The Queerness of Copla: musical hope for the Spanish LGBTQ

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The Queerness of *Copla*: musical hope for the Spanish LGBTQ

Not much information at all exists on the 'Spanish musical', meaning musicals akin to those performed on Broadway and the West End *and* having originated in Spain, in Spanish language, and maybe (only maybe) having been translated and performed outside Spanish-speaking borders. Narrow the search down to Spanish musicals developed in the 20th century and brought to the non-Spanish world, and the results would be close to zero. An explanation can be deduced for this lack. The development of an autochthonous musical theatre in Spain was disrupted during the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975) and progressively replaced by the importation of American musicals in the period following the transition to democracy (post-1975). This historical *disruption* of Spanish musical theatre occurred parallel to the *growth* of American musicals which relied on integration of song and plot or what came to be known as 'the book musical'. Up to that point, Spanish musical theatre had been limited to variety revues largely comprised of *copla* songs, a folkloric, storytelling and theatrical songform that arguably became the key for the development of Spanish musical theatre throughout the 20th century. Despite Spain's primary musical form deviating from those in the United States, Spanish musical theatre has, like the American variety, historically been associated with queer audiences and artists: many LGBT poets, musicians, and lyricists like Federico García Lorca or Rafael de León authored the form, LGBT popular singers like Miguel de Molina served as its primary performers, and LGBT audiences embraced the form, first covertly during the dictatorship and later openly after the transition to democracy, and to this day.

This chapter will explore the LGBT connections and queer undertones existing in the *copla* artform. The LGBT history of Spain is a crucial one to *copla*, as it marks the development of the form throughout a dark period of censorship and repression during the dictatorship, and moves into a period of liberation and empowerment in Spanish democracy. *Copla* has accompanied the LGBT collective throughout the 20th century, with many songs cherished in secret during the fascist regime, songs that later became queer

anthems in democracy. LGBT artists wrote and performed *copla* songs, first secretively, then overtly, and the songs' messages have resonated with the LGBT community in times of persecution, torture and isolation. In the 21st century, my aim is to take *copla* into the world, beyond Spanish borders. My artistic research and creative work present, for the first time, *copla* songs performed in English in the context of a musical theatre narrative, creating links and points of access to this artform for English-speakers around the world. In this chapter, I will present *copla*'s historical framework to establish how it emerged as a queer musical form, even in the shadow of the Franco regime, and discuss my contemporary performance, *The Copla Musical*, to explore how it now stands as an ideal form to cross-culturally articulate Spain's musical history and the space it created and still creates for queer identity.

The role of *copla* as the musical theatre of Spain's 20th century

Copla songs became a popular component of Spanish variety shows during the Second Republic (1931-36), the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), and the subsequent fascist dictatorship (1939-1975). The golden age of *copla* songs in Spain (1940s-50s) coincided with the peak of American musical comedy. In their early steps towards integration of songs and storylines, both *copla* shows and American revues owe significant debts to melodrama, due to their putting together of music and drama with an intention to appeal to emotions heightened through song and musical accompaniment. Also, Spain's *copla* and Broadway's Tin Pan Alley shows integrated song and narrative on stage, while being popularized through radio play that dissociated the music from its original dramatic contexts. Whereas Tin Pan Alley songs fed the growing industry of early Broadway, *copla* songs, rarely integrated into any sort of narrative larger than the songs' own, remained outside of any larger theatrical development. The non-integration or self-contained nature of *copla* songs within theatrical revues failed to spark the development of Spanish musical

theatre in a manner similar to the more integrated Tin Pan Alley songs. Unlike with *copla*, the narrative integration of Cole Porter's and Irving Berlin's music within Broadway's musical comedies facilitated a step towards the evolution of a uniquely American integrated musical form that eventually developed into the 'book musicals' we now see around the world.

Like early American revues, Spanish *copla* shows often gave priority to spectacle, such as singing and dancing, at the expense of plot. The *copla* songs of Spanish revues find their musical foundations in folkloric forms like *pasodoble* and *flamenco*, but are mainly differentiated from those musical forms by their theatrical quality. The popularity of *copla* relied on the telling of a self-contained story that could be dramatized and staged with a beginning, a climax, and an ending. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, *copla* became a dominant genre in Spain's intellectual, political and artistic spheres, performed in cafes and cabarets with audiences that blended different social classes. During the years of the Second Republic (1931-36), a period of political liberalism and ideological progressiveness placed in between fascist dictatorships, *copla* songs were popularised across a divided population of diverse social classes and opposing ideologies. Considered one of the most socially advanced periods of Spanish history, the Second Republic saw the emergence of LGBT figures and sensibilities on Spanish stages. These advances would soon be interrupted by the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and then at the start of the fascist dictatorship (1939), a time when all LGBT visibility would be eradicated and henceforth persecuted.

From the start of the war, fascist propaganda appropriated and manipulated *copla* songs, as they did with many other art forms which had flourished in Republican Spain. During the Francoist regime, *copla* songs, their themes and performers, suddenly presented strong conservative images in tune with the National-Catholic ideals of the regime. Even within this time of ideological conflict, the songs kept their popularity, drawing audiences from opposing political factions: victorious fascist rebels identified

with their new *overt* nationalistic contents, while the defeated Republican liberals found a certain level of release in the lyrics' *encrypted* messages that the regime's censorship body failed to identify. In this period of extreme political and social repression, especially for LGBT collectives, these songs became, in both their content and performance, a means to experience a certain degree of freedom. They also allowed performers to pass on implicit messages of diversity within a particularly repressive Spanish society, especially for the then repressed Spanish homosexual community. In the transition to democracy, *copla* songs have been progressively and openly adopted by LGBT performers and audiences, creating an artistic space for an increasingly visible Spanish 'queer' collective.

A Spanish contextualisation of 'queer' from Franco to Spanish democracy

To this day, the term 'queer' lacks a recognised translation to Spanish, and its use in Spain has proved confusing. While in Britain and the United States, queer theory occupies a notable space within many University programs, in Spain a stigma remains against queer studies, a discipline considered a mere intellectual novelty that challenges sexual taboos (Mérida 2006: 71). Popularly, the concept 'queer' is still relatively new in Spanish culture and is commonly confused with 'gay, drag-queen, transvestite and transsexual', although none of these reflect its real definition (ibid: 70). Queer as a movement rejects *sexual* classifications and instead focuses energies on promoting *social change* against heteronormativity, both individual and collective. Since the start of Spanish democracy (1975), Spain's LGBT collective is more concerned with heterosexist assimilations and the recognition of LGBT rights than a transgression of sexual norms and definitions, and is generally intellectually behind its Anglo counterparts in queer developments. This translates into a lack of intellectual thought due to the long and repressive dictatorship that prevented all discourses of sexual diversity. Effectively, since

democracy, Spanish advances in LGBT discourses are more concerned with ideology and political policy than sexual identity.[1]

The ultra-Catholic social model imposed by Franco's dictatorship from 1939 to 1975 sought to control and repress any deviance from conservative heteronormative canons. This had particularly tough consequences on all women and gay men. Gay men were legally targeted by the *Ley de Vagos y Maleantes*, literally translated as 'law of lazy and mischievous people'. This law had been active since the Second Republic, targeting groups such as nomads and pimps, but it was then modified under Franco in 1954 to include homosexuals. In the 1970s, the *Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social*, translated as 'law of danger and social rehabilitation' addressed *acts* of homosexuality, begging, vandalism and clandestine migration (Pérez 2009: 65). Between August 1970 and the end of 1978, 4,000 to 5,000 homosexuals fell victim to this law, with thousands of gay people condemned without apparent motive, other than the exercise of the repressor's power (Mérida 2015). Gay prisoners were sometimes divided by their sexual practices: active homosexuals would be sent to a prison in Huelva and passive homosexuals to another one in Badajoz, to be administered different 'cures' (Ruiz Mantilla 2013: 52). In prison, homosexuals would be 're-educated' into heterosexuality and forced to endure extreme therapies that included electric shock treatments.[2] At the time, doctors believed homosexuality had a cure, and the medical opinion of the doctors aggravated the repression toward the homosexual community already existing within Spain's political and legal systems (Arnalte 2003).

[1] For more information about the evolution of queer theory and gender studies in Spain, the reader can check Alberto Mira's *De Sodoma a Chueca. Una historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España en el siglo XX* (2014) and Rafael M. Mérida Jiménez's publications: *Sexualidades transgresoras. Una antología de estudios "queer"* (2002), *Manifiestos gays, lesbianos y queer* (2009), as well as *Minorías sexuales en España* (2013).

[2] The felony known as *escándalo público* (public scandal) legitimised the persecution of LGBT collectives, and led to the imprisonment of many with the invasive therapies mentioned above. This treatment was exposed by activist Armand de Fluvià (2003) and subsequently examined by Arnalte (2003), Mira (2004) and Olmeda (2004), among others.

Repressive legislation from the late 1960s coexisted with a shy tolerance for opening new venues where LGBT networks could increase their visibility. In the big cities like Barcelona, new small nightclubs and cabarets emerged offering shows with female impersonators, transvestites, and transsexuals. Autobiographical testimonies from artists such as Pierrot (2006) and Dolly Van Doll (Matos 2007) describe in detail some of these experiences (in Mérida, 2015). Although in 1970 homosexuals were still classified as delinquents, the atmosphere had become more relaxed and men were not so concerned with hiding all suspect mannerisms. From 1975 onwards, homosexual references became more visible within the music industry, both through the lyrics of the songs and the imagery and suggestive appearance of singers. Following three decades of cultural autarchy, Spain started to open to foreign artforms, and international anthem's like Gloria Gaynor's 1978 disco hit 'I Will Survive' started impacting the Spanish LGBT scene. Henceforth, the focus of homosexual representation took more of an international dimension as it integrated foreign influences that had very much been restricted during the Franco years.

According to Javier Ugarte, although wider European legislation regarding homosexuality at this time was also repressive, Spain stood apart from the rest of the continent in terms of what drove its homophobia. While in Europe laws targeting homosexuals tended to focus on psychological deficiencies, 'in Spain they became moral matters due to the influence of the catholic church' (in Ruiz Mantilla 2013: 52). The dictatorial regime also made homosexual oppression a matter of *social class* and penalised those who were single more heavily than married men, who were given less punitive sentences so that they could return to their wives. Gay remained stigmatized during the early years of democracy while the Law of Social Danger was still active. Only in 1999 was a Law of Data Protection approved, purging and deleting all of the information that had been collected regarding arrests of homosexuals during the Franco years and the early years of democracy (Ruiz Mantilla 2013: 57).

After the death of Franco in 1975, Spain started a process of transition to democracy, during which political activism began to publicly address LGBT rights. Barcelona saw the birth of the first Spanish homosexual movement and the organization of the first Gay Pride parade. Public personalities like cartoonist Nazario and painter Ocaña attended in drag and were part of the events, but there was a long path ahead in the establishment of gay acceptance. Even the LGBT community was divided, with gay activists 'reluctant to accept drag queens and performers taking over political demonstrations' (Mira 2013: 60).[3] During those years, artists were concerned with political change and made efforts to normalise a 'moderate' LGBT presence in a Spanish society still experiencing the echoes of the dictatorship: 'any cultural manifestation, whether journalism, literature or painting, had an implicit subtext: this was the 'new' art, this was the "new" Spain' (Mira 2013: 50). Among the main themes of the Spanish films of the transition to democracy (from 1975), there was 'a short-lived obsession with political change, and morality and sexual issues': because of the 1977 abolition of existing censorship laws, LGBT visibility and representation strongly increased in both film and TV (ibid).[4] In the cultural manifestations of the transitionary period to democracy, there was also an incipient obsession for *morbo*: a popular word in the period denoting prurient curiosity for what was forbidden (Mira 2013: 58). In this set up of novelty and exploration, some cultural anchors helped the cultural transition by merging old and new. This is the case of *copla* songs, which could now offer overtly all the implicit messages contained during the dictatorship.

[3] 'Ocaña regarded the fascination towards new sexualities in democracy as unauthentic. […] Although Ocaña uses drag, this is just, he claims, incidental. In his reluctance to accept labels imposed by cultural orthodoxy, we can distinguish an impulse which is more queer than gay, although this is not a distinction he makes' (Mira 2013: 60).

[4] 'Sexuality is praised and identities [are] nothing but stable: this was the age in which transvestites and transsexuals seemed to reign in the media, their fascination linked to ambivalence or fluidity' (Mira 2013: 53).

The role of *copla* as marker of gender identity

Prior to the popularization of cinema and a progressive implantation of radio in Spanish homes, the rural set-ups of post-war Spain had relied on communitarian celebrations of song and dance as primary forms of affordable entertainment. In its role as a significant 'cultural product' and mainly through a process of oral transmission, *copla* managed to expand during the 1940s, along with resultant role models for women, in tune with the official canons of the dictatorship. The presentation of virtuous women in *copla* songs was part of the regime's strategy to create a 'national' conscience in which they used *copla* to disseminate all kinds of stereotypes, images and symbols that coalesced around what it meant to 'be Spanish'. Songs presented female archetypes with a purpose of political manipulation. *Copla*'s lyrics in the 1940s would define the formal and thematic aspects of the genre for the remaining decades of the dictatorship. Many songs share a common denominator: stories featuring key roles for women displaying behaviour and facing situations the regime considered to be transgressions against the official morality of Franco's Spain, and therefore worthy of punishment. These transgressions included prostitution, adultery, maternity outside marriages, pre-marital cohabitation, concubinage, independency, spinsterhood, and even some cautionary tales about behaviours not endorsed by the fascist regime. *Copla* songs warned through their stories about the dangers of straying from the path imposed by the regime.

The female singers of *copla* were culturally considered representative of the 'Spanish virtues' and stories of their private lives would be spread in the media, framing them as ideals of Hispanic femininity and making them role models for what Spanish women should be (Zurián 2005). In Francoist Spain, stardom served a political agenda of alienation, excluding women who could not live up to the stars' depictions of ideal Spanish femininity and morals. As Eva Woods suggests, the regime justified the shaping of female Spanishness through an endorsement of Spanish folklore. Stars in Spanish spectacle were called *folklóricas,* a denomination that originally referred to performers of Spanish folklore

but later was restricted to women doing just Andalusian-flavoured spectacle.[5] The construction of the *folklórica* star system of the 1930s and 1940s 'was predicated on the model of the female entertainer/*cupletista* that dominated the genres of variety shows and the *género ínfimo'* (Woods 2004: 43).[6] The *mise en scène* would be of great importance in folkloric shows. Only women thought to have national-Catholic virtues would be allowed to go on stage: only they could risk singing about passions not easily tolerated by the conservative regime.

The female protagonists of *copla* inhabit a sensorial world of emotions, characterised by being over-affectionate, whimsical, exaggeratedly emotive, and compliant. From a medical point of view, women in *copla* have often been observed as being hysterical and of sexual maturity but infantile intellect. During the Second Republic, *copla* was presented as a vehicle for the transgressive and sinning woman,[7] but this stopped with the start of the dictatorship, which censored and adapted existing songs to fit their bill (Prieto 2016: 317). The Spanish Civil War resulted in the exile of established artists and a new generation of *folklóricas* emerged: they were

> women of strong Catholic values, virgin until marriage, but passionate and feminine (…). Although the *folklórica* icon was not a model of revolutionary resistance but rather one of negotiated class interests, the potential for imagined and vicarious solidarity for Spanish spectators was certainly possible (Woods 2004: 40-41).

[5] 'The term *folklórico* originally referred to both female, male and sometimes transvestite artists whose repertory included traditional regional songs or dances with hints of regional flourishes, regardless of the artist's own regional identity. The reduction of the term to mean only women who performed Andalusian folklore produced a negative connotation, partly because the term indiscriminately referred to any artist that dedicated themselves to any kind of remotely Andalusian spectacle. The term deserves problematizing given its instrumental links to shaping of female Spanishness' (Woods 2004: 57).

[6] *Género ínfimo* refers to the erotic spectacle performed in cafés and concert halls catering to male audiences, that included racy songs and burlesque numbers.

[7] There were also some narratives that presented women who reacted to their unhappy destinies and humiliations by killing others. Prieto defines them as *las justicieras* (the righteous ones) (2016: 311).

If the regime saw *copla* as a cultural component open to political use, others just read these songs outside of their historical context, and placed them instead in what Acosta Díez et al. describe as 'the timeless space of feeling' (1994). During this time, those in power were either not aware of or ignored the double meanings of *copla*. Satisfied with the strong conservative images the female singers presented, those in power and their censors forgot about the narratives the lyrics presented and about other possibilities of identification. Even when censorship managed to change some of the lyrics, *copla* songs still reflected the emotional experience of those the regime had condemned to silence because of their sexuality: homosexuals, transgender people, etc.[8] Because these communities had very few artistic models through which they could manifest these emotions, *copla* implicitly became a shared vehicle for identification. *Copla* lyricists like Rafael de León hid strong male homosexual innuendo within verses narrated by female voices.[9] Such songs subsequently attracted a huge gay crowd that would identify with these narratives, even when sung by a female vocalist. Examples can be found in songs like '*Romance de la otra*' ('Romance of the Other One'), in which the lyrics '*yo soy la otra que a nada tiene derecho'* translate to 'I am the 'other one' that has no rights' and could as easily apply to the homosexual experience as to the female experience (Pérez 2009: 63-64).

At the beginning of the 20th century, male presence onstage in Spanish variety shows was almost non-existent. In other European countries men onstage were more common, with Italian female impersonator Fregoli inspiring male artists in Spain to cross-dress in racy shows (Pérez 2009: 56). From Fregoli onwards, many male variety artists, like Edmond de Bries, participated in cross-dressing onstage. However, male artists who only performed female characters were soon stigmatised and assumed to be homosexuals.

[8] The regime tried to forbid or alter the lyrics of popular songs like *Tatuaje* (Tattoo) or *Ojos verdes* (Green Eyes) but those attempts were rarely successful as people knew the original versions. In *Ojos verdes*, for instance there was a substitution of 'mancebía' (brothel) for 'casa mía' (my house).

[9] De León seemed to be in tune with positions such as 'love in solitude, forbidden passion, secrets, rumour, rejection, sense of pain/heartbreak' (Mira 2004: 345). He spoke through the divas of the time (Concha Piquer, Juanita Reina, Lola Flores, Estrellita Castro) and the listeners of those divas recognised themselves in the lyrics of the songs.

Homosexuality and transvestism were often conflated and associated with *copla* and *cuplé*, the song genres in which these star impersonators most often performed. While audiences often saw lesbian attitudes as provocative when performed by uninhibited stage performers, any homosexual male activity displayed onstage was deemed unforgivable (Perez 2009: 61). In contrast to male performers, heterosexual or homosexual, throughout the 20th century in Spain women slowly achieved some level of social liberation. The most progressive of them could smoke, drive, and wear trousers. Men, to the contrary, needed to maintain their macho image, especially during the dictatorship, neither publicly expressing feelings or performing in variety shows. However, these performative restrictions did not prevent the flourishing of *copla*.

Spanish *copla* during the dictatorship was almost exclusively performed by women or by homosexuals rejected by the regime. With the start of Franco's dictatorship in 1939, variety spectacles that included cross-dressing and all other 'immoral manifestations of art' ceased to exist (Pérez 2006: 61). At the same time that censors policed any artistic representation that could have been seen as an affront to Spanish morals, declared-homosexual Miguel de Molina became one of the first male *copla* performers to gain considerable fame. This led to concrete associations between *copla* and homosexuality. So, even when *copla* took over as the main cultural product in Spain and became fundamentally a female form of expression in a political attempt to paint the genre as heteronormative, it was nonetheless one with which gay men strongly identified. The form's songs predominantly expressed emotions in relation to love affairs, something associated with women, as men were not expected to be publicly emotive during Franco's male dominating macho culture. Male singers who wanted to preserve an image of virility adapted their repertoire to the needs of the time and performed songs of no direct emotional relevance. Performances like Pepe Blanco's '*Cocidito Madrileño'* ('Madrilenian Stew') or Juanito Valderrama's '*El emigrante'* ('The Emigrant') and '*Mi Salamanca'* ('My Salamanca') placed focus on topics such as food and locales within Spain, rather than

relationships. This also served the regime's purpose to expose the grandiosity of Spanish geography and gastronomy through the popularity of *copla*. Some male artists resisted this change of focus and sang the repertoire popularised by female artists like Concha Piquer or Juanita Reina, thereby advocating a more mannered (gay) art. Such artists included the likes of Miguel de Molina, Rafael Conde, and Tomás de Antequera, all of whom acquired a level of success celebrated in Spain first and subsequently in their respective places of exile. In any case, Spanish *copla* during the dictatorship was almost exclusively performed by women or homosexuals rejected by the regime.

The 1950s are considered by many the golden age of Francoist *copla*. With the dictatorship well established, popular female singers like Lola Flores represented an aspiration for many Spanish women under Francoist guidelines: strong but pure, sexy but chaste, and unequivocally 'Spanish' in their mannerisms and expressions. The duality of Flores' inspiring persona made her an ideal point of identification and admiration for many closeted homosexuals. The 1960s saw a shift of Spanish gay icons, where *copla* singers of the decade like Sara Montiel subsequently became the favourite subjects of star impersonators in the 1970s (Pérez 2009: 65). The change of female stereotype from singer Lola Flores to Sara Montiel is fundamental in understanding the change happening in Spain in during this period. The shift from Flores to Montiel brought with it a female 'upgrade' from sensual, strong traditional values to an image of cosmopolitanism, a woman of the world, experienced in her relationships with men (Castro de Paz 2005: 112). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, when *copla* started losing followers, new singers like Raphael started attracting young homosexual audiences who, in the absence of national idols, clung to songs like '*Digan lo que digan'* (Whatever They Say) and '*Qué sabe nadie*' (What Do They Know?). By the 1970s, Franco's death seemed more imminent and sexual liberation became filled with more explicit messages (Pérez 2009: 64): a new visible strain of cross-dressers and transvestites started to perform the songs for wider audiences in subversive venues.

Copla in democracy: the emergence of trans presence and camp re-appropriation

After Franco's death and the abolition of censorship, Spain witnessed an erotic boom that affected the development of spectacle. This erotic boom was in the first instance heterosexual, but gave way to the incipient exposure of trans spectacle (Mérida 2015). Police controls became more irregular and trans presence became less stigmatised and more visible; simultaneously, audiences stopped fearing the 'unknown' and, drawn by their curiosity for what had been long forbidden, could now easily access this kind of queered spectacle. In this period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, trans theatre flourished and was central to a cultural movement known as La Movida, one which had its epicentre in Madrid and involved artists like film director Pedro Almodóvar and singer Alaska. This Post-Franco trans scenario recuperated and updated the pre-Civil war shows in which 'star impersonators' had cross-dressed on stage to imitate *copla* singers in the early 1930s. The cross-dressing scene practically disappeared during the dictatorship, but in democracy acquired more visibility and political presence than ever before. During these early democratic years of 1970s and 1980s, trans presence went beyond stage performance and included the adoption of a queer visibility off-stage. Trans performance became a statement of identity and politics as much as an artistic expression.

This new trans Spanish tradition gave shape to emotions that could not have been expressed in the previous political era due to the regime's political silencing. In the transition to democracy this re-appropriation of *copla* became very popular, with an increasing number of artists performing the songs in drag. For instance, Spanish painter Ocaña, primarily known for his role in promoting sexual liberation during the transition to democracy, promenaded in full drag 'along the Ramblas followed by crowds of onlookers, sing[ing] the Quintero, León and Quiroga *copla* '*Yo soy esa'* ('I am That Woman')' (Mira 2013: 60). *Copla* songs could no longer be defined as simply escapist entertainment

because the cross-dressed singers had faced their own emotions (Zurian 2005). *Copla* began to represent a queer demographic which embraced the form publicly, leading to the establishment of a new political dimension for both the genre and community.

In democracy, *copla* became connected with ideas of gay camp. Spanish queer scholar Alberto Mira asserts that camp is associated with a homosexual positioning of contents proceeding from popular arts and whose sense emerges from recycling these forms (2004: 145). Given the popularity of *copla* throughout the dictatorship and its long relationship with LGBT issues, one could think it only natural that the covert contents of *copla* songs would become overt in democracy. But *copla* in the 1970s felt outdated, old-style and full of stereotypes, and therefore it needed a makeover. Mira argues that camp addresses homosexuality without making it explicit: 'It's cultivated by homosexuals with effort, style, gesture. It's a response to the stereotype rather than a reproduction of it. It is a gay gaze that activates parody, recognises kitsch, and questions gender roles' (2004: 147). Camp works similarly in many homosexual Western traditions –the contents simply change depending on the particular national context.

The emergence of 'camp' in Spanish democracy is of special relevance given the political history of the dictatorship. Camp was already manifest in some theatrical subcultures, such as 1920s *cuplé*, a lighter version and forerunner of *copla*. *Cuplé* songs are filled with homosexual innuendos. The protagonists of these songs were 'easy' women who at the time would be marginalised for their interest in or promptness to sex. While *cuplé* singers would cause sexual excitement in the male audience, the re-contextualisation of these songs by drag artists generates humour, but also allows for a way to satisfy some level of male homoerotic feelings, as self-avowed straight male audience members would argue that what attracted them to drag performers was their apparent femininity (Mira 2004: 155). The attraction of 'straight' men to drag performers and subsequent level of homoerotism were common in the staging of *cuplés* authored by Retana. Álvaro Retana, author of *Las tardes del Ritz* was a self-proclaimed homosexual in 1920s Madrid and one of

the initiators of the Spanish camp tradition. In his extensive literary work throughout the first half of the 20th century, Retana visualised camp through grotesque depictions of homosexual characters which some may have considered homophobic at the time. The 'outness' and self-confidence of his characters were however pioneering for the times, and this together with some homoerotic plots brought visibility to camp and gay sensibilities, likely without Retana being aware of the legacy contribution would bring. As Mira notes, camp is not about creating an illusion of femininity: camp takes place when the performer steps out of its part and ironizes making visible the distance between imitation and reality (Mira 2004: 147). An ironic camp gaze controls these musical numbers: representation is conscious, as the content represented goes in between quotation marks. The performer of the song does not identify with a woman, but rather offers a parody of the gestures associated with the feminine condition.

Camp recycling is often discussed by Spanish scholars in textual terms, like a postmodern writing mechanism (Mira 2004: 150). When a drag artist imitates a *cuplé* or *copla* singer, s/he is taking the image out of its original context (desire, femininity) and transforming it into a spectacle that generates certain excitement and/or fascination for the heterosexual spectator. In this way, camp discourse provides room for a certain level of complicity between creatives and audience members, with a suspicion or certainty of a common understanding. In this vein, Gil de Biedma, influenced by Susan Sontag's essay 'Notes on Camp', argues that camp involves an exchange between author and reader: if the reader doesn't recognise/identify the references, he won't understand or enjoy them. Camp features ludic aspects (provocation), performativity, a gaze through intertextuality and a complicity with gay audiences. The camp reinterpretation of *copla* songs often rely on these characteristics: provocation, double-entendre of the lyrics, and a performance of the song that purposefully twists the chaste features that the 'virtuous' female singers displayed in times of repression. This combination is likely to be appreciated by a gay audience that is familiar with the original system and most generally with the language of

camp. What matters is not what the artist is trying to say but his relationship with the representational system (in Mira 2004: 149).

Mira and Sieburth both argue that identification with marginality is the only faithful interpretation of the *copla* texts. Paradoxically, during the Franco era, rarely was anything suspected to be sexual perversion tolerated. Despite camp not being explicitly homosexual,[10] it employs a frivolous language that would hurt/effect Francoist sensibilities that focused on the worthy and noble nature of the dictatorship and its ideals. The notion of a politically efficacious camp gaze has often been rejected, even within homophile discourse, and subsequently accused of being frivolous and escapist by gay activists.[11] Such anti-camp attitudes manifested strongly during the first years of the transition to democracy. During those years, transvestites and 'queens' were excluded from progressive homosexual collectives (and to a certain level they still are), as they were seen as confirming gay stereotypes and taking the focus away from political struggle. One of the artistic forms most commonly used by transvestites and drag artists, *copla* in its camp re-appropriation *cannot* be defined as escapist. Moving into the 21st century, *copla* has also been more openly embraced by transgender and queer artists like Falete, who perform sentimental *copla,* dressing up in feminine outfits without hiding his male gender, thereby embodying an androgynous identity. As Mira suggests, the performance of camp is the processing of heterosexist cultural myths, potentially oppressive, to transform them in a discourse of pleasure and affirmation of marginality (2004: 349). *Copla* plays an important role in this transformation. Rather than helping escape from the harsh realities of homosexual erasure, post-democracy *copla* now helps reaffirm LGBT existence in all its richness and diversity. Therefore, many gay, transgender and queer artists look up to

[10] The theatrical 'imitation' of women by men is not necessarily associated with homosexuality, as evidenced by long traditions like that of Elizabethan and Noh theatres (Mira 2004: 147).
[11] In the 1970s, there was a strong tendency among homosexuals to distance themselves from camp as an expression of a homophobic stereotype. The defenders of homosexuality as a third sex considered camp something simplifying at the very least (Mira 2004: 152).

copla in the 21st century as a vehicle to express their feelings. This very affirmation of marginality is what inspired me, a 21st century Spanish gay immigrant living in the UK, to channel my artistic position. My project *The Copla Musical* is the result of this affirmation of identity, which aims to export the new and empowered queer *copla* into the Anglo-speaking world through a process of intercultural adaptation.

The future of *copla*: creating *The Copla Musical* for international audiences

Throughout *copla*'s development in the 20th century, and despite its popularity in Spain, its relationship to other song styles and musical theatre forms which prevailed in the United Kingdom and United States has not been explored in any degree of detail. While *copla* has succeeded in the popular music realm across different social groups, and its theatricality has been evidenced and repurposed in many cabarets and TV shows, attention to its origins as musical theatre has slowly faded, culturally diminished by an increasing affinity toward megamusical imports in Spain.[12] At the start of the chapter, I spoke of a historical *disruption* of the Spanish musical during the dictatorship. Even after the post-Franco return to democracy, no homegrown Spanish musical theatre akin to that of the United States and United Kingdom has taken shape. Well into the 21st century, the strong musico-theatrical anchor of *copla* remains in Spain; however, with the exception of a few jukebox musicals and local initiatives that rarely have an afterlife beyond their short runs, very little composition and production of new Spanish musical theatre has emerged. The globalised Anglo-American musicals translated to Spanish language currently fill most of the Spanish stages and create the majority of Spain's theatrical revenue.

[12] Marta Mateo (2008) and Mia Patterson (2010) explain in detail the growing demand of Anglo-American megamusicals in Spain throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

For these reasons, my research and related performance practice look back into *copla* to attempt to re-imagine an artistic avenue for and intercultural intervention with a new Spanish musical, one in dialogue with other international manifestations of the form.[13] My show *The Copla Musical* (2014) explores how the *copla* songs that once formed part of revues and folkloric theatre shows might now be adapted and integrated into a contemporary musical theatre show conceived and presented outside Spain in such a way that it negotiates *copla*'s cultural identity in an alternative linguistic and cultural context. My current artistic practice thus aims to combine this Spanish folkloric songform with principles inherent to musical theatre artworks found in Britain and America. In that sense, my artistic Practice-as-Research holds a double objective. On the one hand, I aim to reduce the historical gap that separates Spanish and Anglo-American musical theatre, a gap which dates to the Spanish Francoist dictatorship. On the other, I want to make *copla*'s once implicit LGBT contents now explicit, not only in terms of camp re-appropriation but also in line with some of the lyricists' emotional intentions, so that the songs can achieve their full expressive, ideological and even revolutionary potential, now in an international context.

Anglophone musical theatre has historically drawn on and adopted a variety of indigenous art forms through its historical development; so why not *copla*? An association with the internationally recognized Anglophone musical form could arguably facilitate the integration of Spanish *copla* into a widely visible musical theatre pathway and generate new interest in the genre outside Spain. The intercultural creation of this modern *copla* musical also engages with the principles underpinning the creation of musicals in a globalized 21st century. Through my creation of *The Copla Musical* I retraced the process of crafting a hybrid form of musical theatre. Mirroring the way the popular genre developed in America, I engaged in a collaborative process that appropriated forms and functions

[13] For more details, please check my prior publications listed in the bibliography.

from other local and foreign cultures. Simultaneous to its larger generic venture, this artistic project generates questions that challenge, renew, and complement historical knowledge of Spanish LGBT collectives.

My research identifies the queer history of Spain and its tight relationship with *copla*. It also explores *copla*'s pertinence to discourses of dramaturgy and performance styles in the context of the dominant paradigms of musical theatre produced in 20th century Spain. During the dictatorship, *copla* represented a series of national-Catholic values imposed by the regime, values far from those originally associated with the songs. In the political climate of 21st century Europe, these songs register a new significance, especially when they interact with other cultures. Thus, further possibilities for identification with the melodramatic narratives and emotions of the *copla* lyrics, such as those experienced by LGBT groups silenced during the dictatorship, can now be openly explored artistically. My performance experience, one that includes cross-gendering in my own embodiment of the *copla* heroine, offers another lens for queer analysis. The queer embodiment present within *The Copla Musical* echoes the past experiences of the marginal communities who originally identified with *copla*. Being displaced from my country sparked a new-born interest in exploring my Spanish cultural identity through the study of *copla*. To this day, *copla* songs help me reconnect with my Spanish identity while living abroad. It is as a gay immigrant that I have noticed *copla*'s evocative power, and practiced a personal approach to these songs that has made me consider studying and disseminating my experience of *copla* to other cultures. *The Copla Musical* has featured several times in the UK and other European countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and even Spain, where Spanish audiences get to experience the newly re-imagined English *copla*. The show has also travelled to Latin America, where only the elder generations have a knowledge of *copla*, due to the exile of singers during the dictatorship. In every country and cultural setup, I always need to consider and somehow address the audience's prior experience or lack-of of musical theatre. Q&As, workshops and interviews commonly accompany the

performance to provide some background information on *copla* and my research, so that the audience's experience can be as rich as possible. Often those exchanges prove to be extraordinarily illuminating, especially when audience members can establish cultural parallels, for instance regarding different LGBT experiences and their channelling through artistic forms around the world. One of the biggest assets of *The Copla Musical* is its accessibility to audiences who are completely new to the form; this is also one of my main objectives at the core of the project. Thus, through my research, and most viscerally through the performances of *The Copla Musical,* I present some snippets of Spanish queer history in order to understand the place and potential of *copla* in the current musical theatre space.

Copla has been strongly associated to the LGBT sensibilities since its birth in the early 20th century. Many gay artists, both writers and performers, have been key in its development, but it is especially LGBT audiences who have embraced the genre throughout its difficult history. *Copla* provided hope in times of oppression and empowerment in times of liberation, there is no wonder why scholar Stephanie Sieburth speaks of *copla* as 'survival songs' (2014). It is also the case that *copla* was at the forefront of musical theatre in the early 20th century with strong parallels to the musical theatre shows emerging in Britain and America at the time, also often generated by minority communities. In a global 21st century, where musical theatre works are often produced for the world to enjoy, it makes sense to rescue this historical, social and poetically charged songform and present it internationally in a new intercultural lens. A lens that embraces its queer history, recuperates the lost avenue to rewrite the Spanish musical and provides an opportunity for global audiences to encounter snippets of Spanish cultural history and identity embedded in the short-lived moments of a song.

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