

Abstract

In the twentieth century, ancient theatres acquired symbolic values through their excavation, restoration, and cultural reuse. While elsewhere in the Mediterranean comparable cases show an early and powerful engagement of a populace with their antiquities, in Spain national ideals did not automatically engage with Classical culture. In the case of the Roman theatre of Merida, cultural and historical realities dictated a series of cultural events that repeatedly concerned collective memory. In addition to the main sequence of the unique occasions surrounding the 1933 and 1934 performances at the theatre, various other agencies had systematically focused on its exploitation from the 1910s. These initiatives were endorsed by numerous formal visits and cultural events that took place in the theatre, from as early as 1914. Through successive spectacles staged at the theatre, a cultural tradition emerged, while political agendas occasionally exploited its increasing popularity, right up to the Spanish Civil War.

Antiquities and Social Memory in Spanish Modernity

The social reception of Classical antiquities in Europe was widely dictated by institutional archaeologies and intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth

century, as a means of claiming a national dimension for their cultural past. (Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996). Ancient theatres followed a singular trajectory in this tradition, given that their architectural character often permitted their modern restoration and reuse for various spectacles that began to take place in the Mediterranean.

Scholars have attempted to explore the relationship between collective memory and Classical revival, focusing on the intellectual authority attributed to antiquities. According to Mitchell (2006: 385), performances in ancient space produce lasting effects. Such revivals transform ancient theatres into spaces where cultural memories become accepted as aspects of modern identities. As such, accreting layers of meaning build up while a series of performances are represented (Tilley 1994: 14–7). The physical presence of those sites plays a crucial role in this dynamic process, as it can psychologically engage modern public with a feeling of authority drawn from their sheer antiquity. Thus, the theatres' reuse should be seen as a deliberate act, designed to exploit material aspects of our world to help form collective identities (Dovey 1986: 38).

In the case of Spain, where social engagement with the archaeological record was not strong, ideological identification with antiquity was minimal. Significantly, official institutions were founded to generate scientific and pedagogical movements,

while legislative reforms provided a certain national engagement with renowned Spanish monuments (Díaz-Andreu 1995). However, the archaeological record was not transmuted into symbolic national heritage for the populace at large.

In the early twentieth century, the legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity in Spain infiltrated the works of numerous artists and intellectuals of a variety of schools, producing a shift towards an academic, theoretical, and politicized perception of the Classics (Morenilla Talens 2006: 437–45). This opened up an opportunity for renovation of the Spanish theatre through the prestige and ‘glorious character’ of Greco-Roman culture (Morenilla Talens 2006: 437–9). Similarly, many Spanish intellectuals viewed the first decades of the twentieth century as an opportunity to align themselves with similar European tendencies. As a result, Classical antiquity managed to reach the Spanish audiences through literature and theatre, by being identified with new trends of the European modernity (García Jurado 1997).

Against the background of these new challenges for the cultural auto-determination of the early twentieth-century Spain, in this study I focus on the revival of the Roman theatre of Merida until the rise in tension in 1934-35 that preceded the Spanish Civil War. The case of Merida is examined along with its European cultural parallels and their socio-cultural impact. My main objective is to determine the aesthetic and ideological parameters of the theatre’s reuse and to draw conclusions on its social context. To achieve that, I will analyse the socio-political

background of a series of spectacles celebrated in the Roman theatre of Merida. As the cultural expression of the period is not independent from the political realities of the Spanish Republic, aesthetic qualities of the productions will be interpreted in both theatrical and political terms.

Creating a Cultural Memory: Excavations and Revival

The quest for the reuse of ancient theatres and the European claims on the intellectual ownership of the Classics were given a material dimension through archaeological interventions. Similarly, the tourist industry encouraged the restoration of such places, with the intention of providing future tourist sites and cultural events (Vega de la Rosa 2008/2009). In cases of ancient theatres in relatively good condition, such as in Epidaurus and Merida, ambitious projects for their complete restoration and a theatrical revival quickly appeared.¹

Although we encounter similar social engagement with ancient theatres elsewhere in Southern Europe, they follow their own courses, moulded by distinct ideological impact in each country. For instance, in Greece the quest for a national

¹ For plans to perform at Epidaurus as early as 1900, see Boletis 2002: 437–440. For plans to perform at Merida, see Monleón 2004: chapter 2.

theatre with a Classical orientation was a long-term aspiration for intellectuals (Georgiou 2018). The two main venues, the theatre of Epidaurus and the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, possessed an uncontested spiritual impact at a national level that endowed them with a collective identity for the Greek population.² Additionally, public reception of ancient drama was dominated by patriotic claims, especially in challenging circumstances (Van Steen 2007: 123–7). In Italy, revival of ancient theatres as a means of cultural unification for the divided nation coincided with D'Annunzio's Romantic aesthetics in the early twentieth century (Miniotti 2017/2018: 57–72). At the same time, many ancient theatres, like those in Fiezole and Syracuse, were reused for open-air performances from the early 1910s adopting regional ideological values (Corsi 1939; Amoroso 1997; Treu 2007).

Meanwhile in Spain, ancient drama became popular especially among intellectuals and Classicists. At the same time, professional performances in Catalonia that attempted to implement European trends in the context of *Reinaxença*

² Michelakis 2010; Mavromoustakos 2010; Ioannidou 2010/2011. The other significant ancient theatre of Athens, the theatre of Dionysus, was used only occasionally due to instability problems (*Proia* 20 May 1932: 1–2).

met with great success and recognition (González-Vázquez 2016: 107–9).³ Ancient drama performances soon acquired pedagogical features that corresponded with shifting philological interests within an academic milieu (Blanco López 2010), but simultaneously escaped any direct ideological engagement with the public.

With the beginning of the excavation in Merida in 1910, reuse of the Roman theatre quickly seemed an enticing opportunity for the modern town, a welcome chance to attract financial capital to the remote Extremadura.⁴ At least from 1910 to 1935, Merida received a large percentage of the national budget for excavations and restoration of its antiquities that accelerated its public acclaim.⁵ Tourism and international recognition would be a noteworthy reimbursement for this investment (Lantier 1915; Vallois 1919).

The first calls for the reuse of ancient theatres came from intellectuals with an international background who aimed to align Spanish cultural tradition with the

³ The Catalan romantic movement of *Reinaxença* dominated the region's theatrical scene in the second half of the 19th century and included historical themes, patriotic exaltation, and regional nostalgia.

⁴ *El Liberal* 8 July 1913: 3; *Suplemento a El Sol* 12 June 1920: 8.

⁵ Díaz-Andreu 2003; *Gaceta de Madrid* 121 (1 May 1927): 758–9; Barroso and Morgado 1998: 41–7. Mérida Alinari 1915: 4–6; Mérida Alinari 1925/1926: 158–71.

European modernist reception of Classical antiquities (Díaz-Andreu 1996). The prevailing attitude of the period was that of a feeling of nostalgia towards the Classical past, due to the fragmented materiality and temporal distance of the monuments (Plantzos 2017). Intellectuals, archaeologists, and journalists attempted first to breach this gap by recreating monuments and spectacles of an invented nature that they hoped would acquire collective engagement, through their material remains in the present. For instance, from the beginning of the excavations in Merida in 1910, detailed notices of the work's progression were regularly published in the Press, demonstrating the diffusion of information by the excavators themselves.⁶ This is the case of an article published the same year by the journalist Enrique Salanava in the newspaper *Por Esos Mundos*,⁷ which made the first documented reflection on converting the ancient theatre into a site of spectacle. His European reference was the Roman theatre of Orange, and his suggestion was intended to serve a double purpose, national engagement with the monument and tourist attraction. Similar aspirations were expressed by the archaeologist Jorge Bonsor, who suggested to the theatre's excavator José Ramón Mérida that they organize cultural spectacles. In one of his letters on 11 March 1912, we read: 'I desired to have the satisfaction to be

⁶ See, for instance, *La Ilustración Española y Americana* 8 August 1912 and *La Esfera* 20 March 1920.

⁷ *Por Esos Mundos* December 1910: 1005.

able one day to occupy a seat there, to attend a performance of a Classical play, a concert, or even better, ancient floral games'.⁸ The same year, in the declaration of the antiquities of Merida as a national monument,⁹ the journalist Marcos Rafael Blanco Belmonte covering the local event offered a glimpse of his own romantic vision of a revival, describing an imaginary performance of Plautus' *Aulularia* in the theatre,¹⁰ in his attempt to overcome his sensation of temporal distance of the restored monument. A similar romantic reconstruction is narrated by Luis Bello in 1927, when he imagines a supposed portico of a 'Roman school' set in the orchestra of the Roman theatre, and spiritually narrates a Roman scene as taking place in front of his eyes.¹¹ These narratives assume that visiting the Roman monument could bend time for the intellectuals and so help revive Classical antiquities. Thus, the desire to prove this relationship across time as genuine was to be implemented through

⁸ 'estaba deseando tener la satisfacción de poder, algún día, ocupar un asiento allí para asistir a la representación de una obra clásica, un concierto o, aún mejor, unos antiguos juegos florales' (Letter 145, 11 March 1912, Maier 1999: 190–91.).

⁹ *Official State Gazette* 210 (28 July 1912: 225) and 57 (26 February 1913: 495–96).

¹⁰ *La Ilustración Española y Americana* 8 August 1912: 9; Blanco López 2015: 359–63. Coincidentally, *Aulularia* became the first post-war play staged in Merida in 1939, by the Women's Section of the Falange political party (González-Vázquez 2015: 499–503).

¹¹ *El Sol* 22 June 1927: 1.

adopting nostalgic attitudes to the ancient theatre (Plantzos 2014: 257–61). Although we encounter such attitudes more in cases like Greece (Plantzos 2014: 261–81), where national imagination is powerfully engaged with antiquities, it is evident that they are not absent in Spain.

Mélida combined the necessary qualifications to become one of the monument's modern ambassadors (Casado Rigalt 2006). His knowledge on ancient theatre and drama,¹² his active role in the *Sociedad Española de Excursiones* (Spanish Excursionist Society),¹³ his authority as Director of the National Archaeological Museum, and his numerous international connections (Díaz-Andreu 2008), all transformed him into an excellent agent for the dissemination of information on Mérida's antiquities. More exactly, the reuse of the theatre as a modern venue was inaugurated with Mélida's conference in April 1914,¹⁴ when he assembled teachers, students, and delegates from institutions from Extremadura to hear about the theatre's recovery. González González identifies the beginning of engagement of Extremadura with its Roman theatre after Mélida's conference, when

¹² *La Ilustración Española y Americana*, 22 March 1884: 183–6, where he offers a detailed review of a theatrical performance, spectators, and romantic atmosphere; *La Ilustración Española y Americana* 15 January 1901: 34.

¹³ Letter 246, 1 May 1920 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez-Martínez 2011: 176).

¹⁴ *La Correspondencia de España* 12 April 1914: 3 and 15 April 1914: 6.

for the first time locals were *en masse* brought face to face with their regional heritage in a formal celebration (González González 2010: 157–61). It was the first manifestation of collective memory that connected the antiquities of Merida with the local populace. Indeed, from that point on, the tourist possibilities of the theatre started to be appreciated, and local authorities began to promote them as a means of economic development.¹⁵

Certainly, after the beginning of the excavations in 1910 and the conference in 1914, trippers began visiting the town to admire its monumental ruins. It was included in tourist guides and became popular among schools, politicians, the Royal Family, and societies that desired to have a glimpse into the promising monument.¹⁶ It was this kind of visits that received national coverage and propagated the site's potential as both tourist attraction and cultural landmark. Nonetheless, lack of an adequate road network in Extremadura was still an unequalled and unfortunate

¹⁵ *El Bloque* 14 April 1914: 1.

¹⁶ These trips were facilitated by a series of maps and guides that were published for the first time in the early twentieth century. Those gave to excursionists the essential information to visit Spanish countryside (Rios Reviejo 2014: 67–97).

reality in the 1920s,¹⁷ while the low quality of any hostelry service and even local resistance to external visits complicated tourist development.¹⁸ In a way, Merida was almost an exotic destination for the Spanish bourgeoisie, a rural town that was still inventing its Roman past.

Aspirations and Regular Reuse (1910-29)

During this transitional period of interventions in the theatre, many initiatives for its reuse were undertaken, whether as a theatrical venue or for the staging of cultural events. Perhaps the most remarkable, albeit unsuccessful, case was the interest shown by the famous actress of the time, Maria Guerrero, who desired to

¹⁷ *El Sol* 12 June 1920: 8; *El Siglo Futuro* 1 May 1926: 2; *El Sol* 22 June 1927: 1. However, it appears that by 1929 the road network from Madrid had been improved, perhaps in view of the Sevillian Exposition the same year, ‘The Spanish road until Badajoz is a magnificent track, where cars move without effort’ (La carretera española hasta Badajoz es una magnífica pista, en la que el coche se desliza sin esfuerzo) *El Sol* 3 December 1929: 5.

¹⁸ *Heraldo Deportivo* 15 December 1931: 133–53; *El Imparcial* 5 September 1919: 3; *El Siglo Futuro* 1 May 1926: 2.

perform there during her successive visits in 1920 and 1922.¹⁹ What was significant in that project was not only that the theatre would come to national prominence but also the fact that it was approved of and desired by Mérida.²⁰ Although he supported the idea of celebrating concrete events of high culture, his priority was the monument's protection, and disagreed with a regular use. This reluctance is indicative of his feeling of having an exclusive moral authority on the prestige of the monument, and it also gives us a glimpse of the formal concession reality of the theatrical space. Between 1920 and 1923, a pedagogic lecture and two floral games took place in the theatre, after having met with strong opposition from Mérida. However, already in 1921, he was not responsible for deciding on the concession and his opinion had mostly symbolic value. He indicates rather the existence of a *Subcomisión de Monumentos de Mérida* (Subcommission for Monuments of Merida) as the agent to be consulted, when petitions for reuse were applied. The final

¹⁹ Guerrero's visits to Merida is mentioned by Mérida in his letters 245, 13 April 1920 and 289,9 April 1922 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez Martínez 2011: 175, 208). She appears to visit the town along with her children and the actor Santiago in 1920, and the actor Fernando Díaz de Mendoza in 1922. These must be the visits at which she appears to have promised locals a performance in the theatre, as claims *La Voz* 21 January 1922: 3. Also see González-Vázquez, 2015: 492–493.

²⁰ Letter 310, 4 August 1923 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez-Martínez 2011: 222).

decision appears to be reserved for the Minister and Director of Fine Arts, who would usually just confirm the Subcommission's report. Despite that, from Madrid where he resided, his authority over Merida's antiquities remained uncontested²¹ right up to the performance of 1933. On the other hand, Maximiliano Macías, as the main excavator of the theatre and secretary of the Subcommission, was also inextricably linked with Merida's antiquities (Macías 1913; Mérida Alinari and Macías 1932).

Excavations at the theatre lasted for six campaigns from 1910 to 1915 (Mérida Alinari and Macías 1932). Its good conservation and the discovery of many architectural parts permitted an extensive restoration. These restoration projects reached the Press as an echo of the *Regenerational* discussion of the period about the national Spanish culture.²² In this spirit, two campaigns were implemented and conditioned the reuse of the theatre (Monleón 2004: 49–53). The first phase extends from 1921 to early 1922 and the second from 1923 to 1925 (Barroso and Morgado 1998: 61). In the meantime, the pedagogic lecture organized by the otherwise

²¹ Letter 245, 13 April 1920 and 246, 1 May 1920 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez Martínez 2011: 175–6).

²² *Regeneracionismo* was an intellectual movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, against the perceived decadence of the Spanish nation and culture, especially after the loss of the last Spanish colonies. (Casado Rigalt 2006: 82–3).

unknown professor Ruano met the indignation of Mérida for its grossness.²³ The floral games took place on December 1922 and 1923 with strong regional, catholic, and patriotic character (Leal Ramos n.d.), organized by the congregation of San Luis. They consisted of a series of cultural competitions celebrated in honor of Inmaculada and Saint Eulalia, the town's patrons.²⁴ The highlight of the games was the participation of a chorus of young local girls.²⁵ Macías, not only participated in the organization committee but also designed the girls' dresses (Caballero Rodríguez 2008: 330–1). These represented Roman tunics and pallia, which were remarkably displayed in various photos at the theatre,²⁶ despite Mérida's disagreement with the competitions.²⁷ The following year, during the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, a performance that took place in Merida became the first unofficial reuse of the theatre for Classical drama. It was a school performance of Plautus' *Captives*,

²³ Letter 245, 13 April 1920 and 246, 1 May 1920 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez-Martínez 2011: 175–6).

²⁴ *El Siglo Futuro* 13 October 1922: 4 and 30 December 1922: 2.

²⁵ *La Acción* 14 October 1922: 5; *La Esfera* 24 July 1926: 34

²⁶ *La Semana Gráfica* 30 December 1922: 17; *La Esfera* 24 July 1926: 34; *La Hormiga de Oro* 22 December 1923: 836. While most sources indicate the theatre Ponce de León as the main hall of the celebration, the newspaper *El Siglo Futuro* 18 December 1922: 2 places it at the Roman theatre.

²⁷ Letter 309, 29 July 1923 (Caballero Rodríguez and Álvarez-Martínez 2011: 221–2).

which probably had almost no audience, organized by professor Santos Coco (Caballero Rodríguez 2008: 334).

In 1928, Arturo Gazul, a journalist from Extremadura, saw in the theatre of Merida the opportunity to repeat Syracuse's example of evoking popular sentiment (González-Vázquez 2015: footnote 11; González-Vázquez 2016: 109; Monleón 2004: 64; Carmen Morenilla 2006: 431–84). He published a series of articles, creating an intellectual dialogue with other local journalists, in *Correo Extremeño*, after attending performances in the festival of Syracuse in Italy. The Italian example seemed to him especially appealing for Extremadura as the 1914 performance of *Agamemnon* that inaugurated the festival of Classical drama at Syracuse 'turned a marginalized and impoverished Sicily into a privileged site for the production and consumption of Greek drama as national heritage' (Michelakis 2005: 17). Gazul's proposal was to create a Spanish festival for ancient drama and that of the Spanish Golden Age.²⁸ A conscious identification of the space as an icon of the region's identity was realized in the celebration of the *Mutualismo Escolar* in 1929, where the theatre was perceived of as a focus for Extremadura's monumental qualities. Through patriotic discourses, pedagogic ideals were fused with a local acceptance

²⁸ *Correo Extremeño* 19 December 1928: 1. He argues against the exclusiveness of performing only ancient dramas in Merida, by proposing to stage Spanish Golden Age or British drama.

of the monument as collective heritage.²⁹ As such, the ancient theatre offered a chance of establishing a collective experience.

As we have seen, Merida had already many European examples to follow in France, Italy, and Greece for the theatre's revival. Particularly, the Delphic Festivals and sporadic performances in the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens were already known to the circles of the theatre critics and intellectuals.³⁰ However, if spectacles in Bayreuth and Orange³¹ inspired the desire to put on modern Classical productions in Spain, it was Syracuse that from 1914 implemented them in a modern successful festival and appeared as the model for many open-air festivals of the time (Corsi 1939). What appears to be common in the Greek and Spanish cases is their inspiration drawn from the Syracuse festival in the quest for regular drama performances with a tourist aspect in ancient theatres.³² In Spain, Syracuse became an ideal model for one more reason. Apart from the successful establishment of its ancient drama festival, what made Syracuse especially relevant to Merida was its regional character that existed at the beginning of its cultural biography. Contrary to

²⁹ *La Previsión en la Escuela*, 1928. It seems that the municipal band along with selected children from Merida sang the society's hymn, in the form of a small concert. *Nuevo Día* 4 June 1928: 2.

³⁰ *El Sol* 7 January 1934: 4.

³¹ *Nuevo Mundo* 30 June 1933: 4–5.

³² *Luz* 15 May 1933: 6; *Luz* 20 June 1933: 12.

the national views of D'Annunzio, who advocated an Italian identification of the theatre, it was the local aristocrat Mario Tommaso Gargallo who took the initiative to organize the first Festival. Specifically, he introduced a Sicilian individuality, a Greco-Sicilian identity, which remained apparent, especially in the 1921 performances, until the populist politics of Mussolini's regime established a national centralized identity (Lamers and Reitz-Joose 2016; Miniotti 2017/2018: 57–72). Although Extremadura did not have aspirations for political emancipation from the centre, the possibility of creating an international spectacle that would attract large number of tourists to the region and to the town of Merida, began to be considered a promising regional economic plan. Even before the end of the restoration works in the theatre of Merida, certain allusions to regional values had already appeared; most celebrations of the 1920s focused not only on cultural interests but also on the identification of the monument as an integral part of the regional heritage of Extremadura.

This challenge to modernize the Spanish periphery was also expressed in international projects responding to the new economic opportunities. The Iberoamerican Exposition in Seville and the International Exposition in Barcelona in 1929 would provide external recognition and would promote Spanish cultural identity (Moreno Garrido 2014). These projects attracted large number of excursionists, workers, locals, and politicians to such places and promoted a

collective understanding of the cities.³³ However, the social impact of these expositions was not limited to the host cities, but many other peripheral centres were prepared for a growth of visitors during and after the events.³⁴ Accordingly, a proposal for a cultural production was submitted by the Athenaeum of Granada to the director of the Exposition of Seville. The plan included performances of Classical drama in the Roman theatre of Merida, along with Spanish drama and cultural activities that would take place in Seville and Granada. The aim was to create a unique artistic production for the visitors, who would experience a fusion of Greco-Roman, oriental, and Spanish theatrical spectacles.³⁵ What is apparent in this case is that cultural and ideological interests aligned, offering a possibility of international promotion of Spanish monuments, based on a new economic model that seemed to meet the needs of European modernity (Díaz-Andreu 1996). Thus, from the 1920s on, internationalization of regional heritage would seem an appealing chance for economic development and modernization in the Spanish periphery.

³³ *Viajes por España* January 1928: 23.

³⁴ *El Sol* 7 April 1929: 1. The example of Cadiz, the main port of arrival for many ships from America, is indicative of the effects of these spectacles at national level (Moreno Garrido 2014).

³⁵ *El Imparcial* 10 November 1928: 5.

Festival of Merida and Ideological Engagement (1932-35)

It is by now evident that the performances of 1933 and 1934 in the theatre of Merida were not just isolated ventures. Contrary, a festival with regional authority would be a natural development, as Merida's popularity acquired a national dimension (Monleón 2004: 61–75). This coincided with the establishment of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931 and its attempt to introduce social reform. Following the sociocultural character that the monument had acquired the previous years, the project for performances of ancient drama was set up on the initiative of the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Fernando de los Ríos, in 1932.³⁶ His idea resulted in negotiations with the Mayor of Merida that in turn led to the performance of *Medea* on 18 June 1933 by the company of Margarita Xirgu and Enrique Borrás, with Cipriano de Rivas Cherif as the director.³⁷ The principles of republican Spain that produced these cultural expressions were those of an intellectual bourgeoisie that emerged along with the new regime. In this way, the allusion of the spectacle to

³⁶ *Crónica* 2 July 1933: 20. See also González-Vázquez 2016: 109–10 and González-Vázquez 2015: 497. Mérida supported it only after he was reassured that no architectural elements would be added to the stage (Rivas Cherif 1991: 110, 263–69).

³⁷ The term used at the time was *asesor literario* (literary advisor), instead of director. However, Max Reinhardt's influence on the dominant role of the director was prominent in the performance (Rivas Cherif 1991: 223–4; Morenilla Talens 2006: 462–8).

republican ideals was not only expressed by the presence of various members of the government and the singing of the Republic's *Himno de Riego*³⁸ but also through the broader social context of the performance. In reality, the festival was executed in the spirit of *Misiones Pedagógicas* with the aim of cultivating theatrical tradition and of reducing illiteracy rates in peripheral centres, through popular theatre.³⁹ In these terms, the play reflected the cultural and social transformation of the Spanish Republic.

As a matter of fact, the right for the full dissolution of marriage was made legal in Spain in 1931 and one year later the Spanish feminist movement achieved the approval of women's suffrage (González-Vázquez 2016: 109–10). With this in mind, the fact that it was the republican actress Margarita Xirgu who chose to perform *Medea*⁴⁰ could be interpreted as the celebration of the social transformation being implemented at the time. Xirgu could have seen *Medea* as an expression of

³⁸ The anthem of *Riego* was sang in Spain as a semi-official national anthem during the Second Spanish Republic, with many varying lyrics.

³⁹ *Misiones Pedagógicas* was a national project that aimed to support general culture and organize cultural events in the Spanish periphery from 1931 (González-Vázquez 2015: 493–5; Monleón 2004: 61–75).

⁴⁰ *El Sol* 13 April 1933: 8.

the women's emancipation in the newly established regime, as has been the case elsewhere (Macintosh 2000: 17–9).

Additionally, in Seneca's version of *Medea* lies an opportunity of expressing an ideological identification with the Spanish national past and an allusion to collective memory.⁴¹ Discussing the play's aspirations in the newspaper *Luz*, the novelist and journalist Juan Chabás stated that Euripides's *Medea* 'would not represent as precisely as Seneca's version the essential quality of our literary and dramatic tradition', and continued, comparing the Roman author with modern Spanish authors: 'These qualities are present in Seneca's style and can be also found in his "Medea" [...] Andalusian qualities of Seneca that later have fully seen achieved in our theatre'.⁴² Seneca's tragedy provided the justification for labelling the festival as a national landmark, for he was in fact born in the Andalusian city of Cordoba. His 'Spanish' birthplace becomes the means through which the theatre would be charged with national values and engage the Spanish audience. Hence, the selection of Seneca's *Medea* instead of Euripides' version aimed to establish an

⁴¹ *Luz* 27 July 1934: 1; González-Vázquez 2015: 494-5.

⁴² 'no representarían tan exactamente como la versión de Séneca la esencial calidad de nuestra tradición literaria y dramática' and 'Esas cualidades están presentes en el estilo de Séneca, y hállanse también en su "Medea" [...] cualidades andaluzas de Séneca, que luego hemos de ver con plenitud de expresión lograda en nuestro teatro' (*Luz* 13 June 1933: 6).

ideological engagement with national memory of the Spanish public. Therefore, the selection of this appropriate spectacle, play, and author coincided with the Republic's perception of the popular feeling and aesthetics. The quest for national spectacles and theatrical modernization were combined to create the need of regular reuse of the theatre.⁴³

The performance also connected the director Rivas Cherif with the European theatrical modernity, in terms of his proximity to Max Reinhardt's spatial perception. Reinhardt's influence on Rivas Cherif involved open air performances, not only in Merida but also later the same year in Madrid and Barcelona. Large chorus, plastic movement, and ritual character were only some aesthetic qualities that Rivas Cherif demonstrates Reinhardt's influence (Gil Fombellida 2003: chapter 5). These would be implemented in Merida to create performances with expressive movement, where human presence symbolically connected with space and light.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Crónica* 2 July 1933: 20.

⁴⁴ For an analysis of Rivas Cherif's chorus and its movement on stage, see García-Ramos Merlo 2014. It is significant to notice the parallel development of the role of director in Greece, where Dimitris Rontiris, also disciple of Reinhardt, implemented similar stylistic approaches in dealing with the chorus, movement and artistic expression, in his performances of ancient Greek drama. (Mavromoustakos 2010).

What Rivas Cherif desired to bring to the Spanish stage was a national theatre that could address popular sentiment. To achieve that he had to manoeuvre between the establishment of an official national theatre like *La Comedie Française*⁴⁵ or the Italian *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico* and the experimentations of the republican theatre of *La Barraca*,⁴⁶ with the two-fold aim of both preserving tradition and renovating the Spanish theatre.⁴⁷ The social transformation that Spain was experiencing at that time can be seen in Rivas Cherif's attempt to seek a balance between a modern European theatre with Classical values and the popular republican sentiment (Gentilli 1993: 87–94). This was also expressed from 1932 by the granting to the Xirgu-Borrás company and himself by the Town Hall of Madrid of the Teatro

⁴⁵ In fact, according to *Ahora* 14 April 1933: 10, a committee was assigned for the mutual propagation of culture and arts between France and Spain, through the Institute of Spanish Studies of The Sorbonne University. Its project included a parallel production of Seneca's *Medea* in a Parisian theatre and in Merida in 1933, in a spirit of common theatrical tradition and good will for future collaborations.

⁴⁶ *La Barraca* was a university theatrical society that belonged to the Central University of Madrid. It was founded by Fernando de los Rios and financed by the Ministry of Public Instruction. Its goal was to bring to the villages and hamlets the Classical Greek theatre, the Roman, and that of the Spanish Golden Age, including plans to perform in the theatre of Merida. (*Nuevo Mundo* 11 December 1931: 10–2).

⁴⁷ *Luz* 18 January 1934: 10.

Español (González-Vázquez 2015: 495–496), the theatre that permitted the organization of the productions at Merida.

In the wake of the performance, aspirations for an annual festival were revealed by the organizers.⁴⁸ However, it seems that, contrary to other European cases of the period such as in Greece and Italy, and despite its success, the festival did not have the ideological impact that the producers had hoped for. Despite the regional similarities with the Festival of Syracuse, the Spanish public did not express a collective engagement with the ancient theatre of Merida and the attempt to provide an ideological nexus with Classical antiquity did not succeed. However, part of the national Press and certain cultural magazines offered an enthusiastic reception of the spectacles, indicating the existence of a limited group of bourgeois that were engaged with the cultural features that were reflected by the Roman theatre. In political terms the spectacles were condemned as a social scandal by the opposition party.⁴⁹ The subvention of 50,000 Spanish pesetas by the government,⁵⁰ the free tickets offered for the performance, the political shift to Merida, the lack of tourist facilities, and the economic recession in Extremadura, all were fiercely criticized by

⁴⁸ *Luz* 20 June 1933: 12; *Luz* 22 September 1933: 6; *Crónica* 2 July 1933: 20.

⁴⁹ What exasperated the right-wing press and caused many caustic criticisms was that Rivas Cherif was the close friend and brother-in-law of the Prime Minister, Manuel Azaña.

⁵⁰ *Luz* 22 September 1933: 6.

the conservative Press, which focused mostly on the political aspect of the performances.

Despite these objections, the following year's festival was renamed *Semana Romana* (Monleón 2004: 76–82) and was directed by a newly founded, homonymous Local Patronage that would defend its interests at the national level. Spectacles included a larger programme, with performances of Seneca's *Medea*, Hoffmannsthal's *Elektra*, and Classical dances. Regional identification linked the festival with the town's cultural life, as its celebration coincided with the annual local folk festivities. *Semana Romana* actually began in the last days of the local festivities, as the hotel services of the town could not cope with such a large number of visitors. On that occasion, Merida presented a multifaceted aspect, attracting local merchants, excursionists, foreigners, and intellectuals,⁵¹ while travel agencies from around Spain promoted the festival by offering tourist excursions. The selection of *Elektra* was probably a convenient choice, as it had been performed by Xirgu some years before in Mexico and El Retiro in Madrid, and thus it was already tried and tested for open air spaces. Notably, the first performance of *Elektra* was part of Xirgu's tour in Latin America and was performed in Tribuna Monumental of Chapultepec Park in the City of Mexico, a semi-circular monument of Roman style.

⁵¹ *El Heraldo de Madrid* 13 September 1934: 4.

The play possessed a series of pluses that led to its selection in Merida: it fitted the intellectual demands of the ancient theatre by identifying it as significant cultural venue and it satisfied the aesthetic precepts of the Republican regime.

After the last successful performance of *Elektra* on 9 September 1934, next year's festival seemed guaranteed. Newspapers were festooned with headlines anticipating the annual performances and suggested future plays.⁵² However, at the end of 1934, an inspection by the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes* (Royal Academy of Fine Arts) took place in the theatre. The architect in charge, Teodoro de Anasagasti discovered damage to the cavea, ostensibly produced by the spectators of the previous years, and suggested the suspension of performances for conservation and the introduction of measures to prevent further damages.⁵³ Failure to safeguard the theatre's architectural integrity quickly became an argument in the conservative press, which condemned the damage done and pronounced on the low quality of the previous performances.⁵⁴ While the Republican Press questioned the damage as described by Anasagasti, the Local Patronage unsuccessfully attempted

⁵² *El Heraldo de Madrid* 1 August 1934: 5.

⁵³ *Madrid Científico* 1935: 6.

⁵⁴ *El Siglo Futuro* 8 January 1935: 1; *La Nación* 9 January 1935: 4; *La Cruz* 10 January 1935: 2.

to delay the implementation of the decision until the director of the excavations submitted his final report.⁵⁵

Theatrical modernization in Spain was also influenced by the politics of the time and a complementary narrative can offer another perspective. A political shift occurred after two right-wing parties (*Partido Republicano Radical* and *Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*) took power in October 1934. After the socialists' rejection of the political shift, a social upheaval occurred, especially in Catalonia and Asturias. When the new government successfully suppressed the general strikes, many political positions were replaced. One of them was the mayor of Madrid, Pedro Rico, who was deposed on 6 October 1934. The new mayor, Rafael Salazar Alonso quickly demonstrated that he would not tolerate cultural and artistic experimentation and the Teatro Español was to be handed over to another group more suited to the new political orientation. The suppression of Xirgu-Borra's work started in the end of 1934 and soon it became evident that the future of Merida's spectacles was uncertain (Aguilera and Aznar Soler 1999: 185–89; González-Vázquez 2015: 496–497). Despite the attempts of the Local Patronage and Merida's Town Hall for the celebration of another performance in 1935, lack of

⁵⁵ *Ahora* 24 January 1935: 11; *La Voz* 24 January 1935: 4.

national funding and political will suspended future performances (López Díaz 2011: 340-4).

Conclusions

Performances in Italy, Greece, and Spain transformed ancient theatres into spaces of social and political values that involved collective identification, theatrical modernization, and economic development. While in the Republican revival of 1933 in Merida there was a clear allusion to an intellectual ancient past, the long history of the theatre's redeployment had already established for it a venue for cultural expression. These events, that began with Mérida's conference in 1914, had transformed Merida into a peripheral town of archaeological interest, which, despite the practical difficulties of its remoteness, became a destination for the intellectual bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century. Therefore, even though public response and collective identification did not always synchronize with national expectations, as in the case of the 1933 and 1934 spectacles, the theatre's connection with European modernity would have been appreciated by a circle of liberal bourgeois, whose identification with Classical antiquities was based on a modernist feeling of romantic nostalgia.

The ultimate failure to classify Merida's spectacles as national projects for the populace at large reflects the lack of uncontested and centralized power on behalf of the Classical antiquities in Spain. Rather events were occasioned by limited and intermittent cultural interests along with certain ideological values. This is why certain ancient dramas were selected to represent national aspirations and political values. *Medea* and *Elektra* became representatives of a desired national past, while a fusion of contemporary, social, and theatrical interests determined their selection. The fundamental significance of these performances lies in the social and cultural interconnections that were balanced between regional and national celebrations, and the theatrical expression of Spanish modernity.

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