

YERMA

October 20 through November 14, 1992

by Federico Garcia Lorca

LORCA: A Life

While Federico Garcia Lorca is considered by many to have written three plays that rank among the classics of the world repertoire, his name is not as familiar to Americans as other world-famous, foreign playwrights. This is largely due to the brevity of Lorca's life: he was murdered at age 38 by Franco's fascist regime, thus cutting short the life of a playwright of great promise. Lorca was an accomplished artist in many disciplines: he was a gifted pianist, guitarist and composer, a painter, a poet, a playwright, a lecturer and a theatre producer, but his friends also knew him as a witty, cultured, progressive thinker.

Lorca was born in 1898 to a wealthy landowner family in rural Andalusia, in southern Spain. His connection to the folklore and landscape of the region of his birth remained constant throughout his life and deeply influenced his art: the gypsy music and dances native to Andalusia, the paradoxical aridity and fertility of the land itself, the sense of social enclosure in this geographically isolated place, the mountains and people of southern Spain inspire every aspect of his work. His family moved to the city of Granada when Lorca was 11, but retained their country home for family vacations. Lorca used this home as a retreat when he was an adult living in Madrid. It was near this country home (Fuente Vasqueros) that he was arrested and murdered in 1936.

Lorca was not a good student and began at an early age to find definition in art: he poured his attention into piano lessons and was fascinated by puppet theatre and religious pageantry. One of the greatest disappointments of his young life was his parents' refusal to send him to Paris to study musical composition. After he unsuccessfully pursued a college degree in Law at the University of Granada, his parents sent him to Madrid in 1919 to undertake university studies at the *Residencia de Estudiantes*

(an intellectual and artistic center of the capital city). Here, Lorca met many of the leading Spanish artists of the day: painter Salvador Dali became a close friend, as did poet Juan Ramon Jimenez, filmmaker Luis Bunuel and composer Manuel de Falla. Lorca was at the center of a ground swell of artistic activity which resulted in the establishment of the surrealist movement.

Until 1929, Lorca divided his time between writing poems and plays. He produced his first play in Madrid in 1920 and published his first book of poems in 1921. While he explored avant-garde methods, Lorca never strayed from the folkloric roots of his upbringing, or from the deep expressions of passion which characterize Spanish culture. Throughout the 1920's Lorca created a prodigious output of art in the many disciplines in which he was accomplished; he organized festivals, exhibited his art work, published, lectured and produced plays.

Just as his fame was spreading throughout the Spanish-speaking world, Lorca experienced an emotional crisis, and left Spain in 1929 to travel through Europe and eventually to New York (where he enrolled briefly at Columbia University) and to Cuba. Having experienced great anguish at being away from his roots and native culture, he returned to his beloved Spain in 1930. He subsequently published a volume of poetry

In your white hands you bear the yarn
of my illusions,
forever dead, and in your soul
the hungered passion of fiery kisses
and your love of motherhood which dreams distant
visions of cradles in quiet places,
weaving with your lips the blue of lullaby.

—excerpt from Elegia (1918)



Federico Garcia Lorca (1899-1936)

Indiana Repertory Theatre

Es Verdad

(From the first scene)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

(The Old Woman enters)

(The Old Woman exits)

LORCA cont...

written while living in New York that rhapsodized the city, particularly the sounds and lifestyle of Harlem.

In 1932 Lorca embarked on yet another aspect of his artistic career: he founded La Barraca, a University touring theatre company with whom he travelled to the remote regions of Spain bringing classical theatre to its geographically isolated population. The most notable of Lorca's plays, *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* were produced professionally in 1932 and 1934 to considerable public acclaim (although *Yerma* was subsequently banned in his native Granada). (His masterpiece, *The House of Bernard Alba*, completed just before his death, was not produced for ten years.) In 1933-34, Lorca visited South America, where his plays were being successfully produced.

The growing political tensions in Spain during the 1930's as the result of the dissolution of the monarchy, a period of dictatorship, the creation of the Second Republic, an inexorable movement toward right-wing beliefs (that paralleled Nazi Germany) and the ultimate fascist takeover by General Francisco Franco affected all of Spain, but most particularly its artists and thinkers. While Lorca never considered himself a political activist, he supported

freedom of expression and socialist republican values. His plays and poetry expose some of the repressive social customs of Spain (particular those related to women) as stifling to the human spirit.) His public position as an avante-garde artist, a pacifist and his reputed homosexuality made him a target for fascist reprisals. In early 1936, Lorca made several public anti-fascist statements and as political unrest grew throughout the summer months in his native Granada, Lorca decided to return there to be with his family. Days after his arrival, Granada fell to Franco's troupes and Lorca's brother-in-law, the mayor of Granada, was murdered. Lorca sought sanctuary at the home of friends who were Franco sympathizers, but even this protection proved unsuccessful. Lorca was arrested on August 16, 1936, despite attempts from many prominent Spanish artists to intercede with the Governor of Granada. He was executed in an olive grove in his beloved Andalusia on August 19 and, with several others, buried in an unmarked grave. His body was never found. He was among the first casualties of the Spanish Civil War.

For almost two decades following Franco's takeover, Lorca's works were banned in his beloved Spain. •

Synopsis of YERMA

Yerma wakes from a dream. Her husband Juan is getting ready to leave the house to tend his flocks and fields. Yerma and Juan have been married for two years and are childless, a fact which Yerma cannot understand. However, Juan seems to accept the conditions of their lives. Soon after he departs, Maria, a young friend of Yerma's, enters with news of her pregnancy. The two women rejoice. Maria has come to ask Yerma, a gifted seamstress, to make baby clothes. As Yerma's childhood friend Victor enters, Maria departs. It is clear that a potent attraction exists between Yerma and Victor. He is looking for Juan, and takes Yerma's sewing of baby clothes to mean that she is pregnant. She explains his mistake and he leaves for the fields. Yerma's yearning for a child is now matched by the anguish of her misfortune.

In the second scene, two more years have passed and Yerma remains childless. Yerma encounters an Old Woman on the road as both are taking midday meals to

their laboring husbands. Yerma questions the Old Woman, who has nine sons, about methods of conception, but the Old Woman, seeing Yerma's desperation, refuses to advise her. Next Yerma encounters a young woman who is happy with her childless state, and suggests to Yerma that life is better without them. Yerma rejects this notion and focused on her obsession to procreate. She encounters Victor, who has come singing along the road; their highly charged conversation is interrupted by Juan, who is weary of the rumors surrounding his house and his honor. He orders Yerma to stay in the house while he continues to stay in the fields day and night.

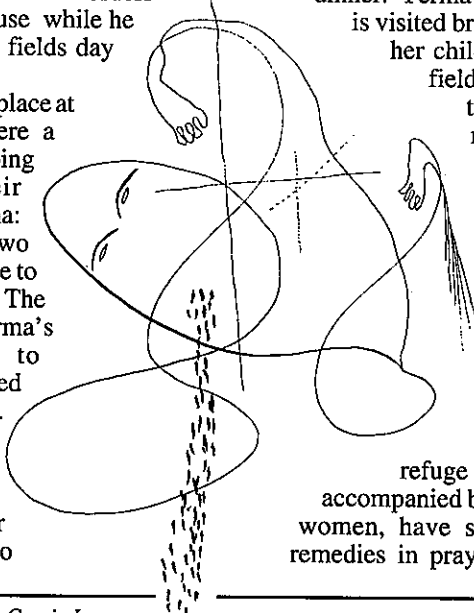
The third scene takes place at the village stream where a group of women are doing their laundry. Their conversation is of Yerma: Juan has brought his two sisters to live in the house to keep watch over his wife. The women gossip about Yerma's apparent inability to conceive and her alleged attraction to another man. Maria defends her friend but Yerma has clearly become an outcast due to her childless state. Juan's two

sisters join the laundry group and the women change the subject by singing a song about the joys of motherhood and life.

At the beginning of the fourth scene, Juan discovers Yerma missing from the house. He questions his sisters as Yerma returns from the village well. Juan's anger sparks a fight which his sisters witness silently: Yerma's longing for motherhood has grown to unbearable proportions. Juan dismisses this and speaks only of his honor, compromised by Yerma's behavior. He and his sisters go into another room to eat dinner. Yerma refuses to join them. She

is visited briefly again by Maria with her child; then the girl from the fields arrives and agrees to take Yerma to visit her mother, Dolores, a village sorceress renowned for assisting barren women. Victor then comes over to announce that he has sold his flocks to Juan and is leaving the village. This last news causes Yerma to flee her house. Juan and his sisters pursue her.

Yerma has sought refuge at Dolores' house, who, accompanied by two of the village's old women, have spent the night seeking remedies in prayers and rituals to make



About the TEXT

Federico Garcia Lorca is probably best known as a poet: he published several volumes of verse in his lifetime and it is the basis of his fame as an artist. Consequently, it is not surprising that his plays are constructed like poetry. In fact, Lorca subtitled *Yerma*, "a tragic poem." The language in the play combines prose with verse and with song, and shifts from one to another with remarkable ease. It is heightened language. Lorca himself said, as the first production of the play was being rehearsed, that the actors were not to sound like they were speaking everyday language. He wanted the powerful imagery of the language to sharpen the attention of the audience and prepare them to receive a play that was rich in symbolism.

Garcia Lorca's plays are known for their symbolic imagery and metaphor. Even the title of *Yerma* tells us much about the

Yerma fertile. The women are convinced that Yerma will conceive, so ardent are her desires to become a mother. Just as dawn is breaking, Juan and his sisters burst in on them and the group witnesses a desperate encounter between husband and wife who are so bitterly at odds that all hopes for a fruitful union seem impossible. The scene ends with Yerma, apparently docile, agreeing to return to her house to lock herself away and wait for death.

Six months pass. Yerma has joined a religious pilgrimage to a holy shrine in the mountains for barren women. The ritual of the shrine involves a stately procession and a symbolic dance. During these rituals, the Old Woman tells Yerma that her barrenness is not her fault alone and tries to persuade Yerma to come live with her and her son, with whom she is sure to have many children. Yerma is outraged at this suggestion of infidelity, and defends her honor: she will never leave her husband. Juan, who has joined the pilgrimage, overhears Yerma's reply. He tells her that he has never wanted children. He wants only to be alone with her and asks her to make love to him in the moonlight. All of Yerma's suspicions are finally realized: Juan's unwillingness to father children will sentence her to eternal barrenness. In a final act of hopelessness and rage, Yerma strangles her husband, thereby destroying her dreams of motherhood forever.

meaning of the play: in Spanish, the word "yermo" means "barren land," and "Yerma" is a feminine derivation of that word. That word is at the core of what the play means. It is also the name of the title character. Another character, Maria, has a symbolic name. She is likened to the Virgin Mary in her innocence and purity. Notice that few of the characters in the play are referred to by name: only five of eleven characters in the play are named. The others are symbolic in their relationship to Yerma: the Old Woman, the Sisters-in-law, the Girls. The play culminates in a symbolic dance between an archetypal Man and Woman.

The image structure in *Yerma* revolves around the duality between barrenness (or sterility) and fertility using two sets of interwoven metaphors: light and darkness and liquidity and dryness. The first two concepts—light and liquidity—and the images that elicit them are both associated with fertility. Their opposites—darkness and dryness—are associated with barrenness. As the play progresses, you will hear many metaphors that evoke these concepts: Juan is said to have a dry personality, but he waters his fields at night which makes them fertile. The laundress scene is a long celebration of the life-giving force of women: as they use the water to clean their clothes, the water itself and the women are seen to contain the ability to give life. The duality of this image structure creates circumstances rife with irony: while Yerma's childlessness continues through the years of their marriage, Juan's fields and flocks prosper. His land is fertile while hers is barren. He grows in worth while she shrinks.

Notice, as the play progresses, how images related to light (dawn, fire, sun, etc.) evoke rebirth, the possibility of growth or fertility. Also notice how the first half of the play takes places during the day, and the second half at night. As Yerma goes further into the play (further into the darkness) so too are her hopes extinguished for bearing a child until finally she herself, at the midnight hour, literally extinguishes the light of her husband's life (and therefore the possibility of creating a child). These images proliferate cont...

Encuentro (1922)

Flower of sun.
Flower of river.

I
Was it you? Your breast
is shining and I didn't see you.

She
How often the ribbons
Of my dress brushed you!

I
Unopened, I hear in your throat
the white voices of my children.

She
Your children float in my eyes
like yellow diamonds.

I
Was it you? Where did you drag
these endless tresses, my love?

She
In the moon—you laugh?—
around the narcissus flower, then

I
In my heart stirs restlessly
a serpent of past kisses.

She
The open seconds nailed
their roots in my sighs.

I
Entwined by the same breeze,
face to face, we did not recognize each
other!

She
The foliage grows dark, go quickly,
neither of us has yet been born!

Flower of sun.
Flower of river.



Ballad of the Black Pain

(from *Romancero Gitano*
(Gypsy Ballads) published 1928).

Cocks with pick-axes
go digging in search of dawn
when down the dark mountain
comes Soledad Montoya.
Yellow copper her flesh,
it smells of horse and shadow.
Smoky anvils her breasts,
they wail rounded songs.
"Soledad, whom do you seek
all along at this hour?"
"I seek whomever I am seeking,
say, what matters it to you?
I am looking for what I need,
my joy and my own being."
"Soledad, my sorrowful one,
the mare that goes unbridled
only runs into the sea
to be swallowed by its waves."
"Don't speak to me of the sea,
for the black pain grows
in the land of the olive tree
under the rustle of its leaves."
"Soledad, what pain you bear!
A pain that is heart rending!
Your tears are the juice of lemon,
sour on lips, sour on longing."
"Such a terrible pain! I roam
my house like a woman crazed,
my two plaits trailing the floor
from my kitchen to my bedroom.
What pain is mine! My skin
turns jet black like my clothes.
Oh, my linen blouses!
Oh, my poppy thighs!"
"Soledad, use skylark water
to wash your body down,
and let your heart find
peace, Soledad Montoya."

TEXT cont...

throughout the play as do images related to flowers (a metaphor for female sexuality), mountains (symbolic of a meeting between heaven and earth, or the divine and the human), horses and bulls (metaphors for male sexuality) and the mythic images of earth and air (traditional metaphors of spirit and of life giving power). The imagery combines the plot and the themes of the play into a striking unity.

The highly imagistic and poetic nature of the play makes it difficult to translate. Many existing translations of Lorca's plays are awkward to speak and don't contain that heightened sense of language that he attempted to create in Spanish. The new translation used in the IRT production retains some of the original Spanish (in song lyrics) and pares the language down to a rhythmic simplicity which approximates the speech of rural peoples without losing the metaphoric content.

Garcia Lorca wrote *Yerma* in six scenes. It is structured much like a Greek tragedy; that is, the pressure on the protagonist (Yerma) builds throughout the play until the climax in which she explodes and commits an irreversible act of passion. The play also contains a chorus, one of the traditional elements of Greek plays. In *Yerma*, the chorus is most evident in the laundresses scene (Scene three) in which a group of village women congregate at a stream to wash clothes and gossip. They appear again in the last scene of the play, on the pilgrimage to the shrine.

The events and characters of *Yerma* are universal: while Lorca wrote his play setting it in his native Spain in the early twentieth century, it is both timeless and without nationality. The truths about Yerma could be true for people all over the world who find themselves locked in a society which forces restraints on them that cause inner conflict. All societies contain a code of honor: the code of honor at work for Yerma

has to do with the importance of bearing children to establish the credibility of a woman, and the necessity of bearing those children only within the confines of marriage. For Juan, honor is defined as providing for the material needs of his wife and keeping his wife confined to the house. Juan does not want children, Yerma yearns for nothing else; Juan wants Yerma to stay at home, Yerma feels that a house without children provides no reason to stay at home. Yerma's lack of fulfillment in motherhood and her resulting unhappiness make her the talk of the town; Juan fears this talk as a blot on his honor. These are but a few of the social conflicts that drive this complex and compelling play.

The conflict between dream and reality constitutes another layer of meaning in *Yerma*. The play begins with a dream/ nightmare from which Yerma, startled, awakes. In this dream are contained all the major themes of the play and much of the suggestion of its action. Yerma dreams throughout the play of motherhood which only causes the reality of her barrenness to be all the more painful to herself and those around her. The play ends in an almost dreamlike moment of passion from which we wonder if Juan—and perhaps Yerma—will awake.

And finally, on many overt and metaphoric levels, the play has much to say about repression. Repression of the young by the old, women by men, the individual by the sanctions of church, state and society. Ultimately, Yerma is repressed by her own image of herself, which causes her to value only her biological functions for childbearing, over her more global human functions as friend, sister, wife and lover. Clearly, Lorca is asking us to examine a society which causes a human being to value herself so narrowly, but he is also fascinated by the personal obsessive drive that compels Yerma to the brink of madness.



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