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"Notes on Adapting and Interpreting La Celestina : The Art of Alvaro Custodio and Amparo Villegas"

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The history of the productions of La Celestina in Mexico reveals the art of two individuals, Alvaro Custodio and Amparo Villegas.¹ What Custodio was seeking to create was a hispanic classical theatre tradition in Mexico. His productions of La Celestina in 1953 and 1968 were significant contributions to such a tradition. Custodio's transference of the "novela dialogada" to the stage was a masterly adaptation of the theatrical elements within Rojas' tragi-comedy. Amparo Villegas's presence in Mexico provided him with an actress with abundant experience on the Spanish stage, who did not suffer from some of the faults of actresses of her period. Although Virginia Manzano played the role of Celestina in the 1968 staging of the work, Amparo Villegas would remain identified with the role in the minds of many theatregoers. When she came on stage at the inauguration of the Teatro Julio Jiménez Rueda in 1965 she was given an ovation, and Juan Miguel de Mora describes her performance thus, "La inesperada ovación (ninguna de las actrices que la precedieron había sido aplaudida antes de su interpretación) alteró muy justificadamente sus nervios, pero cuando se repuso, dijo la Celestina, de esa manera extraordinaria que solamente a ella la hemos oído."²

Both Amparo Villegas and Alvaro Custodio came from families connected with the theatre in Spain. Custodio says, "La calle en que yo nací se llamó la Calle de las Comedias."³ As he describes his childhood, it is clear that not only was he born on a street with a fitting name but that his memories of theatre go back almost to the beginning of his life. "Seguramente," he continues, "el teatro que hizo mi abuelo era el último teatro que existió en la época que yo conocí, pero debería haber un corral de comedia antes o cosa por el estilo en ese lugar." Custodio saw all of the acting companies that passed through his grandfather's Teatro Custodio in Ecija, in the province of Sevilla, such as those of Rosario Piña and Francisco Morano, the husband of Amparo Villegas. He knew many of the actors as well as if they were members of his family. "La fotografía en que estoy de la mano de mi chacha la hizo María Guerrero." He relates that a brother, who was ten years older than he once ran away to Cordoba, about seventy kilometers away, "porque quiso ir con doña María Guerrero y don Fernando porque los quería mucho." If a child were needed for a part, Custodio would fill in. Besides acting in the theatre, it was where he played. As he puts it, "He jugado en el teatro desde niño porque, claro, la mayor parte del año en un pueblo el teatro está cerrado."

A valuable source of information about interpretations and adaptations of La Celestina is the writing of Custodio in newsletters and in his edition of La Celestina.⁴ Custodio describes the purpose of the newsletters in this way,

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"Nuestro boletín mensual publicará artículos, ensayos y estudios sobre el arte escénico y dará cuenta detallada de las actividades de nuestra compañía" (Boletín, Septiembre y Octubre 1959, p. 10). With few exceptions, Custodio himself has written the newsletters. Occasionally, he includes a letter from some one and also reviews of productions. The value of the Boletín and the supplementary sheets, Notas y Comentarios, is twofold: 1) as a record, both written and pictorial, of some thirty productions of the TCDM in the twenty years of its existence from 1953 to 1973 (the company began in 1953, but the Boletín started five years later), and 2) as a source of Custodio's critical opinion of other productions in Mexico, as well as in the United States and Europe, as he travelled widely in the 1960's and 1970's.

Both publications were directed to the patrons and friends of the TCDM. It should be remembered that since 1950, the period of greatest theatrical activity in Mexico, there have been few publications in that country devoted to theatre that have lasted more than a few years. Among the defunct ones are: Panorama del Teatro en México, Boletín Teatral, and Teatro, Boletín de Información e Historia, all dating from the early to mid fifties. This makes the Boletín and Notas y Comentarios more valuable as a record of part of the theatrical activity of the contemporary period.

Custodio writes in Notas y Comentarios of a decisive moment in his life, the period that he spent traveling with Lorca's theatrical group in the north of Spain, "La Barraca, Santillana del Mar y ... así que pasen (sic) 40 años" (No. 29, pp. 4-7). In that article he explains, "Yo también (the same as Modesto Higuera, another member of La Barraca, in Spain) dirigió teatro en México. Nuestro maestro, sin proponérselo fue García Lorca."⁵ Custodio, a liberal Spanish Republican, reached Mexico in 1944. After his arrival he wrote movie scripts, which he rejects, and also was the movie critic for Excelsior. However, of prime importance in understanding Custodio's work with the TCDM is the original impetus that his period as an actor in Lorca's university theatre traveling group, La Barraca, in the summer of 1932, gave him. Custodio has, essentially, carried on in the tradition of Lorca in bringing classical theatre to the people, as the dramatist did with La Barraca, although on a professional, rather than on a university, level. Custodio's productions in Mexico began with his adaptation of La Celestina in 1953 and ended with his adaptation of several works by Cervantes into a mojiganga called El Patio de Monipodio in 1973. Since 1973 he has lived in Spain.

While Custodio's formation in the theatre came partially from La Barraca, Amparo Villegas received her theatrical training on the Spanish stage. Her theatrical background goes back, as does Custodio's to childhood, since her father was the noted theatre critic, Francisco Fernández Villegas "Zeda," who was additionally an adapter of classical plays. Amparo, in the words of Custodio, "se entregó al teatro como Santa Teresa a la Iglesia por una vocación tocada de ese misterioso fluido místico que lleva hasta el éxtasis" (NyC, No. 26, 1969, p. 2). In the original TCDM production of La Celestina, only Amparo Villegas had had notable experience in classical drama. "Exceptuando la experiencia de Amparo Villegas, que fue primera actriz de uno de los más grandes actores del siglo, Francisco Morano, los demás actores no poseían otra que sus leves incursiones en alguna obra clásica o romántica del repertorio

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español, pero sobre todo, la de obras extranjeras o el melodrama y el "astracán" hispano del teatro comercial," as Custodio notes (NyC, No. 23, Julio-Agosto 1968, p. 1).

He speaks of working to train these actors by having them read first and later say from memory, "la difícil prosa de la tragicomedia incomparable" (Ibid.). There were, too, difficulties in training the actors to speak with a Castilian accent. When he felt that they were sufficiently prepared to grapple with the language, he gave them long explanations about the personality of each character, and tried to imbue them with the spirit of the epoch in which the work was conceived. From the actors he trained were to come some of the leading actors in Mexico such as Ignacio López Tarso, Pármeno, in the original staging in 1953.

Amparo Villegas, although her career spanned over two thirds of the twentieth century was not an actress weighed down by old-fashioned Spanish acting mannerisms. Hers was, rather, a subdued style which Custodio describes in this way, "el estilo interpretativo de Amparo Villegas estaba en desacuerdo con el de la mayoría de las actrices españolas de su época: su expresión era concentrada, interna, con una absoluta economía de gestos y movimientos. Nunca recurrió al grito ni al latiguillo y huyó siempre, por naturaleza, del efectismo escénico" (Ibid., p. 3). As he views her in relation to her interpretation of Celestina, he notes, "El valor de la que ha sido quizás la más grande interpretación de su vida--el papel de Celestina--estribaba en la intención, el gracejo, la ironía y fuerza dramática de aquella escena final en que la vieja proxeneta es asesinada a cuchilladas. Sus parlamentos eran ricos en matices, sobriamente dichos, sin canturreo ni aceleraciones innecesarias. Su mismo maquillaje era simple, sin truculencia, de una naturalidad impresionante" (NyC, No. 26, 1969, p. 3). She was, moreover, according to Custodio, a disciplined actress who followed the instructions of the director.

From a poem, "Semblanza de Amparo Villegas," by Francisco Morano in whose company she was the leading actress from 1914 to 1934, comes a description of what she was like physically and mentally, "Arrogante y altiva; sana y fuerte; vió la luz en la docta Salamanca y aun cuando no formó en Estudiantinas/hace honor al manteo y la cuchara" (Ibid.). He writes of her "figura gentil; más que mediana," "el sedoso cabello," "los ojos pardos," "sus cejas negras y pobladas," and the "dibujo perfecto" of her mouth. He describes her hands as "Manos finas.. de abate petimetre." Housekeeping was not her forte. "Mujer de gran disposición, excepto/para oficios prosaicos de la casa." Morano continues, in the poem, the description of her as being "De muy vasta cultura, y tan discreta/que sabiendo de mucho, escucha y calla, como si el escuchar le interesase/y el callar le sirviera de enseñanza." He comments on her as an actress, and the great feeling that she had for the theatre when he writes, "En ser actriz cifró todos sus sueños,/y es actriz, aplaudida y festejada./ Todo cuanto ella es ella lo debe, que en este batallar de la farándula,/ --en que muchos dejaron en girones/ el buen nombre y la fama--/triunfó sin malas artes, por su estudio,/ su afición, su talento y su constancia." Thus, as Morano pictures her in 1922 (the "Semblanza" was written in almost microscopic letters on the back of a portrait of the actress), and Custodio portrays her in 1969, a picture emerges of Amparo Villegas as a dedicated actress and

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admirable person. In the words of Custodio, "tuvo poco amor al dinero y a la publicidad, pero sí un ansia constante de perfección" (Ibid.).

In 1909, at the beginning of her career, she played Melibea at the Teatro Español of Madrid in her father's adaptation of La Celestina. As Custodio points out, in spite of the fact that "Zeda" had carefully edited strong expressions out of the drama, "la crítica y el público de aquella mojigata España salieron escandalizados del estreno, pero nadie escatimó los elogios para Melibea que presagiaban a una gran actriz" (Ibid., p. 2). Half a century later, people were still being scandalized by La Celestina, although this time, in the version of Alvaro Custodio which adheres more faithfully than Fernández Villegas's in its language to the original.

Three cartoons in Mexican periodicals highlight the difficulties that Custodio's adaptation encountered. Although La Celestina was revived in almost all of the seasons of the TCDM from 1953 to 1960, in that year, as the company was rehearsing, the Oficina de Espectáculos refused to permit the staging of the drama.⁶ A Guasp cartoon in Novedades (13 January 1960) after the play was prohibited showed one individual saying to another "Peredo (head of the Oficina de Espectáculos) volvió a suspender La Celestina..." and the reply is, "Nunca creí que era obra de tanto suspenso." In Excelsior (19 January 1960), Abel Quezada sketches Celestina with a black crow on her shoulder leaning over a bubbling pot of "Filtros para hacerse amar locamente," and part of the captions read, "El Departamento de Espectáculos decidió prohibir la representación de La Celestina, obra que fue publicada por primera vez en 1499 y que muchos críticos consideran como la más importante de la literatura española después del Quijote. En estos tiempos, tan cercanos espiritualmente a la Edad Media como lo estaban físicamente los tiempos en que Rojas escribió La Celestina, hay que tener mucho cuidado con las inmoralidades." A third cartoon by Alberto Isaac in Esto portrayed Peredo as a Neo-Nazi painting a swastika on a poster of La Celestina.

Custodio, in 1966, in the first of a series of Ediciones TCDM, edited his version of La Celestina, Adaptación a la escena en tres actos (Snow, LCDB 196.1). He was well aware of the futility of attempting to transpose Rojas' tragicomedy in its entirety to the stage. In "Proemio para el lector," he describes his adaptation thus, "Este no es el texto completo de La Celestina, sino un arreglo para llevarla a la escena con una duración no mayor de tres horas" (p. 15).

When the prohibition of La Celestina was lifted in 1968, and Custodio presented the drama in the Teatro Reforma, Amparo Villegas, over eighty at the time, no longer was able to play the role. Custodio found Virginia Manzano, an able Mexican actress to play the part. In 1973, in looking back at the production, Custodio said that "esta versión de La Celestina fue la más completa que hice en cuanto a montaje porque utilicé en ella decorados de tipo italiano inspirados en cuadros renacentistas con cambios que se hacían a vista del público" (Interview with Custodio in Mexico, January 1973). As he reminisced about the production as compared to earlier ones, he praised the interpretation of Virginia Manzano, "Es una actriz muy buena. No estaba nada mal en el papel. Yo diría que estaba bien, muy bien. Pero Vd. sabe que el recuerdo de las cosas siempre impresiona. Puede ser que estuvo incluso mejor que Amparo. ¿Quién sabe?

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Pero, para mí, la Celestina era Amparo Villegas" (Ibid.)

He viewed his relationship with the theatregoing public as a mission at the service of culture and art. Nor did he disappoint his public. As one critic, José Antonio Alcaraz points out, "Es a Alvaro Custodio y su infatigable esfuerzo que tenemos que agradecer este acontecimiento (La Celestina in 1968). El trabajo y la devoción de Custodio al través del tiempo nos han hecho ver lo mismo a Lope que a Calderón o Cervantes, aportando al riquísimo panorama de la vida teatral mexicana una valiosa información y una contribución de decisiva importancia... Aunque parezca tautología debe decirse que es tan importante que exista en México Alvaro Custodio como el que Alejandro (Jodorowsky) ejerza sus actividades. Nótese de paso que chileno uno, español el otro, han aportado al teatro de este país mucho más que cientos de nacionales..." (El Heraldo de México (13 febrero 1968).

Cipriano Rivas Cherif, famous Spanish director and brother-in-law of Manuel Azaña, maintained that Alvaro Custodio's greatest bit of good fortune was having Amparo Villegas in Mexico to interpret the role of Celestina in his adaptation of Rojas' tragicomedy.⁷ And Rivas Cherif had a valid point, for their association, which began in 1953 and lasted until her death in 1969, brought together a noted actress whose career had begun almost half a century earlier, and a director-producer whose career lay ahead of him. Amparo Villegas shared with Alvaro Custodio a love of Spanish classical theatre and an uncommon knowledge of that tradition. Dedicated theatre people such as Custodio and Villegas strive to outdo their own performances. For them, reaching new theatrical heights is at once an artistic endeavor and a cultural mission. Custodio respected her professional attitude toward her work; she, because of the presence of Custodio in Mexico, was able to interpret the role of Celestina many times, as well as appearing in numerous other TCDM productions. Both were driven by a desire to achieve artistic satisfaction: monetary considerations were secondary to each of them. For Amparo Villegas, playing the role of Celestina was the culmination of an acting career, which, in her youth, had included the part of Melibea: for Custodio, the production of La Celestina was the beginning of an imaginative career as adapter-director.



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NOTES

¹See my "Classical Theatre in Mexico in the 1950's," Latin American Theatre Review, 4, No. 2 (Spring 1971), 29-38 [Snow, Suplemento, S71], and "Alvaro Custodio and His Continuing Dream: The Teatro Clásico de México (hereafter TCDM) in the 1960's," LATR, 7, No. 2 (Spring 1974), 45-57 [Snow, Suplemento, S70]. I am currently revising my manuscript, History of the Cultural Activities of the TCDM, written with the co-operation of Custodio. Peter Earle has discussed the 1953 stage adaptation (Snow, LCDB 513).

²J. M. de Mora, Panorama del teatro en México, Mexico, 1970, p. 31. The other five actresses were: Carmen Montejo, María Teresa Rivas, Ofelia Guilmain, María Tereza Montoya, and Virginia Manzano.

³From a series of interviews I did with Custodio the first two weeks of January 1973 in Mexico City.

⁴La Celestina, Ediciones TCDM, 1966. In 1967, A. C. and Alan Stark translated the adaptation into English. This is unpublished.

⁵This article, slightly revised, also appeared in Primer Acto (Octubre 1972).

⁶See "A. C. and His Continuing Dream (referred to above, note 1)," for additional details about the prohibition.

⁷Interview with Cipriano Rivas Cherif at the University of the Americas, Mexico City, August 24, 1967, the year that Rivas Cherif, who also acted with the TCDM, died.



[Pármeno abre a Celestina y Sempronio]