

## II

### WORKSHOPPING CELESTINA

**Robert Potter**  
**University of California-Santa Barbara**

It is common practice in the theatre these days, particularly in the English-speaking world, to *develop* new plays, rather than simply produce them. Instead of proceeding directly from an author's pen and page to the stage, a new script today is likely to pass through a series of auditions, private and semi-public and public readings before it ever goes into formal production. And in the interim the text, quivering in electronic uncertainty within the author's word processor, remains open to all varieties of last-minute changes.

Partly this new procedure reflects the harsh economics of the contemporary theatre, where the costs of mounting a new production are dauntingly high. But it also can be seen as a modern-day replacement for the Broadway tradition of out-of-town tryouts, with its legendary frenzy of re-written second acts in New Haven hotel rooms. Both processes involve the select exposure of an evolving new

script to an audience, creating the possibility of learning how the enacted play, fleshed out by skilled actors, strikes a living set of auditors and viewers.

In developing our new English stage version of *Celestina*, Pamela Howard and I have been following just such a pattern of cumulative audition. We have done so, not merely out of economic necessity, but also because our experience—both mine as a playwright in America and hers as one of Britain's leading theatre designers—leads us to trust the process. I believe we are finding that this developmental process is, if anything, even more valuable for a fledgling new translation of a classic than it is for a brand new play.

Our collaboration began in the spring of 1987, when Pamela visited California and told me of her interest in directing in London a production of the *Celestina*, which she knew from her years of work in French theatre. The idea appealed to me on two levels: first, because my work as a playwright had included several adaptations of authors as far apart as Ben Jonson and Bertolt Brecht; and second, because my area of scholarship is medieval and early Renaissance drama. I had even, some years earlier, directed a production of the medieval literary comedy *Pamphilus*, reputed by some to be one of the principal sources of the *Celestina*. So I eagerly volunteered, and Pamela invited me to join the project.

Thanks to a grant from the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center at my campus, the University of California, Santa Barbara, I made a quick start on the translation. I was assisted in negotiating the linguistic twists and turns of the text by Susan Giráldez, a doctoral candidate in the Spanish Department with special interests in the medieval period. In the summer I came to England, increasingly confident of being able to do the translation, and increasingly clearer about the emerging structure of the adaptation. Any projected stage version of the *Celestina* is of necessity an adaptation—at least in the most basic sense of a distillation. The nine hours of the original must be distilled to its essence; the question, of course, lies in deciding what that essence is.

Pamela Howard brought two strong affinities to her involvement in the project. In the first place, she brought the incisive and creative eye of the theatre designer for visualizing the essence of a text. Secondly, she brought a strong interest in the interpretation of the *Celestina* as a product of the Spanish *converso* experience, as it has been discerned in the writings of Gilman, Castro and other critics. Guided by these considerations, and assisted at every turn by Pamela's ear for tone and phrasing, I worked on the translation all summer. We traveled to Spain, visiting the places where Rojas had lived and worked: La Puebla de Montalbán, Talavera de la Reina, and Salamanca. Working feverishly against a deadline, I completed a first draft just in time to allow us to conduct a private reading of the script, before I returned to America for the academic year.

The reading took place on September 14, 1987 at the British Theatre Association in Regent's Park, London. The participants, recruited by Pamela, were with one exception professional actors from the London theatre kindly donating their time and including such figures as Timothy West, reading Pleberio, and Linda Polan in the title role. This group, joined by one young drama student in the small role of Sosia, gathered for a single afternoon, carrying scripts they had never seen until the day before, and gave a spirited and very instructive reading of the text, which we tape-recorded for future reference. Though they did not know the play well enough to elicit the subtleties and plumb the depths of the text, these actors helped us to hear what we had actually written, and to imagine what they might actually look like, in a full production.

We were pleased to see that the biting comedy of the play, and the ironic viewpoints of such characters as Sempronio, came through strongly. But I was abashed to discover more than a few discursive and wordy scenes, all sorts of awkward turns of phrase such as are spoken only in translations, and finally an embarrassing plethora of Americanisms which sounded very peculiar in the mouths of these fine English actors. There was much work to be done.

The following summer I returned to England, where we hoped to interest a producer in staging our version of the *Celestina* for the following season. We set about planning a revised version of the text, this time incorporating some visual ideas which Pamela had conceived

for conveying the repressive social circumstances of the original context, such realities as the Inquisition and the persecution of the *conversos*. These images, earlier intended to be part of the scenic design or projected on film, were now incorporated into the text as "Dumb Shows" linking some of the scenes of the play. During a month's residency in Edinburgh, where Pamela was working on another production, I finished a complete revision. Besides incorporating the Dumb Shows, my main innovation had been to introduce the Author, Rojas, as a character in the play. His speeches, taken from the Author's note and the Prologue, would be interpolated into the action, hinting at the deeper meanings of the story. The role would be doubled with that of Pleberio, thus giving the strong actor that Pleberio's final speech demands a fuller place in the action, and underlining our conception of Pleberio as Rojas' alter ego and spokesman.

This version, embellished with illustrations which Pamela had drawn of key visual moments, e.g. Celestina at Areusa's bedside, the midnight meeting in Melibea's garden, was completed in August, 1988. Though we came close to getting this version into production the following summer, at the Edinburgh Festival, negotiations eventually fell through. We did have the opportunity, however to see the Spanish production of *La Celestina* which *did* take place that summer in Edinburgh—the Teatro Clásico adaptation by Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, directed by Adolfo Marsillach. And later in the year Pamela travelled to Paris to see Jeanne Moreau perform the role, in the production directed by Antoine Vitez [A. Vitez, a brilliant director, died unexpectedly in May, 1990].

We were now more eager than ever to see how our version would fare on the stage. The opportunity to take our script to a further stage of development came with the help of Ian McDairmid, the new Artistic Director of the Almeida Theatre in London, who offered us access to that exciting intimate theatre space for a couple of weeks the following spring, in conjunction with a production of *Volpone* in which he would be playing the title role. There would obviously not be time or space for mounting a production, but we would have the chance to assemble a cast and do the crucial investigative work of the early rehearsal process, and test the viability of the script under the equivalent of laboratory conditions.

Pamela was able to recruit an impressive team of artistic talents to work on this project. The choreographer Stuart Hopps, fortuitously a Hispanist by training, joined us as movement director, focusing particularly on the Dumb Shows and a possible Dance of Death at the end of the play. The composer-conductor Carl Davis found time in his busy schedule to write incidental music and melodies for the songs, and Lucie Skeaping, a specialist in Early Music performance, took on the job of performing and integrating this music into the scenes we would be rehearsing.

By the time the workshop got underway, on April 9, 1990, we were fortunate enough to have brought together a superb group of professional actors, some of the best in the London theatre, who had been willing to contribute their time and talents to the project. The cast included Linda Polan once again in the title role, and Frank Lazarus as Rojas/Pleberio. The dynamic young actor Ian Reddington took the role of Sempronio, and the team of powerful young actresses was led by Julie Le Grand as Areúsa, with Heather Tobias as Elicia, Jennie Galloway as the enigmatic Lucrecia, and Kate Littlewood as Dona Alisa. For the part of Calisto we turned to Jamie Glover, the young student who had played Sosia in our reading more than two years earlier, and who now was an emerging star; he was joined by Cate Hamer, the Celia of the *Volpone* production, as Melibea. Others in the cast included Robert Hughes as Pármeno, Marc Warren as Sosia and Dominic Hawksley as Tristán.

With all this talent at our disposal, we still faced numerous frustrations. The Almeida's setting for *Volpone*, as designed by Mark Thompson, proved to be a squalid rat's nest of decadence, a huge lumpy junk pile of trunks and treasure chests, entirely surrounded by rancid water, the overflow of a Venetian lagoon. While splendidly evocative of the world of *Volpone*, this was hardly the ideal physical locality for *Celestina*; in particular, it inhibited many of the plans which Pamela and Stuart had conceived for stage movement and preliminary design experiments. Even more pressing were the time constraints. The two week period had become nine working days, split in half by the four-day Easter weekend. On the final day, Sunday April 22, we were committed to offering a public presentation at 7:30 in the evening.

What form should that presentation take, and to what extent should our workshop be focused on the task of preparing for it? This issue was brought up for debate at the outset, and we agreed that our primary focus should be on serving the script, investigating it and improving it, rather than on "putting on a show." Since there was no time or resources for putting on a full production anyway, this seemed a very sensible decision, although it left still undefined the question of what our public presentation should be. After a first reading of the text, we set about working on some of the scenes which Pamela considered most crucial and difficult, beginning with the "dinner party" scene at Celestina's, with its intertwining of nostalgic soliloquies, satirical attacks on the aristocracy, and lusty by-play. Attempting to harness actors' energies to make all this come alive at once proved both fitfully exciting and frustrating, given the constrictions of the *Volpone* set and the unfamiliarity of the actors with the text, and context, of the play. We moved on, successively, to an attempted approximation of one of the Dumb Shows, to a staging of the opening of the play (in this version, a procession of an after-church crowd, eventuating in the first meeting of Calisto and Melibea), and then on the tangled problem of how to stage the final scene, with all of its walls, ladders and tragic falls. Unable to experiment with her original ideas, which required a bare space and a minimum of props, Pamela struggled to find a way of doing the scene that would make sense in the theatrical circumstances we found ourselves in. With much input from the actors, a solution was ultimately adopted which linked stage ladders to the Almeida's balcony seating—which would stand for the top of the garden wall.

One recurrent problem with *Celestina* productions is the lapse of energy which comes with the death of Celestina, Sempronio and Pármeno, well before the end of the play. We explored a variety of ways of attempting to outwit this problem, in the staging of the final events. I had always hoped to keep most of Pleberio's tragic final speech in our production (it is frequently cut entirely, for dramatic reasons), and we experimented with the possibility of making the speech into a collective utterance of the living and the dead—spoken in turns by the dead Celestina, Sempronio, Pármeno, Calisto and Melibea, as well as the living Pleberio and Dona Alisa. Simultaneously we tried to evoke the idea of a Dance of Death that would link the dead together, and later embrace the living as well.

The results of these experiments were inconclusive and controversial, eliciting much discussion and argument on the part of the cast. Emotions can run high on such occasions, and there were moments when I personally felt alienated from the proceedings, as if "my" script (after nearly three years work on it, the sense of possession is inevitable, if illusory) had been hijacked by a group of heedless strangers for their own purposes.

Eventually we backed away from some of the more radical experiments, much to the relief of most of the actors, who felt they did not yet know the play well enough, either in text or in context, to make decisive staging choices. We retreated to a process which, oddly enough, may well have approximated Rojas' original expectations for how his work would be performed. We sat around in a circle, on stage, simply reading the script, and pausing whenever we wished to raise a point about the meaning of a particular word or passage. Actor's responses and suggestions about the words they are given to say often prove crucially helpful to a playwright interested in improving the script, and this experience was no exception. Moreover, I was able to explain something of the significance of the play for Spanish literature, and the historical context in which it was written, in a way that seemed genuinely informative to the cast. There was a new focus and unity to our work, though music and stage movement had been shunted to the side in the process. We had, of course, been attempting to do too much in too short a time—and now time was running out.

We then faced a final problem—what should be done at the public performance? Some felt that we should simply discuss the play informally, read a few scenes, show our experiments in staging a few others, and let it go at that. Pamela had hoped to present a full reading, with a few scenes fully staged, but progress on the staging was too inconclusive to permit this. I expected that we would do what is customary in the American theatre in such circumstances, a staged reading with scripts in hand, and simple blocking to indicate stage action. But these conventions were not familiar to many of the cast, and opinion was divided. One cast member suggested that the actors simply sit on stage and read their parts, sitting on the various trunks and chests of the *Volpone* set. The result set to rest some of the actors' anxieties, but proved stupefyingly boring to those of us

who had to sit and watch it. Rojas' original performance conditions provided a valid experience for the participants, but not a key to the process of performing the play for an audience.

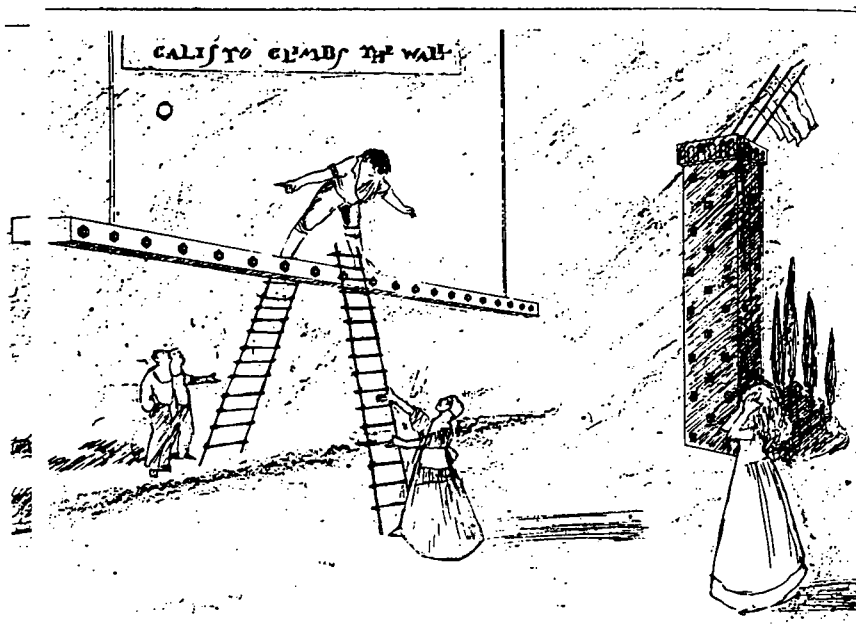
In the end, Pamela decided on a revised version of the staged reading procedure, with the actors occupying the front row of seats in the theatre, and coming up on stage, script in hand, as required for the various scenes. A few crucial props and furniture pieces were used, such as the schematic bird which flutters to the ground at Melibea's feet in the opening scene, and the table and benches around which the lascivious by-play of the "dinner party" scene revolves. Through the long Sunday rehearsal leading up to the performance, Pamela and the cast labored through the play, working out exits and entrances and stage business, as an atmosphere of incipient panic began to beset us all. On the basis of some rough calculations it looked as if the performance might take well over three hours; there would be people with last trains to catch, and the theatre itself had to close by a certain hour. We ran out of time to rehearse the crucial and difficult last scene, and when rudimentary attempts to stage it proved impossible, we simply decided to bring the entire cast on stage for that scene, and read it out, with actors standing when they had speeches to deliver. The rehearsal concluded in an atmosphere of palpable anxiety, which we quenched with a couple of deeply welcome bottles of wine, fearing the worst, but hoping for the best.

In the event, the evening was quite a success [see the following "appreciation"]. The audience enjoyed the comic scenes, and the actors, energized by the challenge, rose to the occasion one and all. Listening to the words, I had the sense that the story was being told coherently, and in a much more forceful, fluent style than in the first version of two years earlier. Best of all, the scenes flew by with almost breathtaking speed. The final scene surprised all of us in its pathos and its power. Frank Lazarus carried off the tour de force of Pleberio's existential lament brilliantly and movingly. And we were done in two hours and twenty minutes, including a fifteen minute intermission!



There was time for all to repair to the Almeida wine bar for drinks, thanks and congratulations. Pamela and I had many words of appreciation and encouragement from theatre people and *Celestina* enthusiasts alike, and we came away from the workshop convinced that our time and that of the actors had not been wasted, and that we were a big step further down the road toward our objective. In subsequent days we had a number of thoughtful critiques from various interested parties which have helped us to see more clearly what remains to be done. The form and content of the Dumb Shows remains an uncertainty, and with it our general objective of communicating the hidden theme of the *converso* experience. How does one make palatable and visible a circumstance which would have been obvious to many in Rojas' original audience, and at the same time so dangerous that it could not be mentioned or even alluded to, except in the most oblique hints and implications of the text? At this writing, as we prepare to put together a third and (we hope) final draft, we are still searching for the artistic solution to this enigma.

Whatever the outcome of our continuing search, I think it is safe to say that *Celestina* is an idea whose time has come, on the English-speaking stage. Whether it is to be our version which will achieve this breakthrough first, or whether it will be one of the other new English stage versions currently circulating (for we are by no means alone in our perception and objective) is finally not so important. There is room on stage for many differing versions and translations of any true classic, and I think there is little doubt that *Celestina* is in the process of establishing itself at last in the English-speaking world as just such a classic. In looking forward to the full production of our version, Pamela and I are pleased at the thought that we have played a part in carrying forward this process. Our Workshop at the Almeida Theatre was one further step in the right direction, in demonstrating how uniquely suited to the intimacy of contemporary small-scale theatre performance this giant of a classic really is.



ACTO XIV<sup>o</sup> PAMELA HOWARD