

Reenactment and Carnival: Els Joglars Take Franco to Vic

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This paper focuses on Els Joglars' *Franco en Vic*, a promotional event that was held on 17 September 2003 as part of the publicity campaign (including press conferences, talks and interviews) preceding their first full-length feature film, *Buen Viaje Excelencia*, on 10 October 2003, and organised to coincide with the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Osona-based newspaper *El9Nou*. I shall argue that it was not only a publicity stunt, but also a performance event combining elements of carnival, street theatre, community theatre and historical re-enactment in an attempt to achieve an educational and social aim. *Franco en Vic* was arguably more successful than the film itself, and what Boadella said of the film could perhaps be better applied to the event: 'Ens dirigim al públic que no tenim al teatre: tota la ciutadania. Els especialistes ja els tenim al teatre, ara volíem una visió per a tot el públic' (Casado 2003a: 40). The town of Vic was chosen for staging this event because of its long and close association with the group, who are considered as part of the community.¹

The film *Buen Viaje Excelencia*, a satire based on the final two years of Franco's life between 1973 and 1975, showed him in a decrepit physical state, isolated in the palace of El Pardo and surrounded by the individuals closest to him, many of whom were intent on milking the last drops of privileges associated with power. The film was not a success in box-office terms as it was not widely shown and received a lukewarm response from the critics, although some voiced their approval at the attempt to resolve what Els Joglars' director Albert Boadella termed 'una assignatura pendent' (Casado 2003b: 26). During interviews with the press prior to the release of *Buen Viaje Excelencia*, Boadella said that he envisaged the film as a demystifying exercise, a chance to purge society of the last vestiges of

¹ Els Joglars' office and archive are based in Vic. The town has been used on previous occasions as a testing-ground for new productions.

the memory of Franco and force the Spanish people to face their fears. In Boadella's opinion, Franco had been a mediocre soldier and an unintelligent leader, whose only achievement had been to escape from being deposed by the rule of fear and the lack of decisive action on the part of the Spanish nation over thirty-six years of dictatorship. Boadella described *Buen Viaje Excelencia* as 'una ceremonia de exorcismo para sacar los demonios que se han quedado equistados en una generaci3n que no supo hacerle frente a Franco' (Martorell 2003: 60). This description, in my view, is equally applicable to the *Franco en Vic* event, which illustrated and capitalised on the need for closure on the Franco era, particularly in terms of the reactions it provoked from the community.

Franco en Vic involved actors from Els Joglars together with choirs and cultural and theatre groups from Vic and the surrounding area. Although Vic's town council and the police gave their full cooperation, Els Joglars were not given permission to use the Town Hall balcony and were allowed instead to erect a raised podium serving as a stage in the main square, which reverted to its previous name of 'Plaza del Caudillo' for the occasion. The event took the form of a mock state visit by Franco and his wife, Doña Carmen Polo de Franco, and was billed as a satirical re-enactment of Franco's previous ceremonial visit to Vic which took place in 1947, although Franco and Doña Carmen's physical appearance was in keeping with their 1970s characterisation for *Buen Viaje Excelencia*. The event was publicised in Castilian in *El9Nou* and on posters around the town calling on the people of Vic to take part; the publicity made use of the tone and style of the Franco regime, when any public use of Catalan was forbidden.

On the day, the number of participants exceeded all expectations, with more than four thousand people of all ages turning out for the event and creating a truly festive atmosphere. Balconies around the square were decorated with flags and banners, and hand-held flags were distributed to the spectators to wave. Speeches were delivered by the principal characters from the podium and the entire square and streets leading into it were used for the performance, illustrating Michael Bristol's observation that in official pageantry and carnival, 'the city streets became a stage' (1985: 60). Indeed, watching

the film footage of the event, at times the podium seemed to become a refuge for the actors from the spectators, who appear to have taken their role as an enthusiastic crowd rather too seriously.² As Bristol argues, theatre, official pageantry and carnival have been closely connected since medieval times. The former involves a public display of the ranks and categories of the social hierarchy and serves as a reminder to the people of the power and grandeur of authority. At the centre of such events is the 'royal personality', the image of authority, the 'political instrument through which the power of the vertically-organised social structure may be deployed in order to dispel social dissonance and conflict' (Bristol 1985: 61). Conversely, carnival involves the mockery and inversion of the ranks and categories of the social hierarchy, in Bakhtinian terms, a 'temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank' (Bakhtin 1984:10). Thus, the central figure of authority in *Franco en Vic* was Franco, but characterised as a feeble, decrepit old man in a grotesque parody of the vigorous image that he had projected during his 1947 visit. Bakhtin identifies the grotesque as a sign that fear has been overcome by the power of collective laughter: 'All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities' (1984: 47). In the case of *Franco en Vic*, certain sectors of the community, in particular those who were of an age to remember the dictatorship, were given licence to experience the thrill of behaving in a way that would have been unthinkable when Franco was in power.

The carnivalesque nature of *Franco en Vic* hinged on the mockery of the maximum authority of the State and on the subverted version of a state visit. In the carnival, as Bristol notes: 'the costumes, insignia of rank and identity, and all other symbolic manifestations are mimicked or misappropriated for purposes of aggressive mockery or laughter' (Bristol 1985: 63). In *Vic*, this mockery took a number of forms, including the misappropriation of the Spanish national flag, on which the arrows of the Spanish Falange present during the dictatorship were replaced with the *El 9 Nou* logo, and the mimicking of the uniform and insignia worn by Franco himself, the uniforms of

² The event was filmed in its entirety but only an edited version was included on the DVD of the film *Buen Viaje Excelencia* as an extra feature.

the military officials, the uniforms of the Guardia Civil, those of the Policia Nacional (known as 'los grises' during the dictatorship), and those of the ceremonial guards of Franco's personal escort, the Guardia Mora. The introduction of fictitious characters added a surreal element to the event and also had the dual function of highlighting Franco's fascist links and associations. These included Ulrike Hitler (a supposed descendant of Hitler) and Silvio Mussolini, 'grandson' of Benito Mussolini – a clear reference to Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian President, who had recently declared publicly that Hitler was not such a bad character as he was made out to be. The Bishop of Vic was portrayed as being no more than 15 years old, 'un prodigi només possible en temps de Franco', as the newspaper *Avui* observed (Sunyer 2003: 45).³ The event included the performance of 'folklore regional', a term used in Francoist Spain to describe any manifestation of cultural difference in Catalonia and other areas such as the Basque Country with the purpose of degrading and undermining cultural symbols. Dances involving 'gegants' and a performance by a local group of 'castellers' emphasised the festive nature of the event.⁴

Bristol argues that the 'misappropriation of symbols is the occasion for gaiety and derision; for the participants it is also an experience of social solidarity and cohesion within a social space no longer vertically organized into distinct and separate strata' (1985: 65). In terms of a social event, *Franco en Vic* indeed brought the local community out on to the streets, no doubt providing the opportunity for neighbours, family and friends to socialise. In Bakhtin's terms, the spectators would have been aware of their role as members of a community, for the participant of carnival 'is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people' (1984: 92). In this sense, *Franco en Vic* provides interesting similarities with

³ In a curious coincidence, the new bishop of Vic, Romà Casanova, was installed the Sunday prior to the event.

⁴ Gegants: huge papier maché figures, sometimes reaching 15 feet, that appear in processions and festivals in Catalonia. They usually parade and dance in pairs, led by the king and queen. Castellers: A castell is a human tower traditionally built during festivals in many places in Catalonia. Several *colles castelleres* (teams) meet and try to build the most impressive towers.

community-based theatre productions, in a kind of crossover between carnival and community theatre, giving the spectator-participants the possibility of taking on another identity, that is in Bakhtin's terms, the right to be 'other'. The participatory nature of carnival – the elimination of the social boundary that separates performer from onlooker – permits the public to temporarily assume new social roles: 'to borrow the clothing and identity of someone else and to adopt the language and the manners of a different social status' (Bristol 1985: 65). The interactive nature of community performance stresses that spectators are not only 'recipients' of the theatrical event but also active participants in the performance and the event of which it is a part. This 'audience participation' was a major feature of *Franco en Vic*, which included a 'warm up' sequence in which spectators were introduced to some of the performers by the master of ceremonies. In some cases participation involved taking on different support roles, such as the police, the clergy and the members of the cultural groups who performed the dances and sang in the choirs. The spectators participated by 'representing' the citizens of Vic, the role assigned to them by the organisers. For some of the older participants, their involvement took the form of a re-enactment of their attendance at the 1947 event.

In street theatre the chemistry between performer and audience takes on particular importance, not least because of the flexibility required when performing in a street environment. The inevitable interruptions by features of city life, such as traffic noise and other street users, the proximity of the spectators, who are standing on the same pavement and therefore literally on the same level as the performers, break down the physical barriers that would normally be present between them in a theatre setting. However, not only physical barriers are broken down, but also psychological and emotional ones. The audience of street theatre is more likely to intervene in the performance by heckling, commenting (thereby adding to the script) or responding to the performer in non-verbal ways by attempting to cooperate with, or indeed disrupt the performance, something they would not contemplate doing in the theatre building. The type of performance involved in an event such as *Franco en Vic* hinges on the elimination of the hierarchical barrier

between actors and audience that normally exists in the traditional theatre venue, which links it in this sense to the breaking down of social hierarchies in the carnival. However, the empowerment of the people of Vic to actively participate in the event and to improvise by joining in the chanting of slogans such as 'Franco, Franco' or 'viva Franco', making gestures such as the fascist salute or waving flags also entails a risk factor. As Mason argues, such empowerment, if misjudged, can turn an audience from being supportive to rejecting what is being asked of them: 'having such an intimate contact with their responses can be alarming and cause problems' (1992:181). *Franco en Vic* utilised the 'liveness' of theatre, relying on the simultaneous presence of performers and audience in the same public space and on the same terms. In the same way as in other types of theatre events in which audience participation is an essential element, such as theatresports,⁵ the spectators cooperated with the performers by 'consciously communicating and being invited to communicate verbally and non-verbally over the course of the event and thus collaborate in creating the performance of which they [were] a constitutive element, not only as "recipients" of the theatrical artefact but also as active participants who shape the performance and the event of which it is a part' (Engelberts 2004:159). However, empowering the spectators to improvise their 'performance' means that, on occasions, the actors are never quite sure of their audience's reactions.

In *Franco en Vic*, this uncertainty was illustrated when it became evident that not all members of the local community wanted to participate actively in the event and some expressed their concern at the implications of resurrecting the old slogans and symbols of the dictatorship. The request to decorate balconies with banners bearing slogans such as 'Viva Franco' or 'Franco, Vich te saluda' provoked unease in some inhabitants of the town, who refused to comply, declaring, as was reported on a local public website: 'no volen veure la plaça vigatana convertida en una plaça espanyola i feixista'

⁵ Theatresports is a form of improvisational theatre in which two teams compete with each other in front of a live audience. Points are awarded by judges but the audience is encouraged to actively participate by showing their approval or disagreement.

(*Vilaweb Vic*: 17/09/03). Others showed reluctance to be seen to participate actively in the ritual: 'Mirar-m'ho, sí, però cridar Viva Franco! No ho faré pas'(Unsigned *El Punt*: 18/09/03). During the event itself, a number of emotional responses were observed in the crowd. As the cavalcade of official cars bearing Franco and his entourage passed through the streets of Vic on its way to the main square, the open car in which Franco sat was the object of shouts such as '¡Estàs mort, cabró!' (Sanchis 2003: 69). In another incident that was captured on the film footage, a man pushed through the crowd and made a two-fingered gesture in front of Franco which, in some areas of Spain, signifies protection against evil or bad luck. In addition, members of Els Joglars later reported several other incidents in which they were heckled or insulted by members of the crowd.⁶ However, not all reactions from the crowd were hostile; some compliments were proffered to the character of Franco's wife, Carmen Polo, and a sector of the audience sang along to the lines 'Moriremos besando / la sagrada bandera' of 'Isabel y Fernando' a popular anthem from the Franco era (Savall 2003: 67). Boadella's comments following the event betrayed his satisfaction at these reactions, which seemed to justify his original thesis: 'vaig veure les seves cares una mica terroritzades i vaig pensar que Franco encara segueix palpitant' (Casado 2003a: 40). Kershaw has described some key aspects of post-modernity as 'a process of forgetting', in which nostalgia replaces memory and fiction replaces history (1999: 167). For many of the participants the event constituted an experience of not forgetting by re-living the past.

Kershaw terms the kind of behaviour described above as 'memory made manifest' (1999: 172-174). According to him, this kind of event sparks a wide variety of 'spin-off' effects, including the relating of reminiscences by older members of the community to the younger ones, and a re-enactment of memories and past behaviours. The performance of history serves, as Kershaw puts it, to 'reconfigure a sense of history in the present' (1999: 177). In the case of *Franco en Vic* this produced discussion about issues such as the suppression of free will, the controlling of information and the writing and

⁶ From conversations with the Els Joglars office in Vic during 2005.

rewriting of history from different points of view. By engaging audiences in a re-creation of the past, the event encouraged participation in a process of reflection and created a potential source of empowerment in the younger participants to question their elders' reminiscences and nostalgia for the past and form their own interpretations of the events and characters depicted. *Franco en Vic* indeed seems to have had the potential to stir up the past and also disrupt the present, provoking radical responses and serving the political interests of certain groups and individuals both for and against the event. A lively debate took place on the local community Internet forum, in which messages of support for Boadella and attacking his well-publicised political views were posted in the days before and after the event.⁷

References made in the Catalan press to the visit made by Franco to Vic in 1947 had the effect of reinforcing the parodical nature of the 2003 re-enactment and its links with the past. *El9Nou* published two special editions, prior and subsequent to the event. The first of these, published on 12 September, publicised the *Franco en Vic* event and examined the original 1947 event. *El País* pointed out that, thankfully, some noticeable differences existed with the original event, including the fact that in 1947 the presence of the Catalan flag, the senyera, would not have been tolerated, neither would have members of the public been able to take photographs and home video footage of the event (Clota 2003: 8). Other press commentators, in particular Carles Capdevila, compared recent examples of Spanish nationalistic discourse with that of the Franco regime. In Capdevila's view, such incidents revealed two problems: that the Spanish had not completely shaken off the past and that the younger generation were ill-informed about their recent history. He fully supported Boadella's attempt to bring Franco back on to the streets and into the public consciousness: 'em va encantar sentir Boadella justificant la necessitat de fer un akelarre, una catarsi col·lectiva. I crec que ens en calen molts més. No és només per riure o venjar-nos una estona del pasat, és per defensarnos del present, perquè el franquisme és bastant viu, i cueja' (2003: back cover). This comment, I would argue, illustrates

⁷ Messages were placed on www.osona.com over the period 16-18/09/03.

that the essential importance of *Franco en Vic* lay in its links with history and memory, and as an attempt to influence current thinking by invoking the past. The timing of the event not only ensured that the film *Buen Viaje Excelencia* received maximum publicity, but also added Boadella's own particular vision of how the debate surrounding the Franco era should be focused.

Boadella's capacity for pre-empting currents of debate and political events has been evident in other Els Joglars productions, notably *Operació Ubú* and the two productions that followed it.⁸ From a 2006 perspective, the true social and political value of the *Franco en Vic* event is only now becoming apparent, as the Spanish parliament debates the proposal for the Ley de la Memoria Histórica. From the point of view of the left wing and Republican political parties, the government does not currently afford sufficient recognition to victims of the Franco regime. In contrast, the conservative Partido Popular (PP) has not lent its support for the new law, and its leader, Mariano Rajoy sustains that the Spanish people 'no quieren hablar ni de Franco ni de la República', a comment that indeed seems to vindicate the original aim behind the event (Díez 2006: 47).

In conclusion, *Franco en Vic* can be considered in terms of the carnivalesque, in that it converted the town into a festive and carnival environment involving the community as a whole. However, as has been discussed above, whilst many members of the crowd indeed entered into the carnival spirit, for others it was an uncomfortable experience, and thus the community was, as Kershaw expresses it, both 'a part of, and apart from, the action' (1992: 192). The event also shared certain features with the community play, in terms of deriving from local culture and history, as Kershaw describes, 'by animating history, community plays aim to make the past vividly alive in the present' (1992: 193). *Franco en Vic* was experienced by individuals forming part of a community group, thus building social relationships into the performance itself, in Marvin Carlson's terms, bringing the experience 'inevitably into the realm of the political and the social' (Carlson 2004: 215-16). Whilst it is

⁸ *Ubú President* (1995) and *Ubú President o els últims dies de Pompeia* (2001).

disputable that the mere action of people gathering together for an event is likely to result in a political effect, this form of performance capitalises on the social nature of theatre, and the role of the local community was, in my view, the strongest aspect of the event. The community re-enacted the event with the performers, showing their approval or disapproval before, during and after the event, thus demonstrating that theatre can be used as a formative instrument of social communication. In the end, *Franco en Vic* was not a successful propaganda coup for *Buen Viaje Excelencia*. In artistic and social terms, however, it fulfilled Boadella's expectations in that it ensured continued press attention for Els Joglars and demonstrated the ability of performance to reach out to the local community, informing the young and offering a liberating experience for its older members.

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