

Back to Basics: What Every Comediante Should Know: Confessions of a Panel Organizer

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Abstract:

Last fall, when visiting a graduate seminar composed of students who had just completed a course on the *comedia*, I was amazed at what I learned. When I asked something about the function of polymetry in *La vida es sueño*, the students chorused, "You mean it was written in poetry?" This brief interaction made me realize how much we take for granted when dealing with our students. When approaching theater, we must consider those aspects that distinguish it from other literary genres. We must highlight its polysemic nature as text and performance. We must guide students as they explore the various realms that comprise theater—especially since many of them have very limited experience.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

**BACK TO BASICS:
WHAT EVERY *COMEDIANTE* SHOULD KNOW**

CONFESSIONS OF A PANEL ORGANIZER

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Last fall, when visiting a graduate seminar composed of students who had just completed a course on the *comedia*, I was amazed at what I learned. When I asked something about the function of polymetry in *La vida es sueño*, the students chorused, “You mean it was written in poetry?” This brief interaction made me realize how much we take for granted when dealing with our students. When approaching theater, we must consider those aspects that distinguish it from other literary genres. We must highlight its polysemic nature as text and performance. We must guide students as they explore the various realms that comprise theater—especially since many of them have very limited experience. (I was shocked last year to learn that out of a class of graduating Spanish majors, only three of forty-four reported that they had ever attended a theatrical production). All of these challenges become magnified when dealing with the *comedia*. So, when I was charged with organizing a division session for the MLA in New York, I decided to invite four specialists—representing a variety of approaches—to participate in a round-table on teaching the *comedia*. I asked them what they considered crucial and urged them to be provocative. I hoped to glean “helpful hints” along the lines of the one Barbara Mujica once shared at another conference. She described

an ingenious yet simple technique to help first time play readers envision production: whenever discussing a *comedia*, she begins by having the class “cast” contemporary actors for the parts. In my experience, this exercise in mental theater (a term borrowed from Ronald Hayman) most often leads to animated, thoughtful discussion of characters, their motivations and the interaction required to make the play “work.”

The four papers that follow are the written form of the engaging performances offered at the New York MLA in December, 2002. I had anticipated an interesting session, but the panelists’ contributions and the ensuing discussion far exceeded my expectations. We have not heavily edited their spoken comments; rather, we have attempted to capture the spirit of the session, including lists of additional references where appropriate.

William R. Blue begins with a series of reflections on artistry, leading us to envision how dramatists take bits and pieces of everyday life and fashion them into theater. His remarks remind me of Elaine Scarry’s timely admonition that we remember to share the joy we take in literature, the pleasure we find in beauty, with our students. He also addresses the phenomenon of “discipline envy” and the impact it has had on *comedia* studies.

Catherine Connor provides a cogent argument that outlines how *comediantes* are, in fact, the ones to be envied for we are poised to flourish at this critical juncture. As cognitive theory reveals more and more about the interrelationships of mind and body, our multidisciplinary perspectives on performance have prepared us to make significant contributions to these current explorations. In the world of *comedia* studies that she envisions, advances in cognitive theory will not only enrich our research but also revitalize our teaching.

James A. Parr takes stock of “canons and kinds” in his metacritical contribution. Some might feel that his description of canon formation as a “democratic process” in which we cast our votes by choosing to work on a selected text is overly utopian because it does not take into consideration other, perhaps more pragmatic, factors that inform scholars’ decisions (such as young assistant professors warned not to “waste time” on minor women dramatists and urged to work on “canonical” male authors instead). Nonetheless, it is a salutary reminder that the canon(s) we bemoan are indeed our own critical creations. His insights into how genre and the understanding of generic conventions can enhance *comedia*

scholarship prove illuminating, as do the works he proffers as suggested readings.

Finally, Laura Vidler offers her own take on the topic by focusing on what we should bear in mind when teaching. She stresses that we need to balance “competence with creativity” and “knowledge with innovation,” emphasizing the ability of students at every level to make original contributions to our understanding of the *comedia*. She also encourages us to familiarize our students with the tools of our trade, ranging from the technological innovations available on the web to the wealth of traditional resources in the library stacks. Her suggestions for effective mentoring of fledgling *comediantes* represent valuable contributions to our endeavor.

Once again, I would like to thank all the panelists and the lively audience that participated in our spirited discussion. Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to capture the energy of that moment on paper, we hope that the following pieces will serve to spark ongoing conversations about the future of our field.

WORKS CITED

- Hayman, Ronald. *How to Read a Play*. New York: Grove, 1977.
Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.