
Santa Juana

The Opening Season in Spain (1925–26)

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ABSTRACT: This article describes and analyzes the production of Santa Juana (the Spanish version of Saint Joan, translated by Julio Broutá) staged by Margarita Xirgu and her company during the 1925–26 season. The outlook of this article is informed by a number of elements that contribute to provide a holistic account of this historic production. First is the sociopolitical situation of Spain at the time, under the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. In more specific terms, while a brief overview of the Spanish theater scene is in order, the fundamental considerations here have to do with the personal and professional qualities of lead actress and impresario Margarita Xirgu, as well as with the technical details of the production. In addition, this article also provides a summary of the critical reception of Santa Juana in the Spanish press.

KEYWORDS: Santa Juana, Spain, Margarita Xirgu, Barcelona, Madrid

The Spanish Theater Scene in 1925: Margarita Xirgu

When Santa Juana premiered in Spain in 1925, the country was in the early stages of the military dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera. From the loss of the last two overseas colonies (Cuba and the Philippines) in 1898 until the onset of Franco’s regime in 1939, Spain experienced a succession of military coups, long periods of social unrest, failed attempts at modernizing the country, and violence. However, as often happens in countries where defeat and corruption poison the political system, Spain witnessed a revival in the arts between the turn of the century and the Civil War. This period,
known as the Silver Age ("Edad de Plata," by contrast with the Golden Age of baroque literature), spans the most fruitful years of three Nobel laureates for literature (Jacinto Benavente, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Vicente Aleixandre) as well as many other iconic writers, among whom Federico García Lorca is perhaps the best known outside Spain.

The censorship of Primo de Rivera’s regime stifled the press (the number of newspapers edited in Madrid dropped from forty-one to sixteen in a seven-year period). Other media, like the cinema, also suffered from strong censorship—especially films that came from the newly established Soviet Union or that would show Germany in a negative light in the aftermath of the Great War. The hand of the censor, however, did not affect literature as much—especially because books were thought to have little influence on public opinion. In the case of the theater, only plays with overt references to the political situation in Spain were banned, such as Valle-Inclán’s *La hija del capitán* and Lorca’s *Don Perlimplín*—whereas *Mariana Pineda* managed to remain on stage despite the rumors that it was going to be canceled because “the current political climate was unlikely to tolerate a production” of a play that can be understood as a libel against the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

As a consequence of all of the above—and the economic growth largely deriving from Spain’s neutrality during the Great War—the theater also thrived in this era, at least in terms of its popularity as a form of entertainment. The building of several new playhouses like Princesa, Maravillas, Reina Victoria, and Lara attests to this. The average play, however, catering to bourgeois audiences that resisted change and intellectual challenge, “would feed the inertia of impresarios and leading actors, who remained unable to take on the renovation of the genre.”

Under these circumstances, the “perfect theatrical storm” formed: a phenomenal actress and impresario, Margarita Xirgu (1888–1969), decided to produce and play the lead role in the play that constituted the summit of the career of the greatest dramatist alive. By 1925, Xirgu had become “Spain’s most powerful actress-manager.” As such, all the plays she starred in attracted much attention from the press and the public. Although Xirgu had had a long and successful career before starring in *Santa Juana*—she played the lead, for example, in Wilde’s *Salome* and von Hofmannsthal’s *Elektra*, not to mention many of Federico García Lorca’s plays—the chance to play Joan remains one of the greatest milestones of her acting life. This was due in no small part to the specific qualities she possessed as an artist and actress; these were qualities that aligned her with Shaw in many respects and made her an ideal actress for the role, first because she did not...
believe in “art for art’s sake,” something she had in common with the Irish author. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, she constantly tried to move, shake, and shock audiences, the same way Shaw “dips his subjects into a bath of muriatic acid.” In García Lorca’s own words,

[S]he is the actress who breaks the monotony of the footlights with the spirit of renovation. She throws handfuls of fire and jars of cold water at the audiences [who are] sleeping through moth-eaten conventions. [Xirgu] has the restlessness of the theatre, the fever of multiple temperaments. I always see her at a crossroads, at the crossroads of all heroines, an objective swept by a dark wind, where the aorta sings as if it were a nightingale.

Another aspect of Xirgu’s acting that several authors have pointed out is the fact that she was not an “actress of plays” but “an actress of playwrights.” This is often corroborated by the breadth of her readings on/by the playwrights whose characters she was to take on, as she readily admitted in the case of Shaw. From her knowledge of Shaw’s plays, she argued that

he is a man of the theatre like few others, for his plays are written with the stage and the audience in mind, and—so to speak—they are “finished.” His stage directions are written in great detail . . . and they provide a very accurate idea of the atmosphere, the movement, and the mise-en-scène.

And there was also an “intellectual dimension to Xirgu’s work,” which constituted a major asset for engaging with the Shavian text. In this regard, she revolutionized acting because of her “non-involvement with the characters,” another trait that agreed with many of Shaw’s plays:

She endowed her characters with emotion and passion but, by being clear that this was theatre and not real life, and through an absence of rhetoric, she raised the theatre to a high level of artistry rarely seen in Spain, prompting numerous comparisons with great European contemporaries such as Duse and Bernhardt.

In this regard, Xirgu managed to “adapt herself to the character,” which is the opposite of what divas do—“they would rather be themselves than their stage alter egos.” Thus, for example, as Cipriano Rivas Cherif recalls, “in the first act of Santa Juana, Margarita cannot walk in skirts; she looks like a man.
Much more so than when she’s dressed as a soldier.” This must be understood in light of Xirgu’s take on Joan, which was also inspired by her own analysis of the character. For her, Joan is a “girl of continuous naturalness and simplicity.”

Fig. 1 | Margarita Xirgu as Joan in the premier of *Santa Juana* at Teatro Goya, Barcelona, 21 October 1925. Personal archive of Xavier Rius Xirgu.
The way she saw the Maid, “everything about her was naïve, spontaneous, and sincere. She truly is a country girl. Her own faith is the simple and charming faith of village girls, devoid of complications, of fictitiousness, of theatricality.” As we shall see, this vision of Joan informed several aspects of the production, especially in terms of scenography.

The Rest of the Cast: The Translation

Apart from the lead actress, Xirgu’s Company had Alfonso Muñoz (1889–1957) as first actor and Francisco López Silva (1880–1942), also one of the biggest stars of his day, who would later have a successful career as a film actor during his exile in Argentina. As we shall see, their acting in Santa Juana was deemed superb by some critics—even over Xirgu’s. In addition, many of the other members of the company would go on to have successful careers whether on the stage, in the cinema, or both. To quote but two examples among the women in the company, Julia Pachelo became one of the best supporting actresses in Spanish cinema during the 1940s, while María Carbonell was awarded the National Theatre Prize twice (1958, 1980), founded her own, very successful company alongside her husband, and (not) incidentally, produced and starred in Pygmalion on separate occasions.

The complete cast of the play (in order of appearance of their first character) was as follows: Francisco López Silva (Robert de Baudricourt and Cauchon), Julio Infiesta (Steward and Gentleman), Margarita Xirgu (Joan), Luis Alcalde (Bertrand de Poulengey, John D’Estivet, and English Soldier), Luis Agudín (Archbishop of Rheims and De Courcelles), Salvador Marín de Castro (La Trémouille, de Stogumber), Amelia Muñoz (Stogumber’s Page), Joaquín Burgos (Gilles de Rais [“Bluebeard”] and Executor), José Ruste (La Hire and Inquisitor), Alfonso Muñoz (Dauphin), Julia Pachelo (Duchesse de la Trémouille), Luis Torrecilla (Dunois), María Carbonell (Dunois’s Page), Elías Sanjuan (Earl of Warwick), Pilar Muñoz (Warwick’s Page), and Miguel Ortín (Ladvenu).

As we can observe, the number of characters in the play made it necessary for some actors to play more than one role. This has been a constant in the productions of Saint Joan since the early days; and it remains a common trait that, if anything, has been accentuated lately. In addition, some of the pages who are simply labeled “Court Pages” in the original script—there is no Warwick’s Page in Shaw’s text, for example—were introduced, presumably, to get some of the women in the company involved, given the lack of female roles in the play.
When it comes to assessing the quality of the Spanish text of the play, one must begin by admitting that a holistic account of its merits is beyond the scope of this article. However, the authorship of the Spanish translation remains one of the most controversial questions about *Santa Juana*. Julio Broutá, Shaw’s official translator, certainly authored the version that was published in 1925 by *Revista de Occidente*. Whether this translation is the one that was used in rehearsals and on the stage is quite a different matter. In the 1950s, Ricardo Baeza, who also tried his hand at translating Shaw’s plays on several occasions, revealed in a curious footnote to one of his essays in *Sur*, the flagship of Argentinian literary magazines, that the staged text “seems [to have been translated] by several young writers, friends of the company.”¹⁶ One of these “friends” may well have been Salvador Vilaregut, who is credited as the author of the Spanish version in a review published in *La Vanguardia*.¹⁷ Vilaregut, who translated Maeterlinck, Pirandello, and Shakespeare, among others, was a close friend of Xirgu and was very familiar with the play—he had seen Pitoéff’s production in Paris. His part in translating the play, however, is not acknowledged in any other sources, and, consequently, it must remain—of necessity—a plausible hypothesis.

**Santa Juana** Premiers in Barcelona

The genesis of this production received its fair share of attention in the media, as it was greatly anticipated by the public and the critics. Even when the only information available to the press was the opening date of the season at Teatro Goya (7 October, *Santa Juana* premiered on the 21st), several reports had high expectations about the repertory—which would also include Massimo Bontempelli’s *Nuestra Diosa* (*Nostra Dea*)—as a fine example of “artistic drama” or “teatro de arte.”¹⁸ In addition, critics noted that Xirgu had acquired the rights of the play for the Spanish-speaking countries, and they eagerly awaited this “transcendental play” by “the most discussed man in Europe today.”¹⁹ It must also be noted that the recent publication of the play in Spanish translation in *Revista de Occidente* had made it widely read among Spanish theatergoers, who also held high expectations in view of the sweeping success of the play in “New York, London, Moscow, Berlin, and Paris.”²⁰

The day before the beginning of the season, Xirgu was interviewed in Barcelona and expressed his personal views on the play and its author. In her opinion, *Saint Joan* was “the best play modern drama has produced in any country,” although she expected Spanish audiences at first to be “a little disconcerted by the touch of comedy it contains”—assuredly later “to be
seduced by the way in which the author portrays people from the fifteenth century as if they were from the present moment.” The actress also confessed that she “had read several plays by Shaw”—whose detailed stage directions she extolled—and that she considered him “the dramatist of the future” and a “worthy heir to Shakespeare.”21

After the curtain rose, only brief reports were published for the next few days. They all highlighted that the play opened to a full house and...
that Xirgu’s acting was unanimously praised by the public.\textsuperscript{22} There seems to have been a similar consensus among critics from the very early performances, and after the second night the critic of \textit{La Vanguardia} described the “irresistible effect” the play had on audiences, and how it “should be seen by the whole of Barcelona.”\textsuperscript{23} Two weeks later, \textit{La Nación} still mentioned that every night was a sellout.\textsuperscript{24} Incidentally, Italian actress Emma Grammatica was playing Joan almost simultaneously at the Teatro Goldoni in Venice, which invited some comparisons—albeit superficial—in the Spanish press.\textsuperscript{25}

Full-length reviews began to appear after the play had been running for little more than a week, and it was clear from the very beginning that \textit{Santa Juana} would transcend its own merits as a play, for it became a symbol of the desirable winds of change in the Spanish scene. Thus, Melchor Fernández Almagro justly complained that “classical pieces” were seldom performed, and that only “poorly adapted operettas” were imported from foreign lands. The situation, he continued, “does not promote the aesthetic education of the public,” and that is why “the excellent example set by Margarita Xirgu in choosing Shaw’s \textit{Santa Juana} has to be commended.” Assessing the literary and dramatic quality of the play, Fernández Almagro argued that the play was “entirely original” despite Shaw’s “not having fantasized in the least.” He also commented on the author’s masterful use of “the dialectic game” and his ability to “revitalize the past.”\textsuperscript{26}

The success of \textit{Santa Juana} extended beyond the Barcelona press, and it became the talk of the Madrid theater critics even before it premiered there. This explains why Julio Broutá boldly wrote to critic Adolfo Marsillach (grandfather of the famous actor and playwright of the same name) to demand an explanation as to why he had not written a review of the play in \textit{El Imparcial}. Although Marsillach did publish a short piece, he decided to let the resident critic of the newspaper (José de Laserna) have the final word when the play came to Madrid. Nevertheless, he echoed how much the play was enjoyed by the public and the excellent acting of the members of Xirgu’s company—particularly the two lead male actors, Alfonso Muñoz and Francisco López Silva. However, Marsillach was of the opinion that Xirgu’s Joan was “a naïve dimwit,” when she should have been portrayed as “a rude visionary, just like Bernadette, the girl from Lourdes.”\textsuperscript{27}

Among the myriad pieces that were published during the Barcelona run of the play, the review by Manuel Rodríguez Codolá in \textit{La Vanguardia} was arguably the most eloquent and insightful.\textsuperscript{28} He maintained that the play pivots almost exclusively on Joan, to the extent that the audience could feel her “flowery perfume, which constitutes a spiritual trace” even in those
scenes where she was not on stage. By the same token, “Joan is the cog-wheel that keeps everyone moving around her”; thus, the audience got to know her also by “how the wind ruffles the waters, by how others murmur and scheme against her.” Furthermore, “the light she irradiates does not blind us,” but rather illuminates and clarifies “the wicked human condition of those around her.” Rodríguez Codolá then argued that by positioning himself halfway between those who accused Joan of heresy and those who canonized her, Shaw showed that “Joan was not a woman of her time. She was ahead of [superior to] it.”

This review also commented on the humor and satire that pervade the play (“the English are not shown in a good light”), especially in relation to the elements that “are a product of the times.” Its simplicity of style was also praised and, paradoxically, the critic considered this very simplicity the root of the idealized aura of Joan. Finally, there were also some poignant words about Joan’s climactic exclamation in the Epilogue: “O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?” In Rodríguez Codolá’s opinion, “Saints are not of this world, which is why they always encounter hostile atmospheres and are deemed dangerous.”

Once a general account of the critical reception of the play during the Barcelona season has been provided, a few words about scenography seem in order. The scenic design (including backdrops made in their own workshop) was commissioned to Federico Brunet (1873–1929) and Antonio Pous (1870–1959)—two of the most admired scenographers of the time, who later had a productive tenure as resident scenography painters at Teatro el Liceo in Barcelona. They had spearheaded the visual aspects of other successful productions such as Decourcelle and Tarbé’s Gigolette and Jover and Valentí’s Los Niños del Hospicio (both in 1920). In addition, they had showcased their stage paintings at the Sixth International Art Fair in Barcelona (1911), where their artwork was displayed alongside that of other members of the Catalan school of scenographers like Mauricio Vilumara, Salvador Alarma, and Félix Urgellés. Brunet and Pous’s work, as we shall see, was a major visual component in the aesthetics of the play, and it was exceedingly fitting to the representation of Joan that Xirgu wished to portray.

All the costumes, furniture, and props (including weapons) were made following designs by Miguel Xirgu (Margarita’s brother), who had been in charge of the scenography for several of Margarita’s productions in the past. Miguel made extensive use of primary sources for his costume designs—as historical accuracy seemed to be a major concern in his work. Thus, for
instance, in the 1930 production of Tirso de Molina’s *La prudencia en la mujer* (1622), his work was reviewed favorably because

[the costumes] have been made in exquisite taste, inspired by old documents, with a simplifying spirit of modernization. Some scenes, thanks to the careful positioning of the characters on stage, look like the pages of an illuminated codex.33

This penchant for accuracy—with subtle stylization in order to modernize the overall aesthetics—is also the case in *Santa Juana*, as the images of the production suggest. Indeed, costumes are rich in detail and allow the audience to separate characters at a glance—something that should not be overlooked in a play where, on the one hand, many actors play more than one role and, on the other, several members of the clergy are simultaneously on stage during the climactic scene. However, baroque style is for the most part avoided, especially in the case of Joan when she is dressed as a soldier. In this sense, Miguel Xirgu captures the simplicity and asceticism of the Maid who, in her final moments, can renounce all earthly possessions but not freedom:

JOAN. . . . It is not the bread and water I fear: I can live on bread: when have I asked for more? It is no hardship to drink water if the water be clean. Bread has no sorrow for me, and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills; to make me breathe foul damp darkness, and keep from me everything that brings me back to the love of God when your wickedness and foolishness tempt me to hate Him: all this is worse than the furnace in the Bible that was heated seven times. I could do without my warhorse; I could drag about in a skirt; I could let the banners and the trumpets and the knights and soldiers pass me and leave me behind as they leave the other women, if only I could still hear the wind in the trees, the larks in the sunshine, the young lambs crying through the healthy frost, and the blessed blessed church bells that send my angel voices floating to me on the wind. But without these things I cannot live.

The same sense of minimalistic simplicity dominated the layout and décor, and it was one of the elements that added to the overall effect of the play, according to different critics. By one account of Brunet and Pous’s design,
“an arcade and some draperies are the only permanent objects, which are only supplemented by a little backdrop curtain that serves to differentiate each scene. This felicitous simplicity in the components contributes a great deal to making the dramatic chronicle come alive in all its purity.”

It should also be mentioned that the backdrop design seems to have been influenced by the French production of the play at the Théâtre des Arts, Paris, April 1925. For example, the triptych in the Spanish version strikingly resembles the one designed by Georges Pitoëff for the Paris premiere. This aesthetic influence may be explained by the fact that many of the people who took part in the making of Santa Juana had imbibed the culture of turn-of-the-century Paris through different media. Scenographer Antonio Pous, for example, received a scholarship to visit the Exposition Universelle of 1900. In addition, although there is no direct evidence that Xirgu attended any of the French performances, her friend (and later literary advisor to the company) Cipriano Rivas Cherif had spent a year in Paris during the 1919–20 season and became acquainted with the new techniques of scenography and lighting that Pitoëff and others were implementing. Furthermore, the 1925 Saint Jeanne quickly became an iconic production.

Fig. 3 | Margarita Xirgu as Joan and most of the cast stand behind King Charles's bed during the Epilogue. Premier of Santa Juana at Teatro Goya, Barcelona, 21 October 1925. Personal archive of Xavier Rius Xirgu.
among Spanish critics and the yardstick against which others were measured. For example, Enrique Díez-Canedo wondered whether the Spanish version would be as successful as Pitoëff’s, and Manuel Bueno concluded one of his famous chronicles by paraphrasing the French translation of the play, not the Spanish one.37 Last, and perhaps most importantly, we should not forget that the Pitoëff Company had been on tour in Spain on several occasions—they would even stage a French-language version of Saint Joan in 1927 at Teatro Alcázar (Madrid), where the same triptych and the same minimalist approach were utilized for the six scenes.38 Judging by the review of this production by Enrique Díez-Canedo, Pitoëff’s talent as a “metteur en scène” was already widely acknowledged in theater circles in Spain, and the audience was likely to have established parallelisms with Xirgu’s production.39

After only twenty-five performances (plus four additional dates as fund-raisers for charity), the play had to leave Teatro Goya—stripping the chance of many to see the play—because the Argentinian company Rivera de Rosas had already booked the venue for their Barcelona debut on 5 November.40 Xirgu managed to secure Teatro Victoria for a few additional nights and satisfied her admirers until Thursday, 12 November (the extra dates were originally scheduled to last only until Sunday, the 8th).41 After this brief relocation, Xirgu and her company were ready to move on to Madrid. They, however, went on the customary tour to the most important cities in the country, which included Zaragoza (Teatro Principal) and Valencia (also at Teatro Principal).42

The Madrid Run

The success that preceded Santa Juana was more than enough to stir a sense of anticipation among the critics based in Madrid. In fact, as the bibliographical material quoted above indicates, several reviews had been published in the Spanish capital during the Barcelona run. As soon as the play premiered at Teatro Eslava (23 February 1926), the reviews came out in rapid succession and, although many authors commented on the same elements and raised similar points, some deserve to be singled out. Perhaps the first review to be published (the following day) was Alberto Marín Alcalde’s in La Correspondencia Militar.43 Although it did not discuss at length the dramatic qualities of the play and the staging, it did summarize a general social framework that has to be taken into account in order to gauge the reception of Saint Joan (and Bernard Shaw, to a lesser degree) in Spain. Indeed, “the religious crowds of Spain” were afraid to see Joan depicted “with irreverent
flippancy.” Likewise, the fact that the author was “English” meant some disquiet for the Catholics—practically all the Spanish population at the time—who “could naturally expect some attacks on the nationalist spirit of the French, thus aggravating the memory of the Saint that had been recently canonized.” In this regard, the critic was glad to report that none of the characters who find Joan guilty “act against their conscience” and thus “she is not burnt because her judges are not fair, but because her death is necessary.”

Once the initial reticence was overcome, several critics took Santa Juana as the epitome of good drama, and exhorted Spanish playwrights to learn from Shaw: “This is how you write plays!”; “Many of our authors could use seeing Shaw’s Santa Juana.”\textsuperscript{44} These remarks should be understood, as I mentioned before, in the context of a stagnant theater scene where this play had been anticipated as an opportunity for modernization and revitalization.

A more detailed review was written by Andrenio (pen name of Eduardo Gómez de Baquero) and published on the front page of La Voz. The very fact that the journalist—who had given up his position as a drama critic a few years before—decided to see the play and write about it is indicative of the type of attention Santa Juana was receiving. Andrenio’s text is divided into two sections, the first one devoted to the limitations of the printed text when appraising a play—he had read the Shavian text beforehand—and the other to the lead actress.\textsuperscript{45} By and large, Andrenio sang the praises of Xirgu as an actress who was “studious” and who did research on the plays in which she was going to take part. He also commended her unlikely combination of “dramatic creativity” and “intelligence”—as well as the “amateur enthusiasm” she always preserved. Yet, Xirgu’s most notable achievement—other than an ideal physical type—seemed to be the verisimilitude of the shift from “the beaten Joan who is willing to recant” to the “Joan who tears up her recantation.” As a diva, what she lacked in “force (loudness)” she made up for “in quality, in nuances, in vibrant and piercing intensity.”

One of the few critical pieces that discussed the success of Santa Juana through a cogent argument based on an analysis of Shaw’s playwriting was to appear in the monthly magazine Por Esos Mundos.\textsuperscript{46} In it, Enrique Estévez-Ortega acknowledged the widespread notions that consider Shaw an “immoral” dramatist whose social criticism was “unoriginal”—as it followed Nietzsche and Ibsen, for example. However, he argued, Shaw had superseded Ibsenism because “his characters are fully human” whereas Ibsen’s are “pathological.” In addition, Shaw’s drama is primarily comic—“a comedy of ideas”—even though there is also “psychological drama” on
occasion. For Estévez-Ortega, “controversy” seemed to be the keyword that defines Shavian drama. After these preliminary remarks, the critic compared Shaw’s Joan to many of the other literary portrayals of the saint, including those by Shakespeare, Schiller, and Twain. As opposed to these versions, Joan was for Shaw “a naïve, clever girl, gifted with an eminently pragmatic spirit . . . in addition to being the first French citizen who implemented Napoleonic imperialism.” In technical terms, *Saint Joan* is a clear example of how Shaw subordinates “plot and action to intellectual action and character.” As such, it is “a slap in the face of those who like to stage plays with grand effects.”

Fig. 4 | Margarita Xirgu as Joan, Alfonso Muñoz as the Dauphin, and Luis Torrecilla as Dunois during Scene V, set in the Cathedral of Rheims. Premier of *Santa Juana* at Teatro Goya, Barcelona, 21 October 1925. Personal archive of Xavier Rius Xirgu.
Santa Juana became such a household word among cultural and intellectual circles that there were all sorts of approaches to the play. The comic magazine Buen Humor, for instance, published a parodic review penned by Manuel Abril, who claimed that “Joan worked another miracle when she made [Shaw] write a Catholic play, an utterly Catholic play.” By the same token, Abril jokingly predicted that the success of the production “will canonize Joan as a daughter of Shaw . . . and she will take her father to heaven, even if he does not want to go.”47 The coda to the piece was a sample of Shaw’s “Maxims for Revolutionists,” a further demonstration of the comic vein of the text. On a similarly satirical note, El Liberal published a parody of the opinions that several Spanish authors could arguably have on the play.48 The piece, of course, was nothing more than a list of clichéd remarks that tell us more about the public image of these Spanish personalities than about the reception of the play. Some of them, however, are truly amusing, like Jacinto Benavente’s surprise when he was told the play was actually Shaw’s, or the hilarious claim by Valle-Inclán (showcasing his notorious lisp in a Pygmalion-like example of eye dialect) that Joan was not the one burned at the stake, “but her sister: Joan was sent to prison in London and, after many years, she married her jailor.”

One question that the majority of the critics failed to mention was that the only other play by Shaw that had been previously staged in Madrid (Pigmalión, 1920) was in many ways a failure because the staging (by Gregorio Martínez Sierra) and the translation (also by Broutá) did not succeed in conveying the true meaning of the play.49 Indeed, Melchor Fernández Almagro believed that “Martínez Sierra’s Pigmalión did not even stimulate audiences to turn to better versions of the Irishman’s drama.”50 However, he was glad to report that “Madrid has been able to ride on the wave of international modern drama” with an author who had mastered the art of “endowing ideas with life and making history relevant for the present.” And this was so because he cared “not so much for events and details as for the world of emotions that shape them,” which is why he did not need to distort history. In Fernández Almagro’s words, “Shaw seems to hold the documents of Joan’s trials to the light, and read ‘Protestantism’ as a palimpsest of sorts.” In the end, the critic acknowledged that the points of view from which one can look at the play “are inexhaustible,” and he concluded by exalting Xirgu’s acting because her “dignified” demeanor managed to convey “the most modern dramatic version of the Maid.” The only “but”—there is always a “but”—was that Xirgu did not seem to be able to strike the right chord with the “rustic” side of Joan, therefore overplaying the “soft” dimension of the character as a consequence.
For reasons that surely do not escape readers, much of the critical reception of this production focuses on the translated text, the staging, and the acting. Many of the ideas expressed about Shaw’s dramaturgy and style—albeit relatively accurate and well-informed—were derived from secondary sources or from his works in Spanish translation. There was one critic, however, who could write and speak English fluently and who published one of the most insightful and imaginative reviews of Santa Juana: Luis Araquistain. He knew British society and culture quite well because he had collaborated with the British intelligence and propaganda services during the Great War, when he was a correspondent in London for El Liberal—he would later be exiled in London for a few years after the Spanish Civil War. Most importantly, he knew Shaw’s plays firsthand, and he had written essays on the influence of the New Drama in different European countries.\[51\]

Thus, relying on his own knowledge about the playwright, Araquistain published a fictional interview of Shaw in La Voz.\[52\] In it, he describes how he allegedly runs into Shaw “in disguise” by chance and he is allowed to interview him on condition that he should not disclose his presence. The whole text is full of covert references to Araquistain’s acquaintance with Shaw’s life and works: he mentions one of his Fabian lectures, a speech he delivered at the Albert Hall, Shaw’s vegetarianism, and so on. In the fictional frame of the interview, Shaw remarks that he allegedly runs into Shaw “in disguise” by chance and he is allowed to interview him on condition that he should not disclose his presence. The whole text is full of covert references to Araquistain’s acquaintance with Shaw’s life and works: he mentions one of his Fabian lectures, a speech he delivered at the Albert Hall, Shaw’s vegetarianism, and so on. In the fictional frame of the interview, Shaw remarks that he wanted to know “how such a Catholic country as Spain would react to the comic vein with which I have addressed this topic.” About the historical events that he depicts in the play, Shaw says that “all the horrors we see in history” derive from the inability “to see things in the perspective of time.” In the specific case of Joan: “do you suppose that the Church of England, had they known that Joan was to be canonized centuries later, would have burnt her at the stake? The sense of embarrassment would have stopped them.” Nevertheless, the most “Shavian” fragment of the text is a long disquisition about why Shaw had decided to visit Spain:

I have already told you [Araquistain] that I wanted to see how a country that passes for a Catholic nation receives the comedy about the canonization of the Maid. My plays have not been able to conquer the Spanish market, and I always thought it was due to Catholicism. But I can see now this was not the reason, because they applaud me. It turns out the Spaniards do not hate the English, like the Germans or the Americans who, from the very beginning, have been my best audiences. In my plays I attack England as a symbol of all human follies: capitalism, marriage of convenience, raison d’état,
hypocrisy, phony religiosity, etc. Of course these happen everywhere, but my success in Germany and the United States stems from the fact that they believe I satirize England primarily, and universal human folly only secondarily. The French, who are more intelligent, do not like my plays because they can see where my darts are aimed at and because—even though they hate the English as much as the Americans and the Germans—they figure they should not encourage my feeble patriotism, lest it should catch on in France. In Spain, on the contrary, I find that nobody is interested in the social issues in my plays and that nobody abhors England—actually, many deem it a perfect country. Perfect! I’m astonished. I don’t think I’ll ever be popular in Spain.

The text ends on the same dream-like note of the Epilogue of the play, the readers trying to come to terms with the fabrication they have just read, while Shaw simply utters a laconic “good-bye.”

The foregoing paragraphs speak to the tremendous success that Santa Juana enjoyed during the 1925–26 season. One of the most telling events regarding the significance of the production was that the leading figures of theater in Spain paid homage to Margarita Xirgu’s Santa Juana success in an honorary banquet at the Hotel Ritz (Madrid) on Saturday, 6 March 1926. Ricardo Baeza, who translated several of Shaw’s plays into Spanish in the 1940s, published an article in La Voz where he explained this was to be a well-deserved tribute to an actress who has “kept a level of decorum and aesthetic quality that is perhaps unique in Spanish theatre.” And he added: “it suffices to compare Xirgu’s managing to that of all the other actors and companies around us to corroborate how much of an exception she is.”

The organizing committee was a veritable “who’s who” of theater and culture in the country, as it included actress María Guerrero, feminist politician Margarita Nelken, Nobel laureate Jacinto Benavente, playwright Ramón del Valle-Inclán, philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, writer (and Nobel Prize nominee) Ramón Pérez de Ayala, and novelist Pío Baroja, among many others. In the end, almost two hundred guests joined the organizers, including Mr. Civil, the president of the Casal Catalá, who named Margarita an honorary member of this institution. At the end of the banquet, Margarita Nelken proposed a toast and gave a short laudatory speech in honor of Xirgu, in which she pointed out that the event “redeems us of so many insignificant, meaningless homages”—this being truly deserved and justified. After Nelken’s panegyric, Eduardo Marquina read a poem he had composed for the occasion. The poem concluded on an energetic note by
comparing Xirgu to “a spoonful of medicine” (“la cucharilla de la medicina”) that was to heal the aching Spanish theater. Incidentally, it is worth noting that although some scholars claim that Marquina’s poem remained unpublished, Heraldo de Madrid reproduced the poem in its entirety a week after the event.56

In the end, and although the banquet was explicitly organized to honor Margarita Xirgu for her role in Santa Juana, the occasion was also vicariously honoring other people. As the critic in La Voz suggested, tongue-in-cheek: “she [Xirgu] would not have played Joan if Broutá had not translated the play . . . and he would not have translated the play if Shaw had not written it in English first . . . and Shaw would not have written the play if Joan had not been canonized . . . and she would not have been canonized if the judges had not sentenced her to be burnt at the stake. Ultimately, today’s banquet honors all of them.”57

This article ends, fittingly, with a celebration of Margarita Xirgu, Santa Juana, Shaw, and all the circumstances and historical events that made this momentous production possible. Although the data to appraise its success have already been provided by the relevant sources, the true significance of Santa Juana for the history of theater in Spain is much more complex. Still, the fact that this was arguably the greatest hit in Xirgu’s career—without a doubt her most celebrated success with a foreign, contemporary play—speaks to its momentous nature, however intangible. Furthermore, Santa Juana would continue in the repertory of Xirgu’s company for many years. Before her exile, she staged the play all over Spain, in places like Albacete, Oviedo, Valencia, Zaragoza—even in Ksar el-Kebir (at the time part of the Spanish protectorate in Morocco), where Santa Juana was the play selected to inaugurate Teatro de la Naturaleza.58 Once she had to remain indefinitely in South America—the Spanish Civil War broke out while she was on tour, and Spanish authorities believed she could do more for the cause of the Spanish Republic by performing overseas—she played Joan in the leading theaters of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, and Peru.59 In short, Margarita and Joan became inextricably linked forever—one of the few characters who remained with the “actress of playwrights.”

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Checklist of Shaviana.” His latest Shaw project is a collective volume titled *Shaw and the Spanish-Speaking World*.

**NOTES**

I would like to give a heartfelt thanks to the family and heirs of Margarita Xirgu, who kindly gave permission to publish the images reproduced here. Credit is especially due to Esther Xirgu Cortacans, a most helpful correspondent, and to Xavier Rius Xirgu, from whose personal archive the photographs were borrowed. Their heroic work to preserve Xirgu’s legacy is available at http://margaritaxirgu.es.

3. Ramón Tamames, *Ni Mussolini ni Franco: La dictadura de Primo de Rivera y su tiempo* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2008), 339. All quotations from texts originally in Spanish are my translation unless otherwise noted.
16. Ricardo Baeza, “Recuerdos de Bernard Shaw,” *Sur* 200 (June 1951): 15n1. Incidentally, Victoria Ocampo, the founder and editor in chief of *Sur*, met Shaw at his house in Ayot St Lawrence and recounts the occasion in an article in the same issue.
17. Manuel Rodríguez Codolá, “Santa Juana,” La Vanguardia, 22 October 1925, 11. All the newspaper articles cited in this essay are available at the Hemeroteca Digital of the National Library of Spain (http://www.bne.es/es/Catalogos/HemerotecaDigital/), the La Vanguardia Archive (http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com), or the ABC Archive (http://hemeroteca.abc.es).


21. See “Margarita Xirgu habla de Bernard Shaw,” El Sol, 7 October 1925, 2; “Margarita Xirgu habla de la obra de Bernard Shaw ‘Santa Juana,’” La Voz, 7 October 1925, 2.


29. Emphasis added.

30. These and other significant Catalan artists are often cited by their Catalan names, e.g., Frederic Brunet and Antoni Pous.


35. I would like to thank Michel Pharand for pointing this out to me when discussing an early draft of this article.


38. See, for example, the review by Floridor (pen name of Luis Gabaldón), “Un teatro nuevo. Los Pitoëff en ‘Santa Juana,’” ABC, 4 February 1927, 31.

46. Enrique Estévez-Ortega, “Bernard Shaw y Margarita Xirgu,” Por Esos Mundos, 7 March 1926, 70–73.
49. For a brief overview of the limitations of this production, see the introduction to Miguel Cisneros Perales, ed. and trans., Pigmalión (Madrid: Cátedra, 2016), 53–54.
51. Ramiro de Maeztu collectively nicknamed Luis Araquistain, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, and Salvador de Madariaga the London Boys. These authors were among the first to break the secular cultural barriers between Spain and Britain at the turn of the century. For more on the literary dimension of this cross-fertilization, see, for example, Mariano Martín Rodríguez, “Los Novecentistas en Londres y la aclimatación del scientific romance en España,” Revista de Filología Románica Anejo 7 (2011): 211–39.
54. “Homenaje a una gran actriz,” La Época, 2 March 1926, 3; “Un homenaje a Margarita Xirgu,” La Voz, 1 March 1926, 2.
55. “A Margarita Xirgu,” El Sol, 8 March 1926, 4. A “Casal Catalá” is a cultural institution that serves as a social club for Catalans living outside Catalonia. There are branches in many cities, especially in Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Argentina, Mexico, and the United States.
57. “La razón de un banquete,” La Voz, 6 March 1926, 1.
59. Rodrigo, Margarita Xirgu y su teatro. See also the biographical information at http://margaritaxirgu.es.