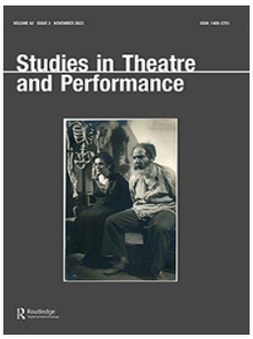

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Negotiating cultural exchange. Federico García Lorca on the British stage from the Spanish civil war until the mid-fifties

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to reconstruct and explore the initial theatrical reception of Lorca in the UK, focusing on why and how his texts entered the British theatrical ecosystem, and how they created connections among artists in and beyond Britain. This exploration of a largely ignored archive of the past also opens new gates for future theoretical reflections surrounding the complex symbolic weight of the author and his work. This, in turn, offers an insightful case study for analysing the role of theatre in forging national imaginaries and creating cultural exchange between artists of different countries in the tumultuous decades of pre and post-Second World War, a period of crisis of national/European imaginaries and realignment of global geopolitical powers that in many ways mirrors our post Brexit COVID 19 present.

KEYWORDS

Federico García Lorca's theatre; Theatrical Cartography; Reception Theory; History of British theatre; cultural exchange

In 2019, a few months before the first COVID-19 cases were identified, the Young Vic Theatre premiered a new version of *Blood Wedding* by Marina Carr. Building on a venerable tradition of making parallels between the countries, Carr situated the Spanish text in rural Ireland. This was the iconic London theatre's second reworking of Federico García Lorca's plays in the last five years: in 2016 Simone Stone presented his acclaimed version of *Yerma* with former child pop-star and celebrity Billie Piper, confounding preconceptions as the eponymous protagonist. As re-imaginings of the plays, both production are revealing of the Andalusian author's present vitality as an inspiration for current and future practitioners. The choice of a 'Gypsy-Irish' ambience in Carr's version (the term 'gypsy' needs to be understood here as a cliched cultural construction), on the contrary, bears testament to his historical reception in UK and the role of theatre in forging national identities. Lorca, let us not forget, is Spanish theatre´s chief ambassador on the global stage.

Although Lorca's legacy outside of Spain has been the subject of growing scholarly interest, it is surprising that the study of Lorca's international afterlife remains largely text-centered. Scholars many times pay more attention to translation and rewriting at the expense of performance when reconstructing the author's reception.[1] And although there are works that mention or study specific productions of Lorca's works,[2] to the best of my knowledge, no important attempts have been made to reconstruct a theatrical

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cartography (in Dubatti's 2008 terms) dealing with spaces, circuits and circulation, artistic interests and connections between artists at a local, national and international level. Adopting this perspective ultimately equates to asking the question about García Lorca's fit in a certain theatre institution, understanding institution in the way Christopher B. Balme (2014, 45) does, that is to say an epochal set of beliefs and ideas related to theatre and its function within a society.

This article is envisaged as the first in a larger body of publications that will attempt to reconstruct Lorca's theatrical (after)life in British theatre institution. In this debut entry, I will address how and why Lorca first arrived onto the UK's stages, where his works were performed earlier than in many other European countries. The death of some of Lorca's important early promoters in Britain, such as John Brande Trend (in 1958) and Arturo Barea (in 1957) and seismic theatrical changes in the mid-fifties (the performance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* [1955] and *Look Back in Anger* [1956] often quoted as turning points in the evolution of British theatre) will mark the closure of this initial period of Lorca's theatrical reception in the UK, which was made mainly through English translations (the only exception was Maurice Jacquemont's French production of *La Maison de Bernarda Alba* that toured London in 1946, as we shall see).

I will study how the introduction of García Lorca onto the British stages chimed with two contemporary trends in British theatre (the poetic and the political), but, nevertheless, was not free from misunderstanding. After all, we must not forget that cross-cultural exchange is always the result of a negotiation. It is arguably in performance (in the act of embodying an 'Other's text) that the transactions between target and source cultures come into sharpest relief and perceptions about an author and nation are confirmed or dispelled. In this sense, if the author's striking work and life/death has offered fertile soil for a vast and arguably overcrowded bibliography relating to the Lorca myth (as a political martyr, as an Andalusian/national poet, as a gay icon…), the reconstruction and exploration of Lorca's theatrical reception and circulation in the UK offers a much more complex picture of this process of creation of symbolic meaning, that includes associations still not sufficiently studied, such as the parallelism and connection with a Catholic Irish culture or the insertion of certain plays in working-class theatrical circuits.

García Lorca's arrival to the UK

Before exploring how Lorca was first performed in the UK, it is incumbent to review what we know about his initial reception in Nöel Coward and Terence Rattigan's homeland. According to Callahan (1993, 158), Lorca's name made its debut in a British newspaper in January 1922: the musicologist John Brande Trend, who shared a mutual friend with the poet-dramatist, the musician Manuel de Falla, reviewed Lorca's *Libro de poemas*. The title of the article, 'A Poet of "Arabia"' is revealing of the Orientalized lens though which Lorca's life and work was filtered from the outset as well as Trend's interest in a 'Moorish' Spanish Past.[3] The British intellectual – who subsequently became the first Professor of Spanish at the University of Cambridge (1933) – saw in this cultural legacy a possible instrument for artistic innovation as part of the foundation of a new Europe after the Great War (in June of that same year Lorca and Falla organized the famous Cante Jondo contest).[4] As Callahan (1991) examines, the interwar years coincide with a period of

British curiosity towards and interest in European culture, a tendency that encompassed Spanish theatre. Thanks to the efforts of the British actor, director and playwright Harley Granville-Barker, the Álvarez Quintero brothers and Gregorio Martínez Sierra were introduced albeit briefly to (unenthusiastic) British audiences. A key figure in the renewal of the Spanish theatre in the early 20th century (in 1920 he premiered at the Eslava theatre *El maleficio de la mariposa*, the first Lorca's play ever to be staged), Martínez Sierra's plays also had a modest presence in the Irish theatre of the time.[5]

With some isolated exceptions (e.g. 1912 performances of Benavente's *The Bias of the World* [*Los intereses creados*]), it was the first time in centuries (since the so-called Golden Age period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) that Britain paid attention (however limited) to contemporary Spanish theatre.[6] Although praised for its airy and sentimental idealism – in contrast to the 'immoral' work of some North European authors such as Strindberg or Ibsen – the plays were seen as realistically depicting a radically different national milieu, character and customs. It was this exotic Otherness that made Spanish plays attractive in the first place, but this was a double-edged sword. Once the curiosity of audiences subsided, they were quickly forgotten. Radical difference also underpinned much of the reception of Lorca, but the Granadan poet was unique amongst Spanish playwrights in that he would go on to enjoy a long and almost uninterrupted life in British theatres.

While the performance of the plays of the Quintero brothers and Martínez Sierra in Britain relied upon the individual enthusiasm of Granville-Barker and his wife, the arrival of Lorca in UK theatres provided a good match (although for very different reasons) with two trends that Warden (2012, 9) considers axiomatic for defining what she labels as a British avant-garde theatre movement, defying the prevailing diluted naturalism of the commercial theatre of the time: the poetic and the political.

Although Lorca was initially known in Britain as a poet, the first mention of his work as a playwright can be traced back to the late 1920s. In August 1928, the Madrid correspondent from *The Times* (1928) calls for creation of a national theatre in Spain (there was a long-running debate about the need for one in UK too) and among the new names and trends in Spanish drama, includes Lorca in the list of 'contemporary playwrights who handle verse.' If poetic drama was claiming 'greater prominence' in Spain, it was also a flourishing genre in the UK and Ireland, thanks to the theatrical experiments of many established poets (such as Yeats, Eliot, Auden and later also Spender and MacNeice). According to Warden (2012, 91–2), this infiltration of poets in drama explains the prominence that text had in British avant-garde theatre and, as we shall see, brought attention to Lorca's plays. But it was his murder in 1936 that finally propelled his plays onto British stages. Killed at the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War, García Lorca became, to borrow a phrase from Ian Gibson (1989, 469), 'almost overnight . . . a Republican martyr' and a symbol of this conflict.

In the Midst of the Fight Against Fascism. First Performances of García Lorca in the UK

The earliest information that I have been able to uncover as regards UK projects to perform Lorca's theatre dates from November 1937, when a production of *Blood Wedding* was announced under the title of *Marriage of Blood* as part of the season of

the Stage Society (The Era 1937, 5). Founded in 1899, the aim of the Stage Society (the oldest and longest surviving of the Sunday Theatre Clubs and the first to produce Shaw's early plays) was to introduce a select audience to a range of European dramatists and unlicensed works. Initially intended to be part of the 1937–1938 season (alongside Strindberg's *Christina* and Odet's *Awake and Sing!*, the British premier of *Marriage of Blood* was postponed several times because the company couldn't find out who held the rights (Nottingham Journal 1938, 6). It finally took place on 19th March 1939 at the Savoy Theatre, and probably also one week later, in a performance in aid of the Spanish Writers' Relief Committee (The Times 1939b, 12). The latter was a politicized event, one of many organized to aid the Spanish Republic cause in a country that by then had officially decided to stay neutral in the conflict.

The brain behind the performance was either the producer, the French director Michel Saint-Denis, or the translator, the writer John Langdon-Davies.[7] A nephew of Copeau, Saint-Denis would probably have meet Lorca at the beginning of April 1933, when the French director's company, Compagnie des Quinze, was invited to perform at the Residencia de Estudiantes (Pérez-Villanueva Tovar 1990, 255). It is even plausible to imagine Saint-Denis attending one of the last performances of *Bodas de Sangre*, premiered successfully only one month before at the Teatro Beatriz of Madrid. According to an unpublished biography (Lerminier 1954), the French director praised Lorca's plays for its poetic realism and showed enthusiasm for the touring company La Barraca; this was a style and working method that was very close to the kind of theatre that Saint-Denis had been championing with his own (and his uncle's) companies.

Saint-Denis moved to London in 1934, where he established the London Theatre Studio. He would soon become, along with many other foreign practitioners who visited or lived in UK in the 1930s, an important renovation figure within the context of a British stage characterized by insularity and traditionality – the UK was undoubtedly falling behind in relation to theatrical experiments taking place in France, Germany, Russia, the US, and – especially since the arrival of the Second Republic – in Spain (for instance, with the creation of state-funded pedagogic ventures such as La Barraca).

As has been mentioned above, from this very first production onwards, the reception of Lorca's theatre in Britain was complex (and not free from misunderstandings) as is revealed in the contradictory expectations expressed in publicity and press responses. A few days before the premiere, *The Times* advertised the show stating that Lorca 'had as a member of a theatrical touring company gained a wide knowledge of the customs, traditional songs and poetry of his countrymen' and, thus, 'in *The Marriage of Blood* there is not one word which could not be spoken or sung by an Andalusian peasant' (The Times 1939a, 14). Discourses of this kind were a re-elaboration of the perception of Lorca as the 'voice of the folk', the poet of the Andalusian/Spanish people, and – irrecoverably linked to this image – the 'gypsy poet'. It was a heuristic lens that had proliferated following the success of *Romancero gitano*, and troubled the poet during his lifetime. Lorca's first Spanish 'heralds' in the UK played a significant role in the spread of such essentialist romanticized stereotypes as they are attributed to the playwright. We need look no further than the title of Arturo Barea's *The Poet and his People* (1944), one of the first full-length literary studies of Lorca's work in English (published, it is worth noting, in Eliot's Faber and Faber).

Returning to Saint-Denis's *Marriage of Blood*, a couple of days after the announcement of the production, *The Times* published a review that shows how much preconceptions about Lorca's work confused the critic, especially the 'rhetoric of baroque conceits' of the third act so unlikely in the tongue of those 'Andalusian peasants' that Lorca was said to give voice. For the troubled mind of the reviewer, the final solution was to place Lorca as part of an (outdated and hyperbolic) Spanish tradition, stubbornly anchored in its (different) Golden Age: 'It is obvious that the play has to be acted at full stretch of the emotions, without hesitations or compromise, and as much in the grand manner as if it were a tragedy by Calderon' (The Times 1939b, 12).

This was not, however, the only way to perceive Lorca and his play. *The Manchester Guardian* offers an almost opposite impression of the performance. Thus, apart from mistrusting the translation, it dismiss the two first acts of the play as 'ordinary enough drama' as a 'matter for passionate opera by some Spanish Mascagni' (in other words, as melodrama),[8] but greatly praises the third act and Saint Denis's *mise-en-scène*. It describes the contrast between the 'tawny yellows' of the settings and the black costumes using Goya's *Disasters of War* and Zuloaga as referents (A.D. 1939, 13). But what is more telling about this second review is the network of theatre associations it builds. Lorca is not perceived through his connection with a Golden Age Theatre tradition but is linked directly with authors such as Synge and Yeats – in other words, to the Irish Literary Revival and poetic drama. I will return to this point later when examining the performance of Lorca in Northern Ireland.[9]

The relative lack of enthusiasm for this debut production of *Blood Wedding* was not all that different to other premieres outside of the Spanish-speaking world, staging's in France and the US also underwhelming critics and audiences (see Barea [1944, 41]; Smith [1998, 46–53]). After the Second World War, Saint-Denis was appointed Director-in-Chief of the Old Vic Theatre Centre and he staged the first act of *The House of Bernarda Alba* with the Old Vic School in 1951. That same year, the director decided to resign his position as his experimental approach to theatre clashed with the more conservative and traditional visions of Old Vic patrons; the School closed soon afterwards (see Cornford 2012, 215–233). But a detail of this latter production also points towards the director's legacy in the training of British actors: Saint-Denis's *The House of Bernarda Alba* featured a rising star, Joan Plowright, in the (minor) role of one of the 'Women in mourning'. The actress would perform in the play again in 1986, under Nuria Espert's direction, this time in the far more prominent role of Poncia.[10]

Because of the aforementioned delays in the premiere of *Marriage of Blood*, this was not in fact the first of Lorca's play ever to be performed in UK. That honor corresponds to a text hardly staged afterwards: *Mariana Pineda*. The drama about the Granadan liberal martyr was performed for the first time in Britain at the beginning of August 1938 at the Barn Theatre of Shere (Surrey) by the Otherwise Theatre Club (The Times 1938, 10). The production was probably well connected to Saint-Denis and the London Theatre Studio circle. Its director, John Burrell, a former producer and director at the Barn Theatre (1933–1937), had joined in 1938 the staff of the London Theatre Studio as producer and director of décor. In charge of the translation was the future Hispanist Charles David Ley, then a young English teacher well connected to Portuguese and Spanish literary circles (he would become an English teacher for the British Council first in Lisbon and afterwards in Madrid) as discussed in his memoirs *Costanilla de los diablos* (1981). But

perhaps the most interesting detail of the production is that it was the second professional experience on stage of one of the most celebrated students of the London Theatre Studio, Peter Ustinov, who left in his memoirs a far-from flattering testimony about the experience of preparing for his role as Pedrosa:

> John Burrell brought us some books to look at, with pictures of rows of sullen gypsies sitting outside their caves in Granada, and of crowds of functionaries, a priest and a surgeon or two, all jockeying for position in the photograph of a newly expired torero . . . . Far from opening any doors for us, these bits of evidence only served to make Spanish folklore even more hermetic, and I launched myself into a text of which I understood not a single motivation, not a single image. It was difficult to comprehend why lust should be so talkative. (Ustinov 1979, 108)

Perhaps for the quality of the translation, perhaps for this need to approach the text from a realistic-romanticized 'Spanish' perspective, the quote exposes how Lorca was not only difficult for the audience, but also for practitioners involved. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that there were no previous points of reference. Burrell's *Mariana Pineda* was not only the first British production of the play, but also probably the first translation to be performed in Europe: if the first French *Blood Wedding* opened in June 1938 (almost one year before the British one), *Mariana Pineda* was apparently not staged in the neighbouring country until 1946 (see Torres Monreal 1989, 1346–1369).

A Humorous Lorca for the Working-Class. The Plays of the Granadan Author in the Workshop and Unity Theatre(s) Repertoires

Interrupted by the war, Lorca's theatrical life in Britain would reassume soon afterwards. In 1945 Joan Littlewood staged *The Love of Don Perlimplin for Belisa in his Garden*. It was the third production of a company that constituted a turning point in British theatre history: the Theatre Workshop. In some handwritten notes for a talk on what theatre should be, Littlewood highlights Lorca's 'poetry in theatre' (Rankin 2014) and the programme of the production also talks about the author's 'full use of poetic symbolism to capture the most profound shades of feeling' (*Programme of Theatre Workshop*).

Although a performance of *Blood Wedding* figured in later (frustrated) plans by the Theatre Workshop, this initial punt with *The Love of Don Perlimplin. . .*, a farcical short play rarely staged in Spain and abroad, needs to be explained in relation to the Company's remit.[11] Having emerged from the Workers' Theatre Movement and from the vibrant theatrical life of working-class culture(s) of the 1920s and 1930s, Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop looked for the creation of a popular theatre for the masses. Thus, comedy and popular genres became common tools to connect with a broader audience. It is not by chance that the company's debut production was a performance of James Henry Miller's (later to be known as Ewan MacColl) pre-war adaptation of Molière *The Flying Doctor*, an author that would soon become a company favourite.

In the programme for *The Love of Don Perlimplin. . .* we can identify associations already evident in the two previous productions of Lorca's plays, such as the political value of 'the great contemporary dramatist . . . executed by the fascist'; 'Lorca's deep love and understanding of the Spanish people's artistic traditions'; and his connection with a

Golden Age tradition ('His fellow poets class him as the greatest poet since Gongora, and the greatest dramatist Spain has produced since Lope de Vega').[12] Nevertheless, these two latter associations were perceived in a very different manner, not as signs of Spanish cultural and theatrical backwardness and Otherness, but as a springboard for possible theatrical renovation. As Lorca had done with La Barraca, Littlewood believed that a return to the classics (a theatre that has been popular in its own time) could help to reconnect with contemporary lower classes (see Leach 2010, 35). In this sense, Spanish Golden Age Drama occupied a decent space in Littlewood's own theatrical interests. In 1937 she had directed *Fuente Ovejuna* for the first time with the Manchester Theatre Union, as part of a campaign to raise funding for the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War, and in 1958 the Theatre Workshop added another controversial and many times politically charged Spanish classic to its repertoire: *La Celestina* (see Bastianes 2020, 223–235). Although it had a much longer stage life than the two previous productions of Lorca's plays, the reception of *The Love of Don Perlimplin. . .* was not always positive, but this time for very different reasons. As Ewan MacColl (1990, 248) recalls in his autobiography, the sexual overtones of the play often scandalized the bourgeois audience in its premier in Kendal, and four years later, when the play was performed at the Library Theatre in Manchester, Joan Littlewood complained about the negative 'puritanical' review of the *The Manchester Guardian* (RHC 1949, 5) in a sour letter to the editor:

> [Lorca's] plays deal with the terrible barrier between the sexes which existed in his country and is perhaps not unknown here . . . . Surely the first impact of any work of art is disturbing and even destructive: we must risk this 'unpleasantness' if our culture is not to atrophy. (Littlewood 1949, 4)

Neither this claim to engage with the avant-garde nature and audacity of Lorca's play, nor the political significance of his presence in the company's repertoire, prevented the Workshop Theatre from peppering the production with picturesque touches, such as flamenco songs. In all fairness, through MacColl, responsible for the music, there was a genuine albeit romanticized interest in popular music: he later would become, after all, one of the principle figures in the British folk revival.

The next British performance of Lorca was produced by another important heir to Workers Theatre Movement: the Unity Theatre(s). After the Second World War, the Unity Theatre Movement underwent a period of great expansion. In 1944, the amateur London Unity Theatre provided the impetus for the formation of a national Unity Theatre Society, which in 1946 established a professional company: the Unity Repertory Company. The endeavor was short-lived, but encompassed two prospective Lorca productions. According to Chambers (1989, 270), a performance of *Blood Wedding* was in the (aborted) original plans of the Unity Repertory Company.[13] Dismissed at first Lorca returned at the end. Fourteen months in, the company ended its short life with a double bill featuring George Leeson's translation of *The Shoemaker's Wife* directed by the actress Dorothea Alexander.

Leeson was an Irish born seaman who has joined the Communist Party in 1935 and travelled to Spain in 1937 as member of the International Brigades. As he recalled in an interview, aside from his anti-fascist convictions, cultural sympathies paid their part in his decision to enroll

> I was already beginning to read Spanish literature, reading García Lorca poems, so I felt a close cultural association as well, plus the fact that my mother came originally from Limerick and there was a legend that a lot of people in Limerick were descendants of sailors who had been wrecked on the coast of Ireland. I remember hearing that there was Spanish blood in our family. (Corkill and Rawnsley 1981, 78)

This last statement proves particularly interesting when considering Lorca's associations with Irish culture, especially Synge, a point to which I will return.

As was the case with the Workshop Theatre's *The Love of Don Perlimplín*, the Unity Theatre probably opted for *The Shoemaker's Wife* – another play rarely staged afterwards[14] – because of its farcical structure. The humor of the production was what most caught the attention of reviewers. Comedy, again, was thought more likely to entice a working-class audience. The production toured several venues during 1947 and Leeson's translation was published in the Unity Theatre Society's recently created publishing house, the New Theatre Publications (García Lorca 1947). At the beginning of March, the London Unity Theatre performed the play first in the capital before touring to Manchester. In June, the Manchester Unity Theatre assumed the lead and staged a new open-air production (probably using the same version) once again with a female director, in this case Eileen Crabtree. In October, James Collins-Baker directed Leeson's translation at Cheltenham Little Theatre. The Working Class Movement Archives hold also a poster of a performance by The Levellers at St. Luke's Parish Hall South Park (probably in Reigate, Surrey) on the 5th February (probably in 1948) (reference: POSTER/SUBJ/THEATRE/0016).

These networked productions are testament to the logistical and theatrical efficacy of the Unity Theatre National Society based on communist principles. In addition, Leeson's translation had an impact beyond the Unity-affiliated theatres, presumably as a result of it being published. The Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club, a university dramatic society (the oldest in England), for example, performed Leeson's *The Shoemaker's Wife* in 1956 (directed by Michael Garland [The Times 1956, 5]) and it is likely that the same version was used for a publicized 1952 production at London's New Torch Theatre (The Times 1952, 3). For the first time, a Lorca play could said to be forming a role albeit minor in the UK theatrical repertoire. Well-connected within the Communist Party, Leeson joined the general management of London Unity Theatre in 1953. Three years later his *Shoemaker's Wife* was performed at the Unity this time in a double-bill with the group's second British premiere of a Brecht's play: Eric Bentley's translation of *The Exception and the Rule* (Chambers 1989, 337–338).[15]

García Lorca's Plays in London Little Theatres (and on the Radio)

García Lorca plays also found a home in many of the self-financed 'little theatres' that provided a refuge for less commercial (and thus more 'risky') theatre in the aftermath of the Second World War. At the forefront was the Ashley Dukes Mercury Theatre, which specialized in poetic drama (establishing its reputation with the 1935 premiere of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*). Thanks to an exchange of 'plays and players' with the Parisian Studio Champs Elysées, the Mercury hosted in June 1946 – just six month after its debut performance in Paris – Maurice Jacquemont's French production of *La Maison de Bernarda Alba* (December 1945) (The Times 1946, 6). Jacquemont's production was

the first European premiere of the play (performed for the very first time in March 1945 at the Teatro Avenida of Buenos Aires) and its presence in London reveals the fluid theatrical connections between British and French 'off' theatres of the time.

In 1947, the Under Thirty Theatre Group – another Sunday-night society producing new plays in West End theatres – gave UK audiences their second opportunity to see *Blood Wedding*.[16] A translation by the controversial South African poet Roy Campbell – a Franco sympathizer at a time when most of the Anglophone cultural world defended the Republican cause – was used.

Probably encouraged by the aforementioned 1946 visit of Maurice Jacquemont's French production, New Chepstow Theatre Club staged an English version of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in January 1949, albeit once again with little success. The critic from *The Times* (1949) complained not only about the actors but also of a text lacking the 'noticeable poetic sensibility, and those scenes of intense imaginative activity that blaze up occasionally in such a play as *Blood Wedding*,' that makes 'inadequate progress towards an effective final act.' This was a harsh appraisal of a play that, after *Blood Wedding*, would become Lorca's second most performed in UK, but it is a useful reminder that he had yet to become a canonical author. It is possible that the problem may have resided in the text given that it is likely the company used the much criticized 1941 American translation of O'Connell and Graham-Luján (see Delgado [2008, 6]). This was the first English translation to be authorized for publication and the one Saint-Dennis would employ in his aforementioned 1951 production with the Old Vic School (Programme 'The House of Bernarda Alba').[17]

Since the end of the 1940s Lorca's plays could be also heard on the radio, a privileged medium at the time for introducing mainstream audiences to international theatre. A quick search through *The Times* online archive reveals that *Blood Wedding* was broadcast for the first time in 1949 (preceded by a talk of Martínez Nadal on Lorca); *Yerma* in 1950; *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 1952; and *The Marvellous Shoesmaker's Wife* in 1954. Could Arturo Barea, who was a broadcaster for the BBC Latin American Service since 1940, have played a role in suggesting these plays to BBC producers? On the one hand, it would seem likely; conversely, however, he was never invited to speak about Lorca on the radio as Martínez Nadal and others were.

But probably connected with this increasing presence on the radio was the 1953 production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* by the Tavistock Repertory Company, an amateur group later known as the Tower Theatre. In charge of the direction was, in fact, another singular figure in Lorca's British theatrical life: Margery Withers, the Argentinian born, former librarian of the last king of Portugal, BBC features producer and radio reporter, and future professional actress (thanks to Harold Pinter).[18] The version this time was based on a translation of A. L. Lloyd. In the archive of this almost one-hundred years old company (created in 1932, it is still alive today) it is possible to find three reviews of the production, two published in the *Tavistock Tatler* (the regular newsletter sent to Members and Friends of the theatre company), and a third in Spanish.[19] In the later Carlos Oliván (probably a colleague of Withers at the BBC European Service)[20] says that the production offered 'una versión realista del drama de García Lorca' and 'un grado de autenticidad ambiental, que rara vez ha sido conseguido en España.' This realistic reading of the play was once again problematic. According to one of the English critics, the play 'lacked motivation, especially to an English audience of

today.' Nevertheless, the extremely naturalistic (and un-theatrical) approach of the critic casts suspicion on the meaning of his words; for instance, he asks if the 'untrained Adela' could 'really have found a rope of the requisite thickness, a beam to throw it over and at the right height and a jumping off point from which to hang herself, all in a minute or two?' More telling as regards the reason for his dismissal of the production is the comment on Lorca's 'novice's mistake of trying to write, as one of his firsts attempts, a play in which the protagonists were all female and all failures' or the comparison with (and distancing from) the apparently mild and moderate British character and customs: 'What justification was there for Bernarda herself to be so cruelly severe on her flesh and blood? . . . Has not snobbery of the obvious kind long been outmoded as a dramatic theme in this country?' Conversely, and paradoxically, the critic finds the Maid and Poncia 'the easiest parts to convey to British audience' because the servants 'were fully motivated through a circumstance all too familiar to us, sheer economic necessity.' It is worth noting that these two characters (Poncia in particular) imbue the play with its (very) occasional touches of humor. Thus, their way of talking is usually more straightforward and less 'poetic.' But if translation seemed to have potentially limited the production, as the third review contained in the Tower Archive suggests, this was not the sole nor even necessarily the most important explanation for a lukewarm reception. In the obsessive repetition on the unfamiliar, outdated or even 'primitive' quality of Lorca's theatre evident in many reviews of this period it is possible to glimpse a hint of discomfort at the ways in which Lorca depicts desire, especially female desire, too bold for some sections of the English audience (as previously highlighted as regards the Theatre Workshop's *The Love of Don Perlimplin. . .*).

García Lorca in Ireland. A Link between Cultures?

The Tavistock amateur mise-en-scene was (incorrectly) advertised in the press as the first attempt to perform *The House of Bernarda Alba* in London (Shand 1953, 5). It was not even the second English production to be seen on UK stages: less than a year previously, in May 1952, a production of the Abbey Experimental Theatre Club of Dublin had visited Manchester Queen's Hall.

Founded in 1937, Abbey Experimental Theatre was the annex of the Abbey Theatre (Ireland National Theatre) and an important hub of modern poetic drama (behind its creation was Yeats's dream of a place for this theatrical genre). In 1947 its first director, Ria Mooney, an admirer of Yeats and poetic drama (McGlone 2014, 64),[21] returned to the Abbey and in 1950 invited the British-born American director Eric Bentley to stage *The House of Bernarda Alba* with the Experimental, once again using the O'Connell and Gramham-Lujan translation.[22] A champion of modern European drama, Bentley was already known as one of the leading translators and experts on Brecht, who had recently returned to Berlin and founded the Berliner Ensemble (Bentley 2008, 417).[23] When talking about his experience staging Lorca with the Experimental, Bentley alluded again to the frequent association between Lorca and Synge, one of the historical figures of the Abbey: 'I was told by Frenchmen and Italians that Lorca resembled Synge and would therefore be no problem in Dublin . . . . None the less, Synge himself was always a big problem in Dublin: the manger [Ernest Blythe] told me he emptied the theatre for five years' (1992, 227). It was a comparison, as Bentley recalls, emphasized in 1945 by the

American scholar Edwin Honig book on *García Lorca*, but present since the very beginning of Lorca's theatrical life in UK, as we have seen in the *The Mancheter Guardian* review to the production of *Blood Wedding* in 1939. It was based on the common Catholic and rural background of both nations: 'What he [Lorca], like those leaders of the Irish movement, proposed to put in its place was the sense of the magic of language to which only a people still attached to the rituals of the land could respond with authentic pleasure' (Honig 1945, 103). Whether this connection between an Irish and a Spanish 'nation' was also used in Ireland, as the words of Leeson (Corkill and Rawnsley 1981, 78) quoted above seems to suggest, and to what extent it had any kind of political connotation in the frame of the Irish nationalist movement (as José Ruiz Mas 2020 suggested in an essay on 'The Spanish Armada in Anglo-Irish Poetry') it is a topic that would need more research. Especially, because as the example of Marina Carr's recent *Blood Wedding* shows, the comparison between both nations and cultures still conditions the way Lorca is performed in our present.[24] What it is almost certain is that the Catholic/Protestant confrontation that was at the core of the narrative of the Anglo-Irish War (and its aftermaths) is shored up in the way Lorca's Otherness was perceived in Britain.

Bentley recognizes in Lorca's play 'an echo' of Golden Age 'honor drama', but one that '[shows] how hideous and destructive the old ideal can be' (Bentley 1992, 218). He also dismisses the analogy with Synge. Perhaps inspired by Brecht's dialectical approach, Bentley reads *The House of Bernarda Alba* paying attention to the material conditions depicted in the tragedy: 'Lorca gives a social grounding to his dramatic inevitability' (219). For the director, the non-Spanish referent is not Synge, but the social drama of Ibsen.[25]

Almost certainly encouraged by Abbey Experimental Theatre Club production, in December 1953 Manchester University Unions Drama Group decided to perform, for a couple of days, the first Northern production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* (The Times 1953, 5).

Also connected to the revival of verse plays in Ireland was the Belfast Lyric Players Theatre 1953 production of *Blood Wedding*. Founded in 1951 by Mary O'Malley, the group was influenced by Austin Clarke's Dublin-based Lyric Theatre. In both cases, the idea was to provide a space for the performance of poetic drama, mainly short plays by Yeats and other Irish writers, such as Clarke himself.[26] In this regard, it is worth noting that from at least 1948 Clarke was on the hunt for Lorca's plays.[27] It is hardly preposterous to imagine that he promoted either the Abbey Experimental Theatre's *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 1950 or Lyric Players Theatre's *Blood Wedding* in 1953. Whatever the case may be, the later was the first of the five productions of Lorca's plays the Lyric Players performed between 1953 and 1963, alongside *Yerma* (1960), *Dona* [sic] *Rosita* (1961)[28] and two *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1956 and 1963).[29]

The few photos of the productions preserved in the NUI's O'Malley Archive at Galway Library reveal simple and often abstract stage designs, echoing Yeats's antipathy for realism. In *Blood Wedding*, for instance, a backdrop with a small design (a square with a horse) is used in the second scene (that of the 'Nana del caballo grande') of the first Act.[30] Another picture shows a similar square design, this time with a Virgin Mary a la Lorca. The forest is represented with a backdrop entirely covered with expressionistic dark lines (some of them resemble tree silhouettes). Costumes are a mixture of traditional garments and avant-garde touches. The Groom wears a dark short jacket and bell bottom trousers,

a short cravat and a sack. In a more conventional 'gypsy' style, Leonardo's trousers are garish and he wears a waistcoat and a blouson sleeves shirt with a neck scarf. Women wear mantillas, dark skirts, aprons, headscarves. In the 1956 production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* the stage design played again with the contrast between black dresses and a light (probably white) background.[31] Although Lorca was usually perceived in Britain as a Catholic author (and therefore, difficult to understand in a protestant milieu), the 1956 production *The House of Bernarda Alba* paradoxically aroused the suspicions of the Catholic community of the socially and politically conservative Northern Ireland, as this anecdote shows. After asking for advice from a priest, the actress who was appointed for the role of Bernarda decided to decline the job, because, according to the priest, it was not convenient for her to be associated with such a 'suggestive and crude' play, that would made 'any Catholics in the audience . . . be embarrassed' (see O'Malley 1988, 66).

Blood wedding (1954). Peter Hall's First Professional Production Closes a First Chapter of García Lorca's Stage Reception in the UK

Returning to London, in 1954 another important milestone that brings this initial period of Lorca's UK afterlife to a close was Peter Hall's production of *Blood Wedding* at the Arts Theatre. Hall's connection with the London Arts Theatre Club dated from his years as a student at Cambridge. In 1953 Hall was invited to direct his Cambridge production of Pirandello's *Henry IV* at the Arts and soon afterwards he was offered a position as script reader assistant. By Spring 1954, he had eventually been invited to stage a production of his own with the theatre. He chose *Blood Wedding*, a play he had been wanting to direct since his days at Cambridge (see Hall 1983, 175).[32] Although, in his memoires, Hall describes the difficulties of working with the Graham-Luján and O'Connell translation – 'an appalling mixture of windy poetics and American slang' (Hall 1993, 94) – the production was received positively, and has retained a privileged place in the early career of one of Britain's leading directors.[33] One year later, in 1955, Hall directed the first English-language performance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and since then, British theatre (and in fact, Western drama) has never been the same, as the director claims (Hall 2003).

Soviet invasion to Hungary and the Suez crisis made of 1956 the year of final disillusion for Left and conservatives, respectively. As Billington (2007, 100) notes, it was a feeling of disillusion wonderfully synthetized in the words of Alison to his colonialist father in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*: 'You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same'. The play, that opened at the Royal Court in May 1956, is usually quoted as a pivotal date, the starting point of a new (revolutionary) period in British drama; in it Spanish Civil War stands for a irretrievable golden past in which a sense of social solidarity was still possible. While society settled for a Welfare State and affluence progressively replaced austerity, the image of Spain as the lost paradise of the Left, was slowly but surely overtaken by another picture of heaven on earth: the one sold by tourism and cunningly promoted by the Francoist regime. Initially fought back by a few remained idealists, Francoist Spain was well and truly embraced as holiday destination by most of the British population, regardless of their social background or political sympathies (Buchanan 2007, 174). From then on, and although the myth of the fascism's martyr would still appear here and there in many future production

of García Lorca's plays in the UK, the author's performance would cease to be so intimately imbued with the contemporary agenda of some sectors of the British left. To borrow Balme's (2014, x) term, it would be reduced to a more closed theatrical public sphere.

The death of important early champions of Lorca such as Barea and Trend (the former in 1957 and the later in 1958) also closed the first period of the poet's reception in Britain. Nevertheless, from the mid-fifties onwards, the Granadan author would counter-intuitively have his presence consolidated in the UK: over the next two decades, Lorca's production would increase in number and size. New plays would be staged (such *Doña Rosita* or *Yerma*)[34]; some of the first plays performed in Britain would disappear (*Mariana Pineda, The Shoemaker's Wife* or *The Love of Don Perlimplín*... did not make a return to the British theatres until the 1990′s) and *The House of Bernarda Alba* and *Blood Wedding* would increasingly dominate the emerging Lorca canon. But this belongs to the following 'chapters' of the stage history of the Granadan author in the UK, that I plan to explore in future publications.

Conclusions

In the years between García Lorca's death and the significant cultural (and theatrical) changes of the mid-fifties, the poet's plays featured in the repertoire of some of the most innovative companies working in Britain. Thanks to their poetic language and the symbolic capital of a martyr of the Republic, Lorca's dramas provided a particularly good fit for the two main trends of the British theatrical avant-garde and secured for him a prominent and resilient place on UK stages. On occasions the work of the author was parallel to contemporary English-language exponents of poetic drama such as Synge, frequently drawing from supposed connections between Spanish and Irish cultural identities. A particular salient feature of this initial period is that companies that formed part of the more political current often tended to performed Lorca's farcical plays, rarely staged afterwards, as a means of connecting with the working-class audience.

But although Lorca was to become one of the important European authors within a universal theatrical canon, UK productions remained overwhelmingly accented with regional features. An idealized realism that saw in Lorca's work an expression of an essence of Spain and the author as the poet of the people, sometimes turned Lorca's tragedies into melodrama. Perhaps that's the reason why the conflicts involved in the plays often could not be seen in more abstract terms, as power dynamics, in the manner of ancient Greek tragedy (I can see no a priori reason for Medea's cruelty to his sons being easier to translate for a British audience than that of Bernarda to her daughters). And Spain did not have the monopoly on conservatism. Puritanical sections of UK audiences were unlikely to warm to the expression/repression of (often female) desire so prevalent in Lorca's theatre.

This survey of Lorca's theatrical (after)life has additional important lessons to impart not just about cultural relations with Spain and the circulation of plays between US, Italian, French, Irish and British stages, but also about (r)evolution in the UK. The number of female directors in charge of these small productions requires further contemplation and study whilst Lorca's plays were performed by some of the artists and companies that, according to Billington (2007, 74), 'will shape the theatre of the

next fifty years:' *The Love of Don Perlimplin* would be among the firsts production of the ground-breaking Workshop Theatre and *Blood Wedding* would mark the successful transition from amateur to professional of one of the main figures of 20th century British theatre: Peter Hall. UK audiences and practitioners may not always have understood Lorca but these misunderstandings are revealing in and of themselves, whilst it would be parochial to underestimate his contribution to the modern British stage.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Walsh (2020), and Mayhew (2018).
2. Edwards (see 2005; and the introductions to his editions of *The House of Bernarda Alba* and *Blood Wedding* [García Lorca 1998, xlviii-lii; and 2006, xlii-xlvii]) and Delgado (2008) are two important examples of scholars that have recently worked on the performance of García Lorca in the UK.
3. An Orientalization of the author and his works with many points in common to the early reception of García Lorca in the US. The latter has recently been studied, although mainly through translations, by scholars such as Scaramella (2017).
4. For more on the idea of Spain as a place considered fit for reinventing the continent within a Europeanizing modernist movement during the interwar period see Rogers (2012).
5. The Abbey hosted productions of *The Two Shepards* (1924), *Kingdom of God* (1924) and *Poor John* (1926), probably as part of the activities of Yeats' Dublin Drama League, which also performed Benavente's *The Passion Flower* (*La Malquerida*) in 1924. We ought not to forget that the Spanish playwright received the Nobel Prize in 1922, just one year before Yeats.
6. See also Gagen (2001).
7. Langdon-Davis had visited and lived in Catalunya several times during the 1920s and after the outbreak of the war he became a war correspondent for the liberal (and pro-Republican) *Daily Chronicle*. He was also one of the founders in 1937 of Plan International, by then a humanitarian institution that sought to provide asylum in Britain for Spanish children. Probably as a result of the aforementioned copyright problems, his translation was reworking of José Weissberger's English translation (The Stage 1939, 4), the only one to be staged before Lorca's death (Delgado 2008, 79–80).
8. In fact, when *Blood Wedding* was adapted for opera in the 1950s, frequent comparisons were made with *Cavalleria rusticana*.
9. This appreciation may be the result of the translation, which according to a non-very flattering letter (probably from the actor Stephen Haggard) contained 'pseudo Irish turns of phrase' introduced 'to make the dialogue "paysan"'. See the archive Michel Saint-Denis of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, box 4-COL-83/509 (4).
10. See *Programme of 'The House of Bernarda Alba'* (1951).
11. *The Love of Don Perlimplin* was banned in February 1929 after the opening night in Madrid by the Primo de Rivera regime and, as Lorca would say in a letter to his family from New York later that same year, his friends in the US were trying to perform it in the more avant-garde American stage (García Lorca 1997, 658). According to Mildred Adams 's (1977, 144 and 146), Lorca asked her later that same year to translate the play, which she attempted with no success.
12. *Programme of Theatre Workshop*. Edwards (2007, 304–316) has recently written on Littlewood attraction to Spanish Drama, although I don't agree with his assertion that Lorca's production of *Fuente Ovejuna* was unknown to the director (309). Announcing Littlewood's production of the classic in 1937, an article in *The Times* mentions precisely Lorca's *Fuente Ovejuna*. Furthermore, the awareness of this previous Lorca's production probably was one of the reasons that prompted Littlewood to resuscitate it in Britain, as

Nadine Holdsworth (2011, 43) suggests. Another, perhaps main, reason for this choice was the fact that it was a play largely performed in Russia since the 1876 and very popular in the Soviet country during the Spanish Civil War (see Ryjik 2011, 125–141.).

13. Behind these initial plans to perform Lorca could have been, again, Michel Saint-Denis, who was teaching Stage Production at the Unity Theatre Society drama School (Chambers 1989, 251).
14. Both plays were in the 1941 O'Connel and Graham-Luján's collection translated into English (García Lorca 1941). They will be staged again only in the 1990s in the versions of Ragazzi Theatre and Absolute Theatre, and in Etcetera Theatre.
15. That same year the Berliner made his first visit to Britain, a visit that would leave an important mark on the development of British Theatre.
16. Four years later the group will find a permanent home in Leatherhead Victoria Hall, becoming the Leatherhead Theatre Club, one of the many repertory regional subsidized theatres that flourish after the war under the support of the newly created Arts Council. For an updated introduction to public support to theatre industry after the war and its catastrophic long-lasting effects in regional theatres see Olivia Turnbull (2008).
17. It was also the version used in the American premiere of the play in 1951.
18. Withers have joined the Tavistock Repertory Company in 1937. In 1959 the amateur company decided to give its second chance to a new play that had been an authentic flop when presented the previous year at the Lyric, Hammersmith, on May 1958. That play was the *Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter second 'incursion' as a playwright (Walmsley 1999, 29).
19. The photos at the online Tower Archive show a stage design that follows Lorca's indication and builds on a contrast between the white walls of an almost bare house and the black dresses. Available online at http://www.towertheatre.co/plays/1953/p5303.htm.
20. Withers probably also knew Arturo Barea, who since 1940 was working at the BBC Latin American Service.
21. In 1942 she has helped Austin Clarke and Roibeard O' Farachain to direct drama in verse at the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, a precursor to the Lyric Theatre Company.
22. One year before, in March 1949, the company had performed O'Connell and Graham Lujan's translation of *Blood Wedding*. And it is worthy to note that later that year an Irish performance of *La Malquerida* by Jacinto Benavente was seen in the main house of the Abbey Theatre (director Tomás Mac Anna).
23. Apart from representing Brecht in America, Bentley would in fact introduce Brecht in Italy in 1951, thanks to an invitation of Gianfranco De Bosio and the Teatro dell'Università di Padova (De Bosio 2016, 87). In 1950 he had also commissioned De Bosio a production of *The Love of Don Perlimplín*... at a festival linked to the Salzburg seminar in American Studies, apparently because he was 'not able to invite a Spanish group' to perform the play (Bentley 1992, 107).
24. It was, in any case, a complex discourse, as the response to Spanish Civil War in Irish newspapers shows (see McGarry 2002).
25. Another illuminating comment of Bentley on how Lorca was perceived among other European playwrights is to be found in his book on Brecht. After quoting a Thornton Wilder's personal remark on how Lorca was less influential than Brecht but 'better any day' and recalling a similar opinion by the very same Eisler, Bentley (2008, 403) asks himself if this was 'a thought that haunted a whole generation.'
26. For the connection between the Abbey, Lyric Theatre and Lyric Players see O'Malley (1988, 16–21); and Connolly (2000, 45–46).
27. As a letter from the writer and film director Liam O'Leary, preserved at Austin Clarke Papers collection at the National Library of Ireland (reference: MS 38,665 /1) shows.
28. In February 1961 the Lyric Players also performed Gregorio Martínez Sierra's *The Kingdom of God*.
29. In 1968 The Lyric Players attracted the patronage of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and become the first Northern Irish theatre ever to receive a subsidy. On the history of the Belfast Lyric Players see Connolly (2000).

30. See box T4/13.
31. See box T4/29. As in *Blood Wedding* production Terence Flanagan was in charge of the decorative panels (Mary O'Malley 1990, 74).
32. In his memoires, Hall (1993, 94) says to have felt attracted by 'Lorca's ability to mix surrealistic poetic theatre with concrete depiction of peasant life', thus not discarding a literal reading (as a depiction of 'peasant life'), but acknowledging the non-realistic, avant-garde, style.
33. See, for example, Hall's obituary in *The Guardian* (Billington 2017).
34. The first British performance of *Doña Rosita* I could trace was Norwich Maddermarket Theatre 1955 production. The following year, students in the final term of Webber-Douglas School staged *Yerma*.

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