The Languages of Puppetry: Rewriting Early Modern Iberian Theater for the Contemporary Stage
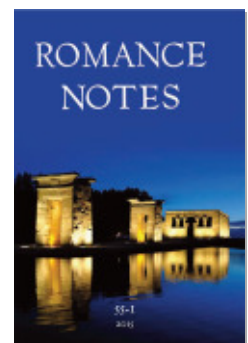
Esther Fernández

THE LANGUAGES OF PUPPETRY: REWRITING EARLY MODERN IBERIAN THEATER FOR THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE

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Placing Spanish classical theater on a par with puppetry might seem paradoxical at first glance since sixteenth and seventeenth century dramaturgy is considered an established literary and performative tradition, while the marionette – in the Western world – suffers the prejudiced view that it is a parodic genre, an entertainment mainly for children or, in Scott Cutler Shershow's words, "a marker or rubric of the 'low'" (6). Nonetheless, in the last decade a number of Spanish directors have managed to masterfully combine Early Modern plays with puppets in order to re-think from the stage some prominent classical dramatic texts, with varying degrees of popularity and cultural impact on modern audiences. That is the case for hagiographic and religious theater, which is hardly ever staged today, most likely because of its thematic concerns, nowadays considered less palatable than other forms of classical drama. In contrast, canonical Early Modern *comedias,* such as Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* [*The Trickster of Seville*] – a play that will be referred to later in this article – have had a rich tradition of performances that have left an imprint of expectation on audiences, particularly concerning the mise-en-scène in the collective imaginary. In this article I will illustrate, through the analysis of three case studies, how the dramatic language of puppets contains, on one hand, the power to reinvent and invigorate a dramatic form – that of religious and hagiographic theater – with minimal impact on contemporary mise-en-scène and, on the other hand, to deconstruct and reconceptualize in a new light the performative tradition of the most emblematic classics.

(RE)CREATING THE SPECTACLE OF HAGIOGRAPHIC PLAYS

   The subject of hagiography today does not enjoy the popularity it did dur-
ing the seventeenth century due, in large part, to the fact that contemporary
audiences are not familiar with the lives of saints (Dassbach 162). This lack of
contextual knowledge on the part of the public and the sense of implausibility
these *comedias* inspire combine for a dramatic genre that is completely for-
eign to contemporary audiences. Nonetheless, this disconnect can be compen-
sated for by the spectacular quality of the hagiographic plots, materialized on
stage through the presence of the puppet. Indeed, the puppet's theological
dimension and its unconstrained acrobatic power make it the most suitable
entity for embodying the supernatural characters and forces of hagiographic
comedia. The marionette possesses the ability to generate on stage the "plausi-
ble impossible," to borrow Michael Malkin's terminology (quoted in Tillis
37), referring to the connection between the real and the imaginary in the art
of puppetry or, in other words, to transform what Antonio Risco has called "lo
maravilloso cristiano" (17) into "lo supernatural verosímil" (17). Evidence of
this is seen among playwrights of European modernism and the Avant-garde,
such as Anatole France, Maurice Bouchor, Paul Claudel and Michel de
Ghelderode, who wrote religious plays and dramatizations of the lives of
saints intended for performance solely by puppets, as emphasized in Bou-
chor's own words: "I persist in believing that the appearance of Saint
Michael, of celestial voices, of miraculous flowerings of lilies and roses, and
the transfiguration of a martyr are more appropriate to our small stage than to
conventional theaters where the personality of the actor, too real and too
familiar destroys all impression of the supernatural" (9).
   Following this theory of materializing the supernatural through the pres-
ence of the inanimate on stage, artistic director Jesús Caballero initiated a
research project in 2006 based on the historical reconstruction of the stage set
of a *máquina real*. The expression *máquina real* refers to those seventeenth-
century theater companies specialized in fully staging hagiographic plays
exclusively with marionettes in *corrales de comedia* [Spanish playhouses]
during Lent.[1] In 2009, Caballero premiered Mira de Amescua's *El esclavo*

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   [1] As I explain in my article, "Santos de Palo: La máquina real y el poder de lo inanimado,"
although the 25th Session of the Council of Trent praised the proselytizing efficacy of hagio-
graphic theater for its visual qualities, the Church was still alarmed by actors and actresses por-
traying sacred characters. For this reason, the moralists awarded puppets the privilege of per-
forming biblical, historical or legendary lives of saints, since marionettes were considered to be
soulless and, therefore, exempt from all sin (Fernández 422). Similarly, in sixteenth-century

del demonio [*The Devil's Slave*] (1612) by creating an archaeological reconstruction of the aesthetics and the inner workings of these historical sets and performances in which the puppet was the sole agent for materializing the mystical texture of such religious plays. In *El esclavo*, Caballero rebuilds an entire cast of rod puppets sculpted and painted according to the exact same process used in Baroque religious imagery. The result was a series of figures with realistic traits manipulated by "invisible" puppeteers who, from under the platforms and above the set, maintained the supernatural aura of the marionette. The framed set or *retablo* – where the puppets move – flawlessly nests inside the stage of the *corral* to visually enhance a *mise en abîme* of a miniature world entirely controlled by the unflinching nature of the puppet.[2]
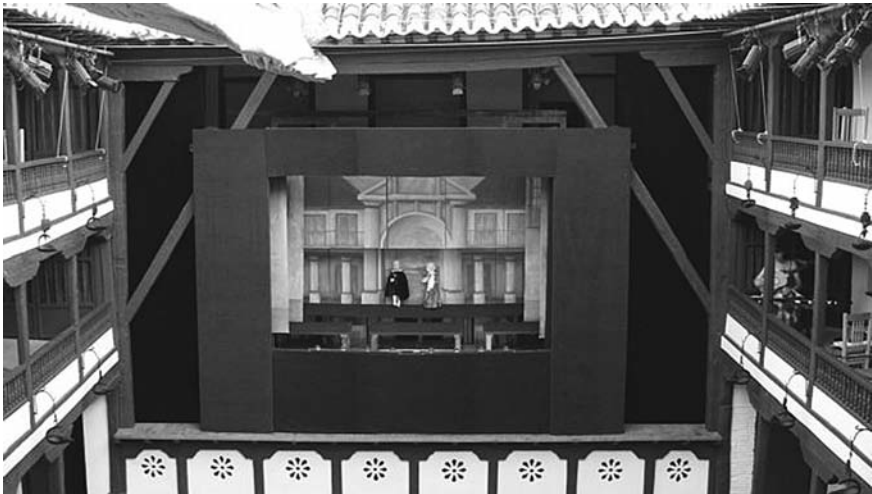

Figure 1. Set of *El esclavo del demonio* in the Corral de Comedias (Almagro). Photo by Jesús Caballero. Courtesy of Jesús Caballero.

Caballero's archeological performance of *El esclavo* emulates the techniques used by the *máquina real* and recuperates one of the most arresting examples of the existing vital bond between the spectacular nature of hagio-

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London, Shakespeare's plays were staged with puppets and, according to Susan Young, those kinds of performances played a key role in the survival of Elizabethan theater during the eighteen years when London playhouses were closed and actors were forbidden from acting (9-10).

   [2] The historical dimensions of the *retablo* are approximately 20 feet long by 16 feet wide while the approximate measurements of the corral's stage are 26 feet long by 17 feet wide.

graphic dramaturgy and the wonder provoked by the marionettes.[3] Although
it is a museum-like set, it is also a valuable historical reconstruction –
through diligent research – that recovers this forgotten performance art,
opening to us new avenues for the study of the representation of saints in
comedias, and contributes to its recovery on the contemporary stage.

(RE)VISIONING RELIGIOUS THEATER THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Caballero's production recreates, through literary research and historical
documentation, a unique performance not seen onstage for the last two cen-
turies. Ana Zamora, in contrast, a pioneer in bringing to the stage primitive
and renaissance theater, diverges from Caballero's museum-like style in
order to experiment with and create a dramatic corpus of sacred themes,
which had been committed to oblivion by contemporary theater companies.
Ernesto Caballero, the current director of the Centro Dramático Nacional
(CDN), distinguishes between modernizing and updating in the field of the-
atrical praxis, and he defines the latter concept as the act of "lograr inteligi-
bilidad" from a text onstage (88). In order to achieve this intelligibility,
Zamora departs from historical fidelity and defers to the puppet to endow the
lyrical and theological essence of religious theater with a tangible presence
on stage. For Francisco Cornejo, the puppet's unique nature resides in its
capacity to "hacer visible en el tiempo 'presente' algo o alguien de otros
tiempos, de otros lugares o de otros mundos" ("La máquina" 26). It is pre-
cisely this "aura of otherness" that, in Barbara Johnson's opinion, "makes
[the marionettes] proper stand-ins for the invisible" (86).

In 2004, Zamora premiered Gil Vicente's *Auto de los cuatro tiempos* [*Auto
of the Four Seasons*] (1513), a short religious play described by Stanislav
Zimic as a "representación poética, lírico-musical del Universo frente al
Nacimiento de Cristo, es decir, de la celebración 'gozosa' [. . .] de una 'gran
mudança' y una 'gran victoria: del amor y la paz en el mundo'" (146). These
abstract notions are evoked and invoked to a great extent in Zamora's mise-
en-scène by the crafting of an aesthetically plain marionette whose simplicity
functions as a way of bringing out the poetic and musical language of the text

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[3] In 2011, Claudio Hochman directed for Caballero's theatre company an adaptation of
Lope de Vega's *Lo fingido verdadero* [*Acting is Believing*] (c. 1608). Despite the fact that
Hochman followed the performance methodology and the aesthetics of a *máquina real*, the
retablo was stripped of all optical illusions in order to show the audience the inner workings of
this performance practice.

on the stage.⁴ According to Zamora: "[. . .] la utilización de los títeres nos permite situarnos en un código simple, quizás ingenuo pero a la vez integrador, que nos sitúa en el campo de la metáfora, y que supone un espacio privilegiado para lo poético" ("El montaje" 10). The four seasons, which have a leading role in Gil Vicente's play, become staging for a quartet of wooden figurines in Zamora's play – reminiscent of the jointed models used for figure drawing – manipulated by two actors in full view of the audience.

Figure 2. Set and puppets for *Auto de los cuatro tiempos*. Photo by Francisco Romero. Courtesy of Nao D'amores.

The decision to use identical puppets to represent the many individualities, tones, and moods of each of the seasons enables the audience to inti-

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⁴ Zimic has underlined the musicality of Gil Vicente's play by describing it as "opera-like" (146). This musical dimension, central to the *Auto*, is stressed in Zamora's performance by a quartet of female musicians who play four kinds of baroque instruments adapted to each of the seasons – harpsichord-winter, viola-autumn, flute-spring, lute-summer (Lázaro 9). These four musicians also interact with the puppets and literally materialize on stage the lyrical and musical essence of Gil Vicente's play.

mately experience the suggestive power of poetry and music in dialogue with the marionette. As if in a drawing class, the director presents the spectator with four abstract models so that during the course of the performance each viewer, transported by the eloquence of the poetic text, the musical performance, and the masterful manipulation of these figurines, endows each with personalized and distinctive characteristics that fully shape notions as broad as spring, summer, fall or winter.

In Zamora's *Misterio del Cristo de los Gascones* [*Mystery of the Christ of the Gascons*], which premiered in 2007 and has been re-staged several times over the last few years, the puppet protagonist is, in this case, a replica of the Romanesque jointed Christ of the Church of San Justo in Segovia, known as the Cristo de los Gascones.[5] In this performance the director draws from a dramaturgy that brings together various fragments of works by Gómez Manrique, Alonso del Campo, Diego de San Pedro and Fray Íñigo de Mendoza to recreate an experimental ceremony inspired by the rite of *Depositio – Elevatio – Visitatio* (Zamora, "Cristo yacente" 6).[6] Unlike Caballero, who uses the puppet for its spectacular and material power as a way of embodying the supernatural aspects of hagiographic plays, Zamora makes use of this specific marionette as a symbolic representative of the implausible, a concept which is at the poetic core of the texts she stages:

Ante un teatro no regulado por paradigmas realistas rígidos, ni preocupado por anacronismos, hemos elegido el teatro de títeres como recurso que acumula todas las inverosimilitudes posibles. [. . .] Los títeres no representan al personaje que encarnan porque son el personaje por el registro limitado de sus gestos, por su incapacidad de reproducir la vida adquieren el poder de evocarla. (Zamora, "El montaje" 10)

Even if throughout the performance of the *Misterio* this Christ-puppet figure manages to acquire an overwhelming humanity in certain scenes, the scenography frames the overall performance as a symbolic ritual that attempts to contain the performance within the parameters of a religious parable.

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[5] For the director, this replica "reproduce las características estéticas básicas de la talla original, pero cuenta con varias innovaciones como son su fabricación en materiales ligeros que permiten la manipulación, o las nuevas articulaciones que se han añadido al muñeco y que amplían sus posibilidades expresivas" (Zamora, "Una travesía" 15).

[6] As Zamora argues: "Con bastante probabilidad, el Cristo conservado en San Justo fue utilizado en este tipo de ceremonias, si es que no se talló específicamente para ello. La articulación de los hombros y brazos permitiría descenderlo de la bóveda del presbiterio, donde aún hoy son visibles los orificios que servían para colgar la figura, depositándolo en el sepulcro que se mostraría vacío como prueba irrefutable de su Resurrección" ("Cristo yacente" 7).

(Re)Writing the Canon from the Stage

In contrast to the two mises-en-scènes mentioned above, in which the directors used the puppet as an avenue for the invigoration of a theater that is rarely brought to stage nowadays, the Catalan director Miquel Gallardo sees in the language of the marionette a way to deconstruct and manipulate dramatic and literary icons with a greater degree of freedom than an actor-centered approach.[7] Specifically, in his staging of *Don Juan, memoria amarga de mí* [*Don Juan, Bitter Memory of myself*] (2009), the director combines various literary versions of the archetype – such as *El burlador de Sevilla*, attributed to Tirso de Molina, *Don Juan* by Moliere, *Don Juan Tenorio* by Zorrilla and *Don Juan* by Josep Palau i Fabre – in order to increase the psychological depth of the protagonist from different perspectives. As a result, Gallardo's protagonist is a sick elderly man, confined to a convent during the last days of his life and utterly dependent on a young friar named Jacobo who becomes his only interlocutor and caretaker.

This pitiable portrayal of don Juan allows the director to experiment with a hypothetical interpretation of "el personaje más individualista e independiente de la historia del teatro, puesto en situación de dependencia absoluta" (Gallardo, "Cara a cara" 181). Such a pathetic characterization of Don Juan arises also, in part, from the director's pragmatic need to create a situation in which only the manipulator and the marionette share the stage. However, this solo performance, inspired by the work of the renowned Australian puppeteer, Neville Tranter, with life-size puppets, requires a dramaturgy that stresses the physical and psychological interdependence between the puppet and the puppeteer,[8] which Penny Francis has qualified as a "demanding" and "ludic" dialectic in which the player and the object manipulate each other (29). From this dynamic between the marionette and the manipulator there also emerges a type of magic that is very different from that which governs in puppet theater where the puppeteer remains hidden:

[. . .] cuando en teatro contemporáneo el animador se hace visible junto a los títeres este efecto "mágico" es mucho más difícil de conseguir; por una parte, porque se hacen patentes los mecanismos de funcionamiento técnicos de la animación (los "secretos"); y, por otra, porque al títere-

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[7] The tight bond between puppet theater and oral tradition tends to justify these loose versions of a classic, which might be dubious in actor-based theater.

[8] Gallardo, in his role as Jacobo, embodies this onstage co-dependence with the protagonist. In 2011, Gallardo premiered *Diagnóstico: Hamlet* [*Diagnostic*: *Hamlet*], a rewrite of the iconic Shakespearean archetype where a psychiatrist, William, tries to help Max (Hamlet) to confront the fears that torment him.

Figure 3. *Don Juan, memoria amarga de mí*. Photo by Tercer Polo. Courtesy of Miquel Gallardo.

personaje le surge una protuberancia humana, viva, de una escala diferente y de una gran fuerza expresiva, con la que ha de establecer forzosamente una relación de sintonía o de competencia. El animador ha de transformarse obligatoriamente en actor y de hecho, deviene el mismo en personaje. El títere (y el animador-actor), en este caso, se ven obligados a utilizar recursos diferentes para conseguir un nuevo tipo de efecto mágico en su público: una nueva clase de "magia" que supere (y que se nutra de) la presencia visible del animador. (Cornejo, "El títere" 48)

No matter how shocking this reworking of *Don Juan* may be, this performance shares with those previously discussed the perfect pairing of a suitable dramatic text, the type of marionette used, and the manipulation techniques chosen. As is the case with all of the productions that I have analyzed in this article, Gallardo's staging presents a unique approach to a universal icon, grounded on the limitless and symbolic language of the marionette. In Gallardo's words:

Crear una obra con muñecos u objetos conlleva siempre la necesidad de ver el mundo pasándolo por el tamiz de cualquiera de las técnicas o lenguajes que hayamos escogido. [. . .] Los titiriteros no nos dedicamos a imitar simplemente el mundo, sino que creamos infinitos mundos en

los que nos movemos y hacemos frente a los conflictos, proponiendo – y en eso estriba la grandeza de nuestro arte – universos variados que se rigen por reglas distintas en cada caso. (Gallardo, "Los títeres" 60)

This creation of new meanings through puppetry is what the three directors discussed in this essay have achieved using Early Modern or Medieval and Renaissance literature as the foundation for their creativity.

Caballero's archeological staging resurrects the performative aspect of hagiographic plays based on a forgotten performance tradition and a lost cultural patrimony that has never been seen before on the Spanish contemporary stage. Gil Vicente's *Auto de los cuatro tiempos* is, at its core, "auténtico teatro de vanguardia, sin otras reglas que el gusto por la experimentación dramática y lingüística" (Zamora, "El montaje" 10). Such a play requires an inventive staging capable of reflecting its unique dramatic essence on stage. As for the *Misterio del Cristo de los Gascones*, Zamora's mise-en-scène materializes the spiritual essence of the text through a divine puppet that is brought to life within the context of a ritualistic performance. Finally, Gallardo's *Don Juan* freely deconstructs and reinterprets a dramatic and cultural icon by literally confronting the universal trickster face to face. Through the puppet – and utilizing contemporary puppet techniques, in the cases of Zamora and Gallardo, such as the return to ritual theater or the visibility of the manipulator (Jurkowski 320) – the three directors leave their signatures on their productions with personalized aesthetics that add a decisive contribution to the authorship of these texts. To this effect, María Delgado reminds us that "mise-en-scène has now evolved into a form of authorship, a mode of creation and interpretation rather than a mere harnessing of stage resources in the 'service' of a text" (427). Nonetheless, I do not believe that these new rewritings of the classics have been motivated by an "anxiety of influence" with respect to what previous practitioners have done with Spanish classics, especially in the cases of Caballero and Zamora, who engage with texts of scarce dramatic tradition. In my opinion, the utilization of the puppet arises from a genuine desire to explore and experiment with new dramatic avenues and to provide visibility for the coming together between puppets and the classics, a union recovered from the past and increasingly common in contemporary performance practice.

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