

 LA CELESTINA REVISITED

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Los Angeles has its own *Celestina* at last. The Bilingual Foundation of the Arts has engaged Alvaro Custodio to direct his own adaptation of *La Celestina* both in Spanish and English for its Inner City Cultural Center. The English and Spanish versions are performed on alternate nights, with some actors doubling roles in the two languages. Custodio has boldly taken the twenty-one act version of Rojas' work and has wrought with considerable skill a text in three acts. In spite of the substantial excisions, Custodio's sensitivity and literary awareness has enabled him to capture the thematic richness of *La Celestina* while at the same time projecting on stage a unified poetic whole. This is not a first for Custodio, who has successfully staged his version in Mexico in 1953 and 1968, and published its text in 1966 (see *Celestinesca* I [Mayo 1977], 13-17). His adaptation has won praise from no less an authority than María Rosa Lida de Malkiel in *La originalidad artística de La Celestina* (*passim*, see Index).

The quality of the adaptation notwithstanding, the production does offer some problems. The sober architectural set is designed to suggest separate entrances to Calisto's and Melibea's houses, while Celestina's is fittingly placed in-between. The transitions from one scene to another, however, often seem abrupt and confusing. The theatre's physical structure and stage dimension probably do not allow for a more imaginative staging and movement. All the action is, in fact, confined to one level. This becomes particularly damaging, I believe, when Calisto rushes from the scene of his love-making to come to the aid of his watchful servants and falls from the ladder to his death. Since the staging offers no suggestion of physical danger, Calisto merely runs offstage, with distant voices announcing his death. With ladder or wall missing, the viewer is left without a sense of dramatic immediacy, and therefore untouched by the tragedy. On the other hand, the theatre does offer a suitable and believable tower, and Custodio uses it skillfully. The distraught Melibea appears at a high window to one side of the theater to disclose her actions to Pleberio before leaping to her death. In this adaptation the role of Alisa is eliminated altogether and Pleberio is left therefore to mourn alone the futility, injustice and tragedy of life.

Unfortunately, David Estuardo, who plays Calisto both in Spanish and English, though handsome and brooding, lacks charm and the expressive potential of an inner world of passionate despair. But Victoria Richart portrays Melibea with a noble bearing, affecting passion, and a touch of playfulness.

At our first glimpse of Celestina's world, we catch her bent over a chest containing her savings and the girls' earnings. The chest and the money it contains are an extension of her person, not unlike the similar situation in Molière's *The Miser*. Later, when Sempronio and Parmeno come to claim their share of the earnings, we see her joyfully caress the contents of the cash-box. She appears in worshipful prayer before it. And finally, her refusal to part with any fraction of this hoard brings about her death. But the actress portraying the Spanish Celestina is too mannered to convey the psychological and linguistic riches we find in Rojas, nor does she reveal the dramatic range that we experienced in René Buch's Celestina as portrayed by Ofelia González, at Berkeley in 1977 (see *Celestinesca* II [Mayo 1978], 31-33). Lillian Adams, the English Celestina, has a better grasp of the role. Custodio deals elegantly with Celestina's supposedly demoniacal talents. He eliminates the infernal apparatus of potions and fetishes. Clearly, however, she knows how to exploit the rich vein of popular superstition. She takes her "tainted" *hilado* to Melibea's house, but her real powers do not lie with Satan but with her profound readings into the human psyche.

The most satisfying moments of the production are provided by Julio Medina's lively portrayal of Sempronio in both Spanish and English versions. Medina's superb expressive skills are pleasantly supported by the two *mochachas*, Irene de Bari and Ilka Tanya Payan.

Custodio has judiciously modernized the language of the Spanish original. It is a pleasure to report that the tone and form of the English version (produced by Carmen Zapata and Alan Stark in collaboration with Custodio) work especially well on stage.

The costumes are rich but not opulent and appropriately suggest the period. Melibea's refined elegance, in particular, reveals the talented hand of Mrs. Custodio.

All in all, *La Celestina* is alive and well this October 1978, even if a few of the actors were unable to meet the demands of the text or execute Custodio's praiseworthy intentions.

