**MODERNIST THEATRE IN CATALONIA**

Modernist theatre in Catalonia emerged out of the interplay between thematic and artistic innovation and the representation of sociopolitical issues such as class and cultural and political autonomy. These particular issues were mainly represented through allegory and the use of symbolism. Thematic and artistic innovation, however, found itself in unremitting tension with the continuity of a Catalan artistic and literary tradition.

In general terms, Modernism (1880-1914) involved a battle against different forms of socio-cultural and artistic traditionalism and thus a will to innovation. Modernists of all types shared two specific attributes. They shared “the lure of heresy that impelled their actions as they confronted conventional sensibilities” and “a commitment to a principled self-scrutiny” (Gay 4). Nevertheless, history shows that the modernists fought bitterly among themselves over basic questions of belief and unbelief. Accordingly, modernist art cannot be defined by a singular understanding of the social and the artist but instead involves the turbulent progression of both artistic movements and cultural formations. Throughout history, severe and consistent censorship of both verbal and pictorial expressions – regarded as blasphemous, obscene and subversive – created an atmosphere of repression that was hostile to modernist innovation (Gay 18).

In Catalonia, *modernisme* began in the late nineteenth century. Its beginning is marked by the year of the Universal Exposition of 1888 as well as the start of the modernist journal *L’Avenç* (“Forward”) founded by Jaume Massó i Torrents. The journal sought to invest Catalan literature with “the seal of the modern spirit” (Resina 513). The deaths of the poet Joan Maragall and the painter Isidre Nonell in 1911 mark *modernisme*’s demise. In theatre, the closure of *El Teatre Català*, founded by Frederic Soler, and the *Sindicat d’Autors Dramàtics Catalans* (1911-1913), is considered an indication of the end of modernist Catalan theatre. Catalan *modernisme* was mostly characterized by a desire to renew and “absorb foreign influences” (George and London, 11), but this willingness was contextualized within a society in the “throes of national birth” (Resina, 513). Catalan *modernisme* coincided with an awakening of political agency spurred by economic growth and national consciousness, which had already begun with the *Renaixença*. Although it did not reject Catalan culture, *modernisme* “embraced the idea of an ever-changing society.” This society “was centered on Barcelona and characterized by rapid industrialization, the growth of an industrial working class, political radicalism, and an increasing identification with a Catalanism that was born of a sense of frustration with the centralized Spanish state” (George and London 11). In general, Catalan modernists did not accept a unitary program, but their intellectual and creative work can be divided into two constituents: a regenerationist aspect that promoted social change and was also concerned with the interests of the working class, and the symbolist aspect, which was interested in the autonomy of art and proclaimed the priority of the artist against a realist aesthetic considered insufficient to penetrate reality and explain it. Although artists were prone to formal exuberance, this formal exuberance was thematically invested in the marginal aspects and areas of society.

The most prominent playwrights of this period were Frederic Soler (1839–1895); Àngel Guimerà (1845–1924); Apel.les Mestres: (1854-1936); Santiago Rusiñol (1861–1931); Ignasi Iglésias (1871-1928), and Adrià Gual (1872–1943). Their main influences were the theatre of Maurice Maeterlinck, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Gerhart Hauptmann as well as Richard Wagner’s operas and Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy. In a revealing statement for the journal *L’Avenç* in 1893, Brossa declared: “Today. . . we are interested in whatever is new in terms of ideals, sensations, temperaments and viewpoint in each artistic personality” (qtd. in Resina 515). Yet, the impulse for the new and “the spirit of the break” was in tension with the impulse to preserve the continuity of Catalan cultural and artistic tradition, a tension that presupposed a form of reflexivity that placed *modernisme* at a distance from European models.

Like Antoní Gaudí, the modernist architect and sculptor, the most celebrated modernist dramatists questioned the idea of expertise in a single branch of art and wrote plays while also engaged in theatre direction, painting, and sculpture. Indeed, this multifaceted character led to the transformation of stage design during an era that also saw enormous changes in the cultural production of mass media (photography, cinema, radio, recording). Prominent figures in the development of stage design were Francesc Soler and Maurici Vilomara, who advocated for the fusion of different expressions of plastic art – decoration and lighting, for instance – in order to achieve a convergence of all theatrical elements.

Although Frederic Soler and Àngel Guimerà subverted and criticized established political, moral, and aesthetic values, they were part of *modernisme* in a partial way. Under the political influence of liberalism and republicanism, Soler began to write comedies that were performed in *tallers* (“workshops”) in Barcelona and were mainly satires of the bourgeois values of nineteenth-century Catalan culture. He became a famous playwright with his play *L’esquella de la torratxa*,which debuted at the Odeon Theatre. This play gave Soler enormous fame, which allowed him to begin a career as a playwright with the company *La Gata*. This company became very popular due to Soler’s parodies. The “gatades” were published under the title of *Singlots Poetics* (poetic hiccups). With the plays *El castell dels tres dragons* and *La cua de palla* he satirized the profusion of the *Jocs Florals* (“Floral Games”) and the literary Catalan of the romantic authors. In *El lliri d’aigua*, a play about “fleeting happiness” that takes place in Paris during the 1900s, Soler concretized the modernist spirit. Guimerà’s plays are considered more romantic-realist than modernist. He is well-known for his exploration of social injustices and prejudices in his plays about rural Catalonia such as *Terra baixa* and *La filla del nar*. His interest in the marvelous and the battle between good and evil brought him closer to modernism in plays such as *Les monges de Sant Aiman*​​, although the influence of a romantic-realist aesthetic can still be seen.

Apel.les Mestres is considered the precursor of Catalan Modernist theatre. He was a poet, playwright, and author of short stories as well as music composer and translator. His work as a poet has a clear influence on his theatre. Several of the characters in his plays are inspired by the figures that inhabit his poems; in this way, he created an enchanted world of dreams in plays such as *Gaziel*; *La rondalla de l’amor* and *Liliana*. In other plays such as *Picarol*, *El Joan de l’Ós*, and *La perera*, he drew from popular legends in order to create a mythic world, which he called *el temps de la vellúria* (“Antic times”). As a modernist writer, Mestres believed in the autonomy of the world of art. Thus, he rejected the civic ideal of *noucentisme*, which he mordantly criticizes in his plays *Els sense cor* and *Justícia.*

Santiago Rusiñol is considered the main figure of *modernisme*. Rusiñol presided the Modernist Festival of Sitges. He is also considered an important figure in Catalan modernist painting. The artistic life of Paris in the 1900s and the painter Ramon Casas had a clear influence on both his painting and plays. As a playwright, he criticized a society of Pharisaism and the social values ​​of the bourgeoisie, to which he belonged. In opposition to this society, he created an alternative one dreamed by the artist in *L’alegria que passa.* In his constant quest to create a world that destabilizes yet criticizes the reality of his time, Rusiñol wrote the allegorical play *Cigales i formigues*, which is reminiscent of Maurice Maeterlinck’s work*.* (Rusiñol had translated Maeterlinck’s play *L’intruse* into Catalan, which was premiered in 1893 in the Modernist Festival.) *Cigales i formiges* is a reflection on the opposition between poetry and prose through characters named “hombres prosa” (prose men). This play is rich in philosophical implications. *L’auca del Senyor Esteve* is probably his most celebrated play. Through satire, Rusiñol addressed in this play the issue of aesthetic autonomy vis à vis the socio-economic constraints of the bourgeoisie.

Ignasi Iglésias portrayed the problems of the working class. Along with Jaume Brossa and the writer and politician Pere Coromines, Iglésias founded the *Teatre independent* in 1896. Iglésias was part of the left-wing *modernista* group named *Foc Nou* (New Fire). His theatre is fundamentally engaged in social criticism and was part of the political theatre performed in workers’ centers. In opposition to this theatre, the Church promoted a Catholic theatre, which was performed in parochial centers. Iglésias’s most noteworthy plays are those of Ibsenian influence such as *El cor del poble*, *Els vells*, and *Les garses*.

The influence of Paris, as well as the desire to renovate Catalan theater that was stimulated by the aesthetic of French symbolism, were the creative motivations of the playwright and painter Adrià Gual, who in 1898 founded the *Teatre Íntim*. For Gual two aspects were crucial for the improvement and development of Catalan theatre. First, that directors improved what their predecessors had done: in scenic art, he claimed, all the elements that made up the scene were crucial and nothing was without value. Second, he was concerned with formation of the actor, for without well-trained actors it was impossible to renovate theatre. This concern led him to found *l’Escola Catalana d’Art Dramàtic* in 1913. His most prominent plays were *Nocturn. Andante. Morat* (1896); *Silenci* (1898); *Misteri de dolor* (1904); *La fi de Tomàs Reynald* (1905); and *Els pobres menestrals* (1908). Although Gual is well-known for his plays, sets, and costume design, he was also part of the group named “Colla del Safra” (Group of Saffron), founded by the painter Isidre Nonell. Along with Santiago Rusiñol, Gual was an important figure in the dissemination of European theatre in Catalonia.

Other artistic forms developed under the rubric of modernism were puppet theatre (installed at the cenacle of the *Quatre Gats*), pantomime, and the so-called *transformisme* (transformism). With *modernisme*, Catalan theatre was incorporated into the *fin de siècle* and turn-of-the-century European theatre. It was a theatre that acquired its most contested dimensions within the Catalan Avant-Garde (1914-1936).

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