

# Old Craftsmanship on the Stage as Resistance

*Mercè Saumell*

A number of small companies that work with the manipulation of small objects and visual dramaturgy have appeared during the last decade in Catalonia and Spain. They have a fragile and peripheral structure based on the artisan nature of craftsmanship. These groups are the paradigm of a new corporeality that contrasts with the hyper tech body from the past decades. They combine records of stage naturalism contrasting with very sophisticated gestures records.

These small companies, which have a certain legacy of surrealism, make reference to past national avant-garde theatre artists like Joan Brossa. Their work also relates the exaltation of the everyday (Michel de Certeau, 1984) and the concept of intimacy (José Luis Pardo, 2009).

At the same time, these creators also offer resistance regarding the hyper media and their endless image overlay. They look into the past, re-reading popular genres like cabaret, Grand Guignol and puppetry. We will talk about the productions and the creative process of companies like Hermanos Oligor, Playground, Cabo San Roque, among others, in order to uncover the political underpinnings of their vintage stage imaginary, and in their artistic and biographic work we find from tin toys and other children's memories to dreamlike nostalgia that help them to build a personal universe with irony and sometimes self-parody.

**Key words:** economic crisis, crafts, nostalgia, intimacy, self-parody.

I would like to begin my statement by quoting the philosopher Michael De Certeau and his defence of the popular, the insignificant, of the everyday as fundamental categories and unjustly forgotten by academic research:

It does not yield itself to researchers who nevertheless have it there before them, just a popular language which escapes them when they approach it, for it comes from too far away and too high (De Certeau, 1992:15).

It is noteworthy that a number of modest theatre companies that work with the manipulation of small objects and visual dramaturgy have appeared during the last decade in Catalonia and Spain. They have fragile infrastructures based on the artisanal nature of their craft. These stage creators place themselves on the periphery of mainstream production; they also claim the right to fail as a form of rebellion against the pressure of the markets. In some cases they even take pride in the right to be complacent regarding their own work.

To what extent is this generation resisting and adapting to the economic crisis and the collapse of big productions? To what extent can we talk about survival strategies or aesthetic choices? The productions and the creative process

of companies like Hermanos Oligor, Playground, Cabo San Roque, Antigua i Barbuda, David Espinosa and La Tristura uncover the political underpinnings of their vintage stage imaginary.

### Common Characteristics

What all these formations have in common is a dramaturgy based on objects and the interrelation between the stage and the visual arts. The overarching characteristic of these new groups, which have an austere format, is their intimate and outright artisanal approach. They tend to be oneiric and look to the past through the construction of very specific universes. Some seek a distanced – nearly ironic – relationship with the spectator. Others seek an emotive intimacy through tenderness and nostalgia for childhood and adolescence. In this respect, these young professionals, most of whom were born between 1976 and 1999, openly demonstrate playfulness in their dramatic creation, good humour, self-parody and, in particular, complicity with and proximity to the spectator.

Of significance is the limited relation between their proposals and those of previous generations, led by technological groups with a prominent international profile (La Fura dels Baus, La Carnicería/Rodrigo García, etc.). What has also changed is the relationship with the spectator, now becoming much more intimate.

In Spain there has been a long period of abundant publicly-funded grants for the creation of modern stage designs, in the areas of infrastructure and the production of shows. This period started with the Socialist Party government under Felipe González as prime minister, going through the pre- and post-Olympic periods of 1992, until the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy. In contrast, the current drastic disappearance of grants has modified the creative process itself. For the most part, today we can only speak of mere subsistence when referring to innovative creators. *Dar patadas para no desaparecer* [Kicking so as not to disappear] (2009) was the insightful title of a show by Colectivo 96, one of the multiple companies whose very existence is threatened by the change in paradigm, with the disappearance of nearly all grants for the creation of risk-taking theatre. It is interesting to note how this artisanal approach is presently being extended to the realm of production itself.

Thus these creators we are referring to prefer to have a defined control over their production. They work with modest, self-managed budgets that translate into shows that are easy to set up and to take to small domestic and internation-

al festivals. We are talking about an easily manageable production system that is alien to the tyranny of new technologies and bureaucratic red tape. They all defend the artisanal, the everyday and the popular value of their creations.

David Espinosa, a stage designer born in Elche in 1976 one year after the death of the dictator Franco, expresses it very clearly:

The reality in which we have always moved as artists is characterized by precariousness and lack of means, and that has always been precisely the focus of our work: devise mechanisms to address the lack of resources, make a virtue of necessity, and emphasize gaps to enhance interest and failure as the engine of creation (Saumell, 2013).



Playground. *El rei de la soledat*. 2006.  
(Photo: Jordi Bover)

## The Defence of the Popular

Something to highlight among these new formations is their relation to popular stage elements. As a result, there are frequent references to the circus world, town fairs and festival stalls toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On these stages of today we find old dolls, automatons, tin-plate toys, cabaret, shadow plays, freak shows, illusion and magic effects, Grand Guignol, pantomime and puppetry. There is a clear desire to appeal to the prominence of what is purely theatrical and anachronistic, an anti-technological desire exhibited as an element of surprise, since we are speaking about a generation of post-television creators that has grown up in the era of the Internet.

A good example of this is the Oligor Brothers. In 1997 the siblings created their Romantic Mechanical Theatre in the School of Fine Arts at the University of Cuenca. Since then they have been instrumental in the strong rise of a num-

ber of artisan aesthetic companies in Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Their production, *The Tribulations of Virginia* (2000), resulting from three years of research, was seen in many alternative festivals. This production, incorporating dolls and automatons operated by pulleys and pedals, took place inside a fair stall, the kind in which 19<sup>th</sup> century curiosities were put on show, such as false mermaids and authentic Siamese twins. Thus with a parody reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century chapbooks, the Oligor brothers, transformed into a duo of cheesy presenters, narrate to the audience the melancholic love story of the minuscule dolls Valentín and Virginia. By manipulating the dolls, the duo brings them to life in their endearing universe of reused objects.

### Influences

In both Spain and Catalonia we can speak of a major influence of the poets and playwrights, Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Joan Brossa, who, although they cannot be considered contemporaneous creators, both participated in clearly surrealist aesthetics. Gómez de la Serna extolled visual surprise and praised the unimportant, the insignificant, the banal and the everyday. In his 1915 book *El Rastro* [The Flea Market], he tells how he captured the most unlucky and abandoned objects in the world-famous flea market of El Rastro, in his native Madrid. The poet felt himself powerfully attracted by the lyrical and poetical evocation of those humble objects. Like Gómez de la Serna, many creators of these new theatrical formations find unusual, even bizarre, objects in second-hand markets, which they then modify, customize and display on stage.

The company Playground, created in Barcelona in 2003 by the actor Xavier Bobés and the stage director Eric de Sarrià, works essentially in the world of second-hand, everyday, humdrum objects, to which they then attribute new discourses in surprising contexts. In *El Rei de la Soledat* [The King of Solitude] (2006), for example, they poetically recreated the claustrophobic world of a 1930s office worker, in Kafkaesque surroundings with surrealist touches and enviable rhythmic precision. Quite possibly Playground is the clearest example of the affinity with Gómez de la Serna's ideas. In the group's foundational text, Xavier Bobés proposes:

Our staging, work method and investigation revolve around everyday objects. (...) The objects are bought in second-hand markets, antiques fairs and old toy stores. We also find many objects that have been abandoned by their owners due to their defective condition (Playground, 2013).

The musical and theatrical group Cabo San Roque, established in Barcelona in 2000, also followed this production line in their first show *La Caixeta* [The Little Box] (2000). Four typical characters are seen inside a giant music box filled with films and other objects found by chance. The objects form a scenic collage of music and automatons and are, at the same time, animated by the projection of amateur home movies dating from 1917 which the members of Cabo San Roque found in a Barcelona rubbish bin. It was from these movies that the idea for *La Caixeta* was developed.

The fascination for objects found is also shared by another Barcelona company, Antigua i Barbuda, formed by the builders of custom stage machinery Jordà Ferrer and Òscar Paz, together with musician Pablo Rega. In 2008 they decided to carry out an ambitious project, *El circo de las penas* [The Circus of Suffering], a drama narrated by twelve machines. Twelve inventions crafted from the plans for twelve emotion machines by the Portuguese inventor, João Siqueiros, in 1890. There is not much information about the life of João Siqueiros, so to research his life and history Antigua i Barbuda have used different sources of information, such as references to Siqueiros's name in other studies by the pioneers of his time, like Narcís Monturiol's *Memories of Submarine Navigation* (1858).

These documents about the Siqueiro's suffering machines reached Jordà Ferrer's hands by chance after one of his Catalan friends acquired them at an auction in Sao Paulo. Neither The Crying Machine, the Memory Machine, nor the Love Measuring Machine were ever built by Siqueiros. However, Antigua i Barbuda, based on these plans and by reusing objects — objects that have memory, according to them — developed a disturbing stage installation of inventions that the spectators operated while moving around between the human-like machines.

Along with Gómez de la Serna, the Catalan poet and playwright Joan Brossa is this generation's other major reference point. Brossa performed sleight of hand when he was young and loved magic and the Grand Guignol (his 1957 work, *Grand-Guignol*, comes to mind). The practice of Surrealism along with the group of painters Dau al Set (including Antoni Tàpies, among others), led him to create in 1967 his *Collar de cranis* [Skull Chain] or *Poesia escénica* [Stage Poems], a compilation of pieces, some of which concentrated on brief actions without words and were a visual prodigy of magic and surprise. Brossa's increasing influence is very evident in Playground, Cabo San Roque, David Espinosa and La Tristura. The one-on-one questioning of the spectator, always seeking the complicity of the audience in this imaginary world, which is now no longer great dramatic fiction but a playful, ironic, quotidian and fleeting experience, is a very Brossa-like premise.

## Recovering Genres

From 1880 to 1914, Barcelona had seven big stages dedicated to Grand Guignol, naturalistic horror theatre. At that time, Jaume Piquet was a silversmith who changed his job and became a weepy melodrama playwright following the genre that was so successful in Paris. His play *La monja enterrada en vida* [The Nun Buried Alive], produced in 1886 in his Teatre Odeón, obtained a resounding success. The plot was anticlerical and this pleased the audience because most of the spectators were workers with strong sentiments against the Catholic Church. They believed a popular legend of the time, that novices were often murdered in the nunneries in order to save their dowries before being married to Christ in their respective ordinations. *La monja enterrada en vida* ran for three years and was good business for Piquet.

In 2012 the artistic duo Nao Albert and Marcel Borràs reworked this most celebrated Piquet play. They recreated and exaggerated the acting style, introducing an almost cartoonish element. They belonged to a new generation of performers that grew up in the 1990s. In their production *Elvira*, the nun, the main character of the play, was performed by Shang-Ye, a young Chinese actress and acrobat. The situation of Grand Guignol actors was complicated because their function was not only to act but also to do tricks. The actors had to portray the exact emotion required and at the same time do the tricks with precision and coordination. The strangest element in this kind of production was the use of contemporary images with the traditional tricks of this basic genre of horror. For example, the scene where the decapitated head speaks is a faithful recovery of the artisanal effect that Piquet used in the 1886 premiere.

## Authenticity

If authenticity is traditionally what differentiates art from craft, these creators defend creation that is humble, creation with a small ‘c’ but valuable and authentic. Again in the words of Michel De Certeau, “the everyday is sown with wonders” (De Certeau, 1992: 98). Following this French thinker, there is resistance to consumer products made available through massive distribution that seeks to shape the multitudes according to imposed consumerism models. As we said before, his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (first published in French in 1984), highlights the value given by De Certeau to the handcrafted, to the unique object, as another act of micro-resistance that at the same time mobilises unsuspected resources.

David Espinosa, who I have previously quoted, is the strongest defender of his generation of creators in this regard. His proposal, *Mi Gran Obra (un proyecto ambicioso)* – *My Great Work (an ambitious project)* (2012), is cheerful, ironic and combative. He says:

My Great Work is what I would do if I had an unlimited budget, the biggest theatre on the planet, 300 actors on the stage, a military orchestra, a rock band, animals, cars and a helicopter. My Great Work is Utopia. But, obviously, with a slight adjustment: the scale. That is, think big and build small. (Saumell, 2013).

*My Great Work* is inspired by the ideas of the visionary Manuel Sarrario de Veloy, an Andalusian socialist, when in 1841 he presented the project in order to create an industrial settlement called Tempul near Jerez de la Frontera, following the proposal of the Delegation of Cadiz to promote new towns. The project presented to Parliament and Espartero in 1842 was approved by the Government, although it was never carried out. A follower of Charles Fourier, Sarrario de Veloy imagined an ideal society and received broad popular support. Like him, Espinosa imagined a Utopian community on his small stage.

Indeed, David Espinosa manipulates handcrafted characters and objects for model train sets, creating a universe whose harmony of scale is shattered provocatively when he introduces a full-size industrial element, such as a can of Coca-Cola. Gathering around the table-stage, the limited number of spectators – that Espinosa receives for each show – follows the action by way of binoculars so as to enlarge the tiny stage objects. This is an ironic nod to the historical audience of the large opera theatres in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that were inseparable from their elegant binoculars. Once again, a game of scale!

## Intimacy

In his book *La intimidad* [Intimacy] (2009), the Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo differentiates between intimacy and privacy, the latter being understood as the trivialization of intimacy. He points out how today there is an overabundance of intimacy (sentimental pornography in the media and on the Internet). For Pardo, true intimacy does not lie in that which is secret about a person but in a linguistic effect and, as such, not only does not exclude the other but actually presupposes the other; it is a shared intimacy. Of the collectives that I have mentioned, the one that explores this theme most fully is La Tristura, established in 2005 and formed by three Galician men and one Basque woman, actors, illustrators and poets.

Their trilogy, *Años 90: Nacimos para ser estrellas* [The 1990s: We Were Born to be Stars], *Actos de juventud* [Acts of Youth], and *El sur de Europa: Días de amor difíciles* [The South of Europe: Days of Difficult Love], which premiered in 2013, intertwines texts and materials by Giorgio Agamben, Jan Fabre, Jean-Luc Godard and texts by the theatre company itself. The aesthetics of La Trisura are austere, lit by candles or everyday light bulbs. In their productions, the characters appear wearing street clothes, some dance, others draw on stage, but above all they talk to each other. Their concept of artisanal scenography is found essentially in the word, through texts that are lyrical and open, ironic and decidedly nostalgic. This nostalgia, evident in varying registers, is shared by the entire generation. The future is uncertain.

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