

HOMOSEXUALITY ON THE SPANISH STAGE: BAROMETER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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El público, Federico García Lorca's daring, surrealistic treatment of homosexual love, was written in 1930 but not published until 1976; it received its world premiere at the Théâtre de l'Europe in Milan in December 1986, finally reached the Spanish stage in January 1987, and was reportedly slated for performance in New York the following fall (Sagarra). In January 1988 it was the play chosen by Jorge Lavelli to inaugurate the Théâtre National de la Colline in Paris. Lorca (1898-1936), whose assassination was doubtless prompted as much by his sexual preference as by his political views, considered the play temporarily unperformable. He reportedly told his friend Rafael Martínez Nadal that «in ten or twenty years it will be a great success» (qtd. by Londré 28). His prediction was off by some four decades, but he had no way of knowing the extent of sexual repression that was to come under the Franco regime (1939-1975).

During the long reign of *nacionalcatolicismo* in Franco Spain, homosexuality was not only prohibited by moral and religious beliefs but also by the legal code. Indeed, the gradual liberalization from the 50s to the 60s to the 70s in some aspects of official censorship and repression notwithstanding, a 1970 law actually dealt with homosexuals more harshly than the 1954 law that it replaced (Alonso Tejada 217-24; Anabitarte and Lorenzo 19).

In democratic Spain, legal reform came relatively quickly. Al-

though a divorce law was not approved until 1981 and the 1983 law legalizing abortion was very restrictive, homosexuality had already been decriminalized by 1978. But a change in the law does not guarantee an equivalent change in social attitudes. According to Alonso Tejada, in the early postwar years no law against homosexuality was necessary because Spanish society spontaneously discriminated against gays with severity and cruelty; as late as 1970, a national survey indicated that the majority of Spaniards viewed homosexuals as morally depraved delinquents (217-18). When the dominant culture imposes such a negative view of a particular group, one can hardly expect the commercial stage to take an opposite stand. Nevertheless, in the past fifteen years, the theater in Madrid has evolved radically in its portrayal of homosexuality, finally reaching a point at which *El Público* could be performed at Spain's National Drama Center and even be sent on tour to represent Spanish culture abroad. Because of the deeply embedded prejudices against gays, that evolution on the stage presents an interesting reflection of Spanish society in transition.

One of the first and most commercially successful postwar Spanish plays to deal openly with the subject of homosexuality was Roberto Romero's *Acelgas con champán*, which opened 26 August 1969 and ran for more than 500 performances. Although critic Pedro Laín Entralgo found a serious message under the surface comedy and at least a modest attempt at turning a caricature into a real person with a real problem, the comments of other critics (qtd. by Alvaro 1968: 70-74) and the synopsis of the play indicate that the farce's appeal to the audience rested on time-honored stereotypical characters and stock situations.

Martín, the young man of doubtful sexuality, is interested in cooking, sewing, and fashion. Wishing to cure him of his sickness, his widowed mother seeks the help of Mónica, a young neighbor of questionable virtue. When Mónica falls in love with Martín, the mother of course opposes their marriage for the same reason that she had initially sought Mónica's help. Happily Mónica is virtuous after all and Martín, in spite of a momentary hesitation, chooses her over his «friend» Pirulo. Martín and Mónica will marry, and the audience may heave a sigh of relief.

Acelgas con champán is an excellent example of what George Szanto has labeled integration propaganda. The dominant tendency

in bourgeois theater, integration propaganda does not advocate change, like agitation propaganda, nor cause the audience to question the social circumstance, like dialectical propaganda. It thus reinforces the status quo —and patriarchal myths. In the case of Romero's comedy, the spectator is presented with the disturbing prospect that a son from a good family is «abnormal», but then is assured that the problem does not exist. With the proper feminine encouragement a potentially homosexual young man will prove to be a perfectly normal heterosexual male. Even Mónica's lack of virtue proves to be but an illusion —another problem that evaporates effortlessly.

Closely linked to the taboo against homosexuality was the treatment of male virginity as a problem. Ironically for a society whose moral code was intended to preserve feminine virtue, the «cure» for the uninitiated —or uninterested— young man often required the sexual exploitation of a woman, but the good of the result apparently kept Spanish censors and audiences from criticizing the questionable morality of the means. The formula was a repeated one both on stage and in the cinema during the Franco years.

As early as the 1950s Víctor Ruiz Iriarte (1912-1982) gently subverted both the stereotypical image of the homosexual and the acceptance of sexual exploitation (Zatlin 1984), but in general the commercial theater in the late 1960s and early 1970s approached these somewhat related themes uncritically. In 1968 Joaquín Calvo-Sotelo (b. 1905) won the Calderón prize for his farce *Una noche de lluvia* in which a concerned father brings home a chorus girl to initiate his supposedly virgin son. The following year the expressionistic tragedy *Hay una luz sobre la cama* by Torcuato Luca de Tena (b. 1923), winner of the National Theater Prize, included a similar situation: a father who hires a prostitute to pose as a maid in order to cure a virgin son of his psychological problems.

By fall 1975 —the same theatrical season as *Equus* and the official beginning of nudity, or partial nudity, on stage— Spanish audiences were willing to accept a play about homosexuals that was far removed from the stock integration formula of boy-meets-girl-and-is-cured found in *Acelgas con champán*. On 3 September, seven and a half years after its New York premiere, *The Boys in the Band* (Los chicos de la banda) opened in Madrid. Its run of

over 600 performances made it one of the top three box office hits of the year (Alvaro 1975: 279).

For *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes, Mart Crowley's play was the most open treatment of homosexuality he had yet seen on the stage. «We are a long way from *Tea and Sympathy* here. The point is that this is not a play about a homosexual, but a play that takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as a valid basis for human experience» (qtd. on cover of Crowley). From the perspective of the present—and compared with more recent plays, like Harvey Fierstein's Tony Award-winning *Torch Song Trilogy*—Barnes assessment, seems unduly positive. The milieu, as well as most of the characters, are stereotypical. Although much more subtly than Romero's farce, *The Boys in the Band* must certainly have functioned as integration propaganda for heterosexual Spanish playgoers. Like Alan, Crowley's one presumably straight character, their glimpse into the secret life of a group of unhappy, maladjusted gays must have sent them complacently home, assured that homosexuals were just as sick as they'd always thought them to be. Indeed critic Antonio Valencia was very quick to quote Michael's line «You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse», however poorly translated: «Un homosexual feliz es tan raro como un muerto riéndose a carcajadas» (qtd. by Alvaro 1975: 87).

Comments of other critics give further evidence that the commercial success of *The Boys in the Band* did not indicate a sudden reversal in Spanish attitudes toward homosexuality. Alvaro himself in his introductory paragraph reports that a fortyish woman in the audience near him mentioned before the performance, «Todos los personajes son maricas» (1975: 86). Fernando Lázaro Carreter conjectured that the audiences consisted of middle-class playgoers, curious, not very cultured or understanding, who attended because the play was a summary of what they wanted to hear (qtd. by Alvaro 1975: 89). While Andrés Amorós similarly lamented the play's reliance on clichés, Adolfo Prego, the reviewer for the conservative newspaper *ABC*, managed to reveal all of the traditional biases:

Entre las plagas de nuestro tiempo figura el homosexualismo, problema pavoroso al que teatralmente suele dársele un tratamiento caricaturesco, porque hay algo en la apariencia y en la conducta del homosexual masculino que induce fácilmente a

la risa. Ellos lo saben, lo padecen y han adoptado una actitud agresiva. La sociedad no acaba de tolerarles. La ciencia médica ha acudido a explicar el homosexualismo como error de la Naturaleza o como fruto de la educación. Hay también lo que es pura y simple depravación viciosa, y esto corresponde ya a la Historia, a la decadencia de las sociedades (qtd. by Alvaro 1975: 86-87).

Given both this kind of continuing prejudice and the new freedom for dealing on stage with previously taboo topics, it is not surprising that homosexuality soon became the subject of agitation propaganda from both sides of the issue. The «teatro de extrema derecha» that emerged in Madrid in 1978 identified a number of social ills that were allegedly caused—or at least encouraged—by democracy: abortion, Communism, divorce, homosexuality, liberalization of the Catholic Church, pornography, and rape (Zatlin 1980). Eloy Herrera and Antonio Olano, principal exponents of this new Francoist theater, caricatured homosexuals as part of their general satirical attack on the post Franco regime.

The most successful of their reactionary plays, Herrera's *Un cero a la izquierda*, opened in Madrid at the Arlequín in January 1978 and ran for more than 800 performances. *Un cero a la izquierda*, as well as Olano's modestly successful *Cara al sol... con la chaqueta nueva*, which opened in the Valle-Inclán the following September, presented derisive images of male homosexuals by exaggerating the old comic stereotype. Herrera's attempt at serious theater, *El avispero*, had a relatively short run at the Valle-Inclán in September 1979. Its protagonist—a prostitute with a heart of gold—is subjected to the advances of a lesbian prison guard. The clear message in all of these plays, whether comic or serious in tone, is «Bajo Franco vivíamos mejor». The spectator is intended to leave the theater ready to fight for a return to traditional moral and political values—including the traditional discrimination against gays.

Although the agitprop theater of the extreme right attracted a steady audience, its impact on the Madrid stage was not significant. The playhouses that catered to these works were among the smallest in the city, and by 1980 the movement had virtually disappeared. On the other hand, 1980 witnessed the production of Francisco Ors' *Contradanza*, a historical drama that was widely perceived

to be antiheterosexual propaganda (Cantera Arroyo, Alvaro 1980: 43-49).

Staged by one of Spain's best known directors, José Tamayo, *Contradanza* opened in March 1980 at the Lara, a theater long associated with the bourgeois audience. Its respectable run of more than 200 performances may well be attributed to the daring nature of the subject and presentation rather than to literary quality. At the center of the plot is the fact that Elizabeth I of England was a man but that his mother had lied about the sex of her baby to protect him. The «virgin queen» is thus portrayed as a gay male who gives himself to male lovers who believe him to be female. Indeed the opening scene, on a dimly-lit stage, reveals Lord Enrique in the process of sodomizing Isabel. When Isabel erroneously believes that Lord Enrique's love will transcend anatomy, he reveals the secret of his sex by disrobing.

Elegantly costumed and impeccably staged, *Contradanza* was presented as an elaborate baroque dance, with a constant shifting of partners. Stock Elizabethan devices and characters further removed the production from contemporary reality. In spite of the work's obvious use of theatrical games, the spectator was left with a clear impression that the underlying message of the play was to be taken seriously. Lady Carolina —the only woman character in the play besides the ghost of Isabel's mother— and Lord Enrique are so perfidious that their violent deaths seem well deserved. The most sympathetic of the heterosexual characters is the elder Lord Moore, who has accepted his son's homosexuality. The younger Lord Moore is murdered by Lord Enrique to keep Isabel from saving him as he had previously saved another young man sentenced to death for being gay. Isabel's final words, an apostrophe to the martyred David Moore, summarize the message:

Descubriste algo tan claro, como que el que dos hombres se besen, es preferible a que se acuchillen. Por pensarlo así, por sentir que era evidente, te han acuchillado. Todos los que creen que una cuchillada es más noble, más hermosa, más varonil que un beso, son los responsables. Ojalá llegue pronto el día en que se les llame por su verdadero nombre: ¡asesinos! (7).

Far less one-sided but no less representative of agitation propaganda was Antonio Gala's *La vieja señorita del Paraíso*, which opened in the Reina Victoria 7 October 1980. Gala (b. 1936) is one

of contemporary Spain's major dramatists. Typically his works are presented in the largest and most centrally located playhouses, such as the Reina Victoria. A run of more than 400 performances placed *La vieja señorita del Paraíso* among the top three box office hits of the year (Alvaro 1980: 325).

In his review for *Diario 16*, Angel Fernández Santos asserted that the real subject of *Contradanza* was not a defense of homosexuality, as other critics contended, but rather a cry for freedom (qtd. by Alvaro 1980: 47). Such a cry for freedom, particularly the freedom to love the person of one's choice, has been an underlying theme of Gala's theater and has generally been expressed by a strong female protagonist (e. g. Jimena in *Anillos para una dama*, 1973). In *La vieja señorita*, Adelaida, the title character, extols love; the couples who absorb her ideology, at least initially, include traditionally unacceptable heterosexual pairs (a black man and a white woman; a priest and an unhappily married woman), as well as Ramiro, the mayor's son, and Tobías, his male lover.

The search for paradise that underscores much of Gala's theater is doomed to failure. For as long as Adelaida's paradise lasts, the love of Ramiro and Tobías is protected and is seen by the majority of the characters as being perfectly acceptable. However, the reactionary forces of materialism and militarism—represented by the mayor and Mr. Stone—ultimately triumph. Tobías commits suicide and Adelaida will allow herself to be entombed with his body. Like Lord Moore's son in *Contradanza*, Tobías is portrayed as a martyr to intolerance.

The confrontation between Ramiro and his father after Mr. Stone has informed the mayor that his son is gay, is a virtual compendium of clichés, presented with Gala's usual comic flair. The father accuses his son of being degenerate and abnormal, of going against God and nature, but finally concludes that there is a solution: «Tú mandas a hacer puñetas al chiquilicuatre ése, que es el que te ha trastornado la cabeza. En cuanto dejes de verlo, de eso me encargo yo, punto final. Muerto el perro se acabó la rabia... Un buen sacerdote y un buen médico, con unas vitaminas, y arreglado» (55). «Ya verás como te casas y tienes hijos y eres un hombre de provecho y te gustan las mujeres. ¿A quién le amarga un dulce?» (56).

Gala also mentioned homosexuality, at least in passing, in his

other two plays of the early 1980, both of which may be interpreted as political allegories. In *Petra Regalada*, 1980, it is revealed that Don Moncho, the character who appears to represent Franco, was a closet homosexual. In *El cementerio de los pájaros*, 1982, one of the Franco figure's sons is a closet homosexual. The references to these two men by the women characters are stereotypically disparaging, but Gala's intention doubtless is to satirize the hypocrisy of the Franco regime. He implies that the official taboo did not eliminate homosexuality, even within the inner circles of the governmental leaders.

On 1 May a stage version of Argentinian novelist Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* opened in the Martín, subsequently achieving a modest run of some 75 performances. The management of the Martín in recent years has been receptive to works that might not be accepted by the larger commercial theaters. Such was doubtless the situation with the Puig text. Although the novel had proved a popular one, the on-stage portrayal of a tender physical relationship between a heterosexual male and a gay—thrown together by chance in a prison cell—had to be considered daring. The 1985 Brazilian-American film, based on the same novel, included a similar scene. Nevertheless, Michael Feinstein, in his 1986 American translation of the play, noted that the sexual act was «impossible to perform on stage for more than one reason» and proposed instead that the two men «get up and come downstage, in bright light, their arms around each other's shoulders» and directly address the audience (54). Puig acknowledges that this was his own suggestion in an early version of the script (1987), but the subsequent Madrid production was more daring than Feinstein could imagine. It was also more daring than the Paris production, which opened at the Studio des Champs Elysées on 15 October 1987. A darkened stage left the scene to the French audience's imagination.

In the tour de force required by a two-character script, the men in *El beso de la mujer araña* discuss a variety of topics—ranging from the popular movies which Molina retells to Valentín's sense of commitment to a political cause—only one of which is Molina's sexual orientation. Unlike *The Boys in the Band*, where all attention is concentrated on the gay characters as gays, Molina is thus presented as a multi-faceted individual. *ABC* reviewer Lorenzo

López Sancho's comment that Molina is a «mariquita típica» notwithstanding (qtd. by Alvaro 1981: 129), both of the men are fully developed characters and hence humanized. They are not only capable of change but indeed interact in such a way as to affect one another. Valentín reveals a sensitive concern for Molina as a person and encourages him to accept himself as he is. Molina in turn finds the inner strength to resist betraying Valentín and is drawn into the latter's political struggle. The spectator, like Valentín, may well be intended to overcome an initial aversion to Molina and become genuinely fond of him, but the approach is more consistent with dialectical propaganda than with agitprop. As Szanto explains, dialectical propaganda attempts to clarify the elements comprising a «confused social or historical situation» and thereby «depict, for its audiences, circumstances not previously understood» (75-76). In any event, the assassination of Molina and the torture of Valentín cannot leave the audience untouched.

In contrast to *El beso de la mujer araña's* short run at the end of a season, Francisco Ors' *El día de Gloria* opened on 17 November 1983 and remained on the boards throughout the 1983-84 season. Very different from the highly stylized historical *Contradanza*, Ors' more recent work might well be classified as a bourgeois comedy of manners —and apparently was well received by the traditional middle-class theatergoer. The title character, Gloria, is a middle-aged woman whose four children are now grown and whose husband, some years her senior, is now impotent. Rebellious against the family's image of her as homemaker, stunned by her husband's idea that she will feel wanted and needed if she has to raise their infant grandchild —so he has volunteered her services without consulting her— and desirous of fulfilling herself as a person after years of subordinating her interests to everyone else's she asserts her freedom by going away with a younger man.

The central action of Ors' comedy openly incorporates many of the concerns about woman's role in society that have been raised by contemporary feminists. Indeed Ors chose his theme quite intentionally as a response to the criticism of his *Contradanza*:

Desde niño, he tenido la suerte de convivir con mujeres inteligentes y valiosas, de ahí que cualquier tipo de discriminación me haya resultado tan irritante. Por eso cuando tras el estreno de «Contradanza» hubo quien me tachó de misógino,

ni siquiera me molesté en desmentirlo: pensé que el tiempo se encargaría de poner las cosas en su sitio.

Creo que «El día de Gloria» transparenta con suficiente claridad tanto mi admiración como mi cariño por las mujeres, así como mi deseo de colaborar a una toma de conciencia sobre ciertas actitudes inadmisibles, pero que, por habituales, han llegado a parecer lógicas (7).

Although the playwright's main purpose may have been to take a stand in favor of women's liberation —and indeed he succeeds in presenting Gloria's decision to leave her insensitive, chauvinistic husband as justifiable —he also deals once again with homosexuality. The only one of Gloria's four children who shows any appreciation of her as a person is her gay son Amado. In turn she —as well as his sisters— have accepted him as he is. Miguel Angel, Amado's friend with whom Gloria leaves at the play's conclusion, is sensitive and caring, a heterosexual male who can be friends with a gay, who knows how to take care of a baby —he is a widowed father himself— and who recognizes Gloria's talents and fine qualities without concerning himself about the difference in their ages.

The idealized Miguel Angel stands in vivid contrast to Gloria's husband Amador both in his attitude toward Gloria and in his attitude toward gays. Like the mayor in *La vieja señorita del Paraíso*, Amador is convinced that his son can be cured, or can at least keep up the appearance of being «normal»: «Casarte, sí, casarte. Pero tú no ves que todos nos casamos, que todos se casan? Pero todos, todos, Tus... amigos, también se casan. Es... ¡integrarse! Luego... siempre tendrás tiempo para echar una cana al aire y tener una amiguita... o una amistad de tu propio sexo si es lo que prefieres» (66).

Through the secondary, off-stage action of the play, Ors indirectly presents his criticism of precisely this kind of social hypocrisy. Amado's lover is an older man, who is married and has a daughter. Aware that both her husband and their daughter are homosexual, the lover's wife tries to pressure Amado into marrying the daughter, thus providing a cover for the two men's «friendship» while simultaneously «integrating» the lesbian. Amado and his lover respond by attempting suicide. The assassins of *Contra-danza* have disappeared, but prejudice and intolerance may still claim their victims.

In May 1984, while *El día de Gloria* was still running, the newly renovated Lara theater opened with Jaime Salom's *Un hombre en la puerta*. The theater of Salom (b. 1925) in many ways has anticipated the transition in Spanish society. His early plays, up through the mid 1960s, often presented a defense of Catholic morality. For example, his unpublished *El cuarto jugador*, 1962, is a melodramatic statement against divorce. On the other hand, his *La piel del limón*, 1976, is an impassioned plea for divorce reform. The reversal in Salom's attitudes has manifested itself in his research and presentation of such diverse issues as radical theology (*Tiempo de espadas*, 1972) and feminism (*Historias íntimas del paraíso*, 1978). It is therefore not totally surprising that Salom is the first mainstream Spanish dramatist to portray lesbianism in a non-judgmental light. What is surprising—and doubtless reflective of the changing times in Spain—is the acceptance of such a portrayal by a theater manager eager to attract a middle-class audience back to the renovated Lara.

Un hombre en la puerta, like *El beso de la mujer araña* and *El día de Gloria*, is not a play about homosexuality per se. The title character, Víctor, is a middle-aged man who has reached a crisis of conscience. After twenty years of devotion to his political party—a devotion so exclusive that he sacrificed his first love, Miriam, to it—he has returned to her apartment in search of himself and his past. He discovers that Miriam now lives with Berta and has found in her female companion the kind of comforting protection that she never received from any of the men who exploited her over the years. Although it is clear that Miriam never forgot Víctor and had always hoped he would come back—indeed she expected him when she learned of his denunciation of party politics—there is no reconciliation or «integration». In the end, Víctor leaves and the two women remain together.

Salom's approach to Víctor's political persuasion and Berta's sexual orientation is dialectical. There are questions, but no answers. The two characters find that they mirror each other, both in their earlier rejection of an intransigent Catholic morality and in their unexpressed self-doubts about the authenticity of their current ideologies. Have they merely replaced one orthodoxy with another? Have they chosen to act for the right reasons or the wrong ones?

Salom's point of departure for creating the relationship between his two women characters was a study of radical feminist theory. That current of thought, perhaps more overt in Europe than in the United States, is that women can never achieve equality within a heterosexual relationship (Oliván). Berta herself is lesbian. As a teacher in a Catholic girls' school, she had resisted accepting herself as she was and had cruelly rejected a student who was attracted to her. Her guilt over that episode had precipitated change in her life that ultimately led to her love affair with Miriam. Miriam's bisexuality, consistent with radical feminism, is her personal response to her disillusionment with men and with her increasing need for stability and security.

Neither *El día de Gloria* nor *Un hombre en la puerta* is a major work that is likely to leave its mark on the history of Spanish drama, but if these plays are measured against *Acelgas con champán*, the transition in the Spanish stage and Spanish attitudes becomes abundantly clear. Amado is not rejected by his family. Víctor is not shocked when he discovers the relationship between Berta and Miriam; he affirms that he does not have prejudices.

The longest-running new Spanish comedy of the 1984-85 season dealt with homosexuals and transvestites: Juan José Alonso Millán's *Capullito de alhelí*. It opened on 9 October in the Príncipe, Madrid's most luxurious commercial theater. President of the Sociedad General de Autores de España, Alonso Millán has written and staged some 60 plays, most of which have been commercial successes. He has a proven knack for picking timely themes. In this case, he uses the abortive reactionary coup of February 1981 as the backdrop for his hilarious view of what a retreat from the liberalizations of democracy would mean for certain groups within society. A conservative critic like Adolfo Prego attempted to find in the work some moral lesson against depravity, but Francisco Alvaro was doubtless right in affirming that Alonso Millán had no such thesis (Alvaro 984: 50). All of the characters are the object of his satire, whether liberal or reactionary, gay or straight. If there is a message in the work, it is that hypocrisy is the greatest absurdity of all.

Somewhat ironically, Alonso Millán's gay characters, however much they may make the audience laugh, are more effective in dispelling stereotypes than the promiscuous homosexuals of

William M. Hoffman's *As Is*, 1985. In essence the spectator of *Capullito de alhelí* is laughing with the gay characters, not at them. The vast majority of Spaniards applauded the failure of the 1981 coup; in the comedy, that failure is linked directly with the decision of a widower to follow his instincts and choose the man he loves instead of the Francoist woman who is pursuing him. Thus the audience is maneuvered into championing the tender love affair of two middle-aged men.

But the measure of how the old Spanish taboos are crumbling is shown both by the reception of Alonso Millán's comedy and the fact that Hoffman's controversial drama about AIDS quickly reached the Spanish stage. Lorca's *El público* had to wait 47 years. Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* took seven and a half years to cross the Atlantic. *As Is* opened in Madrid in August 1986, three months before its New Jersey premiere caused the regional theater that produced it to lose hundreds of subscribers. In the past decade and a half, Spain has indeed changed, becoming ever more liberal at a time when the United States has been moving in the opposite direction.*

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