

Tomás Borrás / Pablo
Luna

El sapo enamorado

María and Gregorio
Martínez Sierra /
Manuel de Falla

El corregidor y la molinera

(DVD, Teatro Auditorio,
Cuenca, 27 September
2015)

reviewed by

Christopher Webber



Good art always surprises us. But in the case of *El sapo enamorado* ('Toad in Love') surprise gives way to astonishment, that such good art can have been forgotten for a century. **Gregorio and María Martínez Sierra's** Teatro de Arte, installed in Madrid's Teatro Eslava between 1916 and 1925, was perhaps Spain's most important attempt at theatrical modernism, mixing the colourful exoticism of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and black-and-white antimonies of silent film with established native forms. **Tomás Borrás's** *pantomima* was one of the first fruits of their initiative, a Madrileño modernist take on the Parisian tradition of mime drama, but with its own, very Spanish twist of cynical irony.



The scenario is simple. Ugly Toad seeks the love of Beauty, who is naturally more attracted to the charms of an adolescent youth. With the help of a mysterious, magical merchant, Toad uses wealth, fame and strength of mind to overpower Beauty's resistance, leaving the youth to be comforted by her best friend. **Rita Cosentino's** production is a masterly reframing of the original scenario. Rather than attempting antiquarian revival of the original's symbolist black-and-white 'animal jungle' setting and costumes (see photo), she places the mime drama in 1916 urban Madrid, with its black-and-white cinemas, fashionable apartments and modern air of sexual sophistication. Add in the filmic mime of **Fernando Lázaro's** movement, and the result is an edgy fable, almost an avatar of Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins* (music by Kurt Weill, 1933), but capturing the experimental spirit of the original most persuasively.



Half the action takes place in silent film montages on a 'silver screen', the rest on a bare stage, where muted tones and cinematic makeup are only relieved by Toad's green suit, Beauty's skin-tight sequined dress and her immaculate straw-blond

perm. One of the strongest aspects of the show is the way the characters react, rather as in **Woody Allen's** *Purple Rose of Cairo*, to on-screen events behind them. It's a clever trick: where – or what – is reality, after all? Toad's ultimate moment of cinematic triumph, where his self-satisfied smile parts to reveal a long, hideously bright scarlet tongue, makes for a shocking coda, layering resonances of gender power play. The alien male toad has caught the female fly.



Cuenca's 2015 production – about to be revived by Teatro de la Zarzuela at the Carlos III University – is immaculately clear as to scenario, style and performance, with **Aaron Martín** leading as a Keatonesque Toad, drolly touching until that final image of nasty, monstrous triumph. **María González** and **Estrella Martín** are equally good as the victim and her friend-rival, while the rest make best use of more limited opportunities. **Balbino Lacosta** must be praised for presenting Borrás's fashionably verbose, Marinetti-like prologue (spoken over music) with the physical economy and conviction needed to drive its modernist moral home.



Talking of that music, **Pablo Luna**'s 50-minute score is a joy. Structured by simple leitmotifs cleanly interwoven with género chico urban dance and vocal forms (a Spanish serenade for the Adolescent, a seductive French waltz for Toad's final assault on Beauty and so on) it boasts theatrical momentum and ironic point, as well as great tunes. The orchestration, featuring a prominent pit piano, is brilliant, light and witty in contemporary, popular French mode with a jazzy patina. The total effect is an exhilarating halfway-house between Chabrier and Les Six – but not without with a Spanish accent, most significantly in the passionate love music for Beauty and the Adolescent. It certainly does not deserve the oblivion into which it has fallen and makes a delightful novelty, when projected with such wit, pace and understanding by **Nacho de la Paz** and his players.

If I say less about *El corregidor y la molinera*, it is only because **Manuel de Falla**'s masterpiece is so well known as to require little description, at least in its rescored expansion as *The Three-Cornered Hat*, commissioned after Diaghilev saw the 1917 Teatro Eslava *pantomima* original. Although Falla's pit-band original has been recorded on CD several times, I'm not sure that any stage production has previously made it to DVD. The Martínez Sierras's 'rural verismo' scenario could not be more different from Borrás's symbolist mime, being more balletic and allowing equally archetypal characters more individuality. All of which gives freer rein to Lázaro's choreographic skills, and to Estrella Martín's wholesomely fresh Miller's Wife – a tremendously athletic and appealing characterisation, mirrored by **Baldo Ruiz** as her young husband. **Ramón Merlo** is suitably cocksure, heavy and oppressive as the lecherous Magistrate who gets his public comeuppance, while Aaron Martín again makes his mark as a corrupt local policeman turned sneak-thief.



Cosentino's production is strongly contrasted with *El sapo*, fluid and direct this time round, creating indoor bedroom and outdoor town-square settings by adroit manipulation of painted screens, while providing situational opportunities which her performers grab with both hands – and feet. Falla's endlessly rewarding score, which renders everything from *cante jondo* to Beethoven's 5th down into that imaginative sound world which seems to embody the soul of Spain, is projected by Nacho de Paz and the instrumentalists with just the right blend of drive and lingering sensuality.

I had expected this double bill of Spanish *pantomimas* to be intriguing, but was not expecting to be bowled over as I have been by the sheer quality of their conception and execution. **Fundación Guerrero's** excellent video presentation of these two works of art – the established masterpiece, and the exciting discovery – deserves wide success.

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Cast: *El sapo enamorado/El corregidor y la molinera*. Balbino Lacosta (Prologue/Priest and Guard), María González (Beauty/Magistrate's Wife), Estrella Martín (Beauty's Friend/Miller's Wife), Aaron Martín (Toad/Sneak Thief), Baldo Ruiz (Adolescent/Miller), Rodrigo Mendiola (Spirit of Water/Dandy), Pedro Dorta (Merchant/), Ramón Merlo (/Magistrate), Beatriz Oleaga (/Voice of the Cuckoo), Olivia Martí and Alex Lazarescu (/Kids). Ensemble DRAMA!: stage director, Rita Cosentino; choreography, Fernando Lázaro, musical director, Nacho de Paz.



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