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Marginalized practices in Spanish theater, part 1: Introduction

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This issue, “Marginality in Spanish Theater,” is presented as both an exploration of issues related to marginality in theater and a reflection on the place Spanish theater studies occupies in North American academia. Our field has adopted changes in methodology, focus, and subject matter implemented in Spanish doctoral programs since the beginning of this century and even earlier. Benjamin Fraser, Susan Larson, and Malcolm Compitello reflect on the reshaping of Spanish departments and remind us that despite the fact that this field “has never been, and never will be a homogeneous group of people who share the same self-identifications or even necessarily similar sets of values,” conditions exist to create a community around the concepts of “mutual respect, tolerance, and multivocality” (87). This change of orientation has prompted a decline in the predominantly textual approach to studying theater in deference to an examination of the theatrical event as a process. The articles included in this special issue are examples of the work of scholars who have been trained in literature programs but who study theater and consider issues of circulation, production, adaptation, acting, audience, and censorship. By no means do these articles constitute a comprehensive compilation of all the approaches to studying theater, but we find them representative of its current state.

Within the field of Spanish studies, theater is often caught in the crossfire between the wars of the discipline. While the analysis of speech and the written word is an important aspect of our work as theater scholars, it is rarely the only focus of our academic practice. In fact, the traditional division of textual and performative approaches does not reflect the complexity of our field, which is as concerned with preservation as it is with mediation and production. We believe there is a need to acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of theater studies and our connections with translation and adaptation studies, cultural and visual studies, and the social sciences, among others, as the contributors to this issue have done. The commitment of the *Romance Quarterly* to providing this space for discussion on the state of our discipline will ideally afford greater visibility to interdisciplinary research in theater studies in future editorial initiatives and conferences. Our hope is that it will help us to gain visibility and end the marginalization of our research.

Among those of us who study and research theater, many have experienced what María M. Delgado explains about a common experience in the field. When she explains that within Spanish studies she works on “creative practice,” it is usually mistaken for the study of plays. Delgado asserts that her research is more complex than mere textual analysis:

[I]t is also about process as much as product, about the group activity of making work, devising or shaping material, workshops, the building of actions or sequences, the development of the *mise en scène*, the discoveries that come in the rehearsal room or on set, the craftsmanship that is too often erased in the need to organize the branding of creative work under the authorial trademark. (“Disappearing Acts” 197)

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For those scholars who, like us, work with contemporary theater practice—which includes contemporary stagings of Golden Age plays—our academic practice entails attending rehearsals and performances several times—perhaps sitting in different seats—interviewing theater practitioners involved in production, watching available recordings of the staging, and consulting reviews.

This work, in dialogue with creative practice, has been more productive in the field of Golden Age theater, where attention to the conditions of production and adaptation of plays has a long history in North American academia. In 2014, the publication of *Diálogos en las tablas: Últimas tendencias en la puesta en escena de los Clásicos*, edited by María Bastianes, Esther Fernández, and Purificació Mascarell, created a space for critical exchange among scholars specializing in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama and theater practitioners, a reciprocal conversation that we recognize as crucial for theater and performance criticism. The most recent contribution to this field is the volume titled *Remaking the Comedia: Spanish Classical Theater in Adaptation* (2015), edited by Harley Erdman and Susan Paun de García, with contributions by Golden Age theater specialists, translators, and theater practitioners, which is also representative of this kind of approach and crossover in academic and theater practice. Contributions included in that volume reflect the hands-on experience that the International Siglo de Oro Drama Festival at Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso offers in conjunction with the Association of Hispanic and Classical Theater (AHCT). National and international theater scholars and practitioners have been gathering annually in El Paso for many years. Unfortunately, there are no similar opportunities for those working on theater from other periods. David George, Stuart Green, and Duncan Wheeler analyzed the state of Spanish theater studies, focusing mainly on the United Kingdom and identifying as one of the obstacles “the impediments to access to theatre practice and practitioners for Hispanists based outside Spain” (108). We believe that the constraints of our academic work call for more collaboration among theater scholars and practitioners from different subfields, as some of the articles in this issue propose and as we foster in the network of researchers to which we belong.

With this special issue, we aim to contextualize Spanish theater studies within the debates on the role of humanities in academia. Rita Felski contributed to the conversation with *The Limits of Critique*, which was subsequently followed by a discussion in the *PMLA* and by a special issue edited by Felski in the journal she directed at the time, *New Literary History*. In her book, she writes, “[w]e might devote more attention to making, building, and connecting” (“Introduction” 223). Collaborations among scholars and theater practitioners, as described above, are examples of our activity that have already moved us in that direction. In addition, this special issue breaks with the exceptionalism of critical discourses that are mainly only relevant to specialists in certain periods of literary history. All of the articles selected for this special issue transcend divisions into historical subfields, a practice that has traditionally hampered our discipline. Focusing on case studies from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, and considering the connections between contemporary theatrical practice and different theatrical traditions, this issue suggests a plurality of possible interrogations. Regardless of the specific development of marginality that is bound to the historical context associated with each article, we believe that the various approaches proposed by these articles contain and advance a profound understanding of the theatrical event as part of a common Spanish theater culture, which is defined by the marginality of the practice itself. Delgado understands the marginal nature of theater as an opportunity that “[le] ha permitido mantenerse—como provocación—en el dominio público” (“*Otro*” teatro 53). It is this conception of theater as a marginal space of resistance “donde cuestionar unos límites” (53) that constitutes the point of encounter we find in all the articles included in this issue.

This issue of *Romance Quarterly* is the result of a collaboration by the members of a network of scholars interested in the study of Spanish theater and performance. The editors of this issue co-founded the Iberian Theater and Performance Network (ITPN) (<https://itpn.mla.hcommons.org/>) with María del Pilar Chouza-Calo (Central Michigan University), Juan Hernando Vázquez

(University of California, Davis), and Javier Irigoyen-García (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). ITPN celebrated its inaugural symposium at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the fall of 2016. The next conference will take place at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Amherst College in the fall of 2018. Our future plans are to organize a major biennial conference and regular panels and working groups like the one we chaired at the Modern Language Association conference in 2018, which prompted this issue.

ITPN facilitates the collaboration of scholars and theater practitioners by programming productions that reflect on the specific topic of each symposium. At the symposium in Urbana-Champaign, organizers teamed up with performers to develop a play on the topic of the conference, “Theaters of Memory.” The piece that closed the symposium, *Haciendo memoria*, included fragments of *Ay, Carmela!*, by José Sanchis Sinisterra, *Pies descalzos bajo la luna de agosto*, by Joan Cavallé, *El triángulo azul*, by Laila Ripoll and Mariano Llorente, *Presas*, by Ignacio del Moral and Verónica Fernández, and *NN12*, by Gracia Morales. In 2017, *Haciendo memoria* toured in the United States at the University of Cincinnati, Indiana University, and Bentley University. In addition to performing in this play, Isabel Rodes and David Boceta offered acting workshops on Spanish Golden Age theater to undergraduate and graduate students. They are both professional actors trained at the Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático (RESAD) and have had long careers in prestigious companies such as the Compañía Nacional de Teatro Clásico (CNTC) and the Centro Dramático Nacional (CDN). In 2018, our conference in Amherst, “Theaters of Marginality,” will showcase *Desde lo invisible*, performed by Juan Hernando Vázquez, Isabel Rodes, and Victoria Teijeiro. The play aims at overcoming barriers through the juxtaposition of short scenes introducing different conflicts related to disabilities. In addition, Esther Lázaro will present for the first time in the United States Max Aub’s monologue, *De algún tiempo a esta parte*, which deals with the topic of intolerance and exclusion suffered by the Jewish community in the late 1930s.

Finally, another objective of the ITPN has been to encourage educators to approach theater in the classroom from a more comprehensive perspective that considers literary analysis and critical research, as well as stressing the need for creative and experiential learning. By following the ITPN model, based on a thematic axis clustering together a series of plays from different historical periods, students can approach theater in the classroom through the creation of their own dramaturgy—based on the texts previously studied—and immerse themselves in the design of different aspects involved in performance.¹

Our exploration of marginality in Spanish theater began at the 2018 Modern Language Association conference in New York and will be expanded at our next conference at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Amherst College. At the MLA conference, contributors to this special issue participated in a working group that for two days discussed the connections between marginality and marginal theatrical practices. During our exchanges with presenters and the audience in New York, it became clear that Spanish theater has struggled between occupying the center as a form of high art and remaining on the margins while flaunting its popular roots in both its practices and performances. It is precisely this ability to be conversant with its elites and, at the same time, its action-oriented pragmatism and ability to address social issues and appraise them that has made the theater one of the most powerful vehicles for aesthetic, critical, and political progress in society.

Within the Spanish theatrical context, marginality and social exclusion have evolved in various ways since early modernity. Whereas courtly performances and theatrical activities in Jesuit schools were widespread on the Peninsula, the most genuine form of theater was born from humble origins and strengthened by popular support. Cervantes bears testimony to Lope de Rueda’s street performances in the “Prologue for the Reader” of his *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nuevos, nunca representados*:

At that time there was no theatrical machinery nor duels between Moors or Christians either mounted on horseback or on foot. There were no figures which arose or seemed to arise from the center of the earth

through the hollow of the stage, which at that time consisted of four benches arranged in a square, with four or five boards upon them raised about four hands from the ground. Nor did clouds with angels or souls descend from the skies. The furnishings of the stage were an old woolen blanket drawn by two ropes from one side to the other, which formed what is called a dressing-room, behind which were the musicians, singing to the accompaniment of a guitar some old ballad. (Cervantes 22)

In our opinion, this image captures better than any other the way the theater strived to carve out a central place for itself by acknowledging its marginal roots. Actually, this highly romanticized vision of the bare theater also enables us to surmise the vulnerability that certain professionals had to endure and continue to confront to this day. Whereas the actors/artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were persecuted for their licentious reputations and lifestyles, these days “they have become the new rabble-rousers who must be persecuted, combatted, and repressed” (Bottin 291). In addition, financial precariousness has also been a constant trademark of this profession.² Even from a strictly artistic perspective, certain subfields remain marginal, such as street performances, puppetry, and contemporary applied and documentary theater. Thus we are talking about a profession and an artistic practice that, in different contexts, has learned to co-exist with marginality in all its forms and aspects, making this trait a fundamental part of the profession’s identity. Indeed, theater is born of marginality, converses with it, denounces it, and, at times, becomes complicit with it.

Among the most recent approaches to theater and marginality is a volume coordinated by José Romera Castillo, *Teatro y marginalismo(s) por sexo, raza, e ideología en los inicios del siglo XXI* (2017). This compilation of studies presents an approximation to contemporary theater and productions addressing problems of marginality and social exclusion in our time. As affirmed by Jerónimo López Mozo, in the twenty-first century “the novelty is that, in addition to the usually considered issues, such as social exclusion, others have emerged and have been added as a consequence of the profound transformations that have taken place in our country in recent years” (253). This special issue reinforces what has already been accomplished in marginality studies by addressing the theatrical mechanisms through which the continuous presence of marginal subjects and “the Other” on stage has negotiated alternative iterations of the nation’s social realities. Lives lived out on the margins, on a fictional level, cannot be understood in isolation. They should be studied because they overlap and repeat throughout Spanish history, specifically as a series of defining forces, such as spatial boundaries, gender and identity politics, socioeconomic processes, and political contexts.

Ultimately, our objective is to continue exploring a series of questions that demonstrate the inexhaustible and porous nature of marginality in Spanish theater and performance culture. Are marginal subjects to be understood as agents of protest? How do resistance and marginality dialogue in these plays and performances? Are marginal displacements to the center meant to be a positive transition? How are margins within the margins addressed in plays and stagings? How is the “Other” inscribed within the boundaries of the performance? Is it possible to effectively translate social exclusion from the past to contemporary audiences? These guiding questions, which underlie this project even though they may remain open-ended, are addressed in some way or another by the featured articles. Our intention is to advance dialogue among Spanish theater scholars and with other colleagues within Spanish studies, working on different periods and from different approaches, while simultaneously fostering an exchange with current creative practices in Spain.

This special issue of *Romance Quarterly* is presented in two parts. This first part, in issue 65(4), includes four articles that explore marginal subjectivities and their negotiations in the realms of gender, sexuality, race, and identity. Our intention is to present a trans-historical overview of marginality that avoids a chronological approach, which, we claim, simplifies the study of theater as a homogeneous phenomenon. Harrison Meadows’s opening article begins by examining the tradition of the wild figure in early modern theater. Meadows questions Spanish *Comedia*’s diminishing ability to resolve the recurring problem of wildness. Furthermore, he considers who stands to benefit from the social order and those who, like the wild figure, find themselves

excluded. Esther Fernández's research shifts the focus to female subjectivity to expand on how disempowered women protagonists in seventeenth-century plays recover their sense of agency in new contemporary readings. Specifically, since the passing of domestic violence legislation in 2004, a new wave of adaptations on the Spanish stage have turned to the symbolic capital of early modern classics to raise awareness of women's misrepresentation and gender violence. Fernández evaluates this historical revisionism as a sociocultural phenomenon that is increasingly entrenched in contemporary theater. Also, looking at early modern theatrical adaptations in dialogue with contemporary female subjectivity, Elena García-Martín considers the recent staging of *Fuenteovejuna* by a collective of nonprofessional Roma women in Seville as a site of resistance and representation of race, identity, and place. The author considers this performance, premiered at a venue sixty yards from the performers' slum community of *El Vacie*, as a crucial contribution to the construction of a historicized politics of identity that positions Roma women at center stage as creators of a national cultural heritage.

The article that closes this first part is Anton Pujol's take on marginalization through Paco Bezerra's characters, presented as oppressed beings in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. This characterization is reinforced by an unrelenting criticism of a higher form of authoritarianism that pervades his characters' particular circumstances. Pujol shows how Bezerra conceives marginalization as a process by moving from the particular to a larger phenomenon that affects the characters and the audience and, consequently, envisions troubling prospects for Spanish society.

Notes

1. For a more detailed description of a course that illustrates this specific pedagogical model, see "Experiential Learning with the Creative Arts," Teaching Studio, Center for Teaching Excellence, Rice University (<http://cte.rice.edu/teachingstudio/fernandez>).
2. Indeed, companies that do not currently perform in commercial venues have to seek creative ways to present their work to remain financially viable, whether by reducing their casts to a minimum, designing low-cost productions, or performing in alternative spaces.

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