

# Homage to Catalonia on stage: an interview with writer Pablo Ley and director Josep Galindo

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Barbara Slaughter of the WSWS interviewed Spanish writer Pablo Ley, who co-adapted George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* for the stage, and Josep Galindo, who directed the recent production. [See: "A new dramatization of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*"]

Barbara Slaughter: It's very unusual for the issues in this play to be treated in the theatre. Socialism has been seen as a lost cause, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Why do you think it is important to stage this play today?

Pablo Ley: The importance of staging the show is that the problems of inequality, of tyranny and injustice still exist. What we see in this play in Spain in 1936, we see in many places today.

[Former Prime Minister Jose Maria] Aznar was a fascist. At this moment the PSOE [Spanish Socialist Party] has a difficult challenge. They cannot just be technocrats; the ethic of the left has to become something again.

BS: I interviewed Jim Allen, who was the scriptwriter for *Land and Freedom*, and he said that this history about the POUM and the role of the Stalinist was almost unknown in Spain. His film had a tremendous impact, especially on young people. I think that you said that this history was suppressed during the 40 years of Franco's rule and then there was total silence after that. Why was there such a silence?

Josep Galindo: There was obviously silence and manipulation during Franco's regime. Then with democracy there was an attempt to "heal the wounds" without disinfecting them somehow. "Let's pretend nothing has happened." The transition was managed by moderate Francoists and many things were silenced. The people who had been prominent under Franco were just recycled into politics. Many of the people who were in the Aznar government were the direct descendents of Franco's ministers, which is amazing. How can you have that? The same man who ruled Galicia under Franco is now the president of the province.

At a certain point there was an attempt at a coup d'état in Spain and the socialists went into power. After that there was a decision taken not to provoke the extreme right wing and not to provoke any other reaction.

There is a strong parallel between the two Socialist electoral victories in Spain. One was after the attempted coup and the other after the recent tragedy of the terrorist attack in Madrid.

There was tremendous opposition in Catalonia, and in Spain generally to the war in Iraq and to the coalition—more than 90 percent of the population. One million and a half went onto the streets to say out loud, "No we don't want it!" Half of the population of Barcelona demonstrated against the war, and the other half that did not go on to the streets felt exactly the same.

But the right-wing government just patronised the population and now they have had to pay the price, because they have been lying about all the issues they have had on the table.

BS: What drew you to the writings of George Orwell?

PL: Thirteen years ago I was working in Barcelona on the radio and I used to go for coffee at the Café Moka. Every time I went there I saw the plaque which commemorated the fact that this was the place where the friends of Andreas Nin last saw him. I also read Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and it touched me very much.

At the same time I was a friend with Calixto Bieito, the director of Teatro Romeo, which I really liked, and I told him I was thinking about this story—that I thought was very important to bring it to the theatre.

Many years later Calixto came to me and said, "I think it is possible to make this play," and so we began. It is very important because there are so many things to explain. We need to remember what happened in this time. There are so many people who have relatives that were deeply affected and whose stories must be told.

We haven't done a play about "good" and "bad" characters but a story that can somehow begin to put in motion the people's memory of that time. We hope that when the audience goes out from the play, it makes them think of their own stories, how we say in Spain "the stories of nameless men."

JG: For example, we know who all the characters are in the play. We together with the actors have been working with these characters and we know who each of them is. But we have not even put their names in the programme because we are representing nameless men. We are trying to render homage to the unknown revolutionary soldiers at the same time

BS: Why was it at this time that Calixto came to you and said, "Now is the time to put on the play"?

JG: It's difficult to say. I think that things happen at the right time because they have to somehow. No one has planned that there will be a change in government in Spain. Probably the people who come to see this play will already have some consciousness about what is happening

PL: Stalinism didn't finish with Stalin's death. Friends of Orwell were killed by the Stalinists. We are celebrating the memory of someone like Orwell who was ethically and morally socialist. I like Orwell because he reduces socialism to a very simple axiom—economic equality. It's education, it's money, it's life, it's dignity and it's common decency.

BS: What is the significance of the play for Spain today in light of the huge opposition to the war and the rejection of the Aznar government?

JG: When we began working on the play it was supposed to be a very strong protest against the government ruling in Spain. Now we see it as a commemoration for the dead. I have seen it now over one hundred times and I still find it very moving.

BS: In what tradition do you place this piece?

JG: We try not to get it too bogged down in tradition. It is very challenging for us to investigate and try to find the right theatrical language to express this play as far as we can. We didn't want to do it like conventional story-telling. And also we try to fly a little.

PL: The problem was we needed to explain something that was very

difficult to explain in a theatre. We tried it in very many ways. I know what theatre I like. It is the most contemporary.

JG: But we were not looking for modernity. We were trying to find the right way to explain as well as we can, as clearly and at the same time as strongly and in a touching way.

PL: The language needs to be contemporary, because if you approach a piece with the outlook of 20 years ago you are not reaching today's audience. You have to reach young people, old people, everybody. The only thing we want is that they come to the theatre and think a little. We realise that the play is very demanding. It is not just entertaining. There is so much going on. You have to decide where you look.

This is the most important thing to explain. We worked from the beginning with all the team, with the filmmaker, with the designer, with both the writers, with the director, with the documentary researcher. And we worked with Orwell's book and translated it into many languages.

The dramaturgy has a line, but it is a line of many lines; there is the images' line, the objects' line, the characters' line and the text line. That is not the most important, because the most important thing is that we put all these lines together and of course integrate it with the music. We worked on this for a year and a half and then we brought the actors together and worked with them for six weeks.

The Spanish actors had a background that allowed them to be more in contact with this story, but they only knew a small part. The big silence that we spoke about means that they did not really understand. In fact, most people in Catalonia don't know of this book.

We try to show the utopia that Orwell found in Barcelona. He looked around, he saw the people, he saw everything and it seemed equality was possible, somewhere, in a big city, so maybe it is possible.

That was his hope. That is why he said, "OK. I am going to the front and I will do what I can to defend what is here." He was ready to do that. It was real at a certain point. I wasn't there, so we will never know. It is not clear to what extent he was projecting his ideal. It is clear that it was not real because it collapsed and Barcelona suddenly seemed another thing.

BS: But that was because of the actions of the Stalinists.

PL: Yes. In the beginning there was a great happiness. But there were also many killings that Orwell doesn't say in the book. What Orwell was trying to express with all that effort was the possibility of a better world. It is more likely that the real situation in Catalonia was the situation that Orwell describes in *Animal Farm*.

BS: Orwell explains that before he went to Spain he wasn't a convinced socialist. But after his experiences in Barcelona he became a socialist.

PL: What Orwell said was that he believed above everything in human beings. On the Aragon front the situation was that they were all on the same level, they had nothing and there was a war. The enemy was in front and the comradeship in the trenches was the utopia.

BS: That was the spirit that existed in Barcelona as well.

PL: When he arrived in Barcelona, people told him that the situation had already deteriorated. And the second time he went back he said, "Where is Barcelona?" because everybody was backing out. Everybody was scared.

BS: Can you tell us something about your history?

PL: I was a playwright and I had won many prizes. Then someone offered me a job as a theatre critic and because I had no money and I took on the job and did it for several years.

Now I am doing what I want to do, that is working on serious projects in the theatre as a writer. This play is part of a trilogy we are working on about the civil war. The second part is about the transition from the Republican time to Francoism and then to the end of Francoism. We are working with the same team, with images, in the same way.

We don't want to make beautiful theatre. We want to explain things. When you are interested in something, you read and you find many things you didn't know before. Then you want to explain it to others. If I read

something I am sure there are many other people who read as I do, but many other people don't know and don't understand. I think you can tell beautiful stories if you like, but stories that are well explained, that is the most beautiful thing.

In this play, what is important, what makes it true in the first part is the images. And in the second part what makes it true is the story. In the second part there are only a few images.

In Orwell's book there are very clearly two parts. The first part is about the war, and we dealt with that from the point of view of a dream because it showed the possibility of everything, that the world was opening up. And for us the second part is end of the dream when the nightmare begins—the end of hope and the beginning of the persecution, the fall of the ideals, the restoration of bourgeois values.

There is this shift of colour, of everything.

JG: You will find that all the details of the play are coming out of the book. Any object that is on the stage is actually referred to in the book somehow—the golf clubs, the oranges, the bicycle. In other words, it's a kind of kaleidoscope.

For us Orwell was looking and writing. We are reading and showing as best as we can. We have to try to see with his eyes if this is possible.

BS: Do you think there is a progressive atmosphere in Spain at the present time?

PL: I think that culturally it is a very interesting time. Barcelona has two million inhabitants, but one million live close to the city. And things there are changing very fast and the theatre has become an expression of that change.

Of course in Barcelona we speak Catalan. And during the Franco years the language was forbidden. And this is the reason our language is so important both politically and artistically.

BS: And what about in the rest of Spain?

PL: We can be separatist or not. We can decide we want to stay inside the rest of Spain, but even if we do stay together there are many differences. I think Catalonia is more democratic, more culturally sophisticated, more interested in Europe, more interested in many things than the rest of Spain. I am not a Catalan nationalist because, for example, if I were I would not use the Spanish form of my name, rather than the Catalanian.

I normally speak Spanish not Catalan. I can speak both but my first language is Spanish. But I am very proud to be a Catalan. I look at the world from my little city, because I want to look at the world from there. I think if we all look at the world from our little countries we can be more particular and at the same time more universal in our artistic outlook.

BS: But surely today the nation is becoming more and more irrelevant.

PL: I think not. Because we are in a very big Europe and we need something close to the heart. I don't need something to fight for. I need something to love. I need my little country. I need to speak to my friends who are there at home. I need it. I don't need to fight... But we are different.

BS: In your play you explain that what Orwell experienced in Spain deepened his feelings for the whole of humanity.

PL: Yes, but I think you can love your little country and also love humanity. I am not rejecting anything. My father was German, my mother was Italian and I was born in Barcelona. As I said, my first language is Spanish, but I feel that my roots are Catalan. But I am not a politician. I am ashamed to try and speak about politics because I don't know very much.

I know there are big problems today because the propaganda is more developed. The Aznar government was elected not because they were brilliant but because of the disasters of the previous Socialist government.

BS: Is it going to be any different now do you think?

PL: We hope that [the Socialist Party's Jose Luis Rodriguez] Zapatero will be a good president. We hope so very much.



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