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Recommended Citation

Kaiser, DJ, "The Gift of Drama" (2008). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 13.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/13>

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The Gift of Drama

by DJ Kaiser

It was October of 2000. Only three weeks had passed since I moved to Barcelona. And it was my birthday. One of my newest friends, Joan, knew my predilection for theatre and took it upon himself to help me celebrate while introducing me to new aspects of Catalan culture. The National Theatre of Catalonia was presenting *Terra baixa* (*The Lowlands*) by Àngel Guimerà. I had never heard of Catalonia's most famous dramatist and biggest theatrical export—I still barely spoke or understood the regional language he wrote in.

Sitting through the three-act, nineteenth-century drama brought all my linguistic limitations center stage. Noting my frustration, my friend mentioned that Guimerà's language was challenging even for native speakers. "No one writes or speaks like that anymore." At a special home-cooked birthday dinner, Joan presented me with a copy of *Terra baixa* in a special edition prepared for high school students footnoting difficult vocabulary like many editions of Shakespeare's plays. Still daunted by Guimerà's language, I filed *Terra baixa*—my first Catalan drama text—on my shelf and turned my focus to more contemporary theatrical productions and texts.

By 2004 my linguistic confidence in Catalan was stronger and my interest in Catalan theatre at a new height. Several new titles made their way onto my shelf, many of them English translations I had ordered through various Internet book vendors or found in New York theatre bookshops. Thanksgiving break while riding a train from my

Newark hotel into New York City, I found myself tearing through my new copy of Sergi Belbel's play, *Blood*, translated by Marion Peter Holt. Enamored by the play and impressed at the translation, I looked up the translator and contacted him. A professor emeritus at CUNY specialized in Spanish and Catalan drama, Marion and I quickly became friends staying in touch through the Internet and phone to discuss our shared interests.

A few months later I met Guillem Clua. After reading his online profile noting that he lived in Barcelona and wrote plays, I decided to send this fellow playwright a message. After a few exchanges, he e-mailed me his newest play: *La pell en flames* (*Skin in Flames*). The play was spellbinding. Though I had never translated a play, I knew that I could translate this one—I *had* to translate it. I quickly called Marion to ask this published translator how to proceed. Listening to his advice, I nervously composed an e-mail requesting permission to begin my first translation. Permission was granted and within a few short months my translation was complete and already scheduled for production. When Guillem flew in to see the production he presented me with signed copies of two of his award-winning scripts to add to my library. The fast success of my translation in the United States fueled my passion for Catalan drama and play translation.

Having recently started my master's in Drama at Washington University, I decided to combine my theatrical interests with my academic pursuits. With funding from the Graduate College, I returned to Barcelona during the summer of 2006, determined to begin translating another play from Catalan into English. Guillem had promised to have his newest play ready for me translate by the time I arrived, but he soon informed me that he would be delayed at least a month in completing a readable draft.

Luckily, I had packed a back-up plan in my suitcase: the copy of *Terra baixa* Joan gave me for my birthday six years prior.

Quickly I knew this translation would serve as part of my master's thesis, but my advisor said I would need to anchor my thesis in research on the play I translated. During translation breaks I browsed Barcelona's used book stores and street book vendors in search of other editions of *Terra baixa*, books on Guimerà, studies on the history of Catalan drama, and any other Catalan play that sounded interesting. My hunting that month paid off as I acquired some of my most prized books in my entire collection. In a theatre specialty shop I found a tenth edition of *Terra baixa* from 1947 printed in Guimerà's original pre-standardized Catalan. In a used book store around the corner from my boarding house, I found a rare, undated publication compiling essays and poetry about and by the playwright along with excerpted scripts and photographs. My proudest find that month occurred during the Sunday book fair at the Mercat de Sant Antoni. After more than an hour of hunting and already weighed down with an armful of books, I found an original copy of the 1948 Editorial Selecta anthology of Guimerà's plays and poetry. My copy even includes the original inserts from its initial running and embossed on the cover in gold is Manelic, the protagonist of the very play I was translating.

By the time I completed my master's thesis, my Catalan theatre book collection had grown to more than thirty books. As I now work toward my doctorate in Comparative Literature, these books continue to help my academic pursuits but have also made great vacation reading to keep up my Catalan reading skills and expand my knowledge of Catalan drama. My collection now includes out-of-print and rare books,

personally signed copies, and editions dating back to 1915. But my proudest addition to this book collection was published in 2008.

Marion Peter Holt took the liberty of sending my first play translation to one of his publishers with a personal recommendation. The ESTRENO Contemporary Spanish Play Series, from which I own numerous titles, picked up my translation for publication. Earlier this year I received a package with ten copies of my translation of Guillem's play. *Skin in Flames* now sits next to my personally-signed copy of *La pell en flames*. And I have recently taken great pride in signing a few copies of my translation as I give them away as gifts to friends and colleagues to add to their book collections. For many of these people, this gift will be the first piece of Catalan drama to be placed on their bookshelf.

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(to accompany the essay The Gift of Drama)

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