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Josep M. Benet i Jornet



Who I Am and Why I Write

Josep M. Benet i Jornet

Josep M. Benet i Jornet is one of Catalonia's leading playwrights. He has written more than forty plays since 1964. He is also a television scriptwriter.

My grandfather Josep Benet was a humble farmer from Borges Blanques, one of those people who hung a picture of Macià at the head of the bed. Neither he nor his children read books or went to see plays. They had enough to do fighting poverty. My grandfather Francesc Jornet was quite a well-known doctor in l'Hospitalet de Llobregat. He was an office-holder in a right-wing party and the reds killed him just after the war began in 1936. He used to read but didn't want his daughters to have any kind of serious education. My father, Pere, hated having to toil on the land and became an accountant. In marrying him, my mother, Concepció, went down the social scale. They rented a tiny flat in Barcelona, in the Ronda de Sant Antoni and my sister Núria and I were born there.

At home you could count the books we had on the fingers of one hand. We didn't go to the theatre. However, when I learned to read (with difficulty as I was very slow-witted), books became my passion. If I had to choose between a toy and a book as a gift (we couldn't afford both), I preferred a book. My uncle and aunt from Gironella, where we spent our summers, had a library, which, to my eyes, was abundant and attractive. It dated back to Republican times and there I read things in Catalan. In Barcelona I read "penny dreadfuls" in Spanish. My classics were Alf Manx (cops and robbers), Josep Mallorquí (Wild West), George H. White (science fiction) and Marisa Villardefrancos (romance). But I also read, for example, Jules Verne and Karl May. Not much more than that though. A couple of times I performed in school plays (Escolapis de Sant Anton). At the age of sixteen I became a passionate member of the youth theatre group of the parish of Carme.

I always wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be a writer like someone wants to be an astronaut, knowing that it couldn't come true, that I'd never be one. In fact, for some time I wanted to be a pulp writer. I found Graham Greene's novels heavy. I was a neighbourhood kid, but I didn't fit into the neighbourhood and nobody gave me any other bearings. I was weak, lacking in confidence in myself and with still less confidence in my intellectual abilities, and with parents who were worried by my ineptitude ? but I wrote, and I knew that I'd never stop writing, first novels and then theatre. You can imagine what kind of texts they were. I had no false hopes. I knew I wasn't writing anything good, that I'd never write anything good, but writing was a vice, and my awareness of this vice that was condemned by the family but also inevitable was confused with the beginnings of my awareness of sexuality, another vice that society condemned in those days but that was also inevitable.

In the wretched years after the Civil War my mother took refuge in an iron-clad religiosity while my father took his refuge in the girls that went to the Price dancehall on Thursday afternoons. My sister was open and nice and I was shy and unsociable. My constant distraction for years was comic strips (books dribbled in every five or six months), and I, with any old bit of paper - usually what they used to wrap our purchases at the market - drew my own comics, whole collections with drawings and texts. At home they thought that I liked drawing and that I was good at it (false) but they never gave any

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importance to the fact that my drawings were always accompanied by a story. Those clumsy comic strips, with image and dialogue, were a bridge to the theatre. But why theatre? I don't understand: it's a mystery. I don't understand where this craze came from. Through his sacrifices (as I was always reminded), my father wanted me to get where he hadn't been able to get, by studying industrial engineering, while my mother wanted to return me to the place that pertained to me through her former condition, to another social status: we are not just anyone, she always said. Disaster. I played truant, escaped to the Library of Catalonia, and kept clear of responsibility by reading new and different authors, in such a way that went a bit beyond pure consumption. I had the instinct of going beyond my own threshold of interests and did it groping my way with no one to guide me or to tell me that maybe I wasn't doing anything wrong. As an overgrown kid, of eighteen I think, I told my parents after the Christmas holidays that I wasn't going back to the Industrial Engineering School, where I kept failing the exams, and that they should send me out to work. My father, generous, desperate, asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't expect the question but, with a flash of intuition, I told him I wanted to do an Arts degree. They paid for me to finish my school-leaving exams (in which I had only completed four subjects) and then financed my Arts degree.

One of my best friends, a classmate, says that he has never seen anyone get through university learning as little as I did in the subjects they taught. I passed because it was impossible to fail Romance Languages. University was very important for me. My aim was not to get a degree but to find out how to write theatre. My classmates taught me about literature, about thought and about life. The professors didn't, but my friends did, I think. For the first time I found some orientation. Again, and also for the first time, there were people who valued me. Not a lot. Just a bit.

My father, through family tradition, was a Catalan nationalist and anti-Franco, but in name only. At university I realised that I had to align myself with Catalan culture and I took part, without any prominence, in the anti-Franco struggle. But I never joined any party. With [Joaquim Molas](#) and from Joan-Lluís Marfany, I learned in clandestine classes what I know of Catalan literature, especially that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the EADAG theatre company, through Adrià Gual, I met people who were to become prominent in the revival of theatre in Barcelona. In 1963, I astonishingly won the Josep M. de Sagarra Prize for theatre. It was the beginning of the "career" of the playwright who had dreamed of it but believed it was unthinkable.

I am a playwright, I would say, because of some kind of ineluctable destiny, in spite of myself, my shortcomings and my weaknesses. There must be some analysis that is more rational than this, but love of theatre has been and is an obsession that has totally conditioned my life. I have very little confidence in myself but I know I will never stop writing theatre, and that I will never stop striving to write plays that are always more rigorous and ambitious than those I have written hitherto. Even if I crash. But I'll crash trying to do better. Writing is not easy. It is less and less easy. Writing is not having a piss and imagining, with some kind of primitive pretentiousness, that you are pissing gold. Writing must involve a different kind of pretension. It must mean wanting to build a cathedral, a job that is full of endless problems and you have no way of being sure that you will be able to resolve them.

The "subjects" of my works are limited. I strive to exhaust them and to present them with the maximum degree of complexity, and I know that there are only two alternatives: first, I don't achieve it or I fail and, second, I do achieve it and a whole part of my very limited field of action will be over and done with, and not to be returned to ever again. Whatever the case, I am terrified whenever I finish a new work.

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I write theatre and my texts try to become a show on the stage. Despite a misanthropic instinct, I love the contact with theatre people and find that the rehearsal process is a fascinating and enriching experience. I know that, in the production as a whole, I am just one of many pieces that comprise it and that the experience of putting it on can oblige rewriting the text. I take that into account. The work will be mine and mine alone, so to speak, when I go back to the book, to written literature.

A premiere night is the most anxiety-producing thing in the world. But it is also the most beautiful and I wouldn't have it any other way.

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They Have Said...Among his other merits, Benet i Jornet has the singularity of being the only writer of his generation who has managed to be regularly performed. Despite his militancy in defending the playwright in the face of theatre that is constructed from zero, in principle according to different parameters (for example, Els Joglars, Comediants, La Fura, etc.), Benet has enjoyed, and still enjoys, a presence and recognition that we do not find with any of his contemporaries. There must be many and diverse reasons for this (constant work is a major factor), but there is one that I believe is essential. Benet has been able to evolve slowly, while at the same time maintaining a sufficient degree of aesthetic and ideological complicity with a public that may be a minority one, but it nonetheless understands him. Benet's subsequent relation with the theatre, with the stimuli and approaches of Sergi Belbel, has also contributed to the fact that younger people now see him as a reference.

In any case, Josep M. Benet i Jornet should be seen in his own terms and not as the embodiment of a grievance against his colleagues. And, seen thus, with the perspective of time, his capacity for coherent evolution within his basic concerns becomes clear. From the play *Una vella, coneguda olor*, of 1963, to *Olors* (2000), through *Berenàveu a les fosques* (*You Had Tea in the Dark*) (1971), *Revolta de bruixes* (*Witches' Revolt*) (1975), *Descripció d'un paisatge* (*Description of a Landscape*) (1978) and *Desig* (*Desire*) (1989), there are some thirty plays of very different registers: from the social realism of his early works, the quest for a mythical territory in *Cançons perdudes* (*Lost Songs*) (1966) and the other works of the Drudània cycle, his return to realism but now focusing on the intimate lives of the characters in *Berenàveu a les fosques*, his subsequent slow approximation, generated by his own resources, to the work of Harold Pinter (here, the explanation for his subsequent coinciding with Sergi Belbel should be sought), his attraction to a certain kind of extraterritoriality with *El manuscrit d'Alí Bei* (*Ali Bei's Manuscript*) (1984), and, in his most recent work, a return to intimism in which communication is almost impossible?

Formal matters aside, Benet i Jornet's theatre has always seemed to me to be constructed on the basis of a determinist focus. The setting bears down overwhelmingly on human beings, conditioning them, shaping them and deforming them. If, in the early years of his production, the surroundings made people unhappy or cruel, and were shown as clearly unjust, whether it was strictly within the family or the wider social context, his milieus have been undergoing change and they now create difficulties for his characters in expressing themselves. This occurs to the extent that the degree of responsibility of the setting has become less clear and the grievance increasingly difficult to formulate. Incest, one of the latent or manifest themes in both early and later stages of his work, is something I see more from this point of view - that the milieu in which we live can corrupt us - than as the necessary transgression that appears, for example, in [Palau i Fabre](#).

Jordi Coca, "Benet i Jornet, una excepció (Benet i Jornet, an Exception)", *Avui* (14/1/2003)

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On 30 September 1964, a new era of Catalan theatre began with the premiere of Josep M. Benet i Jornet's *Una vella, coneguda olor*, which was followed a few years later, in 1971 by Jordi Teixidor's *El retaule del flautista* (*The Legend of the Piper*), confirming the existence of a group of young authors who wanted to produce a different kind of theatre. They were not alone in this because a complex network of other professionals was also striving in the same direction. In the Balearic Islands and, above all, in the region of Valencia, similar things were happening around initiatives like the Centre Experimental del Teatre (Experimental Theatre Centre) and authors like Rodolf Sirera. From the institutional perspective, a significant event occurred in 1971 when Hermann Bonnín was named director of the Theatre Institute of the Provincial Council of Barcelona, thenceforth enabling a new phase in the training of professionals working in theatre.

Enric Bou, "La literatura actual. El teatre (Literature Today. Theatre)" in M. de Riquer, A. Comas, J. Molas, *Història de la Literatura Catalana (History of Catalan Literature)* (Barcelona, Ariel, 1985)

Berenàveu a les fosques (1972), a realist drama, at times naturalist, written without any concessions, and as bitter as the collective vicissitudes of the previous years, sums up, in essence, the particular bitterness of individuals. And it is through a few individuals, with their paltry yearnings and eventual failures, that Benet i Jornet describes for us Barcelona's defeated and disoriented petty bourgeoisie, which has lost consciousness of its proletarian and artisan origins and is bent on dreams that will only break it up and, in the end and destroy it.

Berenàveu a les fosques offers the action on two different planes wherein the author intervenes so as to make them simultaneous. First, is the revelation of a family anecdote, the family in question being profoundly marked by the privations of the years that followed the Civil War and that were still fresh in people's minds in the early 1950s. The second is the evolution of the anecdote and of the milieu through two women, Montserrat and Fanny, who experience them in different situations and at different ages.

The author thereby invites us to look with a certain distancing at an epoch that seems to have definitively been overtaken by the fever of the consumer society of our own times.

Xavier Fàbregas, "*Berenàveu a les fosques*, by Josep Maria Benet i Jornet", *Serra d'Or*, Nº. 154 (July 1972)

In the course of his career as a playwright - with a total of 28 works to date - Josep M. Benet has revealed a special obsession with reflecting upon how the individual fits into a society and a country that have been severely handicapped with regard to their natural development since 1939, the year that ushered in the might of the Franco dictatorship. In all his plays, he addresses, though with different nuances, the relationship of the individual with the Franco regime. And it is within this general orientation of Benet's theatre that we thus need to fit the play *Ai, carai!* (*Oh, Gosh!*)

This work was born from a decision by the author, which seems to be similar to that which led to *Berenàveu a les fosques*, in other words, that of coming to terms with the immediate history around us. If in *Berenàveu a les fosques*, Benet acidly takes on his father's generation (that of the Civil War), he now turns to his own generation, that which is somewhere between 45 and 50 years old (to be clear about it, that old, familiar youth of the sixties, now sifted through the sieve of the transition, which appeared in *Baralla entre olors* (*Battle Among Smells*)), and which constitutes the centrepiece of this play in which Benet i Jornet congratulates himself on his 25 years of passionate devotion to the theatre.

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Enric Gallén, "De l'amor i la desolació (On Love and Desolation)", *El País* (17/1/1991)

Desig takes us to a recognisable world, complete with cars, second residences, plastic-looking bars, men and women. The characters move about in apparent normality and confront, from their own particular positions, the "cry" or appeals from the unknown (hallucination, mystery, projection). But between the personal Ego, made up of initiatory memories, loyalties and insecurities, and this dual setting, there is a feeling of foreignness that leads them to construct a wall of words and gestures that comes between them and constrains any relationship. They are, then, different, tortured forms of the Ego's projections. THE HUSBAND, humiliated, dependent, has ended up accepting things as they come, taking refuge in his apparent control - that of the artisan - of the small family circle, even while his milieu inevitably eludes him. SHE, in turn, is restlessness, the quest, projection. She wants to know, to find answers, to recover the space from which she feels expelled. These two characters are confronted with - complements or duplicates? - the MAN and the WOMAN. The story - Benet does not deny himself narration - resists being closed into "a" story. It remains open. *Desig*: the title condenses this binding together of characters who coexist without being able to escape from being both profoundly strange and profoundly well-known to each other.

Jordi Castellanos, *Desig* (València, Eliseu Climent, 1991)

Bio-bibliography

Biography



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Breu biografia, obra i enllaços sobre l'autor al web de l'enciclopèdia lliure.

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WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

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VIDEO: Benet i Jornet a Veus literàries

Documental sobre la vida i l'obra de l'escriptor, realitzat per l'AELC.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=19233



WEB: The author in the Who's Who of Catalan Literature

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/qeq/FitxaAutorsuk.asp?nom1=benet&cercauk2=Search&quinform=form1&NRegistre=4&idregistre=544>



VIDEO: Benet i Jornet in Veus literàries [Literary Voices]

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Documentary on Benet's life and work made by AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers).

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WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

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<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Benet%20i%20Jornet%20Josep%20M%20&sc=1&ln=ca>



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Criticism



WEB: Cinema i literatura catalana

Pàgina de lletra dedicada a les adaptacions cinematogràfiques de la literatura catalana.
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WEB: Josep M. Benet i Jornet a l'AELC

Biografia, publicacions i altres materials.
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WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona

Nota biobibliogràfica, ressenya d'algunes obres teatrals i un extens article d'Helena Hevia sobre *Olors*.
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WEB: AELC Page

Biography, information and publications.
<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/benetjornet/>



WEB: Josep M. Benet i Jornet in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, works, links and transcription of articles on this author.
http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=222



PDF: Let's Do Theatre with Josep M. Benet i Jornet

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Miscellaneous



WEB: **Teatre català**

Conferència de Rodolf Sirera sobre l'evolució del teatre en català, a París (24/04/01).

<http://parnaseo.uv.es/Ars/Documentos/paris.htm>



WEB: **"Dramaturgos refugiados en la televisión"**

Moral, Ladrón de Guevara, Benet i Jornet i Galceran analitzen el fenomen del creixement de les sèries de televisió de producció pròpia. A *El Cultural* (16/09/04).

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PDF: **"Les telenovel·les catalanes: entre el serial i el relat de costums"**

Marta Ortego fa un repàs a l'origen de les telenovel·les catalanes, les característiques i l'evolució del gènere des que va començar a TV3. A la revista de la UAB *Anàlisi*, núm. 23 (1999).

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WEB: **El Mirall trencat de Benet i Jornet**

El dramaturg va fer l'adaptació televisiva de la novel·la de Mercè Rodoreda.

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Dossier de premsa sobre l'adaptació cinematogràfica de *Testament* realitzada per Ventura Pons.

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WEB: **Teatre infantil**

Teatre Nu, en coproducció amb el Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, posa en escena *La Ventafocs*, adaptada per Josep M. Benet i Jornet.

http://www.teatrenacional.com/obra_teatre/la-ventafocs-hervas.html



WEB: **Catalan Theatre**

Lecture given in Paris by Rodolf Sirera on the evolution of Catalan-language theatre (24/4/01).

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PDF: **"Les telenovel·les catalanes: entre el serial i el relat de costums" (Catalan Soap Operas: Between TV Series and Stories with a Local Flavour)**

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PDF: "Els serials Catalans: un nou producte amb denominació d'origen" (Catalan Serials: a New Product of Guaranteed Origin)

Joana Gallego discusses the Catalan soap opera and one of its "fathers", Benet i Jornet. In *Anàlisi*, N° 23 (1999).

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The playwright adapts Mercè Rodoreda's novel for television.

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