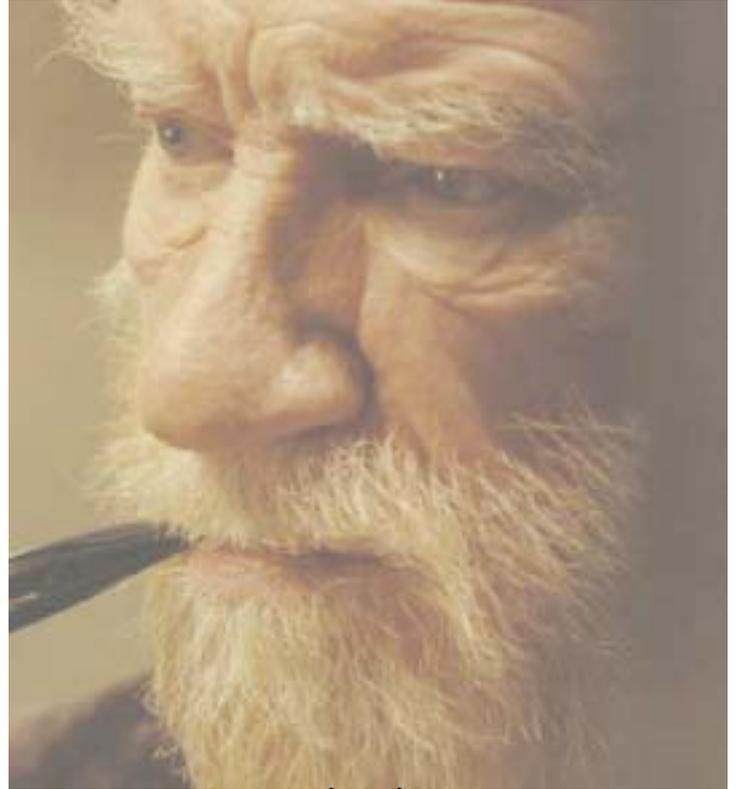


FERNANDO FERNÁN-GÓMEZ (1921-2007)

WRITER, MOVIE-MAKER AND ANARCHIST

J. F. Paniagua, *Tierra y Libertad* (Madrid), No 234, January 2008
(Translated by Paul Sharkey)

His mother was a performer too. Fernando was actually born in Lima in August 1921 while she was on a tour of Latin America, although his birth was registered in Buenos Aires, and he retained his Argentinean nationality for a long time. His father never acknowledged him and it was only years later that they had any sort of contact, but in any event his father was someone for whom Fernando had only scorn, contrary to how he



FERNANDO FERNÁN-GÓMEZ (1921-2007)

felt about his mother and above all his grandmother. These days the fact that he came of acting stock comes with an additional surprise now that we can state that Fernán-Gómez was the son of Fernando Díaz de Mendoza, himself the son of the great actress María Guerrero of whom it was said that she took a dim view of her son seeing an actress, Carola Fernán-Gómez and she secured her a contract with a show touring the Americas when she fell pregnant. Which just goes to show how hard and uncompromising the gifted actress María Guerrero was.

Fernán-Gómez's infancy and childhood was spent in Madrid in close proximity to sensational political events and the day-to-day life of a besieged city under air raids during the civil war. This was the setting in which he penned his first

poetry and embarked upon a career as an actor with the school drama group; he enrolled in a CNT-run school for dramatic arts where he had the finest elocution teachers like Carmen Seco and Gaspar Campos and made his debut in war-time theatres such as the Pavón or the Eslava. His earliest contact with anarchism came through his membership of the CNT and he brought a lot of anarchist propaganda home. After the civil war ended, Jardiel Poncela rewrote a part for him as Peter the Redskin in *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (*We Thieves Are Decent People*). Some reckon that it was only then that Fernán-Gómez was truly happy in the theatre, which he was to quit once and for all in 1992, weary of performing day in and day out and tired of the attitude of some of his audience. "I won't do theatre because I don't like people watching me while I work", was the hilarious way he explained it.

Shortly after he performed the Ponciela play he began taking movie parts. "Eleven years playing inane characters in nearly always innocuous movies, miserable pay, hunger pangs, long periods of idleness, moments - very long moments that really couldn't be called moments - of loss of heart and despair." The red-headed actor made his debut in 1943 with Juan de Orduña and carried on working, practically up until the end came, with the young director Gustavo Ron: his final movie being *Mia Sarah*. Along the way he played wonderful parts in movies of variable quality in which his talent seemed to stand above good and evil. Fernán-Gómez scored a great success with *Balarrasa*, directed by Nieves Conde, a movie produced in 1950 by Cifesa and shot in the Sevilla Films studios, transplanting the Hollywood model to a poor country: it was a movie as the actor himself put it, about 'priests' and 'war', a movie with a clever good versus evil script as suited the times. *Esa pareja feliz* [*This Happy Pair*] (1953, directed by Juan Antonio

Bardem and Luis García Berlanga) had nothing in common with such religious cinema: its aims might be compared with the Italian neo-realists, breaking new ground in Spanish movie-making. And Fernán-Gómez had arrived as a leading player. Perhaps his last two great parts were in two good movies which might have met with a different fate but for the way this inspired performer was able to introduce that extra something: the unforgettable teacher in *La lengua de las mariposas* [*The Butterfly's Tongue*] (1999, José Luis Cuerda) and the lovable old man obsessed with his past in *En la ciudad sin límites* [*The Boundless City*] (2002, Antonio Hernández).

Fernán-Gómez was very soon being regarded as an intellectual actor and no doubt his regular presence at the Gran Café in Gijón "an island of freedom during Francoism", as Francisco Umbral described it, played a part in this. A number of plays, the odd book of poetry and the humorous novel *El vendedor de naranjas* [*The Orange-Seller*] (the first edition of which was published by fellow regular Giner) were produced under the influence of Gijón. As hinted earlier, the ambitious and somewhat secretive author that Fernán-Gómez was at the outset would wait for years before working on better productions. He wrote scripts and directed poor movies screened in local cinemas, movies that have since been hailed as real collectors' pieces: *La vida por delante*, *El mundo sigue*, *El extraño viaje*. The script for *La vida por delante* was written by Fernán-Gómez in partnership with his great friend, the author Manuel Pilares, the aim being to make a "satire on Spanish sharp practice, though the director did not think that this idea shone through the movie which he described as a light comedy, even though some leftists regarded it as a brazen act of opposition to the regime. *El mundo sigue* (1963) failed to make it to the screen at the time and was an adaptation of the novel of the same

name by Juan Antonio de Zunzunegui, set in Madrid after the civil war and it talked about 'poor folks', something that Fernán-Gómez regarded as a recurrent theme in his oeuvre. The wider public was more familiar with *El extraño viaje* (1964), shot at a time when Fernán-Gómez's acting career had gone into decline and when his finances were not at their most sanguine: the script by Pedro Beltrán was based on an idea by Berlanga who was very much into solving mysterious crimes and it was inspired by an actual happening known as 'The Mazarrón Crime'. The film - it was six years before it made it to the big screen - proved to be an exemplary exercise in dark humour, an implacable portrait of repressive Francoist provincialism. One of his boldest movies as director is *El viaje a ninguna parte* [*Trip to Nowhere*] (1986) a horrific depiction of the lives of performers in 1950s Spain. It started off as a radio serial before being turned into a novel and finally winning the prize for main feature film in the first ever so-called Goya Awards. The story is as amusing as it is tragic and cruel and it is told from the point of view of one of the protagonists of this meandering voyage through the lives of the players whose memory lets him down as he confounds dreams and reality and thinks he has been the success in his profession that he never was. This movie may well be regarded as the definitive movie about a profession with which the maker was so familiar.

For nearly the last four decades of his life, Fernando was with his last loving partner, Emma Cohen, a vivacious and committed woman who finished up on the Spanish movie scene after living through the events of May '68 in France with their urge to work, be creative and change the world. Ferrnan-Gomez met her during the 1970s which he thought of as "my finest summer, if rather belated, in that it found me in the middle of my autumn years", as he puts it

in his memoirs. "She was young, pretty, light-hearted and thoughtful. She liked reading, was keen to work in the movies, in the theatre, direct pictures, write and change the world." Perhaps it was down to her arrival, but Fernán-Gómez's career improved remarkably and, just when political circumstances were at their most appropriate, he was offered the lead part in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*: other outstanding theatre work from this time included Ricardo Talesnik's *La pereza* or Bertolt Brecht's *A los hombres futuro, yo*. He played loads of parts in a series of movies that had nothing to do with his earlier career in terms of success and intentions and we might single out Carlos Saura's *Ana y los lobos* [*Ana and the Wolves*], Víctor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* [*Spirit of the Beehive*] or Jaime de Armiñan's *El amor del capitán Brando* [*Captain Brando's Love Affair*]. *Mi hija Hildegart* [*My Daughter Hildegart*] (1977), a movie he directed himself, may not be his most highly-rated but there is no denying that it is interesting. It is based on Eduardo de Gúzman's book *Aurora de sangre* [*Blood Dawn*], itself based on a real incident in republican Spain. Aurora is a dyed-in-the-wool feminist who decides to raise the perfect woman who will spearhead the cause of women's liberation: forced to endure an inflexible education, young Hildegart has, by the age of 18, turned into quite an institution in intellectual and revolutionary circles in Madrid, her fame spreading internationally (her correspondents included Sigmund Freud and H.G. Wells). In the dramatic finale to the story, Hildegart falls in love and tries to break free of her controlling mother in a move that can be construed as paralleling the switch from authoritarian to libertarian socialism.

As Eduardo Haro Tecglen has put it, *Las bicicletas son para el verano* [*Bicycles are for the Summer*] – one of the finest contemporary plays and no question

– is laden with autobiographical references and deals with the aspirations of a group of people who let slip their chance to change their lifestyles and life itself. Even though the central family is not unmistakably a casualty of class oppression and has no very well-defined ideological persuasion – the author himself refers to his work as ‘anti-heroic’ – anarchist thought proves central to the development of the play and this blunt, naïve statement of intent is placed in the mouth of the militiaman, Anselmo: “First we generate the wealth; then enjoy it. Let machines do the work. The unions will industrialise everything. The working day will be whittled down; in the countryside, at the cinema or wherever, folk can amuse themselves in the company of their children ... Their children and other amusements. But without benefit of marriage, family, documentation, judges or priests. Free love, mister, free love. Freedom in everything: in work, in love, in living howsoever you may please.” The closing passage from the play has now become part and parcel of popular culture and of the history of Spain which has had such problems with its memory. “Peace hasn’t come but victory has.”

From the 1980s on, Fernando became very prolific as a writer, contributing articles to a range of newspapers and penning lots of essays and novels, notably *El mal amor*, set in medieval Castile but dealing in an ironic, astringent fashion with conflicts not restricted to a single period of history; *El mar y el tiempo*, which was made into a film directed by himself in 1989, a dismal depiction and analysis of Francoism’s final years; *El acensor de los borrachos*, a meditation on the passage of time written with subtle, melancholy humour; *La Puerta del Sol*, a narrative of Spanish history from the beginnings of the First World War to the 1950s, in which anarchist demands are evident despite the overall pessimism shrouding the book; *La cruz y el*

lirio dorado, another historical novel set in 15th century Florence showing the Church scheming to hoist certain families into power.

Those who had dealings with Fernán-Gómez speak of a man who was kindly and chivalrous, an outstanding conversationalist, brimming with a sense of humour, a man who was extremely shy and who displayed an insecurity that might well have come from the feeling that he was a fish out of water and unease at the role in which fame had cast him, as well as at the silliness and mediocrity that he occasionally saw on all sides. It would take too long to detail the movies and plays in which Fernando Fernán-Gómez starred or which he wrote and directed, as well as list his novels. The anarchist performer turned his hand to many things in his professional career and was good at them all and was quite often superb at them. I dare say I am speaking for a majority when I rate him the best movie actor ever was and maybe it was this, alongside his career as a theatre- and movie director that prevented him from becoming one of the finest writers of his day: his masterpiece must be his priceless memoirs *El tiempo amarillo*.

Some will be taken aback that the elderly anarchist actor was admitted to the Spanish Royal Academy or shook the hand of a Bourbon at some prize-giving ceremony. I cannot see such things as anything other than details, things into which he may well have been forced by the special circumstances of a performer who did not, oddly enough, seem comfortable with the part in which life had cast him. Besides his professional life which is undeniably part of Spain's history now, I cling to the image of a man who radiated integrity, nobility and solidarity, who could be mindful of his loyalty to anarchist ideas at the most unlikely moments, mindful of the horrors of war as he had known

it, which may well have been why he enunciated a round, booming “No to war!” Sometimes it takes actors to open our eyes to integrity and to get us to trust to a better world. Quite recently, which the asses took to the streets to hammer home their rejection of a new war, one wretched radio commentator ventured to dismiss people from Fernando’s profession contemptuously as ‘glove puppets’. I have no doubt but that it was such small-minded, self-seeking statements from mediocrities blessed with a degree of media savvy that prompted the elderly performer to deliver himself of comments such as his frivolously popular catch-phrase: “Go to hell!”

Fernando Fernán-Gómez died on 21 November 2007, robbing us of a key figure in contemporary Spanish culture. An anarchist (red and black) flag draped his coffin. Thanks for everything, Fernando!