



Montserrat Roser i Puig (ed.), *A Female Scene: Three Plays by Catalan Women*. Nottingham: FiveLeaves Press, 2007. Pb. ISBN: 1-905512-20-1 . £11.99.

A Female Scene is the latest in the Anglo-Catalan Society Occasional Papers (ACSOP) project to bring contemporary Catalan writers into English. The volume presents three plays by contemporary women playwrights, all in some way involved with the Projecte Vaca to support and promote the work of women dramatists. Mercè Sarriàs's *Un aire absent* (1997) is translated by John London as *An Absent Air*; Àngels Aymar's *Magnolia Café* (2000) is translated by Marion Peter Holt; and Araceli Bruch's *Re-clams* (1997) is translated by Laura Melcion as *Re-Call*. All three plays were introduced together in staged readings by the World Theatre Café in 2005, including a performance at the Cambridge Anglo-Catalan Society conference in 2005 which was followed by a round table, chaired by Montserrat Roser i Puig, involving some of the writers and translators. Edited by Roser i Puig, the volume contains a short general introduction to the plays, seeking to place them in the context of contemporary Catalan theatre, particularly of women's theatre, as well as individual readings of the themes and structure of the dramatic texts. On the whole, *A Female Scene* provides an enlightening window on to the vibrancy of the contemporary Catalan theatre scene, although there is little reflection on performative aspects nor on the translations themselves.

In general, the texts are competently translated and offer invaluable access to key elements in the original structure and idioms of the plays. Sarriàs's experimentation with notions of relativity in *An Absent Look* pulls on an alternative, Sala Beckett tradition inspired by José Sanchis Sinisterra, one of the many examples of cutting-edge, cross-cultural exploration in the Hispanic textual theatre tradition. The dramatic tension in the play is largely decontextualised, and the audience is left to construct a plausible story to connect the different characters. In many ways, the space of the play is conventionalised,

literary, exploring the threshold between fiction and reality; and it is this that constitutes the metatheatrical focus of the play. John London's version adds to the absurdity of the situation by including anti-naturalist dialogue, a high degree of interference, that might indicate a primarily foreignising translation strategy, as well as different options for some aspects of the text.

Likewise Marion Peter Holt's translation of Aymar's *Magnolia Café* suits the subject matter of the play, fitting into an aesthetic in which globalization of the local is placed at its heart; the play's questioning of any sense of an ending, or meaning, is reflected in the coloured beads on the Magnolia tree, which make reference to past histories (the café owner's adventures in New Orleans; the traditions of the Washo indians) and future possibilities, to fictional roles and their relationship to the real social relations between the actors. Once again it is left to the audience to choose and to make connections, but above all to reflect on the myriad different levels of interconnectedness that constitute contemporary culture. Finally, Laura Melcion's version of *Re-clams* is sensitive to the subtle changes in tone of Bruch's generational reimaginings of Lou Andreas Salomé, in dialogue with each other across the years. Here we observe the different fragments that contribute to the formation of a female subjectivity, but also the fractures and discontinuities, in a celebration of difference.

All three works reflect on the relationship between dreams and reality, on the problematic encounters of women with social expectations and cultural constraints. As Roser observes, they present an important counter to any more 'limiting' notions of femininity and experiment with textual theatre as an antidote to what she describes as 'the austerity, harshness and bombast so characteristic of contemporary male representation' (41). The tendency to unify these three authors by presenting a simple opposition between 'male' and 'female' scenes is ultimately undermined by the variety of registers and theatrical idioms they employ. Indeed, the question of how and why they constitute a 'female scene' remains open; remains 'an absent look'. More recently the work of all three playwrights has enjoyed increasing fortune in the different performance spaces of Barcelona;

and it is to be hoped that this volume will open our eyes to the range and quality of work produced there, encouraging international audiences to look beyond the 'big' names of the performance groups of the 1970s and 1980s to embrace the current diversity of the Catalan theatre scene.

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