

# CELESTINESCA

CELESTINA by FERNANDO DE ROJAS. Directed by CHRISTOPHER  
FETTES  
Drama Center, London. November 27-30, 1984

## A TRIPLE REVIEW

[I have received three independent assessments of this original stage performance in English of *Celestina*. Since all have the value of witness to what is too often an evanescent element in the "celestinesca" phenomenon--the live performance and adaptation--I have decided that it might be well to print all three. I do so in the order of their receipt. Ed.]

### 1. Review by David HOOK, King's College, University of London

A converted religious building in north London has now been the venue for *Celestina* rehearsals on two separate occasions. Charles Lewsen's 1978 production of Mabbe's translation for the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield (*Celestinesca* 2, no. 2 (Nov. 1978), 33-34) began its rehearsals at the Drama Centre London, and in the same room (though now graced with an auditorium not there in 1978) as Lewsen's rehearsals occupied, the Drama Centre's own production, directed by the Centre's Principal, Christopher Fettes, took place from 27 to 30 November 1984. The first performance was, through circumstances beyond the control of the Centre, the Dress Rehearsal, so the public were admitted free for that evening.

A set with a backdrop of arched doorways devoid of glazing, looking as though salvaged from demolition sites, was cunningly contrived to fit all the various requirements of the different locations of the action; a low platform to the (audience's) right of stage provided Elicia's bedroom in Act I, and Areusa's in Act VII and XVII; a higher level to the left of stage, reached by ladder, served as Melibea's fatal tower. The stage proper was occupied by a table to the right and a bed to the left, with a further table on the left between the scaffolding supports of the tower platform; this area provided all the main locations from Melibea's garden to Celestina's house with further action taking place behind the largely open backdrop when Pleberio and Alisa discuss marriage and when Calisto's servants are on duty outside the garden. Projecting "corridors" to right and left facilitated entrances and exits. Details of the set which one had not noticed suddenly became vital to the setting, as when the innocuous item on one of the doorframes sud-

denly served as a holy water stoup for the church scene in Act XI. An atmosphere of decay and corruption was conveyed by the broken wood and unglazed openings; a toppled urn and sweepings against the backdrop furthered this, and the costumes of the lower-class characters were impressively seedy against the restrained dignity of finery of Pleberio. Lighting, sound and mist effects were well contrived; the arrival of Pármeno and Sempronio at Celestina's house in Act XII during a thunder storm was an interesting touch.

The text upon which this production was based was Mabbe's 1631 version, and this was faithfully treated despite the need for considerable compression to fit the three hours and one quarter performance time. The servants (except Tristán) and prostitutes spoke in Irish accents; Celestina's otherness was emphasized, in a fine performance by Juanita Waterman, by her dark skin, so that she stood on her own, distinguished from the other low-life characters by accent, and from the other members of the cast by colour. Strong performances were the order of the day, and this was a superb production in every way. Even the intrusive pair of gangsters in streetwise modern garb, who spoke the *argumentos* to the acts, moved the props as necessary, and sat in various postures of arrogant decadence on stage throughout most of the action, smoking, playing chess and reading newspapers, had a point; played by Sosia and Tristán during the lives of Sempronio and Pármeno, they were replaced by the actors representing the latter when Tristán and Sosia came into the action, so that when one of them silently led Melibea to the edge of the tower as her speech to Pleberio in Act XX comes to an end, it was not surprising that the other should have appeared bearing a draped skeleton which represented Melibea's corpse for the final scene of Pleberio's lament.

Interpretations of the text which struck one as interesting and useful were the portrayal of Pármeno (Dominic Arnold) as Calisto's steward, with prominence among the props given to the account-book and papers; of Pleberio (Stephen Caro) as forceful and haughty, though with a tender touch for Melibea (Helen Parkinson). Andrew Latham's Tristán was a good interpretation of the undervalued page, while Brian Fearn's Sosia brought out the humour of the part to the full. Centurio (James Burton) played the scheming braggart well, and his acceptance of a cigarette from one of the mobsters seemed entirely appropriate despite the historical anachronism. Yvonne Orengo's Alisa was every inch the upper-class mother. Other parts were performed by Mark Schofield (Calisto), John Wagland (Sempronio - perhaps a little too similar to Centurio in some respects), Emma D'Inverno (Lucrecia, portrayed with a pronounced limp), Sarah Huntley (Elicia), Kate Gartside (Areúsa), and Bas Van Dam (Crito). The dress rehearsal was seen by a packed audience; it is a pity that the capacity was not greater, for this production deserved to be more widely seen.

2. Review by John LONDON, Oriel College, Oxford University

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To mount a production of *Celestina* is an ambitious project, but for students to attempt such a feat seems heroic. The problems are multiple. In the first place, an enormous amount of cutting has to be undertaken to shorten the nine hours that a representation of the original would take. With the total absence of stage directions it is difficult to know how much to include and how much to imply. There is also the vexing question of which translation to use.

The choice of Mabbe's version is an exciting one. The language has, at times, a conscious Shakespearean ring which can encapsulate the tragicomedy perfectly. This production has supplemented this linguistic wealth with such comments as "What's done cannot be undone," as Sosia cries after Melibea has bewailed the loss of her virginity. The phrasing can have a grandeur of its own in Areúsa's "Lett him be base that holdes him selfe base. They are the noble actions of men that make men noble..." or in the comedy of Celestina's comments about wine: "With this I furr all my clothes at Christmas; this warmes my blood, this keeps me still in one state, this makes me merrie where ere I goe, this makes me looke fresh and ruddie as a Rose...."

The cutting is rarely noticed on stage. We may miss the crudity of Centurio's more vulgar comments, but they are replaced with an equally convincing transparent bravado. Besides, what this production lacked in its four hours of material, it more than made up for in its thought-provoking innovations.

Christopher Fettes has chosen to include the "argumentos" or "arguments", as Mabbe calls them, at the beginning of each act. They do not help the audience to understand the following act but, rather, provide a break in the action. The main interest they provide lies in the fact that they are recited by two anachronistic characters, in modern clothes, who remain on stage, observing the other characters throughout the action. They smoke, play chess and smile when the plot takes an amusing turn. It is as if a modern audience were being placed on the stage and told how to react to the tragicomedy.

But the device goes further. These two shady characters turn into Sosia and Tristán (Brian Fearne and Andrew Latham) after the death of Pármeno and Sempronio. They are replaced by the actors who played Pármeno and Sempronio (Dominic Arnold and John Wagland). The modern audience is now involved in the tragedy. They interact (although they never speak) with the actual characters and become more involved with the emotions in the play. When Lucrecia (Emma D'Inverno) comes to tidy the stage, before the entry of Alisa and Pleberio, she scowls at one of them and hands him the daily newspapers. Yet, such comedy takes on a sombre note when, in the final act, John Wagland brings in the skeleton representing the dead Melibea. All this may seem somewhat obtrusive but it is worked into the play in a surprisingly subtle manner.

The interpretations of the roles are more conventional. Mark Schofield plays a melodramatically forlorn Calisto, dashing from one side of the stage to the other. Helen Parkinson is a rather too willing Melibea.

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A sort of bastard Irish has been adopted by the low-life characters which makes the educated talk of Sempronio and Pármeno seem yet more bizarre. Juanita Waterman is a coloured Celestina, rolling her eyes in anticipation of the lust we never see her perform, only encourage. It is obviously difficult for such a young actress to play such an aged role but, with back bent, stick in hand, all this Celestina lacked was a little more confidence and a beard.

A central problem is how to overcome the essentially novelistic devices in the play, what is left unsaid, rather than what is said for directors to copy. Christopher Hobbs has employed a loud electric humming for the dramatic moments when, before the first meeting of Calisto and Melibea, at the erotic climax of the seventh act and when Calisto and Melibea die, the stage is left in darkness. It is a comparatively easy option and sometimes backfires. One can but giggle at the yokel Tristán's amazement at his master's death - "O he is deade as a doore - nayle " - and the faithful rendering for Sosia - "Helpe, Tristanico, Helpe to gather up these braines that lye scattering heere amongst the stones."

Indeed, there is more unintended comedy than tragedy. Celestina is ingeniously killed behind an overturned table, but the O'Toolian detail of blood spurting over Sempronio as he madly stabs her to death is a piece of melodrama which simply will not create the desired effect in a modern audience. Pármeno vomits in horror at the sight of the dead Celestina, but we are still laughing.

The vulgar episodes are also highly amusing. We see Crito in full action with Elicia. Calisto is equally overt in his enthusiasm with Melibea. A delightful touch is the sound of Sosia's public urinating while he tells Tristán about Areúsa.

But the final visual image of mourning is what remains in our minds. Areúsa's and Elicia's clothes are highly pictorial and reminiscent both of Goya's "Maja" and Manet's imitations of them. Furthermore, Pleberio's weeping was all the more moving because of Stephen Caro's comparative maturity.

This production certainly deserves a rapid revival.

3. Review by Clare LUDDEN, Melanie STRICKLAND and  
Amanda TAYLOR, Westfield College, University of London

A production of James Mabbe's 1631 English translation of *Celestina* was recently staged by final-year students of The Drama Centre, London. The Drama Centre is dedicated to the revival of the classical theatre, which influenced the Director, Christopher Fettes, in choosing Mabbe's translation, as opposed to a modern version which might have been more appealing to a contemporary audience. This decision successfully places the production in an appropriate historical context.

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The casting of a coloured Celestina, Juanita Waterman, was innovative in that it paralleled the plight of the medieval underdog with that of the ethnic minorities in present-day society. An interesting distinction between the upper and lower classes was the use of the Irish accent. This enhanced the earthiness of the servants and members of the working classes. The difficulty of staging the novel as a play was overcome by two journalists-cum-stage-hands who gave a résumé of the action to follow in the next scene, which added fluency to an otherwise fragmentary plot. This is making full dramatic use of the *argumentos* which Rojas' first printers added to his original and which consequently appear in James Mabbe's translation. The play is made more compact by the combination of pairs of *argumentos* thus enabling the journalists to be both concise and comprehensive. Their continual presence on stage helped focus the audience's attention on minor detail which might otherwise have been overlooked.

The production included some very striking dramatic effects, the most poignant being the use of a veiled skeleton to portray Melibea's remains. This made the final scene very impressive and the distraught Pleberio's lament all the more tragic. Up to this point much of the action had been presented in a comic light with a raucous bed scene (Elicia and Crito) and some slapstick comedy but the introductory bawdiness was overwhelmed by the tragedy of the final scenes.

Many problems had to be overcome in the realization of the production. Principally the dramatization of a novel which includes numerous long speeches and laments, and the presentation of the Spanish traditions of honour, love and sexuality which do not have the same importance in English culture. Paul Brown's scenery managed to encompass all the places of action in the play, as it comprised scaffolding and various doors and levels, giving the actors an infinite variety of position and movement in an extremely limited space.

The cast succeeded in captivating the audience during a lengthy four-hour performance. This can only reflect the high quality and professionalism of their acting.

