

European Stages

Silence, Shakespeare and the Art of Taking Sides: Report from Barcelona

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David Wills (Sergi Torrecilla) and Emmi Straube (Anna Alarcón) look on while Major Arnold (Andrés Herrera) interrogates conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (Josep Maria Pou) in Ronald Harwood's *Taking Sides* (*Prendre Partit*) at the Teatre Goya. Photo credit: David Ruano

When the actor and director Josep Maria Pou informed me that he was staging Ronald Harwood's *Taking Sides*, first produced in 1995, at Barcelona's Teatre Goya, I was a little surprised. My last encounter with the piece, István Szabó's 2001 film adaptation, left me thinking this was a rather dated morality play. But watching the piece again in Pou's clean, crisp production, presented as *Prendre Partit* in a Catalan translation by Ernest Riera, the staging resonated as a defiant

indictment of the systematic politicization of culture in Spain. Harwood's play contrives a courtroom-like encounter between a coarse, combative American military officer, Major Steve Arnold (Andrés Herrera), who confronts the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (Josep Maria Pou), over the latter's supposed collaboration with the Nazis during the Third Reich. The altercation takes place in the Berlin headquarters where Arnold is stationed with his Jewish lieutenant, David Wills (Sergi Torrecilla) and secretary Emmi Straube (Anna Alarcón). In Joan Sabaté's grey imposing set, this is a post-war world of muted walls, broken windows and high arches, where people are dwarfed by their surroundings: tiny cogs in a bleak, existential machine, where agency too often seems a thing of the past.

Arnold, a former insurance claims investigator, is first seen asleep in a chair. But the rousing sounds of Beethoven's 5th Symphony in C Minor soon spur him into action. He jumps up like a clockwork toy, overly excited at the prospect of nailing the eminent German conductor for his supposed collaboration with the regime. Herrera's Arnold is dogged in his pursuit of these "degenerates." He clutches files in search of incriminating evidence, wags his finger and points in an accusatory manner. He is a man with a mission and won't, as he nonchalantly informs his Lieutenant, let facts get in the way of "nailing the bastards."

Pou's production shows Herrera's stocky Arnold to be as inflexible as those he denounces, and his cropped hair and small moustache cannot help but posit an analogy with Hitler. He snarls and bites, issuing orders like a brusque snapping

dog. He darts and jives like a boxer hoping to pull a punch on his opponent. On the other side of the ring, Pou's lugubrious, aging Furtwängler bides his time. A meticulous man, economical in his moves, Furtwängler is watchful of whom and what is around him. On his first appearance, he removes his gloves in a cautious manner as if carefully peeling off a layer of skin. Furtwängler's stillness is consistently contrasted with Arnold's pent-up rage. Furtwängler knows that there are no absolutes, nothing that is fixed or determined. Music is the art of interpretation, and Emmi and David admire Furtwängler's epic, weighty renditions of Beethoven's scores. His recordings sweep them away into a space where they are transported into a place of beauty where subjectivity is played out.

Arnold cannot accept a grey position, insistent that Furtwängler's decision to remain in Berlin during the War as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra confirms his commitment to the ideology of the regime. He is triumphant in tone when crowing that Furtwängler sent Hitler a telegraph on his birthday and gleefully waves a file of papers revealing the conductor's extra-marital affairs. The socially awkward Helmuth Rode (Pepo Blasco), a former second violinist with the orchestra, testifies to the conductor's courage in refusing to give Hitler the Nazi salute, but the increasingly agitated Arnold refuses to listen. There is no room for ambiguity in Arnold's world.

And yet Pou's production consistently refuses to take sides. The restless, animated Helmuth Rode was able to obtain a position in the Berlin Philharmonic because Jewish

musicians were excluded from the orchestra. The privileged Furtwängler may have been on the Nazi's *Gottbegnadeten* (Important Artist list) but he used his position to help Jewish musicians to leave Germany. Arnold irritates and abuses; he refuses to see the poetry and energy in Furtwängler's recordings, referring to the conductor as "Hitler's bandleader," but he also acknowledges the weight of the dead that hangs over the grey, fractured landscape in which the characters operate. The distraught widow of a pianist exterminated in a death camp defends the conductor's attempts to get her husband out of the country. "You want to burn him at the stake," she tells Arnold. He has indeed internalized the culture of polarized, binary opposites that so defined Nazism.

The two desks in the large bombed building look like tiny satellites in a murky void. Furtwängler is positioned center stage as a point of gravity around which the restless Arnold hovers. Pou's Furtwängler stoops but holds his ground: the shuffling is minimal, the responses measured. "I love my country. I believe in art. What could I do?" he states. In his own defense, Furtwängler claims he gave spiritual nourishment to the German population during trying times. Collaboration is shown to take many shapes and forms: Helmuth's involvement asks a series of questions about what the general populace knew or didn't know and how they colluded in the operation of the regime, benefitting from the misfortune of the persecuted Jews. Herrera's Arnold, an image of imperialist arrogance, marches around Furtwängler like a dog with a bone, like Death dancing in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, only he is alone without the travelers following

on. David and Emmi refuse to go along with him, choosing to occupy a less partisan position. They stand still listening to the sweeping lyricism of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, which Emmi puts on the record player as the Major screams out of the horrors of the gas chambers.

The parallels with contemporary Spain are not difficult to spot. Spain has its own contested history of collusion with a dictatorship responsible for overthrowing a democratically elected government. A series of artists went into exile at the end of the Civil War rather than collaborate with Franco's regime. Furthermore, in contemporary Spain, as politicians meddle in cultural appointments and effectively censor culture through legislation that seeks to marginalize the artistic, Pou's production argues for a more considered contemplation of artistic worth and ethical responsibility. The production's run coincided with the Goya (the Spanish equivalent of the Oscars) award's ceremony, where Pedro Almodóvar stated that José Ignacio Wert, Spain's Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Sport is not included as a friend of culture and Spanish cinema. When political opportunism dominates, culture functions as a pawn and commodity. The overwrought Arnold may have legitimate concerns, but his refusal to listen to the terms of engagement of his opponent displays an absolutism that undermines democracy's ability to operate in the grey areas that exist between the black and white extremes of dictatorships.