

## Albert Boadella and the Catalan Comedy of Cultural Politics

Jill Lane

*I am a puppeteer without country or god  
who complicates the good progress of society*  
—Albert Boadella

Director Albert Boadella appreciates the seriousness of a good joke: three decades of playing well-targeted political comedy in Catalonia have—among other things—started riots, provoked bombings, and certainly won him a reputation as Catalonia’s most provocative jester. In 1989, he chose to play a small joke on the Catalan government, which had for some time been planning the opening of their prestigious National Theatre. A dozen years after Spain’s difficult transition to democracy, and only nine years after Catalonia was established as a relatively autonomous government, the opening of the National Theatre of Catalonia appeared to seal the region’s long struggle for national and democratic autonomy. While promoted in populist terms—“a theatre for everyone, by everyone, at the service of everyone”—this state-funded theatre would serve the project of national reconstruction, complementing the legal and political process with that of cultural legitimation, lending coherence and world-class prestige to a rehabilitated Catalan culture.<sup>1</sup> Albert Boadella was decidedly uncomfortable with this reinvention of the theatre as Catalan ideological state apparatus, and felt that perhaps he too, as the ranking theatre activist during the long struggle for autonomy, should reconsider his service to the nation. Thus, long before the National Theatre could inaugurate its lofty stage, Boadella announced that his own company, Els Joglars, would change its name in honor of the patriotic fervor apparently sweeping the community: Els Joglars would hereafter be called “Els Joglars–National Theatre of Catalonia.”<sup>2</sup>

While not kindly taken by the directors of the National Theatre, Boadella’s little joke underscores the persistent issues that inform the relation of theatre practice to the development, maintenance, and representation of national community—issues which have deeply informed his own career as well as Catalan theatre at large. Here, as elsewhere, the question of representing the nation in the theatre is one of both authority and strategy: who is authorized to “summon” the

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national community in representative stage practices; who determines the “representative”; and what practices affirm and secure its legitimacy?<sup>3</sup> The case of Catalonia is even more complex: during and after forty years of General Franco’s repressive regime, at stake was not only *who* could speak for the “nation,” but whether the ethno-national community of Catalonia could have any voice at all, as the Franco regime had rigorously censured its native language and indigenous cultural practice, including theatre, and denied the region any political or legislative formation. After his death, the issue of how, by whom, and on whose terms the Catalan would be (re)constituted as a political and cultural entity in a democratic Spain has been divisive and hotly contested terrain. In this setting, the stakes and consequences for a specifically Catalan theatre practice have been formidable.

A self-fashioned, self-employed, and enduring jester in each of these courts, Albert Boadella could reasonably claim the title “National Theatre of Catalonia” for his company. His work has, more than any other in the region and certainly more than an eleventh-hour National Theatre, been relentlessly engaged with summoning, articulating, and often challenging the boundary and meaning of national community. Indeed, one could easily interpret his entire career as an extended defense of the integrity of Catalan culture. His first appearance on the theatrical scene in 1962 set the tone for his defensive stance. As Catalan language was officially prohibited, he refused the political compromise of speaking Castilian and opted instead for a silent stage. His company, Els Joglars, was thus formed as a comic mime troupe. Established professionally in 1967, and gradually incorporating dialogue and sophisticated staging, Els Joglars took aim at government media censorship in *El Diari* (1969), state terror in *Cruel Ubris* (1972), at Franco’s project of centralization in *Àlias Serrallonga* (1974), and at state-sponsored political violence in *La Torna* (1977). Boadella’s subsequent work continued to defend the Catalan throughout the radical social changes of Spain’s transition to democracy and entry into the European Economic Community: against the encroachments of Anglo-U.S. culture through the economy of tourism in *M-7 Catalonia* (1978); against the dangers of a homogenized international, media culture in *Olympic Man Movement* (1981), *Teledium* (1983), and *Bye Bye Beethoven* (1987); and against the self-defeating Europeanist aspirations of the Catalans in *Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* (1985).

But this interpretation of his work, while valid, misses the punchline of the joke. Albert Boadella’s theatre simply could not be anointed the National Theatre of Catalonia. For Boadella’s most trenchant stand through these years has not been against foreign intervention in his culture, but against the systems through which the Catalan community itself might seek to anoint, legitimize, and dictate its integrity. No friend to official culture under Franco, he has been no

more a friend to attempts by the Catalan government to institutionalize its culture. He has taken sharp aim, in other words, precisely at the manner in which the national (Spanish or Catalan or otherwise) attempts to capitalize itself.

Albert Boadella's innovation in the theatre, then, has been to summon and explore the meaning of national and cultural community while never capitalizing (on) it. As such, his work lends insight into the strategies of an enduring oppositional theatre which does not crumble with the demise of its opposition, and lends insight into a deeply politicized theatre practice which itself resists demagoguery. To negotiate this precarious position, Boadella has centered his practice not, as some argue, in his political persuasions,<sup>4</sup> but instead in the mechanisms of effective comedy. In his words: "Societies create myths, flags, constitutions, hymns etc. and the comedians, with a most ecological attitude, take on the task of bringing them down, to demonstrate the relativity of the sacred. In that sense, then you see: I am a classic."<sup>5</sup> Thus while his many productions over the years have explored, exploded and revealed the comedy of the divisive cultural politics gripping Catalonia, his work underscores and manipulates, in turn, the nuanced cultural politics of comedy itself.

To tease out this complicated relation between the practice of comedy and cultural politics, I resist two possible pitfalls. First, I attempt to skirt the universalizing tendencies of theories of comedy: theories of the genre, from Bergson to Freud to Bakhtin, seek universal laws governing laughter, thereby emptying specific comic practices of their social particularity. In this theory, laughter has no history and no culture; its politics are an afterthought. Yet I am equally hesitant to reduce Boadella's comedy to some broad notion of "political theatre," which often amounts to little more than flattening laughter into a political slogan, and does not in turn account for the particularity of the artistic practice. While this essay cannot aspire to resolve fully these large theoretical concerns, I believe that Boadella's work in effect performs its own theory of how the mechanisms of comedy and those of politically committed theatre may inform and deform one another in practice. Focusing on his practice during the critical years of Catalonia's social and political transition before and after Franco, 1967-1985, I explore the transition in Boadella's own comedy from the technique of mime under censorship to that of paratheatre in a democratic Spain. Throughout, I trace the production of a laughter that is culturally specific, politically astute, and never easily co-opted by those in power.

### **Comedy under censorship: Catalan sign-language**

Albert Boadella's initial training in mime established the ground for his subsequent approach to both cultural politics and comedy. Els Joglars' early

work—first mime skits performed in amateur venues, later more complex productions in professional performance spaces—roughly corresponds to their years under Franco (1967-1977). Their politics in this period were characterized by a pro-Catalanist tenor, and their comedy advanced an anti-fascist parody of the Franco regime. Working in mime, their theatre stood in sharp contrast in form and methods of conventional dramatic theatre, stagnating under years of censorship. Beginning with the silent, neutralized body of the mime-actor on an empty stage, Els Joglars initially summoned their national community by staging its absence. The visible trappings of the culture were nowhere present, but the audiences of the leftist Catalan cabarets where they performed readily understood that absence as a critique of Franco's censure of their culture. Boadella remarks, Els Joglars were "performing mime—mute, but in Catalan, so it seems."<sup>6</sup> In an atmosphere heavily weighed with censorship, the body of the comic mime oscillated between fierce parody and necessary camouflage. "Any gesture properly distorted could mean something else"<sup>7</sup> recalls one of the actors; a simple image, like that of "an old man giving orders could produce an immediate association of ideas," recalling Franco, says Boadella. "Winking at the audience did not have to pass through the censors."<sup>8</sup> Masquerading as Marceau-inspired clowns, they conjured not butterflies and absent walls, but a communal, conspiratorial laughter with their Catalan audiences.

Boadella's "winking at the audience" capitalizes on what we might call an "ethnographic pact" already operative within the logic of comedy. Umberto Eco's singular insights into the generic logic of comedy and tragedy are instructive here. He contends that a basic mechanism of any theatrical story is the violation and subsequent re-establishment of a rule or norm. Where serious or tragic theatre works to reaffirm the power and majesty of the broken norm, comedy offers delight in the challenge to the repressive power of the rule, in part because its violation usually carries little consequence, and because even when it does carry consequence, the comic violator is ultimately seen as a barbarian, as not "really one of us." If the tragic figure is a scapegoat whom we respectfully bury with pity and fear, the comic figure is a scapegoat whom we exile with laughter. In order to secure its power, tragedy must re-state the social norm, always offering "a lesson in cultural anthropology: it makes even its future readers aware of a certain rule, even though this rule was previously alien to their cultural sensitivity."<sup>9</sup> The logic of comedy, in turn, prohibits the spelling out of the broken norm, and presumes its audience already carries the necessary ethnographic information to participate: "If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect."<sup>10</sup>

Thus comedy relies on this "ethnographic pact" to operate its comic effect. In practice this dynamic can evoke and advance the proprietary

assumptions of a cultural community—who can claim a culture and in turn be claimed by it, who belongs and who does not. In other words, if you are in the cultural circle, you'll understand the joke, your set of norms will be reaffirmed, and you in turn will be reaffirmed by them. If you are not in the cultural circle, too bad for you; you won't be invited in, as only a "jerk" would explain the joke. And comedy is no culturally sensitive practice: it presumes your pleasure in watching the barbarian, the one "other" to you, bear the brunt for violating the norm you wanted him to break. If the very notion of culture always already "designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to [itself] come into forceful play"<sup>11</sup> as Edward Said suggests, then the practice of comedy is particularly suited to this forceful play, and to the making and unmaking of those boundaries.

Boadella's comic play in mime thus dedicates itself to unmaking the boundaries imposed by Franco's censure of his culture, and to evoking another set of boundaries to which only the Catalan is privy. Where the comic generally relies on the unstated shared assumptions of its audience, comedy operating under censorship does so all the more: double entendre becomes the required norm. In Boadella's comedy of the oppressed, the barbarian-scapegoat is always the Censor, stupidly smiling in the front row, puffed up with his own sense of power, blissfully unaware of the comedians' transgression, blind to every joke made at his expense. For example, in a central skit of *Cruel Ubris* (1972), a critique of state torture masquerades as a circus act. A scantily clad woman assists two "agents," dressed in stereotypical raincoats, oversized mustaches, and dark glasses, while they beat a ravaged-looking young man. Each sensational smash to the head is accompanied by a drum roll, a clash of symbols, and an energetic "alee-op." The sexy assistant rushes forward, and striking a pose, invites applause for each successful torture-stunt. While this kind of critical humor made the company popular with its anti-fascist audiences, it passed unnoted by the censors. As Els Joglars were officially classified under "circus and variety acts"—not generally thought subversive—the censor worried only about the young lady's state of undress, and never registered the political humor.

Boadella's "winking at the audience" behind the back, or rather, in the face of the censor under Franco, was effective humor—theatrically and politically—because it tapped into the shared experiences, angers, or knowledge of his Catalan audiences without making them explicit. In Michel de Certeau's terms, Boadella comedy succeeds at the level of "tactics," operating "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality."<sup>12</sup> Miming "in Catalan," the shared experience of community is summoned and made present

precisely through its invisibility: this gives the humor both its pleasure and its political power.

The conjuring quality and power of mime infused Els Joglars' performance style under censorship even as they began to incorporate voice, costume, and more complex stage vocabularies. In *Àlies Serrallonga*, which marks Els Joglars first attempt at full-length dramatic narrative replete with dialogue and period costume,<sup>13</sup> Boadella made his strongest, riskiest attempt to summon an identifiable Catalan culture against Franco's regime. He did so by drawing on the oral history, myth and cultural practices through which Catalan culture was defined and maintained despite censure. He chose to re-tell the historic struggle by the Catalan hero, Joan Sala, alias Serrallonga, against Philip IV as an allegory for the present moment. Under the influence of the Count-Duke of Olivares, Philip IV—like Franco—had set forth a comprehensive, brutal project to centralize and Castilianize Spain; Serrallonga, mythologized as a kind of Catalan Robin Hood, had challenged the monarchy and was eventually tortured and killed to set an example. Serrallonga was used here as an alias not for the real Joan Sala, but as an alias and apology for contemporary terrorism, activism, and violence against Franco's regime.

Els Joglars told the allegory by weaving selective fragments of the history, myth and cultural practices through which the Serrallonga story survives, quoting ballads and poetry, borrowing images from famous paintings, and performing fragments of Catalan folk songs and traditional dance forms. These were reassembled into a highly choreographed stand off between Philip IV's forces and the Catalan peasants who eventually rise up against him. This quoting was, on the one hand, crafted for a specifically Catalan audience which immediately recognized the fragments: the Spanish censors generally did not recognize the nationalist folk songs or images, much less understand their importance. On the other, this quoting was imploded with parodic humor and self-conscious anachronism. The Duke of Olivares, for example, appeared with a large sewn-on horse bobbing in front of him, following Velazquez's famed portrait. The feeble king repeatedly forgot his lines and had to be prompted, parodying Franco, suffering from Parkinson's disease at the time. Serrallonga's executioner entered dressed in a suit, and pulled his instruments of torture from an anachronistic briefcase. The shards and clippings of history and legend are thus interpolated with present-day images, producing an irreverent comedy of past and present social conflict between the Catalan and Castilian, which has its roots in these historically-defined power relations, but which repeats itself to the present day.

Here Els Joglars become de Certeau's creative consumers, tactical users of the theatre and of their culture: their comic play is "composed with the

vocabularies of established languages,” and remains, under censorship, subordinated to “prescribed syntactical forms”; yet their “trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop.”<sup>14</sup> Without an official or “proper” place in the culture, these itinerant Catalan mimes insinuate themselves into the totalitarian Spanish social body; ruminating inside it, they expose its humors. In the process, they summon a community whose only sign is its shared, complicit laughter. Their conjuring practice breathes new life into the age-old notion of comedians as social parasites: playing under the watchful eye of their host-turned-censor, Els Joglars “poach” fragments of the culture, in de Certeau’s fine phrase, illuminating them for a moment with a critical, conspiratorial laughter.

### **Humoring the national body politic: from parasite to paratheatre**

Boadella’s comedy misfired only once, with his production of *La Torna*, in the confusion of Spain’s transition years. Most think of this piece as the company’s triumph, as it made them the *cause célèbre* of a nation-wide political movement for freedom of speech. In truth, this ferocious comedy was Boadella’s only failure: the censor got the joke. With newly relaxed censorship laws following General Franco’s death, Els Joglars thought it safe to address an overtly political theme: the controversial 1972 government execution of the young Catalan anarchist, Salvador Puig Antich. This comedic re-telling yielded a fiercely parodic portrait of the Franco’s military establishment, so fierce indeed that the Armed Forces answered by closing their production and putting them in jail. Boadella had overlooked the fact that in 1977 the new government in Madrid had not yet dismantled the Spanish Armed Forces’ antiquated but still legal authority to prosecute for “offense” to their image. Albert Boadella and his actors went to jail for criminal parody.

Most Catalan audiences did not see the play, as the actors went to jail days after it opened, but it was heralded by the Catalan Left nonetheless—or rather, all the more. “The whole affair resulted in such an enormous popular mobilization in our support,” says Boadella, “that at one point one of the military leaders state publicly the Els Joglars could well be responsible for a *coup d’état*.”<sup>15</sup> And indeed, Boadella’s *coup* was still to come, although not the one anticipated by the thousands who signed petitions for his amnesty. For those who expected him to act as spokesman for Catalan nationalism in a new Spanish democracy, Boadella had a surprise in store. His case was blazing in the Spanish press, letters of support were pouring in from around the country and from abroad, chants of “Freedom for Els Joglars” were heard in countless nation-wide sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations. And how did this *enfant terrible* repay this

show of massive support? Following his sensational escape from prison and into exile to Perpignan, Boadella decided to create a new theatre piece which he staged upon his return in 1978. This new comedy offered a scathing comic critique not of the Spanish Armed Forces, nor of the Conservative Right, nor even of the Centralist government in Madrid, but of the supportive liberal Catalan population itself.

This production, *M-7 Catalònia*, marked a departure for Boadella: once having sought to reaffirm shared bonds with Catalan audiences, he now began a theatre of open confrontation with that same audience, never to look back again. Boadella comments:

Under the Franco regime, we shared a code, a convention with the audience. It was like a church service if you will. We the actors were the celebrants who shared their faith with the congregation. It was a way of giving each other a certain optimism. But when Spain embarked on its democratic journey, I no longer had any use for that conspiracy with the audience.<sup>16</sup>

The social frame was shifting, hence so did the ground of his comedy. While clearly ghosts of the Franco regime were alive and well (guarding his actors in jail), these would soon be exorcised. The silent pact of faith he had once shared with his fellow Catalans could now be summoned and articulated through other means; his comedy was no longer necessary for a shared political practice, and, once spoken, that particular pact was no longer useful for his comic practice. The social revolution he had helped to nurture had arrived, and as Eco reminds us, “even revolutions produce a restoration of their own . . . revolutionary rules . . . in order to install their new social model.”<sup>17</sup> The Censor was gone, and the new kings in court were his one-time friends and fellow celebrants. A jester in every court, he would spare them no fewer comic punches.

The growing rhetoric of nationalism and regional pride in Catalonia impelled Boadella to turn his critical eye on the status of Catalan culture itself. From exile, Boadella looked at the new face of Catalonia. Instead of the wooden “official culture” of the Franco regime, he saw instead a new, yet not so different, commercial culture created for the profit of theoretically progressive Catalans. He saw a renewed packaging of the Catalan as souvenir for export, and for the enjoyment of the armies of Anglo-American tourists who descend on the region every year. “We have become the *concierges* of the Mediterranean to keep and entertain the vacation homes of barbarians,” who far from being recognized as threats to the vitality of the culture, “blind us with their progress,



their technology, their science, their philosophers, economists and politicians.”<sup>18</sup> In Perpignan, the once-Catalan region of Southern France where the Catalan survives only as folklore, Boadella seemed to see the future. *M-7 Catalònia* challenges Catalans to think through the implications of the commercialization of their culture. In making this challenge, however, Boadella cancels his “communion” with the audience: this new comedy presents the audience itself as the new barbarian.

An Orwellian cautionary tale, *M-7 Catalònia* is set in the future: Catalonia as we know it no longer exists (it is “Zone 7” of the Mediterranean), and the world is now dominated by a technologically advanced Anglo-Saxon culture. The piece takes the form of a scientific lecture/demonstration delivered by two anthropologists who have found the last remaining “specimens” of the extinct culture of “Catalonia.”<sup>19</sup> The lecture is subtitled *Conference for the practical application of extinct cultures under the general plan of the Wallace Müller Report*. The slick anthropologists are especially pleased to have found these living “relics” because the Müller Report recommends the controlled “application” of certain practices of extinct cultures as a means to correct the ills of their homogenous and over-rationalized society. A lecture such as this facilitates the therapeutic use of “irrational” cultures without “the inconvenience of having to live there.” The doctors proceed throughout the production to have the “specimens” perform demonstrations of their cultural habits, rituals and social structures to which the doctors add misguided analysis. For their part, the Catalan “relics” are only marginally cooperative but have no trouble exhibiting the comic “irrational” and “backwards” traits which have earned their captors’ interest.

Boadella continues to rely on an “ethnographic pact” to make this comedy, only now the humor derives from the audience’s recognition of their own culture metamorphosing into folklore and into fossil. The audience sees their culture defamiliarized through the lens of the foreign eye. While the Catalan characters are developed according to a meticulous realism, their social codes and habits become comic within the frame of the gravely-conducted lecture. An elderly Catalan man happily gobbling down his paella becomes humorous under the neon lights of the laboratory, and under the amazed eyes of the scientists. As the scientists replay and analyze the culture, their interpretative skills, in turn, reveal their lack of comprehension and compassion.

Boadella thus comments on present-day society by casting the present into a disjointed future anterior: on stage is a future which carries out the problematic implications of which the present holds in store. Like much science fiction, it allows purposeful confusion between analogy and prediction, offering both a distorted mirror of the present and a vision of where that present may lead.

What “is” in present-day society is presented as “what was” on stage. The contradiction plays itself out in a challenge to the audience: they must become critically aware of what their society “will have been” if it continues on its present path.

Thus while *M-7 Catalònia* celebrates the Catalan in the humorous antics of the Catalan “relics,” the laughter it evokes houses a critique of its Catalan audiences. The Catalans in the play are comic “barbarians” in their animal-like hungers, their bad manners, and comic inability to even get their own rituals straight, confusing things like eating salami for receiving the Host. The Catalans in the audience are “barbarians” just like them: aren’t they laughing out of happy recognition? But the audience is also barbaric for laughing *at* them, since that laughter is also implicated in a self-destructive cultural arrogance; it is the social conduct of the audience, not the characters, which is responsible for enabling this future in the first place. The audience may well include the same “progressive” Catalans who package Catalan culture into souvenirs for the pleasure of people who, like these scientists, want to “go native” without the inconvenience of having to live there. Of course the anthropologists are the real barbarians, but *they* are decidedly not funny, and are not about to be conveniently expelled as scapegoats: in this futuristic setting, the straight men have firm control over the proscenium frame and control all the funny Catalans trapped in it, which is no laughing matter at all.

Boadella here arrives at a signature tactic he will repeat hereafter in his comedy of nationalist humors in post-Franco Spain. He has created a paratheatrical frame which does not, like conventional plot-driven narrative, require a resolution of the conflict he wishes to examine. The paratheatrical frame avoids the necessity to finally “expel” the comic (or not so comic) violator of social norms: his theatre poses the questions, exposes the conflict, but never aspires to provide answers. That he leaves to his audience. If the parasite-comedian operating under censorship worked to insinuate himself into the fissures of the Spanish social system, the paratheatrical effects a full pause in the functioning of the social machine, momentarily opening a space for reflection, critique, and maybe change. If his comic miming had once sought to conjure the sense of community through a complicit humor, this new conjuring is of another order. Embodying the very social situation it critiques in order to exorcise it, this paratheatre effects a kind of sympathetic magic on its subject. No longer defining itself against an oppressive other, it always demands a self-critical, reflective laughter.

In his 1981 production, *Olympic Man Movement*,<sup>20</sup> Boadella returns to this tactic, now focusing his comic eye on the government recently instated in the new Catalan *Autonomía*. Fascism could wear many faces, and Boadella

speculated that its next face—judging from the militant rhetoric of socialist youth movements and the continued presence of ETA terrorism—just might emerge from the Left, over-reacting to their forty year censorship under Franco. The new Catalan president of parliament, Jordi Pujol, was himself busy drawing up the statutes that would enforce his program of integration in a new Catalonia: “It will be a single people, not two or three peoples more or less juxtaposed, but opposed. . . . We must succeed in making the official reality of this country . . . basically and fundamentally Catalan.”<sup>21</sup> The popular political slogan of the day concurred: *Ara més que mai, un sol poble!* (Now more than ever, one people!). *Olympic Man Movement* was a reminder that Franco did not invent official culture, forced homogeneity, or fascism, and his death was no guarantee that it could not return.

Like *M-7*, *Olympic Man Movement* adopts a paratheatrical frame: a political rally, subtitled “an act of affirmation and propaganda,” for a liberal political movement in its “seduction” phase, soliciting membership and propagandizing against its opposition. Again there is no narrative plot: the narrative tale, Boadella implies, is already being written in the streets outside the theatre and in government buildings. Here sympathetic magic becomes homeopathic medicine: Boadella saw the production as kind of “vaccine,” a purposeful introduction into the body politic of small dose of the “virus” of political militancy in order to help build immunity to that disease should it appear off stage.<sup>22</sup>

The entire production consists of a demonstration of the movement’s political and social platform. The Olympic men and women turn to the world of sports—presumably free of prior ideological taint—to draw the aesthetic and practical symbols, rituals and ceremonies of their new world order. Not coincidentally, their flag, image and gestures bear some similarity to those of Nazi Germany. Taking cues from the Olympics, they fly every national flag under one international banner, advocating a world-nation with shared regulations and voluntary participation. They communicate through one global language, presumably English, although this is left ambiguous enough to resonate with language politics surrounding the enforced use of Castilian under Franco and now Catalan under Pujol. The bold Olympians, it seems, share a commitment to cultural diversity under one unified destiny.

The Olympian politics appear to be liberal and echo many Catalan liberal political platforms of the day. The movement reaches out to “women who fight . . . to dignify their position,” to all the forgotten functionaries who now “work in anonymity,” to the peasant laborers who want “the land to belong to those who labor it,” and to environmentalists, who favor natural and clean energy. The movement advocates legal abortion and homosexual marriage. “We fight . . . to

liberate all of humanity from the chains of demagoguery and false liberties.” The Olympic men and women are compassionate, beautiful and strong, physically capable, and offer the promise of hope and change.

This Olympian liberalism is, however, only nominal. For every freedom there follows a qualification which betrays the movement’s intolerant ideology. Abortion, for example, is less an issue of choice than service to the community: women of low “mental coefficients” must be sterilized; deformed children must be aborted. Homosexual marriage is permissible, but following the “ecological laws of nature” same-sex couples renounce their claim to have children, and as a minor consequence the State will inherit their financial estates when they die. All of the liberal propositions of the Olympic Movement regarding labor, education and the environment are likewise assimilated into a conservative structure which ultimately favors the State and limits individual control or choice.

In the past Boadella had sought to outwit a totalitarian system to effect a covert liberal politics; in *Olympic Man*, he offers an overt liberal politics to reveal its potentially totalitarian logic. The comedy of the piece rests on the audience’s recognition of their own ideas being transformed into precisely that which they claim to abhor. The danger, of course, is that someone might actually find the Movement’s politics appealing, as Els Joglars never break character to explain the humanist moral, or explain the joke; they offer not a wink. Apparently this grand joke hit a chord, in just the right place. Many liberals in the press felt this was far too dangerous a game and denounced it, accusing the company of flirting with fascism in earnest. They were convinced that audiences would not understand the irony of the piece, and would instead support its politics.<sup>23</sup> Boadella could not have been more pleasurably amused, for it was just these myopic leftists whom the play targeted. Infected with his “virus,” they did not note the similarity between their own prescriptions for “proper” leftist theatre and the prescriptions of the Olympic Men, but he hoped other audience members would. Those rigid Leftists were, like the one-time censors, the comic protagonists of his play, and, not surprisingly the ones who failed to appreciate the joke.

While Boadella’s stance toward his audience had changed, he had not ceased to be a tactical user of the culture or of theatre: the success of his comedy—theatrically and politically—continued to rely on and manipulate current attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, images, and icons operative in the culture around him. As proof, we need only note how little success his work has found abroad. Foreign reviewers praise Els Joglars’ meticulously choreographed performance style, but most have found their meaning and humor vague. Paratheatre out of context loses its primary frame of reference. For example, *Olympic Man* traveled to New York City for a brief run at La Mama in 1981.

One might think that the U.S. at the beginning of the Reagan decade might benefit from a strong dose of homeopathic medicine such as this. Yet Jennifer Dunning of the *New York Times* gave the production a poor review, claiming that “the targets are so scattershot . . . that one longs for some sense of the everyday against which these outrages may be measured.”<sup>24</sup> Compare this to a Spanish editorial in *Diario 16* of the same year by José Manuel Llerandi:

In the early morning of the 31st of March, after having seen Els Joglars’ latest production, I am given unexpected news: ETA had murdered Doctor Carsa. It seemed as though the theatrical representation had not ended, as though the stage frames of *Olympic Man Movement* had left the stage and entered into everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

There was ample critique of American as well as Spanish/Catalan “liberal” politics in *Olympic Man*, but the reference was couched in a cultural idiom which Catalan audiences immediately recognized and American audiences, it seems, did not.

Clearly, Boadella’s paratheatrical techniques only function well in their culture and in their present moment. As a result, he travels little and never restages his work once its relevance has passed. He continues, however, to seek out his audiences in their own space. Still without a theatre of his own, he has toured every production throughout the country in small towns as well as larger cities, with an average run of 250 performances. Boadella has never aspired to translate his talent into an international idiom: it would mean renouncing the very source and power of his particular brand of comedy. As he puts it, in order to be famous in New York, Paris and Barcelona simultaneously, he would have to “devalue the stakes of the game and create archetypes from which [he is] substantially more distant.”<sup>26</sup> Playing forcefully on and within the boundary of his own culture, Albert Boadella is firmly committed to what he calls “theatre of the tribe.” That theatre is “much more potent than an international theatre, but only within the tribe; once you pass the frontier of that tribe, their cultural frontier, you hardly communicate anything.”<sup>27</sup>

Boadella’s production *Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* (1985) offered something of reconciliation with his audiences and between his approaches to comedy: taking the Catalan “cultural frontier” as his subject, the piece is at one and the same time his fiercest criticism of the Catalan and his most loyal affirmation. This piece was conceived to honor, or rather, humor Spain’s entry into the European Economic Community. After Spain’s acceptance into the E.E.C., *Ya semos Europeus* (“Finally we are Europeans”) was the slogan

plastered on every Barcelona wall. Boadella, in turn, posed a humored query: now that Catalonia was “finally European,” to what Europe would they be paying allegiance, with what consequence? But how would Catalonia—so terribly “backwards” and in the minds of other more “developed” nations, if we listen to the rhetoric of the E.E.C. decision—become “European” overnight? As soon as Spain’s entry was official, Boadella set to work on a new “vaccine” to combat the flurry of cultural conceits and vanities of the Catalans and of their new European brethren. As one reviewer put it, “On the eve of our entry into the E.E.C., *Virtuosos* is a recipe of preventative medicine against the excessive gases accumulating in our political organism”<sup>28</sup>

*Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* offers a critical view of contrived European camaraderie, but also celebrates an alternative. To the new, technologically advanced, aesthetically refined Europe of the E.E.C., Boadella opposed another Europe: the Europe of the old Mediterranean, ludic, ribald, vulgar. *Virtuosos* thus stages a madcap battle of common cultural stereotypes in which these two visions of Europe are implicated. To do so, Boadella chose a classical concert as his paratheatrical frame: a refined symphonic concert would stand in for the harmonious, unified culture of the E.E.C. The sleek, serious aesthetic of concert halls is one he associated with what he calls “the Culture of Ministries,” the culture manufactured by the network of Ministries of Culture across Europe with the money, funding, and political muscle to generate and sustain cultural activity which maintains their own values.<sup>29</sup>

The refined European concert he stages is, not surprisingly, ill-fated from the start.<sup>30</sup> The concert features a special appearance in Catalonia of the renowned French musicians from Fontainebleau, arranged by the Catalan Culture of Ministry—so the program tells us—to honor Spain’s entry in the E.E.C. Staged in actual concert halls, the piece begins with the six elegant musicians playing Vivaldi (actually, in the program, “Vivaldon.”). After several minutes of music, there is tittering in the audience, which brings the musicians to a halt, insulted. They heatedly confer among themselves, and chose to play something more “Spanish,” hoping thereby to quiet the audience. To their horror, this provokes outright laughter: apparently this provincial group thinks classical music is some kind of comedy! Outraged, the performers confront the audience; they will offer a “pedagogical interlude” to instruct these Catalans in classical music, and along the way, instruct them in the proper behavior expected of true Europeans. The pedagogical interlude, of course, lasts the entire production and degenerates into a veritable war of cultural chauvinisms. The progressive unraveling of the concert’s slick aesthetic thus stages the dismantling of the Culture of Ministries which the musicians represent.

In order to explore and explode the common stereotypes through which the Catalan defines itself or is defined by others in the European context, Boadella fastened on a scenario which accessed live cultural arrogances of their Catalan audiences: their historical complex and competition with the French. Both France and Catalonia find themselves waging their cultural chauvinism on two fronts in a North-South matrix. Both are in the South of Europe, and both, claims Boadella, have been guilty in greater or lesser degrees of “turning their backs on the Mediterranean” and looking farther North. Compared to France, Catalonia is more “southern,” less developed economically and, in the realm of ethnographic stereotypes, more sensual, less conceptual, and so forth. But within Spain, Catalonia is very “northern,” far more industrialized and economically developed than the Spanish south. In the realm of Spanish national stereotypes, it is the Catalans who are “cold,” “reserved,” and given to opportunistic, rationalized compromise. Despite their historic enmity with France, Catalonia has been the proud, “progressive” link with the rest of Europe precisely through its French border. Says Boadella:

*Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* speaks directly to the Catalan spectator, seizing him from every angle. On the one hand because that spectator is pro-European. On the other because, despite being from the south of Europe, he looks with mistrust at what is further South. And from another angle still, because, in spite of everything, he feels and is Mediterranean.<sup>31</sup>

*Virtuosos*, then, presents a parodic interplay of these many cultural stereotypes, exploding their contradictions, pitting the French and the Catalans as either Northern or Southern, enemy or brethren, depending on the rapidly shifting orientation of the multiple stereotypes.

While the *Virtuosos*' pedagogical interlude betrays their patronizing attitude toward the Catalans, it also betrays their increasing slips from the strictures of their *haute culture*. Consider, for example, their demonstration of the inherent relation of cuisine to music, in which they extol France's gastronomic virtues as the essential nutrient to their genius; *haute cuisine* and *haute culture* are never far apart. Hence they intone a Bach *fugue* via the names of their greatest cheeses and finest soups. In contrast, they claim, the heart-burn-producing food of Spain could only lead to guttural, foot-stomping musical art. Intoning the names of Spanish food and enacting the physical effects it must produce, the *Virtuosos* show the inherent relationship between Paella and Flamenco. *Haute culture* never looked so silly; not surprisingly Boadella calls the play a “counter-Carmen.”<sup>32</sup>

No sooner have the French completely disavowed Spanish culture, than one of the French women is seduced by the “brute Spanish passion” of Antonio, the Andalusian assistant who is only too happy to be enjoyed by the *risqué* violinist. “You see? Cultural exchange is easy!” he quips. Soon the other musicians are infected by this same “Spanish” passion. Sheets of Vivaldon’s music are ripped, tuxedos loosened, pants dropped, musical instruments used for questionable purposes in a uninhibited revelry in Spanish “irrationality.” With this sudden change of heart, the French cry out: “Don’t become part of Europe! We need virgin territory!” The Virtuosos imagine they celebrate Spain’s virtues, but of course, their feminized view of their southern neighbor still cast it as the inferior “other.”

Scatological and sexual humor drives *Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* with a clear object in mind. “The great conquest of Mediterranean civilization,” says Boadella, “is humor, which . . . allows maximum resistance in the face of the unknown,”<sup>33</sup> and, presumably, maximum resistance in the face of cultural conceit. In *Virtuosos*, as in *M-7 Catalònia* and *Olympic Man*, the powerful “other” which is the object of critique controls the proscenium frame. Here, however, the sympathetic magic is meant not only to reveal and exorcise the false pretenses of such prescribed social unity, but to let a “Mediterranean” breeze through the ruptures the humor creates. Exploding stereotypes of the French, Catalan, North, South, the E.E.C., and the Culture of Ministries is accomplished primarily through this leveling humor, a humor which ultimately shows up all of the characters on stage as fundamentally “Mediterranean” in spite of their aspirations to a more refined culture. As long as his audiences were laughing, which they were, he had tapped the “Mediterranean” in them as well: complicit laughter returns as the means to summon the optimism of his community. Boadella thus stages a grand celebration of the barbarous, a carnival of arrogances. Camouflaged under all the well-heeled the straight men, it seems, are vulgar comedians, and their humor may save them yet.

*Virtuosos de Fontainebleau* ends in a full-scale volley of these chaotic stereotypes. The insulted Catalan Master of Ceremonies insists that the Virtuosos leave immediately before they colonize his stage with inaccurate portrayals of Spanish culture. Unsuccessful, he counters with his own version of Catalan stereotypes, dressing up as the Catalan Drummer of Bruc—the legendary drummer whose charmed rhythms once drove the French from the mountain of Montserrat during the war of Independence—and tries to re-enact the historic moment by drumming the Virtuosos off the stage. He is assisted by the Catalan Virgin of Pilar, who is played by Antonio; therefore this most venerated patron saint now wears a huge mustache, like Duchamp’s Mona Lisa. The French, however, are not to be outdone in this war of legendary icons. Napoleon enters



with an accordion; a scandalously dressed Liberté emerges accompanied by her stiff Gendarme, and to top it off, Louis XIV enters in 18th century drag, lip-synching the sultry music of Edith Piaf. Desperate, the Drummer of Bruc quickly distributes oranges and apples to the audience and encourages them to throw them at the growing line-up of French icons: "Fight against the European! Liberate yourselves of your complexes!" The audience happily complies, throwing fruit at the French who now bob up and down behind Louis' flowing gown like ducks in a fairground shooting gallery. It is not until the curtain call that the French and Catalans arrive at something of a reconciliation: Napoleon, Louis XIV, Liberté, and the Gendarme join the Drummer of Bruc and the mustached Virgin in a most unorthodox and comic rendition of a Catalan folk dance, the *jota de Dolores*.

In contrast to the plush, serious concert of the symphonic E.E.C., this final image is Boadella's response to that supposed cultural unity. European "harmony" is no longer expressed through a concert of sophisticated *artistes*, but instead through a deranged folk dance performed by a pastiche of exaggerated cultural types which seem to have no place next to one another, and all of which—Catalan and French alike—have been made to look quite ridiculous in their attempts to define and defend their cultural heritage. From Boadella's skeptical view, it was only after being ravaged by a strong dose of necessary "Mediterranean" humor that they now could put on a common ridiculous grin and honestly affirm "finally we are European", vulgar comedians all.

Albert Boadella's comedy of cultural politics has sought the success of all good parasite-comedians: to successfully transform its host without killing it. Over the years, Boadella's achievement has been to continually resist the place of the proper, of the legitimized, of the capitalized Nation, to perform the work of the jester. The popular Catalan *enfant terrible* under Franco's regime, Boadella was able to renounce that affirming community in order to become an even more effective comedian in a democratic Spain. The comedy of cultural politics, through his work, is always revealed as pretension and dangerous vanity: another myth or flag for the joker to unravel. The cultural politics of comedy, in turn, are always enacted in his play as a tactical practice: "What it wins it cannot keep. [It] must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any moment."<sup>34</sup> Through their manipulation in his comedies, Boadella casts into momentary relief and doubt the unspoken but shared codes which structure cultural practice. His humor hides inside the ever-changing proprietary structures of culture, only to stage there a surprise attack, siphoning off power through laughter.

Because of his political relevance, Boadella is typically considered a radical political artist, but radical he is not. Deconstructionist in spirit, Boadella's comedy does not—cannot—escape the strictures of the cultural idioms he

critiques. Nor does it aspire to. In this way Boadella becomes Eco's humorist: unlike the carnival clown, he "does not pretend to lead us beyond our own limits"; instead he reveals the structure of those limits. He does not "fish for impossible freedom." On the contrary, he "reminds us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under the law—any law."<sup>35</sup>

Thus when the Catalan government invited Josep Maria Flotats to return to Barcelona after years as a leading dramatic actor at the *Comédie Française* in Paris to direct their National Theatre of Catalonia, Boadella's irreverent rejoinder is no surprise. On Boadella, the title "National Theatre of Catalonia," like the mustache on his virgin Saint, hangs like a blasphemous smile. And so be it: his Mediterranean laughter, he says, "is a humor with very few loyalties."<sup>36</sup> Always performing that "most ecological" task of the *joglar*, Albert Boadella's only loyalty is to the joke. But for just that reason, he insists, Els Joglars' "merit in history will not be to have created good theatre, but much more, our contribution to civic life."<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

Thanks to Spencer Golub and Bert O. States for generous help on this project.

1. Josep Maria Flotats, *Un Project per al teatre nacional* (Barcelona: Edicions de la revista de Catalunya, 1989).

2. See *Escena* (December 1989) for several articles on the National Theatre question in Catalonia. Regarding Boadella's protest, see Francesco Burguet Ardiaca's interview with Boadella, "Qui té la clau del TNC—Albert Boadella, la rehòstia!" in that issue (4–7).

3. Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1992) 3–5.

4. Eugène van Erven, for example, reads his work as "radical" political theatre in his article "Franco's Spain and After," in his *Radical People's Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 145–172.

5. Carmen Rigalt, "Boadella: un bufón de sí mismo" *Diario 16* (16 February 1986) 8. All translations from the Castilian or Catalan are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. *Mester de Joglaria: ELS JOGLARS/25 Anys* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1987) 36. This history of Els Joglars first 25 years, co-authored by Boadella, Luis Racionero, and Antoni Bartomeus, will hereafter be cited as "Mester" in this text. While a partial translation of the text into English appears in the appendix, I translate from the Catalan text.

7. Gloria Rognoni quoted in *Mester* 79.

8. *Mester* 61.

9. Umberto Eco, "Frames of Comic Freedom," in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas Seebok (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1985) 4.

10. Eco 6.

11. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983)

12. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) xix.

13. As I have only seen portions of this production on videotape, I rely heavily on reviews, interviews, and histories, in particular *Mester* 81–87, and Xavier Fàbregas, “‘Àlias Serrallonga,’ una reflexió sobre Catalunya y los Catalanes,” rev. of *Àlias Serrallonga*. Granollers, Spain. *Destino* (4 January 1975).

14. de Certeau xviii.

15. Qtd. in Erven 161; translation his.

16. Qtd. in Erven 165; translation his.

17. Eco 7.

18. From the *M-7 Catalònia* program.

19. Note that the spelling of “Catalònia” in the title is the Anglicized spelling of the Catalan “Catalunya.” By all accounts, *M-7 Catalònia* was never videotaped. I rely on reviews, photographs and a published text which includes ample description of the set and action, in Albert Boadella, *M-7 Catalònia i Operació Ubú*, ed. Francesc Castells (Barcelona: Cara i creu, Edicions 62, 1985).

20. Title in English in the original. I follow a videotape of the production, recorded before an audience at the Teatre Romea (3 Feb.–14 March 1982). A text was also published in *Pipirijaina* 21 (March 1982) 44–107.

21. Quoted in Susan M. DiGiacomo, “Images of Class and Ethnicity in Catalan Politics 1977–1980,” in *Conflict in Catalonia*, ed. G. McDonogh (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1986) 86; translation hers.

22. Personal interview, 19 February 1991.

23. See Erven 165.

24. Jennifer Dunning, “Stage: Debut by Spaniards,” rev. of *Olympic Man Movement*, La Mama, New York. *The New York Times* (25 June 1982).

25. José Manuel Montero Llerandi, Editorial, *Diario 16 I* (1 April 1982).

26. Qtd. in Patricia Gabancho, *La creació del mon: catorze directors catalans expliquen el seu teatre*. (Barcelona: Publicacions de L4, Institut del Teatre [Monografies del Teatre 24], 1988) 108–9.

27. Personal interview.

28. Felix Población, “Virtuosos de Fontainebleau: Europa en solfa,” *El Público* 27 (December 1985) 6.

29. Qtd. in Rigalt 8.

30. I follow a videotape of the production, taped for Spanish Television (TVE) before an audience at the Palau de la Música in Barcelona, December 1985.

31. *Mester* 142.

32. Manuel Muñoz, “El Nuevo montaje del grupo Els Joglars es una especie de ‘contracarmen’ según Albert Boadella,” *El País* (29 October 1985) 27.

33. Qtd. in Gabancho 100.

34. de Certeau 37.

35. Eco 8.

36. Personal interview.

37. *Mester* 28.

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