

The Trials of Translating and Directing *The House of Trials*

David Pasto

As the translator of Sor Juana's comedy, *Los empeños de una casa*, I had to make a number of choices which would determine the overall style of the translation. The most important choice, of course, was the level of diction. Translations of Spanish Golden Age *comedia* often sound stilted and overly ornate in English. Language that sounded graceful and polite to seventeenth-century Spaniards would strike a modern English-speaking ear as pretentious and florid.

Sor Juana wrote in rhymed verse, which was the norm for her time, but is not common in English theatre. I chose to avoid rhyme except for the song, the short scene immediately following the song (for reasons discussed later), and lines at the ends of scenes (to bring scenes to a graceful conclusion as Shakespeare often did). Richard Wilbur's verse translations of Molière work beautifully in English, but most rhyming translations sound like bad Dr. Seuss. So, I chose to render the play in prose so it would flow easily off the performers' tongues, but to make the language as theatrical and pleasing to the ear as possible.

I made the decision to emphasize Sor Juana's metaphorical diction. At the beginning of Act II, for example, Ana asks Leonor how she slept last night and Leonor responds,

Like someone

shipwrecked amid the tempests

of a stormy sea
with the keel aground
and the stern in the air.

I could have simplified this to “I felt shipwrecked and run aground in a storm,” which would have rendered the general image of the line, but would have lost the sense of an extended metaphor. Sor Juana’s poetry is often elaborate and baroque, so I sought English phrases that maintained the complex imagery without being stilted.

I also chose to use alliteration whenever possible to make the dialogue appeal to the ear. Thus Castaño says “How wonderful to be wooed” instead of “It’s nice to be made love to” and refers to “a legion of lackeys” rather than “many servants.” Sometimes I was even able to use double alliteration, as in Juan’s soliloquy in Act III, “How can I risk proving my dishonor without preparing my defense?” This also creates a rhythm, making the dialogue fun to listen to in the theatre.

I also attempted to create different levels of diction for different characters. Whenever Rodrigo enters, the verse form changes from assonant rhyme to true rhyme, which suggested a more strict and rigid language, reflecting his strict and rigid character and sense of honor. In translation, I made his language more formal and academic. He never uses contractions, splits infinitives, or ends a sentence with a proposition as other characters do. On the other hand, the servants use slang in the original, so I had to give them more colloquial diction in translation.

The servants proved to be the most difficult characters to translate. First of

all, their use of seventeenth-century slang made it a challenge to understand what they were saying. In addition, they often spoke in puns that would not translate literally into English. I found that translating jokes from one language to another was a maddening struggle when searching for a humorous equivalent, but a rewarding pleasure when I discovered a related pun in English. Celia, in Act II, has a speech which uses several different forms and meanings of the verb *mandar*. The word means “to give an order” and also “to leave in a will.” My solution was a series of variations on the words “give” and “order”:

. . . it always turns out
that if they order something
in order to give,
they give themselves the excuse
that they forgot to give the order
in order not to give.

While perhaps not as clever as Sor Juana, the speech at least gives a sense of Celia’s playful diction.

Some puns, however, were just impossible to translate or find any equivalent in English. In the last act, Castaño says that his gloves are *de perro*, which literally means made of dog skin, but is slang for cheap or dirty. Several lines later he says that he is *el perro muerto* (the dead dog) from which the gloves were made. The phrase, *el perro muerto*, also refers to a man who tricks a women into having sex with him by pretending to be someone else. In English, we have no word for a man who performs “a bed trick” nor do we describe cheap gloves as being made of dog fur. I failed to find any equivalent for these puns, so

Castaño describes the gloves as “cheap” and himself as “a cheap trick.” Some *double entendres*, alas, have no equivalent in translation.

Some phrases can be literally translated quite easily, but sound odd or absurd in another language. In Golden Age Spain, it was customary to utter to the polite phrase “I kiss your feet.” I was afraid, however, that a modern American audience would laugh, so I changed the sentence to “I kneel at your feet” which is the action implied by the original phrase.

One formally polite Spanish phrase that sounded both stilted and sexist in English was the recurring phrase: “I am the master of her heart” or “He is the master of my heart.” While the phrase is intended to be romantic, it has sinister overtones of sexism, since it is always the man who is the master of a woman’s heart and never the other way around. Here I varied my translation depending on the character who spoke the line. I viewed Leonor and Carlos as an ideal couple in the play, so instead of letting Carlos say “I am the master of Leonor’s heart,” I gave him the phrase “I am the man Leonor loves” (which also allowed for alliteration). On the other hand, I interpreted Ana as a schemer who is trapped by her own plots into marrying Juan, so she lies and claims that he “reigned absolutely over all the thoughts in my heart.” Because Ana is lying, I purposely had her overstate her feelings. My vision of the play resulted in different English translations of the same Spanish phrase.

In many small ways, my translation favors my interpretation of the play, in which Leonor and Carlos are the heroine and hero, because they represent an androgynous ideal. In Golden Age Spain, intelligence and reason were considered masculine traits while beauty and discretion were feminine traits.

Leonor's intelligence is emphasized in her long exposition speech, and when she describes Carlos, she emphasizes his beauty and his manners. Thus Leonor sees both Carlos and herself as combining traditionally masculine and feminine traits. I believe that Sor Juana intended to depict each of them as ideally "bi-gendered." Therefore, when given a choice, I always gave Carlos and Leonor the most feminist translation possible.

My interpretation of the play caused me to alter the title of the play, which proved problematic in English, in any case. The literal translation is "the trials of a house," which makes no sense in English. Sor Juana intended it as a pun on the title of a play by Calderón, *The Trials of Chance*. Since this play is unknown in English, there was no reason to keep the play on words. I interpreted the play as a series of trials for Leonor and Carlos, whose love is tested by Pedro and Ana's schemes while they are trapped in their house. Thus, I decided to call the play *The House of Trials*.

Another important decision that incorporated my interpretation of the play was the repeated use of theatrical metaphors throughout the text. Sor Juana filled *The House of Trials* with puns that refer to the theatre, and I chose to emphasize this in my translation. Whenever a word had several meanings and one of them referred to performance, I chose the theatrical metaphor. Thus, Celia refers to a long speech as "a monologue" and refers to her deceptions as "plot devices." The meta-theatrical joke that audiences always laughed at was Castaño's line to Carlos at the end of Act II:

Let's go and skip the cries of "alas!" and "alack!"
that prevent our leaving and prolong the act.

These lines are part of a pattern of theatrical language that permeates the text. (And, by the way, it is usually the servants, Castaño and Celia, who use the theatrical metaphors.)

The meta-theatrical language is most obvious in Castaño's soliloquy as he dresses in Leonor's clothing. He talks to the audience and addresses individual people who must have been present at the play's premiere. The series of self-reflective references begin with Castaño's plea,

. . . help me to escape these trials
by inspiring a scheme for me
worthy of the great playwright, Calderón!

Sor Juana borrowed heavily from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's dramaturgy throughout the play, but in this scene she outdoes the master. She dares us to compare her play with Calderón's and then proceeds to use Castaño's disguise for a type of gender-bending comedy that Calderón never produced.

The meta-theatrical language becomes meta-theatrical action in the musical performance in the middle of Act II. Ana prepares a musical performance for Leonor to listen to while she is trapped in Pedro and Ana's house. Meanwhile, Ana hides Carlos and her servant in a room with a latticed window, so Carlos can watch Pedro make love to Leonor and be driven by jealousy to lose interest in Leonor. Ana creates a performance for Leonor as well as performance for Carlos, thus Ana arranges a play-within-a-play-within-a-play. After the singers complete their song, each of the six characters on stage has a speech with the same complex rhyme scheme and two identical lines spoken in between each speech. In addition, the last line of all six speeches rhymed with each other. This was truly

a translator's nightmare! (**Video Clip 1** [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#))

As you can hear in this video from the performance at Oklahoma City University, I translated each of the six speeches into two rhyming couplets, with a repeated refrain. You also may have noticed that the formality of the language in this scene is reflected in the formality of the blocking. The choreography for the musical performance was formal and the singers were obviously in performance mode. Then the movement pattern for the following six speeches was identical for each character. The actor rose on the first word, crossed to another location while speaking, and sat on the last word. The characters, like the singers, seemed choreographed. Their movement patterns were intentionally artificial and theatrical in order to visually mimic Sor Juana's deliberately artificial and theatrical versification. When this production was performed at the International *Siglo de Oro* Theatre Festival in 1996, both of the adjudicators commented on the dramatic effectiveness of this scene in terms of both the translation and the direction.

I had originally translated the scene on video in prose, but while listening to my actors perform the scene when I first directed the play in 1995, I realized that these speeches had to be rendered in rhyming verse. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to hear my text spoken by actors and make changes in rehearsal. When the lines sounded awkward or stilted, I was able to alter them to flow more smoothly. I adjusted the wording of puns and jokes to achieve the best comic effect. With the help of several professors correcting my translation, I was able to produce a version that was reasonably accurate as well as stage worthy.

Catherine Larson's article, "Writing the Performance: Stage Directions and the Staging of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa*" had alerted me to the

unusually large number of asides, but until I had to direct the action on the stage, I was not fully aware of the problems raised by the vast volume of asides. The issue came to a head as I was directing the third scene in Act One. During a scene in the dark, four characters (Leonor, Juan, Ana, and Carlos) grope around the stage in a humorous and thematically significant series of mistaken identities. Then Celia, the maid, enters with a light and the following revelations are all asides:

CELIA (*aside*): I came to see if my mistress is here,
so that Don Juan, who I left hiding
in her room, could sneak out.
But what do I see?

LEONOR (*aside*): What is this? Heaven defend me!
Isn't this Carlos I see?

CARLOS (*aside*): Unless I'm deceived
this is Leonor.

ANA (*aside*): Don Juan here?
I'm speechless!

JUAN (*aside*): Why is Don Carlos here?
He must be Doña Ana's lover.
Because of him that
treacherous and unfaithful woman
treats me with scorn.

LEONOR (*aside*): My God! Is Carlos in this house,
while I lovingly wept

for him being in prison?
In a darkened room
does he make love to me
thinking it's someone else?
He must be this lady's lover.
But how can that be?
Is all this an illusion?
They brought me to him as a prisoner
and left me here! I'm
drowning in a sea of sorrows.

These six asides in row proved to be impossible for the actors to motivate using the staging conventions normally used in directing Shakespeare and other seventeenth-century plays.

The solution I discovered involved having all the other characters freeze while each character spoke directly to the audience. This stop-action technique proved both effective and funny. In fact, the audience was laughing by the fourth aside, having found the obviously theatrical pattern very amusing.

I decided to have the actors freeze during the asides throughout the entire play, which was difficult to train actors to do, but solved a number of textual problems. The cast and I began to experiment with the stop-action technique after the actors playing Castaño and Carlos froze in a particularly funny tableau during one of Ana's asides. Characters would be caught in the middle of an action that could be completed only when the aside had passed.

When we revived the production the following spring in order to tour the

production to the *Siglo de Oro* Theatre Festival, I began to play more games with the asides. Sometimes characters moved during their asides while the other characters were frozen. The others would unfreeze to discover that the character speaking the aside had suddenly been transported to another spot on the stage.

This joke was especially effective in the scene where Castaño is disguised in Leonor's clothing and Pedro makes love to him thinking he is Leonor. (**Video Clip 2 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#)**). As you can see in this scene, Pedro backs Castaño over a chair in an attempt to kiss him, but Castaño slips out from under Pedro during his aside. When Pedro unfreezes, he falls into the empty chair where Castaño had been. The chair is used again for another visual joke after Carlos and Juan enter sword fighting. Juan lunges into the chair, freezes during Ana's aside, then feels the pain when he unfreezes.

Also, note that the scene ends with six asides in a row. The use of the freezes clarifies the action and helps the audience to focus on the speaker of each aside, since audiences usually focus on whichever character is moving. (This is a basic principle of directing for the stage.)

These bits of comic business using the freezes during the asides were effective because they created visual jokes that matched Sor Juana's verbal puns. I believe that the use of freezes and the jokes we played with the technique also added to the theatricality of the play. Thus, we found a visual equivalent for Sor Juana's verbal self-reflexive comments.

Before starting rehearsals, I had been aware of another the major problem in the text--the long exposition speeches. The play begins with a three page monologue by Ana soon followed by a six page monologue by Leonor. My

solution for this seemingly endless narration was to stage some of Leonor's monologue. As she described how many men courted her, those men appeared and offered her gifts which she refused politely as she explained how she courteously defended her honor. Then, as she described her elopement and the sword fight that ensued, Carlos and Diego appeared and dueled. As Leonor described the action, Carlos wounded Diego, who was carried off, and the police arrived to arrest Carlos. This not only gave the audience something to watch during the long exposition speech, but it also allowed us to introduce some exciting sword play into the first scene. If the audience had started to fall asleep during the exposition, the duel slapped them awake.

By staging what had happened earlier on the street in Ana's house, we once again emphasized the theatricality of the play. In real life, past events do not spring to life as we describe them later. The audience was shown a kind of play-within-a-play. Leonor created the suitors and the duel for us as she narrated them, writing a performance within the performance, just as Ana staged a play-within-the-play for the musical entertainment in Act Two.

The solutions to the translation and directing problems posed by the long exposition speeches, the numerous asides, and the musical entertainment all involved emphasizing the theatricality of the play. The trials of staging *The House of Trials* appear only if the director insists on staging the play as realistically as possible. The more theatrically and artfully the director conceives of the production, the more effective the performance becomes and the problems disappear. Having staged the play twice now on the same set, I would love to stage the play on a less representational and more presentational scene design.

More theatrical design elements would create less trials.

“The critic who no longer enjoys the theatre is obviously a deadly critic, the critic who loves the theatre but is not critically clear what this means is also a deadly critic: the vital critic is the critic who has clearly formulated for himself what the theatre could be—and who is bold enough to throw this formula into jeopardy each time he participates in a theatrical event.”—Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

“I never knew classical theatre could be like that.”—audience member for Crisis Point production of *The House of Trials*.

Rough Translations in the House of Trials: Playing with Sor Juana’s *Los empeños de una casa*

John Fletcher

Despite boasting a range of ideas and styles easily comparable to that of English or French Classical theatre, Spanish Golden Age drama remains virtually unknown in U.S. university and college theatre departments. The dearth of English editions accounts for only part of the problem. Even after a work has been rendered into stage-worthy English, university artists and professors must present seventeenth-century works informed by *Siglo de Oro* logics like *honra*, *limpieza de sangre*, and Inquisitional Catholicism in a manner compelling to present-day students and audiences. To do so, directors, designers, and actors must confront a number of barriers—historical, cultural, and stylistic—no less daunting than those faced by linguistic translators. The result? Only rarely does a *comedia* find its way into theatre history or dramatic literature classes.

Productions of *comedias* on university stages are even rarer. Given American audiences’ cultural prejudices against classical drama in general, university theatre departments may well judge Golden Age works as simply too foreign and not worth the trouble. The task before scholars, professors, and practitioners of

the *comedia*, then, is one of translating the contributions of critical-theoretical scholarship into ideas productive for the practical-artistic motives fueling production.

Evidence suggests that *comedia* scholarship is expanding its focus to meet this challenge. Writing in 1991, Charles Ganelin notes that “The *comedia* critic’s concept of audience has, until recently, related to colleagues who read words written about a dramatic text viewed from a reader’s perspective” (103). Thanks in no small part to contributions from Ganelin and other critics, however, critical attitudes toward the semiotics of live performance are becoming more sophisticated. Scholars can now consult any of a number of recent studies which explore how the requirements of performance impact critical approaches to interpretation (I’m thinking specifically of Louise and Peter Frothergill-Payne’s *Prologue to Performance* as well as Ganelin and Howard Mancing’s *Golden Age Comedia: Text, Theory, and Performance*). The ongoing interactions between the annual Association for Hispanic Classical Theatre conference and the Chamizal *Siglo de Oro* Festival encourage (and at times challenge) critical views of classical texts (and vice versa). The forthcoming journal *Comedia Performance* promises to provide an exciting space for scholars to examine possibilities for *comedia* production. More and more, this tide of scholarship is breaking down the polarity between theatre scholarship and theatre practice. Scholars are recognizing the director’s work in interpreting a play for the stage as the “flip side of a critical perspective brought forth by the critic” (Ganelin 107).

In this article, I discuss some of the choices I made in my own experiment in combining critical and directorial perspectives. During the fall of 2001, I directed

The House of Trials, David Pasto's English version of Sor Juan Inès de la Cruz' *Los empeños de una casa*, for Crisis Point Theatre at the University of Minnesota —Twin Cities. In bringing Sor Juana's work to a small, low-budget college stage, I found myself negotiating between the exigencies of production and the thematic and stylistic complexities that surround and inform the play. How could I produce an entertaining piece of theatre while still doing justice to the critical sophistication of Sor Juana's work? My process of answering such questions was for me a means of addressing the translation challenge facing *comedia* scholarship today.

Throughout this discussion, I use *translation* as a guiding metaphor for my project, as I see a resonance between the task of translation and the common ground shared by critic and director. In the growing body of literature on *comedia* adaptation, *translation* is often described in terms of "building a bridge" between two worlds (present-day English-speaking and seventeenth-century Spanish). While I appreciate the implication of back-breaking labor the image conveys, I'm dissatisfied by the connotation of a static connection between two entities that remain alien and unchanged. I begin, then, by suggesting a modification of the term *translation* drawn from the work of interwar German philosopher Walter Benjamin.

In his essay, "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin discusses and rejects the image of translation as a mechanical or utilitarian exercise of substituting words in one language with their analogues in another. Instead, he insists that the translator's duty "consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76). Benjamin positions translation as a negotiation between two imaginative systems.

More often than not, Benjamin elaborates, such a negotiation requires a change in both languages, both systems. Quoting Rudolph Pannwitz, Benjamin asserts that “[t]he basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by a foreign tongue” (80). Translation, then, functions less as a bridge between two discrete entities and more as a dynamic encounter between imaginative forces who emerge from the experience transformed. For me, Benjamin’s definition elaborates an ethical imperative: If I truly seek to *translate* a work from the past onto the present stage, I must strive for the transformative, for that which challenges and exceeds an audience’s expectations and preconceptions.

My history with *Los empeños* introduced me to such transformative possibilities. My first encounter with *Los empeños de una casa*—indeed, my first encounter with any Siglo de Oro drama—came in 1995 when, as a Freshman at Oklahoma City University, I had the great fortune to be cast as Castaño in Dr. Pasto’s premiere production of *The House of Trials* (the first English production of the play). The following year, I reprised my role for the Chamizal audience at the XXI Annual *Siglo de Oro* Festival in El Paso, TX. Three years later, Dr. Pasto brought a production of his translation of Alarcón’s *Las paredes oyen* (*The Walls Have Ears*) to Chamizal, and again I was cast. During that Festival I saw Sor Juana’s play performed by a professional company, the Teatro de Repertorio Latinamericano from Caracas, Venezuela.

Their production style was radically different than that of OCU. Where Dr. Pasto had premiered his translations in the context of a period-specific design concept, the Teatro de Repertorio chose a pared-down, low-tech approach that

challenged the Chamizal auditorium's formal proscenium dynamic. Two bands of cloth hanging from the ceiling just off the wings and two high-backed chairs served as their entire set. Actors wore plain black and white outfits and wielded simple, utilitarian stage properties. The minimal design concept created the feel of an impromptu make-believe session, as if children had pulled discarded pieces of clothing from a box and used their imaginations to create the world of the play.

The company's staging reinforced this playful atmosphere. Just before the performance, costumed ushers coaxed a good portion of the audience out of their seats and relocated them to on-stage bleacher seating directly facing the house audience. Spectators on stage and in the house grinned at each other across the narrow aisle playing space; watching others enjoy the show became as much fun as the show itself. Throughout the evening, cast members took full advantage of the lively intimacy between performer and audience. Without the barrier of a raised stage and orchestra pit, expository asides grew into confidential gossip between characters and spectators. Songs and musical interludes became up-close-and-personal cabaret numbers. Castaño's Act III cross-dressing involved an extended foray into audience seats (and onto one person's lap). These choices, coupled with the craft of the performers, created a joyfully theatrical experience, a playful space quite different from OCU's production, yet somehow absolutely *right* for the piece.

At the *mesa redonda* discussion afterward with the cast, I listened (with Professor Amy Williams' kind assistance) to Costa Palamides, the director, speak about his motivations for producing the play. His troupe, it seems, had made a name for itself primarily as a comic troupe playing modern-day farces. Only

recently had they decided to turn to a more classical repertoire. Palamides spoke of the company's trepidation about tackling "classical" theatre, particularly given the expectations of their decidedly non-classical audience base. They felt that a conventionally formal production with period dress and elevated settings would have been alienating. Instead, they crafted a production that would maintain the integrity of Sor Juana's work while being adaptable enough to be played on the streets. For me, Palamides's approach opened my eyes to new possibilities for what "classical theatre" could be and do. I left excited about the prospect of attempting my own theatrical translations.

That following fall, as I started graduate school at the University of Minnesota, I became involved in with a student-run theatre troupe, Crisis Point Theatre, whose setup specifically welcomed such translation projects. Thanks to a yearly grant from the University of Minnesota, Crisis Point operates outside of the auspices of the University's Department of Theater Arts and Dance (though collaborations are frequent). Helmed by a core board of graduate and undergraduate students, Crisis Point describes itself as a "laboratory for artistic experimentation offering students from a variety of disciplines the chance to be involved in all aspects of making theatre" ("Description"). Every year, the company produces a season of original, infrequently staged, and/or challenging work alongside the University Theatre's own season. Past seasons have boasted premieres of award-winning student-written plays as well as critically lauded productions of canonical works like *Angels in America*.

Crisis Point's operating conditions, while exciting from a Student Life "let's include everyone" standpoint, can complicate its goal of producing challenging,

quality theatre. Since the terms of its funding grant mandate involving the University community at large, Crisis Point strives to draw actors, directors, playwrights, and designers from outside the Theatre Department proper. Consequently, casts generally feature an uneven range of talent and experience, a mix at odds with the requirements of an average Crisis Point show. Professional actors generally train for years to master classical verse or avant-garde movement styles; tackling Shakespeare or German Expressionism with a cast of undergraduates—some experienced, some brand-new to theatre—borders on the foolhardy. Additionally, Crisis Point lacks a stage of its own, so each production must find and rent performance space. “Found spaces” like art galleries, studio apartments, and empty classrooms serve almost as often as small theatres. Finally, sets, costumes, and props must be drawn from Crisis Point’s limited storage supply or purchased with a show’s even more limited budget, discouraging high-concept period productions.

While these constraints can often prove frustrating to directors and designers, they also encourage a high level of ad hoc creativity, similar to what director Peter Brook calls “rough theatre.” According to Brook, rough theatre is theatre stripped to the bare essentials: performers and spectators combining imaginations. Bypassing formalized conventions, in rough theatre “a bucket will be banged for a battle, flour used to show faces white with fear. The arsenal is limitless: the aside, the placard, the topical reference, the local jokes, the exploiting of accidents, the songs, the dances, the tempo, the noise . . .” (Brook 66). Crisis Point productions invite such an improvised approach. “How can we block a three-act, multiple-locale play in a space with only one stage entrance?”

“How can we choreograph a swordfight when no one has even one fencing lesson to his/her credit?” “Does that actor *have* to have so many lines?” Questions like these crop up with such regularity that *rough* becomes the default style.

Brook’s conception of rough theatre dovetails with Benjamin’s ethic of translation. Rough theatre revels in a sense of theatrical *play* fueled by a union of imaginative energies: the performers’, the audience’s, and the playwright’s. In such a meeting place, received conventions dictating what a certain text *really* means or how a particular play *ought* to be done—normative preconceptions that ensure listless translations—prove less important than asking the essential question of how to make imaginative encounters vital and engaging. Given that much of the reticence to produce Spanish works derives from the *comedia*’s departures from “classical” (read: Shakespearean) norms, rough translations that operate outside of or against such norms offer a possible space for Spanish classical theatre to flourish in the U.S.

While I knew that Crisis Point’s rough production values would have a transformative effect on Sor Juana’s text, I sought also for elements in the text could inspire a present transformation. As most Sor Juana scholars will aver, *Los empeños* has more going on than just a convoluted love plot. A recent upsurge of critical attention to the play has contributed valuable insights into specificity of Sor Juana’s dramaturgy relative to that of other (male) contemporary playwrights. In modeling the play’s title after a Calderónian *comedia* (i.e., *Los empeños de un acaso*), in patterning her plot after a Calderónian *capa y espada* (*Casa con dos puertos mala es de guardar*), and, finally, in having Castaño pray for a specifically Calderónian inspiration, Sor Juana underlines her play’s relationship to more well-

established (masculine) models. Critical interpretations of Calderón's influence on *Los empeños* have abandoned the picture of a cloistered Mexican nun imitating the Spanish master (Schmidhuber lists examples of such dismissive commentary) in favor of a portrait of Sor Juana consciously inhabiting Calderonian forms and techniques in order to parody them (Kenworthy). Christopher Weimer goes further to argue that through certain strategic modifications to Calderonian tropes, such as Castaño's sympathetic reflection on women's roles while he's in drag, Sor Juana in fact openly criticizes and overturns masculinist representations of gender and honor (Weimer; see also Freidman and Cypess). Beneath its frothy exterior, then, *Los empeños de una casa* serves as a sharp satire of seventeenth-century Spanish gender roles.

Initially, I wanted to use this critique as a point of departure for my stage translation. As I played out various stagings along this line, however, I ran into difficulties. While as a critic I appreciate the political significance of Sor Juana's citing and modifying Calderón, as a director I had to confront the hard fact that such significance will be lost on a Crisis Point audience wholly unfamiliar with Calderonian dramaturgical models and seventeenth-century gender norms. Moreover, Sor Juana's handling of gender—subversive as it was for its time—remains hopelessly antiquated from the perspective of a twenty-first-century audience. Potent as Doña Ana is, her ultimate submission to her “master” Don Juan galls modern sensibilities. Leonor's exceptional combination of intelligence and beauty—probable autobiographical references to Sor Juana herself—get upstaged in the play as she becomes the helpless object of a male tug-of-war. Even Castaño's famous cross-dressing scene loses something of its shock value

when presented to an audience inured to plots like *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *The Birdcage*. In fact, insofar as the humor of Pedro's clumsy overtures toward Castaño/Leonor relies on a tacit assumption of the absurdity/undesirability of same-sex desire, the scene suffers from what is in the present a potentially homophobic undercurrent. I had to admit, then, that a vision of the play as potent gender satire would not translate easily in a small-scale present-day production.

Luckily, Sor Juana's comic sophistication isn't limited to a play of gender norms, and her lively dramaturgy suggests other modes of subversion. The two previous productions I had encountered had already made use of Sor Juana's heightened metatheatrical consciousness, an understanding of the theatrical form as an inside joke between stage and audience. In the introduction to his translation, Pasto notes that characters in *Los empeños* display an unusual awareness of themselves as being in a performance (16-17). The *criados* in particular repeatedly point out their being in a play, as when Celia bemoans Leonor's lengthy exposition: "A monologue in the middle of the night, by candlelight? God forbid!" (43). Or, as Castaño cross-dresses, he excuses himself, "Please remember, ladies, [that this] is a play. Don't think I hatched this scheme myself" (117). Though only the servants exhibit such an overtly metatheatrical consciousness, every character enjoys his or her special relationship to the audience thanks to the unusually high number of asides in the play (one scene, for example, features five asides in a row). Noting Sor Juana's frequent use of this device, Catherine Larson argues that, in a comedy driven by misunderstandings, hidden agendas, and deceptions, the constant check-ins with the audience do more than clarify plot twists. They draw the audience in as every

character's confidant and accomplice, creating another level of meaning-making during performance (Larson 193). Dramaturgically, *House of Trials* can be read as a play about *playing* with reality, about manipulating conventions of stage, plot, and audience.

This critical inroad, meshing nicely with Crisis Point's rough style, guided some initial production choices. To begin with, I sought to distance the production style from the popular image of "classical theatre." I began by seeking out an explicitly non-theatrical venue uncontaminated by bad memories of compulsory high-school Shakespeare productions. I found the perfect setting in a vegetarian café/liberal religious bookstore called Saint Martin's Table. Located across the street from campus, St. Martin's Table served as a popular spot for lunch meetings, book signings, and community workshops. The managers were happy to rent the space to us for a very reasonable price. Of course, since the café had to operate during the day throughout our run, we were responsible for transforming the space from dining area to theatre and back again each night. Each evening, the cast and I would move the twenty or so tables out of the dining area, re-arrange the chairs into a makeshift audience, hang lights, and delimit a playing area.

The nightly load-in and strike dictated an extremely simple production design. The set consisted of hanging sheets, two wooden blocks, a chair, and some floor pillows. Even so, the playing area and audience space just barely missed being qualified as "cramped." Spectators were never seated more than six feet from the stage. To light our show, stage manager Jonathan Kranzler came up with a fairly ingenious system of clip-on lights, power strips, and

extension cords which threaded to on-off switches at his control table. Specials (such as spotlights for black out scenes or back-lighting for shadow effects) were the result of powerful handheld flashlights wielded by cast members backstage or squatting in the audience. Emily Hansen, our costume designer, complemented the set's minimalism by choosing inexpensive, loose outfits that suggested a time and place remote from the present and avoided tying the production to a specific period or locale. Simple color choices indicated links between characters, such as green for Ana and Pedro or white for Carlos and Leonor.

Though partially the product of necessity, the intentionally bare-bones design served—and, to a certain extent, was redeemed by—the text's metatheatrical sensibility. Precisely because no element was slick or complete, the production required audience members to invest a good bit of imagination and good will to make the show work. Audience members simply had to accept a slit in a hanging sheet as a locked door, a hastily re-arranged set of blocks as a street, and a young man in drag as a passable copy of the lead actress. Unapologetically incomplete, the design elements invited a generosity of spectatorship, freeing audience members from expectations and anxieties associated with high culture or formal theatre. Completing the picture and filling in the blanks left by makeshift props and sets became part of the show's fun for the audience.

Wishing to capitalize further on such “fill in the blank” jokes, we took a cue from old-time radio plays and set the stage manager's table and lighting controls just off stage in full view of the audience. Jonathan's position made his conventionally back-stage participation part of the main show. For instance, in act

three, competing suitors Carlos and Juan burst in fighting with swords. Jonathan clattered two butter knives together as the on-stage actors leapt about waving their wooden dowel rods at each other. The audience loved it. Panicking at the chaos, Castaño (who is at this point in drag as Leonor and affianced to Pedro) initiates a strategic black-out by reaching over to Jonathan's table to hit the master lights-out switch.

(Video Clip 1 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#))

The clip also demonstrates my tactic for handling asides. While conventional in seventeenth-century Spanish drama, a character's aside can appear awkward or quaint in present-day performances. Directors have a variety of options at their disposal to handle such moments. A common choice involves justifying why other characters on stage do not hear various asides (establishing side conversations, stage business, etc.). For my production, however, I decided to steal an idea from Dr. Pasto and dead-stop all stage action for asides. Given the frequency of asides, this stop-and-go choice affected the overall tempo of the show and led to several hilarious moments, as when Juan and Carlos freeze in mid-sword battle. At other points I pushed the convention of freezing even further. Late in the play, Leonor, desperate to leave Pedro's house, attacks Pedro's servant Celia to get her to unlock the door. Finding herself on the receiving end of a stranglehold, Celia steps back from a frozen Leonor to discuss her options with the audience. Once she has a plan, she clammers back into the "being strangled" position before continuing. The comic timing of actors Emily Bethke and Talia Gallowich makes the moment work.

(Video Clip 2 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#))

As rehearsals progressed, the production's stylistic sense of rough play between levels of reality led me to note how play of reality informs the text's themes as well. Though most *comedia* playwrights display a fondness for lengthy expository speeches, Sor Juana seems determined to outdo them all *Los empeños*. For example, the show begins with a three-page-long "as you know..." discussion between a mistress (Doña Ana) and her servant (Celia). Soon, however, the heroine Leonor appears and launches into a speech that is easily twice as long. While no other monologue quite equals this monster oration in length, the rest of the play brims with characters explaining what *has* happened, what they *think* happened, and/or what they *want* others to think happened. The characters' retellings of events take up almost as much stage time as the events themselves. A standard reading of the text tends to divide the characters and their stories into three basic groups: the truthful stories of the virtuous characters (Don Carlos, Doña Leonor), the deluded stories of the ignorant characters (Don Rodrigo, Don Juan), and the self-serving stories of the deceitful characters (Doña Ana, Don Pedro, Celia, Castaño).

Such readings affect how a director chooses to stage the monologues. In OCU's production, for instance, Dr. Pasto supplemented Leonor's massive exposition with a live-action re-staging of the events she describes, including a fully choreographed sword fight. In addition to keeping the audience's interest in what is otherwise at least five minutes of uninterrupted background information, Pasto's choice lends strength to Leonor's version of history. Since the audience sees the events she describes re-enacted (with the actor playing Carlos as the hero), it gathers that the virtuous couple's take on reality is to be trusted in

contrast to the machinations of Ana and Pedro. Since my concept revolved so much around the idea of playing with reality, I wanted to deny any character the right to an objective monopoly on truth. After all, as Larson points out, even the virtuous Leonor's story is mistaken on some points (the "police" arresting Carlos are not actually police)—a discrepancy the audience is aware of thanks to exposition by Ana (Larson 193-4). Whether they are confused or simply scheming, no character's "take" on reality quite matches what the audience knows to be true. To highlight this fluidity of reality, every time a character launched into a memory (either "real" or fabricated), their retelling was supplemented—and commented upon—by some other form of representation.

For example, to present Leonor's six-page speech, I asked the actor playing Leonor to create a series of stick-figure cartoons, each illustrating a scene from the monologue's story as the character might have remembered it. Thus, after Ana asks for her back story, Leonor takes a deep breath, snaps her fingers, and *ding!* A slideshow projection appears above her head. Referring to the slideshow throughout her story as a politician might refer to a chart, Leonor emphasizes various pathetic points of her hectic existence to win Ana's sympathy: how beautiful-yet-lonely she is, how manly-yet-feminine Carlos is, how frightening-yet-exciting the elopement is, etc. Later in the play, after a confusing series of events and revelations during a blackout, Carlos struggles to catch Castaño up to what has happened. Crude shadow-puppets projected on the sheet behind him illustrate his story.

(Video Clip 3 [High Bandwith](#) | [Low Bandwith](#))

Such additions served several functions. Aside from garnering a chuckle

from the audience, the slide show and puppet shows enhanced the expository functions of the speeches, helping to clarify the complex plot and characters. Yet the informal dynamics of stick figures and hand-puppets added a subjective dimension, implying, respectively, Leonor's self-aggrandizing tendencies or Carlos' confusion and urgency.

At other points, this choice underlined characters' tendencies to re-write history. When Leonor's father Don Rodrigo confronted Pedro (whom he believes to be his daughter's kidnapper), Hernanda—here re-imagined as Rodrigo's personal/legal assistant—whips out a chalkboard diagram laying out their case against him. Pedro, painfully aware that the story is false but wishing to secure a future as Leonor's husband, snatches the board from Hernanda and, during the course of his monologue, literally re-draws their picture of history to support his own agenda.

My most overt intervention into the text involved staging Sor Juana herself. At the top of the show, as the audience settled into restaurant chairs arranged in rows or on pillows scattered on the floor, I began a standard pre-show speech. Two actors dressed in nun's habits stepped out and silently indicated that I should clear the space for them. Once I was gone, they showed a series of signs to the audience. "I'm Sor Juana," stated the first sign, "and this is MY play." Subsequent signs reminded spectators to turn off cell phones and pagers. The last sign read, "Caution: Objects on Stage May be Less Real than they Appear." This generally got a chuckle from the audience. The Sisters then signaled Jonathan, and the show began.

The Sisters—I declined to clarify exactly *which* one was actually Sor Juana

—continued to pop up throughout the production, usually during scene changes, where they lip synced to recorded music (played obviously from a small boom box on the stage manager’s table). At one point, one of the Sisters invaded the audience, shooing people aside to squeeze into the first row. During the blackout portion of the subsequent scene, she acted as a spotlight, shining a flashlight beam onto the faces of characters as they spoke asides. In a way, the Sisters’ presence(s) embodied the spirit of rough translation I strived for. On one level, they acknowledged the production’s indebtedness to its author, reminding the audience that another imagination besides that of the audience or the performers was at work. At the same time, the doubled presence marked the production’s refusal to lay claim to being the “true” or “correct” representation of Sor Juana’s imaginative work. Is this the *real* Sor Juana or just an interpretation? I wished to preserve plausible possibilities instead of supplying final answers.

Directing *House of Trials* under rough conditions proved to be a rewarding experience for me, and in the future I would like to put such techniques in conversation with other Golden Age plays. I would not suggest, however, that rough translations represent the only or even the best way of producing *comedias* in general. As many other productions (including, I believe, OCU’s premiere production) at the Chamizal festival have shown, more conventional styles can and do succeed admirably. Indeed, the conventions of formal and/or professional theatre possess their own attractions—craft, polish, and professionalism—that rough theatre often finds difficult to attain. And although *Los empeños* proves hospitable to a bare-bones staging, other texts would suffer from such an intentionally unrefined approach. As Brook argues, the flaw of bad productions

(or, in a Benjaminian vein, bad *translations*) of classical theatre isn't their level of formality but their presumption to have found and achieved the final answer to "how the play should be done" (14). *Comedia* texts—and particularly *Los empeños de una casa*—are inexhaustibly rich with interpretive possibilities. A corollary of Benjamin's ethic of translation is that no act of translation is ever definitive or final. New imaginations in the present will give rise to new and unexpected possibilities for transformative encounters with the past.

As homage to that interpretive humility in my own rough translation, I gave Sor Juana the last laugh of the play. In the final scene, every couple has paired off and exited the stage except for the hapless Don Pedro. Spying Sor Juana sitting in the audience, he offered his hand to her in condescending invitation, as if saying, "See? You are alone as well. *I* can complete you." Sor Juana stood up, looked him over, and belted out a you've-got-to-be-kidding guffaw before exiting the space.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. 69-82.
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.
- Cypess, Sandra Messinger. "Los géneros re/valados in *Los empeños de una casa* de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." *Hispanamerica: Revista de Literatura*. 22.64-65 (1993): 177-185.
- "Description." *Crisis Point Theatre*. Student Activities Office of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. 31 October 2003.
- <<http://studentgroups.tc.umn.edu/groupdetail.pl?orgid=16>>.

- Fothergill-Payne, Louise and Peter Fothergill-Payne, eds. *Prologue to Performance: Spanish Classical Theatre Today*. Lewisville, PA: Bucknell UP, 1991.
- Friedman, Edward H. "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa*: Sign as Woman." *Romance Notes* 31.1 (1991): 197-203.
- Ganelin, Charles. "Peter Brook: Performance Theory and the *Comedia*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 43.1 (1991): 101-110
- Good, Carl. "Baroque Desire: Sor Juana and Calderón in *Los empeños de una casa*." *Latin American Literary Review* 27.53 (1999): 28-48.
- Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sor. *The House of Trials: A Translation of Los empeños de una casa*. Trans. David Pasto. New York: Peter Lang, 1997.
- Kenworthy, Patricia. "The Spanish Priest and the Mexican Nun: Two Views of Love and Honor." *Calderón de la Barca at the Tercentenary: Comparative Views*. Ed. Wendell M. Aycock and Sydney P. Cravens. Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1982. 103-117.
- Larson, Catherine. "Writing the Performance: Stage Directions and the Staging of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa*." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 42.2 (1990): 179-198.
- Mancing, Howard and Charles Ganelin, eds. *Golden Age Comedia: Text, Theory, and Performance*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1994.
- Schmidhuber, Guillermo. *The Three Secular Plays of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: A Critical Study*. Trans. Shelby Thacker. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000.
- Weimer, Christopher. "Sor Juana as Feminist Playwright: The *Gracioso*'s Satiric

Function in *Los empeños de una casa*.” *Latin American Theatre Review*
26.1 (1992): 91-98.