

# Introduction. Recasting the *Comedia*: Confronting the Challenges of the 21st Century

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## **Introduction. Recasting the *Comedia*: Confronting the Challenges of the 21st Century**

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If in the early part of the twenty-first century there has been a moment prone to rethink history, both History with a capital H and the more silenced intra-history [*intrahistoria*], one could say that it has been the period framed by the COVID-19 crisis. From the decree of the worldwide state of alarm in March 2020 to the present day, as we have all learned to cope with a “new normal” order of things, this bracket of time has been decisive in re-assessing our world.

In addition to the pandemic chaos, other social and political crises occurred at the same time leaving an imprint difficult to erase. We are referring here to racial protests, the new social movements that arose in their wake, and the controversial presidential changeover in the United States. All of these events have shaken the foundations of our society, forcing us to turn inward and take stock of our past, present, and future both on a personal level and as global citizens. As intellectuals and scholars, especially those of us who focus on the study of history—whether literary, political, or social—these last two years have led us to question the past in relation to all these events that have shaken our most immediate existence.

In the field of *comedia* studies—a discipline that might seem at first glance to be stuck in an imperialist and colonial past—Golden Age theater has been able to revitalize itself against a reductionist view of history while reclaiming its place in the present in many ways. Within the entertainment sector, the COVID-19 crisis had a frontal effect on theater, which experienced in a matter of days the closure of its performance and rehearsal venues, the disappearance of the traditional stage, and the cessation of its coexistence with in-person spectators. The artistic essence and the human scaffolding of the theater collapsed but, in record time, new alternatives developed

that allowed it to stay afloat. Digital platforms soon emerged as the new stage and within this framework, early modern Hispanic theater did not hesitate to find its place as well.

In fact, perhaps because of such unexpected artistic coupling that merged the humanity of theater with digital technology, the Spanish *comedia* fully thrived in the times of COVID along with new original interpretations and adaptations of its texts. As we argue in a special issue of *Romance Quarterly*, the COVID-19 pandemic was in some ways a boon for theater companies that specialize in early-modern theater—although as we will see below, this was not always the case.

We originally conceived of this special issue to honor this new reconceptualization of the form and content that we have witnessed in *comedia* studies over the last two years. We have compiled this collection from presenters at the 37th Annual Association for Hispanic and Classical Theater Symposium, which we had the privilege to organize in collaboration with the Festival de Teatro Clásico de Almagro in July 2021. The three lines of research on which we decided to center the conference are reflected in the articles of this issue of *Comedia Performance*: (1) Theater Practicalities: Innovation, translation, and pedagogical collaborations; (2) The Intersectional *Comedia*: Questions of Race, Gender, Class on the Stage; and (3) The *Comedia* under Siege: Confinements, Digitalization, and the Future.

Although not all the present articles touch directly on performance, our goal was to create a conference and special volume that would bring to light the issues that these plays bring to the modern stage. Representations of race, gender, class, and how those issues in turn affect the pedagogical and performance aspects of theater, as well as the rapid digitization of performance during the pandemic all have the potential to shift the ways in which these plays are perceived by audiences and staged by artists.

In the first section, devoted to *Comedia Intersectionalities*, the articles curated address the way non-centered groups are represented in the *comedia* and how the *comedia*'s social context influences our perception of gender, race, and class when we read or view it. The first article, "Performances of Power: Staging Queenly Authority in Lope de Vega's *Los pleitos de Ingalaterra*" by Victoria Jane Rasbridge, winner of the 2021 Hesse Graduate Student Grant for her paper, examines relationships of power, identity, and performance to expose how power is only temporary. Rasbridge demonstrates that power does not pertain to a particular entity and argues the play invites us to reconsider traditional ideologies that instruct how authority should be acquired. The second article, "Aesthetics and the Staging of Sexual Violence in Cervantes and Lope" by Bradley Nelson focuses on Lope's *Peribañez y el comendador de Ocaña* and the Tosilos episode in the second part of *Don Quixote*. It studies how these texts position the aesthetics of courtly love with regard to sexual violence in seventeenth-century Spain, viewed through the lens of the robot writer in Francisco García González's "When a Robot Decides to Die." The third article in this section, "Irrepresentable Corporealities: The Staging of *Las Paredes Oyen* in the 19th and 20th Centuries" by Pablo García Pinar, revamps how Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *Las paredes oyen* has been historically staged in Europe, Mexico, and Canada. It relies on archival material to discuss why the character of Don Juan was not always portrayed as disabled in plays produced from 1829 to 1975. The next essay, "Cuando el Occidente escribe al Otro: el monólogo de Tucapel en la comedia famosa *La confesión con el demonio* de Francisco de la Torre y Sevil" by Verónica Cora-Castillo, looks at discourses of power in Torre y Sevil's *La confesión con el demonio* to show how the author whitewashes the character of Tucapel and explains its problematic implications. It also reflects on how plays that incorporate controversial representations of black characters should be assessed and properly adapted to be brought to the twenty-first-century stage.

The next section of this volume, *Comedia Practicalities*, explores the advantages of working with companies, collaborative learning, and translation. Over the last decade, practitioners and scholars have collaborated to make the study of *comedias* much more accessible for students. However, this collaboration has not come without challenges that deserve to be brought up and analyzed in detail. Much as Erin Cowling and Ana Rodas Garza argue in the first article of this section, “Academics in Practice: Moving Beyond Appreciation,” we believe that it is our duty as performance scholars to support the work of theater artists from beginning to end—and that includes bringing to light works and themes that can help them better reach a modern audience. It is our hope that even those articles that do not necessarily speak directly to performance issues can be used to reveal new works and interpretations that can then be used to create new pieces that speak to the twenty-first-century spectator. In creating a more symbiotic research-creation relationship with artists, we hope to see many more Golden Age plays performed for years to come.

Next, we find “Medieval Ballads in Miniature and Our New Gold: Collaborative Theater Projects in the Digital Era” by Glenda Y. Nieto-Cuebas, Hannah Treadway, Jasmine Lew and Paula Rodríguez, which explores two digital collaborative theater projects in order to highlight the dynamics of theatrical collaboration outside the traditional performing arts setting. It gives the reader ideas on how these projects can educate and improve students’ and audiences’ knowledge and understanding of Hispanic Classical Theater. The last essay in this section, “Translating Musicality: Tools from the Translation Lab’s Work with *The Cape Snatcher*” by Ben Gunter, examines the process of translating Luis Quiñones de Benvente’s *La capeadora* (1632), soon to make its English-language debut as *The Cape Snatcher*. It focuses on the piece’s musicality and dramaturgical effect, considering how the use of musical pieces can drive a play to its denouement.

We devoted the last section of this special issue to a Forum on Performance contemporary issues that have been understudied. The two articles focus on two case studies that shed light respectively on Andalusian theater companies specialized in classical theater and their resilience during the pandemic and the education outreach journey in which the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico engaged since the new millennium. Laura Ramiro Moreno's thorough study, "Spanish Classical Theater in COVID-19 Times: How Andalusian Companies Dealt with the 2020 Pandemic," intends to examine the way COVID-19 has made us rethink these alternative forms of theater by focusing on the ways in which small Andalusian companies attempted to keep the *comedia* afloat during a rigorous confinement through digital media and to evaluate the contributions of these creations. It looks at how companies have coped with more than three months of closure and the serious implications of performing with a reduced capacity. In a similar fashion, Esther Fernández's article also traces a series of initiatives, such as the educational and outreach work carried out by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico (CNTC), specifically in the last three decades. This reflection aims to highlight some of the initiatives that have contributed most effectively to make early-modern theater known beyond the traditional stage and to create an audience among the younger generations.

Although we only edited the sections directly related to the conference, the reader will also find interviews with practitioners and book reviews relevant to the *comediante* scholar that continue the conversation begun with the above articles. Perhaps of particular interest is the transcript of the interview conducted with Natalia Menéndez, renowned actress and director, during the 2021 AHCT symposium. You will also find an interview with Jesús Torres who discusses videogames and digitization of the *comedia*. The interview with Aihnoa Amestoy

regarding her adaptive work on the *Desengaños amorosos* delves into the ways in which confinement affected her adaptation of the play, both before and after the start of the pandemic.

As guest editors of this issue, we strongly believe that all these matters are the heart of our human and intellectual concerns, especially after the experiences of the last two years. It is our hope that the articles and interviews featured here encourage our readers to look at the *comedia* as a powerful artistic channel. If we have learned anything, it is that we are no longer alone in Ivory Towers, but rather must engage with each other, practitioners, and our students to bring the *comedia* into the twenty-first century and use it as a tool to understand the past, present, and future.

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<BIO> Esther Fernández is an associate professor at Rice University and specializes in early-modern Iberian literary, visual, and cultural studies.

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