

Catalan Women Playwrights: A Round Table¹

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Having been the protagonists of countless plays written and directed by men dating back to the Classical Greek tragedies women were nonetheless denied access to roles of responsibility in the world of theatre, such as direction and production, over the centuries. In the case of Catalonia, these limitations were magnified by the pervasive repression and censorship imposed until 1975 by the dictator Francisco Franco, who not only singled out theatre as the most potentially disruptive of cultural activities, but also imposed a ban on the public use of the Catalan language. Like women elsewhere and despite finding themselves in an environment which they had not created, Catalan actresses were able to assimilate the principles of theatrical creation and their commitment to them was indisputable but, as Joaquina Alemany i Roca and Maria José Ragué Arias point out, it wasn't until the 1990s when 'as a result of changes in [Spanish] society and, therefore, in theatre' (Ragué Arias 1994: 11), that Catalan women playwrights were finally ready to demonstrate their talent in all those areas of expertise that had been traditionally out of bounds for them (Ragué Arias 1996: 261-262).²

It was from this point in time onwards that Catalan women playwrights strove to develop their own genre and, following the French feminist model, claimed back both their body and their writing, transforming the language created by men into a much more malleable form of communication suited to feminist discourse. They strove for a truly non-patriarchal idiom, intrinsically different to that

¹ The participants were Àngels Aymar, author of *Magnolia Café*, Araceli Bruch, author of *Re-Call*, John London, translator of *An Absent Look*, Laura Melcion, translator of *Re-Call* and organiser of the event, Ariella Eshed, director of *An Absent Look*, Pilar Orti, director of *Magnolia Café*, Olusola Oyeleye, director of *Re-Call* and Montserrat Roser i Puig as chair.

² Here and elsewhere our English version will render original quotations in Catalan and Spanish.

one used by men, which they perceived as having offered audiences a deformed representation of women and their world which revolved around the male-imposed social divide between a dominant and a subordinate culture.³

In this process, Catalan women playwrights demonstrated a marked interest in formal, structural, linguistic and aesthetic issues and, at an intellectual level, pursued an ambitious socio-philosophical line of enquiry which worked towards the recovery of concepts which were dear to them but which had traditionally been dismissed, forgotten or ignored. In spite of the scarcity of resources at their disposal and the reticence towards them still current in the male-dominated theatre world, they volunteered their own vision of social issues in plays which placed intellectual feminine discourse into the mainstream.

The outcomes of such a sustained effort have become evident in Catalonia with the staging in recent years of a number of plays written by these women. However, international audiences had not had the chance to enjoy them yet, hence initiative by Laura Melcion in 2005 to bring a sample of them to the UK. The project involved the selection and dramatized reading in English of scenes from three plays which were deemed to be representative of the advances made by women in Catalan theatre in the last decade of the XXth century: *An Absent Look* (1997) by Mercè Sarrias, *Re-Call* (1997) by Araceli Bruch and *Magnolia Café* (2000) by Àngels Aymar.

The round table transcribed below took place in Cambridge on Saturday 19th November 2005, following their first dramatized reading and we offer it here as a testimony to the empowerment of women in the theatrical arena of Catalonia.⁴

³ Cixous, Hélène, "The Laugh of Medusa" in Marks, E & Courtivron, I, Eds., *New French Feminisms: an Anthology*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, 1981.

⁴ This reading took place on 19th November 2005 during the Anglo-Catalan Society's 51st Annual Conference celebrated in Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge, and was followed by another performance at the White Bear Pub Theatre, Lamberth, London, on 20th November. The English translation of the three plays, with an introduction by Montserrat Roser i Puig is presently in press as a single volume. See Montserrat Roser i Puig (Ed.), *A Female Scene: Three Plays by Catalan Women*, Five Leaves Publications, 2007. <http://www.fiveleaves.co.uk/latest.html#fscene>

MRP: How did you feel about the productions today and about your work with the authors, translators and directors? Has there been a lot of interaction?

AB: Being in this ancient city I have felt very emotional because it is the first time that one of my works has been translated into English and I have enjoyed the production very much. I want to thank the Anglo-Catalan Society for having included a small sample of Catalan female playwriting in this year's Conference and, especially, I would like to thank Laura Melcion (leaving aside for a moment her magnificent work as a translator) for organizing this event that has brought together such a group of directors, actors and actresses.

MRP: What type of spectators do these plays aim at? Is this theatre produced by women or produced for women?

LM: I think that it is theatre produced by women for everybody. I don't think that it is for a specific feminine audience, female audience.

OO: Maybe we could talk of a theatre by women for women if, as in *Re-Call*, it is about a character of a woman who has achieved a lot. It is almost like a re-discovery of the woman and all her connections: Nietzsche, Freud... Before I was introduced to the play I hadn't heard of Lou Andreas Salome. I think that shows the power of theatre: it can introduce us to celebrate the life of women who have had major achievements and of whom we might not have had any knowledge. That is definitely a feminist introduction. Watching it I found myself feeling that it is very rare to see such a strong feminine energy on stage and I found the strength of the characters in the different ages extraordinary. I haven't seen two male energies as strong as those in the performance of *An Absent Look* for a while either. That was quite unusual.

MRP: You were talking about *Re-Call*, but how did you feel that female issues were being presented in the other plays?

AE: I think that in *An Absent Look* what we thought was that it was very universal. It wasn't specifically female and, actually, that was nice. There was something in the writing of the male characters that was very strong and very specific. It doesn't feel like the woman is written better than the male characters.

MRP: Yes, she came across as very stereotyped, as not as psychologically complete. It came though in the performance, I think, but the scripted character was almost sketchy.

AE: It feels like there are strong insights. The male empathy was indeed quite nice. *An Absent Look*, specifically, I think is more universal than feminist.

MRP: What do you feel about *Magnolia Café*?

PO: I think that in the extract that we picked female issues come up quite strongly, with the woman who has the Tunisian lover and doesn't quite know what to do with him, although that can be linked to racism as well. But she talks about how long it has taken her to get somewhere in life and how she fears that her credibility is going to be destroyed because she's going out with a Tunisian. There is also the waitress, who is so worried about her boss that she is almost torn between her job and the musician, between her love interest and her work.

AE: And the photographer is as well: an old woman who has lived a lot. I don't know if that has the specifics of a feminist issue but for me Martina's character (the woman who flirts with the journalist and then starts her friend talking about the Tunisian lover) is very relevant to contemporary women.

MRP: Compared to women in "Culebrones" (TV soaps) who are so stereotyped that they become totally transparent, do you think that in

theatre there is the opportunity of giving back to the feminine characters their richness and complexity?

OO: Definitely.

LM: We did a lot of research on the characters in *An Absent Look* and we found lots of different levels of things that, obviously, you would not find on television. There is, definitely, much more interaction between the characters and they are more developed than anything you see on TV.

AB: It all depends on how many more women writers there are in the future. Mercè Sarrias, for instance, also writes for TV. It doesn't matter if the audience is male or female but, if it's written by a woman, the vision is different. The outlook on the world is different. And in this case I agree that it could be very beneficial to do it in the theatre. What happens is that people see a lot more TV than theatre, at least in Catalonia. The TV female character model is very influential and there should be more women script-writers because breaking the stereotypes of today is very difficult.

AA: I think that there is a difference between theatre and TV. If you write for a TV producer you are under pressure. They ask you for specific things because they are looking for specific properties in women. When you write theatre you are freer, maybe because there is not a publisher who pays you. Thank god! And you can say exactly what you want.

MRP: Would you describe the work that you have been doing as being guided by a feminist aesthetics or a feminist background?

AA: For me feminine is different from feminist. Being a feminist involves a political stance. It involves a search for ideas and shows one's intentions. When a woman writes, she just writes the way that she sees the world. In my case people know that's a woman writing but becoming too politicized limits me even more, and I already feel

too limited by so many things! So, I don't need to add this one. I write like a person who writes and, besides, I am a woman. So, obviously, there are going to be things that will show the gaze of a woman in my writing, but it is not my intention to be feminist.

MRP: From the point of view of the directors, are feminist/feminine issues important or do they just happen?

PO: I think that for *Magnolia Café* they are an issue. It was at the back of my mind, because there are so many female characters and one needs to give a fair chance to all of them. They all need a story, their own individual story, so for me it wasn't a feminist question after all to say, right, let's get this out! But *Magnolia Café* is all about individual stories and about bringing the characters and that café to life, so it's probably not feminist theatre.

OO: There was something unifying in these three pieces. They are more feminine than feminist in their approach. But I think that there may be something unique in the aesthetic of the three pieces. There is something about the detail. Maybe it was the aesthetic of the whole evening what made it more feminine.

AB: I think that it was as much an ethical as an aesthetic question. Behind a work of art there is an artist and the artist may be feminine and may or may not have feminist intentions. This is seen in the result. It is not the product of aesthetics but, since feminine voices have not been heard for such a long time, maybe the status quo will change as the number of plays written and directed by women increases.

MRP: Is working in theatre more difficult for women than it is for men?

AB: Yes.

JL: I think that it is.

MRP: Is it the same in Britain and in Catalonia?

OO: I think that in Britain quite a lot of the writers and directors of the regional theatre companies are women. The challenge has to do with culture, with class (which is the big thing in the UK) and so many other things! The issue which becomes more prominent is in their access to the national theatres, to the bigger venues. It's all right for women to do things in the smaller regional theatres, but the bigger stages... I find that a bigger challenge.

AB: With regard to Catalonia, and I had the opportunity to talk about this publicly not so long ago, there is a very clear example, that is, the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2004, Elfriede Jelinek. She remains unpublished in Catalan and there have been no productions of her work. It is strange, to say the least, that a female Nobel winner does not have the same opportunities as a male one to see herself represented but, that being the case, what can we expect of the run-of-the-mill women playwrights?

AA: The National Theatre of Catalonia in Barcelona offers 5 annual scholarships for playwrights to be resident there. Every year there is one woman amongst them and I suspect that the woman is there because of parity and I wonder if they would choose a woman otherwise.⁵

MRP: Does normality really exist?

AA: I don't think so. I don't think that there is normality. What happens is, at least basing it on my own experience that women directors (and I would even say those actresses who, like myself, want to produce certain things such as the project which is presently being organised by the University) end up working in small women's

⁵ Two weeks after the celebration of this round table, both Àngels Aymar and Mercè Sarrias were invited to become a resident playwright at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya for the following three years. In the 2005 round three men and three women were selected.

organisations in order to promote their own works. It is a Catch 22 situation, because we get stuck in small circles and therefore the situation is not one of normality at all. We are not in the normal and natural circuits of our trade, at least not at home.

AB: And if it were normal, we wouldn't be talking about it now.

OO: Even here, would this event have been the same if we had been men?

MRP: The Anglo-Catalan society is interested in Catalan culture and it wouldn't have made any difference had it been men coming to present and perform their plays.

OO: But then, do you mean that you would need to have a group for women and a group for men? Normality would be that at an Anglo-Catalan society you do mixed plays.

MRP: I was thinking in terms of the projection of Catalan plays abroad. Do you think that taking Catalan plays into an international sphere is an interesting exercise? Did you feel that the plays were Catalan?

OO: I really enjoyed working on my play. We picked, admittedly, the beginning and the end of the play because of the nature of the theatricality of the piece. I work a lot in opera and built a lot on the music in that play: music in the language, music in the rhythm... It is interesting to work on a piece where all the characters are the same person and trying to make sure that that connection is there. The link then was with the translator, then the dialogue with the author and then the constant linking around, pruning, changing slightly... Not because of the play itself but because you have to create the environment for the performance. Because theatre is a marriage. It can take an average of about two years to get a play from the time that it is written to the time when it is performed. You have to actually love that piece of work, both the writer and the producer. You've got to

love it because it's two years of your life. Culture and all of those things are not specific. I learnt a lot from working on this play because it introduced me to an extraordinary lady that I didn't know very much about and I then went on a journey of research. That is the wonderful thing about theatre.

MRP: Do the other people think about bringing these Catalan pieces to Britain? What was the challenge? What about the translator? Were there specific issues that posed a challenge to you when you were translating these pieces?

JL: Definitely. I was under the female gaze, surrounded by women and felt that my feminine sensibility (if I have any) should have emerged in the translation. But it has to be said that *An Absent Look* has one woman and two men and it is very nice because the men are not really very pushy; they are quite timid in their relationship with this woman whom they both fancy, and this is already very comforting for me as a bloke (with aspirations to a feminine sensibility) and as a translator. There is a tendency to go on about the troubles of women in Catalan theatre, but there is one woman whom we haven't mentioned up until now and who does get regular productions in Barcelona when she just clicks her fingers and that is Lluïsa Cunillé. In fact, Lluïsa Cunillé is also the dramatist who has been granted the biggest production of a Catalan play (*La cita*) in English: a huge production in a huge theatre, which was seen in Barcelona first and then in Edinburgh in 1999 (whether you do or don't like it, is another point). She is there and I don't know if you see her as a potential role model... She wasn't an actress, really. She's a very publicity-shy woman still. And what she creates is acceptable for audiences outside Spain and outside Catalonia because she writes in a very general way which is, up until the last couple of plays, very non-specific. The sort of problems that I had when I was translating *An Absent Look* were to do with specificity. Think about 'translating' the mention of Spanish authors. Pío Baroja is mentioned, but is he too unfamiliar to a UK audience? In *An Absent Look* there is a scene where there is a bookshop and all these books are mentioned and you think, do any of

you know who Unamuno is? Should they know who Unamuno is? Should you translate it at all? Should you set it in Notting Hill? And therefore, should you really make it something done by a female translator? And does that change the character's sex? Which perhaps would be more acceptable to a British audience...

MRP: That would be a very great risk to take...

JL: Well it depends. It isn't easy, it has to be said, for women in Catalonia, dramatists especially, because they have had a double fight, the fight initially (up to and even after 1982) for the language (which male writers had as well), and the fight of women. It is amazing when you go back and you read what somebody like the honourable Joaquim Molas was writing in the 1960s about a novel such as *La plaça del Diamant* by Mercè Rodoreda. One feels he almost did not want to acknowledge it as a valid novel for those times in Catalonia because it didn't come to grips with Catalan reality in a direct way. One could argue that he wasn't understanding the female sensibility in the novel and wanted to reduce it to what he calls 'dramatic and profound realism.' It is difficult because, if you look at Caryl Churchill, at probably our most famous female playwright, her initial famous plays were sophisticated feminist plays and recently she has felt that she doesn't have to write like that. Is there anybody that can be compared to Caryl Churchill in Catalonia yet? Or to Sarah Kane? She is known in Catalonia, isn't she?

AB: In any case, a few things have been done by women but not enough. As I discussed with Laura Melcion recently, Sarah Kane is known in Catalonia but I think that the number of productions of this type that are put on are always very few. This also applies to the case of Elfriede Jelinek I mentioned earlier on. In her case it is because she is a lady who annoys the cultural establishment, as must have been the case of the British playwright you were mentioning. So, independently from a question of sex, there is a question of annoyance to the system. Some authors are, simply, more annoying than others.

AE: What was really nice for me in *An Absent Look* was that it was very refreshing in its style. There is something about absurd writing which is just different from rich theatre. There is something in the colour and the writing style, which is really special and even the translation, in a way, adds to it. It is something that feels a bit alien: from a different place, with a different colour and a different texture. That gives it a sense of ambiguity and intrigue.

JL: So that means that the translation was bad.

AE: No, no! Not at all!

AB: A translation, in theory, is always enriching for both the author and the translator. That is to say, one can re-read the work in every new translation, in spite of the well-known refrain of *traduttore traditore*. It creates a cartography of desire, because there comes a point when the translator should not be called a translator any longer. I'd rather say that Laura has done a version of *Re-Clams* and that *Re-Call* is a version of *Re-Clams*. A translation is always a version and every version is an added value; an enrichment not only for the artist but also for the two cultures involved.

JL: How would you have preferred it, how it has been done by a woman or how it would have been done by a male translator?

AB: From what you mentioned earlier, I think that I would also like to be translated by a man. In that case, it would add to all the enrichment that I was talking about earlier. It is not a matter of being in two separate ghettos. It is about us managing to acquire the same voice and not having our tongue chopped off and being mutilated.

AA: All my plays have been translated by men and I don't feel the difference.

JL: Don't you?

AA: No.

OO: You mentioned Sarah Kane, the late Sarah Kane, when you were talking about Caryl Churchill, and I was thinking that there are two schools of thought in terms of her style of writing. What was refreshing about doing these plays is that they are all different and they were about different themes. We are sometimes in danger when writing what we call feminist theatre of picking subjects that we think will be put on. In other words, theatre has to be about something you feel passionate about, but it has the same kinds of restraints as writing for television, actually, because someone has to commission your work. The interesting thing about Sarah Kane, as a member of the younger generation, was that her work had to be compared to a male writer, Edward Bond. So, in a way, the same confines are there. What is important is not to define necessarily a work as feminine or feminist, because it actually takes such a long time to write a work about the things that you are interested in. That was what interested me in *Re-Call*. It brought up a woman's hidden connections and her hidden history. From my perspective of being born in the UK of African descent, there are lots of hidden histories, and it was a wonderful thing to open up this other hidden history and to be able to say: "OK, I have now another little bit of knowledge and I can carry on into something else."

PO: For me as well, in the extract we did of that *Magnolia Café*, the only reference to something that happened in Catalonia was the Anarchist theme (which the photographer brought up with her story of her father dying), but everything else could be anywhere. For me, as a Spanish person working in England, it is very important to celebrate the differences, but also to recognise the similarities, and say: "OK. The people are over there, but the universal themes are still there as well." It is not always that the theatre written in a foreign country feels really foreign or alien. You can go to it and you don't see a piece of history or a sociological study. It is actually a piece of theatre. That is also quite important to me as a practitioner. That's why I liked

Magnolia café: everybody can go to it; it is written by a Catalan woman but it is not foreign. One can buy into it immediately.

OO: I felt that it was very important to hear the Catalan language in *Re-Call*. The play itself is very poetic (except for the middle section which is very different), but I wanted to hear that language through the poetry to connect the three women, the three parts of the same woman, together. So, when the floor opens up, it will become interesting to hear how that was received.

MRP: How did you pick the excerpts that you decided to stage and how did you put them into action?

PO: I would like to apologize to Àngels Aymar profusely for cutting three characters in the scene from *Magnolia Café* that we performed. It was done for practical reasons and not without a lot of thought. There were three older characters: A wife and husband who were going through a huge crisis (they were probably about to split up for good) and a man on his own. The reason why I picked that bit (and not everyone agreed) was because it really brought the Café to life (the atmosphere of the place) and showed what all these people were going through. That piece was really nice because it was always jumping from one table to another and with that you could see what was happening with the musician, the waitress, the woman, etc.

OO: It was quite hard to choose from *Re-Call* to ensure fairness. The reason for choosing this section was the feeling that it was a self-contained section within the play. Within this bit you have a journey, even if it is a small journey. So, it was treating the play-reading as a play of its own with a beginning, middle and end. And in terms of the structure, it was also a nice snapshot moving between monologues and the ending with the three Lous having different pieces of monologue, so we could experience three different waves of theatricality. In *Re-Call* what we really focused on was looking at the characters and the characterisation also physically, and trying to understand the situation, trying to find that analogy for the situation in real life, so we could

find the reality of it and not go against the poetry, the symbolism of the setting.

AA: For me, when I write, I try to synthesize the idea I want to develop as much as I can. That means that, depending on the amount of time and the obvious needs of the plot, when I write I need to sacrifice something. So then, when they say to me that they are going to do 20 minutes of *Magnolia Café* I feel that they have cut part of me!

JL: Good job it wasn't men doing it, isn't it?

AA: I think that it is a good exercise for the director to choose a part of the play, but in my play the structure was very important to help understand the whole. At a certain moment (which we didn't see today) all the characters you have been following take off their clothes and become actors doing a play, and that is very important. I would like to think that it has awakened the audience's interest to read the whole play.

LM: As we were organising the event and fitting things together, we found it really difficult to select a section of each play. My main objective was to provide a hook so people would then go and read the whole thing.

MRP: Are there any questions from the floor?

Member of the Audience: If one wants to appeal to a wider audience than those who can understand Catalan, aren't there better ways of getting the Catalan message across than speaking it on stage?

OO: I think that it is a fair question, but I stand by my decision. It is the music of the language both in the English translation (which Laura did and I think that she did a good job), and in the language in which the play was originally written. We see many plays from all over the world in the UK. For instance, we see plays from Japan with surtitles.

Theatre has to be a challenge on many levels. A delight is not quite the word I am looking for, but it is like eating a meal where you taste all the flavours and suddenly a different flavour comes and sparks a different taste bud. And I think that our ears and our sensibilities just need to be open to all those different things. So, when I had the opportunity to do these 20 minutes, I wanted to hear how that language worked on stage and I was happy with that. This is what the readings were for. A play is not just what is on paper. We always say: a play is not just the text. It is the subtext. It is what is under there whether there are any stage directions or not. A play is that puzzle. It doesn't come alive unless all the people come together in the theatre. There is a magic that is not there at the rehearsal phase. You put a different sort of people together and you'll get a different reaction.

AB: I agree. When the work gets out of the hands of the author it becomes the director's, so to speak. And when it gets out of the director's hands, it becomes the actress'. And it is precisely this process that ends up constructing it. When it comes out of the actress, it becomes the public's and it ends up in the thinking and reaction that the audience takes home.

OO: It is a connection between audience and actors, the directors, the designer, the lighting designer... We didn't have any lights, so what were the thoughts today? OK. Fine. We'll have a little bit of these flashing lights to see if it adds to the effect of this other world. You are the audience. You make that decision about whether it works or whether it doesn't. All we are doing is exploring things on stage. We are doing it on another stage tomorrow, so we learn from today, and we try something else.

AA: I liked very much that you introduced Catalan for two reasons: One because we are in the Anglo-Catalan Society and the other because I approve of your decision to recover the original language as if it were music. I like this contrast between the two languages and find it very enjoyable.

PO: In this particular piece, given that we decided that the poetry was to be spoken by the actresses in English at the same time as in Catalan, you have everything: the musicality of the language plus the sense of the words. As long as both elements are there, there is no reason why a British audience should not find it acceptable.

OO: I've done similar things in a lot of plays. For instance, how many people speak the Creole languages from the Caribbean? They are spoken in the Caribbean and I have done plays where I have mixed those different languages. I am into reclaiming languages. I find it so important. We have languages here, too: Welsh, Gaelic... How many people can speak those? I love hearing them, their poetry. Our ears need to be open, because it is our culture.

AB: Another thing that doesn't happen in Catalonia, which I liked in the extract from *Magnolia Café* is seeing actors of different races doing the different roles in the play... That is one thing that is not seen in Barcelona. It is another new thing for us. We will have that in twenty years' time, probably.

Member of the Audience: I quite enjoyed the philosophical aspects of *Re-Call*. Is there a feminine or feminist critique of male-dominated religion in it? Did you want to replace it with feminine existentialism or atheism or, on the other hand, was it trying to replace male religion with a more feminine one?

AB: No. The ritual performed by Lou the girl and the 20 year-old Lou was just the ritual of her own religion. As a historic character Lou Andreas Salomé was a pantheistic woman and the play tries, by remembering her life, to show what she always said: that she was only faithful to herself. Her call was for freedom above anything else. It is the substitution of the religion imposed upon her by her Russian family and culture, etc. by her own personal religiosity and spirituality. Ritual is something that I particularly like and I brought it into the play through the scene of the dresses. In a way the two Lous, the girl and the young woman, are doing a word ritual, a poetry ritual

in fact, and of disguise. The dresses become symbols. It is not masculine and feminine religiosity. If that is what you have read into it: Fantastic! I find it interesting and will give it some thought, but it did not have that intention.

Member of the Audience (Lourdes Orozco): John was talking about the problems that women authors have in Catalonia at the moment, which have to do with the language as well. But, apart from being a problem for women, it is also a problem for contemporary authors in general. While Professor Ragué in one of her studies, creates a list of over 60, in practice there are only 4 or 5 authors who have the opportunity to have their works regularly performed and there are many others for whom that is not a possibility.

AB: It is all related to political issues. This happens in Catalonia because in the last 25 years, generationally, many things have been lost. For instance, today I brought as a present to the Anglo-Catalan Society two plays by a woman (who not here but could be), who has taught actors and actresses and who is a very good playwright: Rosa Victòria Gras. She has been given prizes and been entered into the historical studies such as the one by Professor Ragué, which you just mentioned (Professor Reagué is a good friend of ours) and in many others, such as *Dona i teatre: ara i aquí*, published by the Institut Català de la Dona. However, she has never been performed. Never. This is an outrage. There is a mixture of reasons. It is not just the man-woman problem or just a generational one. But, do you know what happens? There was a very interesting article in the paper *Avui* the other day about Buenos Aires where they have 240 theatres and there are 90 Argentinean playwrights running at any one time. And it is not that it is a very prosperous country! But this does not happen for us at home.

AA: And besides, when you write in Catalan, you already have a limitation that you wouldn't have if you had the assurance that you were going to be performed in Catalan. In fact, because they do not stage you and because there are such few opportunities for you to be

staged, you must translate the play immediately to take it outside Catalonia, or you have already reached the end of the road.

AB: I shall add, given that John mentioned Mercè Rodoreda before (whom I had the honour and pleasure of knowing personally) that when she arrived back from exile to Barcelona in 1979, she was shaken. In fact, in a theatre company not unlike the one run by Laura called 'Bruixes de Dol' (Witches In Mourning), we put on a performance based on some of her short stories before *La plaça del Diamant* was staged and before she was given the Premi d'honor de les lletres catalanes (the Prize of Honour for Catalan Letters). She was amazed at the great number of young people at that time who were writing in Catalan because she saw the huge difficulties. Rodoreda did not get any attention until three years before she died, and I am talking, as John said and as everyone in the auditorium knows, about the novelist par excellence of the twentieth century in Catalonia. And she is not an exception. So, this is not something that applies only to playwrights, but to others such as the great and greatly missed poet Maria Mercè Marçal, who had been given prizes earlier on and made a great fuss over and been compared to Ausiàs March himself!, but who was only taken up on the rollercoaster of fame when she died in 1998.

AA: This is a condition that we suffer in our lands, isn't it? People go on unnoticed for a long time and are only acknowledged when they have been acclaimed abroad, or when people from outside talk about them, or when they die. While you exist it seems that the cake is being shared amongst a few: The star system concept is adopted in all fields, and all is being shared out amongst the same people. When things are done outside Catalonia, it is always the same authors that are taken around. That is good because a sense of continuity is developed for a number of authors but, alongside them, there should be the others, sponsored by them as it were, so that the road could get progressively wider.

AB: Because of political conditioning (and this will be remembered by those members of the audience who had to live at that time), there

was a time when the theatre was about guerrilla, protest, montages... It was, against Franco. In the UK it is different because you have a different tradition, but in Catalonia, doing a montage on Rodoreda and working on text-based theatre was not modern enough. Performing and writing text-based theatre was out of fashion. At that time one had to go much further. I remember the first times I saw Àngels working as an actress (because I don't know if the audience knows that we are also actresses and directors), she was doing a very nice comedy entitled *La primera de la classe* (*Top of the class*) by the Valencian playwright Rodolf Sirera. At that time we used to go to see text-based plays because they were so rare. This also shows how a whole tradition was interrupted as was the possibility for some male and female playwrights to develop. Several generations were lost, people belonging to older generations re-emerged or started writing late and whole generations, such as that of Rosa Victòria Gras, were never performed at all. This lady needs to be performed before she dies and let me take up the opportunity to ask for it here.

MRP: Today's event has given voice in English translation to three Catalan women playwrights. The directors, actors and actresses have succeeded in making the plays come alive and in giving us a taste of what contemporary Catalan theatre has to offer. I want to thank everyone for all the effort that has gone into it, congratulate everyone for three beautiful performances, and voice the hope that further things like this are done again in the future.

**Cambridge,
19th December 2005.**

Bibliografia

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