

MEL GUSSOW, NY Times May 15, 1992

'Blood Wedding': A García Lorca Tragedy of Blood Lust and Death

The revolutionary legacy of Federico García Lorca endures in his poetry and in his three poetic tragedies. The first of the three plays, "Blood Wedding," surges with passion and earth wisdom, both of which are captured in Melia Bensussen's vivid production at the Joseph Papp Public Theater.

Using a lyrical translation by Langston Hughes, Ms. Bensussen explores the heart of this tale of barrenness and blood lust. Beneath the surface calm, all is turbulence, as fate and the masterly hand of the playwright drive the characters to their shared catastrophe. Inspired by a true story, García Lorca wrote of acts of violence that destroyed several families. As in Ibsen's "Peer Gynt," a man steals a bride on her wedding day, but with García Lorca the marriage thief pays the ultimate price.

From the opening scene, as a domineering mother (Gloria Foster) and her son (Al Rodrigo) discuss the son's wedding plans, thoughts of death are omnipresent (and, later, death appears in the figure of a beggar woman). The mother has not recovered from the loss of her husband and her other son. "Grief stings my eyes," she says, and that grief quickly becomes a lamentation.

Swirls of passion engulf the characters, even as they go through the ritual formalities of the wedding ceremony. Glowering on the sidelines is Leonardo, the bride's former suitor, who is discontented in his own marriage. Selfishly pursuing his own interests, he will soon eradicate everyone else's chance for romantic fulfillment.

In 90 unabated minutes, Ms. Bensussen and her company clarify the overweening love of the mother, the innocence of her son and the insidiousness of Leonardo: the warring elements that divide one character from the other and that activate this deadly dance.

As directed by Ms. Bensussen and as choreographed by Donald Byrd, the production merges both the naturalistic and metaphorical elements of the drama. Movement rises to flamenco, as characters stomp staccato messages. In the background we hear Spanish strains with a flavor of jazz. At one point, three young women become entwined in a cat's cradle of red string as they sing about winding a symbolic skein of wool.

The Langston Hughes translation, in its first professional performance, is relatively close to the traditional one by Richard L. O'Connell and James Graham-Lujan, but with greater smoothness and poetic intensity. The imagery remains visceral: tears "burn like blood" and eyes are "as sharp as thorns."

Evidently encouraged by the heightened language, Ms. Foster initially overdramatizes her dialogue, but soon holds herself to García Lorca's pitch. His plays are a natural subject for her talent (in the late 1960's, she played the title role in "Yerma" at Lincoln Center). Ultimately, her performance consolidates the mother's stoicism with her ferocity. She will stand for no questioning of her rights and motives, and when she is overcome she is devastated, and has no room for anyone else's remorse.

Mr. Rodrigo and Elizabeth Pena (as the bride) are evenly matched, in his resolute self-confidence and in her wishfulness, as she is seduced into a romance outside of marriage. Joaquim de Almeida is a brooding Leonardo, Ivonne Coll strikes musical sparks as a voice of caution and Mike Hodge offers a portrait of dignified restraint as the father of the bride.

Derek McLane's set design is an active participant in the performance, with stuccoed walls and cycloramic strips of sky simulating the Spanish landscape. The setting extends into the area just offstage in Martinson Hall, where we glimpse the edge of a Spanish garden. Late in the play, with the characters embarked on their tragedy, the backdrop turns into a Miro-like landscape. As events accumulate, the color of the environment shifts from blue to red and finally to black, for the play's horrific conclusion.