

Who I am and Why I write

Josep M. Benet i Jornet

At my childhood home in the Sant Antoni neighbourhood of Barcelona, where I was born in 1940, there were very few books. We didn't go to the theatre; nevertheless, as soon as I learned to read, books became a passion for me. If the choice were a toy or a book (we didn't have the means for both), I would always prefer a book. In fact, I always wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be a writer like the boy who wants to be an astronaut, knowing that it's a lie, that it can never be. I was a typical neighbourhood child, adapted to my surroundings but without any other points of reference. Lacking in self-esteem and, with even less confidence in my intellectual abilities, with two parents who were anxious about my ineptitudes, I began to write. And I knew that I would never stop writing: first novels, then plays. You can imagine what they were like.

During the misery and unhappiness of the post-Civil War period, my constant distraction for many years were comic books (they would arrive in a slow trickle, one each five or six months), and with any scrap of paper that I could find—usually the paper that was used to wrap food at the market—I would create my own comic books, entire collections, including drawings and text. At home they thought I liked to draw and that I had talent (a lie), and they didn't pay much attention to the fact that my drawings were always accompanied by a plot. Those clumsy drawings, image and dialogue, served as the bridge that led me to the theatre. But why the theatre? I don't understand it; it's a mystery: the origin of this obsession is incomprehensible to me. With plenty of sacrifices (I was continually reminded of them), my father wanted me to accomplish what he could not: that I study Industrial Engineering.

I would skip class and escape to the National Library of Catalunya and would avoid my responsibilities, reading new and different writers who were slightly beyond the purely commercial authors. I had the instinct to break through my own ceiling of interests, and I did it feeling my way around in the dark, with absolutely nobody to guide me and tell me that perhaps I was mistaken.

My rebellion, I believe, took place at the age of eighteen. After Christmas vacation, I announced to my parents that I had no plans to return to the Industrial School. My father, generously, desperately, asked me what it was that I wanted to do with my life. I wasn't expecting the question but, instinctively, I replied that I wanted to study Philosophy and Letters. They agreed to pay. My time at the University of Barcelona was very important to me. My objective was not to have an academic career; it was to find a way to write for the theatre. My classmates gave me lessons in literature, in modern thought. The professors did not, but my classmates did. For the first time I was able to find relevant points of reference and, for the first time, there were people who valued my work. Not so much, but at least a bit.

At the University I finally began to understand that I had to forge linkages with Catalan culture, and I participated, without any sort of protagonism, in the struggle against the Franco regime. But I wasn't a militant member of any party. With Professor Joaquim Molas and my friend Joan-Lluís Marfany, in clandestine classes, I learned most of what I know about Catalan literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the Adrià Gual School of Drama, I was able to connect with people who were key players in the theatrical renewal that was taking place in Barcelona. The year 1963, unexpectedly, I was awarded the first Josep M. de Sagarra

Theatre Prize. It was the beginning of a career as the playwright—one that I had dreamt of but had considered impossible—.

I am a playwright, I would say, because of an unavoidable stroke of fate, in spite of myself, in spite of my limitations, in spite of my weaknesses. There should be another more rational analysis than this one, but my love for the theatre has been, and is, an obsession that completely conditions my life. I have very little confidence in myself, but I know that I'll never stop writing for the theatre, I'll never stop struggling to create plays that are each time more rigorous and ambitious than those that I have written previously.

I still stumble, but I stumble while trying to raise the bar. Writing is not easy. Writing a play can be likened to wanting to construct a cathedral, a work with infinite problems, without any certainty that they will be resolved. Whatever the theme may be, a sense of terror always overtakes me when I finish a new play. My texts, of course, are often converted into theatrical spectacles and, despite an instinctive misanthropy, I love to be with theatre people. I find the rehearsal process to be a fascinating, enriching experience. The night of the premiere is the most angst-ridden thing in the world. But it is also the most beautiful, and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

I don't know whether I could say that *Desire* is one of my most beloved plays, but I could say that it has been one of the most cherished works on the part of critics and audiences. It represented a turning point in my career as a playwright. I wrote it when I was in the midst of a creative crisis and, from then on, almost nothing has ever been the same.

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(Translated by Sharon G. Feldman)

Josep M. Benet i Jornet has authored more than forty plays in Catalan. His many honours include the Josep M. de Sagarra Prize, four Serra d'Or Critics' Prizes, the National Catalan Literature Prize for Theatre, the National Theatre Prize from the Spanish Ministry of Culture, the Cross of Saint George from the Autonomous Government of Catalunya, and the Max Prize for best Catalan play. In May 2010, he received the prestigious Max Award of Honour for his entire professional trajectory in the theatre in Spain.