



*The Border,
an Unavoidable Concept?
Barcelona. 1, 2, 3 March of 2012*

**International Conference on the Border and its Relationship to
the Performing Arts in Europe**

**Organized by: GRAE (Grup de Recerca d'Arts Escèniques /
Research Group in Performing Arts) of the
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**

Coordinated by Sharon Feldman & Núria Santamaria

The notion of a limit or threshold as an element denoting the demarcation of a conceptual or physical reality is difficult to ponder within the context of the evolution of conscience. One draws a line to separate what is perceived as different; a line is traced to discriminate between the sky and land, human being and animal, young and old, ego and alter ego, us and them. The contents and meaning of the line are unstable: it could be an expression of the end –the most extreme point associated with an entity–, it could be an obstacle to knock down... it could be the *border*, the line that delimits what is ahead, distinct, or, perhaps, opposed.

Given the inherent ambiguities underpinning the idea of Europe and European identities, the concept of the border and speculation with regard to its possible destruction are especially problematic and provocative topics of discussion. Today, to speak of Europe as a specific place or locale is to ponder a space whose boundaries and contours have been and are in perpetual flux and transformation. "From a geopolitical point of view", Michel Foucher reminds us, "Europe is not an old continent, it is the newest". Certainly, the dilemmas and clashes generated with regard to nationalisms, wars, imperialist fervor, and migratory movements, as well as the logic of capitalist markets and new technologies, have substantially modified the order and contours of the pieces that comprise the European puzzle; but this plasticity, this almost continual variance that, perhaps, places into question the type and form of each border, has not taken away its relevance as a dividing line.

The progressive expansion of the European Union, the fall of the Berlin wall, symbolically magnified, does not allow us to forget that Euro-skeptics make up a considerable percentage of the population, embracing political positions stemming from a broad ideological spectrum. Since 1989, more than 1400 kilometers of new borders have been created on the European map. They recognize the distinctiveness of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, the Baltic countries segregated from Russia, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia, among others. These new states are searching for a recognition that vacillates between belonging to a collective –the diffuse Europeanness that attempts to eschew eastern influences, the Soviet shadow, or feared Islamic fundamentalisms– and particularistic constructions.

To what extent does the European theatre scene take into account or reflect these debates, these contrasts, and these paradoxes? Is it still possible to aspire today to construct a national dramaturgy in the same way in which Schiller and his contemporaries attempted to do? Is it possible to construct a drastically monolingual national repertoire, as has been the case in France, Spain, or Great Britain? What degree of international projection or recognition can be attributed to dramaturgies created in minority languages such as Catalan, Cornish, Frisian, Basque, or Rusyn? What space should the contributions of newer immigrants (Africans, Latin Americans, Asians) occupy in the different European national dramaturgies? Is it possible to conceive a European theatrical canon that eludes the empire of the market and supersedes the asphyxiating dominance of the language of the official state? Is it desirable? What degrees of divorce or reconciliation can exist between the proclamations of political institutions and creativity? Is there such a thing as a dramaturgy of the border? Are there theatre artists with Europeanist interests who are alien to the market of institutional festivals and coliseums?

Far from a certain utopian naiveté, all indicators point to the border as a concept that incites transgression. The Europe that ordinary citizens are speaking and thinking about is situated beyond territorial materiality and administrative constraints. Europe is, in many ways, “the incomplete adventure”, lucidly described by Bauman. It is situated at the crossroads of the legacy of a history consecrated as the cradle of civilization, exported throughout the world, willingly or by force, and of the promise of a future, always deferred, which is configured as a project under construction. In the context of these temporal borders, it is necessary to decide at some point whether what unifies us is more powerful than what differentiates and separates us, if cultural threads can reconnect us with as much force as George Steiner contends, if Europe is that “supplement of spirit” in which Tzvetan Todorov would like to believe: an adhesion to shared values of liberty, secularism, justice, and equality. Or, perhaps, it is enough for Europe to function as a consortium strategically situated in resistance to predictable intellectual, philosophical, and economic changes that other continents are proposing. What type of theatre rethinks this vacillating Europe? What theatrical alternatives propose a critical revision of a shared past and present or serve as the basis of an uncertain future? How is the dissolution or sedimentation of borders within intangible realms (ideas, languages, cultures) conceived from a theatrical perspective? Can the theatre surpass the very borders that confine it to the territories of consumerism, be it within an elitist context, or within the realm of the popular majority?

Understood in a literal or a rhetorical sense, the nature of the border within a theatrical context is always mobile and permeable. The drive to surpass limits, invade artistic territories,

and create disciplinary hybridities has generated a constellation of theatre artists who consider themselves “of the border” or “on the border”, and who work with traditions, genres, aesthetic practices, and intellectual and physical domains of varying types. The effort to challenge the decisive moments marked by convention or tradition often has to do with intellectual and artistic concerns that explore modes of communication beyond a discourse that is presumably locked in a Cartesian pattern; the move toward other disciplines often implies a conversion of forms into a metadiscursive theme. To what extent are such artistic endeavors truly experimental? Have the aesthetics of fusion and synthesis already created their own rhetoric, their own obsessions, and their own areas of consumption? How has the concept of the border contributed to reflection with regard to the objectives, definition, and boundaries of Europeanness? What space is occupied, in the European and global context, by a stateless dramaturgy such as that of Catalonia?

The Research Group in Performing Arts of the Autonomous University of Barcelona invites scholars from throughout the world to participate in a debate about the multifaceted relationships between the concept of the border and European theatre: from approaches grounded in territory, politics, and identity, to reflections with regard to scenic and/or artistic limits, along with ideological borders that affect contemporary artistic production. We wish to confront two essential ideas as a way of understanding the contemporary times in which we live: is there such a thing as European theatre? Is the border an unavoidable concept?

Sharon Feldman (University of Richmond) & Núria Santamaria (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), coordinators.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The conference will be organized around three sections:

1. Tangible borders (physical, territorial, economic)
2. Intangible borders (ideologies, beliefs)
3. Expressive borders (languages, artistic disciplines)

We are accepting proposals for 20-minute papers, in Catalan, Spanish, English, French or Italian. Please include the following information in your proposal:

1. Provisional title. (Indicate the section in which you would like to participate).
2. 5 keywords
3. A 700-word abstract, including an account of the subject matter and methodology of research
4. Brief cv (maximum 200 words)
5. Regardless of the language in which you plan to present, please be sure to include an English version of both the abstract and the cv.

Proposals will be accepted between 1 March 2011 and 31 October 2011.

Proposals (in MS Word) should be sent via e-mail to: gr.arts.esceniques@uab.cat

Scientific committee: Jean-Louis Besson (Université Paris X – Nanterre), Maria Delgado (Queen Mary, University of London), Enric Gallén (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), and Mercè Saumell (Institut del Teatre de Barcelona).

The committee will evaluate the proposals between 1 November 2011 and 31 December 2011.

The selected participants will be contacted via email.

The final written version of the paper should be submitted for publication before 1 April 2012 in accordance with a style sheet that will be provided.

Costs related to transportation, room and board will be incurred at the expense of presenters or their respective institutions.

Up-to-date information about the conference will be posted on our webpage.