

Festival Grec 2021

By Maria Delgado and Anton Pujol

Every July, Barcelona hosts the Grec Festival, or “el Grec,” as it is commonly known. Named after the 1929 Greek amphitheatre in Montjuïc, it has become an important multidisciplinary event in the European summer festival circuit. Covid-19 closed theatres across Europe and wreaked havoc across cultural institutions in many countries. However, Spain was an exception. After a mandatory initial lockdown, theatres opened doors with limited capacity and fully masked spectators under the “culture is safe” motto. While last year’s Grec Festival went on with limited programming, this year, its 45th year, it was (almost) back to normal, with over 100 productions across different city venues. These performances were attended by almost 107,000 spectators (approximately 70% capacity). Strict Covid-19 protocols were in place throughout the month, but, unfortunately, full runs of five scheduled productions were cancelled, as were many performances of other productions.

Running parallel to the Grec Festival were two productions that deserve special mention. The first one is the Uruguayan playwright Gabriel Calderón’s clever monologue about an actor about to play Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, titled *Història d'un senglar (o alguna cosa de Ricard) (History of a Boar (or Something about Richard))*. Joan Carreras, one of the best stage actors in Spain, and a long-time collaborator of Àlex Rigola during the latter’s time as Director of the Teatre Lliure, offered a mesmerizing tour de force where he cunningly played several characters while also impersonating different people involved in the mounting of the show. This monologue deserves to be translated and performed across the world as soon as possible. The second noteworthy production was mounted by La Calòrica, a small theatre company that has typically performed in fringe venues. However, in July, the group finally had a full commercial success with a sold-out run at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya of *De què parlem mentre no parlem de tota aquesta merda (What Are We Really Talking About While We Do Not Talk About All This Shit)*. This work is a play by Joan Yago and directed by Israel Solà that tackles the global climate crisis from a very local point of view. It addresses this important issue with hilarity, but also brings an unexpected serious heft towards the end. La Calòrica, a company at the top of their game, will finally make their Madrid debut next year with *Els ocells*, their uproarious version of *The Birds* by Aristophanes.

The actual festival opened with a worrying misstep. The focus of this year’s Grec was African culture, with a particular emphasis on the city’s people of African descent. There were also many performances from different African countries. For example, from Morocco, Mohamed El Khatib presented *Finir en Beauté/C’est la vie*, and Algerian choreographer Nacera Belaza dazzled with *La nuit+Sur le fil*. There were productions from many other African countries, including Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast, to reflect the variety of artistic richness from the vast continent. It came as a surprise, then, that the opening production of *Carrer Robadors* (an adaptation of Mathias Énard’s novel *Rue des voleurs*), directed by Julio Manrique, chose Guillem Balart, a Caucasian actor, to play the main role of Lakhtar, a young African born in Tanger. This action cast a shadow of hypocrisy over the much-publicized theme of the Festival. Leaving aside the early bump and the Covid-19 cancellations, the Festival, directed by Frances Casadesús, was truly a success, both in numbers and quality of the local and invited productions. The sheer number of offerings became something akin to a mirage given how devastating the impact of the pandemic had been on the local theatre scene. Theatregoers could choose between Peter Brooks’

latest production of *The Tempest* and Lauwers & Needcompany's *Billy's Violence*, an adaptation of the ten Shakespeare tragedies that primordially highlights the encroachment of misogyny on our culture. The repetitive, overlong, highly disturbing and graphic staging created an unintended opposite effect by delivering a voyeuristic "épater le bourgeois" kind of evening. Director and playwright Pablo Messiez also teamed up with renowned singer Sílvia Pérez Cruz to offer a beautiful spectacle that merged songs and theatre seamlessly. Set around a wooden box (stunningly designed by Sílvia Delagneau and Max Glaenzel), Pérez Cruz's soulful music created evocative moments that produced an exquisite evening.

One of the most anticipated openings of the month was the quickly sold-out return of Dimitris Papaioannou with *Transverse Orientation*. Although the Greek director's production might not have reached the resounding artistic success that *The Great Tamer* achieved, it still provided some indelible images and breath-taking moments that were carried out seamlessly by an indefatigable cast of actors/dancers.



Acciones sencillas, by Jesús Rubio Gamo. Photo: Jesus Vallinas.

As usual with the Grec programming, dance was center stage, in all its forms, ranging from María Pagés to Les Impuxibles, to name a few. The indomitable Sol Picó triumphed yet again with *Malditas plumas (Damned Feathers)*. She offered a delirious, and at times very touching, take on the world of Spanish genre called revista (a sort of vaudeville) that was very popular in the Barcelona theatre district known as Paral.lel. Jesús Rubio Gamo, one of the leading choreographers of his generation, presented

his *Acciones sencillas* (*Simple Actions*) to much deserved acclaim. With just five tireless dancers, three cantoras (flamenco singers) and an empty stage, Rubio Gamo created repetitive, asynchronized sequences by merging naked bodies and voices that then he would completely divide, and break into bare moments to mesmerizing effect. There was an unforgettable pas de deux where one of the singers stood on the stage and followed the dancers with her voice and her clapping and, most importantly, her whole body. After his take on Ravel's *Gran Bolero* (2019), Rubio Gamo was recognized as an important choreographer. However, after *Acciones sencillas*, his work has become unmissable. Finally, in the *Escena híbrida* (Hybrid Scene) section, Enric Montefusco's *Viaje al centro de un idiota* (*Trip to the Center of an Idiot*) at the Sala Hiroshima delivered one of the most interesting pieces I have seen in a long time. The work mixes music, dance, poetry, art and theatre with exquisite simplicity and Montefusco invites us to think, or better yet, to re-think everything that we know about ourselves, to inquire anew.

As usual, theatre offerings were plentiful. Ana Torrent and Alicia Borrachero offered perfectly nuanced performances in a top-notch production of *Las criadas*, Paco Bezerra's shrewd translation of Jean Genet's *Les bonnes* (1947), directed by Luis Luque. *M'hauríeu de pagar* (*You Should Pay Me*) by Jordi Prat i Coll became a sold-out hit at the small (and very uncomfortable) Sala Àtrium. The play is composed of three monologues that are more compelling and better structured than most modern plays. Hopefully, someone will bring it back to the stage soon, and with the same three actors: Àurea Màrquez, Albert Pérez Bort and Carles Roig. Àlex Rigola brought to Barcelona his adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull* that had opened at the Teatro de la Abadía in Madrid in October. Several changes to the cast (including Rigola himself playing the role of Trigorin) gave *La gavina* an edgier approach that transported Chekhov's classic into a closer realm, while maintaining the Russian author's themes. Rigola adapts the play while combining the actual actors' experiences; thus, Chantal Aimée, who plays Arkadina, talks about her illustrious career as a theatre actress, having worked with the most important directors on the European scene, while Nina's Melissa Fernández recalls the first time she was in an acting class with Rigola. It is a different approach, yet it places the original play under a different light that allows Chekhov's spirit to resonate anew. Josep Maria Miró premiered *L'habitació Blanca* (*The White Room*) at the miniscule Sala Flyhard. Meticulously directed by Lautaro Perotti, Miró told the story of an old teacher who revisits three of her students after thirty years. As is usual with Miró, he superbly crafts a text where nothing is what it seems, and a word might turn the characters' lives upside down—where reality is a fragile construct that we cannot trust, and, as usual, subtle time and space shifts, create a menacing atmosphere. Miró's plays invariably leave the audience with more questions than answers, and this work was no exception. Francesca Piñón, as the teacher, was a study in quietness that slowly wreaks havoc on her old students, played by Paula Blanco, Albert Prat and Marc Rodríguez. Miró's importance on the contemporary peninsular theatre scene can no longer be overestimated. Another playwright with the same last name, Pau Miró, adapted *Pedro Páramo*, the well-known Mexican novel by Juan Rulfo from 1955. This was a risky proposition that did not quite succeed for many reasons, but mainly because the two great Catalan actors, Vicky Peña and Pablo Derqui did not deliver. They were portraying iconic Mexican characters, but despite their efforts, it felt like they were playing them instead of inhabiting them. The cringe-inducing Mexican accents did not help.



Las criadas, by Jean Genet, directed by Luis Luque. Photo: Jesús Ugalde.

Finally, there was the much-anticipated *Liebestod* by Angélica Liddell, one of the most controversial figures on the Spanish theatre scene today. The play combines bullfighting with a special nod to Juan Belmonte, a famous matador immortalized by García Lorca and Ernest Hemingway. Unfortunately, Liddell says, his regret was not dying in the bullring, but, instead, committing suicide after being diagnosed with cancer. In an interview, she said that “(On stage) I swallow Belmonte, I infuse him in my blood and I dance with his ghost” ([Toni Polo Bettonica’s “Angélica Liddell baila con el fantasma de Belmonte” in *El país*](#)). She considers Belmonte, who consciously risked his life every time he stepped in front of the bull, a kindred spirit, since she herself comes close to death every time she steps on stage. Liddell creates both striking visual tableaux (a scene using Francis Bacon’s work is particularly inspired, as is her use of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*’s leitmotiv), but she also performs extremely disturbing scenes where, for example, she mutilates herself as if wanting to die in front of her audience. The play ended with a long, angry, and, Liddell being Liddell, highly controversial scene. She shouts that she hates the fags and women (her words) who make up most of her audience, that she hates actors and actresses (that is why she employs non-professional actors), that she thinks actresses are whores, and that she hates the me-too and the anti-system movements. There were other provocative declarations, all of which she has repeated during media interviews. Her views may be controversial, but her intensity and her complete abandonment to her creation is unquestionable.

In all, this 45th edition of the Grec Festival turned out to be a huge success for both the professionals on stage and behind the scenes, but also for the audiences that flocked nightly to experience theatre in all its forms—a seemingly small feat that we can no longer take for granted.

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Anton Pujol is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He graduated from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and he later earned a Ph.D. at the University of Kansas in Spanish Literature. He also holds an MBA from the University of Chicago, with a focus in economics and international finance. He has recently published articles in *Translation Review*, *Catalan Review*, *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea* and *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, among others. His translation of Don Mee Choi’s *DMZ Colony* (National Book Awards 2020 for Poetry) will be published by Raig Verd in 2022. Currently, he serves as dramaturg for the Mabou Mines company opera adaptation of Cunillé’s play *Barcelona, mapa d’ombres* directed and adapted by Mallory Catlett with a musical score by Mika Karlsson.



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Table of Contents:

1. [Berliner Theatertreffen Fights to Survive as Live Theatre Adapts to World Conditions](#) by Steve Earnest
2. [Cultural Passport for Piatra Neam? Theatre Festival 2021](#) by Oana Cristea Grigorescu
3. [We See the Bones Reflected: Luk Perceval's 3STRS in Warsaw, 2021](#) by Chris Rzonca
4. [Festival Grec 2021](#) by Maria Delgado and Anton Pujol
5. [Report from London \(November – December, 2019\)](#) by Dan Venning
6. [A National Theatre Reopens](#) by Marvin Carlson
7. [In Memoriam: Mieczysław Janowski, 1935 – 2021](#) by Dominika Laster
8. [In Memoriam: Jerzy Limon, 1950–2021](#) by Kathleen Cioffi
9. [In Memoriam: Marion Peter Holt](#)

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