

THE NENA

It is nothing new that there have always been complaints about the French influence that has spread through our country, corrupting our customs, perverting our language, and changing ideas, something which will eventually, if it hasn't done so already, make us a copy, or a caricature, of our neighboring country.

Fígaro, El Curioso Parlante, El Solitario, Bretón, and thousands of other works that we might mention right now, have used the weapon of satire to battle against this mania to imitate everything which comes from France. But neither their witty sayings, nor their warnings, have been enough to suspend the torrent washing over the heads of those who have attempted to stop them, whose waters will continue to inundate us until God finally decides to free our country from all the books, gadgets, clothing, furniture, paintings, figurines, and all the other things, that those with this fondness for foreign customs have used to create this sickness, and strengthen this plague.

This is a big problem, but it is also an inevitable one. It is our own fault, not someone else's that, while we have wielded the baton to direct the symphony of our civilization, we have dropped it, so that others have been able to pick it up and use it to set whatever tempo they please; a tempo, which those of us who once were the directors, are forced to follow without objection, under the threat of being ostracized and isolated from everyone else, so that we live in a world like China, where one particular civilization is separate from all the others.

It is too bad that our fathers, who had the courage to prevent a physical invasion, did not also have the strength to keep from bending their necks under the yoke of their words. It is they who opened a gap in the Pyrenees through which other styles, other literatures, and other customs have entered. Now, almost everything we see, everything we feel, and even the air we breathe, is foreign to our culture.

We can pity the one who attends a formal dinner without knowing French and is not able to recognize the names of foreign dishes; it is also probable that the *Maitre d'* will not understand them and neither he, nor the servants, will have the slightest idea of what they are serving.

So you go to look for a book and you enter the most expensive bookstore in the center of Madrid: it's a French bookstore; you find another, and they also have books in French; then another, with the same result. Where do they sell Spanish books? Are they even written? And if they are written, where are they sold?

Those of us who complain about this invasion and try to stop it can only go into the store of Duran and ask for the latest works that have come from France, from Germany, or from England.

They erect building like those on the *boulevares*, the ladies bring home the jewels and fancy ornaments, and the clothing, they bought in Paris. The cafes, the establishments, and the shops are all set up *a la francesa*; we read in French and think in French along with the author whom we are reading; the poets, whose verses we repeat from memory, the philosophers, whose works we study for knowledge, the railroads we travel on, the style of our shoes, even the cigarette holders we smoke with, all are foreign. Nothing belongs to us, nothing was invented by us, nothing is a product of our initiative, of our artistry, or of our thinkers; we have chosen to follow the path of progress and this path,

from one day to the next, is never more than one; and then, when we continue walking, we are forced to keep on following in the footsteps of those who preceded us.

But this atmosphere is smothering us; there are occasions when we long to perceive a trace of our defunct nationality, and then we open a book by Cervantes, or read one of the plays of Calderon, or else we think of the place where we were born, in whose songs and customs, there is still a remnant of our former habits and characteristics.

During one of these patriotic moments, or during one of the days when we set aside the *Meditations* of Lamartine and look at our Romancero, we come across *The Nena*.¹ For us, *The Nena* is a reminder of better days, a breath of fresh air from the old country, an echo of the ideas and customs of our native land, a Spanish performance, among so many other bastard, or completely foreign performances.

However, it must be said that here another deceit awaited. The program already made us begin to have suspicions. The title of the dance is clear enough; but dividing it into parts that include something like one of those grand French dance performances cannot help but be a threat to its pureness and its originality. So, deciding that we would go and see how faithful the title actually was, we set out for the Royal theater where we took our seat and waited until the music sounded and the dance began.

When the curtain was raised, several groups of women appeared and danced to the music of a small guitar in a room so plain and so ordinary it was almost painful to look at. Instead of that, we would have expected to see something like the famous open-air theaters of Triana, with their Moorish arcades, their corridors with wooden balustrades, pots of lilies, and grapevines with tendrils hanging like green canopies, here the mouth of a well, and there the saddle and harness of a horse.

The décor of the first act was hardly appropriate for an Andalusian scene; it was nothing more than several yards of white canvas, the classic scene of a poor house that is seen in all the theaters. Didn't they have anything better than that?

After some talented dancers with graceful figures had finished their dance, the *Nena* finally appeared. As always the *Nena* was graceful, nimble and slender, and beaming with grace and charm, but then, to our dismay we noticed that she was dressed like one of those sylphs that sometimes appear in French operas. A dress that was completely white, very short, and very thin, adorned with gauzes, ribbons, and tulle. So this is her *toilette*... since *toilette* is precisely what we should call it.

After a short pantomime, she began an Andalusian dance that was a bit affected, but still very quick and graceful. It would be next to impossible to describe with words what a dance like this looks like when it is performed by a *Nena*. Even when you see her, it is difficult to imagine such agility, such quickness, and such precision, in these difficult and complicated movements.

After this, the scene changes, and what had been a simple room, is now a street.

Those who have seen a street in Seville, with its houses of different sizes and styles, with their balconies, and their flowerpots like hanging gardens, their windows with green shutters, rows of bluebells and green foliage, gardens with sweet-scented honeysuckle, and in the background an arch leading to a passageway, in the distance the steeples and bell towers with weather vanes, yes, I repeat, those who have seen one of these streets, would do better to close their eyes than to look and the miserable décor of this scene.

¹“Nena” can mean something like “Darling girl.”

Fortunately, this change has not affected the *Nena* as she appears again. When this graceful ballerina is on stage, no one notices the décor; they all look at her and, in spite of the fact that she is attired à la française, she is Andalusian from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. It is a shame that her performance in this scene is more reminiscent of the performance of the sylphs in some grand opera; it is in vain that she attempts to make it seem like a flamenco; in essence it is not, and that is the problem with this performance. Mr. Moragan, who is the director, is not willing to try anything else, other than the usual dance style, which is French, or sometimes Italian.

Again the sound of a bell announces a change of scene; now we will see the location of the fiesta where, after hesitating a moment between jealousy and pride, the lady will go in pursuit of her lover; now we will undoubtedly see one of those Andalusian inns with its awning over the door, its white walls and its fences of loosely connected boards; on one side will be fields full of tall, yellow cornstalks and between them there are red poppies; on the other side there is a garden with its agaves and its prickly pears; the Royal Road stretches out into the distance with ladies that come and go on horses outfitted like they are in the country, buggies that travel through a cloud of dust, and in the distance we will see Seville, with its towers, its minarets and belfries, and La Giralda, which rises above the horizon and is reflected in the waters of the Guadalquivir that flow through the flowers at its base like an immense blue serpent. This is undoubtedly what we are going to see; this is the real heart of the traditions of our country. Then... the bell sounds again; in one place the scenery disappears, in another a canvas rolls up, a change takes place, and a sumptuous garden appears; large arches of myrtle and boxwood are symmetrically arranged, small fountains, statues, and some ballerinas who are very charming and nicely aligned, but once again, inappropriate.

In this scene there is the *passing of the veil*, which we would call a mantilla, because whether it is black or white it is still a mantilla, a mantilla worn with grace and charm by the *Nena*, and through the laces, from time to time you can see her jet-black eyes.

Then there is a short scene when the lady is furious after catching her lover *in flagranti* while he is flirting with another woman; but her anger lasts for only a moment, and her jealousy is like the flowers described by Góngora:

today they were blue flowers,
tomorrow they will be honey.

And indeed, the embrace that is a signal of reconciliation, must be as sweet as honey, even sweeter than that found in Alcarria.

Then, at this point, the main part of the performance begins.

The *Nena*, relieved of her mantilla, drinks a few small sips of sherry to the health of those present and then begins a charming flamenco dance.

After the flamenco, which is performed with grace and charm, there is an Andalusian dance, executed perfectly by the *Nena* and the director of the company, Mr. Moragan.

As this last part of the performance begins, everything is forgotten except this woman, with her elegance and charm, and her marvelous and inconceivable agility; the decor is forgotten, as are the earlier performances, and the other dancers, the lovely garden, the statues, and her French *toilette*; because she is totally Andalusian as she twists and turns, and pirouettes, in a way that is both dazzling and fascinating when she moves gracefully across the stage.

This is the *Nena*, the real *Nena*, the faithful keeper of the traditions of Andalusia; of the traditions that were beginning to be lost and, in a few more years, could be nothing more than a memory.

The civilization, yes, civilization is a great blessing; but it is also a mundane equalizer which will end up making Humanity into a bastion of uniformity. Spain is progressing, that is true; but as it progresses, it is losing its originality and uniqueness.

The clothing, the customs, and even the cities, are being transformed and are losing their former nature and quality.

Toledo, for those who love its former glory and its legendary history, and Seville, for those who care about its customs and traditions, should both remain intact, at least as a model or a pattern. But no: a day will come when Toledo sees its historic Zocodover as foreign; a day, when its narrow and twisting streets full of shadows and mystery, will be transformed into *boulevares*; a time will come when the Andalusian people will wear an overall and a cap like Catalan workers, which is a poor imitation of the French; there will be more emphasis on morality and perhaps more erudition; instead of gathering in noisy *zambras*² around the doors of an inn, they will go to the theater; instead of buying copies of stories about *Los Siete Niños de Ecija* and singing flamenco songs, they will read newspapers and hum songs from an opera; you might say that this is an improvement, but it is certainly less picturesque, and less poetic; so, while the thinker and the philosopher will rejoice, the painter and the poet will mourn their loss.

The painter and the poet will also regret that they cannot see a feudal Lord come out of his ancient fortress, his horses dressed in armor, making the drawbridge creak as they march off to war, preceded by their banner and escorted by their followers.

The painter and the poet would still love to see the naked athletes struggle, and the beautiful Aspasia racing in pursuit of the prize, in the now deserted amphitheaters.

² A “zambra” is an Andalusian gypsy dance.