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Andrés Pérez-Simón

**Manufacturing Authenticity:
Anonymous Acting Celebrities
in Atalaya's Production of Lorca's
The House of Bernarda Alba (2009)**

This essay reflects on the concepts of the “stage figure” and “acting celebrity” as developed by Otakar Zich (and later, Jiří Veltruský) and Michael Quinn, respectively, and proposes the new term “anonymous acting celebrity”. The concept of *herecká postava* (literally “figure of the actor”, but frequently translated into English as “stage figure”) was formulated by Zich in his *Estetika dramatického umění* [Aesthetics of the Dramatic Arts], published in 1931. A very young Jiří Veltruský first approached this idea in 1940 in his essay “Člověk a předmět na divadle” [Man and Object in the Theatre]. More than three decades later, now settled in Paris, Veltruský authored a rich corpus of essays that contained multiple references to the concept of the stage figure (1976, 1984). Instead of adopting the dichotomy of actor/character, Zich developed a tripartite model by adding the intermediary concept of the stage figure. Veltruský then pointed out that the stage figure inevitably contains traces of the actor’s physicality, even if that is not the actor’s or the director’s intended purpose (VELTRUSKÝ 1976: 578–579). The corporeality of the human being motivates an indefinite number of physical traits that become semiotized the moment after the actor steps onto the stage. It is therefore impossible to attain complete control of the fluctuation between non-motivated signs and those that are consciously integrated in the process of construction of the stage figure.

It can be stated, after Zich and Veltruský, that the stage figure is the product of the actor’s work – the visual and acoustic signs to be perceived by the

audience. On the other hand, the dramatic character is the result of a phenomenological operation that corresponds to the audience. To date, Zich's original contribution has not caught the attention of many practitioners¹ of semiotics of theatre and drama, especially if they do not have a solid grasp of the semiotics of the Prague School. This is not surprising, however, when we consider that Zich's trichotomy was not even popular among Prague scholars² themselves. As Veltruský observed in his retrospective essay "The Prague School Theory of Theatre", "[m]ost of the theoreticians belonging to the Prague Linguistic Circle were reluctant to adopt this concept of the stage figure as distinct from both the actor and the character" (VELTRUSKÝ 1981: 232) due to the influence of Saussure's dual conception of the linguistic sign. The fact that this very suggestive concept was not embraced by all of the Prague scholars is paradoxical, to say the least, especially if we take into account Michael Quinn's description of the stage figure as "probably the most important" of "the many original concepts contributed by the Prague School to theatre theory" (QUINN 1989: 75).

In "Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting" (1976), Veltruský details the three components interacting during the acting event:

- 1) The performer, with personal characteristics (face, body, voice, and so on) that are expressive even before entering the stage.
- 2) The stage figure, the set of acoustic and visual stimuli created by the performer in interaction with the rest of the cast.
- 3) The *dramatis persona* or character, an immaterial construct that resides in the consciousness of the audience.

Quinn observes how "the personal, individual qualities of the performer always resist, to some degree, the transformation of the actor into the stage figure required for the communication of a particular fiction" (QUINN 1990: 155). What occurs when celebrities are at work is that the performer's personal contribution is more visible than usual. Quinn argues that while the referential function is dominant in most Western theatre, the presence of acting celebrities produces a shift of the dominant. In this case, it is the expressive function that comes to the foreground (QUINN 1990: 155). And while mainstream au-

1 In her recent essay "A Critical Analysis of Michael Quinn's 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting'", Elizabeth Fordham presents a thorough study of "the effects which the castings of 'stars performers' has had on a number of theatrical productions" (FORDHAM 2009–2010: 87). Some of the actors in her study are Ralph Fiennes, Kelsey Grammer (*Frasier*), Daniel Radcliffe (*Harry Potter*) and Kevin Spacey in Irish, English and American productions of the past decade.

2 An exception to this rule would be Jindřich Honzl's "Herecká postava" (1939).

diences tend to enjoy the presence of charismatic actors on the stage, no matter the character they are supposed to impersonate, authors and directors generally feel uncomfortable because the artist's presence may considerably affect the reception of their work.

To illustrate my idea of the anonymous acting celebrity, I will discuss a recent production of Federico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the Seville-based theatre group Atalaya. For this project, the director Pepa Gamboa recruited a group of local gypsy women that had no previous acting training. In 2009, this production was selected to participate in the *II International Festival of Research Theatre*, organized by the TNT International Theatre Centre – TNT is also the home of the Atalaya theatre company. TNT is considered the most advanced laboratory theatre in Spain and for the last ten years it has worked alongside other European centres, such as Odin Teatret and the Grotowski Centre, under the sponsorship of one of the cultural agencies of the European Union. Atalaya's *The House of Bernarda Alba* was applauded by critics and spectators alike and TNT decided to schedule periodic performances in Seville, with enormous success up to today – more than 6,000 people had watched this show by early 2012. In addition, the production toured Spain in 2010 and 2011 and gained access to such 'official' spaces as the "Teatro Español of Madrid" and the "Teatre Lliure of Barcelona". It also received wide coverage from the national and international media press.³ The women performed to a full house in the "Teatro Español of Madrid" for two weeks in March 2010, an event that was organized to commemorate the "European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion". The night of March 6th had special resonance due to the presence of three female ministers of the Spanish government, the ambassadors of Sweden, Denmark and Slovenia to Spain, and a wide range of Spanish and European authorities. It is obvious that having a group of gypsy women perform in public spaces to which they had no access previously was an exercise of (personal) liberation and (social) recognition. The need to empower these marginal women was in fact the seminal idea behind the theatrical workshop that the TNT Centre organized before even considering staging *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

What is it that made Atalaya's production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* something unique and radically different from the hundreds of previous adaptations of Lorca's drama? The distinctive element was the presence of eight out of nine actresses that were gypsy women from El Vacie, a marginal area in the northern outskirts of Seville that is only 500 metres away from the TNT

3 The *Financial Times* devoted for the first time a full page to a Spanish theatrical production. Purcell, Julius. "A gypsy troupe conquers Spain" [online]. Dec 19, 2009. Registration required.

Centre. These women had no previous artistic experience and, to complicate matters, six of them were illiterate. When examining the dozens of press reviews that have appeared since the premiere of the play, one can find a recurring idea that permeates, in one way or another, all of these critical responses. It is the idea that Atalaya's is the most 'real' performance of the Lorquian text to date; in addition, because of its 'authenticity', this production constitutes a milestone in the history of Spanish modern theatre. It could be said that Lorca's female characters finally found their ideal director after seventy years and hundreds of adaptations in Spain and in the rest of the world. A reviewer for *ABC* newspaper, for example, wrote that it is "impossible to find more authenticity" without denying that the actresses lacked acting skills (I would dare say that this impression was in great part *because of* their lack of skills); a critic of the local *Diario de Sevilla* confessed her struggle when it came to evaluate a play that goes beyond "the parameters we are used to working with [...] it is as if there were almost no characters at all"; and a reviewer for *El País* praised the "ingenious truth" and the "envious intuition" demonstrated by the women. These statements were accompanied by headlines such as "Eight real women and a poet" (*Diario de Sevilla*) and "The Triumph of Truth" (*El País*).⁴ The paradox operating behind these critical judgments is the constant emphasis on the 'reality' of this production, all the while still operating within the fictional framework established by Lorca's text.

To explain the reception of Atalaya's production, I propose the term "anonymous celebrity," for it synthesizes the apparently contradictory features of this *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Firstly, the women brought to the stage are anonymous because they are poor women condemned to living in the margins of society. Hence, there is no risk of having celebrities conditioning the authorial or directorial plans at all. Nonetheless, several of the features that Quinn associates to acting celebrities are present in this play, as I will explain later. This is because the expressive function is dominant in this production. I distinguish three main elements that make the spectators focus their attention on the actual bodies that are on the stage as opposed to the fictional work that is expected to unfold before them:

4 Quotations from the following electronic sources: Martínez, Lara. "Del Vacie, con mucho arte". *ABC* [online]. Nov 25, 2009 [accessed on March 9, 2012]. Available online at <<http://tinyurl.com/7sqydqd>>; Gómez, Rosalía. "Ocho mujeres y un poeta". *Diario de Sevilla* [online]. Nov 11, 2009 [accessed on March 9, 2012]. Available online at <<http://tinyurl.com/7vkkobj>>; Vallejo, Javier. "Lorca, de barro y oro". *El País* [online]. March 13, 2010 [accessed on March 9, 2012]. Available online at <<http://tinyurl.com/7zqp9ch>>; Molina, Margot. "El triunfo de la verdad de El Vacie". *El País* [online]. Feb 28, 2010 [accessed on March 9, 2012]. Available online at <<http://tinyurl.com/773ulom>>.

1) The sequence of events in Lorca's play is widely known by the Spanish spectators (a canonical text, even a 'celebrity text' in its own right) who therefore can turn their attention on the part of 'reality' of the actresses, from their particular oral delivery to their bodies and clothes. I prefer "clothes" to "costumes" because there is the illusion that the women are wearing their everyday clothes, instead of the black dresses that everyone associates with the mourning in Bernarda Alba's house. There is in fact a shift of dominant from a black and white space that is heavily invested with meaning in Lorca's drama (black dresses—mourning; white walls – the virginity of the daughters) to an apparently neutral visual arranging that corresponds to what one can see when visiting a gypsy encampment nowadays [see photo 1]. In Lorca's text, this stylization in black and white provides the background for the rebellion of the youngest daughter Adela, who dares to wear a green dress on the day of her father's funeral. This semantization of the *décor* and the costumes is not present in Atalaya's production, which tends to mimic a documentary aesthetic.

2) There is significant room for improvisation on the stage due to the basic acting training received by the women. We thus see the rule of expression over convention and the actresses only partially adopt an acting code – it is evident when they are openly acknowledging their feelings of embarrassment in certain exchanges that are regarded as comic by the spectators. The active intervention of the professional actress Marga Reyes, who played the role of the servant La Poncia, was crucial in accommodating these moments of spontaneity without producing major interruptions. Her function was key because she worked as the extension of the director on stage – she had the right to improvise whenever the situation required it. Hers was a very peculiar role operating somewhere in between the protocols of dramatic theatre and the improvisatory tradition that reminds us of the *commedia dell'arte*. In the cases when the actresses were illiterate, they simply adopted a map with basic dramatic situations that loosely followed the dialogue in Lorca's text. It was because of their inability to read that they had to learn the text by practicing oral exercises with the director Gamboa.

3) A last factor that individualizes this production is the presence of pseudo-spontaneous singing and dancing numbers that are relatively disconnected from the dramatic action. When adapting Lorca's text, the director Pepa Gamboa reduced the length of the play to one hour and added songs, dance and music. I said 'relatively' because Gamboa's modifications may refer to the fictional world of the play, as in the case of a song about Pepe el Romano, the absent man whose presence around the house jeopardizes Bernarda's control over her daughters. Of special interest is the hybrid nature of this production, one that conciliates plot progression and virtuoso exercises [see photo 2].

Quinn claims that celebrity acting “exists in strict opposition to the system of stage types” (QUINN 1990: 155) because the acting stars operate at a different level from the rest of the cast. Yet the anonymous celebrities of *The House of Bernarda Alba* proceed in an inverse manner, for no actress was destined to attract more attention from the audience. It could be said that the spectators found themselves witnessing a chorus of ‘real’ women. Interestingly enough, this choral arrangement ended up producing certain problems when it came to staging Bernarda Alba in her interaction with her servant La Poncia [see photo to 3]. The figure of La Poncia is unique in Lorca’s drama because, despite her social inferiority, she still shows an attitude of disrespect towards Bernarda.⁵ Take, for example, the dialogue in Act II, when La Poncia insinuates that it would have been better for Bernarda’s family to have moved to a new town in order to avoid the constant rumours surrounding them. Bernarda eventually tells La Poncia that she has no right to address her in those terms, not only because she is paid “to work and stay silent”, but also because she has serious things to hide herself – Bernarda implies that La Poncia was born to a prostitute. It is my view that Atalaya’s production cannot fully render the tension that is contained in Lorca’s text in the same way that more traditional versions of the play do. This is due to the fact that this production emphasizes too much the poor condition of the gypsy women through varied external signs – their simple clothes, vulgar hairstyle, rude manners, and incorrect pronunciation of Spanish words. While we can still see how Bernarda’s cane works as a symbol of authority over La Poncia, what cannot be conveyed is the idea that Bernarda descends from an aristocratic family (the final reason why she refuses to interact with the rest of the villagers). The class conflict is therefore lost here as a direct consequence of the casting decision. In fact, a very frequent choice by the Spanish adaptors of *The House of Bernarda Alba* has been to cast a major actress – a theatrical star, if possible with a television background – precisely in the role of Bernarda Alba. This decision has been normally explained due to the need to situate Bernarda at a different level from the rest of the dramatic figures in the play. Atalaya’s production, on the contrary, adopts the patterns that Veltruský associates with “naturalistic” theatre, “which strives both to make stage figures as different from each other as possible and to put them all on an equal footing, without clear mutual subordinations” (VELTRUSKÝ 1976: 555).

5 La Poncia is the only character that confronts Bernarda from the very beginning of the play. In addition, the first information we have about Bernarda comes from La Poncia’s description in her conversation with another servant, before Bernarda enters the stage. This is a classic example of characterization *in absentia*.

In Atalaya's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, expression takes the place of convention, as I have explained above. A quick look at the promotional apparatus surrounding the play will help to understand how the non-theatrical condition of the actresses is constantly foregrounded through explicit and implicit means during the promotion of the play. For example, in an interview for a news segment on Spanish national television one of the actresses recalls a verbal incident she experienced during the premiere of the play. Standing nervously in the wings, she heard somebody shouting "*Mucha mierda*" at her, which she replied to with an insult. This happened because at that point, she was not aware that these apparently rude words are part of a code shared by all the participants in the theatrical event (in English the equivalent would be "Break a leg"). This public confession of ignorance constitutes a clear symptom of the message to be conveyed by the promotional apparatus of the play. What we have here, in short, is theatre done by women that do not follow the laws of theatre, hence the *reality* of this *Bernarda Alba*. If we refer to the threefold scheme integrated by performer, stage figure and character, it is evident how the attention remains on the actress as a biographical (and social) subject. To conclude, I propose a comparison chart with the main differences between Quinn's concept of acting celebrities and my idea of anonymous celebrities as seen in Atalaya's production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*:

ACTING CELEBRITIES	ANONYMOUS ACTING CELEBRITIES
They enjoy public notoriety that is prior to their appearance in the play (or film).	No previous notoriety, but they rapidly become local celebrities after their acting work. For example: one of the women says that she is now admitted to the biggest department store in Seville; another woman has now received several job offers.
Celebrities resist ensembles and the system of conventional stage types.	<i>The House of Bernarda Alba</i> is defined as a choral work, and neither Bernarda nor Adela (the youngest daughter, who rebels against her mother's tyranny) seems to step out of the rest of the cast.

<p>“The intrusion of celebrity displaces authority from the creative genius of the author (or the interpretive genius of the director)” (QUINN 1990: 157).</p>	<p>No doubt remains about the authority of the director Pepa Gamboa, who takes liberties with the dramatic text, and includes music and dance (she is renowned for her work with theatre and flamenco). Her final goal is to better integrate these women into the society through artistic practice.</p>
<p>Celebrities negotiate job contracts in their own terms.</p>	<p>The women enjoy no privileged economic status in return for the extra dosage of “authenticity.” In fact, the women receive a symbolic retribution. They <i>were</i> amateur and they still <i>are</i> amateur.</p>

What singularizes Atalaya’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* is that its authenticity effect (as judged from the reaction of spectators, critics and institutions alike) is not the result of reducing theatrical practice to a happening or some sort of one-time event – something that must resist reproduction and, at a last extent, commodification. It is obvious that the raw work of these actresses makes true the idea that two enactments of the same play are never the same, though this does not automatically mean that performance takes precedent over fiction. The success of this production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, one that emphasizes perceptibility without sacrificing the existence of a dramatic world, can be better understood in light of the numerous pragmatic implications that are contained in the concept of anonymous acting celebrity that I have proposed here.



Photo 1. *A wide spectrum of colors substitutes for the white walls and black dresses to be found in Lorca's drama*

Photograph © Atayala



Photo 2. *Time for a virtuoso exercise.*

Photograph © Atayala



Photo 3. Bernarda Alba and her servant La Poncia, who is played by Marga Reyes, the only professional actress in the cast.

Photograph © Atayala

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From the left: Yana Meerzon, Herta Schmid
Photograph © Patrice Pavis

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Summary

Andrés Pérez-Simón: Manufacturing Authenticity: Anonymous Acting Celebrities in Atalaya’s Production of Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* (2009)

In this essay I first review the concepts of “stage figure” and “acting celebrity” as developed by Otakar Zich (and later, Jiří Veltruský) and Michael Quinn, respectively. I then propose the new term “anonymous acting celebrity.” The concept of *herecká postava* (literally “figure of the actor,” but frequently translated to English as “stage figure”) was formulated by Zich who coined the concept of “stage figure” in his *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (1931), and

Veltruský first approached this idea in 1940 in his essay “Man and Object in the Theatre.” In the 1970s, Veltruský also authored a rich corpus of essays that contained multiple references to the concept of stage figure. In his 1989 essay “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting”, Michael Quinn adopted Veltruský’s terminology in order to show to what extent the presence of charismatic actors may considerably affect the reception of a play – no matter the artistic plans of authors and/or directors. To illustrate my idea of the anonymous acting celebrity, I discuss a recent production of Federico García Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the Seville-based theatre group Atalaya. For this project, the director Pepa Gamboa recruited a group of local gypsy women who had no previous acting training. To explain the ‘authenticity’ effect of Atalaya’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*, I develop the notion of “anonymous acting celebrity” as a way to uncover the numerous pragmatic implications that surrounded the collective reception of this production.