

Allen, John Jay.

La piedra Rosetta del teatro comercial europeo: El Teatro Cervantes de Alcalá de Henares.

Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2015. 150 pp.

This book is the latest contribution by John Jay Allen to our knowledge of the material conditions of Golden Age theater, a field in which he is the undisputed living expert and the importance of which it would be difficult to overestimate. Here Allen tells three stories. The first is about the discovery of a 1601 *corral* under the superimposed layers of an eighteenth-century coliseum, a nineteenth-century romantic theater, and a twentieth-century movie house, plus the effort by the three students who made the discovery to reconstruct it, with the assistance and direction of John Varey. The second is about the construction and structure of the *corral*, built by Francisco Sánchez, an illiterate carpenter, following the Corral de la Cruz, which he had seen in Madrid. The third reiterates Allen's previous work on the layout of *corrales*, with particular emphasis on their relationship to adjoining houses, and how this affected the staging of individual *comedias* such as *La vida sueño* and *Fuenteovejuna*.

The first story is a saga with a sad ending. The struggles of the devoted students and John Varey, opposed or ignored by uncaring bureaucrats and ambitious politicians, were long and tortuous, in spite of the support of the international and national community of experts on Golden Age theater. After decades of disheartening failures the *corral* was restored, but not before the death of Varey, who never saw his labors come to fruition, nor was his personal library, which he had donated to the project, preserved at the site. The library ultimately was dispersed and lost, yet the theater is there, with its three incarnations restored, available for Spanish and foreign companies to stage classical and modern plays.

Sánchez's construction of the *corral* is crucial, because this is the only remaining vestige of a historical Golden Age theater, and its rebuilding is a unique process on a European scale. Shakespeare's Globe in London burned down, as we know, so what we have is a replica built on the site following documents of the period. The stones on the patio of the *corral* in Alcalá are the same ones on which Cervantes reports to have stood; hence, "Rosetta Stone" in the title of the book. The carpenter—whose illiteracy I question, for how could he have taken and preserved measurements?—followed the basic plan of the Madrid *corrales*, with the *apostentos*, *cazuela*, basic stage, bleachers on the side, patio for the *mosqueteros*, and, most importantly, ways to collect money from the spectators. The Cervantes was not funded by a hospital or welfare institutions; it was a commercial theater.

Allen makes much of the *apostentos*, the windows on the walls of

adjacent houses that served as box seats for the well-to-do. This configuration established a complicated social and monetary relationship between the theater and the community and played a significant role in the placement of the audience around the stage, as well. How could the producer, *autor*, charge spectators for the use of these, and how was access to them arranged? Allen argues that the *apostentos* were integrated into the *corral*. This discussion leads to detailed calculations of how the monetary contribution of the *vulgo* compared to that of the rich, in order to test the material validity of Lope's assertion that he wrote for the people because they paid to support his work (Cervantes says the same, but as a critique). Allen agrees with Lope: the *vulgo's* share is more significant, which also explains Lope's pandering to the humble in plays such as *Fuenteovejuna* and *Peribáñez*. We know that there is more to it than that, of course, but this is valuable information.

Allen returns in the last part of the book to his magnificent observations about how the architectural features of a *corral* determined stagecraft and how this affected the actual performance of the *comedias*. His examples come mostly from the opening scenes of *La vida es sueño*. It is a very enlightening analysis, in which he follows, line by line, Rosaura's and Segismundo's allusions to their surroundings—the cave, the mountain, the tower—which reveal their representation on the stage. I am taken by how Allen demonstrates how much all the stage props and their arrangement owe to the *autos sacramentales*. But I am also induced to think how the structure of a *corral* that could hold up to a thousand people affected the gestural codes followed by actors and their delivery of lines, which had practically to be shouted to be heard, because of distance and acoustics. It makes one wonder how lines of such exquisite poetry were recited and appreciated by the public.

We must thank again John Jay Allen for his meticulous work on the representation of the Comedia.

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