

Interview: Teatro Inverso

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Paula Rodríguez and Sandra Arpa, performing in *Rosaura*
Picture courtesy of *Teatro Inverso*. Photographer: Fran Vergara

Teatro Inverso is a theater company based in Madrid and London dedicated to Spanish Golden Age Theater. Founded in 2015 by Paula Rodríguez and Sandra Arpa, its ongoing mission is to create a «new way to do classical theater». Rodríguez and Arpa, who adapt, direct, and act in their productions, creatively reimagine classical texts using the performance style of «storytelling», in which they use exaggerated body language, dance, and riveting narration to construct the story within the minds of the audience members. This style enables the modern viewer to engage with these golden-age narratives in a whole new way, while at the same time preserving the profound, philosophical essence of the original texts.

In the following interview Rodríguez and Arpa discuss *Teatro Inverso*'s production *Rosaura*, an adaptation of Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* that centers around the character of Rosaura, who sets out to revenge herself against a lover who wronged her. Rosaura's insistence on self-determination allows her to fight against restrictive gender norms and recover her honor, thereby becoming a source of transformation within her own narrative. By focusing on the journey of Rosaura rather than that of Segismundo, Rodríguez and Arpa are able to highlight the struggles that women faced and continue to face in their quest for justice and empowerment. *Teatro Inverso* is currently working on a new production titled *Wonders*, based on Miguel de Cervantes' work.

What sort of feedback have you received from this production? From men and women?

The feedback we have received is incredibly positive. We are very surprised with how moving the show is for the audience. We have created this show for everyone, men and women, to empathize with Rosaura. Our heroine is a young person trying to find her identity, her place in the world, and she is a woman, which makes it even more difficult. But we believe men feel very compelled to this journey of self-discovering too. Also, the audience have many times expressed their desire to read Calderón's play again after seeing our show, which is a great compliment.

Storytelling is a very unique and effective way of producing theatre. What led you to utilize this specific style for *Rosaura*?

We needed to tell her story, and we had recently explored Storytelling while working with expert Stephen Harrop. It was just perfect. Also, we were only two actresses, and we needed to tell the whole of *Life is a Dream*, so we needed



a dynamic and flexible tool that allowed a lot of possibilities. Storytelling is all of that and more.

How does Storytelling allow you to experiment with the best ways to bring about the messages of the play? What does it mean for your portrayal of multiple characters, comedic moments, famous final lines, etc.?

Storytelling gives you a lot of freedom and at the same time it comes with a huge responsibility. It allows you to go really far in the search of materials and to make massive jumps and swop styles and themes and places. But, all of this has to belong to the same world, so storytelling demands that you be very clear about your identity as an artist and about the world of the play. You need to create your universe, and once that is done (and believe me, is not easy to build a whole universe) all you need to do is play and tell the story.



Sandra Arpa, performing in *Rosaura*
Picture courtesy of *Teatro Inverso*. Photographer: Fran Vergara



How does the focus on movement and body language further the play's message?

The physicality of the play is extremely important to transmit the story. Especially when we work with audiences who don't speak Spanish, as we keep fragments of Calderón's texts in Spanish. Moreover, the poetics of the body (as we call it) establish the aesthetics of the play. We are conscious of the fact that most of the time the audience is watching two women moving on a stage, and that they alone represent a whole universe, from kings to warriors, to caves, mountains, courts and armies, and mothers and homes... this is also a political statement.

The female experience of the story is central to your vision. This reimagining gives a voice to Rosaura and also puts more emphasis on her relationship with her mother. Rosaura's body becomes a battleground for the tension of living up to society's impossible standards of gender, where she becomes a «monster» for trying to be both masculine and feminine. Keeping this in mind, were there any specific schools of feminist thought that you intentionally employed?

There is a key monologue in Calderón's play *Life is a Dream* in which Rosaura presents herself as a woman and as a man. In this fascinating text, Calderón is establishing the concepts of the feminine and the masculine and the possibility for them to exist inside a person beyond this person's gender. Rosaura makes it clear that she holds a man and a woman inside her, and that these two parties bring different but equally important and relevant aspects to herself. Moreover, she is offering Segismundo her support to fight a battle (an activity that has been related to men for many centuries) but she is talking about the need for female qualities to carry out this task, like humbleness and kindness. These ideas are extremely advanced. This text was a huge inspiration for us and a great mystery that we slowly have unraveled.

As artists and women, we are interested in feminist and other movements questioning gender, but when it comes to work with Calderón the objective is to



explore his words in depth. We believe the idea that masculinity and the femininity are not a question of gender is extremely accurate and interesting for us and today's society.

«Dreams the man that he is man...» Do you think there is an intrinsic difference between men and women, so that this story is meant to be told through a distinctly female voice? Or does this story in fact show that all gender is a societal construction, because Rosaura and Segismundo are in fact so similar?

The second idea is the most interesting indeed. Calderón portrays two beings searching for their freedom and identity in the world. The characters have roughly the same amount of dialogue, and their stories run parallel to each other. They enlighten each other and they help each other. In most contemporary productions of *Life is a Dream*, Segismundo is the protagonist and Rosaura is just one of the female characters, but that is not what Calderón wrote. Calderón was very clearly presenting these two people as equals and also as complex, contradictory and mysterious people that needed to know more to question their reality. They are both the heroes of this story beyond their gender.

What do you imagine happening to Rosaura after the events of the play? In the original ending she marries Astolfo, but this is a disempowering conclusion considering her treatment at his hands. In your production Rosaura and Segismundo seem drawn together magnetically. Was this meant to suggest the possibility of a romantic/sexual relationship or was it more about the meeting of kindred spirits?

We don't know, all we know is that now she is free to choose what to do. We wanted to give her options and freedom, not an ending.

Does Rosaura kill Astolfo in the end? To what extent is this sequence a dream?



This final sequence which takes place on the battlefield but after the battle is definitely a dream-like sequence, inspired in Kurosawa's movies. Rosaura is fighting her ghosts, or if we think about it in a more physiological perspective, she is fighting her mind's shadows, her traumas: the failed relationships with her first love, with the father that abandoned her and with a mother that remained living in grief. She is freeing herself.



Paula Rodríguez, performing in *Rosaura*
Picture courtesy of *Teatro Inverso*. Photographer: Ricardo Espinosa Ibeas

How has this been empowering for you as actresses to create/perform? What was the experience of taking a golden-age play and making it your own? Do you feel that the roles for women in these classical plays are limited?

This production has given us many things. We have discovered ourselves working beyond our limits. We have grown so much, both as artists and as women. We are now also much freer, like Rosaura. We have our own company



and we can do what we love and do it our way. Being an actor can be very difficult and demotivating. Having your own company is also difficult, but extremely empowering and rewarding. There are incredible female roles in the classical theatre as well as many other roles that are not female but could be performed by a woman. Cross gender productions are more and more frequent, and yes, we need actresses to work more. In my opinion we also need to revisit the figure of the actor, both actor and actress and their role in this profession. Actors should be more respected and have a more of an active task in the development of productions. Actors should be empowered too.

In what ways can theater empower women?

In so many ways. Theatre is full of women, making decisions and bold choices, fighting, loving, and thinking. Theatre is empowering for everyone, and one of our main objectives was to share our experience as women doing what we love and working hard for it and enjoying it. Maybe this is also inspiring for other women and men too.

