

Spanish Theatre for Children in the XX Century.
Tradition and Modernity

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Introduction

This study analyses in depth a variety of dramatic texts and theatrical performances aimed at children's audiences in Spain in the twentieth century. Aspects such as the use of structural models, the prevalence of traditional themes and the trend towards new approaches to plot are discussed, as well as some reflections on drama and the phenomenon of modern intertextuality. Both in Spain and around the world at large research into drama for children is still in its infancy, insofar as little has been written about either drama in its literary format or about stage performance. The aim of this article is to forge a way ahead in this line of research.

Different aspects will be selected for analysis for their importance in the origin as well as in the present state of dramatic literature. Performance and staging will be reviewed, through a description of the theatrical companies which aim their shows at a children's audience and also occasionally at adolescents. Productions for the latter are only just beginning to appear in Spain and as yet only sporadically. While not intending to be exhaustive, an analysis is given of the following aspects: structural models, old and new stories in both contemporary and earlier twentieth century texts, the phenomenon of intertextuality and a brief personal reflection on drama. Then follows a brief conclusion about the coexistence of tradition and modernism, whilst a plea will be made to continue

working in children's and juvenile drama, so that it will be allowed recognition and afforded the same seriousness and depth in its creation as when it is aimed at an adult audience. In short, what is needed is drama which is alive and thriving, and is of the highest quality as much in its ethics as in its aesthetics.

1. Two structural models

Two kinds of dramatic structure will be analysed, a traditional one and a much more recent one.

The first is to be found in the internal structure. Its significance lies in the development of the storyline, typical in many children's tales. It is a model based on a series of identifiable actions which weave a type of story of infinite variation, yet uniform both in framework and in meaning. This can be considered a ratification of the well-documented theory of the morphology of popular tales, a theory proposed by the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp, who revolutionized the classification of popular tales with his structuralistic tool. In Propp's work, first published in 1928, and in Spain in 1981 as *Morfología del cuento*, he established a category, with its own particular identity, labelled as the magical popular tale ("cuento maravilloso", 38). He defines the basic structure of this kind of tale as a limited series of actions, 31 maximum, performed by the characters, described as "functions" and repeated constantly. These characteristics do not imply that all the actions must appear in the same tale nor that they must follow the same order, but that the function system is identical. Therefore, the vast cultural heritage of magical fantastic folk tales found in the European cultural world presents an amazing uniformity, as well as an extraordinary diversity and picturesqueness in details.

The story comprises different stages, all of which (or at least some) are present in every piece. At the outset there is a villainous act or someone is in need of help. The series of intermediate functions may include: “Partida” (a departure), “Prohibición” (a prohibition), “Fechoría” (a misdeed), “Función del donante” (the function of the donor), “Mediación” (a mediation), “Recepción del objeto mágico” (reception of the magic object), “Tarea difícil” (a hard task), ”Combate” (a fight), “Socorro” (aid), “Pretensiones engañosas de falsos héroes” (misleading aspirations of fake heroes), “Reparación de la fechoría” (amendment of the misdeed), “Vuelta” (return). The tale ends when the felony has been scantedimed “Victoria” (victory) follows “Ascensión al trono” (ascension to the throne) and “Matrimonio” (marriage) (38-74). These last two functions of the story are considered the reward, which represents happiness according to classical tradition. Nowadays we interpret the meaning of this symbol as the enhancement and exaltation of the hero. It is also a representation of his/her maturity and his/her integration into the social community.

This morphology of functions is very frequently observed in children’s drama in Spain. It is present both in theatrical adaptations of traditional stories and in a number of theatrical texts, both classical and modern. The following list (in chronological order) highlights a few early examples of Spanish children’s theatre in the 20th century: *El príncipe que todo lo aprendió en los libros* by Jacinto Benavente¹, *La cabeza del dragón* by Valle Inclán², *Pinocho y Blancaflor* by Alejandro Casona³, *La maquinita que no quería pitar* by Lauro Olmo y Pilar Enciso, *El gigante* by Luis Matilla o *Tristín, Tristana, Tristón y la colada del Señor* by Sebastián Bautista de la Torre⁴.

A noteworthy example of the structure of functions is the above mentioned play - *Pinocho y Blancaflor-* by Alejandro Casona. The main character in this two-acts drama is

the well-known marionette Pinocchio. Nevertheless, the only similarity between Casona's play and the classical tale by Carlo Collodi is Pinocchio's name. The plot, conflicts and incidents are all completely new.

It dramatizes the story of young princess *Blancaflor*. Palace tradition has determined her destiny against her will: an arranged marriage. During the wedding celebration, the bride is kidnapped by pirates. The king promises his daughter's hand in marriage and half his kingdom in exchange for her life. Pinocchio turns from a wooden puppet into an armed knight, surmounts all the obstacles and releases the Princess from the claws of her kidnappers and the evil of the selfish suitors. The hero overcomes all adversity, marries the princess and achieves eternal happiness to all appearances.

Casona's work thus fulfils epitomises the paradigm of magical tales. In spite of this functional structure, the play reveals other characteristics. Casona aims at appealing to children and contains elements of the comedy genre, as stated by Pavis (66 and 218): the characters belong to a lower status and the ending is happy, its objective being to make the audience laugh. In fact, it is a comedy in a farcical tone; the relevance of the third criterion is marked by the use of well-known devices that create comic effect: typical characters, a series of comic situations, puns, grotesque masks, mockeries, jokes, bufooneries, caricatures and so on. In other words, it complies with what Peter Brook termed "teatro pobre" (poor theatre) (76). One example is the hyperbolic language of the witch and sorceress *Escaldufa*, who mocks the dramatic situation of the princess in a tone of parody:

Veo una infantina rubia,
va flotando entre las aguas...
Se acercan negros con flechas...
Van gritando en las piraguas...

La Infantina es carne fresca;
ya el caldero hirviendo está.
El negro afila el cuchillo.
¡Los negros la comerán! (Cuadro segundo, p. 107)

The double level of the play, as a magical tale and comic farce, makes it a most interesting corpus for research and interpretation. What happens on stage is what always happens in the magical tale: outing to the woods and the world, meeting with antagonists and friends, obstacles that have to be overcome in order to deserve the victory and have a happy end. The succession of the same actions traces a symbolic itinerary of initiation rites and the road to maturity, that is to say, it presents the milestones in the path of life. Thanks to these symbols, children realize that they will have to face the future on their own and acquire confidence by identifying with the characters. Through their identification with the hero, they advance in their path and convince themselves that those who are brave enough to fight, no matter how small or weak, will succeed in the end. They always reach the symbolic finishing line, where the princess and kingdom, are the rewards. This is interpreted as the achievement of a mature, harmonious personality, integrated in the social group they belong to as López Tamés (32) states in his research into the psychological meaning of the magical popular tale. Casona's aim is to offer the children a theatrical version of this folk material which has been transferred from time long past already belongs to children's cultural heritage. On the other hand, the constant presence of comic elements throughout the farce clothes the work in a new and modern suit. The following dialogue, an amusing caricature of marriage, is a suitable example:

INFANTINA - ¿Tú conoces el matrimonio, nodriza?
NODRIZA - Poco. Lo conocí una vez, pero ya apenas me acuerdo.

INFANTINA - ¿Por qué?

NODRIZA - Porque a la semana de casarnos mi marido tuvo que marchar a la guerra... y tuvimos la desgracia de que era la Guerra de los Treinta Años. Todavía lo estoy esperando.

INFANTINA - ¿Era guapo tu marido?

NODRIZA- De perfil, sí. El pobre era un poco tuerto.

INFANTINA - ¿Era bueno contigo?

NODRIZA - Cuando no se emborrachaba era un encanto.

INFANTINA - ¿Te pegó alguna vez?

NODRIZA - Muy poco. No tuvimos tiempo. (Cuadro primero, p. 90).

Or the sarcastic satire against monarchy:

REY.- ¡Tengo una idea!

CHAMBELÁN.- ¿Vos señor? ¡Corte de Panfilandia: el rey tiene una idea!

REY.- Mejor dicho... dos.

CHAMBELÁN.- (Frenético) ¡Dos ideas! ¡El rey tiene dos ideas al mismo tiempo! Desde el terremoto de hace siete años, no se había visto en el reino un fenómeno semejante. (Cuadro primero, p. 97)

Both techniques are used to modernize situations and characters, without erasing the deep symbolic meaning of the folk tale. Therefore, *Pinocho y Blancaflor* can be read on two different levels -the traditional and at a distance, through modern eyes, as it has been explained in the analysis.

The second structure is a recent innovation in the external framework of texts which are intended to be performed, but are also aimed at the reading public. This structure constitutes a transformation, both in form and in function, of the stage directions. This changes the play into a new type of story, while still maintaining a script for the stage. Therefore it affects the external form of the dramatic writing and it can be argued that by doing so, a new dimension has been created in this branch of literature.

As everybody knows, dramatic works show some formal characteristics that differ

from other kinds of literary texts. Following Carmen Bobes' terminology (25), the semiologic research of dramatic works distinguishes two aspects in dramatic texts: "texto literario" (literary text) –formed basically, but not exclusively, by dialogues- and "texto spectacular" (spectacular text) –which includes all the signs that lead to an eventual representation in the text.

Stage directions are undoubtedly the dominant feature in spectacular texts. In the convention of the genre, stage directions are essentially informative and concise (though there are wonderful exceptions such as the very literary ones by Valle Inclán) and are originally addressed to the director and actors, who will make the needed modifications in order to transfer the verbal signs of the text into the non verbal signs of the scene. The inclusion of plenty of merely referential "stage directions" in dramatic texts requires an important effort of concentration and imagination by the reader. On the one hand, the reader must not allow himself to become distracted from the main plot by these indications which relate to the performance. On the other hand, he needs to undertake a kind of simultaneous mental translation using these signs to allow him to appreciate the imaginary representation of the drama.

The innovation to be found in the "stage directions" consists basically of the fact that technical specifications, referred to as the non-verbal codes (such as lighting, sound, costume, make-up, props, etc.) are included in notes and narrative descriptions which carry the reader through the play as if they were part of the story. A representative example can be found in *El pirata Lagartijo* by Juan Pedro Romera:

¡Atiza! Viene Lagartijo, ya se oyen los cánticos de los piratas. (...) Está cambiando la iluminación. Antes era muy brillante y ahora es más tenue y hay algún color que

cae sobre las palmeras. Atención que aparece el barco de Lagartijo al fondo. Bueno, la verdad es que sólo asoma la proa porque el barco entero no cabría en el escenario. (Acto único, p. 13).

The dramatic piece is therefore converted into a type of dialogued story, with the important presence of the author's voice as a narrator. This obviously allows texts which are meant to be read and performed to be circulated in a much easier way. At the same time professional actors are not denied an excellent opportunity to take on a theatrical production. Finally, these narrative substitutions of the distant stage directions, which are so difficult for children to visualize and assimilate, may help young readers sense they are part of the drama and even feel they are the main characters.

2. Old and new themes

Traditional children's theatre was characterised, up until the renovation which took place during the 70's, by its obvious pedagogical aims and overt messages. Throughout the post-war years of the Franco regime, "school drama" was promoted and performances were held regularly. The actors would be the pupils at all boys' or all girls' schools. Its main aims were naturally dictated by the "Formación del Espíritu Nacional" (state Catholic education) and by the political right-wing thought of the day. Authors such as Aurora Diaz Plaja, Carmen Bravo-Villasante, Aurora Mateos or Carola Soler wrote for the girls. Many of the plays consisted of only one act and were meant to be performed in class. They were published periodically in the children's magazine *Bazar*. Furthermore, in many of these plays, morals were very clear and obvious. Such is the case of *La princesa remilgadina* by Aurora Mateos:

CRISTOBITA.- (Dirigiéndose al público.)

Vista y oída está, con seguridad, ¡oh! público respetable, la historia trágica y espantable, de una Princesa holgazana, que no trabajaba nada. Como a tiempo se arrepintió, de terminar asada se libró... Si aquí por casualidad está algún niño holgazán, aproveche la lección, ahora que bajo el telón. (Acto Tercero p.64)

Fortunately, before and immediately after the period of the dictatorship, until the cautious renovation of the 70's, some authors were able to break free from this antiquated pedagogical framework. These writers attempted to appeal to children by using themes that would interest them, tackling subjects whose underlying political or social criticism is couched in a humorous way. Nevertheless, their number is not great. Among them, such outstanding figures as Valle Inclán at the beginning of this century and Lauro Olmo in the 1960's can be found.

Of these authors, there is only space to review Valle Inclán, whose rebellious vision of Spanish society is especially lucid. If seen against the background of the non-critical line of thought which, it may be argued, has invaded our present-day society, his ideas are even more striking for their honesty and courage. It is worthwhile recalling some examples from *La cabeza del dragon*, which unfortunately is his only piece intended for a younger public.

In the political sphere it is important to point out that his ferocious attacks are directed at a series of institutions and their representatives:

- Against the monarchy: kings and queens are a continuous object of caricature. He deliberately gives them very un-innocent proper names. In Spanish the name *Gran Rey Mangucián* makes the audience think of the word “mangar”, meaning to steal or rob, and implies that the King makes the townspeople poor. In the name *Rey Micomicón*, the word

“mico”, the Spanish for monkey, is obvious, and intimates a clown-like character. In the stage directions as well as in the dialogues, the incorporation of this name shows the royalty up for being cowards, drunkards and gluttons. Their government is a disaster and their behaviour is undesirable. Honesty is incompatible with the royal condition:

EL PRÍNCIPE AJONJOLÍ.- A un Príncipe no se le puede llamar ni hombre de bien ni hombre de honor. Es despectivo. (Escena primera, p. 21).

- Against the nobility: Valle Inclán denounces the rumours and the petty jealousies that abound in the palace. He laughs at the falseness of the high lineage of the nobles. It is precisely this on which they base their privileged social position. He even goes so far as to identify the nobility with society's lowest and most debauched classes:

EL REY MICOMICÓN.- Un bandolero puede ser tronco de un noble linaje, como nos enseña la Historia. (Escena quinta, p. 100).

- Against institutions and politicians: he attacks the Courts, the Crown and the politicians, whom he accuses of being corrupt and inept in their jobs, and for not finding solutions to the problems of people:

EL BUFÓN.- En España, donde nadie come, es la cosa más difícil el ser gracioso. Sólo en el Congreso hacen allí gracia las payasadas. Sin duda porque los padres de la Patria comen en todas partes, hasta en España. (Escena segunda, p. 37).

At the same time, Valle Inclán also ridicules other members of society, such as the military:

El heroico General Fierabrás es un viejo perlático, con el pecho cubierto de cruces y la cabeza monda. La punta de la nariz le gotea sin consideración, como una gárgola. (Escena quinta, Acotación octava, p. 99).

And on various occasions, he tells of the horrible conditions in which Spanish people live, their hunger or the humiliations they undergo:

EL CIEGO.- Había tomado pasaje para mí solo y no me admitían al perro. Querían que pagase como si fuese una persona. (Escena última, p. 106).

EL BUFÓN.- Las personas son la que debían pagar como perros, porque de tales reciben el trato en esos barcos de emigrantes". (Escena última, p.107)

The comedy, irony and sarcastic mordacity present in Valle Inclán's work are patent. What a pity that this line of critical observation and vision of transformation has not influenced more authors nor has had more continuity in later decades!

General Franco's death and the transition from dictatorship to democracy opened the door to a wider range of topics, although the way these are approached has not altered as much as it might have been hoped. Most plays still have a very strong educational purpose, often at a very elementary level in many texts and shows. New messages dealing with values that our society expects are making their way in:

- Instead of the model child, full of virtue, found in the decimononic theatre, Consuelo Armijo brings to the stage the child who is a rebel, who fights against the system of obligations which are thrust upon him by the adults in *Guinapo y Pelaplátanos*.

- Against war and militaristic policies, Gloria Fuertes proclaims pacifist messages in

a humorous vein in one of her most celebrated works, *Las tres reinas magas: Melchora, Gaspara y Baltasara*.

- In favour of tolerance, dialogue and multicultural communication in *Los pieles rojas no quieren hacer el indio* by Fernando Almena.
- The review of traditional educational topics such as the attack on the teacher who is hateful and oppressive, a call to corporate loyalty among students even if they have been unfairly punished, or sexual initiation are some of the topics that can be found in *A la paz de Dios* by Vicente Leal⁵.

- Family life, with authority/obedience conflicts, obligation/recreation and the rebellion of a girl against the norms imposed on by her parents are the main topics in the play *El secreto de Lena* by the Sambhu Theatre Company of Navarre (1997). Based on the novel of the same title by Michael Ende, the stage adaptation of this complicated story is most imaginative. The text has been carefully selected and the performance is superb with its fine rhythm and coherence. The play's ability to fascinate the audience is obvious. The magnificent surprise of seeing the parents reduced to half their size and still moving acrobatically with great elegance is added to many other effects: dynamism due to the speed with which scenes succeed each other; gesture and body movement is carefully studied; moving decors; music mixed with sound effects typical in our everyday lives in this technological era. All these things together make the play interesting for children as young as 5 or 6 years old, as well as for the adults that come with them. The latter find themselves happily surprised at being able to enjoy a play aimed at a young audience. This illustrates once again what should be a feature of successful children's literature and theatre. While great plays are not always for the general public, good plays for children can interest and

indeed appeal to adults.

-The conflicting situation of a parent's divorce or separation, from a point of view which neither hides nor falsely softens the difficulties, is the theme of *Hasta el domingo*, by María Falcón. It received a special mention in the Latin-American theatre contest of 1992. Tenderness and irony can be found in the text and show younger children that parents also have a hard time learning how to live through this new situation. Nevertheless the author makes the children aware that something as important as their parents' love towards them and the feeling of security in their care is still going to be there and has not been changed.

- Sexual equality is not a theme which has been widely dealt with, although a few attempts have been made. One is *El cuarto de los juguetes* (1994) by the group from Murcia Fabula Teatro. This play exposes to children the reality of the sexual stereotypes present in their role-playing, where boys usually play the part of Indians, cowboys or train drivers, while girls play the part of mums, nurses and so on. The suggestion is that children should break with these cultural and traditional models.

- There are also texts whose purpose is to awake our social conscience. One of the themes that has received most attention is ecology: the fight against the degradation of the environment, the extinction of animal species and the progressive destruction of the ecosystem. These topics are found in plays and stories such as *Historia de una cereza* by Miguel Pacheco. Others include shows performed in the open air -such as *El baile de las ballenas* by Luis Matlla (1985), performed for the first time on the lake at the Crystal Palace in the Retiro Park, Madrid, under the direction of Juan Margallo and published with *El bosque fantástico* in *Teatro para armar y desarma* or in conventional theatres -such as *Planeta Tierra* by the Catalan group Arca (1996).

To conclude with these political or social trends in theatre, several examples of plays which take sides in conflictive situations should be cited. They explicitly proclaim their support for a specific social creed and aim at arousing a social conscience towards the problems of the world. It is a theatre that refuses to give up the search for a political solution and invites us to reflect on the times we are living in and what is going on around us. Examples of this kind of children's theatre can be found in plays such as the following:

- *Zapatos rojos* (1993), by the group from the town Vitoria Teatro Paraíso. This play highlights the tragic situation of the street children of Brazil, a terrible problem that affects millions of children in the streets of third world countries. Text, acting and scenery make it a great quality play, in which a devastating exposure of this topic is made, whilst the audience's attention is captured in a cross-fire of emotions. Before and after the performance, the company invites the audience to participate in different activities that can be worked on with the children, in order to think about the problem and to try to find possible solutions. Their aim is achieved without falling into the easy demagogic which would do little to enhance the play's underlying theme.

- *Opus Primum: a war story*, written and directed by Hadi Kurik and represented by Teatre de la Resistència (1995) is accompanied by a dossier written in coordination with Tomas Motos, professor at the University of Valencia. This offers ample documentation about the atrocities committed during the war in Yugoslavia, as well as activities to promote and teach peace in the classroom.

- Without being explicitly educational, although it was conceived along the same lines as the former, *Patito feo* (1997) is a production by La Machina, a company supported by the University of Cantabria. It borrows the title from Andersen's classic and taking its

inspiration from the tale of the ugly duckling, highlights on stage themes such as justice/injustice, humanism/ fascism and love/hate relationships. The play is able to portray contemporary tragedies such as marginality and xenophobia, while conveying the message that everyone has the right to survive and attain self-development.

3. Games, folk and classic sources

Modern literary theory believes that intertextuality is inherent to literary discourse. Julia Kristeva states that: “todo texto se construye como mosaico de citas, todo texto es absorción y transformación de otro texto” (190). The phenomenon of intertextuality is not new but its aims and usage are. There are four important aspects of this innovation: its use as an intentional feature, the intensification of the coexistence of more than one text within the new one, the modernization of the imagined elements and finally the overt critical purpose of parody.

Indeed the presence of characters, situations, plots and different references already known to the audience and belonging to an oral or written literary tradition, are a very important feature of contemporary children’s literature. This is also present in theatrical works aimed at children.

We have numerous examples in texts and productions. One of these is the piece written by Alejandro Casona in which he uses intertextuality: In addition to *Pinocho y Blancaflor*, the farce commented above, and the following story, *El hijo de Pinocho*, Casona wrote four other plays during the years in which he was exiled in South America.

El gato con botas. This play completes the trilogy with the aforementioned two. It is a comedy in five acts, inspired by Charles Perrault’s famous story, but with a very original

and personal touch by the playwright from Asturias.

El lindo don Gato. Its author states that it is a “romance-pantomima” and that consists of only one act, in which the popular song “Estaba el señor don Gato” is set for the stage. This play was supposedly written before 1950 although the exact date of its première is unknown.

¡A Belén, pastores! This is a Christmas story with traditional carols and popular songs (Tejada, Rengifo, Lope de Vega and Góngora), a play written in the liturgical tradition, but including funny and profane episodes. Its première took place in The Rodo Park in Montevideo, in December 1951.

Retablo jovial, which appeared in Buenos Aires in 1949 and consists of five farces in one act: *Sancho Panza en la insula*, *Entremés del mancebo que casó con mujer brava*, *Farsa del cornudo apaleado*, *Fablilla del secreto bien guardado* and *Farsa y justicia del corregidor*. The first one has its origins in *El Quijote* by Cervantes, the second in the *Exemplo XXXV* by Conde Lucanor and the third one comes from the story number LXXII in the *Decameron* by Bocaccio. The last two are based on folk tales, the fourth on a popular Italian story and the fifth and last, on an oriental morality tale. As Juan Cervera says in his *Historia crítica del teatro infantil español* (393-398), the first two farces were written by Casona for *el Teatro del Pueblo de las republicanas Misiones Pedagógicas* that he directed between 1931 and 1935. The other three plays quoted were already written in America although with the same purpose. *Retablo jovial* is therefore not intended for a young audience, but for adults. The reason to include it in this research is that, just like many other manifestations of popular literature, it has always been well received by the younger public.

Cervera, the children’s theatre researcher and theorician already mentioned, also used

intertextuality in *Contar, cantar y jugar* as a playwright. This work consists of three short pieces based on popular stories: *Zas, zas, zas*, *El burro, el camello y la cabra* and *Al freir será el reir*. The first is an adaptation of Charles Perrault's tale, *Los deseos ridículos*. *El burro, el camello y la cabra* is based on a little-known Arabic story and *Al freir será el reir* is also a compendium of several oriental tales. All these are supposed to be funny and at the same time educational, and their adaptation was intended not only to be entertaining but also to revive old sayings and maxims for children.

Therefore themes, characters, tales, fables, traditions and legends, clichés and archetypes –all rooted in culture, transferred to the stage with actors or puppets, and accompanied by all kinds of techniques – strive to find a new format and succeed.

In the first category, known as object theatre, a fine example is to be found in *El Gato con Botas*, by the group from Santander La Maleta de Mariano (1990). Its apparent simplicity yet the extraordinary use he has invented for handmade objects is probably one of García Pérez's greatest achievements, for he surprises old and young alike with a unique display of creativity. It is puppet theatre without puppets. First of all the actor tells the story and then, just as children do in their own play time, everyday objects are transformed by the actor into animated beings in front of the audience. The audience might find that a slipper with a pair of glasses perched on the front has become the sick miller in bed, or a baby's bootie is a cat, scrubbing brushes are the wheat fields; shoeboxes are castles... Whistles, bells and gazoos are used in original ways to identify the characters and situations... Classical tales are recreated in an unusual scenic game without a single word being spoken. A simple table becomes a reduced scale universe where, thanks to the complicity of the story, the audience is invited to discover the role of each object while they

gaze spellbound as witnesses of a unique event: the transformation of symbolic child's play into a spectacular show.

In *Besos para la Bella Durmiente* by Jose Luis Alonso de Santos, the hypotext used is another fairy story with the same title by Charles Perrault, retold in verse this time. Using *La Bella durmiente* as his source, the author creates a new story combining tenderness and poetry with satirical humor. He uses a vast range of techniques to create on the one hand a feeling of distance – distortion, caricature of traditional stereotypes...– and, on the other hand, a feeling of contemporaneity –colloquialisms, deliberate changes of time and setting, and comic mixtures of past and present (tangos danced in the medieval castle, a flying motorcycle instead of a broom, etc.)... All these overlie the same eternal topics and finalize with the conventional happy ending: the power and triumph of love over all. Here is one example:

CABALLERO RUBIO:

¡Y cómo es que os atrevéis
con esa pinta de momia
a ir a quitarme la novia?
¡Vaya cara que tenéis!

CABALLERO MORENO:

¡Novia será del primero
que al llegar donde reposa,
le dé un beso marinero,
y la convierta en su esposa! (Primera Parte, Escena IV pp. 46-47)

La niña que riega las albahacas by Antonio Rodríguez Almódovar is a splendid dramatic version of a popular Andalusian story which is “atípico y prodigioso” in the words of the author of this adaptation (7). It is a real gift of popular novelty and ingenuity. The main character, *Mariquilla*, is an intelligent enterprising girl, whose very name, the

diminutive of María, suggests affection and admiration of her worth and ingenuity. She is quite the opposite to the typical feminine stereotype, so common in traditional fairy tales. She ridicules the abuse of power thanks to her intelligence and makes the best of every situation she finds herself in, succeeding in very difficult tasks. Even marriage, the usual outcome of the story, symbol of happiness and harmony, is turned upside down and used as a final joke, played by the girl on the villagers. She shows the prince how he really is: vengeful and stupid.

This story full of humor helps to fill the small space that children's drama occupies today, and recovers emotions and knowledge of people for all of us. I refer to the genuine flavor of people -forceful, direct, eschatological...- that has been forgotten for centuries, and their traditional knowledge -firm in its truths and fearful of those in power- though such thoughts have been hundreds of times disguised or erased from History by those who write it.

It is worth pointing out that this version of the popular Andalusian story is in appearance very different from the one Federico García Lorca probably knew and on which he based a children's puppet show: *La niña que riega la albahaca y el príncipe preguntón*⁶. The opening performance of Lorca's work was held in Lorca's house in Granada on January 5th 1923, eve of the festivity of Three Wise Men or Twelfth Night. Two great artists collaborated with the poet in this project: the puppets were made by Hermenegildo Lanz and the music was composed by Manuel de Falla⁷. However, there are some things in common, such as the dialogue between the prince and the girl:

PRÍNCIPE.- Niña que riegas la albahaca,
¿cuántas hojitas tiene la mata?

and the girl, always answering back, replies with another unanswerable question:

IRENE.- Dime, rey zaragatero,
¿cuántas estrellitas tiene el cielo? (Estampa Primera, p.27)

En busca de la isla del tesoro by Alberto Miralles is a work in which such well-known figures such as the crafty pirate Long John Silver or the innocent and courageous young Jim Hawkins appear. These characters and the background of R.L.Stevenson's classic adventure story are the setting for this children's play, which also uses to great effect the technique of "drama within drama", which Pirandello has made popular among contemporary playwrights.

A further example of intertextuality can be seen in the combinations of distorted stories: many stories at once which now become something different, after the style of Gianni Rodari. The mixture of characters and situations preserves the essence of the traditional elements (although there are many changes that modernize or soften the most obsolete aspects of the stories). The show *Pulgarcito, ¡qué miedo!* (1994) by the group from Murcia Fábula Teatro is one example. Sometimes a total and radical transformation of a story's original theme occurs, as in *¡Te pillé, Caperucita!* by Carles Cano. This is the dramatic text which won the famous award Premio Nacional de Literatura Infantil Lazarillo in 1994. It is a motley of classical characters: Red Riding, Hood Pretty, Puss in Boots, Snow White, Cinderella... alongside modern idols or myths belonging to literature, music or the movies: Frankenstein, Dracula, Rambo, Michael Jackson... Demystification, reversal of roles, total distortion, burlesque, onomatopoeia, puns, contemporary slang, tricks of animation, and a sense of complicity with the audience. A happy combination of plot,

technical features and stage directions that culminate in the sensible choice of presenting the play as if it was a TV program, interrupting the story line at the end of each scene with an Anuncio (advent), just as in real life. It is a very witty satire about the excesses and deceit of advertising and the cravings of a consumer society. The following extract from Anuncio “Cirugía estética” offers an opportunity to illustrate the humorous range of characters on stage, the irony directed at advertising and the jokes with the audience as complices:

FRANKIE.- Un día vino Pinocho a nuestra consulta, y con una de éstas (coge la sierra) le dejamos la cara como si fuese uno de los tres cerditos, como podéis comprobar. (...) Con el trozo de nariz que nos sobró le hicimos una pata de madera al soldadito de plomo que, casualmente, pasaba por allí. Y como le cobramos un ojo de la cara, desde entonces se dedica a la piratería, y por la foto que nos ha enviado parece que le va viento en popa. (...) También pasó por aquí el patito feo, y desde aquel día se lo rifan en las películas de ciencia ficción. (Gira una silueta de "Alien, el octavo pasajero".) (...) De manera que ya lo sabéis... Cuando acabe la función tomaré nota de la dirección y el número de teléfono de aquellos que necesiten un apaño, que por lo que observo sois prácticamente todos y todas. (Anuncio 2: “Cirugía estética” pp. 42-44).

As a last example of intertextuality we cite the show *Aladino* (1997), an original play by Gianni Franceschini. In Spain Carlos Herans directed the play with la Compañía Achiperre. This group, one of the oldest professional theatrical companies in Spain, is now a cooperative located in Zamora. The story *Aladino y la lámpara maravillosa* from *Thousand an One Nights* is used as the foundation of the play. The text goes beyond the original tale in that it analyses the theme of desire in depth by portraying how aspirations in life are the driving force in human behaviour. It is a far cry from the shallow adaptations of classic tales by Disney. Intended for children between 6 and 12 years old, the show offers a mixture of magic, dreams and reality thanks to the role of a very popular character in oriental stories: the story-teller. Many highly elaborate puppets are used, together with other

types of puppet and hand-held objects, for the company has mastered an enormous variety of techniques of manipulation. The actor's role is to present the drama enacted by the objects and puppets. Some of these speak, others are dumb. Throughout the play elements such as light, music and sound effects are used together with visual and acoustic surprises to express something as complex as the effect of imagination in real life.

4. Textual and visual theatre

To finalise this account, a brief comment on drama has a right to be included. It is essential to offer some thoughts on what the role of the dramatic text or script is and how it affects the play and performance nowadays in the professional theatre for children and young people. Drama for children is still in its infancy. It still lacks recognition as a serious art form, although one may encouragingly come across plays of high quality from time to time. Some aspire to be restrained, simple and succinct, others use gigantic scenic apparatus, while others elicit audience participation. The possibilities are endless and the balance between the text and the visual effects is one of the features which gives each production its own individual identity. The success and creativity of a play is the product of a very complicated combination of different factors, which is difficult for a critic to determine.

One very important principle should be remembered: children, and adults as well, go to the theatre hoping to see a well-performed story. The key factor is for the story to appeal to the members of the audience, make them laugh, make them think, either by relying on the words in the script or only by using them as an element in the drama, combining them with other non-verbal signs which make up theatrical language. It is even possible for the

play not to include any dialogues.

Nevertheless, I also need to stake a claim for the great need for dramatic texts. There is an enormous lack of poetic, connotative and suggestive texts, and therefore a lack of certain nuances only available in these texts. I do not mean to ignore or berate the importance of visual drama, nor to suggest that there should be long speeches in the plays or solely adaptations based on texts already written. I am trying to insist on the need to boost the creation of children's drama and to take special care in the making of adaptations from other genres. Too many plays have been written from stories which have been poorly chosen and grossly cut as Derek Shiel says⁸.

Theatrical companies should stop considering that paying a playwright is an anathema, and aspire to the subtlety of communication, valuing the delight of well spoken words, the beauty and the precision of language. However great the effort made in this direction, it is still likely to fall short, but audiences will acknowledge the initiative and be grateful. One example of an excellent script and carefully worked dramatic piece is the show *Por el mar de las Antillas* (1997) performed by the company Teloncillo. The script is the work of the veteran director del Pequeño Teatro de Valencia, Eduardo Zamanillo, accompanied with songs and poems by María Elena Walsh, Celia Viñas and Nicolás Guillén.

Obviously, I do not mean that a story cannot be properly told when the visual effects are the fundamental elements of the piece, and the dialogue is relegated to a very secondary role. This is what happens in *La fábula de la raposa*, produced by the group from Aragón, Los Titiriteros de Binéfar. A thrilling story which is not based on words but on the expressive force of movement, gesture, silences, onomatopeic language... Images are

essential. The play received the award Gran Premio UNIMA (Pécs, Hungary, 1995) not only because of the technique in the fabrication of puppets (metal rods with multiple articulations, combined with strings and manipulated in full sight of the audience from a higher level) but also due to the relationship of puppets with dialogue: an intertwining of very short phrases that keep the plot going forward. The play also relies on animal sounds: each bird or animal character (vixen, mouse, crow, robin redbreast) has its own language. Music and lighting accompany the dynamic rhythm. There is something that lies beneath all these elements and brings them together: a good plot that combines two legendary fables –*La zorra y el cuervo* and *El león y el ratón* – with the urgent need to protect our environment⁹. Thus two classical stories have been incorporated into a play with modern themes and they all revolve around the metaphor of the circle of life. A successful reworking that keeps the audiences attention and intrigues the spectator from the beginning to the end. This is partly due to the visual effects but also to the outstanding script, which is both appealing and thought-provoking.

Conclusion

Contemporary children's theatre, just like drama for adults, combines tradition and modernism in its dramatic texts and in its shows. We are heirs of a culture that is part of the fabric of our ideas and that we reinforce or against which we fight. The theatre is one of the mirrors in which we contemplate our society, in which our values are reflected, but also our aspirations or our desire to effect changes. It is also the mirror in which creators and spectators observe themselves. Creation not only implies aesthetics but also ethics and philosophy. Teenage girls and boys also look into the mirror, expecting to recognize

themselves. Let us hope that they find the pleasure of identification more frequently, or even better, that they discover unknown aspects of themselves, an advance of critical conscience and a commitment towards our present.

Notes

¹ *El príncipe que todo lo aprendió en los libros* by Jacinto Benavente was performed for the first time the 20th of December 1909 in the opening of Teatro de los Niños (Children's Theatre) in Madrid. The enthusiastic project of this playwright awarded with a Nobel Prize promoted a national theatre for children. It included several works by himself, Valle Inclán, Eduardo Marquina, Enrique López Marín and Silesio Delgado, among others. Nevertheless, this theatre had a short life, since it closed only two months later, due to the lack of institutional and artistic backing, as well as to its poor success with audiences.

² *La cabeza del dragón* by Valle Inclán is the only play for children written by this great Spanish playwright. It was first performed in Teatro de la Comedia de Madrid by Compañía de Matilde Moreno on the last evening of Teatro de los Niños, the 5th of March 1910, with its original title: *Farsa infantil de la cabeza del dragón*. It has been edited many times. These are some of its editions: Valle Inclán, R., *Farsa infantil de la cabeza del dragón. Tablado de Marionetas para educación de príncipes*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1961; *La cabeza del dragón* en Espasa Calpe, Col. Austral Juvenil, Madrid, 1982; and in Alborada, Col. La locomotora, Madrid, 1987.

³ *Pinocho y Blancaflor* by Alejandro Casona was performed for the first time in the Teatro Ateneo in Buenos Aires the 16th of June 1940. However, Evaristo Arce, the editor, quotes an autographic inscription that sets the play in Mexico, the 14th of August 1937. As two other children's plays written by this author born in Asturias and exiled in Argentina, *Pinocho y la infantina Blancaflor* (original title) remained unpublished until 1983. Luis Miguel Rodríguez, a nephew of the author, recovered them and published them in a nice critical edition in Asturias. See Tejerina, Isabel, "Análisis funcional, sintaxis y semántica de personajes en *Pinocho y Blancaflor* de Alejandro Casona", *Letras de Deusto*, 62, enero-marzo, 1994, pp. 133-157.

⁴ A deeper analysis of this structure, as well as other dimensions related to the themes, characters and language, applied in a wide range of works and including quotations can be seen in Tejerina, I., *Estudio de los textos teatrales para niños*, Universidad de Cantabria: Servicio de Publicaciones, 1993.

⁵ This play won the Concurso Iberoamericano de Dramaturgia Infantil, 1992, awarded by Comité Iberoamericano de Creación e Investigación Teatral y el Centro de Documentación de Títeres de Bilbao. The works awarded in this relevant yearly convention for dramatic creation for children are being published by The Centro de Documentación de Títeres de Bilbao, headed by Concha de la Casa, whose aim is to improve dramatic creation for children.

⁶ This text -an adaptation from an old tale from Andalucía- was lost for many years. The first edition was published thanks to Francisco Porras, on a really low budget, in the magazine *Títere. Boletín de la Unión de Titiriteros* in 1982. It was analysed and published by Professor González del Valle, from Nebraska-Lincoln University, in "Perspectivas críticas, horizontes infinitos. *La niña que riega la albahaca y el príncipe preguntón* y las constantes dramáticas de Federico García Lorca", *Anales de la Literatura Española*, 7, 1982, pages. 253-264. Later on, it was published again in *Anales*, Vol. 9. Separata, pages 295-306 and in *Obras Completas* (The Complete Works) of Aguilar (1991). It also precedes the chapter "Teatro de Muñecos" of the book *Federico y su mundo* by the brother of Francisco García Lorca (*Obras para títeres de Federico García Lorca*, Zaragoza: Teatro Arbolé y Cultural Caracola, colección Titirilibros, nº 9, 1998.)

⁷ For further information on this original party and about the importance of puppet shows in the first part of the 20th century, please refer to: Francisco Porras Soriano, *Los títeres de Falla y García Lorca*, Madrid: Edition by the author and sponsorship by UNIMA and Centro de Documentación de Títeres de Bilbao,

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1995. Or to my article: Tejerina, I., "La tradition hispanique. Un théâtre pour les enfants" in *Puck La marionnette et les autres arts*, n° 10, monograph *L'enfant au théâtre*, Éditions Institut International de la Marionnette. 1997.
- ⁸ En *Animations*. Trad. "El texto en el teatro de títeres", *Titereando*, n° 3, Unima Federación España, diciembre 1995, pp.3-4.
- ⁹ Both tales, whose main characters are anthropomorphic animals, *La zorra y el cuervo* (fox and crow) and *El león y el ratón* (lion and mouse), have been travelling around for 2500 years: from Aesop's Greece (VI B.C.) to Phedro's Rome (I A.C.); in the Middle Ages, María de Francia (12th century), el Arcipreste de Hita in *El libro del Buen Amor* and Don Juan Manuel in *El Conde Lucanor* (16th century); La Fontaine rewrote them in France in the 17th century; Fernando de Samaniego adapted them in Spain in the 18th century... and so on until today.

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