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0521622921 - The Theatre of García Lorca: Text, Performance, Psychoanalysis

Paul Julian Smith

Excerpt

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Introduction

Text, Performance, Psychoanalysis

In 1994 the Fundación Federico García Lorca moved to new quarters in Madrid, next door to the Residencia de Estudiantes, of which García Lorca himself had been the most celebrated student. There, under the direction of García Lorca's nephew Manuel Fernández-Montesinos, the Fundación continued its academic activities – publishing a specialist journal that featured a wide range of contributors and approaches, editing catalogues of its invaluable manuscript holdings, organizing international symposia on the poet.¹

In 1995 the Huerta de San Vicente outside Granada was opened as a “Museum-House” (*Casa-Museo*) dedicated to García Lorca. Purchased eleven years before by the town council, it was filled with “furniture, pictures, and original objects from the house as it was when García Lorca lived in it,” at a time when he composed some of his best-known plays and poems.² At the opening ceremony García Lorca's niece Isabel García Lorca played the poet's arrangement of a popular song on his own piano. *El País* reported that the Museum “seal[ed] the reconciliation between García Lorca and Granada,” and that together with the birthplace in Fuentevaqueros (also a museum to the poet)³ and the Fuente de Lágrimas (“Spring of Tears”) of Alfacar, where the poet's remains are believed to lie, the Huerta de San Vicente “complete[d] a Lorcan route” or tourist trail.⁴

The Fundación, with its catalogues and manuscripts, the Huerta and birthplace with their relics and collectibles (“Letters from Granada: Number 1 in an Epistolary Series”), each seems to signify in its different way the definitive institutionalization of García Lorca in Spain, the poet's consolidation as an academic and a popular icon on the verge of the centenary of his birth. Moreover, *El País*'s stress on “reconciliation” suggests the final termination of an

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extended period of mourning, one marked by the full incorporation of García Lorca into the Madrid academy and the Granadan establishment toward which in his lifetime he felt such ambivalence: Isabel García Lorca is reported to have wept on hearing the address by Laura García Lorca de los Ríos, the director of the Huerta, in which she presented the house as “an extension of the body [of the poet], an extension of his imagination.”

Outside Spain also it appeared that García Lorca had achieved an untouchable status – for example, it was reported that in the United Kingdom he had surpassed Brecht as the most performed foreign playwright.⁵ Yet it is a commonplace of cultural studies that any public figure (writer, politician, movie star) is a site of struggle. And one aim of this book is to examine the constitution of what I have called elsewhere the “author function” in relation to García Lorca,⁶ to tease out those contradictions that trouble the smooth surface of institutional prestige and historical reconciliation. More specifically, the increasing acknowledgment of García Lorca’s homosexuality must problematize the very notion of a “legacy” of García Lorca that is to be preserved and consecrated by family, region, and nation-state. Lesbian or gay artists whose relationships remain invisible or unrecognized by law may not be best served by those who legally inherit what remains of their name and property. As Luis Fernández Cifuentes has persuasively argued, it was the nature of García Lorca to seduce.⁷ And this seduction (etymologically, “leading astray”) means that García Lorca’s life and work are irreducible to bare facts, “original objects,” or plot synopses. But this need not mean that the glamour of his figure or the rapture produced by and celebrated in his work can simply be assigned to an ineffable “magic” or *duende*. Rather, I will suggest that this shuttling between concept and affect (between thought and feeling) so characteristic of García Lorca’s theater should itself be submitted to analysis, and most specifically to psychoanalysis as the vocabulary of passion, in all senses of the word. As we shall see, passion, like seduction, leads to the greatest of threats and of pleasures – the loss of a sense of self (of García Lorca’s and of our own).

Cultural studies as a discipline is only now emerging in Peninsu-

lar Hispanism.⁸ But if, as has been recently argued, “the modernizing project” of Spain in the 1920s and 1930s involving the “incorporation of popular and mass cultural forms particularly marked . . . the Spanish avant garde,”⁹ and if García Lorca’s work is itself characterized by both “avant garde experimentalism and traditional elements,”¹⁰ then García Lorca must remain a key figure in any new approach to Spanish culture, as he was in more traditional literary studies. In my stress, then, on the historical, commercial, and ideological conditions of García Lorca’s “production” (of his self and of his theater), I thus seek to make a contribution to this emerging field. However, unlike many practitioners of performance studies and some theater professionals who engage in “director’s theater,” I do not contest the importance of the text.¹¹ And if the 1990s have seen an institutionalization of García Lorca in Spain at least, they have also seen a number of publications that have changed the corpus of García Lorca’s writing and will perhaps transform our present understanding of its canonicity. Thus we have seen the appearance, much delayed, of three substantial collections of juvenilia – prose, poetry, and drama;¹² of the first free-standing edition of the *Sonetos del amor oscuro* (*Sonnets of Dark Love*), previously included only in the last edition of the complete works;¹³ and the first Spanish edition of the unproduced film script *Viaje a la luna* (*Journey to the Moon*) based on access to the original manuscript.¹⁴ There is little doubt that further unpublished works held by the Fundación will emerge.

The misadventures of García Lorca’s manuscript have by now a long history: If *Viaje a la luna* had appeared in both complete and incomplete form in English translation before it did so in the Spanish original, then, notoriously, *El público* (*The Public*) had been the object of a full-length critical monograph in both Spanish and English before permission was finally given for the text itself to appear.¹⁵ The precedence of commentary over original in this case is a deconstructive irony noted by critics such as Fernández Cifuentes.¹⁶ But this postponed publication is the clearest case of a divergence between the playwright and the family that inherited his copyright – for García Lorca had published in his lifetime the most

explicitly homoerotic fragment of the play, the dialogue of the Figure of Bells and the Figure of Vine Leaves; and he had repeatedly insisted that *El público* and the other “unplayable” plays constituted his real, true theater.

There has thus been increasing critical interest in García Lorca’s experimental plays, a change of emphasis that is reflected in this book by the fact that I devote half of my study to them.¹⁷ And there seems little doubt that an earlier publication of the unplayable plays would have counteracted the pernicious and pervasive folkloric stereotypes that still determine foreign responses to García Lorca: The recently revised *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* simply fails to mention the experimental plays, focusing, as ever, on the so-called rural trilogy.¹⁸ If the “impossible” theater was, as García Lorca declared, destined for the future, we are now that audience, and we have an ethical responsibility to respond to its challenge, a responsibility which earlier generations of scholars and theatergoers were denied. Such a burden cannot leave us indifferent, intellectually or aesthetically.

In tandem with this revision of the corpus of García Lorca’s theater comes the proliferation of critical approaches. While the history of what has been called “the politics of theory in post-Franco Spain”¹⁹ has meant that Spanish criticism remains predominantly within its linguistic and philological tradition, U.S. scholars in particular have produced a wide range of readings, in addition to the exemplary historical and textual work of, say, Christopher Maurer and Andrew A. Anderson – a contemporary scholar or student can pick and choose among feminist, gay, and deconstructive García Lorcás, to cite only the most familiar.²⁰ In this study I generally confine to the footnotes my references to the massive body of preexisting criticism in order to leave a clear space for my own argument and for close reading of the texts themselves.

It is in these close readings that I formulate some controversial interpretations of four major plays, which I take in reverse order of composition and increasing order of conceptual complexity and antinaturalism. Thus of *Yerma* I argue that the central, sterile protagonist can be read as an “intersexual type,” and that when she

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strangles her husband at the climax of the play she is, following Gregorio Marañón's recommendation to Spaniards of García Lorca's time, suffocating the seeds of the opposite sex that lie deep within her. *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*), I argue, dramatizes a lost object or relation – the young male body and its confrontation with that of the other, a mutual penetration of “two men in love,” as Langston Hughes's translation puts it. This confrontation cannot be staged by García Lorca but is, much later, by Carlos Saura in his flamenco film version, which I examine in Chapter 4. In *Así que pasen cinco años* (*When Five Years Have Passed*) the hesitations of the protagonist, his postponed engagement and deferred desires, are read as characteristic of the Gidian youth, more desired than desiring, unable or unwilling to integrate romantic love and genital pleasure. Finally, in *El público*, I argue, in the context of Lluís Pasqual's production, for a connection between the play's twin arguments on theater and on homosexuality, a connection that focuses on the perilous and provisional status of both, caught as they are between the subjective and the social, the personal and the public.

My readings are thus dependent on four successive intertexts – writers who are diverse not only in themselves but also in the nature of the relation between them and García Lorca. Thus Gregorio Marañón, Spain's most famous doctor, was a friend of García Lorca's and attended private readings and public performances of his plays. I cite him, however, as the theorist of intersexual states, a theory linked to but distinct from Freud's hypothesis of universal bisexuality and that has complex and productive implications for fertility, feminism, and male homosexuality. Langston Hughes, luminary of the Harlem Renaissance, was the translator of *Bodas de sangre* and of García Lorca's poetry; and the director of a recent New York production of that play cites their similar “interests and passions.”²¹ I myself am more concerned to show the differences between Hughes's translation and the unpublished version by José Weissberger performed in 1935, differences that reassert discreetly but emphatically a poetic tension and a homoeroticism absent or excluded from the text as it was performed. I also contrast Hughes's practice as a tragic playwright with that of García Lorca. There is

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some evidence that García Lorca was familiar with Gide's early apology for homosexuality; certainly the title *Corydon* is cited by Rafael Rodríguez Rapún in his one surviving letter to García Lorca. I do not aim to prove that García Lorca drew on this work (published in Spanish with a hostile introduction by Marañón) but rather appeal to it in order to establish a framework within which to reconcile García Lorca's appeal to a natural paradigm with the highly artificial reversals and inversions of *Así que pasen cinco años*. Finally, Lluís Pasqual is the best-known modern director of García Lorca in the Spanish state and the European Union. My last chapter seeks to show how text and staging are inseparable in his productions. But it also suggests that Pasqual's complex relationship with García Lorca is the model for a new kind of identification with the playwright – one that addresses both regionalism and homosexuality with intelligence and humor.

The homosocial confrontation I stage between García Lorca and these four figures (Marañón, Hughes, Gide, and Pasqual) thus leads me beyond literature into other disciplinary discourses, most particularly politics and medicine. My aim here is at once sociopolitical and literary-aesthetic: It is both to open the theatrical text out onto those historical contexts within which it finds its meaning and to lead back nonliterary discourses, such as science, to the literary forms they repudiate but whose traces persist in them nonetheless. Thus while Gide brings literary technique to scientific material in his artful dialogue on biology and evolution, Marañón renders science poetic in his persistent appeal to natural metaphors shared with García Lorca – the tilling of fields, the flooding of streams, the voice that speaks in the blood.

If Spanish cultural studies is still in its infancy, then the same is true of performance studies. Both scholars and theater professionals have lamented the lack of resources in Spain itself – there is no video collection of modern productions; no company dedicated to exploring and renewing the corpus of García Lorca's or Valle Inclán's work; and the annual number of productions of twentieth-century Spanish plays declined dramatically in the 1980s.²² Spaniards frequently contrast this state of affairs with the more congenial atmosphere they believe to exist in other European countries.

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In contrast to a certain strand of performance studies that is biased toward informal productions, often improvisational in form or mounted in nontraditional locations, I restrict myself in this book to theatrical performances of a conventional kind. I thus take four geographical places and historical moments as exemplary or symptomatic of the varied production history of García Lorca.

The first is the best known and thus the least discussed by me: Spain in the 1930s. While Spanish theater of the 1920s has been described as “mediocre and old-fashioned” by European standards,²³ the combination of avant-garde experimentalism and the renovation of traditional forms had by the time of the Republic produced a vital and varied dramatic scene. I focus particularly on the polemic over the 1934 premiere of *Yerma*, a polemic that recurred in a different form in the last days of the Dictatorship with Víctor García and Nuria Espert’s iconoclastic production of the same play. My second place and moment is Broadway in the same decade. Here the Neighborhood Playhouse production of *Bodas de sangre* (the first staging of a García Lorca play in the United States) is read within the context of a Broadway still recovering from the Depression and whose critics are often hostile to what they perceive as the pretensions of “little theater” – artistic, mannered, and overly reliant on music and mime. Significant here is the appearance of fully fledged stereotypes of García Lorca and of his theater (of precious lyricism on the one hand and of telluric elementalism on the other) that persist into our own time. A recent multicultural New York production is also examined for the purposes of comparison. The third moment is France in the 1950s and 1960s, when popular biographies and a large number of theatrical productions gave rise to a García Lorca cult or myth based, as elsewhere, on a curious mix of folkloric Hispanophilia and universalist abstraction.²⁴ The troubled 1958 premiere of *Así que pasen cinco años* (adapted by García Lorca’s friend and biographer Marcelle Auclair) is also read (like the New York *Bodas de sangre*) in the context of the struggle between the conflicting priorities of commercial playhouses and a Left Bank or “quality” theater whose artistic tendencies provoked violent reactions in critics.

Finally I address the figure of García Lorca in 1980s Spain, trac-

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ing his cinematic profile in biopics and adaptations, before giving an account of Pasqual's publicly funded productions in the various institutional contexts of Barcelona, Madrid, and Paris. García Lorca's legacy is here subject to multiple and contradictory readings, only some of which are reducible to Socialist cultural policy in the period. As in the 1930s, however, García Lorca's productions become the nexus of varied artistic projects, more or less directly connected to the plays themselves – thus Pasqual's *El público*, produced initially for the Centro Dramático Nacional, of which he was director, gave rise not only to Fabià Puigserver's radical staging but also to Ros Ribas's impressionistic production photographs (far superior to conventional press shots) and Frederic Amat's obsessively repeated paintings of top hats and horses, only a tiny proportion of which were used in the posters and program.²⁵ If it is indeed the case that, as John Hooper suggests, “without government subsidy it is very likely that drama in Spain would have entered a fatal downward spiral in the 1980s,”²⁶ it is Pasqual's achievement to have created almost *ex nihilo* a performance tradition of the unplayable plays, helped perhaps by Miguel Narros's earlier productions of *Así que pasen cinco años* in 1978 and 1989, which I discuss in Chapter 3. It is an achievement comparable to that of another Madrid-based initiative of the Socialist government, the Centro Nacional de Teatro Clásico (National Center of Classical Theater), established in 1986, which has also sought to re-create a modern tradition whose roots in the past have been violently severed from the present.²⁷

There is thus a sense of fragility in performance studies, a pathos and an uncertainty due to the lack of an artifact that survives the event itself, such as one finds in the case of a cinema screening. I have attempted to supply this lack through reference to still photography or video where available. But my main resource is press notices. These may frequently be impressionistic, anecdotal, or inaccurate (such as the New York critics who referred in 1935 to “Lorco”); but they provide invaluable and as yet insufficiently exploited evidence for the aesthetic preferences and ideological prejudices of their age. I thus use press material extensively, but criti-

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cally, to point up the production and consumption of the figure of García Lorca and the image of his theater in the United States, France, and Spain itself. As I have suggested earlier, this figure and this image remain disturbingly consistent, if internally contradictory, from one period and one place to another, thus suggesting that they are the product of deep-rooted fantasies about nationality and sexuality, fantasies that it may prove impossible to dispel. For theater is both singular and collective, the audience at once isolated and juxtaposed in the darkened auditorium. We are thus both free to fantasize during the performance and inevitably exposed to the public commentaries purveyed by the mass media that precede and underwrite that private experience. In just such a way, psychoanalysis shifts between the subjective and the intersubjective – the psychic formation of the individual and his or her socialization in the collectivity. Public performance, whether it is understood as “theatrical” in the restricted sense or as the acting out of prescribed social roles, is thus connected in complex but undeniable ways to what psychoanalysis’s first patient baptized the “private theater” of the psyche.²⁸

Why, then, the return to Freud in this book? I have already suggested that, in its twin stress on the psychic and the social, psychoanalysis is particularly appropriate to the study of drama. Beyond this methodological conformity, however, there is a theoretical choice: Given, on the one hand, the apparent exhaustion of Lacanian or *Screen* theory, threatened as it is by a newly vigorous cultural studies and historicism, and, on the other, the popularity of semi-academic Freud bashing that has led even historians of psychoanalysis to concede that “Freud [is] on trial,”²⁹ it is vital to return once more to Freud’s own words. It is for this reason that I have generally chosen not to cite commentary on Freud, be it Marxist, Lacanian, or feminist. If it is indeed the case, as Alan Sinfield argues, that the Freudian corpus is so large and complex as selectively to support almost any interpretation,³⁰ my own reading coincides with that of Jeremy Tambling, who argues in his important book on confession that “far from colluding with forms of confessional knowledge, [psychoanalysis] has the capacity to put into question pre-

cisely the repressions and interdictions forming the basis of religious confession and societal restraint.”³¹ This is vital for a figure such as García Lorca, whose works, even at their most hermetic, have often been interpreted violently as a personal testimony that betrays the secrets of their creator’s soul, a soul that is then made to serve as a prison for the libidinal body of the drama. Hence if I draw in this book not on Freud’s literary or cultural texts but on his clinical or metapsychological works, it is not because I seek, as some previous critics have, to pathologize García Lorca or his characters; indeed, a psychoanalytic reading, as I understand it, must transcend both author and protagonist. It is, rather, because my model of theater is comparable to one of Freud’s models of the psyche – an economy of drives and desires in which differing quantities of energy are made manifest in subtly varied qualities of affect. Psychoanalysis can thus attempt to incorporate at a theoretical level the most delicate, fragile, and pleasurable aspect of the theatrical experience – dramatic rhythm.

Contrary to the authoritarianism of which he has stereotypically been accused, Freud consistently refuses to draw a simple dividing line between neurotics and perverts on the one hand and “normal” subjects on the other. Taking his lead, I draw on linked pairs of terms in each chapter in order to give a general account of psychic and dramatic processes in each play that is related but not reducible to that play’s narrative content. In *Yerma* I focus on anxiety and bisexuality. “Anxiety” is a liminal term, variously positioned, as Freud develops his theory of mind, between the present and the past, the real and the fantastic, the somatic and the psychic, the constitutional and the accidental. Bisexuality, for Freud, constitutes the “highest degree of complexity” in such fantasies, provoking such theatrical phenomena as the “play[ing of] both parts” in the sexual relation, a “simultaneity of contradictory actions” or “constant switching . . . as though on to an adjoining track” that is also a key to the dramatic complexity of García Lorca’s theater.³² In *Bodas de sangre* I focus on mourning, melancholia,³³ and masochism. While these psychic phenomena correspond to the action of the play (with its grieving women ever anx-