

The Grec Festival 2023

By Anton Pujol

As it does every July, the Grec Festival arrived in Barcelona, but offering more shows than ever before. Over the course of just one month, across various venues around the city, the Grec Festival presented over 90 shows, encompassing all genres and catering to all audiences. The 47th edition of the festival had a unique opening this year. In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Passeig de Gràcia, the emblematic Modernist thoroughfare in the middle of the city, the Festival extended an invitation to the French group “Les Traceurs.” Under the direction of Rachid Ouramadne, the tightrope walker Nathan Paulin crossed Plaça Catalunya en route to the Generali building at the corner of Passeig de Gràcia and Gran Via, another major artery of the city. Nathan Paulin accomplished a remarkable feat by walking a 350-meter tightrope back and forth, suspended at a height of 70 meters. What made this performance even more captivating was that the spectators below could hear Paulin's thoughts being broadcasted. This unique addition allowed the audience to feel the nervousness and danger that the artist was experiencing in real-time. The spectacular opening served as a promising prelude to the successes that followed. Francesc Casadesús, the Festival's director, reported impressive statistics, with a 72% occupancy rate translating to over 130,000 spectators. Here is a recap of some of the highlights the Festival had to offer.

The Australian cirque company, Gravity & Other Myths, had the honor of officially opening the Festival with their performance, *The Pulse*. Directed by Darcy Grant and featuring music by Ekrem Eli Phoenix, this Adelaide-based troupe collaborated with the Women's Chorus of the Orfeó Català. While the 24 acrobat-dancers constructed impressive human towers in various patterns, threw themselves into the air and onto the floor with mesmerizing fearlessness, and presented unforgettable tableaux, the 36-woman choir provided an eerie a cappella counterpoint to the company's death-defying acts. While *The Pulse* was undoubtedly a group effort, there were two standout moments that deserve special mention. On the musical side, Buia Reixach, the chorus conductor, delivered a solo performance, singing in perfect harmony with individual dancers' routines, creating an ideal fusion of music and movement. Another highlight was the solo by Dylan Phillips whose body contorted, tumbled, and bent to seemingly impossible degrees. With a runtime of just seventy minutes, the show also incorporated some clever and humorous moments. For instance, there was the 'human piano,' where the circus troupe arranged themselves in a semi-circle, and each emitted a grunt in various tones when one of the dancers stepped on their abdominals. Another noteworthy element was the exceptional lighting design by Geoff Cobham. It served as a unifying and indispensable component, introducing visual effects that enhanced the drama of the performance and seamlessly complemented the expansive open-space venue.



The Pulse. Photo: Dancy Grant.

Dance has always been at the heart of the Grec Festival, and this year was no exception, featuring several outstanding performances. *Vessel* is the culmination of a collaboration that began in 2015 between Belgo-French choreographer Damien Jalet and Japanese visual artist Kohei Nawa. The performance begins on a pitch-black stage, and slowly, light begins to filter in. At first, the audience cannot discern what lies on the stage. Gradually, a white platform, reminiscent of an ice cap or a lunar surface, emerges from the darkness, surrounded by water. This striking centerpiece is encircled by three dense, quarry-like sculptures that, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be composed of human bodies. These performers then begin to untangle themselves, slowly moving onto the shallow black pool that forms the stage floor. Throughout the performance, the dancers maintain a unique posture, with their arms positioned over the back of their heads, concealing their faces from the view of the audience. The performance creates a striking and disorienting effect, intensified by the reflection in the water, which keeps the audience from fully grasping the unfolding events. At times, the contorted bodies take on an otherworldly quality,

resembling aliens, monsters, or creatures not yet fully human. This ambiguity persists until the end when, standing on this island-like platform, they extract a thick, white, and pasty liquid from the floor, pouring it over themselves. This act raises further questions about the nature of these enigmatic beings. Numerous hypotheses abound regarding the meaning of it all, ranging from the beginning or ending of the world to the existence of a parallel reality. Yet, meaning remains elusive, for as their bodies transform, so does our comprehension of the performance. *Vessel* is a truly hypnotic and captivating display that swiftly became one of the Festival's highlights even in such a dance-heavy program.



Vessel. Photo: Yoshikazu Inoue.

The dance troupe, Mal Pelo, presented *Double Infinite: The Bluebird Call* at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya. Since its inception in 1989, Mal Pelo has emerged as a significant presence among Catalan and Spanish dance companies, boasting a portfolio of over thirty productions. In this showcase, the company's leaders, María Muñoz and Pep Ramis, graced the stage alongside three

talented musicians: Quiteria Muñoz (soprano), Joel Bardolet (violin), and Bruno Hurtado (cello). The performance is structured around two dance monologues followed by a final duet: first, Muñoz, then Ramis, and finally, the two together. The stage is framed by colossal screens displaying black-and-white images of snow-covered forests—a desolate landscape that mirrors the unfolding narrative on stage. Muñoz initiates her solo performance with a discussion of longing, seamlessly transitioning into dance. It is remarkable to witness choreography designed for mature bodies, where Muñoz and Ramis skillfully incorporate the passage of time into their movements, crafting an arc of yearning that is both exquisite and profoundly moving. The concluding segment, *The Bluebird Call*, incorporates a poem by Bukowski (“there's a bluebird in my heart that/wants to get out/but I'm too tough for him,/I say, stay in there, I'm not going/to let anybody see/you”). While the ending takes on a more playful tone, Muñoz and Ramis guide the audience through a beautiful journey of recollection—technically impressive and achingly beautiful. It feels less like an ending and more like the start of something new and captivating.

Rocío Molina, one of the most revered dancers in Spain, is known for infusing flamenco with a contemporary twist, revolutionizing this millennia-old art form. Her show, titled *Carnación*, alludes to the process of adding color to flesh in painting to make it appear more authentic, a metaphorical journey that unfolds on stage. She begins the performance in a stunning, vibrant pink chiffon dress. Molina climbs onto the back of a chair and violently drops herself multiple times, foreshadowing her rejection of conventional paradigms imposed on young women, regardless of how hard they might try to conform. It is evident that her interpretation and execution of flamenco defy its traditional rigidity, which may not sit well with purists of the art form. Soon, this doll-like figure sheds not only her dress but also her physical body and even her soul, with the assistance of Niño de Elche, another prominent singer in the world of contemporary flamenco. To describe her performance as 'raw' would be an understatement, as her physical metamorphosis transcends anything witnessed on stage before. While at times she dances solo, her body is often entwined with her partner's and that of Maureen Choi, a violinist who gracefully traverses the scene. Pain becomes the shared theme in their entanglements—they struggle against one another, vying for space and presence, as if asserting dominance over the other is the only means of survival. Yet, they ultimately converge in a spatial union where their diverse bodies can coexist. Towards the finale, Molina binds her body with ropes, drawing from the Japanese tradition of Shibari, which has applications ranging from torture to bondage and sexual pleasure. Molina's flesh is tightly bound; her ponytail is even tied to her toe. Her breasts, limbs, and body teeter on the brink of physical exhaustion, all the while undergoing a transformation in color before our very eyes. It is a personal ecstasy and a distinctive triumph that she achieves.



Rocío Molina and Niño de Elche in *Carnación*. Photo: Simone Fratini.

La Veronal needs no introduction. Directed by the wunderkind Marcos Morau, this company stands among the most sought-after dance troupes worldwide. The world premiere of *Firmamento* was a standout event at the Festival, although it did not receive the same ecstatic critical acclaim as their previous works, *Opening Night* (2022) or *Sonoma* (2020). Morau explained that their new piece was crafted with younger audiences in mind, particularly adolescents whose worlds are on the brink of significant personal and societal changes. As always, the technical aspects were impeccable. Max Glanzel (scenic design), Bernat Jansà (lighting design), and Juan Cristóbal Saavedra (sound design and music) created three distinct settings for the performance. The first part unfolded in a music studio, followed by a segment featuring a cartoon on a cinema screen. Eventually, the cinema screen revealed a stage for the final act. Deliberately, it seemed, the audience was left in a state of partial comprehension. Was it a dream or a chaotically reconstructed memory? Morau artfully incorporated a wide array of intertextual references borrowed from various genres, spanning cinema to Japanese anime, puppets, toys, and fragments of multilingual texts and songs. This mosaic reflected the intricate workings of a young person's mind—a delightful

clutter that everyone must sort through before moving forward, though this is merely conjecture. What truly shines, however, is the whimsical imagination of La Veronal and the unwavering commitment of its dancers to continually push the boundaries of what the arts can achieve.

Circus is another staple at the Grec. This year, two shows quickly became the critics' and audiences' favorites: *L'absolu (The Absolute)* and *Sono Io? (Is It Me?)* Created and performed by Boris Gibé, *L'absolu* was the perfect combination of space and spectacle. The performance takes place inside a towering silo, standing at an impressive twelve meters in height and with a diameter of nine meters. Audience members ascend the cylindrical tower and arrange themselves along its wall in a spiral configuration, leaving the central space free for the performer. Gibé leads the audience on a vertiginous and exceedingly perilous journey through the four elements. As the performance commences in complete darkness, the rumble of a storm fills the air, and at the very top of the tower, faint glimpses of plastic and soon human appendages emerge. The womb-like structure ruptures, and Gibé descends, secured by a rope. Further into the performance, at the tower's base, he appears to be swallowed by quicksand, sets himself on fire, and in the final segment, he blindfolds himself and ascends the cylindrical tower with minimal protection until he ultimately vanishes. Gibé's daring feats sharply contrast with the highly poetic and existential essence of the performance. The numerous allusions to Greek mythology (including Narcissus, Prometheus, and Oedipus), the strenuous struggle to free himself from the elements, and his eventual triumph all serve to question the inherent fragility of humanity. The audience is continually engaged in a seemingly futile pursuit to find significance.

Circus Ronaldo came back to the Grec after a six-year absence with *Sono Io?* Danny and Pepijn Ronaldo wrote and performed this autobiographical show about fathers and sons, the passing of time, and intergenerational conflicts. The performance begins with Danny, seated alone in a bathtub, playing recordings of his past successes on a tape recorder. The setting paints a clear picture that his triumphs are now a distant memory. His son arrives after what appears to be a prolonged separation, sparking a friendly competition between the two. It becomes evident that the father can no longer execute his usual tricks, but his son, unbeknownst to the elder Ronaldo, secretly assists him in completing them. Simultaneously, the son attempts to showcase his own new set of tricks, but his father persistently undermines him, reminding him of the traditional ways practiced by the Ronaldo family for seven generations. This playful banter and rivalry weave through a series of astonishing classic circus performances. As the back-and-forth continues, the son ultimately takes center stage, unveiling his unique brand of circus artistry to the astonishment of both his father and the captivated audience. The show's narrative simplicity, emotionally charged conclusion, and its profound love for a profession that seems to be fading away culminate in a perfect evening, leaving the audience thoroughly enthralled and appreciative.



Danny and Pepijn Ronaldo in *Sono Io?* Photo: Festival Grec.

María Goiricelaya gained national prominence through her daring staging and widely acclaimed production of García Lorca's *Yerma* in 2021, performed both in Basque and Spanish. In 2022, in collaboration with Ane Pikaza, she ventured into the realm of documentary theatre with *La dramática errante (The Wandering Theatre Troupe)* as part of the *Altsasu* project. This project was a part of “Cicatrizar: dramaturgias para nunca más” (“Healing Wounds: Dramaturgies for Never Again”), led by José Sanchís Sinisterra and Carlos José Reyes for Nuevo Teatro Fronterizo. The initiative aimed to present five plays from Spain and five from Colombia, addressing issues related to Historical Memory—a topic of great controversy in Spain. Goiricelaya's work dramatizes the events that unfolded in the small town of Altsasu on October 15, 2016. At approximately five in the morning, a bar brawl occurred between a group of young Basque separatists and two off-duty Guardia Civiles (members of the Civil Guard, Spain's rural police force). The altercation resulted in one of the police officers sustaining a fractured ankle. Initially, local authorities regarded the case as a typical alcohol-fueled altercation, not attaching significant importance to it. However, a few days later, the prosecution, acting on direct orders from Madrid and under pressure from right-wing

parties and associations, reclassified the case as an act of "terrorism." The prosecution initially sought a 62-year prison sentence for one of the accused and 50 years for the other seven. Ultimately, these young men received disproportionately harsh sentences, ranging from three to nine years in jail. Crucially, the prosecution disallowed the use of footage from the fight, early statements made by the participants, and other key evidence. Goiricelaya presents both perspectives as objectively as possible, incorporating footage, depositions, and media interviews from all sides. However, the inconsistent verdict and several questionable episodes of misconduct during the trial procedures lead the audience to sympathize with the accused. With only a cast of four actors, two men and two women, the director and adapter narrate the story based on all the available information about the case. The actors take on multiple roles, with the two male actors seamlessly switching between playing the accused and the police officers simply by donning or removing a jacket. Towards the conclusion, Goiricelaya interweaves the regional tradition of "Momotxorroak," which occurs during Carnivals and had been banned for over forty years. In this tradition, townspeople dress up as animals and smear their bodies with animal blood. The Altsasu case bears a resemblance to another significant legal drama portrayed by Jordi Casanovas in *Jauría* (2019), where Spanish Justice ultimately emerges as a flawed, antiquated, and ideologically influenced institution.

Carolina Bianchi, a Brazilian playwright and performer, along with her company Cara de Cavalo, brought a highly controversial show to the Grec Festival. Her production, titled *A Noiva e o Boa Noite Cinderela (The Bride and The Goodnight Cinderella)*, serves as the inaugural chapter of her trilogy *Cadela Força (Strong Bitch)*. The show is characterized by two markedly contrasting parts that present the topic of rape in an unconventional and deeply unsettling manner. In the first segment, Bianchi herself addresses the audience, issuing a warning about what we are about to witness. She reveals that she was a victim of rape after being drugged with a date rape substance known as 'the goodnight Cinderella.' On stage, she prepares the drug and consumes it, acknowledging that she may lose consciousness before completing the first part of the performance. She assures us that her company is prepared to step in at any moment. Bianchi proceeds to read from a stack of papers, delivering a text that could easily pass as an academic conference paper. Her discourse commences with quotes from the initial verses of Dante's *Inferno*, showcases paintings by Botticelli, and delves into the significance of performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, and, notably, Pippa Bacca (1974-2008), an Italian performance artist renowned for her project "Brides on Tour." Bacca, perpetually adorned in a wedding dress, embarked on a hitchhiking journey from Milan to Jerusalem, consistently accepting rides regardless of the circumstances. Regrettably, Bacca's expedition ended tragically when she was kidnapped, raped, and murdered in a town in Turkey. Before she loses consciousness, Bianchi utilizes Bacca's narrative to delve into the entrenched issues of rape and femicide within Western society. As she collapses, completely unconscious, her company members carefully relocate her to the side of the

stage. In the second part of the performance, the company members engage in suggestive dancing, sing songs inside a car that later crashes, and share horrifying stories about rape in Brazil. One such story involves a soccer star who murdered his pregnant lover, subsequently feeding her remains to his dogs. Shockingly, this soccer star was later reinstated in his club, as if the heinous act had never occurred. Bianchi also invokes Roberto Bolaño's renowned chapter in *2666*, which addresses the ongoing femicides in Santa Teresa (a stand-in for Ciudad Juárez). The audience finds itself immersed in Bianchi's personal hell, and while it becomes challenging to discern specific actions on stage, one is undeniably witnessing sheer horror. However, Bianchi refuses to grant us respite. Toward the end of the play, two of her company members place her at the center stage, undress her, and insert a small camera into her vagina. A giant screen suspended above her slumbering body then meticulously reveals the actual space where the rape occurred—the precise location where the trauma began, creating wounds that can never truly heal. The phrase “No act of catharsis overcomes the damage” appears repeatedly on various screens, highlighting an unfortunate truth. As the lengthy performance reaches its conclusion, the effects of the drug wane, and a member of her company assists her in waking up. Yet, she remains silent. The audience is left to contemplate whether it was necessary to present such a vivid account of her story and whether reliving her ordeal with each performance is healthy. This production undeniably leaves a profound impact on its audience, the kind of play that lingers in one's thoughts long after the curtain falls.



Carolina Bianchi in *A Noiva e o Boa Noite Cinderela*. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Experimental theatre held a significant place within the Grec Festival's diverse program. Often challenging conventional definitions, experimental theatre frequently thrives in festivals like these, where artists are invited to push the boundaries, blend genres, and challenge preconceived notions of what art and theatre should be. Works such as *Riding on a Cloud* by Rabih Mroué, *One Night at the Golden Bar* by Alberto Cortés, and *Love to Death (Amor a la Muerte)* by Lemi Ponifasio were prime examples of this trend, which the Grec sometimes categorizes as “Hybrid Scene.” Two of Spain's leading theatre companies also presented their new works. *Una Illa* by Agrupación Señor Serrano brought artificial intelligence (AI) to the forefront. Creators and directors Àlex Serrano and Pau Palacios embarked on an exploration of what a play generated by AI would look like. They allowed AI to generate text, music, images, and voices to shape the performance. The narrative commences simply enough, with a young woman engaging in a conversation with an AI device while practicing yoga. This seemingly mundane dialogue sets in motion a series of vivid yet lengthy scenes. The journey unfolds through a progression of pseudo-classical paintings, morphing lamps that transform into faces, and ultimately culminates with a group of young people dancing inside a

large balloon until their escape. Upon reflection, after the extensive performance, it becomes apparent that the play created by AI, while visually captivating, falls short in terms of quality. Perhaps, in the end, this was the intended message all along—a commentary on the limitations of AI-generated art.

Cabosanroque, an experimental group founded by Laia Torrents Carulla and Roger Aixut Sampietro, presented a trilogy of exhibits under the title of “A Trilogy of Expanded Theatre.” The works included are: *No em va fer Joan Brossa (Joan Brossa Did Not Create Me)*, *Dimonis (Demons)*, and *Flors i viatges (Flowers and Journeys)* where they explore a particular aspect of Joan Brossa, Jacint Verdaguer, and Mercè Rodoreda; three influential artists in Catalan culture. Among the exhibits featured at the Grec Festival, only the one dedicated to Rodoreda was entirely new to the city; the other two had been previously presented in different editions. It is worth noting that the professional backgrounds of Torrents Carulla and Aixut lack any theatrical pedigree; one is an industrial engineer, and the other is an architect. However, their immersive installations are undeniably rooted in theatrical conventions, which they manipulate not merely to craft a dramaturgy or storyline but to evoke profound sensations. In each exhibit, designed for a limited audience of 15-20 people and featuring distinctive themes, viewers are invited to immerse themselves in the author's universe. In their Rodoreda exhibit, participants are seated on low stools, surrounded by screens and other enigmatic objects. On these screens, ten Ukrainian war refugee women read passages from Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1983) and *Last Witnesses* (1985), while fragments from Rodoreda's literary works resonate in the background read by Mónica López. Beneath the screens, mounds of soil undulate, resembling the rhythmic breath of the earth, or perhaps concealing the bodies of soldiers whose harrowing stories the women recount. The exhibit holds more surprises in store, ultimately submerging the audience in a sea of laser lights and fog, leaving them with a profound sense of melancholy and sadness.

One of the last plays to open was also one of the best offerings of the Festival. Alberto Conejero's *En mitad de tanto fuego (Amidst So Much Fire)* premiered at the Sala Beckett. Conejero draws inspiration from the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, transforming it into a poignant and passionate monologue that brings the often-overlooked Patroclus to the forefront. In the program notes, the playwright emphasizes that his interpretation is neither an adaptation nor a reimagining of Homer's text. Instead, it represents a deeply personal and intimate exploration of a story that has captivated him since his youth. Conejero avoids the usual euphemisms surrounding the relationship between the two warriors and places Patroclus, portrayed by the almost-possessed Rubén de Eguía, squarely in the throes of an intense and genuine love for Achilles. Clad in jeans and a plain t-shirt, Patroclus emerges as a man profoundly devoted to his lover, even in the face of his impending demise. Conejero's poetic text serves as a beautiful ode to unabashed love, which Eguía delivers as though it were an integral part of his

being. Eguía's tour de force performance and Conejero's compelling and heart-wrenching text find exquisite balance under the direction of Xavier Albertí. Albertí, who also collaborated on the lighting design with Toni Ubach, effectively utilizes the unconventional space of the upstairs theater at Sala Beckett, an expansive hall with undulating walls, and guides Conejero's text as if it were an aria, with its peaks and valleys, modulating every phrase as if they were sublime notes on a pentagram. Eguía positions himself squarely in front of the audience, engaging us with gestures and emotions that span from rage and anger to inner fortitude and, occasionally, serenity. He embodies a man teetering on the edge, driven by the need to share his version and have his voice heard, however painful it might be, before Hector enters and kills him. Throughout the play, a clever lighting design casts Eguía's formidable shadow on the worn walls, creating the illusion of a dialogue transpiring on stage—a simple yet highly impactful device. As the monologue delves into the horrors of war, Patroclus does not merely recount his own war experiences; he transcends them to address the perpetual backdrop of warfare in human history. This backdrop always leaves behind countless innocent victims, silenced and unable to share their stories. However, thanks to the effective combination of Conejero's text, Albertí's meticulous direction, and Eguía's compelling performance, Patroclus emerges from the shadows of a secondary character. He takes center stage, becomes the focal point and he is finally able to articulate his side of the story. This extraordinary play is destined to be performed and celebrated for years to come.



Ruben de Eguía as Patroclus in *En mitad de tanto fuego*. Photo: Sala Beckett.

Anton Pujol is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He graduated from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and he later earned a Ph.D. at the University of Kansas in Spanish Literature. He also holds an MBA from the University of Chicago, with a focus in economics and international finance. He has recently published articles in Translation Review, Catalan Review, Studies in Hispanic Cinemas, Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea and Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies, among others. His translation of Don Mee Choi's DMZ Colony (National Book Awards 2020 for Poetry) will be published by Raig Verd in 2022. Currently, he serves as dramaturg for the Mabou Mines company opera adaptation of Cunillé's play Barcelona, mapa d'ombres directed and adapted by Mallory Catlett with a musical score by Mika Karlsson.



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