

Mainstream Meets Neighbourhood: Community Opera in Barcelona

by Eugene van Erven

In August 2018, ICAF partnered with Eva García, [comuArt](#) and the prestigious Grec Festival to produce our very first summer school outside The Netherlands. [Here](#) you can read more about that event. One of our modules back then involved fieldwork in the Raval neighbourhood, a socially and economically troubled area just South of the famous Ramblas that dissect downtown Barcelona. We worked there with two Mexican artists and found that a few days of interaction with locals is simply too short for meaningful community art to emerge. Busy as we were, Anamaria, Jasmina and I didn't realize that during this same period Eva was already talking to the Liceu, one of Spain's (and indeed Europe's) largest and most important opera houses. It is located right on the Ramblas with its 'culo', its backside, towards the Raval neighbourhood. For a while, the Liceu had already been trying to attract a more diverse audience to its performances through a reduced tickets scheme, but it had never seriously entertained the idea of co-creating an original opera with people from Raval. Until then...



The Raval choir. Photo: Christian Machío

Four years later, two sold-out performances and a try-out attracted a total of 6,800 spectators, many of whom were residents of Raval and had never seen the inside of the Liceu Opera House before. More than 350 of their neighbours performed in a production in which they were far from mere pawns. Behind the scenes, many more people and organisations from Raval contributed significantly to other aspects of this massive production, which also became part of a big EU-exchange project called 'Traction'.¹ In [this video interview](#), Eva García provides a look behind the scenes.

¹ 'Traction' is about developing and sharing knowledge about opera co-creation for social transformation. It involved bringing opera to diverse communities through technological innovation. It received funding from the EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Agreement no. 870610. www.traction-project.eu

Internal Institutional Change

Eva, who had been involved in many community arts projects since 2005, joined the Liceu production team as an external community art expert. As such, she worked closely with the person in charge of the institution's social programme, 'LiceuApropa'. From September through December 2018, she helped explore how sincere the Liceu and its employees were about community opera, whether it was indeed part of Liceu's mission and how it would impact the work of its different departments. She first talked about community art and what shapes and forms it might take within the opera house's activities. Then, a monitoring committee was formed to gauge the progress of the project. It was composed of all the heads of department of the Liceu, including the general manager, the person responsible for social outreach and Eva. In their bi-weekly meetings, they discussed the results of a poll among all Liceu employees (85% was in favour). Eva also showed the committee members many examples, including of ICAF, to demonstrate that a great deal of community art exists all over the world, good and bad. Some of it is spectacular, but other projects may look like they failed in terms of their formal output but which under the surface may well have been successful in their process. In its content, most opera repertoire is far removed from the day-to-day reality of people living in neighbourhoods like El Raval. So to create an original work with them based on their realities, let alone committing to a long-term programme, was a huge step.

Enter El Raval

Once everyone in Liceu was on board, the organising work in El Raval began. Eva recalls: "We began by fathoming what the interests of the existing community organisations were and what capacities they had. This process with the community was extremely intense, particularly the first two and a half years. But it needed to be for all the other aspects of the project to work, and for establishing the necessary trust, which we were able to maintain for the entire four years. The people needed to realise that this wasn't just some gimmick nor manipulation."

The playwright, Victoria Szpunberg, started her work in March 2019. She was done in the fall of that year, which is when the composer, Arnau Tordera I, took over. Once the text and parts of the composition were ready, in early 2020 the music and stage directors, Alfons Reverté and Ricard Soler Mallol, could begin pondering how to involve the participants. And then Covid-19 struck...

The Pandemic

"The first decision we took was to continue with the project no matter what," Eva remembers:

In March 2020 we were working specifically with the design of the posters and we decided to go on with it, mostly online, because we did not want to add even more frustration to the many frustrations that these participants already had. We also continued to meet with people and organizations in the neighbourhood. The most extreme consequence was that we had to postpone the premiere by one year, because it was impossible to rehearse with so many people in the middle of the

pandemic. Besides, many of the choirs that were part of the opera weren't able to meet during the pandemic and some were even on the brink of disappearing. In that sense, *Gata Perduda* became a lifeline for many groups, a motivation to continue existing and reviving.



Posters co-created by course participants of the SINIA occupational center and students of the Massana Art School, supervised by the artist Curro Claret

Another reason for postponing the event was that during the pandemic El Raval, with all its informal activities, had become socially and economically completely devastated. Many municipal social services had stopped their activities so all energy in the neighbourhood went to improvised emergency food supply and providing basic needs. All this, naturally, took priority over working on a community opera.

In September 2021, the choirs finally began rehearsing at their usual times and locations. In February 2022, all the 11 choirs involved in *La Gata Perduda* met for the first time and in May of this year regular rehearsals started and continued until the premiere. Meeting live felt like an enormous liberation for the participants. Eva: “the simple pleasure of being together, taking off masks to sing. At first, it was also a bit scary to be with so many in one room. Most of all, however, it was a rekindling of hope, of learning to be close and to even touch again, tell each other things.”

The Traction EU-Project

The *Gata Perduda* community opera began as an initiative of the Liceu, which assumed responsibility for everything, including the budget. A year into the project, the University of Barcelona informed the Liceu about a European project launched by technology/media company Vicomtech from the Basque Country, which also works in Catalonia. The idea was to figure out how new technologies could make European cultural heritage more accessible. Since opera is generally regarded as a traditional cultural pillar that is particularly inaccessible, the Liceu

was immediately interested in joining. All of *Gata Perduda's* media outputs, including the online communication tools that the choirs used to interact, were intended to increase its accessibility. In Portugal, the opera was created in and with inmates of a youth prison and the technology there was used to establish and maintain contact with those outside the prison, including families and international TRACTION partners. In Ireland, the technology was used to connect opera with small isolated coastal populations who have no access to culture. The Irish National Opera created an opera with VR that could travel around the country. Eva found it very valuable to visit the other European partners in their own contexts: “to get out of your own bubble and through the probing questions of your partners you learn things about your own practice that you wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Plot Summary

La Gata Perduda tells the story of Botero’s cat, which is an iconic bronze sculpture on the Rambla of Raval, which one day disappears. Some magnate who lives in the exclusive higher part of Barcelona, is very interested in this cat and in gentrifying El Raval, of which the cat has become a symbol. He contracts three experts to look for it.



Photo on the right by Christian Machío. It features Dianne Ico as the cat and behind her the Botero replica created by Massana Art School students and the artist José Menchero.

During the search of the three investigators we discover that this alleged tomcat in reality is feminine and that she decided to escape and emancipate. The residents of Raval, also tired of the stigmas imposed on them by tourists, speculators and city officials, rebel and join forces with the emancipated cat. At the opera’s finale, they return triumphantly to rescue Raval from the hands of the magnate and his cronies.

Lessons Learned

In [this video](#) I have included still and moving images from the *Gata Perduda* production, which I found very impressive when I saw it on October 7. In it, Eva García talks enthusiastically about the project and ends on an upbeat note, listing several aspects in which she believed it succeeded. The conclusion of the video might come across as uncritical. Eva would be the first to acknowledge, however, the importance of pointing out flaws, weaknesses and missed opportunities as well. When she was just about to elaborate on this when I was filming her interview, the memory card on my camera ran out. So here is what Eva believes large-scale, mainstream community projects like *Gata Perduda* should pay special attention to:

- how to take care of special needs and circumstances without mainstream concerns blotting them over;
- how to make visible the many parallel processes that occur and that are necessary for fully comprehending the project in its entirety but without overloading people with information;
- how to deepen the content of the piece and the involvement of the participants in the light of their many different circumstances and their limited time and resources;
- how to build in more risk in the aesthetics and the creative process (which was now mainly controlled by mainstream professionals);
- in the aftermath continuing to organise mutually useful discussions, artistic and economic collaborations and exchanges of knowledge between the Liceu and El Raval;
- deepening work processes and team work;
- how to communicate large-scale projects in which mainstream institutions collaborate with community residents without overshadowing its processes, values, aims, and structures.

Which is to say that on all the above points *La Gata Perduda* left room for improvement.

Additional Resources

- Project blog made up of entries from the Opera Prima monthly newsletter: <https://liceuapropa.wordpress.com/blog/operaprima@liceubarcelona.cat>
- Web experience: www.lagataperduda.com

Hand program:

https://www.liceubarcelona.cat/sites/default/files/espectacles/temporada_2022-23/opera/la_gata_perduda/05_liceu_opera_en_lagataperduda.pdf