

The Everyday and Immersion in Roger Bernat's Theater: Scenic Language Reinvented

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"I do things with people."¹ That was how the Catalan director Roger Bernat once summed up his practice as a theater director. Known for hosting performances that emphasize the participation of non-professionals - be they from the actual public or invited guests - Bernat is currently one of the most referential artists in the Spanish contemporary scene. With a history that accumulates two decades of work, the director stands out for the political and aesthetic incisiveness of his theatrical investigations, carrying out constant transformations of what is meant by theater throughout his work.

Since 2008, Bernat has worked in a scenic dialogue in which the idea behind the work coincides with the creation of inventive public participation devices. Through them, the viewer is invited to an immersive experience in which he or she performs a number of actions: to dance *La Consagración de la Primavera* (Rite of Spring), answer questions *Pendiente de Voto and Domini Público* (Voting Pending, Public Domain) or reproduce conversations (*Numax-Fagor-Plus, Comedia sin Título*). It is also during this period that he founded his current company, FFF (The Friendly Face of Fascism).

Before that, however, Bernat was already widely known for his documentary and essayist work in the early 2000s. For example, with the *Buena Gente* cycle (2002-03), in which the director shared the scene with guests from various fields - such as a magician, an Internet hacker and a transsexual. Or in the stage production *Amnesia de Fuga* (Escape Amnesia, 2004) in which Indians and Pakistanis living in Barcelona reproduced on stage their work environments - internet cafés/communications centers - to talk about their daily life in the common context of

¹ Available at: http://rogerbernat.info/teatre/2004_AMNESIA_DE_FUGA/Texts/dosier.pdf. Accessed on Nov. 25, 2015.

immigration.

With unfinished degrees in architecture and painting, the director customarily says that he arrived late to the field of performing arts. "Before I was 24, I had never been to the theater."² This might explain an attitude of estrangement and a penchant for linguistic subversions that characterize his career. He got his diploma in direction and dramaturgy at the Institut de Teatre (Barcelona) in 1996. In the same year, he founded the General Elèctrica company, which continued until 2001, with outstanding works such as *10,000Kgs* and *Comfort domèstic*.

A constant presence in theater festivals around the world, Bernat's shows have also circulated frequently in Brazil. Only in 2015, they were presented in cities such as Rio de Janeiro (Tempo Festival), São Paulo (Oficina Cultural Oswald de Andrade), Curitiba (Festival de Curitiba) and Florianópolis (SESC Florianópolis).

And although his creations are often classified as "performance" or "happenings," the Catalan director usually defends the word "theater" to describe what he does. For he says that he considers theater a historically privileged space to reflect on the encounters that surround us. As he points out "The Theater, in its essence, is only dedicated to this, to rethink our collective relations." (Fig. 1)



Fig.1: The director Roger Bernat on scene in *Pendiente de Voto*

² In an interview with journalist Mariana Moreira (Veja Brasília) on 26 August 2013. Available at: <http://rogerbernat.info/premsa/attachment/entrevista-brasilia/>. Accessed on Nov. 25, 2015.

Interview

JG - Even before starting with your pieces geared to public participation, you worked with specialists, with non-professionals. What makes you bring these people to a theatrical creation? What interested you in them?

RB: *I think it starts with the type of interest that I always had for theater. Non-professionals, people of all kinds, taxi drivers, immigrants, Indians, a transsexual, actors without a career, who had never studied theater, have always been present in my work, since my first projects. I always felt a certain need to blur the boundary between the stage and the audience. The guiding principle of these 10 years of work responded intuitively to the fact that I did not feel that the stage was a legitimate place of social representation, and since I felt this lack of legitimacy, I also had the urge to bring in elements that were not from theater, to bring what was real into theater.*

JG - And why did the fictional scene not seem to you a legitimate place of social representation?

RB: *As a viewer I could not make a fictionality pact. I go to the movies to achieve this integration, but I could not conform to the fictional part of theater, I was more concerned with the real: who were those costumed people, and why were they moving that way etc. So I could not get to the next step, to believe that these people were real. Faced with this impotence, I found myself compelled to work with other elements.*

JG - What names do you use to refer to these participants?

RB: *For me they were always 'non-professional actors,' but actors because they play a role and are very aware of their way of being in the scenic space, which is modified in relation to everyday life. They know that their time there is definite. And when it did not turn out that way, it became very painful for everyone. When I worked with a transgender girl it was very difficult, because on stage she reported that she felt like a "fair monster," like a nineteenth century bearded lady, because for her it was difficult to establish the difference of acting the role of transsexual activist. Then there were presentations in which she could not finish because the gaze of the other (public) bothered her so much.*

JG - So, how was your work with those people who did not come from theater?

RB: *When working with non-professional actors, we worked through games, or-organized games that were able to construct the scene. With Indian and Pakistani immigrants, the game was to relate trips they made throughout their lives. I put out some staging premises, such as to tell their stories from the proscenium, or from the back of the stage, and from there we were able to set a series of stories.*

JG - How did you get people who would be part of the *Amnesia de Fuga* production (2004)?

RB: *It was fieldwork because the show was done in the Raval³. There began to be a change in the traditional trade in the region, which gradually became run by Indians and Pakistanis. The fieldwork was to go to their shops and talk with them, then little by little a group of people began forming to participate in the show. The hardest thing was to find women who agreed to participate, precisely because of their roles in everyday life were more backstage. But in the end we formed a group of 12 people, with two women.*

JG - Was there also a desire to break with spectacularity by inviting these people?

RB: *Probably yes, since in any case I never felt especially attracted by the idea of spectacle.*

JG - At one point in your career, you ceased working with non-professional actors and began to focus on works that explore public participation. What brought you to this change?

RB: *I suddenly felt uncomfortable working with non-professional actors because what ended up appearing on stage was singularity.*

JG - Singularity in the sense of alterity?

RB: *There was something of alterity, yes, but at the end what was generated - as the trans girl noticed very well - was that the spectator exercised, with his gaze, a strong oppression on the people on stage, and put them in a subordinate position, since the spectators were in a very comfortable place while they only listened to the demands of these people without asking - at any moment - what their role might be in relation to the situations of those who were before them. Then I real-*

³ A neighborhood located in the central region of Barcelona.

ized that it is one thing is to report the dysfunctions of society, and another thing to stimulate reflection on how the public causes these disorders.

JG - And how does this reflection arise when the audience starts to occupy a central place in the scene?

RB: *From the moment that the public moves out of the dark and gets under the spotlight, they immediately become an element that must be observed, looked at. On the other hand, the axis of being on stage creates certain difficulties for reflection, because being on stage means being inserted into fiction. In this sense, it loses some of the criticism, but I do believe that this judgment is recovered after the show ends. (Fig. 2)*



Fig.2: Spectators participating in a performance of *Domini Públíc*

JG - You mean that when the spectator becomes part of the scene, he would lose critical distance?

RB: *Yes. The idea that public participation would have a critical view of what is happening on stage is often overstated by the assumption that when he is in a dark room without participating, he would be able to be more critical of what is happening on stage. In any case, there is a whole discussion now regarding this tendency (in which the viewer participates) that claims a privileged participation in*

order to remain critical about the reality on stage. This is something that I discuss a lot with Roberto Fratini⁴ and it is evidently important to maintain a critical look at audience participation. However, not all public participation is unreflective, just as the participation of the spectator in the darkened room is not necessarily reflective. In these productions I put on that drag the public into participating, many report that they had no intention of participating in the beginning of the presentation, but suddenly find themselves dancing, for example, and only afterwards begin to wonder if their participation was voluntary or forced. Any collective drama has very positive elements but also atrocious elements, as in any party. All of my shows have something of a party. I think that is fully connected to that ephemeral sociability that produces theater.

JG - In your shows that dialogue with the spectator's participation, I realize that in some, the public executes preset actions or play the role of another person - *La Consagración de la Primavera* and *Numax-Fagor-Plus* - while in others, the spectator-participant speaks for himself - such as *Pendiente de Voto*. Are your intentions in terms of these participations also diverse?

RB: *I do not see the difference as you see it, because to me these works only function when establishing a tension in the spectators between the person that someone believes himself to be and the character he decides to represent during the show. Besides, in *Pendiente de Voto*, I see that often someone sets out to create a role that is not he himself, until he realizes that he is not exactly what he believed himself to be. As the show unfolds, spectators begin to take on roles that they did not imagine, for example, a conservative in the case of someone who is considered progressive. Similar things go on *La Consagración de la Primavera*: it depends on how each person constructs himself during the role - the show does shake up prior consciousness. It is rather like Brecht's comments on the work of actors, of always having to act the yes or the no in regards to the character that the actor will represent. Also, in my shows it is impossible to identify 100% with the role that you will represent, so then the spectator is wondering all the time if what he's asked to do is what he is. (Fig.3)*

⁴ A member of the FFF group, and professor of Dance Theory at the University of Pisa, and at the Theatre Institute of Barcelona.



Fig.3: A scene from *La Consagración de la Primavera*

JG - In your work with the public, it seems to me that the question of devices is very important to determine the mode of participation. How are these devices usually created in your work? Is there, first, some thematic research? Or does the search for a language, the device, come before?

RB: *I think I usually start by the device. When I see some device functioning in society that seems interesting to me - for example, parliamentary or about assemblies (the case of Pendiente de Voto), or maybe even a loving device. At the beginning of creating Numax-Fagor-Plus, the work was focused on the loving device. By absurd coincidences, the production we would do based on this device did not developed, which led us to the meetings device. But the original idea was to have two screens on which a man and a woman would be present reading the texts.*

JG - In the examples you give of devices in society, both the Parliament as well as the assemblies are related to the idea of democracy. Do you have some special interest in this?

RB: *I do not think there is any theme that seems particularly interesting to me. These examples are interesting as collective drama, which may also appear either in an assembly or as the daily life of a couple, but also at a party or a mass. I believe that the multitude and the community always have the tendency to represent themselves. There is surplus symbolic value in self-representation, the community tends to act in ways that are very crystallized. For example, when the multitude*

goes out in a manifestation, all mandates that govern street representation are suspended and the demonstration appears as a univocal manifestation. This is what interests me. On the other hand, only the theater investigates this symbolic asset, this representation, because theater is precisely the place where we come together to think about the encounters that are around us, since in both a museum and in the movies the relationship I have with the work tends to be more individual. The theater, in essence, is only dedicated to this, to rethink our collective relations. We go to the theater precisely for that and thus we are already asserting ourselves as a collective and as a community.

JG - In this sense, the theater would be close to the idea of heterotopia as a space that serves as a kind of incubator to think other spaces outside of it?

RB: *In the theater, what appears is an innocuous collective, peaceful, where all its cruel potential is suspended. It is a moment, a finite time that we give to the theater, to the game that is possible.*

JG - For the researcher and professor José A. Sánchez, a feature of your work is the centrality of dialogue with the other and the transformation of the concept of 'author.' How do you see these two characteristics?

RB: *I realize they are multiplied in working with the public. In the same way that I worked with non-professional actors, I try to create a space in which things happen; where fiction can develop. And in both cases I don't construct the fiction, but rather I stage a moment, a place. It is the same in my current work, but instead of preparing a scenario for the actors to develop the fiction, it is the performances, themselves, that work this way.*

JG - The work you performed at the inauguration of the García Lorca Foundation in Granada, *Comedia sin título*, by Garcia Lorca, works with the adaptation of a device originally created for *Numax-Fagor-Plus*. Is this the first time you adapt a device to take advantage of it in more than one show? How did this idea come about?

RB: *Yes, here we made an adaptation from Numax and the truth is that while I was doing it, I thought a few years from now no one will think that we had first created the device for Numax, and then used it for this new show, *Comedia sin título*.⁵ Because it seems to have been invented by García Lorca. In the play *Comedia sin**

⁵ The show was created especially for the Garcia Lorca Foundation, in Granada, in September.

título, it's really important that the public get up on stage, something that also occurs in another play he wrote in the same period, *El Público (The Public)*. Lorca wanted the audience on stage. So, the truth is that it was a happy coincidence; one realizes that an object turns out to be useful for different discourses. And that made me think that we do not do much work with theater perceived as a device. To use philosophical jargon, what we do is create a technique. And the technique has the particularity to make something shine, to stand out. So, this device is a technique that takes the audience onto the stage and gets them to face their own identity, their fears, their need to be with others and a whole host of issues that Lorca was stressing in his plays. But while Lorca does this in a semantic way, we do it in a syntactical way.

JG - Syntactical in what sense exactly?

RB: *Because when we give out the rules of the game, what we do is create a syntactic rule, a language. And this language has some needs that the public, itself, discovers as the production progresses, a process that gives birth to the production.*

JG - In this case, the same device is used for very different contexts. *Numax* is a documentary work and here [*Comedia*], a fiction and a play. Does this modify the manner of participation?

RB: *I would say the two contexts are entirely fictional. Numax had a fictional context, since the original movie, by Joaquim Jordà, is a fiction because the workers there were repeating what they had lived months earlier. In this sense, the film was a fake documentary in which the workers had to interpret their own roles. So here, with Lorca's play, we have the same situation in which viewers have to play their own roles and realize the falseness of fictionality and the artifice of reality itself. And I think that's the cool thing about devices. If you will, the difference between a "participatory" theater like this one and participatory theater of the second avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s is that the avant-garde had a need to emancipate the public, make them discover their full potential as human beings.*

JG - And maybe change the world ...

RB: *And of course change the world and make the revolution. And here, I think we follow the same equation, but from another angle. In other words, the only thing is*

to discover is that you are a totally fictitious construction and therefore false. What the workers in Numax discovered after years of self-management is that the identity of the worker is an imposed identity, no one can feel himself a worker, because that would mean accepting his role as a subordinate in a given social hierarchy. So in these shows, the public needs to accept that its identity as a spectator is an identity to be questioned.

JG - And that is what interests you most in working with the public?

RB: *Not only what interests me most. It seems to me, when you question their identity as spectators, you begin to question their other identities, the identity of a man, a woman, the illiterate person's identity or of canonic literary knowledge...*

JG - In your work with the public, it seems that there is always a tension between the device, which is often quite imposing (and in *Pendiente de Voto*, there is even a meta-story about this) and the idea of participation. The proposal is to put these two elements in tension, creating oppositions?

RB: *Living as a couple means to impose a set of rules. Working with more people or governing a country, as well. Because in the end, we need to adopt rules to support how unfathomable it is to be living among strangers. This also puts us into another reality: there is no participation without manipulation. And my intention with my productions is for you to realize you are being manipulated, the public already knows that perfectly well. And it goes to the theater precisely to be manipulated. And you are manipulated quite well when you watch a movie or go to the theater. (Fig. 4)*



Fig.4: A scene from *Pendiente de Voto*

JG - But when observing the public reaction to your work, you realize that viewers always recognize the manipulation?

RB: *It seems to me that if someone has a problem with being manipulated, this is his problem. This is the typical response I give whenever there are these conversations after the presentation, when people tell me, "but I felt manipulated, and such" and I have to hear it 20 times. But here at least the laws of manipulation are on the table. Before and after the show, the degree of manipulation is much higher and no one will tell you. The theatre is exactly the place where we go precisely to be manipulated according to our own desires, right?*

JG - And in participatory theater, the question of the rules becomes even clearer ...

RB: *Yes. And, after all, the simple fact of having to speak, having to move, that's what makes you feel manipulated? But the manipulation to which we're customarily subjected is usually much more subtle. And besides, I believe that the problem of participation is already overcome. I think we're somewhere else. I think that we are more concerned now to understand socialization spaces, or how to create forms of socialization passing through other circuits than those imposed on us. And this is a very current topic. It is no longer a question of reflecting on whether participation is good or bad, but rather seeing who proposes the participation where it leads. Because, without a doubt, we will have to participate, since as citizens of the twenty-first century we will have to be responsible for our surroundings, if we want to move forward. So we have to go on stage, occupy scenic space, this is fact. But how do we do this? With sticks, flags, by Facebook? How do we do this in the family environment? And that's what's worth reflecting on.*

