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Productive Contradictions in

*The House of Bernarda Alba TNT-El Vacie Version*

*The House of Bernarda Alba TNT-El Vacie Version* (La casa de Bernarda Alba versión TNT-El Vacie) is an award-winning adaptation of the play by Federico García Lorca that premiered in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Featuring eight first-time actresses of Roma ethnicity from an impoverished community in Seville, the production came about as a result of an acting workshop organised at Territorios Nuevos Tiempos International Centre for Theatre Research (TNT). One evening, the students of the workshop were invited to watch a professional play at TNT. It was then that Rocío Montero Maya, who would later play Bernarda Alba, first expressed her desire to make a real show just like the one they had seen. That was the impetus for the production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* that would tour Spain and abroad under the direction of Pepa Gamboa.<sup>2</sup>

Lorca's 'Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain' presents quite an appropriate vehicle for this particular project.<sup>3</sup> *The House of Bernarda Alba* tells the story of a stern, austere mother and her five daughters. In the story, the recently widowed Bernarda Alba decrees eight years of strict mourning during which all the women of her immediate family must remain confined to the house. The authoritarian attitude of this mother towards her daughters ends in tragedy. Rocío Montero Maya and the other women who performed in *The House of Bernarda Alba* live in a neighbourhood known as El Vacie, a community of about 120 families, mostly of Romani origin, located on the outskirts of Seville.<sup>4</sup> They too rarely have the opportunity to leave their neighbourhood. TNT is located just a few steps away from El Vacie, and is the headquarters for the Imarginario Theatre Project (Proyecto Teatro Imarginario), an initiative that uses theatre to address social marginalisation. Silvia Garzón, who was in charge of the first workshop with the women from El Vacie, explains that from the beginning the aim of the project was to share theatre with sectors of the population that do not normally have access to it:

We were not thinking of training actors, but rather of the need to get closer—with and through theatre—to other sectors of the population that we can label marginal or marginalised (No pensábamos en la formación de actores, sino en la necesidad de acercarnos con y desde el teatro a otros sectores de la población al que podemos etiquetar de marginales o marginados.) (Garzón 2010).

At first, the workshops consisted only of theatrical games and playful improvisations. Because the majority of the women from El Vacie either have low levels of literacy or cannot read or write, at first they did not work with written texts. But as the women increasingly began to enjoy their experiences with theatre, they insisted on more. Eventually, the adventure turned into a more serious artistic commitment. When Ricardo Iniesta, artistic director of TNT, invited Pepa Gamboa

to join the project as director, Gamboa proposed working with *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Iniesta was skeptical at first, but ultimately agreed to the proposal. Through games and improvisations, Gamboa and her directing assistants Silvia Garzón, Jerónimo Obrador, and Marga Reyes passed the text on orally to the burgeoning El Vacie actresses. The result was a performance of an abridged version of the original story, for a live paying audience. Once this shift to professional theatre took place, TNT began paying the El Vacie women as they would regular professional actresses. Characters and plot structure were maintained, but the lines were paraphrased during the rehearsal process by the El Vacie women.

In what follows, I begin by briefly discussing the idea of using theatre for the purposes of social inclusion. Drawing briefly on relevant key ideas from Gayatri C. Spivak, Augusto Boal, and Jill Dolan, I sketch some necessary conditions for this type of work to remain ethical, and how its professionalisation might influence its outcomes. Referring to the scholarship of Claire Bishop and Nicholas Ridout, I elaborate on ethical questions that arise from the encounter of professional and non-professional artists in *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Then, focusing on TNT's particular approach to the El Vacie women in the first iterations of the Imarginario Theatre Project, I discuss specific problems regarding the hierarchical implementation of the project, while also indicating how this sort of critical analysis proved insufficient in this case, something that became clear only after my personal interactions and conversations with the women in the play. Finally, and most importantly, I explain how the women from El Vacie subverted the project's arguably paternalistic tinges, and at the same time undermined my initial outsider criticism. Using Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's conversation on performative politics, I elucidate the mechanism through which the women's agency emerged in practice (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). In a critical analysis that focused only on the artists' implementation of the project, this emergence of agency could be overlooked, but here, the entangled nature of political, aesthetic, and ethical issues becomes evident. Could it be that, as Butler and Athanasiou suggest, the precarious life conditions of the women who performed in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and the consequently vulnerable situation in which they were placed, are the very conditions of possibility for their resistance? In this paper I explore how the women staked a claim to their own self-determination by choosing the contingent benefits, for them, of the practice of theatre.

### **Theatre for Social Change: El Vacie and Atalaya-TNT**

Bounded on one side by the cemetery of San Fernando and on the other by one of the major highways of Seville, El Vacie is characterised by poverty, segregation, and poor infrastructure. In the media, it is often associated with drugs, crime, and violence, and is considered highly dangerous (*Callejeros* 2007; *ABC de Sevilla* 2007; *El País* 2014). Those who live outside it are rarely aware of the situation its residents have lived in for decades. Though all of El Vacie's inhabitants are stigmatised, the women are subjected to additional pressure, being targets not only of ethnically motivated prejudice against Romani people, but also suffering the oppressive effects of the patriarchal traditions and mechanisms of that culture. As happens elsewhere, low access to educational and cultural resources keeps this economically disenfranchised community excluded from the production of discourse and knowledge. Artistic practice is one aspect of this discursive exclusion.

TNT's presence on the border of El Vacie dates from the end of 2008 and is a relatively recent development in their history. The institution started in 1983, when Ricardo Iniesta founded the company Atalaya, initially as a street theatre troupe. Since 1986 they have maintained a permanent group of professional theatre artists dedicated to research and collaborative production. An offshoot of Atalaya, TNT was founded in 1994 as a space dedicated exclusively to research and

training. Its motto is: 'Another theatre is possible' ('Otro teatro es posible'). The mandate of both institutions rejects what Iniesta calls 'commercial theatre' (Europa Press, 2008). Since its inception, TNT has hosted many internationally renowned theatre practitioners who have presented workshops and given classes; it is part of a European Union program called International Theatre Laboratory for Cultural Innovators. In 2008, TNT moved to new facilities, built on a large section of land bordering El Vacie that the city administration of Seville (Ayuntamiento de Sevilla) gave them permission to use for 30 years. It was with this 2008 move that Imarginario Theatre Project started to take shape. Garzón explains the initiative as follows:

A project arose at TNT-Atalaya called Imarginario Theatre to work with different marginal and marginalized sectors of the society. And we had El Vacie next door, so it was very clear with whom we would work, right? (Se plantea desde TNT-Atalaya un proyecto que se llama Teatro Imarginario para trabajar con diferentes sectores de la sociedad marginal y marginado. Y tenemos El Vacie aquí al lado, entonces era muy claro con quienes íbamos a trabajar, ¿no?) (Peralta 2011)

Promoting social inclusion through the practice of theatre is a noble idea, but what does it actually entail? A starting point might be to assume that working for social inclusion implies addressing imbalances of power in social relations. Groups deemed to be marginalised do not have access to conditions that would allow them to live well, grow, and prosper. Being at the margins of society means being deprived of access to a purportedly shared space of social opportunities. In real life, marginalisation can have a wide range of effects, but often is manifested most urgently in problems of a socio-economic order, such as not having access to housing, health care, jobs, education, or leisure activities. The people of El Vacie are economically deprived and suffer, in particular, from a lack of education and intellectually engaging leisure. As Spivak argues, since such leisure is crucial to the development of personal freedom of thought, being systematically deprived of it can have devastating consequences (2012: 120–22 ).

The creation of theatre is exactly the kind of leisure that is too often denied to marginalised people. If we accept that the goal of Imarginario Theatre Project was to stimulate creativity and intellectual freedom, then the collaborative creation of a theatrical production with the women of El Vacie certainly had the potential to do good. By encouraging the development of creativity through the practice of theatre, projects like this can contribute to the type of aesthetic education that Spivak refers to as being capable of '[r]earranging desire' (2012: 537).<sup>5</sup> For Spivak, these initiatives can contribute to 'training the imagination for epistemological performance' (Spivak 2012: 122). Such opportunities are often crucially lacking amongst those who are the most oppressed. In this context, Imarginario Theatre Project was a concrete opportunity for TNT and the women from El Vacie to share the adventure of thinking through theatre, and to create the type of performance that Nicholas Ridout hopes for and has described as offering 'an image of the unconstrained community of fellow-feeling that might ground a utopian politics' (2013: 4).

The playful character of the practice of theatre allows for intellectual exercise at the same time that it affords pleasure for those involved. It is intellectual work that often does not feel like work—it is fun. In addition, as Jill Dolan posits in her book *Utopia in Performance*, theatre enables that form of 'mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets [people] imagine a different, putatively better future' (2005: 168) especially as theatre encourages people to come together to collaborate. And as Augusto Boal clarifies in *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, the dialectical relationship between the aesthetic process during rehearsals, on the one hand, and the final art product of the show, on the other, is important when exercising the imagination. Boal champions the idea that '*[i]magination is memory transformed by desire*' (2006: 21, original emphasis). Because the

practice of theatre allows those who are involved in it to switch roles, and to attempt to perceive the world from different embodied perspectives, it can help make more salient the intersectional nature of processes of marginalisation.

Such an imaginative sociological laboratory can happen most effectively in a context of equality, where differences are not simply tolerated, but thoroughly respected as a fact of life. However, the first instances of Imarginario Theatre Project tended towards paternalism rather than egalitarianism; they were fashioned more with an attitude of 'giving back to the community' similar to that of some charitable endeavours. For example, there was a tendency to preemptively assume that the women from the community lacked capacity for action and for choice. This kind of assumption informed an interview statement by Iniesta that indicated he was not sure if the women would have the capacity to go on a tour: 'We did not know whether they would dare to go out, whether they would have this continuity, whether their husbands would allow them to' (No sabíamos si ellas mismas iban a atreverse a salir, si ellas mismas iban a tener esa continuidad, si sus maridos las iban a dejar) (Peralta 2011). This dynamic was present from the beginning of the workshops, and it was only exacerbated when the production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* became more professionalised. Once the decision was made to undertake a professional production, TNT had unilateral control of aesthetic and logistic decisions, and prizes and recognition mostly went to the professional artists involved. The women of El Vacie were lower in the hierarchy than their professional artistic partners, and as a consequence, their racialised and marginalised identity became objectified.

Little information was offered in publicity materials about the El Vacie performers. What was available focused on the fact that they were 'eight illiterate Romani women who live in El Vacie, the oldest shantytown in Europe' (ocho mujeres de etnia gitana, sin alfabetizar, que habitan en el Vacie, el asentamiento chabolista más antiguo de Europa). This comment appeared often in press materials, including twice in the dossier of Teatro Español, where *The House of Bernarda Alba* was shown in 2010 (Teatro Español 2010; Atalaya-TNT 2014; Pérez 2014). As a result of this approach to publicity, the women ended up serving as archetypes of the dignified poor, and their purportedly authentic racialised identity appeared at odds with their status as burgeoning artists.

Despite the fact that the women of El Vacie were representing the fictional roles of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and not their own lives, it nevertheless can be useful to regard the production as a case of 'delegated performance'. In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop discusses different instances where professional artists engage 'real people' to perform their 'real identity' onstage. She calls the works characterised by this casting strategy 'delegated performance'. Bishop clarifies that 'the most compelling examples' of such performance 'reify precisely in order to discuss reification, or [...] exploit precisely to thematise exploitation itself' (2012: 239, original emphasis). When *The House of Bernarda Alba* is regarded as a delegated performance, it is indeed questionable whether the TNT version succeeded in sufficiently probing the reification of the Romani women from El Vacie. This is in great part because the treatment of reification was impacted by the development of a disconnect between the marketing and the making processes of the show. On the one hand, the marketing objectified the community's poverty in an exploitative way, while on the other, director Pepa Gamboa worked together with the women to deal ethically with the aesthetic paradoxes of the project. This disconnect was the product of an unanticipated shift from a social inclusion project to a professional theatre production, a shift that grew out of the women's own excitement and engagement with the newly discovered joys of making theatre.

Engagement in serious artistic activities can certainly help promote the social inclusion of a marginalised community such as El Vacie, and a partnership with professional artists from Atalaya-

TNT is an added bonus. But any benefit from such a project is not immediately measurable (and perhaps is not measurable at all), and organisers should not lose sight of the primary goal they set for themselves, which in this case was social inclusion. Since the ‘rearrangement of desires’ is not an overnight process, a short-term project would not be enough to really address the deeply ingrained, complex problems of intellectual exclusion as they exist within El Vacie, and particularly amongst the women. The framework of the Imarginario Theatre Project ensured that the main beneficiaries of the focus on social inclusion were not the marginalised women who participated, but rather the middle-class audience. By being confronted with El Vacie residents, the audience was being asked to accept them as humans and to confront their own prejudice against that community. The production of a professional show can be important for validation and exposure of social inclusion work, and also contribute to its continuity, but a different approach to marketing could have been developed to put more emphasis on the El Vacie women. As I demonstrate below, questionable priorities undermined Atalaya-TNT’s stated intentions with regard to their social inclusion agenda.

### **Imarginario Theatre Project**

An analysis of the implications of TNT’s project must take questions of space—of territory—very seriously. The story here is that of a theatre institution moving into an impoverished neighbourhood and finding the situation of social marginalisation there to be at odds with this institution’s own immediate interests, as the following statement by Iniesta makes clear:

In a very hostile environment—a forgotten place like El Vacie, an environment that is extremely difficult to access—we found people who have such authenticity and truth, [people] who transfer their lives onto the stage; we found people with even more dignity than those outside the walls of El Vacie (Hemos encontrado dentro de un medio muy hostil —un medio muy difícil de acceder, un medio muy olvidado como es El Vacie—hemos encontrado personas que tienen una autenticidad y una verdad, [personas] que trasladan sus vidas al escenario; hemos encontrado personas con mucha mayor dignidad que las que existen fuera de esos muros del Vacie) (Peralta 2011).

On reflection, this comment somewhat dehumanises the El Vacie population. Iniesta seems to express surprise at finding people with ‘dignity’ and ‘authenticity’ in the impoverished neighbourhood. The comment also testifies that the company arrived at El Vacie with many preconceived ideas about what the people there were like. However, the factors that shaped the Imarginario Theatre Project were more complex than the socially engaged discourse would suggest. Although Garzón has said that the company’s proximity to El Vacie made the choice of where to start the project an easy one, a look at the circumstances surrounding the construction of TNT’s facilities at that particular location suggests that perhaps the company *needed* to secure El Vacie’s support.

When the city administration of Seville gave Atalaya-TNT the rights to use the land located close to the cemetery of San Fernando, all parties knew that this was not an affluent neighbourhood. There would be unavoidable, obvious class differences between the theatre’s prospective audience and the residents of the surrounding community. The construction of TNT could certainly be interpreted as a step towards gentrification of the area. The possibility of adversarial behavior from the impoverished population was a concrete business risk—if theatre-goers were regularly targeted for robbery and muggings, for example, the whole project would suffer. Iniesta’s statement above reveals that such anxiety was present. But if the new arts centre were to establish itself as an ally, not an enemy of the community, the relationship could be much smoother. The desire to become

an ally does not in itself indicate bad intentions on the part of the company, nor that the company wanted to take advantage of the situation. In fact, part of the reason for TNT receiving the rights to the land was to implement social projects (*El País* 2006). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a partnership being productive for both parties and indeed it has the potential to prove ideal. However, a lack of sensitivity to the complexity of questions of exclusion alongside an attitude of superiority from the company towards El Vacie made the cultural incentive look conspicuously like a civilising project. The social integration of an excluded community attracts governmental support for the institution, and also serves to pre-empt possible acrimony from the community. Sharing theatre with the women from El Vacie clearly comes with added benefits for TNT-Atalaya.

In his discussion of Orientalism, Edward Said asserts that the desire to know the other is almost always linked to the desire to exercise power over that other (Said 1979). The civilising projects conducted by imperialistic forces in their colonies claimed they were liberating these populations from their supposedly savage, obsolete cultures, but what these forces truly sought was to secure their political and economic power. Something similar can be recognised in the case of Imarginario Theatre Project. Atalaya-TNT's relationship with El Vacie had much in common with that of imperial powers who seek to learn about the populations in their colonies in order to dominate and conquer, but end up alarmed or humbled by the autonomous actions of these same people.

Though the project started off by addressing just the women of the community, and raised practical questions regarding their oppression under patriarchal Romani tradition and under the authority of their husbands, no careful addressing of the reasons behind their particular circumstances took place.<sup>6</sup> Preconceptions and assumptions about the patriarchal nature of the Romani community guided the work, which left unexamined the mechanisms through which this patriarchal tradition manifests in daily life. The institution assumed that the women were victimised and submissive, and that they would not take theatre seriously. Instead, as it became clear, they had ample ability to self-determine their actions independent of their husbands, and were quite interested in taking the theatrical project seriously. With regard to the latter point, Juana Sonia da Silva (who played Bernarda Alba's daughter Adela) made the following comment about having to leave the project after she became pregnant: 'On the one hand, I am happy with my daughter, but on the other, no, as I had to leave the work. I really miss the work, I would like to join again.' (Por un lado, estoy contenta con mi niña, por otro lado ya no, como he dejado yo el trabajo. Extraño mucho el trabajo, yo queria entrar otra vez.) (Peralta 2011)

Even the name 'Imarginario Theatre Project' itself belies a patronising attitude regarding El Vacie. In Spanish, the word 'imaginario' means 'imaginary' or 'imagination', one of the most basic aspects of theatre. The word connotes the capacity to arrive at new possibilities with nothing more than one's own mind, and hence it evokes a sense of hope, creativity, and new prospects. By slightly modifying this word with the addition of an 'r' to form *imarginario*, the word marginal is added to the equation. This word-play evokes and embraces the creativity or the imagination of the marginal. The neologism suggests that the marginalised are also capable of imagination, of hoping, of creating something beautiful from nothing but their minds. However, although 'imarginario' is at first glance an inoffensive term, it becomes problematic if we appreciate the othering that it entails. What the use of this term fails to take into account is the stigmatisation that the people participating in a project with such a name can experience. If the idea is to promote social inclusion, borders need to be erased, frontiers need to vanish. By labeling a social integration project in terms of an imposed categorical difference, segregating the prospective artists into the category of 'marginal', the project falls short of having truly integrating effects. There was certainly a positive intention behind the endeavor, but is good intention enough?

As Angela P. Harris explains in *Gypsy Law*:

Roma have for many centuries been the target of discrimination, persecution, stereotyping, forced assimilation, and violence. Survival for cultural groups in this situation becomes what Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor calls 'survivance,' for survival through resistance; and the primary Romani tactic of survivance has historically been invisibility (Harris 2001: ix).

Harris is talking above about the North American context, but parallels can be drawn with the situation of Romani groups in Europe, and in Spain in particular. For centuries, the Spanish government has used the tactic of making the Romani population more visible in order to control them; conversely, by seeking to remain inconspicuous, Romani communities have more easily escaped the politics of assimilation (Hernández, García, & Martínez 1996: 89–90). When artists, scholars, or other knowledge producers decide to deal with oppressed communities, especially when the endeavor entails a visibility that was previously resisted, there are important considerations to be made regarding power dynamics. Self-determination, particularly for those on the less empowered side of the dynamic, becomes very difficult to maintain if a project mixes different types of knowledge but construes some of these knowledges as better or more important than others. These problems affect the framework through which Atalaya-TNT organised its project.

So far, my focus has been on the organisers' side of the story, which reveals their tendency to dismiss the capacity for autonomous thinking of the people participating in the project, and thereby the limits of the TNT project's capacity to contribute to social inclusion. However, as the next sections demonstrate, after my conversations with the women in the play, it became apparent that such a critical approach is insufficient. It is insufficient because it bypasses the expressions of agency from the women that permeated the work in unexpected ways, and falls prey to the very patronising attitude that it seeks to elucidate.

### **Expanding 'Imarginations'**

As argued above, the subjugation of artistic goals to commercial interests revealed in this case study undermined the potential for social inclusion of the women from El Vacie. Despite this, a space for performative politics remained where the El Vacie women's autonomy resisted the institutional pressures, a space of creative resistance and expression where the questions surrounding their oppression emerged as ethically, politically, and socially entangled. I argue that these remaining spaces were precisely the spaces of the aesthetic, where marketing concerns did not play a significant role. My research into *The House of Bernarda Alba* has shown me that while the production was affected by problems regarding the objectification of poverty, the relationship between the actresses and director Gamboa did not conform to that objectifying dynamic. Gamboa's egalitarian approach, despite all the institutional problems highlighted above, challenged the paternalistic tendencies of other aspects of the production, and allowed space for subjective expressions from the women. For example, during the rehearsal process, she and the actresses jointly experimented with participatory games and some subversive aesthetic choices, one result being a complex power dynamic that defies a one-sided focus on institutional ideology.

For example, consider the final scene of Lorca's playtext. Adela, the youngest daughter, kills herself after her mother shoots her secret lover Pepe el Romano, who was also her sister's fiancé. Then, Bernarda Alba demands that all the women in the house stop crying about Adela's suicide, and proclaims that her daughter died a virgin. She insists on Adela's virginity, making sure that all

present understand that the honour of the family must not be tainted by the episode. From the text we understand that Bernarda Alba's main concern is with the family's reputation: we know that Adela loved Pepe el Romano, and had many trysts with him, but for Bernarda this news cannot leave the house. Lorca's text wages a strong critique against hypocritical morality: Bernarda Alba censors truth in the name of honour. However, in TNT's production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, one element is included in the story that disturbs this oppositional logic between truth and honour, and shakes up common interpretations of the final scene of the play. In the El Vacie version, when Adela commits suicide, her sisters immediately perform a traditional virginity test known among the Spanish Romani population as the 'handkerchief ritual' (ritual del pañuelo).<sup>7</sup> In the final scene, Bernarda Alba holds up the piece of cloth stained with Adela's blood, proving she was a virgin.

The portrayal of the virginity test ritual in the play came as a surprise to me because the result of the test—the bloody handkerchief—collapses the uncertainty about Adela's virginity, which is the hallmark of Lorca's drama. In one of our conversations during my research visits to El Vacie, Rocío Montero Maya told me that in her family, the ritual is a common practice; she explained to me that virginity is the most important sign of honour in a Romani marriage. For anyone who claims to be a defender of cultural diversity, and of respect for Romani culture in particular, it is very challenging to witness this ritual being celebrated in the play. For 'gajos' like me—outsiders to the Romani community—it is unacceptable that the value of a woman be contingent on the results of a virginity ritual that is humiliating, invasive, and even dangerous to her health. And indeed a report from the European Roma Rights Centre states the following:

Empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that strict demands regarding virginity lead to women marrying early. Furthermore, failure to prove virginity results in the loss of value in the eyes of the community, which then results in the inability of the girl or woman at issue to find a husband, as well as being stigmatized by the community. (2006: 3)

From a perspective outside of Romani culture, virginity tests are indefensible, and the portrayal of one on stage can seem like a problematic choice for this production, since the director herself is not Romani. Yet, these tests are a usual practice in the lives of the women who act in the play. The audience is left to figure out by themselves where the choice to portray the test in the show came from. For some the last scene may smack of what Uma Narayan calls an 'anthropological perspective' that involves a certain patronising attitude, one characterised by refraining from criticising a cultural community for fear of stigmatising it as inferior (Narayan 1997: 125). One potential result of such an attitude is paralysis of dialogue and a rendering impossible of any sincere discussion of problems in the community. Did such an attitude inform the staging of the last scene of the play? Why perform the *pañuelo* ritual on Adela's dead body? Was Gamboa showing a patronising view of Romani culture? Was she taking an anthropological stance that involves ignoring human rights? I would not have expected Gamboa to consider acceptance of this ritual a healthy practice, and hence it was doubly surprising to see the play finish on this note.

However, this scene opens up an interesting opportunity for a discussion of patriarchal values that are often present in both Romani and non-Romani cultures. Women's bodies are too often treated as public property; this is a reality not only within the Romani community, where the ubiquity of virginity tests and arranged marriages make objectification of women's bodies seem like a localised aberration. Sexism is too prevalent in mainstream society to be dismissed as a problem of the past, or of the other. The portrayal of a virginity test on the dead body of Adela, whose trademark is her resistance to her mother's authority through the expression of her sexuality, is first and foremost a reminder that our societies' subjugation of women's bodies is a very complex



issue. Women's oppression happens regardless of ethnicity, sometimes right next door, right under our noses, and it takes many shapes.

Should Lorca's text have taken precedence? Has the image of Bernarda Alba holding a handkerchief stained with blood become a more powerful symbol? What will the spectators bring back home with them? Theatre scholar André Helbo helps to unravel these questions surrounding aesthetic representation:

in the unfolding of the play, the spectator will not only perceive the problematic of the realization of the text, but also the relation of this realization to the activating of other codes, for example, visual and auditory and hence a relation which eventually interferes, and in extreme cases, lends to confusion (1987: 28).

As 'A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain', Lorca's play focuses on the pressures that certain patriarchal traditions have exerted on the lived experience of rural Spanish women. While some have interpreted the play as portraying an oppression of women that extends beyond its Andalusian setting, the production featuring the Romani actresses highlighted both the way that a woman's body in many contexts can become the site of cultural struggles that undermine her ability to be self-determining, *and* the socio-historically specific nature of patriarchal oppression that manifests differently depending on the context.

The power of this production lies precisely in the way it leaves us without a final answer to the ethical questions raised by this undisputable affirmation of Adela's virginity. The public is exposed to the layered significance of the virginity ritual for Romani women; paradoxically at the same time Lorca's formulation of Adela's resistance appears to be emptied, betrayed, silenced. Not only the voice of rebellion, represented by Adela in the play, is censored and silenced; the body that performs that rebellion is violated by the need to prove something to the world outside. Though the final scene of the play is perhaps a controversial aesthetic choice, it cannot be described simply as the director's choice: it stems from a situated interpretation of the text by these particular performers, expressed in an aesthetic context but informed by their lived experience. It is because the show raises rather than resolves the ethical issues surrounding the subject of the virginity test that it forces the audience to confront their assumptions of what is right or just.

In a lecture titled 'Staying with the Trouble: Becoming Worldly with Companion Species', Donna Haraway urges us to confront our assumptions with regard to correct formulations of lived experience. She tells us to 'stay with the trouble', to confront mutually incompatible senses of what is true (Haraway 2014), instead of attempting to immediately resolve the contradictions by quickly taking sides. This production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* affords the spectator an opportunity to do so. Although this production removes the uncertainty surrounding Adela's virginity, it produces a type of ethical uncertainty that is now displaced from the realm of the story to the realm of the spectator's experience. Because the production creates an opportunity for staying with the trouble, it encourages spectators to revise their understanding of who is oppressed by whom, and of how exactly this oppression takes place. For example, audience members may start to reconsider where Bernarda Alba's dominating attitude comes from. Is she also oppressed? And how about Rocío Montero Maya? Here, the vulnerability of the women from El Vacie brings about an instance of what Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou describe as performative politics. Butler has observed that 'performativity names that unauthorized exercise of a right to existence that propels the precarious into political life' (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 101). In dialogue with Butler, Athanasiou attempts to unravel the dynamic of this politics as follows:

performative politics in conjunction with the politics of precarity entails a double movement of performative troubling of the ontological grounding of norms simultaneous with continuous acknowledgement of the unequal and unjust ways in which precarity is differentially distributed as a condition of social ontology (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 102).

Bernarda Alba is a character that personifies the most oppressive and contradictory aspects of patriarchy in Andalusian society. Through the imposition of strict Catholic norms and a hypocritical morality, Lorca's Bernarda Alba dominates the women in her house to such an extreme that it results in the tragic death of her youngest daughter. She embraces her role within patriarchy, exemplifying how domination is also perpetrated by the dominated. At the same time that she oppresses her family, Bernarda Alba is herself oppressed by the customs and traditions of a society that shape her existence. As she dearly holds on to the contingent power that is accessible to her in the story, she is also holding on to a power that is fraught with contradictions.

Embodied by Rocío Montero Maya, the dramatic role 'Bernarda Alba' becomes a vehicle to project publicly the actor's situated existence. This is an instance of performative politics in *The House of Bernarda Alba* inasmuch as Montero Maya appropriates some of that contradictory power, with which Bernarda is infused, for her own purposes. Within her community, Rocío Montero Maya holds a similar type of power, but unlike Bernarda Alba, Montero Maya is aware of the double bind in which she is placed. She knows it is quite impossible to disentangle her own roles as both contributor to the patriarchal regime of her culture, and also as one of its victims, but that does not stop her from questioning the conditions of her oppression. At the same time that the 'amateur' actress was on stage portraying the character of an oppressor in the world imagined by Lorca, she was testing the limits of her own power through the act of stepping onto that stage. Through her decision to make theatre, her insistence on acting in a real play, and her showing of her decision to an audience, Montero Maya publicly demonstrated that she has a voice and that she deserves to be heard as the woman that she is, with all the contradictions of her social position. The ubiquity of patriarchal values, well beyond Romani communities, is exposed in this production precisely because of this raw juxtaposition of Lorca's text with the live bodies of the Romani actresses from El Vacie.

Gamboa's casting choices were also performatively political because they challenged assumptions about appearance and about beauty. The most prominent characteristic of the production was the Romani women. The only professional actresses who worked in the production were Marga Reyes and Beatriz Ortega, who took it in turns to play Poncia. This decision to cast a white performer in a servant role is in itself subversive because it consists of a reversal of the ethnic roles that traditionally operate in Spanish society. More usually, Romani women find themselves in a situation of exploitation and submission, while whites dominate and give orders. In this case, Bernarda's family is Romani, while the servant is white. The public's assumptions about the meaning of bodily beauty were challenged through the casting of obese actresses as two of the three main characters in Lorca's play. Their non-conforming bodies not only resisted the imposition of ideals of beauty, but also served as a reminder that obesity is a class issue intrinsically related to access to resources. Too often obese people are blamed for not conforming to what is deemed 'ideal weight' or a 'healthy shape' as if the choice not to be obese were straightforward and easy. The problem is not just the assumption that obese people do have that choice, but also the imposition of the idea that the *right* choice is *not* being obese. Obesity is a complex issue involving access to resources and requiring attitudes of respect towards individual situations. Casting these actresses invited the audience to look at this problem from a different angle.

### Feminist Theatre for Whom?

It was not only through the staging and casting choices that the El Vacie women were able to express themselves politically. Their view of what the production was and what it meant to them also lies outside the bounds of the analysis conducted thus far. I began to discover their view when I proposed to the women that we carry out more theatre workshops informed by feminist principles. This idea stemmed from what I had perceived as the commercial exploitation of the women's vulnerability, something that in my mind could be addressed by attending to feminist insights. At first, I approached TNT with the idea, but they did not have space in the budget for further workshops with the same women, so I approached the women directly to invite them to work with me in the context of my Master's research at the University of Seville. My idea was to initiate a two-way sharing of stories of day-to-day life between Romani and non-Romani women, and to use theatrical games to invent material and devise a show.

From the moment I pitched the idea to Rocío Montero Maya, I could see that she was skeptical. I talked about the importance of sharing our own subjective knowledges in an egalitarian context, and of devising the story and creating the production collaboratively, but she seemed unconvinced. She often returned to the point that she could not read or write as an argument against being able to create stories, and did not really accept my practical suggestion that we use video recordings to allow thoughts to be recorded and developed so that there would be no need to write things down. Rocío Montero Maya told me that she wanted to tell a beautiful story, to wear a long dress and speak beautiful words. She said that her life, and the lives of the women of El Vacie, were not beautiful. These lives were hard, ugly, difficult. She told me that when it rains her house fills up with water, and asked why anybody would want to watch a play about that, a comment she also made repeatedly in the media, and when she spoke at the award ceremony where the show received the Concordia Prize from the Cultura Gitana Institute. She invited me inside her house and turned on the TV. There was a soap opera showing. She pointed to the TV and said that that was what people wanted to see. Beautiful things, beautiful stories, beautiful people. Not her shanty-town house. Not her poor life. She told me 'you study, you know how to write. You go and write something, then we can all make a play. You write and we play with you' (Tu estudias, tu sabes escribir. Escribe algo y podemos hacer teatro. Tu escribes y nosotras vamos contigo) (Montero Maya 2011). Rocío Montero Maya's husband, Manuel, smiled at me more than once and told me I was going to make a lot of money with their 'Gypsies'.

During my conversations with the actresses it became apparent that they were keenly aware of their value as performers, and of how much of that value came from the objectification of their poverty. Artistic creation requires agency. In the case of the women of El Vacie, the agential space they had to create *The House of Bernarda Alba* was carved out using the cultural capital of Atalaya-TNT and the objectification of their poverty. While my initial analysis began by looking at a piece of theatre, Rocío Montero Maya's began with the direct benefit the project would have for her and her family. I very much believed that these women had important things to say to the public and that theatre could provide them with the tools to express their knowledge. They agreed, but they showed me they were already doing that in a different way. Addressing the public at the Concordia Prize awards ceremony, Rocío Montero Maya commented: 'Since we had the chance to have an experience, a life, a career, we would like our children to have that too' (Ya que nosotras hemos tenido una experiencia y una vida y una carrera, queremos que los tengan nuestros hijos) (Peralta 2011).

The El Vacie actresses provide a striking example of how different types of discrimination intersect and affect the lives of people and hinder any agency they may have. Due to patriarchy and

misogyny these women depend on the men in their lives to make important decisions about marriage, birth control, education, and family finances. Due to poverty, they are deprived of the means to lead a healthy life and to learn about the best options for themselves and their families. Due to racism, they are deprived of access to social environments that accept their 'Gypsiness', and consequently are dismissed as the Other. Despite all this, and despite my preliminary conclusion, these women were very much masters of their agency in this instance. They were expressing to me the terms under which they were interested in participating in a theatrical project, and they were shaping their artistic expression as something economically valuable. Getting a paid job enabled them to be empowered, even if only momentarily, to solve their concrete problems and control their lives in a way that best suited their situation. Lole del Campo, who played Martirio, puts it succinctly:

Our life is not to say that we eat with theatre. Our life is the same as always; we eat thanks to [what we get from collecting] scrap metal. We are actresses once a month at best, but we are Gypsies our whole lives. (Nuestra vida no es decir que comemos por el teatro. Nuestra vida es la de siempre, comer por la chatarra. Actrices somos a lo mejor una vez al mes, pero gitanas somos toda la vida) (Peralta 2011).

I saw the feminist theatre project I put forward as an educational experience for all the parties involved. The compensation would not necessarily be monetary, but we would all come out of the experience having earned something: knowledge about each other. Education would be a tool capable of enabling oppressed populations to overcome their subordination. Through education and art, the El Vacie women would be enabled to understand the misogyny they experienced and act upon the problems they faced. From my privileged position, theatre seemed to provide this opportunity. The women, however, saw the theatre as a place where they could earn monetary compensation, while being who they are. And on top of everything, it was fun and glamorous. I understood their biggest problem to be the misogyny they suffer in Romani society. They understood their biggest problem to be the racism that was a major contributor to their poverty. I went to El Vacie with hopes of working towards changing these women's oppression through theatre. The women from El Vacie came to theatre with the hope they could show the world who they are, and be respected as they are. In the end, we did not succeed in agreeing on the objectives of the new project because we were unable, at that moment in time, to work on the intersection of issues of ethnicity, gender, and poverty, which are the basic pillars of the problems these women face. But through their decision to become actors on a professional stage, they did manage to change how I looked at them.

## Conclusion

The analysis in this article has sought to demonstrate how the women from El Vacie resisted external determinations of what was the best for them. They did so in each relationship fostered during the project, by negotiating their contingent choices. In the artistic context, facilitated by Gamboa's approach to the work, they told the story of Bernarda Alba and her daughters from a perspective unapologetically informed by their experience as economically marginalised Romani women. Parallel to the artistic work, they also used the success of the production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* as a platform for exposing and denouncing their precarious conditions. Finally, they also set their own parameters for what they were willing to accept as the benefits of working in theatre, showing that they understood their marginalisation as being placed in the intersection between ethnic and economic exclusion. In summary, the women who acted in TNT's *The House of Bernarda Alba* made it clear that they were not interested in 'empowerment' handed down to them. Instead, they embraced their own autonomy to determine what they wanted for their lives.

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**Notes**

1. This article is based on research that received the support of an Erasmus Mundus grant for a Joint Master's undertaken at both the Université Libre de Bruxelles and Universidad de Sevilla from 2010 to 2012.

2. A trailer of this production can be found at the following URL: <http://www.atalaya-tnt.com/tnt-%C2%B7-espectaculos/la-casa-de-bernarda-alba/la-casa-de-bernarda-alba-%C2%B7-videos/>; for pictures, visit [http://www.atalaya-tnt.com/?page\\_id=929](http://www.atalaya-tnt.com/?page_id=929).

3. The subtitle in the published play text reads 'drama de mujeres en los pueblos de España'. All translations from Spanish to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

4. Cast: Rocío Montero Maya – Bernarda Alba; Maria Luz Navarro Jiménez – Abuela Josefa; Lole del Campo Díaz – Martirio; Carina Ramírez Montero – Amerlia; Sandra Ramírez Montero – Angustias; Ana Jiménez García – Magdalena; Sonia Joana da Silva/Isabel Suárez – Adela; Pilar Montero Suárez – Criada; Marga Reyes/ Beatriz Ortega – Poncia. When I asked Rocío Montero Maya if she thought there was anything offensive or pejorative about the word 'Gitano', the Spanish equivalent to 'Gypsy' that is used to refer to the Romani community, she answered in the negative: 'They call us *Gitanos*, then we are *Gitanos*. In Portugal, they called us *Ciganos*' (Nos dicen gitanos, entonces somos gitanos. En Portugal, nos decían *ciganos*). But since '*Gitano*' and 'Gypsy' are derived from the inaccurate early modern belief that the group emigrated from Egypt, I use instead the term 'Romani' which the Spanish advocacy group Unión Romani support as the more accurate demonym. The exception to this is the cases where I am translating reported speech, where I used Gypsy as a translation of gitano/gitana.

5. 'Rearranging desire attempts to engage the mind at this level, where the student is constructing a "world" for knowing and, of course, acting upon' (Spivak 2012: 537).

6. Other instantiations of the project focused on youth, for example.

7. For further details of virginity testing, see European Roma Rights Centre (2011: 6).

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