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PROLOGUE

A dramaturgy of metaphor and meaning

1. Rosa M. Isart's formation (Barcelona, 1970) as an Art historian and her belonging to the star sign of the twins must stand up for, at least partly, a dual writing style which tends to advance by expressively intertwining very powerful metaphors and dialogues that go from the strictest realism to the surreal and most grotesque insanities. A passionate lover of drama, Isart makes her point with the strong imagery that she wraps her texts in and that fills them with meaning and suggestion. Her playwriting does not respond to the hegemonic patterns of Escola Beckett in Barcelona, neither does she mirror herself mimetically with the great International totems: Isart is a free spirit, and she does just fine. Writing is at least useful for her to conjure up her artistic restlessness, vent personal ghosts and share the existential concerns that worry her. She has not isolated herself, nevertheless, in an ivory tower, quite the opposite. She has made an effort to broaden her knowledge by attending courses and *master classes* of drama and cinema, she has participated in the Drama School of the Drama Research and Development Association belonging to the Geography and History College of the University of Barcelona, she has directed dramatized readings and staged plays as a professional and, among other things, has practiced journalism reviewing plays in the local press. However, above all, she has written indefatigably, tenaciously, since 1998, without stop: nearly twenty titles in over a decade, among which it is worth noting, at least, *Vainilla (Vanilla)* (1998 [2001]), *Senyoreta Ella (Miss She)* (2001 [2005]), *No es preocupi (Don't worry)* (2002 [2004]), *Lleons (Lions)* (2006 [inedited]) and *Barri (Neighbourhood)*(2009 [inedited]), all of which are orphans of stage.

2. Rosa M. Isart becomes known with *Vainilla (Vanilla)*, a play that won the 1st Prize at the 2000 Joaquim M. Bartrina Drama Awards, and with which she tried out the description of a generation that, in their early thirties, struggles to overcome the Peter Pan syndrome. Sara, the young protagonist of *Vainilla*, is, just as her mates, the prototype of a modern, cultivated, urban girl full of restlessness who, after a disappointment in love, is looking for "new sensations" to live unforgettable aesthetic and vital experiences. She finds them in snobbish art and love without boundaries. *Vainilla* is a naïve statement for parsimony and uncertainty to make up for the frenzy and bestowed certainties, as well as an eager claim for naivety, good nature and plural open love without a complex.

What surprises one about this earliest piece is the striking plasticity of the images it creates. Isart sets off with a scene in which some boys and girls are playing Paradise and they dare eat the apple from the Tree of Good and Evil. Then, all of a sudden, some human skeletons, Berga's Patum festival style, scared them away from Eden. It is quite a graphic, metaphoric way to show the end of the

Paradise of adolescence and the landing on the world of adult relationships: ephemeral, unstable, shameless, liquid. The vanilla metaphor itself –“sweet, nice, suggestive”– is an invitation to discovery and pleasure. With a touch of ironic surrealism, *Vainilla* conjures up God, Jesus Christ Superstar, a Blonde-haired Angel or Plato to dissect a generation in fear of the frailty of everything that still believes in love and beauty.

Senyoreta Ella (Miss She) picks up the topic of (un)love in a more crude and comical way, to the point of becoming a kind of satirical vivisection of the liquid love Zygmunt Bauman diagnosed. The character of Ella, a woman of stunning beauty, behaves despotically and frivolously with everybody, showing no empathy whatsoever towards her peers, like a ruthless femme fatale, both a myth and man eater. Nevertheless, being actually a wounded woman, she defends that love requires not only a continual feedback that revives it daily, but as well a deeper profundity that can take the relationship beyond the epidermis. Around such hyperbolic and contradictory character, Isart pictures a parade of men and women that, for the sake of a badly digested postmodernity, express their disorientation when facing the changes in love relationships that have altered male supremacy, the length and intensity of commitment, the old conception of love, the assessment of sex, etc.

Wading through the topoi about the issue of the “war of the sexes”, *Senyoreta Ella* depicts the psychopathologies of the 21st century men and women in relation, above all, to love affairs, and it’s a heads-up to our times rotting of values, principles, attitudes or behaviours in danger of extinction. Ella’s blatant amorality probably is the caricature mirror of the moral cosmos vision it defends. With a sometimes macabre sense of humour, Isart does not refrain herself at exposing, although in passing, the dangers of today’s consumer society, the ravages of neoliberalism or the medicalization of souls which also add up to the dehumanisation of affection. Unlike *Vainilla*, in which the treatment was quite naïve, in *Senyoreta Ella* the tone is distant, harsh and sceptical, with no concessions made. The reality shown there becomes tough and rotten, all hopes denied.

The intertext of the *Divine Comedy* is the starting point of *No es preocupi (Don’t worry)*, a piece about today’s society’s real and metaphorical diseases. Guided by Virgil, a young man from Barcelona –the new Dante- sinks in the depths of the cursed city following the nine Dantesque circles and their derivations, while his mother has to get over the diagnosis of a presumed cancer of mamma. The play updates present “sins” and projects them not only on the truth to life real case of a woman that can have a cancer of mamma, but also on several archetypes of a present metropolis. If the trip to the hell of the city portrays the different kinds of violence dwelling in its hidden areas, the anguish and suffering of the mother when facing the diagnosis of the disease deal with physical and moral pain (“the last chance to learn”, says Virgil), the personal feeling of helplessness deriving from it and, to top it all, the anti-empathy of those surrounding her.

No es preocupi is a very plastic and oneiric text full of icons, of great formal complexity due to its barroquism and dispersion, which projects Dantesque mythology on nowadays reality. The double-way hell –both individual and collective- becomes a metaphor of the disease that wastes away the mechanisms of social coexistence and human bonds. The long cast of characters goes freely beyond the boundaries of time and conjures up in the same space characters from the *Divine comedy* and present men and women. Angels and demons, centaurs and

mythological names, whores and damned to hell mingle magnanimously in this fable about today's ethics and morals. As it is usual in her playwriting, main topics branch out in many other secondary ones, all stemming from the same root: extreme violence, lack of deontology, ill-communication in relationships, social hypocrisy and cainism, indifference towards immigration, etc.

Also from a satiric point of view, *Lleons (Lions)* reintroduces the topic of the "new" condition of women, already present in other plays by Isart, in the bodies of two businesswomen who, although being very competent at work, do not know how to take their femininity. In the changing room of gym in a high-standing area of Barcelona, where they struggle to improve their figure, the two women keep a long confidential conversation –seasoned with music, games and several choreographies– about sex, domestic life, men, art, culture, rubbish, fashion, religion, lesbianism, etc. Of the two, it is Anna, a finicky, extravagant woman, who receives the attentions of the other one, Nadja, a more sensible, intellectual woman who helps her exorcise her ghosts for falling in love with a woman. In contrast, Anna's mother becomes the conventional, hysterical woman, who thinks herself indispensable for her daughter to survive and lives in ancestral fear of men.

A comical and uninhibited play, *Lleons* revolves around a constant theme in some of the plays by the author, -especially in the also inedited plays *Les mil i una o Cassandra versus Tirèsies (Tough times or Cassandra versus Tiresias)* (2005) and *Pa(r)ís* (2006) –, which is the precarious situation of Catalan identity and language. The open denunciation of the belittlement of the language and the political submission to the Kingdom of Spain often turns up in Isart's texts. In *Lleons*, the character of Anna vents out in a dithyramb about the process of turning Catalunya into a province which calls for general mobilisation while reflecting about the impeditive and hegemonic nature of the language of power, that is, Spanish, at the expense of Catalan, which suffers a growing inverted diglossia. Another of the ideas we find again in this piece is the issue of the "war of the sexes", for which the metaphoric image of the lions is associated to men, tamed by the tyranny of women, and in which female tribulations are the connecting thread of the conversations.

Barri (Neighbourhood), one of her latest works, takes to the extreme the trend to conjure up, in the same scene an exotic world where we can find living together characters the like of Heraclitus or James Moll, including Sergei M. Eisenstein, Federico García Lorca, Ava Gardner and Claude Lanzmann. These "real" characters coexist with other fictional ones like Ponet Caselles, a character taken from *No n'hi ha d'altre*, by Emili Vilanova, or the ones born from Isart's own imagination like The Censor of the play, The Person, The Reasonable or the Violent Ones, or The Flowers, amidst others. In contemplation of this crowded heterogenic world, M. L. The Actress presides –in silence or as a counterpoint– this original "neighbourhood", created "in the world of ephemerals" staring straight into another taboo theme: death.

With the will of conveying a moving atmosphere, Isart combines choreographies, projections of films and images, *ad hoc* music or anonymous voices of the ones weeping for the death of the actress Mercè Lleixà, to whom the play pays homage. The character M. L. The Actress meets up again, in this "neighbourhood" out of time, out of space, or in another time, another space where there is still room for human sensitivity, with several artists whose works deal with barbarism (*Battleship Potemkin*, by Eisenstein; *Shoah*, by Lanzmann, or *The*

Last Days, by Moll) or the cruelty of death (*Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, by Lorca), of which they have been “exemplary” victims (Lorca himself or Irène Némirovsky) or who have suffered painful diseases (Gardner). Its main goal? To evidence, while projecting some of the paradigms of horror and suffering, the helplessness one feels in front of an incurable disease and a cruel, unfair death like Mercè Lleixà’s, at 49, a victim of cancer.

Whereas *Vainilla* was an explicit sensory hymn to love and life, *Barri* can be placed at the other end of the spectrum: a reflection about death as well as a disquieting outcry for humans not to get used to it, for humans to somehow preserve their sensitivity in front of the cruelty of death. When the irreversible time comes, all is vanity, even the richness claimed by Ponet Caselles in a Espriu-like fashion. Without abandoning her irony and black sense of humour, Isart pays homage, in her mourning for the death of Mercè Lleixà, to little affections, the jobs well done, the affability in character. Besides this paradigmatic framework, the memory of the actress can also be seen through the characters she played, like for instance Irène Némirovsky, corresponding to the homonymous monologue by Joan Guasp, or through the evocation of intimate scenes or loved ones of her autobiography.

3. Dedicated to Rosa Novell and Josep M. Pou, the monologue *Tendències (Trends)* (2008) can be read as a *sui generis* x-ray of today’s psychopathologies when it comes to imposed fashion or globalisation. The ten naked human beings that, from the very beginning, burst awkwardly onto the stage, as if they were in extreme danger, are a precious metaphor of the vulnerability of the actors exposed in front of the audience, but likewise today’s men and women, immersed in the everyday jungle. Once the naked stage is occupied, the actress depicts her “world map” of vital interests, focusing above all on the most blatant “trends” of present society. Among them, stands out, for example, the devastating frivolity of TV journalism or the appalling state of local politics –not a much dealt with topic in present playwrighting, it must be said, despite the wide range of critical approaches it admits.

Soaking in irony, the analysis that the actress makes of Catalan society, while having her afternoon snack, is incisive: not only does she reproach both the colonial Spanish unitarisation and the numb Catalan stationariness for the unhealthy craze we are suffering lately for the art of cuisine. The chaotic “world map” of the politically incorrect actress, moves on from one theme to another without rhyme or reason, while striking with sentences as true as God: “Democracy is not a fact, but a trend. Dictatorship is not a trend, but a fact.” Or proclaiming that the only useful approach is individual and collective “survival”. She chats on the same level with Arthur Schopenhauer and Jean-François Lyotard, to utter her disappointment at the intelligence quotient of today’s men and women and to criticise the bad manners and little love for the land of the new comers or the imposition of Spanish as an everyday language.

While she is hanging out her linen—a metaphor of unfolding your inner thoughts open—, the actress ends up opting for the “power of love” to solve, collectively, the issue of the integration of the newcomers in Catalan culture and society, and from a more individual point of view, to recover what humanity has lost: the bodily sensorial dimension. In the last stretch of the monologue, after being a catastrophist and often incoherent, oscillating between sanity and madness, between sense and rapture, the actress appeals to her body to linger in

the nostalgia of the past and calls for love as a power that “helps” in the concretion of good.

Divided in three part, *Tendències* moves forward in symbolic colorations absolutely connotative–light going from neutral to orange, to red–, alternating the format of stream of consciousness with a proto dialogue the actress keeps with a presumed friend and closes in an implacable circular ending by returning to the starting point. With a short transition, during which some slides are projected showing cats on the city roofs –another metaphor about the individualist nature of city souls–, the monologue can start anew, as a diptych, now from another angle and point of view: in the words of a transsexual actor that surprises the expectations of the audience.

4. From *Vainilla* to *Barri*, Isart has sharpened the resources and proceedings of a singular impressionist playwriting, full of images and brilliant metaphors, highlighting the movement, the plasticity and the sensorialism of the scenes to convey ideas or sensations. The universes created by Isart are somehow fantastic and grotesque, in the style of a Kantor or a Ghelderode, with a slight sway to the lyricism of marginality, in the fashion of Lorca or Koltès, four of her outspoken guides, while also being baroque, confusing, magmatic, shallow or baffling. In any case, there, holding hands with aesthetics, is Isart’s playwriting; to put it in the celebrated binomial so dear to Ricard Salvat, an explorative not dogmatic ethics, and an intuitive one, that evidences the loss of values, feelings, emotions and innate senses, at least up to date, of human beings. With a stroke of illustrated moralism and romantic nostalgia, with an open social vocation, Isart seeks those dehumanising attitudes and behaviours that define the turn of the century (selfishness, cowardice, unlove, hooliganism, violence, corruption, numbness...) and, without pondering how great the aesthetic or the ideological feat might be, boldly filters them through the sieve of a glance that wishes to understand the mysteries of life and transform what she sees around her in order to make existence better and more selfless and beautiful.

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