

## A poetics of memory on the Madrid stage (2018)

In the year in which Nuria Espert was awarded the Europe Theatre Special Prize acknowledging a career in theatre lasting over sixty-five years, she chose to work with director Lluís Pasqual on the sixty-minute *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*), a highly personal reflection on her relationship with the work of Federico García Lorca which encompasses work as an actor on *Yerma* (1971), *Doña Rosita* (1980) and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (2009)—the latter a play she also directed in 1996—as well as recitals of his poetry. Presented at Madrid's Teatro de la Abadía between 17 October and 11 November, a last-minute addition to the programme, it was due to be performed in an edited form in St. Petersburg for the Theatre Prize events. Espert, however, suffered an accident at the dress rehearsal breaking her wrist. The show went on in Madrid but Espert was not permitted to fly so the St. Petersburg performance had to be cancelled. The production embarks on a national and international tour throughout 2019.

*Romancero gitano* is, as the title suggests, a recital of Lorca's 1928 anthology. But for those who recall Espert's poetry recitals with Rafael Alberti in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Aire y canto de la poesía* (*Air and Song of Poetry*), as well as her later work with Pasqual on *La oscura raíz* (*The Dark Root*) in 1998, this is a similar return to poetry as storytelling. Traces of her earlier Lorca roles also run through the staging. The complication of poems that Pasqual and Espert have selected is both a comment on the collection first published ninety years ago and a reflection on Pasqual and Espert's performative journeys with Lorca over forty-seven plus years. The poems serve as a springboard, a way of thinking through what it means to perform Lorca's work, how the mouth enunciates, how the body shifts. Drawing on Lorca's lectures, Espert performs one of her own where her words and those of the poet meld.

Two blocks of theatre seats are positioned on the stage: a block of four to the right, a block of three to the left. Espert emerges from the back of the stage in a simple loose-fitting two-piece trouser suit. She greets the audience, script in hand, with a warm address, "Good evening." She begins reading from words that belong to Lorca, but they could be hers or Pasqual's (who is responsible for the script as well as the direction). An anecdote where Lorca creates a sense of intimacy, speaking of creating the illusion that he is reading *Romancero* to friends in his room, is appropriated by Espert. Espert provides another side to the exuberant Lorca that the audience think they may know. His public ebullience masked a timidity, a need to prepare each and every lecture like a script. Espert speaks of him needing to take someone's arm, even that of a stranger, to cross the street. He may have given the impression of improvising, but this too was an illusion. Everything was methodically written down like a script that Lorca chose to adhere to; he was "like an actor," taking on the words of an "other" even though these were words that he had written himself. The performative dimension seemed to proffer a sense of security rendered through *Duende*—the thrill of the live—that Espert conjures in the performance. *Duende* is the performative fire that creates "the other"; it propels her into *Romance de la luna, luna* (*Ballad of the Moon, Moon*) the first poem in the collection. Pascal Merát's lighting shifts to a silver blue as a breathless Espert embodies the tale of a boy warning the moon of the arrival of gypsies before he is carried away by the moon. Espert moves between two voices—that of the moon and that of the boy—a breathless sense of energy propels the action as the voices interlock. Espert looks down as the moon asks the boy to leave and not tread on her "starched whiteness."

The lighting shifts again to a warmer wash as Espert shares stories of her childhood, growing up in a working-class home without books. She remembers her father bringing home an edition of *Gypsy*

*Ballads* and copying out a number of poems all night, including *Ballad of the Moon*, *Moon*, which he transcribed for her, a poem she then went on to recite at the *Nidos de arte* (*the Art's Nests*), where the working classes congregated for artistic activities. A slight shift of the head and Espert is now embodying Lorca's words on the Gypsy Ballads, and moving to the second and third poems in the collection. She is at the edge of her seat, almost breathless as she urgently tells the story of *Preciosa y el aire* (*Preciosa and the Air*), a woman pursued aggressively by the wind. A gentle drumming underscores her recital, a pulse that propels her forward like the breeze that pursues *Preciosa*. For *Reyerta* (*The Quarrel*) there is a red light that bathes the stage, foretelling that blood will be spilt – the echoes with the feud in *Blood Wedding* are palpable. Espert's arms carve through the air like the poem's black angels with wings as wide as knives. She uses Lorca's words to introduce the poem as a tale of irrational violence; an attack that has no explainable reason; the mystery of the unknown. In an era of irrationality, this motif echoes through the auditorium.



Nuria Espert in *Romancero Gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*) directed by Lluís Pasqual at Teatro de la Abadía.  
Photo: Sergio Parra.

Espert has described each of the poems as a “tiny theatre play” and narrative clarity is central to the ways in which she performs them. “My voice is marked by Lorca,” she mentioned to me later that evening. She carries with her the layers of those who have performed the works before her. Espert mouths the words to Paco Ibáñez's version of the *Canción del jinete* (*Song of the Rider*), a further recognition of the ways in which Lorca's words have had new lives through the bodies and sounds of others. For *La pena negra*

(*Ballad of the Black Sorrow*), Espert stands; her body coils and scrunches as she becomes Soledad Montoya. She places her hands on her hips, she appropriates the role of the narrator who confronts Soledad.

Lorca's view of theatre as a communal act is appropriated by Espert as the governing motif of the production. Espert's act of sharing involves giving voice to Lorca's women, many of those figures she has already embodied onstage. These roles haunt her performance: her arms reach out recalling the desperation of Yerma; the tinges of melancholy could be those of the abandoned Doña Rosita; the lament has echoes of the Mother in *Blood Wedding* that she performed in a reflection on the performance of Lorca's work, also conceived with Pasqual, *Haciendo Lorca (Making Lorca, 1996)*. Espert is bathed in mustard yellow light for Mariana; the pitch of her voice is lowered for the Mother in *Blood Wedding*. Her hand leans on the seat for support as the lonely Rosita.

The lighting sculpts her face as she recites *St Gabriel*, her hand raised at the poem's opening, her voice as taut as she evokes "the skin of an apple at night." She moves her arms as if cradling the child in the poem's penultimate verse. For *Romancero sonámbulo (Sleepwalking Ballad)*, which Lorca referred to as his favorite poem in the collection, she stands and turns around; the voice echoes through the auditorium, a cold blue light creates an eerie ambience. She walks across the stage and shares the tale with the audience with a sense of complicity and mystery. She shifts from character to character with precision, voice shifting to ensure difference is crisp and clear, the head arching to point to a change of speaker. Espert does not try to disentangle the poem's mysteries, quoting Lorca's open acknowledgement of the poem's secrets: "nobody knows what happens, not even me." Rather the focus is on a tale of pursuit with a disturbing sexual symbolism where desire propels an elusive narrative, a desire made palpable by the breathless tempo of Espert's delivery. Espert recollects reciting the poem with Rafael Alberti, silence following the intensity of their duet. And of hearing Alberti speak of eating half a cold melon on a hot summer night in Madrid, asking Lorca about a poem whose mysteries he could not himself unpick.

For *Muerte de Antoñito el Camborio (Death of Little Tony el Camborio)* she stands behind the seat, leaning forward with a breathless excitement. There's a desperation to her voice as she shares the tale of Tony's death. Part lamentation, part observation, there is a slight hush in tone at the poem's end. It's a rendition that gains a spontaneous applause from the audience. For *Thamar y Amnón (Thamar and Amnon)*, the audience is lulled into a false sense of security with a warm light. She embodies both the brother overwhelmed by desire and the sister who he rapes. Her body turns from one to the other, her moves quick and abrupt. As Amnón she comes menacingly forward like a giant bat. Her hands hack through the air as she refers to David severing the harp's strings with a pair of scissors. The narrative has echoes of the dual roles of victim and perpetrator that she took on in *The Rape of Lucrecia* in 2009.

The final section of the piece positions the *Gypsy Ballads* within a broader body of Lorca's work. Lorca's words on Amargo "the angel of death and the despair that Andalusia's doors hold" offers a bridge to *Canción de la madre del Amargo (Song of the Mother of Amargo)* from the *Cante Jondo (Deep Song)* collection, written in 1921. Espert's move into the Mother's final speech from *Blood Wedding* allows for both a reflection of the role actresses played in shaping Lorca's dramaturgy and of the broader genealogy of actresses—within which Espert can be positioned—who have promoted Lorca's work. Espert may never have seen Margarita Xirgu perform live but she admits she has listened to recordings of her voice and learned from her. She also played Xirgu at Madrid's Teatro Real in Golijov's opera *Ainadamar* (2012). It is as if Xirgu's ghost inhabits the stage with Espert, they are walking together

with Lorca and Pasqual, both a palimpsest and an acknowledgment of the different contributions made by actors and directors to the canonization of Lorca.

*Romance de la Guardia Civil (Ballad of the Civil Guard)* opens with the sound of the trotting of a horse. It is a beat which is used by Espert as an accompaniment, a metronome. Espert's recital, again inflected as if sharing a story with the audience, is a tale of injustice and exploitation that needs to be told, that needs to be listened to. Espert's eyes look out in terror at what she sees before her. She positions Lorca at the poem's end not only as a poet of death but as a poet of love. The *Soneto del amor oscuro (Sonnet of Dark Love)* is recited gently, softly, intensely. It is almost a plea on her part: "don't let me lose what I have won." Espert may speak of "the black Spain of that moment" when Lorca was killed but there are echoes with the present that the production negotiates with levity. Espert stands behind the seats to deliver the final poem *Grito hacia Roma (Cry to Rome)*. Her voice slices through the air like the silver swords shaving through apples. Imagery from the poems is not illustrated by her gestures but commented or expanded on. She clutches her blouse with desperation and fear. The poem's imagery is cruel and painful: "clouds cut by a coral hand.../sharks like tear-drops/roses that wound." She spits the words out and they ring through the air; it is almost a tone of hysteria, of panic in the streets that took me back to Pasqual's production of *The Public* in 1987. Espert's voice rings out with the "crowd of laments." There are moments of lyricism, as when she describes the statues bereft of "love below the complete crystal eyes." Bells toll in the distance—part of Roc Mateu's rich soundscape. Her face crunches at "the multitudes with hammer, violin and clouds" and then there is stillness as the poem reaches its end "because we want Earth's will to be done so she gives her fruits to all"; the stage then turns to black.

Espert's performance is one focused on the act of storytelling. The sense of intimacy, urgency and complicity with which she recites the poems, the mood of informality with which she shares information about her childhood and friendship with Alberti. The abrasive language of the poems then cuts abruptly through the mood of informality and confidence, part of the contrasts set up in the production. At first, it is not clear if Espert is reading from a script or not. The script is soon revealed as just a prop to create the informality of a rehearsal, a reading like those given by Lorca when sharing work with friends. Pascal Merát's lighting creates a different mood for each poem from the glacial, mordant light of the moon to an ominous red wash. Pasqual's production is lean and bereft of any distractions that remove the focus from Espert. Roc Mateu's soundscape creates a percussive rhythm, a base line to Espert's sonorous voice. At 83, Espert demonstrates a resolve and sense of purpose. These are poems that demand to be shared and share them she does interweaving the personal and the political in ways that demonstrate why she remains such an important artist with a clear sense of purpose in an age where political commitment too often incurs government wrath.

Ramón del Valle-Inclán was Lorca's contemporary, and a dramatist with both an innate sense of theatricality and a radical ambition. His sprawling, epic plays have not had the resonance of Lorca's works in the English-speaking world and are less immediately accessible, even for audiences within Spain. Valle-Inclán's 1920 play, *Luces de bohemia (Bohemian Lights)* makes significant demands on any prospective director. A large character list of over sixty, a nocturnal journey of fifteen episodic scenes across thirteen different locations—from dingy taverns to a cemetery at dusk, a darkened attic room, glass-strewn streets, a prison cell and cave-like bookshop—its episodic form and specific allusions to places and figures of the time, as well as a linguistic register that moves across the colloquial, the literary and neologisms, has given it the status of a rarefied piece. Never staged in the playwright's lifetime, it was not professionally premiered in Spain until 1970. Lluís Pasqual's 1984 staging, now a contemporary

classic, was a coproduction between the Centro Dramático Nacional [CDN] and Strehler's Théâtre de l'Europe, presented on Fabià Puigserver's mirrored floor set with a cyclorama which conjured the sunrise and sunset in a series of cubist colours. Alfredo Sanzol's staging is the first at the CDN since Pasqual's. Like Pasqual, Sanzol frames his staging around the dramatist's theory of the *esperpento*: an aesthetic of synthetic deformation which perturbs and disturbs the viewer/reader but is, at the same time, beautiful in the mathematical precision of its distortion. Whereas Pasqual opted for a tiled floor of mirrors, Sanzol brings a giant mirror down from the flies that serves as an additional character to the action. The audience see themselves reflected in it before a single word has been spoken. We are implicated and reflected in this grotesque, distorted world from the production's very opening.

Pasqual had a cast of forty for his production. Sanzol has sixteen. Alejandro Andújar's set revolves around two key objects: the giant mirror which is moved by the actors during the transition between scenes and an upright piano played by Jorge Bedoya with a score composed by Fernando Velázquez (who is also takes responsibility for the production's exquisite, layered sound design). The piano, too, is moved across the stage, contributing to this sense of a world in motion. The scene changes—brisk, focused, purposeful—give the production its pace and provide the sense of a society where Max has been left behind, a relic from an earlier era, always seeking to catch up with what is going on around him.



The blind poet Max Estrella (Juan Codina) and his wily sidekick Don Latino (Chema Adeva) with the Night Watchman (Jorge Kent) in Alfredo Sanzol's production of *Luces de bohemia* (*Bohemian Lights*) at the Centro Dramático Nacional's Teatro María Guerrero. Photo: Samuel Sánchez, courtesy of the Centro Dramático Nacional.

The different locations are created through the placement of the mirror which is moved from scene to scene by the actors to create distinct spaces: placed beside a window to create Zarathustra's claustrophobic bookshop; hoisted up to create the Café Colón where Max, Don Latino and Rubén Dario drink and reminisce; positioned to create a corridor through which Max is taken to prison; pushed along on wheels, it seems to run in pursuit after Max through the nocturnal streets of Madrid. The mirror creates an elusive stage world where reality and reflection merge. It is the mirror in which the Police Inspector Serafín el Bonito/Slick Back Serafín, pipe in mouth, preens himself and creates the tight space which traps Max in the police station; and serves as the wall where prostitute Enriqueta La Pisa Bien/Enriqueta the Street Walker poses to promote her wares. It is dangerously restless as Max visits the Minister, a plethora of tiny tiles that distort the emaciated poet, with no shoes and no shirt. Max and Don Latino sit at the back of the mirror's frame as dawn breaks and bang on the frame as if knocking on a door. Pedro Yagüe's lighting creates a crepuscular atmosphere, from the warm sepia tones of Zarathustra's bookshop to the grey blue of the graveside scene. Lighting demarcates the different stage spaces and creates the sense of a bitter cold night as Max and Latino fraternize with the two prostitutes, La Vieja Pintada/The Old Heavily Made-up Woman and La Lunares/The Mole.

Juan Codina is a lean angular Max Estrella, the blind, bohemian poet whose tragi-comic death lies at the centre of Valle-Inclán's play. An emaciated figure with more than a touch of Don Quixote about him, he looks out at the audience as he claims to see again, but soon turns away. He moves from anger to disgust in swift outbursts. His voice rings through the busy soundscape created by Fernando Velazquez which provides the sense of a world that wants to drown him out. His daughter Claudinita (Lourdes García), all plaits and glasses, may appear like an innocent school girl but the vehemence with which she attacks Chema Adeva's ragged Don Latino—Max's nocturnal guide through the streets of Madrid—on numerous occasions is anything but benign. Adeva's Don Latino sticks to Max like glue, casting a constant shadow to his side. The men's torn dirty attire testifies to poverty, Don Latino's greasy hair to unkemptness. Don Latino is a drunken presence at Max's funeral, lunging forward to comfort the family, much to their disgust, lashing out when questioned and almost falling head first into the coffin in a shambolic manner. (Indeed, Sanzol choreographs the wake scene as farce, darkly funny and brutally absurdist.) Don Latino shuffles while his voice ingratiates itself with platitudes that ring hollow. Max speaks out, Don Latino speaks in asides. Sanzol presents *Bohemian Lights* as a play of contrasts. One moment Max kisses his longsuffering French wife Madame Collet, the next he is squandering the little money he has left while his wife and daughter are literally starving.

Valle-Inclán cannot be performed as naturalism; his work requires an acting register that recognizes the shifting tones of the play. Sanzol's elegant choreography gives the production an overarching frame and a pulse which sets its rhyme. The actors are uniformly excellent. With extensive and imaginative doubling (Lourdes García takes on daughter Claudinita and the prostitute La Linares, Ángel Ruiz the narcissistic Serafín and the rhetorical Rubén Dario), characters are distinguished by distinctive props, items of costumes and physical traits. Zarathustra's (Jorge Kent's) burnt orange scarf; the wayward, swaggering Enriqueta La Pisa Bien/Enriqueta the Street Walker (Paula Iwasaki) with hair falling down her face and a bunch of wild flowers in her hand; the modernista Dorio de Gadex's (Kevin de la Rosa's) large earring and close-fitting burgundy three-piece suit in which he poses and postures; the infantile Don Gay's (Paco Ochoa's) stripy outfit with something of a child's sailor suit about it; the slicked back hair of the pimp El Rey de Portugal/The King of Portugal (Guillermo Serrano); the newspaper editor Don Filiberto's (Josean Bengoetxea's) arm waving; the drunken reveler (Jesús Noguero) who is always teetering and threatening to fall over but never quite gets there; the screech of Señora Flora (Ascen

López) the no-nonsense concierge who finds Max's dead body; the four gravediggers (Josean Bengoetxea, Jorge Kent, Paco Ochoa, Gon Ramos) surrounding the ageing Marquis of Bradomín (Jesús Noguero), smoke from their cigarettes clouding the morning air. The hobbling night watchman (Jorge Kent) with lamp in hand. There is a precision to the characters and their moves that creates the sense of a credible, concrete world that is in constant motion.

While Pasqual's staging had a distinctive feel of 1918 Madrid, Sanzol opts for a more open aesthetic that also has elements of early twentieth-century Dublin. There is something of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the colors, textures and mood of Sanzol's metropolis. Pica Lagarto's noisy bar with its plain wooden furniture and its array of regular customers could be downtown Dublin. The production also feels rooted in a Spain that feels eerily contemporary. The aesthetic of austerity that hovers over the production creates sharp resonances between 1918 and the present. A girl runs across the stage waving a Spanish flag screeching "Viva España." The tune of "Viva España," albeit written by a non-Spaniard, carries particular nationalist sentiments at a time where Catalonia continues to make its case for separatism. (The pianist also plays the Spanish national anthem at one point.) The role of the Catalan prisoner (Gon Ramos)—who is first seen being marched through the streets by police at the end of Scene 2—appears particularly pertinent here, with Catalan politicians Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Turull still imprisoned at the time of the production's run for their roles in the 1 October 2017 referendum. Valle-Inclán's caustic reflections on turbulent times appear perhaps more pertinent than when Pasqual staged the play in the jubilant years of Spain's nascent democracy. The references to austerity, to riots in the streets, to police brutality, and political corruption appear highly current. Max is roughly handled and forcibly pried apart from the Catalan prisoner. Bribes are the order of the day. Loyalty can be bought and sold if the price is right.

There is also a strong concentration on posture and stance, carriage and façade. This is a society where appearance matters. Don Filiberto (Jesús Noguero) and Serafín (Ángel Ruiz), representatives of the newspaper industry and police service respectively, look at themselves admiringly in the mirror. Dorio shows his disdain for Filiberto by putting his feet on the table; Don Filiberto makes his point by banging his hand ceremoniously on the pile of print newspapers. The Minister enters to greet Max in a state of undress—has he been asleep or involved in sexual activities behind the scenes. Neither contributes to a portrait of responsible governance.

Pianist Jorge Bedoya is part of the cast—taking on the roles of a young *modernista* and El Pollo del Pay Pay—but also stands outside the action. In Scene 9, just before Rubén Darío begins reciting his poem, he stops and stares at the cast and then resumes playing, underscoring the recital. There is a sing song around the piano in Scene 11—drunken revelry prevailing—before the woman emerges with her dead child, here played by an adult actor. Tellingly Max's death has no musical accompaniment, a moment of silence that echoes through the auditorium. A harmonica played by one of the gravediggers escorts Max's coffin as it is taken to the cemetery. A melancholy tune at the piano sounds by the graveside.

Sanzol's fluid production creates a moving landscape—the effect is like being on a conveyor belt. The *modernista* writers carry Max's corpse from his doorway into his threadbare coffin. Characters come and go—prostitutes, newspaper sellers, barmen, police—creating a sense of hustle and bustle as Max and Don Latino make their way through the city. The action is beautifully choreographed creating the sense of a palpable, concrete world. Don Basilio (Jorge Kent) creeping off after his cruel insistence that Max remains alive but in a catatonic state has been unequivocally exposed by the no-nonsense Doña Flora. At

the end there is no mirror, the final scene has Don Latino squandering his ill-gotten gains and making unholy pacts with Enriqueta and El Rey de Portugal having deprived Max of his lottery winnings. Max's widow and daughter have committed suicide and just Jesús Noguero's Drunkard remains on stage, swaying like a demented bullfighter with no palpable opponent in front of him remains, an absurdist manifestation of an unstable world where chaos, avarice and self-interest reign.

In *Un bar bajo la arena (A Bar Beneath the Sand)*, José Ramón Fernández creates a magical space which functions as the terrain of memory and myth. The once legendary café bar in the basement of the Teatro María Guerrero (or "Mariguerrri" as it's affectionately known) which ran from 1970 to 1999 was a much-loved meeting place in the Spanish theatre, a place where performers and audiences mingled, a space for dreaming, encounters and gossip. Now refashioned as a studio space, the Sala Princesa, the theatre—Spain's de facto national venue—is left without a café bar. It's a loss much lamented. Audiences now leave the building without the opportunity to stay and discuss what they have just seen. Spilling out of the theatre, as I did after *Bohemian Lights*, it takes only a few minutes for the doors to lock and the theatre to close; it is as if nobody was there. Jose Ramón Fernández's play celebrates the communities forged through theatre across the social spaces where creatives and audiences gather to share something of what they have seen or participated in.

There's a decidedly retro feel to the space designed by Monica Boromello. Worn armchairs stage left and stage right. A well-trodden fleur-de-lis patterned carpet. The bar has a wipe clean imitation leather counter. It has a homely, lived in feel. Two technicians of differing generations wander in—they have shows to work on. Blas (Janfri Topera) runs the bar. José María (Pepe Viyuela) is a loyal middle-aged spectator who sees the café-bar as a second home. His clothing appears ill-fitting, incongruous, a little like him as he walks tentatively towards the bar. Soon the reticence gives way to a sense of belonging. Here José María feels at home, watching and interacting with the café-bar's regulars. There are over forty characters who pass through the bar played by a versatile cast of fifteen (Jorge Basanta, Isabel Dimas, Luis Flor, Carmen Gutiérrez, Ione Irazabal, Daniel Moreno, Julián Ortega, Francisco Pacheco, Raquel Salamanca, Juan Carlos Talavera, Janfri Topera, Maribel Vitar and Pepe Viyuela).





Leslaw and Waclaw Janicki (Jorge Basanta and Dani Moreno) interact with José María (Pepe Viyuela) in José Ramón Fernández's *Un bar bajo la arena* (*A Bar Beneath the Sand*). Photo: Marcos Gpunto, courtesy of the Centro Dramático Nacional.

Rosa (Ione Irazábal) and Filomena (Carmen Gutiérrez), part of a youngish company who have a slot at the National Theatre, are preparing a new production for the venue—their first—a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's a milestone in their careers and they are genuinely excited. But as José María informs them, "This is going to fill up with ghosts." And fill up it does, as the ghosts of those who have performed on the stage of the María Guerrero theatre pass through its bar, haunting the imaginary of Rosa and Filomena as well as the production that they are preparing that remains forever in the distance.

A voiceover lulls the audience into a false sense of security by asking for mobile phones to be switched off. The voiceover then continues, moving from the operational into a more conceptual frame, encouraging the audience to enter a theatre beneath the sand—the arena Lorca delineated in his 1930 play *The Public* which was famously premiered at the María Guerrero in 1987. "The performance is about to begin" rings out as a fierce wind sweeps the slim José María across the stage, bringing on Fuso Negro—the supposed nomadic madman of Ramón del Valle-Inclán *Comedias bárbaras* (*Savage Plays*). Fuso Negro (Julián Ortega) makes regular appearances through the piece, tearing through the stage and disrupting its stillness with his rowdy presence. Other ghosts also appear recurrently: Buster Keaton (Pepe Viyuela)—who featured in Lorca's *El paseo de Buster Keaton* (*Buster Keaton's Walk*), part of a season of Lorca plays staged by Lluís Pasqual in 1986. The famous blue sand that covered the floor of the theatre for *The Public* is brought unwittingly into the bar by José María. As he shakes the sand out of his

show he stores it away, a treasured memento, a trace of the performance to carry home with him. The Silly Shepherd (Francisco Pacheco), a character from *The Public*—played by Juan Echanove in Pasqual’s keynote production—then comes in to sing his solo. Juliet appears, wandering out of sorts and displaced not only from *Romeo and Juliet* but also from *The Public* where she is one of a number of characters from different plays and eras that Lorca brings together in his tale of a tortured director attempting to fashion a new theatre for the age.

Moments of contemplation are followed by frenetic action. Juan Echanove (Francisco Pacheco) recalls his role in *Ivanov* while the twin actors, Waclaw and Leslaw Janicki (Dani Moreno and Jorge Bastanta), from Kantor’s *Wielopole, Wielopole* march in. Leslaw speaks of memory as “a room where we put that which we do not wish to lose.” They converse with Aurora Redonda (Isabel Dimas), who jumps in and out of role as Sgricia from *Giants of the Mountains*. Waclaw and Leslaw come from 1981 when *Wielopole, Wielopole* opened the Centro Dramático Nacional (National Dramatic Centre) at the María Guerrero and enjoyed a huge impact on the Spanish theatre. Aurora is from an earlier era, where actors managed a repertoire of roles in their heads, reciting any one at the drop of a hat. Her large hands spin in front of her as she conjures words from these different dramatic works. Berta Rianza (Ione Irazábal), Gertrude to José Luis Gómez’s Hamlet in 1989, conjures other legendary Hamlets. Amanda (Maribel Vitar), on the other hand, has yet to have her first big role, she’s an aspiring actress with a great deal to prove.

Imaginary figures, like Amanda, Blas and José María, converse with characters from plays—as with Pepe (Dani Moreno) and Leticia (Raquel Salamanca), the charismatic leads from Enrique Jardiel Poncela’s *Un marido de ida y vuelta* (*A husband Who’s Coming and Going*). Pepe and Leticia further take on the roles of the Figure with Bells and Figure with Vine Leaves in *The Public*. The actor-director Adolfo Marsillach (Pepe Viyuela), the first director of Spain’s Classical Theatre Company (CNTC), converses with actor Paco Ochoa (Juan Carlos Talavera) who took on the role of the Nobel-prizewinning neuroscientist and pathologist, Santiago Ramón y Cajal in Fernández’s earlier 2010 play *La colmena científica* (*The Scientific Beehive*). Julia Gutiérrez Caba provides a Lyuba (Carmen Gutiérrez) able to step out of role to reflect that ‘no one narrates life quite like Chekhov’. The pain of separation and miscommunication in *The Cherry Orchard* is contrasted with the fevered desire of Pepe and Leticia. The ramblings of Valle-Inclán’s Max Estrella (Pepe Viyuela) and Don Latino de Hispalis (Juan Carlos Talavera) appear particularly resonant as the characters tread the boards in the upstairs theatre in Alfredo Sanzol’s staging of *Bohemian Lights*. Fernández offers Max a chance to converse with Fuso Negro, and the latter takes Don Latino’s place as the favoured companion through Madrid’s nightlife. New conversations; new configurations; new encounters. Individual protagonists are contrasted with the chorus of Aristophanes’ *Peace*, a 1977 production where *A Bar Beneath the Sand*’s director, Ernesto Caballero, featured in the choral body.

In Fernández’s play, the devil is in the detail. Blas is quick to chide Pepe for not realising the difference between an anchovy and cheese sandwich and a cheese and anchovy sandwich. Wigs are a prominent prop for Adolfo Marsillach. *El País*’s legendary critic Rosana Torres (Carmen Gutiérrez) recalls watching *Doña Rosita* with Nuria Espert in the title role. A drunken Víctor García (Jorge Basanta) who died soon after his fellow Argentine Jorge Lavelli compatriot directed Espert in *Doña Rosita*, returns to unsettle Espert (Isabel Dimas), just as the productions they realised together, *The Maids*, *Yerma* and *Divinas Palabras* (*Divine Words*), haunt all subsequent stagings of those plays. The break-away from García may not be as straightforward as Espert may hope. Their working lives remain indelibly intertwined.

Fernández has ultimately fashioned a play about the ghosts that wander across the stage every time an actor takes on a role previously inhabited by others. The actor's body wears the traces of these others. The audiences project their own others on to the actors they see. When Juan José Otegui (Juan Carlos Talavera) as Valle-Inclán's absurdist Friolera speaks of the relationship between theatre and football, I am reminded of José Bódalo stepping on stage with earphones listening to his beloved Real Madrid on the pitch. Goya (Janfri Topera), the protagonist of Antonio Buero Vallejo's *El sueño de la razón* (*The Sleep of Reason*), appears fleetingly. Fernández also appears, not in person but inhabited by another, the actor Jorge Basanta. Recalling Catalan dramatist, Josep Benet i Jornet, now with advanced dementia and unable to recognise him, he requests one last hug "even if you are no longer in that body that looks and smiles and me."

Actors are here presented as agents of the imagination and of change – the actors' strike of 1975 is referenced in a latter scene of the play. *A Bar Beneath the Sand* is also a play about audiences as José María's fleeting presence suggests. Rosana Torres brings her father's ashes to the bar because it was one of his favourite places. Actors live on in the imaginations of those who saw them play. "You are your memories," states José María as the play reaches its end. The foyer of the Sala Princesa—through which the audience enter—is further filled with ghostly portraits of those referenced in the play, a further performative frame for the action. As actors and audience meld in the play's final scene, a woman brings José María a sandwich—likely anchovies and cheese!—and breaks into a rendition of "We'll meet again." It is an act of exchange and communication that evokes the process of interaction at the centre of the actor audience relationship.

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