



Josep Maria Pou in the title role of Sócrates discussing his fate with Carles Canut's Crito. *Juicio y muerte de un ciudadano* (*Socrates. Trial and Death of a Citizen*) directed by Mario Gas. Photo credit: Jero Morales/Festival de Mérida.

The difficulties of confronting the legacy of a dictatorships is all too present in *Imagination of the Future* where the failure of the Chilean Left to deal with the infrastructure of the Pinochet years is shown to have consequences for the present. In *Socrates. Juicio y muerte de un ciudadano* [Socrates. Trial and Death of a Citizen] the predicament of another citizen, the Greek philosopher Socrates, is used to probe wider concerns about how democracy functions that are all too resonant in contemporary Spain. The play, crafted by Mario Gas and Alberto Iglesias from the writings of Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and

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Diogenes Laertius, uses Socrates' trial and subsequent death (poisoned with hemlock) in 399BC to ask a series of questions about what it means to participate in a democracy. Gas writes, appropriating Jan Kott's famous phrase, of framing Socrates as "our contemporary" and the production is tellingly dedicated to the Greek populace and their government. The casting of Josep Maria Pou, one of Spain's most respected actors who has spoken out against divisive political posturing, as Socrates also allows for a particular resonance within Spain. The polarised political discourse of twenty-first century Spain finds an echo in the "them and us" vocabulary through which Socrates' opponents function. The stage area—marked out by benches that suggest both a theatrical venue and a parliament—brings the audience into the discussion from the opening. Paco Azorín's empty stage with raked bench-seating provides the sense of a participatory space; the seven actors remain on stage throughout, moving across the seating as both spectators to and participants in the action. The audience members are addressed as "citizens" and are invited to participate in the debates articulated on stage. They are urged to put their phones to one side and refrain from taking photos; our attention is sought and the effect is like that of sitting around a campfire listening to a story that intrigues and alarms.

The audience first sees Pou's Socrates rolling up his sleeves as if preparing for a hard day's work. He introduces himself to the audience in veritable Brechtian manner and joins the other six actors positioned at the back of the stage. He is one of them, part of a community whose governing principles he engages with and confronts. There is no attempt to opt for naturalism here but neither is there for pontification. Rather compact storytelling punctuated by telling commentaries indicate why the committed, learned, outspoken, fearless Socrates had to be silenced. There are also no narrative surprises—the audience is told that Socrates will be poisoned by one of the chorus members. Pou's down to earth philosopher is honest about what he knows and doesn't know: "I only know that I know nothing but I know something." Socrates' entire discourse is based on questioning and probing, on refusing to accept givens and aspiring to more just society. By better knowing yourself you can better help others. Socrates' dialectics and celebration of logical argument are enacted through the dialectic tone of a production determined to put over different viewpoints.

Those who know everything are the so-called democrats perverting democracy. The citizens who conspire to have him tried resemble the plotters in *Julius Caesar*. Socrates observes them from the onstage benches. Two of the citizens defend his thinking; two others oppose him. The stage mutates into a court where the audience are addressed as fellow jurors and the chorus move in and out of testimonial roles: some for, others against. He is found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens by a majority of sixty and is sentenced to death. He refuses to provide a viable alternative sentence, as with going into exile, and asks instead to be celebrated for his contribution to knowledge. Pou's Socrates stands tall center stage throughout.

The production's stand-out scene sees Socrates visited by Carles Canut's Crito who begs him to go into exile with the funds of wealthy supporters who are willing to assist him to escape. Socrates quietly refuses. The men sit side by side, conversing and confiding. It is a brilliant enactment of Socrates own ideas on friendship. It is also an encounter that recalls their dialogue as Lear and Gloucester in Bieito's *King Lear*; unadorned, simple and devastating in its scenic efficacy. It is, however, not just the stubbornness of Lear that comes to mind here. There is something of Stockman's obduracy in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*—another play that has been playing to stand out audiences in Miguel del Arco's 2014 production.

Gas's production stresses a culture of defiance that links Socrates, through Pou's words, to a wider rota of defiant heroes that includes Galileo and *The Crucible's* John Proctor: "I am born every day, I live across all eras and will never die." Pou avoids the rhetoric of Marsillach's characterisation of the role in 1972. He rubs his head, shrugs, and converses in easy tones. He looks intently at his accusers, his disciples and the audience. There is a commitment in the level of engagement that remains in the voiceover that comes towards the end of the play as he reflects on his qualities and flaws. The voiceover is accompanied by a washing of his arms on stage; a cleansing of body and mind, a sharing of inner thoughts with the audience. There is not a single wasted gesture; rather an economy of corporal and verbal language. Occasionally, his large hands weave around his words like butterflies, something delicate rather than ornate. He has an easy conversational tone that contrasts with the empty rhetoric of Pep Molina's accuser Meletus. Molina's register is too inflated in my view; his Meletus too dastardly and too obviously the "bad guy" to be entirely credible. At times I wondered if he was acting in another production. Borja Espinosa gives a far more convincing performance as the second of the three accusers Anytus. Guillem Motos and Ramon Pujol have a credible complicity as his two loyal disciples and their retelling of his final moments has a breathtaking simplicity.

I was not convinced that Xanthippe's monologue to the audience, giving her point of view of her husband's position, is necessary. Amparo Pamplona creates a down-to-earth housewife carrying baskets home that disrupts the compressed progress of the trial, spilling out into the stalls. The focus on Socrates' public persona does not make the scene necessary or entirely relevant to the action. Her overly fussy orange dress and blue apron invades the visual purity of the rest of the production. Antonio Belart's costumes are simply cut white linen trousers and shirts with a beige cloak-cum-toga. There is something monastic about them. The actors are barefoot, their feet touching the ground, as grounded indeed as the play itself.

The production was to become the biggest hit of the Grec Festival, reaching over 6,300 spectators during its run at the Romea. Leaving the theatre I was struck by the level of animated discussion conducted by the audience: a need to engage with the theme of democracy and how it applies to contemporary Spain. *Socrates, Trial and Death of a Citizen* is a production with an urgency that engages with what it means to be a citizen and how participatory agency works. The producers responded to the clamor for tickets with a further run at the Romea from 24 September to 18 October, with dates planned for Madrid and a tour across Spain in 2016 to follow.

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