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Dossier "Resistance and normalization: uses of the past and cultural discourses in contemporary Catalonia"

Archaeologies of the National: Albert Boadella and *El Nacional* revisited*

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of resistance and normalization in contemporary Catalan culture through a case study of the recent revival of a devised performance by Els Joglars. The play in question, *El Nacional*, was first performed in 1993 as a response to the changing landscape of contemporary theatrical production, shaped by increasing political intervention in the cultural field. In particular, it presented a challenge to the monumental vision of a Teatre Nacional de Catalunya through continuing commitment to an alternative Catalan national theatre based on the creative exploration of identity in performance. Revived as part of Els Joglars' celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of their foundation, *El Nacional* has been explicitly presented as a prescient exploration of the conditions and need for a culture of resistance, capable of standing against the normalizing tendencies of political and economic power. However, both the discourses of the national in which the play has been reinserted and the particularly overt archaeological focus with which it has been re-enacted, replace the more translational aesthetics (and ethics) that were the hallmark of Els Joglars' devised practice with a performance style more committed to repetition and re-inscription, resulting in the reproduction and fetishization of stereotypes of Catalan difference.

Keywords

Catalan theatre, national identity, performance, theatre history, resistance, embodiment

Arqueologies d'allò nacional: Albert Boadella i la nova versió d'El Nacional

Resum

En aquest article s'analitza la dinàmica de resistència i normalització en la cultura catalana contemporània a través de l'estudi de cas de la nova versió d'una obra de creació col·lectiva d'Els Joglars. L'obra en qüestió, El Nacional, es va representar per primera vegada l'any 1993 com a resposta als canvis en el panorama de la producció teatral contemporània, marcat per una creixent intervenció política en l'àmbit de la cultura. En concret, l'obra presentava un desafiament a la visió monumental d'un Teatre Nacional de

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Catalunya a través del compromís permanent amb un teatre nacional català alternatiu fonamentat en l'exploració creativa de la identitat en la representació teatral. El Nacional, que ha tornat als escenaris com a part de la celebració del cinquantè aniversari de la fundació d'Els Joglars, s'ha presentat explícitament com una clarivident exploració de les condicions i la necessitat d'una cultura de la resistència, capaç de mantenir-se ferma davant de la tendència normalitzadora del poder polític i econòmic. No obstant això, tant el discurs sobre allò nacional en què s'ha inserit l'obra com l'enfocament arqueològic, particularment evident, d'aquesta nova versió substitueixen l'estètica (i l'ètica) més translacional que va ser el segell distintiu de les creacions col·lectives pròpies dels Joglars per un tipus de representació més compromesa amb la repetició i la reinscripció, que dona com a resultat la reproducció i la fetitxització dels estereotips del fet diferencial català

Paraules clau

teatre català, identitat nacional, representació teatral, història del teatre, resistència, materialització

The return of the national

This article constitutes a return in a number of different senses, in that I first began thinking of Els Joglars' *El Nacional* many years ago in the context of work I was beginning to put together on Catalan national theatre, after long years excavating the ways in which twentieth-century Catalan theatrical discourse was shaped and inflected through the translation and reception of Shakespeare.¹ The work I was doing eventually materialized in an issue of *Romance Quarterly* on Catalan spaces, where I used the debates on the construction of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya to reflect on the relationship between theatre space and cultural identity in Catalonia (Buffery, 2006). Reference there to *El Nacional* was framed mainly by consideration of Josep Maria Flotats' idealized representation of "Teatre de dins i símbol arquitectònic exterior", in which there was overt recognition of theatre's status as an architectural monument within the urban environment and of the different layers of operation of urban space. Reflecting on the importance of theatre space in the projection of the Catalan capital and of Catalonia as a whole, I drew attention like others (Feldman, 1998; Orozco, 2006) to the opposition between this monument and non-architecturally based theatres, between what Boadella himself christened the Catalan Valley of the Fallen (Delgado, 2012: 180) and his own projection of the Catalan performance groups as an alternative Catalan national theatre. If I return to *El Nacional* here and now, it is because it has come back to me in the manner of one of those fleeting flashbacks, glimpses of half-formulated recognition or moments of alarmed *dejà vu* experienced in encounters with other writings, performances by Els Joglars and perhaps, above all, in the spectacle of Boadella himself as he parades his own idiosyncratic views about Spanish and Catalan national identities. My return to *El Nacional* thus responds to three main frames:

1. Resistance and normalization: Els Joglars famously emerged from the cultures of resistance of the 1960s and 1970s and, as is endlessly repeated in theatre histories, constitutes one of the few independent theatre groups who survived on its own terms,

continuing to provide a critical voice throughout the period of 'normalization'. *El Nacional* is, of course, neither the only nor the most famous of their works to have enacted a criticism of the perceived obligation of Catalan cultural production during the 1980s and 1990s to simply represent a vision of the contemporary Catalan community envisioned by the political classes, but it is perhaps the one that engages most overtly in archaeological endeavours around discourses of the national and around the relationship between theatre and community.

2. Archaeologies of the national: If *El Nacional* is invoked here to remember the relationship between resistance and normalization that characterized the Catalan cultural field of the 1980s and 1990s, it is also a play that, rather fortuitously, has once again entered into and is playing with the national consciousness (past and present). This is because the company that came to stand for the Catalan community's resistance to Franco has survived so successfully that it recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. And what was the play chosen to celebrate the monument? It was, of course, *El Nacional*, revived and re-enacted from the archive, drawing on the same costumes, sets and many of the same actors – Ramon Fontserè, Begoña Alberdi, Jesús Agelet, Pilar Saénz and Minnie Marx – in the kind of supremely archaeological endeavour that I am palely imitating here, in my own attempts to draw on documentary traces of fleeting instances of performance to reconstruct and address their relationship with aesthetic, social and political context.

3. The past in performance: Most interesting and urgent of all for me, though, is the need to grapple with performance's relationship to the past, with how analysis of the repetition and re-enactment of *El Nacional* helps me to apprehend the uses of history in contemporary Catalan culture and to appreciate the cultural encounters produced by theatre as it travels to different geographical and linguistic contexts. If elsewhere I have applied translational approaches to Els Joglars' *Trilogia Catalana* in order to discuss the construction of identity in translation (Buffery, 2013), here I wish to begin to explore



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what performance theory can bring through engagement with the work of Joseph Roach (1996).

Boadella, Els Joglars, resistance and normalization

Albert Boadella, through his work with Els Joglars, is one of the most consistently experimental and original theatre practitioners to have emerged in the Spanish state (see Breden, 2009; Feldman, 2009; 2011, amongst others). Whilst the creative process followed by Els Joglars has always been a collective one, many of the textual versions of their productions are published under Boadella's name, indicating his influence and *auteurship* within the group. He is overtly critical of the conformism of much of contemporary theatre and of the conservative complacency of Catalan culture since the 1990s. More recently he has been outspoken about the dangers of Catalan separatism, challenging what he perceives as the subordination of the Spanish language and Spanish speakers to Catalan, as well as political moves towards further independence in Catalonia. For him, Els Joglars "tried to become antibodies for the disagreeable virus of nationalism" (Boadella, 2007, p. 303).

The company's 'resistance' credentials are linked to their origins in the non-textual forms of the Independent Theatre of the 1960s, drawing both on international performance currents and providing an outlet for cultural protest against the dictatorship that could bypass the censor. Alongside other performance groups such as El Tricicle and Comediants, they came to embody the resistance of the Catalan community; however, unlike the latter, they maintained their political radicalism beyond the 1970s, continuing to produce critiques of official culture since then. Their continued radicalism has mainly been attributed to the persecution of the company after the production of *La Torna*, which satirized the military, in 1977. However, as explored by Feldman (2009; 2011), it was also fed by the waning of critical and audience responses to their work on their return to Catalonia from exile in the 1980s and by their choice of self-exile in constructing a creative space beyond the centralizing forces of a capital city in the throes of the Barcelona model. Feldman celebrates the exilic quality of Els Joglars' work as something that allows them to combine a nostalgic desire for the homeland with a more critical vision: "convierte en un problema sin resolver la cuestión de la identidad cultural. A través de sus viajes y trayectos nómadas logran que sus obras continúen vibrando con intensidad"¹ (Feldman, 2011, p. 11).

First performed in the Teatre Municipal de Girona in 1993 then touring across the Spanish state, *El Nacional* was devised explicitly to contest the operation and effects of cultural policy at that time, both at national and regional levels. Set in a dilapidated former

musical theatre, the play turned this setting into a sacred space, with the formerly opulent carpets that provided bourgeois theatre-goers with the trappings of luxury now surrounded by candles that transformed the stage into a space of ritual transition. The theatre's remaining occupants include the former usher Don Josep, an Andalusian cleaning lady with a double personality, who often slips into the persona of opera singer Castadiva, and Don Josep's side-kick Paganini, who procures the actors needed to revive this theatre's fortunes. An assortment of homeless beggars, buskers, pimps, pickpockets and prostitutes are rounded up and made to 'perform' *Rigoletto* in return for a theatre roof over their heads. Just as they are living in the theatre, so Don Josep teaches them a mode of performance that is not about imitating life but intended to be more far-reachingly transformative: one that shuns the – for Don Josep – unforgivable crimes of contemporary dramatic theatre, one capable of fooling even the flies. Thus, the play both displays and confronts different methods of performance, playing with them, and even satirizes Boadella's own methods of improvisation and devised drama. Yet the space they create is shown to be marginal and fragile, threatened by health inspectors, press reporters, architects and bulldozers who come to condemn these theatre squatters (and are themselves condemned to death and dispatched with gusto, one by one).

The play's focus on a marginal space, occupied by social outsiders and faced with erasure to make way for new spatial uses, both provides commentary on the side-effects of public redeployment of existing cultural spaces and explores the very ontology of cultural practice; the opulence of the opera house is stripped back to consider the relationship between art and life, whether in the Andalusian cleaning lady's transitions into her other role as opera singer, or in mirroring the 'real' death of the architect on stage in the mimicry of the actors. The play emerged from a context of widespread debate — in the cultural world around the politics of cultural funding, and in the theatre around the tendency to focus on highly visible big-budget spectacles based in capital cities rather than spreading the funding across different geographical locations and social strata (Orozco, 2006; 2007). At a local level, the play responded to the immediate context of the Generalitat project to create a Catalan national theatre. However, whereas the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya emerged from government identification of the need for visual display, an ideology reflected in the 'transparent' glass structure of the building designed by Ricard Bofill, Boadella and Els Joglars' 'national' theatre presented an inverted mirror to the national, with a dark, degraded, ruined space occupied by tramps, streetworkers, pickpockets and the former usher of an operatic theatre, whose mistrust of official 'actors' underpins the critique displayed by this play:

1. "it leaves the question of cultural identity unresolved. Their nomadic wanderings and travels mean their works continue to vibrate with intensity."



Don Josep: Vinga! Practiquem un acte ecològic! Que vagin passant sobre l'altar del sacrifici! Assessors culturals!... Artistes, funcionaris!... Consellers de cultura!... Jurats de premis nacionals de teatre, crítics, directors de teatres nacional, assessors teatrals, tècnics de cultura, representants artístics, artistes de vanguardia, periodistes mercenaris...

[...]

... subsecretaris, catedràtics, programadors, fundacions artístiques, genis contemporanis, guardonats de les arts, traficants de subvencions, models, dissenyadors, arquitectes, publicistes, urbanistes, ministres de cultura! Ballarins de flamenco! ... Esnobs, públic elitista, intel·lectuals nacionalistes, artistes oficials...² (Boadella, 2002, pp. 570-1)

This scene is considered by Corral (2011) to be the most powerful in the play, because of its heightened synthesis of language, music and bodily gestures. In it Don Josep's translation of the Vendetta aria from *Rigoletto* evolves into a hypnotic attack on the different individuals and organisms "que han colaborado de forma determinante en reducir el teatro a una simple imitación sin ningún compromiso social"³ (Corral, 2011, p. 5), accompanied by the stylized movements of the hunch-backed Finito, the music of the band of indigent buskers and the *bel canto* of Castadiva. All of these characters variously stand for Rigoletto in the final scene of the play.

Archaeologies of the national

What kind of mirrors does the play present today? Why the archaeological endeavour for 2011-2012? In the press dossier and almost all subsequent reviews, Els Joglars' choice of *El Nacional* is presented very overtly in terms of the continuing relevance of Boadella's theatrical manifesto, espousing a shift away from the focus on theatrical monuments, prizes and the responsibility to represent the community, towards a more critical, processual practice, towards the creation of a space where culture is constructed by bodies in the here and now, in which identity is in flux and community is negotiated. Boadella himself presents

the play as a very prescient one of more relevance today, in the midst of the economic crisis which Spain is currently suffering, at the tail end of Europe's 'PIIGS':

En estos tiempos de inflación artística los grandes coliseos de la ópera compiten empleando complejas y costosas estructuras para sobrevivir como nuevo parque temático musical... La gran complejidad burocrática y laboral que se ha organizado... ha propiciado el intervencionismo tutor de los Estados con su nuevo modelo de nacionalización de la cultura elitista. Un modelo de muy difícil sostenimiento dadas las actuales circunstancias.⁴ (Boadella, in Els Joglars 2011a, p. 1)

In the press releases, trailers, dossiers and interviews that were produced to advertise the play, which are then just repeated ad infinitum in theatre 'reviews' (Els Joglars, 2011b), the double function of revisiting the past is very clearly marked out. Once again, it is to denounce the deleterious effects of public funding of the arts, which leads to the generation of empty spectacles and the management of cultural heritage for ends that have more to do with political display than with aesthetic, cultural or social value. On the one hand, Boadella draws attention to the changes made to the new version of *El Nacional*:

Yo no puedo copiar a mí mismo 18 años después. He respetado la estructura de la obra y he aumentado las cosas que me parecen los valores esenciales de esta compañía... He aumentado la música porque cuento con dos grandes figuras del canto... Y el texto está muy cambiado. Es mucho mejor que la anterior porque los actores tienen 18 años más de experiencia⁵ (Boadella, 2011).

On the other hand, the advertising of the play relies heavily on documentary traces of the 1993-1994 'original': the same actors, costumes and set, to photographs, reviews and video clips which are juxtaposed with footage of the rehearsals for the 2011 version. Added to this is the even greater focus on the (admittedly self-proclaimed) role of 'independent' artistic communities like Els Joglars, who, in this play, come to stand very clearly once more

2. Don Josep, come on! Let's practise an ecological act! Queue them up for the sacrificial altar! Cultural advisors!... Artists, civil servants!... Culture ministers!... Jury members for national theatre awards, critics, national theatre directors, theatre advisors, cultural technicians, agents, leading artists, mercenary journalists... [...]
... under secretaries, full professors, schedulers, artistic foundations, contemporary geniuses, arts award winners, traffickers of grants, models, designers, architects, publicists, urban planners, ministers of culture! Flamenco dancers! ... Snobs, elitist audience, nationalist intellectuals, official artists...
3. "that have played a vital role in reducing theatre to a simple imitation without any kind of social commitment".
4. At these times of artistic inflation, the great operatic coliseums compete by using complex and costly structures to survive as new musical theme parks... The great bureaucratic and employment complexity that has been organized... has led to tutored interventionism from States with their new model for nationalization of elitist culture – a model that is very difficult to sustain given the current circumstances.
5. I can't copy myself 18 years on. I have respected the structure of the work and expanded the things that I feel to be essential values for this company. I have increased the music because I have two great singers.... And the text is very different. It is much better than it was because the actors have 18 more years of experience.



for a culture of resistance at the very limits of cultural survival. Just as Rigoletto represents the essence of theatre for Don Josep, so his endeavour is mirrored in Boadella's own aspirations as transmitted to the press: "Busca una vuelta a los orígenes del teatro del arte, un renacer de ese oficio de bufones, juglares y payasos, muy alejados de los actores histriónicos e intelectuales que degeneraron la profesión hasta convertirla en un arte para funcionarios"⁶ (Boadella, as cited in Fernández, 2011).

The indigents occupying the theatre – and Els Joglars, in their repetition of their role – come to stand for the squatters standing against the bulldozers, against police violence, press complicity and the cynicism of the professional classes, who are prepared to tear down public space rather than see it recycled and reused from a counter-hegemonic perspective. In relation to the discourses of 2011-2012, then, Els Joglars are no longer standing for an alternative Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, but for an alternative embodiment of the 'national', one that stands for the hungry, battered, marginalized national body of the people and that in some ways justifies the use of monstrous violence in order to stand against the forces of hegemony. The main difference here is that this Teatre Nacional is now Teatro Nacional, that is, it no longer includes Catalonia; the play now exists in a Spanish version — not as the Catalan/bilingual version that emerged out of the original improvisations — and thus arguably draws primarily on the Spanish text published in 1999. Furthermore, the play is not to be performed in Catalonia. Why not? According to Boadella, not through any fault of Els Joglars, but because Catalonia no longer wants them, due to Catalan media censorship of their satirical, counter-cultural work. Quotations in the press include: "Podríamos haber sido la gran compañía del oficialismo catalán pero nos pusimos a la contra y lo pagamos"⁷ (Lorenci, 2011); "'Si no te quieren, dejas de querer'", en alusión a la marginación mediática y política que sufre la compañía por representar sus obras en castellano⁸ (Calderón, 2011); "Estáramos encantados de actuar en Cataluña. Simplemente, no nos quieren, nos han considerado traidores a la causa"⁹ (Agencia EFE, 2011). That such claims form such a central part of the advertising of the play and are repeated in so many press releases and reviews is not accidental, for what we see is a construction of the national that excludes Catalonia — indeed, that is built on anti-Catalanism, on the same association between the causes of the crisis and Catalan profligacy, nationalism and betrayal that underpins the coetaneous discourse of the Spanish government and the press. Furthermore such a 'differential' construction of the national is further confirmed by the other intertexts brought into play in

presenting *El Nacional*: reference to Boadella's own stance on Catalonia, his involvement with the political party called Ciutadans de Catalunya and even his love of that other alternative national spectacle, the *fiesta nacional*, that is, bullfighting (see, for instance, A. D., 2011)

The past in performance: Rigoletto as effigy

In many ways, then, the intertextual link drawn between Els Joglars and Rigoletto could not be more apposite. Here we have an appeal to the marginal, outsider jester central to the company's vision of performance history and its role as uncomfortable commentator on the discourses of power. Yet the appeal to Rigoletto, in particular, is a rather problematic one, for the central character of the jester is ultimately a grotesque figure whose performances are also about maintaining and reaffirming political power and, in fact, result in the death of what he most loves. The question of how Rigoletto is re-enacted and repeated in these endless performative repetitions is one that I would like to end by discussing briefly drawing on Joseph Roach's concept of the 'effigy' (1996, p. 33-41). However, we could of course quite easily – if somewhat naughtily – choose to see Boadella himself as the hunchbacked Rigoletto who, from the perspective of a Spanish national frame, represents the necessary underpinning and restoration of hegemony, even if he carries the monstrous hump of being a Catalan (a hump which he is able, like Finito in the play, to put on and take off as he pleases), and even if, from the perspective of the Catalan national frame, he represents the betrayal of the Catalan community (the stabbing of the possibility of a hybrid Andalusian/Catalan opera singer) — precisely because the Catalan hump is one that is detachable and expendable.

The different archaeologies of the national re-staged here leave us to grapple with what they actually stand for and what they tell us about the function of the past in the here and now. On the one hand, they are compelling allegorically because of the way in which they oppose the construction of an architectural theatre as a place of memory, standing for a fixed relationship between a community and its past, with a more ephemeral site of memory constructed by the interaction between the different bodies that come together in a particular context of situation. They indicate the importance of attending to the histories of bodies in performance and of looking closely at how the functions of the past in contemporary discourses are inscribed and reproduced

6. "He is looking to return to the origins of artistic theatre, a renaissance of this profession of buffoons, minstrels and clowns, far removed from the histrionic and intellectual actors that have denigrated the profession to the extent of making it an art for civil servants."

7. We could have been a great company for official Catalan line, but we went the other way and paid for that."

8. 'If they don't love you, you stop loving,' in allusion to the political and media marginalization that the company suffers for producing plays in Spanish."

9. "We would love to perform in Catalonia. They just don't want us, they deem us to be traitors to the cause".



in the bodies of performers. And thus they compel us to turn to Roach's exploration of the ways in which performance engages with the past through embodiment in order either to maintain continuity or differentiate.

Roach develops the concept of the effigy in *Cities of the Dead* (1996) in order to examine how culture is reproduced through the process of surrogation, drawing on a wide range of theories from performance ethnography to Derridean deconstruction. He explores the function of effigies in Circum-Atlantic encounters through performance, centring on the particular urban vortices of behaviour of London and New Orleans, which bring different languages, cultures, communities and bodies into contact. His work adds to recent work on linguistically-divided geographies as translation zones (Apter, 2006; Simon, 2011), the tools with which to analyse documentary traces of the performance of identity. If performance is seen as a process that always contains excess, difference and supplement, through the links it sets up with the bodily, with the environment in which it takes place, it becomes necessary not only to take account of the multiple media through which it communicates but also the performativity of the actors who, by stepping into a role, repeat and restore behaviour whilst at the same time inventing and re-creating it. Applied to *El Nacional* we have already glimpsed the different ways in which Els Joglars' bodies reproduce and are criss-crossed by cultural discourses to produce a vision of identities that are performative, drawing heightened attention to the experience of being in the here and now, as located political actors in public space.

But there is more to it, for the repetition of *El Nacional* in fact moves away somewhat from Els Joglars' devised processual practice of 1993 to one that is as much about reconstructing a monument, based on a text fixed in Spanish (Boadella, 1999). It thus reminds of how the attention to bodies in performance needs also to engage with many different layers of documentary traces, to explore more carefully the languages and discourses from which they emerge and with which they enter into dialogue, attending to them as bodies in translation and also as bodies that relate in myriad ways to the authorities of text, language and history.

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