

Diversifying the Classics: Suggestions for Production

In our experience working on translations and adaptations in Los Angeles, we have found that theater practitioners are both surprised and delighted by what the *comedia* has to offer. From Lope de Vega and Guillén de Castro to their distinguished peer from across the Atlantic, the Mexican Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, the corpus has a great deal to offer those who want to venture beyond Shakespeare to imagine a more diverse repertoire.

Comedias were plays for the people: performances took place in open-air theaters, where audiences of all classes and both sexes commingled. At the same time, the works are sophisticated dramas, offering pointed reflections on the constructed nature of class and gender as well as the performativity of social roles, issues that resonate with audiences today. The *comedia* offers fantastic roles for women, many of them written for famous actresses in the period—unlike in Elizabethan England, in Spain there were women on stage, although they still relished cross-dressing plots.

We aim above all for language that will work for actors and allow them to shine. We have tested our translations both in our workshop, which is regularly attended by practitioners, and in staged readings by Chalk Repertory Theatre and the UCLA Department of Theater. Our translations include dramaturgical introductions and annotations. We are also available to supply additional support for productions as necessary, and to translate or adapt any play not on the list below. Please contact Barbara Fuchs at fuchsbar@humnet.ucla.edu for further information, or follow our work at <http://diversifyingtheclassics.humanities.ucla.edu/>

The plays:

Guillén de Castro, *The Force of Habit*: Can gender be learned and unlearned? Félix and Hipólita, two siblings separated at birth, are brought up in the habits of the opposite gender. Kept close by his mother's side, Félix is timid and sensitive. Hipólita, trained by her father on the battlefield, is fiercely attached to her sword. When the family is reunited, the father insists on making the siblings conform to traditional gender roles. Helped along the way by their respective love interests, the two gradually assume traditional positions, but their journeys expose the limitations of the gender system. **Substantial roles: 7 male, 4 female.**

Lope de Vega, *A Wild Night in Toledo*: In Spanish popular culture, the phrase “una noche toledana” refers to a long and sleepless night of wild, often amorous intrigues, or of unrelenting annoyances. Such is the case in this funny, fast-moving play, in which young men and women cross paths at a hostel in a single night. Under the covers of darkness and disguise, they use ingenuity and humor to navigate personal desires, negotiate collective frustrations, and test whether they can rewrite their destinies alongside their identities. **Substantial roles: 10 male, 3 female.**

Lope de Vega, *Women and Servants*: Recently rediscovered in Madrid's National Library, this *comedia* emerges from its 400-year sleep with a remarkable freshness: it presents a world of suave dissimulation and accommodation, where creaky notions of honor and vengeance have virtually no place. Lope depicts a sophisticated urban culture of self-fashioning and social mobility, as the titular figures outsmart fathers and masters to marry those they love. The sisters Luciana and Violante prefer their choices to men of higher standing, and are more than capable of getting their way. **Substantial roles: 8 male, 3 female.**

Guillén de Castro, *Unhappily Married in Valencia*: Amazingly modern, this biting comedy shows what happens *after* the traditional happy ending. Two married couples air their disillusion with marriage, while the cross-dressed mistress of one of the husbands merrily manipulates one and all. With everyone attracted to the wrong person, innuendo, accusations, and revenge steal the show. **Substantial roles: 5 male, 3 female.**

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, *What We Owe Our Lies*: Mexican writer Alarcón imagines a Madrid in which a foreign suitor can wreak havoc with preexisting alliances. Urbanity and urban space are at the heart of this play: how do you sort out your affections when the women you court live literally on top of each other, in a house with multiple stories? Parents remain offstage as sons and daughters must figure out their obligations to each other and to who they are, or at least who they say they are. **Substantial roles: 5 male, 4 female.**

Lope de Vega, *The Widow from Valencia (in progress)* introduces audiences to Leonarda, a young woman intent on protecting the freedom afforded to her by her husband's death. While she first rejects a series of potential suitors in order to conserve her liberty, she soon begins clandestinely pursuing a lover from behind the “invisibility” of her veil. Hers is a balancing act of appearances and disappearances, aspirations and desires. **Substantial roles: 7 male, 3 female.**

Sample excerpts:

1) Hipólita says goodbye to her sword after living as a man for twenty years

Guillén de Castro, *The Force of Habit*

[Raised on the battlefield, Hipólita must now return to society and learn to behave as a young lady. Forced to abandon the only identity she has ever known, she bids her trusty sword a bitter farewell.]

I cannot take this quietly—
I must say a proper goodbye!

She draws her sword

Oh sword! I worship
the cross of your hilt
and your blade of steel.
I can have no hope
of buckling you on again,
for it would be cruel,
dishonorable, disloyal
to take you up once I'd placed
a knitting needle
where you used to be.
And yet,
how much more honor is there,
valiant sword,
in detecting an ambush
in your polished steel
than in gazing at braids
in the looking-glass.

Time is unjust—
being a man
suited me so well,
that just as my disposition changed,
my gender should have changed too.

Oh my sword!
Banished from my side,
perhaps you could bend a little,
although you are made of steel,
and return where you used to be,
so close and well girded.
Sword of my life,
heaven knows,
this hand never
drew you to your shame!

And if obedience
did not force my hand,
no one could take you from it.
I would guard you and defend you.
Let him whom I obey
bear witness that I leave you
out of obedience and honor,
to my great sorrow,
but not for cowardice, no.

2) Having accidentally brought her love and her rival together, Lisena fears the worst
Lope de Vega, *A Wild Night in Toledo*

[Disguised as a servant at the inn, Lisena has accidentally locked up Florencio, the man she loves, with her beautiful rival, Gerarda. Dismayed, she bemoans her ill luck.]

Who has ever suffered like this?
On this night when I feared that
my jealousy would prove justified,
when I thought everything
was well under control,
with my enemy locked up
and rendered harmless,
that vile Innkeeper
puts them in the same room!

But no, he doesn't know what's going on,
or that they're in there together.
I put them into that room,
so that I could be safe,
as long as I kept hold of the keys.
He must have given them that room
because they fear the Law,
and they can reach the monastery from there.
Unaware of my misfortune,
he's put the four of them together!

Together! They are in there together,
with plenty of time and space
to enjoy each other at will.
Just kill me with love, jealousy!
And I was the key,
I gave Florencio and Gerarda
the chance to be together!

My God!
How can I live with the thought of it,
happening now, this very moment?
Florencio with another woman,
before my very eyes!
Together in the same room,
holding, embracing one another.
How can I know it, see it,
allow it, hold my tongue?
How can I not call on the heavens?
How can I not scream and rant?
How can I not go mad,
and break down those vile doors,
though they were made of diamond
to barge in and kill them?
Just kill me with love, jealousy!
And I was the key,
I gave Florencio and Gerarda
the chance to be together!

Florencio, you traitor,
I am Lisena. If you claim you left me
because I gave you reason to be jealous,

then why do you resort to deception?
I have always loved you, you cruel man.
Don't give me reasons to forget you.
You were my first love—
I never loved before or after.

Oh Heavens, I am trembling.
Did they come here to meet?
Have they already recognized each other in there?
Does she want him to hold her in his arms?
Or are they hiding in silence,
because Gerarda doesn't know
who has come in,
and Florencio doesn't know it's Gerarda?
What terrible confusion!

But they will talk.
One of them will certainly make noise,
and the other one will ask something.
Or simply because he hears breathing,
looking nervous, Florencio will ask,
suspiciously, "Who is there?"
How can Gerarda, after hearing his voice,
possibly stay away from him?
Lovers' arms work more quickly than their voices.
How then, my sorrows,
am I to endure you,
when you allow them
to enjoy each other?

I will not allow it,
I will tear you to pieces, oh doors,
And may fire consume you,
though I die in the attempt
a Samson to this dreadful temple.
Just fall on me, kill me already.
And I was the key,
I gave Florencio and Gerarda
the chance to be together!

3) **Luciana and her servant Inés discuss what women really mean when they make promises**
Lope de Vega, *Women and Servants*

- Inés If Teodoro's jealousy is all about your not receiving the Count's letters, you must take them secretly.
- Luciana And my oath?
- Inés I'll get to that. Just listen, and don't lose any more sleep over it. Did you say which hand wouldn't take any letters?
- Luciana No.
- Inés Well, then you have an easy way out! Even if you can't remember exactly what you swore, if you said the right, then you'll just take them with the left. It makes me laugh to hear lovers speak of truth when they're apart—that's just fine nonsense! When a woman says, "I cannot even dine, I am so miserable," she will have lunch ten times over, because lunch is not dinner, see? When she says she has not slept, she means "in her clothes," for of course she slept once she got undressed. And when she says, "When I don't see you I find everything tiresome," of course she's not referring to parties, or men, or money. If she swears over and over again "to be your slave for life," clearly it's because life is but a day. Is there any religion—look at the examples I come up with!—that can make a meal last from one day to the next? And in love, which is a tyrannical faith, no woman should save a man for tomorrow when she can have him today.
- Luciana You must be joking, Inés. Surely you are not serious.
- Inés Yes, this is all just nonsense—I'm just joking with you. An honorable woman should profess only truth, constancy, and chastity until love leads to holy marriage.

4) Eugenia bemoans her marriage and describes her ideal man
Guillén de Castro, *Unhappily Married in Valencia*

How could I be jealous
of a husband I retain
yet have no love for, only disdain?
And what I've suffered here
all comes from this:
that the husband who's bound to me
has never had my love.

Women want men
who are not so easily moved,
who are what they seem
in thought, word, and deed.
It's inevitable, I fear,
that you'll come to detest the one
you're stuck with for life,
especially if he acts like a woman.

I trust you,
and hope you can find
a cure for my woes:
I'm dying to have a husband
who is the opposite of mine—
a tireless man about town,
a hungry wolf.
Loving all and keeping none,
his sword abides
by fury and reason,
punching one here
and slashing another there.

That kind of man consumes me—
he is just my type.
And don't be surprised,
oh, Antonio!, that these men
drive a woman crazy.
Those are men to love,
those are men to adore,
they heat up the senses,
and set a woman on fire.

5) Diego tries to sort the lies from the truth amid accusations of false love

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, *What We Owe our Lies*

[Diego is offended when his beloved accuses him of playing false. He defends himself against her doubts, while at the same time making his own misgivings clear.]

How can my unlucky stars
so mislead a noble heart
to such malicious judgments?
Go on, oh ingrate, oh cruel one!
It's so subtle of you
to deny your fickleness
by inventing faults for me!
Given that Leonor adores me,
and that don Sancho wants me
to take her hand in marriage
who is it up to? Who?
Is it not up to me?

If I loved her and just pretended
to disdain her for your sake,
what would stop me now,
when I know that you know
and that I pretend in vain?
Especially when you've so wronged me
in both word and deed,
that I'd be justified in changing my mind,
and even in taking my revenge.
Would I not be knocking down her door?
Would I not be fulfilling my designs?
Would I be here explaining myself to you?
Would I be hanging on your every whim?

So if I leave her and seek you out,
if I flee her and pursue you,
if I adore you and despise her,
if I beg you and resist her,
how can you not be satisfied?
What other possible crimes
am I accused of to justify
this notorious treatment?

Say that you've changed your mind, you traitor,
say that don Sancho is richer,
say that I am a poor wretch,
say that your love was feigned,
say that I do not deserve you;
but do not deny my devotions,
when their strength could have pierced
even a heart made of stone!

6) **The widowed Leonarda chooses not to remarry and complains about men's low intentions**

Lope de Vega, *The Widow from Valencia*

You can accuse me of nothing,
and unless you've something to add,
I've already heard you out.
Tell me, Lucencio,
should I risk sinfulness
for your sake?
Would you want that for me,
when all the authors agree
in condemning remarriage?
Is not prudent and chaste widowhood
universally praised?
Even jealous slander
cannot last for long.
The truth soon comes out,
and a good name rises,
like a phoenix from the flames,
to welcome a new day.

Who, I ask you, would want
one of those candy-coated dandies
in a rakish hat,
short feathers, new sashes,
shirt open just so,
and Italian linen—
nice and clean on the outside,
old and grimy on the inside.
Boots so tight they won't come off,
not for months at a time,
baggy stockings down below,
and a mustache out to here,
with toupees and pomade,
fake necklaces to impress with,
scented gloves—
a great one for sonnets and love letters.
With those immaculate hands
he'll snatch at three thousand a year,
ready to take his ease
between sheets of the finest silk.

Before a week's out,
he'll be off to find other women
or return to old loves,
and so forsake mine.
He will come home late,
I will be jealous.
He'll throw my money around,
and then we will argue
about what he has and has not done.
I'll hide it and he'll give it away,
taking on debts in my name.
The police will come knocking,
there will be yelling and screaming.
Day and night, he'll stir up the house.
And the more I give in,
the more he'll grant me
such fine and noble titles
as Countess Kicked-and-Slappedinthe face.
I have said quite enough.