**MODERNIST THEATRE IN SPAIN**

From the mid-nineteenth century on, Spanish theatre was immersed in a battle between the renewal of both content and form and the ossification of cultural, artistic, and political values*.* Beginning in around 1898, this tension took the shape of a debate known as *El tema de España* (the Subject of Spain). This debate revolved around issues such as Catholicism versus anti-clericalist opposition, sexual morality versus tolerance of non-normative sexualities, and the opening up to or rejection of the politics, culture and theatre of other European countries. In this context, Benito Pérez Galdós, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, and Federico García Lorca might be considered the first creators of modernist theatre in the sense that they impelled a rupture with, and critique of, the values and idiosyncrasies of Spain during that epoch.

*Modernismo*, as an aesthetic category, originated in Latin America, where it was first used by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío in the late 1880s. It closely corresponded to French Symbolism and Parnassianismandinvolved, among other things, the creation of a new literary language as a means of overcoming the realism and positivism of the nineteenth century. In the context of Spain, *modernismo* also marked the moment when Latin America could influence the metropolis. It was understood and defined in multifarious ways and perspectives: as the use of symbolist techniques and means; as new modes of literary expression subversive of the *status quo*; and as a synonym of modernity (Santiáñez, 479). Yet in terms of the evolution of the dramatic genre and theatrical productions, it proved difficult to break with both the aesthetics and language of romantic theatre.

Adelardo López de Ayala (1828-1872) and Manuel Tamayo y Baus (1829-1898), the most prominent playwrights of the Spanish *alta comedia* (high comedy), are considered the first playwrights who tried to renew the nineteenth-century theatre written in Castilian. Still, if part of the “modern spirit” entailed a reflexive take on the socio-political structures that composed modern society, it would be appropriate to consider the theatre of two women playwrights, Adelaida Muñiz y Mas (?-1906) and Rosario de Acuña (1851-1923), as particularly modern in its content. Acuña is considered the pioneer of feminism in nineteenth-century Spain. Both playwrights wrote plays that scrutinized and criticized nineteenth century Spanish bourgeois society and its values, and specifically the place of women. Inspiredby Henrik Ibsen’s female characters, Muñiz y Mas criticized the power of money in *La mancha heredada*. Acuña’s *El padre Juan* is one of the most anti-clerical Spanish plays of the end of century and offers a radical critique of the Catholic Church while staging a plea for secular education. The playwright José Echegaray also echoed Ibsen’s *Ghosts* his play *El hijo de Don Juan*, though he did so by means of a romantic aesthetic and language.

Spanish Peninsular modernist theatre can be located within the temporal *durée* comprising the last years of the nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936). Such boundaries have been termed “a modernism of a historical conjunction” (Santiáñez 481). Thus it is arguably Pérez Galdós (1843-1920), primarily known as Spain’s major nineteenth-century novelist, who was the first to create a form of modern theatre not only reminiscent of, but also as formally and thematically complex as the theatre produced at the time in other European countries. His plays *Realidad*, *La loca de la casa* and *Doña Perfecta* were exceptionally influenced and motivated by the social concerns represented in Ibsen’s dramatic work. It was Galdós’s play *Electra*, a poignant critique of Spain’s cultural and socio-political backwardness, that “made theater history” (Gies 445).

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, Spanish Peninsular theatre was caught between the “forces of continuity and renewal” (Dougherty 587). Accordingly, between 1931 and 1936, the years of the Second Republic, theatre in Spain experienced a period of renewal. The aim was to promote four changes: 1) to expand the thematic of the theatrical repertoire by including topics of sexuality and social justice; 2) to endorse a change in the economic and commercial structure of theatre; 3) to modernize stage machinery; and 4) to perform *avant-garde* theatre (*teatro de vanguardia*). New forms of artistic creation in France influenced Spanish avant-gardetheatre. In addition, these were the years of Ramón Sender’s defense of the so-called Proletarian Theatre, and Alejandro Casona’s pedagogical missions with the company *Teatro del pueblo*. Likewise, during these years Lorca was the driving force in the creation of the university theatre company *La Barraca*, which, like the *Teatro del pueblo*, also had a pedagogical mission. Other small theatre groups were Ramón María del Valle-Inclán’s *Cántaro* and Cipriano de Rivas Cherif’s *Caracol*.

Jacinto Benavente (1866-1954) is considered one of the most prominent figures of the theatre of the pre-Civil War, for he “set a high literary standard for the stage” (Dougherty 580). His plays *La comida de las fieras* and *Los intereses creados* [*The Bonds of Interest*]are a scathing criticism of traditional institutions and the upper classes. But it is not until the late 1920s and 1930s, after years of crisis under the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-1930), that Spanish Peninsular theatre experiences the modernist impulse of break and innovation that characterizes the theatre of other European countries. Accordingly, it was a form of modernism that entered into the spectrum of the modernism that arises as a result of, and response to, the two world wars. Therefore, it manifested itself as an expression of the aesthetic of the avant-garde.

These were the years when José Ortega y Gasset wrote his seminal essay “La deshumanización del arte” [“The Dehumanization of Art”], which elucidates the transformation of art and artists in terms of what he calls the “New Art”. For Ortega y Gasset the art of the turn of the century in Europe – and in Spain – was dehumanized in the sense that it was a new art “que tiene a la masa en contra suya” (that has the mass against it); hence, it is an unpopular art in its essence (47). For, as the Spanish philosopher further argues, “sus resortes no son genéricamente humanos” (its means are not generically human) (49). Scenery renewal, for instance, formed part of the adoption of modern notions of art in theatre. Gregorio Martínez Sierra (1881-1948) is considered the pioneer of modern scenery in Spain, since he emphasized the visual and semiotic aspect of theatre. The plays that stood out for their experimentation and innovation with stagecraft were *El señor de Pigmalión* by Jacinto Grau (1877-1958) and *Los medios seres* by Ramón Gómez de la Serna (1888-1963). The influence of European directors, like Max Reinhardt, also introduced to Madrid’s stage modern technologies of stagecraft such as side lighting. *Brandy, mucho Brandy* by Azorín (1873-1967) and *El hombre deshabitado* by Rafael Alberti (1902-1999) embraced modern standards of stagecraft to the point that were defined as anti-theatrical. Likewise, in terms of its content, sophisticated reflections on sexuality interrogating the construction of normative sexualities were first staged in Cipriano de Rivas Cherif’s *Un sueño de la razón* (Dougherty 587-591).

However, the foremost playwrights of this period, because of the experimentation and novelty in both the form and the content of their plays, were Ramón María del Valle Inclán (1866-1936) and Federico García Lorca (1898-1936). In the period between the turn of the century to 1936, Valle-Inclán published his “Comedias bárbaras” (*Aguila de Blasón*, *Romance de Lobos* and *Cara de Plata*) as well as *Divinas palabras* [*Divine Words*]and *Luces de Bohemia* [*Bohemian Lights*]; these were plays that conveyed a mordant social criticism of modern Spanish society. In these plays one finds a concoction of linguistic experimentation and socio-political reflection on feudal remnants in twentieth-century Spain, the power of the Catholic dogmas and punishment for adultery, and socio-political oppression during the Bourbon Restoration (1874-1931). Valle-Inclán not only “erased the line dividing literary genres and ended up creating a language of his own” (Santiáñez 482), but he was also the creator of the notion of *esperpento* (the grotesque, the deformed, the carnivalesque), which Valle set forth in *Bohemian Lights* and *Los cuernos de don Friolera* [*The Grotesque Farce of Mr. Punch the Cuckold*]. The *esperpento* aesthetic has been understood as a “radical form of literary and political dissidence” (Santiáñez 485).

Federico García Lorca’s plays are characterized by a sort of surrealist language and imagery that create an atmosphere akin to the world of dreams. Lorca’s theatre has been grouped in various categories: puppet plays, farces, avant-garde theatre, and tragedies (Anderson, 601). His first allegorical drama, *El maleficio de la mariposa* [*The Butterfly’s Evil Spell*], bears the influence of Maurice Maeterlinck’s symbolist aesthetic (the play’s characters are insects). His main puppet plays are *Los títeres de Cachiporra* [*The Billy-Club Puppets*] and *La niña que riega la albahaca y el príncipe preguntón* [*The Girl Who Waters Basil and the Very Inquisitive Prince*], both of which portrayed, by means of this theatrical form, the particularities of Andalusian culture. Lorca’s farce *Amor de don Perimplín con Belisa en el jardín* [*The Love of Don Perimplín and Belisa in the Garden*] – characterized by a grotesque aesthetic and a tragic *denouement* – portrays a voluptuous, lush sensuality that produced an effect of shock when the play was performed in 1933. But Lorca’s most experimental play, laden with strangeness and implausibility, was *El public* [*The Public*]*.* This metatheatrical and highly allegorical dramatic piece presents his most artistic and complex, yet also quite explicit, treatment of homosexuality. After *El público* Lorca wrote *Así que pasen cinco años* [*When Five Years Pass*], an avant-garde reflection on the passing of time. After these two plays, Lorca writes what will be his most famous plays, namely, the Andalusian tragedies *Bodas de Sangre* [*Blood Wedding*], *Yerma* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba* [*The House of Bernarda Alba*]. These were plays that challenged traditional values ​​and the status quo, in this case contextualized in the Andalusian countryside. But the artistic challenge to the status quo and the development of Spanish peninsular modernist theatre came to a halt with the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975).

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**Jennifer Duprey, Rutgers University**