

ESPEJO, RAMÓN. *THE CATALONIAN JOURNEY OF AMERICAN DRAMA 1909-2000 FROM JIMMY VALENTINE TO THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*. LEGENDA, 2024. 305 PP.
ISBN 978-1-83954-169-8

NOELIA HERNANDO-REAL
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
noelia.hernando@uam.es

Received 9 May 2025

Accepted 4 December 2025

Ramón Espejo, Professor of American Literature at the University of Seville and a distinguished scholar in U.S. drama opens *The Catalanian Journey of American Drama 1909-2000 from Jimmy Valentine to The Vagina Monologues* with an inspiring quotation by Michel de Certeau: “Readers are travellers.” This is a very apt metaphor to express how readers of Espejo’s latest book will feel. This book invites us on a fascinating journey across the Atlantic and the 20th century to address a significant question: the impact that US theatre has had on the Catalanian theatrical landscape, and through this, to better understand the notion of Catalonia and Catalanian culture beyond its native dramatic output.

This transatlantic approach adds to the burgeoning field of Transatlantic studies that, as defined by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, aim to develop new paradigms for literary criticism in historical and contemporary contexts of exchange, circulation and transformation (2007). More precisely, the book also contributes to the field of Transnational American Literary Studies, which started over three decades ago, and which, as Yogita Goyal has said in her introduction to the groundbreaking collection *Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literary Studies*, presents transnationalism as “the occasion for the questioning of nation and alternative formations to the nation – like world systems and world literature – by emphasizing flows and migration but also revealing the synergy of

cultural and economic aspects of such histories “ (7). Significantly, Espejo does not only discuss the journey of American plays to Catalonia, and the synergies between both cultures, but also the flux, crossroads and journeys of US plays within Spain. Espejo’s book shares with these two approaches their dialogic essence, their trying to map out and dislocating rigid boundaries in national literary imaginations. But it is noteworthy that, though Espejo aligns his work with such transnational approaches, he refuses to engage in lengthy discussions as to what the terms transnational or transatlantic imply, for the same reasons that he does not enter discussions usually found in such approaches, which commonly start by defining what the very term “American” means. Typical of this writer’s style, he is much more straightforward and declares in plain language his main objective: “what is offered here is a detailed historical survey of American dramatic borrowings in Catalonia throughout the twentieth century that hopes to answer the questions of who paid attention to American plays in twentieth-century Catalonia, why and how?” (2). But on this journey, he offers much more to his readers.

Certainly, Espejo is a good guide on the journey. His expertise in the field of US theatre and drama is proved by his numerous publications, studies, critical editions and translations. His studies on the reception of Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams and Broadway musicals in Spain had provided solid ground from which to examine the relation between US theatre and Catalonia. This close examination was a necessity. In a neatly mapped out state of the art, Espejo makes it evident that previous studies, to which he is indebted, are quite limited (Berdusan 2021, Gallen 1992, George 2002, London 1997).

The book follows a sensible chronological organization, marked by one of the most determining political events in the history of Spain, and hence of Catalonia, in the 20th century: Franco’s dictatorship. Part I, entitled, “Before Franco,” includes only one chapter, “The Earliest Borrowings.” And so the journey starts with a play difficult to define, *L’agricultor de Xicago* (1908), apparently based on a work by Mark Twain which has never been found. This early example illuminates a peculiar phenomenon in the performance of plays, allegedly American, in Catalonia. Espejo has coined the term “Fultonism” to refer to the common practice of Catalonian playwrights’ writing an “American”

play, full of entertainment, which was also announced as purely American and usually signed by one Oscar Fulton. This Oscar Fulton, Espejo argues, never existed, and this name was used for the sake of advertising certain plays and creating expectations among the audience. Apart from this “Fultonic” tradition, the Catalanian stage in these early years started importing works by venerated male authors: Eugene O’Neill or Elmer Rice among others, writers that would have their impact on Catalanian playwrights too.

Part II covers the period from early to mid-Francoism, 1940-1960, a period of theatrical colonization, when, as Espejo argues, Catalanian sensibilities were wiped out, together with the exclusion of Catalan language from the theatre. Concurrent with the disappearance of Catalan playwrights who had enjoyed some success in the 1920s and 1930, such as Josep Maria de Sagarra, Joan Oliver, and Carles Soldevila, there was a recurrent pattern of staging American plays in Catalonia, mainly coming from Madrid. This is the remarkable case, for instance, of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), which debuted at the Teatro Borrás as *Nuestra ciudad*, after its premiere at Madrid’s Teatro Nacional María Guerrero. From 1946 to 1950, however, no American drama was brought into the region, a fact Espejo believes was due to the difficult relations between Franco and the US at the time. In the same way, once Franco decided to resume relations with the US, in the early 1950s, the production of American plays also resumed – albeit subjected to censorship, one should not forget. One of the main assets of Chapter 2 is Espejo’s engaging discussion of the adaptation and reception of Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in Catalonia in 1953. Using a variety of sources, including critics, reviewers and Miller himself referring to this, Espejo convincingly argues how the play was used to claim Spain’s openness and modernity, while underlining the evils of materialism and how evil ensues in families not ruled by God. This second chapter, with a focus on Miller, Tennessee Williams and commercial hits, emphasizes a key point: the division of Catalanian audiences into well-to-do patrons, ready to consume these “borrowings,” to use Espejo’s term, and see adaptations of plays that would leave them unbothered, and what Espejo calls “the theatrical intelligentsia”, which turned to *cámara* productions to satisfy their interests (50). Actually, Chapter 3, devoted to *teatro de cámara*, is the gem of the book. Espejo has navigated

challenging research, when there was no extant bibliography, to lay out the ground for further research on the pivotal role of these groups, amateur by force, and usually made up of dissidents. These groups found in American drama an outlet for their own political and social claims. Much work lies ahead as regards Teatro Club, TEU, Teatro Yorick or Teatro de Cámara and the popularity of Miller, Williams, O'Neill and William Saroyan among them.

Part III, "Late Francoism and the Steady Recovery of Catalan Theatrical Culture", covers the period between 1960 and 1977. Chapter 4 focuses on the waning popularity of the American male classics that had dominated American borrowings, while Chapter 5 stresses the "New School", as Espejo refers to Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, or the visits of Living Theatre, Bread and Butter or La Mama to Catalonia. This New American Drama, different from the Old (mainly realistic plays of Miller and O'Neill), found an outlet in independent theatre. Espejo convincingly argues that it was because Catalan playwrights had liberty to use their own language in the theatre, which had been forbidden till then, that these other borrowings took place. This would pave the way for the real opening of Catalonia to American theatre in the following years, which are covered in Part IV, "The Autonomous Community of Catalonia", with chapters 6-11 covering the period from 1978 to 1999.

These chapters unpack the role played by American drama as Catalonia freed itself from the political, cultural and linguistic constraints of Francoism. In Chapter 6, Espejo explores the continuity of the triad O'Neill, Miller, Williams. Chapter 7 examines the impact of Neil Simon and Woody Allen in Catalonia, highlighting the elevation of the latter to a status he does not even hold in the US. Chapter 8 focuses on the importation of Broadway musicals, done, as the author wittily suggests, by "displaying an idiosyncratic approach to the genre" (180). Throughout this chapter, Espejo distinguishes between two categories: shows that offered a lavish spectacle, but remained unconcerned with relevant subject matters; and works that did engage with provocative topics and used the tools of musical theatre in challenging ways, as is the case with, among others, *Sweeney Todd*, *Chicago* and *Rent*. Chapter 9 discusses the vogue for David Mamet and Sam Shepard in Catalonia in the 1990s, a vogue, Espejo claims, that was mismatched with a poor understanding as regards what makes these playwrights innovative in the US. Chapter 10 explores productions of "Other New Playwrights", which include Martin

Sherman, Harvey Fierstein, Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel, and Michael Kearns. The last chapter, “Beyond Playwriting: Companies, Directors and the Printed Page” tackles the works of American directors and companies, such as the always controversial Robert Wilson, Leo Breuer and Pigeon Drop. This chapter also discusses hybrid formats, shows created across media, such as the production of *Bartleby* by Teatro Fronterizo. Finally, Espejo devotes the last part of his book to translations and studies of American drama in Catalan and in Castilian but published in Catalonia. Espejo ends with hope that in the future more texts in Catalan will be made available.

As a whole, Espejo fulfills his goal. His exhaustive research is woven neatly as he unpacks the numerous productions of American plays in Catalonia during the past century. He aids readers in understanding the staging of American plays in Catalonia with appropriate references to historical, political, social, cultural and linguistic data, which, nonetheless, are not overwhelming. His prose is engaging and fluid, though one misses the translations of quotations in Spanish and Catalan into English, perhaps an editorial decision. One misses the explanation of idiomatic expressions as well, some surely hard to understand by non-native Spanish speakers of a certain age, such as “ozorismo” or “landonismo”. And while Espejo mostly maintains an objective stance in the presentation of plays, his reference to Marsha Norman’s *‘night Mother* “as second rate” (165) and altogether unsuccessful on Broadway underrates the play. *‘night Mother* ran for eleven months on Broadway, gained four Tony nominations, including best play, and was the winner of the most prestigious awards: the Dramatists Guild’s Hull-Warriner Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1983. The play’s translation into over twenty languages and its film release indicate its success. The play’s further success in Spain, where it was awarded several prizes, could have been noted as well (Cuenca 290). But these shortcomings are just minutiae in this thoroughly researched work, which is but a gate-opener for future research. As Espejo sentences in his concluding remarks, “Much remains to be done” (258). His book is a cliffhanger to future journeys. Two main approaches lay ahead: on the one hand, picking up one of the hundred threads Espejo has started unweaving and pursuing further research on particular plays, authors, and companies, and on the other hand, a deeper development, based on specific case studies, of the transnational relation between American dramaturgy and the

Catalonian stage. For its richness, novelty and style the book is good reading for those in American and Catalan Studies, and especially for those interested in Theatre, Transnational, Transatlantic, Translation and Adaptation Studies. Indeed, much remains to be done.

WORKS CITED

- CUENCA, Inés. "Marsha Norman." *Otros escenarios. La aportación de las dramaturgas al teatro norteamericano*, eds. M^a Dolores Narbona and Barbara Ozieblo. Icaria, 2005. 285-93.
- GOYAL, Yogita. "Introduction: The Transnational Turn." *Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literary Studies*. Cambridge UP, 2017. 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316048146.002>
- MANNING, Susan and Andrew Taylor, eds. *Transatlantic Studies. A Reader*. Edinburgh UP, 2007.