

VOCES CONTRA LA MEDIOCRIDAD
LA VANGUARDIA TEATRAL DE LOS
PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS, 1915-1922.
NOELIA HERNANDO REAL.

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Voces contra la mediocridad is a twofold proposal in one. In the first part, the book introduces the innovative, ground-breaking amateur endeavor of the Provincetown Players to a Spanish-speaking readership; in the second, it includes a translation of eight plays, one for each of the seasons it lasted. The story of the group has elsewhere been told, both by insiders (Deutsch and Hanau; Kenton) and scholars in more recent times, among others (Black; Sarlòs), as a result of a renewed interest which has yielded interesting publications not only in theatrical or group history but also in play anthologies, literary biographies or critical studies. But the objective of the present text is to reach an audience in Spain who might not have access to the texts written in English. The targets here would include literature scholars and teachers as well as university or theater students, thus broadening the scope and opening up from the more restricted realm of specialists, researchers and scholars in US theater, drama, literary history and culture.

In the first part, Hernando Real has written a detailed account of the history of the Provincetown Players following a chronological time line with one chapter for each of the seasons preceded by a general introduction to set the context of the artistic and cultural milieu which favored the appearance of the group. Despite the influence of the commercial theater and its realistic stage, many of the avant-garde, experimental innovations from Europe found a space in the US thanks to several factors. Among them, the spread of the little theaters, George Pierce Baker's university course English 47, the tours of European ensembles like

the Abbey Players, or Edward Gordon Craig's *The Art of the Theatre*. When the Armory Show exhibition arrived in New York, the time was ripe for a collectivity of Greenwich Village bohemians to engage in an artistic project that would finally bring American theater to the forefront of experimentation and give it an authentic, native voice. The other chapters of this section describe the development of the Provincetown Players in the first two seasons in Provincetown and the ensuing six seasons in New York, from 1915 to 1922. Each chapter follows the same structure: an introduction highlighting the most relevant accomplishments of the season, the different venues, and the members involved, as well as the interactions among them, followed by a description of the different stage programs offered, detailing even the proposals that could not be performed and their alternatives together with critical reception. Because the list of plays, members, and playwrights is so extensive, it is sometimes difficult to follow the flood of information contained in each chapter. On the other hand, Hernando Real's effort to provide first-hand information through the reproduction of minutes, memos, advertising, announcements and critical comments published in newspapers render the text varied and lively.

The eight plays selected and translated are always presented with a brief introduction. The choice comprises six one-acts –so typical of the Provincetown– and two longer plays for the last two seasons. The authors include some not so well-known for the Spanish audience together with more recognizable names in American literature such as Edna St. Vincent Millay or Susan Glaspell. The plays also showcase a variety of formal preoccupations ranging from experimentation to more traditional realistic structures and diverse thematic concerns which deal with political, social or artistic topics. *Cambia de estilo (Change Your Style)*, authored by George Cram Cook, is a satire on art, the tension between tradition and the avant-garde, and the conflict an artist faces between art for art's sake or art as a commercial enterprise. For sure, this debate would ring familiar to the members of the Provincetown whose guiding force was to foster productions fundamentally opposed to the commercial, mainstream theater of Broadway and to find a genuine, native voice. Louise Bryant's *La partida (The Game)*, a morality play, is a highly symbolic text with four allegorical, archetypical characters: Death and Life, Youth and Girl. The play has generally been recognized as an interesting contribution in formal innovation. *Cocaína (Cocaine)* by Pendleton King, a realist play, is not innovative

in form but in the choice of a plot that includes social problems such as drug consumption and prostitution. James Oppenheim's *Noche (Night)*, a poetic, symbolic drama, also introduces three archetypes – a priest, a poet and a scientist – who discuss their conflicting visions of life from the top of a hill to be interrupted by the plight of a suffering Woman who can only find empathy and support in a Man, down in the valley. *El cochecito del bebé (The Baby Carriage)* by Bosworth Crocker – Mary Arnold Crocker's pen name – addresses the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the US melting pot. Social, economic, cultural and religious dilemmas are present in this comedy, set in New York, with two female protagonists: one Jewish and the other Irish. *Aria da Capo*, by Edna St. Vincent Millay makes use of elements from the *commedia dell'Arte* and the bucolic literature from Virgil to compose an enigmatic play, written in verse, on the human condition and the effects and responsibilities of war. *Herederos (Inheritors)* and *Al límite (The Verge)* are the last two plays selected for translation and the ones written by Susan Glaspell, one of the great dramatic voices which sprang from the "beloved community" of the Provincetown Players. Both are full, three-act plays and have fared better than others because, thanks to the unfailing efforts of Glaspell scholars from the end of the 1980s, they are available in print (in English) in several editions – some of them as recent 2010 –. *Herederos* has been hailed as an epitome of the genuine, authentic American theatrical voice which was one of the explicit mission statements of the Players, and *Al límite* may be noted not only for its feminist thematic concerns but also for its avant-garde experimentation and the introduction of expressionistic techniques on stage.

The range of bibliographical sources is astounding and its rendering in different sections is extremely useful. Apart from a revision of the already-mentioned primary sources, there is a list of archives which attest the meticulous, thorough, detailed research work that Hernando Real has carried out along the years with a focus on feminist concerns and American theater. Her lasting interest in this domain has resulted in valuable publications both as an author (2011) and as an editor (Ozieblo and Hernando-Real). At the end, she also offers the reader a bibliography beyond the works cited. This new contribution by Hernando Real to the scholarship on the Provincetown Players and Susan Glaspell in Spanish will add to other recent initiatives on American female playwrights like the edited volume of *Asparkia* (Alberola Crespo and Hernando Real) or

the translations of plays (Alberola Crespo and Shafer). Undoubtedly, it will act as one more bridge by offering plays and theater histories for actors, directors, playwrights and Drama Schools across the country.

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