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Spregelburd's *Stubbornness*

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In recent years I have almost religiously gone to see something by or featuring Rafael Spregelburd whenever I visit Argentina, on stage or screen. On my last trip, this March, alongside two films (Florencia Percia's debut *Cetáceos* and Lucrecia Martel's historical drama *Zama*) and a talk, in conversation with the academic Gabriel Guz, it was his ambitious play *La terquedad* (*Stubbornness*). Spregelburd is widely acknowledged as one of Argentina's most significant contemporary dramatists. His work appears regularly on European festival stages, and has won prizes worldwide. He has translated Harold Pinter, Sarah Kane, and other British playwrights for performance in Spanish. Yet it is a number of years now since *The Argentine Moment* appeared at London's Royal Court, and his name will hardly be familiar to British readers. Some may recognise him as a screen actor, playing the proverbially tortured political artist, gruff husband to the eponymous heroine, and love rival to Sam Huntington's lead in Nico Casavecchia's *Finding Sofía* (2016).

The first work of his I saw was *SPAM*, not to be confused with the Monty Python musical of the same name. When it was described to me – a 140-minute *sprechoper* with multimedia and musical interludes, and in which the 30 scenes can be performed in any order whatsoever – I was almost immediately put off. But it is a mark of Spregelburd's intelligent writing and charismatic performance that being harangued, and occasionally sung at, karaoke-style, on a series of mismatched themes by a stocky man in an ill-fitting tuxedo for over two hours, is in fact a thrilling piece of political theatre.

Spregelburd's works rely on intricate construction, multimedia presentation, and seemingly arbitrary, if not perverse creative constraints – an *OULIPO* for the stage, let's say. Telling the story of a linguistics professor who mistakenly answers the junk email of the title, and subsequently loses his memory, *SPAM* defies meaningful summary. In part, it deals with the proliferation of stuff in modern life – rubbish, pollution, opinions, communication – and the possibly apocalyptic effects this will have. A recurring motif is an island of plastic in the middle of the ocean. A hallmark of Spregelburd's stage-writing is single-minded confidence in the appeal of his vision, following through on ideas that when précised sound ridiculous but in his version cohere and persuade. Having his musical sidekick, Federico Zypce, dress in scuba gear for much of the performance, or deciding the order of the scenes with a leaf blower, might seem at best peculiar, but in *SPAM* it makes total sense.

In 2016 I saw a revival of *Apátrida, doscientos años y unos meses* (*Stateless, two hundred years and a few months*), which was initially penned for the 2010 Argentine independence festivities. It is a very odd play to mark a national celebration, for *Apátrida* tells the story of one who jibs at the proud tales countries tell themselves. On Christmas day 1891, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, a duel took place between a painter and an art critic. The writer, Max Eugenio Auzón, had waged epistolary

war on the artist, Eduardo Schiaffino, in the pages of a local evening newspaper. Their disagreement was over the existence or not of a “national art” in Argentina. The tone of the exchange had risen steadily, until Schiaffino took offence and challenged his rival to settle the matter *mano a mano*. *Apátrida* is another spoken-opera that uses this historical footnote to question the relationship between art and the nation-state. The context was of an ongoing debate about patriotism and cosmopolitanism: should the young nation train teachers or import them? Should civic buildings be designed by local architects, or by imported talent from overseas? For some contemporary intellectuals, the foreign signatures on the Teatro Colón or the Casa Rosada were marks of backwardness; for others, of good sense.

There is much in *Apátrida* that simply shouldn't work on stage: Spregelburd skipping rope and then strapping on a heart monitor; his musical accompanist, Zypce, throwing ball bearings over his steam-punk instruments; and a dance routine to Depeche Mode's “Personal Jesus” to cap it all. A creative bomb perhaps exploded in the script, and no one has dared to cut anything out, or attempts at cutting have had exactly the opposite result: the result is bricolage Brechtianism, held together by the gigantic, magnetic central performance, and the layers and loops of Zypce's Heath-Robinsonian instrumentation. *Apátrida* gives a sense of the scope and strangeness of Spregelburd's imagination.

La terquedad is the first large-scale work by Spregelburd that I have seen. It premiered in Frankfurt, at the 2008 Positionen Festival and has appeared around Europe, but only last year, 2017, did it arrive in Argentina. It needs a big theatre, a large stage, a numerous and very professional cast, and a lot of logistical support. It has been running at the Teatro Nacional Argentino - Teatro Cervantes in Buenos Aires, since the end of last year. The Teatro Cervantes currently hides behind scaffolding and hoardings, but under the directorship of Alejandro Tantanián has gone from being a rather tired space staging Argentine classics, to the home of the very best of contemporary theatre and performance in the city. One thing catches the eye outside and in the foyer: the youth of the audience here tonight.

The play's importance is only partly intrinsic. *La terquedad* is the final play in a heptalogy based on Hieronymus Bosch's “Table of the Seven Deadly Sins”. Previous instalments include *Paranoia* and *Idiocy*. Stubbornness, like the latter two, is not actually one of Bosch's deadly sins – a rather typical Spregelburd caprice. Indeed none of the plays have titles that feature in Bosch's painting. If anything, the play explores wrath: in Bosch's wheel of sins, “ira” appears at the bottom, and is only scene that can be viewed the right way up. Like *La terquedad*, it is the centre, and the end of the cycle.

Bosch's scene of *ira* depicts a woman breaking up a fight between two peasants, one of whom has a triangular table on his head, for reasons which would have been clearer to medieval viewers. Scenes depicting one person in the middle of a senseless, even comic fight between two others recur throughout Spregelburd's play. The nature and effects of stubbornness and anger, though, are just some of a host of questions posed over the three-plus hours of the show: what is progress; what is the relationship between science and the spirit; and why does mankind so often mistake the arrival of fascism for a new version of humanism?

Spregelburd has spoken of his peculiar relationship with Bosch's painting, and how it informs his composition across the seven plays. He also set himself a series of constructive rules or obligations: operations with time; operations with foreground and background, or figure and depth; operations around morality; and the idea of a "lost dictionary" – that characters have access to explanations that the audience can only infer. Bosch's work is full of symbols, but their meanings seem lost now. The playwright gives the example of the horn, recreated with the cacophonous sound that starts each act – a temporal marker but also a reference to the painting. Bosch's symbolism was meaningful to contemporaries, but today the triangular table on the man's head or the horns on the floor hold more sense (*sentido*) than meaning (*significado*). The "Table" is full of what Spregelburd calls "symbolic menace" but whose precise nature has blurred. Also important is medieval painting's conception of time: a journey can be represented by showing a character in multiple places at once in the same frame: unity of space but not of time, like a cartoon strip, but without the borders. In a twist on this method, Spregelburd's play runs the same sequence of events three times.

La terquedad is set at the very end of the Spanish Civil War, in Francoist-held Valencia, 1 April 1939. Spregelburd also directs and plays the lead, Jaume Planc, a police commissar. Planc is a political pragmatist: while claiming to be a good fascist, he served untroubled under the previous Republican administration. Local anarchists have stolen some goats and a plough from a minor landowner, Aribau (Pablo Seijo), who also happens to be married to Planc's ex-wife, Magda (Andrea Garrote). They have also run off with his daughters, fleeing to the frontier with France. Planc is trying desperately to avoid having to investigate. The opening of the play is bewildering and breathtaking, the cast acting with what Spregelburd calls "Latin velocity", with no concession to the audience's understanding. He admitted in conversation that after twenty minutes few people will have any idea what is going on. The effect is deliberate, not least as, with the action repeating twice more, there is the opposite risk of being too explicit. This is just one of the challenges Spregelburd makes of his public: total attention is required to keep up.

The opening exchange with Aribau is played for laughs, but underlying the wisecracks is a debate about the nature of property, informed by the history of Spanish anarchism and worker resistance. The Spanish Civil War is especially poignant when viewed from Argentina. Firstly, Argentina received many exiles during and after the conflict, and anarchists had strong ideological and personal links to the political left in Buenos Aires and the far south. Secondly, lawyers and judges in Argentina have in recent years been active in applying international law to prosecute crimes against humanity committed by Franco's forces and regime, allowing the dictator's victims and family to seek redress denied to them in their own country. So a repeated joke about the poet García Lorca, murdered by Falangists in 1936, and what he has been up to in recent years, is at once pointed and darkly funny. Antonio Machado, dead across the border in France, is also mentioned. For Spregelburd, the Spanish Civil War functions as an icon for the loss of the values of modernity. This responds to one of the original questions posed by the Frankfurt festival organisers who first commissioned the play: why has so much progress been made in science but so little in ethics?

Planc is avoiding the obligations of his work not just for political expediency. He has a much bigger project in train: he is launching a dictionary. Here Spregelburd is in his element. The police commissar has invented a language, a rationalised quasi-Esperanto, to solve what he sees as the inefficiency and ambiguity of verbal communication. Planc has coined a numerical system, stripping words and letters to their most basic elements, to find the hidden order behind language. “One sound for every letter, no letter without a sound,” is Planc’s motto. He calls this language “Katak”, and it is brilliantly idiotic. What’s more, he has invented a mysterious machine, hidden upstairs for much of the first two acts, to record and translate this irrationally rational language. And a Russian translator, Dmitri (Santiago Gobernori), wants to test Planc’s invention, perhaps to co-opt it for the Soviet cause.

Planc is based on a real person, Juan Ramón Palanca Gómez. Palanca had a vision in a dream of a perfect, God-given language, and the resulting dictionary and grammar were published in Valencia. In 1978, the Spanish daily *El país* announced that Palanca was convening the first poetry competition for “Tupal” – the name he gave to his “idioma universal”. It could be mastered, he claimed, in four hours. Spregelburd had owned a copy of the dictionary for years, and most of the words – except for “baubau”, for dog – are taken directly from Palanca’s own idiom. For Palanca, actual language was a mess, and only rational principles could solve it. Spregelburd takes Palanca’s ideas to their ridiculous, but surprisingly logical conclusions: in the play, he comes, accidentally, to invent cybernetics – the idea that the world can be registered as a simple combination of on/off values. Behind Spregelburd’s mockery lurk Walter Benjamin’s ideas about translation and Umberto Eco’s study of ideal languages.

The set for *La terquedad* is huge, and revolves. There are three acts, each covering the same time period, but from a different angle, revealed by the rotating set. We see the house from three sides, and in the final act a large and previously unnoticed back garden. Each act’s perspective includes partial views on the rest of the house. Windows and doors, and interior lighting, mean that some of the off-stage/in the wings activity is visible during the sequences that focus on the other angles. This is the concept behind *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or Noises Off* – to turn the theatre round for the audience – taken to the nth degree. The house itself is a bizarre construction. A Le Corbusier-esque design, but decorated by a Spaniard, it has paintings by a Valencian (Sorolla) and local objects – including hunting trophies and stuffed wild boar. The backdrop is a painting of Turís, outside Valencia. The set also gives the impression of a crisis of some sorts. It is not clear if the paintings have been looted, or if the décor is being moved. There are gaps on the walls, too – another nod to Spregelburd’s love of the missing datum.

In the second act, the stage turns through 90 degrees. We see the room of Alfonsa, Planc’s ill or convalescing daughter, upstairs and previously obscured, with the action of the play running again, from a new viewpoint. Much of the comedy results from realising what was going on in the first act behind closed doors. We discover hidden back staircases, and once muffled sounds become telling dialogue. A new player, Javier Drolas as Parson, an English militiaman, enters the action, having been hidden away throughout the whole of the first act. There is an important role for a previously incidental character, the venal priest Padre Francisco (Diego Velázquez), who is busy trying to persuade Parson to burn his church down, to encourage greater faith among his parishioners. Neither shares a language,

and much fun is had with their mutual misunderstandings. The character of Dmitri, the Russian translator (and possibly spy), is also developed in the second act, with his growing interest in Planc's invented language. Layering absurdity upon absurdity, we discover that the source for the terms in Katak is Alfonsa herself, or at least her fever-dream murmurings, partly inspired by sordid attentions of Padre Francisco.

La terquedad is a farce, in the vein of Alan Ayckbourn or Michael Frayn, but a farce of ideas, drawn from history, politics, and linguistics. In the second act, Planc reveals his invention, an automatic translating machine for his new language, which he calls a "CPU". For Dmitri, Planc's ideas about rational languages and hidden but shared concepts are profoundly communist. This horrifies Planc, an obedient if distracted Francoist. A philosophical point about the relationship between language and politics is played for laughs, and this is just one of many concepts thrown out in passing that would be enough for a whole play. There are several "MacGuffins" – Dmitri's briefcase, Planc's machine, or the central unknown, the apparent digression, another of Alfonsa's ravings, about a little girl lost down a well. Is this a third sister, or one of the two surviving girls? It is never fully cleared up. In Act III we see the hole, now cordoned off, behind the house. The mystery is no closer to being solved.

Spiegelburg spoke of trying to portray the collision between different orders, which reason works hard to eradicate. There is a clash between complexity and linearity that he explores in this play, as a central conflict in modern life: that we still think like Newtonians but know we live in a world of protons. Spiegelburg has stated that the role of theatre is to compete with reality. Drama has the power to free us from the oppression of received common sense. Operations with time are key to this. Planc receives a delayed letter, predicting a glorious victory, from his now dead son, drowned during the Battle of the River Ebro, undifferentiated from the Republican enemies he was fighting. If the dead write back to us, then our future is the past. Yet Planc seems unable to see that his future might not view him as he hopes. Riffing on Walter Benjamin, and his "Angel of History", we hear in Act III a painfully comic exchange about how the "good fascists" hope to be judged.

Farce does not lend itself to rounded characters, but *La terquedad* relies on empathy as well as humour, and all the actors achieve this. Spiegelburg is a slab of comic energy, playing Planc as a "humanist fascist" – the combination is what makes him interesting, and what creates troubling emotions for the audience. Analía Couceyro, one of Argentina's most gifted screen and stage actors, as Planc's other daughter, Fermina, is a model of physical control and emotional flexibility. Not strictly an ensemble cast, they are well drilled and mesh like oiled cogs. The physical comedy, clowning even, includes leitmotifs, as when characters smooth down their trousers, as if in search of calm and order. All of the characters, as absurd or unattractive as they may be, inspire sympathy or understanding, such is the nuance of Spiegelburg's worldview and the strength of the acting.

The denouement is at once farcical and sad, revolving around a misrecognised note, either a hitlist of republicans or the guests for Planc's book-launch. Having realised that his beloved linguistic invention is, at heart, communist, Planc storms out and returns with a Flintstones-esque club to destroy it all. News then comes that victory has been declared for the Nationalists, and all celebrate. But is this triumph pyrrhic, and how will it be viewed by history? This is the play's central dramatic irony, and

evidence of the eponymous stubbornness of Planc and his comrades in arms. Then, suddenly, wrath takes hold, and a bloody finale is unleashed: if not historical opprobrium, then a more immediate tragic fate of loss and betrayal is to be Planc's. Our empathy lasts until the end, when Planc and his deputy emerge into the fray wearing Argentina Federal Police (PFA) bulletproof vests. In one sense this is a rather crassly made point, as the PFA have a terrible reputation for violence and corruption in Argentina, and have been very visibly present in the repression of protests and marches under the current government there. But with one wardrobe change we wake up to the fact that Planc, for all his charm and wit, is still a fascist. "Fascism is the eternal theme", Spregelburd has said. Here he connects forms of authoritarianism separated by decades and an ocean.

In the accompanying booklet published by the Teatro Nacional (*La propiedad es el robo. Notas sobre La terquedad de Rafael Spregelburd*), Andrea Garrote, a regular Spregelburd collaborator, notes that the play aims to answer a central question: "How many things can happen at once?" Lots, infinite even, perhaps is the answer, and thus the logic of the interlocking consecutive scenes. *La terquedad* is, like many of Spregelburd's plays, an architectural work, as Garrote also points out. Eduardo del Estal notes that his drama relies on speed: very much happens, masses of material is packed in, over the hour or so of the play's action. But it never becomes heavy or portentous. Spregelburd believes that in theatre the audience is always interested in the future, the "devenir"; the novel, in contrast, sketches the present. Theatre creates the illusion of a "virtual future life". For all the grandeur of this staging, he is modest about what a play can do: "Our tools (*elementos*) are unsophisticated (*toscas*): they are people and objects that move".

Audiovisual media play an important but unobtrusive role. The music, by Nicolás Varchausky, mixes classical, electronica, and folk, to add emotional layers, with nuance and restraint that one would not expect in a farce. Across the three acts, similar musical themes appear, but in different versions, as if emotionally twisted by the action. Varchausky's music is emotive, but often distorted, dark, and dissonant. Projections and intricate lighting changes mark time and shifts of perspective; Fermina is accompanied by shadows of creepers climbing the inner walls of the house. The whole second act is lit and decorated in sepia, with characters changing the colour palette of their costumes. The room is shaped in cinemascope format – and so suddenly it looks like we are watching a film. There is no obvious reason for this, other than to disconcert the audience and bracket the second act from the first and third.

The ending, like that of *SPAM*, is meta-theatrical: "So many words ... Let's all go", says Alfonsa, with her dying breaths. Other characters lay dead or dying on stage. Fermina is left to preserve the dictionary. In a final song, the playwright's concession to musical theatre, the cast sing that "Dios nos deja y se va" – God leaves us, only to return in language, as in Planc's fantastical, unintentionally communist, invention. At over three hours long, *La terquedad* makes physical as well as intellectual demands of its audience. Spregelburd and his team stretch the limits of what contemporary theatre can achieve, combining political analysis that crosses time and space with provocative philosophical investigations. His work deserves a bigger audience internationally.

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Ben Bollig is Professor of Spanish American Literature at the University of Oxford. His recent publications include the chapter on contemporary poetry in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin American Poetry* (ed. Stephen Hart), *Politics and Public Space in Contemporary Argentine Poetry: The Lyric and the State* and, as a co-editor, *Latin American Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Routledge). He first wrote about Spregelburd for *Oxford Magazine*, which he co-edits.