

Barcelona

Maria Delgado



Josep Maria Pou in the title role of *Sócrates. Juicio y muerte de un ciudadano* [Socrates. Trial and Death of a Citizen] from the Escena Festival of the Teatro clásico de Mérida. The production subsequently played at Barcelona's Grec Festival. Photo: Jero Morale/Festival de Mérida.

Argentine theatre has had a regular presence at Barcelona's Grec Festival for many years. Now it is the Chileans who are coming, building on the Argentine tradition for acerbic political theatre that tears through niceties and exposes the power dynamics that govern social behaviour. La Resentida are a young Chilean company established in 2008, who promote a poetic theatre unafraid to grapple with wider political issues that continue to dominate Chilean society. *La imaginación del futuro* [Imagination of the Future] imagines a scenario inside Salvador Allende's cabinet room, immediately prior to Pinochet's coup. Here the President does not commit suicide but is rather packaged by his cabinet into a commodity that can be sold to the people. This Allende is far from the idealised hero that stares back at the viewer in black and white portraits of the time, but rather a narcoleptic President whose coterie of ministers and advisors – all dressed in black – swarm

around him trying to package his message into a more 'voter friendly' format that will keep the police, judiciary and military happy.

The production begins with the recording of Pinochet's now legendary 11 September radio message to the Chilean people; the stop-start formula allows the ministers to try and massage his socialism into a neo-liberalism that has no boundaries. While Allende identifies himself as a socialist, his ministers are anything but. He refuses to bow to the US President and ends a phone conversation with him with a barrage of expletives, to the horror of his ministers. These bouts of non-conformity, however, are few and far between. Increasingly confused, frightened and indecisive, this Allende is a rather ineffectual figure at the mercy of the warring PR factions. He is a less than attractive orator and appears weak and infirm. It's a far cry from the nostalgic hues through which Allende is often presented.

Rodolfo Pugar – a torture

victim of the Pinochet regime – is expertly cast as the bumbling Allende. But while Allende's 1973 broadcast is the starting point for the piece, *Imagination of the Future* is about the present and the climate of social discontent evidenced in mass youth demonstrations and protests demanding changes to higher education and enhanced rights for women and indigenous communities. Indeed, anachronisms abound – Allende makes a reference to Hannah Montana and the PR gurus are dressed in contemporary attire.

Imagination of the Future is not verbatim theatre but rather an imaginative take on how Allende might have been branded by the new generation of communication experts that dominate contemporary politics. At one moment he's talking too fast, at another not fast enough. The backdrop is too red, the suit too formal. Allende is dressed up like a doll – a suit one moment, a track suit the next – made up, touched up and moved like a puppet. The

athletic performances of the cast, spinning around the stage like out of control toys, convert this into a piece of *danztheater*. As the action proceeds, the stage opens up beyond the cabinet office. The different scenarios see the PR gurus hit the streets to probe some of liberalism and neo-liberalism's more frightening facets. A twelve-year old boy, Roberto, is used mercilessly to elicit funds. Twenty euros from each audience member will offer him the education he needs. When the audience makes no effort to hand over the money, one of the cast assaults an audience member, removing her clothes in anger in the hope that she will shame him into confronting why it's easier to generate funds for pornography than humanitarian aid. Roberto, used to entice pity and shame on his first appearance, is later shot in the street. Each appearance sees him used as an object by different factions to further their cause.

The aggressive performance style lends the piece a confrontational tone. As an

audience we are made to feel uncomfortable about the abuses enacted on stage, from cruelty to children to the consumption of cocaine in the inner circles of government. When politics becomes about control and commercial clout, the humanity and idealism of the enterprise is lost. The plastic mannequins of idealised children wheeled out to create the 'perfect image' are a far cry from the living, breathing bodies that charge around the stage. The one-size-fits-all approach, promoted by the synchronised dances of the bathing beauties in technicolor swimsuits offers little disparity or dissent. Director Marco Layera reminds the audience that democracy is a space for confronting uncomfortable realities: we leave the auditorium exhausted by the human casualties left by these politicians in their wake.

The difficulties of confronting the legacy of a dictatorship is all too present in *Imagination of the Future* where the failure of the Chilean left to deal with the infrastructure of the Pinochet years is shown to have consequences for the present. In *Socrates. Juicio y muerte de un ciudadano* [Socrates. Trial and Death of a Citizen] the predicament of another citizen, the Greek philosopher Socrates, is used to probe wider concerns about how democracy functions that prove resonant in contemporary Spain. The play, crafted by Mario Gas and Alberto Iglesias from the writings of Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes and Diogenes Laertius, uses Socrates' trial and subsequent death in 399BC to ask a series of issues about what it means to participate in a democracy. The polarised political discourse of 21st century Spain finds an echo in the 'them' and 'us' vocabulary through which Socrates' opponents function.

Paco Azorín's empty stage with raked bench-seating provides the sense of a participatory space; the seven actors remain on stage throughout, moving as both spectators to and participants in the action. The audience are addressed as 'citizens' and invited to participate in the debates

articulated on stage. They are urged to put their phones to one side, leave 'WhatsApp' alone and refrain from taking photos; our attention is sought and the effect is like that of sitting round a campfire listening to a story that intrigues and alarms.

The audience first sees Josep Maria Pou's Socrates rolling up his sleeves as if preparing for a hard day's work. The casting of Pou, one of Spain's most respected actors who has spoken out against divisive political posturing, is significant. He introduces himself to the audience in veritable Brechtian manner and the play proceeds with the clarity of purpose of the German dramatist's most lucid work as Pou goes to join the other six actors positioned at the back of the stage. He is one of them, part of a community whose governing principles he engages with and confronts. There is no attempt to opt for naturalism here but neither is there pontification. Rather compact storytelling punctuated by telling commentaries indicate why the committed, learned, outspoken, fearless Socrates had to be silenced. There are also no narrative surprises – the audience is told that Socrates will be poisoned by one of the chorus members. Pou's down to earth philosopher is honest about what he knows and doesn't know: 'I only know that I know nothing but I know something.' Socrates' entire discourse is based on questioning and probing, on refusing to accept givens and aspiring to more just society. Socrates' dialectics and celebration of logical argument are enacted through the dialectic tone of a production determined to put over different viewpoints.

Those who know everything are the so-called democrats perverting democracy. The citizens who conspire to have him tried resemble the plotters in *Julius Caesar*. Socrates observes them from the onstage benches. Two of the citizens defend his thinking, two others oppose him. The stage mutates into a court where the audience are addressed as fellow jurors and the chorus move in and out of testimonial roles: some for, others against. He is found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens by a majority of

60 and sentenced to death. He refuses to provide a viable alternative sentence, as with going into exile, and asks instead to be celebrated for his contribution to knowledge. It's a sarcasm and wit that annoys the authorities.

The production's stand out scene sees Socrates visited by Carles Canut's Crito who begs him to go into exile with the funds of wealthy supporters who are willing to assist him to escape. Socrates quietly refuses. The men sit side by side, conversing and confiding. It is a brilliant enactment of Socrates own ideas on friendship. It is also an encounter that recalls their dialogue as Lear and Gloucester in Beito's *King Lear*; unadorned, simple and devastating in its scenic efficacy.

Gas's production stresses a culture of defiance that links Socrates, through Pou's words, to a wider rota of defiant heroes that includes Galileo, *Enemy of the People's* Stockman and *The Crucible's* John Proctor: 'I am born every day, I live across all eras and will never die.' This Socrates rubs his head and shrugs, converses in easy tones and evades any kind of patronism. He looks intently at his accusers, his disciples and the audience. There isn't a single wasted gesture in Pou's performance; rather an economy of corporal and verbal language. Occasionally, his large hands weave around his words like butterflies, something delicate rather than ornate. He has an easy conversational tone that contrasts with the empty rhetoric of Pep Molina's accuser Meletus. Molina's register is too inflated in my view; his Meletus too dastardly and too obviously the 'bad guy' to be entirely credible. Borja Espinosa gives a far more convincing performance as the second of the three accusers Anytus. Guillem Motos and Ramon Pujol have a credible complicity as his two loyal disciples and their retelling of his final moments has a breathtaking simplicity.

I was not convinced that Xanthippe's monologue to the audience, giving her point of view of her husband's position, is necessary. Amparo Pamplona creates a down-to-earth housewife carrying baskets home that

disrupts the compressed progress of the trial, spilling out into the stalls. The focus on Socrates' public persona does not make the scene necessary or entirely relevant to the action. Her overly fussy orange dress and blue apron invades the visual purity of the rest of the production. Antonio Belart's costumes are simply cut white linen trousers and shirts with a beige cloak-cum-toga. There is something monastic about them. The actors are barefoot, their feet touching the ground, as grounded indeed as the play itself.

The production has proved the Grec's sell out theatre production – only Catalan singer Joan Manuel Serrat achieved a higher audience during the festival's five-week run which has seen audiences rise to 141,000 and 60.80% occupancy (up over 11% from last year). Leaving the Romea theatre, I was struck by the level of animated discussion conducted by the audience: a need to engage with the theme of democracy and how it applies to contemporary Spain. *Socrates. Trial and Death of a Citizen* is a production with an urgency that engages with what it means to be a citizen and how participatory agency works. The producers have responded to the clamour for tickets with a further run at the Romea from 24 September to 18 October, with dates in Madrid and a tour across Spain in 2016 to follow.

Madrid

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Juan Carlos Rubio's *Las heridas del viento* [The Wounds of the Wind] has proved one of the most resonant Spanish plays of the past decade. First premiered in 2005 at Miami's Teatro 8, the play has subsequently been seen in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, England, Greece, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Spain and Uruguay. In late 2013, Rubio directed his own production of the play, seen across Spain with a three-day run at London's Courtyard Theatre as part of the London Spanish Theatre Festival in June 2015. The play has a simple premise: David (Dani Muriel) is sorting through his father's personal possessions in the aftermath of the latter's death. It is an emotionally-charged situation that allows for family secrets to tumble out, forcing David to confront both an overly-fixed idea of his father and his own sense of self.

Rubio's staging is simple but effective. David enters and switches on the lights (José Manuel Guerra's lighting design is stark but effective), allowing the audience easy access into the intimate family space. David then begins confiding in them about his father's foibles and characteristics. He is conjured as a palpable presence through David's narrative: a methodical, respected lawyer who was not able to talk about his emotions and feelings. A metallic box with a lock reveals a package of letters which David begins to pick out as the glamorous blonde actress Kiti Manver, made up and dressed elegantly as if going out to a formal event, reads out the contents of the letters from the opposite side of the stage. The audience is lulled into the assumption that these are letters from a female lover.

As Manver removes her wig, however, she also reveals that the signatory of the letters is not a woman but a male lover, Juan. In front of the audience, Manver continues her metamorphosis from a Joan Collins-esque middle-aged woman to a sixty-something man. The construction of a male identity is fabricated before the audience's very eyes: eyebrows, earrings and lipstick removed and put in a case as the face is stripped of adornments. Manver imbues

Juan with a wit that moves from warm to corrosive in an instance. Juan has had to live his life in the closet but he insists on dignity and respect and seduces both David and the audience with his compelling stories.

This is in many ways an odd couple play with the two men positioned as diametric opposites that come to share an emotional space as the play progresses. Juan has a mischievous wit and a playful sense of humour. He has a dapper sense of style – sharp suit, burned orange striped tie and matching handkerchief – which contrasts with David's more casual attire. Juan is the mechanism that allows David to look into his own past, come to terms with his grief and make sense of his formal relationship with his father.

Dani Muriel presents the 32-year old David as an infantilised adult – he still lives in the family home and his prudish attitude to Juan's revelations suggest that the progressive politics of post-Franco Spain may not be as forward-thinking as they appear. Melancholy hovers over the play's end as David reveals that he only got to know his father the day he died. Juan accepted the relationship with Rafael on its own terms. David struggles to do this. At the play's end he is as restless a being as he was when he first appeared on stage.

The play's ability to talk about dysfunctional families, domestic secrets and the weight of the past has clearly resonated with audiences in Spain. *The Wounds of the Wind* is about the importance of confronting the past and of the importance of working with those that we might not immediately identify as our allies. At a time of austerity too the empty stage – two simple chairs, four onstage lights operated by the cast and Félix Ramiro's simple, clean cut costumes – signal a theatre of economy that prioritises clear storytelling and direct address. The production continues on tour until the end of the year with dates in Madrid at the Pequeño Teatro Adolfo Marsillach de San Sebastián de los Reyes and the Casa de la Cultura de Collado Villalba in October, and performances in Alicante and Cádiz in November.

Federico García Lorca is the Spanish icon that simply refuses to die. He is the ghost that hovers over Alberto Conejero's fine new play, *La piedra oscura* [The Dark Stone], which takes place in a prison cell in Santander where Republican soldier Rafael Rodríguez Rapún is receiving medical treatment having been wounded in action. Watching over Rafael is a young nervy Nationalist soldier, Sebastián, about to turn 18 and clearly anxious about the responsibilities he has been given. The audience first see him sitting with his eyes closed, shouting out orders in a hysterical manner. He clutches his rifle to him as if it were a safety blanket. He looks ill at ease and confused.

Sebastián has been entrusted with guarding the injured Rafael and the play charts the men's relationship from initial suspicion to a tenderness that sees the traumatised Sebastián confess, at the end of the play, that he is a fearful adolescent who has not yet turned eighteen. The play witnesses the men's growing emotional intimacy – from positions of initial suspicion to warmth and tenderness, a space where difference can be recognised and respected. It is, like *The Wounds of the Wind*, a play with lessons for contemporary Spain where political discourse remains sharply divided with little inclination to find the shared intellectual spaces that dispense with the vocabularies of antagonism.

The set is simple and bare: a grey battered environment that speaks of poverty and abandonment. Two chairs at the back of the stage and a makeshift camped stage right where Daniel Grao's Rafael spends much of the play. Grao has matinee idol good looks with a rugged demeanour and enough stubble to suggest a young Spanish Indiana Jones. He's a dominant presence, even when still on the bed, and his easy tones contrast with Sebastián's jumpy, tense voice. Nacho Sánchez's Sebastián has a lean and hungry look. He sulks and paces, looking around him with an edgy sense of panic and mistrust. He wants nothing to do with Rafael, fearing contamination will mar his own

shaky allegiances.

Rafael Rodríguez Rapún was an engineering student when he joined La Barraca, the student theatre troupe that Lorca co-directed between 1932 and 1935. Touring to the rural villages of Spain, it presented new productions of the Golden-Age canon that would assist with the Second Republic's literacy programme. Rodríguez Rapún served as secretary of the company and while he never considered himself as homosexual, he and Lorca did embark on a two-year relationship that marked the writer profoundly. On hearing of Lorca's assassination, he joined the Republican cause. Taking a course in artillery, he was given the rank of lieutenant and dispatched to northern Spain, commanding a battery close to Santander. He was seriously injured following an air attack where he seemingly refused to take preparatory measures by throwing himself to the ground. He died in the military hospital in Santander a year to the day of Lorca's own death.

While Conejero has consulted Rodríguez Rapún's family in researching the play, he doesn't stick with these facts in his own speculation of what his final days might have been like. Instead, he chooses to have the character of Rafael sentenced to die by firing squad. It is Sebastián who is given the task of giving Rafael the news and it is to Sebastián that he confesses the lasting legacy of his love affair with Lorca. In turn, at the end of the play, Sebastián also has something of his own to confess to Rafael: he tells him his name, something that he was unwilling to divulge at the play's commencement.

The production has a claustrophobic intensity created by the single location in which the two men are contained. Rafael's language is expansive and open; Sebastián's more truncated and hesitant. Rafael's preoccupation with legacy is one that contemporary Spain should heed. He is keen to preserve Lorca's cultural inheritance for the future and urges Sebastián to make contact with Modesto Higuera – another colleague from La Barraca – or the writer Rafael Martínez Nadal in the hope that Lorca's

manuscripts can be saved.

Argentine director Pablo Messiez's direction is clean and clear. There is an economy of gesture, and a willingness to let the silences speak of the gulf between the two men and their positions. The outside world intrudes through the sound of the sea, shots and cries, shuffling sounds, slamming door and raised voices. The dirty checked floor of Elisa Sanz's set suggests a chessboard where the men move carefully in order not to be caught out. Rafael's bandaged body and blood stained clothes speak of his injuries and traumas. Sebastián's body is tightly wrapped in a uniform that accentuates his spindly frame and sense of ideological containment. The men's growing relationship is played out in their gestural language as much as their words.

At first, when Rafael asks for water, Sebastián thrusts the water bottle out to him, evading contact. By the end of the play, he is assisting him to dress and they embrace before Rafael leaves the stage – the execution rendered through a bright light and shots that echo across the stage as Sebastián comes to terms with Rafael's physical absence. In *The Wounds of the Wind* Juan and David were not able to find the shared space that Sebastián and Rafael encounter at the play's end. *The Dark Stone* demonstrates the ways in which culture is trying to carve out a space for discussion that the political sphere evades.

The production played to sell out audiences at Madrid's María Guerrero's theatre's Sala Princesa at the beginning of this year. It returns between 18 September and 19 October.

At Madrid's Latina Theatre, a series of early Chekhov pieces are imaginatively reworked into a lithe, metatheatrical production, *Atchúusss!*, set in the backstage area of a fading theatre. Carlos Alfaro, as director and designer, creates a space with scarlet curtains and late nineteenth-century furniture. Two-way decorated mirrors allow the audience access to the actors' dressing-rooms. It's a fluid performance arena where props and furniture are wheeled on and off as necessary under the watchful eye of the two characters who frame and contextualise the ensuing action: elderly actor Dimitri (Enric Benavent) and pianist-cum-prompt Nikita



A moment from Atchúusss!, a series of early Chekhov pieces At Madrid's Latina Theatre, directed and designed by Carlos Alfaro.

(Ernesto Alterio), a Cat-in-the-Hat like individual with boundless energy and scissor-like legs, who underscores the action with Mariano Marín's jolly melodies. Nikita's presence creates the mechanism through which Dimitri's glorious past roles can be re-enacted through a series of amusing vignettes that provide acerbic comments on social mores and double standards.

The first of these, 'The Seduction,' involves a bourgeois married couple, the wife Irina (Malena Alterio) is pursued from afar by an ageing lothario, Andrei, played by Benavent who seduces her from afar through her hapless husband, Niko (Fernando Tejero). Niko naively conveys Andrei's fawning comments on her beauty and style, intoxicating the bored housewife to the point where she becomes obsessed with Andrei, abandoning all sense as she throws herself at him in a park. He has enjoyed his fun and deploys his customary empty rhetoric to reject her in playful fashion. The actors slide on and off stage with a languid elegance in a wry tale of deception and amusement where the jaded Irina proves the unappreciated possession of the self-satisfied Niko and the emotional plaything of the wily Andrei.

The second, 'The Governess,' is another cruel tale where a meek governess, Julia (Malena Alterio) comes in to receive her wages

from her boss (Adriana Ozores) who begins an elaborate game, deducting roubles from her monthly 40-rouble salary to the point where the amount shrinks to the paltry sum of 10 roubles. It's a virtuoso performance by Ozores whose energy and self-righteousness is simply accepted by the servile Julia. Ozores flutters and flaps while Alterio remains rooted to the spot. And while the ending boasts an unexpected surprise, the vignette is a telling comment on exploitation and abuse that resonates all too clearly in present-day Spain.

There's a greater degree of clowning and farce in 'The Bear,' as a grieving widow Popova (Ozores) tries to send away a farmer Grigori (Ernesto Alterio) who is owed money by her ex-husband. An elderly butler (Tejero) struggles to keep up with the ensuing action as Popova tries to rid herself of Grigori on numerous occasions, only to find that his refusal to go is now contaminated by a physical attraction for the widow in black. Doors slam open and shut, the wobbly butler struggles to cope with the warring couple, like a toy thrown between them in the kind of banter that resembles a 1940s screwball comedy.

'The Marriage Proposal' similarly negotiates a farcical register as leprechaun-like hypochondriac Sebastián (Tejero) calls on his animated neighbour Natalia (Malena Alterio) to make a

proposal of marriage. He is a vain being with a large hat, a flustered manner and a misplaced sense of style. Misunderstandings come to the fore over who owns what land and each takes an entrenched position that looks to bring them to blows. When she backs down, flattered to know that he was going to propose, it looks as if the terrain is set for a reconciliation, but when the argument ensues over the merits of each of their dogs, the battlelines are drawn again to the point where they have no option but to agree to disagree. The comic timing is impeccable as the couple bicker and bite in madcap fashion.

The final piece, 'A Helpless Creature' continues the vaudeville routine as an elderly woman (Ozores) and her niece (Alterio), pleading penury, visit a bank manager (Ernesto Alterio) in search of a one-off payment. Refusing to be put off by his earnest secretary (Tejero), they stage a fuss (the niece echoing her aunt's plaintive cries) until he gives in with sheer exhaustion. It's another virtuoso piece with vocal crescendos that reworks the genre of the picaresque – the aunt is a fitting heir to Celestina, able to use her wiles and guile to get what she wants. The plaintive begging transports the audience to one of Quevedo's tales or Valle-Inclán's acerbic dramas. The tone of the grotesque is also borne out in María Araújo's costumes, with their cartoonish dimensions – the cut may hark back to the late nineteenth-century but the colours are distended to the point where they stretch at the registers of naturalism.

At the end Dimitri returns to address the audience and close the performance. He is a more cheerful figure, more animated and dynamic. He has been restored by the power of theatre and in urging the audience to celebrate each hour of life, he recognises the importance of culture as a space where laughter is generated and emotions are stirred. The full house on a hot Madrid evening responded with cheering and prolonged clapping to a virtuoso ensemble piece where individual energies are directed to the collective cause, a timely reminder of the solidarity that theatre is capable of generating.