

Esencia de mujer: Exploring Women's Socio-Political Boundaries in Post-Franco Spain

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During the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, avant-garde Spanish theatre was acutely concerned with criticising and destabilising the continually more precarious grip Franco held over political and cultural life. After the dictator's long-drawn-out death in nineteen seventy-five, people experienced relative freedom combined with the frustration of relinquishing a long-held objective that was never achieved as such, in the sense the regime was never conclusively overthrown. As a consequence, and in an attempt to deal with this vacuum, creative energies in the theatre were channelled away from the direct political fight against state-organised oppression towards exploring and striving for more personal freedoms of expression in many areas. John P. Gabriele notes how these included redefining women's socio-political parameters. [Gabriele, 1991, 949]. I will examine "Sorpresa" by María José Ragué Arias and "Allá él", by Concha Romero Pineda for the ways in which this ground is explored.

Women playwrights in Franco's Spain were few and far between for many reasons including difficulties in accessing education, strong social censure against women participating in intellectual pursuits and, allied to this, an inability to break into male-dominated, professional (or even amateur) theatre production. When women such as Ana Diosdado, Mercedes Ballesteros or Dora Sedano did achieve professional or semi-professional status as playwrights, often through marriage to a man connected to the theatre industry, their subject matter tended to be light and conservative. As Patricia O'Connor states:

"women dramatists writing before the eighties... [r]eflect their more restricted education, ...are more conservative ideologically, more puritanical linguistically, and less innovative technically. Their plays tend to stress religious fervour, focus on idealised romantic episodes, and reinforce traditional values."

[O'Connor, Letras Peninsulares, Spring 1988, 99]

She goes on to suggest that another reason for the dearth of women playwrights in the sixties and seventies, under the greatly relaxed censorship laws, was that women's "cultural conditioning" urged them to step aside from the task of weaving a "more aggressive, materialist, and specifically sexual component" [ibid] into their plays. However, those women who did persist committed

themselves wholeheartedly to forging a new socio-political identity for the “new woman” who was emerging in the young democracy.

The *teatro realista* [realist theatre] of the forties and fifties, by authors such as Fernando Arrabal, Francisco Nieves or Josep Palau i Fabra, had been superseded by a theatre in which writers like Alberto Morales and Jordi Teixidor began to produce work much richer in symbolist imagery. This undoubtedly occurred in response to the pressure to discover a new theatrical language capable of subversively criticising the regime that could slip freely through censorship restrictions. As María José Ragué Arias has written: “Las obras, en su gran mayoría, no pueden contemplarse únicamente desde el punto de vista del drama literario. Los textos son propuestas escénicas en unas claves que hoy han perdido afortunadamente su sentido.” [“The majority of these plays cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of a literary drama. These texts are stage proposals written in codes that have fortunately lost their meaning today” Ragué Arias, 1996, 59].

In the *nuevo teatro español* [New Spanish Theatre], as it was known, characters were often cast as animals, or the authority figure of Franco represented by characters such as Power, Nero, or Creon, since the classics freely lent themselves to such allegorical interpretation. In referring to a theatrical generation previous to her own, Paloma Pedrero has described it “en una onda más de teatro condicionado por la censura... un teatro más paródico, más Brechtiano” [“closer to a theatre tradition conditioned by censorship... a more parodic, more Brechtian theatre,” *Gestos*, Noviembre 1999, 150]. A good example of this is Jordi Teixidor’s *El retaula del flautista*, premiered in 1968. In 1996, Dagoll Dagom staged a return season at the Teatre Joventut in l’Hospitalet de Llobregat, with Ramon Teixidor playing the Franco-like Mayor and another younger actor in Teixidor’s original part of the Pied Piper. However, free from the backdrop of *Franquismo* that had once given the allegory meaning, and in spite of being a fine production, this new version of the Hamlyn fairy tale was quietly criticised.

Though the *nuevo teatro español* developed into the non-text-based, physical theatre of Els Joglars, Els Comediants and la Fura dels Baus, which is still a popular theatre genre in Catalonia, it lost power in the immediate post-Franco environment when creativity turned inwards to examine social and personal power relationships. Nevertheless Lidia Falcón has suggested another reason for the collapse of creative production after Franco’s death, in the late seventies: “En la Transición ya éramos tan felices, tan felices que no teníamos nada que escribir, nada que criticar, nada que reflexionar, nada que pensar.” [“During the Transition, we were happy, so happy we didn’t have anything to write about, to criticise, to contemplate, to think about.” *Gestos*, Noviembre 1999, 150]

While not a fertile period for women theatre writers, the sixties and seventies nevertheless stimulated fresh configurations in work and social structures, opening up more freedom for women in many spheres. As they became more active in the struggle against the crumbling regime, they began to question and stretch the boundaries of the gender roles they had been forced to accept for forty years, and to use the tools of activism they had developed in their own favour. Therefore, the early eighties saw a new generation of women writers emerge, who explored a more intimate area of gender relationships in their work, an area virtually unexplored by male or female Spanish playwrights.

María José Ragué Arias’s “Sorpresa” is a study of a woman dependent on the patriarchal structure around her. As a youngish actress, Gloria constitutes an object of attraction for the male gaze, which is one of her sources of power. While she is a working woman, and therefore has a certain degree of independence, her profession is dependent on the choices the men around her

make, especially those of her producer spouse, Alfredo. She earns her money by displaying herself in public and she tells us that up until the present she has always played “*el papel de chica joven y sexy*” (“the young, sexy girl” García Verdugo, 1995, 14]. She has won some of her roles so far by being Alfredo’s sentimental partner—or is it rather that in order to succeed as an actress, she must accept his, or another male’s (producer, director, client, etc.) advances? Yet her desire to change, to play more intellectual, emotionally deeper roles, is the springboard of the play. Therefore, for a key interview with Alfredo’s Argentinean director friend, she chooses to dress soberly and un-sexily, but as she gets ready, Alfredo calls to tell her he has decided to present a younger actress to the Argentinean director. So even before she has articulated her decision to the outside world, she has had her power taken away. A retrospective viewer—someone aware of feminism’s development since the eighties—might anticipate that the play’s resolution would involve her rejecting male hegemony in order to resolve her dilemma through true independence, unsupported by any male power structures. Yet the unnamed Argentinean director decides, to Alfredo’s chagrin, to cast a more mature woman (Gloria) in the leading role. It is a slightly naïve resolution, almost a fairy tale happy ending. It is difficult to see how Gloria’s situation is truly empowered here, even though she will be acting in a role more to her liking. Is there really much difference between playing Medea or a blond bimbo if it is yet another man who is pulling the strings behind the scenes? She may gain better lines, but find her Lady Macbeth reduced to a vacuously sexual or *morboso* image by the director’s myopic vision. Gloria moves from dependence on one male to dependence on another (or both), one who has different—albeit more intellectual—criteria. While all the economic cards are dealt into male hands, the author narrowly manages to suggest (ironically?) that Gloria regains her power because of the awareness she comes to through her decision.

In “Allá él”, Concha Romero Pineda presents a superficially similar scenario: an actress, restrained from realising her full professional potential through a partner’s emotional coercion. Yet the resolution is profoundly different. Romero plays with the play-within-a-play structure. Pepa, a middle-aged woman, now a housewife, is left by her husband for—she conjectures—a younger woman. Initially she runs the gamut of emotions: anger at having endured the lean years while now that other woman will enjoy his wealth, “*las vacas flacas para mí y las gordas se las comerá con ella*” (“The thin calves for me and while she’ll eat the fatted ones.” García Verdugo, 1995, 46]; self-accusation for having wasted her youth, beauty and relative success within small but explosive roles, “*papeles de rompe y rasga*”, on a man who took her away from the stage and her own independence; disillusionment at twenty years of relationship going down the drain just because he desires a younger woman; despair because she now feels too old to get back into the dating game, and again anger that the man she thought she knew is so dishonest and cowardly as to refuse to accept his own aging by fleeing into a younger woman’s arms.

Despair predominates, despair at having abandoned her career and at being abandoned. She goes through a sequence of “Let me count the ways...” to kill herself, and finally settles on sleeping pills, of which she has a good supply. It is at this point that the “naturalism” of the play begins to transmute into a kind of magic realism. A providential phone call from her sister stops her from taking the final step towards her death. This conversation takes her back to a previous unmarried existence and forces her to look in the mirror at her own identity. Switching on the television, Pepa is confronted by the monologue with which she herself opens the play. Her sister has urged her to call her old friend Gonzalo, which she does. Is this the same Gonzalo who is “Pepa’s” childhood sweetheart in the play? The scene in the *prostíbulo* [brothel] between Pepa and Gonzalo makes us as audience members question what is real and what is a fantasy. Is Gonzalo truly a childhood

sweetheart, or is this another fantasy of hers? Or of his, a pre-arranged client scenario? In any case, the situation, whether illusory or real, of having someone believe in her, love her throughout all these years gives her the strength to reinitiate her quest to “tocar el mundo con [sus] manos” (“touch the world with her hands,” *ibid*, 58]. Through her meeting with Gonzalo, Pepa achieves a sort of epiphany, that sets her free. She wants to be unbound, to try a second time—though belatedly—to conquer life. The whole telephone-television-mirror sequence and even the sordid setting of the brothel scene, can be doubly read as the crisis of self-evaluation facing post-Franco Spain. After forty years of self-imposed amnesia and blindness, democracy forces it to open its eyes to its own existence and reassess its identity. Spain must abandon the dirty dealings, the darkened rooms of the dictatorship and re-enter the world of light, of honest relationships.

“Allá él” can also be read as a continuous, more realistic story, in which the Pepa who opens the play is the same Pepa working in the *prostíbulo*. Therefore, the coincidence whereby she gains her role in Gonzalo’s play becomes a fantasy she creates in her own mind to justify the job she gets—working in a brothel. This is the much more logical story of a forty-year-old woman who must re-enter the workforce, and who needs the fantasy of acting in a play to make her unsavoury work more palatable—catering to the same male needs that drew her partner away from her. Even if we assume in this reality that she wins her degree of financial independence as an employee of the brothel’s female *madame*, she is still inextricably locked into the patriarchal structure. The choice of brothel as workplace can be seen as a metaphor for the theatre, and for the place of women in patriarchal society. Yet it also functions as a metaphor for the power politics of work in its basest sense. The profession of actress has always been closely associated with that of prostitute, the oldest profession. Even if Pepa is not actually attending the clients, she is still dependent on a patriarchal system of values.

Settings are important in all the *Esencia de mujer* plays, and are generally domestic. In fact, the play-within-a-play scenario of “Allá él”, where the twin settings of home and brothel are overlaid, reflects the desire and demand of women throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to enter the exterior world, the supposedly masculine sphere. Yet it is in the private sphere that both Pepa and Gloria examine themselves and attempt a healing, before setting out to conquer the public sphere. However, if men control the public sphere, these domestic spaces are not necessarily female-controlled. The first lines of “Sorpresa” are: “¡Uy! Pero, ¿qué hace usted, aquí en mi casa?” [“Oh! But what are you doing here, in my house?”], and in choosing her own style of theatre, free of “moscas” [flies] and parasites such as Alfredo, she speaks of it as a house: “*Eso, eso es lo que debo hacer, sacar a todas las moscas de mi teatro.*” [“This, this is what I must do, shoo all the flies from my theatre.” i.e. spring-clean; start afresh.] So it natural that the house is an area of female power, and a place where she can take important decisions and undertake her own healing. Yet because her house is imbued with the presence of the man she lives with, her hardest challenge is to remake her life, reorganise her house for life without her husband. For Pepa, who has stopped working, the house she lives in is not her own. Even though she inhabits it, it is Juan’s wage that has paid for it and Juan’s presence that she evokes throughout the space, so going out to work represents an escape and an emancipation. Her final lines, from a song or poem—delivered to Juan, from whom she has emancipated herself—in one sense accept that she may have to leave her house. In fact, part of her freedom must consist of leaving her interior space and going out to explore the outside world. The lines also read as a metaphor for *Franquismo*:

Se me ha quedado estrecha mi casa,
el tiempo de silencio se acabó,
la voz se me quebraba en la garganta,
y el aire, de tanto encerramiento se me viciaba.

[My house, now, is too narrow for me,
The time of silence is over,
My voice was getting hoarser in my throat,
And the air, so closed up, is enclosing me.]

García Verdugo, 1995, 60

The “house” of the Franco regime has become too small for Spain’s growing democratic freedom, And the “*tiempo de silencio*” [time of silence] is over, even if the *pacto de olvido* [pact of forgetting/oblivion] will last long after the Transition and right up until the end of the century.

If the generation of the *nuevo teatro español* was “*la generación más premiada... y la menos presentada*” [“the most highly awarded... yet the least staged theatrical generation”, Ragué Arias, 1996, 55], women writers after the decade of the eighties could be described as having been the least staged and also the least subsidised. Furthermore, women writers began to distance themselves from the label of feminist, as Paloma Pedrero states, “*yo, a través de mi teatro no quiero reivindicar nada.*” [“Through my theatre, I’m not trying to demand anything.” Pedrero, in Charnon-Deutsch, 1992, 56]. This was partly due to the increasing institutionalisation of funding channels and the men who controlled them. According to Lidia Falcón, the enormous amounts of funding available as spin-offs in the lead up to the large-scale projects of 1992—the Seville expo, the Barcelona Olympics and Madrid, City of Culture—meant that female authors and *intimista* [intimate] works tended to be sidelined in favour of an increasing emphasis on big-money productions. As Pilar Pombo states: “*Pasamos de una dictadura ideológica con Franco, a una dictadura económica... Ahora, cuando no les interesa algo, con no darte dinero y no programarte, lo tienen solucionado.*” [“We went from an ideological dictatorship to an economic one... Now, when they aren’t interested in something, it’s enough not to fund you, not to programme you in theatres, and their problem’s solved.” *Gestos*, Noviembre 1999, 153]. She adds that the actor became undervalued in favour of the director and set designer, who became the new stars.

So while the eighties constituted a narrow window of freedom for feminist expression, the nineties saw these opportunities reduced as a new patriarchal institutionalism took over the reins of power in theatrical production, excluding women once again from writing and direction. Yet at the same time, as the transition normalised into democracy, many women stepped back from the extremism and even separatism of nineties feminism, opting for a new style of liberation in which they attempted to integrate gender equality into the prevailing system, choosing a strategy of education over conflict with their male counterparts. The challenge of the new democracy was to integrate plural opinions and expression into a single system.

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