

From The Times
August 29, 2008

Lorca Dreams at Arcola, E8

Benedict Nightingale



The cast of Baraka's Dreaming Lorca all perform beautifully



According to the Arcola's programme, "*baraka*" is Arabic for blessing, French slang for luck and Serbian for shack. It's also the name both of the company presenting this salute to Lorca and (with a different spelling) of the touring troupe that the dramatist joined in 1931 to introduce Spanish punters to their nation's classics. I'd like to say that this information helped me to decode this strange, surreal piece, but actually it left me as disoriented as, perhaps, I was meant to be.

Maria Caudevilla's production, which is always beautifully performed by Baraka's five-person cast, opens with **Ana María Montero** peering out of a crate and emitting a big, welcoming giggle. She's then joined by performers identified as the Melancholic Man, the Woman of Apples, the Summer Man and the Umbrella Man, who wears a pilot's leather cap, holds a broly and eventually morphs into Lorca's influential friend, Salvador Dalí. And when Dalí is walking through a desert observing clocks and scorpions, and the company is flinging about the intoxicatingly lush, florid imagery so characteristic of Lorca himself – well, it would be absurd to expect clarity or anything remotely conventional.

Still, we get the odd fact or near-fact. We're told of Lorca's love of nature as a child. We hear a letter written by the dramatist to his family from New York, in which he says there have been six suicides in the Depression-hit city in a single day, one of which, witnessed by Lorca himself, ended with a man "squashed on the ground" below the Astor Hotel. We also get an extract from his little-known "erotic lace-paper Valentine in four scenes", *The Love of Don Perlimplin and Belisa in the Garden*, in which the Don of the title tells his lady that he didn't love her before he married her.

However, I can't say that I recognised anything from the well-known *Yerma*, *Blood Wedding* or *House of Bernarda Alba*, though snippets may have whizzed by in all the exotic talk of love and of the fruit that come across as Lorca's main metaphor for love and lovers: scrumptious apples.

More to the point, the mix of extravagant language and visual imagination – expect people to say things such as "her stripy legs tremble on the grass like two dying zebras" or "an apple will always be a lover but a lover can't ever be an apple" while dancing about the stage – seemed so impressionistic that we learn little that's concrete about the dramatist whose murder by Franco's thugs was one of the 20th-century theatre's great calamities. But then the poet Lorca is dreaming, not giving us his bio – or so the title suggests.