

Conversation - for NUNO

My work for the NUNO exhibition conjures the atmosphere of my father's political exile from Spain to England (1939 -1989) using domestic objects relating to family life and our constant journeying between Birmingham and Barcelona to visit my grandparents in the 1960s and 70s.

Unknown in his lifetime, my father, José García Lora, is now the subject of a study by my collaborator, Dr Helena Buffery, as an exemplar of Spanish Republican exile theatre. *Conversation* draws on his creative life, and his one grand obsession: to be a famous playwright despite his exile, or perhaps because of it.

NUNO takes place in 2019, which is the 80th anniversary of the *Retirada*, when the democratically elected Republican Government was defeated by General Franco's Fascist forces and nearly half a million Spaniards fled for their lives from Spain. My piece, *Conversation*, forms part of a body of work undertaken since 2013 responding to this history, and I'm delighted to be able to present it in this anniversary year under the NUNO project umbrella.

Originally my title for this work was to be *Portrait*, but the title *Conversation* is more apt in the context of a silenced history because conversation was absent: in common with other traumatised Spanish Republican exiles, my father couldn't talk about his experiences. Yet, as a dramatist, his early works focused on aspects of the continuing Franco dictatorship, and the extreme poverty of life in a shanty.

For *Conversation*, I revisit these early plays, and revive my 2014 invention of the imaginary *Not Lorca Theatre Company*, playfully alluding to the missing 'c' from the family name, which was always confused with the towering figure of Spanish Republican theatre, Federico García Lorca.

At this time I became fascinated by the props and stage direction in my father's plays, and began to view my assemblage works and the performative side of my practice as fertile areas of creative common ground. The sense of parallel interests and shared sensibilities led to the idea of a posthumous collaboration.

After months of research, in December 2014, an intertextual play called *Playa y Toro appeared*. Entering a trance like state in my freezing studio, I wrote it in the space of three weeks. *Conversation* features an excerpt emanating from a telephone receiver, which rests on a vintage suitcase of the kind seen in photographs of the *Retirada*, but on a miniature scale.

Playa y Toro combines a cast of characters from my father's plays, *A Bull for Antonio* and *Tierra Cautiva (The Captive Land)*, and my online blog, *Barcelona in a Bag*. It opens with the conceit that Lora (the playwright) has gone missing and the cast are stuck without him to write the action. We join them at the close of the play when Lora has returned, and Antonio must make a decision: bull or bust!

Playa y Toro attempts to work through the traumatic critical reception for my father's play, *The Captive Land*, which failed to translate to British audiences. This experience was to haunt him, and both his exile and the failure to find an audience for his work became entwined.

In *Conversation*, I seek to give my father a voice, and to dignify his life long struggle with mental illness, which I chose to reframe as a truthful resistance.

As ever, in my work for NUNO, objects have led my process and guided me. My interest in 'object work' as a creative practice and as 'embodied' research is what brought NUNO into being. I hope in future to be able to collaborate with academics in the areas of cultural studies and material memory, to further understand 'object-work' as a core feature of creative practice.

Contents:

Sound - A reading of Playa y Toro, first made for my BBC Radio 4 programme, The Art of Now: Return to Catalonia in 2018, has been reworked to sound like a melodramatic radio play. This is presented in a 'suitcase telephone'.

Assemblage - One vintage display cabinet containing objects from the family archive. Where I have been unable to use original pieces, stand-ins have been sourced.

A framed black and white aerial photograph of the French internment camp at Le Barcarès, given to me by Annie Foroni during the making of Return to Catalonia. The photograph shows the barracks where my father was held captive in 1939.

My plan had been to present a 'groaning cabinet' (heaving with allusion) but this changed with the development of the voice piece, which prompted me to make a decisive edit.

At the time of writing, I am considering using some of the props alluded to in the play for the exhibition. There will be sand.

Photography - During the making of Conversation, I documented the contents of the cabinet, including new arrivals and changes in configuration, with a Canon EOS 400D. This was a departure from working almost exclusively with my iPhone in my art practice.

This process became completely absorbing to me. This documentation is presented as a slide show on a small monitor.

Photographs for this booklet were taken with the Canon EOS 400D after the cabinet edit. They reflect a new way of seeing and documenting which has emerged in the process of making this work.

Sonia Boué - March 2019