

**Clothes Make the Woman:
Transvestism and Transgression in
Tiempo Común's 1990 Production of
*El acero de Madrid***

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—Director Hugo Márquez's staging of *El acero de Madrid*, with Alfredo Carnevalli in the pivotal role of Teodora, is but one example among many of cross-dressing on the late twentieth-century stage and screen. From Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*, to feminist performance artists of New York's WOW café, to comedian Dana Carvey as the "Church Lady," transvestism has become a staple of both popular and *avant-garde* entertainment. This recent proliferation of cross-dressed characters even prompted Lawrence Senelick to proclaim transvestism "the theater's trendiest trope" and to inquire ironically, "Doesn't anybody have a gender anymore?" ("The Illusion" 12). 1

—Perhaps a better question would be if anybody has *ever* had a gender. Certainly, the frequency of cross-dressed characters and actors in all varieties of performance media is not unique to the last half of the twentieth century. In the case of drama from Spain's *Siglo de Oro*, stock characters such as the *mujer vestida de hombre* or the occasional cross-dressed *gracioso* place Tiempo Común's transvestism firmly within *comedia* conventions. In a dynamic fashion, Márquez's casting choice underscores the ways in which *both* Golden Age and contemporary drama explore self-consciously the performative transaction as a manifestation of the constructedness of gender roles. 2

—The Venezuelan group's adaptation of Lope's text was received quite favorably by audiences at the Golden Age drama festival held annually at the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas. Guadalupe Silva, a reviewer for the *El Paso Times*, praised the staging as "filled with the fluid performance of professionals who know their work by heart and do it well." She also congratulated the group for its successful efforts to bring the *Siglo de Oro* to the present, an observation supported by the many awards, including Best Play, Best Director and Best Actress, lavished on Tiempo Común for its (re)staging of *El acero de Madrid*. Additionally, Silva characterizes Carnevalli's portrayal of Teodora as "excellent as a hypocritical old woman with a bass voice" but writes little about the effects of the Venezuelan group's casting choice on audience reception. 3

—Spectators familiar with Golden Age drama would have recognized the exploration of men and women's social roles undertaken through the recourse of cross-dressing as a key feature of the genre. Although Spain did not have a tradition of cross-dressed *actors* (as did England), numerous instances of *comedia* characters who appropriate the clothing of the opposite sex do exist and much recent criticism centers on the 4

ability of these characters to invert cultural norms. Carmen Bravo Villasante's study of the *mujer disfrazada de hombre* merely touches upon the social implications of theatrical cross-dressing, noting only that to describe a Renaissance woman as manly, in deference to patriarchal values, was to pay her the highest complement (64-6). Merveena McKendrick's seminal analysis of the *mujer varonil* suggests that Golden Age gender play ultimately resulted in the affirmation of seventeenth-century Spain's rigidly-defined categories of male and female. McKendrick's position has been contested by Catherine Connor Swietlicki, who affirms that the *mujer vestida de hombre* does indeed have a subversive potential:

La mujer vestida de hombre que se porta varonilmente o aun de una manera superior a lo que puede hacer el hombre corriente representa un desafío a la masculinidad esencial y supuestamente natural . . . Su desafío es subversivo porque la metafísica de su época trata de garantizar la jerarquía social y la identidad sexual aunque los dos conceptos son construcciones socio-culturales. (144)

Connor Swietlicki concludes that although some critics read the fact that women who disguise themselves as men in the *comedia* reinscribe themselves into the patriarchy at the play's conclusion by marrying, the simple act of casting doubt on the notion of gender as essential undermines the repressive social systems within which the dramas unfold (144).

—Examples of male *Siglo de Oro* dramatic characters who dress as women have also inspired scholars to study more closely the ways in which the theater may simultaneously affirm and question a society's construction of gender. Sandra Messinger Cypess observes that although there are only about thirty plays in which men dress as women, presumably because doing so implied a loss of power, in the case of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa*, the cross-dressed Castaño gives a voice to feminist ideas and resists assumptions regarding male and female roles (181-182). Drawing conclusions similar to Connor's, Messinger-Cypess notes that *Los empeños* brings to the foreground the notion of gender as a cultural construction (185). Christopher Weimer also examines the subversive nature of Sor Juana's play, centering on Castaño's drag performance as an inversion of the misogynistic paradigm of "woman" espoused in the *comedia*. This inversion, in Weimer's words, "gives *Los empeños de una casa* a distinctly modern quality, separates it from most other Golden Age dramas and makes it worthy of even further examination" (97). Jean Canavaggio's general study concurs with the theses of Weimer and Messinger-Cypess, positing that male transvestism in *Siglo de Oro* drama uses disguise in order to reveal. Moreover, Canavaggio writes that a man in a dress is a hybrid individual, existing for himself as a male and for other characters as a female, yet not fitting perfectly within either category (144-45).

—Assuredly, not all instances of theatrical cross-dressing serve to challenge the patriarchy; even though the practice has become less controversial in terms of its shock value, drag, particularly male to female, is still a hotly debated topic in academic circles. In her polemical article

"Classical Drag," Sue-Ellen Case observes that because women were not allowed to perform in ancient Greek drama, plays and conventions of classical antiquity "can be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production" (318). Case's argument that men who portray female characters on stage perpetuate gender stereotypes, denying women the freedom to define themselves, is anticipated in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's response to a late eighteenth-century performance of Carlo Golondoni's *La Locandiera*. Lesley Ferris paraphrases the German playwright's praise of the Roman tradition of all-male performance, stressing Goethe's implicit assertion that at least on stage, "men made better women" ("The legacy" 51). In his review Goethe writes:

[O]n the Roman stage we find no cold absence of love, no female wantonness--the performance merely reminds us of them. We applauded the young man lightheartedly and were delighted that he was so well acquainted with the ensnaring wiles of the fair sex that through his successful imitation of feminine behavior he had avenged us for every such offense women had made us suffer. . . what we found here was the enjoyment of seeing not the thing itself but its imitation, to be entertained not through nature but through art, to contemplate not individuality but a result. (qtd. in *Crossing* 49-50)

—According to feminist performance theorists such as Peggy Phelan, Amy Dolan and Erika Munk, women fare no better in contemporary drag. The hegemonically constructed idea of woman (albeit in an exaggerated form) perpetuates notions of a fundamental difference between males and females, with the hierarchy implicit in this differentiation. Ferris's introduction to *Crossing the Stage*, a collection of essays on transvestism in performance, brings the controversy to light as follows, "Cross-dressing . . . is riddled with dissension and ambiguity. Contemporary drag, for example, answers to a viable gay aesthetic while simultaneously promulgating misogynistic images of women" (9). Ferris paraphrases Munk and Dolan's arguments, noting that in a drag performance, the male defines the female without ever losing his privileged status as a man. 7

—Such polemics may well leave Tiempo Común's staging dangerously situated somewhere between a conservative rock and a liberal hard place. Spectators who want or expect to see, in the words of Peter Brook, "classical theater as it ought to be performed" might well object to this instance of perceived unorthodox cross-dressing in the *comedia*. On the other hand, audiences more accepting of experimental stagings of Golden Age drama could view Teodora as a mere pawn in the patriarchy's play for power. I would submit that Teodora is a character fraught with ambiguity which, by definition, suggests the possibility of a multitude of potential, even contradictory interpretations. Additionally, the cross-dressed actor must be studied in the context of the play as a whole, for it is Teodora's relationship to the plot and to other characters that helps define more clearly the role of transvestism in Tiempo Común's staging as at once groundbreaking and conventional. 8

—*El acero de Madrid* centers on Belisa, a young woman who, denied 9

the freedom to pursue her romantic interest in Belardo, feigns illness in order to escape the confines of her home. Belardo's servant Beltrán disguises himself as a doctor and prescribes the perfect remedy: Belisa must leave her house in order to drink water laced with steel (hence the play's title) and to socialize with other people. To protect his daughter's virtue, and to ensure that she marry Prudencio, the husband *he* prefers, Belisa's father asks his sister Teodora to watch over the girl. Aunt Teodora proves to be a poor choice; she is easily seduced by the flattery of Riselo, a friend of Belardo's who pretends to love Teodora so that she will forget her familial obligations. When Beltrán's charade is discovered, he and Belisa escape paternal wrath by donning the clothing of the opposite gender and fleeing the house. The play's conclusion replicates conventional *comedia*: plot patterns: Belisa explains to her father that she and Belardo are already married, Teodora is appropriately repentant and the secret nuptials are legitimized by a reluctant paternal seal of approval. *El acero*'s humor is derived from Belisa's machinations to secure her freedom and the multiple instances of role-playing within the role, including cross-dressing, in which characters engage in order to achieve their desired goals.

—Throughout Lope's text, Belisa's aunt demonstrates ambiguous behavior, and the modern staging reflects the character's contradictions through casting. Teodora's first words are to scold Belisa for looking at a man and to warn the young girl of the fragility of her honor. The aunt's strict adherence to her religious vows and the honor code is exemplified by Carnevalli's portrayal of the character as the production opens. ([video clip 1](#)) Here, Carnevalli's gestures are stiff and mechanical, his step a regimented march. The ambiguity of the character's gender, the female name cancelled out by the masculine features, the shapeless garment, and the absence of gender-inflected mannerisms, contribute to a character that is neither entirely male nor female. Teodora's characterization through costuming, movement and dialogue creates a sharp contrast to the giggling Belisa, bedecked in feathers and vivid colors and brazenly greeting the men she passes. 10

—Furthermore, Tiempo Común's decision to cast a male actor in the Teodora role deviates significantly from other (textual) examples of cross-dressing in the *comedia* because in the Venezuelan staging, the transvestite is not merely a *gracioso* or a woman spurned. First, Teodora bears the responsibility of protecting young Belisa's virtue, a duty conventionally given to male relatives in *Siglo de Oro* drama. Second, the character appears dressed as a nun, which bestows upon her the power of the Church and simultaneously underscores the indeterminacy of her sex. Because of the significance of her role, casting Carnevalli as Teodora affords the contemporary production not only the opportunity to play with notions of male and female, but also to satirize a representative of the Church and of established social order, blurring distinctions between such binarily opposed categories as man and woman, mother and father and religious and secular. 11

—It is precisely Teodora's costume that situates her within a tradition of gender-ambiguous social figures, as Marjorie Garber observes in *Vested Interests*: 12

The role of religion in Western culture . . . almost inevitably invites both gender parody and gender cross-over. The male nun [and] the female monk . . . are recurrent figures of fantasy as well as of history and propaganda. They . . . are "third kinds," figures who put in question received beliefs . . . (213)

Lope's text supports designating Teodora as a "third kind" through the potential double meaning of the term "tercera," (2412) which Belisa uses to describe her aunt's transformation after meeting Riselo. Moreover, Lisardo, in both the text and staging, says that Teodora is "entre fraila y dueña," (90) a play on words with the normally masculine gender of the word *fraile*; he later characterizes her in phallic terms as an "águila de media arriba; de medio abajo culebra" (91-2).

—The questioning of an essential gender that begins with the indistinguishable sex of Teodora is intensified by the dramatic change in the character's behavior after she is wooed by Riselo. In the modern staging, Carnevalli displays Teodora's supposed feminine side through parodic coquetterie. ([video clip 2](#)) Here, Teodora's surprise approximates that of audience members, now acutely aware of the distance that separates the reality of the corporeal presence on stage and Riselo's (re)creation of Teodora's body. The actor moves fluidly, flutters his eyelashes and giggles self-consciously. Later, he toys with a shawl, an accessory that replaces the rosary Teodora held in her hands in the opening scene. Significantly, the character refers to herself in the feminine gender for the first time only *after* Riselo's attentions, underscoring the irony that the spectacle of a man portraying a woman is most obvious when Carnevalli acts in an exaggeratedly feminine way. 13

—Carnevalli's parodic performance also illustrates the modern production's self-conscious exploration of conventions of romance and marriage in the *comedia*. The traditional parallel relationships between *dama* and *galán* and *criada* and *criado* are problematized by the overtly theatrical nature of Riselo's false admiration and the questionable gender of the object of his affections. Teodora's role as a go-between in these socially unacceptable relationships is also suggested by the positioning of characters on stage. Before Riselo, Teodora saw to it that men and women remained on opposite sides of the stage, a separation underscored by the crisscrossing lines representing streets used by the production. However, after falling victim to Riselo's charms, Teodora "crosses over" to the other side, thus paving the way for Belisa and her maid to follow suit. 14

—Teodora's hyper-feminine behavior continues even after Riselo leaves and she returns home, where aunt, niece and Beltrán make plans to meet with their lovers. ([video clip 3](#)) Teodora's changes in behavior and attitude produce a permissiveness that approaches encouragement of Belisa's pursuit of Belardo. In these scenes, the actor vacillates between a parody of "woman" and the ambiguity suggested by his stature, facial features and the sexless nun's habit. This purely theatrical vacillation grants the character the freedom to move from one world to the other and is reflective of Teodora's eventual transformation into a conduit: a means by which Belisa--the guarded, sheltered young woman-- is able to make contact with her lover. 15

—Tiempo Común's adaptation of this text capitalizes on the tradition of cross-dressing in the *comedia*, establishing connections between seventeenth-century drama and late twentieth-century theatrical staging. In fact, Carnevalli's portrayal of Teodora may actually surpass recent efforts to blur male/female distinctions because it is an apparent example of gender-blind casting. According to Senelick, this practice continues to be uncommon and could "go far to reinvigorate the weary war-horses of our stage," allowing the classics to "gain in theatrical dimension and playfulness" (16). Senelick's sentiment is echoed by Amy Dolan who, in her discussion of cross-dressing as a mechanism whereby dominant discourse is challenged or affirmed, wonders why more directors do not consider cross-sexuality casting. Given such observations, it is clear that Tiempo Común's use of transvestism is not only an intensification of the gender-bending *mujer varonil* or the cross-dressed *gracioso* of mainstream Golden Age drama, but is also a step beyond the conventionally cross-dressed characters appearing in much of *contemporary* entertainment. 16

—As Tiempo Común deconstructs the notion of gender as essential, the adaptation undermines the binarity of male/female classification *per se*, creating through the Teodora character a third category that paradoxically affirms, subverts and reshapes the other two. Tiempo Común's Teodora, echoing Canavaggio's discussion of cross-dressed characters, employs a double disguise in order to remove the mask of convention that would posit holy matrimony as the only appropriate end for Belisa. As an ambiguous figure, Carnevalli's Teodora has the potential to examine critically the idea of marriage precisely because the institution relies so heavily on sex role absolutes. Yes, Belisa marries at the close of the play. However, she does not wed Prudencio, with all the good behavior implicit in the name, but rather Belardo, a thinly-veiled reference to a certain playwright who, if only for a short time (and especially through the filter of Tiempo Común's staging), destabilizes rigid notions of male and female, allowing characters to slip in and out of preconceived gender roles with the ease of putting on or casting off a dress. 17

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