

EPIC PROPORTIONS: COMMON PILLARS OF SOME SUCCESSFUL *COMEDIAS* IN ENGLISH, AND WHAT'S NEXT

The surge in performances in English of Spanish Golden Age plays catalyzed by the Royal Shakespeare Company's Spanish Golden Age Season in 2004-05, and the many subsequent productions including those at the Bath Theatre Royal in 2013, offered audiences flavors from a variety of genres, but mostly served up those that are better known. During that precious moment in *Comedia* translation history, audiences enjoyed hilarious comedies such as *The Dog in the Manger*, *House of Desires*, and *Don Gil of the Green Breeches*; were awed by the verbal pyrotechnics in *The Phoenix of Madrid* and *The Lady Boba*; and gasped at a couple of tragedies such as *Tamar's Revenge* and *Punishment Without Revenge*. The RSC ventured bravely into lesser-known forms such as the episodic *Pedro, the Great Pretender*, and played the mythological epic *Daughter of the Air* for the radio. Around that time, productions elsewhere in both the British and American theatre inspired audiences, such as *Los locos de Valencia* at Trafalgar Studios, *Life Is a Dream* at the Donmar Warehouse, *The Dog in the Manger* for the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington DC, *Fuente Ovejuna* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada, and so many others. Instructive moments from all the phases of the collaborative process set the

foundations of future productions. The comedies were the most *commercially* successful, but of course, that is not everything; the non-comedies whetted the appetite for other performative capabilities of the *Comedia*. What could happen on the English-speaking stages if companies grew yet bolder? What could be gained by the risk of investing in translation and performance processes of unknown works and genres newer to our audiences, but whose popular appeal filled the *corrales* of Lope's time, and whose gaping maw Lope fed with so many different forms of theatrical art lost today?

This present study explores the essential elements of our *Comedia* performance canon in English, expanding into new territory using the foundational principles of successful productions in which I have participated or that I have observed. These elements include the ineffable but critical pillar of *tone* and the freeing limits of *genre*; the importance of *design*; the danger and beauty of *contrasts and juxtapositions*; and the power of *open endings*. These functions are key to the best of theatrical work, and are evident when collaborators work alongside the (albeit *difunto*) playwrights as master dramatist members of the team. This study picks out the moments in relatively recent *Comedia* production processes and suggests fresh texts for performance that utilize the best building material for a sustainable future of the *Comedia* in diverse forms.

Tone and Genre: Expressing the Epic Scale of Human Thought and Emotion

Human beings hunger for *epic*, for art that reflects the depth and scale of our ideas and feelings. The quality of *tone* can lend depth to an epic scale. So, what is tone? Elusive, indefinable. Yet it is critical. Tone is what makes otherwise dead words breathe again, and that term used in a vocal sense can be the factor that makes one performer captivating and another a bore. From the very first moment of the performance, tone is often expressed in lighting, a very first musical note, a sound or shift in sensory perception that signals that it is time to settle and begin. When artists construct *tone* carefully, they create cohesion, fullness, a sense of having come full circle by the end. Tone begins with the end in mind from the start.

As an example, consider Jonathan Munby's production of *The Gentleman from Olmedo* at the Watermill in Newbury (Berkshire, U.K., 2004),

which ran concurrently with the opening of *The Dog in the Manger* in Stratford-upon-Avon. For this production, the Watermill stage was sparse in the pre-show, except for a large circle of rose petals laid out on the floor. The many bare glass light bulbs hanging from the ceiling allowed for a starry night effect when the rest of the fixtures dimmed. The room filled with a thin haze. One ragged woman took the stage, her ginger hair in a ponytail with a few clips holding back strays, her skin like a three-pack-a-day smoker with a rough voice to match. Johnston's translation opens with her song, and she began:

A square in Medina.

FABIA (Singing):

They killed him in the darkness there.

The caballero.

The glory of Olmedo.

The flower of Medina.

Shades warned him, told him not to go.

They warned him he should stay away.

The caballero.

The glory of Olmedo.

The flower of Medina.

(The Gentleman from Olmedo, trans. Johnston)

All around her the lights faded slowly, leaving her in a spotlight, then shrouded in darkness as the entire cast surrounded her, forming a V. The old woman clapped once, initiating a series of Flamenco-style *palmas*, the ensemble joining her as a lively fiesta begins. A young woman in a red skirt with a white embroidered peasant top, her long dark hair cascading down her back, turned a gazing circle with her dancing partner, who bore a resemblance to Superman. Just as she was giving him her red belt, another dancer whisked it away and blindfolded him with it. He danced, unseeing, passed from arm to arm. When everyone cleared out, he clawed at the blindfold, alone. His are the first words spoken: «How could any man call this feeling love, / when love hides its face, then takes flight?»

Following along in the Spanish, it is at this point that Lope's play begins, in *décimas*:

Sale don ALONSO

ALONSO:

Amor, no te llame amor
 el que no te corresponde,
 pues que no hay materia adonde
 no imprima forma el favor.

(*El caballero de Olmedo*, ed. Williamsen)

Fabia's song appears later, in a brief version at the end of Act I and in the fuller text that Johnston transposed to this first moment. In the Spanish, an ominous «Voz» gives the song and Alonso associates it with Fabia at the height of his third-act distress. Arguably, a director working with the play in Spanish could make the same choice. It is not really an adaptation, but a production decision made in order to build the element of *tone*. It builds flavor like a *sofrito* underscores a dish. The story will begin from this base, and, if it is of high quality, it will infuse and improve all that happens. Alonso cannot, in Berkshire or Medina, manifest out of thin air and begin to apostrophize Love. He has to come from somewhere, and before he can, most directors worth their salt will establish a world to which he will come. In this case, Munby used lighting, haze, music, percussion, and brought the moment to life. The director had the company on stage, dancing; the principal lovers encountered one another in the established setting, their eyes meeting amid a flurry of choreographed celebration. This way, recounting what the audience just saw rather than filling in the past, Alonso's opening lines are shared memory, not exposition. These are offerings to the invisible, all-powerful god of *tone*.

Tone leads to *genre* because tone leads interpretation of *what* the audience sees and hears, not just *how* it comes to the eyes and ears. In a play like *El caballero de Olmedo*, the production can be living, tonally, in comedy for the first two thirds of the play, and only shift to tragedy in the final act. The events drive the action, but the tone gives *genre*. Julie Goddard advised her readers in the *Newbury Weekly News* about this production: «Do book your seat; chuckle at the humorous one-liners in the first half, and have your blood chilled in the second» (Goddard: 2004). This tone shift defines many a Spanish tragicomedy. In order to effectively chill the blood of the audience, they have to be tuned in. The art of drawing the audience in to the production starts with adapting the words on the page to other media, seen in Munby's piece with music, flower

petals, lighting states, and creative tools that heighten and foreshadow later moments. The audience is invested enough to shiver at the end because of the artists' careful inclusion of those elements at the beginning. They are there as sentinels of genre, telling in what world this play lives, and how it feels, guiding an emotional response to it.

Shakespeare's Polonius from *Hamlet* provided a nice list of just a few of the many instances of *genre* that his hired actors are able to play: «tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral» (II. 2). Within what is known as the *Comedia* there are many, many more. Some audience members may be unfamiliar with the distinction between a *comedia religiosa* and an *auto sacramental*, for instance. Plays on religious themes were made for very different purposes in their day, whether for the social ritual of entertainment at the public *corral* or the private court, as part of a church celebration such as Corpus Christi, or a combination. What are our ritual needs these days for which performance is called?

The *comedia religiosa* has not, for some time, appealed to commercial interests. Yet I would offer that this play appeals to the recently renewed interest in myths, images, and symbols observable in the current zeitgeist. There is an incredible moment in *La devoción de la cruz* that might attract a fresh staging. *Devotion to the Cross* is the ultimate play of redemption, and redemption may be what our world lacks at this moment. Unredeemable abusers and hopeless victims fill our screens. But the ending of Calderón's play shows the murderer Julia (who kills several people while dressed in the habit of the novitiate, after escaping the convent in shame for breaking her vow by relenting, in her mind, to her lustful brother). Her criminal twin Eusebio rises from the dead just long enough to confess and receive absolution before dying again; and Julia, on the point of execution for her crimes, is spectacularly assumed into heaven as she clings for succor to the wood of the cross. Modern audiences may find the subject matter to seem at once foreign and familiar; this is a story of truly epic proportions that depicts human beings' capacity for the extremes of love and death. Julia's ascent on the cross, the murderous novice nun finally forgiven, has an iconic potential that feels like it could be akin to the Angel from *Angels in America* bursting through the ceiling of our times.

Another play within this arena with great potential is *La creación del mundo*, a *comedia* «a lo divino» by Luis Vélez de Guevara. William Manson and George Peale's new Spanish edition with an in-depth introduction by

Jonathan Thacker (2018) may engender future performances. Thacker makes the case that it could plausibly have been conceived for the Corpus Christi celebrations in 1610 in Badajoz, where a range of commissions transcended generic expectations for the *auto sacramental*. As opposed to a mere dramatization of Genesis, Vélez brings his creative nous and experience as a theatre-maker to embody the visual and verbal features of the narrative. Geared up for the war to capture the human soul, «[l]os más demonios que pudieren salir» (Vélez de Guevara: 2018: 65) fight with *Comedia*-worthy motivation (and arrayed with detailed costuming described in the ample stage directions) as villains of the cosmic narrative. The play may attract contemporary companies with its surprising mutuality in its view of the love between the ancient couple. Rather than fall prey to resentment, they accept their new reality together and Adán refuses to let Eva shoulder the blame alone. Thacker goes so far as to say that, «Vélez se desvincula de la misoginia que se había asociado con el pecado original» (21). Eva has the last word; at the end, weeping over her husband's grave, Eve praises the mercies of Heaven, «para que este bien se acerque, / de quien tan dichosos somos!» (Vélez de Guevara: 2018: 130). Vélez's *La creación del mundo* presents the human capacity for love within the domestic context of shared struggle.

For directors hungry for new classic tragedy, another genre beckons, that of the history play. A taster for directors and producers is the scene where young Bariato makes the horrendously thrilling decision to throw himself from height rather than succumb to Roman rule in *El cerco de Numancia*. Though it may be naïve to try to shift the association that this play has with the Stalinist productions of Rafael Alberti in the 1930s and '40s, and the Francoist views of its translator Roy Campbell, *The Siege of Numancia* may be ready to be re-read and re-interpreted with modern sensibilities about personal resistance to totalizing narratives and structures. Productions of this play have continued in Spain and around the world. Many of our «town squares» (collective spaces) and the threats to their integrity today are online. Could this play have an(other) new life there, or outside where a director could make new use of a location in the public consciousness as «height» or «tower»? When Eric Bentley brought this play to his «Dramatic Repertoire» series, he acknowledged its past then, ending, however, with [Joaquín] Casaldueiro's 1951 point that «the play is essentially unpolitical» (Bentley: 1985: 294). If, in our world now, everything is political, the action taken by the young boy (and last

remaining survivor of his town) to kill himself rather than submit to being a war trophy for Scipio to parade in the streets of Rome is one that can be re-viewed. His adherence to a personal code of loyalty goes beyond the name of Numancia, as he decries the temptations of false wealth promised in exchange for his capitulation. He addresses first his dead compatriots, then turns his voice to the Romans.

BARIATO:

And I assure you, my brave citizens,
 That your resolve within me is not dead—
 That the perfidious Romans shall not triumph
 But over our mere ashes. Their designs
 Are all in vain, whether they strike me down
 Or tempt me with their doubtful promises
 To spare my life and ope wide gates to wealth.
 Hold back, you Romans! Do not waste your strength
 Or tire yourselves by swarming up the wall!
 Were you ten times more powerful, your power
 Could never hope to conquer me at all.
 (*The Siege of Numancia*, trans. Campbell, ed. Bentley)

Dramatized here is the notion that the life of each individual person comes down to one essential choice, one essential moment, and that the element of personal freedom and free will, conditioned and socialized though human animals are, separates us from the beasts and defines us. The decisions made by individual human beings have consequences that echo throughout the ages. One does not need to look far to see the ripple effect in action, and the critical importance of personal freedom and shared social goals.

By stepping boldly into new genres sometimes consigned to a worldview thought dated or colored by the past, new languages are ripe for expressing the epic scale of human capacity, thought, and feeling. Artists make these qualities of human life specific in myriad ways, including in their workshop the tools of tone and leveraging the freeing boundedness of genre. These tools are foundational and lead to the second pillar, *design*.

Design

In 2004, amid rehearsals in Stratford-upon-Avon for the RSC's Spanish Golden Age season, I interviewed designers Katrina Lindsay (scenery and costumes for *House of Desires*), Rae Smith (costumes for *Pedro, the Great Pretender*), and Ben Ormerod (season lighting designer). Though each artist had a unique process and approach, there were similarities in the ways they spoke about designing worlds of imagination, rather than re-creating a historical reality. Lindsay and Smith were both very clear that their work was not about creating looks that were «realistic» or archaeological, but instead, that their approach was to mine the text for the playwright's creative art. A pillar of strength in the RSC season was this clear prioritization of the work of the playwright, and not just the works of words but of imagination. Smith parsed the differing elements of realism and the imagination: «Realistic means for me an authentic or original practice sense where you spend all your time trying to find a documentary realism to what you are doing. And I'm not interested in that because I'm interested in the imaginative world of Cervantes» (Smith: 2004). As for *Pedro, the Great Pretender*, the play invites the audience in to some moments that seem drawn from the playwright's own life. As Smith recounts, «It's sort of biographical, and then it takes off into something that he's trying to say, and also an imaginative escapade where he's telling us a story that he has based in the reality of people's lives, but also goes out to another place. And I think it's important to reflect that in the way that you design a show.»

The way that Smith put this into practice with *Pedro, the Great Pretender* was to create a physical rather than realistic sense of the characters' appearance.¹ She elaborates: «And so when I said 'physical sense' it's this kind of disguise word for process. Because what's pertinent is that the actor's physicality, their sense of themselves, their character, and colors that suit them, how they stand, how they hold themselves, is something that you need to follow.» Smith then gives a practical insight into how she works with costume pieces: rather than solely using fittings and individual meetings with actors, she also introduces items to the rehearsal room, so that they can try on pieces while moving and being in

¹ See the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust for a photograph of Smith's design in action: <http://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/pef200409>

the scene. I was present as rehearsal dramaturg and observed that early in the rehearsal process, racks of hundreds of items appeared in the Michel St. Denis studio, and the number of items grew as the weeks went on. Shirts, trousers, skirts, shoes, coats, scarves, veils, all manner of items that you might expect, and a great many items that you would not have expected, came from the imaginations and shopping expeditions of Smith and her team. The actors made costume choices as part of beginning their work each day. I watched as the items evolved over time, also how the actors' choices evolved as well; many actors rehearsed in a variety of items before settling on their characters' clothes, while others found something on the first day.

[I]t being clothes rather than costumes is very significant because there is an idea that there's theatre, and in theatre you have actors in costumes. But for me I don't see it like that, I see it like what you're making is an imaginary world live on stage, so they're not sort of theatre costumes, they're clothes that the people wear in this world. And therefore they reflect the inner world of the persona of the actor as much as they do tell the story of who they are and what they are doing. (Smith: 2004)

There is a paradoxical realism to this notion. Costumes here are the «real clothes» of a fictional character. The actors have ownership and a fair amount of control over which items they choose and how they wear them, but Smith curates the options and is there shaping, editing, and designing all along. It is difficult to express how subtle this process is, as the designer gently allows the actors to make choices within her palette of carefully chosen items. The collaborative process, making direct use of the actors' creativity, allows multiple voices in the creation of the visual «looks» of the world.

A dynamic relationship forms among the playwright, the director, and the designer. Each collaborative structure is unique to that theatrical production. Another example from the RSC season illustrates how a similar idea, working from the life and mind of the playwright, expressed itself in the relational work of design. The director of *House of Desires* (*Los empeños de una casa*), Nancy Meckler, was very interested in the play's author, the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Meckler and Lindsay conducted pre-production research that yielded, among many things, the idea that Sor Juana is also a character in her life story, and writes herself

into the play. Lindsay mentioned to me that early on in her process she and director Nancy Meckler decided that Sor Juana was going to be directly present as a character. Lindsay put it this way,

[S]omething that Nancy said that became a real key for me in the design was that she really wanted to [...] have the Sor Juana character in it, and that this was a story that was created from that person's mind, [...] that gave us quite a lot of freedom in the kind of visual language of it; it became quite theatrical, because you were seeing it through somebody's head [...] I wanted to have a sense of period, but for it to be its own world, so that, especially because it's such a playful piece, and sort of fun and constantly referring back to itself [...]. (Lindsay: 2004)

This choice was clear in the opening moments of the performance. Sor Juana herself appeared in full nun's habit, arranging beautiful dolls made in the likeness of the principal characters in the play, dancing them around the stage as she imagined the action of her play, then sat down at a writing desk with quill and ink to compose (Jeffs: 2018: 188). The notion of the dolls, a concept that set the stage for the production as taking place in a deliberately composed, storytelling mode, came from the director. The design of the objects themselves came from Lindsay, who relates, «Nancy was quite clear that she thought it would be really lovely as a way of introducing the characters and very much saying that they are characters in a story, would be to have these dolls at the beginning. That was one of her first images» (Lindsay: 2004).

The device of «Sor Juana» transforming into the heroine, Leonor, was actualized with her whirlwind on-stage costume change as her habit was whisked away by the «Cloaked Men» who deposit a breathless Leonor to Doña Ana's care. This overt theatricality is the element of the play's inherent tendency to be, as Lindsay put it, «constantly referring back to itself» and is why theatre design has such a unique role to play in translating concepts into practical realities. A design concept that foregrounds the storytelling mode must tread a delicate balance between self-reference and a distraction. Many designers I have spoken with over the years have said something similar to the fact that if you are noticing the design while watching the performance, something is off; design is there to support the storytelling, not draw attention. In my view, design is there to express the soul of the work, in detail, size, and scope. Without its soul, a production,

like a person, is lifeless and hollow. Design is the pillar that unites and vivifies the collaboration, bringing into being elements that are otherwise behind the eyes, unspoken. To design for the theatre is to make the invisible soul of the play live in time, perceptible by human senses as shared experience.

The Danger and Beauty of Contrasts and Juxtapositions

Master artists use the interplay of light and darkness, earth and air, water and fire, dreams and reality, flesh and spirit. Contrasts among the elements are also an ancient human way of expressing the interplay between order and chaos. These dynamics are powerful within the human mind and can be found everywhere from Carl Jung to *Frozen II*. Contrasts and juxtapositions are bread and butter to the *Comedia* and often serve as a structuring device: imbalance, chaos, balance, restoration. There are many versions of the hero(ine), as Joseph Campbell has shown in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and our storytellers have known this from time immemorial.

Many, perhaps all, of the *comedias* that have survived take their structure from imbalances and their restoration. The circumstances vary widely, and can include differences in age, status, power, money, masculinity/femininity, etc. Imbalances in status paired with racial and cultural differences can form plot points, such as the King's lust for a Gypsy girl, Belica, which drives the action toward the second half of *Pedro, the Great Pretender*. It is common to see an older man paired with a young lady, an arrangement that can spell tragedy (e.g. *El castigo sin venganza*). Disturbances in family harmony such as a stepmother falling for her husband's son justify vindictive violence in that play as well.

Comedia performance, an embodied art, brings the playwrights' crafted contrasts and juxtapositions to physical life, experienced by multiple human senses as the bodies of the actors and audience members immerse in the theatrical environment. Diana, in her first appearance in Lope de Vega's *El perro del hortelano*, is awakened in the night by what she assumes is a gentleman suitor breaking in to see her. She immediately calls to the unseen man, appealing to his human senses to turn, see, and hear her: «¡Volved, mirad, escuchad!» (I. 8). She contrasts her real perceptions with fantasies: «Pues no es sombra lo que vi, / ni sueño que me ha burlado» (I. 11-12). Associated mythologically with the moon, Diana is

traditionally phlegmatic, wet and cold, but the evening's sudden disruption causes her to see herself instead as choleric, hot and dry, chastising her servants as cold, slow-moving in contrast to her quick heat: «Para la cólera mía, / gusto esa flema me da» (I. 15-16). From this start, Lope throws his audience into the dangerous world of inversion. The Moon goddess is raging hot; this cannot be good.

These kinds of connections offer a rich playground for the visual imagination. Lighting designer Ben Ormerod used the juxtaposition of moonlight and candlelight, among other images, to highlight the mythological associations of Diana as a goddess associated with the moon, but also as a human woman experiencing the fire of desire. In our interview, he described his process:

For *The Dog in the Manger*, [...] I met with the director, Laurence Boswell, to discuss where each scene is set geographically (i.e. in Naples, in a palace, outside, etc.). At the opening of the performance, they come out into the moonlit courtyard, an icy, moonlit courtyard. [...] To watch it from one side you would see candlelight on one side, and moonlight on the other. Moonlight is an important part of the design of this show because of its archetypal connection with chastity. It is important that the first scene be moonlit to initially connect Diana with the moon. The icy coolness of Diana's words and movement gives us the impression that she is chaste, so when we glimpse the fire burning inside her, we are surprised by the heat of the passion hidden inside (hence the candles that burn inside the gold doors). [...] She is in obvious parallel with the Virgin Mary interpreted as a pagan goddess. Marianism was in that time also a form of Diana worship, uniting the pagan world with the Catholic fervour of Lope's day. These kinds of connections are the Holy Grail of lighting design. (Ormerod: 2004)

Diana functions in the play, at first, as the archetypal, unassailable virgin (Artemis) (Dixon: 1981: 34) but the overtones of the Virgin Mary (the chapel-like candles of her inner sanctum) invoke a Christian iconographic, religious, and literary language ubiquitous in Europe of the 17th century. When the ideas flow from the playwright to the audience through the interplay of spoken word and sensory physicalization available to designers, great heights of communion across time and space are possible.

Lope de Vega takes imbalances of class and power to their extreme in *Fuente Ovejuna*. Laurence Boswell directed this play for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada, in 2008, and I served as a consultant early in his process. The order and beauty in the love between Laurencia and Frondoso pitted against the chaotic tyranny of the noble Comendador. Laura Vidler articulates the structuring function of operative principles within a work as akin to Pierre Bourdieu's definition of *habitus*, «principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes» (Bourdieu: 1990: 53, quoted by Vidler: 2012: 39).² A hallmark of excellent *Comedia* performance work could be said to be a successful adaptation of the operative *habitus* in the Spanish play text to the situation of the production.

Vidler writes of *Fuente Ovejuna*:

This production was successful, not because [...] it approximates «the interests and cultural assumptions of the receiving system» [...], but rather because dramatic text, performance text and audience share the underlying *habitus* of Western Civilization. [...] Boswell appropriates and incorporates Spanish cultural structures to communicate characterization, theme and conflict. However, this is not simply a Spanish play in English, or even an English play with Spanish «flavor.» Boswell has woven cultural structures together, drawing the Anglo and the Spanish back to their shared human history. (Vidler: 2012: 60)

The principle of juxtaposition is crucially at play in Boswell's direction, as Vidler calls our attention to the way that the Spanish corporeal body juxtaposes with the 21st-century actors' body carriage, and how the rehearsal process included physical training from experts for the actors to address this.

Photographs from the Stratford production, as well as those from the archived «costume bible,» reveal conscious physical postures that both recall and reject the *planta natural*, thus distinguishing between the noble and lower classes. [...] Scott

² The photographs showing the actors' movement and excerpts from Boswell's production prompt script are available at this link:
https://www.academia.edu/1416507/Bourdieu_Boswell_and_the_Baroque_Body_Cultural_Choreography_in_Fuenteovejuna

Wentworth as the *Comendador* strikes the very pose [...], with his weight balanced over the *planta natural*, his body erect and chest held high. This posture is mocked by a town peasant in the wedding dumb show. (Vidler: 2012: 50)

The Comendador's sexual desire is perverse in the play because it crosses both social class (power) lines and boundaries of desire (she does not reciprocate his lust). «By juxtaposing the staid posture of the nobility with the swirling dancing of peasants, Boswell establishes a natural order, which will, of course, be compromised later in the play» (Vidler: 2012: 50). The dangerous consequences presage a tragic end, and the vengeance-seeking townspeople destroy the Comendador. His victim, Laurencia, has to cajole them into it, arguing that justice is more important than personal safety. She juxtaposes and rebalances her desire for justice with their desire to keep their heads below the parapet.

Which leads to another function of epic: the problem of the ending.

Unsettled, Unsettling, and Otherwise Open Endings

Play endings vary by genre in how they are constructed. *Comedias* in the tragic mode often end soon after someone dies or is destroyed because of an imbalance or disordered love. David Johnston calls this the Rubik's cube, as «Calderón, the master craftsman gives one final twist to the action and everything falls into place with startling force» (Johnston: 1995: 8). That «startling force» is one of the tools the playwright uses in service to the goal of moving the audience to thoughts via their feelings. When the audience is kept engaged, rapt with suspense for a sustained period of time, and suddenly that tension is relieved with an unsettling moment of ostensible finality, the true cruelty of «justice» or «revenge» or the human cost of upholding rigid ideals can be seen in beautifully sharp relief. Other tools used to create that include suspense, conflict, and dramatic irony, all of which lead up to and construct the power of the ending.

Looking to the future of *Comedia* performances, a play with a dramatically abrupt, unsettling ending that merits a re-resurrection is Calderón's *El pintor de su deshonra* (*The Painter of Dishonour*). Boswell and Johnston dug this one up for the RSC at The Other Place in 1995. The ending is unsettling in the sense that there is virtually no denouement,

unraveling of the action, or processing of emotion. The itinerant painter cum vengeful murderer, Juan Roca, blind with rage at the sight of his beloved Serafina in the arms of her abductor, shoots them both dead. The other people around swiftly clean up the mess. A self-appointed, impromptu jury of his peers exonerates the executioner immediately. Serafina's prophetic words from the second act echo in the ears even as they ring from the gunshots: «For my sake? What have I done wrong? / Is there no justice under heaven?» (Calderón: 1995: 61) as justice is so swiftly and resoundingly enforced. Here, the form is the message. The playwright's tool of suspense building up to an abrupt ending underscores the carriage of dubious justice. «Significantly, no portrait of Serafina was ever painted, so that at the end of the play, as Melveena McKendrick points out, 'no completed image of Serafina survives; she is obliterated'» (Fischer: 2009: 199).³

A masterfully laid out conflict is the central element of engaging drama. Elements of the staging are instructive when thinking about how the conflict resolves (or does not) in the ending of a play. Relying on an eagle-eyed witness, Susan Fischer, we can witness the staging of the ending of *The Painter of Dishonour* at the RSC in 1995:

Captive within his own destructive creation, Roca–Carlisle stood locked behind a lattice-work window area in a no-exit space textured totally in red, whence he was to paint the sleeping figure of Serafina. [...] Grasping the iron-gate that imprisoned him and shaking it furiously, he externalized the pain he would have to bear until vengeance could be exacted. His torment appeared motivated, not so much by the loss of love, as by the (physical) confinement that kept him from redressing the supposed blemish upon his honor. His suffering, no matter how self-centered, invited pathos beyond the footlights. (Fischer: 2009: 198)

The operative conflict as the play rushes towards its shocking conclusion is between passion and physical and emotional incarceration. For Serafina's part, she falls dead in this production at the same moment as does the masked figure personifying Death, who has been haunting the stage and lurking behind the action (Fischer: 2009: 199). The moments after the shooting are the most important in the play because they reveal

³ Fischer quotes McKendrick: 1996: 274.

how these actions will be received, what their deaths, and therefore their lives, will ultimately mean. Noting that the «Death masque» and Serafina come to a sad end while «the avenging subject lives», Fischer reads the meaning of the ending:

The reader of performance was made to query whether such juxtapositions could only have had a radically subversive intent. Instead of complying with the demands of formal generic harmony – the convention that would have countenanced the attempt at resolution – Calderón’s *English Painter*, under the directorial aegis of Boswell, concluded with irreconcilable events that interrogated, if not undermined, the prospect of closure and restoration. (Fischer: 2009: 202)

The meaning of the unsettling ending is in its abruptness. The ending, resounding with gunshots and leaving so many questions unanswered, invites inventiveness of both form and content. That the events are «irreconcilable» begs new companies to make their own sense of the horror-comedy. *El pintor de su deshonra* epitomizes the importance of getting the ending right in *Comedia* production, and deserves a fresh airing.

The principle works just as well in plays that end in the comic mode, with weddings instead of corpses. The best comedies may have an *ostensible* happy ending that smells off due to some remaining imbalance. These types of endings may be those that open up the greatest number of interpretive possibilities, reflecting the diversity of resonances among audience members, as Catherine Connor (Sweitlicki) has noted (2000: 26). Unsettling ambiguity and openness in the ending is important in one of Guillén de Castro’s most fascinating plays, *La fuerza de la costumbre* (*The Force of Habit*). A playwright whose work certainly deserves greater inspection, translation, and performance, Castro’s oeuvre represents some of the greatest output in the Valencian school of plays in the Lopean style of the *Comedia nueva*. This is the case in *The Force of Habit* with the lady Leonor, who has treated her lover, Félix, abominably all along, goading him into violence to earn her respect (and build up her ego). When the play ends with Félix in courtly position kneeling to his lady-love and offering her the spoils of his exertions on her behalf, Castro sets up the question of whether her «love» is built on a foundation of stone or sand. Her *señas* of love have amounted to laughing at him, bullying him, and essentially ordering him to commit an act that reasonably could be

considered an act of moral injury to himself. Félix seriously injures Otavio behind closed doors, using desperate tactics that may not be totally above board, seeming at least capable of killing his opponent. In a way, Leonor re-parents Félix, raising him during their courtship into a state that seems «unnatural» given who the young man was at the start of the play, but which is touted as «natural» for a man by his father who demands Félix's transformation from soft boy to mercenary of honor. Can the marriage survive, let alone Félix's relationship with his father? The resentment Félix must carry for both Leonor and his father is either intensely felt in the final scene, or sublimated, and the director gets to decide which feelings to reveal in him. Contrast this with Luis, who seems to love Hipólita without wanting to change her. He loves her for the way she is before her father requires her to readjust herself. The audience must feel uneasy at this union and tableau of the «happy family», so contingent on self-betrayal and violence. The moments of unsettling endings, or dis-ease in the happy-ending moments contribute to the sense of an epic potential for human feeling, of high stakes, of big emotions looked forward to in attending the theatre.

A play that spans the divide between tragedy and comedy, and whose ending is both unsettling and poignantly emotionally real, is *The Mountain Girl from La Vera (La Serrana de la Vera)* by Luis Vélez de Guevara, recently translated by Harley Erdman (2019).⁴ The play has a tragicomic structure akin to that of *El caballero de Olmedo*, full of festival and rural tradition, peppered with comedic tropes until the fatal turn to tragedy. Gila, the «moza varonil» («He-Girl») (Vélez de Guevara: 2019: 152-3), falls in love, only to be seduced by a noble Captain who promises marriage but abandons her. She retreats to the wilderness where she transforms into the Serrana of legends, killing any man who approaches her until she is finally able to kill the seducer himself. Bereft of her honor, and already reviled, with cutting contrasts drawn from animals used to describe her, «lobo y zorra en la cautela» («A girly fox, a mangy he-wolf») (Vélez de Guevara: 2019: 120-1), what future can she have? In one way, the Captain killed her first: deceived her out of her virginity, stripped her of any possible identity and wrested away her future at that moment. The play can only end with her marriage or her death. This time, there is an emotional reality to the

⁴ See my review in *The Mercurian*.

final twist. Gila is brutally executed for her crimes, shot by arrows in a San Sebastian-esque execution. There is the public performance of what had been her inner reality of a death by a thousand cuts. It is also a comment on the complex duty of monarch-as-judge, who must act according to the letter of the law (her crimes of murder cannot be allowed to go unpunished, no matter how sympathetic the King might be to her circumstances, which he indicates that he is). The King thus fails to enact true justice, paradoxically admiring her, just not enough to prevent her annihilation at the hands of popular justice. Thus on both an inner, emotional level, and an external, social plane, the play's ending drives its message home with piercing clarity.

An important method of achieving epic scale in the theatre is through dramatic irony. Akin to Sophocles's Oedipus with his disordered, compulsive need to know the truth that destroys him, the Spanish Golden Age masters use suspicion and paranoia to create epic proportions, and *Comedia* directors amplify them onstage. Staging choices, particularly choices made in the ending moments of the play, offer the director particular opportunities to highlight the irony. Some directors show this in a sarcastic tone, such as the jilted Marcela clapping right in Teodoro's face in the celebratory wedding dance at the end of Boswell's *The Dog in the Manger*. Amid the wedding preparations, intimations of violence linger in the fact that the Countess Diana threatened to have Tristán killed (he remains a liability to her, holding the secret of Teodoro's fabricated pedigree). Might she carry out that threat after the time of the play's action, as an insurance policy? Meaningful glances and choreography can keep these threats alive or bury them, depending on the director's intended focus as the performance concludes. The meaning of endings is paramount, and irony in the final images can be important for what an audience member takes away and remembers from the production.

Conclusion: What's Next? Propel the Imagination Into the Future

The qualities that will sustain and inspire *Comedia* performers, directors, and designers of the future will be those that apply to the best of all performing arts endeavors. The future of epic productions is a theatre that is necessary, in Peter Hall's sense: «It is an instrument of change; it does not normally preserve the status quo. It frequently

produces a live debate that frees the imagination and provokes the audience to ask questions. It is therefore dangerous» (Hall: 1999: 11). The theatre is changing, as it always is, and its «seemingly infinite capacity for rebirth» will endure if it is true to the best in itself (Hall: 1999: 12). The four pillars I have outlined provide a foundation for future programming in our theatre spaces in their many physical and digital modalities. These qualities are «what's next» for the *Comedia* if it is to maintain its forward trajectory boosted by the high-profile productions and seasons that have launched it from its niche (back) into the public space. It is a uniquely fruitful time to build what comes next for the *Comedia*; the ground is fertile and ready to receive new seeds of ideas.

Each collaborative team to tackle a *comedia* in English usually has someone on it who says they are opening up a new vein of «gold» (hence the ubiquitous references in publicity and critical material to mines, gold dust, nuggets—all forms of relating that special feeling of interacting with this still «untapped» resource). Yet it is the case that there are still so many «undiscovered» plays, given the sheer number of works that the *monstruo* and his contemporaries (and predecessors, and successors) wrote.

How can those who make theatre programming decisions have some nuggets of «gold» on their desks as they discern the seasons of the future?

The answer is to mine the shared *habitus* and symbolic language for archetypal connections that give artists and audiences rootedness in a distanced, digitized world. The *Comedia* and manifold drama of the Siglo de Oro harbor rich stores to feed a hunger deeper than the desire for «gold». Plays that are not yet mainstream in English but are performance-tested, such as *El cerco de Numancia*, challenge personal and public values, while plays of identity such as *La Serrana de la Vera* get at who we really are. Tone, genre, and form forge deep meaning and the possibility to connect with others on multiple personal, cultural, linguistic, and national levels. An emphasis on design makes the internal forces visible and instantiated, perceptible in auditory and visual sign-systems that connect audiences to the scope of human imagination. A quintessential example of the power of design, the brass floor for the RSC season stage was cut in the shape of the molecular structure for gold.⁵ Lights shone up through

⁵ See Es Devlin, <https://esdevlin.com/work/rsc-spanish-golden-age> for photographs of the design in action.

the floor on to Diana's face as her tears fell, the designers underscoring the moment as one of infinitesimal scope (the shape is of an invisible molecule, a building block of being), and galaxy-class in that it ends up shining like a canopy of stars, from below. Design as the soul provides the foundation and the firmament, and although the audience is not aware in the moment of what the shape represents, there is no life without it.

The danger and beauty of contrasts and juxtapositions can bring that which is internal violently forth, such as in *Fuente Ovejuna* when a personal cause corrects a political imbalance. Play endings, such as those in *El pintor de su deshonra* and *La fuerza de la costumbre* employ suspense, conflict, and irony to unsettle the audience so it is moved to do...what? The too-tidy resolution, the lack of humanity, the dearth of nuance, shocks by its utter absence. The grey area that is missing is the role of mercy, tolerance. When mercy is seen as weakness (i.e. King David in *La venganza de Tamar*), tragedy follows. When mercy is not seen as weakness, when even the physical laws of death are shown mercy (i.e. *La devoción de la cruz*), we see that human beings are not, ultimately, machines. Though we now interface with and through our computers, and wrestle with contemporary versions of the laws of honor, we are not (yet) mechanized, not yet slaves to *honor*. Ambiguity and unanswered questions reign in our lives as a celebration of our humanity, our capacity for re-invention and redemption. Symbols have multiple meanings among dreamers, *la vida es sueño*, and this is what unites and individuates us as human beings.

The theatre exists for its images, for symbols, to see others act, so that we see ourselves. The truism that Golden Age socialites went to the theatres to «see and be seen» is accurate on a much deeper level than a parade of the latest accoutrements of fashion; we go to see our deepest desires in seeing others act.

In future play-selection processes, we must take what is big enough to survive; we must take what we cannot leave behind. Take what you would take from the play if it were a house burning down: the loved ones, the precious images, that which gives the play life and cannot be itself without. The next production—let it be epic, let it be necessary.

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