

Theme Park's Selective History Appeals to a New Spanish Nationalism

Puy du Fou España has drawn visitors with spectacular shows about Spanish history. But part of its success lies in what goes unsaid.



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Reporting from Toledo, Spain

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Moving through the darkened holds of a replica of Christopher Columbus's ship, visitors on a recent afternoon marveled at the tangle of compasses, cordage and barrels. They stumbled as the ship swang and creaked with the swell of the sea. At last, a voice shouted "Land!" and the white sands of America appeared.

"Our journey has changed the world. May it be for the greater glory of God," Columbus was then heard telling Queen Isabella I of Castile. Referring to America's Indigenous people, he added, "I apologize in advance if iniquities or injustices are committed."

And so ends one of the shows at Puy du Fou España, a historical theme park that is all the rage in Spain today, with over a million visitors expected this year.

The popularity of the park has come as a surprise in a country that has long been shy about celebrating its history. Nationalist sentiments were largely taboo after the dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco, who died in the 1970s.

But the time that has elapsed since Franco and the recent secessionist movement in Catalonia, which threatened to fracture the country, have helped spur a resurgent nationalism in Spain. It may now give a lift to conservatives and their far-right allies when Spaniards vote in a general election on Sunday.



The theme park expects more than a million visitors this year. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

The park is filled with hallowed symbols like the cross and the flag, and most of the shows feature conquests and glorious battles to defend the country. The more questionable aspects of Spain's past — from the bloody conquest of America that followed Columbus's trip to Franco's repressive rule — do not appear in more than 10 productions.

"What we're trying to do is present a history that's not divisive," said Erwan de la Villéon, the head of the park, noting that historical taboos continued to run through Spanish society.

But the approach has raised concerns about the history that the park is highlighting instead — pageantry that emphasizes Spain's Catholic identity and its unity against foreign invaders — and how it may shape visitors' views.

"This is a selective history," said Gutmaro Gómez Bravo, a historian at Madrid's Complutense University who has visited the park twice. "You can't or shouldn't teach that to people. History is not gratuitous — it carries major political weight."

The park was launched in 2019 after the founders of the original Puy du Fou in France,

the country's second most-visited theme park after Disneyland Paris, decided to take their concept abroad.

Historians have long criticized the French park as promoting nationalist views. It similarly glosses over some of the most painful episodes in France's past, such as its history of colonialism, and highlights the country's Catholic identity.

The founder of the French park, Philippe de Villiers, whom Mr. de la Villéon called "a mentor" and "a genius," is a prominent far-right politician.



Erwan de la Villéon, the head of Puy du Fou España, said he had sought to find unifying aspects of Spain's history, and it was "too soon" to mention Franco's dictatorship. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

Mr. de la Villéon denied that the Spanish park promoted any political line. But he called supporters of Catalan independence his "enemies" and railed against the former prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, a Socialist who passed a memory law to honor victims of the Civil War and Franco's repressive rule.

Spain, Mr. de la Villéon said, proved an ideal place for a new park because of the country's "great historical trajectory" of invasions and conquests. He chose to build it in Toledo, he said, because the ancient city south of Madrid once stood at the

crossroads of Europe's kingdoms.

There, some 200 million euros, about \$220 million, have been invested to create an impressive complex of castles, farms and medieval villages filled with terra-cotta vases and whitewashed houses with exposed beams.

But it is the historical stage productions, performed in large amphitheaters, that are the big draw.

“The Last Song” takes place in a rotating auditorium and follows El Cid, a knight and warlord who became Spain's greatest medieval hero, as he fights enemies appearing successively behind large panels that open onto the semicircular stage. In “Toledo's Dream,” the flagship evening show retracing 15 centuries of Spanish history, Columbus's life-size ship emerges from a lake on which characters were dancing moments before.



Supporters of the far-right Vox party at rally in Barcelona, Spain, in July. The party is expected to increase its vote in Sunday's general election. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

Both shows received the IAAPA Brass Ring award for “Best Theater Production,” considered one of the international entertainment industry's most prestigious prizes.

On a recent afternoon, visitors were ecstatic about the experience.

“Great — it’s just great. I didn’t know that history could be so appealing,” said Vicente Vidal, 65, as he exited a show featuring Visigoths fighting Romans. In the park, children could be seen playing sword-fighting, shouting, “We’ll fight for our country!”

Mr. de la Villéon, who is French, said the success of the park reflected a desire among Spanish people to reclaim their past. “People want to have roots, that’s the first need that the park’s success reveals,” he said. “You come here and you think, ‘Man, it’s cool to be Spanish.’”

Modern Spain has an uneasy relationship with its history because of chapters such as the Inquisition and the colonization of the Americas, said Jesús Carrobles, head of Toledo’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Historical Sciences, who was consulted on the park project.



The Cross of Burgundy, on prominent display at the park, is a longstanding symbol of the Spanish monarchy that has also been embraced by some on the far right. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

“The park allows you to reclaim an idea of your past that you can be proud of,” Mr. Carrobles said. “A beautiful past, a past that’s worth remembering.”

But it has also proved to be a selective past.

The shows depict Isabella I as a visionary and a merciful queen, making no mention of her order to expel Jews during the Inquisition. The Aztecs appear once in a dance scene, but their deadly fate at the hands of the conquistadors is omitted.

Perhaps most telling is the park's treatment of the Spanish Civil War, whose legacy continues to divide the country. The conflict is only vaguely mentioned at the end of "Toledo's Dream," when a woman mourns her brothers who "killed each other." The scene lasts one minute, out of a 75-minute performance, and the show ends without mentioning the subsequent four-decade dictatorship of Franco.

"Too soon to talk about it," said Mr. de la Villéon, noting that memories of Francoist Spain were still raw.



Some 200 million euros, or about \$220 million, have been invested in creating a medieval atmosphere. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

"It's a very consensual show, which has glossed over the questionable aspects of Spanish history," said Jean Canavaggio, a French specialist in Cervantes who reviewed the script of "Toledo's Dream." He added that the park could not have succeeded had it

taken a “critical look” at Spanish history, given how politically fraught that remains.

Mr. de la Villéon said that he had looked for events illustrating Spain’s unity. In Puy du Fou España, they revolve around a central element: Catholicism.

Nearly every show features clerics and soldiers dedicating their fights to God. In “The Mystery of Sorbaces,” a Visigoth king converts to Catholicism as his troops fall to their knees and a church rises from underground, to the sound of emotional music.

Mr. de la Villéon — who makes no secret of his faith and had a small chapel set up in the park — argued that Catholicism was “the matrix” of Spanish history.



A replica of Christopher Columbus’s caravel. Catholicism is central to the park’s shows. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

Mr. Gómez Bravo, the historian, who specializes in the Civil War and Franco, said the park presented the Catholic reconquest of Muslim-ruled Spain as the foundation of Spanish unity. “This a very politically charged idea because it was promoted above all by Franco’s regime,” he said.

Still, many in the Spanish park seemed to embrace the park’s mission.

“Spain is a great country!” said Conchita Tejero, a woman in her 60s, who was seated with three friends at a large wooden table in a medieval-style tavern adorned with imperial flags. “This park is a way to reclaim our history.”

Her friend, Esteban Garces, a supporter of the far-right Vox party, said he saw the park as a counterpoint to the “other history” that portrayed Spain as needing to make amends for its past.

Exiting the park after nightfall, Mr. Garces said he had been delighted with “Toledo’s Dream.”

“The true history,” he said.



The idea that Spanish unity was founded on the Catholic reconquest was “charged,” one historian said, because that was the narrative promoted under Franco. Samuel Aranda for The New York Times