

PRECARIOUSNESS, A SPARK FOR CREATIVITY OR AN OBSTACLE
FOR EXPERIMENTATION? THE CASE OF SPANISH FRINGE
THEATRE

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Abstract: The goal of the present article is to analyse the phenomenon of independent theatre in Spain in order to establish hypotheses and raise issues about the interrelationship between the following three factors: precariousness, creativity and experimentation.

The article explores the production conditions that have determined the evolution of Madrid fringe theatre in the past decade and the rising of the multiprogramming. It also establishes hypothesis on how these two factors have conditioned the specific weight of playwriting in Spanish contemporary theatre, at the expense of the spectacularity and the role of the director in the creative process. Given this relationship, the article aims to establish the hypothesis on how production conditions determine, probably more in the performing arts than in any other artistic field, its social function and connection with its contemporary public.

In order to produce this article, I have surveyed an array of Madrid theatre professionals, via a brief Internet sample, which has had a response of around 200 people. This sample, that has no other scientific validity than to take a snapshot of the practitioners, focused on the most recent production which they had taken part in. The sample had two simple goals: to relate production conditions with risk-taking and to find out the financial involvement of theatre practitioners in their work. The most relevant results will be shown in graphics. The results of this poll will be referenced throughout this article, and will be referred to as the *professionals sample*.

Keywords: independent theatre, Spanish fringe theatre, contemporary playwriting, audiences.

Resumen: El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar el fenómeno del teatro independiente en España para establecer hipótesis y plantear problemas sobre la interrelación entre los siguientes tres factores: precariedad, creatividad y experimentación.

El artículo explora las condiciones de producción que han determinado la evolución del teatro Fringe en Madrid en la pasada década y la implantación de la multi-programación. También establece hipótesis sobre cómo estos dos factores han condicionado el peso específico de la dramaturgia en el teatro español contemporáneo, en detrimento de la espectacularidad y el rol del director en el proceso creativo. Dada esta relación, el artículo apunta a establecer la hipótesis de cómo las condiciones de producción determinan, probablemente más en las artes escénicas que en ningún otro campo artístico, su función social y su conexión con el público contemporáneo.

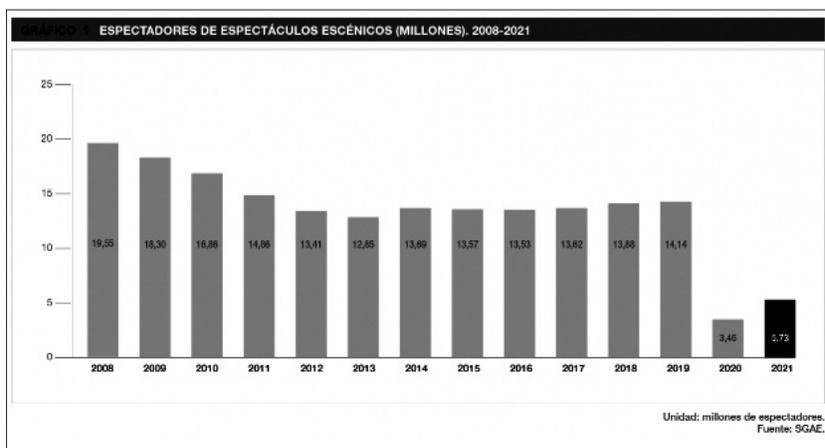
Para escribir este artículo, he realizado una encuesta a profesionales del teatro en Madrid a través de un formulario de Internet, que han respondido unas 200 personas. Esta muestra, insuficiente a nivel estadístico, pero significativa de la perspectiva de los profesionales, se enfocó en las producciones más recientes en las que habían tomado parte. La muestra tenía dos objetivos: relacionar las condiciones de producción con la asunción de riesgos y detectar cómo se involucran los artistas financieramente en su propio trabajo. Los resultados más relevantes serán mostrados en los gráficos, y me referiré a ellos como *la muestra de profesionales*.

Palabras clave: teatro independiente, teatro Fringe de Madrid, dramaturgia contemporánea, audiencias.

THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC FUNDING (2008-2022)

AS WE ALL KNOW, THE INTERNATIONAL credit crisis in many countries brought about profound restructuring within public economies, reduced public investment in basic services and also negatively affected public funding in research and development programmes. The arts have been no exception to this, particularly in Spain, where the Popular Party came into power in 2011 and the state budget for arts dramatically decreased. The change of the ruling ideology in Spain, with the first coalition government between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos, plus the Next Generation funds to rescue European economies after the pandemic of CoVid-19 has almost doubled the total public budget for culture in just four years (Graphic 1).

However, there are certain habits and trends in the decision-making process for artists, cultural managers and politicians that settled down during the years of the financial crisis (roughly 2008-2018) and that are still yet to change, if they do so. Those habits and trends in



Graphic 1. Source: General Budget of Spain, Presentation of the Ministry of Culture 2023.

creative products, exhibition patterns and public funding distribution have led the performing arts sector to a precarious way of working, which has been normalized by all cultural agents as the new working environment, and that the recent Ukrainian war and hyperinflation in Europe only underpins. This article aims to analyse this environment and the direct relationship between production conditions and artistic products.

The 2008 financial crisis directly affected the three main ways in which public money funds the arts:

- a) Production grants: once upon a time most independent theatre companies in Spain got money in part from box office takings, and in part from production grants, which were specifically centred around the production process of the play or the distribution process. These grants did not generally cover the entire cost of the production, but producers used to inventively match these figures in order to minimize the impact of possible box office losses thanks to these grants. With the onset of the financial crisis, not only the total amount of grants went down, but each grant no longer necessarily covered the costs that it used to.
- b) Public hiring: approximately 80% of theatre venues in Spain are funded by the state. These venues, which are managed by town councils and which generally do not have an in-house artistic

director, rely on a public budget to hire companies for a set price per show; this covers all the costs of a particular show, plus a percentage on the return of investment (to be used by the producer in forthcoming productions). Due to the financial crisis, these public theatres reduced their budget for hiring companies, the set price per show went down to the limit of covering costs and in the case of hiring a company, some had to wait years in order to be paid by these theatres for the show.

- c) Public productions: There are also state funded venues which do have an artistic director: these are the ones which are home to public theatre companies (such as the *Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico*) and which produce big shows. The *Centro Dramático Nacional*, *Teatro Español*, *Teatre Lliure*... reduced their annual budget for productions and created a formula of public-private collaborations in order to continue running.

In Spain, other possibilities for funding, such as bank loans or tax-free donations, are not legally developed to a point of being really useful to the professionals, and therefore the two main sources for funding were extremely damaged by limited resources and overwhelming taxes. However, as stated above, this led to an unbelievable increase in independent creators and venues. The theatrical offer, particularly in Madrid, started feeling greater than ever, and still continues so: it seems as if the impact of the 2008 crisis has permanently changed the theatrical landscape of Spain, and taking off from artists the fear to entrepreneurship, both as companies and venues. However, this offer is characterized by its precariousness: it seems as if the business industry is grounded in this way of working, which implies certain aspects that I will now go on to explain.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF INDEPENDENT THEATRE IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN

For the sake of understanding, I will use Madrid as the basis for my explanation, but this can all be applied to other cities such as Barcelona, Valencia and Seville, which may have similar characteristics, but to a smaller degree.

- a) Exhibition: venues, formulas and multiprogramming

The most important consequence of the shortage of financial resources can be found in the exhibiting conditions of theatre pieces.

- Exhibition: the creation of new formulas

The lack of conventional spaces prompted artists to find new ways of presenting their work. This imagination focused on *where to show theatre*, with notable findings. The trend was to *reduce the size of the performing space* and, consequently, the amount of people that can watch a theatre piece at one time. There have been diverse formulas: some, such as Turlitava Teatro, which hired out an old bar in the centre of Madrid and which continually performed *The Living Ones and My Ones* for nearly a year to an audience of maximum 20 people at each sitting. Others, such as La Casa de la Portera, was a flat which was once a concierge's living quarters within a four-floor building. This started out in order to exhibit a single play, *Iván-OFF*, and whose success led to regular programming for a period of three years, in which many theatre companies presented conventional pieces to an audience of 22 people in a living room. The other solution has been to have a bar as the main business and then have small theatre venues attached to it, which is similar to what is seen in London. La Escalera de Jacob features two small venues and offers traditional theatre pieces. However, the biggest success in terms of general audience has been Microteatro por Dinero: here there is a bar on the ground floor, with 5 rooms in the basement, where 5 short plays (no longer than 15 minutes each) are performed simultaneously in loop for an audience of 15 people maximum per performance. The tickets for these are cheaper than those for a long play. This exhibiting format has been such a success that it has already become a benchmark and has franchises in Seville, Miami and Mexico.

All these venues are characterized by their lack and shortage of technical resources, particularly in terms of lighting, and the way in which they push the boundaries of legality.

- Sudden boost of fringe venues

Many artists became entrepreneurs, opening small theatre venues for audiences which barely ever reach 100 spectators. In the website of *Revista Godot*, one of the most reliable sources for fringe theatre in Madrid, 70 off-theatre venues with regular programming are listed: this, of course, do not include site-specific, in-house performances, rented

lofts... This amount of venues is roughly the triple of year 2008 (where around 20 stable fringe theatres were open in Madrid).

However, this bloom is far from sustainable in the long run: overall, the number of theatre venues has tripled over the last ten years. You can now find around 70 fringe venues in Madrid which can find themselves listed in magazines such as *Revista Godot*, but there are also many places with regular programming which do not make it into the 'What's on' section in theatre magazines and furthermore there are no official figures for this phenomenon. However, these spaces open just as frequently as they close. Places such as El Sol de York, Garaje Lumiere or Espacio Labruc have been open for nearly two years, but were unable to financially get by until they were entitled to apply for public grants. Others, such as Teatro del Barrio, have found a legal solution to remain afloat through multiple small investors, most of them artists. Likewise, Nave 73, founded in 2012 by a group of artists, has established itself as one of the most solid fringe venues, relying not only on its secondary business (the bar), but also on the opening of a professional acting and directing school. The consequence of this is the *instability of the landscape concerning fringe venues*. The technical resources of fringe venues may be better than those of new formulas, but on a whole are in poor conditions. Many of them which have closed were forced to do this due to legal problems: some may not even have an opening license according to its activity, some may be complying with the expensive requirements of concert halls.

- Multiprogramming: the survival of the theatre venue

The need for each theatre venue to survive led to an unforeseen consequence which has come to stay: *multiprogramming*. Each venue has on as many performances as it can technically sustain in terms of technical capacity and available human resources. Each performance is exhibited once or twice a week, maximizing the occupation of their seats, in an attempt to guarantee the survival of the venue itself. Just to show an example, Nave 73 generally shows 9 different performances per week, and it is not the busiest venue in Madrid. In this sense, the company benefits are secondary to the exhibition: the company shows the work *to gain exposure*. Multiprogramming has a secondary consequence in technical terms: due to the fact that all the lanterns are shared by all the companies, and that there is no real time to work on them between

performances, this particular resource is generally underused by the artistic team. Likewise, scenography needs to be efficient enough to be set on and off usually in less than one hour.

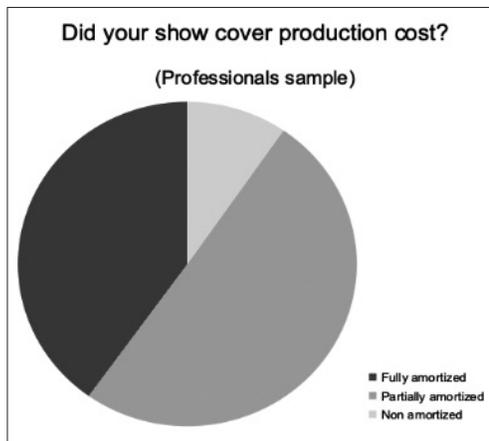
These exhibition characteristics depict a landscape which, to start with, is really difficult to study with rigour due to its conditions which are marginalized and sometimes illegal. But it is easy to see that performing arts creations are exhibited atomized in time (multiprogramming) and space (multiplicity of theatre venues and unconventional spaces). It is a guerrilla theatre, which prioritises *the survival of performing to an audience at the expense of the survival of the artists*. Besides this, in the past years these trends in fringe theatre infected managerial styles in commercial and public theatres, which are now also turning towards multiprogramming. Many of these spaces have opened what they call an 'off venue', in which emerging artists can display their work. From private theatres, such as Teatro Lara, to public ones, such as María Guerrero, in many of these places the economic conditions do not differ from real «off» venues, and only contribute to the multiplicity of what's on offer.

This atomization is unconsciously perceived by potential audiences, which can barely identify a single piece of theatre amongst the overwhelming amount of performances that are exhibited each week. As a result, I believe this is the reason why audiences treat the performing arts as a single entity: unlike other arts, in which people distinguish between genres (thrillers are not romantic comedies, although both are cinema), the impossibility of treating each performance individually in terms of technical resources, marketing and press has led to a *metonymic* perceptual relationship of the Spanish public with theatre: each play is taken as the entirety of the performing arts manifestations in the country. This applies to almost all theatre (independent, commercial or public), with the exception of one genre: musicals.

b) Finance: the problem of box office income

Given the fact that public funding was highly restricted, the money had to come from the box office. This has an added problem that we have not mentioned above. Due to generous public policies during the 80's and 90's, the box office was not expected to cover the entirety of the costs of investment: public grants used to cover up to 50% of total

production costs, sometimes even more, and therefore theatre ticket prices did not need to be calculated in order to get an appropriate ROI (return of investment). This sudden dependence on the box office has given rise to a problem where prices are artificially low, with creators seeing no return on the money spent on their project and with audiences now used to paying cheap tickets in order to see theatre. At first it seems crazy to challenge our audiences' purchasing power by rising ticket prices, but in not doing so, the professionals sample gives a chilling percentage: 60% of theatre productions that are now exhibited in Madrid never cover, partially or totally, the cost of investment: creators are working in order to lose money (Graphic 2).



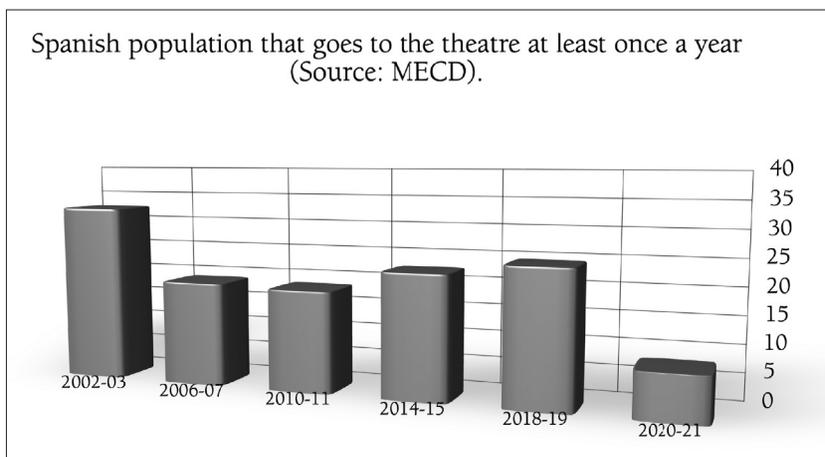
Graphic 2.

c) Audiences: the paradox of the empty stalls.

As I previously said, there are no official figures to study the phenomenon of independent theatre in Spain in its entirety. However, paradoxically, at least, the statistics that do exist directly contradict the perception and the economic results of independent theatre. Furthermore, official statistics depict quite a different landscape.

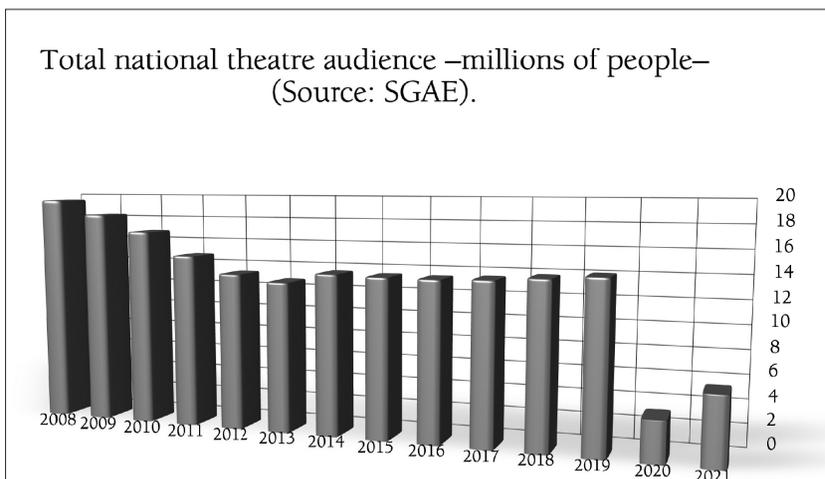
The Ministry of Culture carries out a thorough national study, called *Encuesta sobre hábitos culturales* (Cultural Habits Survey). As we can see, the CoVid 19 pandemic has depleted theatre attendance (Graphic 3).

The other large institution which carries out a thorough study, the Spanish Society of Authors and Editors (SGAE, in Spanish) differs in



Graphic 3.

results. The parameters, however, are different: the previously mentioned survey studies the percentage of the Spanish population which goes to the theatre; SGAE offers figures regarding seating occupation (Graphic 4). Of course, this does not take into account venues which find themselves on the edge of a legality, and which neither pay taxes nor royalties to playwrights.



Graphic 4.

As we can observe in both graphs, the decrease in theatre attendance starts around 2008, with theatre audiences decreasing by around 20%

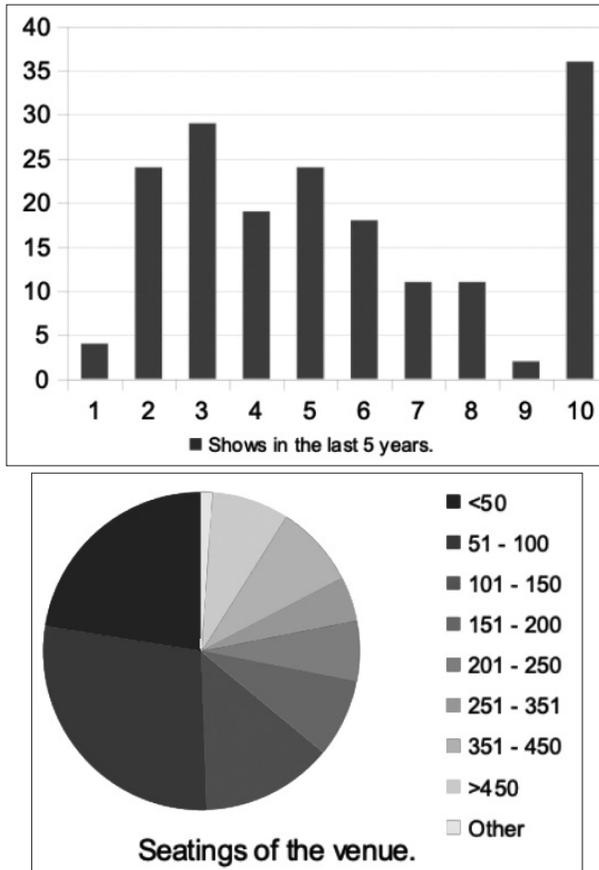
over the last few years. The years of the financial crisis the theatre attendance remained stable, until the pandemic depleted theatre audiences in almost 60%, from its normal functioning in 2019 to 2021, the first year of full reopening of venues. These data should be analyzed in depth, since they raise some issues: which is the profile of the loyal theatre attendees? Are they related to the performing arts industry somehow, or is it general audience? Who are the ones who have stopped going to theatre? How can we rescue them back as regular theatregoers?

Going back to the main issue, we see that the pandemic has only accelerate drastically a process that was already occurring: the depletion of theatre audiences. Stalls are currently extremely difficult to fill with spectators; however, theatre practitioners remain adamant in offering more shows than what the actual market can absorb. This is the paradox of empty stalls: instead of reducing supply to adjust itself to demand, the empty stalls become the spark for many individuals to open a new space, that will contribute to the already atomized demand, leading to even emptier stalls.

In the professionals sample, it is quite appalling that 20,2% of the professionals had done 10 or more shows in the past 5 years (Graphic 5). If we open this range to those who had done more than five shows, the percentage goes up to 57.3%. This basically means that each show had a very short run. If we cross this fact with the percentage of the shows, 50,7%, that were exhibited in venues with less than 100 seats (Graphic 6), we can sustain that this paradox is real: the theatre professionals are facing the lack of audience by reducing the risk of lacking audience, showing their work in spaces with less seatings (so they could be full with less people), and creating more work to attract the same audience with novelty to the space, rather than looking for new audiences for the same show.

d) Theatre professionals: the rising of the playwrights vs. the idea of group

All these problems in producing and exhibiting new work have engendered a sense of collectiveness among theatre professionals, who are frantically engaged in numerous initiatives to look after not only their own particular interests as individual creators, but also to improve the aforementioned disastrous conditions and to gain visibility for their



Graphics 5 and 6.

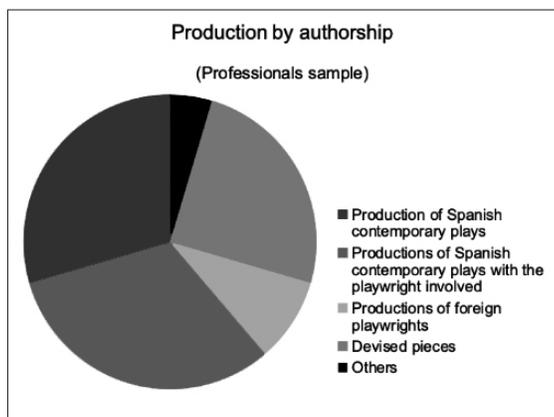
work as a whole. There are professional associations, such as Asociación de Autoras y Autores de Teatro (AAT-Female and Male Playwrights Association) and Asociación de Directores de Escena (ADE-Stage Directors Association), which have been working for decades and have now been revitalized with new leaders which used to premier at fringe venues. There are also initiatives such as Contexto Teatral (www.contextoteatral.es), a playwrighting database, which was created by the theatre company Nueve Novenos. It took two years for this to come into fruition, with no subsidies whatsoever, and which in less than six months has become a calling point for contemporary Spanish playwrighting. *Revista Godot* organized for a few years the Godoff Awards, which recognised the work of Madrid fringe theatre. There is also a

strong commitment to parity within the arts: Clásicas y Modernas is successfully trying to get public theatres to commit to gender parity programmes; exactly one year ago, the Spanish branch of the League of Professional Theatre Women (USA) started a Facebook page that attracted more than 6000 female followers within three days. Its mission is to create professional networks amongst women in theatre. Precariousness is encouraging the feeling of belonging to a large group.

Paradoxically, this does not correspond to the simultaneous process of the personalization of creation. Playwrights occupy a central position in fringe theatre in terms of reputation and recognition. Directors, who once had a prominent place during the 90s and at the beginning of the 21st century, are unable to experiment with the *mise-en-scène* in such production conditions (something which also applies to public and commercial productions): likewise, devising along with collective experimental creative processes are on the whole residual, and if so, they do not get the recognition for the process or for creative leadership, but simply for the end product. The playwrights, who can take creative risks without compromising financial resources (just with the text), have become the pillar that makes up the fringe theatre star-system.

The combination of these two factors has led to the rise of a cohesive group of playwrights, which identifies with their peers as a generation in terms of age and aspirations, and which is slowly managing to make it into official theatre venues. As Luque (2013:34) says, «the step forward, from anonymity or new playwright to emerging playwrights often comes when one of these artists wins a playwriting contest». However, unlike other countries, in Spain a playwriting award is generally just an economic prize with the publishing of a playwright's text. It is through this that many emerging playwrights, with the desire of seeing their texts being performed, have become directors and producers themselves, balancing the overall production to the relevance of the text to the detriment of the *mise-en-scène*. This has generated an inertia in other theatre artists, and the production of contemporary Spanish playwrights is more than common (Graphic 7).

In this category of emerging playwrights, we find people from a wide age range (from 25 to 55), forming a historical anomaly: 20 years of experience do not seem to recategorize professionals and neither add value to the academic consideration of their work. The Olympus of the



Graphic 7.

renowned playwrights is slowly being widened by the push and the courage of these artists. This is also another factor, which should not be underestimated, which has fostered the explosion of new work being exhibited within big cities.

Just to mention a few names, we have people such as José Padilla, Paco Bezerra, Alberto Conejero, María Velasco, Lola Blasco, Carolina África and Diana Luque, all of them multi-award-winning playwrights who are being programmed in public theatres. We also find playwrights who have decided to work as a collective, like *Colectivo Nueve Novenos*, set up by Eva Redondo, or the brothers QY Bazo (Quique and Yeray). There are so many of these that it is impossible to mention them all. But we are going to attempt to depict the main themes and styles of their playwriting.

According to Pérez Rasilla (2012), emerging playwrights tend to lean towards «tragic textuality rather than comedy, which is scarcely present in their writing». Revisiting Greek or Spanish Golden Age classics is quite common, either to offer insight into a certain character that represents a particular aspect, which is relevant nowadays, or simply to explore dramatic conflict. Immigration is another of these main themes, treated from a critical viewpoint and with certain lyricism. For Rasilla, «the most ambitious texts of new playwriting imply a proposal to overcome the dichotomy between privacy and politics». Over the past few years, due to the financial crisis, plays about the media's agenda have sprung: international or national politicians

have become the protagonists of many performances –Antonio Rojano, with *Dios K*, which examined Dominic Strauss-Kahn’s sex scandal–; gender-based violence; house evictions; paedophilia; corruption cases –such as *Ruz-Bárceñas*, by Jordi Casanovas, which re-enacted the trial concerning the ruling Popular Party’s treasurer–. In terms of style, eclecticism is the underpinning theme. From verbatim theatre to traditional realistic drama, emerging playwrights seem to adopt approachable styles to convey their message in a better fashion.

I will now choose two different examples of work: Iñigo Guardamino and the theatre company Teatro de Fondo, with the director and playwright Vanessa Martínez. For me, each of them represent two distinctive trends: one of an emerging playwright and the other of collective work.

Iñigo Guardamino (Bilbao, 1973) has developed his career mainly in fringe theatre. He has won the LAM Award for LGTB playwrighting, the I Godoff Award for Best Playwright and has been nominated for a Max Award for his play *Vacaciones en la inopia* (*Holidays at The Absent Mind*). Guardamino, one of the most original voices of his time, mixes up with absolute freedom and at times in a wild manner, storylines, styles and characters, creating a raw naturalistic world with dream-like features. His dialog and situations are sardonic, narrative starting points reveal obscure aspects of our society: there is no mercy for anyone in his plays.

Each story is very different from the other: *Londres, Londres* (*London, London*) unfolds on a plane to London, where last-minute decisions change lives; *El año que mi corazón se rompió* (*The Year My Heart Got Broken*) reveals the changes within a family after a son reveals that he is homosexual; *Huevo* (*Egg*) tells the story of a couple (she being a workaholic and he being the ‘househusband’), whose lives’ change forever after a human-size egg turns up on their doorstep. He has directed his last two plays himself: *Castigo ejemplar, yeah -Exemplary Punishment, Yeah-* and *Solo con tu amor no es suficiente -Your Love Is Not Enough-* show the development of his writing. The first one is about a couple who break into the head teacher’s office at their son’s primary school in order to erase all evidence of their son’s bad behaviour. The play, somewhat serious and hilarious, present two social losers trying to redeem themselves by spending all their money on getting relevant childhood friends for a son who seems to be a potential serial killer. *Your Love is*

Not Enough presents a series of stories that happen sometimes simultaneously, sometimes not; some of them are based on real-life events (such as the fact that Karol Wojtila was a playwright during his youth), some of them are not (like the story of two Siamese twins, joined at the pelvis, born under the effects of the Hiroshima bomb). These intertwined stories, which depict the craziness of the 20th century, don't completely make sense in terms of narrative, but the interaction between stories gives the final meaning.

Despite the fact that each play is very different from the other, the universe of his plays is very recognizable: in his own words,

I think that everyone has something like a primal subject, and is always telling the same story. AC/DC has been releasing the same album for the last 30 years. But I don't want to know which story I am telling, I am scared that, once I know this, I will be incapable of doing what I can do. This is neurosis¹.

Guardamino works generally with the same collaborators, although they are not established as a creative working group.

Unlike him, Vanessa Martínez and Teatro de Fondo are one of the few independent theatre companies which seems to be coping with the crisis. Founded in 2002 by Vanessa Martínez and Pablo Huetos, they have put on 24 shows since then. They have received many awards, the last one being the best stage director at Festival de Torrejón de Ardoz. Their work oscillates amongst challenging devised pieces -like in *Stabat Mater*, in which they reflected upon the concept of motherhood and parenting around the 13th century Catholic hymn dedicated to the virgin Mary-, putting on classics -*El maestro de danzar*- and versions of classics -*Los atroces*, based on the Greek trilogy of *The Atreidae*, which reflects the corruption and atrocities done by the same family-. Their work is solid and varied, and the dramaturgical work is impossible to separate from putting on the piece, its exhibition and distribution. It is not unlikely that both Martínez and Huetos perform in most of their shows, as well as directing and writing (Martínez) and producing and selling (Huetos). Teatro de Fondo embeds with the tradition of strong theatre companies, like La Fura dels Baus or Els Joglars, or going even

1 Personal communication, February 14th, 2017

further, to the traditional Spanish Golden Age theatre companies, focused on showing the scenic work as the final piece of art and working more like a small business than like independent artists. This is remarkably difficult in the present circumstances, in which the trend is to individualize, and their case should be acknowledged as extraordinary, both artistically and in terms of cultural independent business.

Drafting the landscape

Just to sum up before we continue, the landscape in Spanish independent theatre just before the pandemic was characterized by:

1. decrease of global audiences
2. decrease of public funding
3. concentration of theatre exhibition in metropolitan areas
4. this exhibition is atomized in time (multiprogramming) and space (small venues, microtheatre)
5. precariousness is a spark to produce more, despite of the fact that the audience is decreasing
6. the playwright has a central role in the creative process

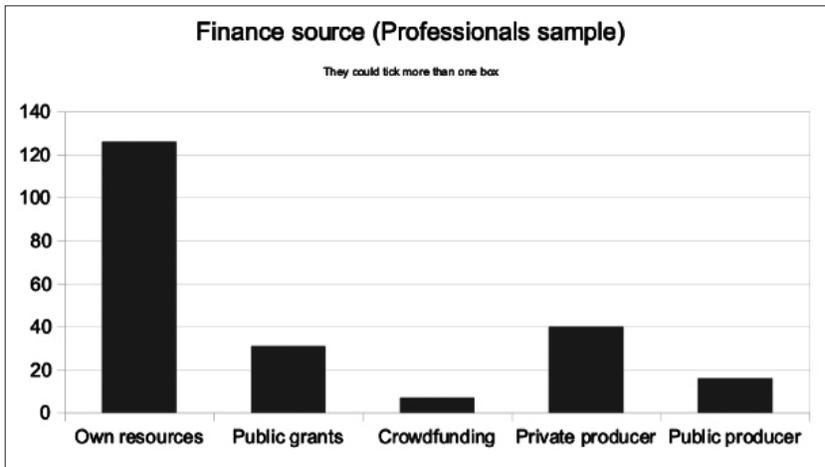
How does all this affect theatre professionals and their approach to experimentation and risk?

3) CONCLUSIONS: THE DISTORTED CANON AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL GAP

We can conclude that precariousness, as bad as it is, can be an stimulating factor for theatremaking and a way of cohesion for such an atomized sector. The flourishing of new ways of exhibiting theatre, from microtheatre to rented houses; the stamina of creators -showing their work against all odds-, raising political and social issues in their plays; the professional movements tending towards establishing a valid common voice to negotiate with institutions and society, that are born from a strong sense of group; all of them are definitely positive unexpected consequences of the financial crisis that has led not only the creators, but a big part of the population, to a precarious way of living. It has definitely shaken up the basis of Spanish theatre industry, forcing the professionals to redefine assumed ways of producing and exhibiting.

But, of course, there are always another side of the story. The pandemic of CoVid-19 and the consequences of Ukrainian war, just when

the business industry was about to resettle, have grounded the sector in deprofessionalization, paradoxically due to the need of sharing creativity with the society. The professionals sample shows that productions rely mainly on the own resources of the theatre makers, but they are not profitable. In the following graphic (Graphic 8) we can see that most of the shows are produced by private money. Artists keep on producing even if they lose their money: theatre has always been a sector which has very little money, but at this stage there are no opportunities within the profession to make a living. Besides this, audiences are not ready to pay a ticket price that will make possible the ROI, due to the excess of offer and the low prices.



Graphic 8.

But going back to the beginning and trying to relate precariousness, creativity and experimentation, we can conclude that precariousness is definitely a spark for creativity, but not necessarily for experimentation. Precariousness is the feeling of risk which an artist may need to break certain barriers, particularly in terms of subject matter: once I know that I am not going to earn money with something, as an artist I have freedom of speech. No one owns my words, so I can say whatever I please. Most artists in Spain are heavily politicised, and the absence of public funding has been the spark which has engendered a movement to not even attempt to be politically correct and in turn talk about social problems. But we cannot mistake freedom of speech with experimentation.

Actually, the lack of resources leads to a formal pattern in productions: from the professionals sample, we can see that 67,4% of the productions count on 4 or less actors; 47,2% use just the technical resources that the venue can provide; scenography seems to be the place in which theatre companies invest (55% of the productions need a medium size or big size van to transport it); but 72,5% only covered human and technical resources before the premier, and 60,3% did not recover the investment totally (9,7%) or partially (50,6%). In this scenario, the professionals sample shows that the self-perception of risk is high (60%), but when asked by a qualitative question why the show took a risk, the answers were split amongst *subject of the play, the theatre style and the profitability of the show*. Experimenting with new technologies (VR, MR, apps or AV), engaging new audiences or even analysing marketing strategies are diminished by the struggle of putting on a play about a meaningful subject. The risk is perceived to be in the message, not in the way of delivering it within the theatre context: the theatre industry is perceived as risky in itself. The «off-theatre», which has traditionally been considered as the R+D of theatre, is so constrained by financial means that the risk is put in subject and by the mere fact of doing so, diverts attention away to other key points of the performing arts conditions.

Precariousness has led us to this effervescent panorama, full of pieces of theatre, but the fringe-theatre environment offers a lesser amount of creation coming from experimental creative processes in favour of solo writing, and it has also helped to develop what could be called a *distorted canon*. To understand that, I would like to briefly quote Bert O. States in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985), where he brilliantly explains what he calls the life cycle of an image.

Any image (...) has a life cycle we might characterize as a movement from innovation to convention to cliché, often with a final stage of self-parody. (...) The innovative stage of an image is characterized by enthusiastic overstatement. The new image, like new fashions, goes too far. (...) The innovative obviously gives way quickly to the conventional phase of the image. (...) Function disguises form: when content is interesting you are not apt to notice the container (...). (The image tries to) guard itself against the audience growing familiarity. (...) (But) Once the theatre is armed with a paradigm it will not be satisfied until it has tried out every available content. (...) Images vary in their resis-

tance or submissiveness to convention. (...) It is only a matter of time it takes an image to fill up with emptiness. (States: 186-190)

Due to precariousness, fringe theatre does not comply anymore with innovation, but rather it is the first step to getting to other places (commercial and public theatres). However, because of the production conditions, it is still considered fringe theatre. This creates a *double perceptive distortion*:

- most of the formal discoveries of fringe theatre have not reached a conventional state because they do not get to a mainstream audience, so for many people they are still new and ground-breaking, even annoying, if they end up seeing something like that.
- because the time for it to become convention has not come yet, creators insist in these languages in fringe environments, and fringe theatregoers -who tend to be artists themselves- do not find it challenging anymore.

Therefore, this artistic form is slowly becoming fossilised even before it had reached conventionality. This is extremely dangerous for the Spanish theatre world, because it implies dual immobility: both conventional theatre, reluctant and slow in incorporating new languages, and experimental theatre, unable to think about itself due to the needs of production and probably alien to this problem. R+D is, by definition, an activity that does not generate revenue in the short term: somehow, the system is demanding that artists fund this R+D sector. Their response is to talk about what they want and to change the system in order for it to become conventional, but this movement has not happened yet.

Another thing we need to talk about here, regarding experimentation, is the technological gap. There is no institution in Spain that is concerned and actively thinking about how new technologies will affect theatre exhibition and reception. Due to the shortage of financial resources (again), all innovation is focused on text, which is, at the end of the day, just one of the codes of a performing arts piece. It is not my intention to devalue dramatic literature, but again it is quite obvious that the rest of the languages that come into play in a performance (lighting, sound, actors, proxemics, audiovisuals, and now, virtual reality and interactive technologies) have specific weight on the performance which institutions seem to be oblivious about.

This technological gap is a real necessity to overcome if we go back to one of my previous points: *the empty stalls*. It is necessary to start thinking about how to engage with new audiences, and not just by content (which is fine), but also with regards to a show being a spectacle, that idea that configures the theatre-going experience as something unique and conforms the ritualistic communion amongst theatre and its audience. In a highly technologized society as the one we live in, where technology is part of our private and professional lives, it is imperative to start researching on how live entertainment can benefit from new technologies. This is already being done in places like Carnegie Mellon, at the Entertainment Technology Center (United States); at the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham or City University (United Kingdom).

FINAL CONCLUSION: INDEPENDENT THEATRE AND THE IDEA OF R+D IN PERFORMING ARTS

The reason why fringe theatre has been considered the natural place for experimentation was precisely because the independence from heavily state funded companies and the freedom from the mainstream audiences demands gave it the space to break the rules and go further, to explore the margins of creation, decency, perception, astonishment or physical possibilities; nowadays in Spain, this particularity is slowing down, if not stopping in some cases, the savage, furious and genuine creative search, biasing many productions to use this exhibiting circuit as an entrance hall to public or commercial theatre. Therefore, the life cycle of the images is distorted, and slows down the overall progress of theatre.

This conclusion raises quite a lot of questions. Can we really demand our creators to combine the struggle for making a living with sustaining a risky business? Is it ethical to ask to an exhibition circuit to identify with a type of creations? If fringe theatre is not necessarily that R+D place it used to be, where is, then, the appropriate place for experimenting? Would it be appropriate to establish experimenting programs with public fundings to position performing arts in a similar situation to science or technology? Having the arts such a strong political content in them, would that actually be good? Would it be possible the freedom of creation in such conditions? Shall the state just leave performing arts to evolve naturally, or shall the state intervene? Proba-

bly these questions can have as many answers as readers of this article. I do not know them, but I will try to clarify my point of view about it.

At the risk of being too bold, I strongly believe that economic and cultural imperialism are two faces of the same coin. It is not possible to create a strong economy without a strong culture, and that does not rely only in the maintenance and exhibition of traditional folklore or the respect for the geniuses from the past. We need to create now, for today's audiences, and that needs investment in research that, like it happens in science, has a long-term view and does not necessarily have to live up to immediate economic revenue. If not, the economic colonization of those who do invest in cultural and artistic research is inevitable.

The best well-remembered sentence of Federico García Lorca, extracted from one of his most famous conference, says that «A society that does not help and foster its theatre, if it is not a dead society, it's a dying society». I would like to add something to Lorca's words, regarding experimentation. Investigation in theatre is not necessarily related to its basic survival: theatre is still the primary way of imagining collectively, the most accessible art to create an 'us', and in its primary form (someone who plays and someone who watches) I believe it will never disappear. But for this ancient craft to still have the social value it has always had, it needs strong institutions to sustain it to evolve, with definite cultural policies that can help to enhance the existing creativity. Reflecting about precise data and raising questions about them may be the first step to define creation spaces and allocate appropriate resources. Creativity as such will never be locked up under constraining labels or exhibiting places, but theatre industry definitely needs a legal and economic working frame that aims to update working methodologies and new creative proposals: if not, it is destined to survive as a marginal creation, only possible in its majority as an amateur activity, with the intangible, yet dramatic and still immeasurable, loss it will cause to society as a whole.

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