

## National Theaters on the Iberian Peninsula

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**Abstract:** In his article "National Theaters on the Iberian Peninsula," Anxo Abuín González discusses the rise of national theaters understood as processes of national planning, starting with certain common systemic parameters developed and implemented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the context Abuín González's analysis is located in is Spain's centralized literary system, his focus is on the interliterary and systemic relationship between Galician and Portuguese theater, with some references to Catalan theater.

## **Anxo ABUÍN GONZÁLEZ**

### **National Theaters on the Iberian Peninsula**

Translated from the Galician by Mark Wiersma

National theater — as explained by Mary Trotter in the case of Ireland — functions as nation building: "creators of a nation do not exactly identify a community out of which to build their state so much as they imagine one, establishing a sense of commonality among a people that overrides the ideological and cultural differences within the national group. In Ireland's case, cultural nationalists sought this national common ground by resurrecting and rewriting a body of national myths, thus promoting an ideology of common heritage, tradition, and belief" (Trotter xi). I believe that this idea of a "common ground" is familiar as a basic mechanism for provoking the illusion of identity, reinforced by, of course, what Homi Bhabha would call "narratives of unity" by stories, images, and ritual symbols that give the impression that naturally shared, like-signified elements exist. Theater occupies a space in this construction of identity, a cultural discourse not unaffected by political denunciation and protest, like the protest the Irish have levied against English domination since 1800. In his study on the formation of the North American (U.S. and Canada) theater, Bruce McConachie appeals to the concept of "theatrical formation," taken from Tony Bennett ("reading formation"). Emerging theaters feel themselves drawn by the magnitude of canonized models (e.g., Shakespeare, Molière, Calderón, etc.), at the same time they are eager to preserve what is original and idiosyncratic about their cultures. Laurence Senelick signals certain common traits in these processes: "there are the initial manifestos which proclaim the need for a national theatre in order to fortify the language, improve manners and morals, educate the people and, ultimately, validate the credentials of the nation, putting it on a par with its European fellows" (3).

In the following, I discuss the history of theater on the Iberian Peninsula: the central axis of the process is in this case located in the nineteenth century, when the nationalist explosion associated with the romantic movement took place. Nationalist theories of aesthetics initially opposed the cosmopolitan, based on the Herderian idea that humanity was divided into different races and communities, stemming from ideal and permanent qualities, that poetry is imbued with a national character and constitutes the essence of its history, and that only by adhering to nationalist models could the artist create great works. The consequence was the appearance of models which were in part hostile to the cultural realities of other countries: "the need to define an original avenue, to find appropriate models, to at times limit influences considered to be encroaching, is common to all attempts" (Krebs xvi). At an early stage it is the *Comédie française* which served as a model for the development national theater in Spain's various ethnic minority cultures. The case of Galicia, even in its late development, is representative of this situation. Although the starting point of the history of Galician theater could be situated chronologically in 1903 when the Escola Rexional de Declamación was created, it is more fitting to first refer to the Conservatorio Nazonal de Arte Galega (1919), marked by the Irmandade da Fala in A Coruña. *A Nosa Terra*, a weekly serving the interests of the Irmandades, would dedicate attention to theater as a genre in the recuperation of national identity through nationalist ideology and connected to efforts towards recuperating the language and the recreation of the most unique aspects of Galicia from a historical perspective, social or cultural (see, e.g., Lourenzo and Pillado; Vieites).

Galician nationalism aspired to involve the urban middle class and for this it would take on as one of its more urgent tasks the creation of a corpus of cultivated and modern literature and that would align with the most avant-gardist propositions in Europe. This occurred, for example, with the staging of *A man da satiña* by Fernando Osorio do Campo (he was trained at the Lisbon Conservatory, where he had served as director of the Teatro de la República) and later Leandro Carré Alvarellos would take his place in what today is called the *Escola Dramática Galega*. From 1922 to 1926, Carré returned Galician theater to the less innovative *costumbrismo* on 22 October 1922. At the performance a significant text was released in which it was affirmed that "one of the greatest forms of propaganda that we can use to extend the redemptive ideal of the Galician people and emphasize their racial personality is theatre" ("unha das máis grandes formas de propaganda que podemos

utilizar para espallar o ideal redentor do pobo galego e afincar a propia personalidade racial, é o teatro" [pamphlet, n.p.; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Wiersma]).

With regard to Catalonia, in the nineteenth century there were several theaters with innovative performances, for example La Gata, Català, and Romea. In particular, the play *L'esquella de la torratxa* by Serafi Pitarra (1864) is significant. Later also performances of lyric poetry — the Jocs Florals — are important. From 1879 onward, Josep Yxart defends the Catalanian national spirit in relation to the Scandinavian for its tendency toward introspection, hence it is not surprising that Catalanian theater developed fundamentally along the lines of Ibsen, so revered by the modernists (see, e.g., George 87). Theater reflects and acts upon the society which produces it, making it the genre that best represents a people through the use of its own language. Thus, Yxart's interest in distancing Catalanian theater from the Castilian tradition in order to sidle up to the "northern figures" and "Europeanize" it with the introduction of foreign models and the application of a realist aesthetic. Later, Francisco Curet would also see theater a "living organ" that "marches to the beat" of a country's institutions, "flag of stridence, declarer of popular clamour" and revealing "at all times with precision, the popular taste and the refinement of the customs" (25). And Xavier Fábregas places the moment of the institutionalization of theater in Catalonia during the modernist period 1888-1911 coinciding with intellectual and creative awakening: "thus the modernist celebrations of Sitges presided over by Santiago Russinyol, the Teatre Íntim, d'Adrià Gual, the Espectacles-Audicions Graner, of Lluís Graner, Felipe Cortiella's ol'Agrupació Avenir" (172). For example, Gual carried out an imitation of the Théâtre d'Art by Paul Fort and the protection of the modernist aesthetic. This regenerationist modernism (modernismo regeneracionista) was of a radical character and included Ibsen's and Hauptmann's influence. Nevertheless, it would not be until the Second Republic when attempts to make Catalanian theater an official institutional structure through the efforts of Gual (and Ventura Gassol) that the Institució del Teatre was established.

During the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera references to French, German, and Austrian models of theater abound in newspapers and magazines, but only in 1931, with the coming of the Second Republic, are the first steps taken: first, the Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas was created in 1931 with the goal of bringing theater to the people, especially to those living in rural areas. Soon after, the Teatro Universitario La Barraca and the Teatro Lírico Nacional were created. There was considerable debate about the Teatro Dramático Nacional with regard to the creation of a school of theater as the only mechanism capable of securing a "national dramatic consciousness." The Civil War would interrupt everything and the victors took over the responsibility for these initiatives by forming a National Theatre with *falangist* roots. In 1938, Dionisio Ridruejo (National Chief of Propaganda), appointed Luis Escobar Kirkpatrick as director of theaters. During Franco's dictatorship the aspiration was to create a national theater, one that would revive the past glories of the Golden Age thanks to a repertoire composed basically of Spanish classical works (see, e.g., Gallén; Peláez). This was also used as a way of legitimizing the regime. Luis Escobar, an intellectual from an aristocratic family but with leftist inclinations, was charged with organizing the Teatro Nacional de la Falange, upon the personal initiative of government minister Ramón Serrano Suñer and of the intellectuals in the Propaganda Service.

Theater in Portugal — as a national concept — came about during the second half of the seventeenth century, when the illuminist aesthetic is implemented through institutions like Arcadia Lusitana and the Academy of Sciences in Lisbon. In the seventeenth century the Spanish influence is notorious owing to the Philippine domination (see Barata) and also owing to the major public success obtained by Spanish companies while on tour in Lisbon (see Stegagno Picchio). During this time, Calderón was more popular than Lope or Tirso and comedy was the preferred and successful genre: "a tendency to turn towards Spanish culture can be seen ... Nevertheless, the Portuguese once again look for support in French culture, now surrounded by the aura of the splendorous century of Louis XIV" (Coelho do Prado 478). For Álvaro Manuel Macado, the *francesismo* "implied [the] slow mythical fixation of a cultural influence [and] allowed the liberation of the Iberian image by which Europe, even France, always labeled us, assimilating us with Spain, even confusing us linguistically and geographically" (12). The illuminist authors sought the dignification of theater, language, and nation and to this end they put into play a series of strategies opposing the "Spanish." The theater of Molière

and to a lesser extent that of Corneille were consolidated, much like the moral drama which were better adjusted to rationalist and enlightened ideals. Scholars strove for the dignification of theater from a social point of view, although they did not disregard imitating Greek theater and Aristotle in tragedy. Examples of the discourse about theater include such as *Verdadeiro método de estudar* by Luís António de Verney, who condemns the lack of verisimilitude and the irrationalism pertaining to the Spanish influence or in *Arte poética ou regras da verdadeira poesia* by Francisco José Freire who resisted the return to Aristotelean orthodoxy, or in *Orações e Dissertações* by Correia Garção, who referred to Greek and Roman theatre as the only source of tradition and good taste (see Bello 131-54). A further impulse in Portuguese theater came with Almeida Garrett. More than being drawn towards a certain genre (tragedy) and theme (national issues), he argued for the development the dramatic genre (see Abreu 410; see also Cruz; Picchio).

In the development of national theater on the Iberian Peninsula in addition to the institutional and political perspectives the issue of language is an important factor and related to the question of language is literature's interaction with and within the political sphere. Ann MacCarthy argues that representatives of culture including writers and scholars from peripheral systems are more active because of their reaction to the position of power in centers of culture (52-53). For example, in 1880 Silva Vianna criticized the poor state in which Portuguese theater: the poor quality of actors, the indifference of the public and the press, and, above all, the mercantilism of businessmen without whose funding theater would not exist. Vianna also contended that Portuguese theater had become corrupt just like the society to which it belongs: "it is said that the theater is the reflection of the state of a society. This is my opinion and it seems to me to be incontrovertible. When society is corrupt; when the principles of good morals are not followed, theater perverts rather than instructs, demoralizes rather than moralizes" ("Disse que o teatro e o reflexo, do estado da sociedade. É essa a minha opinião e que me parece ser incontroversa. Quando a sociedade está corrompida; quando não observa os principios de boa moral, o teatro perverte em vez de instruir, desmoralisa em vez de moralisar" [5]) and his remedy is censorship by the state (see also Carreira). Further with regard to language, translation has become a crucial medium of transmission. An example in Galicia is of the work of Antón Villar Ponte as a translator of Catalanian texts by Ignaci Iglésias and Santiago Rusiñol. Manuel F. Vieites synthesizes many of these problems, applied to the case of Galicia: "the predomination of certain subgenres as a function of the ultimate intentionality of each piece and thematic recurrence as a function of the historic period — a consequence of the instrumentalization of a text — serves the purpose of supporting the use of the Galician language and as a vehicle of political struggle, as much in the realm of regional or national liberties as in the defense of Galicia's aspects of difference" ("Predominio de determinados subxéneros en función da intencionalidade última de cada peza e recorrencia temática en función do período histórico, consecuencia da instrumentalización dun texto que servía para reivindicar o uso da lingua galega e como vehículo de loita política, tanto no eido das liberdades rexionais ou nacionais como na defensa do feito diferencial galego" [39]). The literary and cultural interferences Vieites is referring to is of course a basic principle in the theoretical and methodological framework of Dionýz Ďurišin's concept of the interliterary process and in Itamar Even-Zohar's concept of the polysystem: "interference occurs when a system is in need of items unavailable within itself" (*Polysystem* 69; see also Even-Zohar, "Factors"). Further, the situation of writers coming from "minor literatures" — who distance themselves from adjacent cultures and aim to complete their repertoires from such cultures so that borrowed material would tend towards something simplified, regulated, or schematicized (Even-Zohar, *Polysystem* 70) — applies in the case of Galician theater.

Literary interferences produced between the Madrid — the center — and the Galician periphery are of course direct (the agents are familiar with both systems) and unilateral (on Spanish theater, see, e.g., Aguilera Sastre; Bernal and Oliva). The interliterary reality is voiced in some texts and point to the continuation of a quasi colonial situation. For example, in *O engaño*, Leandro Carre puts in an interesting *mise-en-abyme* in motion: the protagonist Ernesto is a dramaturge who has written a successful play, *O engaño*, but he aspires to glory in Madrid and when this denied to him, and he is forced to return to his origins. The theme seems to deal with ambition (transposed to the political arena in a parallel plot), but *O engaño* is important as an illustration of how in a literary text the interliterary and systemic process between the center and the periphery is suggested within the

narrative. A further example of interliterariness is the relationship between Madrid and Barcelona. In David George's study of the connection between the two capitals since 1892 — e.g., the first translations of Àngel Guimerà i Jorge's texts to Spanish, the release of *Realidad* by Pérez Galdós with great repercussions in both cities, or the representation of *L'intruse* by Maeterlinck in Sitges *Festes modernists* — are pertinent examples. Guimerà i Jorge mediated with ease between both systems of literature whereby both wanted in one way or another to monopolize his talent (George 38) and Gual was also a key player in the development of these systemic relations from the creation of Teatre Íntim in 1898 until the attempt to set up the Catalanian School of Dramatic Art in 1913.

Perhaps in no Galician author's work is the presence of the political beneath the influence of Spanish authors present as in the work of Manuel LUGRÍS Freire: his *A ponte* (1903) marked a considerable rupture with respect to earlier theater in the use of language and the constant reference to social thematics (see, e.g., Risco Agüero) and where the conflict of love and sex underlines social problematics. The later influence of *A ponte* is seen in the texts of Villar Ponte and, above all, in those of Xesús San Luís Romero. With regard to Portuguese theater, in 1838 Garrett wrote about the sorry situation as he saw it: "in buildings stripped of even the most rudimentary conditions of decency (according to contemporary testimonies, the Teatro do Salitre 'resembled a bar' and the Theatre da rua dos Condes was a filthy and dilapidated spectacle, actors who spent the day working with a hammer or seated on stools and many times showed up for dinner drunk in this way spending their days, debated without conviction or dignity, emphatic tirades, or occupied themselves with the vilest table games" (Villar Ponte qtd. in Rebello 86). The creation of a national theater attempted to remedy this situation but in 1870 Theofilo Braga insisted, nevertheless, on the role played by dramatic literature: "dramatic creations have only expressed the character of a people and of their liberty; they have for their criteria naturalness and simplicity, and exist for this reason, as Shakespeare has said, 'the form and pressure of the times.' True originality is in the genius of the race, which is shown in spite of all the influences of civilization. Spanish and English theater present the integrity of two races in their wonderful richness, not confused nor amalgamated with political commotion; their creations are the legends and national sentiments, in all their simple and natural flowering. After assembling the factors that constitute the history of the Portuguese theater, a very sad conclusion becomes evident: among us dramatic art has nothing of national, because insuperable circumstances did not allow the Portuguese people to know theater" (1-2). Villar Ponte wrote in 1924 that "practically nowhere like in Galicia is recourse to the creation of a historic theatre necessary — we possess little aptitude for stage literature — as the most effective means of finally awakening the emotion of our past in the souls of the people, which until now is only felt, and almost never completely, by so many compatriots of exquisite spirituality ... A people without historical emotion is a dead and moribund people, as we were told with clear judgment ... and if Galicia has felt this emotion, it has lost it completely. In order to inject it back into its bloodstream, one must recur to all, and especially to theatre, because theatre, art of the multitudes, is the art that reaches and is appreciated by all" ("Un medio para crear la emoción histórica" *Galicia* [21 March 1924]).

The existence of a cultural and political tension between high and low culture and between subsystems in the history of the literatures of the Iberian Peninsula is clearly evident. This tension is patent in Galicia, where, from various angles, the necessity of a national theater and later the possibility of a sophisticated culture of theater have been denied. At the same time, development in a subsystem towards cultural autonomy is crucial as is evident in the case of Galicia: "the creation of chorus and dance groups, excursion organizations and *enxebre* celebrations, which at the same time serve to spread the presence of the new organization of the towns and villages close to the first nuclei; acts of exaltation of the language and Galician culture; homages and the inauguration of monuments, the promotion of theater; the organization of expositions of young Galician painters; and the first steps in creating a myth symbolizing the national resistance of Galicia" (Beramendi 12). Indeed, theatrical representations of choruses — almost always of a folkloric character, brief and light such in sketches, vignettes of customs, pastimes, monologues, or dialogues — took place throughout Galicia starting in the early twentieth century. Laura Tato Fontaíña describes their essential characteristics as follows: "they were short works, without complications in set design, in which there were never more than two actors on the stage, and that combined popular types and costumbrism



inherent at end-of-the-century literature, with the revitalizing spirit of the agrarian movements" (Tato Fontaíña, *Teatro* 26). These performances were critical and against some sort of socioeconomic exploitation (of the farmer or the sailor) with a subplot (as a secondary action which in many pieces quickly turned into the principal one), of an amorous theme (see Vieites 201).

Further, the above situation of theater performance in early to mid-twentieth-century Galicia suggests an opposition between the autochthonous *enxebre* (pure, authentic) and the "foreign" and thus underlines the objective of the creation of national theater. Following the failure of Xaime Quintanilla's *Donosiña* (1920) and serving as a pretext for those who were not in agreement with the universalizing and modernizing tendency instrumentalized by the Conservatory and the National Theater, the latter were decidedly partial towards translating authors such as Yeats, Maeterlinck, or Strindberg into Galician. When the expansion of the repertoire to include high-brow classics was imminent — for example the staging of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* — the principal leader of the Galician theater scene, Osorio do Campo, resigned. At the same time, Galician theater owes him the introduction of Portuguese dramatuges such as Manuel Larajeira or Júlio Dantas, or the Paraguayan author Florencio Sánchez. In this debate other questions that affect the level of independence of the Galician national theater with regard to the Spanish became tangled, among these a bitter discussion on the place in the Galician culture and theater authors such as Rey Soto, Linares Rivas, Pardo Bazán, or Valle-Inclán, who wrote in Spanish. Thus, in the debate about the modernization and universalization of the Galician theater "young" authors are separated from the "old" ones and a powerful conservative current existed and Comellas Coímbra's *Nan de Allariz* or San Luís Romero's works and who defended the said conservative perspective were preferred and thus staged.

In conclusion, I refer to the current situation of Galician theater: Tato documented the opposition of "theater for the minority" versus "theater for the majority" (*Historia*) and this is in many ways related to the situation I describe with regard to the twentieth century. Some are in favor of "intimate" theater of minimal space, in limited set-design, and with limited public. Villar Ponte would associate this type of experience with the education of the elite and the true and indispensable training of actors, authors, and critics. There are differences between cases where the idea of national theater is developed from within the nation state and those in which culture is present without the backing of a national state (see Easthope 42). In this sense Loren Kruger speaks of "theatrical nationhood" as a sentiment and practice which expanded throughout the nineteenth century: "discursive formations of national theatre as a utopian figuration of the nation united in theater are likewise marked by a persistent contradiction — as much political as dramatic — between the advocates of a centralized nation that might reconcile the nation from above and rival, perhaps antagonistic, 'popular' cultures on the social and geographical periphery which resists the reconciliation under duress" (3).

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