

The Past Is Present: Mayorga and Morote on the Madrid Stage

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Two outstanding productions among contemporary plays on the Madrid stage in early March 2008 were Herbert Morote's *El guía del Hermitage* (The Hermitage Guide) at the Bellas Artes and Juan Mayorga's *La tortuga de Darwin* (Darwin's Tortoise) at the Abadía. Both were performed to full houses when I attended. Morote's ekphrastic text takes place one cold winter during the siege of Leningrad in World War II; after the treasures of the Hermitage have been moved to protect them from the German invaders, the title character brings paintings to life through words. Mayorga's title character is a tortoise who passes as an old woman. On the eve of her 200th birthday, she recalls events and people that she has witnessed over those years from her ground level vantage point. The Morote text emphasizes the best of human nature; Mayorga's tone is far more satirical.

Morote was born in 1935 in Perú. Following a business career, at age 55 he took early retirement in order to study history and become a writer. Although he now lives in Madrid, *The Hermitage Guide* had its world premiere in Lima in November 2004. The Spanish production opened in October 2007. The play has been translated to English and Danish and soon will be performed in Russian.

The cast of three consists of the elderly, ill museum guide Pavel Filipovich (Federico Luppi), the museum guard Igor (Manu Callau), and Pavel's wife Sonia (Ana Labordeta). The two men, who initially seem quite different in character and often bicker in comic fashion, are united by an enduring friendship. Sonia, who is younger than her husband, is part of the city's committee of defense and does not live at the Hermitage; when she can, she makes her way across the dangerous city to bring them supplies. There is no doubt about the deep love Pavel and Sonia feel for each other. Although at the outset it appears that only Pavel is an idealist and the other two are firmly planted in reality, even scepticism in the case of Igor, by play's end it is clear that all are dreamers who overcome their tragic circumstances through love, friendship, illusion and their commitment to great art.

In his program note, Argentinean-born director Jorge Eines affirms that

a museum guide, a museum guard, and an art restorer (Sonia's apparent pre-war position) have no antecedents in contemporary theatre; however, there are 20th-century Spanish plays that not only foreground famous paintings but also link art and war. Examples include Rafael Albertí's *Noche de guerra en el museo del Prado* (written in exile and published in Buenos Aires, 1956; Night of War in the Prado Museum) and Antonio Buero-Vallejo's last drama, *Misión al pueblo desierto* (1999; Mission to an Abandoned Town).

Buero (1916-2000) frequently focused on artists, in works such as *Sleep of Reason*, about Goya, and *Las Meninas*, about Velázquez (both translated by Marion Peter Holt). In *Mission to an Abandoned Town* he places the action in the 1930s and refers, through the mechanism of a fictional lost painting by El Greco, to real efforts to preserve and protect national art treasures during the Spanish Civil War. The need to save art, specifically during World War II, is also highlighted in the well-known 1964 war movie, *The Train* (dir. John Frankenheimer). Starring Burt Lancaster and Paul Scofield, the film is based on a factual book by a French art historian on how the Germans looted the Jeu de Paume and other art museums and private collections and how the French Resistance attempted to fight back. Thus, while Morote's *The Hermitage Guide* is, as Eines suggests, a highly original work, it nevertheless speaks intertextually to other fictional works as well as to historical events.

In essence the cast consists of three major characters and all three actors performed brilliantly. Luppi as the guide might be considered the lead actor in this production, but Manuel Callau as the guard both opens and closes the action. Labordeta is on stage less but nevertheless also has a key role. In a time of extreme violence and strife, it is the touching relationship among the three that underscores enduring human values as well as the transcendence of art. Although the guard alerts Sonia that her husband has gone crazy, that Pavel describes paintings that are no longer there to museum visitors who do not exist, he also speaks through a window to his son, who he should know has died out in the trenches. It is also the atheist guard who has risked his life to sequester a medieval icon of an angel with golden curls in the hope that the painting can bring about miracles. Sonia humors Igor in his desire to believe that his son is still alive; Pavel warns Igor that he will be executed if authorities discover he has kept a painting behind but clearly would never denounce his colleague.

For several months, in offstage action, Sonia arranges to have real groups of Leningrad citizens visit the museum for Pavel's tours: illusion is an escape for them from the harsh reality of a city under siege. When the old man dies, Igor assures the bereaved widow that he knows the tour material

well and will carry on in Pavel's place.

The single set, designed by José Luis Raymond, reveals a bleak room with blanket-covered cots where the men sleep. A samovar, located downstage right, provides hot tea and some warmth. An old trunk, downstage left, provides a place for Igor to stand and peer out an invisible window. Straight back chairs with red velvet cushions, located on opposite sides of the stage, at times become seats in museum halls for sitting and viewing a particular painting. Near the play's end, a series of projections visualizes the several paintings that Pavel has so vividly described that the audience can recognize them easily. The play runs 90 minutes without intermission; blackouts indicate the passage of time.

The costume design by Ikerne Giménez enhances the sense of cold and desolation. Sonia, huddled in an overcoat, enters shivering but gradually is able to remove her outer garment. The two men sometimes put their blankets over their shoulders as protection from the chilly room with its bare stone walls. Emphasis is placed on cold hands. Sonia appears not to have gloves at all. Igor wears ragged, fingerless gloves. When she is departing, after Pavel's death, Sonia turns back to Igor to give him her husband's intact, warm gloves as a remembrance of his friend.

Latin American presence in this production of *The Hermitage Guide* includes Federico Luppi, a famous Argentinean actor who now resides in Spain. He had devoted some ten years to making movies before returning to the stage in the Morote play. In an interview for *Teatros*, a free magazine that is distributed in Madrid's theatres, Luppi stated that he was delighted by the text: a fable that affirms the need to keep dreams alive and that does so without resorting to "immoderate sex, double meanings or low blows."

Juan Mayorga (b. 1965), winner of Spain's National Theatre Prize in 2007, is undoubtedly one of the country's outstanding younger playwrights (See *WES* 14.1, 37-39; 17.3, 125-27; 19.2, 37-38). Between his original stage plays and his creative adaptations, virtually no season passes without at least one of his works being performed on the Madrid stage. The 2004-05 season witnessed three plays: *Himmelweg* (*Heaven's Way*), *Últimas palabras de Copito de Nieve* (*Little Snow Flake's Last Words*) and *Hamelin*. Likewise in 2007-08, *Darwin's Tortoise* was not his only play of note. This season he also received the Max Prize for his *El chico de la última fila* (*The Boy in the Back Row*), and *La paz perpetua* (*Everlasting Peace*), directed by José Luis Gómez, was to open in April at the National Drama Center.

Mayorga's satirical commentary at times is presented through animal-characters. Copito de Nieve is a white gorilla. Characters in *La paz perpetua*, which was on tour during my stay in Madrid in March, are a Rottweiler, a

Doberman and a German shepherd who are competing to wear the white collar of the best antiterrorist dog. The protagonist of *Darwin's Tortoise* thus is not alone in the playwright's menagerie.

The director of *Darwin's Tortoise* is Ernesto Caballero, a playwright himself who has been instrumental in bringing to the Spanish stage works of younger authors as well as innovative adaptations such as the 2006 production of Ramón de la Cruz's *Sainetes* for the National Company for Classic Theatre (See *WES* 15.2, 21-22; 18.3, 101-02).

Darwin's Tortoise has a cast of four: the tortoise (Carmen Machi), who calls herself Harriet and refers to Darwin as Charley; a professor of history (Vicente Díez) and his wife Betti (Susana Hernández), and a doctor (Juan Carlos Talavera). Machi is a well-known television and stage actor. One could say that in her wide-ranging dual role of turtle and old lady, she steals the show, but all four actors deliver outstanding performances. Díez, who has worked with some of Spain's most celebrated stage directors, also is known for his performances in movies and television. Hernández likewise has a diversified background but is primarily a stage actor who has collaborated in the past on a number of productions with Caballero. Talavera performs his mad scientist with relish, as we would expect from roles he has played in the past in collaboration with Elena Cánovas or Caballero (See *WES* 15.2, 21-124; 17.3, 128; 18.2, 101-02).

Darwin apparently did take a giant tortoise back to England from the Galápagos Islands. Given the extreme longevity of the reptile, Mayorga imagines that Harriet escapes from Darwin's garden and, one way or another, travels throughout Europe to become witness to the words and deeds of the most famous people of the 19th and 20th centuries. She has outlived eleven popes and 35 American presidents and has survived two world wars, the Russian Revolution and Perestroika.

Caballero states that the principal theme of Mayorga's fable is the devastating history of the 20th century. The play is filled with humor but also makes serious points. The tortoise first stands on her hind legs to run away from the bombing of Guernica. She learns to speak when, in her desire to save a Jewish child from the Germans, she shouts "No!" By putting a dress over her shell, she can become a woman and use the shell to hide a little boy. When being a human is dangerous, she can tuck the dress there and once again become a reptile.

Harriet proposes to share her revisionist and often comic view of history with the professor, then finds herself being time-shared by the professor and the doctor, who blackmails the historian into the arrangement because he wishes to conduct experiments on the tortoise-woman. When it

becomes clear that she is not only being victimized by both men and the historian's wife but that they will kill her once she is no longer useful to them, Harriet implements Darwin's concept of the survival of the fittest. She plans her own 200th birthday party. She bakes a cake laced with all of Betti's pills, decorates it with a single candle, and, after they sing "Happy Birthday" to her, serves it to them. She--along with the audience--gleefully watches the three humans writhe as they die from poisoning.

In one of her short, metatheatrical plays, Paloma Pedrero has a character affirm that what actors most enjoy doing is dying. This scene from *Darwin's Tortoise* confirms that statement. The historian, his wife, and the doctor surely "had it coming", and the actors have the time of their lives as they die agonizingly comic deaths. The expression on Talavera's face by itself is worth the price of admission.

José Luis Raymond's set design, aided by Paco Ariza's lighting, facilitates movement between the history professor's study and the doctor's office. The former is marked by a display of tropical plants upstage and the professor's desk downstage right. Betti, who is not allowed in her husband's study but does not hesitate to eavesdrop, generally appears at a doorway downstage left. A strip of white light in conjunction with the doctor's white coat, the disappearance of the plants and the shifting location of the desk readily indicate the transition from the study to the office. When Harriet recounts battles and violence, her narrative is highlighted by red lighting. Changes in time and space are also noted by blackouts and a variety of music.

Special mention should be made both of Machi's remarkable portrayal of Harriet and of Ikerne Giménez's costume design. The tortoise's dress, sweater and hat are a drab brown, in contrast with the brighter colors worn by Betti. Hernández, who is taller than Machi, stands straight and walks quickly, also in contrast to the tortoise-woman's stooped shoulders and halting steps. A comic highlight is a scene in which the tortoise is on her back, kicking her legs in the air. The historian becomes convinced that the old lady's story is true when he sees her shell. The audience never does but is perfectly willing to suspend disbelief and imagine it.

Raymond, who did the set for both plays discussed here, is on the faculty at RESAD, the Royal School of Dramatic Arts, in Madrid. Mayorga and Caballero also teach there, and Ikerne Giménez is a RESAD graduate.

My time in Madrid this March was very limited, but I consider myself fortunate to have been able to attend two splendid productions: Morote's *The Hermitage Guide* and Mayorga's *Darwin's Tortoise*.

