



**‘Barcelona theatre 2012:
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under the scalpel and the ghosts
of the past’**

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona Theatre 2012: Mismatched Couples, Capitalism under the Scalpel, and the Ghosts of the Past

Maria M. Delgado

Lluís Pasqual has returned to take over the artistic directorship of the Teatre Lliure this season. As one of the venue's co-founders in 1976, he is part of its DNA. He's also had enough experience of working at choice national and international venues—as director of the Centro Dramático Nacional (1983–89), director of the Odeón-Théâtre de l'Europe (1990–96), the theatre program of the Venice Biennale (1995–96), and as a regular guest director at Milan's Piccolo Teatro—to have a tangible sense of how the Lliure fits into the wider ecology of Europe's theatrical landscape.

But whereas his predecessor Àlex Rigola ran the theatre through the "boom" years of the mid-eighties, Pasqual is facing economically harder times. The *ajuntament* (or City Council) which had been one of the theatre's great supporters is no longer Socialist run. Like the *generalitat* (Catalán Parliament), it is run by the center-right nationalist party, *Convergència i Unió*, who have made savage cuts to culture. As a result, the Lliure has lost 614,000

euros of its total subsidy for the year and been forced to postpone two productions from the present season—Albert Boadella's *Amadeu* and Pep Bou and Lluís Pasqual's *Bombollavà*. With cuts of fifteen per cent in its grant from the Generalitat, twelve per cent from the Ministry of Culture, and a further three per cent from the City Council, cancelling productions looks to be a standard feature of the programming for some time to come.

Bleak times indeed, and bleak times call for culture to take a stand and engage directly with the state of the nation. It is not easy, however, to try and think through how the predicament of a nation-state might be staged when unemployment is running at close to twenty-three per cent (the highest in the Euro zone), a right of center *Partido Popular* (or People's Party) holds a vast parliamentary majority but no ideas for meeting the pledge to cut the country's deficit to 4.4 per cent of GDP over the next year. The economy is shrinking and a further recession is hovering over the draconian attempts to meet deficit



Peter Handke's *Quitt* [*They Are Dying Out*], directed by Lluís Pasqual. Photo: Ros Ribas.

targets.

So it is perhaps not surprising that Lluís Pasqual has turned to a desperate play for desperate times. Only it is not a contemporary work but a piece of uncompromising political theatre from 1973, *They Are Dying Out*. Peter Handke's play is presented with a new title, *Quitt*—the name of its central protagonist. Herman Quitt is a reworking of the Everyman figure refracted as a Mephistopheles for the age of high finance. A wealthy capitalist industrialist who controls a number of companies, one day Quitt has an idea that will allow him to take over all markets and destroy any rivals. He goes back on his promise to colleagues (who become increasingly desperate as the production progresses), murders a shareholder, and finally kills himself. Rules go out of the window for Quitt; avarice and control are all that matters. He may destroy his opposition but greed doesn't make him happy and in the end he has to destroy even himself. Corporate capitalism is shown in the play to go crazy: unregulated and untempered, it implodes with terrifying consequences.

Peter Stein presented a celebrated absurdist production at the Schaubühne in 1974 with Bruno Ganz as a melancholy but fierce Quitt. Fassbinder's reading, that same year, had an effeminate, playboy Quitt with the entire play read as an embodiment of his state of mind. Here, Pasqual opts for a 1970s environment with Eduard Fernández's businessman as a slick operator—with shiny suits, designer track suits, and silver or gold ties. This is a man clad in the trappings of the capitalist dream who wears his wealth on his sleeve. He's combative, opinionated, stubborn, and hard-headed. He has the build of a compact but lethal rugby player. He treats his mistress and wife with contempt: they are as disposable as his business associates. He is a man in freefall but unable to articulate his crisis—it is embodied by a blues number he presents at the grand piano in the play's second half, a brilliant image of a man deflecting his anxieties through song.

The cast are uniformly excellent. Boris Ruiz is the wily shareholder Kilb: feverish, anxious, ferret-like. Andreu Benito, Jordi Bosch, and Lluís Marco are each able to define the three businessmen that Fernández's Quitt destroys. Benito is a cleric, adorned with the trappings of religious iconography; Bosch's Lutz is both smug and nervy; Marco's von Wullnow is slightly too comfortable with himself and what he represents. Jordi Boixaderas, with a disarming Cheshire Cat-like grin, presents Quitt's butler Hans as curt, loyal, and ever so slightly creepy. Marta Marco is a chic, well-groomed mistress—

with perfectly styled hair, a fixed smile, and floating headscarves—who stands in evident comparison to Miriam Iscla's characterization of his more homely wife.

Paco Azorín's set flaunts the vocabulary of high finance. Flashing screens show the flickering and ever shifting figures of the stock exchange. A lit up logo Q in which Quitt seeks refuge frames him as a tiny boy caught in a giant brand that dwarfs and defines him. The two pool tables in the first half suggest something of an upmarket working men's club where Quitt and his male cronies shoot balls into the holes with casual disdain. A punchbag at the back of the stage allows Quitt to take out his frustration—a frustration that takes a more desperate course in the final scene of the play. In the second half of the production, it is as if we are all out at sea with Quitt on a cruise liner looking out into an infinite abyss. Quitt watches the crumbling universe from a giant screen like a Big Brother figure. The eponymous screen could be a PowerPoint demo or a vision of surveillance. "I get the feeling my body's not following me," Quitt states. In an attempt to follow everything around him, he loses touch of himself. In Handke's text Quitt kills himself by hitting his head against a rock; here it is a swift and genuinely shocking gunshot that follows his brutal strangling of Ruiz's Kilb. Fernández places his fingers in his mouth and we hear the sound of a gunshot as the lights go out.

The meta-theatrical is a very present motif in Pasqual's production. Fernández's Quitt watches from a pair of seats that look as if they have taken from the Lliure's tiered seating racks. We are never quite in darkness, never able to sink into anonymity. Pasqual makes us part of this frightening and almost absurdist world—and while some of the furnishings and the cut of the costumes may be resolutely 1970s, the contemporary climate is never terribly absent from the audience's mind. There are references to Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)—another devastating interrogation of capitalism's excesses and the surreal rituals that govern our day to day routines. Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977) also came to mind as I watched the partying businessmen with Marta Marco's Paula Tax.

The play is bleak, terrible, and relentless. I can understand Pasqual's reasons for staging it, but Handke's writing always feels like too much of a diatribe, too dryly preachy. It lacks the poetry of Bernard-Marie Koltès, the corrosive magic and sexual charge of Genet, the deftness of Martin Crimp.

Carol López, the artistic director of Barcelona's Villarroel theatre, is a deft dramatist but



Res no tornarà a ser com abans (Nothing Will be as Before), directed and written by Carol López. Photo: David Ruano.

sometimes whimsy takes the better of her. *Res no tornarà a ser com abans* (Nothing Will be as Before) is certainly more substantial than her frothy *Boulevard*, but it lacks the punch of *Germanes* (Sisters), her finest play to date.

The plot could be taken from Alan Ayckbourn. Andrés (Andrés Herrera) has left his wife for Dolo (Dolo Beltrán), a musician who isn't sure if she wants to stay with Andrés who desperately wants a child with her. Meanwhile Andrés's colleague, Andrew (Andrew Tarbet), and his complacent wife Olalla (Olalla Moreno), have a toddler, Bruno, and a relationship both believe is rock solid. Only Andrew has a roving eye, and when he and Dolo begin an affair both partners are forced to evaluate what they really want.

The play has an evident debt to classical farce with a husband knowing his wife has a lover but not knowing it is his best friend. This obviously leads to some priceless moments of humor (and embarrassment) as with Dolo trying to leave the house for a rendezvous with Andrew when Andrés has prepared a romantic evening with champagne and a new DVD of *The Wire*. Dolo Beltrán is excellent as the restless musician who wants something dangerous to excite her as she tires of life with the dependable, boyish Andrés. Andrés Herrera has an expert sense

of comic timing and an ingratiating air of innocence. We root for Dolo and Andrés and will them to stay together.

This isn't the case with the second couple, Andrew and Olalla. Andrew Tarbet appears excessively vain and preening, with an arrogance matched only by the high-handedness of his waspish wife—the "oh so smug," "why can't everyone be as lucky as me?" Olalla Moreno.

López juggles scenes with the couples—in different configurations—with projections showing the four of them in therapy. Confessional monologues to the camera on a large screen show each of the four characters filmed individually as well as with their respective partner. The therapy scenes are an effective way of presenting exposition material on how they met and what has led them to seek therapy, and often present some telling moments of humor—as when Andrés and Dolo are asked about the last time they had sex.

Cube.bz's set presents two domestic spaces: a dining table and bedroom where Andrew and Olalla live and a living room and bathroom that functions as Andrés and Dolo's quarters. There is spillage across the different spaces: Dolo and Andrew enjoying secret rendezvous in the bathroom and bedroom; Dolo and Olalla having a girly chat on the

sofa. There's a particularly good scene when Andrew and Dolo have oral sex as Andrés and Olalla hover in the foreground during a dinner date and another towards the end of the piece as Andrew and Andrés bond over gaming on the PS3 console.

As with López's previous works, the dialogue moves effortlessly between Catalan and Spanish with Andrew resorting to English—his native tongue—at certain key instants. The play wryly observes the middle class mores of a late thirty-something generation hooked on American television drama. The judiciously dispersed musical moments work well in embodying a mood or a shift in dynamics. Blossom Dearie's "Plus je t'embrasse" is performed as they lay the table and prepare to share a meal, the characters singing along to the song on the record player in Dolo and Andrés's living room. It is a moment of elation as Dolo and Andrés enjoy the first flings of lust. "Stormy Weather" comes later in the production as Dolo tries to leave for a meeting with Andrew.

López has an ear for colloquial dialogue and the play is as light and easy to digest as a perfect soufflé. Developed through improvisations, it is enjoyable enough on its own terms but it is also wafer thin. It lacks the emotional resonance of Pinter's *Be-*

trayal, which negotiates similar terrain, but is nevertheless worth seeing for Beltrán and Herrera's evident onstage chemistry and appealing performances.

The writer and actor Iván Morales has presented a gem of a show at the Espai Brossa's newest venue, La Seca—a former factory right in the middle of the city's hip Borne district. *Sé de un lugar* (I Know of a Place), takes its name from a song by the band Triana, from the record *El Patio*, released in 1975. It is an emblematic song for Simó (Xavi Sáez), a thirty-something screenwriter who is hurtling towards an emotional crisis as the play begins. He is visited at regular intervals by his ex-girlfriend Béré (Anna Alarcón)—the chalk to his cheese. Whereas Simó favors meditation and green tea, Béré likes to hit the town—her visits often come in the aftermath of a heavy night of partying. Béré is restless and manic with a new boyfriend (or girlfriend) in tow at each of their encounters. She is completing a dissertation to finish her degree and working at her parents' shop to make ends meet. Whereas Simó barely leaves his flat, Béré recounts tales of travels to Berlin and Nepal with the German actress with whom she has an affair. Béré is always running—from Barcelona to Berlin; from her actress girlfriend Anita to her new boyfriend Vicente, a DJ come lawyer with



Sé de un lugar (I Know of a Place), written and directed by Iván Morales. Photo: Courtesy of La Seca.

a large apartment he's inherited from a grandparent; from the cloying Vicente to another ex, Aleix.

Béré and Simó have a past—and it has created a bond that leads Béré to describe them as companions, practically family. Béré cajoles and encourages him, "you've got a gift" she tells him in scene 3, one of a number of smatterings of English gleaned from movies and popular culture that pepper her dialogue. She nevertheless worries about the ever more reclusive Simó. Simó, however, has a Hindu neighbor, Shahrukh, who runs errands for him. One of Morales's inspired touches is having the role of Shahrukh played by an audience member—the random spectator who sits in a particular chair in Simó's living space. On the night I saw the performance, it was an elderly gentleman, as far removed physically from the Hindu Shahrukh as it is perhaps possible to get. It is a credit to Morales's production that we never doubt that this audience member is Shahrukh. The conceit is accepted and respected. This is a play where ridicule never comes into the equation.

The production's compelling power comes from the space in which it is performed: a long rehearsal room conceived as a studio flat with a kitchen in one corner and a sofa in the center. The audience are scattered through the space, part of the living area inhabited by Simó. There is no attempt by Sáez and Alarcón to pretend that they are alone. The audience are asked to move a hand or shift along to another chair by the actors. But it is all done as if it were the most natural thing in the world. We are made to feel part of this world and we will them to find a way to stay friends. And so when Béré turns up in scene 6 with a bottle of tequila and both begin to down shots of the beverage, tongues loosen and confessions spill out. Simó seems disillusioned that his birthday gift to Béré of Triana's *El Patio* didn't make an impression, unaware of the fact that Shahrukh bought the wrong record—flamenco fusion meets children's songs by a certain Triana Pura. Only when Béré brings him Triana's *El Patio* as a gift does he realize what's happened. The play ends with a shared moment of tenderness and togetherness as the couple listens to the song on Simó's sofa.

The production impresses for a series of reasons. Firstly, there is the sense of intimacy generated by having the actors so close by. They sit next to us, we hear their breathing, see and smell their sweat, feel the steam from the kettle when it boils behind us. The piece feels immediate and of the present. Béré talks of going to a demonstration in the play's final scene; the sense of despair in the air is palpable and shared. Secondly, the dialogue is crisp and ut-

terly credible. Morales knows how to craft smart, witty conversations that feel highly resonant. The language never feels forced or pretentious. There is something of the air of John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959) about the production. A poster of Gena Rowlands and Seymour Cassel in *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971) and a photograph of a laughing Cassavetes alongside Peter Falk and Ben Gazzarra from *Husbands* (1970) are part of the décor in Simó's home. Morales creates a theatrical language that may evoke the wordplay of Eric Rohmer but is perhaps more indebted to the *cinéma vérité* of Cassavetes where spontaneity and edginess—or at least the illusion of it—predominate.

Alarcón is terrific as the lean, jumpy Béré, whose animated state appears fuelled by a cocktail of drugs and alcohol. Always looking for a way out of the predicament in which she finds herself, Alarcón's performance ensures that Béré's vulnerability and her optimism find a productive balance. Sáez's Simó is the yin to her yang—trying to "find" himself through meditative yoga, green tea, fasting, and reclusion. There's a palpable chemistry here between the performers but it is a chemistry that can't be reduced to simple lust or sexual attraction. Marcos Ordóñez, of the leading Spanish daily *El País*, spoke in his review of a sensation watching the play in one of Buenos Aires's emblematic fringe venues, El Camarín de las Musas or Timbre 4. Morales, as both author and director, succeeds in bringing more than a spirit of Buenos Aires's insistence that theatre directly relates to the world beyond the performance venue to this production. This is a play that speaks to the desperation of a generation of young people left with few hopes in a climate where youth unemployment is dangerously close to fifty per cent. It is also about the things—friends, music, hopes, dreams, memories—that sustain us at such times.

Mismatched couples are also the order of the day in *El tipo de la tumba de al lado* (The Guy from the Grave Next Door), an adaptation of Katarina Mazetti's novel by Alain Gamas, presented by Josep Maria Pou at the Goya theatre. It's a single premise play: a late thirty-something widow visiting her husband's grave begins to notice the guy visiting his mother's grave close by. They are chalk and cheese. She's a bookish librarian; he's a farmer with interests in cows and boosting milk production. She quotes Lacan; he thinks Lacan is a type of bacon. He wants a woman who knows how to dress up and likes to put on a pair of heels and a bit of lipstick before going out. She wants someone to go to the opera with. It is effectively a reworking of the odd



Katarina Mazetti's *El tipo de la tumba de al lado* (*The Guy from the Grave Next Door*), adapted by Alain Gamas, directed by Josep Maria Pou. Photo: Paco Amate.

couple as they discover a mutual attraction, embark on an affair, and each try to mould the other into their "ideal" partner.

Ana Garay provides an undulating set that suggests the eponymous hill from Robert Wise's 1965 film of *The Sound of Music*. Two wooden benches are nimbly used to suggest a range of settings from a dining room to a library. Maribel Verdú is effectively cast against type as the politically correct (but sexually obsessed) vegetarian librarian whose biological clock is ticking away. Her descriptions of Pablo's house (adorned with his late mother's needlepoint) are witheringly funny. Antonio Molero is credible as the no-nonsense Pablo who tries to impress Laura by showing her pictures of his prized cow. His bemusement at Laura's minimalist white flat also pokes fun at middle class fashions.

The production is slickly staged by Josep Maria Pou. He keeps the pace brisk with crisp scene changes and confessionals to the audience that ensure complicity. It's a piece that has more than a little in common with Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*. The empty stage is dominated by a mutating, almost magical sky, suggesting a world beyond the rainbow

where dreams can indeed come true. The play is on the leaden side with a number of revelations that come as no surprise—Pablo, we discover, was an A-grade student who was forced to leave school to run his family farm, Laura's husband was perhaps a little too earnest for his own good and not her soul mate as we are first led to believe. The play has to carry an audience with it and Pou realizes this, creating a clean, no-nonsense production that prioritizes simple, old-fashioned storytelling.

Alfredo Sanzol is back in Barcelona. I reviewed *Delicades* (Delicate Women) when it was first seen in the city at the Grec Festival in 2010 [WES 21.1, Winter 2011] and it is highly deserving of a second outing in the city, playing at the Poliorama for a three-month run as part of an extensive tour of Spain. Sanzol's eighteen vignettes resemble a tasty tapas menu: tiny morsels of digestible theatrical fare. Set largely in the 1930s and 1940s with a few select scenarios occurring in the present, the play offers a charming but politically incisive homage to the generation of his grandparents who lived through the horrors of the Civil War and its aftermath. Its Chekhovian tone belies sharp social observation and

a willingness to think through a model for political theatre that evades easy political rhetoric or simplistic polarized positions.

Sanzol's latest play, *En la luna* (On the Moon) which I first saw in Madrid at the Teatro de la Abadía in December 2011, is a co-production with Teatre Lliure and his most incisive piece of writing, a brave and beautiful play about historical memory, the legacy of Francoism and how we make sense of a past rewritten by highly partisan political parties. Again, Sanzol opts for simplicity and an economy of style, both in his writing and in his sparse, fluid production. Like *Delicades*, *En la luna* is a play structured as a series of short vignettes rather than in a linear, chronological mode. It is a piece based on Sanzol's own memories of growing up in the aftermath of the Franco era, although—bar the final scene—it can't be judged autobiographical. Sanzol was born in 1972 as Francoism was in its final throes, and the play's tone reminded me a little of the child's view of the world presented in Victor Erice's *El espíritu de la Colmena* (Spirit of the Beehive, 1973) and Carlos Saura's *Cría Cuervos* (Raise Ravens, 1975). The episodic scenes, set in the period between 1975 and 1985, move from social realism to semi-absurdist encounters and parables.

The powerful opening scene provides a potent example of the former as an artist, Garrido, who designed a plan sphere for Franco but was never financially rewarded for the job, is asked to act as a pallbearer at the late dictator's funeral, much to the irritation of his wife who has similar tales of Franco's wife, Carmen Polo, requesting valuable antiques that she never paid for. The couple's attempts to settle the outstanding debts with Franco's head of household, Colonel Sánchez, meet first with platitudes and then indignation. As Garrido's wife wryly observes, Franco may be dead but Franco-ism is all too alive and kicking.

Indeed, the rest of the play sets out to expose the traces of a thirty-six-year dictatorship that remain in the national psyche. Garrido's wife screams out that democracy will bring justice, but these comments ring hollow in a society that has just placed the human rights judge, Baltasar Garzón (who has attempted to bring those responsible for the human rights' crimes of the Civil War and Franco era to account) on trial in what looks like a nasty case of trying to forcefully gag someone who won't buy into the pact of silence that prevailed in the aftermath of Franco's death and still remains a force in Spanish politics.



En la luna (On the Moon), written and directed by Alfredo Sanzol. Photo: Ros Ribas.

Sanzol's fifteen scenes present stories of the Civil War's losers—as with scene 2 in which a woman too poor to buy herself a new coat, thinks she should have moved to France like so many political and economic refugees during the Franco era, and scene 11 with tale of two warring brothers, themselves an image of a divided nation. Secrets abound. In scene 3, a woman meets the sister of her new boyfriend only to discover for the first time that he was once a priest. In scene 7 a precocious girl realizes that her father is having an affair with the mother of the young boy with whom she is playing. Corruption and deception remain palpable modes of operation. Scene 10 shows a woman admitting to authoring the erotic fiction that her husband clandestinely reads in his secret stash of porn magazines. In scene 4, a policeman comes to interrogate the witness that saw him commit a bank heist. The man, no doubt recalling the horrors of the Francoist secret police, is terribly afraid of what might happen to him. Democracy in Spain saw its own dirty war with underhand police methods exposed in the dealings of the infamous GAL case, where death squads worked to annihilate Basque nationalist activists and members of ETA in the period between 1983 and 1987.

This is a play that isn't afraid to touch on such taboo subjects. In the play's most resonant and moving scene, two sisters search for the grave of their missing parents, brutally killed during the Civil War. Surely, one sister and her husband note, "before 1990 there won't be a single mass grave left in Spain ... I don't think they'll host the Olympics with the ditches full of corpses." The irony cannot be escaped. With 100,000 bodies thought to still lie in the mass graves that litter the nation, the comment is a telling indictment of a nation unable to come to terms with its own atrocities.

The play's scenes provide observations on how easy it was for the wolves to take on sheep's clothing and be allowed into the brave new world supposedly initiated by the transition to democracy—as with the retelling of the three little pigs fairy tale in scene 6. The relationship of how the past is preserved is also evident in the tale of a fan—blowing away the cobwebs of an infantilization symbolized by the pram that Man 1 wants to sell. Scene 8 also tells of stunted lives, a sulky teenager trying to make sense of a world where her mother offers a

malevolent presence, only evident in the scene's final moments as the attempted *coup d'etat* of 23 February 1981 demonstrates the community's true colors.

On the Moon also captures the euphoria of the transition to democracy—a time of great change for Spain in so many ways. In scene 12, two *progres* (progressive) sisters horrify their conservative mother by heading out to a demonstration, refusing to take their grandfather's gun as protection. As their mother deprecatingly observes, the high heels they insist on wearing will offer little protection as they totter to escape the police. The daughters may want to join the "democratic" club but the institutional structures that nurture them are shown to be deeply conformist. This is a country that wanted to believe anything was possible—shown in scene 9 as a woman is given an elixir that will cure her cancer. The legacy of the past, however, often emerges when least expected.

Alejandro Andújar's set evokes a lunar landscape that owes much to Lars von Trier's images of the planet Melancholia. Props are minimal. Plates and glasses for the birthday party of scene 8; a giant antique fan in scene 5; an oversized lollipop in scene 2. Décor is largely written on and through the bodies of the six performers who embody a series of characters across a broad age range. Perhaps the title, *On the Moon*, refers to the perspective of the present, allowing us to look back at the past as if it were another planet.

All the performers are outstanding, moving from character to character with the simplest of costume changes, a shift of the shoulders, a raising of the eyebrows, a different posture. The acting never feels forced or knowing. Two of the actors (Juan Codina and Lucía Quintana) are previous collaborators of Sanzol's, four more (Palmina Ferrer, Nuria Mencía, Luis Moreno, and Jesús Noguero) may be "new" to this writer-director's work but they integrate effortlessly to create a wonderfully understated aesthetic. It seems churlish to single out any of the sextet, rather it is the collective performance that will remain with me: a vision of the ensemble's power to move beyond age-specific roles and a close correlation between actor and character, *On the Moon* is playful, timely, and a corrosive recognition of theatre's role as a repository of cultural memory.