"And We Are Still Here:"
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Anchoring Lope de Vega in Florida: Theater with a Mission’s Performance of Lope’s (small) New World*

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How do we make a modern audience in the United States relate to a play written more than four hundred years ago in Spain? How do we breach the language and cultural barriers to make these plays accessible to popular audiences? These are questions that TWAM, Theater with a Mission (founded in 2009), adeptly answers with its production of Lope’s (small) New World [L(s)NW].

Ben Gunter, the company’s artistic director, has made it his mission to rediscover the history of Florida through the performance of early modern Spanish plays. For Florida’s five-hundredth anniversary of its encounter with the Old World, TWAM set out to translate, adapt, and perform El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón by Lope de Vega, the first play ever written about the encounter between Spain and the Americas. Although the play grapples with Columbus’s first voyage, Lope de Vega takes creative license by incorporating names from nonrelated sources—“Ongol” from Ercilla’s Araucana and “Dulcanquellín” from Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s Naufragios, to name a few. Lope’s liberties with historical verisimilitude and his inclusion of characters named after people from Chile, Florida, and the Antilles result in a play that addresses the encounter between Spain and all of the Americas. TWAM takes advantage of this and has Columbus/Colón (played by Yankiel Camaraza) land somewhere in Florida.

The over three-thousand verses of Lope’s play were translated collectively by the members of TWAM into nine scenes, divided into three acts lasting approximately seventy minutes without intermissions. The language was accessible, with a small number of anachronistic remarks for comedic effect. The few lines included in Spanish (some lifted directly from the original) were usually preceded or followed by their translation into English or could be completely understood from context. This abridged version preserved the major components of the original play: Columbus’s appeals for patronage to the courts, a divine intervention that encourages Columbus to continue his quest, Granada’s defeat, the arrival to the New World and the problems that follow, the rivalry between the Amerindian chiefs, the rebellion against the Spaniards, and the emphasis on whether the conquistadors had in mind greed or evangelization.

It diverged from the original play in significant ways. The most obvious change is the omission of the final scene wherein Colón takes a group of Amerindians and offers them as gifts to the Kings of Spain. Instead, L(s)NW closes right after the rebellion. The actors form a tableau and unfreeze one at a time to pose questions about what will happen to the characters in the play. Changing the ending in this manner not only allows for the inclusion of questions that elicit further connections to Florida and to the audience, but also prevents the Amerindian characters from being regarded as mere objects to be traded. The empowerment of the Amerindians is present throughout L(s)NW, but it is more clearly displayed in Tacuana’s monologue and in Palca’s reaction to the mirror. In the original play, Tacuana falls in love with Terrazas and expresses her desire to have the Spaniards and the Amerindian intermarriage so that they all become Spaniards. On the contrary, in L(s)NW, Tacuana (Sharon Sibley) uses Terrazas (Yankiel Camaraza) to climb up the social ladder because she recognizes that the political organization of her people has been drastically and permanently altered. Likewise, Palca (Marcy Palmer) does not recoil in fear after seeing herself in the mirror as indicated in the original play; instead, she marvels at herself and bows down, not to the Spaniards, but to what she considers to be her sister spirit.

Another characteristic of this adaptation is the inclusion of Brechtian techniques, such as using songs, breaking the fourth wall, allowing the audience to see how the actors rearrange the set, or having some actors play multiple roles. Even though some of these techniques are used in early modern theater, the manner in which they are employed in L(s)NW is more akin to Brecht’s methods. In early modern theater, the characters usually perform for other characters and their songs often mirror their situation onstage. In contrast, in L(s)NW, the entire cast sings directly to the audience. Additionally, there is a sense of dissonance in the instrumentation, which may be the result
of using faithful reconstructions from period instruments. These provide a slightly different aesthetic than what the modern audience is used to hearing; there is a sort of nasality to the wind instruments with which we are not familiar. The repetition of notes and the heavily marked rhythm create a hypnotic effect. The music engrosses the hearer and transports the audience back in time—a testament to the excellence of the music researcher, Romas Sparkis, and the musicians, Russell Almond, Kirsten Henriksen, Margot Almond, Gabrielle Reed, and Romas Sparkis himself. Still, the lyrics of the songs pull you back to the present as the actors sing “Welcome to Lope’s (small) New World,” a clear example of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt (estrangement) since it punctuates that this is a performance and not real life. They further break the illusion and finish the entrance song with the entire cast creating a cacophony by intentionally singing each a different note simultaneously.

Regarding the breaking of the fourth wall, in early modern plays, this happens in asides or in the last few verses to indicate that the play has ended. In L(s)NW, the fourth wall is continuously broken. Several characters comment on the actions of another as if they were members of the audience—e.g. Imaginación (Zadi Almond, Figure 1) claps and cheerfully says, “Bravo. What an exit! Too bad the actor’s full of it.” However, the most recurrent breaking of the fourth wall is carried out by a character not found in the original play: the Historian (Beverly Lewis, Figure 2). She welcomes the audience to the performance, lists the scenes to be performed, explains the connections that this play has with Florida’s history, coaches the audience, and can freeze and unfreeze the action on stage with a snap of her fingers. The Historian allows for direct interaction with the audience and encourages its participation by assigning it a role.

Breaking the fourth wall, contrary to creating estrangement as Bertold Brecht intended, has the opposite effect in this play; it foments audience engagement. This works brilliantly for acts one and two. In the first act, the audience’s role is to be “bigwigs” and to mock Colón by saying “Procura cura para tu locura
Procure a cure for that craziness of yours” whenever members of the cast lift a banner with this phrase written on it. In the second act, the audience is to yell “kaboom!” every time a harquebus is lifted in the air. The audience is also responsible for solving the monster mystery posed toward the end of act two—ending the act only after a member of the audience has provided the correct answer. For the third act, the audience is asked to cross itself. This type of nonverbal participation may be a bit uncomfortable since the audience does not have the luxury of anonymity provided by the darkness of a proscenium house.

This brings us to the design choices for this play. Like Teatro Campesino, TWAM travels constantly and performs in found and site-specific spaces so that it can reach more audiences. In the case of the performance in question, the company used a conference room at the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress, which provided little choice for lighting design. As a result, the people in the audience and the actors onstage were equally illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights. The scenery, however, was very creative due to this very constraint. David Smith, the scene designer, used three crosses draped with assorted fabrics to function as backdrops for the courts, ships, and crosses, among other things. This provided a welcomed splash of color to contrast the off-white walls. Additionally, the use of three chests allowed the actors to create different levels by sitting or standing on them. The costumes, designed by Gabrielle Reed, were also very versatile; many actors indicated a change in role by donning a different costume. A white and beige cotton outfit was worn by all actors. The actors playing Europeans wore coats, hats, mantillas, or other garments that identified them with the Old World. On the other hand, the Amerindians draped Spanish moss over their dresses—a bit of irony perhaps or maybe another way to connect with present-day Florida.

The choreography of the dance in the wedding scene provided another clear connection with Florida. Idy Codington (choreographer and dancer) based this dance on Jacques Le Moyne’s engraving of the Timucua Indians: Solemnities at the Reception.
of the Queen by the King (Figure 3). The engraving shows a group of women in a circle in front of the Queen and King. Idy Codington discovered that each of the women depicted in the circle represented a step in the dance and that following the circle in a counterclockwise manner revealed a dance sequence. The reconstruction of the Timucua's dance was one of the highlights of the play; it gave us another glimpse into the richness of Florida's heritage.

Concerning the acting, we must bear in mind that this is a volunteer theater company and as such the expertise levels vary greatly. The best performances in this play, nevertheless, were nothing short of professional. Sharon Sibley, in her storm dance, displayed great fluidity in movement and provided visual focus. In her speaking roles, she transferred her musicality to the cadence of her voice, which made her presence onstage mesmerizing. Another great performance was given by Mitchell Ronderrick, whose timing was perfect—especially in his comedic role as Pinzón. Also very impressive was his ability to create striking differences between Rey Chico and Pinzón, the two characters he portrayed.

L(s)NW is not a faithful translation, and that is one of its best attributes. It keeps the essence of Lope's play by addressing the issues contained within it. By drawing explicit parallels between the action onstage and Florida, TWAM
highlights the importance of this play. It reminds the audience that Lope’s play is about coping with change, human rights, and the challenges brought forth by two vastly different groups of people attempting to coexist. In its interpretation of Lope’s play, TWAM has made the encounter between the New and the Old Worlds relevant, thought provoking yet funny, interactive, and enjoyable for audiences of all backgrounds and ages.

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