

Portrait

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How the artists's collective La Fura dels Baus developed from Catalan street theater into a global cultural benchmark

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IT'S A TYPICAL, swelteringly hot July day in the Catalonian town of Peralada. "Water?" asks Carlus Padrissa, quite unnecessarily. Apart from his brown exercise sandals, he is – as befits a purist – dressed entirely in black. He reaches for the water bottle and, in theatrical slow motion, empties it over his bald head, for all the world as if this were a solemn baptism. Perhaps, though, the gesture is more like the showman's prologue to a dazzling self-dramatization. Then again, it could be just the primitive reflex of a hot and thirsty man. Or it could be all of these things and more: With his head bowed, his eyes half-closed and his mouth half-open, the sighing figure of Padrissa could well have stepped straight out of the pages of a Greek tragedy or an avant-garde mystery play.

Here we are, then, with the master craftsman and *spiritus rector* of *La Fura dels Baus*; or, as Padrissa might put it, *estamos aquí*. The setting is a modest sports hall next door to the renowned late medieval Peralada Castle, the voices of singers and actors from across the world ringing in our ears. Yet regardless of the language being spoken or sung, it is immediately obvious that wherever Carlus Padrissa is in charge, communication is channeled through images as well as through the exhilaration of music in a multi-media, cross-disciplinary blend. So, before everything gets turned upside down, jumbled up and made into something new, and while we still have control over our senses, let's set the scene. There are just a few days to go until the premiere of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, with the Georgian mezzo-soprano Anita Rachvelishvili, who is singing one of the title roles, having to compete for attention with the cutting-edge interactive multi-media technology used in the production – not to mention the storks nesting in the castle's ancient walls. People attending one of *La Fura dels Baus*'s performances are no ordinary opera-goers; they are pilgrims to the domain of the *Furistas*, and where the *Furistas* are, there is always a promise of spectacle.

In fact, Peralada is itself has become a place of pilgrimage, with its castle hosting an international music festival from mid-July to mid-August each year. The

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festival is the acknowledged climax of Spain’s summer cultural offering. But the involvement of *La Fura dels Baus* has lent this embodiment of Spanish – or, to be more accurate, Catalan – culture iconic status.

So who exactly are the *Furistas*? Since the late 1970s, the group has been behaving like a fractious but inseparable family, occupying the streets first of Barcelona and then of the rest of Spain and conquering its theaters before going on, with unstoppable momentum, to storm the bastions of European and international theater and opera. And not just that: over the years, they have also managed to turn our definition of ‘culture’ upside down. Thirty years ago, no-one could have imagined that these street-brawlers would one day conquer the Bavarian *Staatsoper* – perhaps the ultimate stronghold of bourgeois opera-going culture. Yet that, in December 2011, is where Padrissa will be producing *Turandot* under the musical direction of Zubin Mehta.

Mehta and Padrissa are, in fact, an established partnership. To huge public acclaim, they collaborated on the *Ring of the Nibelung* for Valencia’s new opera house, the first Spanish production of the *Ring* cycle for many years. The production – a light-footed and modern take on the world of classical music as a cross between *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* – was the result of Padrissa’s intensive reflection on Wagner’s universe. Observers testify to the iron discipline with which he approaches works but also to the benevolent paternal authority with which he directs his team. Is this combination perhaps part of the secret of his success? Be that as it may, the *Furistas* have come a long way on their journey from the dusty streets of Catalonia to the cultural Mount Olympus they occupy today.

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Their story has little of the divine about it, though. It all began in a tiny, one-horse town in Catalonia, near Barcelona, with the melodious name of Moià. A dried-up river-bed ran through it, every bit as useless as the old donkey the mad street theater boys were offered as local transport. “To start with, there were just five of us, but once we got our VW bus, that grew to nine.” Why nine? They couldn’t get more on the bus.

Thirty-three years later, the glue that holds this small dramatic clan together is as strong as ever. “We are a creative collective, a family, and each member has his own part to play,” says Padrissa. But it would be quite wrong to see the group as a cozy nuclear family. Quite

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the opposite, in fact: Carlus Padrissa tells us they feel more like a bunch of orphaned brothers and sisters, a little lost and, perhaps, a touch neglected, like circus kids who have always known that “together, we are stronger.” And suddenly, the conversation turns to wolves, who can die of fear when isolated but who inspire that same fear from the safety of the pack.

Homo homini lupus: Man is a wolf to his fellow Man. So is Man his own worst enemy? In the 1970s, this toxic philosophy was undoubtedly the life-blood flowing through Spanish society. And who better to have experienced first-hand what that meant than the founders of *La Fura dels Baus*, who all grew up under Franco? They came of age just as the Generalissimo died, but the repression a country suffers when it has been suffocated for so long lingered on. So was it just a natural reaction when *La Fura dels Baus* burst on to the scene, using all their pent-up energy to consolidate freedom? Padrissa recalls their destructive approach to the work they presented: It was all smashed-up cars and actors hanging from meat-hooks. “Repression was a trigger,” he muses, “but drama was just a pretext, really. What we really wanted was adventure, some excitement in our lives.”

Wasn’t this, though, a little over-the-top, just for a bit of fun? “Making theater was also a kind of therapy for



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us, something we had to do to fight against what the Spanish call *vergüenza*,” says Padrissa – the word means inhibition, or perhaps prudery. “And then we wanted to reinvent ourselves.” It goes without saying that large amounts of testosterone were involved, too: The founders of *La Fura dels Baus* were all angry young men, “so it was really all about physicality, youth, and narcissism – all the things that we’ve now stopped being so obsessed with.”

Even the company’s name is something of a manifesto. “The word *Fura* is related to ‘furor,’ to the passion of creativity, and that sums up our identity. *Fura* is something that we all carry inside ourselves, an unbridled part of our ego. *Fura* means ‘anger,’ and that’s something else we try to do – to release the anger inside ourselves.” The collective still includes six of the original nine angry young men on that VW bus. One of them is Germany’s Jürgen Müller. Inevitably, the nature of the group has changed, but, says Carlus Padrissa, there has been an organic pace to that change. And he has an accessible metaphor for it: “Thirty years ago, we were on peak form. And then we faced what every professional footballer faces. You can play as a forward in your twenties, as a defender till you’re 35, and as a goalkeeper until you turn 40. But from then on, you’re well advised to become a coach. And that’s what we’ve done.” These particular coaches, though, haven’t exactly set the bar low in terms of their creative ambition: They want to “create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*,” a synthesis of all

the arts. Yet while their goal is ambitious, their sense of their own identity is firmly grounded: “We’re flexible and we regard ourselves as learners.”

The creative collective has become a collective of creative individuals. *La Fura dels Baus* is now the only theater company that has not one but six directors. And those directors operate as a global ‘culture factory,’ with special local productions and local partnerships. Along with Carlus Padrissa and Jürgen Müller, the artistic directors today are Àlex Ollé, Miki Espuma, Pep Gatell and Pera Tantiña. Four out of every five productions are staged abroad, throughout Europe but also in Asia and even in the USA, where audiences for mainstream culture tend to be nervous about sudden outbreaks of primitivism. The huge wave of popularity that *La Fura dels Baus* is currently riding began with *The Damnation of Faust*, its production of Berlioz’s setting of part I of Goethe’s *Faust*. The production won critical acclaim at Salzburg in 1999 and was followed by an equally celebrated production of *The Magic Flute* for the Recklinghausen *Ruhrfestspiele*. Then *La Fura dels Baus* wowed audiences in Valencia with its *Ring* cycle and staged its acclaimed productions of *Carmina Burana*, and Stockhausen’s *Licht* opera cycle. The former anarchist group was turning into a thoroughly professional company. In an interview with the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, Jürgen Müller has argued that it is now “a collective of individuals who respect each other more than they did 15 years ago because we are now surer of ourselves.

