

'The Impossible Theatre': The Spanish Stage at the Time of the Avant-Garde*

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This article offers a general overview of the new Spanish theatre during the twenties and thirties. The first section covers the trends in scenic renovation promoted by Rivas Cherif, Valle-Inclán and García Lorca, among others, and reviews the main premieres, both in the professional and in the experimental and university fields. The second section attempts to synthesize the ideas derived from the texts of playwrights and critics which could form part of scenic models not applied in their time, attempting to show the parallels between these authors and avant-garde European theatre of the period.

KEY WORDS: Rivas Cherif, García Lorca, Spanish theatre, Avant-Garde theatre.

'Right now, generally speaking, [Spanish theatre] is theatre for pigs, by pigs. It's theatre made by pigs, aimed at pigs.' That was García Lorca's crushing response in 1933 when a journalist, after having interviewed him about *La Barraca*, wanted to know the poet's opinion on contemporary professional theatre in Spain.¹ Lorca's pronouncement is reminiscent of Artaud's famous remark about writers, though in the Spaniard's case the virulence and bitterness seem more justified. With similar scorn, Valle-Inclán had declared a few years previously that he had never written, nor would he ever write for Spanish actors,² and his theatrical creations were in fact kept much further away from the professional stages of Madrid than those of Lorca.

*Dedicated to Oscar Gómez, Juan Loriente, Carlos Marquerie, Olga Mesa and Sara Molina, who continue committed to the truth and beauty of an impossible theatre.

¹Francisco Pérez Herrero, 'Nuevo Carro de Tesis', *La Mañana*, Leon, August 1933. All translations from the Spanish undertaken by the translator.

²'... I have never written for Spanish actors, nor will I ever write for them ... Spanish actors do not even know how to speak. They stammer. And since none of them know how to speak, it seems stupid to write for them. That would be bringing myself down to the level of illiterates.' (ABC, 23 June 1927).

Spanish theatre from the first decades of this century is, in fact, characterized by a tragic imbalance between the plans for a renovation of the stage that were formulated by some dramatists, critics and intellectuals, and the outdated concept of the profession that was prevalent in most Spanish theatre companies at that time. This imbalance (paralleling that which existed between the intellectuals of the Republic and the masses which permitted the violent eruption of fascism) meant that most of the aforementioned ideas were only realized in amateur productions, or in a greatly compromised form in professional productions. In short, the concept of contemporary Spanish theatre implied by both, the dramatic and theoretical works of the writers mentioned above, and those of a few critics, intellectuals and theatre professionals, had little to do with the reality of a theatre that retained nineteenth-century methods of organization (companies that were built around a single actress or actor, to whose characteristics dramatists adapted their work, and that performed in theatres run by businessmen with more interest in economic matters than in art), and which appeased the lowest tastes of the bourgeois audience with post-Romantic melodramas like those of Echegaray, comic novelties or *costumbrista* works (Comedies of manners) like those of Carlos Arniches or the Álvarez Quintero Brothers, or at best, the elegant but empty 'well-made' plays of Benavente.

However, the landscape of Spanish stage creation, although desolate, did contain a few exceptions. Principal among these was Cipriano de Rivas Cherif, a friend of Valle-Inclán, with whom he collaborated on several theatrical productions. He played a central role in most of the attempts to renovate Spanish theatre during the twenties. At his instigation, Margarita Xirgu left the commercial repertory stage for good, and together they staged the first productions of works by Valle, Miguel de Unamuno, Rafael Alberti and Lorca. The latter, for his own part, and despite his general indictment of Spanish theatre, had allowed performances of his work, not only by Xirgu, but also by Gregorio Martínez Sierra and by Josefina de Artigas, and he actively collaborated with some semi-professional companies. There were also others who made more or less successful attempts at renovation, and although this never went as far as the dramatists had requested, it is necessary to reconstruct what was actually realized, before recounting what they had really wanted to do.

Attempts

Towards an Art Theatre

In 1923, during a dinner held by the PEN Club in Madrid, Rivas Cherif defended the idea of setting up in that city 'the idealistic, poetic, so-called "intimate" theatre, that exists in Barcelona under the direction of

Adrià Gual'. The Catalan dramatist and director had been running, since the last years of the nineteenth-century, a chamber theatre, which he himself called 'exceptional'. It was conceived as a laboratory in which to try out new theatrical forms on an extremely wide repertoire, which also included contemporary international plays. There were also experiments with a form of staging connected with the success of the modernist aesthetic in Catalonia.³

The first attempt at an art theatre in Madrid was made by Gregorio Martínez Sierra. Following on from the modernism of his first productions, Martínez Sierra decided in 1913 to set up a company with the name 'Teatro de Arte', which would attempt to apply the models of Max Reinhardt (whose work he knew and admired), Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, as well as the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia and Fritz Erler. One of its most important features was the central role given to designers. Martínez Sierra frequently collaborated with Siegfried Burmann, Manuel Fontanals and Rafael Pérez Barradas. Burmann had been a disciple of Reinhardt, and after a period in Paris, he moved to Spain, where he proved highly influential.⁴ Despite the eclecticism of his designs, he introduced new set design techniques to Spain, which differed from those of the traditional painted backcloths, and in the Teatro Eslava, home of the Teatro de Arte company, he managed to establish a set-building workshop, which allowed him to have direct control over the set-building process. The other great set designer, Fontanals, was trained as a draughtsman and furniture designer, and had never had any contact with the theatre until his meeting with Martínez Sierra. When the Teatro de Arte closed, Fontanals and Burmann became the most sought-after set designers in Madrid, and they created a certain style of set which, despite its disparity with what had gone before in terms of style and simplicity, still evoked the idea of a painted backcloth.

The importance of the set designers and Martínez Sierra's own interests ensured that the Teatro Eslava tended towards the spectacular. Some of its most famous productions were the premieres of ballets by Manuel de Falla: *El amor brujo* (*A Love Bewitched*) in 1915, with sets and costumes by the symbolist painter from the Canary Islands, Néstor, and *El sombrero de tres picos* (*The Three Cornered Hat*) in 1917 (two years before Serge Diaghilev's London production). As well as those two productions, mention should be made of the productions of Jacinto Grau's *El hijo pródigo* (*The Prodigal Son*) in 1918, and García Lorca's *El maleficio de la mariposa* (*The Butterfly's Evil Spell*) in 1920, with sets by Fernando

³ Adrià Gual, 'Els petits cenacles', *La Revista*, September 1923, p. 159.

⁴ Ana María Arias de Cossío, *Dos siglos de escenografía en Madrid* (Madrid: Monadori, 1991), p. 257.

Mignoni and costumes by Pérez Barradas, which resulted a commercial failure, and was only performed four times. However, these productions (like the Spanish productions of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*), were exceptions within the output of the Eslava, which was principally fed by writers such as Arniches, Pedro Muñoz Seca and Eduardo Marquina, generally satisfying the tastes of the mainstream audience that, in theory, ought to have shied away from such an art theatre. Failure with the repertoire and the technical failings of the theatre provoked criticism from Rivas Cherif, who compared Diaghilev's production of de Falla's *El sombrero de tres picos* at the Opéra de Paris (with sets designed by Picasso) with the 'pantomime of performance' of the same work directed by Martínez Sierra, and did not hesitate to nickname the Teatro de Arte 'the Company That Wants To But Can't'.⁵

Cipriano Rivas Cherif (1891–1967) could be considered the first Spanish stage director in the modern sense of the word. A period in Italy between 1911 and 1914 allowed him to become acquainted with the work of Gordon Craig, who was to become his greatest inspiration and role model, and from whom he acquired many ideas, especially regarding lighting, stage architecture, the 'Supermarionette' theory and, in particular, the re-establishment of the stage director as the creator of a production. While in other European countries, the central role of the stage director had been taken for granted from around 1920, in Spain its appropriateness was still being questioned by such prestigious critics as Díez Canedo, afraid that the director's intervention would endanger the supreme importance of the text. Few shared Rivas Cherif's concept of a stage director as the author of a work differing from the written text,⁶ so much so that even when the Spanish director fulfilled that role in Margarita Xirgu's company, he had to be credited as literary advisor, since the term 'stage director' had not yet been accepted into theatrical terminology.

During a stay in Paris in 1919–1920 (together with Manuel Azaña, future President of the Republic), Rivas Cherif discovered the work of Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Diaghilev, Georges Pitoëff, Firmin Gémier, and particularly Jacques Copeau, whom he considered to be 'the most original interpreter, in the French style, of the ideas of Gordon Craig'.⁷ As soon as he returned to Spain, Rivas Cherif devoted himself fully to directing for the stage. In 1920, motivated socially as well as artistically, he staged Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* at the Teatro de la

⁵ Cipriano de Rivas Cherif, *Cómo hacer teatro* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1991), p. 273.

⁶ *Idem.*, p. 253. Similar ideas are put forward by the critic Manuel Pedroso in the *Heraldo de Madrid*, 14 May 1924.

⁷ Manuel Aznar, *Valle-Inclán, Rivas Cherif y la renovación teatral española (1907–1936)* (Barcelona: Cop d'Idees T.I.V., 1992), p. 21.

Escuela Nueva, taking popular Soviet theatre as his reference point.⁸ In 1921, after a failed attempt to continue his work under the name of 'Teatro de los amigos de Valle-Inclán' ('Theatre of the Friends of Valle-Inclán'), Rivas Cherif staged a programme at the Madrid Ateneo, with works by Shakespeare, Synge and Cervantes, and announced forthcoming productions of Unamuno, Schnitzler and Valle-Inclán, although these never materialized for economic reasons.⁹

After two years as director of publicity at Vittorio Prodecca's Teatro dei Piccoli, and another two as adviser to Mimí Aguglia's company (who staged Valle-Inclán's *La cabeza del Bautista* [*The Head of the Baptist*] in 1924), Rivas Cherif undertook another venture into experimental theatre with the company El Mirlo Blanco, set up as a chamber theatre in the house of the Barojas. The venture received a lot of attention on the part of educated critics as the embryonic form of a new art theatre. Four different programmes were offered, each comprising two or three plays. The first one, produced on 6 February 1926, included the prologue and epilogue of Valle-Inclán's *Los cuernos de don Friolera* (*The Horns of Don Friolera*) together with other works by Ricardo and Pío Baroja, and on 8 March of the same year it included *Ligazón* (*Blood Pact*), a shadow play written by Valle especially for El Mirlo Blanco.

The opening of the new Círculo de Bellas Artes building allowed the chamber theatre to move to a larger space (although the stage dimensions still remained reduced). The company was renamed El Cántaro Roto, and it was joined by Valle-Inclán as project director. The inaugural programme consisted of a performance of *La Comedia Nueva o el café* (*The New Play or the Café*) by Moratín, followed by a new version of *Ligazón*, and in the second programme, the second play was replaced by Baroja's *Arlequín, mancebo de botica* (*Harlequin, Pharmacy Assistant*). The experiment was cut short at this point, partly due to economic problems, and partly due to Valle-Inclán's incorrigible impertinence in dealing with the authorities in charge of the Círculo de Bellas Artes.

After a period of deep depression, which rendered him inactive for several months, and a brief reappearance with El Mirlo Blanco, Rivas Cherif founded a new company, El Caracol, in 1928. This time he had his own venue: a rented basement in the Calle Mayor that was known as the Sala Rex. The theatre opened in November 1928 with a programme comprising *Lo invisible* (*That Which is Invisible*) by Azorín (who appeared in the production himself, reading the prologue), the short

⁸ C. Rivas Cherif, 'Divagación a la luz de las candilejas', *La Pluma*, no. 3, August 1920, pp. 113–119.

⁹ For more information regarding this or later productions by Rivas Cherif, consult the book compiled by Juan Aguilera and Manuel Aznar, *Cipriano de Rivas Cherif: retrato de una utopía* (Madrid: Centro de Documentación Teatral, 1989).

works *Doctor Death de 3 a 5* (*Doctor Death From 3 to 5*) and *La arañita en el espejo* (*The Little Spider in the Mirror*), again by Azorín, and Chekhov's *El oso* (*The Bear*), whose inclusion was intended as a homage to the Moscow Art Theatre.

The Sala Rex was where Rivas Cherif was able to get closest to his concept of a modern theatre, although spatial and economic restrictions continued to hamper the development of a form of staging in tune with his ideas. He did, however, make a clear display of the autonomy of stage creativity in relation to literary creativity when on December 6th, he staged *Despedida a Rubén* (*Farewell to Rubén*), a performance including poetry, music and dance. He declared that in his 'chapel' there was room not only for theatre, but for any communicative art form involving music and voice. This pioneering work was continued with the production of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, on December 19th of the same year, with sets by Salvador Bartolozzi and performances by Rivas Cherif himself in the role of Orpheus and Magda Donato as Eurydice. The company's final production was of a work by Rivas himself, *El sueño de la razón* (*The Sleep of Reason*). Its theme, lesbianism, alarmed the authorities of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, who closed the theatre and confiscated the manuscript before the next work on the programme, García Lorca's *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* (*The Love of Don Perlimplin with Belisa in His Garden*), could be performed.

Other initiatives followed during the first three decades of the century: the Teatro de Arte directed by Alejandro Miquis, with whom Gómez de la Serna collaborated, and who almost succeeded in staging his work *La utopía* (*The Utopia*); la Sociedad Nueva de Escritores Dramáticos y Líricos (the New Society of Lyric and Dramatic Writers); the Fantasio chamber theatre, at the home of Martínez Romarate, or the Teatro Cachiporra Andaluz, founded in Granada by García Lorca in collaboration with de Falla, in an attempt to rediscover the popular tradition of puppet shows.

As far as professional theatre of the twenties is concerned, attention should be drawn to two important productions. One was Ramón Gómez de la Serna's *Los medios seres* (*The Half Beings*), at Madrid's Teatro Alcázar, which the writer made into a kind of avant-garde soirée, despite the fact that neither the staging nor the text matched the radical nature of his intentions.¹⁰ The other was García Lorca's *Mariana Pineda*, which was staged in 1927 by Margarita Xirgu's company, with the

¹⁰ Rafael Flórez, 'Crónica de una batalla anunciada (el estreno de los medios seres)', in Ángel García Pintado et al., *La utopía de Ramón* (Madrid: Centro de Documentación Teatral, 1988), pp. 20–21.

assistance of the writer himself, who collaborated with his friend Salvador Dalí on the set designs.¹¹

Margarita Xirgu, although not involved in proposing the development of an art theatre, did make a decisive contribution in elevating the levels of artistry of the Spanish stage. Trained as a very young girl in working-class amateur dramatic groups, she gained some recognition for her role in Zola's *Theresa Raquin*, which gave her access to the professional theatre at the age of just sixteen. She played a wide variety of roles, collaborated at one point with Adrià Gual's Teatro Intimo, and ended up becoming, over very few years, the great actress of the Catalan theatre. Among her most important productions of this period, Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* especially stand out. Her acting technique was intuitive, although in her rare reflections on the subject, a connection can be discerned with certain basic ideas of Stanislavskian naturalism, even the method of physical actions. Those who attended her performances single out the expressiveness of her face, her soft but tense voice, and an enigmatic stage presence. As far as her work as a director is concerned, her main contribution was the maximum simplification of stage resources, and the construction of scenery based on real models taken from memory.¹² In 1915, she staged Valle-Inclán's *El yermo de las almas* (*The Wasteland of Souls*) in Barcelona, although even by that time she worked largely in Madrid, with Jacinto Benavente being one of the writers whose plays she regularly performed in. She established a repertory that combined contemporary writers (both from Spain and abroad), and classical writers, and in fact, it was in the field of renovating the staging of Spanish theatre of the Golden Age where Margarita Xirgu made one of her greatest contributions. Her meeting with Rivas Cherif, and the founding of the Teatro Español in 1930, marked the beginning of the most interesting stage of her career.

Towards a National Theatre

Just as attempts were made to create an art theatre in Spain, so critics and professionals during the time of the dictatorship talked of the need to found a national theatre based at the Teatro Español or the Teatro de la Princesa. During the time of the Republic, the discussions became formal plans, with the theatre's base moving to the Teatro María

¹¹ Of these, the critic Díez Canedo writes: 'Designed with the eyes of a child, at once reminiscent of Picasso and school paintings of the most playful spontaneity, they are intimately interwoven with the spirit of the play.' (Enrique Díez Canedo, *Artículos de crítica teatral. El teatro español de 1914–1936 V. Elementos de renovación* (Mexico: Joaquín Moit, 1968), p. 134).

¹² Domènec Guansé, 'Toda una vida', in Enric Gallén et al., *Margarita Xirgu, crónica de una pasión* (Madrid: Centro de Documentación Teatral, 1988), pp. 29–63.

Guerrero. The last of these plans was drawn up by Max Aub in 1936, and sent to Manuel Azaña. In it García Lorca, Rivas Cherif, Alejandro Casona and Martínez Sierra were proposed as directors, in a bid organized around the centrality and autonomy of the stage director, at the time that a need was becoming apparent for a new conservatory to train actors and directors, which was to be led by Rivas Cherif.¹³ The fascist uprising of General Franco prevented the project from proceeding any further, despite its clear-sightedness both in selecting the key players and in laying down the structure of such an organization.

In the absence of a National Theatre, the Teatro Español fulfilled that role. In 1930, coinciding with the establishment of the Second Republic, Margarita Xirgu's company, which had merged with that of Enrique Borrás, were awarded use of this theatre (from Madrid's Council), which lasted until 1935. Rivas Cherif collaborated with her as a literary and artistic advisor, although in actual fact he took on the role of stage director. Despite the nineteenth-century legacy within the company's organization, and the almost unchanging pictorial nature of the stage design, Rivas Cherif and Margarita Xirgu considerably raised production standards on the Spanish stage. They had the support of the major set designers of the time, Fontanals, Burmann and Bartolozzi, and they staged a very balanced repertoire, comprising works by writers such as Seneca, Lope, Tirso, Calderón, Goethe, Duque de Rivas, Hofmannsthal, Unamuno, Valle-Inclán, Benavente, Lénormand, Rice, Kaiser, García Lorca, Alberti, and Casona, amongst others. Following the models of Reinhardt and the Soviet theatre, Rivas Cherif organised open air performances in a wide variety of locations: most remarkable among these were the productions of Seneca's *Medea*, translated by Unamuno, and of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, both at the Roman theatre at Mérida, with no sets except the stones of the monument itself. Also notable were Calderón's *El alcalde de Zalamea* (*The Mayor of Zalamea*), which was performed in Madrid's Plaza Monumental, and Lope's *Fuenteovejuna*, in the town that gives the play its name.

In 1929, Valle-Inclán, who had not had any works produced for many years, allowed Irene López Heredia's company, for which Rivas Cherif had been advisor, to stage *El embrujado* (*The Bewitched*) and *Farsa y licencia de la reina castiza* (*Licentious Farce of the Throughbred Queen*), which he himself directed. In the same year, once the friction between Valle and Margarita Xirgu had been overcome, Rivas Cherif and Xirgu staged one of his great works, *Divinas palabras* (*Divine Words*). Surprisingly, this was a huge failure with audiences, a fact that Rivas Cherif bitterly regretted,

¹³ M. Aznar, *Max Aub la vanguardia teatral (Escritos sobre teatro, 1928–1938)* (Valencia: Universidad de Valencia, 1993), pp. 135–151.

despite the defence of both the work and the staging made by critics and writers. The experience of this failure ultimately distanced Valle-Inclán from the stage, and resulted in him hardening his stance against the production of his plays, so far as to make him affirm that this was one of the worst tortures his sensibility had suffered: 'Everything is different to the way I intended it to be. Does the performance actually have anything to do with the stage directions I set down? I'm sure that my directions will give a more complete idea of what I had wanted to do than the performance does.'¹⁴

Another controversial production of that year was Rafael Alberti's *Fermín Galán*, a work about the Jaca revolt in the style of a *romance de ciego* (ballad of the blind), a failed attempt to introduce a strand of political theatre in Spain.¹⁵ Critics, in general, praised Rivas Cherif's staging, Margarita Xirgu's performance, Burmann's sets ('admirable for the stylized simplicity of their design, and for the pleasing harmony of their colours'),¹⁶ and the work of the whole cast of actors, something rather rare in a theatre still governed by the system of 'principal actors'.

The first work of García Lorca's to be performed at the Teatro Español was *La zapatera prodigiosa* (*The Prodigious Shoemaker's Wife*), in 1930. Lorca himself played the role of the Author in the prologue, and designed the sets and costumes, which were made by Salvador Bartolozzi. The critic Fernández Almagro emphasised the popular aspect that the sets and costumes provided 'with intentional childishness of execution and gaudy colours',¹⁷ while Díez Canedo spoke of the 'rhythmic and mischievous charm, stylized grace and fine understanding of shading' displayed by Xirgu.¹⁸

Bodas de sangre was not given its first production by Xirgu but by Josefina de Artigas, with joint direction by Eduardo Marquina and Federico García Lorca. According to Francisco García Lorca's testimony, the poet personally directed the actors, who were used to a very different type of theatre: struggling against them, without them really approaching his objectives. Critics mentioned the difficult co-existence of literary values with emotiveness on stage, the relationship between the tones of the set and the dramatic emotion of the text, and the anti-realism of the stage discourse that showed 'an Andalusia that did not speak Andalusian'.¹⁹

¹⁴ M. Aznar, *Valle-Inclán, Rivas Cherif y la renovación teatral española (1907–1936)*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Alejo Carpentier, 'Teatro político, teatro popular, teatro viviente', in *Carteles*, 23 August 1931.

¹⁶ E. Díez Canedo, *Artículos de crítica teatral. El teatro español de 1914–1936 V. Elementos de renovación*, p. 121.

¹⁷ Fernández Almagro, *La voz*, 25 July 1930, p. 2.

¹⁸ E. Díez Canedo, *Artículos de crítica teatral. El teatro español de 1914–1936 V. Elementos de renovación*, p. 136.

¹⁹ María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *Los estrenos teatrales de Federico García Lorca, (1920–1945)* (Madrid: Tabapress, 1992), p. 75.

The apotheosis of García Lorca as a dramatist came with the production of *Yerma* in 1934, this time once more under the direction of Rivas Cherif, in collaboration with Lorca himself, and designed by José Caballero and Manuel Fontanals. But this success only lasted a year. The staging in 1935 of *Doña Rosita la soltera o el lenguaje de las flores* (*Doña Rosita the Spinster or The Language of Flowers*) at the Teatro Español ended the writer's list of professional productions, since that of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*), planned for 1936 by the same company, was cancelled when the Civil War began.

Experimental Theatre and University Theatre

Despite working hard as a professional director, Rivas Cherif did not abandon his experimental and pedagogical interests. In 1930, he set up the Teatro Experimental de El Español, which opened with the premiere of *La zapatera prodigiosa* mentioned earlier, preceded by a medieval Chinese fable translated from the English by Rivas Cherif himself. The company's second production was *Un día de octubre* (*A Day in October*), by the German expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser, with sets designed by Burmann. But what interested Rivas Cherif most in the final years of the Republic were his plans for a theatre school, first in the form of the Estudio de Arte Dramático del Teatro Español (which in 1933 would become part of the Conservatorio de Música y Declamación, when Rivas Cherif joined that institution as a subdirector), and later under the name of Teatro Escuela de Arte (TEA), based at the Teatro María Guerrero. There he staged many experimental productions, with the collaboration of Felipe Lluch (stage director), Bartolozzi (set designer), and Enrique Casal (musical director).

One of García Lorca's most important contributions to Spanish stage directions is in connection with the Club Teatral Anfistora, established by Pura Ucelay. Between 1933 and 1936 he directed five works there, two of them his own: *La zapatera prodigiosa*, and *Amor de Don Perlimplín*. Although the first of these was practically a repeat of the production staged at El Español, the second enabled Lorca, despite human and material limitations, to put into practice a number of his innovative ideas, some of which are inherent in the initial text notation 'Teatro de aleluyas' (Theatre of Hallelullahs), which will be discussed below.²⁰ The set designer Fontanals collaborated on the subsequent productions of *Liliom* by Ferenc Molnár, Lope's *Peribáñez y el Comendador de Ocaña* (*Peribáñez and the Commander of Ocaña*), and García Gutiérrez's *El trovador* (*The Troubadour*); productions which gave the Club Anfistora the prestige of a real art theatre. The premiere of *Así que pasen cinco años* was

cancelled as a result of Lorca's assassination in Granada in July 1936, an event which also signalled the end of the club Anfistora.

Where university theatre is concerned, two important initiatives must be mentioned: the Teatro de las Misiones Pedagógicas, and La Barraca. Both had in common the aim of bringing the great classical Spanish repertoire closer to the lower social classes. But while the former was conceived as a travelling theatre, with the aim of bringing theatre to towns where it was unknown, the latter was designed to be a university theatre, based in Madrid, which could eventually tour around nearby Castilian towns. Alejandro Casona, as director of the Teatro de las Misiones Pedagógicas, strived to create a repertoire of simple plays, combined with dance and music, and performed with a minimum of props and/or scenery. Rafael Dieste, for his part, ran a puppet theatre variation, the Retablo de Fantoches or Guiñol de las Misiones, in which he collaborated with the painter Ramón Gaya. There were also other initiatives of this type, among them El Búho, Valencia's university theatre, with a similar agenda to that of La Barraca, and which became after 1936 a theatre of agitation and propaganda under the direction of Max Aub.

Within this field of university theatre, once again the most interesting contribution came from García Lorca. Although in the manifesto he spoke of the educative function of the classics and the social dimension of the scheme, Lorca did not renounce the introduction of renovating elements. That renovation began with the adaptation of the texts and the musical composition and arrangements: work often undertaken by Lorca himself. It continued in the rhythmic treatment of delivery, with special attention paid to silences and musicality, and it ended with the collaboration of excellent artists to design sets and costumes: Benjamín Palencia, José Caballero, Ramón Gaya, the sculptor Alberto, and Santiago Ontañón. Particularly interesting are Benjamín Palencia's sets and costumes for Calderón's *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*) (which incorporated an astrological backdrop and costumes that combined the popular and the surrealist); José Caballero's designs for *El burlador de Sevilla* (*The Trickster of Seville*) and *El caballero de Olmedo* (*The Knight of Olmedo*) (incorporating very simple elements at many levels), and those done by Alberto for *Fuenteovejuna* (based on backcloths painted with popular scenes).²¹ One new element of renovation was the democratic organization of the company, freed from the system of principal and secondary casts,

²⁰ F. García Lorca, *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, ed. Margarita Ucelay (Madrid: Catedra, 1990).

²¹ Reproductions of the designs and photographs of the sets can be found in Francisco Calvo, Ángel González and Francisco Javier Rocha, *La Barraca y su entorno teatral* (Madrid: Galería Multitud, 1975).

and which Lorca compared to a 'phalanstery'.²² As a paid up member of the avant-garde, Lorca, who repeatedly declared himself apolitical, made his social preoccupation into an educational objective, and moved the political component from the theme into the plays' form and organization.

Models

Although some of the productions mentioned above were important, they did not completely embody the radical nature of their creators' stage ideas, and only made up a minimal percentage of the Spanish theatrical output during those decades. It would thus be misleading to argue that they were particularly effective in their objective of modernizing the theatre. The terrible consequences of the military uprising against the Republic affected the regeneration of the Spanish theatre in two ways: firstly, by preventing the continuation of stage productions by creators such as Rivas Cherif and Lorca, and secondly, by destroying the legacy of undeveloped ideas, both of those artists and of others such as Ortega, Pérez de Ayala, Valle-Inclán, Gómez de la Serna and Max Aub. The fact that this legacy has been reliant on written evidence and has mainly been the object of philological studies has for many years prevented a clear recovery of those ideas for the history of contemporary theatre. The following pages are a modest attempt to contribute to this task.²³

The Anti-Realist Polemic and The Reassertion of a Plastic Theatre

One of the starting points for the creation of avant-garde theatre in Spain has to do with the choice of an anti-realist aesthetic. Rivas Cherif claimed that the theatre should be rediscovered as 'an art of the imagination, and not merely an exemplary reproduction of the worst of everyday life'.²⁴ Similar opinions were expressed by Mauricio Bacarisse, Benjamín Jarnés and Díez Canedo: they stood in opposition to bourgeois comedy and mannered farces. In his 'Meditación sobre el marco', Ortega y Gasset saw the entrance to the stage as the opening to another world, 'the unreal, the phantasmagorical', and warned

²² Interview with García Lorca by José María Salaverría, *La Vanguardia*, Barcelona, 1 December 1932, reproduced in *Idem*, p. 24.

²³ In recent years, research has begun into Spanish theatre of the twenties and thirties; particularly notable are studies by Dru Dougherty, María Francisca Vilches, Manuel Aznar and Juan Aguilera.

²⁴ *Heraldo*, 7 August 1926, p. 4: cit. in Dru Dougherty, 'Talía convulsa: La crisis teatral de los años 20', p. 128.

against making the stage into a repetition of what the audience carried in their hearts and minds: 'it will only appear acceptable to us if it sends us gusts of fantasy, the air of legends'.²⁵ Undoubtedly, Ortega's expectations would have been satisfied by a staging of Valle-Inclán's *Comedias bárbaras* (*Savage Plays*) which was conscious of facing the challenges of the unreal that the writer had posed: the sets of visions and shadows, the central dramatic role played by animals, the dream-like stage and the almost cinematic dynamism of sequences such as the flight of Sabelita down the night streets in *Aguila de blasón* (*The Emblematic Eagle*), all united under the myth-like tone that enveloped the stage presentation and the characters' actions.

The unreal is the point where works as diverse as those of Valle-Inclán, Unamuno and Azorín coincide. Unreality, in Unamuno's meta-physical theatre, becomes 'nakedness', a category that could be connected with the purification of the stage space proposed by Copeau, or earlier by Lugné-Poe,²⁶ and which gives Max Aub grounding to imagine a staging of Unamuno's *Sombras de sueño* (*Shadows of Dream*) in a theatre without a fourth wall, 'with no real set, surrounded by the audience on all sides: an island, isolated'.²⁷ More in harmony with Valle-Inclán's work, the novelist and critic Ramón Pérez de Ayala, after recognizing that naturalist theatre and analytic psychology could not last, predicted in his article 'Máscaras', a 'retheatricalization of the theatre'. During the years of the Republic only a few writers such as Ramón J. Sender and Max Aub defended, to a degree, the idea of realist theatre from a political perspective. But in general terms, the Spanish theatre of the avant-garde was much closer to this idea of 'retheatricalization', which should be associated with the models that arose from symbolism: Appia, Craig, Copeau, Tairov and Meyerhold.

Although Unamuno, Azorín and later Max Aub were unwilling to accept that the spoken word had lost its central role, the most lucid intellectuals and the greatest artists of the era understood that this principal of unreality had to be matched by a physicalization of the stage along the lines suggested by Craig. In contrast to the concept of theatre as the staging of a dramatic work, Ortega spoke of the stage as a place where painting, music and poetry would meet, giving the playwright the task of creating not a literary text but a 'programme of events', on the understanding that 'in an ordinary theatrical work, anything of real value can be fully appreciated through simply reading the play, with no

²⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, 'Meditación del marco' (April 1921) in *Obras completas II* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1963), pp. 312–313.

²⁶ Ana María Arias de Cossío, *Dos siglos de escenografía en Madrid*, p. 247.

²⁷ Max Aub, 'Algunos aspectos del teatro español, de 1920 a 1930', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, XXXI, 1935, p. 26.

need to go to a theatre'. As far as actors were concerned, Ortega demanded that they stop being merely interpreters of the written work, in order to become acrobats, dancers, mimes, jugglers, converting their plastic bodies into a universal metaphor. It is in fact precisely this physical reality that makes all the difference here. It is through physicalization that a magical transformation occurs, creating the 'phantasmagoria' conceived by the playwright.²⁸

Ramón Gómez de la Serna was one of the first to champion the concept of a physical and visual theatre. During his stay in Paris in 1909–1910, he became fascinated by the popular stagings of pantomimes, and on his return to Spain the first dramatic work he published was itself a pantomime: *La bailarina* (*The Dancer*). His interest in the non-verbal dimension of theatre led him to play with images in the same way he played with words, and this is evident (despite the weakness of the work and its failure on opening) in the construction of *Los medios seres* (*The Half Beings*). This was apparent not only in the fact that the actors had half of their bodies and costumes painted black, in a visual interpretation of the characters' half-lives, but also in the attention given to stage colouring and to the dynamism of the stage composition. However, it is without doubt in a few shorter works that Gómez de la Serna's obsession with plasticity becomes more explicit: *La utopía* takes place in a shop that sells religious icons, with these becoming the protagonists on stage, and *El lunático* (*The Lunatic*) begins with an extremely long passage of stage directions, in which minute detail of an almost pictorial quality is used to describe the appearance of the protagonist's office and the characterization of the cast.²⁹

The Cinematic Model

Gómez de la Serna's interest in visual performance was undoubtedly linked to the fascination felt in those years for silent movies. It gave grounding to the imagination in 'a kind of physical symphony ... a pure "ballet" of shapes and colours within a rhythm' (which is clearly associated with Gómez de la Serna's idea of pantomime), but the cinema was also considered by critics and artists alike to be the first step in the replacement of intellectual culture with a culture of the senses. While Antonio Espina emphasized the dynamism of the screen, Rivas Cherif focussed on the perspectivism that the cinema allowed,

²⁸ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Ideas sobre el teatro y la novela* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente/Alianza Editorial, 1982), pp. 70–95.

²⁹ Ignacio Soldevilla, 'Ramón Gómez de la Serna entre la tradición y la vanguardia', in María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia* (1918–1939), pp. 69–78, p. 77.

as opposed to the static nature of the theatre, and Enrique Lafuente showed the possibilities of presenting the real and the imaginary simultaneously.³⁰ Faced with the narrative and spectacular possibilities of the cinema, some thought that the only way the theatre could survive was to return to pure drama. Others, with greater insight, accepted the challenge and tried to take what they could from the new developments, from the cinema's new rhythm and aesthetic.

On one occasion a journalist remarked to Valle-Inclán that he had been seen going to the cinema, and even to a *Salon de Varietés* (Music Hall) in the company of Rivas Cherif. To this the dramatist replied:

Well, of course... Why shouldn't I go? Of course I go to the cinema. It's the new theatre, it's modern. It's visual; it belongs more to the physical senses, but it is art. A new art form, the new physical art form. Living beauty. And one day, the cinema and the theatre will come together and make a complete whole, two theatres in a single theatre. And then people will be able to meet up and pass their time in the theatre.³¹

Elsewhere, Valle-Inclán drew a link between the construction of a new Spanish dramatic theatre and putting an end to actors corrupted by 'a drawing-room theatre'. This would allow a new theatre to develop which 'had no stories or single sets: following the example of current cinema, which, without words or sounds and fuelling itself only from the dynamism and variety of screen images has managed to become a worldwide success'.³² And when a journalist commented, referring to the failure of *Divinas palabras*, 'What a shame the theatre does not have the resources that the cinema has for dealing with this kind of work', the playwright replied, 'Exactly. *Divinas palabras* looks like a film script'.³³

The presence of cinema as a model for Valle-Inclán's theatrical ideas is visible in several areas. Firstly, it is present in the construction of the works themselves. In the first decades of the century, cinema was seen as a series of postcards or animated photographs: Valle-Inclán compared it to a series of historical tableaux, a kind of visual narrative, related to the popular *romance de ciego*. Valle-Inclán shared with the young Brecht a fascination for American cinema, popular ballads and Shakespeare's plays. Using *Hamlet* as an example, Valle-Inclán explained how it is not the dramatic situation that creates the scene, but the

³⁰ Dru Dougherty, 'Talía convulsa: La crisis teatral de los años 20', pp. 6–7.

³¹ Federico Navas, *Las esfinges de Talía o Encuesta sobre la crisis del teatro* (Imprenta del Real Monasterio de El Escorial, 1928), reproduced in Dru Dougherty, ed., *Valle-Inclán y el cine* (Catalogue of the retrospective organized by Filmoteca Española) (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 1986), p. 9.

³² *Luz*, 23 November 1933, in *Idem.*, p. 9.

³³ *El Sol*, 25 March 1933, in *Idem.*, p. 9.

inverse of that: one begins with a spatial and visual concept to advance the dramatic action.³⁴

Dynamism of action, continual transformation of the stage space, the introduction of the unreal into the real world: these facts connect Valle-Inclán's work with certain structural elements of expressionist drama. Such coinciding factors should have resulted in a similar treatment of stage space, and particularly of lighting. The interplay of light and shade, combined with voluminous sets, is where the key lies to staging Valle-Inclán's impossible theatre. His shadow plays provide a clue to the preference for a black and white aesthetic, another link with the cinematic model, and a factor discernible throughout his work.

The sensual dimension of Valle's theatre, however, is not restricted to his preoccupation with light: there is also an interest in the plastic, in the physical dimension, which goes back to his earliest written works. Speaking of the *Comedias bárbaras*, Rivas Cherif said that they appeared freshly painted rather than written, and that 'everything works on a visual plane', as much because of 'a certain outward manner taken from characteristic Shakespearian movement', as because of the Wagnerian musical tone in which his characters speak. 'Valle-Inclán is perhaps the only Spanish writer who frames his work with a pictorial atmosphere. He is surely to become a great stage director.'³⁵ Unfortunately, he never came to be one.

Puppet Epics

As an intellectual disciple of Gordon Craig, Rivas Cherif could not leave unexplored the possibility of linking Craig's stage utopias with the impossible plays of his friend Valle-Inclán, nor that of connecting the dream of a theatre without human performers with the dramatist's furious rejection of Spanish actors, whom he insulted on several occasions. However, the 'Supermarionette' theories of Gordon Craig were not interpreted by Rivas Cherif as a proposal for conventional actors, in the style of Meyerhold and the constructivists, but as a vindication of the puppet-show genre itself. Rivas linked this with the model of the *bululú* (a play performed by a single actor with the aid of puppets), and with the kind of production given by the Italian puppet company Teatro dei Piccoli, directed by Vittorio Prodecca. In fact, when the Italian's company, with which Rivas Cherif was to collaborate, played in Spain, Valle-Inclán

³⁴ Valle-Inclán, 'He hecho teatro tomando por maestro a Shakespeare', ABC, 23 June, 1927, reproduced in J.A. Hormigón, *Valle-Inclán. Cronología. Escritos dispersos. Epistolario* (Madrid: Fundación Banco Exterior, 1987), pp. 66–67.

³⁵ Manuel Aznar, *Valle-Inclán, Rivas Cherif y la renovación teatral española (1907–1936)*, p. 70 and p. 35.

announced, 'I now write theatre for puppets. I have invented something that I call *esperpentos*. This kind of theatre cannot be performed by actors, only by puppets, just like the Teatro dei Piccoli in Italy.'³⁶

What most annoyed Valle-Inclán was the way actors spoke. According to him, they either screamed or stammered, with no middle ground. In the *bululú* he must have seen a means of more effectively controlling verbal interpretation. Rivas Cherif too, in his notes on acting technique, pays a lot of attention to declamation, particularly of verse, but very little to movement. Perhaps the impossibility of realizing this idea prevented them from imagining a play performed by actors using the physical and verbal discipline of puppets, something which Ortega did explicitly mention.

Apart from the confrontational and romantic implications arising from the use of marionettes in Valle-Inclán's theatre from the point of view of staging, the most obvious consequence is a distancing effect.³⁷ This effect is made explicit in the prologue to *Los cuernos de don Friolera*, when there is a juxtaposition of the way Shakespeare identifies with his characters with the superiority of the puppeteer over his puppets,³⁸ a distance which is evident to the audience. In this prologue, the character of Don Estrafalario, who is attending a *bululú* performance together with Don Manolito, complains about the antipathy and coldness of popular Spanish theatre, and reflects, 'If our theatre had the excitement of bullfighting, it would be magnificent.'³⁹ (It is also worth noting that Margarita Xirgu, a friend of Joselito, was fascinated by the spectacular nature of bullfights, and by how effectively they created physical, direct emotion, a fascination that led her to experiment with open-air theatre, in the Roman theatre at Mérida, Barcelona's Grec Theatre, in the Parque Retiro, and even in the Plaza de las Ventas.) But this theatre cannot be the result of a mere transposition of a popular genre to the stage (in the epilogue, Don Estrafalario asks Don Manolito to buy the *romance de ciego*, 'to burn it!'), but must instead be subjected to an artistic reconstruction, which Valle-Inclán calls a 'mathematic'. In the reference to the *esperpento* that appears in *Luces de bohemia*, the writer Max Estrella, after explaining that the real Spanish avant-garde is not that invented by the *ultraístas*, but that which follows on from Goya, notes that the 'tragic sense of Spanish life can only be expressed through a systematically deformed aesthetic', but that the 'deformation ceases to be one when it

³⁶ *Idem.*, p. 76.

³⁷ Jean-Marie Larvaud and Eliane Larvaud, 'Valle-Inclán y las marionetas entre la tradición y la vanguardia', in María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia (1918–1939)*, pp. 361–372 and p. 367.

³⁸ R. del Valle-Inclán, *Martes de carnaval (Esperpentos)* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1980), p. 76.

³⁹ *Idem.*, p. 75.

is subjected to a perfect mathematic. My current aesthetic involves transforming classical norms through the mathematic of a concave mirror'.⁴⁰

In this claim to be creating a new canon of deformed proportions, just as in the vindication of a sensual theatre in the face of the coldness of usual theatre, a certain harmony between Valle-Inclán and the general manifesto of historical avant-garde movements can be clearly detected. What is interesting, and makes all the difference, is that the invention of this new form suggested by Valle-Inclán, the *esperpento*, is the result of an interaction between a new expressive need and a popular genre. This is one of the keys to the renovation of Spanish theatre in the 1920s and 1930s: the absence of a sufficiently established urban bourgeoisie and of a tradition of bourgeois theatre developed during the nineteenth century (like that of Germany or France), meant that the alternative had to be sought within the popular. From this comes Valle-Inclán's orientation towards Galician traditions and the *bululú*, and García Lorca's towards puppet shows and Andalusian folklore.

The Poetic and The Popular

One of the most flawless of García Lorca's minor works, and one of the few he could direct himself, is *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, which is an 'aleluya', meaning it is taken from a popular story distributed on folded paper, where the narrative appears in the form of printed pictures with writing underneath, a genre very close, therefore, to that of the *bululú* and the *romance de ciego*. In the preliminary stage directions of one of the manuscripts, García Lorca describes green, yellow and white backgrounds, on which appear figures dressed in black 'with their hands and faces the colour of the background, and features drawn in black. The most absolute coldness and inexpressiveness are the main features of this kind of theatre'. Later he talks of 'austerity and inexpressiveness', and notes that the 'impression it should give is that it has been made geometrical, and is being told by a child from centuries ago'. The emotion it produces should be 'very distant, petrified', as if the life of the characters was 'connected to the rhythm of the world'. The characters are described as 'cold mathematical formulae', a formulae which the audience should be able to decipher to familiarize themselves with the characters' problems, since drama 'must be inside the audience but not inside the characters'.⁴¹

Although this treatment involves the elimination of the most direct element of emotion required by Valle-Inclán, it does maintain the idea

⁴⁰ R. del Valle-Inclán, *Luces de bohemia* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1994), pp. 162–163.

⁴¹ F. García Lorca, *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, pp. 35–41.

of combining the popular with the artistic, and in a very similar form: a combination of the sensual with the mathematic and geometrical. Also noticeable in the stage directions is the suggestion of a theatrical aesthetic that has very clear links with expressionism and especially with the most abstract expressionism, or rather the theatre that is derived from it (Piscator and Brecht, on the one hand; Oskar Schlemmer on the other). What remains obvious is Lorca's interest in very simple staging, with a set design that is very stylized, almost abstract, and a strictly controlled use of gesture, using neither identification nor naturalism, but instead physical and musical action.

This insistence on the principles of mathematics and music is a constant in Lorca's work as a stage director. José Caballero, who collaborated with him on the design for the staging of *Yerma* in 1934, recalls the writer's desire that everything function 'with the same precision as clockwork, without a single mistake ... Because he wanted it to be a single poem read by several voices, without losing the rhythm and the inflections in any one of them, so that they form a controlled and matching whole'.⁴² Lorca conceived the performance as a musical show, in which verbal interpretation and stage movement would be rhythmically integrated. 'It must be mathematic!'⁴³ was an oft-repeated phrase during the rehearsals for *Bodas de sangre* in 1934. Gerardo Diego, in his commentary of that play, enthused about the rhythmic nature of the resulting performance, and declared: 'Theatre is not, nor should it be, literature. It should be the spectacular meeting of Poetry with Sculpture and Music'.⁴⁴

Also of particular interest is the way Lorca managed to translate the interaction of the poetic and the popular on a visual level into the set design. 'He had built up a picture', his brother Francisco describes, 'of the inside of a cave with entrances and lights at different levels. This sort of home is common in the province of Granada, where living in a cave is not necessarily a sign of poverty, since a certain geological configuration allows caves to be dug into the earth that are well lit and have wide interiors'.⁴⁵ In the same way that Lorca's lyric poetry is inspired by popular forms and subject matter, and his dramatic poetry springs (in the case of *Bodas de sangre*) from a real-life incident, his stage design was

⁴² Alardo Prats, 'Los artistas en el ambiente de nuestro tiempo', *El Sol*, 15 December 1934, cit. in María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia (1918–1939)* (Madrid: CSIC, Fundación F. García Lorca, Tabapress, 1992), p. 244.

⁴³ Francisco García, *Lorca, Federico y su mundo* (Madrid: Alianza, 1980), p. 335.

⁴⁴ Gerardo Diego, 'El teatro musical de Federico García Lorca', *El Imparcial*, Madrid, 16 April 1933; cit. in Federico García Lorca, *Bodas de sangre*, eds. Allen Joseph and Juan Caballero (Madrid: Catedra, 1990), p. 38.

⁴⁵ Francisco García Lorca, *Federico y su mundo*, p. 336.

also inspired by a popular kind of housing, making it more simple and extracting all its rhythmic and formal potential, in order to obtain a result that corresponds to the idea of rhythmic space, articulated on various levels, almost abstract in nature.

The popular factor also manifests itself at another level in García Lorca's theatre: its social dimension. Following the model of Soviet theatre, Lorca, Rivas Cherif, and to a certain extent Xirgu, all aspired towards a theatre that combined renovation of form with the ability to communicate with the public. It was a matter of educating the audience without forcing their taste, and making theatre into accessible entertainment, either by establishing a standard ticket price at large theatres, or by taking theatre out to the people, and into open spaces.

The Theatre as Poetry Incarnate

However, together with his populist concerns, Lorca also maintained some strictly avant-garde ambitions in the field of staging, which are highlighted in the ideas visible in the 'impossible theatre' texts. Some studies have underlined the presence of expressionist elements in those texts, such as the abstract naming of characters, the existence of collective characters and symbolic characters, and the dramatic structuring into 'seasons'.⁴⁶ Other studies have suggested keys for the interpretation of Lorca's impossible theatre taken from surrealist poetry. But what is really required is an investigation of his thought processes at a largely stagebound level.

That which is known as Spanish surrealist theatre was linked with the strictly literary proposals made by writers such as Unamuno, Azorín, or Claudio de la Torre. In a way, some of García Lorca's 'Diálogos' accept this inheritance and make connections with the dramatic output of the French surrealists.⁴⁷ But García Lorca was aware that the renovation of the theatre could not come purely by means of poetic intervention: 'The problem of novelty in the theatre is to a great extent linked to the plastic. Half of the performance is dependent on rhythm, colour, set design.'⁴⁸ The stage play *El paseo de Buster Keaton* (Buster Keaton's Walk), and the screenplay *Un viaje a la luna* (A Journey to the Moon) are two of Lorca's most fully realized attempts to approach this type of sensual

⁴⁶ Andrew A. Anderson, 'El público, *Así que pasen cinco años*, y *El sueño de la vida*: tres dramas expresionistas de García Lorca', in María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia* (1918–1939), pp. 215–226.

⁴⁷ Perhaps the most radical of these are the 'Diálogo mudo de los cartujos' (a typographic translation of the characters' gestures) and 'Diálogo de los dos caracoles' (a series of images which could be related to the wordless dramas of Roger Vitrac). F. García Lorca, *Obras V*. ed. Miguel García Posada (Madrid: Akal, 1992), pp. 61–68.

⁴⁸ F. García Lorca, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1964), p. 1774.

performance from poetic creation.⁴⁹ Both of these are clear examples of the use, in a surrealist form, of elements from the earliest American cinema, and while on this theme, it should be pointed out that due to his friendships with Dalí and Buñuel, it was in a visual, rather than literary sense, that Lorca came closest to surrealism.⁵⁰

So even though the themes and images of works such as *Así que pasen cinco años* (When Five Years Pass) have an obviously surrealist influence, the same cannot be said of the formal structure and the mode of representation which that entails. The only effective renovation of the stage in Spain has been that introduced by Rivas Cherif, and Rivas' starting point was, like that of the expressionists, the ideas of Craig and Appia, the strengthening of gesture rather than psychology, of light rather than painting, of sound rather than words. The contribution of Valle-Inclán (and also that of Burmann) involved allowing the expressionist structures of staging also to be imposed on the impossible theatre of García Lorca, interacting with surrealist elements, and creating a mixture whose relationship to the theatre of Yvan Goll, though somewhat distant, could still be discerned.

While *Así que pasen cinco años* can be considered a performable drama according to the principles stated above, *Comedia sin título* (Play Without a Title) and *El público* (The Public) would have to be interpreted more as reflections on the nature and future of the theatre, written in a dramatic form, and not directly as dramas to be performed in a surrealist style (despite the excellent production that resulted from the interpretation of the second text by Lluís Pasqual in the mid-eighties). What García Lorca suggests in *El público* is the need to destroy the theatre in order to be able to express that which must be expressed. In 1929, at the time of writing this work, García Lorca wrote to his family from New York, 'We must think about the theatre of the future. Everything that exists in Spain today is dead. Either theatre must be changed, right down at root level, or it is finished forever. There is no other way'.⁵¹

This destructive impulse manifests itself in various places: in the rebellion against the repression of the mask/form, in the vindication of original dramas as opposed to the performance of stale tragedies, or in the director's final reflection:

⁴⁹ Julio Huélamo has brought together the common features of Lorca's dramatic works, particularly *El paseo de Buster Keaton* with those of the surrealists, in 'Lorca y los límites del teatro surrealista español', in María Francisca Vilches y Dru Dougherty, *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia* (1918–1939), pp. 207–214.

⁵⁰ Virginia Higinbotham, 'La iniciación de Lorca en el surrealismo', in *El surrealismo*, ed. Víctor García de la Concha (Madrid: Taurus, 1982), p. 244.

⁵¹ 'Federico García Lorca escribe a su familia desde Nueva York y La Habana (1929–1930)', ed. Christopher Maurer, *Poesía*, Madrid, nos. 23 and 24, 1986, p. 78.

Breaking down all doors is the only way that drama can justify itself; seeing with one's own eyes that the law is a wall that dissolves in the smallest drop of blood. I am repulsed by the miserable man who draws a door on the wall with his finger, and then sleeps peacefully. Real drama is a three-ring circus where the air and the moon and the animals come and go with nowhere to rest.⁵²

Lorca conceived his 'open-air theatre' as an exteriorization of his own internal world: the characters are no longer characters, they are not masks that have been given psychological individuality, but instead are poetic creations, that coincide with sensual creations on stage. The actor, meanwhile, should be able to physically transform the lyric content of the text, and interact with an abstract space, corresponding to that dramatic space which is free from the usual constraints of time and space, and is in a perpetual state of transformation, just as the characters themselves are.

Octavio Paz defines surrealism using three key terms: freedom, love and poetry. Dalí, on the other hand, talked of sexual instinct, awareness of death, and the physical concept of the enigma. These six keys are brought together in *El público*, but not only at the dramatic level, but also at a conceptual/staged level. The concept of the theatre as poetry incarnate ('the theatre is poetry that gets up from the book and becomes human') is linked to the idea of an interaction between the poetic/formal and the sensual/chaotic in the course of a theatrical performance. 'The theatre requires characters to appear on stage dressed in a suit of poetry, but at the same time with their bones and blood visible.'⁵³ The way to reach a balance between the mathematical principle of order and the liberation of instinct, love and matter on stage is the basic problem posed in *El público*: the tension that the director feels, aware that 'open-air theatre' can only be conceived as a limit, never as a reality, unless one chooses to actually live through theatre; in other words, to take the idea of a theatre of cruelty to its very limits. However, not even Artaud intended to eliminate the formal aspect of the performance: he too, like Lorca, dreamt of the possibility of creating a hieroglyphic score that would give form to the chaos of the passions. These must never be displayed openly, but should only remain allusions, like 'the outline of a hidden force'. And in this tension of the hidden, the theatre should live, but without ever renouncing that tension or the will to grow nearer to its manifestation.

Disturbing the audience, away from the comfortable lie of words, and making them confront the real problem, the problem of their own

internal world, through the representation of the writer's internal world in a 'three-ring circus': that is the objective. Such a representation is impossible without recourse to the many properties of the poetic word itself. Through the remaining accounts of the rehearsals for *Así que pasen cinco años* in 1935, we know that Lorca devoted much attention to the sensual dimension of the performance: the actors were cast according to physical criteria, each character had to have a voice of their own, a way of moving, a personal rhythm, and Lorca was very attuned to small visual details. Unfortunately, the play never reached its first performance, which is why there is no visual record of the stage version of the only work from the impossible theatre that reached the rehearsal stage before Lorca's death. However, it is more than doubtful that it would have lived up to the radical nature of the ideas allowed by a reading of the text, and which Lorca never attempted to put into practice in an immediate form, as he admitted on several occasions. What García Lorca's surrealist theatre would have been like is something that, like the *Comedias bárbaras* or the *esperpentos* of Valle-Inclán, we can only imagine.

Conclusion

The enormous imbalance existing between the renovation of theatrical creation and the production mechanisms and tastes of the audience condemned the principal figures in the Spanish theatrical avant-grade to a life on the margins, or the renunciation of their most radical ideas. This imbalance caused both Valle-Inclán and García Lorca to seek an escape route through popular genres. This is the sort of theatre which, to some extent, and due to the intervention of Rivas Cherif and Margarita Xirgu, was actually performed. However, not even Xirgu could impose upon her company this new form of performance and staging which befitting works too advanced for the Spanish mainstream tradition. The situation would have been different if the plans drawn up in the Republican era had been followed through, particularly those for Rivas Cherif's Teatro Escuela, where a new generation of actors and directors would have been trained, and versed in the sensibility that would have fulfilled both the demands of the new Spanish writers and the stimuli received from the experimentation of the European stage. The triumph of fascism in Spain meant that the work of Rivas Cherif, Margarita Xirgu, García Lorca, Max Aub and others was cut brutally short. It would be necessary to wait until the late seventies and early eighties to see model performances of works by Lorca and Valle-Inclán. However, their most valuable legacy, the one that should enable the discovery of forms to fit our time, remains largely unrecovered. Those who wish to rebel, just as they

⁵² F. García Lorca, *El público*, ed. María Clementa Millán (Madrid: Catedra, 1988), pp. 158, 182, 184 and 185.

⁵³ F. García Lorca, *Obras completas*, p. 1810.

did against the conservatism that reigns in current Spanish theatre, continue to suffer the same incomprehension and the same persecution as our greatest stage artists of the beginning of the century did during the hardest years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. The theatre still remains an intrinsically conservative art form, and now, more than ever, Lorca's dilemma is relevant: one must either destroy it, or learn to live within it.

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Valle-Inclán, Spanish Precursor of the Absurdist Mode

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After an introductory section on his life in Spain and abroad, theatre background (acting, directing), and literary works (plays, stories, novels, poetry, aesthetics), pertinent plays by the Spanish writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) are presented as evidence of the dramatist's precursory role in the evolution of the Theatre of the Absurd, a position now being recognized by critics and directors throughout Europe, the United States and Latin America.

KEY WORDS: Valle-Inclán, Ramón del/*Comedias bárbaras* (Savage Plays)/*Divinas palabras* (Divine Words)/*esperpento* / *Ligazón* (Blood Pact)/*Luces de bohemia* (Bohemian Lights)/Theatre of the Absurd.

It is too often the fate of an individual marked by genius not to be seen as such and, consequently, to suffer a lack of recognition in his lifetime due to the indifference, ignorance, or malice of his contemporaries. One such glaring case is that of the Spanish author Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), one of the greatest writers ever produced by Spain. Demeaned by the cultural establishment of his own country, he was judged solely on his larger-than-life public persona and never accorded the status that he deserved as a cultural icon. He was better served abroad than in his own country.

Valle-Inclán was a man of many talents. The labels playwright, novelist, poet, aesthetician, and translator describe the writer of twenty-four plays, twelve novels, seven short-story collections, three books of poetry, two treatises on aesthetics, and five novels in translation. But this summation conveys only the literary aspect of Valle-Inclán's creativity. He was also a man-of-the-theatre, having been an actor, director and artistic consultant with a variety of theatrical companies, often on national and international tours with his wife, the actress Josefina Blanco, as well as a theoretician who expressed his ideas both vocally