

Actors and Theatrical Documentation in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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In the late nineteen-seventies, a research programme on the Spanish theatre, led by Dr Joan Oleza, was initiated in the Department of Spanish Philology at the University of Valencia. It was first formulated in Oleza's article "A Hypothesis on the Genesis of Spanish Baroque Drama and Sixteenth-Century Theatre", published in 1981 [nineteen-eighty-one], which proposed a new approach to the study of Spanish Golden Age drama, seeing it as the result of a complex symbiotic process involving a range of popular, courtly and learned scenic practices. Whereas the [standard] interpretative model, which originated in the nineteenth century and was perpetuated by Spanish critics for much of the twentieth, tended to emphasise the role of the great dramatists in the formation of Spanish Baroque drama, and especially the individual contribution of Lope de Vega, this new line of research proposed an alternative approach, aiming to capture the historical development of the sixteenth-century theatre by tracing its own internal dynamics, analysing firstly the co-existence, then the interaction, and finally the convergence of different scenic practices which crystallized to form the beginnings of Golden Age drama, and also highlighting the decisive role played by dramatists such as those of the so-called Valencian school in that synthesis of elements of diverse origin. The new approach was consolidated in research carried out by several members of the

Department, leading to the publication of two collective volumes entitled *Teatro y prácticas escénicas* ("Theatre and Scenic Practices"), in 1984 and 1986 [nineteen-eighty-four and nineteen-eighty-six]. The first of these focussed primarily on the Valencian theatrical tradition of the sixteenth century, while the second was directed towards Spanish seventeenth-century drama. They have been followed by further publications which have sought to enhance our knowledge of the different scenic practices and genres of the seventeenth-century theatre and of Lope de Vega in particular. To this end, regarding the dramatic text as a primordial but by no means exclusive source, we have been led to explore such aspects as staging, the relationship between court theatre and festivities, or the conditions of theatrical infrastructure and reception. From this perspective, one of the lines of activity we have been pursuing in recent years has involved the study and classification of the abundant documentation available on actors and acting companies in Spain.

The idea of acting as a profession began to appear in Spain in the 1540s [fifteen-forties] as the first companies of professional actors were established, led by actor-directors such as Lope de Rueda. The emergence of professional actors and companies therefore precedes that of commercial theatres, since *corrales*, or playhouses, did not come into operation until the period 1565-70 [fifteen-sixty-five to fifteen-seventy]. But the necessary conditions for their creation were established as early as the 1540s [fifteen-forties], in that by then there already existed a paid professional activity and an audience keen to attend performances. We know very little about how the companies were organized during this initial period, or about the number of people in each company and their degree of specialization. From the outset, however, one can clearly distinguish the figure of the *autor*, the term used to designate the leader of an acting

company who, in this early period, sometimes combined the functions of actor, director and dramatist.

It must also be emphasised that the guilds of craftsmen responsible for organizing the Corpus Christi festivity constituted an important source of future actors during these early years. Since the Middle Ages, members of the various trades had participated in the Corpus procession with dances, music, and performances of religious scenes using either effigies or living actors in costume, and from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (though in the Catalan-speaking region the process is documented earlier than this), they provided true dramatic performances on religious subjects which they staged themselves. When the first companies of professional actors appeared, the town councils which took over the running of the Corpus festivity in the sixteenth century tended to hire true professionals to perform these religious plays, known as *autos*. But it is significant that many of the early professionals emerged from the guilds and are occasionally identified in early legal documents by reference to their original trade, since that of actor was not yet properly recognized either legally or socially.

As commercial theatres started to appear in the late sixteenth century, two types of companies came to be established in legal practice: "royal or titled companies" (*compañías de título o reales*), whose *autor* or director held an official title or licence to perform, granted by the Royal Council, and "companies of the league" (*compañías de la legua*), so called, [it is said], because they were not allowed to perform within a league of major towns and cities, and thus they remained on the margins of the official channels of theatrical production. [A Spanish league was equivalent to just over four miles.] Their marginalization is evident from the surviving legal documentation, which is scarce in the case of "companies of the league" but overwhelmingly abundant on

official companies. The terms *compañías de partes* and *compañías de ración y representación* (literally "companies of parts" and "companies of ration and performance") are also found in the documents, but these refer simply to the different ways in which the actors were paid. The second mode, "ration and performance", was the more usual in the seventeenth century: actors received a payment for each performance according to their role within the company, plus a specific sum for special performances such as those for Corpus, and also their "ration", a daily salary to cover food and maintenance. In "companies of parts" (*compañías de partes*), the proceeds of performances were shared out proportionally according to each member's role.

The economic situation of actors varied considerably according to whether they belonged to "companies of the league" or to titled companies, and within the latter there were differences corresponding to the status or role of each individual. Apart from the director, [who was usually though not always one of the leading actors], the best paid members were the leading man and the leading lady (*primer galán* and *primera dama*; the latter was generally paid a little more than her male colleague) and occasionally certain particularly famous leading comic actors, called *graciosos*, such as Cosme Pérez, better known by his stage name Juan Rana (literally "John Frog"). Many actors and actresses danced and sang as well as acting, and some were musicians.

The number of actors in a company varied over the period. Although we have relatively little hard information for the early years, it is generally thought that the number was lower up to about 1580 [fifteen-eighty]: around eight or nine members. In the seventeenth century the maximum was normally about twenty, whilst the minimum is more difficult to establish: perhaps sixteen on average. Companies were organized on a hierarchical basis, with the director, or *autor*, as the visible head, since he [or occasionally she] was the person with the legal authority to form a company and acted

as a true businessman, signing contracts with actors, with the lessees or administrators of playhouses, and with the organizers of Corpus festivities, and buying plays from playwrights. The plays, once purchased, became the property of the director, one of whose functions was to adapt the text to the requirements of the company or the performance and even to modify it to his own taste. As the theatrical director, he established the company's repertoire, led the rehearsals and took decisions on the infrastructure necessary for the staging of plays, also taking part as an actor himself on many occasions. Below the autor, in descending order of importance, came the actors who played the leading roles (essentially the first lady, first man and first comedian), then secondary actors and actresses, and finally auxiliary personnel (prompters, money-collectors and wardrobe-keepers).

Authority over the theatre was ultimately exercised directly by the Royal Council through the figure of the Protector, and licences to perform were granted personally to *autores*, the directors, who subsequently had to present lists of the members of their companies around Easter, that is, after Lent, the period during which companies were formed for the new theatrical year. From surviving documentation we know that the number of official titled companies was eight in 1603 [sixteen-O-three] and twelve in 1615 [sixteen-fifteen] and 1641 [sixteen-forty-one].

Initially female roles were played by young men or boys, but in Spain women joined companies as actresses from an early date. The lack of legal provision in this area during the early years of the profession must have encouraged a greater degree of permissiveness, and we know the names of some actresses who belonged to the companies which performed in the first Spanish public theatres. An attempt was made on moral grounds to curtail the incorporation of women into companies, and in 1586 in 1587 [fifteen-eighty-six] the Royal Council prohibited them from taking part in

performances. Those who spoke up against the prohibition included notably fourteen actresses, [all married to *autores* and actors], who appealed to the Council in 1587 [fifteen-eighty-seven] in a petition in which they defended themselves with the argument [and I quote]

that because they have been prohibited from performing they are suffering much hardship, and their consciences and those of their husbands are troubled because they are separated, for as a result, in order to make up for their absence from the performances, their said husbands are bringing in many good-looking boys and dressing them and arranging their hair like women, which gives rise to much greater indecency and scandal than the actresses themselves caused, and this could be stopped by granting them permission to perform, on two conditions: first, that everyone must act roles of their own sex and kind, men dressed as men and women as women, and second, that no spinster may belong to a company or take part in performances of plays, but that every woman must be married and accompanied by her husband. [end of quotation]

From 1587 [fifteen-eighty-seven] the Royal Council repealed the prohibition, thus recognising the legal right of women to perform in Spanish theatres. Subsequently, although there were some further attempts to expel women from the stage, these never reached the point of a legal prohibition.

Despite the raising of the ban, the participation of women in theatrical performances was not exempt from controversy, for very soon it became the focus of a wave of hostility towards the theatre and actors which manifested itself most virulently against women. Although this wave of opposition to the theatre did not manage to get

the playhouses permanently closed or women expelled from the stage, the bad reputation which hung over the lives of actors is reflected in the Ordinances issued by the Royal Council governing the organization of titled companies, through which the State attempted to control the moral conduct of actors: thus when the prohibition was revoked in 1587, the Council decreed that only married women, accompanied by their husbands, could perform, that actresses could not appear disguised as men and that boys were not to play female roles. The foundation in 1631 [sixteen-thirty-one] of an actors' guild, called the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Novena, at the instigation of some of the most prestigious directors of the period, was a step forward in the organization and defence of the interests of actors, but also an attempt to offer a more socially acceptable image of the profession. One must not forget that the Brotherhood was born under the patronage of the Virgin Mary, establishing its headquarters in the Church of Saint Sebastian in Madrid.

As early as the seventeenth century we find some first-hand accounts, such as that of [the actor and writer] Agustín de Rojas in his *Entertaining Journey*, of 1603 [sixteen-O-three], which offer us an idea of how professional actors spent their working days, at least during periods of full employment and within the most prestigious companies. Apart from the time spent individually learning their roles, they attended rehearsals, which usually took place in the morning, since the afternoon was devoted to performing in the playhouses, where performances would begin earlier in the autumn and winter (two o'clock in the afternoon) than in spring and summer (between three and four o'clock). Performances in the playhouses might last between two and three hours. The most fortunate companies were also called upon to perform *particulares*, or private performances, in private houses, or in the palace, if they were in Madrid. During the period of the Corpus Christi festivity, the actors had to concentrate

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on performing the *autos sacramentales*, or sacramental dramas, and although the playhouses were closed for those few days, the companies which were selected to do the *autos* received important benefits, not only in terms of their remuneration for the festivity but also because they had the exclusive right to perform in the city's playhouses in the period from Easter to Corpus; this arrangement enabled the organizers to ensure their presence for the preparations and for the festivity itself. Lent was a period of theatrical inactivity, but a time when much business was transacted and *autores* took the opportunity to hire actors or sign contracts to perform in different cities. The season began at Easter or soon afterwards and lasted until Carnival the following year, ending on Shrove Tuesday; actors' contracts are usually for this theatrical year.

All this theatrical activity generated an important and rich corpus of legal and administrative documentation in Spain, which allows us today to form a fairly detailed picture of the professional lives of many actors. In 1998 [nineteen-ninety-eight] the late John Varey, the leading expert on this documentation, published an article in which he argued that there was a need for a dictionary of Spanish actors to be compiled, drawing together the copious available material, and he set out the basic features and the methodological limits of what was then still a hypothetical project with no established research team. The long-standing collaboration between Professor Varey's own Department of Hispanic Studies at Westfield College (now Queen Mary and Westfield College) in the University of London and the Department of Spanish Philology at the University of Valencia made it possible in 1993 [nineteen-ninety-three] to form a team of collaborators from various universities, which included Professor Varey himself until his untimely death in 1999 [nineteen-ninety-nine], and in which Dr Charles Davis has also been participating. The object of this research project, which I have been

directing since 1993 [nineteen-ninety-three], is to compile a *Biographical Dictionary of Actors of the Spanish Classical Theatre*, by drawing together the abundant but widely-dispersed documentary information we now possess in published form on the subject, including all those actors and *autores* whose professional activity is documented before 1700 [seventeen hundred].

For this project we are using information technology that allows all the members of the team to work with a single database held at the University of Valencia. This also offers great advantages for the later development and use of the project, both in terms of its potential for expansion and revision and also because of its power as a research tool, allowing the user, by means of automated searches, to establish a rich network of relationships among the data. The database currently contains over 6,500 [six thousand five hundred] entries, and when it is published in book form it is likely to occupy some ten volumes.

Each entry begins with the surnames and forenames of the actor or actress as well as their nickname or stage name where these exist. The first part of the entry draws together data such as their place of birth, known family relationships (parents, brothers and sisters, spouses, children) and other information difficult to assign to a specific date, including for example the plays performed, or in some cases composed, by the actor or director in question, their other known activities outside the theatrical profession, recorded contemporary opinions on their work and other non-datable anecdotes related to their biography. The second part of the entry offers, as far as the available data permit, a chronological biographical account, year by year, month by month or even day by day, based on the surviving documentation, which mainly consists of performance contracts between directors and actors, or between directors and the representatives of commercial theatres or of municipalities who hired their services for local festivities.

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There are also contracts to transport the actors and the company's baggage and payments for accommodation or for the purchase of cloth to make costumes, [for example]. An important source of information is the palace accounts, which offer data on payments for private court performances. A further source of great importance, despite the many errors and contradictions it contains, is an anonymous eighteenth-century manuscript, the *Genealogy, Origins and Records of Actors in Spain*, edited by Varey and Shergold in their important series *Fuentes para la Historia del Teatro en España* ("Sources for the History of the Theatre in Spain") published by Tamesis. This manuscript is a collection of data extracted from the records of the actors' guild, the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Novena, including the names of new members and their families, their attendance at meetings of the Brotherhood, the financial contributions paid by companies and the Brotherhood's expenses, as well as the deaths of members.

The material stored in the database offers information not only on the lives of actors and companies but also on various aspects of the works of dramatists of the period, such as documented performances of an author's plays during his lifetime or the degree to which they remained in companies' repertoires after his death. In some cases the *Dictionary* can even help to fix the date of composition or performance of a play by allowing us to identify the actors mentioned in the cast lists often included in surviving manuscripts of plays and the period during which they were active in the relevant company. Indeed, one of the research projects being carried out alongside the compilation of the *Dictionary* involves establishing a complete catalogue of play titles mentioned in the documentation and identifying the plays concerned and their possible authorship.

Collecting all this material together in digital form offers great advantages to researchers, not only in terms of the time saved by being able to access all the

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information we possess on a particular director or actor in a single consultation, but also because it allows us to perceive certain aspects of the subject which are often concealed from us by the sheer quantity of the documentation and its fragmentary nature: how many actors, actresses and companies can we document in practice from the sources? Did the number of titled companies authorized by the Royal Council vary significantly year by year and over the whole period? When precisely did women become involved in directing companies? Could a woman be in charge of a titled company? How were the theatrical itineraries of the companies defined geographically?

Our *Dictionary* therefore aims to provide an additional instrument available to researchers to enable them to answer these and other questions which, because of the overwhelming quantity of documentary information, still remain unresolved.