

# STAGED MEMORIES: SPANISH DRAMA AND CINEMA, ANDALUSIAN IDENTITY AND FLAMENCO MUSIC IN ARGENTINA AND MEXICO

**Emilio J. Gallardo-Saborido**

*University of Seville, Spain*

*Abstract:* Culture, particularly cinema, drama and music, played a key role in order to keep and reinforce the identity of Spanish migrants in Argentina and Mexico during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For decades, these countries had received thousands of migrants from Spain, and by the period following the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) a notable colony of them settled in Buenos Aires and Mexico City. At the same time, several artists arrived to these places escaping from the war, political repression or, simply, looking for new work opportunities. For instance, famous singers, actors and flamenco players and dancers (v.g. Miguel de Molina, Angelillo, Niño de Utrera, or Sabicas) achieved overwhelming successes in Buenos Aires and Mexico City's theatres. Even more, they created a parallel Spanish stardom abroad.

Hence, this proposal summarizes the contribution of some of these artists and the fusion between theatre and cinema, and typical Andalusian music as flamenco to preserve and evoke the collective memory of such a faraway motherland. Since Andalusia (the Southern region of Spain) and its culture acted as a metonymic

resource to represent that country during that period, migrants from different regions could recognize a common notion of the Spanish identity in them. In this sense, 'home' could be staged, remembered, fictionalized and, obviously, idealized.

*Keywords:* Spanish migrations, theatre/cinema and memory, flamenco music, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Andalusia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Could culture be a resource to heal wounds? How theatre, cinema and music can help to mitigate distance and nostalgia? Could cultural and social identity be considered as a mean to afford the menaces of war and exile? In Spain, the Civil War (1936-1939) forced many artists, writers and musicians to migrate in order to avoid violence and poverty. Many of them arrived to Latin America, especially to Argentina and Mexico. There, they found new opportunities and, in the case of Mexico, a political context (Lázaro Cárdenas' government) that helped them to thrive economic and socially.

Therefore, these migrants set communities of refugees that shared *habiti* (in the Bourdieusian sense) that reinforced their self-image as a singular group (with obvious and multiple differences). Clearly, after the end of the war, many of them perceived themselves as the inheritors of the civilized spirit of the Spanish II Republic in front of the barbaric dictatorship of Franco. In Mexico, they established their own schools, hospitals, and they visited the same cafes as the Tupinamba in Mexico City or the Iberia in Buenos Aires. They even got used to marry among them. Certainly, they were pro-Franco Spaniards in both cities, and many of them had previously arrived as economic migrants. There were tensions between these two groups, even direct fights, but I presume spectators from both groups enjoyed the shows of the Spanish artists living in these two countries in theatres or night clubs. In this sense, I assume the public of flamenco music and dance shows was probably heterogeneous, including both Spanish and Latin American people.<sup>1</sup> There could be some reasons to explain this point:

- a. Flamenco music is particularly close to the southern region of Spain, called Andalusia; nonetheless, it had –and it has– many followers all around the country.
- b. The type of shows that were offered usually combined flamenco dance with other folkloric expressions from other regions of Spain as Galicia, Valencia or Madrid.
- c. Normally, political –and specifically Republican– commitment was not

one of the main features of these flamenco artists. Of course, there were some notable exceptions as Angelillo or Miguel de Molina; nonetheless generally they had escaped from Spain fleeing from violence and poverty instead of political repression.

- d. The shows offered had mainly an aesthetic or playful value more than an ideological one.

## II. THE FORCED VOYAGE OF AMALIO ALCORIZA'S COMPANY

In this regard, it could be interesting to check the case of the so-called *Grand Spanish Company of Musical Comedies of Alcoriza*. This theatre group specialized in Andalusian and flamenco comedies was in the province of Cadiz when the Civil War broke out. According to the words of the son of one of the actors –Florencio Castelló–, they fled to Gibraltar, the British colony in Spain. Fortunately, they had a contract to work abroad and performed in Tangier and then, they took a boat from Marseille to Buenos Aires. They obtained several successes there with a particular kind of plays where acting and flamenco music were combined thanks to singers as Pena *hijo*, Niño de Utrera, and lately Florencio Castelló, or guitar players as the well-known Sabicas, his father and his brother. One of the major successes was the play *Father Castanets*. Since the protagonist was a priest who sang, the main singers of the company were reluctant to feature this role. This was the chance for Castelló who embodied the character Father Castanets in

hundreds of performances along Latin America and even recorded a vinyl with the songs of the play. The company of Alcoriza travelled around Latin America and they finally arrived to Mexico City where they dissolved the group.

This company exemplifies a transplantation of the Spanish culture to Latin American lands. Its work contributed to mitigate the feeling of nostalgia of the motherland. Moreover, they knit a net of common meanings and references which underpinned the notion of community through resources as theatre and flamenco music. Lastly, it should be interesting to check the nature of the spectators who paid for this kind of shows, since commonly, at least in Mexico, the audience of flamenco performances was usually formed by Mexican and Spanish people. In this regard, Alcoriza was continuing the far-reaching tradition of Spanish theatre companies that went across Latin America featuring plays by well-known authors such as Jacinto Benavente, José de Echegaray or the Álvarez Quintero brothers. Then, Alcoriza and his partners were also contributing to keep the Hispanic references in a geographical context compound by to some extent recently emancipated nations.

### III. LOOKING BACK WITH 'CAMPNESS': MIGUEL DE MOLINA AND NOSTALGIA

There is another case which could help us to understand how Spanish folk music –*copla* in this example– and its relation with show business acted as resources that had an impact on social assumptions and codes of the Spanish communities in Latin America and on the image of this country abroad. I am talking about the actor and singer

Miguel de Molina and his frequent representation of subaltern masculinity in musical shows and films.

Nowadays, when we watch the performances of Miguel de Molina in films like the Argentine productions *Ésta es mi vida* or *Luces de candilejas*, we experience the sensation of being contemplating a pretty particular show that could be described as 'campy'. He had an unmistakable style performing that enhanced with his marvellous and creative wardrobe and his set designs.<sup>2</sup> This section is devoted to study the implications of the description of these spectacles and Molina himself as campy. The use of this adjective in this case points at the expression of diverse types of otherness that cross Molina's life and work.

Miguel de Molina's autobiography entitled *Botín de guerra* (*War Spoils*) was published in Spain in 1998. It offers a fascinating testimony of Molina's tireless aspiration of artistic success and, at the same time, the story of constant persecution that eventually forced him to migrate from Spain to Latin America. As he declared (Molina, 1998: 131), he had sympathy for the Republican cause because of his humble origins, but he never belonged to any political party or felt special interest in politics. Nevertheless, his sexual orientation (he was openly homosexual) and his participation in performances for the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War were enough to condemn him to a series of diverse punishments. The most serious one was his kidnapping and torture by three men in 1939, after one of his performances at the Pavón Theatre. However, he did survive and after his recovery began to sing again. The next scandal occurred in 1940 at the Teatro Cómico, where a group of ultra-right agitators shouted at him: "We do not want faggots! This commie should not be allowed to work!" [Translated by the author](Molina, 1998:

164). After this incident, Molina was confined in Cáceres and Buñol until the beginning of 1941. One year later, he decided to travel to Argentina, in the hope of escaping from the continuous humiliation that he had experienced in Spain.

Currently, the figure of Molina has been recovered even institutionally since in 1992 the king Juan Carlos I bestowed him an important decoration ("Orden de Isabel la Católica"). Moreover, he has received tributes through different artistic expressions such as a theatrical show devoted to him called *Miguel de Molina: el Musical* by Jacinto Esteban, or a poem written by one of the finest contemporary Spanish poets, i.e. José Hierro (Huerta Calvo et al., 2005: 482-483). More recently, specifically in 2009, a book (*Miguel de Molina. Arte y provocación*) was edited in order to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of his birth. During that year, there were other events to remember and celebrate his career such as an exposition directed by his grandnephew titled "Art and provocation". Furthermore, another drama was staged in his honour (*La copla quebrada*, Borja Ortiz).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Molina's repercussion has jumped beyond the Spanish speaking world. So, for example, in March of 2010 it was presented by the theatre group La Barni a performance called *Ojos verdes, Miguel de Molina in memoriam* at the University of Birmingham, sponsored by the Department of Hispanic Studies.

Ideologically speaking, his work and figure challenge us to rethink the relationship between power and the Andalusian folk music. His performances, through some of his lyrics and his figure himself, offer an alternative view of this kind of cultural products. Molina's image is a far cry from the cliché that links the Andalusian folk stars from the 40s-60s to the Francoist hierarchy. Finally, his attitude towards his sexual orientation does not

fit with the mainstream behaviour and opinions in the 1940's Spain.<sup>4</sup> Molina behaved with pride and courage in a historical context characterized by the official imposition of a morality based in an extremist conception of Catholicism.

This revision of Molina from our present position allows us drawing on a later aesthetic category, i.e. "Camp", in order to think and understand his profile but his contemporary influence as well. In this regard, the notion of "Camp" has traditionally stressed the importance of reception as a creative act. Richard Dyer summarizes this idea stating: "...Camp is far more a question of how you respond to things rather than qualities actually inherent in those things. [...] Basically, it is a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial" (Dyer, 2002: 52). But could we consider Molina's filmic interventions as campy products? In order to answer this question, we will draw on one of the classical approaches to this phenomenon, say, Susan Sontag's text called "Notes on Camp" (1961).

Molina's performance clearly expressed an alternative version of masculinity that had nothing to do with the contemporary hegemonic views.<sup>5</sup> For instance, by embodying young gallants in his Spanish short films Molina removed himself from the fascist filmic interpretations of masculinity. Military heroes such as the characters of Alfredo Mayo in the productions: ¡A mí la legión! (Juan de Orduña, 1942) or *Raza* (José Luis Sáenz de Heredia, 1942) constituted an evident representation of hegemonic masculinity in cinema, linked ideologically with the new political hierarchy. In this regard, it is possible to make the first assertion of Molina's performances in terms of being campy, since Sontag asserts: "As a taste in persons, Camp

responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility. [...] What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. . . . Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms. For obvious reasons, the best examples that can be cited are movie stars" (Sontag, note 9).

And, later, she will add: "Camp is the glorification of character". Indeed, the relationship between homosexuality and Camp is highlighted in Sontag's text. Here, in the history of snob taste, homosexuals are deemed to be the inheritors of aristocratic values. These inheritors are described as: "an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste" (note 50). According to Sontag (note 51), these collective experiences *have a peculiar affinity* with Camp; although this does not mean that there is a complete equivalence between Camp and homosexual tastes.<sup>6</sup> And, finally, Sontag argues the reason why she considers homosexuals as the *vanguard* and *the most articulate audience* is linked with an ethics of poetics. In the note 52, this writer adduces that aesthetic sense has been a useful tool in order to make homosexuals' integration into society easier. In this regard, Camp's emphasis on artifice, joy and aesthetics, acts as a *solvent of morality* and enhances the playful sense of life instead of *moral indignation*.

With regard to Molina's performances, maybe it is necessary to question the cliché that states

that homosexual behaviour is more tolerated in the world of show business. In the Spanish context of the 1940s, the figure of Molina was selected as a synthesis of non-desirable masculine features so repressive forces turned him into an ideological and moral target. His visibility triggered his following damnation. Maybe it was easier for him to show his homosexual desire during the II Republic years, due to his work as an artist, but that situation was inverted with the onset of the dictatorship.

Lastly, the whole aesthetic dimensions of his filmic performances show Molina's concerns, especially on those occasions where he had more freedom to direct his shows, for example during the Argentinean period with films like *Ésta es mi vida* (Román Viñoly Barreto, 1952) or *Luces de candilejas* (Enrique Carreras, 1956). Here, his character as a total artist, who cared infinitely about the configuration of every part of each of his productions, shines through. Indeed, his attraction for innovative costume designs (blouses are the best example) refers contemporary audiences to "the love of the exaggerated, the off, of things-being-what-they-are-not" (note 8) that Sontag points out. The idea of Molina as a total artist is linked with the stress of Camp on artifice over nature ("Nothing in nature can be campy . . .", note 7). Furthermore, Molina's insistence on representation and spectacle as a way of life connects with Campy ideal of theatricality (note 43).

Therefore, Molina can be considered a Spanish campy reference, but at the same time the value of his performances does only not rest on their style. It is more than a matter of aesthetics. Indeed, there

are ideological implications on his work because his expression of masculine otherness challenged an authoritarian gender and moral framework that tried to subsume Molina's attempt to live and work without fear.

#### IV. EXPORTABLE DIVAS

To conclude, I will just briefly mention another case of study that could help us to understand the relationship among the Spanish communities in Latin America, the remembrance and construction of the image of Spain, and certain cultural products. The attraction that the Andalusian folklore, symbols and images had in and out of Spain was also used in the Mexican cinema of the golden years to film a series of joint productions with Spain. These films resorted to some national stereotypes (e.g. the Spanish female gypsy and the Mexican *charro*) to create a transnational star-system. They played with recognizable and powerful references that became quite profitable. In these productions Spanish artists that fled their country during the war or the post-war period appeared next to others that had spent most of the last years working inside Spain. Considering the high-level of codification of the stereotypes, we could think that Spaniards living in Mexico and Argentina probably watched them as to some extent parodic or at least a playful revision of the Spanish identity. The well-known stereotypes and the comical nature of many of these films helped to play with the typical images of Spain/Andalusia. In this regard, resources as cross-dressing (for instance in *Lola Torbellino*, René Cardona, 1955) or musical/dance parody were used (e.g. *La gitana y el charro*, Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1963).<sup>7</sup>

The Spanish protagonists of many of these productions were the Andalusian folk song stars Lola Flores and Carmen Sevilla. Apart from these actresses, settled in Spain, other Spaniards living in Mexico were frequently hired to embody other characters. That was the case of the already mentioned Florencio Castelló who took part in dozens of films in Mexico.

These productions staged recurrent stories of international brotherhood among Spanish-speaking countries favouring the development of the notion of "Hispanity" and taking profit of the use/construction of a twofold star-system. In this sense, the producer Cesáreo González and his company Suevia Films were two of the main actors in this enterprise. Obviously, the economic interests basically underpinned these productions but at the same time they allowed to export, reinforce and rethink certain clichés related to the image of Spain abroad.

Hence, the production and consumption of these films offer another way to understand different issues linked to the presence of the Spanish communities of flamenco artists in Latin America during our period. I refer to issues as the work chances of these artists, the representation of Spain abroad, or the interests of the Spanish cinema spectators living in Mexico and Argentina in relation to the remembrance of the motherland.

Finally, I would like to quote the Argentinian scholar García Canclini who in his influential book *Hybrid Cultures* stated: "It is necessary to register those aspects that keep different in mixings" [Translated by the author] (García Canclini, 2009: XVI). Consequently, we have still to reflect on how flamenco and Andalusian folklore contributed to underpin the memories of the Spanish refugees in Mexico and Argentina and how they supported a



process of common meeting among these refugees and their Latin American neighbours. This effort will help us to understand more accurately the mechanisms of memory and representation in other contexts where violence or poverty have impelled other groups of artists to leave their countries.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] In this text I offer some basic impressions on the composition of the public of the shows related to flamenco music and dance. Nonetheless, I recognize that more work is needed to be done in this regard in order to obtain a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of this issue, including the differences and similarities of the cases of Mexico and Argentina.
- [2] Nevertheless, the singularity of this kind of creations could just being completely enjoyed in his last film *Luces de Candilejas*. There Molina acted in two musical performances that were shot in colour despite the rest of the film was in black-and-white.
- [3] More information about this commemoration can be found in the website of the Foundation Miguel de Molina: [www.fundacionmigueldemolina.org](http://www.fundacionmigueldemolina.org).
- [4] According to Huerta et al. (1998: 481), Molina: "made popular a singular way of singing *copla* in a sissy way. This fact turned him into ahead of his time artist since he bravely assumed his homosexuality" [translated by the author]. Nevertheless, Diego Galán (2009: 161) points out that, according to those ones that watched him at stage, he emphasized his sissiness in the films.
- [5] Stuart Hall has defined the notion of the "hegemonic viewpoint" as follows: "[It] is (a) that it defines within its terms their mental horizon, the universe, of

possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy –it appears coterminous with what is *natural, inevitable, taken for granted* about the social order" (Hall, 2006: 172).

- [6] However, it can be argued if actually there is something that can be named "homosexual taste" (and at least in singular).
- [7] It would be interesting to analyze the presence of parodies of the Spanish stereotypes in other kinds of contemporary Mexican films such as the comedies of Tin Tan (e.g. *El rey del barrio*, Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1949).

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