

Dissolution

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: As a playwright, dramaturge or stage director, he has participated in over fifty stage projects. He has been distinguished with the Valencian Performing Arts Award or the Valencian Writers Critics Award, bestowed by the Association of Catalan Language Writers (AELC), among others. In addition, he holds a PhD in Hispanic Philology from the University of Valencia, where he carried out research in modern and contemporary theatre.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

By reviewing several stage projects in which the playwright participated between 2000 and 2021, we propose a reflection on the link established between the concept of authorship and current production processes and models. From the perspective of authorship, is it still possible to achieve a meeting of imaginations, similar to falling in love, with the audience of the stage production? To what extent is it necessary now to argue for an intersubjective creation in order to delve more deeply into the complexity of today's reality and avoid being abducted by market mechanisms? Is it appropriate to find creative models that, in addition to being collective, do not accelerate research or aspire to commercial results? These are some of the questions that the playwright raises from his dissolution as an individual creator in processes shared with other creators, groups or communities, where professionals and people usually excluded from the stage can also come together. In some way, this dissolution enhances the central idea of this paper: every play should be a meeting of voices.

Keywords: Contemporary theatre, contemporary dance, community theatre, community dance, dramatic authorship, playwriting, Valencian theatre, Valencian dance, stage creation, stage experience

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I

“The link we establish with the concept of authorship determines our creation processes and models.” Thus began the abstract of this paper when I had not yet written it.

And the first idea that came to mind was: “The audience waits for the moment when their imagination encounters the imagination of those who created the show.”

This meeting of imaginations has nothing to do with identification but would be closer to a kind of ecstasy. Every play contains that wait, the wait for an unexpected encounter with the imagination of the other, an encounter not anticipated by authorship. This fleeting moment, this small miracle, also recalls the flash of falling in love.

Thus, when we start writing plays, we want to do so like Koltès, Churchill, Bernhard, Lorca, Kane... After the flash of falling in love, we wish to be the object loved, to feel different, to inhabit their skin, to speak, write, walk like them... Their voices will always be with us.

In the amorous encounter, says Barthes, I keep rebounding, I am light. Imagination also brings that lightness, which is why we can make it fly. When I discovered *Crave*, by Sarah Kane, or *Clase*, by Guillermo Calderón, I felt that flight of love and the desire for a first date. I wanted to know the other better to exchange subjectivities and savour the differences. So I directed the two plays. The rehearsals are the subsequent dates that the whole team shares in a polyamorous manner.

Some time ago I decided not to direct what I write because I think it does not help with the intersubjectivity that the performing arts require. I feel that the accumulation of multipurpose authorship tasks can diminish creative dialogue, encourage narcissistic temptation, and create a distancing from the world that can make us talk to ourselves and about the same thing. Undoubtedly, there must be individualities dedicated to art, especially if they have enough time to be able to express interesting things. For now, however,

I believe in a fairer distribution of the work and in developing encounters that can shake up the bodies and brains of the various subjects involved in the same creation.

II

“The link we establish with the concept of authorship determines our creation processes and models.”

There are fourteen days left to read this. Did you really quote A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments, by Roland Barthes? In times of liquid love, the anguish of Eros and Tinder, you quote Barthes...? The audience does not expect that meeting of imaginations you mention, for two reasons

First: Today our imagination is determined more than ever by consumer goods and mass culture. The desire for the other, the old engine of falling in love, has been replaced by the comfort generated by similarity, non-traumatic identification. Even so, we can consume the other, everything is possible for the market, but only if it appears stripped of otherness or if it creates fear or pity. Therefore, it seems more and more complicated for us to fall in love with the other and with their imagination.

Second reason: Do you think creators have time to fall in love? You yourself have gone through processes of cultural production so demanding that they have exhausted your imagination, projects that ensure you a discontinuous survival and don’t allow you to live. And your head knows very well that imagination is an essential natural resource that can reach its limit of exploitation. A shortage that for some time has been affecting the supply chain of the fictional products you have had to deliver lately. Right now, you are fracking the deepest rocks in your brain to be able to write this.

Conclusion: In a narcissistic society that rejects the difference of the other and a means of production that exploits the imagination to the point of exhaustion, how can this falling in love, this sublime encounter, take place? How is it possible?

Exhausted, you rely on the etymology of the word read, *llegir*, in Catalan: *legere*, to pick. Now you have time to cultivate your brain because you are unemployed; but all cultivation requires commitment and patience to be able to pick out at least a few fruits in the future. After months of overexploitation, before-during-and-after the pandemic, your brain is a wasteland, hungry for new encounters. Take the opportunity to sow. For the time being, however, start providing concrete examples!

7 January 2020

A creation laboratory gets underway linked to the Festival Dansa València, together with other colleagues. There we will share our exhaustion.

We wanted to research care and the body in the face of our diminished physical and emotional well-being. That's why we did not want to create too many expectations and called the show *Vamos a estar a ratos*.

We wanted a break from our precariousness on stage.

We wanted to fill the space with hammocks and invite the audience to lie down, to do nothing.

This laboratory was supposed to be an abrupt stop in the productive acceleration that we had been enduring for some time, but breaking with routines is complicated and it became a new endeavour, we couldn't resist any longer and got sick.

The first fruit of our research was this: only *illness* allows us to stop and rest. After a few days, with Covid, the whole world knew.

After enjoying a process full of beautiful encounters, after our exhausted imaginations became strong together, we had to postpone the festival.

And the pandemic did not change us. Well, yes, we were months behind schedule and everything went even faster. We had to feign a normality that, in reality, had never existed. But the show had to go on, it was safe, and it had to make money again. With physical distancing, we had to give up the hammocks. Sitting around a table we launched an endless list of questions. We had read together, we had cultivated our bodies and brains, and now we were reaping the rewards. Maybe that's why there was a flying fruit bowl full of grapes and an oven, next to the musician, that filled the whole room with the smell of bread.

An audience member who writes in a newspaper thought that the whole thing was uninteresting and dull. We could have pretended everything was fine, but we decided to exhaust ourselves with our exhaustion. A futile cry against the production machine that was already picking up speed again. Months later, the same person who writes in a newspaper saw a play that lasted three hours, but that seemed to last only one! So he heralded it as a masterpiece. And, yes, maybe plays that fly by are masterpieces... of entertainment. And that's also fine, but the watchword for cultural workers is clear:

You have to produce more quickly and make products where the consumer doesn't notice the passage of time.

No one can suspect the inevitable coming of death.

III

Every play is a meeting of voices.

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IV

“The link we establish with the concept of authorship determines our creation processes and models.”

Take advantage of the blank canvas offered by unemployment and remember, memory is the faculty that enables us to write. It explains the origins, when you didn't make a living from this and you had enough time to imagine alone or accompanied...

...

In 1999 we had a venue. In fact, it was a garage in the neighbourhood of El Cabanyal in Valencia. When we came home, we reeked of dampness and happiness. We rehearsed each piece over the course of a year, meeting a day or two a week. All this time we talked and imagined together. Everyone in their space, responsible for a specific task, shared references with the others and created as a team. In those days, we did postdramatic theatre, the text was one more resource in a dialogue with the physical and visual actions. We read about performance and saw a lot of weird cinema. The first result of that work process was *Escoptofilia* (2000), a reflection on the gaze. In the performances, reality burst onto the stage literally and metaphorically with the body of a pizza delivery man. Just before, the performers had placed an apparently fake phone order. At first, the deliverymen were shy in front of the audience, then they got used to it and made a greeting or even did their own special performance.

I have a theory: if each performance counts as a year of life, I have premiered pieces that have not reached adulthood, “beautiful corpses”. In that garage, we could see the works ageing; they were in the listings the whole season. That venue was our wood-fired oven where the brains were cultivated and our homemade pizzas were baked. Since there was no demand in the theatre market for the pizzas we made, we didn't deliver them. We were young and didn't aspire to sell anything, we survived with what we did. Our process and our creative model were not considered professional by the industry, but we were happy and even received some awards.

V

“The link we establish with the concept of authorship determines our creation processes and models.” You could now consider the link...

In the theatre context of the Valencia Community, you can choose different production models: Actor-Playwright-Director, accompanied by a Producer, a 1900s business model; a group of colleagues, with a very specific market segment or with difficulties to get local distribution and public funds, an association or cooperative model of the 2000s; or with your romantic partner, who also works in theatre, accompanied or not by a competitive distribution, a self-employed-girlfriend-family-business model, common in the last decade... All three models currently coexist and can be mixed

or confused. I came late to the business model, and I'm neither an actor nor have I ever had enough savings to ask for credits; I tried the second model for a few years until it stopped being a group project; and the third has been impossible, as I have almost never had a stable partner...

At first, therefore, my link with the concept of authorship was the conventional one: writing alone, asking for subsidies, entering a literary contest, and having a company produce some of my plays. All this began to falter with the arrival of the first commissions from other creators and my gradual interest in directing plays by other writers. In these cases, you feel obliged to put yourself in someone else's shoes and all shared authorship implies the dissolution of individual authorship, which I think is what I'm trying to talk about here.

In this respect, I would like to start by talking about two productions with different creation processes and models: *Zero responsables* (2010), a group piece in homage to the relatives of the victims of the underground accident in Valencia who had been enduring the indifference of the government and Valencian society for four years; and the piece co-written with Begoña Tena *I tornarem a sopar al carrer* (2017), another tribute, this time to the neighbourhood groups of El Cabanyal, which had to put up with the threat of destruction of their houses for twenty years.

Over fifty professionals were involved in the first piece, and around thirty people in the second, including professionals and participants from the neighbourhood (in addition to the brass band). Pieces created as support and appreciation for two social struggles representative of a true popular culture, which could develop a critical and transformative discourse and also dialogue with various artistic initiatives. These were groups that, at least, defeated a stubborn and cruel fragment of capitalist realism. This effort left casualties because power does not allow alternative realities at any price and demands sacrifices, exemplary punishments. Consequently, these pieces did not "grant a voice" to others; rather, we were given powerful voices, allowing us to dress up, dialogue and imagine with them... Thus, we were able to make each piece a meeting of voices.

Collaborative or community projects implicitly or explicitly question artistic individuality. Faced with a market that processes everything and makes it into a product, what is the strength of a single subjectivity that ends up being forced to become a brand in order to survive? With this question in mind, and since I had no stable partner or bank credit, as a playwright I found myself jumping from project to project of different groups and creators. Thus, I have dissolved into many intersubjective and therefore unpredictable processes. In addition, this gradual dissolution of sole authorship has helped me to diversify in tasks (playwriting, direction, dramaturgy, coordination...) and has allowed me explore unknown territories of the performing arts, linked to other disciplines such as dance or circus. In recent years, instead of developing a personal brand, I have been working with very heterogeneous groups of people. Today, I still write alone, but I can spend years writing the same play...

VI

“The audience must be summoned to a storm!” Remember that? It’s from your notebook when you directed *Crave*. You miss good storms in the theatre, don’t you? Lately, it’s almost always good, pleasant weather in theatres. In fact, the new plans of the Valencian public institution argue that culture must heal, and forget to say that it must also hurt, disturb. On the stage, you see too many plays with moral pretensions without any moral interest, plays that protect you from the dark parts of being human. There are no more storms because they are offensive or inflammatory, but no one accuses plays of irreproachable morality which, consciously or unconsciously, defend capitalist realism, of being offensive or inflammatory.

Few dare to dress up as depraved, violent or cruel individuals because they could be accused of being inhuman, of having made a confessional piece. And no one wants to risk being accused of suffering from a lack of humanity, when the person who really suffers is the person who is immune to one of the most essential human capacities: imagination. We must defend the ability to imagine in order to be able to multiply and diversify our identity, to explore an infinite possibility of worlds that disturb and help reconsider certainties and moral prejudices. Right now, for example, a significant part of our society is excluded from the stage and only a privileged minority presents itself as its spokesperson. We must exchange each other’s voices, wear them, and distrust these supposed spokespeople.

In 2015, the director of La Coja Dansa, Santi de la Fuente, invited me to direct the show *Sospechosos*. Santi had been holding workshops with young people from multi-problem families for years. The piece was called *Sospechosos* because, every day, the police asked the three protagonists, two Moroccans and a Romanian, for their papers. It was my first experience in dance and in a participatory project. The whole team could contribute textual, musical or visual materials. From everything we found, I remember a scene where the three young men donned Pasolini’s voice. While they played carefully removing the wood pieces from a giant jenga, Santi interviewed them:

Interviewer: How would you define love?

Pasolini 1: People die from lack of love. Society suffers from it and that’s why we tend to glorify love. It’s one of the keys to productivity.

Pasolini 2: Without love, humanity can’t produce. And all societies are sexually repressive, because the energy consumed by making love escapes the profit of capital.

Pasolini 3: Society forbids us knowing the power of love; it doesn’t let us really make the most of it.

Interviewer: Do you always say what you think?

Pasolini 1: No, I can’t always say everything I think.

Interviewer: Say it.

It all comes down to this: how to say what we can’t say. The three teenagers wanted to join the army. We discovered that members of the army

visit associations of unaccompanied minors to offer themselves as protective parents and their only future employment. When the three young men researched and learned the fine print of their future contract, we created a shocking choreography with screenings of drawings of child soldiers. Working with non-professional people uncovers unknown corners of reality. Somehow, we feel that the professional inertia of production robs us of imagination and illusion, and we don't realise it until we work with non-professional people. The continued link with the professional market distorts the ability to love.

Recently, I worked on another dance piece, *Soledad* (2021), which mixed professional dancers, young migrants and a group of elderly people who share housing. The director (Gustavo Ramírez Sansano) explained that no professional dancer can dance like Pepa, aged seventy-two, or Yacouba, seventeen. The spirited content of these bodies was quite a learning experience for the trained and disciplined bodies of the dancers. Every dance creation is a meeting of bodies. No matter how many step outlines we did, the mysterious energy of that group always led us to an uncertain place. These proposals contain surprising transformative individual and group potential. Links are established that provide new views from shared spaces and experiences, as well as highlighting conflicting intimate and social situations. There is no single protagonist; everything dissolves with such diverse imaginations. It is in this kind of creation that we can most question and dissolve our identity. I recently experienced it again with a piece I wrote with the help of a transgender teen.

VII

Angel Olsen sings a song I find enchanting:

*I don't want more answers,
as nothing is eternal.
I just want
a little beauty.
You understand?*

With the dancer and choreographer Ángela Verdugo, we created the pieces *A-normal o la oveja errante* and *SC_Santa Cultura*. It all starts when Verdugo shares pages and pages of chaotic thoughts on a concept with me. The game is about discovering the meaning of everything. Only towards the end of the process, when the piece begins to speak for itself, do we discover where we are. Our time management is anarchic and we cook on a low heat, we let the pot simmer for as long as necessary. We do long creative processes when we don't make money or lose money, but we make up for lost time. In a way, we reclaim our chronic precariousness.

The first piece talked about Verdugo's difficulties in being a mother and dedicating herself to the stage. Her educational positioning is irreverent, she says things that a mother might not say, we mix autofiction with a children's story that would never put a child to sleep. There are also other calmer and more contemplative moments when, sometimes, beauty puts in an appearance. Towards the end of the piece, Verdugo admits that "she likes what is beautiful." A naïve and innocent confession that her daughter might make, but that hides a deep and desperate desire that we have both shared since we met, just as Olsen sings: "I just want a little beauty". Well, that moment of explosion of beauty is when the doors of our and the audience's imagination open. And the longed-for meeting, the ecstasy, occurs in the most unexpected way, the only opportunity to discover, perhaps, who we are after having fallen in love.

