

WESTERN EUROPEAN STAGES

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THEATRE CENTER
THE GRADUATE CENTER OF
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

‘Spanish Language Productions Dominate at Ricardo Szwarcer’s Final Grec Festival’

A review by Maria Delgado

Published in

Western European Stages

Vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011), pp. 45-52.

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The Graduate Center of the
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WESTERN EUROPEAN STAGES

Volume 23, Number 3

Season 2011

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ISSN # 1050-1991

Spanish-language Productions Dominate at Ricardo Szwarczer's Final Grec Festival

Maria M. Delgado

For his fifth and final Grec Festival, director Ricardo Szwarczer brought back favored directors—as with Romeo Castellucci and Àlex Rigola. There was a marked concentration on work from France and the French-speaking world—including Peter Brook's *Magic Flute*, Olivier Cadiot, and Ludovic Lagarde's *Un Magé en été*, Koffi Kwahulé's *Jaz*, Patrice Chéreau's production of Jon Fosse's *I am the Wind*, Joël Pommerat's *Cercles/Fictions* and *Le Petit chaperon rouge*, Jean-Luc Lagarce's *Les Règles du savoir-vivre dans la société moderne* (The Rules of Etiquette in Modern Society) and a production of *Waiting for Godot* by Joan Ollé. In addition, there has been a crop of home-grown productions. Home-grown, however, has not merely included the Catalan—as with departing Teatre Lliure director Àlex Rigola's *Tragèdia* and Carles Fernández Giua's production of Esteve Soler's *Contra la democràcia*—but also a notable percentage of productions presented in Spanish by directors based

in Madrid. These include two productions that had earlier played at Madrid's Español theatre to excellent audience responses.

The first of these, Argentine director Claudio Tolcachir's reading of Miller's *All My Sons*, begins very promisingly with a storm that announces the danger to come. Elisa Sanz's set is informed as much by American art of the 1950s with its clapboard houses and pruned lawns as it is by discourses of realist décor. Tall trees provide a curtain of sorts and announce the thematics of disguise and deception that inform the play. The trees are a pseudo-expressionistic element—almost like something from an Egon Schiele painting—and ominously suggest a lost-in-the-forest-scenario. The production begins with an impressionistic energy: overlapping dialogue; deft, almost dance like moves; Joe Keller (Carlos Hipólito) and his son Chris (Fran Perea) reading the papers with identical gestures; Frank (Alberto Castrillo-Ferrer) jogging onstage



Arthur Miller's *All my Sons*, directed by Claudio Tolcachir. Photo: Jean Pierre Ledos.

to provide a sense of the world that is about to be definitively destroyed by the revelations that are to follow.

Hipólito is a notable Joe Keller: he may be slight but his physique serves him well to suggest vulnerability. As the production moves on through the play's creaky dramatic mechanisms—still very evident despite Tolcachir's pruning—he appears increasingly hunched and susceptible. His clothes hang off him as he shrinks before the audience. He is also, however, able to bring out a certain humour in Joe. This Joe can have a laugh even if his wife Kate cannot. Gloria Muñoz as Kate appears too much the homely Andalusian stay at home mother. Fran Perea is able to bring out some of Chris's awkwardness but never quite convinces as the lover besotted with his dead brother's girlfriend. As Ann Deever, the girlfriend who is no longer waiting for her serviceman to return, Manuela Velasco has something of Maribel Verdú about her. It's a lovely performance, negotiating delicacy, reticence, and willingness. Her luminescent beauty points to the attraction she held (and indeed still holds) for the Keller brothers. Jorge Bosch is a decent George Deever but as with Muñoz's Kate, never quite captures the character's development through the action of the piece.

While the production is never dull, it fails to really take off. Following the electric opening, there is too often a stolid quality to the action that never proves compelling. Tolcachir creates a series of memorable images: a stolen kiss between Chris and Ann at the side of the house; a weeping Chris on his knees at the end of the play; a jovial Joe trying to keep appearances as his past returns to haunt him; the blank look that Joe provides as he is faced with the implications of his past deeds. Nevertheless, the final impression is that of images in search of a production. Tolcachir has proved one of a number of Argentine directors (like Javier Daulte and Daniel Veronese) who have both imported to (and staged influential productions in) Spain, bringing something of the spirit of the found space, of high-energy performances, and of the unpredictable to their reading of the classics or formative Western myths. Here, working with Spanish actors, the results are not as compelling as the work he has realized with Argentine actors, but it does announce a willingness to play with the classical canon that may reap rewards in future productions.

At the Tívoli, the Español's artistic director, Mario Gas, has provided one of the sell-out productions of the Grec with an intelligent staging of

Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The production has many things going for it: a tight translation by José Luis Miranda, a beautiful set replete with elegant projections by Juan Sanz and Miguel Ángel Coso, atmospheric lighting by Juan Gómez Cornejo, and a stellar cast headed by Vicky Peña in the role of the wounded Blanche. Somehow, however, the production doesn't quite come together. There are many reasons for this but perhaps the key one is Peña who just doesn't have the sexual charge necessary for Blanche. She is able to suggest the coquettishness of Williams' eponymous protagonist: mannered, hot, and bothered, she arrives in town tripping over herself and her bags. She is definitely, not, however, in her forties and lacks the overt appeal and vulnerability that Rachel Weisz brought to the role at London's Donmar Warehouse in Rob Ashford's 2009 staging. There's an indication of the terrible solitude of Blanche but the desperation never quite comes off. Certainly, she becomes more matronly as the play progresses, celebrating her birthday in a conservative dress that visibly contrasts with her earlier apparel. Peña is a rather wizened Blanche, more Joan Crawford than Vivian Leigh but there's a flint-like toughness that outstrips the susceptibility.

Roberto Álamo—currently to be seen in Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live in* (Le temps de mon esprit) as the brutish brother Zeca—imbues Stanley with a harsh masculinity. There is less of the swagger here and more of the fist. This is a man with a temper who is not afraid to show it. There's no real charm, no moments of tenderness with his wife Stella (Ariadna Gil). Álamo has an imposing stage presence and here he gives us a cold, calculating animal—a million miles from Marlon Brando's characterization in Kazan's 1951 film or Elliot Cowan's smug, self-satisfied Stanley in the 2009 Donmar production. It's certainly an unglamorous portrait but it's hard to sympathize with him at any point in the production. He seems vindictive from his opening appearance.

Gil delivers a put upon Stella who rarely imposes herself. She's delighted to see her sister but proves weak as she finds herself caught between her violent husband and manipulative sister. Alex Casanovas steals the show as Mitch, observing Blanche in admiration from the side as the card game is underway, grabbing a few embarrassed lines with her while Stanley imposes his demands, clutching her hand awkwardly after a night out. He's terrific as the shy, lonely bachelor trying to make the first move and then comes into his own as he discovers Blanche's terrible secret and turns up in a drunken state to voice his despair and anger.



Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Mario Gas. Photo: Andrés de Gabriel.

Gas knows how to craft a staging and this is on many levels a pleasing piece of work. Blanche emerges from the mist in the production's opening scene as the sound of the tram fills the air. Mitch and Blanche return from their date to a sky full of twinkling stars. Sanz and Coso's set proffers different pockets to give a veritable sense of both the cramped apartment and the hustle and bustle of the tenements. Projections capture a tram hurtling towards the audience and noirish milieu. Anabel Moreno is good as the kindly, brash neighbor Eunice, lifting the pace with her every appearance. Atmospheric sound effects offer both ambient noise and a comment on the action. But for all the technical brilliance of the production, Peña just can't pull Blanche off. It's not a bad performance by any stretch of the imagination—Peña is too good an actress for that. It just seems that here a piece of miscasting has drastically affected the cadence of the production.

Calixto Bieito has now left the Romea to head Focus's BIT (Barcelona International Theatre), a platform for international collaborations that has a UK Shakespeare staging planned for 2012. With a range of international partnerships in place—including the Barbican Centre London, New York's Baryshnikov Arts Center, Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional, and Buenos Aires's Teatro General San Martín—

its opening production in November 2011 will be a staging of Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo* (The Great Theatre of the World) to be presented by German and Spanish actors. Plans for 2012 include a compilation of texts from Shakespeare by Catalan and English actors titled *Forests* (coproduced with the Shakespeare International Festival and the London 2012 Cultural Olympics) which will open at Birmingham Repertory Theatre in August 2012. Outside BIT Bieito has plans to direct *Camino Real* for Chicago's Goodman Theatre in a production due to open in March 2012.

At the Grec Bieito has presented two pieces: *Voices*, a contemporary oratorio presented in Danish, and *Desaparecer* (Disappearance) based on texts by Edgar Allan Poe. The latter is a show about storytelling and narrative conventions where Juan Echanove weaves together *The Crow* and *The Black Cat* as tales of the eerie and the uncanny. Musician Maika Makovski sits at the piano—a reminder of Horatio at the piano in Bieito's 2003 *Hamlet* and provides a sung commentary to the action. Both are in formal evening wear, as if temporarily distracted from another engagement. There's no denying Echanove's force as an actor but here the performance seems too much like a recital (and an emphatic one at that) and lacks the nuances that the actor brought



Edgar Allan Poe's *Desaparecer*, directed by Calixto Bieito Photo Josep Aznar.

to their earlier collaboration on the 2007 stage adaptation of Michel Houellebecq's *Platform*. I would have welcomed an element of mystery in the décor or costume, something less glamorous or chic that might match the creepy, disarming qualities of the Poe texts.

There were two stand-out offerings in the Spanish-language productions I saw at the Grec this summer and they couldn't be more different. The first, *Días estupendos* (Marvellous Days) sees Alfredo Sanzol return to the festival for a second successive year—this time at the Teatre Villarroel—with a piece that follows the vignette formula deployed to such powerful effect in *Delicades* (Delicacy). Only while *Delicades* seemed to have its roots in the post-Civil War era of his grandparents, here the action seems more rooted in the 1970s—albeit an imaginative take on the decade—as holiday makers head to the beaches and mountains in search of fun and frolics. It's a playful landscape dominated by a grassy, undulating surface evoking something of the great outdoors of Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills*. A single tree recalls the world of *Waiting for Godot*, only here there's no waiting for a Godot who may or may not come. These characters are on a journey and

nobody is going to stop them.

An array of figures are conjured by the dramatist-director and his cast: young and old, male and female, boisterous and bashful, flirtatious and shy, Spanish and foreign. A slight move or the simplest of entries and exits suggests a change of role and situation. It's fluid and fast moving; for ninety minutes the audience are transported off on a temporary holiday where they are privy to moonlight encounters, revelations by a campfire and mischievous encounters in the hot sun. Atmospheric lighting by Baltasar Patiño expertly suggests the different locations without ever appearing unduly labored. Indeed, Sanzol's production is as deft and light as his writing.

A Civil Guard offers a warning to a nudist bather but his remarks speak of a world at the point of change—the move from dictatorship to democracy. A bullfighter cries uncontrollably after having run over his cat and contemplates a change of direction much to the despair of his friends. The death of one brother and the survival of another generate anger and frustration on the part of a woman who mourns the loss of her loved one. An ETA activist returns home from prison (with a guitar case that all

the locals feel hides a sinister weapon) to find his loyal friend has a new husband who happens to be in the military. A pregnant woman speaks to her unborn baby of the future ahead. A mother listens to a letter received from her son on a school holiday camp which is read aloud by her husband. At first we witness her tenderness but as it becomes evident that her son really doesn't want to come home and asks to be adopted by his temporary guardians, the mood shifts to horror. A goodbye scene between a group of friends is perfectly pitched; only when the departing Sofia returns to pick up an umbrella she'd forgotten, the remainder of the gang hide. They have played out their farewells and feel that attempting them again would simply destroy the memories that remain as well as the moment they have just shared.

The production is able to comment on the wider *Zeitgeist* without ever appearing pedantic. Whether it's the factors that lead a liberal to vote for the right of center Partido Popular, or the shift to a new era in the dying days of the Franco regime, the

current economic crisis (a couple face losing their house and resort to desperate measures to keep the punters coming to their bed and breakfast), or the issue of exile and historical memory. The piece just has its finger on the pulse of the moment and is able to suggest a time span that moves from the final years of the dictatorship to the contemporary present without ever appearing disjointed. Friends discuss spotting Javier Bardem and Eduard Fernández in Barcelona in one scene while the spectres of the dying days of the Franco era hover in another.

The cast of five are uniformly excellent. There are no changes of costume, no wigs or accoutrements to distract the viewer: a shift in posture or a move of the head suggests a new role. The characters range from German tourists to adolescent giggly girls, from a couple contemplating separation to a nudist enjoying some privacy in the summer sun. Natalia Hernández is terrific as the mother who realizes her son is happier at school camp than at home. Pablo Vázquez provides laughs



Días estupendos, directed by Alfredo Sanzol. Photo: David Ruano.

as the guy who is more interested in sex with a melon than a girl—much to the anguish of his best friend. Juan Antonio Lumbreras is superb as the titillated Civil Guard and the returning ETA activist—two hugely contrasting roles that evade easy caricature. Elena González is delightful as the mother giving pragmatic instructions to her unborn child and Paco Déniz strikes the right note as the boyfriend meeting his partner's close friend recently released from prison. But it seems churlish to single out individual roles in a production marked by its attention to the ensemble and the wider thematic links between the tiny tales that are woven before the audience. Sheep are conjured by an actor sounding two bells. *Bodas de sangre* (Blood Wedding) is gently evoked by two lovers meeting in a forest, with a woodcutter making a timely appearance, as in Lorca's play. The characters appear only briefly but Sanzol never opts for simplistic characterizations or typecasting. It would be too easy to pigeonhole the characters into "good guys" and "bad guys" but *Días estupendos* instead offers a nuanced examination of the spirit of summer holidays refracted through a fresh, light humor that never feels forced. With *Días estupendos* Alfredo Sanzol confirms his position as one of the most original dramatists currently working in the Spanish language and one of the most assured young directors of his generation.

There are few directors who have been brave enough to tackle Ramón Valle-Inclán's *Luces de Bohemia* (Bohemian Lights). The play, first published in 1920—although lacking scenes two, six and eleven which were added in 1924—offers an odyssey through an absurd, brilliant, and hungry Madrid. Its episodic structure is both a reflection of and a comment on the fragmentary, divisive nature of Spanish society in the aftermath of 1918 with religion, political instability, and corruption, police brutality, industrial unrest all commented on through the fabric of the play. José Tamayo opted for formalism—and moments of the folkloric—in his 1971 reading; Lluís Pasqual for a brilliant mirrored floor that reflected the chaos surrounding the blind poet Max Estrella in his 1984 production. Oriol Broggi's extraordinary new staging at the Biblioteca de Catalunya couldn't be more different to Pasqual's reading but is similarly and blisteringly effective in capturing the grotesque qualities—or *esperpento* as the author termed it—of Valle-Inclán's mad, bad world.

Broggi, collaborating with Sebastià Brossa on the set, uses the width of the space beautifully, offering an expanding, open space with raked

seating on two sides. A bar is at the extreme edge of the stage facing one of the seating blocks. The space between the second longer seating balcony and the bar is a sandy floor where the action moves along as the scenes flow into one another with two tables and four chairs brought on and off and moved around as required. Broggi has opted to read a number of Valle-Inclán's stage directions, notably in the opening scenes of the play. This offers both a tangible sense of place and mood. It also allows for the elegiac, melancholic tone to be set from the opening as an actor addresses the audience directly, welcoming them with a cordial "Good evening" before going on to describe Max's attic home and bringing on Max and his wife Madame Collet. Actors watch from the doors of the bar, hover in the distance and on the balcony above the stage, and provide musical and sonic commentary. "¡Viva España!" sounds ironically on the guitar at the end of scene 1 and the refrain is repeated by the parrot in the closing moments of the play.

The width of the stage is beautifully used to ensure that the scenes flow effortlessly into each other. Actors create the sounds of animals that form such a part of Valle-Inclán's stage universe without it ever appearing strained or corny. Characters pack up and move the furniture as they leave the stage; it is almost as if it were part of them—an extended arm or leg—departing as they do. The light is crepuscular and nocturnal—scenes 1 to 12 chart a twelve-hour period from dusk to dawn—mutating from scene to scene. The characters too (with the exception of Lluís Soler's Max Estrella and Jordi Martínez's Don Latino) mutate from role to role. Soler gives a majestic Max a hunched weakening figure with a rasped voice and a well-worn suit. He captures the moral authority of Max, the sense of a tragic hero who's seen better days. There are echoes of Lear on the heath in his impotent raging and escalating madness, and his otherness comes out in a potent Catalan accent that is strongly inflected through his spoken Castilian.

Martínez is a young Don Latino (perhaps too young I would argue) and while he captures the hypocrisy of the fawning two-faced friend, he appears a little too clean and tidy to be a stellar Don Latino. We don't sense the repugnance and seediness that was a feature of Carlos Lucena's acerbic conception of the role in Pasqual's production. And while he certainly suggests a figure used to living off his wits who makes the most of any opportunity presented to him, we don't really grasp the ruthless avarice and degeneracy of a character all too often to



Valle-Inclán's *Luces de bohemia*, directed by José Tamayo. Photo: Bito Cels.

be found in a gutter.

Xavier Boada excels as the wandering tourist Don Peregrino Gay, replete with beret and rucksack, sharing his bizarre experiences of foreign travel with Max and Don Latino. Boada is also terrific as the bar owner Pica Lagartos as well as the mean but dapper red-scarfed Dorio de Gádex. Manel Dueso is both cocky and aggressive as the companion of the prostitute Enriqueta la Pisa Bien and a pedantic Don Filiberto, editor of the newspaper *El Popular*. His Ruben Dario is perhaps less distinctive and too anonymous to be effective. Jacob Torres stands out as the defiant Catalan prisoner and the creepy Dieguito, assistant to the corrupt Home Secretary. Camilo García is also impressive as the pedantic Home Secretary, the squalid bookshop owner Zarathustra, the preposterous Basilio Soulinake and the spooky but stately Marquis of Bradomín.

The imaginative casting sees Marissa Josa as Max's despairing wife, the poignant mother of the dead child, an old prostitute past her best days and one of the pretentious modernist poets (among other roles). Màrcia Cisteró takes on Max's feisty daughter Claudinita, the "in-yer-face" Enriqueta la Pisa Bien

and the young prostitute La Lunares. She also evades easy parody in her characterization of the "more than my job's worth" law enforcer Captain Pitito. All the actors are outstanding in capturing the essence of a character, however briefly they appear. The posture of Enriqueta under a streetlamp in scene 4; the weaving of the modernista poets in and out of each other later in the scene; the Catalan prisoner hunched in a darkened corner of the stage in scene 6 with his luminous white shirt; the home secretary in scene 8 who looks as if he'd be more suited to vaudeville than politics; the stoical gravediggers in the cemetery in scene 14 who efficiently shut the doors leading out to the toilet area as if shutting the cemetery gates; the waiter at the Café Colón in scene 9 who bursts into song. On the night I saw the production, an audience member chose to join him in singing "La poesia es una arma cargada de futuro" ("Poetry is a gunshot into the future"). All these moments offer a window into the soul of each character allowing the cast of eight to build up a world populated by hundreds of diverse personalities. The eccentricities are beautifully captured and never descend into facile parody. Max's death is a model of scenic efficiency.

His body wrapped in a carpet that has something of the magic carpet of antiquity capable of transporting the person into another world.

With the political turbulence of recent months and the economic chaos of a country where unemployment runs at twenty-one percent, the play proves both timely and resonant and the contemporary parallels are certainly not lost in Broggi's elegant staging. The sound of gunshots and breaking glass, scuffles and street fighting punctuate the play lending something of a contemporary air to the action. The final scene may sometimes give the impression of looking at a sepia photo but the choice of "Walk on the Wild Side" as the closing number inflects the production with a resolutely modern feel—echoed in the cut of the costumes which are 1918 Madrid inflected with a contemporary touch.

I have greatly admired Broggi's work as a director to date but *Luces de bohemia* strikes me as his most mature production, up there with the very best productions I have seen this year. Its attention to the rhythms of Valle-Inclán's semi-absurdist language, to the sounds and colors of a city on the edge; its energy and attention to pacing; its sense of a world imploding in on itself through hedonism and avarice; its precision in characterization are all very special indeed. This is a lithe, supple production with echoes of Cheek by Jowl and Pasqual's early work at the Lliure, and it fits like a glove into the crumbling, worn space of the Biblioteca de Catalunya. The fluid magneticism of Broggi's inspired staging sets a very high standard for this play which Lluís Homar's forthcoming production at the Centro Dramático Nacional in this coming season will be pressed to match.

Perhaps it's not surprising that Broggi's innovative work with his company laperla29 has caught the attraction of Barcelona's politicians—rumor has it he was offered the directorship of the Grec but chose not to succeed Szwarczer opting instead to pursue his own directorial interests. This might prove a canny decision in a year where state finances for theatre are tumbling as the governments—both national and local—seek to make cuts to stop the economy crashing further. Szwarczer's final Grec saw over 116,000 spectators with sold-out runs for *Luces de bohemia* and 12,373 tickets sold for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and 9,705 for *All My Sons*. While this is down on the 120,000 registered last year; this has proved a difficult year with institutional budgets cut and the economic climate meaning Spaniards have less disposable income. The announcement of Szwarczer's successor, Ramon Simó, has failed to ignite enthusiasm. A past director of Tàrrrega's street theatre festival and a member of the advisory panel of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Simó is also a theatre director but one whose appeal has remained local rather than national. He has plans to develop the Grec—although his opening press conference gave little concrete information of what this might involve—but might find it difficult to gain the support of theatre makers following an appointment that was made by politicians behind closed doors. Catalonia may wish to disassociate itself from some of the nepotistic practices that it locates in Madrid, but the appointment of Simó indicates that there's a long way to go in Spain before cultural appointments are subjected to an open and transparent competitive process freed from political machinations.