

I

THE WORKSHOP *CELESTINA*:
ALMEIDA THEATRE, LONDON 1990

Joseph T. Snow
University of Georgia

One of the abiding interests of *Celestinesca* has been always to provide for as much access to theatrical adaptations and performances/stagings of *Celestina* in the twentieth century as is possible. The subject of this report, a pre-production "workshop" of a new English-language adaptation, first came to my attention just after the San Francisco Modern Language Association meetings in December of 1987. My friend and colleague from the University of California at Santa Barbara, Harvey Sharrer, had invited me to extend my California visit with a post-MLA stay at his home, to continue through the celebration of the New Year 1988. One of the treats of this stay—which included Hearst Castle, the Monterrey Peninsula, good Mexican food and a visit to the UCSB Jorge de Sena Center—had to do with this new *Celestina*.

One of Sharrer's Drama department colleagues, Robert Potter, had been working on a new English version and had told him that it was coming along very well at that stage. Potter's English collaborator, Pamela Howard, a professional stage designer and director—it so happened—was visiting Santa Barbara as well that New Year season and Harvey had arranged for us all to meet one day at his home. Which we did, on a chill January afternoon. I remember that almost all of us had colds and were suffering. Bob, I learned, had finished the first draft of his adaptation and, although I did not see it at that stage, we discussed some of the basic premises and rehearsed some of the staging and techniques to be employed (potentially) in its mounting.

One clear point of departure was to be the idea that the family of Pleberio was *converso* and that this would be suggested with music and with scenes projected on a screen suspended above the stage. No speeches were to be introduced into the text (since Rojas himself did not incorporate any such) but the "feel" was to be there in the ambientation surrounding the actions. The notion transferred to me then was that, as happens in most of the adaptations I know, the bulk of the "interpolated acts" from the *Tragicomedia*—what might be called the harlots' revenge—had been sacrificed in the process of compressing the action into a reasonable 2-2 1/2 hour playing time.

I was, of course, intrigued by this *Celestina* and was most interested to follow it through to its eventual staging—wherever that might take place. Pamela Howard at least entertained the hope that it might have its *début* at the Edinburgh Festival (but this proved too optimistic as it turned out). One of my own suggestions—from the viewpoint of a collector and archive builder—was that they keep a kind of record, or diary, of the involvement with their *Celestina* project. I think the idea appealed to Bob, and I hoped it did to Pamela. One thing I lament about theatrical performances—and more so in the particular case of *Celestina*—is how little remains of them. Yes, the journalistic reviews, the occasional interviews (newspapers, TV and radio) with the principal movers and shakers involved, and what few program notes that manage to survive. But how useful it would be for future historians of the theatre to have in published, or publishable form, such diaries, articles by the director (and, perhaps, the main actors) about the problems encountered in the staging, the adaptation, the realization, the pacing, timing, the search for (or lack

of) verisimilitude, and so much more. Videos—now, thankfully, more common—can tell us about many aspects of the performance (costuming, gestural conventions, set design, vocal affectations, and so forth), even while they convey only a single performance and cannot reproduce the audience's appreciation (or lack of), this being, of course, the other "half" of any performance. But the people involved should be aware that videotaped performances are only one step, and that other important vital steps remain still. For the sake of theatrical history, more "how I came to do it this way" pieces would enrich and facilitate the scholarly work yet to be done.

I kept in touch with Potter and Howard by letter; I sent copies of *Celestinesca* (in the «Pregonero» section of one I had mentioned their project) and found them warmed by my interest and earnest persistence. Pamela had other commitments for a while. And then it was planned that Nuria Espert was to direct a version of *Celestina* with Joan Plowright at the National Theatre in London. This was eventually postponed when Sir Laurence Olivier (Plowright's husband) died. This for 1989. The idea is still alive in 1990 but it may result that all the pieces cannot be reassembled as desired. The English version, to add a footnote, to be utilized for the Espert production, was originally to have been the one devised by Robert David MacDonald for the production of *Celestina* at Glasgow's Citizen's Theatre (early 1986), but has been dropped in favor of an even newer version by John Clifford.

Pamela Howard's interest and determination to have this *Celestina* produced has been growing. She and Potter gathered a group of actors for a reading of the adaptation at a London location [see the following report]. This evening—not unlike one of the ways in which the text was "presented" in the early sixteenth century: in a circle of friends using voice modulations to bring to life the *Celestina*, *Melibeia*, *Calisto*, *Pármeno* and *Sempronio*, etc. of the Rojas text—allowed Howard and Potter to "hear" how the spoken text came across. Further work was performed on the adaptation and the text I now have (a gift for my archive) is—I am told—something of a third draft, and very near a final one. Of this circle of actors from the oral reading, only Linda Polan (*Celestina*) took part in the 1990 workshop at London's Almeida Theatre.

Harvey Sharrer now appears in the story again. When he heard that I would be spending some time in London in March and April of 1990, he recalled that Bob Potter was to be there as well for some kind of consulting on the *Celestina*. As a result of his mentioning this to Potter, Potter wrote me with the news of this workshop, the dates, the venue, and asked me—if I could manage it—to attend one, several or all of the workshop sessions. Another letter from Pamela, received almost as I was leaving for London, expanded on the information and made the same invitation. I checked my agenda and it happened that I could make two or three of the sessions. I was thrilled.

A workshop (or "taller" in Spanish) is an unusual animal. It gives the director a chance not only (as reported above) to hear *Celestina*, but now also to begin "seeing" it. A team of professional actors was assembled and they would stay together for nine days, that ninth day ending with a shared "state-of-the-play-so-far" in the presence of an invited audience (friends of the principals, mostly, with the assorted *celestinista* from among the ranks of the British hispanists, for example). In this situation, the director works with the actors, expects them to provide information and suggestions about the feel of the text and the experiments in movement, blocking, gestures, and so forth, that are being worked out. In addition to the actors, there were present a "movements" director and a musical director. And me, watching it all happen.

I had to miss the first day, when the group read through the script. I regret this because in the days I was there only select parts of the play were to be "theatricalized." But show up I did on the second day (April 10th). Pamela was just beginning to get the group together when I arrived. She most graciously introduced me, told them who I was and what I was doing there, but made me feel comfortable. As did the cast, many of whom came by to say "hello" and welcome me, talk with me, ask me questions about my own particular understanding of the character he/she was playing. The first day, I would have lunch with Pamela and Bob at the Almeida, and a late afternoon coffee with Celestina. The second day (April 12th), I had lunch with Sempronio, Tristan and the Asst. Director, with Celestina, Pármeno, and Pleberio dropping by later. In the theatre I was able to share some thoughts with Melibea, Lucrecia and

Sosia. I even travelled on the same tube with Sosia (and thought of him as Sosia, too!).¹

I was able to attend two morning and two afternoon sessions but I wish I could have been there for all that were scheduled, and also for the final night, April 22nd. I was, however, constantly amazed by the vitality of *Celestina* a la Howard-Potter and friends. To begin with, they were occupying, so to speak, the shell of the sets already in the Almeida Theatre for Ian MacDiarmid's *Volpone* (an excellent production I'd seen just a few nights earlier). I mention this for two reasons. One: two of the *Volpone* actors were performing in this *Celestina* by day (Melibea and Pármeno). Two: the sets presented a challenge for they had to be adaptable to what celestinesque imaginations the director and movements man could come up with. As we know, in theatre the illusion is all. Over the two days I was present, the memory of *Volpone* on that elaborate set faded and the reality of it being the streets and houses of Rojas' world took over and the actors created a garden, a room for a beggar's banquet, and the sights and sounds (I remember especially *Celestina's* whooping laughter) that I associate with Rojas' fictional world.

What the 'company' was working for was the actualization of three scenes (the opening and closing ones of the play, and the Act IX dinner scene at *Celestina's casa caída*. The actors would continue—even on the final night of the workshop—with scripts in hand (although by the third day of the sequence, much of the dialogue for the three scenes to be actualized had been thoroughly absorbed and sounding very close to the real thing). The script between these three scenes would be read in place by the actors. At strategic points, the action would "freeze" and dumb shows would be presented: these, I could see, had by and large replaced the slide projections on overhanging screens (part of an initial vision, we recall), but still were intended to project the *converso* subtext in a visual way.

One particularly interesting experiment they made was the following: Pleberio was "Rojas" as well as himself. At crucial moments, "Rojas" would step out from behind Pleberio and speak to

¹ The 'Sosia' I saw was played by Robb Hughes. See the accompanying report by Robert Potter about a later casting change.

the audience. For these moments, Potter has incorporated some of the text from the preliminary materials: the Prologue, the Letter to a Friend, and so on. I thought this was theatrically exciting and felt that, at least as I experienced it in April of 1990, it worked very well. For the dumbshows, some music had been adapted of a definitely stark, even lugubrious and haunting nature. The actors all were taught to entone this melody-without-words and, when they joined together to perform it—with appropriately heavy rhythmic movement, in their dumbshows (between discreet segments of the work: a total of five are projected for the full stage version), the effect produced was very dark and strikingly original. It works as a kind of second chorus: the "Rojas" bits are straightforward didactic readings directed to the audience; the dumbshows capture the same tone in music and movement. The feel is "right" and I give it a good chance of working, when perfected.

One thing that I was amused by was the actors' (remember: none of them had ever read the Spanish original) picking up on the higher level of language employed by the low-life characters. This means, of course, that the adaptation preserves the tone of the language of Sempronio, Pármeno, Areúsa, Elicia, etc. In discussing this aspect of Rojas' work with some of them, I tried to make it clear that the irony of the linguistic imitation is part and parcel of Rojas' dark vision of human nature in his work, and in this sense, perhaps, is more "natural" than would at first appear. It is one more of the masks at work in his play, a mask that, in Rojas hands, conceals as it, paradoxically, also reveals.

A few other notes from my observations of the workshop "at work." Although—as in the original Rojas text—Tristan and Sosia do not speak until after the deaths of Sempronio and Pármeno, the workshop Tristan and Sosia are *there*, silent but very much present in the early action. It was thought that when they do assume active (speaking) roles, it would be less of a surprise to the audience. Since this could be done without traducing in any way the original text, I liked it and found it worked just fine. In this way, a hierarchy of the servants in Calisto's household is established and this is helpful to those who watch the action unfold. Also, the actor-Tristan was also used where Crito appears in the Rojas text. Now this *is* a change but one which added a touch that was in tune with the patterns of deceit for which *Celestina* is well-known. To have one of the lesser servants

of Calisto's household occupying Sempronio's place in Elicia's bed does not do violence to the text—especially since the surrounding dialogue is not affected. The audience can revel in this, since Tristan has been earlier identified visually.

In the final scene there was an attempt to end the work in a stunning way. Again, there was no violence done to Rojas' text. Although the *retablo*—if retained in future—will surprise many viewers, it would be bound to delight as many more. What happens is as follows: as Pleberio/Rojas begins the play-ending lament over the body of his beautiful Melibea, each of the now-dead characters enters the stage, one-by-one. Each, at some point, takes up some words of Pleberio's narrative monologue (the effect is like a series of voiceovers). In short, we have the lament, indeed, but it is articulated not only by Pleberio (who remains onstage, bent and broken) but also by those who have entered into this strange dance of death which is *Celestina*. As a finale to the work as a staged adaptation, I felt that this was a brilliant stroke, far more theatrical than Rojas, but, then, Rojas was not writing for the stage. The impact of the lament is not at all diminished: rather, its universal applicability is thus imaginatively and graphically extended to the stage of the universal mind. In all that I saw being done, tested, tried out, abandoned and extended, the same theme was evident: there was a sense of the deep appreciation of the words of Rojas' text (even in modern English accents) at the same time as there was a deft theatrical intelligence at work in its translation to the stage and to the medium of visualized—or actualized—action meant to affect the onlookers in a profound way, one that is indicated in the text itself. It is evident that Pamela Howard and Robert Potter have gotten under Rojas' skin and are seeing things his way.

I departed—having seen the troupe work through the banquet scene (Act IX) and the garden scene (Acts XIX-XXI)—feeling privileged to have been one of the early onlookers of this second-round workshop in a good cause; i.e., the eventual production of a lively version of a staged *Celestina*. My own acting days ended at University. Still, like *Celestina* in Act VII when she still feels the old feelings (in her exchanges with Areúsa), I left feeling that I too would love to be back "on stage." The old feelings, like the phantom limb phenomenon, stay with you for a very long time!

I came away from the workshop with new insights and more sharply-defined angles on some aspects of *Celestina*. This time, a lot of it had to do with my personal involvement, my direct contacts with director, adapter, and actors (and their *personae*). Now, a word on the casting instincts of Pamela Howard. As a corollary to my appreciation of her theatrical insights into the performance of *Celestina*, I offer the fact that—at least to my mind and eye—her casting was right on the mark. I can scarcely think of more physically accurate representations of Rojas' Spanish characters. Even without much costuming and no attempt at making up, these actors seem ideal choices: these were, surely, Sosia, Celestina, Areúsa, etc., turned actors. It was *that* easy to convert them—with an exception to prove the rule—into the types that we follow in Rojas' *Celestina*.

Pármeno was shy, pretty, but there was passion lurking beneath his fair exterior. Sempronio, taller and darker, more evidently mischievous and expressive of look, flashed his deceiver's smile even as the tide of events turned against him. Celestina, husky-voice, raucous laughter, wizened eyes taking in absolutely every thing, looming, always larger than life. Tristan and Sosia, replicas of Sempronio and Pármeno, one tall and dark, the other smaller, more fair, both appealing innocents, earnest servants to the end. Elicia and Areúsa, comely and snappish, endearing and excitable, neither young nor old, focused on the material world around them, and its ever-present pleasures. Melibea, pretty, dark, the face of an innocent to whom experience may well soon beckon. Calisto was cast young—as an experiment—but had the youth and curlyheaded, boyish charm that Melibea might fall for: the excess of his passion at the opening sat well on this young man, and it was believable. Pleberio (and "Rojas") had just the face of a man who, despite the passing years, might not suspect that his world could collapse around him and him not know it! I did not see Alisa perform but she, too, was cast rather younger than type. The exception, mentioned above, to "type" would have to be—from where I sit—Lucrecia. I—and the *grabadistas* illustrating her in the sixteenth-century editions—see her as a less imposing version of her mistress Melibea, the kind for whom a little hair dye and some mouthwash would make her desirable. This Lucrecia was, of course, a fine actress in the role: my only point is that the physical fit was not as startlingly "right" as was true with the rest of the cast.

All of the above remarks are meant as a kind of personal documentary/diary of a scholar peeping into the world of the professional stage. But for the scholar, this "rite of passage" allowed me to see some of the inner workings of a *Celestina*-in-the-making, not an inconsiderable benefit in the pursuit of a more ample reading and understanding of the Rojas work.

My final words are of thanks to the entire company and crew for inviting me into their world and for making it possible for my world to be enriched by theirs and, perhaps, vice-versa.

CAST

Calisto: Jamie Glover
Pleberio-Rojas: Frank Lazarus
Sempronio: Ian Reddington
Pármeno: Marc Warren
Sosia: Robb Hughes
Tristán: Dominic Hawksley

Melibea: Cate Hamer
Celestina: Linda Polan
Elicia: Heather Tobias
Areúsa: Julie Le Grand
Lucrecia: Jenny Galloway
Alisa: Kate Littlewood

PRODUCTION

Director: Pamela Howard
Asst. Dir.: Kate Raper
Musical Dir.: Lucie Skeaping
Movements: Stuart Hopps
Literary Advisor: Robert Potter

Writer: Robert Potter
Composer: Carl Davis
Musicians: Kate Crowden,
Douglas Wooton
Administrator: Dusty Wesker



ACTO IX^o

PAMELA HOWARD

ACTO XIX^o

