

La Celestina. Chamizal National Memorial XXXIII Siglo de Oro Drama Festival, March 5-8, 2008. El Paso, Texas.

La Celestina was performed on March 8, 2008, as the last of four works comprising the XXXIII Siglo de Oro Drama Festival in El Paso, Texas. As is well-known, the festival takes place annually at the Chamizal National Memorial of the United States Park Service, a site marking a previously contested border between Mexico and Texas. The festival coincides with the annual conference of the Association of Hispanic Classical Theater (AHCT), which this reviewer was attending.

Rojas's work was presented by Teatro Círculo, an experienced theater company based in New York City. The company had performed the work as part of its regular season in November and December of 2007. Beatriz Córdoba directed and also filled the challenging role of *Celestina*. Córdoba based her production on Luis Escobar and Humberto Pérez de la Ossa's 1957 adaptation of the sixteen-act *Comedia de Calisto y Melibea*. A dialogue with the director and cast, arranged by the AHCT and led by Professor Isaac Benabu of Hebrew University, followed the production. It provided insights into the artistic vision shaping the production.

A particularly striking element in this production is Jorge Dieppa's set design, starkly simple and yet very flexible. The curtain opens to reveal five wooden platform ladders placed at the rear of the stage, the tallest one of about twelve feet in the middle and the others descending in height on either side. These ladders serve variously as the walls, doors, gates, and the tower that figure so prominently as barriers in Rojas's work. To cite only one example of their effective use, in Calisto's tryst with Melibea the two characters place themselves behind separate ladders, circling around and within them as they converse.

In front of the ladders and defining center stage is placed a large platform about twelve feet square and a foot high, with a brightly-colored

and lit circular pattern in its center. Much of the action takes place on and around the platform, which represents different interiors. Hanging over the platform is a dangling web of gourds, herbs, and string, along with two hanging nooses, the latter present only during Act One and a dance interlude that follows.

After the initial meeting of Calisto and Melibea, two female figures in black leotards sensuously climb on the background ladders and then slither across the center platform where two male figures in period costume are performing a slow-motion knife fight. The dance ends with each male-female couple rolling on the platform locked in an embrace. In the post-performance dialogue, Beatriz Córdoba observed that the dance interlude expresses her understanding of Rojas's view of the world as a nest of dangerous vipers that are always ready to attack (an unacknowledged allusion to Rojas's own words in the prologue to the *Tragicomedia*). In the director's interpretation, the two human needs that shape the play are lust and violence, symbolized respectively by the female and male dancers at the beginning. She also explained that the hanging nooses in the prologue are meant to introduce a note of circularity by anticipating the execution of Sempronio and Pármeno, thereby introducing the idea that in the end «the Devil takes revenge on everyone.» Likewise, the tangled web hanging over the central platform responds to her desire to make the play revolve around *Celestina* and her «rotten, smelly» house. This also accounts for the very rapid pacing of the second half of the play, the piling up of one violent death after another, with the arrival of the authorities at Celestina's house closing the play, well after Pleberio's speech.

Music and lighting work well together to create or enhance a mood of foreboding. Although simple, the music ranges from sensual to menacing, and often has a Middle Eastern rhythm that features drums and flutes. Lighting effects, centered on the central platform, also contribute nicely to the overall effect. The scene of Celestina's conjuring of the devil, for example, is accompanied by a jungle rhythm and lurid red and purple light patterns on the platform, with the rest of the stage shrouded in darkness. On the other hand, the overall darkness of the production, while suggestive of the sinister quality that the director seeks to convey, at some crucial moments undermines its dramatic quality. The most notable failure in this regard is the final appearance of Pleberio, who inexplicably delivers his wrenching soliloquy in almost total darkness.

Of the period-appropriate costuming (by Maria Cristina Fusté), Melibea's is the most evocative, from the red velvet dress she wears at her first encounter with Calisto, to the gauzy blue nightgown that he removes unceremoniously in the seduction scene, leaving her in a satin slip. Also remarkable is the shapeless brown burlap tunic that Celestina wears throughout the play.

All of the actors perform their roles well and project the nuances of the dialogue and asides clearly. José Enrique Díaz plays Calisto in a somewhat subdued and straightforward manner, downplaying the character's parodic exaggerations. The blond and elegant Silvia Sierra makes a striking Melibea. She conveys the character's growth —perhaps a bit too abruptly— from an uncertain and sheltered young person to a desiring woman writhing (literally) in the throes of passion. Of the secondary characters, Pármeno and Elicia are the most effective, the former convincingly conflicted and wavering in his loyalties, the latter giving a very physical performance that is both bold and bawdy, especially in the upstairs-downstairs bedroom farce scene of Act One.

As for the anti-heroine herself, it is perhaps not surprising, given the challenges of simultaneously directing and acting, that Córdoba's performance as *Celestina* is not as compelling as one would wish. Although she possesses considerable stage presence, Córdoba is too attractive, youthful, and lithe to play the old bawd weighed down by age and poverty, despite the aforementioned burlap tunic that hides her figure. Nor in this reviewer's opinion does she project the power of verbal manipulation that is central to the character and her interactions with her clients. It should be noted, however, that Córdoba received an Association of Critics of Entertainment (ACE) award for her acting and direction of the play.

On its website Teatro Círculo describes itself as «a theater company founded by a group of Puerto Rican artists with a strong academic background committed to preserving and promoting our cultural heritage through the presentation of creative, inclusive and educational theater works. It is our purpose to expose the public to the best works of Spanish and Puerto Rican playwrights, both contemporary and classical and in general, to foster an appreciation of the richness of Latin American and Iberian cultures in the context of the pluralism that characterizes NYC.» Their effective stage adaptation of *Celestina* performed before a full audience of Hispanics and Spanish-speakers at Chamizal, demonstrates that they are fulfilling their cultural mission.

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