



LA CELESTINA ON STAGE

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A stage adaptation of *La Celestina* was presented in November of 1977 at the University of California Berkeley, by the New York Spanish Company, Compañía de Teatro Repertorio Español.¹ First performed in New York in March of 1974, this version has since played in repertory in New York and on tour both in the United States and in Mexico. It was also presented at the IIO Festival Internacional Cervantes in Guanajuato, Mexico, and at the First Siglo de Oro Drama Festival at El Paso, Texas, where the production won all the awards in the professional theatre category.

The director of the company, Mr. René Buch, has composed a text which draws on Rojas' sixteen-act version. This adaptation, however, is much more than an abridgement of the original: major changes were seemingly dictated by practical and technical concerns. An example: in order to reduce the number of actors, Mr. Buch eliminates the role of Alisa and has Pleberio himself receive Celestina in his house. He also eliminates the roles of Tristán and Sosia and has the *mochachas* announce the death of Celestina, Sempronio and Pármemo to Calisto while Calisto is taking leave of Melibea--thus causing his fall from the wall and his death. For all practical purposes, the play ends with Celestina's death. Still, on the whole, Rojas' work shines through this arrangement designed to project Mr. Buch's interpretation of *La Celestina*. While Rojas integrated--with effective counterpoint--the idealized and erudite courtly tradition and its earthy, realistic counterpart, Mr. Buch assumes an anti-classical bias favoring the naturalistic elements.

In addition to an abridgement of the original, we witness a telescoping of events, often through a reshuffling of their order. The consummation of the love of Calisto and Melibea, as I have indicated, takes place before Celestina's death. Sempronio and Pármemo leave the lovers unguarded in their garden of delights to demand their share of the gold chain from Celestina. Hence, Buch wants us to feel that Celestina's blood is violently shed at the same time as Melibea and Calisto succumb to desire.

Rojas' various encounters between Calisto and Melibea are condensed

into Buch's single encounter. In one brief night, Calisto manages to speak to Melibea, overcome all the physical obstacles and gain entry into Melibea's private world. In an effort to intensify libidinal forces and render carnal fulfillment inevitable, Buch stages sudden encounters of the lovers from the very beginning of the action, and these rapid encounters become part of the texture of the work. They serve as a referential context for a magnetic, irresistible sexual force which dominates all of the characters' lives, but which is initially sublimated in the case of Calisto and Melibea. The creation of this visual intertext is supported on the semantic level by having Calisto's opening line,

"En esto veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios"

repeated by Calisto on successive meetings. Even though the scenes proceed in a fragmented collage-like form, an attempt to create a simultaneity of levels--dream-vision and reality--, the content of both levels is monosemous. That is, the dream-visions revealed in Buch's cinematographic flashes confirm the signified expressed in Calisto's line.

Buch's staging is simple, even sober: a ladder on each side of the stage is used as a perch for each of the *mochachas*. Center-stage, a loft reached by two separate ladders serves as the "locus amoenus" of the two lovers. The somber atmosphere is accentuated by the characters' basic black costumes. The staging creates a Caravaggesque chiaroscuro, naturalistic and dynamic, which charges the atmosphere with violent tensions and vigorous earthiness.

Unfortunately, the production conveys no sense of philosophical grandeur. By imposing his own vision of earthbound human relationships on Rojas' work, Buch loses most of the moral, philosophical and even poetical substance of his model. The result here reminds us of Caravaggio's manner of displacing the formal, contained Renaissance image in favor of scenes where contemporary low-life is dynamically portrayed. A vivid example of this technique occurs in Caravaggio's "Crucifixion of St. Peter," where the artist makes the workman's buttocks as important as St. Peter on the cross. Buch, for his part, stresses only the palpably sensual elements of Rojas' work though without descending to vulgarity. Pleberio's lament is reduced to a few scant lines, mutilating thereby its dramatic and philosophical impact.

It was only the role of Celestina which, though simplified and excised of all the demonic elements, maintained its dramatic force. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that the actress portrayed her character with dignity and a superbly vivid down-to-earth manner without falling into the picturesque. Celestina's scene with Parmeno and Areusa (Rojas, aucto VII) was one of the few places where Rojas' text was more fully reflected. Buch here has caught the rich artistry and complexity of Rojas' work, better than in the remainder of his adaptation.

The basic structure of Buch's version is characteristic of the rondo in its instrumental form. The main theme is provided by the recurrent

line already mentioned, "En esto veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios," which is spoken by Calisto as he witnesses the varied physical experiences of the characters (played simultaneously on stage). The signified is before us since the composite image embodies the sign and the referential context. Thus the secondary motif of the rondo here conveys the earthiness of the secondary characters. This motif stands in counterpoint to Calisto's thematic line. Calisto seems to be telling us that the *grandeza de Dios* consists of and is celebrated by the characters' pagan joy, desire, and fulfillment. Real space--shifting locale of the actions--and real time--chronological duration of the actions--are an emptiness; both concepts are suspended to allow the contrapuntal rondo to play itself out. The accidental death of Calisto brings this dance of life to an abrupt end. The repeated single line, "En esto veo, Melibea, la grandeza de Dios" has become an obsessive metaphor for Buch's dance of life and it drives out the multi-faceted world view of Rojas' original since the subordination--even, in some places, disappearance--of all other levels of meanings (in Rojas' text) leads us to consider the physical experience as the only reality (in Buch's). By juxtaposing the love scene of Pármeno and Areusa with that of Calisto and Melibea, the director focuses on physical possession as the pre-eminent, non-chromatic human reality.

Finally, we understand that the verticality emphasized by the use of ladders has no transcendental meaning but rather suggests a phallic presence, a constant reminder of the carnal thrust toward a single human goal. Buch's *Celestina* asks no disquieting metaphysical questions. If God is not dead, He is conspicuously absent from the consciousness of the characters.²

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¹ For additional information, see the first supplement to "*La Celestina: documento bibliográfico*," in CELESTINESCA, Vol. I, no. 1, pág. 35 (núm. 202).

² An initial version of this review was read in the *Celestina* Scholarship special session at the MLA Convention, Chicago, December, 1977.



Calisto escala el muro del huerto. Aucto XV^o. Grabado de la Comedia (Burgos, 1499?)