



## DANIEL BIANCO

### ESCENA DE LA PUREZA

By Raúl Asenjo

"The theatre is a school of weeping and of laughter, a free forum, where men can question norms that are outmoded or mistaken and explain with living example the eternal norms of the human heart and human sentiment". (Federico García Lorca, from "Words on Theatre")

I am convinced that to begin to talk of Daniel Bianco it is appropriate to cite these words that Federico García Lorca pronounced at a conference, one evening shortly before he was assassinated. I often feel the impulse to commence with these lines the correspondence that I mail every day to those who, like me, are involved in the project that Bianco has just started as Director of Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid.

And this, not because it is difficult to speak of Daniel Bianco the scenographer; not because his work lacks a certain fascination, but because a large part of his body of work cannot easily be read simply through the aesthetic appeal of his designs nor can a conceptual reading be extracted from the perspective of a critical interpretation.

Yes, Bianco is a scenographer, without doubt, yet to speak of him merely from this point of view would surely be simplistic. In his work as a scenographer there is a valid internal coherence, the mark of a genuine man of theatre, to whom it is paramount to give physical space to that free forum, that school of weeping and laughter.

From a young age Daniel was no stranger to the theatre; when as a child every Sunday his parents - Emilio, a professional portrait artist, and Julia, an art teacher for children with special needs - and his aunt Matilde, his true accomplice and guide, took him to the theatre.

He found his place in the world in a theatre located in Avenida Corrientes in Buenos Aires.

*"Corrientes, by night! While the other streets sleep tight to awake at six in the morning, Corrientes, the vagabond street, turns on all its luminous signage at seven in the evening, and adorned with green, red and blue rectangles, shoots onto white walls its methylene blue and picric acid yellow reflections, as if it were the glorious provocation of a pyrotechnic display. The street that one loves, that one holds dear. The street along which it is a delight to stroll from one end to the other as it is the street of idleness, of wandering, of oblivion, of merriment, of pleasure."*<sup>1</sup>

He was fifteen when he found his place in the no-place of a scenario, covered by a large dark cloth. From that time on, in Bianco dwell two names: Fabià Puigserver and Nuria Espert.

The company founded by Armando Moreno and his wife Nuria Espert arrived in Buenos Aires to stage “Yerma”: they came for a week and remained for several months.

From that evening on, Daniel took care of that “no-place” in the Avenida Corrientes once or twice a week, where he experienced a kind of epiphany, which over the years would prove to be a revelation. After the show he would wait for the company of comedians in a nearby café. He never once managed to exchange a word with them. It was enough simply to observe them, perhaps because *“we don’t feel the truth when it is within us, but how great and how it hollers when it emerges into the open with arms raised!”*

Externalised, in the erect body and in the deep voice of the actress that he so admired, it seemed to be his own truth.

He finished high school without being able to give a name to the desire to occupy that “no-place”. He graduated from the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de la Nación “Ernesto de la Cárcova” where he was taught by two highly regarded experts: Mario Vanarelli and Germen Gepi.

The following year, after Vanarelli’s retirement, a young teacher arrived at the school – Hugo De Ana, already well known for his early productions at Teatro Colòn. This encounter would prove to be a determining factor in Bianco’s life, in particular, what significance it would have for his future career.

He himself affirms to have learnt all that today is his defining characteristic: in theatre, one must be prepared to do all that is necessary to get a show up and running. It is for this reason that right from the start he felt that he fitted in and in order to pay for his studies he set to work painting backdrops in the scenery shop of the Teatro Cervantes, or as an assistant or propman wherever called upon.

He wasn’t hellbent on designing a project for the Colòn, the object of desire of all the students of the scenography course at Buenos Aires, because, as he himself says, “I never expected more than I had and that has allowed me to obtain more than I ever could have imagined”.

At the age of twenty-four he finally made his debut as a scenographer with “Casa de muñecas” (“Dolls House”) for a cycle of dramas that were broadcast by a TV network in Argentina.

For a period of four months, in that role, he proved to himself to be capable of heading the creative team throughout the entire cycle.

It wasn’t long before he returned to the theatre: Josè Luis Alonso hired Hugo De Ana to design the scenery for Gluck’s “Armide”, for the Teatro de la Zarzuela opera season, at that time the town’s only opera house. De Ana took the young Bianco on as his assistant. The year was 1985; Argentina had just emerged from a bloody dictatorship while in Spain the newly elected Socialist Party embarked upon a vigorous programme of building and refitting theatres nationwide. Great expectations, perhaps excessive, but the illusion of being able to work in Spain prevailed, while also rediscovering his roots, leaving where just as forty years previously his Asturian grandmother had left to seek fortune in the Americas.

“Cinco Lorcas, cinco” literally opened the doors to him at the Centro Dramático Nacional (CDN). To the theatre’s director, **Lluís Pasqual**, on behalf of Gerardo Vera (who at the time was working on the shoot for “El Amor Brujo” directed by Carlos Saura), he presented this brand new project of “García Lorca” pieces. That same morning, the artistic coordinator had quit his job and so Pasqual and Josè Luis Tamayo offered Bianco the post. When he asked Pasqual in what being artistic coordinator entailed, the reply still resonates today, it has become a guiding principle throughout his career: *“In theatre we must all find our own niche. You must be your own boss.”* And he began to find that niche: he became assistant to the Technical Director of the CDN, he had the opportunity to tour with some of the best shows of **Lluís Pasqual’s** Spanish period. There is no doubt that to the roster of Espert, Puigserver and Hugo De Ana, one must add that of **Lluís Pasqual** as one of the personalities who have had a major influence on his professional life and artistic temperament and with whom he has become skilled at the creation of a project day by day and his friendship is comparable only to the reciprocal admiration that they themselves declare.

In 1987, he made his debut as a scenographer designing for Emilio Sagi with “Don Gil de Alcalà” in the theatre that he currently directs. Looking back, he doesn’t hide the fact that the success garnered from “Don Gil de Alcalà” alarmed him, hence the decision to pursue a career in technical

direction. That decision did not weigh upon him because the periods in which he worked as an assistant then as Technical Director at Teatro Real in Madrid and the brief period in the Compañía Nacional del Teatro Clásico made him the artist that he is today. He believes that Ezio Frigerio will never be aware of how much he learnt while working at Frigerio's side as Technical Director in the creations that the Italian scenographer designed for Teatro Real and he feels indebted to Pina Bausch or Bob Wilson, whom he considers responsible for his way of interpreting theatre, beyond the influence that they may or may not have in his work as a scenographer.

"Resolving a technical problem in the working of a design sketch – or in planning rehearsals for an opera or when developing the programme for a Zarzuela – I consider this aspect just as creative as designing a set for "Tosca". Wherever I happen to be, I endeavour to channel my creative energy into the sole aim of creating a stage show.

A writer needs only his hands, a pen and some paper in order to produce his work while a stage designer's hands are his team of painters, carpenters, workshop and stage technicians who must then translate the stage designer's desired effect and vocabulary into their own. This activity of interpretation among technicians and the scenographer I have always viewed as a predominately creative enterprise as it's about an act of generosity: you offer your labour, your time and the sum of your abilities so as to realize the creative concept of another. I have applied this same attitude to my career as a scenographer. I don't design scenery while thinking about the best way to show off my acquired or innate talents; that ego that we all possess, I always try to put it at the service of the story that the director wants to narrate."

At the age of fifty, he again accepts a project as stage designer from Emilio Sagi. "Yo llego tarde, pero siempre llego" ("I arrive late but I always arrive"), he insists on many occasions with those whom are his collaborators at Teatro de la Zarzuela.

With "Le Chanteur de Mexico", for Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, he returns to stage design and ends his career as Technical Director of Teatro Real. Since that time his name has been linked with a number of Emilio Sagi's most important productions.

"Don Giovanni" for the Teatro Colón de Buenos Aires; "Die Feen" and "The Sound of Music" for the Châtelet; "I due Figaro" for the Salzburg Festival, the Teatro Real in Madrid and the Festival di Ravenna; "Carmen", "I Puritani" or the hyper-realistic "Il Turco in Italia" for the Municipal de Santiago de Chile; "Tancredi" in Chile and for the Lausanne and Philadelphia opera houses, these are some of the most celebrated shows staged by the Bianco/Sagi partnership. Let's not forget titles such as "Il Mondo della Luna" by Haydn, "La corte de Faraòn" by Lleò, "Myrentxu" by Guridi, "L'Isola disabitata" by Manuel García or "La Vedova Allegra" by Lehár, for the Teatro Arriaga de Bilbao, where Daniel Bianco was Assistant Director to Emilio Sagi, and where their combined efforts succeeded in converting this theatre into a national landmark for opera performance, in particular for the Spanish opera genre.

Other than that of Sagi, one needs to cite the name of Giancarlo del Monaco, whose "Tosca" and "Madame Butterfly" for Ópera de Tenerife, merit a special mention, that of Gustavo Tambascio (Händel's "Giulio Cesare" for Teatro Argentino di La Plata and Chekhov's "The Seagull" for the Arriaga de Bilbao), and the name of Ruggero Raimondi (Verdi's "Attila" for ABAO).

"Yes, there are elements in my stage designs that give form to a kind of personal code: the tulle of the proscenium, the use of mirrors, the oversized elements, the elements that are repeated in order to create workable spaces, the combination of firm, fixed flooring and one of sand (the former lets you count on a stable surface where the singers can execute the most difficult arias with a certain ease while the latter helps the singers obtain a more theatrical form of movement) ... But I don't think you can say that this serves to elaborate my discourse as a plastic artist. These decisions always belong to the stage manager, not me. I have always viewed scenography as a craft, a profession that is much more artisan than is often supposed."

Bianco understands that the theatre is a laboratory cum workshop where one has the opportunity to create and a trove of sentiment and emotions to experience on the stage but also beyond: in the platea among the seating, with the audience, in the dressing rooms with the artists and in the production and administration offices with the theatre staff.

Everyone who works with him knows that he puts so much passion into engaging a great singer for the coming season or convincing those responsible that the theatre can host more activities, so that the public that it accommodates can make use of this space and spend more time there, with more convenience and so that the quality of the shows is always the best possible. Bianco is the type of creator who tries to transform that no-place that is the scenario into a place that everyone can inhabit, if only for a brief moment in time.

If the dream of one originates is rooted in Spain, the dream of one who has maintained and nurtured it awakens him every morning.

This passion and this honesty he has learnt from Nuria Espert, who interprets Medea with the same intensity whether in the Roman Theatre of Mérida or on the stage of a little provincial theatre while on tour.

I believe there is no better way to sum up Daniel Bianco than with the same words with which **Lluís Pasqual** described him: “scenography is a delicate and complex art. A good scenographer is an artist who possesses a strong personality. His creative expression, however, does not belong to him, as it does to a painter, but he puts it at the service of an author, or of a libretto, a piece of music, the insights of a stage manager ...while still retaining his imprint, his look. This requires a generous spirit. Good stage designers are those that approach theatre with a humanist outlook, for whom the voice of a singer or an actor is more important than their own design aesthetic; they are the ones who follow through the venture of putting a show on the road, they accompany it with a creative eye and the hands of an artisan, they attempt to create a place in which is ignited that spark of beauty that opens the heart of the spectator and immerses him in an undreamed of world... Daniel Bianco belongs to this category of artist. By way of intuition or by know-how. And also, and not least, because he loved – and continues to do so – with undoubted passion the theatre, with or without music, before even knowing that he would become a scenographer.”

Notes:

1. Aguafuertes porteñas, by Roberto Arlt
2. Yerma, by Federico García Lorca

Daniel Bianco

He studied the Arts and majored in Film and Theatre Design at the Scuola Superiore di Belle Arti della Nazione “Ernesto de la Càrcova. After graduating, he immediately decided to work in theatre and relocated to Spain. In 1983, he began working as an assistant in the stage design and wardrobe departments in a number of productions, working alongside eminent artists.

Since 1986, he has combined his career as a scenographer with his activities in stage management and production at Teatro Real (Madrid), at Teatro María Guerrero and in the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico. Nel 2008, he was made Assistant Artistic Director of Teatro Arriaga de Bilbao and in 2015 he became Artistic Director of Teatro de la Zarzuela.

As a scenographer, his vast experience has led him to collaborate with stage directors such as Lluís Pasqual, Emilio Sagi, Giancarlo del Monaco, Gustavo Tambascio, or bass-baritone and actor Ruggero Raimondi, in several Zarzuela opera, ballet and studio productions in Spain and in theatres throughout Europe and America.

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