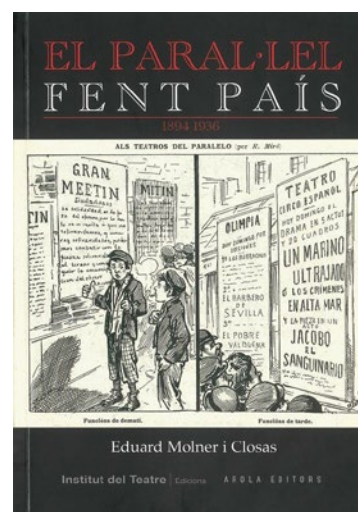


El Paral·lel, a Bastion of Modernity

Joaquim ARMENGOL ROURA

juquimroura@gmail.com

Eduard Molner. *El Paral·lel fent país*.
Barcelona: Arola: Institut del Teatre, 2023.



English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Arola editors and the Institut del Teatre have just published *El Paral·lel fent país*, a study by Eduard Molner i Closas (Barcelona, 1968) about the artistic and social phenomenon of Paral·lel Avenue, a piece of research that covers the period from the late 19th century until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. I do not know if Molner's interest in this era of El Paral·lel is the result of that extraordinary exhibition at the CCCB in 2012, curated together with Xavier Albertí, or if he had already had the idea of researching the famous avenue for some time. In any case, that great exhibition had a very significant title: *Paral·lel Avenue, 1894-1939. Barcelona and the Spectacle of Modernity*, which highlighted the importance of El Paral·lel in the cultural, social and political fields. An era and a place that became the main focus of entertainment and leisure for all kinds of people, but especially for workers, artisans and bohemians, thanks to a varied range of multicultural and heterogeneous shows at affordable prices. The fact is that this avenue turned Barcelona into a true bastion of modernity, unique in Europe. However, the exhibition posed one main question to the public: why did we know nothing about this wonderful legacy?

Molner's research provides an answer to the question and delves extensively into the causes and those behind this unfortunate situation. But the study adds yet another key question: why did the Catalan cultural elite turn their backs on the extensive popular culture that emerged from El Paral·lel? Well, the answer is clear: because it was popular and removed from the interests of intellectuals and politics of *Noucentisme*.

El Paral·lel fent país effectively explores the whole range of shows and leisure offered by El Paral·lel, while analysing the contents that, in some way, defined the soul and tastes of the Catalan working classes. El Paral·lel was a long avenue dedicated to the performing arts that responded to a social

demand in Barcelona, but not to any political or cultural planning, hence its character as marginal and bordering the bourgeois city. A logical demand and result of the formation of the social and working class periphery of Barcelona. From Sant Martí to La Bordeta. The case of El Paral·lel is an extraordinary phenomenon. In a few years, from 1894 to 1910, a large number of fairground booths, theatres, music halls, taverns, many cafes, cinematographs, and so on, emerged, which lent the area, known as Barrio Chino or Distrito V, an emblematic character.

Molner explains that the first El Paral·lel had a fairground, gypsy and flamenco air, with characters of all kinds who performed sporting and physical feats, and all of this coexisted alongside the so-called *género chico*, an entertaining derivation of the zarzuela and the one-act farce, and also the *género ínfimo*, or “variety”; that is, shows that fundamentally include the couplet. They were shows steeped in a kind of suggestive eroticism, with outstanding pioneering figures such as La Fornarina and Raquel Meller.

However, the first theatre as such was the Circo Español Modelo, a stage that triumphed with a new genre, *pantomima*, which later gave rise to melodrama with social content, a genre embodied by José Fola Igúrbide, author of texts dominated by the idea of social justice and criticism of exploiters and disastrous power structures, including the church. Let us not forget that the social context of the time is that of the Tragic Week and La Canadencia strike. In addition, there was the anarchist political theatre of Felip Cortiella and his dissemination of libertarian ideas. But in El Paral·lel all kinds of genres were combined until entertainment and partying were prioritised, which is why vaudeville entered the scene, led by Josep Santpere and Elena Jordi. It can be said they gave birth to commercial theatre in Catalan. The realistic drama of the Distrito V also emerged, a subgenre that stages the calamities of the Barrio Chino itself. These were tailor-made shows that responded to the tastes of so-called mass culture, with a group of wonderful people who created material for El Paral·lel entertainment industry, journalists such as Josep Amich i Bert, “Amichatis”, Gastó A. Màntua — in fact, more a playwright than a journalist —, Lluís Capdevila, Francesc Madrid, Manuel Fontdevila, Joan Tomàs, Brauli Solsona..., intellectuals and translators such as Salvador Vilaregut, lyricists such as Rossend Llorba, theatre people such as Joaquim Montero, and producers like Manuel Sugranyes. Amichatis, however, was the most prominent figure according to Molner, defender of a theatre of entertainment and mass consumption, in favour of the realism of the Distrito V, a theatre with secular morality and responsibility, which addressed issues such as prostitution, poverty and guilt, especially of men, exploring these dramatic family situations.

We could say that Joaquim Montero and Manuel Sugranyes were responsible for the large-scale revue that appeared in El Paral·lel, an evolution of the variety shows quite heavily inspired by Emili Vilanova’s one-act farces and the popular theatre of Pitarra. Montero added political commentary and cinema. *El Papitu Santpere* (1932) is a manifestation of his poetry and pro-Catalan Republican ideology. The more international Sugranyes was an importer of reviews from Paris that could also succeed in Barcelona.

Beyond the zarzuela there was another musical genre that enjoyed great success in El Paral·lel, which was musical theatre in Catalan. On 16 April 1926, a classic premiered at the Teatre Nou in El Paral·lel: *Cançó d'amor i de guerra*, a piece written by Lluís Capdevila and Víctor Mora, with music by Rafael Martínez Valls, although there had been the precedent of *Baixant de la Font del Gat o la Marieta de l'ull viu*, a lyrical version of the show by Amichatis i Màntua. These were productions that expressed similar political and moral values to audiences and included traditional elements of Catalan culture and a particular way of understanding the world.

And against this impressive flow of shows appeared the cultural weekly *Mirador*, a Republican and liberal magazine that reflected the political choices of its editor, Amadeu Hurtado, a lawyer close to Acció Catalana. *Mirador* sought a modernisation of Catalan society, which was European in nature, with a clear desire to influence the performing arts and all cultural sectors. It called for the development of a representative national theatre with cultured productions in Catalan and also to determine the nature of more popular entertainment in order to put an end to the kind of productions it considered sleazy, vulgar and stereotyped, reminiscent of Pitarra, evocative of rural life, archaic and sentimental. Hence the rejection of everything that did not fit in with its ideology; that is to say, most of the productions in El Paral·lel. Very critical opinions that came from admirable writers such as Sebastià Gasch and Joan Tomàs, Ramon Pei, Jaume Passarell and Joan Cortès; and others such as Josep Maria Planes, Andreu-Avel·lí Artís i Tomàs, Rafael Tasis or Josep Maria de Sagarra, a show lyricist, all of them dismayed at seeing how theatre was still on the sidelines of the modernisation of the country and the world of entertainment. Despite this critical battle and the theatre crisis, popular pieces that emerged from El Paral·lel such as *La reina ha rel·liscat* by Alfons Roure or *Gloriosa* by Miquel Poal-Aregall became great hits with the audience. As Molner says, the contribution of this theatre must be valued because it normalised the presence of Catalan on the stage, and also because of its contribution to the literary tradition. Novels like *Private Life* by Josep Maria de Sagarra or *A Broken Mirror* by Mercè Rodoreda would not have been possible.

However, everything changed from the 1930s, when sound cinema and sports (football, boxing, cycling) became hegemonic popular shows. Some theatres disappeared or were transformed into movie houses to accommodate the innovation. The contributors of *Mirador* felt that cinema was an unsurpassable form of entertainment, because it seemed to them reality itself. So sound cinema would define what artistic taste should be and became a model for judging the performing arts in general. The crisis of El Paral·lel was already a reality. Moreover, the Spanish Civil War turned everything upside down, ruining Catalonia and also the dazzling cultural life of the famous avenue.

Molner's study reflects the great importance of El Paral·lel, not only because it was popular but because part of our cultural heritage comes from there. El Paral·lel built a citizenship and, therefore, also a country. It promoted values such as work, honesty, solidarity, democratic will, republicanism

and the self-government of Catalonia, and made an invaluable contribution to the Catalan language. And all thanks to the works of writers and artists who were very popular with a mass audience. Desires that arose from an era and wonderful people, from that world or underworld of the Distrito V. Molner's interpretation and explanation of these fundamental shows is exemplary, as he sheds light on the texts to be able to understand the political and social intention of theatre in El Paral·lel, and its rejection by the intelligentsia of *Mirador*. *El Paral·lel fent país* is a wide-ranging, profound and serious study, especially because of the author's interpretation of the great Amichatis and the weekly *Mirador*, and because it summarises, with his own input, that unique exhibition at the CCCB: *Paral·lel Avenue, 1894-1939. Barcelona and the Spectacle of Modernity*. Overall, it is an admirable contribution to the culture of a country — although some may have forgotten it — called Catalonia.

The question we should ask ourselves now would be this: what needs to be recovered from that torrent of works and authors of El Paral·lel? Many of us, like Molner, defend this rich and wonderful legacy. Thus, a book like *El Paral·lel fent país* makes us think about the need to publish the work of those important figures of Catalan popular literature who fed the El Paral·lel industry with their talent, because of their literary, historical and social interest. But who will do so? We must insist on the need to create a Catalan national publishing house that releases all this kind of material, a cultural and literary heritage that has shaped our essence. Even if only to understand who we are.

