‘Barcelona and Madrid 2012: ‘Making Theatre in a Time of Austerity’

A review by Maria Delgado

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Barcelona and Madrid 2012: Making Theatre in a Time of Austerity

Maria M. Delgado

There are many ways of playing Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Oriol Broggi opts for the playful and the melancholy, using Xavier Bru de Sala's lively Alexandrine verse version. This is a theatrical world of red and white curtains where two headless mannequins boast period costumes. Actors move the costumes offstage and greet the audience. There is no fourth wall here. Rather the spacious long space of the Biblioteca de Catalunya is reconfigured as a bustling outdoor fair, a carnivalesque space, with a constructed stage and performers animating the space. Empty chairs are acknowledged as if they were an audience, actors are criticized from the backstage. Swords are positioned against the back wall—props ready to be picked up when needed.

Oriol Broggi's production portrays a company at work, an ensemble where actors take on the roles demanded of them across the boundaries of gender and age. Lights twinkle in the distance like magical stars, drums, and violins offer an atmospheric soundtrack that suggests something of the military world that shapes Cyrano. Rosaura (Marta Betriu) looks down at Bernat Quintana's Christian from her balcony. The latter has a broad smile and boyish good looks but can only declaim clichés. Pere Arquillué's Cyrano is a weary, hardened soldier—he watches from the audience position as the bland Christian attempts to seduce Rosaura. Christian may be able to climb up the balcony like a deft lizard, but he cannot offer the intelligent comraderie Rosaura craves. "You'll never work alone" is heard in the distance—a hymn to the camaraderie that shapes both Cyrano's ethos as well as that of Broggi's company.

This production wears its theatrical trappings on its sleeve. A hotel and a bakery are constructed through the most minimal of means and a shift in light—Guillem Gelabert's lighting is a tour de force of pools of light across the breadth of the

Kelley O'Connor as Lorca in Peter Sellars' production of *Ainadamar* at the Teatro Real Madrid. Photo courtesy of the Teatro Real Madrid

expansive nave space. The red curtain opens as Cyrano confesses that he loves Rosaura. A paper lantern in the distance looks like a giant moon. At the camp, as the soldiers gather, fast furious action is followed by exquisite slow motion. The soldiers all hum as a flute plays summoning them to action. Cyrano sits on the picturesque golden hued windowsill reading as his troops boast of feats. A fort is constructed from tables and chairs. Thrilling sword fights have something of melodrama's *Count of Monte Christo*. In the play's final act, stage managers scatter fallen leaves on the floor—a symbol of the passing of time as Rosaura meets the dying Cyrano fourteen years after Christian's death. A nun at the convent where the widowed Rosaura is visited by Cyrano, plays a violin—a lyrical sound that heralds the sadness that hovers over this reclusive spot. Lighting captures the different moods: the crepuscular night, the breadth of the convent garden,

Arquillué moves from the clownishness in act 1 to a heartbreaking sadness in act 4. He moves almost across the seven ages of man. There's a swagger to his walk, an adroit joviality and bravura that gradually slows down as the production progresses. Soldiers and citizens gather at his feet as he tells a story. This Cyrano is a compelling raconteur. His rich voice has a broken quality, rough, raw and rasping. His bulkish build contrasts with Quintana's wispier physique. It is not surprising to the audience that Christian perishes in battle while the heartier Cyrano survives. Arquillué's worn, wind-battered face and graying hair points to a man who has been around. Arquillué's Cyrano has an answer for everything but knows that his distended nose won't win him favors in a society that values the good looking and the attractive. His glances to Rosaura are open and admiring. He revels in the sparring, in the banter and smart conversation. And when Christian secures Rosaura, a slight quivering is balanced by a realization that it is a situation of his own making.

The production is marked by Broggi's habitual attention to detail. Dogs bark in the distance as Christian and Cyrano move through the night to charm Rosaura. He appears dressed in black and white, yet is anything but a black-and-white cardboard cut out. There is certainly a nod to Josep Maria Flotats's celebrated 1985 *Cyrano* but this is a less clownish characterization. Arquillué's Cyrano has no false expectations. He never thinks he can win Rosaura and this is part of the reason we root for him.

Two home-grown playwrights have had extended hits this season. At the Villarroel, Jordi Galceran's farce *Burundanga* features a terrific central performance from Carles Canut. Pau Miró's *Els jugadors* ("The Players") is an altogether more sombre play, although it has a fair dose of black comedy running through it. There is something of Patrick Marber's *Dealer's Choice* in this four-act tale of four gamblers—all damaged personalities whose rumblings and ruminations pre- and post-games we are privy to. The four meet at the home of the professor—a math teacher who has lost his job through a violent assault on a pupil who questioned his formula. This bear of a man is morose and unable to move forward. Trapped by the requests and mementoes of his dead father, he moves around the kitchen with the weary resignation of a half-comatose zombie. His late 1970s kitchen (an impressive design by Enric Planas) is a notable vision of himself: shabby cupboards, a once stylish but now grimy retro fridge, worn worktops, and a cooker that has seen better days. The clock is stuck at 9:15—an image of the professor's inability to move on. This is a world that has failed to reinvent itself, and it looks tired and unfit for purpose.

The professor's three partners in crime are similarly damaged personalities. The actor Jordi Boixaderas has something of worn Al Pacino of *Dog Day Afternoon.* He sports a similar 1970s leather jacket, and while he may ostensibly appear the calmest of the three, he has demons aplenty. He may be a seductive performer—as his rendition of Dean Martin's "You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You," microphone in hand shows, but he is also a man who has touched rock bottom. He is a habitual thief, a kleptomaniac who steals compulsively from supermarkets. Only his targets are not iPhones or electricals but the most mundane of items: a bag of fairy cakes, a bottle of dodgy gin. He is excited by the thrill of getting caught, and he resents the younger generation who he argues have stolen his future.

Jordi Bosch is the most explosive of the group, a nervy undertaker with a nasty temper and sour temperament. Not only a gambling addict, he is also addicted to sex with a Ukrainian prostitute whom he can't stop seeing, and his explosions are genuinely menacing. He sees violence as the only thing that works—the answer to all his problems and frustrations.

The wily Boris Ruiz is a barber whose business is on the point of closing—one of many references to the Spanish recession. He dare not tell his wife what is going on. He's smart but cynical and

Pau Miró's *Els Jugadors*, directed by Jordi Galceran. Photo: Ros Ribas.

refutes agency, preferring to see himself as a victim of a world that has left him behind. It's hard not to see a critique here of the generation that allowed itself to be swept away by promises of easy credit and quick bucks. This generation never takes responsibility for what the mess the country is in.

The four gamblers exist on a diet of coffee, gin, and beer—with a stash of gin hidden for an emergency. This is the place where they all feel at home: a kitchen that's seen better times. If Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping & Fucking* gave us a culture where the youth of today are nurtured on ready-made microwavable meals, Miró too doesn't see so much of a difference with their elders. These men also appear nurtured by a battered microwave—the most dominant item in the kitchen. Only while Lulu and Mark appear to relish the supermarket culture of the present, these four gamblers feel that the world has changed. Fuelled with anger and resentment they lash out at the women in their lives. This is evidently a generation tarnished by antiquated views of women as unreliable whores and swindlers. Life hasn't delivered what it promised and so they rant indiscriminately at the injustice of it all.

All four are aggrieved gamblers who have lost considerable amounts of money at the roulette table. Now they meet to play poker, and their tawdry reunions provide a festering climate for their frustration, desperation, and resentment. The blues guitar gives the piece a melancholy air; while the constant fixes of coffee and gin fuel the men's anxieties creating a charged atmosphere. Miró directs with an escalating sense of tension, and while he never romanticizes these deluded, ageing losers he also avoids demonizing them. Their vulnerabilities give them a particular humanity. Their pottering in the kitchen—washing crockery, making coffee, opening the fridge in the hope of seeing something else they can consume, discovering a hidden bottle of gin—lends their daily rituals a morose sadness. The story has something of the energy of *Reservoir Dogs* refracted through the game play of David Mamet's *House of Cards*—and Bosch more than a passing likeness to Joe Mantegna—but the context of a Spanish nation falling apart at the seams also lends the play a poignant contemporary relevance and immediacy.

It's been almost a decade since the last new show by La Cubana. *Campanades de boda* ("Wedding Bells") offers a blisteringly funny treatment of the wedding as onstage and offstage drama. Crafted as a frenetic satire, it negotiates a series of clichés about weddings that are innovatively exposed and interrogated. Nuptials are exposed as

a fusion of panic, neurosis, vanity, and narcissism. Cross-cultural misunderstandings are the least of the couple's worries.

The Rius family are florists, owners of the Floriteria Ruis (open 24/7), and daughter Violeta (Montse Amat) is getting married. Only this paragon of Catalan enterprise and respectability is marrying a famous Bollywood actor, Vickram Sodhi (performed on screen by Ajay Jethi), who Violeta met at the Café de la Radio while he was working in Barcelona. While she would rather just have a small ceremony, her mother has other plans. Act 1 takes place in the chic apartment of Violeta's mother, Hortensia (Annabel Totusaus), who is leading on the lavish wedding preparations with her sister Margarita (a return to the company for one of its earliest collaborators, Mont Plans). The action is structured as a run up to the wedding using a series of flashbacks—from six months before to a mere six hours before the big event—with a sense of count down indicated through the projections on a screen. The action offers a fusion of Ray Cooney, French farce, and the escalating chaos of Robert Altman's *A Wedding* (1978). As with Altman's film, there is an expansive cast, the use of a tiered wedding cake as a prominent publicity element, and conflict through an unconventional pairing: for Altman the conflict comes through a class schism; here it is distance (as well as race and ethnicity) that separates the two families.

Violeta's family are also beset by their own internal squabbling. Hortensia's ex, Paco Zamora (Xavi Tena), a former policeman who evidently models himself on a fusion of Tom Selleck's Magnum and James Garner's Rockford, arrives with his alcoholic French girlfriend Margot (María Garrido) in tow. And Margot can always be relied on to arrive drunk, desperate for a drink, or inappropriately attired to any event. Violeta's siblings have their own concerns to grapple with. Narcís (Toni Torres) is a hen-pecked husband in awe of his voluptuous, fiery wife Regina (Babeth Ripoll), a volatile Brazilian who uses their small daughter as a bartering tool in her wars with Narcís's imposing family—who evidently resent her. Brother Jacint (Bernat Cot) has a gay partner, Juan Carlos (Oriol Burés), and longs for the large-scale social nuptials being lavished on Violeta. But the family wants to keep Jacint in the closet as they fear the conservative streak embodied by Paco's aging *tía* Consuelo (Meritxell

La Cubana's *Campanades de boda*. Photo: Josep Aznar.

Duró). Aunt Consuelo is draconian in her beliefs, arriving at the house sporting fiercely traditional Roman Catholic beliefs and a dramatic *mantilla*, an imposing walking stick, and a mysterious package that she refuses to part with. The package is revealed in act 2 to be a portable altar that she opens during the civil ceremony as her way of ensuring that there is a religious presence at a wedding that she sees as dominated by pagan interests.

Consuelo is clearly no fan of Hortensia and Margarita. Her rabidly anti-Catalan sentiments manifest themselves on numerous occasions. Paco cowers to her, refusing to acknowledge his own separation from Hortensia in an attempt to keep up appearances within his highly conservative family. Manolita is the compassionate and loyal Andalusian family servant who has served the Riuses through thick and thin. Like Consuelo she is "other" to the Catalan family, but her fluency in Catalan suggests a level of assimilation that Consuelo—consistently clad in black and flapping around the stage like a deranged raven—fiercely rejects. Manolita is a chorus of sorts, commenting on the action as someone who stands on the periphery of the family. She doles out advice to Violeta and leads the audience through the tussles, tantrums, and intrigues besetting the family. Like Lorca's aging Doña Rosita, she also reflects on her own lost love. Her predicament is further echoed in that of Modesto (Jaume Baucis), who supervises deliveries for the family business and pines adoringly for the single Margarita.

The structure of act 1 is very much that of a French farce with the forthcoming event threatened by a range of unforeseen calamities. The wedding planners, from the company Campanades de boda, don't quite have control of the event—one of a number of references to poor organization at the institutional level that allude to Spain's economic woes. The *concejal* who was due to officiate the ceremony is now indisposed, so an actor is contracted to take his place. Recruited from street theatre on *la Rambla*, however, he isn't too confident with the text he's been given to perform, and panic ensues as he fluffs his lines and suffers a bout of rampant diarrhea. Wedding preparations are further interrupted by a range of visitors—both foreseen and unforeseen—and this allows for the narrative to be consistently halted. The restaurant is changing the menu at the last minute. Unwanted gifts arrive—including a hideous porcelain statue. The Romanian cleaner has to be shown the ropes by Manolita. The hairdresser turns up with dynamic ideas for styling Violeta. Regina stomps in to confront Narcís—and pushes Paco into the food prepared for the family. A *tuna* (a Spanish university band made up of singers and instrumentalists dressed in seventeenth-century cloak, doublet, and stockings) made up of four singer-musicians, including a bushy-haired animated tamborine player who performs with great gusto, serenade the bride to be with "Me gusta mi novio" (I like my groom). Violeta is unhappy with the meringue-style dress that her mother has chosen for her and the campy dress designer, Anselmo de la Croix (Jordi Milán) faces the challenge of designing a dress in the six hours remaining before the wedding's that will simultaneously please the bride and not alienate her mother.

Momentum escalates as the act progresses with the drama over the dress and venue providing the move from act 1's boulevard comedy to act 2's participatory experience. With 1000 plus invited guests and an escalating list of potential additions, the decision is taken to move the event to a larger venue, and this is where the Tívoli is revealed as the chosen location. As Manolita bursts into song—music is linked with love as in the classic Broadway musicals and is used to signal moments of heightened emotion throughout act 2—Violeta disappears under the layers of white cloth that Anselmo de la Croix and his team will fashion into a wedding dress. Manolita's song "Al día" guides the audience through this transition from the apartment to the wedding venue. Flower petals are scattered across the space; guests cascade down the aisle towards the stage; and the audience are given brightly coloured pamelas to wear and greeted as friends in a fevered rush of activity that opens the opulent ceremony. The ceremony, however, is soon shown to be bereft of one key element: the groom. Vickram cannot leave Mumbai, and so the wedding will have to take place via video link with a family standin, Ana Porrón, who works as a secretary at the Instituto Cervantes in Bombay, to orchestrate proceedings from there and Kandarp Raturn representing the groom's family in Barcelona. This is a wedding for the digital age where geographical distance is no impediment to nuptials, a virtual ceremony where the two families effectively communicate via a Skype connection.

Act 2 functions as a variation on the backstage musical. Weddings, of course, often feature in screen narratives as a mode of showing a restoration of order and narrative closure. Here the couple have to overcome a range of obstacles—including the physical absence of the groom—to achieve this symbolic union. Margot trips over the train as she scuttles in impossibly high shoes and

then vomits before being carried off stage; Regina wants Narcís to leave his mother's apron strings and follow her; the video link between Barcelona and Mumbai threatens to break down; a petrified actor performs the ceremony as if explaining a story to children—but the show must, as in *Una nit d'òpera*, nevertheless, go on. The Indian guests sing Joan Manuel Serrat's *Paraules d'amor.* Jacint and Narcís embark on a performance—playing the cello and reciting verses in honor of their sister's nuptials (before the temperamental Renata finally succeeds in dragging the confused Narcís off home) and the screen and stage worlds unite in a rendition of the Punjabi wedding song from *Brides and Prejudice* (2004). Not even Consuelo's brutal rendition of a variation on Ave María "Salve Rociera" as the Punjabi Wedding Song is underway can tarnish the celebratory mood.

The wedding party thus effectively becomes La Cubana's celebration of its relationship with its loyal audience. The show's final number, "Como nos gusta hacer teatro/Com ens agrada fer teatre" by Joan Vives, one of the company's most regular collaborators, summarizes the pleasures of making theatre with an audience. Theatre here becomes about the creation of a community brought together through stage, screen, and the auditorium.

The audience are made to feel a part of the team-effort in a series of ways. In act 1, members of the audience are named in Hortensia and Margarita's discussion of seating plans. In act 2, the wedding party talks to audience members as they make their way to the stage. Audience members are invited to act as bridesmaids and witnesses to the ceremony and a photographer moves across the auditorium taking photographs of the audience in their wedding pamelas. These photos are available post-performance on a website run by the newspaper *El Periódico*: http://album.elperiodico.com/galerias/lacubana/. As such the guests take a primary role in the family album realised for each show on this website. The photo offers an after-effect, a way of ensuring that the affect of the performance remains after the performance.

At Madrid's Español Theatre, Mario Gas closes his final season as artistic director with his own production of a musical for lean times. Sondheim's *Follies* is a celebration of the need to emerge from the knocks life throws at you. The reunion that brings the different members of "Weismann's Follies" together sees two unhappily married couples meet again after over two decades. Buddy and Ben were once best friends. Only Ben married Phyllis leaving a heartbroken Sally who settled for Buddy as the second best option. An encounter with Ben convinces Sally she's still in love with Ben. Only Ben appears only in love with himself. While the couples bicker, barter and reminisce, other "follies" appear to share moments of their past and revive past numbers. The characters are constantly reminded of a better past—when they were fitter, livelier, happier, and full of illusions about the future. The ghosts of the follies walk across the stage in the opening moments of the piece; the younger selves of Buddy, Ben, Sally, and Phyllis follow them, playing out the key moments of a shared history that has indelibly marked their present; the hold of the past proves hard to let go of.

Gas is a master craftsman and the smoky gray set is evocative of a 1940s noir movie with a balcony and iron stairs that allows for the younger selves of the two couples to play out their scenes. The bright lights of the city—a fluorescent "Jesus Saves" sign, a tall tower, theatre names and nightclubs shine in the distance. The bluish-gray hues hark back to both black and white cinema and a time muddied with mist and memories. There is an attention to movement and mannerisms that allow for parallels to be established between the jaded middle-aged couples and their younger embodiments. Diego Rodríguez suggests the vanity of Ben; Ángel Ruiz presents Buddy's impulsive manner. Marta Capel points to Phyllis's clinical pragmatism; Julia Möller points to the character that sees Sally lose out to the wilier Phyllis. It's with the four adult counterparts that the show really takes off. Vicky Peña's Phyllis is a figure in glacial baby blue with platinum hair harshly pulled back and a dismissive manner. She's an effective contrast to Muntsa Rius's sunny girl-next-door Sally in a plainer green dress. Pep Molina's Buddy is down to earth and sings "The Right Girl" as an Archie Rice-like figure. The days on the road as a travelling salesman have taken their toll on him. He looks worn and battered; someone who finds solace on the road—in wine, women, and song. Carlos Hipólito is excellent as the arrogant and isolated Ben for whom the grass always looks greener on the other side of the wall. There is an effortlessness to his performance of affluence that is beautifully understated.

Asunción Balaguer steals the show as the elderly Hattie Walker who has buried five husbands, all younger than her. Her "Broadway Baby" number is a delight of wit and the most delicate of dance steps. Carmen Conesa presents a glam *femme fatale* as the vampish Solange LaFitte. Mario Gas plays Weismann in a knowing manner—an appropriate

piece of self-referential casting. 1968 Eurovision Song Contest winner Massiel is larger than life singing the showstopping "I'm still here" as the grand Carlotta Campion—a picture in pastel pink. The cast of thirty-eight appears a luxury in a municipal theatre at such a time of austerity but it's a decision that pays off. The staging is able to accommodate the intimate and the epic, the private moments and revelations and the bigger show tunes. The production is able to function as a homage to the piece's Broadway heritage but also gives packed houses in Madrid a positive message of surviving loss and making it through to face another day.

At a time when Spain is struggling to come to terms with the human rights atrocities of the Franco era, Osvaldo Golijov's opera *Ainadamar* (closing the season at Madrid's Teatro Real) offers an elegy to the poet Federico García Lorca presented through the eyes of one of his most regular collaborators, the actress Margarita Xirgu. Xirgu, in exile in Uruguay, shares stories of her collaborations with Lorca with a young actress, Nuria, training with her. The chorus of women in black recalls those of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba,* their lament is a further nod to the grieving women who close *Blood Wedding*. The *cantaor* (male flamenco singer) Jesús Montoya who takes the role of Ruiz Alonso (shared with the dancer Marco Berriel) sings his orders as he orders Lorca's execution. His loud lament echoes across the auditorium, a nod also to the *duende* of flamenco that so influenced Lorca's work.

The role of Xirgu is split between Jessica Rivera and Nuria Espert. The former sings a soprano role, the latter recites poems from Lorca's Moorish-influenced late collection, *El Diván del Tamarit*. Nuria Espert's figure in white offers a visual point of contrast with Jessica Rivera's black clad Xirgu. Espert is Xirgu's host, her shadow, her pulse—both a revenant and a manifestation of the past in the present. She cannot escape her status as Spain's most acclaimed living actress; a figure who has acknowledged her lineage to Xirgu. She is at once Xirgu and Espert; one dialoguing with the other.

She embraces Kelley O'Connor's shimmering mezzo Lorca: a figure in a white suit who illuminates the stage. This Lorca is at once

Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, directed by Mario Gas. Photo: Courtesy of Español Theatre.

fragile and luminous, ghostly and radiant. He is protected by both Rivera and Espert's Xirgu. They hover over him like a child. He rises; he falls; he is pushed; he lingers. The parallels with Christ on the way to the Mount of Olives are evident; a bullfighter (Ángel Rodríguez) and teacher (David Rubiera) are the two companions on the final journey. The chorus of women lament his death with Espert and Rivera as the Mary and Mary Magdalene figures.

A complex soundscape of radio broadcasts, the sound of running water, and gunshots interact with the music, vocals and Espert's recital. Peter Sellars' production has a formal austerity that echoes that of Lorca's *Diván*. Gronk's set creates a busy, angry collage where Picasso's "Guernica" interacts with Latin-American conceptual art. Past and present are in constant dialogue. When the back wall rises to show the world outside the theatre, we are reminded of a Spanish state that put Baltasar Garzón on trial for investigating the disappearances, including that of Lorca, of the Civil War and Franco era. In a Spanish nation struggling to come to terms with the implications of the pact of silence introduced in the immediate aftermath of Franco's death, the Argentine Golijov and librettist Asian-American David Henry Hwang fashion an elegy to a dead poet whose legacy was promoted across the Americas by the actress who had premiered so many of his works.