

Carlos Rodero

An architect of the ephemeral

Excerpts from the interview by Zolnay Ágota in November 2015

Translation by Ladányi Bea

Photographs by Magos Eszter

He arrived to our city fifteen years ago and step by step he has been making his way in the Hungarian theater landscape, with passionate and often risky stage projects although, according to what he admits, «*There is still a lot of things to do*». Producer, stage director, playwright and trainer there are few things in this profession that he has not done. With productions such as *Csodakvintett*, *Excerpts of a Working Diary*, *Orpheus Stomped in Dirt* or *Matruska* based on his own texts or dramaturgical approaches he has earned a reputation as a restless sniper. His work has never left anyone indifferent. From text-based theater to dance, including some pieces for the children's audience, as well as many other activities related to the promotion of Contemporary Spanish Drama and pedagogy, he faces everything. The critics received *Csodakvintett* with joy —perhaps their most unanimous success to date, together with the Hungarian version of *¡Ay, Carmela!* By José Sanchis Sinisterra for the **National Theater of Pécs**— was radically divided with *Orfeo Stomped in Dirt* and has always been interested in other proposals. He has shown his works in venues of great reputation in the city such as the **National Theater of Budapest**, the **National Theater of Dance**, **Milleranis Teatrum**, **Tívoli Theatre** or **MU Theatre**. Premiered in Spain his theater dance show *Heartbreaking*, inspired by poems by Miklós Radnóti and Miguel Hernández and next to his premiere at the **Círculo de Bellas Artes** in Madrid of *Matruska* and *Orfeo*, have been his only visits to Spain in more than a decade. Under the **MISERO PROSPERO Project** brand, it hosts all his personal projects as an independent company.

He welcomes us into his home, and before he starts he confesses to me half-jokingly: «*I'm not sure if I'm a fiction builder, or maybe an architect of the ephemeral... but, please, do not mention that in your article.*»



Why Budapest?

Well, there is not a reason, to be honest. I decided to start traveling outside Spain, after a very intense decade in Barcelona where I was trying to combine the struggle to develop an independent theater company and formalize my training. I was exhausted and felt the need to reflect and see the world, as they say. I arrived in Budapest without any plan, almost by chance, I liked the city and decided to stay for a while. Six months, maybe a year... And you see. Things started to happen right away. It was all very exciting, until one day, after almost two years accepting jobs, meeting fascinating people, I began to wonder if it would not be a great host city to continue my career. It was not premeditated. It just happened. Many times the most important things about our lives are not decided by us.

And did not you miss your country? Did not you think at any time to come back?

Although I am not a nostalgic person, there is always a part of me that misses something. Some people or urban landscapes of Barcelona, some flavours, wine, especially the sea... But when things work and projects are born and you have to fight for them, you simply cannot run away. You focus on what you are doing, work to get it out and meanwhile time runs without warning.

Is it hard to be a foreigner in Budapest? What difficulties have you had to overcome?

The hardest thing has been —still is— the language. I say it is, because although obviously now it's not like when I started, you always have to be learning and correcting yourself, struggling to make yourself understood. The Hungarian language is really beautiful and at the same time extraordinary complex. It does not look like any other one. At the time of facing a text-based piece or understanding with actors and actresses who do not speak English, the rehearsals can be exhausting if you depend only on an interpreter. The positive thing about this is that I have learned to economize a lot on what I say and focus on what is essential. I think directors often talk too much. (*Laughs*) In addition, between professional colleagues there is a common space that goes beyond the language. And if we all want really to communicate, the thing works out. It is not harder to be a foreigner here than anywhere else. Some people look at you weird and think «*What is he doing here, why he does not work at home?*» but there are also some who see you with curiosity and interest and notice that there is a certain expectation. It is not easy to be accepted, but in general it is not easy for you to be accepted anywhere, you always have to earn it. Here the theatrical and dance profession is a very wide and varied community and in general I have never had any serious problem worthy of mention.

What would you highlight from the Hungarian theater scene? How do you think you can contribute?

As I say, one thing that impressed me from the beginning was the variety and the large number of venues in the city. With productions of all kinds. Virtually all have their own company and their loyal public. I have never seen an empty theatre. The

repertoire system allows the theaters to maintain a very high-level offer of different works that, sometimes, endure several seasons. The theater and, although to a lesser extent, the dance are part of the society and the Hungarians value and support the scenic arts, beyond genres and artistic quality. As for my contribution, sometimes I have been asked this question referring to my nationality, «*How can a Spanish contribute...*» and I do not think it has much to do with this... Maybe because one ends up adapting to the way of doing things here, what I have learned, my culture... well, they are small things. What I bring is my own way of seeing things, my personal world. This is very difficult to sell.



How it all started?

I wrote and then directed a play for puppets and actors for the company *BaoBab Theatre*, which we then premiered at the Kolibrí Theater. That was my first professional job in Budapest. *Three wishes*. It was a cross between a tale of Western European tradition with another Slavic one, well known in Russia. With an adaptation of the Bunraku technique, and the participation of actors, it was very successful with the audience and critics and was on the bill for two years. Children adored the play, but the adults laughed the most.

Then, Csodakvintett arrived.

Yes, a couple of years later. The truth is that it was one of those productions in which you spend a good time from the beginning. I worked with fantastic team and so everything is much easier. The actors were great. We managed to get rid of the grotesque, the caricature, which in principle is something like a black hole in its education. I was training them a couple of weeks before starting the rehearsals and then everything was really smooth. The audience had a great time and the critics pushed me to the stars. It was a great gift.

From Excerpts of a working diary, you began to experiment with the text and the physical involvement of the actors.

Excerpts was a difficult process. They were a moment that I was very involved on a personal level and that is not always a good idea. I also wanted to try things that, to

put it somehow, went far enough from the conventional and the effort to communicate it to the actors with the inconvenience of the language was monumental. They were great and in the end we got a good show that received good reviews, and the impact with the audience was really strong. Several months after the premiere, I continued receiving messages and comments. It was all very intense.

With your original training, based in the text theater, how did you finally get to dance?

I've always had a very special interest in dance, I do not know if I could explain exactly why. When I went to the Institut del Teatre de Barcelona, where, as you say, I studied dramaturgy and stage direction, when I could, let's say as extracurricular activities I collaborated with dance companies that asked me for dramatic advice or that I wrote some text for their show. Maybe it was just a flirt, but I've always felt a great attraction for the theater of movement and from my work as a stage director, if I can, I try to give a visual and corporeal component to the texts I use. It was here that I began to consider creating shows that went beyond the text or that included it in an alternative way. I started collaborating with choreographers and dancers. Then I realized that this formula maybe opened the doors to me to express many more things and with much more impactful languages. Although soon I also realized that I wanted to transcend what has been labelled as dance-theater, that is, dance performances more or less dramatized or with some punctual dramatic component.



And the answer is the Physical Theater.

Well, yes. This expression has always been a little exasperating to me. It is a kind of perverse redundancy. Although it does not stop insinuating a metaphysically possible chance, I mean that if there is Physical Theater there must also be a theater that is not, it is a fascinating idea. But, yes, we accept this term that the British made fashionable, some companies like DV8 or *Theater de Complicité*, and that's how we understand each other. The problem arises when it comes to defining what it is. I cannot think of another expression that has more meanings, it seems like everything comes in. A show of mime or clown is physical theater and also a contemporary dance in which the dancers use the theatrical word at some point... Actually, for me Physical Theater is synonymous with Total Theater, that is, a show in which everything fits,

also, why not, the text. And of course, I'm also trying to find my own personal definition.

But then, do you prefer the dancers than the actors?

(Laughs.) No, no. Absolutely not. They are different, not only their training obviously, but their motivations, their objectives, even sometimes the treatment or the way of working, is different. I know the actors very well. I like them and it could not be otherwise. I was an actor myself. I think I understand their processes and their weaknesses. I like to accompany them. With the dancers I engage in another kind of relationship. But in the end, what I'm always looking for is the performer. Who may incorporate the skills of both worlds. And I do not mean only an actor who can dance or a dancer who is able to pronounce a text... But the actors understand the corporal processes, the training and the discipline of the dancers and these incorporate the dramatic intuition, the scenic presence of actors. The result is the performer, trained and prepared for a physical theater show.

Matruska, Heartbreaking, Orpheus Stomped in Dirt.

Yes, they were very intense years of work with choreographers and dancers... Exciting. *Matruska* had several versions and we travelled a lot. *Heartbreaking* was commissioned by the Cervantes Institute that we premiered at the National Dance Theater and then went to Madrid. The challenge was to do something like parallel lives between two poets, Miklós Radnóti, Hungarian and Miguel Hernández, who had many things in common. Through a selection of poems, which then were not pronounced on stage. Imagine. It had a lot of acceptance.

Orfeo Stomped in Dirt has undoubtedly been your most controversial production. How did you live that experience?

It was a huge production effort. We work with a jazz band, Balázs Elemer Group, very well known here, who adapted the music of Monteverdi and played live and invited a Spanish performer. I felt free and, for once, there was no self-censorship or restriction. The result was a very powerful show that divided the whole audience. There were people who loved it and others rejected it outright. Very very good reviews and others, well... We also presented it in Madrid and it worked well there. I have a bittersweet memory of everything, many things happened to us. And there were some bad times. But it is one of the jobs that I am most satisfied with.

What place does pedagogy occupy in your professional life?

I always say that pedagogy—which I prefer to call training—is the utopic part of our profession. The dream of many is to work with performers trained by themselves. That's why when I run a workshop I always work with the participants as if they were going to work with me in one of my productions. I like to think that I give them tools and inspiration so they can be more creative, so they can be more involved in the process of building a piece. Obviously the reality imposes its rules and the performer

has to work in circumstances that do not favor him at all to what he has been experiencing in his training. It has to adapt or perish. Myself, as a director, I have to do things that sometimes clearly go against what I teach, which is nothing other than what I would like to do to myself. These are the contradictions of professional life. But what matters is that, whenever possible, the circumstances should be created in order to work in the best possible way. Many times it is not possible, but sometimes, yes.



You mean the independent company-stable theater dichotomy?

It is not so simple. That said, it seems that independent companies have more freedom and can be more creative, but this is not always the case. Economic or production difficulties can stifle a project and become a server for several masters. In the same way, in a stable theater, where everything is hierarchized and there is a specialization of work, there may appear small loopholes that allow you to do something interesting. But, yes, in this type of theaters it is practically impossible to impose your style of work. It is the opposite. And you have to adapt and do what you can with what you have. When I work with my own company, of course, in each assembly I fight to get things done as I think they should be done... But that does not mean that I always succeed.

What are you planning?

Now I'm preparing a staging from a selection of stories by Patricia Highsmith and the premiere in Budapest of two montages that I showed last season in the countryside. And a physical-theatre dance pieces based on *Las Ruinas Circulares* de Borges.

