



SONG OF FIRST DESIRE

13 FEB - 23 MAR



**BELVOIR ST
THEATRE**

By
Andrew Bovell
Directed by
Neil Armfield

SONG OF FIRST DESIRE

RUN TIME: 1 hour 50 minutes (no interval)

CAST

Kerry Fox

Julia/Carmen

Borja Maestre

Alejandro/Juan

Jorge Muriel

Carlos/Luis

Sarah Peirse

Camelia/Margarita

CREATIVES

Writer

Andrew Bovell

Director

Neil Armfield

Set and Costume Designer

Mel Page

Lighting Designer

Morgan Moroney

Composer/Sound Designer

Clemence Williams

Associate Sound Designer

Madeleine Picard

Movement and
Intimacy Director

Nigel Poulton

Voice Coach

Laura Farrell

Stage Manager

Luke McGettigan

Assistant Stage Manager

Jen Jackson

WAAPA Stage
Management Secondment
Estelle Gomersall

WARNING

Song of First Desire contains strong language (including homophobic slurs), mature themes, references to sexual assault and nudity.

This production includes haze effects.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we share our stories.

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SPAIN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Spain lost most of its overseas colonies in the last decade of the 1800s after humiliation in the Spanish-American War. This sense of failure and economic hardship caused a Right-wing backlash; conservative groups attributed the national decline to the country becoming too liberal and diminishing authority of the Church.

In this atmosphere of instability, Spain remained neutral during the First World War, which had long-lasting ramifications. Parts of the Spanish economy boomed with wartime demand; the wealthy became *very* wealthy, but inflation, shortages and low wage growth meant the wealth did not flow to all of the population – social discontent followed. Another disastrous war in the early 1920s saw Spain lose more prestige, and radicalised the **Army** and **Church**, two powerful institutions in Spain. The Right were strengthened in their belief that Spain needed greater respect for traditional authority, the Left were convinced the oligarchs and aristocrats acted only in their own interests. Both ideologies undermined faith in the major institutions of state such as the law, the education system, and industry.

When the instability resulted in collapse in 1931, the **Republic** was born. The **Monarchy** went into exile, the government was democratised, women were given the vote (decades after other European nations). However the Republic's attempts to curtail the power of the Army alarmed many, and the Church agitated against a perceived diminution of its influence. By 1936 the Republic was back in chaos, and a Right-wing coup was enacted. Republicans resisted; the armed forces were divided, and a **Civil War** erupted. The large cities initially supported the Republic, the aristocracy, military and big business supported the coup initiators, they were known as the **Nationalists**. The Republic drew support from the Soviet Union and many non-Spanish volunteers (including a number of Australians). The Nationalists had the backing of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, as well as many European plutocrats.

After a horrific Civil War of appalling butchery (300,000 to 1 million Spaniards lost their lives, Picasso's *Guernica* remains the enduring image of the hell that was loosed upon the land) the Nationalists were victorious. **General Franco** became Dictator, the Monarchy was restored, and the Church assumed a power to control institutions and private lives of citizens unlike anywhere in Europe. Reprisals were harsh; an estimated 150,000 Republicans were executed by the government in the first four years of the Second World War. A further pertinent occurrence was forced **Adoptions** – thousands of children from Republican families were forcibly removed and placed in 'appropriate', Catholic, Nationalist homes, never to see their parents again.

Spain went into a decades-long period of authoritarianism and conservative dominance, which only began to lose its grip with the death of General Franco in November 1975. Almost immediately a rapid period of transition ensued; between the General's demise and 1983, liberal institutions were re-established, the economy began a long period of growth, women's rights were restored or liberalised, and Spain joined Europe formally in 1986.

The effects of a century of turmoil remained under the surface of modern-day consumerist Spain, however. One way of thinking about this is the idea of **The Two Spains**; that Spain is not in fact one country, but two, so different they are incapable of existing with the other, both Spains to some extent present in every citizen, every conversation, every moment. One Spain is deeply religious, black-and-white in philosophy, wary of outside meddling, yearning for 'strong leadership'. The other is secular, 'European', sometimes chaotic, romantic. These Two Spains continue their war, to this day.



Kerry Fox, Jorge Muriel, Sarah Peirse & Borja Maestre

WRITER'S NOTE

ANDREW BOVELL

This work stems from my love affair with the city of Madrid.

I met the translator and actor Jorge Muriel when he visited me in Adelaide in 2013. He had discovered the play *When the Rain Stops Falling*, whilst studying in New York. He showed it to the director, Julián Fuentes Reta and together with an ensemble of actors and theatre artists they mounted a production in Madrid in 2013. As well as translating the play, Jorge played the role of Gabriel Law and it was in preparing for the role that he travelled to Australia. Jorge followed the journey of the character from Adelaide to the Coorong to Uluru. At Uluru he collected a vial of red earth. Before every premiere of the production, they spread a little of this earth on the stage.

The Spanish production was a great success, winning many Spanish theatre awards, and impacting the Spanish theatre scene in a way I hadn't anticipated. The production gained a national tour in 2015 and the company invited me to join them for the premiere, as I hadn't been able to come the year before. I arrived

in Madrid with my wife, Eugenia and we were immediately embraced by the company. I remember arriving at a restaurant at around 11pm, which is the customary time for dinner in Madrid, to be greeted by a table of 16 people. They rose as one and moved forward to embrace us. There were tears and declarations of love for the play and for me for having written it. We talked late into the night and into the next morning. I was overwhelmed by their warmth and passion. Julián and Jorge and the creative ensemble they gathered around this production have since become lifelong friends.

In 2019 they mounted a production of *Things I Know to be True*. The play was produced at Belvoir in the same year, directed by Neil. The two productions were incredibly different and yet each was very true to the play. It was a thrill to see it interpreted by two such different theatre cultures and by two directors I respected so much.

My relationship with the Spaniards and the city deepened during this time. I was learning the language, studying its history, walking its streets

and discovering its secrets. Both *Rain* and *True* are Australian plays, and yet they had found a home and an audience in Madrid. It was about this time that we began to dream of a third work but this time it would be a new play and it would tell a story about Spain.

We began with a simple question. What is the thing you are most afraid to talk about? Universally, the answer was The Civil War and my response was, then this is what we must talk about. The reasons my collaborators didn't want to make the play about the war are complex and varied. Some want to break free from that history and feel that it has defined Spain, particularly to the rest of the world, for too long. Others did not want to go there because they understood that the wounds were still deep and the ideological animosities that divided Spain then, continue to do so.

As a way to begin I asked each member of the company to tell me a story about their grandparents. This process took us back to the time of the war through their personal family histories. It was not an easy task, as many of the stories were about great suffering and trauma. They also reawakened political animosities that existed within families and between generations. Others had to confront their grandparent's silence and refusal to discuss the past at all. Some even admitted to feeling degrees of shame about a grandparent's actions during the war. They were brave and generous in sharing these stories with me. I was struck how this history, this pain, this trauma remains unresolved and continues to impact contemporary Spain. One of the recurring themes of my work, seen in plays like *Rain*, *Holy Day* and *The Secret River* is how the unresolved trauma of the past is carried by future generations, how the secrets of the past continue to impact our lives. It became a central theme of this play, too.

The concept of *Dos Españas* or Two Spains emerged as central, in which two opposites and contradictory understandings of Spain exist side by side. Both true and yet both denying the other. Catholic and Conservative Spain vs Secular and Progressive Spain. But it goes further. A patriarchal culture that continues to be defined by its machismo is equally matched by the strength of its women and the instrumental and sometimes subversive roles they played in the Civil War, on both sides and have continued to play in Spanish society since.

This idea of *Dos Españas* is embodied in the two-time frames of the play through the twins,

Luis and Julia in the contemporary story, brother and sister, born from the same womb, constantly at war and through the relationship between the women Margarita and Carmen in 1968, two women from opposite political sides, who find common cause and purpose in the final moments of the play.

As our research continued, our focus began to shift from the Civil War to the Francoist period that followed it. I became fascinated by the period of "the white terror" (1939-45) in which the victorious Franco cemented his regime by systematically arresting and murdering anyone perceived to oppose him. Republicans, Socialists, trade unionists, intellectuals, artists, teachers, workers were taken from their homes and summarily executed and buried in mass graves. It is said that there is only one regime in twentieth century history that directly murdered more of its own people than Franco's Spain and that was Pol Pot. This astonishing fact made it clear to me the extent of the national trauma that Spain endured and the depths of the wounds it still carried. There is a line in the play "The victory was already yours but still you filled our mouths with dirt". This climate of fear and repression continued in Spain for the next three decades.

Following the death of Franco in 1975, Spain entered into a formal agreement called the *Pacto del Olvido* (The Pact of Forgetting), in which all political parties agreed not to discuss the past. The result was that no one was held to account for the violence and repression, no one was prosecuted for the murders and rapes, "the missing" were never recovered and no one was allowed to tell their story. Spain was determined to put its fascist past behind it in order to become a modern democracy and so a silence descended upon the people, which was simply another form of repression. Juan, a character from the play asks his mother, Margarita "Why do you never speak of the past?" "To protect you from it", she answers. "But you've only left me with silence", he says, in response.

This silence resonates with our own history. We did not enter into a formal agreement but we, being white Australia, tacitly agreed that past wrongs would not be discussed and that responsibility would not be taken for the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the suffering that followed. Well might I talk about Two Spains but there continues to be Two Australias divided by our view of the past and the actions each seeks to take in response.

Like here, the past remains deeply contentious in Spain. In 2019, after years of divisive debate, Franco's body was removed from the "Valley of the Fallen", the mausoleum he had built before his death. The site had become a point of focus for the rallying of right-wing movements, on the rise throughout Europe. His body was reburied in a humble grave in the village where he was born. Such an action is symbolic of Spain's determination not to glorify its fascist past. The bodies of those murdered during his regime are also in the process of being exhumed, identified through DNA and returned to their respective families, so they can be buried with respect. This is indicative of Spain's desire to build a "culture of memory" as an antidote to the "pact of forgetting" that preceded it.

The act of remembering is crucial to the play, and becomes a subversive act in itself in a society that has been told to forget. It opens on the image of an old woman struggling to remember a childhood poem and closes on her triumphant recall. All that happens in the play, takes place between this moment of forgetting and remembering.

The play premiered in Madrid in 2023 in this period of reckoning and healing. It was met, as we expected with contentious debate with some challenging the right of an outsider to depict the sensitivities of Spanish history and others claiming that only an outsider could do so, with a degree of objectivity.

It is a great privilege to be invited to walk through another people's story. I could only do so with the collaboration of my Spanish camaradas, Julián Fuentes Reta, who directed it and the actors, Jorge Muriel and Borja Maestra who have joined the Belvoir cast and Pilar Gomez and Consuelo Trujillo, who watch from afar.

I had hoped that one day I would see a production in my own country and in my own language. I owe my thanks to Eamon Flack and the Belvoir team who have made that possible with a spirit of adventure and risk and to my old friend and comrade, Neil Armfield who stepped into the role of director at late notice and who has led us through a fascinating rehearsal process, bringing the Spanish actors together with two actors I have wanted to work with for a long time, Sarah Peirse and Kerry Fox.

At the close of the Civil War, Dolores Ibárruri, the renowned Communist leader, known as La Pasionara, marched through the streets of Madrid, as Franco's forces advanced upon the city, rallying the people with the cry "No Pasarán". (They will not pass). "Resist. Resist" she cried.

Song of First Desire, gently urges us to continue to do so.

Andrew Bovell



Borja Maestre & Sarah Peirse



Neil Armfield

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

NEIL ARMFIELD

It's an honour to take on Andrew's new play, *Song of First Desire*. It's five years since our collaboration on his marvellous *Things I Know to Be True* (my last production for Belvoir) and it's thirteen years since we began work on a stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*.

Writing a play from Australia about the inheritance of fascism in Spain might seem to be a massive reach, but Andrew's fractal poetics come from a place with its own history of forgetting, of silence, of lies erasing a shameful past. If Spain enacted its *Pacto del Olvido* (Pact of Forgetting) to try to bury the heinous crimes committed under Franco, in Australia we didn't need to - we already had the lie of *Terra Nullius*.

Since the Mabo and Wik decisions in the High Court, the last three decades have seen those lies exploded. But the forces of reaction have been hard at work.

Peter Dutton, he who carries the greatest burden of responsibility for the silencing of The Voice, has begun to campaign as a strong leader who will unify the country under one flag.

We've heard it before. Beware.

Neil Armfield AO



Kerry Fox



Borja Maestre



Sarah Peirse



Jorge Muriel



Borja Maestre & Jorge Muriel



Kerry Fox & Borja Maestre



Sarah Peirse & Borja Maestre



Kerry Fox, Jorge Muriel & Sarah Peirse



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