

***Blood Wedding* Receives an Irish-Gypsy Makeover at the Young Vic**

By María Bastianes

Following the critical and commercial success of Simon Stone's remarkable reworking of *Yerma* (2016) with Billie Piper in the eponymous lead role, the Young Vic, in Kwame Kwei-Armah's second year as artist director, returns to the work of Federico García Lorca. *Blood Wedding* (*Bodas de Sangre*) brings on board two heavyweights of the English-speaking stage – Irish playwright Marina Carr and South-African director Yaël Farber – to revive Lorca's first breakthrough, the only one of his plays to have been translated for the Anglophone stage in his lifetime. The 1935 debut English-language production of *Blood Wedding* in New York received a lukewarm reception at best, but Lorca is now the best-known Spanish playwright in the UK and US, a posthumous canonisation inextricably linked to his execution by the Francoists at the onset of the Civil War.

It is easy to see how Lorca became a martyr, but even his most realistic and best-loved plays—*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* or *The House of Bernarda Alba*—pose some very difficult challenges for the contemporary stage. Dense poetic language and a carefully elaborated tragic structure can easily lapse into the default setting of stage(d) melodrama. Throughout its stage history, *Blood Wedding* has been understood in relation to his earlier poetic collection *Gypsy Ballads* (*Romancero Gitano*) and to the world it describes, despite Lorca rejecting this association. Based on a historical crime that had taken place some years previously in Almeria (where Lorca briefly studied when he was a child), *Blood Wedding* contains no reference to gypsies.

The Young Vic production departs from a promising premise: to infuse the Andalusian landscape with the ethos and ambience of rural Ireland often found in Carr's own plays. The lyricism of the Irish theatrical tradition is a good match for Lorca's writing-style (as the programme notes, the Granadan poet admired and was probably influenced by John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* when writing *Blood Wedding*). To employ acidic humour, another hallmark of many Irish authors (Carr included), might also have supplied an antidote against the risk of lapsing into melodrama.

The adaptation of *Blood Wedding* returns to recurring concerns in Carr's oeuvre: vicious cycles of competition between female characters (especially within the family), women entangled in relationships with unequal power relations, in which they are subjugated by unloving partners and an asphyxiating social environment. In the case at hand, the character of the Bride is afforded a newfound prominence. Trapped amongst the blood feuds between two families, she is almost forced to marry the Groom and is animalized by her future mother-in-law (the first time the characters meet, the younger woman complains of the older one examining her body as if she were a heifer at the mart). Victim of the violence of her own father, her groom and even her beloved Leonardo, the real aspiration of Carr's Bride is to be free.

The rural Irish atmosphere is replicated on and through Susan Hilferty's sets designed for an in-the-round thrust stage and comprised of a wooden floor and items of humble furniture and objects (there is also a predominance of wood in the props), that the actors place and remove during the performance, often through choreographed movements. At the rear, a platform that can be moved to redefine the stage helps

to demarcate different spaces (it is used most spectacularly as an inclined plane from where the Bride and Leonardo descend to the floor as they elope together after fleeing the Groom and his family in the midst of the Wedding). The mise-en-scene also provides room for more ludic and quasi-oneiric scenes. Hence, for example, the use of a flying device to re-enact Leonardo's gallop around the stage.

Carr introduces transitions with the Moon character between scenes, allowing the symbolic and poetic elements to be present from the outset, instead of concentrating them in the third and final Act as in Lorca's original text. The touching voice of Thalissa Teixeira, cast as the Moon, is a recurring and mesmerizing presence in these interpolations. The majority of her lines originate in Lorca's play (she sings for instance, the *Lullaby of the Big Horse* and the epithalamium), although it is also possible to identify other pieces by the author such as a fragment in Spanish from the *Sleepwalking Ballad* (*Romance sonámbulo*). Carr condenses in the sole figure of the Weaver Lorca's more realistic character of the Neighbour and the allegorical figures of the Old Beggar (Death) and the three little girls who, like the three Fates, ask the yarn about what awaits the lovers.



Roger Jean Nsengiyumva and Faaiz Mbelizi. Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, adapted by Marina Carr, directed by Yaël Farber. Photo: Marc Brenner.

Natasha Chiver's lighting design reinforces this division between two worlds: warm light is employed for the more realistic moments, matching the wooden sets, and cold light is typically reserved for the symbolic and lyrical passages. The production opens with the striking image of the Mother kneeling on

the floor, cleaning in half-darkness a spot of something that could perhaps be blood, an image that is revisited with circular symmetry at the denouement as the Mother and the Wife of Leonardo wash away the blood of the dead bodies. Following this silent prelude, the sprightly initial dialogue between the Groom and the Mother provides an ideal showcase for Olwen Fouéré's gifts as a performer (I found myself unable to take my eyes off this austere and sour matriarch any time she was on stage).

As the play unfolds, the production was unable to maintain this intensity. Although it picks up on many of the play's original themes, there is an unfortunate tendency by both Carr and Farber to make explicit what is only subtly intimated by Lorca. As a result, characters and actions alike are simplified and become more Manichean. An increased emphasis on the feud between the warring families provides space for issues not always recognised in earlier productions such as the greed of the Father of the Bride and the "financial problems" of Leonardo (Paula Ortiz' 2015 cinematic adaptation, *La Novia* bypasses completely the fact that the Bride and Leonardo were unable to marry in part at least because of his lack of lands and material possessions). Conversely, however, Carr plays down the importance of the fatal and inescapable passion that links the lovers. What Leonardo is after in this version is not getting the Bride but offending the Groom. As a result, any sexual tension is lost in the mix, no matter how many times the hyper-masculinized Gavin Drea's Leonardo takes off his shirt during the show. This was a far—and, for this spectator at least—disappointing cry from the electrifying, erotically charged atmosphere that Farber brought to her 2012 production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. The sensual dialogue between the Bride and Leonardo after they run away from the Wedding, one of the original play highlights, is rendered in a lacklustre and, quite frankly, dull manner here. An absence of tension in general provides one explanation as to why even the most spectacular moments of the show (e.g. Leonardo's aforementioned galloping or the rain of green leaves falling from above at the end) failed to connect with auditorium.

Listening to Aoife Duffin's Bride constantly evoking the full name of Leonardo Felix as a way of drawing attention to the hates between families, reminiscent of the declamatory style of a Mexican soap opera, did little to alleviate the situation. Neither was I convinced by the new ending of the play, in which the Bride is surrounded and threatened by all of the characters, before being killed by the Mother. An arguably worse fate befalls Lorca's Bride whose transgressions are not punished by the knife but instead by the icy indifference of her "not to be" mother-in-law. The dramatic fight to death between Gavin Drea (Leonardo) and David Walmsley (Groom) unwittingly provoked laughter amongst some members of the audience. The actors ought not to be held to account: it is a nigh on impossible task to reciprocally kill each other in an ostensibly realistic scene (perhaps that's the reason why the action occurs off stage in Lorca's play).



Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, adapted by Marina Carr, directed by Yaël Farber. Photo: Marc Brenner.

These were, however, relatively minor misgivings in relation to what I would content to be the most unfortunate characteristic of this reworking: the use (and abuse) of a dangerous cliché. The image of the gypsy as an avatar of some mythical Irish essence (more ancient, free and connected with nature) is a minor recurring motif in many of Carr's plays, usually linked with a specific model of femininity. It is, for example, in place in her play that will be staged as part of the Young Vic's next season: *Portia Coughlan*. The objective appears to be to reconceptualise and revindicate the figure of the gypsy as an "other," but, even with the best intentions, there is the risk of falling into the trap of reifying cliché, of trading in essentialist generalisations. The risk is even bigger if the *cliché* occupies a central place in the play, as is clearly the case in this production of *Blood Wedding*. The Bride's thirst for freedom is inherited from her ancestors, and the character belongs to a lineage of "mischievous," "unruly" women. Her mother was stoned alive and hung, seemingly for her behaviour with men, whilst her gypsy grandmother, La Manchita, was, we are told, chased before finally committing suicide by riding off a cliff on her horse. Carr's version, alongside her comments in the programme notes, conflates Moors and gypsies. The dramatist speaks of "the annihilation of identity and the psychic wound of colonisation" in Ireland and the Spanish "reconquest of the land from the moor." This reflexion on the dynamic of oppressors and oppressed, victims and persecutors includes also a reference to Lorca's murder. Universalising suffering and oppression runs the danger of underplaying and trivialising the specificities underpinning instances of cultural or political oppression.

Gypsies and Moors also play a privileged role in the antiquated romantic idea(l) of Spain, as an exotic place of passion and wonder. A similar complaint can be made about the foregrounding of the Catholic devotion of the characters: as a wedding present the Mother gives to the Bride not only the not very chaste silk stockings that appear in Lorca's play, but also, and paradoxically a pearly rosary blessed by

the Black Madonna of Montserrat. The lack of care in the use of Spanish in the production does not help. La Manchita (literally ‘the little stain’), is a ludicrous nickname for a person (is it a veiled homage to the *Don Quixote of La Mancha* or a reference to the reputation of the character?). Sometimes the Moon sings in Spanish, but instead of the original text what we hear is a translation of the translation in English, and the result of this double displacement doesn’t always sound natural. That is what happens for instance with the fragment of the *Sleepwalking Ballad*, one of the most popular poems from the *Gypsy Ballads*, often learnt by heart by school students in Spain. Although non-Spanish speakers will not notice this linguistic slippage, Thalissa Teixeira’s task would have been made much easier if she had been left to sing the original verses, instead of a translation that lacks rhythmic meter and accent.

Ethical qualms aside, playing with clichés is symptomatic of a production that amounts to far less than the sum of its parts: Carr and Farber’s track record boded well, as did the talent of the actors treading the boards of the Young Vic, but this underwhelming and sometimes insensitive production proved incapable of transforming its considerable potential into a moving and memorable night at the theatre.

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