

“Cultural and political pluralizations of Shakespeare on the Spanish Stage now”

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Today Shakespeare is more present in Spain than ever as a result of the critical interest and spectacular growth of his popularity among Spaniards who recognise him as the embodiment of cultural and literary values. Since the celebration of the Seventh World Shakespeare Congress in Valencia in April 2001 Shakespearean productions have proved more active and vigorous than ever. Their effects can be seen in different facets of Spanish culture and life.

Although Spanish scholarship has paid little attention to the study of Shakespeare productions beyond the research carried out by few scholars like Keith Gregor and Rafael Portillo, Shakespeare remains the most staged playwright, even more than the Spanish Golden Age dramatists. There has been an unprecedented increase in Shakespearean performances in contrast with the small number of plays by the Golden Age dramatists seen on the Spanish stage (Gregor 1). Summer festivals like Grec, Almagro, Mérida, Santa Susanna and Olite have given a special place to him. Shakespeare's plays have proven a popular and commercial success in most cases, up to the point where professional theatre companies regularly include the most popular Shakespearean plays in their repertoires. The productions reviewed are those that engage with current affairs as well as those that show new tendencies in theatrical production from which to challenge and understand the present. But, as Alan Sinfield reminds us, “Not any interpretation will pass as Shakespeare, of course. A major role of theatre criticism is to police the boundaries of the permissible...judging whether or not particular productions fall within the scope of Shakespeare as currently recognized” (Sinfield 200).

After his production of *Otelo* (2001), Emilio Hernández's *RomeoxJulieta* (2002) for the Centro Dramatico Andaluz reminded us of the risk of taking Shakespeare too far away from Shakespeare. This adaptation by Antonio Onetti –as its title suggests– increased that same radicality and postmodernity of Luhmann's *Romeo+ Juliet*. The production was designed to present a contemporary abbreviated and updated staging of the Shakespearean text. All the elements contributed to create a juvenile effect in the costumes and music of the chorus which was composed of three skilful young girls

singing and dancing rap. Like the bold twentieth-century musical version *West Side Story* it emphasised the generational gap and the bloody violence of youngsters who divided everything into two opposites. The quarrels and fights were a spectacle to be watched from the stands at the back of the stage.

The contemporary appeal of the performance was mainly achieved through the Andalusian setting and elements that were used in the production. The Andalusian resonance and contextualisation was both stronger and more evident in *Romeo x Julieta* than in *Otelo*. Flamenco singing and dancing became an essential part of the performance. The flamenco music was composed and sung by Tomatito, one of the best current flamenco singers. It drastically increased the tragic experience and frustration which originated in deep pain and sorrow, having much in common with Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. Love was drastically reduced to sex. Romantic love was turned into promiscuous sexuality. The charm and the innocence of the play were lost. It was as if only the joy of sex could remedy the pain of loss and death. Free sex for everyone seemed to be the case with a nude Julieta running from one side of the stage to the other, Lady Capuleto having a sexual affair with Paris, and Mercucho enjoying a homosexual relationship.

Paco Vidal's *Troilo y Cresida* (2003) was the first production of the play in Spain. Shakespeare's deeply tragic account of human nature, war, and the ravages of time and malice was turned into an enjoyable frolic of love and youth for youngsters. As advertised in the poster it was an "epic, cheeky, amusing, sexy, heroic, laughable and tragic" adaptation of Luis Cernuda's translation of Shakespeare's play. The staging could hardly have been more radical with its setting of a Nazi concentration camp and its presentation of a dramatic universe where man was reduced to mere instinct as a consequence of the destructive nature of war and its corrupting effects.

Sex was the only possible way out from that tragic situation. This obsession with sex was best dramatised in the burning passion of Daniel Guzmán's Achilles and Alicia Pascual's Helena. She was presented, dressed in stockings with a suspender belt and wrapped in a red gown, as a lascivious woman with an insatiable appetite for sex. Thus the play became a drama of sexual perversion. Here, as Michael Foucault suggests, "the particular power of sexuality lies in the extent to which it operates as a challenge to language, to order, to limits." (Foucault 49).

Calixto Bieito's *King Lear* and Denis Rafter's *Twelfth Night* were two of the most innovative and successful Shakespearean productions of the 2004 season. Again this

obsession with the idea of the theatre as a form of provoking and challenging the audience was present in Calixto Bieito's *King Lear* that was more a theatrical exploration of the character and universe of the king himself, played by José María Pou, than a dramatisation of the Shakespearean text (See Delgado).

Denis Rafter's *Twelfth Night* took place on a bare stage. A box and a log were the only props. The box was a magic one. Once it opened, music played, and the colours of the lighting turned blue and red to take us to the imaginary country of Illyria, a forest of idyll where impossible dreams and encounters might come true. We were transported to that fairyland from the beginning of the performance when a blue linen sheet appeared on the front stage symbolising the sea. There was also something of the Platonic idea of Lindsay Posner's RSC production of *Twelfth Night* (2001) in the sense that we are all split souls searching for a hermaphroditic unity.

The production, with a strong cast who played with vivid, piercing intimacy, highlighted the lyrical, joyful, and bittersweet poetry of the text. Gladys Balaguer's Viola spoke verse beautifully with a gentle accent and a subtle grasp of lyrical formality. Her speeches to Olivia had a wonderful natural intensity. As always, Malvolio's acting and characterisation are crucial to the staging of *Twelfth Night*. You have to make a choice: he is either a monster or a victim of his own fancy. Antonio Castro chose a third way: a victim acting as a monster. But Malvolio was not one of the highlights in Rafter's production. The extravagant make-up and the smiles with waving arms with which he attempted to woo Olivia provided the comedy with its darkest shadows.

The production might have been more reverential towards the original music of the play. "If music be the food of love, play on..." requires something of its period rather than songs by Louis Armstrong –however inspired. Denis Rafter's staging of *Twelfth Night* employed gimmicks, a frequent feature of American and British productions of Shakespeare; however their use requires judgement and moderation. Larks and monkeys appeared only to break the tension of the scene; at best they were pointlessly distracting.

Undoubtedly 2005 was *Richard III*'s year. Two productions (Manuel Guede's for the Centro Dramático Galego and Àlex Rigola's for the Teatre Lliure) and two adaptations (Chema Cardena's for Arden Producciones and Julio Fraga's for Avanti) were staged in 2005. Its popularity and appeal might be due to the fact that "All plays about war and power, the main subject of the histories, became instantly relevant in wartime." (Potter 450). The involvement of Spain in the war of Iraq, the threat of ETA, and the terrorist

attacks in Madrid became a burning issue in Spanish life. The confusion and the terror had their dramatic counterpart in Richard III.

The two major productions of the Shakespearean play adopted a comic, ironic stance. They were mainly concerned with the potential of the play as spectacle. Playing with the play was their major interest. They tried to entertain the audience as if they wanted to make them forget the tragic events that brought chaos and despair to the country. They used comic and melodramatic elements to alleviate the radical, tragic, side of life. The tragic tone of the original play was reduced to make it more spectacular and entertaining as Richard appeared as the player-king. Sensational, violent, and musical elements gradually became an essential feature of these productions. They appealed to emotion as an alternative to overmuch thought about a situation involving terrorism and war.

The new production of Centro Dramático Galego rested on two principal convictions: that the play abounded in comedy and that Richard was never more himself than when he was play-acting as a consummate actor. It was a wholly Galician production since the 15 actors were Galician, including Manuel Guede, the director, who had also translated the play into Galician. The opening of the play was seemingly intended to shock. Dressed in underpants and slippers Richard broke off his opening soliloquy. While an informal Richard was descending one of the two side staircases, the other characters were dancing to the music of mambo 11 as a reference to the people who would die. The popular song “Del Pita Pita Del”, used to advertise Coca-Cola, referred to the kind of drowsy society of the play which was responsible for the ills dramatised. Such a passive, uncritical, and divided society was the cause of the tragedy of Richard himself. The production underlined that Richard was not the only one to blame for violence and terror.

The theatrical experiment with Xosé Manuel Oliveira “Pico” simply did not work. To play Richard was a big role for him. He was definitely not the actor to play such an evil and complex character despite Manuel Guede’s intention of showing the bright side of Richard as a good and charming character. Much more interesting and innovative was the way Guede presented key scenes like the final fighting on the battlefield. This time the confrontation was dramatised as a television debate. The army leaders were more politicians than soldiers who voiced their complaints and tried to justify the war and explain their right to the English crown. The microphones could not stop the massacre of the war that was seen on different screens backstage.

Àlex Rigola's *Richard III*, his latest Shakespearean offering as director, presented a new challenge to the staging of such a complex and intriguing play. It contained clear analogies with his earlier work: the corrosive political criticism, the appropriation and use of elements of popular culture, the use of microphones, and the profusion of images and music. Salvador Oliva's translation made with textual care was not the most suitable one for Rigola's lewd aesthetics, for the text to him was not as important as the idea of the play as spectacle.

Rigola's production was intended to make spectators think about today's violence and war. He asserted in the programme notes that the play was set in an inverted world like our own where violence affects us in different ways. Rigola asked searing questions about how we were educating our families and why politicians lied their way to waging wars. Rigola's interest is made explicit from the beginning of the play, which opens with a Kant quotation: "Man is what education makes of him", projected on the screen.

It also provided a new departure, featuring a new location very different from the one used in his *Julius Caesar* (2002) with a more sophisticated and meaningful setting. The dramatic action was situated in a pub of the 1970s with a long red bar at the back of the stage. The lurid colours created an erotic and morbid atmosphere suitable for a mafia underworld where ambition for power and prestige justified all means and abuses. And Richard was the new Corleone who learnt that power was seductive and used his strengthening position to destroy those who were an obstacle to his dreams of political grandeur. The setting was reminiscent of Scorsese's *Casino* (1995) and Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) to which Rigola was greatly indebted. This was the mafia kingdom of Pere Aquellé's Richard where drugs and alcohol were provided to offer full satisfaction.

Visual effects and images were used profusely throughout the performance (Delgado, *Plays International* 32). It was a complete visual spectacle. Rigola employed the visual resources with technical brilliance. Video recordings captured the actors on film and projected their images in real time on a large screen. A roving camera followed characters through the hidden corridors to show what was going on behind closed doors. Pop music also contributed to a visual and aural spectacle which transformed Shakespeare's play into a kind of Broadway musical. The tragedy of *Richard III* became light tragicomedy.

None of Shakespeare's plays of the 2006 season were anything like Lluís Pasqual's innovative productions of *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, though the enterprise of putting the

simultaneous staging of the two plays on with a single repertory company of twenty actors assembled for the project might have been too ambitious. Pasqual initially had the idea of presenting the new project at the Forum in Barcelona, but finally declined to do so considering that it did not match up to requirements. The idea was finally taken up when Pasqual accepted the artistic direction of the Arriaga Theatre that hosted the premiere of *Hamlet* on February 25 while the debut of *The Tempest* was on March 4.

The plays were put on separately, but with similar aesthetics, though the director himself recommended seeing *Hamlet* first and *The Tempest* after the break. In fact, the opening of *The Tempest* was part of the final scene in *Hamlet* that was performed on a bare stage with a staircase coming down into the stalls, while the staging of *The Tempest* evoked a lot of pallets on an island. Pasqual was concerned with violence and terrorism, making it clear that if we could not change the world, theatre could make us a little bit better.

Francesc Orell played Prospero, Eduard Fernández was Hamlet, and Marisa Paredes played Gertrude after twelve years without stepping onto a stage. Music became an important part of the performance as it reinforced the sense of mystery and magic in the two plays. Both productions were put on in Madrid and Barcelona as they were also co-produced by Teatro de Madrid, and by Teatre Lliure and the Grec Festival in Barcelona.

2007 was a boom year for Shakespearean performances in Spain. Eduardo Alonso's *Romeo and Juliet* for Teatro do Noroeste, Tamzin Townsend's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Magüi Mira and Ferran Madico's *The Winter's Tale* were some of the memorable productions of the season. However, Helena Pimenta's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the latest production of Ur-Teatro, was the most impressive theatrical achievement not only for the ways in which it used the play as a source for a series of arresting images of our troubled times, but for the singular clarity and force with which it rendered the psychological states of the play's chief characters. It was presented at the Palacio de Festivales of Cantabria in Santander on 21 December to celebrate its twenty years as a theatre group.

It was in 1987 when UR-Teatro presented its first Shakespearean production entitled *Xéspir* which consisted of extracts from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Coriolanus* and *Richard III*. This Basque group had always been very much concerned with the search for a particular dramatic language looking for new, meaningful, ways of delivering dramatic texts to a contemporary audience through a total theatre that included music and

dancing as its productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992), *Romeo and Juliet* (1995), *Love's Labours Lost* (1998), and *The Tempest* (2004) showed.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona has been neither frequently staged in Spain nor much appreciated by Spanish scholars. Helena Pimenta's production dramatized the love story of Proteus and Valentine with a touch of bitterness. They were best friends. But love for the same woman came between them. The staging highlighted disloyalty and treason, and, in particular, the blunt rivalry of the two protagonists that was staged in a boxing ring.

The Milan court was brought to the 1920s with bizarre décor which showed a corrupt society where favours were given at random. Pimenta was concerned with the contempt of court and the charm of small cities. Verona and the true love of Julia contrasted with the corruption and depravity of the court and with the sophistication of Sylvia respectively. On the whole, it was a highly polished and consistently entertaining production, but there were times when an excess of effects was added to the play, sometimes in defiance of the text.

The King Lear of the Centro Dramático Nacional was probably the highlight of the 2008 season. Gerardo Vera's *King Lear* dramatized the end of a sort of middle class cracked by modernity in the 1940s. It was performed on a neutral, bare space, so that on stage there was only one arm-chair and a chair. Vera opted for the absolute vacuum as for him the production was mainly a work of interpretation. Mayorga's translation and adaptation retained the essence of the original play but with a contemporary look. Shakespeare's tragedy was concerned with base passions and forms of true love. It was a human microcosm where the innocent and the horrible were mixed up. The play was not only an encyclopedia of the human but also an encyclopedia of the theatre as it contained all genres and all styles. In today's world, where honesty and loyalty are quixotism, Lear, played magnificently by Alfredo Alcón at 78, was still wandering with his perennial philosophy and diagnosis of today's ills. It was a sign of our times, anticipating Tomaz Pandur's *Hamlet*, with Blanca Portillo as Hamlet, Carlos Aladro's *Measure for Measure*, and Andrés Lima's *Tito Andronico* three of the major productions to be seen in the 2009 season.

The challenge for the future

The appropriation and acculturation of Shakespeare in Spain do not end here. It is an ongoing process open to the future. As the new technologies will both embody and reshape changing social relations, the emerging digital culture will not leave Shakespeare untouched. But even then Spanish criticism will have a word to say. The review has not only led to further questions and discussions that have opened up a debate on the afterlife of Shakespeare in Spain, but has also suggested some lines for further research which is in a permanent state of evolution. First should be the study of Shakespeare in Spain today to show how he is (mis)appropriated in contemporary popular culture, which has become an increasingly powerful source of knowledge about Shakespeare, and to see how contemporary Spanish artists like Carmela García and Susy Gómez, or movie directors like Inés París have found inspiration in Shakespeare. Rewriting Shakespeare is another productive field that needs closer examination for contemporary writers like Javier Marías and José Carlos Somoza; poets like Alfredo Gómez Gil; and dramatists like Francisco Nieva who reproduce Shakespeare today in many different ways in the light of present anxieties and expectations. Another urgent task is to look into theatre productions of Shakespeare's plays because criticism in this field is practically non-existent. It is most needed in order to complete the picture of Shakespearean studies in Spain. Thus Spanish scholarship can make a stronger, more sustained and relevant international contribution to Shakespearean studies in years to come.