



YERMA

By Federico Garcia Lorca In a new translation by Pam Gems

a resource for

and teachers

Adaptable Approaches

This production of *Yerma* at the Royal Exchange is a modern adaptation by the celebrated British playwright, Pam Gems. In adapting the play, the writer has chosen to clarify the language and some of the structure for a modern audience.

Translations and adaptations of play texts are always fascinating. They can mean that we have very different scripts for the same work. In translating a play from another language, the translator might choose quite different styles to achieve a different impact on an audience. The translator may, for instance, want to remain as close as possible to the original text, only reworking dialogue when it is so unusual for our ears that we do not understand. Quite another translator might choose to shift the language into a very fashionable idiom so that the language is immediate and might be heard in the pub or corner shop.

Adaptations tend to take things one step further. They rework some of the ideas in the original script so that different insights or experiences of the characters and action are available for the actors and their audience. For example, Pam Gems adapted the novel and play *Camille* by Alexander Dumas and in so doing chose to give us background information that was in neither of the original texts about the central character, Marguerite Gautier. Marguerite is a prostitute and in Pam Gems' adaptation of the play, she suggests that as young women, Marguerite Gautier was sexually abused. In another adaptation of the same work, the writer Neil Bartlett has chosen to only use dialogue from the original book. The process of adaptation for him is to rework the order of events but not to include any new information.

Pam Gems is renowned for writing about the lives of strong women. Both Edith Piaf and Marlene Dietrich have been subjects of her writing. It is not difficult to see the appeal of *Yerma* for the playwright; indeed this is the writer's second version of the play – the first was produced at the Battersea Arts Centre nearly ten years ago.

From the very beginning of this version of *Yerma*, Pam Gems has made interesting changes in the approach to the play. The dream sequence with shepherd and child is not used and the song heard through the window is a man singing about his need for comfort and

a woman to warm his bed. A conventional translation of this song gives us a poignant plea for a baby. It is what is happening in *Yerma's* head. This shift in approach makes for a different focus for us as an audience and our initial experience is likely to be upon *Yerma* and Juan as a married couple rather than upon *Yerma's* maternal longings. The shifts in dialogue are often subtle but inevitably they will move us in new and exciting directions in understanding the characters and action of the play.

Pam Gems has extended Lorca's idea of a chorus by including poems such as the one that celebrates fertility at the beginning of scene two, which sets up the mood for the action that follows that follows where *Yerma* discusses her fertility with the Pagan women. There are a number of verse sequences that are from the adapter's pen rather than being the work of the playwright. Interestingly, however, the women and the girls (who are more of Lorca's chorus), Pam Gems has given them the names – somehow they are offered a little individuality. In this adaptation, the language is often more contemporary than a direct translation of Lorca. It offers a particular and unique relationship with what happens on stage for both the actors and audiences that may have more immediacy than a conventional version.



WHY NOT?

- Discuss the differences between this production as a script and another version that you know. Why do you think the writers have used particular ideas and language? Do you have a preference for one approach or the other? What appeals to you about your preferred text?
- Write a review that focuses on how Pam Gems' version of *Yerma* changes your understanding of the play and its themes. Are there particular sequences that offer you new insights and responses to the central character and her misery at being childless?
- Choose a scene from *Yerma* and, either by yourself or as a group, attempt your own adaptation of the scene. You will need to decide or agree upon a particular approach. For example, your adaptation might set out to give a version of the events that is sympathetic to Juan.

Note

Given that *Yerma* is a set text at GCE, references in other sections of these notes relate to syllabus recommended translations.

Universal Ideas, Minor Details

Insights from Simon Higlett, designer for *Yerma*

You can hear the enthusiasm in the designer's voice as he speaks. Simon Higlett is a man who enjoys his work, values his creativity and finds great privilege in working in theatres all over the country. His particular favourite is the Royal Exchange in Manchester. "Every time I come back to it, I find myself thinking 'Thank God I don't have to build a wall'."

Reading through *Yerma*, Simon was continually struck by a sense of the setting, of barren earth and lush water. The images recurred constantly in his mind and he found himself imagining a great saucer as the floor of the theatre. There was a strong sense, too, of the universality of the themes and the clear sense that this play could happen anywhere.

The round of the theatre gave a strong metaphor for realising this sense of the earth as a planet. Mixed in with this was the exploration of a series of paintings of women and Simon was struck by the rounded, almost sculpted form of a belly. As he and the director looked at the photograph, there was a revelation about the relationship of the earth surface that was to be the stage floor and the belly of a woman. Here was the possibility of saying something about *Yerma's* sterility. What had been a saucer of a floor in the original design was suddenly inverted and became a mound, the horizon of both the landscape of Lorca's writing and the belly that aches to carry a child. The surface of the mound is barren, earthy, cracked and parched. From time to time water flows into the space echoing Lorca's strong sense of the connection between nature and sexuality.

Simon Higlett is adamant that the relationship between a designer and a production is about the actor within a space. He does not like being asked to create a picture in which one simply places the actor but to work from the actor towards a sense of connection between the action and the environment of the play. The designer's early career was in musicals, a form that he came to dread although he recognises that it has given him a rich base for his professional life. However, his heart was not there. "I wanted to do what I considered serious theatre, Shakespeare, classics, that kind of thing.

His career as a theatre designer has taken him all those places. He has worked extensively for the RSC, for West End theatre, the Royal Court and in theatres the length and breadth of the country. He has designed for drama and opera; he has worked here and abroad in places such as Germany and the US. Yet his heart and excitement are

very much in the Royal Exchange. "I remember going with my tutor to the Banqueting House in Whitehall and we sat cross legged on the floor of the main hall. It was the most perfect space." Oddly enough, Simon's tutor was Richard Negri, the artistic designer of the module within the Exchange that is now the theatre. "And," observes Simon, "it's another perfect space."

For Simon there is a clear limitation in designing for a proscenium arch stage because of the demand for a picture. The distance of the audience from the stage often means that the design is about broad sweeps rather than about detail. The space in the Royal Exchange is quite different. The audience is very close to the action – there has to be an attention to detail and Simon is passionate about this approach. In designing the costumes he worked very closely with the actor, the director and the wardrobe department. He worked his drawings in black and white (he rarely uses colour) and then adapts his ideas through the process of fitting and continual discussion with the members of the company. It's a process that he thoroughly enjoys and sees as an ideal approach to design work. It is not so much design for as design with. Design is for an actor and not what colour the curtains are. He clarifies this in saying, "The fact is that often in a Royal Exchange production, it's very hard to really know where someone's ideas begin and someone else's take over; it's how it should be." Simon describes himself as working best "in dialogue".

Initially the costumes were going to be neutral in terms of period and place but as Simon has worked through the process, he has spent time looking at images of Spain during the Civil War of the 30s and 40s. Drawn back to Lorca's passion for his Andalusian homeland and its people, Simon began to reconnect with a sense of the Spanish. There is still an element in which the costumes carry a little ambiguity and the large shawls are clearly redolent of peasant cultures anywhere. Grasping the sense of Lorca's connection with the landscape and the intertwining of nature with human lives, the masks used at the end of the play are made from the landscape, from objects like skulls, from naturally occurring materials from growth and decay.

Working in the Royal Exchange is both demanding because the theatre demands detail, and intensely rewarding for the designer. "It is," he says, "the place where I come to be professionally refreshed and recharged."

WHY NOT?

- Work on a scene from the play. When you are satisfied with the shape and flavour of your work, focus your attention on how you might design both setting and costume for the piece. Try and work as Simon Higlett does, from the actor rather than from a sense of placing the action within a ready-made environment.
- Research images from Spain both as a landscape and through its people, their history and the lush imagery of Catholicism. Collect ideas in a scrapbook that might be useful in shaping your ideas for designing both setting and costume.
- Explore the use of texture within set design by echoing Simon's design for this production of *Yerma*. Using either a large upturned plate or a plaster mould of your own making, try and find interesting materials to cover the surface that give a sense of parched earth. Divide the surface into areas and explore the way in which different textures both contrast and compliment. When you are happy with the design, glue the materials to the surface and coat it with several dilute layers of Copydex to hold the colour.

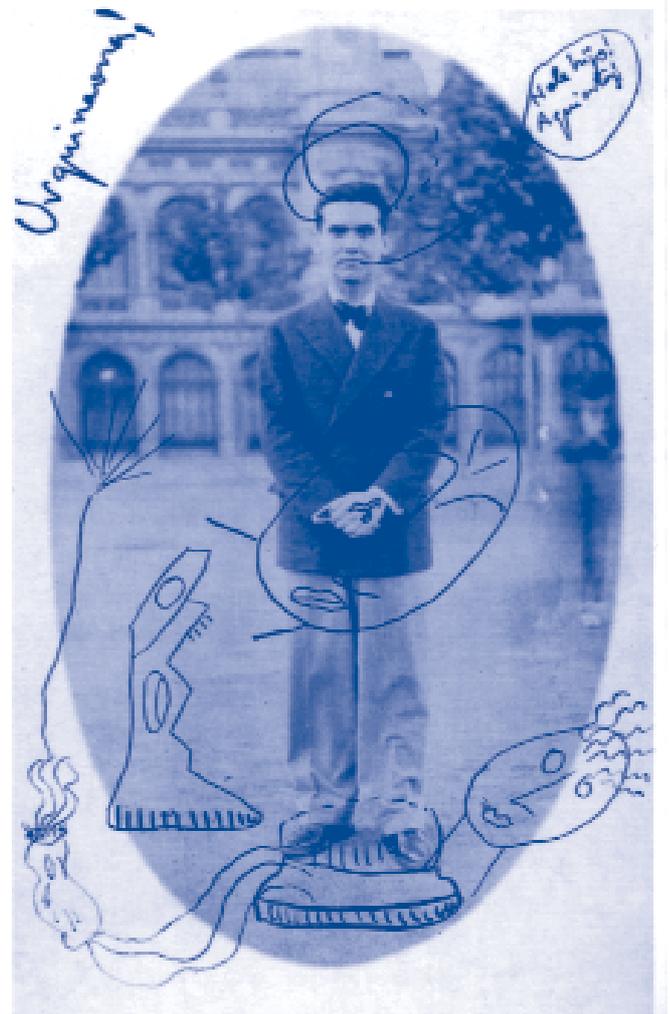
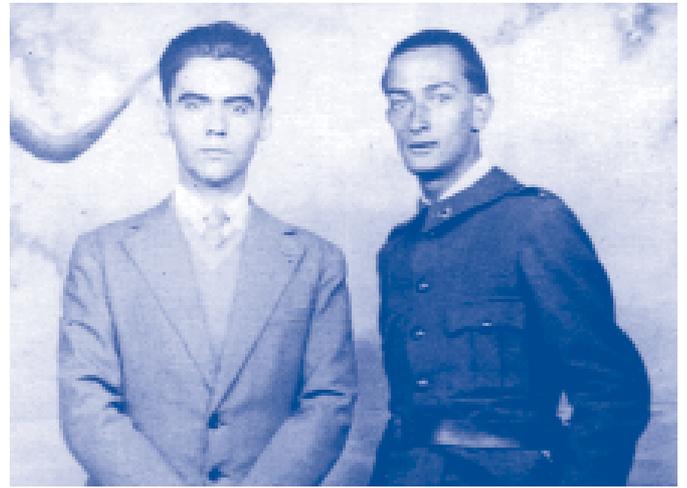
La Barraca

As a child, Lorca developed a fascination for puppets. With cardboard figures fashioned by his aunt he would entertain his family with shows that borrowed from Andalusian tradition whilst including his own scripted words, songs and music. This fascination endured into adulthood. The elements of its form, the breaking of the fourth wall convention with direct addresses to an audience, the rude and ready language, the rough and makeshift imagery – all this delighted the playwright and he preferred it greatly to the tame, polished productions of mainstream theatre. In early adulthood, Lorca continued to work with puppets, mounting occasional productions where he exercised all his talents as a musician, a writer, a performer and a director. One of his puppet characters, Mosquito, offered his audience an insight into the playwright's condemnation of the well-made play to be seen in plush theatres. It was, said Mosquito "...a theatre of counts and marquises, a gold and crystal theatre...where men...and ladies...go to fall asleep...".

The experience of working with puppets and confronting the cosy world of the theatrical establishment fed directly into Lorca's organization of his own theatre company, La Barraca. With strong echoes of Brecht, Lorca wanted to take drama to rural and working audiences. He wanted to extend their experience of theatre, to use traditional and popular forms to celebrate the long cultural history of regional Spain. However, he did not want to patronise his audiences or to dumb down the material. Rather than using his own writing, Lorca chose classic Spanish playwrights from what was known as the Golden Age, alongside the work of work from abroad. The best, claimed Lorca, of the old and new. The essential difference with Brecht was that his work was extensive and practical, it moved beyond theory to become a theatrical practice that was immensely successful and popular.

Receiving no salary and working long, intense hours, the young company of student actors toured their plays in a Chevrolet truck, performing in village squares and public buildings. The women dressed always in blue skirts and blouses whilst the men sported one-piece overalls of the same colour. Both the uniforms were emblazoned with the company's vibrant logo. The costumes were designed to echo the commonplace dress of their rural and working class audiences.

Whilst Lorca grew up in a very affluent land-owning family and lived always in considerable comfort (unless he occasionally chose otherwise), his sentimental and political commitment to the peasant culture of Andalusia never left him. Where La Barraca served such audiences, his writing in plays such as Yerma continued to focus on these people that he cherished.



WHY NOT?

- Discuss the people that you often see in the audience of theatres that you have been to. Who are they, where do they come from, what do you imagine their lifestyles to be like? You might like to research the concerns of the Artistic Directors of both the Royal National Theatre and the RSC. What can you discover about the challenges they have identified for attracting new audiences to these theatres?
- With three or four other people, identify a group that you feel is unlikely to go to the theatre. How might you attract them as an audience? Plan a company for yourselves and make notes about how you would go about shaping an artistic and theatrical plan that would serve this new audience. What sort of plays would you do? What sort of venues might you play in? Give your company a name.

Interview with the Director

For the director, Helena Kaut Howson, this production of *Yerma* honours Lorca's zeal for finding new forms within theatre. As Helena observes, "We are so used to seeing reality in our television that theatre offers us another way to explore stories and lives. A theatre-in-the-round demands imagination; we look down on it or up from it, across it – we do not sit and look into a box." Lorca's own concern was not, of course, with the realism of television, or indeed film, but with breaking away from the tired formulas and clichés of bourgeois theatre of his time. It was a theatre of tired scripts and lazy productions that were driven by box office profits rather than an aesthetic or theatrical impact.

Although the writer wanted everyone to have access to the theatre he was vehement that there should be no dumbing down of drama, that the language and ideas on stage should be provocative. The idea that theatre is about experimenting with form, and not being bound up in naturalism, is dear to Helena's thinking.

Helena Kaut Howson has worked all her professional life as a theatre director apart from a short period as an actress in her native Poland. She came to this country over thirty years ago and did a course in theatre direction at RADA. Since then she has worked largely in theatre including being the artistic director at Theatre Clwyd. Helena has worked a little in television but finds it a disappointing medium. "It's too fast, too technical," she explains. Since leaving Theatre Clwyd, she has worked quite regularly with the Royal Exchange at Manchester. Laughing, she says, "I am a sort of artistic cousin."

In staging this production of *Yerma* at the Royal Exchange, Helena was intent on achieving the epic sense of Lorca's play where the action moves from interiors to exteriors, from inside *Yerma's* head to the reality of the world of strict expectations that Spanish society of the time placed upon women. The director suggests that the abstract setting she has chosen, of a floor that depicts parched soil, a sense of a rolling landscape that helps to realise the epic of the play rather than making it domestic with the use of detailed interiors. She wants us as an audience to work our imagination and to share with the actors in visualising the detail that is not physically there in props and setting. In so doing, we might also explore the idea that so much of what this play is about is within the prison of *Yerma's* thinking and her life.

With some excitement, Helena expands on this idea of imagination and remembers a production she directed that began in a hospital ward. However, the rest of the play was about a journey. Rather than shifting to yet more realistic setting, the actors employed the trolleys and paraphernalia of hospital life to become their vehicles. It was an agreement between actors and audience to suspend their disbelief. This is different from Stanislavski's use of suspending disbelief where he wanted detailed reality. It is a demand that we as the audience do some of the creative work as we watch and listen to the drama in performance.

The anguish for *Yerma* as a character is, in Helena's view, about the extreme situation she finds herself in, of being imprisoned in her head and heart and yet having to go out into the big world and face the values and expectations of

other people. The fact that we see this production in-the-round gives a strong sense of the universe rather than a box. *Yerma* is living in a repressive society, bidden by the pressure of her peers who determine her role and this becomes an obsession. Even the trees, the very earth is pointing at her, reproaching her. As the director points out, *Yerma* is based on the Spanish word *yerma* meaning barren, wasted or useless.

Asked what this production might mean for a modern Manchester audience, Helena hesitates for a moment. "In part it's about peer pressure. You know, like the thing that all teenagers experience about fashion and trainers. It starts as trivial and then it can become overwhelming. It becomes the child who will then not go to school because the trainers haven't got the right label. In extreme circumstances, the child takes his own life." Helena goes on to say that she is not trivialising the issue of women in an oppressive society but that some of the human experiences of pressure are the same regardless of the issues.

Delighted in the casting of the actress Denise Black as *Yerma*, the director suggests that Denise's qualities of strength and an ability to be honest and earthy will be invaluable in realising the peasant *Yerma* and in understanding the character's power. Helena has directed Denise before in another muscular role as Mrs Warren in George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs Warren's Profession*, here at the Royal Exchange. A critic described Denise's performance as blunt and forthright without letting her manner drown out her words. The director feels that *Yerma* has also to be understood as self-oppressive, part of her anguish comes from her own high standards, her own blind determination.

Helena enthuses about the quality of the cast generally. For example, there is Lydia Baksh who is playing girl 2, Dolores' daughter. Lydia has a history of being involved in theatre from a very young age as an active member of the youth theatre at Theatre Clwyd and she has a passion for innovative, physical theatre. She worked for some time with Frantic Assembly. The director admires this young actor for her motivation in pushing the boundaries of her role as a performer, exploring Yoga and other belief systems and discovering the world as a traveller and. "Lydia is minute but incredibly powerful," says Helena. "There are so many incredibly stupid things said about young people's lives like they are only interested in alcohol and clubbing. Lydia is a prime example of someone who is highly individual and in control."

This openness of cast members like Lydia makes rehearsal a stimulating process where issues and ideas can be picked over and worked into performance if they feel right. Helena suggests there are issues such as the question of *Yerma's* crime of murdering her husband. She notes that someone recently had a sentence shortened for murdering her husband on the basis that their marriage had been coloured by his violence. "Is there a case for recognising that society can be just like this husband and that *Yerma's* guilt is ours as well?" Helena asks.

There are no easy answers in Lorca's writing. Helena talks about the contradictory nature of the play with forces pulling in two directions. There is the conservative nature of the world of Spanish women in this era, and there is bubbling repressed passion. This era of Spain's history is just as paradoxical. The country swung from a liberal socialist government to a totalitarian fascist administration. It was a country turning in on itself, brother killing brother just as *Yerma* turns in on her own marriage and murders the very person that gives her some possibility. Helena likens this to the grotesque imagery in Dali paintings of the physical world being devoured. She is adamant that the strength in *Yerma* is that Lorca does not try, does not want us to sort it out and

come up with a simple moral answer. The contradiction and the struggle is just what she wants us to experience through the actors in the mounting of this production of the play.

WHY NOT?

- Explore the use of space and the connection with an audience by moving seating into different relationships with a performance area. It might help to have a tableau of actors who never move. This will mean that you are focusing on the relationship of the audience with the stage rather than the actors' experience of their space.
- Improvise a scene where the props are taken from anything immediately to hand and made to seem as if they are quite something else. Helena Kaut Howson uses the example of a hospital bed that becomes a vehicle. What could a bucket, a broom, a school bag stand for. Remember it is really not about what the item looks like but how you use that will be convincing for your audience.
- Discuss what this play means to you. Are there different points of view amongst the members of your group or class? Did your understanding of the play change between reading it and acting it out, between studying it and seeing the play on the stage?

Eileen O'Brien

AN ACTOR PREPARES

I am more interested in the people who inhabit the landscape than in the landscape itself. Federico Garcia Lorca

Self consciously theatrical, the company would arrive unannounced in a space that housed a youth club somewhere in more distant, less fashionable corners of London. The group was trendy, outlandish, very physical. They dressed in long coats, hats, fluttering exaggerated false eyelashes; this was the seventies after all. As the actors moved into the space, the youngsters would slowly cease whatever they were doing to watch this odd ensemble. The theatre group similarly eyed their prospective audience, challenging them with their direct strangeness. Slowly the performance group would move into a choreographed sequence where they would do everything in unison, taking a glass, pouring a Coke, drinking. Once satisfied that this new audience was hooked and curious, the actors would move into the open space, dancing to a Rolling Stones track, shedding the deliberate silliness of hats, coats and eyelashes and move into role within a circle. The real play then began.

There were other projects too. Working with street theatre where Eileen O'Brien would find herself in a company of actors who simply set up on the pavement edge to deliver a production that questioned the values and ideas of the time. With the Northcott Theatre in Exeter, Eileen found herself touring plays that raised environmental issues, questioned the drive to make money. She performed in schools, village halls, prisons. There were the plays about a fire in the soul, a drive to serve people in characters such as Ghandi and Joan of Arc. Questions, issues and politics were part of theatre's purpose.

Whilst Brecht influenced the plays and the focus on raising political issues, the practice of going out and finding your audience would have been dear to Lorca's heart. Just as La Barraca did, Eileen O'Brien spent her early career working before and with audiences who were unlikely to find their way to a smart, red plush auditorium.

FINDING DOLORES

Eileen plays Dolores in this production of Yerma at the Royal Exchange. Asked about her preparation for a role, she talks about a career as an actor, about the woman she is in her own life. All these aspects are important in shaping an understanding of a role and a play.

Audiences will recognise her as Maddy Wright in Mersey Beat or Mick Johnson's mother-in-law, Gladys Charlton, in Brookside. As an actor who has worked a great deal in television, Eileen savours coming back to the theatre at any opportunity. She observes, "Theatre, when you are rehearsing a play, give you time to ask questions. To ask questions. When I was very young I thought going to a play was only about a story and a feeling that you took away. But people take away ideas."

Before rehearsals began, Eileen spent considerable time working on the script. It was not just a matter of getting to grips with the words. Reading it through and thinking hard about the characters and how she felt about them. "At this stage," she observes, "you are often putting together questions that you want to explore when you are working with the company.

Dolores fascinates Eileen. There are elements of Christian belief and Pagan practice in the character. Dolores is a wise woman and religious but she is not conventional. The spiritual and religious elements of Yerma appeal to Eileen and she says there is an echo here of where she lives. "It's a small town with a strong spiritual identity." Eileen talks about using reflexology, massage and meditation at various times in her life to address her physical and mental happiness. She sees this as giving quite concrete links to the character of Dolores.

The process of working on a play begins even before being cast. Eileen will read through the script, identifying what is important about each of the characters. "I look for what grabs," she observes. "Often I find myself thinking 'I could do that' or 'I'd like to do that'...sometimes they are different things."

Once she knows her role, Eileen will spend time re-examining the script and do a lot of speaking aloud. There is a great deal of preparation and focused work that has to happen even before the rehearsals begin.

The fascination for Eileen in Lorca's play, Yerma, is that it isn't straightforward and issues and events are often contradictory. Sometimes her sympathies stray from Yerma and she finds herself empathising with Juan and Victor. The central question for Eileen as an actor is what the relevance of the play is for a modern Manchester audience; the play is not merely an historical classic. She muses on the fact that infertility used not to be talked about, a hidden grief for a woman and her husband. We now live in a world live in a world where we expect the technology of medicine to deliver conception when there are difficulties. Somewhere in that nub, Eileen worked through her point of view as she rehearsed this production of Yerma.

WHY NOT?

- Select a character from Yerma and make a list of the qualities that you would look for in an actor to play the chosen role. What traits, appearance and personal history would help you to find a suitable actor?
- Read through a scene from the play and make quick notes about each of the characters that give you insight to their individuality and manner? Try and notice what is said about and to the characters as well as what they say for themselves.
- As a group, explore ways in which you might begin an improvised performance so that you catch the audience's curiosity and attention from the very beginning. Eileen O'Brien's experience of working in London Youth Clubs might help you think of novel and interesting approaches to this challenge.
- Look at the opening scene from the play Yerma and plan how you would stage this to gain a strong theatrical impact and a sense of both the mood and the contrasts between reality and dream states.

Duende

The hillside fell away towards a small reservoir, Fuente Grande, that supplied water for the city of Granada. The landscape was sparse, flecked with the occasional scruffy olive tree. As the thin light of early dawn broke over the hills, rifles cocked and fired at a huddle of men. Four people lay dead. One was a socialist school teacher, two were bullfighters with left wing views and the fourth was Federico Garcia Lorca. The fingers that pulled the triggers belonged to members of the fascist Falange who shared the same political goals as Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany.

Lorca had always been absorbed by Death. In childhood it was the rituals in his rich Catholicism that drew him to its fascination. As an adult, it was the constant companion of being alive. It was not necessarily his own demise that concerned him but the sense of the way that death generally both overshadowed and sharpened one's sense of existence. The playwright believed that somewhere in the dark recesses of this space in one's head lay the creativity of artists, musicians and writers.

He called this awareness Duende. It is an idea that is sometimes difficult to pin down. Lorca claims it as being essentially Spanish. It is a cultural darkness that finds its expression in real live form; of blood; of ancient culture; of creative action. He saw this like roots tapping into the civilization of the past and somehow forging the artistic voice of the present. It was also specifically Spanish and he observed that sometimes a dead person was more alive when dead than in any other part of the world...his profile cuts like the edge of a barber's razor.

Yerma is created consciously from a sense of the organic world of Spain. It is best described in the words of the poet and playwright himself. From this pagan feeling, placed in a poetic social setting (where religious ceremony acquires the character of an ancient rite); from the mixture of instinct and tradition; from the blind, individual passion, punctuated by cries of collective encouragement - from all this is woven the central character - a poetic, tragically solitary creature, born amid the almost miraculous fertility of our lands in the Vega of Granada.

It was in the Vega of Granada that Lorca died, buried in an undiscovered grave in the very soil that he believed gave him his creative voice. The nearby reservoir also had an Arabic name, Ainadamar, which means the Fountain of Tears.

Duende indeed.



30's suit used for
farm work :-
'mounted by his clothes'
will get wet!

Yerma in Production

The curtain rose on a stylised set of a hillside Andalusian village of tall white houses under a brilliant blue sky at the premiere of Yerma at the Teatro Español in Barcelona. It proved to be a provocative occasion. The critics disagreed wildly on the content and language of the play and had difficulty in their assessment of the politics and morality that Lorca explored. Audiences were more positive and the play ran for over a hundred performances, the first of Lorca's plays to achieve such a season. Some reviewers found the play disturbing and anti-catholic, a "miserable play", "crude", "disrespectful" and filled with "blasphemies" whilst others recognised a radical development in Spanish theatre with the use of a poetic voice and a "revolutionary theatricality". The playwright was utterly delighted when the play went into production in France and he was positively compared with Henrik Ibsen and the play A Doll's House. The two plays' examination of the tragedy of women's lives was absolutely what Lorca wanted his audience to understand.

The world has moved on in many ways since 1934 and particularly in Western cultures where feminism has profoundly changed how people think about equality between men and women and our individual choices and roles. Indeed, there are clearly people who feel that the play no longer speaks to audiences. Reviewing the play for the Portland Mercury in February this year, this American reviewer observed that Unfortunately, somewhere during the transition from Spain in 1934 (when Yerma was written), to liberated Portland now, sexuality became much less taboo, and spirituality much less important. When I witnessed Yerma's sinful thoughts in response to her husband's negligence, I wasn't shocked, but thought, "You go, girl!" And when a heathenistic pagan lady told her that the way to get a bun in her oven was not to worry about getting pregnant, but instead, just enjoying the sex, I wasn't outraged, but wanted to shout, "Preach on, Sister!" Yerma is thus about dated issues; dead, dusty old things...

This is possibly an odd position to take up that, because something is in the past, it does not have relevance for a modern audience. After all, we might have to abandon Shakespeare and every other playwright that has never had a coffee in Starbucks or a burger from Macdonalds. Helena

Kaut Howson, the director for this production, is clear that whilst we might have different perspectives on gender, we still experience the same pressures of expectation from society and our peers.

Other directors have shifted the action of the play into different settings to look at the issues very much in terms of the relations between men and women. At the Edinburgh Festival in 2001, the director Biyi Bandele's adaptation of Lorca's Yerma transferred the action to an African village. Using a small company of actors, they switched between roles in ensemble style. The production was a great success and one critic observed that this was a strong, beautiful, and emotionally absorbing version of the story, linking traditional village life with the experience of a modern audience much more convincingly than any production set in western Europe now could...

A production at the Royal National Theatre's Cottesloe auditorium achieved a sense of claustrophobia by hanging four sides of both the audience and stage with washing. The production was intimate and claustrophobic and for one reviewer it suggested a womb and the repressed passions of women's lives. The production was intently loyal to a realistic sense of everyday Andalusia with water being carried in pitchers from a well, black shawled women doing their laundry at the rivers edge and the sun relentless and fierce in its drying of the washed clothes.

WHY NOT?

- Write your own review of this production. What does the sparse set, the lack of detailed interiors and the absence of props do to your focus on the play? What issues or messages do you think this production achieves for its audiences?



This production of YERMA is designed by Simon Higlett. Costume sketches are reproduced with his kind permission.

c. December 2002. Written and researched by Peter Rowlands for the Royal Exchange Theatre, Education Department, St Anns Square Manchester M2 7DH Tel: 0161 615 6721/0.