

## **-Introduce selves, name, major, minor, Female empowerment in hispanic classical theater**

In this presentation Sarah and I will discuss the TPG that we conducted this past summer where we did qualitative research on how different contemporary theater companies are dealing with the need to expand the roles available to women in the Spanish *comedia*, or Golden age plays from the Renaissance. We will discuss our findings while on this theory-to-practice grant, how the questions we were asking fit into a larger movement within the world of theater, as well as how this experience influenced our current projects.

## **Took an Early Modern Spanish Literature and Culture class of Spring 2018**

The course that we took on Early Modern Spanish Literature and Culture was designed to promote students' understanding of the analysis, adaptation and performance of the Spanish *comedia*. To accomplish this, the class was assigned to

- work in groups of about 4 people each in different comedias.
- abridge the three-act plays into shorter versions for 15-minute performances.
- learn parts and rehearsed for a final class show.
- Perform the adaptations before a large audience.

**ADRIAN** - Reading and condensing so many classical Spanish texts allowed us to see patterns in how men and women were interacting and the roles available to actresses. We noticed that men had more types of roles available to them and in higher numbers.

A little bit of background on the Spanish *comedia*. The Spanish comedias are not separated into the traditional categories of comedy vs tragedy, but contain a mixture of both comic and tragic elements. The characters all fall into distinct categories that perform certain

kinds of actions in the play, like in the comedia del arte style. There are multiple stock roles available to male actors. They can play the galan, the young male love interest, or the graciosos, his funny, greedy side-kick. Or they can play the concerned father, or a stately neighbor or nobleman. In contrast, women only have two roles available to them, the dama, or lady, the female protagonist and or love interest, or her servant, la criada, who is often paired with gracioso in a love affair. The Spanish comedia does have many good female protagonists, they often go for what they want, they might cross dress, or use their wit to overcome obstacles, but their stories always revolve around love, and the characters are always young, which leaves out a significant portion of the population. Not to mention playing the same type of character can get old and the roles within each production are more limited for women than men.

Because of the central role golden age plays still play in the literary and cultural landscape of the Spanish speaking world, Sarah and I wondered what sorts of practices and approaches were being implemented centuries later to expand the roles available to women. This drove us to write a theory to practice grant to travel to Almagro for the annual International theater festival to analyze how different companies were tackling the issue of gender and representation.

## **Theory to Practice Grant Info:**

### **Objectives:**

Our goal is to understand Classical Spanish theater as a vehicle for women's empowerment and/or marginalization, both within its original 17<sup>th</sup> century context and in contemporary society. We will do this by attending the Almagro National Theater Festival in Spain, participating in a theater workshop that focuses on gender, and conducting interviews with Spanish theater and history specialists. Seeing professional portrayals of these classic

scripts will allow us to analyze how contemporary performers and directors retain or challenge the gender dynamics “inherent” in these stories. Overall, we want to discover how reinterpretation and rereading (specifically through a feminist lens) of canonical plays can yield positive societal changes for women.

We learned how cross-dressing, casting women in men’s roles, and innovative ways of costuming can reshape the narrative being presented. Mayte Bona, actress and costume designer of Morfeo Teatro, prefers playing masculine or androgynous characters because of the wider range of roles available to her that way. Their company usually doesn’t change the gender of the character, but instead casts her in the traditionally male roles. Another group costumed *Desengaños Amorosos* non traditionally, giving the characters more modern dress, and dressing one of the women in pants.

The theater company Morfeo Teatro has a strong background not only in performance but also in the historical context of the theater, and they had a lot to teach us about the history of women in Spanish theatre. We learned how women have been challenging tradition in comedias since those traditions were established even if their protestations have been erased by history. There were many female directors and playwrights during the golden age, and actresses were often the star individuals of their companies, not only because they had to be very talented to land more limited roles but because men loved seeing women dressed in pants, which happens a lot in comedias. All of this is not to say that we shouldn’t be critical of the roles available to women in these productions or expand them in the modern day, but we learned a valuable lesson that we should not assume that women in early modern times were not doing anything to challenge the limited roles available to them. We need to acknowledge those women of the past who did make their voices heard even if the history books written by men don’t give them any credit.

Adaptation was another important element to the works we studied. One company in particular, Teatro Inverso, created a show called *Rosaura*, which is based off of the Golden Age classic *Life is a Dream* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. In it, they tell the story from the perspective of the main female character, Rosaura, rather than focusing on the protagonist of the original, the prince Segismundo. Teatro Inverso uses Storytelling and more modern performance styles to bring this story to an audience. Other performances we saw could also be considered adaptations in certain ways. Almagro's productions of *La cueva de Salamanca*, *De lo fingido verdadero*, and *El banquete* all took a very metatheatrical approach. *La cueva de Salamanca* and *De lo fingido verdadero* set the original Cervantes and Lope works as a play-within-a-play. *El banquete*, of *The Banquet* was a collection of scenes from classical plays presented in an immersive environment where the audience was seated in long banquet tables in a U-shape and the performance happened all around us. We noticed that all of these adaptations allowed for women to develop more roles, diversifying the characters they were portraying onstage. They were able to perform as both the Golden Age characters written as well as present-day actors putting on the show, or in the case of *El banquete*, multiple classical roles in the same performance. Almagro's production of *Desengaños Amorosos* was adapted from what was originally a novel written during the same period.

We also learned about our own preconceived notions and how to challenge those, which Adrian will touch more on.

## **ADRIAN -**

Another very important part of untangling the narrative surrounding the roles available to women in these classical texts was to free ourselves of our own preconceived notions of the meaning of the text. The workshop with Teatro Inverso was key in this process. Sarah and I had

to memorize Segismundo's and Rosaura's monologues from *La Vida es sueño*, or *Life is a dream*, a play that is as famous in the Spanish-speaking world as *Hamlet* is in English. Within the workshop we did many exercises designed to loosen us up physically and mentally enough to play with the text, to see what new kinds of meaning could arise if we used these famous words to give voice to our own experiences. We realized that just with a change of tone or body language Segismundo's monologue could be said by children playing on the ground, or by gossiping housewives, or existential college students, or they could just be so many sounds and rhythms. These monologues might exist within a set sequence of events in the play, but understanding the vast possibilities within each word is itself a whole avenue to extract new meaning and new ways of expressing identity within each play.

Professional actors and directors no doubt understand this about plays, that in approaching a new production you aren't limited to the interpretations of previous plays or your own preconceived notions of play. But as college students studying these plays through a literary lens, Sarah and I came in with an idea that the way gender was being portrayed in these plays as being linked to the text itself, when it was just as often our own ideas of gender that were forming how we approached the text in the first place. So a production doesn't have to change the script to bring out a whole new side of the play, the actors just have to approach the script differently in their minds. We would never have grasped this if we had not participated in a workshop where the actresses are constantly reimagining the text.

Of all the activities we did during our trip, this was the most revolutionary for our understanding of the transformative possibilities contained within literature and performance. Without travel, we could never remotely replicate such a hands-on, movement oriented, impulse driven exploration of theater without the human connection and guidance of Paula and Sandra of Teatro Inverso without the travel component of the theory to practice grant.

## **Closing Remarks:**

Dr. Nieto and I went on Dr. Long's Travel Learning Course "Shakespeare and Sites of Performance," where we saw the production of *Hamlet* at the Globe, directed by and starring Michelle Terry as Hamlet. Hers was not the only role in the production that was gender-bent, or given a sense of fluidity. Ophelia was played by a man, Horatio by a woman, and Guildenstern by a woman as well. These choices allowed the audience to see each character in a new light, bringing out different perspectives on the same words that had been spoken for centuries by giving additional layer to a character's identity and story. This was especially relevant in the case of Guildenstern. The actress was Deaf and used British Sign Language to deliver her lines. This not only added another culture to consider when understanding the character, but showed to an extra extent how powerful nontraditional casting can be when trying to expand an audience's point of view.

So while Sarah and I were looking at an exploration of women and gender within a specific genre of Spanish theater, the impulse to reexamine and explore identities that have traditional been excluded from the theatrical world is part of a larger social movement within contemporary theater.

## **How it's affected our current projects:**

The outcome of this experience is that I have a new appreciation for the transformative power of performance. That is why I am writing an article with Professor Nieto about the effects of cross-dressing Hamlet and Segismundo in the recent productions from the Globe and the **National Theater of Madrid** using Judith Butler's and Beauvoir's gender theories as a frame.

The process of conducting this TPG helped highlight for me which aspects of research I really enjoy, I found interviewing people to be the most personally rewarding. I loved exchanging ideas with Morfeo Teatro and Teatro Inverso and nitpicking their brains and most importantly get a contact high from their enthusiasm and energy. Having to think of good questions to ask actors and directors was also very helpful for me in configuring the information I had learned within my brain. I've taken every opportunity to interview more people since this experience. We were able to publish our interview of Teatro Inverso in the December, 2018 volume of *Anagnorisis*, an academic Spanish theater journal.

I wrote a second TPG once we were back on campus in the fall to bring Teatro Inverso to OWU for a performance of Rosaura and to do workshops with me and another student. Monty Almoró and I are planning our Theatre senior capstone project inspired by their work, and they have helped us to develop a draft of our own script-- our take on retelling *Life is a Dream* for a modern audience. I will be studying abroad in Madrid in the fall, and the performance would then be in the spring semester.

Adrian, Dr. Nieto, and I also traveled to El Paso, Texas two weeks ago to give a similar presentation to this one at the annual Symposium of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theatre.

This Conference was a very good experience. The positive feedback we received from multiple academics in the field on our project has given us even more confidence as we move forward in our academic and professional careers.