Josep M. Benet i Jornet

The Theatrical Landscape of Benet i Jornet

Enric Gallén

Over forty-four years, Josep M. Benet i Jornet has been shaping a compact theatrical universe, consisting of sixty-six plays and characterised by a number of themes, his quest for new formal and expressive codes and by his desire to not associate this theatre with any aesthetic trend. In his early works – Una vella, coneguda olor (An Old, Familiar Smell, 1965), Fantasia per un auxiliar administratiu (Fantasy for an Office Worker, 1964) – Benet, influenced by Spanish and American realist theatre, offered a dislocated vision of the 1960s through young characters who are unable to confront a reality they perceive as hostile and oppressive. Retracing his footsteps, and by means of a trilogy he bases on the myth of Druñanía – Cançons perdudes (Lost Songs, 1966), Marc i Jofre, o els alquimistes de la fortuna (Marc and Jofre, or the Alchemists of Fortune, 1968) and La nau (The Spaceship, 1969) – Benet then reflected on his country, the system, and western society in general, using techniques he had learned from Brecht and epic theatre. He culminated his Brechtian apprenticeship with Berenàveu a les fosques (You Had Tea in the Dark), winner of the 1971 City of Sabadell Prize.

With Desig (Desire, 1989), he returns to the theme of unattainable happiness, which he had dealt with implicitly in La fageda (The Beechwood, 1977). None of the characters in Desig can attain a state of total happiness because the human being is unable to prevail over a destiny that denies them this ideal. It is only possible to achieve isolated moments of fulfillment and these are manifested in unhealthy and fleeting desires. As a result of the resolute stylistic, formal and linguistic revival that occurred with Desig under the significant influence of Harold Pinter, some themes that he had previously touched on (feelings, for example) became more prominent in his work. Hence, through the six characters of Fugac (Fleeting, 1992), Benet discussed the question of the different ways of approaching the meaning of life. One year later, he wrote E. R., a “parable on the world of theatre”. Given that Fugac seemed to have led him into a cul-de-sac, Benet then sought an “optimistic” vein in the nihilist attitude of his doctor character and found it in developing the stance taken by the character of the Friend in Fugac. The result was Testament (Legacy, 1995), which recognised that an intellectual or artistic legacy can give meaning and justification to life. In another order of things, with El gos del tinent (The Lieutenant’s Dog, 1996) and Olors (Smells, 1998), Benet perhaps brings to a culmination some of his thematic obsessions. In the former work, interwoven with certain political concerns discernible in Berenàveu a les fosques and Descripció d’un paisatge, is Benet’s attack on totalitarian power that uproots everything and crushes it without a second thought or any remorse. In Olors, Benet closes the trilogy that he began with Una vella, coneguda olor and Baralla entre olors (Battle among Smells), offering a desolate vision of the devastating passage of time over the ways of life in a neighbourhood and in the milieu of ordinary people who look on impotently at the radical and arbitrary disappearance of spaces and buildings – their memories – at the hands of urban planners steeped in arrogance and contempt for others.

In 2000, Benet finished Això, a un fill, no se li fa (This, You Don’t Do to Your Kid), a spare and caustic comedy along the lines of Joe Orton’s theatre. One year later, with L’habitació del nen (The Boy’s Room), Benet presented an extreme situation arising from an apparent accident and the death of a son. Who is right? The father who believes that the mother who is afraid to accept the loss of the person she loves? Benet limits himself to “observing” the characters and leaving the answers to the views of each reader/spectator. With Testament (Legacy, 2002), Benet discussed the question of the different ways of approaching the meaning of life. One year later, he wrote E. R., a “parable on the world of theatre”. Given that Fugac seemed to have led him into a cul-de-sac, Benet then sought an “optimistic” vein in the nihilist attitude of his doctor character and found it in developing the stance taken by the character of the Friend in Fugac. The result was Testament (Legacy, 1995), which recognised that an intellectual or artistic legacy can give meaning and justification to life. In another order of things, with El gos del tinent (The Lieutenant’s Dog, 1996) and Olors (Smells, 1998), Benet perhaps brings to a culmination some of his thematic obsessions. In the former work, interwoven with certain political concerns discernible in Berenàveu a les fosques and Descripció d’un paisatge, is Benet’s attack on totalitarian power that uproots everything and crushes it without a second thought or any remorse. In Olors, Benet closes the trilogy that he began with Una vella, coneguda olor and Baralla entre olors (Battle among Smells), offering a desolate vision of the devastating passage of time over the ways of life in a neighbourhood and in the milieu of ordinary people who look on impotently at the radical and arbitrary disappearance of spaces and buildings – their memories – at the hands of urban planners steeped in arrogance and contempt for others.

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“In the plays of Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, and this is equally true for both his beginnings and for the later period, no hidden messianic spirit is hovering. This does not mean that he is distrustful of the human condition. On the contrary, We soon divine that Benet is not impartial but that he takes the side of the rebels, the individuals who strive to be genuine and who confront corrupt and false institutions.” Xavier Fàbregas, 1970.

“Marc i Jofre”, o els alquimistes de la fortuna (Marc and Jofre, or the Alchemists of Fortune)

“El's alquimistes de la fortuna, narrated in realist style, alternating moments of prodigious vivacity with others that are perhaps rather too discursive or at least too explanatory, is an anti-intellectualist and anti-political play that puts its whole emphasis on mass-based movements, the only forces that still wage a clear struggle and yet are able resist the temptation of dogmatic or prophetic triumphalism. It therefore leaves the solution hanging at the start of a battle that, while it may be just, is also uncertain.” Joaquim Molas, 1970.

Berenàveu a les fosques (You Had Tea in the Dark)

“The re-creation of the same petit-bourgeois milieu of his early works was presented in Berenàveu a les fosques with Brechtian distancing thanks to the help of the classic techniques: signs, projections on to a screen and front-stage recitations that weave the narrative thread between the scenes. The contrast between the historical scenes, which are realist, and the recitations that are concerned with the present, signals the continuity and the relationship between the past of the years immediately after the Spanish Civil War and the situation in the 1960s. With this procedure the highly precise, descriptive details of these scenes shed the manners-and-mores feel and immediately after the Spanish Civil War and the situation in the 1960s. With this procedure the highly precise, descriptive details of these scenes shed the manners-and-mores feel and achieve historical authenticity.” Joan-Lluís Marfany, 1988.

Revolta de bruixes (Witches’ Revolt)

“Revolta de bruixes is a complex work, the story of which is unfolded by means of a totally hermetic structure, wherein even real time and representational time coincide. As it proceeds, although adopting a realist guise that distances it from the narrative style of revealing characters that is typical of some pre-Brechtian theatre, and that will appear again, accentuated, in his subsequent works, it manifests voluntary contradictions with the use of formulas that pertain to this kind of theatre, for example with simultaneously occurring discussions between different groups of characters as yet another way of highlighting the on-stage fiction by forcing precisely its own conventionality through the unfolding of the plot. And what is this conflict? It is the conflict of a very important part of Benet i Jornet’s theatre: commitment, reality, reason, confronting fear, evasion and fantasy.” Rodolf Sirera, 2001.

Desig (Desire), Fugaç (Fleeting)

“Having definitively abandoned (at least at that date) the social and political themes when they characterised the largest part of the production of the first period, the author seems to develop a dramaturgy of the intimate and the private; a dramaturgy of secrets, if I may use the expression. In Desig, even the plot is secret, which obsessively covers up nothing more or less than a feeling – undisclosable love – and is finally revealed and verbalised in Fugaç – the confession of love – and guides the characters towards a tragic unravelling, thereby closing the circle to pass from ignorance to knowledge, and spiralling back into ignorance (last scene of Fugaç).” Sergi Belbel, 1994.

Testament (Legacy)

“It is clear, then, that Testament strikes a balance and closes a cycle. Nonetheless, it could be said that it closes the cycle thematically and no more than that. Stippling through the main motif of the drama – a legacy – the themes of unattainable happiness, fear, the longing for transcendence, the confrontation between reason and irrationality, the transitory nature of love and life, the inexorable passing of time, the difficulty of communication, irreversible illness ... are all spelt out, without exception.” Carles Batlle, 2001.

Salamandra (Salamander)

“Extinction: this is the great theme of the play and one of the constants in Benet i Jornet’s opus. It is the awareness that both time and history, over time, relentlessly eliminate personal and collective worlds. This is nature’s law, but all too often violent action or simply self-interested abstention bring about changes, and with them, the unhappiness or destruction of men and their world. The desert salamander, injured and in danger of extinction, bestows a symbolic dimension on the theme. Again, there is the wolpertinger that, despite its mutilation, is still able to stir Hilde’s personal memories, her ties with her land, and the contradictions of her men, as well as her own.” Jordi Castellanos, 2005.

General assessment

“His works convey the existential pain that emanates from the fact of knowing that, within the universal order, our existence as mortals is no more than a fleeting instant and that the most subtle relationships can often be key factors that determine the difference between love and hate, happiness and sadness, life and death. Any show of comfort and relief frequently comes from an apparently trivial gesture, the repercussions of which, paradoxically, can transcend the limits of mortality. In Benet’s theatre, the theme of immortality – the fact of leaving a physical, intellectual or artistic imprint in the world of mortals – is inextricably linked with the idea of salvation. However, his concerns are not restricted to the merely personal or individual sphere but are also expressed, even more significantly, in a collective sense.” Sharon G. Feldman, 2005.

E. GALLÉN

Una vella, coneguda olor (An Old, Familiar Smell). Fantasia per a un auxiliar administratiu (Fantasy for an Office Worker)