesh—even if the reality of what Ahedo prepares is somewhat different.

The De Dietrich pristine, metallic kitchen is suspended on a platform where Javier Ahedo labors through the production. The smells filter through the auditorium creating a tangible sense of expectation. It is a shame, however, that the idea is never fully realized, for Ahedo sits somewhat outside the action, never really fully integrated in the events happening around him. The production is at its most effective in the moments when he does enter into the action. His removal of the attire of Tamara's dead sons (who are presented to him bound in a black sack), and hanging them up in his kitchen on meat hooks is one of the staging's most unnerving moments.

There is certainly a worthy attempt to return to La Fura's early productions, like *Accions* and *Suz/o/suz*. Cars are driven through the space filling the auditorium with the smell of petrol. Tall towers on wheels house the feuding warriors. The towers are manoeuvred by beefy warriors, like the giant pieces of a chessboard, forcing the audience to move out of the way or face the consequences of the characters' wrath. There is a palpable sense of danger in the confrontation and the general unpredictability of the moves. The dead semi-mummified bodies of Tamara's family are carried across the stage in search of their final burial place, looming dangerously on stretchers over the audience's heads. At times the feeling is one of terror and it is here that the production is at its best, consistently unnerving an audience who may think they have seen it all before.

Too much, however, seems at the stage of an embryonic idea rather than a fully thought through concept. Shadow play is used intermittently—as when Titus cuts off his hand. Projections flash across the four giant screens that enclose the space: marching troops, the imagery of gaming, the pages of a book, writings on the floor. But the images follow thick and fast and don't linger with enough time to be fully processed. Lavinia comes across as little more than a Lolita temptress. She appears as a pole dancer in her giant tower throwing grapes to the cook: her sexual precocity emerges also in the screen images of her projected across the screen-walls.

Characterization is rather simplistic across all the major roles. Lavinia pouts. Titus marches purposely and shouts. Demetrious and Chiron behave like playground bullies. There are thrills for sure but this truncated adaptation of Shakespeare's most savage tragedy presents a rather one-dimensional, almost cartoonish reading of the play. Poetry is left far behind as atrocities and horrors become the primary prism of the production. The parallels with our own society are only too evident, but it is a shame that these are not more fully teased out. La Fura have opted for an aggressive "in-yer-face" approach that never moves beyond surface violence and gore. After each tragedy, people keep eating. "Bon appétit," reads the final projection. It's hard to disagree, although I'm still left wishing the message could have been delivered in a somewhat more challenging (and complex) manner.