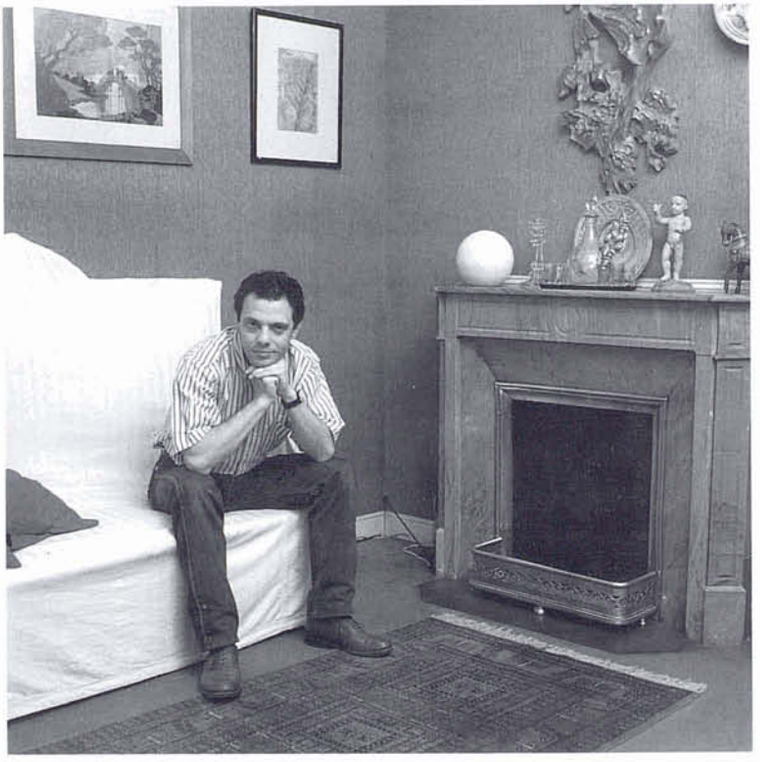
LLUÍS PASQUAL: INVENTOR OF THEATRES



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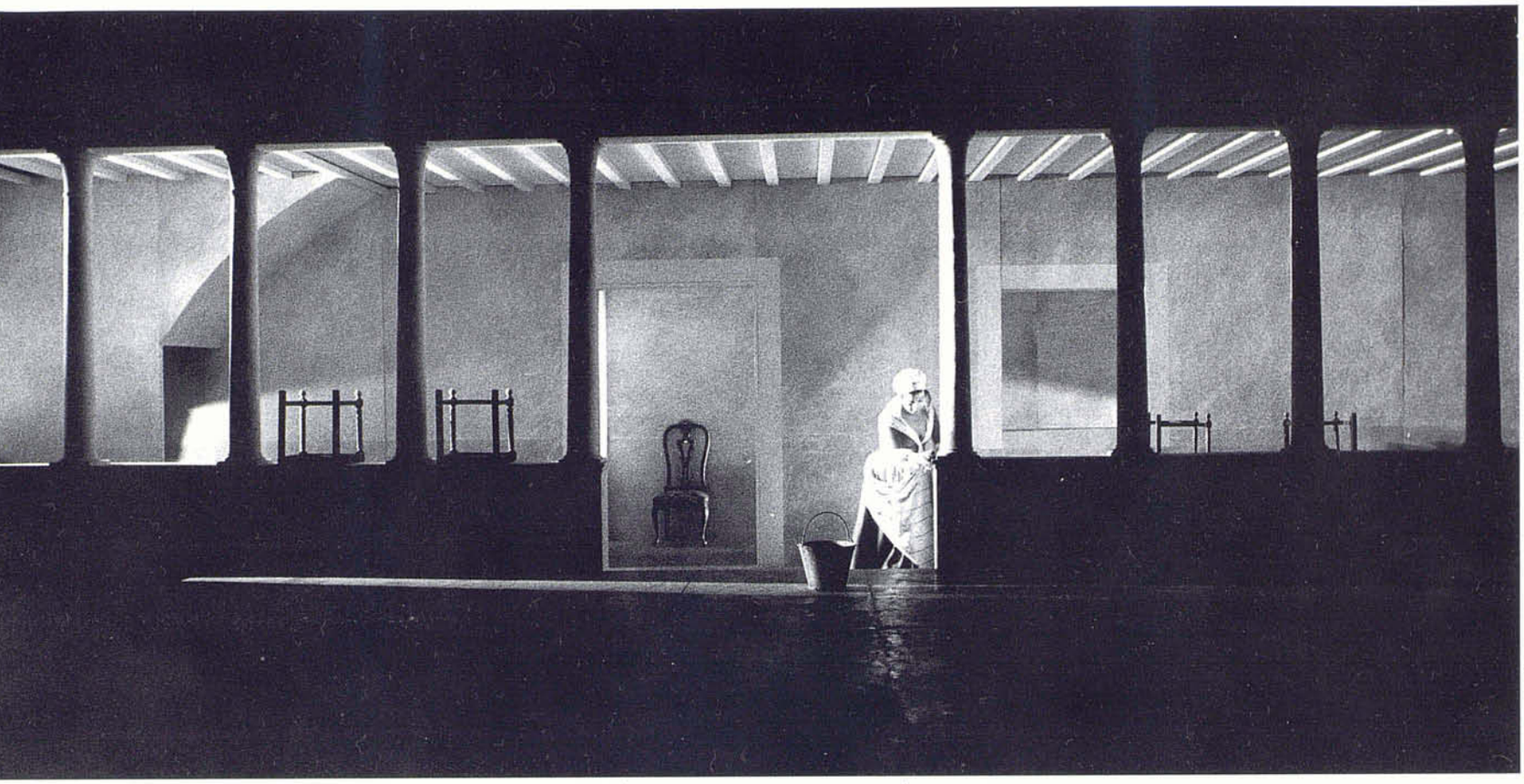
LLUÍS PASQUAL, AT PRESENT DIRECTOR OF THE THEATRE OF EUROPE, THE PARIS ODÉON, IS UNQUESTIONABLY ONE OF CATALONIA'S LEADING THEATRICAL DIRECTORS. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEATRE LLIURE IN BARCELONA, THE REFORM OF THE CENTRO DRAMÁTICO NACIONAL AND THE RENOVATION OF THE THEATRE OF EUROPE ARE THE MOST OUTSTANDING LANDMARKS IN AN IMPECCABLE CAREER.

PEP BLAY JOURNALIST



UN DELS ÚLTIMS VESPRES DE CARNAVAL BY CARLO GOLDONI, DIRECTED BY LLUÍS PASQUAL AND SCENOGRAPHY BY FABIÁ PUIGSERVER

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His favourite author, Federico García Lorca. The work he dreams of staging, Homer's Odyssey. "It has everything in it", says Lluís Pasqual. Born in Reus in 1951, the present director of the Theatre of Europe, the Paris Odéon, has seen his career take a continuous upward course, having started as a hobby in his native town and begun developing seriously at the Institut del Teatre and the Grup Independent d'Horta in Barcelona. The construction of the Teatre Lliure, the reform of the Centro Dramático Nacional and the renovation of the Theatre of Europe have been the three great culminating points in an impeccable career which includes brilliant productions of classics such as Valle-Inclan's *Luces de Bohemia,* Shakespeare's *Al vostre gust (As You Like It)* or Lorca's *El público* and *Comedia sin título.* While he plans an essentially Hispanic '92 in Paris, he continues to work on his project of making Valle-Inclán's work *Tirano Banderas* into a theatrical reality.

Lluís Pasqual joined the world of the theatre at the age of fiteen, with the Reus group La Tartana, "by chance. People always tend to start their work by chance." It was during his secondary studies that he directed his first play: *El barret de palla d'Itàlia.* He moved to Barcelona to study philology, but kept up his craze for the stage through independent companies like the Grup d'Horta. Very soon he joined the teaching staff at the Institut del Teatre, where he worked as an assistant with the future director of Els Joglars, Albert Boadella, and with Josep Montanyés. At the same time, he combined this work with a teaching post at the Escola de Teatre of the Orfeó de Sants. "There I was asked to direct the end of term exercise and as I didn't like any of the texts I decided to write one myself, and the result was *La Setmana Tràgica*". We hired the "Aliança del Poble Nou" and the play was put on for three days. But the day after the opening I had to go to my military service, I'd finished the course and..."

His return home coincided with the operation Grec 75, which had been co-ordinated by the Assemblea d'Actors i Directors, and he took part with a show in collaboration with two other directors: Pere Planella and Fabià Puigserver. But at that time, work was going ahead on the first great adventure that was to absorb Lluís Pasqual: the Teatre Lliure.

–During that first phase, the Lliure was freer than it is now; perhaps it hadn't yet become such an instrument of the institutions?

–No, what happens is something quite natural: people grow up and the years go by. We're not as reckless as when you start out at the age of twenty-three; they're not the same motors and there isn't the same energy. They were very special years belonging to a different historical moment. There were two or three independent theatrical groups that had packed up and they offered us premises, a co-operative in Gràcia. I was there body and soul for six years, which were the discovery of everything, we all let ourselves go. It's like the first time you fall in love: you fall in love with love and, while you're at it, you fall in love with the person. When this becomes institutionalized, things rest. The problem the Lliure's had since the beginning of the eighties is essentially one of growth,which can't be solved for the moment with the new auditorium. There's no room, there are a series of shows and projects that can't be done for the simple question of space. O.K., so then the institutions come along and do a catalogue or something for you,

fine; but the advantage of the Lliure is that it's never belonged to one particular institution. The idea from the beginning, the same as with the new premises, was that there should be as many people taking part as possible, so as not to become a kind of national theatre that would only correspond to one representative institution.

–By the way; what do you think of the Generalitat's initiative for the creation of a National Theatre of Catalonia?
–When people mention this subject to me, which I don't normally want to talk about, I always say, "the more the merrier". In other words, I'd rather there were two theatres than none at all. I don't know if this is the right moment to start a national theatre and for there to be an institution like the Generalitat that decides to have a theatre. Now, the need for a theatre existed, all right. Barcelona is a city without theatres, there are masses of companies that can't come for the simple reason that there are no stages. There's the Romea, which is a small theatre; there's the Tivoli, which is a cinema and is in bad condition; there's the Mercat de les Flors, which isn't a theatre either, it's a garage that's been more or less fixed up. For some shows it works very well, but you have to improvise in very poor conditions each time, because it's not finished off as a theatre. You go there because there's nowhere else, but Barcelona needs a couple of good theatres.

–Does Barcelona need a big, Italian-style theatre?
–It doesn't have to be Italian-style. *In the case of the Lliure's new premises, it won't be an* Italian-style *theatre, but it could be, as well. The problem is that there isn't a theatre either* Italian-style *or "Barcelona-style". There isn't anything. When they put on an Italian-style show at the Mercat de les Flors it's like a ledge, a platform, no more, a theatre you look at front-on but that has nothing to it at all. People say it's very nice? Well yes, but it's not a multifunction space, because, as I said, it isn't a theatre: it's a garage. It can be adapted, you can have lights, but it's not serious. It's the difference there is between a mobile unit and a studio set. The mobile unit is all very well but it isn't a studio set.*

–You left Barcelona and the Lliure to go to Madrid, to direct the Centro Dramático Nacional (CDN). What made you accept the gamble?
–I didn't go to direct the CDN, I went to create it, which is different. I went there under very specific historical circumstances, otherwise I wouldn't have accepted. I wouldn't go there now, although you never know what might happen to me. I was asked to do it in 1983, and I'd always thought the CDN was something a bit wooly, without much personality. Presumably, though I've never known for sure, they thought of me because of my apprenticeship at the Lliure, they liked that style. But what attracted me was that everything had to be done from scratch: the auditorium had to be reformed from top to bottom, there had to be a policy, a theatrical programme at a moment when there wasn't one. And when we'd finished the auditorium, the system of tours, the material, the lorries, the spotlights, specific shows, when we'd toured all over Spain and then all over the world, when the playwrights had been staged that needed to be staged, I left.
In fact, you've always been seduced by the idea of starting from scratch, of putting into practice the ideas you've got in your head about the world of the theatre.
Exactly, that's what's always attracted me. Directing a theatre isn't something I particularly like or dislike, what I enjoy is inventing it. The same thing that happened with the Lliure happened with the CDN, and now it's happening with the Theatre of Europe. No-one knows what the Theatre of Europe is, because, for one thing, we'd have to agree about what Europe is, and that would be a very difficult, very long or impossible process. So, as it was the National Theatre, the Odéon, a symbolic theatre in France, but with a programme to be thought up from nothing, I decided to take a chance. The day I see that things are going ahead, I suppose then I'll get tired and I'll leave it.

–When you went to Madrid, there were doubts raised over the fact that a Catalan should direct the Centro Dramático Nacional. Now, in France, there's been criticism over the fact that a Spaniard should be in charge of a French national theatre. Have you had any problems in this respect?
–No. In Madrid, although I was a Catalan and whatever people thought of that, I had a Spanish passport and they obviously couldn't use the Madrid chauvinism. Anyway, amongst the people who had directed the CDN before me there were two Catalans, even if they were settled in Madrid: first Adolfo Marsillach and second Núria Espert. Then came José Luís Gómez, who's Andalusian, and me. I don't think I've ever had any problems, because I've never made a problem of being Catalan; which I am, I was born in Reus, and that's all there is to it, that's obvious. If you don't make a problem of it, then presumably other people don't either. On the other hand, the move from Madrid to Paris was definitely a more difficult step. But the French, in spite of being the most chauvinist of people –it was they who invented the term–, are also curiously enough extremely open. The pyramid of the Louvre was built by a Japanese, the opera of the Bastille was built by a Uruguayan who lives in Canada, and I direct the Theatre of Europe. They may or may not like it much, but they certainly don't let me feel it.

–Don't your responsibilities at the Theatre of Europe go beyond your scope as a theatrical director?
–It's a question of directing a theatre, just as you might direct a car factory; the pattern –only the pattern– is much the same thing. You direct a factory in which, in the case of the Odéon, there are 130 permanent staff and another

100 non-permanent, and you're responsible for the policy of the theatre, the finances, the artistic programme, the shows you invite, the productions you think up, and you choose a director, actors... I've got an administrative director who helps me in this sort of work, but I'm actually in charge. I've only done two shows personally and this season I'll do two more. People always ask me if the office work gets in the way or takes time from the artistic work, but I like the office work as well. Because a theatre isn't just a show that's presented on the stage, it goes from the smile on the face of the girl in the ticket office to the way the programmes are done, the policies for the whole season, what kind of shows are put on, the type of research and how the money's used. And I enjoy both sides just as much. Of course, if I had to choose at gunpoint, I'd rather go on doing shows, but so far no-one's put a gun to my head.

–When you staged Shakespeare's comedy *Al vostre gust* at the Odéon, in 1989, just before you took up your post there as director, was it a trial by fire for the minister Jack Lang to base a decision on?

–It coincided, because the Al vostre gust *production had been signed before they made me the offer. It was Antoine Vitez who invited me and the day we opened there were all the ministerial observers there had to be to know if they'd made the right choice or not. But actually, before doing* Al vostre gust, *I already had the official offer from Jack Lang to take charge of the Theatre of Europe. If they hadn't liked it, maybe they wouldn't have signed the contract, but I don't know. At all events, I don't think you can mix management and directing. You can be a very good director and a bad manager and vice versa. I enjoy both jobs and I'll carry on until I no longer enjoy one or other or both of them.*

–Has the endless applause of that opening night continued with the work the Odéon has done so far?

–For the time being they respect me. But remember that before that, in France, I had already put on Luces de Bohemia *and* El público, *at the Odéon, and* Eduard II *at the Avignon Festival. Apart from that, I'd had a show at the Paris Opera. I already had professional contacts in France. More than* Al vostre

gust, *one of the most influential factors when they thought of me was the Critics' Award for the Best Foreign Language Production at the Odéon, which went to* El público. *Although prizes aren't normally any use at all, the French give this one a lot of importance, it earned a certain respect from them. Every show in the world passes through Paris, at least the best, and the fact that the prize should have been given to a Spanish show, more precisely, to me, went down well. It's a country where you can work, where theatre people in general are respected, as you can see by the number of politicians that have come from this world, something inconceivable in a country like ours. The idea of someone from the stage being given a ministerial post, assuming it appeals to them –it wouldn't to me–, is a strange one here; there it's more accepted.*

–Why do you always choose playwrights who are dead rather than living contemporary authors?

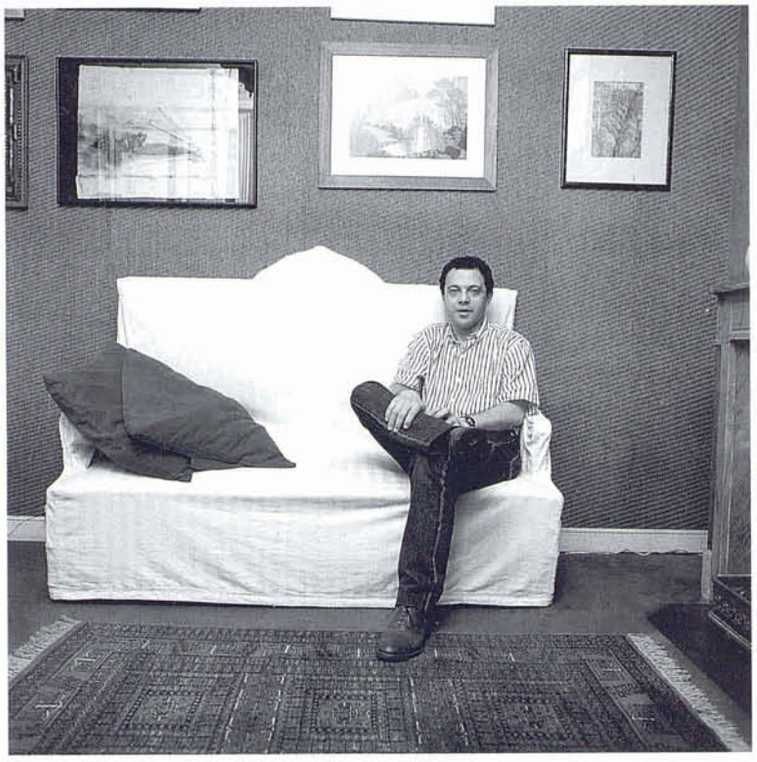
–There are about twenty works of universal literature that are always a pleasure to stage. By living contemporary authors, I've staged Espriu's Fedra, *a play by Ramon Gomis and another one by Joan Abellan. Three only. What's the matter with the contemporary authors? Just that there aren't any, or very few. There are lots of people who write plays; I receive some 150 new plays a month and, although I'm helped by a reading committee, I read a lot, about twenty-five a month. That's a total of more than 200 plays a year, and I don't find any. Whose fault is it? Probably mine, but when I speak to my fellow-directors I find that we all have the same problem. I think the good people who write well at the moment are writing for the cinema, for television or else they write novels, but they don't write plays. The theatre is probably the most difficult art to write after poetry and, strangely enough, it's something that people do as a sideline. Thirty per cent of the plays received are by doctors; I don't know why and I don't know if this means something, because Brückner was a physician, Chekhov was a doctor, Ramon Gomis is a doctor. Anyway, even if there are doctors who write very well, there aren't good texts. I never see them. If I found them I'd do only contemporary theatre.*

–Do you think the figure of the playwright has been replaced by that of the theatrical author –that is, the person who writes and stages his own work, like Sergi Belbel?

–Sergi Belbel is a good writer and he has the staging in mind when he writes his text. But so did Chekhov, because he had Stanislavsky beside him, Shakespeare wrote for his company. There are cases like Beckett, who never left home for anything. .. Writers are unclassifiable. The thing is that as well the thirty or so great works that have survived from the history of humanity there are millions that haven't. In other words, out of what's being written at this moment, ten will survive. What wouldn't I give to do contemporary theatre! And every now and then take La bogeria, King Lear, Hamlet, The Cherry Orchard, *which is something that's always a pleasure to do, but I don't find any. And no-one has the obligation to do anything; at least, I don't have the obligation to do contemporary theatre. If I've chosen this work it's to tell stories that I like, and at all events, if I do take on an obligation it's that the stories I tell others should be stories I like, because otherwise it's like telling a joke you don't like: it doesn't make anyone laugh.*

–Have you ever tried sitting down to write your own plays?

–I wrote three; the last when I was twenty-four. I used to write when I



thought no-one could ever tell the stories I wanted to tell. The moment I directed the first play by someone else and I realised that there were people who told stories very much better, I gave up writing.

–Your next production is *Tirano Banderas*, by Valle-Inclán, an author you've already worked with in *Luces de Bohemia*.

–It's a project we're working on very seriously. Jorge Semprún has written the script and I've had to go to South America, because the cast includes actors from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Mexico. Apart from this play we're planning an eight-month programme with a collection of works on Hispanic themes. That's what the Theatre of Europe does: it publicizes theatrical fields that are unknown or only very partially known. This year, for example, there's a month devoted to Polish theatre.

–Can one speak of a differentiated Mediterranean theatre?

–No. One can speak of a northern Mediterranean character and way of acting –and I specify because the Arab world has no theatre– that's more organic but less systematized. And if that's the way it is it's because there's never been any need to systematize it. In the theatre of the South everyone lets themselves go more, from the actors on the stage to the public. Opera wasn't born in Italy by chance. The whole of northern theatre –whether Russian, Anglo-Saxon, German, Polish...– is a much more systematized theatre because it's a reflection of another culture, another character. It's colder, in the theatre it's nice and warm; it's their life they're talking about... But all of this is getting mixed up, until it's unmixed again, because I don't think it can be mixed up, and precisely at the Odéon the actors come from all over the world. What's fantastic about the Odéon adventure is to be able to compare all these cultures and see how the way a person acts reflects a country's character.

–From the experience you've gained in charge of theatres in Barcelona, Madrid and Paris, what are the features that differentiate these three cities?

–I don't really think they can be compared. To start with, there's a question of tradition. In France there's great respect for tradition: except for some oriental groups, the Comédie Française is the oldest company of actors in the world, and it's survived revolutions, Napoleon and everything, and it's still going. In France there are five national prose theatres, apart from the opera houses, of which four are in Paris and one in Lyons, and they have 57 dramatic centres. The infrastructure, as you can see, is enormous. We can't compete with that. The infrastructure created in Catalonia after the reform of 83-84 has meant that there are a fair number of theatres, fairly well restored, where it's possible to perform. At least there's that. So Madrid's got more infrastructure? Yes, there's a lot more; but, paradoxically, the Catalan theatre is always much more advanced. I'd say there's very much more imagination, probably because there are less means available. ■