

Sister Act(s): Catholic Schoolgirls Rule



La llamada (The Call), written and directed by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi, and *Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour*—an adaptation of Alan Warner’s 1998 novel *The Sopranos* by the National Theatre of Scotland—have proven to be unexpected critical and commercial hits. Songs perform an important role in both, but there is more dialogue and psychologically complex characterization than is the norm for musicals. Although set and staged in different contexts, musically literate Catholic school girls provide a unifying link for the depictions of a Christian summer camp, “La Brújula,” in Segovia and a twenty-four hour trip taken by six members of a choir from their coastal hometown to Edinburgh for a national singing contest

A native of Obad, Scotland, Warner now lives in Jávea (Alicante), with his Irish-born wife who was educated in Catholic schools in both Spain and Ireland, explaining the repeated nods to Spanish language and culture, which range from *Don Quixote* to the version in Castilian of Kool and the Gang’s disco classic “Celebration” (“Celebremos”) alongside the inclusion of the Spanish word for a thong (*tanga*) or the c-word (*coño*) which, somewhat incongruously to the Anglophone ear, is used liberally even in respectable circles in Spain. Although many of these references have been excised from the stage adaptation by Lee Hall—best known for scripting an adaptation of *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000) for the West End—a description of alcohol-induced vomiting in Lloret de Mar, a hotspot for cheap all-inclusive package deals, remains. *La llamada*’s parochial landscape is imbued with transnational divinity through the appearance of God, played by Scunthorpe-born actor Richard Collins-Moore, who first appears descending down the steps from the balcony singing “I Will Always Love You” (the keynote track of the film—and later musical—*The Bodyguard* [Mick Jackson, 1992]). Like a thief in the night, He reappears on various occasions to communicate through his chosen avatar: Whitney Houston songs. The dramatic arc of the play is provided by the two rebellious female protagonists, who form an electro-latino band, embracing their respective passions: María discovers God and Susana lesbianism, falling in love with twenty-something-year-old nun Milagros.

Positive reviews and excellent word-of-mouth ensured that *La llamada*, which premiered in the lobby of Madrid's Teatro Lara in 2013, was soon promoted to the main auditorium where it continues to play, having been seen by over 150,000 spectators in the first three years of its run. Alongside crowd-pleasing urban comedy *Burandanga*, *La llamada* has provided the Lara's management with leverage to programme less commercial plays, whilst companies from across the Peninsula travel, often at an economic loss, to accept less favorable slots at the theatre—e.g. mid-week bookings over the course of the summer—with the hope that it will be an investment and function as an effective platform for future promotion. *La llamada* has been staged in Argentina and Mexico, with its potential pan-Hispanic appeal instrumental to a cinematic adaptation whose release is imminent.

Michael Caton-Jones, director of *Rob Roy* (1995), bought the film rights to *The Sopranos* years ago, but the project stalled in production. The rebranded—presumably as a result of the success of the HBO crime drama television series—*Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour* has given the novel a new lease on life, delivering, to borrow a phrase from the *Evening Standard*'s Henry Hitchings, “a fearless portrait of adolescence, fuelled by songs and Sambuca.” Much like Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, the dialogue-heavy prose of *The Sopranos*, especially when read two decades later, can come across as overly mannered and repetitive. Hall's adaptation equates to a lean seventy-five minute performance time and carries out effective pruning, whilst the physical presence of six excellent actresses—who, in addition to embodying Fionnula, posh girl Kay, Orla, Chell, Manda, and Kylah, play out the roles and actions of the generally lecherous men and the convent nuns they encounter on their night out—helps circumvent the charge of ventriloquism for which Warner's depiction of teenage female mores could easily stand accused. There were discussions about whether or not to tone down the language for foreign audiences when *Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour* toured North America and Australia. The decision was nevertheless taken to retain the original version which, if no less Rabelaisian than Warner's prose, is more amenable to the untrained ear as the young women's performances function as a medium of communication in which a full understanding of individual words is hardly paramount.



La llamada (The Call), written and directed by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi. Premiere: Teatro Lara, 2013.

The cast all have excellent and versatile voices, capable of performing works of Bach, Bartok, Handel, Mendelssohn, and Ralph Vaughan Williams in the choir environment and then switching to pop songs in their leisure time. Cult artists (e.g. Liz Phair, The Rezillos, Jah Wobble) and deeper cuts by superstars (The Stone Roses' "Elizabeth my Dear" and "Citadel" by the Rolling Stones) predominate the musical lexicon of Warner's novel. With the twin appeal of engaging the audience and avoiding exorbitant licensing costs, the stage production opts for a middle ground. If the text finishes with an obscure song by Bunny Wailer, the stage production closes with Bob Marley's "Redemption Song"; it took Hall over a year to successfully convince Jeff Lynn to give them permission to include ELO songs including "Mister Blue Sky" and "Don't Bring me Down", which effectively take on the narrative role of the chorus from classical drama.

The absence of mobile phones and, at least for the British viewer, references to drinks such as Hooch or a more laissez-faire approach to allowing underage drinkers into city-centre pubs firmly anchors the production in the 1990s, but its tragicomic realism chimes with a night out in any major Northern UK metropolis, a fact brought vividly to life on the Friday night I saw it at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne as theatregoers tricked onto the city's alcohol-strewn main thoroughfare just as an urban display of Dionysian excess was beginning in earnest. In Hall's diagnosis, "There is a real low, a tragic low that isn't a glib celebration of transgression only. It is an essay about wasted lives." There is a universal frustration at play in this portrait of a very specific milieu that is more readily translatable than the straightforwardly ludic Spanish play. *La llamada*'s success relies on a frequently inebriated and complicit audience—weekend performance times beginning at just before midnight—primed to enjoy itself, alongside an attention to detail which I would likely not have picked up on if I had not attended the play with a thirty-something-year-old Spanish friend who had attended such summer camps. She provided context for references to students being given mosquito spray for their dorms and cajoled me into joining into spirited renditions of staple songs from such camps such as "Somos alegres" ("We are Happy"). Such generational markers were most explicit in her somewhat catty observation that the scantily clad actress playing the teenage lead must be older than I thought as she had an appendicitis scar which advances in medical practice have rendered obsolete.

Although the production featured a professional live band, the quality of the singing was uneven, with the actress playing Milagros the sole performer with any chance of being cast in a traditional professional musical. The cast nevertheless had commanding stage presences, and were familiar to spectators through their work in cinema and television. Anglophone audiences rarely have the opportunity to watch and hear plays such as *La llamada*, socio-linguistic chauvinism ensuring that traffic between English- and Spanish-language musicals is almost exclusively one-way (*Sister Act*, which premiered in Barcelona in 2014, has gone on to successfully tour the whole country), depriving those who do not regularly travel of the opportunity to view the best examples of by the far the most popular genre for domestic audiences. For better or worse, neither the practice nor the theory of European stages can afford to ignore musical theatre if it falls within its remit to include a comprehensive vision of theatre and its audiences. *Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour* and *La llamada* not only offer enjoyable and frequently moving nights at the theatre, but also provide the possibilities for developing (inter-)cultural literacies. Employing the vernacular form,

both productions effectively test and extend the parameters of a much derided tradition which, when it hits the right note, is far less formulaic than detractors might have us believe.

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