



THEATER

## Why I Hate the Theater

Javier Marías

SOME READERS have asked me to explain a chance remark I made a month or so ago in another column. Among my favorite literary works I mentioned Valle-Inclán's *Comedias bárbaras* (*Barbarous Comedies*), adding: "even though I hate the theater." I will attempt to explain, but I will simply be explaining a personal mania of mine. I don't claim to be right or to have any objective arguments to offer, nor, of course, do I hope to convince anyone. So please do continue to go to the theater!

I think the main reason for my aversion to the theater is the cinema. For someone brought up from childhood on that particular representative art, what the stage can offer is bound to seem relatively poor, stylized, and unconvincing. In the cinema, you're given every possible point of view, that of the viewer, but also that of all the characters, even that of a plane, an eagle, or a snake, or indeed God; you see the action and the actors from a distance and from close up, obliquely, on the move, and there is, of course, no problem in making shifts in time and space. You get to see both the inside of

a room and a ship battered by a storm, you catch the actors' most subtle expressions or looks, you can witness the past and the present and even the imagined future, you can jump from one scenario to another and still another. In the theater, though, our perspective never changes: the characters remain always at the same distance from us, we can barely see their faces, our enduring sensation is one of impotence. And I cannot easily shake off the alienating effect of the comparatively poor scenery. It bothers me that the décor is so obvious, that the doors are so clearly false, that when someone turns on a tap, water doesn't necessarily come out.

Ah, but if it was only that. If it was only the technical deficiencies of traditional theater, the theater of yesteryear, I could ignore them and accept the rules of the game and the conventions.

The biggest problem for me is that the theater of the age I live in has almost always tried to be "innovative" and "modern." And that supposed innovation and modernity often consists in such infelicities as these: if it's a classic work, you almost never see that

work, but a version, adaptation, or recreation by some sly contemporary who thus pockets all the money, given that Sophocles, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Molière, Goldoni, and other such luminaries are all out of copyright. These adaptations generally involve the destruction of the classic work: some dispense with verse, if there is any; others dress Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Brutus in suit and tie, or as Nazi bigwigs, or have them run around naked throughout the entire play (although there is also a fashion for dressing everyone in a kind of hideous sack, so that they all look the same); there are those who prefer to have the characters prancing around a completely bare stage, screaming loudly, or on a stage equipped with a ramp or a tent or a net they can dangle from. Actors are usually told to be either "very natural" or "very artificial," but the result is always the same, namely, their complete inability to speak the words audibly and in a way that captures the interest of the audience, who end up being so distracted by the actors' howls, phoney pauses, incomprehensible songs or litanies, and imperfect diction (as well as looking to their own protection, because actors often hurl water or even fireworks into the audience) that they take little notice of what the actors are trying to communicate verbally. In the theater nowadays, it's almost impossible, regardless of whether it's relevant or not, to escape (a) hysterical, meaningless dancing, perhaps so that the audience can enjoy some "physical movement"; (b) a more or less "savage" or vaguely medi-

eval scene, along the lines of some kind of revelry or peasant hoedown, or a lynching perhaps, or a gang rape, or a bit of group cannibalism—and whichever option they choose, none of them impresses or seems remotely believable; (c) somersaults, pirouettes, and juggling with a bit of mime thrown in, and there's nothing I loathe more than mime and juggling (no need, I hope, to explain why). The words, on the other hand, seem to be gradually disappearing: what with all that bodywork, the cuts to the text, and the superfluity of idiotic characters (the legacy in part of my hero Beckett), it seems that the words are the least important part. There must be some happy medium between lazy, outmoded productions à la Pérez Puig (who seems to have been in charge of the Teatro Español in Madrid for decades now) and the jokey superficialities of the professional innovators. Anyway, if I have a couple of hours to spare, the last thing I'm going to do is sit down to watch a load of dimly-lit sacks, tents, and ramps, and some poor deluded actors pretending to be crazy people running around shouting and dancing and stammering. You will understand why it's so difficult for me to believe in anything that comes with all that baggage. And if I don't believe in it, what am I doing there sitting in the dark for two hours? So, yes, I do occasionally read plays, something that gives me great pleasure. And I have absolutely nothing against that. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)