

# CATALAN WRITING

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**Chief editor:** Dolors Oller

**Editor:** Carme Arenas

**Editorial Staff:**

Josep Bargalló

Emili Manzano

Ramon Pla Arxer

Jaume Subirana

**Illustration:** Ramon Enrich

**Coordination and documentation:**

Glòria Oller

**Translation:** Discobole

**Proof-reading:** Zachary Shtogren

**Design:** Azuanco & Comadira

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PEN Català

Canuda, 6, 5è

08002 BARCELONA

T 93 318 32 98

pen@pencatala.cat

www.pencatala.cat

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## EDITORIAL

### An international showcase for catalan literature

The appearance of the second issue of *Catalan Writing* in this exciting phase of its existence—coinciding with the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair at which Catalan culture was guest of honour—is a good opportunity to encourage readers to discover more about our literature and explore it deeper. Catalan literature and the great variety of works written in the Catalan language in its different territories – from Barcelona to Mallorca and from Perpignan to Andorra and Valencia – has a remarkably rich history, and has contributed a considerable number of men and women writers to the body of world literature from its beginnings to the present day. Starting with Ramon Llull, the first person to



use a Romance language for literary creation and ideas, and continuing to today's writers like Quim Monzó, Baltasar Porcel, Francesc Mira, Carme Riera and Pere Gimferrer—the five writers of diverse styles and genres who presented our wide-ranging literary programme at the Frankfurt Book Fair—Catalan literature has had a role in shaping European history. The early classics laid a foundation with the medieval novel *Tirant lo Blanc* and works by the poet Ausiàs March. They were followed by the modern classics by such writers as Josep Maria de Sagarra, Josep Pla, Mercè Rodoreda and Salvador Espriu, who were also at the Fair in literary events and, most significantly, with a greater profusion of works translated this year into German, English and other languages than ever before.

Catalan literature is one of the oldest of Europe, but, in addition to this glorious history, it has also maintained its essence of modernity, creativity and talent. High sales figures and an enthusiastic critical reception in recent years, and at Frankfurt in particular, of novels like Albert Sánchez Piñol's *La pell freda* (Cold Skin), or Maria Barbal's *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree) encourage us to keep striving to enhance the international presence of the Catalan language and culture.

JOSEP BARGALLÓ

*Director of the Ramon Llull Institute*

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# ACTIONS & VOICES

The Catalan theatre tradition survived during the better part of the xix century with the one-act farce and, afterwards, with Frederic Soler’s *Pitarra*, a work that expanded and converted the tradition into costume-based comedies.

Àngel Guimerà brought to it a hefty combination of romanticism and realism with works like *Maria Rosa* (Maria Rosa, 1894), *Low Country* (Terra baixa, 1897) and *The Daughter of the Sea* (La filla del mar, 1900).

Between the early 20th century, modernism arrived to the Catalan stage particularly with the work of Adrià Gual, the pioneering creator at the Teatre Intim, and Santiago Rusiñol, the author of *The Tale of Señor Esteve* (L’auca del senyor Esteve, 1917), the piece that created the archetypal shopkeeper, “Senor Esteve.” Later, during the 20s and 30s, the poetic theatre of Josep M. De Sagarra found a loyal and sizeable audience.

The outbreak of the Civil War and the revolution brought the collectivising of theatres and the appearance of some revival theatre, like *Hunger* (La Fam, 1938), by Joan Oliver.

There was almost a complete prohibition of theatre in Catalan between 1939 and 1946. A true revival of the Catalan stage did not come until the appearance of the Dramatic Group of Barcelona (l’Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona, 1955-1963), and, above all, the Adrià Gual School of Dramatic Art (1960) that introduced epic theatre to the national stage and promoted the Salvador Espiru’s work, *The Death Watch In Sinera* (Ronda de mort a Sinera, 1965) and *The Original History of Esther* (Primera història d’Esther, 1968).

In the 60s and 70s, there were two significant events that stood out: the appearance of independent theatre groups like The Jugglers (1962), The Comedians (1972) and The Ferret of the Baus (1979), and authors like Josep M. Benet i Jornet, Rodolf Sirera, Sergi Belbel and Jordi Galceran.

MIQUEL M. GIBERT



# INTERVIEW

## SERGI BELBEL:

ÀNGELS AYMAR

**Sergi Belbel is Director of the National Theatre of Catalonia (TNC) and the Catalan playwright with the most works in translation and performed abroad. He just returned from New York where there was a reading of his play Mòbil\* (Mobile), a work that has been translated into English, Danish, German, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish and Dutch. This season he directed Àngel Guimera’s play En pólvora (In Dust) at the TNC and October will see the premiere of A la Toscana (In Tuscany), his own most recent work, which has been translated into German and Italian.**

“I prefer to direct my own works first, and after that other points of view are fine by me.”

**What contributes more, the experience of directing to your writing, or writing to directing?**

Directing is an apprenticeship for writing, more than the reverse. Directing enables me to go deeply into someone else’s work. I like directing Molière, Shakespeare or other contemporary writers, for example.

**What works are on your list for directing?**

I’ve got three: Racine’s Phaedra, Molière’s Don Juan, and Shakespeare’s King Lear. I’ve never directed any Greek tragedy – any play by Aeschylus, or Sophocles or Euripides, for example – and that’s something I’d like to do.

**Do you go about writing all your plays in the same way?**

You could say that the time of year in which the writing happens, which has been summer these last years, is the only point they have in common. Otherwise, each play goes its own way. There are some I think about a lot before writing and others, like A la Toscana, which I wrote as it came out. Once I start writing, if I start thinking about it too much, I leave it. If I get into the process as if I’m on a binge, I just keep going. It’s like a jar that’s filling up and when it starts to spill over, I sit down at the computer.

**How are things in Catalan theatre at present?**

It’s creative, with more resources and greater opportunities. We have public theatre, private theatre and alternative theatre. If you take this season’s list of premieres, you’ll see how many Catalan authors have been staged this year. This encourages the appearance of new people, which didn’t happen before. At the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, playwrights were rather out of it and most were regarded as bourgeois writers who had to disappear. There’s been a great change in the last fifteen years.

**Is writing in Catalan a limitation?**

The language doesn’t determine the success of the project.

**What is theatre for you?**

It means presenting the spectator with a challenge that is found nowhere else but there. Theatre cultivates a space for communication without intermediaries. It’s direct.

Everybody has his or her ideas about the function theatre should have. What moves me is to see how someone has come especially to see a play, has made the effort to come and see a live version of a story or an actor on stage. This is why it doesn’t disappear, because it’s an art that works with reality.

**What would you like to achieve as director of the National Theatre?**

Quality popular theatre, that everyone can see and where everyone can find something. It can be done. Shakespeare did it.

**Do you think people in other countries are interested in our theatre?**

More and more.

**Is there any feature in particular that characterises Catalan theatre writing?**

Apart from the language itself, yes, there are things ... but I’m not sure if I can put it into words. From inside and without enough distance, it’s very difficult to say. Nowadays, for example, there’s a tendency of Argentine influence that has contributed a more light-hearted feel to our writing. In my times, the main influence was Sanchis Sinisterra.

**Should parity exist?**

I don’t think the criterion is positive in itself. Maybe in fifty years’ time it won’t be necessary but it is now, especially in scientific and creative work because men have been occupying these posts in too high a percentage. Parity is a way of settling what has been happening over so many centuries. I hope it will be a transitory measure.

**What concerns you most about today’s world?**

About the world? Oh, a lot of things bother me! The polarisation between the West and the rest, especially the Middle East. The health of the world. The distribution of wealth ... In that regard, I’m happy to pay taxes!

**Sergi Belbel is a cultivated, curious man, a lover of science, a good conversationalist, sharp-witted and playful at all levels, both with his students and in his own writing.**

“Playing is also a form that is useful in giving structural organisation to a work. It helps to establish strategies and encourages reflection, all within the same game.”

**But what I admire most about him is the passion with which he speaks about theatre because this is a way of being in the world that is increasingly difficult to find.**

\* “Mobile” has been translated into English by Marion Peter Holt and the play was read in May 2007 as part of the cycle “Readings of Catalan Playwrights at MESTC”, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, New York.

# ON POETRY

The voice of Joan Vinyoli (1914 – 1984) is one of the most refined of inter-war expressionist post-Symbolism. A superb translator of Rainer Maria Rilke into Catalan, he always aspired in his own work to bring to light the poetic frisson, on the basis of his own observation of reality. A poet of everyday experience formalised in highly expressive symbols, his poems express implacable solitude, the anguish of primitive want and the incessant, relentless loss of love and joy. Taking pleasure in the vigour of the living word, Joan Vinyoli’s poetry ignites the spaces of most intimate experience and offers them transformed into sincere literary emotion of soaring lyrical register.

## Self-Portrait at Sixty-Five

Look at how I have the flown face

of an old satyr. What a winy

colour of life lived the full,

now irretrievable. Empty glasses.

Yet still I gather grapes with a false

voracity, and get myself drunk

on the wine of the years. And I reel, groping

at walls of darkness, now never touching

the peach-skin body of any woman,

for I am no longer in love.

A wasted time

Of life this is, for nothing but floundering about.

## Autoretrat a seixanta-cinc anys

*Mira’m la cara encesa*

*de sàtir vell. Quina vinosa*

*color de vida molt viscuda,*

*ja no recuperable. Vasos buits.*

*Cullo, però, raïm amb una falsa*

*voracitat i m’embriago*

*de vi dels anys. I tentinejo, palpo*

*parets de fosca, no tocant ja mai*

*el cos de préssec de cap dona,*

*car ja no estic enamorat.*

*Malaguanyat*

*temps de vida, aquest, tant sols per patollar-hi.*

J. Vinyoli, *In the Small Hours* (1981) (Translated by David Warwick Orr)

J. Vinyoli, *A hores petites* (1981) in *Obra poètica completa*, Barcelona: Edicions 62 / Diputació de Barcelona, “Clàssics Catalans”, 2001

# WORK IN PROGRESS



## LLUÏSA CUNILLÉ

Born in Badalona in 1961, Lluïsa Cunillé Salgado is one of the most established playwrights in the Catalan theatre scene. Since 1992, when the Teatre Romea of Barcelona staged her play *Rodeo*, more than thirty of her works have been performed. Notable among these are *La festa* (The Party, 1994), *Accident*, winner of the 1997 Institute of Catalan Letters Prize, *Vacantes* (Vacant, 1996), *Apocalipsi* (Apocalypse, 1996), *Dotze treballs* (Twelve Labours), which was premiered at the 1998 Festival of Sitges, *Passatge Gutenberg* (Gutenberg Passage), winner of the 1994 Critics of Barcelona Prize, *Mapa d’ombres* (Map of Shadows), winner of the City Barcelona Prize for the Scenic Arts, the Max Prize and the National Theatre Prize, and *La cantant Calba al McDonald’s* (The Bald Soprano in McDonald’s, 2006). Her paly, *Tot assajant Pitarra* (Rehearsing Pitarra), written with Xavier Albertí, is newly-premiered.

**Fragment from the play El bordell (The Brothel)**

*A stormy night. The bar of a roadside brothel. The OLD TRANSVESTITE is asleep, slumped over a table. Standing at his side is the TRAVELLER, still in her overcoat. She rings a handbell three or four times. Silence. The OLD WHORE appears on the stairs.*

OLD WHORE: If men had their dicks where their feet are they’d be in no danger of getting chilblains.

(Pause)

TRAVELLER: Did you call me?

OLD WHORE: Yes.

TRAVELLER: Are you in charge here?

OLD WHORE: No. (Goes behind the bar.)

TRAVELLER: Can I speak with the owner?

OLD WHORE: When he wakes up you can speak to him.

TRAVELLER: Is he the owner of this?

OLD WHORE: He and two other partners bought the business for me twenty-five years ago. I’ve been working for them ever since. I run the bar and make sure everything goes smoothly. (Pause.) Do you want a drink?

TRAVELLER: What’s the bell for?

OLD WHORE: He hates being alone for very long. Normally, when he’s had too much to drink I call for a taxi before he starts to sleep it off.

(Pause.)

TRAVELLER: Have you got a room free?

OLD WHORE: You want a room?

TRAVELLER: For him, so he can lie down somewhere.

OLD WHORE: He’s too heavy to carry upstairs.

TRAVELLER: Isn’t there anyone who can help us?

OLD WHORE: You see someone else round here?

# PUBLISHING NEWS

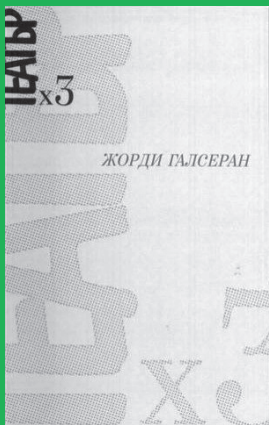


## Carles Batlle

*Transit* (Transit)

Merlin Verlag  
Translation into German by  
Thomas Sauerteig and Hans Richter  
2007

This play presents us with a portrait of contemporary Europe, a continent in transition and one replete with challenges and contradictions. Three men and two women are travelling through Europe by train. All of them hide desires and secrets they cannot confess and all of them will have to make decisions. The lives of these characters are interwoven and this means they will have to adjust their plans. The work is set in a not-too-distant future and the plot is constructed around a curious time sequence. Carles Batlle is the director of the Obrador of the Sala Beckett in Barcelona, a space for experimentation, creation for the stage, and where the theatrical review *Pausa* is based.

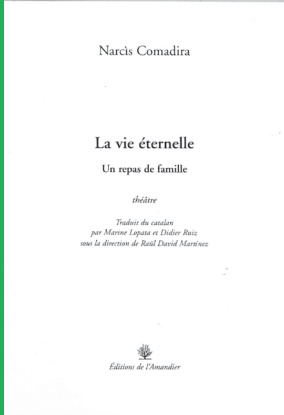


## Jordi Galceran

*El Mètode Grönholm*  
(The Grönholm Method)

Panorama+ plus Edicions  
Translation into Bulgarian by Neva Gueorguieva  
2007

Four candidates, three men and a woman, show up for the final phase of a series of unconventional tests organised by a multinational company in order to select a senior executive. What are they prepared to renounce in order to get the job? *El Mètode Grönholm* is a caustic comedy whose humour is tinged with tension, intrigue and cruelty because Galceran takes a real-life situation to its limits, reflecting the conflicts of the workplace, its power struggles, the ferocious competition, and the abuses committed by companies. The play has been widely acclaimed by critics and audiences alike.



## Narcís Comadira

*La vie éternelle* (Enduring Life)

Éditions de l'Amandier  
Translation into French by Raul David Martínez Gili  
2006

A woman of about seventy years old and her youngest son, about forty, come together over lunch, and enter into an argument. In the course of their conversation, the spectator discovers the complex situation of this bourgeois family living in Catalonia in the mid-1970s. None of the mother's children lead the kind of life she considers proper and has wanted for them, especially her youngest. Also present is the memory of her husband who died twenty years earlier. The son resembles him, which disturbs the mother because when she had been confronted with the father's scandalous conduct, she never forgave him and ended up destroying him. Comadira speaks of intolerance, lack of understanding, absence of respect for differences, lying and hiding the truth. Besides being a playwright, he is a poet and painter.



## Maria Barbal

*Wie ein Stein im Geröll*  
(Mountain Scree)

Trad. HeikeNottebaum  
Transit  
2007

Gives us a view of simple woman who takes part in the injustice of war after a radical shift in her calm life. After this, social changes succeed in driving her from her village in the Pyrennes to Barcelona. Based on true events, the story has been experienced by a great number of readers since its publication in 1985. The style is restrained yet often full of images that show the beauty of daily life.

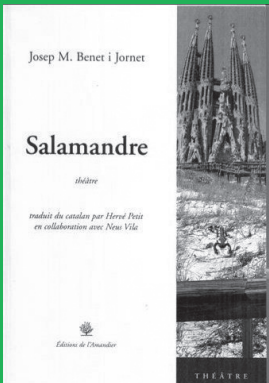


## Josep M. Fonalleras

*August & Gustau*

Barcelona: Ed. Empúries Narrativa  
2001

A solitary man, “without father nor mother nor genealogy” works in a museum. At home he listens to Tom Jones and works on puzzle everyday. It is a reproduction of *El Taller d'Apel·les*, a canvas from 1630 by a Flemish painter. With this fixation on this painting, we face a man's worrisome and obsessive story with the ever-present suggestion of death. On All Saints Day in the bar “O pecado” he suffers love's disillusionment that goes from fantastic to delirious. In the same month, he meets two unique characters, August and Gustau with whom he will share his final days. *August and Gustau* is a parable that seduces as much for its metaliterary perseperspective as for its elegaic charge in its anonymous voice that speaks with the proverbial simplicity of the Bible.



## Josep M. Benet i Jornet

*Salamandra* (Salamander)

Éditions de l'Amandier  
Translation into French by Neus Vila and Hervé Petit  
2006

A successful Californian film director is tackling his next project, from the security of his home, The work concerns his mother, his never-questioned nationality and the identity he has forged. Clinging to this certainty, he resists taking on another reality, one raised by people close to him, and in particular by a letter he does not dare to open because it is from his biological father whom he has never met. The play presents today's great ideological debates: identity, cultural traditions, memory, and the destruction and preservation of nature. In this work, Benet i Jornet clearly sets out the consequences of oblivion.

MONTSERRAT SERRA

# ON STAGE

A clear, determined institutional decision to showcase literature Temporada Alta, the Autumn Festival of Catalonia, which stages seventy shows from fifteen different countries, aims to rank as the foremost Catalan theatre arts festival. This is a festival in which theatre, dance, circus and the music of the finest international artists share spaces around the city with the latest offerings by Catalan creative artists.

In the fifteen years it has been held, in collaboration with publicandprivate institutions, the Temporada Alta Festival has provided a setting for established and emerging artists, innovative staging, worldwide premieres, and the participation of such first-rate guest artists as Ute Lemper, Isabelle Huppert, G. Strehler, Chéreau and Lepage.

This year Peter Brook, one of the regular attendants, will join Dario Fo to offer an artistic review of the twentieth century through three of its most prominent personalities – themselves, with Samuel Beckett as the third member of the trio. The version of “Krapp's Last Tape” that Beckett directed will also be performed.

The Temporada Alta Festival is a showcase for the very best of international theatre. For example, this year offers another exceptional threesome, Christoph Marthaler, Jan Lauwers and the Polish artist Krystian Lupa, as well as a magnificent overview of Argentine theatre.

Again, the Temporada Alta Festival is noteworthy as a platform for performance, offering incentives for the creation of contemporary works and promoting the most promsing performances in the national theatre scene. Finally, the Festival takes place in a part of Catalonia that stand to grow artistically in 2007 with the inauguration of the Salt-Girona Canal Centre of Scenic Arts, to be held in the final week.

SALVADOR SUNYER

# ON LINE

Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (National Theatre of Catalonia)

<http://www.tnc.cat/> (website in Catalan and Spanish)

It is now ten years since Tony Kushner's *Àngels a Amèrica* (Angels in America) inaugurated the National Theatre of Catalonia, then under the directorship of Josep Maria Flotats. Over time it has developed a reputation of combining quality, a willingness to take aesthetic risks and the desire to provide first-rate service for the theatre-going public. The present director is the playwright Sergi Belbel.

Teatre Lliure

<http://www.teatrelliure.com/> (website in Catalan, Spanish and English)

Created in 1976 by a group of professionals engaged in independent theatre, the Teatre Lliure was distinguished from the outset by its commitment to text-based theatre. With directors like Fabià Puigserver, Lluís Pasqual and Lluís Homar, key names in Catalan theatre circles, the Lliure was one of the founding members of the Union of Theatres of Europe. Since 2003, Àlex Rigola has headed the artistic direction of the theatre, which now works in concert with all the public entities and is located in a new venue, the former Palace of Agriculture on the slope of Montjuïc.

Sala Beckett

<http://www.salabeckett.com/> (website in Catalan and English)

The Sala Beckett theatre first appeared in 1989 as a space-cum-headquarters for the company, El Teatro Fronterizo, directed by José Sanchis Sinisterra. It has now become a benchmark for research-oriented proposals in the field of stage language and contemporary Catalan theatre in general. The present director is Toni Casares.

Misteri d'Elx (The Mystery of Elx)

<http://www.lafesta.com/> (website in Catalan and Spanish)

The *Festival* or *Mystery of Elx* is a late-medieval reanactment of the death, assumption and crowning of the Virgin. It is sung in Catalan in the Church of Santa Maria in the town of Elx (in the Valencia region) on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August. The drama, in which the town's residents participate, has been performed every year since the Middle Ages. It is the only performance in the world that has been declared a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (2001).