

CELESTINESCA 22.2 (Otoño 1998)

«La Celestina» (ballet). Music: Carmelo Bernaola. Direction: Adolfo Marsillach. Choreography: Ramón Oller. Madrid Symphonic Orchestra, dir. José Ramón Encinar. World Première, 24 June 1998, Teatro Real (Madrid).

Can a successful ballet be made of *Celestina*? One would think so. The work has been adapted to an operatic stage several times in the twentieth century, beginning with Felipe Pedrell's 1903 effort (never seen or heard in a full version) and ending with the promised debut in 1999 in Barcelona's Liceu of an opera by Joaquín Nin Culmell, passing through an English-language opera, *Calisto and Melibea* by Jerome Rosen and the French (but multilingual) opera by Maurice Ohana, *Célestine*, seen in Paris in 1988. This ballet is, I think, the third effort to make *Celestina* a work for interpretative dance: Alberto Cárdenas (danced by Susana & José) attempted it in 1968, and then Paco Romero and the Ballet de España in 1990.

But the answer to the initial question, at least to my way of thinking and seeing, is *yes*, only not this time. The world premiere, which I attended at Madrid's Teatro Real, was advertised to last 55 minutes but lasted, perhaps, 45. My purpose here is not to evaluate the music of Carmelo Bernaola: it seemed quite fine even if the overall impression was heavy, owing, I suspect, to the 17 scenes selected to form part of this adaptation, scenes that in the collective emphasized the darker side of the plot. Now might be the best time to give a synopsis of what actually was seen.

The opening scene, the encounter in Melibea's garden (a voiceover for Calisto tells us that: "Melibeo soy. A Melibea adoro. En Melibea creo. A Melibea amo") is followed by a group scene in Calisto's home with three servants: Calisto communicates in gesture and dance his rejection by Melibea. We see Sempronio knock on Celestina's door (she lives under the stage with several *mochachas* and emerges through a diabolical red-lighted-from-below trap door). She quickly understands what is wanted and needed. Sempronio exits accompanied by the four wenches in Celestina's service. Next follows the casting of the spell (more voiceovers) and the emergence of several (10?) strange figures from round openings in the stage floor who, aided by Celestina, spin out a skein of yarn into a web. We are next swiftly transported to the area where Melibea and Lucrecia are dallying by a swing. Through gestures

and mime, more than through dance, Melibea is informed of Calisto's desire, and Celestina requests her *cordón*, worn round her waist (a new voiceover): resisting at first, Melibea eventually gives in, and Celestina performs charms on the girdle thus obtained. We are next with Calisto's rhapsodic reception of the *cordón* and his rewarding of Celestina with a gold chain. This is followed rapidly by a return to Melibea's house and her interview with Celestina, at the end of which she grants Celestina permission to arrange a meeting with Calisto.

This scene is followed by the struggle of Celestina and Sempronio over the gold chain and the murder of Celestina, her *mochachas* looking on, aghast. Immediately after, we see Sempronio surrounded by the local gendarmes armed with truncheons, and their choreographed movements end with Sempronio, inert, being carried off the stage. This is reported by a servant (in a voiceover) to Calisto, who decides he will keep his date with Melibea (another voiceover). In the meantime, a tough guy (Centurio) appears, singing a song about murder. Celestina's *mochachas* appear and, after a danced set piece that aims at communicating foreboding and menace, Centurio swears to murder Calisto. It is now night. Melibea is singing, Calisto waiting outside a wall made up of the strange swaying figures we saw in the conjuration and spellcasting scene. His servants help him over this moving, supernatural wall, and he and Melibea each remove pieces of clothing to suggest nudity and then make passionate love. They are interrupted by the sounds of a fracas. Calisto, abandoning Melibea to respond to the danger, mounts the wall, is stabbed by Centurio, and dies. Melibea, anguished, repeats some of the initial dance figures from the opening scene. A rope descends (representing a stairway?) and draws Melibea up and she is last seen, spinning slowly, as snow begins to fall, the light slowly dimming until, finally, all is darkness: Melibea, too, is dead. The curtain descends.

Students and scholars who know *Celestina* well will recognize to a greater or lesser degree what moments of the original have been utilized, and which have been sacrificed. I realize, however, that my synopsis is aided by my own pre-knowledge of what could have been happening on stage: I believe others in the audience would have had no such expectations. To be just, no one expects, in any kind of adaptation of this work, that more than a controlled selection of moments will be retained, and I have no quibble with the artistic judgments made here. Marsillach, I am reminded, directed in 1988 the Madrid production of the Torrente Ballester adaptation of the work, and he knows *Celestina* well, perhaps too well for this kind of adaptation. His version, laudably, does not reflect some earlier attempts to make the affair of Calisto and Melibea into a gloss on *Romeo & Juliet*, Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers. It opts

to demonstrate clearly the lust that unites and consumes the lovers, and the cupidity of those who work hard to bring the union to fruition and in this respect, at least, it sets out to reflect the original work's sardonic view of society.

My disappointment with this *Celestina* lies in another quarter. Ballet must project some thread of a plot, some characterization of its principal actants and their surroundings, and some fluidity of action that make sense of the whole. All of this is accomplished through movement, line, gesture and dance. Dance solos, duos, trios, and ensembles alternate to give an internal architecture to the work. Good ballet literally unfolds before one's eyes, helped by expert choreography, the meshing of the music from the orchestra pit with the visuals of the dance. It must create meaning on its own terms.

While there may have been coordination of the musical score with the *action* on the stage, there was too little dancing, too much time invested in theater (mime, gestural movement, singing, voices in off, frequent scene changes, superfluous props) to suggest a balletic *Celestina*. I have, however, only praise for the talent that was on view. The single set, of inward leaning arches was used to suggest all venues but could not have been as effective as it was had it not been for the clever symbolic use of color in a conceptually-brilliant lighting design (kudos to Albert Faura). The performers were very talented, but I thought their dance characterizations too facile, too topical or stereotypical to capture as effectively as is desirable the nuances of the many interpersonal conflicts that are the centerpiece of *Celestina*.

The dance sequences were overly brief in most instances, failing to explore more than superficially what each character felt and desired, and the sequences were too often made jagged by the interruption of non-dance moments. These latter may be attributable, I think, to Marsillach's direction, his need to incorporate details of plot moments that translate poorly to the ballet frame. One example: the struggle between *Celestina* and *Sempronio* over sharing the gold chain could have been interpreted, and made very clear, in vivid modern dance movements: it could have been an unforgettable duo. What we instead have is a physical struggle in which movement, line, and characterization are broad and bold, swift and jerky. There is no pathos, no sentiment, no feeling communicated to the audience in this, the turning point of the action of *Celestina*. Another example of theater winning out over dance: the conjuration scene. It is an overlong, if dramatic, one. The strange figures that emerge from the stage floor, eerily illuminated, are very effective. Each has a skein around his or her waist. *Celestina* runs about

stringing out these skeins among the various figures until it is obvious that a web has been spun into which Melibea will be tempted. This is visually attractive but is the dance equivalent of *verbose*, and like so much else in this production, comes across as the balletic equivalent of operatic *recitative*. There can, I believe, be too much use made of a theatrical effects and, here, Marsillach's hand is heavy indeed.

Nor did the choreography seem to me to rise to the occasion: it followed the need to illustrate the action rather than work to give (dance) form and meaning to it. It is extremely difficult to adapt a classical work, relatively well-known to its audience, to another medium. Two classical works I have seen recently have achieved great success, however, giving deep pleasure to general audiences: Antonio Gades' minimalist gypsy ballet of «Fuenteovejuna» and Pilar Miró's enchanting film of «El perro del hortelano».

It is possible I am being too harsh, but I have also not been too demanding. In this production of the Ballet Nacional de España, a hybrid (Hydra?) of dance, theater and song, the magic formula for success was not there (as it was not, unfortunately, in Gerardo Vera's 1997 film version of *Celestina*). It is a work not without its moments and novel visuals (the conjuration scene, the human wall), it has energy, yes (but little fire), but it comes across, by the final curtain, as in need of a more sensitive and fluid dance concept to achieve the characterizations that would make us care about what happens to these people. That is why I feel that, perhaps, the *next* attempt to translate the work into dance stands a better chance of answering positively my initial question: Can a successful ballet be made of *Celestina*?

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Celestina regaña a Elicia.
Acto VII. Burgos 1499?

