Verse Drama Elsewhere: *Páncreas*

Patxo Tellería (translated from Spanish by Claire Hélie[1])

Abstract: Are the questions raised by verse drama specific to British productions? To answer this question, I asked a few playwrights from other cultural areas to tell me about their experience, and this text by Patxo Tellería was the most stimulating. Patxo Tellería is a Basque playwright, actor, director who wrote *Páncreas* in 2015, a verse play about three friends, one of whom is to receive a pancreas transplant, another who has planned to commit suicide to escape from the decrepitude of old age, and the last one who wants to play the role of the go-between. The play was first performed in Basque at the Teatro Arriaga in Bilbao by the TARTEAN Teatrao Company, before being translated into Castilian by Tellería and played at the Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid. Among the 30 plays written by Tellería, *Páncreas* is the only one in verse. This text, especially written for this issue of *Coup de Théâtre*, sheds light on the differences and similitudes in the treatment of verse drama in two different cultures.

Résumé : Les problématiques soulevées par le théâtre en vers sont-elles spécifiques à la production britannique ? Pour répondre à cette question, nous nous sommes tournés vers des dramaturges d'autres aires culturelles pour recueillir leur retour d'expérience, et nous avons retenu cette proposition de Patxo Tellería. Patxo Tellería est un dramaturge, acteur, metteur en scène basque qui a écrit en 2015 *Páncreas*, une pièce en vers sur trois amis, l'un qui doit recevoir une greffe de pancréas au plus vite, un autre qui veut se suicider pour échapper à la décrépitude de l'âge, le dernier qui joue les entremetteurs. La pièce a d'abord été jouée en basque au Teatro Arriaga de Bilbao et interprétée par la compagnie TARTEAN teatroa, avant d'être traduite par Tellería en castillan et d'être jouée au Centro Dramático Nacional de Madrid. Parmi la trentaine de pièces qu'il a écrite, *Páncreas* est la seule en vers. Cette proposition, rédigée spécialement pour ce numéro de *Coup de Théâtre*, nous a paru intéressante en ce qu'elle montrait les différences

et les ressemblances dans le traitement du théâtre en vers dans deux cultures différentes.

Keywords: Patxo Tellería, *Páncreas*, verse drama, Basque, Castilian

Mots-clés : Patxo Tellería, *Páncreas*, théâtre en vers, basque, castillan

I started wondering why theatre is not always written in verse a while ago. I thought of some reasons, but all unsatisfactory.

First reason: *"Verse drama sounds old-fashioned."* It is natural that this should be the case, since all the verse plays that are staged belong to another time, it is theatrical archaeology. However, such an idea can be dismantled. Verse, on the contrary, as the language expressed with rhythm and rhyme, is not outdated at all. In fact, many of the songs we sing and love, whether in Basque, Castillan or English, are written in verse, a literary means that, when used well, brings beauty to the language, or as any business management coach would say, "added value". Verse is a rising value in many cultural environments. Of course, that is the case in the Basque-speaking culture. And nobody can ignore the fascination that rhymed language provokes in new urban generations around the world in the wake of the emerging phenomenon of rap. Verse is not old-fashioned. What is outdated is the theatrical repertoire. For the simple reason that no one writes theatre in verse anymore. It is like going round in circles.

Second reason: *"Verse drama is difficult to understand."* And to argue for this, we just have to read or listen to theatrical texts in verse, whether by Tirso, Lope or Calderón. Such an idea can also be dismantled. And with similar arguments. It is not so much verse that makes it difficult to understand the text (although it cannot be forgotten that it is a language which is more elaborate and further from colloquial speech, therefore requiring more attention), but the very language used in those lines of verse, from another era, with words, expressions and references that are no longer in use. The theatrical event requires

complicity with the audience, and this is difficult to achieve when the context is unknown to us. And that is going round in circles again.

Third reason: *"Verse drama is disconnected from reality."* And that is the case. It is an irrefutable truth, no one goes down the street talking in verse, and if they do, they should have their head examined. But let me retort with a new question, *should theatre look like reality?* Undoubtedly, theatre has to tell us about reality, assimilate it, influence it. But look like it? All art is a reinterpretation of life. And therefore, it is artificial.

However, a contemporary audience does not want the aesthetic canon to be restricted to the theatre of olden days, and it is true that during the last two centuries we have lived an enriching process of authenticity, both in the texts and in the acting style. We have much to thank this process for, because it has generated many masterpieces. But it so happens that this authenticity, this approach to reality, has been adopted in the audiovisual language (whether it is, cinema, television or any of the new formats to come...), practically superseding it. Competing in realism and plausibility with constantly fewer means is a difficult challenge that theatre has to face. That is why I believe that, far from being a flaw, this "formal estrangement" from reality is a virtue that strengthens the dramatic event. A signature piece. As long as the estrangement does not mean ignoring or living on the margins of reality itself, which is our source of inspiration.

Theatre must seek its own expressive means. And now, I circle back to the first question I raised, which I asked myself a few years ago. Why should I not also use verse for contemporary, understandable and aesthetically elaborate theatre?

And since I could not find any reason not to do so, I decided to write *Páncreas*. Obviously, I didn't just do it because I couldn't find any reason not to. It was also because I found one specific reason to do so, which has to do with the play's own dramaturgy: *Páncreas* deals with an unrealistic situation. The characters do not speak to us from this world, but from beyond the grave. Spoiler alert, the audience discovers this only at the end of the play. In fact, shortly after the performance begins, the characters give some explanation to the

public, without revealing more than that which the author wants to be known:

> *By the way, surely, more than one will have noticed*
> *we speak strangely, rhythmically and with ABBA rhymes.*
> *This is how, in this "new abode", things are discussed.*
> *At first it sounds unusual, but then come the good times.*

It seemed to me that using verse was appropriate to imagine how the dead speak in that "new abode", that unreal limbo. If I were a 17th-century author, I wouldn't have felt the slightest need to explain why I make my characters speak in verse. In the 21st century (and even more so in the context of the theatre in Basque), I deemed it necessary.

Páncreas is a contemporary tragicomedy in verse. An unusual renewal of the genre. Unusual not only because it is written in verse today, but also because it has the audacity to do so (and represent it) in two different, very different, languages: Basque and Castilian.

First, I wrote a version in Basque, the language in which I write most of my works, it was performed by the theatrical company I usually work with, TARTEAN, and revolved around the geographical area in which this language is alive, that is to say, the autonomous community of the Basque Country, Navarra, and the French Basque Country.

I suppose the reader is completely unaware of the history of Basque-language theatre. I don't want to stray too far from our topic here, so I will just say it has a relatively recent history. Except for performances of popular theater in the French Basque provinces, mainly the Pastorals of Zuberoa (in the Soule region) and some other *autos sacramentales* (translator's note: a Spanish dramatic genre that is close to the English Morality plays), it can be said that it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the first dramas timidly began to appear, mostly performed by amateurs, far removed from the commercial circuits. In the 1970s and 1980s, at the end of the Francoist dictatorship, in the context of the renaissance of the Basque culture, and promoted by independent theatre companies, theatre in Basque really started

to emerge. Today there are many professional theatre companies that work in the two languages (Basque and Castilian), and no fewer than half a dozen do so exclusively in Basque.

Pankreas (in the Basque version) was a real innovation, as there was no tradition of Basque theatre in verse (except for the pastoral songs of the French Basque Country mentioned before). In the absence of direct theatrical references, I used the usual metrics of *bertsolaris* (improvisers, troubadours who improvise sung lines, a genre whose roots can be found in the popular culture of oral transmission, and that today benefits from a huge presence and popularity in the Basque Country) and I also resorted to the models of the Spanish Golden Age (Lope de Vega, Calderón...) adapting the metrics to the specificities of Basque. The reference to classical Spanish theatre did not only help me choose models for stanzas and rhymes. I also adopted more general criteria, suitably filtered by time, many of which had been artistically created by Lope de Vega in his original *The New Art of Writing Plays in This Time*: what kind of metrics suits each genre (comedy, tragedy...); how and why should a playwright combine different metrics into one piece...

In this version in Basque I used different types of stanza: couplets, tercets, quatrains, quintets, ten-line stanzas... As for prosody, from 8 syllables for the lightest lines to 14 for the densest, to 10 and 11, one of the most common line lengths in Basque.

For the Spanish version, I could benefit from a large number of references, and from an ear that was both educated and used to listening to classical theatre in verse. But that did not make the job any easier. One of my main concerns was precisely to avoid succumbing to the temptation of using an old-fashioned language, which my own sensory memory sometimes threatened me with.

For both versions, there was the added difficulty of my own lack of experience. It was the first time (I don't know if I will repeat the experience again) that I wrote in verse. But I think I can say without sounding too boastful that I have an innate gift to play with the language and its sounds, and in many of my previous works, especially in

Basque, I was used to manipulating words and sounds, using language as if it were modelling clay to my liking and convenience.

In the Castilian version, I used the same stanzaic forms as in the Basque version: couplets, *terza rima*, quatrains, quintets, real octaves, ten-line stanzas (all with different combinations of rhymes and metrics) and Manriquean stanzas. All of which have a long theatrical tradition.

Obviously, writing in verse adds some extra difficulty, but this difficulty only concerns the volume of work. The process is slower and more laborious. Not necessarily harder. The real difficulty of any theatrical text is to get the idea right, it is to find a topic that will elicit the audience's interest, passion, amusement, surprise, emotions and / or make them think. The rest is effort, professionalism and dedication. Whether in prose or in verse.

With regard to the impact of each version, I have to say that the original, in Basque, because it was so new, provoked positive, and sometimes negative, reactions. The spectators who were eager to discover a new form and had no prejudice were enthused by the proposal; but there were also spectators who were not looking for experiments and renewals, and others who were prejudiced against theatre in verse, and they did not appreciate the proposal.

The Castilian version had, of course, a longer life. The potential audience was larger by far. In the country, there are more than forty million Castilian speakers, while the number of Basque speakers does not reach one million. On the other hand, it is clear that the Spanish-speaking audience is perfectly accustomed to listening to theatre in verse, although there are also a large number of spectators who reject it for the reasons (more or less founded) that I explained above: because it sounds old-fashioned, difficult to understand and artificial.

With regard to the reaction of cultural institutions, I must separate the two experiences again, because they did not travel along the same paths. For the Basque version we received financial aid from the Basque Government, which helped to finance 40% of the total budget. I do not believe that the fact that it is a text in verse had any leverage on

the decision of the financial committee. The company's trajectory, its history and its artistic reliability (as is usual in such cases) were much more decisive factors.

The Castilian version, although it was supported by the Centro Dramático Nacional, was essentially a private initiative. The play competed for two years in the "jungle" of commercial theater, and managed to come out with flying colours, which is no small feat.

Páncreas is a work that is still performed to this day. There are two semi-professional theatre companies that have it on their repertoire today. In addition, a production is being rehearsed in Buenos Aires, which will be performed shortly. And there are other Ibero-American producers interested in staging it.

The work, in addition to Basque and Castilian, has been translated into Slovenian, and soon the Japanese translation will be published.

It has been almost five years since *Páncreas* premiered. Since then I have written and produced a few more works. I haven't used verse again.

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[1] I would like to thank Clara Escoda, from Barcelona University, for proof-reading this translation.