

UCLA Diversifying the Classics: The *Gracioso* in Comedia



MFA students from UCLA TFT playing graciosos in *The Widow of Valencia*

The *gracioso* has its roots in the buffoons of Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and his traits can be traced back to the stock characters of the Italian tradition: he's usually a servant to the leading man, cowardly and lazy. He loves money, pleasure, and food. However, the Spanish comedia develops this character type into a more complex comic foil for the male protagonist(s), serving as advisor, friend, and social counterpoint. Despite his lower social class, the *gracioso* is often witty, or at least canny, and is able to see the threads of the plot with more clarity than other characters. He may be either a help or hindrance to the lead players, according to his own needs.

The comedic force of comedia often depends on this character, mining the contrast between a servant's lower-class view of the world, more concerned with instant gratification and material desires, and the more abstract pursuit of love and honor supposedly sought by the nobler master. Because the *gracioso* is often framed as unsophisticated and even foolish, he can be explicitly critical of the upper classes and of society at large, in a way akin to Shakespeare's fools; *graciosos* can afford to be plain spoken about social artifice and other foibles because they exist outside the social demands their masters experience.

Graciosos are also often vehicles for metatheatricality, bringing the audience in as co-conspirators with asides that playfully point out the artificiality, melodrama, or silliness on stage, as in Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs* when the *gracioso* Ribete laments his role in life (and in the show): "Why must the servants always be the hungry cowards and play the fool? [...] Couldn't the servant be twice as brave as his master?"

The comedic value of the *gracioso* is deeply embedded, so that even his name makes puns easy: Catalinón from the Don Juan play *The Trickster of Seville* means "scaredy cat"; Martes, from Lope de Vega's *Women and Servants* means both "Mars" and "Tuesday," for double the pun. A male *gracioso* is often paired with a female servant: they either scheme together to bring about the desired outcome for their masters, flirtatiously counter each other's desires, or serve as the subplot to the play. The value of these characters should not be underestimated: according to contemporary records, the actors who could best play *graciosos* were often the most sought after and the best paid in the company.