

7-2009

## Memoir about Angel Berenguer

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### Recommended Citation

Kennedy, William. (2009) "Memoir about Angel Berenguer," *Teatro: Revista de Estudios Culturales / A Journal of Cultural Studies*: Número 23, pp. 43-45.

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

■ Angel Berenguer is closing out a formidable career as a scholar and teacher in theater studies, a maestro in the academic world. But this is much too limiting a way of summing up his life. Angel is a cultural savant, an irrepressible lecturer on the dimensions of whatever happened yesterday, an aggressive wit and master of the homespun analogy (“Fidel is like my mother”), a bon vivant, a sometime chef of serious achievement, an epicurean host and provost of the dinner table, a Spanish citizen of the universe whose home is a crossroads where you eat, drink and talk with artists, playwrights, moviemakers, even novelists, who think that talking is how you solve the problem. Whenever I spend more than twenty minutes in Angel’s company I find myself expanding my waistline and my consciousness. Eat, drink and think about how to be brilliant.

Angel also is a husband who lucked out in his lone venture into matrimony — marrying Joan Pierson, a lovely erstwhile California hippie, an entrepreneurial dynamo, an indispensable, organizational presence in the Berenguer life and times, a living argument for the precocious wisdom of Angel’s exogamic urges. I remember a night when my wife Dana and I were with Joan and Angel in Almeria, Angel’s home town and now the second Berenguer home (after their grand Madrid apartment, not far from the Prado, you can’t miss it). This was before 2006, when Almeria dedicated a plaza to Angel in the Vicar section of Almeria — *Plaza Profesor Angel Berenguer Castellary*. You can’t miss it.

Before our arrival Angel had written memorably about his early family life in an essay published in an Almeria newspaper about his father, Angel Berenguer Santisteban, proprietor of a bakery, *La Flor y Nata*, whose doors he opened in August 1932 in the era of Almeria’s sweet-toothed passion for sugared almonds and Three Kings Cake. “Nobody better than he,” Angel wrote of his father, “could explain the sweet history of Almeria during the past 70 years.” But then in May 2000, when sugar was poison to a new generation — “sugar made you fat and fatness was an abominable state,” Angel pointed out — his father, for assorted reasons, closed the doors of *Flor y Nata* forever, ending what his son called “the beautiful and exemplary journey that was his life.” This was family emotion on the page, sweet words; but also a sample of the vivid sense of place and of home that colors Angel’s imaginative thought.

On this warm summer night in Almeria the four of us were walking across Plaza Vieja, the breeze was blowing in off the Mediterranean as it had in the time of Hercules, for whom a road nearby is named, and the mood of evening was elegant,

the night sky bright and stellar, the aged buildings looking far better than they had any right to; and I was in the throes of expectation that some extraordinary 19<sup>th</sup> century event might replay itself at any corner. Angel pointed to a building on the square and said, That house there, next door to City Hall, that used to be mine. I bought it for 10 million pesetas and I was very happy with it. But one day I found the city had reassessed it for tax purposes, doubling its value to 22 million. Angel boiled with litigious fury and was unleashing his lawyer on his old friend, the Mayor, to seek relief from municipal outrage. But then the Mayor called and said, Angel, my friend, we need to buy your house to expand City Hall. And Angel said, in his most generous voice, of course, Mayor, of course you can have it. And I don't want one peseta more than you say my house is worth.

We walked on and came to the Casa Puga, a restaurant of improbable vitality and unforgettable décor. Angel grew up next door and so we did not have to wait for a table. Middle-aged waiters moved rapidly to serve teenagers, twenty-somethings, and couples young and old, all in animated conversation. Bullfight posters of seasons gone were wall-to-wall, along with cartoons and clippings about Casa Puga, group photos, shelves of old wine and whiskey bottles wrapped to preserve labels, and cheeses and hams hanging from the ceiling — maybe 50 hams, some dated for next June and July; for these hams can last 24 months if preserved with their own fat.

The impulse in Casa Puga is to sit down and eat until you explode. And so we ate and talked of my play in progress, which Angel liked, and his talk about it ranged over Lope de Vega, the Greeks, German drama, Calderon because of his prologues, Arrabal and Beckett, and your play is not like plays being written today, but it may be too complex, and it must be done with shadows, and it's not realistic, do not think of it as realistic, and on we went until we could not eat any more, and so we pushed ourselves away from the table and went out and walked the streets that Angel had walked as a youth, and he remembered friends from that time who never left Almeria, and their lives were sometimes a dark story. We walked on and found an entire block, full of trees and now occupied by young people talking, drinking, at peaceful, late-evening play. And Angel remembered as a very young boy coming to this block when there weren't this many people and sometimes you could secretly watch couples kissing.

Years later when Angel came back to Almeria to build what will soon be his principal home — in Vicar — he was preceded by his reputation as a writer, a theater scholar, an honored professor, a hometown boy who can have a Plaza named for him, and some of his boyhood friends told him, Angel, we're glad you got out. And Angel said that in my novel in progress I should write about such young fellows, who

grow up and don't leave but who need to tell those who did leave how smart they were to get out.

It turns out that before (and after) this night, I had been writing about these fellows; and I was one of those who, like Angel, got out. And I thought I was gone forever, until I came back to write about my old neighborhood of North Albany, and about its trees and its kissing and about my father who still lived there and was one of those who had never left, and about the girls I knew and what we all did and didn't do with our lives; and I stayed, and did not leave any more.

Angel was still talking and I understood perfectly that he was saying something very valuable and that there was profundity in the essence of it; and I was paying attention. But I was also feeling fat from the jamon Iberico and the Ribera del Duero vino from Casa Puga, and I said to Angel, "I'm beginning to feel brilliant."