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WRITING IN MARGINS: BENEDETTO AND OCCITANIE

The post-war decentralisation movement in France produced patchy results in its attempts to confront the cultural hegemony of Paris and redress the balance in favour of the regions. Despite the considerable success of practitioners like Planchon at Villeurbanne, a profound malaise affected many of leading figures in the decentralised public theatres in the wake of May 1968. Throughout the 1970s, an ongoing sense of crisis enveloped playwriting, which was only partially offset by remedial measures undertaken under Jack Lang in the 1980s. During the last thirty years, some of the more interesting work in the theatre has taken place well away from both the Parisian limelight and the subsidised regional theatres. In this article I will look at some of the thematic, stylistic and contextual aspects of the work of André Benedetto, who has for much of that time existed in the margins of the French theatre. In particular I want to explore Benedetto's complex relationship with the language and culture of Provence, where he has been based for the whole of his artistic career.

One of the immediate effects of the May 1968 events was the impetus given to radical theatre groups to move out of the ivory towers of theatre buildings and establish direct contact with some of the ten million striking workers. Even if many of these contacts remained on the level of romantic gestures and soon petered out, seeds were sown which led to a fruitful reorientation of work for some companies. Bernard Dort has pointed out how some of the more interesting examples of this work took place well away from the capital:

L'expérience [...] n'est pas stérile. Elle provoque la naissance de nouveaux groupes en rupture avec les institutions: ceux-ci s'établissent au contact de leur public, ils s'im-

mergent dans des microsociétés. Là où ils s'identifient à des particularismes sociaux, ils subsisteront quelques années: moins à Paris et dans sa banlieue qu'en province, moins au nord qu'au sud de la France où ils s'emploient à défendre ou à revivifier l'idée d'Occitanie (le travail d'André Benedetto, à Avignon, fait figure d'exemple)¹.

Dort shows how Benedetto's work inspired groups like the Teatre de la Carriera, the Théâtre de l'Olivier and the Centre dramatique occitan de Toulon, who in their different ways all showed a commitment to work with local communities in the towns and villages of Provence.

Benedetto's own work around the broad concerns of 'Occitanie' extended over a number of years. During the early 1970s he came increasingly under the influence of the ideas of Félix Castan, who had been proselytising in favour of Occitan culture and language since well before May 1968. Castan was based in Montauban, and pursued his activity on a variety of fronts. He produced a theoretical journal *Môstra*, had established the 'Centre international de synthèse du baroque', and had set up a centre of contemporary Occitan visual art at Larzac. Most importantly he was the leading spirit in the Montauban Festival, which had taken place annually since 1959, but was turned by Castan in a more determinedly radical direction from 1971. One of Benedetto's earliest Occitanist plays, *Pourquoi et comment on a fait un assassin de Gaston D.*, was premiered at the 1973 Montauban Festival, and Benedetto's company was to appear regularly at the Festival throughout the 1970s.

Castan's concerns were of a broad cultural nature rather than being narrowly political. He tended to reject any artificially constructed 'Occitan nationalism' as a basis for his project, claiming that such an ideology would contradict the general trend of Occitan thought at various stages of History:

Au cours de sa longue histoire, le peuple occitan n'a jamais cru que la Nation fût la seule forme d'existence d'un peuple, ni qu'un patrimoine linguistique et culturel, aussi fort soit-il, dût nécessairement engendrer une nation, encore moins un Etat².

The rejection of any nationalistic (or regionalist) political project did not imply any softening of his oppositional stance to the harmful effects

¹ *Le Théâtre en France*, ed. J. de Jomaron, Paris: Armand Colin, 1992, pp. 1007-1008.

² Castan F., *Manifeste multiculturel*, Montauban: Editions Cocagne, 1984, p. 26.

of Parisian cultural hegemony: on the contrary, Castan demanded that Occitan writers should do all in their power to undermine this centralist domination, which he likened variously to a 'virus', a 'gigantesque moulinette' and a 'dévoreur d'identités'. Defending Occitan language and culture was an article of faith for Castan, a means of pitting against the deadening hand of Parisian centralism 'la plénitude des vents, de la mer, des montagnes et des forêts, la santé des communautés, le génie des villes, l'histoire de tous'³.

The uncompromising tone of these polemics chimed well with Benedetto's own temperamental inclinations, though he was also, at least at first, more inclined than Castan to flirt with overtly political Occitan groups. Since his defiant launch of the Avignon Off-Festival in 1966, Benedetto had rapidly acquired a reputation as one of the most 'contestataire' of contemporary French dramatists. His *Napalm* (1967) was the first play written in French about the Vietnam war, while his 1968 'psychodrama' *Zone rouge* seemed to many observers a pure distillation of the spirit of the May events. In the early 1970s Benedetto produced a triptych of fairly orthodox Marxist parables which managed to lighten their didactic intentions with humor and an innovative use of theatrical space, movement and audience involvement. He had become experienced at producing pieces of street theatre to mark specific events, and had begun to work in conjunction with local community groups who often had no experience of the traditional theatre. One of these pieces, *A Bec et à griffes*, (1971) proposed an alternative view of the history of Avignon, placing the emphasis firmly on the role of the unnamed 'ordinary' people who had built the town and created its wealth. This play contained the first brief use of the Occitan language in Benedetto's work. The final part of his 'Marxist' triptych, *Histoire d'un oeuf*, (1972) had as its central character a small Provençal peasant farmer, Marcel. The play concerns the battle for Marcel's allegiance waged by the forces of international capitalist wealth and power on the one hand, and the 'producteurs des richesses' on the other. Within Benedetto's company were figures like Jean-Marie Lamblard who had already developed an interest in Occitan language and culture. These were all factors influencing Benedetto's turn towards the Occitan question in 1973.

Equally important was the wider international political situation. The movement for independence of former colonies, culminating in the epic struggle in Vietnam, brought to the forefront of world politics the issue

³ Ibid., p. 23.

of conflict between powerful nations and small, often underdeveloped countries fighting to preserve their language and culture. Within Western Europe the 'national minorities' issue began to assume greater importance, with the movements in Catalonia and the Basque country during the last days of the Franco regime gaining in momentum at the same time as the Republican campaign to end British rule in Northern Ireland, and even the striking electoral success in the early 1970s of the Scottish and Welsh Nationalist parties.

Benedetto, who always possessed acutely sensitive antennae to developing social movements, could not fail to be influenced by this context. 'Occitanie' now became his central preoccupation. At the 1973 Avignon Festival his company produced two major new plays, *Pourquoi et comment on a fait un assassin de Gaston D.* and *La Madone des ordures*, which mounted a concerted two-pronged assault on what Benedetto had come to perceive as the injustice and exploitation visited on Occitanie by the centralised French state. He went beyond mere theatrical productions, however, throwing his energies into the organization of a three-week long event at his Théâtre des Carmes to celebrate and propagandise for Occitan culture. Styled the *Rescontres Occitans d'Avignon*, this event combined plays, meetings, concerts, street demonstrations and the production of a partisan newspaper, aiming to create a sort of Occitan counter-cultural movement to the official Avignon Festival, the jewel in the crown of official decentralisation, which Benedetto had long ago written off as a sclerotic, conservative force.

Pourquoi et comment on a fait un assassin de Gaston D. dramatised a wellknown *fait divers* from the relatively recent history of Provence - the trial of a 76-year old peasant farmer from Haute-Provence for the murder of a family of wealthy English tourists in 1952. The accused, Gaston Dominici, was found guilty and condemned to death, but eventually pardoned on the personal intervention of De Gaulle. Benedetto's play does not seek to express an opinion on whether Dominici was guilty or innocent, but aims instead to expose the psycho-social mechanism which made his conviction inevitable at the time. The play leans heavily on the theory of 'internal colonisation' which enjoyed a certain vogue at the time within minority nationalist circles, including among some Occitanist *groupuscules*. Benedetto's main contention was that Dominici was the victim of a kind of conspiracy - one not hatched by a few villainous individuals, but the product of an entire historical period in which France was struggling to come to terms with the loss of its

colonies in the Third World, and equally unable to relinquish a cast of mind which categorised its own citizens in regions like Provence as varieties of 'colons' or 'indigènes'. He attempts to show that a section of Occitan people themselves engaged in a hysterical search for a sacrificial victim to expiate the unthinkable crime of the murder of a 'civilised' family on their soil:

Les Occitans se sont bien déchirés entre eux et ont finalement livré un des leurs en expiation du crime commis sur leur terrain de chasse⁴.

At the same time Benedetto also sets out to paint Dominici - who is certainly not portrayed as a hero - as the bearer of a culture - oral, rural, rooted in centuries of tradition - which was on the verge of extinction. The Occitan language, which is used sparingly in the play, is the vehicle for the expression of a way of life and a culture which is in harmony with the natural world. Although the play is marred by occasionally heavy-handed didacticism, on the whole it is understated and conveys effectively the tense passions and contradictions of the period it depicts.

The second of Benedetto's 1973 plays, *La Madone des ordures*, is a more substantial piece of work. The play places the dilemmas faced by ordinary Occitan people in the 1970s in a context of wider historical and cultural issues. A family of small Provençal peasant farmers, forced by economic factors they can barely comprehend to leave the land, sets out on a journey across Provence. In the course of the journey - which has more than a distant echo of that undertaken by the characters in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of wrath* - the family members are forced to confront key moments in the history of Occitanie, such as the Crusade against the Cathars during the thirteenth century.

The three main characters represent a kind of Trinity, each symbolising a different aspect of Occitanie and its people. The mother - the Madone of the title - whose instinct for survival through tragedy and suffering recalls *Mother Courage*, symbolises the resilience of Occitan people. Her elder son Peire shows the initial naivety, followed by a growing awareness and anger at his ruined condition, of the peasant driven from the land. The most intriguing of the three, the younger son Joan, is in some ways reminiscent of a Shakespearean 'fool' character.

⁴ *Pourquoi et comment on a fait un assassin de Gaston D.*, Paris: Editions P. J. Oswald, 1975, p. 53.

He is the poet to Peire's worker, with the clearest understanding of the past and present problems of Occitanie, frequently underscoring insights with his caustic wit. At the end of the play he deliberately opts for the role of sacrificial victim, continuing the tradition of the Counts of Toulouse Ramon VI and VII. His deeper vision and capacity for self-sacrifice is shown as the necessary premise for the rebirth of a liberated Occitanie in the future.

The play mixes consideration of contemporary social issues with historical and legendary material. One stage of the family's odyssey takes them to Fos-sur-Mer, site of a huge modern industrial complex near Marseille. Benedetto sets out to show the destructive effects of the site's construction, not only on traditional local occupations like fishing but also on the whole environment of the area:

Ici les hommes bâtissent
Les colossales
Cathédrales industrielles
Mangeuses d'hommes et d'oxygène⁵.

He also indicts the disregard shown by Government and employers for the health and safety of the mainly immigrant workers who constructed the complex. Peire and Joan sit in a wake over a labourer killed in an industrial 'accident' at the site. The dead worker becomes a modern incarnation of the legendary 'Géants de la Crau', as the brothers imagine his rebirth as the future leader of a movement to purify the land of the profit-obsessed capitalists who have despoiled it.

In the play's final section the family arrive at an enormous rubbish dump. In desperation Peire is driven to seek to make a living by organising a flea-market on the site of the dump, while Joan signs a contract to be used as a living human target by the military who have a training camp nearby. Despite the savage, despairing irony of this implied comment on the depths to which Occitan people have been driven by the despoliation of their region, the play in fact ends on a note of optimism. The mother undergoes a mock canonisation on the rubbish dump, and the characters prepare for the symbolic burning of the dump to prepare the creation of a more beautiful land and a more truly human way of life for its inhabitants.

⁵ *La Madone des ordures*, Paris: Editions P. J. Oswald, 1973, pp. 69-70.

These images of death and rebirth constitute a thread running throughout the play. They are intimately connected with an exploration of the power of language, which is in a sense the chief preoccupation of the play. In a complex, cathartic scene which begins with Joan re-enacting the humiliation of Ramon VI at the hands of the Pope in the thirteenth century, the younger brother painfully 'gives birth' to a few halting phrases in the Occitan language. This symbolic rediscovery by the Occitan people of its own suppressed language and culture is seen as a precondition of their future emancipation and full human development:

PEIRE: Dis-le.

JOAN: Siau ieu tu sias ela es [...]

Crois-tu que je dois me coucher

et si j'avorte

PEIRE: Non ne l'arrête pas nais-nous tous à mêmes

Ara es vengut lo temps de prendre la parola⁶.

As the above extract makes clear, the characters switch repeatedly between speaking French and Occitan. This play makes far more extensive use than *Pourquoi et comment on a fait un assassin de Gaston D.* of the Occitan language, which accounts for about 50% of the text. In itself, this was a bold departure and made an original political and cultural statement. Benedetto was saying - both to the French cultural Establishment and ordinary people of the Avignon region - that the despised patois of their parents and grandparents was a language in its own right, a language with a rich cultural tradition. As if to illustrate this point Benedetto has one of his characters recite an extract from *Mireio*, the masterpiece of the great Provençal poet, Frédéric Mistral. It is a language, Benedetto asserts, perfectly capable of being used for serious literary expression. There are no concessions to the French literary establishment, as the rapid switching in the text from French to Occitan presupposes a knowledge of both languages, and operates to several different purposes. Though it is hard to generalise, the use of Occitan appears to be linked to the natural world, deep personal responses, collective ritual and to layers of personality buried deep in the 'inconscient collectif'. It is intimately bound up with the question of identity, both of individuals and an entire people. Benedetto insisted that it is never used merely to add a dash of quaint local colour or 'folklorisme' to the text.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

Whether in French or in Occitan, Benedetto uses language in a consciously poetic way throughout the text. Apart from the obviously lyrical qualities of many individual passages, especially those spoken by Joan, the play's structure is provided by recurrent images (of fire, death, rebirth) and concepts (the journey, self-castigation) rather than by plot or naturalistic development of character. The constant references to the elemental forces of sun, sea, and other aspects of the natural world indicate the attempt to penetrate the veil of the 'quotidien' and uncover the profound, irrational forces at work beneath the surface. If the play can be seen in some senses as an epic poem, the mood and tone are by no means homogeneous. By turns lyrical (especially in some of the songs), humorous, savagely ironic (in particular in the speeches of Joan), the language is suffused by a wide range of imaginery. In its portrayal of world of Fos, this conveys an apocalyptic quality:

Au coeur de nos pays
 Ces plaies à ciel ouvert
 Il y a le vieux Vaccarès
 Si tu l'as vu à l'agonie
 Et ce vieux Berre
 Qui crache le sang noir
 La Méditerranée crève des déchets rouges
 Jamais Mistral le maître vent
 Ne pourra purifier tout l'air empuanti⁷.

The range and power of the language in such passages, wedded to the constant interplay between finely-observed pictures of social reality and more mystical aspects, give the play an impressively forceful impact.

Benedetto had far from exhausted the thematic potential of the material he drew on for *La Madone des ordures*. In *Esclarmonda* (1974) he returned in greater depth to the theme of the burning of Cathar heretics at Montségur. He explores the heresy of the Cathars, not only in philosophical/theological terms, but also as a form of social revolt with relevance to the diffuse liberation movement in Occitanie in the 1970s. Benedetto sets up a clear antithesis between the semi-legendary figure of *Esclarmonda*, who incarnates the value of 'paratge'⁸, and the charac-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸ Benedetto attempted to elucidate this untranslatable term in a footnote to the text of the play: Il exprime à lui seul une série de valeurs morales, telles que la raison, la mesure, la sagesse, la droiture, la tolérance, le courage [...] Le paratge, c'est le respect de l'autre, de l'égalité, *Êsclarmonda*, Editions P. J. Oswald, 1975, p. 50.

ter of Richelieu (sic) who symbolises all the negative, potentially totalitarian features of centralism. This short, fast-moving play has an eclectic dramatic language which borders on surrealism, mingling as it does scenes of historical re-creation with sometimes puzzling explorations of philosophical and political ideas. Though it encompasses a kaleidoscopic range of themes and ideas, it lacks the sustained emotional and dramatic impact of *La Madone des ordures*.

During the same year (1974) Benedetto collaborated with Castan on another play which drew on events from the history of Occitanie to illuminate contemporary political issues. *Le Siège de Montauban* took as its thematic inspiration the siege of Montauban mounted by Louis XIII in 1621. The temporary victory of the Montalbanais was ended when Richelieu crushed the town's resistance eight years later. This brief period of resistance by an Occitan town to the most implacable representatives of French centralism, contrasted with its present dependence on agriculture and tourism, led Benedetto and Castan to distinguish archetypal features in this apparently sleepy provincial town. In preparing the play for its premiere at the 1974 Montauban Festival, Benedetto hoped that the project would differ radically from the habitual experience of the theatre undergone by most ordinary people:

réaliser quelque chose dans une ville, à partir de son passé, de son présent et avec elle. Un spectacle actuel qui dynamise la place nationale et qui s'inscrit dans la vie d'une cité autrement que comme une série de représentations 'étrangères'⁹.

The project was prepared over a period of seven to eight months on the model of collaborative work already pioneered during the production of *A bec et à griffes*. The objective was to unlock the potential of theatre, the most collective of literary forms, as a catalyst for reflection and constructive social change on the part of a whole community. However, Benedetto became keenly aware of the gap between aspiration and reality as the project came to fruition. The largely middle-class background of the most active collaborators from Montauban revealed that the relative alienation of working-class people from the theatre could not be overcome merely through the goodwill and zealous proselytising of one theatre group. He was proud, of course, that considerable numbers of working people had been drawn into the cycle of discussions about Montauban which formed an integral part of the

⁹ Interview with Benedetto in "La Dépêche", 14/2/74.

project. However, when it came to active participation in the spectacle itself, it was mainly students who were involved. The sheer amount of time required effectively debarred workers, women with childcare responsibilities and others whose voice would have provided a more convincing representation of present-day Montauban.

Notwithstanding these problems, Castan was able to claim with some justification that the preparation and realisation of the project represented 'une expérience unique en France de décentralisation et d'animation durable'¹⁰. Whether intentional or not, it is interesting that Castan's vocabulary here recalls two of the central concepts of Malraux's tenure as Minister for Culture ('décentralisation' and 'animation culturelle') which Benedetto had stridently derided earlier in his career. The 'animation' practised by Benedetto at Montauban was, however, of a quite different nature from that envisaged by Malraux and De Gaulle. He certainly did not see himself as a cultural specialist dispensing the riches of bourgeois culture from high for the civilisation of the ignorant masses. He was aiming at a far more active, participatory model, in which the non-specialists themselves would help to set the parameters of the projects and contribute to the creative process. He saw the project as a two-way process, with the theatre professionals learning at least as much from working people as they could teach them. On a smaller scale and in vastly different circumstances, Benedetto's Montauban project had far more in common with the approach of Latin American educationists, literacy workers like Paolo Freire, than with the theories of Malraux.

Thematically, the most interesting aspect of *Le Siège de Montauban* is the further development Benedetto gives to his portrayal of Richelieu, who here appears in his true historical context. Richelieu is presented not only as the butcher of the Montauban resistance, but also as the originator of imperialist conquest by the French. However, the main aspect of Richelieu which Benedetto attacks is the rigid centralism, the systematic annihilation of everything which fails to conform to his requirements:

Il y a désormais en France l'unité et l'unification pour les siècles des siècles. Il n'y a plus les individualités. Il n'y a plus forteresses religieuses et morales. Nous avons rasé et arasé tout ça. Aplani les terrains et les idées. Nivelé les consciences. Tout est

¹⁰ "La Dépêche", 14/2/74.

normalisé. Tout est pacifié. Mis en ordre et quadrillé. Bientôt viendront les Intendants. Il n'y a plus de place dans ce royaume que pour des sujets dociles¹¹.

The style of the play borrowed heavily from the popular theatre traditions of Occitanie, while taking to a new stage the company's development of street theatre technique. Most notable was the radical and innovative use made of the possibilities afforded by the open-air acting area - the Place Nationale at Montauban. Different sectors of the square were occupied by the various forces in the drama, while the actors frequently invaded the space occupied by the spectators, implicating the latter in the action and questions posed by the play. Deliberate stylistic anachronisms, such as the use of a police van as the locus of those holding political power in different historical eras, pursued the same objective of rupturing audience expectation and inviting connections between past and present. Equally bold was the transformation of the lighting tower erected in the square into an actual element in the acting area. The inhabitants of historical Montauban were perched on this structure as Louis XIII's entourage literally besieged the tower.

Under the influence of Castan, Benedetto was aiming to create in *Le Siège de Montauban* a 'baroque' style of drama. In his notes to the play he gave his own individual definition of the baroque, seeing it as the direct antithesis of 'le classique':

La perfection classique. [...] Bienséance. Honnête homme. Harmonie. Discipline. Ordre. Régularité. Belle ordonnance. Equilibre. Rigueur. Fixité de l'odeur, non! de l'idée. Logique. Rimes alternées. Hémistiche. Jardin à la française. Vertus de la contrainte. Sens de la grandeur. [...]

La baroque est presque le contraire de tout cela. Décentrement de l'expression, pluralité des points de vue, perspectives diverses, anti-unitarisme et profusion, révolution copernicienne, voix multiples et égales, dérision du principal et de l'unique autoritaire, démocratie et changement des signes, territoire de la contradiction, force issue des profondeurs de la civilisation en marche et ferment explosif¹².

Benedetto's Montauban play gives a good illustration of this conception of the baroque style. There are constant leaps between historical epochs, an eclectic mixing of styles, both verbal and visual, a non-naturalistic approach to character, an emphasis on providing a voice for ordinary

¹¹ *Le Siège de Montauban* in Benedetto's *Théâtre I*, Paris: Editions P. J. Oswald, 1976, p. 200.

¹² *Théâtre I*, ed. cit., pp. 217-218.

people, and a bold and disconcerting use of the acting area. Needless to say, there is a fairly obvious subtext at work in this opposition between baroque and classical:

'classique' = conformity = intolerance = repression = Northern France.

v.

'baroque' = irreverence = creativity = resistance = Occitanie.

One does not have to be in total agreement with this implied political analysis to appreciate *Le Siège de Montauban* as a successful piece of contemporary popular theatre. Benedetto even construed the subsequent withdrawal of grant from the Montauban Festival by local councillors made nervous by the political edge of *Le Siège* as proof of the success of his venture!

Characteristically, Benedetto soon saw the need to move away from the formula of plays linking episodes from the history of Occitanie with contemporary political questions. He was also beginning to lose patience with the hair-splitting and perennial squabbles of the political Occitan groups he had been in contact with. In *Géronimo* (premiered in November 1974) he uses the legendary figure of the Apache warrior, the last of the great native American leaders to succumb to White America, to set up parallels with and ask uncomfortable questions about the situation of Occitanie in relation to the French nation. The central issue is, of course, the repression of a minority culture and people, regarded as historically backward or savage, by a powerful modern industrial nation. The most interesting aspect of the play is that Benedetto refuses to make a direct and simplistic equation between the virtual extermination of the native Americans by a youthful American capitalism, and the position of Occitanie in 1974. The relationship between the two situations is seen as problematical, not straightforwardly allegorical: one can perceive a degree of doubt and ambivalence emerging in Benedetto's implied and explicit attitudes on the Occitan question. The play confronts its audience with a series of questions: about Geronimo himself, about Occitanie, the general nature of repression and resistance - and about Benedetto's own artistic and political stances.

On one level there is little or no ambiguity. The straightforwardly historical aspects of the play's narrative present a clear antithesis between the demonic, corrupting influence of White America, obsessed with money and power, and the justified revolt of the Apache people, whose only aspiration was to live in peace and harmony with the

natural world. In common with many supporters of the French Left at this period, Benedetto gives free rein to a fairly crude vein of anti-Americanism. At one point he has the Statue of Liberty declare ironically:

Qu'est-ce que j'ai dans la main?
 Une bouteille de whisky pour éclairer le monde
 Une lampe au napalm pour éclairer le monde
 Ici commence le monde libre¹³.

There is rather more ambiguity where the character of Geronimo himself is concerned. On the surface he is presented as the great inspirational leader of an oppressed people, the iconic hero symbolising all those who refuse to be cowed by repression. However, we also see him in his decline, a pathetic figure ruined by alcohol and exhibited as a tame curiosity, pawed and stared at by tourists. Even here, in his portrayal of the 'real' historical Geronimo, Benedetto refuses to indulge in facile triumphalism. We are reminded that the genocidal crusade of White America achieved its aim, however much the 'victory' may have contaminated the soul of the victors. There is even a sense that Geronimo's revolt was predestined to failure. His taking to the road of resistance was an act of desperate necessity, totally heedless of the prospect of success:

Il n'y avait rien d'autre à faire que ce qu'il a fait [...] mais c'était la dernière chose à faire¹⁴.

However persuasively Benedetto narrates the story of Geronimo the historical figure, his main concerns lie elsewhere. Instead of simply telling this story in a linear sense, he explodes the thematic material in time, space and his own imagination. Firstly, though by no means exclusively, he explores the insights it might offer into the Occitan question. Throughout the play, historical re-enactions are interrupted by references to the present day. As soon as the actor playing the part of Geronimo begins to narrate his life-story, he steps out of his role to interject: 'Pourquoi vas-tu raconter cette histoire? Qu'a-t-elle à voir avec la tienne?'¹⁵ and launches into a discussion of the dilemma of Occitanie in

¹³ *Géronimo*, Paris: Editions P. J. Oswald, 1975, p. 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

1970s France. What is most striking about this early explosion of the story is the tension, uncertainty and even scepticism of the author – in two senses. Firstly, he asks whether the Geronimo myth has any genuine relevance to Occitanie, and secondly, whether the Occitan movement itself has any reality or prospect of success:

Il n'y a rien de comparable. Nous ne sommes pas des Apaches.

Mais c'est tout comme!

Tu exagères. Tout ça, c'est de l'histoire ancienne.

Je demande: les minorités ont-elles droit à l'existence en tant que telles qu'elles sont pour y puiser des forces oubliées?

Il n'y a plus de minorités. Elles sont au fond de la mer. Elles sont au fond de la terre. Les bouledoseurs nivellent les cultures. Y a-t-il encore des Indiens ici? La vraie France est celle du Nord. Moi je suis de la fausse France. On l'appelle Occitanie. Hier c'était un besoin. Aujourd'hui c'est une douleur, un terrible écartèlement... Et une farce!¹⁶

Benedetto's somewhat troubled scepticism regarding ideas he had adopted with crusading zeal only a short while previously emerges with particular force in relation to the Occitan language, which is used far more sparingly than in *La Madone des ordures* or *Esclarmonda*. Here Benedetto suggests that to use Occitan to tell the whole story would be a pointless indulgence. Instead of a viable popular means of communication, the language is seen as 'una mena de silenci dins la vida esconduda'¹⁷.

Nevertheless Benedetto does convey a powerful sense of the acute disgust he felt at the abject prostitution of Occitan people and culture frequently enacted for the amusement of wealthy tourists. A grotesque version of the 'welcome' extended to tourists arriving at Avignon on the car-sleeper trains is recreated here, with a clear parallel being drawn with the decline of Geronimo, reduced at the end of his life to signing photos for tourists in order to satisfy his growing craving for alcohol. On the whole *Geronimo* presents a more pessimistic picture of the prospects for Occitan regeneration than do his earlier plays on the question. There is an equally strong sense of injustice and identity crisis, but Benedetto seems to have lost the élan of enthusiasm, the ebullient certainty in the need to use and develop the Occitan language. The Occitan passages in *Geronimo* rather evoke an elegy for something

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

irrevocably lost, and a wry smile at the futility of trying to preserve something that is to all intents and purposes dead. This pessimism is given a further twist at the end of the play. Benedetto poses the question of what has become of Geronimo's legacy. Assembled around the totemic object of Geronimo's cloak, various characters discuss who has the greatest right to wear the cloak today. The discussion ends when Tribollet, the play's most loathsome representative of White American supremacism, offers to buy the cloak, thus suggesting that no value, or act of revolt, is safe from the recuperative embrace of the dollar.

Benedetto's apparent pessimism in *Géronimo* about the viability of the Occitan language was counterbalanced by a more measured treatment in his historical play *Les Drapiers jacobins* (1976). Once again the theme was suggested by Castan, and the play was premiered at the 1976 Montauban Festival. The play situates the issue of minority languages in the context of the 1789 Revolution, taking as its main thematic inspiration the petition in favour of linguistic pluralism drawn up in 1791 by the Montalbanais lawyer Gautier-Sauzin. Benedetto's main thesis is that the eventual strangling of Occitan and other minority languages was not a consequence of Jacobin and Robespierrean fanaticism, but a by-product of the Thermidorean reaction which reflected the need of the nascent capitalist class to limit and curtail the process of revolution. The same process which produced the 1791 Loi Le Chapelier denying workers the right of self-organisation also led to the decree banning the use of minority languages in 1794. The main protagonists in this aspect of the play are the aforementioned Gautier-Sauzin, championing the use of minority languages and dialects, and the Abbé Grégoire, who plays the rôle of fanatical centraliser similar to that filled by Richelieu in other plays. The question of language, and in particular its use by human beings in their most vital collective activities (of which making a revolution is among the most important) pervades the entire play.

In *Les Drapiers jacobins* Benedetto manages to achieve a partial solution to the problem which had troubled him in *Géronimo*: how to use the Occitan language in a theatre that had pretensions to be popular without mystifying a large section of his audience. He achieved this through an extensive use of Occitan folk songs, which would be familiar to many of the spectators. Through these Benedetto was able to make a number of social and political points without resorting to lengthy lectures. Most well-known of all the Occitan songs used in *Les Drapiers jacobins* is *Paure Carnaval.*, which is used in the scene which relates the death of Louis XVI. The audience is thus invited to identify the

execution of the despot with the cathartic burning of the derided figure of authority in the popular tradition of Carnaval¹⁸.

The most significant use of the Occitan language occurs when the peasant Caminel relates the high point of his own revolutionary activity as one of the detachments of the Marseillais who attacked the royal palace on 10 August 1792. The story of this climactic episode is told entirely in Occitan, consisting in large measure of excerpts from Félix Gras's novel about the period, *Lei Roges dau Miegjorn*. What is remarkable about this passage is the muscular revolutionary passion and sheer energy which the language conveys:

La libertat intrava triomflanta, lo despotisme sortia en se rebalant coma un rainard que compren que i va estubar sa bauma [...] A! meis amics! es aici lo nis de la serp! [...] Vos assegure que fasia bon a aqueu moment de portar la camisa de tela rufa, e d'aguer lei mans d'un trabalhador. Sias un obrier? Sias un enfant dau poble? crida Viva la Nacion, fugues bon patriota, e passa que t'ai vist! Tot lo contrari, portas debas de seda? n'as lo pelatge pomadat? pan! avala aquela pruna¹⁹.

This robust narrative was underscored in performance by the delivery and gestures of Jean-Pierre Meyer, whose Caminel conveyed a powerful sense of the determination and exhilaration of the illiterate peasant called on to carry out the rôle of the executive arm of history at one of its most critical junctures.

This reminder that the detachments who served the nation with the most vigorous revolutionary zeal and determination were not natural French speakers is reinforced at the end of the play with the surprising invitation to the audience to join in the singing of the *Marseillaise* in Occitan. The spectator is thus asked to re-examine one of the most clichéd expressions of the Great French Nation, to situate the National Anthem in its historic specificity, rediscover the revolutionary energy which informed it and to recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity of the nation both in 1789 and 1976.

¹⁸ Benedetto was to explore the carnivalesque tradition in much greater depth in *Carnaval-Express* in 1979. Choosing to portray Louis XVI as Carnaval was not an original idea of Benedetto's. The Théâtre du Soleil's 1789 had depicted the king in similar vein in the scene where he is brought back from Versailles by the revolutionary women of Paris. See Bradby D., *Modern French Drama 1940-1990*, Cambridge, CUP, 1991, p. 197.

¹⁹ *Les Drapiers jacobins* in *Théâtre I*, ed. cit., pp. 74-75.

Benedetto continued to grapple for many years with the issue of Occitanie, its language and culture, even going so far as to write an entire play in Occitan²⁰. Many of his plays deal with the specific social problems of the region. *Fusillade à Montredon* (1980), for example, was a powerful modern tragedy inspired by the violent clash between wine-growers and CRS police at Narbonne in 1976. In other plays, such as *Carnaval-Express* (1979), Benedetto made intelligent use of the popular cultural traditions of Occitanie in exploring contemporary issues.

At the same time he seemed to reluctantly concede that the Occitan language was no longer a viable, vital means of communication for most ordinary people, especially among the young, urban working class. His 1975 play *Aïe! Les Lunes de Fos*, which explored in greater detail one of the thematic concerns of *La Madone des ordures*, is written entirely in French. One of its more engaging characters, an old trade union militant, relates episodes from his early life in a salty, colloquial Marseille French dialect rather than in Occitan. Here the character is perfectly realised, coming to life on stage through the medium of a precisely captured mode of speech. A similar process can be observed in a much more recent play, *Fleur du béton* (1996). The younger, female character in this bleak two-hander about a dead-end HLM estate awaiting demolition speaks like a 'rappeur', her language evoking perfectly the desperation, toughness and energy of young people, not only in the specific location cited in the play (the Champfleury estate in Avignon), but in similar estates throughout France.

The conclusion seems to be twofold. Through his work Benedetto has demonstrated that it is possible to create and sustain a vibrant body of theatrical work rooted in local communities, their problems and cultures, often under pressure from centralising trends in the contemporary world which are paradoxically both anodine and threatening. At the same time he insists that theatre must base itself on the real language used by people today, connecting with the popular culture of the present and helping to create the culture of the future. Despite his unjustified reputation as something of a political 'dinosaur', the linguistic eclecticism of his plays is surprisingly postmodern. Interestingly, contemporary rap groups such as the Toulouse-based Fabulous Troubadours - who claim Castan as an influence - share this trait, combining the most contemporary musical styles with the apparent anachronism of using the

²⁰ *L'Occitana engabiada*, produced in 1978.

Occitan language in their songs. Benedetto has devoted most of his artistic career trying to create a space in which those existing 'in the margins' can be heard, in whatever voice or tongue they choose to use.

PISANIE NA MARGINESACH: BENEDITTO I OKSYTANIA

(Streszczenie)

Na przykładzie twórczości Benedetto autor wykazuje, w jaki sposób uprawiać można twórczość teatralną, wywodzącą się ze środowisk lokalnych, których problemów i kultury dotyczy, choć poddawana bywa w świecie współczesnym naciskom centralizującym. Zarazem jednak Benedetto uważa, że teatr powinien mówić prawdziwym, dzisiejszym językiem, włączając się w ten sposób w nurt kultury popularnej współczesności i tworząc podstawy kultury przyszłej.

Autor twierdzi, że choć Benedetto nazywany bywa przez niektórych krytyków „politycznym dinozaurem”, to językowy eklektyzm jego dzieł jest zaskakująco postmodernistyczny. W konkluzji podkreśla ponadto, że Benedetto poświęcił się próbie wytworzenia artystycznej przestrzeni, w której własnym głosem mogliby się wypowiadać ci ludzie i te społeczności, które pozostawały dotąd na marginesach.