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Review of John Jay Allen, *La Piedra de Rosetta del teatro comercial europeo. El Teatro Cervantes de Alcalá de Henares*

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Allen, John Jay. *La Piedra de Rosetta del teatro comercial europeo. El Teatro Cervantes de Alcalá de Henares. Madrid-Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2015. 1 + 150pp. + 20 ill.*

Thanks in part to the clamorous success of its splendid Hieronymous Bosch exhibition, Madrid's Prado Museum managed to attract a record number of visitors last year— over three million, in fact. Yet another museum less than a five-minute walk from the Prado also did well in what experts in the trade refer to (among themselves) as “tourists delivered.” The Casa-Museo Lope de Vega works on a somewhat lower scale, given that it can be seen only by guided tour, ten visitors at a time. But ticket-holders standing in the vestibule have an object of considerable interest to contemplate while they wait: a scale model of a Golden Age *corral de comedias*, or public theatre.

John (a.k.a. Jay) Allen opens this slim but entertaining book by alerting the reader to the convoluted history of this artifact. It is actually a successor to another model, one Allen designed in 1983 and which now resides in the National Theatre Museum in Almagro. Years of painstaking archival research had led him to the conclusion that his original understanding of the layout and setting of Spain's earliest permanent theatres—the *corrales* that had appeared in Seville, Valencia, Madrid, and various other cities toward the end of the sixteenth century— enshrined a fundamental error. At least in the case of Madrid's two playhouses, the theatre was not so much a building, as a semi-open space lodged between at least two other buildings. This area— a more fitting term than “structure”— moreover, changed considerably over time. Contemporary documents show its owners experimenting with new solutions to problems of space, seating, hierarchy, comfort, visibility, acoustics, and the numerous other conditions that had to be taken into account in a public place where individuals from different social levels (and sexes) came together to see plays performed.

Allen's fierce attention to detail in this and all his other works does not derive from mere fondness for the concrete. Here as elsewhere he wields small facts to make big claims. The first is that theatre in early modern Spain emerged “not thanks to princes and architects, nor through the patronage of the powerful, but from actors and their audiences” (15). That is, it started as performance and practice from the ground up, and even when it consolidated in terms of architecture and activity it still retained much of the vitality and flexibility that marked its early penchant for improvisation. The latter quality in particular allowed the Golden Age stage to adapt and thus survive competition from a wide range of new challenges. One example of the latter was the rise of an alternative court theatre in Madrid whose calling card was the elaborate architectural artifice and scenery that developed in northern Italy beginning in the late sixteenth century. Allen finds a similarly responsive flexibility in the versification of Golden Age plays, and suggests that selective adaptation of Italian metrical forms in particular endowed Spanish theatre with a unique poetic richness.

“Unique” is the keyword here. Allen rarely takes his eye off parallel developments in theatrical culture and activity elsewhere, especially on the northern side of the English Channel. Many of these parallels turn out to be uncannily similar to contemporary practices in Spain. How and why this was so is hard to explain, given the distance— and not just political and religious— between the two countries and their cultures. But what most catches his eye is a contrast. London's reconstructed Globe

Theatre has been enormously successful in its outreach, and has helped intensify a level of spectator devotion to early modern drama that any Spaniard with a similar interest in theatre would look on with envy. But by the end of the day, all the English have is a replica, whereas Spain has the real McCoy: a *corral de comedias* built by an illiterate carpenter in 1603 (a mere three years after the original Globe!) on the main square of the city of Alcalá de Henares. Allen deftly reconstructs the history of this building (now known as the Teatro Cervantes) in its many guises over time. What started as a barebones stage had become an ornate coliseum by the nineteenth century, and then served as a cinema until (after a period of virtual abandon as a warehouse) it recently was successfully restored as a working stage that features many of the standard sub-spaces and props that were common features in the seventeenth century. And enter here the decoded, Rossetta Stone-like mystery of the title. For Allen argues that theatre historians can learn valuable lessons by studying the long-term evolution of a structure that was unique in surviving intact over four centuries, yet which proved far from singular in its impressive adaptability.

This is a story with good guys—the local scholars who decoded the building’s history and then fought for years to save it—and bad guys (mostly a sorry lot of local politicians, but also indifferent restorers, careless custodians, and architects and even theatre people insensitive to the historical and archaeological richness of the building). Allen makes no bones about his writing as a witness for the prosecution, and I for one would not want it otherwise. Not all readers will be fascinated by the ins and outs of the running battles the book reconstructs, but few will fail to be moved by the good guys winning in the end (thus far). Whether the strong promise of the “Spanish Globe” will ever be fully realized is still up in the air. But this short but heartfelt book gives readers the strongest possible guidance as to which side to root for.

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