

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## The House of Bernarda Alba

Federico García Lorca

Yas-e-Tamam Theater Group/SUSPENSE London Puppetry Festival

New Diorama Theatre

(2011)

This production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* moved me profoundly. It is imaginatively economical in its delivery, creating evocative atmospheres with carefully chosen sound effects and precise movements and poses, but at the same time it is rich with imagery and meaning. Even the parallels between the life of these women - Bernarda twice widowed, her five daughters, mother and servant trapped in mourning and by the necessity of conforming with strict traditions and religious observance - and the lives of women living under fundamentalist regimes such as that of Iran cannot go un-noted.

This Tehran based company, under director Zahra Sabri, uses three actors who both take roles and manipulate handheld puppets of the characters. The actors have covered faces, the white muslin embroidered with black crosses and coloured stitches that suggest scars, and their heads are covered in white-rimmed black cloth reminiscent of wimples. They are dressed in black loose jackets with layered lace cuffs and long black skirts; it is a combination which, whilst suggesting a Quranic *jilaabah*, equally points to traditional Spanish styles and at symbols inextricably linked with Christianity and mourning.

It helps to have some knowledge of the story beforehand or to have read the programme's synopsis since the play is presented without surtitles but the strong Catholic undercurrent, the domineering nature of Bernarda and the suppressed energy of her daughters is inescapable. The rows of stationery puppets that sit round the back of the set bear silent and threatening witness to the action like gossipy neighbours waiting for a transgression to destroy the reputation of Bernarda's household, which she holds so dear.

Pepe el Romano, suitor of eldest daughter Angustias and secret lover of the youngest Adela, is represented by a hand puppet in the form of a red horse. This stallion imagery is very strong and is carried through the play and, as the horse/hands run over the young girls' prone bodies, the sensuality is intense. Other images are similarly powerfully created.

The handling of the puppets is deft and the symbiosis between actor and puppet as a character is striking, each taking the role by need or for effect: when Alba, in a fiery rage, leans over the puppet the disparity of her size over that of her daughter is frightening and when she hits the cowering actor holding the puppet the impact is huge.

Not understanding the language - the text here is acted and narrated on a recording - is both restricting and liberating. Clearly some of the story, the subtler messages and commentary were lost but it focussed my attention on the detail of the design and inspiring eloquent action. Whatever I may have missed was more than made up for by the hauntingly expressive images.

*"The House of Bernarda Alba" was presented as part of [SUSPENSE](#), a biannual London-based puppetry festival for adults produced by The Little Angel Theatre*

**Reviewer:** [Sandra Giorgetti](#)