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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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info@skeneproject.it

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FRANCESCA COPPOLA*

Eduardo Pérez Rasilla (ed.), *El Teatro Español de Madrid. La Historia (1583-2023)*¹

Abstract

The thirteen chapters of the anthology *El Teatro Español de Madrid. La historia (1583-2023)*, edited by Eduardo Pérez Rasilla (2023), analyse the history of this, the earliest existing European theatre. The contributors, each one a specialist in their field, reconstruct the various phases, from the first corrales de comedias to the present day, which have proved to be the key moments in the development of this historic establishment and have often changed it permanently. The volume is intended to be an easy-to-read chronological guide for a wide readership and includes - often for the first time - anecdotes, exploits and even accidents which occurred during the existence of the centuries-old theatre. But it also provides a rigorous analysis of a place where the greatest Spanish playwrights have had their work performed, from Lope de Vega to Benito Pérez Galdós to Alfonso Sastre.

KEYWORDS: Teatro Español; Madrid; Siglo de Oro, corral; coliseo

In a celebrated quotation Orson Welles affirmed that “theatre resists as a divine anachronism”. His words, *en abyme*, seem perfectly in line with the history of Madrid’s Teatro Español, founded in 1583. The events revolving around this place, a symbol of Spanish literature and culture from the moment of its inauguration to the present day, are at the centre of the 2023 anthology of essays *El Teatro Español de Madrid. La historia (1583-2023)*, edited by Eduardo Pérez-Rasilla. The thirteen chapters of the volume are each the work of a scholar specializing in the period being discussed and present a surprising variety of anecdotes, exploits and even accidents which have proved to be key moments in the development of this historic establishment. The volume is intended as an easy-to-read chronological guide to this prestigious place, the oldest theatre of its kind in Europe. It also provides, for the first time, a complete reconstruction of all the events connected to the centuries-long existence of the Teatro Español, an investigation which depends upon meticulous and painstaking research on the place itself, where the works of

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* eCampus University - francesca.coppola@uniecampus.it

the greatest playwrights have been performed, from those of the *Siglo de Oro* to those of today.

The Introduction, “La forja de una pasión” (The forging of a passion), consists of a dialogue between the editor, Rasilla, and the artistic director of the Español, Natalia Menéndez. They explain the reasons behind the book’s conception: in reality, notwithstanding the large number of studies on the subject of the history of the Theatre, none of these, however important they may be, offers a vision of the “enorme montaña . . . de sustratos . . . creada por las personas” (9; huge mountain . . . of . . . substrata . . . created by people) that is concealed behind this emblematic location. Neither do these studies enjoy very much distribution. In other words, these specialist studies add to their necessary partiality the fact that they are directed specifically to a relatively small number of readers in the academic world. In this way the common reader is deprived of the “sensación de vértigo” (ibid., sense of vertigo) that is caused by information on the contextual background of the Español. Published after four years research, the aim of the volume is to “dar a conocer esta maravilla, una joya que estaba escondida, como en una pirámide” (10; allow people to get to know this marvel, a gem which seems to have been hidden within a pyramid).

The origins and the phases that preceded the foundation of the Teatro Español are outlined in the first chapter, “El Corral de comedias del Príncipe” (The Prince’s Theatre) by Francisco Sáez Raposo. This is a detailed excursus illustrating the reasons behind the so-called professionalisation of Spanish theatre starting from the economic revolution which began in 1492 with the discovery and the riches of the new world. The effects of this unprecedented reality swiftly showed themselves in the cultural context of the time and Raposo explains how modern theatre is generated by this new-found wealth and becomes a mass phenomenon. Indeed between 1520 and 1565 actors, playwrights, musicians and the swarming network of agents gravitating around them gradually managed to earn their living from their work. Besides this, the writer pauses remind us that in the beginning places designated as locations for “teatro profesional” (24; professional theatre) such as public theatres or *corrales* used to be the property of religious brotherhoods engaged in good works such as healing the sick. They charged the theatrical companies large sums of money for the rental of such spaces and this practice, a fully-blown “modelo de explotación” (ibid.; exploitation pattern) was exported from Madrid to other cities in Spain. It is in this climate of fervent change, and, more precisely, on the 19th February, 1582, as witnessed by the Acquisition Deed kept in the Archivo Regional de la Comunidad de Madrid, that the Corral del Principe (Prince’s Theatre) comes into being, an “espacio teatral que de manera estable más tiempo ha estado en uso de manera ininterrumpida en España” (28; a theatrical space which was in

continuous and uninterrupted use for the longest time in Spain). After its demolition in 1744 it was rebuilt on the same site by the Italian architect Juan Bautista Sachetti and inaugurated the following year as the Coliseo del Príncipe. In 1849 it was assigned to the municipal administration by royal decree with the name by which it is still known today: Teatro Español.

The next chapter, “De corral a coliseo: el Teatro del Príncipe en el siglo XVII” (From *corral* to *coliseo*: the Prince’s Theatre in the seventeenth century), by Fernando Doménech, opens with the story of a momentous dynastic change at the end of the seventeenth century which sees the decline of the House of Habsburg in favour of the Bourbons. With the arrival of the new royal family a new idea of theatre is preferred, one characterised by greater spectacularity, with multiple stages and astounding scenographic and technical artifice: a theatre, “como expresión del fasto cortesano que se prodigaba en las cortes de toda Europa” (56; as an expression of the lavish pomp and splendour to be observed in all the courts of Europe). Besides this, thanks to the two marriages contracted by Philip V – first with Maria Luisa of Savoy and then with Isabella Farnese – Philip’s French taste was enhanced by that of Italy. It was indeed the king’s second wife who promoted Italian opera and its spectacular performances, which at the time were triumphing all over the continent. The magnitude of the resulting theatrical innovations signified that the original playhouses found themselves without either the means or the space to cope with them, and had necessarily to be transformed into *coliseos* or “teatros a la italiana ajustados al gusto moderno” (Italian style theatres adapted to suit modern taste). As for the works which were staged, in particular at the Teatro del Príncipe, the most frequently performed were without doubt those by Calderón de la Barca, followed by Agustín Moreto and Rojas Zorilla, signifying an evident predilection for plays from the *Siglo de Oro*. Another characteristic is the public attention given to authors unappreciated today, such as Matos Frago, Cubillo de Aragón, Bances Candamo, with a consequent relegation to the margins of Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina. Doménech helpfully points out and emphasises an aspect of the century that comes as a surprise: the ease with which six *autoras de comedias* (women playwrights) managed successfully to establish themselves: Sabina Pascual, Petronila Jibaja, María Hidalgo, Águeda de la Calle, María Ladvenant. Among these Hidalgo deserves a special mention for the prolonged presence of her works on the stage (from the season of 1754-1755 to that of 1770-1771) and Ladvenant for also distinguishing herself as one of the most important Spanish actresses.

The third chapter of the book is dedicated to “El Teatro Español y sus actores: hacia un Teatro Nacional (1800-1850)” (The Teatro Español and its actors: towards a national theatre) by Guadalupe Soria Tomás. In this period the Junta de Dirección de Teatros (theatre management committee) was

founded and initiated a process of reform in all the public theatres of Madrid. The reform was conducted following Enlightenment ideology and sustained by intellectuals such as Jovellanos, Moratín and Francisco Plano. In their opinion the widespread corruption typical of the theatrical milieu prevented its didactic function, and the theatre had always been considered the “termómetro de la cultura nacional” (81; thermometer of national culture). The farfetched plots and the unrefined taste of the audience accompanied by mediocre actors who had little desire to improve their art through the exercise of their profession triggered the reaction of a plan for innovation; this, between highs and lows, aimed to replace the Baroque aesthetic code with Enlightenment verisimilitude. The same design intended that young actors should study “Declamación teatral” (84; theatrical declamation) – two actors for each *coliseo* in the area – so that they could receive an adequate training in dramatic art based on scientific principles, with a salary of 6000 *reali* a year subsidised by the government. At the end of the 1840s, in the wake of these innovations, the Teatro del Príncipe was promoted to the status of Teatro Nacional: that is to say it was regarded as an “escuela de ejercicio cómico” (117; school of comedic practice), a model to emulate, focussed upon training actors through the study of the “buenas máximas del arte dramático” (118; the true precepts of dramatic art), such as prosody, mime, decoration and costume.

The history of the Teatro Español is continued through the second half of the nineteenth century in Ana Isabel Ballesteros Dorado’s essay “El Teatro Español (1851-1900): el disputado príncipe de los ingenios nacionales” (The Teatro Español 1851-1900: disputed prince of national talent). A particularly interesting part of the chapter is that dealing with the decree of the 28th July 1852, signed by Queen Isabella II, which establishes a new regulation of the times and modes of the theatrical seasons. In the first place it rules that the season must begin on September 1st and end on 30th June, performances are banned on 1st November, Fridays in Lent and during Easter week, only one Italian opera house is permitted in any town, foreign companies are only allowed to perform for three months a year and for the first time a prize is to be awarded for the best dramatic work staged. Among the most successful works of this period was the exceptional *El tanto por ciento* by López de Ayala which was repeated uninterruptedly for thirty-eight nights on the stage of the Teatro Español where at the time repeat performances only lasted four or five nights at the most. Among the interpreters, the brilliant Teodora Lamadrid managed to enthral the public so greatly that in all the *tertulias* and *paseos* she was the main subject of conversation, so predominant that even the birth of the Queen’s second daughter took second place. What is more, the performance was permitted a three-week extension in the Madrid theatre before its tour in the provinces before it returned once more to the

Español on the 17th May 1862 in a special edition translated into Italian by the stage manager Giuseppe Pietriboni.

The first three decades of the twentieth century are the subject of Chapter 5, “Entre bambalinas: los entresijos del Teatro Español de 1900 a 1936” (Behind the scenes: the inner workings of the Teatro Español from 1900 to 1936) by Ana Alma M. Garcia. The author’s research is based on a detailed consultation of primary sources including contemporary periodicals, journals and correspondence with the intention of reconstructing what was happening backstage at the Theatre: The chapter is divided into four sections, each one concerning a different management. The first eight years, 1900-1908, were under the aegis of the impresario Fernando Díaz de Montoya and his wife María Guerrero, the second, (1908-1918), was captained by Enrique Diego Madrazo, the third (1919-1931), saw Ricardo Calvo in command and finally the fourth (1931-1936) which coincided with the birth of the Second Republic and lasted until the outbreak of the Civil War. Ana Alma Garcia emphasises the almost daily attention the newspapers paid to any theatrical happening: they did not limit themselves to announcing the various stagings of the shows but gave column space to their designers and promoters. This is demonstrated by quotations from *El Heraldo de Madrid*, *Estampas de Madrid Teatral*, *Crónica Teatral*, *El Liberal*, *La Correspondencia de España*. to cite only a few among the many examples given. The chapter concludes with a chronogram clearly illustrating the succession of artistic directors and leading actors of the Español during the thirty years examined.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 remains a moment of decided interruption but at the same time of continuity for the Teatro and this is the subject of Chapter 6, “El Teatro Español durante la guerra civil, y hasta 1950” (The Teatro Español during the Civil War and until 1950) by Victor Garcia Ruiz. The war had been going on for a year when the Consejo Central del Teatro (Central Council for the Theatre) was established, a body that was prevalently communist in character, consisting of thirteen members. Among these the most prestigious was the vice-president and author Maria Teresa León, who had just returned from the USSR with her husband Rafael Alberti. The new institution took over complete control of the theatrical repertoire which showed its first results right from the beginning with the staging of *Numancia*, produced by Alberti himself (he too was a member of the Council): This play was a revisiting of Cervantian tragedy inspired by the ideas of “de Arte y Propaganda” (220) admired in Russia. Because of the bombings of Madrid, the Español had to keep closing down and in the first six months of the war – between the 18th July 1936 and the 20th February 1937 – it was only open for thirteen days. Continuing with this line of argument Garcia Ruiz explores the second stage of the Theatre’s activity during the conflict as he considers the founding of the Grupo García Lorca. This company, directed by

Manuel González, besides staging the classics of the *Siglos de Oro* and plays by Galdós (*Electra*, *Gerona*) put on the contemporary *Bodas de sangre* by Lorca. The chapter ends with a long and detailed discussion of the theatrical seasons from the end of the war onwards (1939-1950).

“El Teatro Español desde los años 50 hasta la transición política” (The Teatro Español from the Fifties to political transition”) is the title of the seventh chapter by Berta Muñoz Cáliz and is focussed on the second half of the twentieth century until the Transition to democracy. The author bases her essay on the existence of two document collections which are particularly interesting and contain information about the intense “actividad escénica” (229; theatrical activity) of the Español. The first of these, kept in the Centro de Documentación Teatral (CDT) created in 1971, bears witness to the way in which Francoism took care to create a legacy that told, by way of a decidedly revisionist reading, the story of what had been staged during the years of the dictatorship. At the same time, another large collection, that in the Archivo General de la Administración (AGA), shows a very different reality: that is to say the many expedients adopted to censure anything that was not in line with the regime, to subjugate art in all its forms and manifestations and in particular to transform a place like the Español into the “buque insignia de su política teatral” (230; the flagship of its theatrical policy). The stages that the history of the theatre goes through during this particular phase are closely linked to those of the same dictatorship, as are the changes of direction and programming that the place in a certain sense underwent. For this reason, Muñoz Cáliz structures her essay according to the same vicissitudes which, in the following order, centred around the nominations of Cayetano Luca de Tena (1952), José Tamayo (1954-1962), again de Tena (1962-1964), the directorial triumvirate of Federico Carlos Sainz de Robles, Francisco García Pavón and José López Rubio (1964-1965), Adolfo Marsillach (1965-1966), Miguel Narros (1966-1970), and Alberto González Vergel (1970-1974).

With the decline of Francoism and the transition to democracy the Teatro Español undergoes an epoch-making change writes José Ramón Fernández in Chapter Eight “Vida desde las cenizas (1979-2022)” (Life from the ashes 1979-2022). With the celebration, in 1979, of the elections (the first since 1931 to signal the beginning of a brief Second Republic) the cultural face of Spain is destined to change significantly. In a very short time the patrons of the theatre were the State and the Madrid City Council, while the artistic directorship was given to José Luis Alonso. He inaugurated the 1980-81 season with *Macbeth* by Miguel Narros. The following year José Luis Gómez took Alonso’s place and the season went down in history with the huge success of *Las bicicletas son para el verano* (*Bicycles Are for the Summer*), which had received the prestigious Lope de Vega award in 1977. The subsequent seasons have a certain continuity with the first to follow the

end of the regime: great significance is given both to the Spanish classics and classics in general, without forgetting to make room for contemporary playwrights. For example, 1983 saw the stagings of Duque de Rivas' *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* directed by Francisco Nieva, Clifford Williams' *Richard III* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (*La Tempestad*) in Terenci Moix' translation, in 1984 Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* directed by José Carlos Plaza was put on, and 1986 Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with José Pedro Carrión's brilliant interpretation of Puck. By the time the season of 2005-2006 arrived the Español's second auditorium was inaugurated and would eventually bear the name of Margarita Xirgu, the celebrated actor and director during the 1930s. The next season which opened on the 11th September saw the indispensable Alfonso Sastre, who at the Español was already well known for his celebrated *Escuadra hacia la muerte* (*Death Squad*). Some of the more significant works to mention, among many, are the adaptations of great literature for the stage such as the 2013-2014 season's show, Alessandro Baricco's *Novecento*, in the version by Raúl Torres, a long monologue interpreted by Miuél Rellán, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* reworked by Carme Portaceli with the collaboration of Michael de Cock and Anna M. Ricart, presented in 2019 and Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*, an important production also adapted by Portaceli and Ricart and performed at the Español in April and May 2021.

The fact that the Teatro Español has been in existence for over four hundred years means that it is a living witness to the changes in architectural style during this time. What is more, although the spectators may perceive it as a unified space, it has always been in a state of evolution as Carlos Villareal Colunga explains so well in Chapter Nine "La huella del Español en la ciudad" (The Español's traces in the city). The stage where Calderón's *La vida es sueño* was performed is certainly not the same one where the *Electra* by Benito Pérez Galdós was staged and to this could be added the many other examples cited by the author. The great variety of styles and forms that have one after another defined the theatre's actual appearance – from the very first *corral de comedias* to the construction of the Margarita Xirgu auditorium – have made it into a "multiplicidad de edificios, la mayoría ya inexistentes, más que un edificio perpetuo" (338; multiplicity of buildings, the majority of which no longer exist, more than simply one permanent building). Colunga follows and reveals the many embodiments of the Teatro Español, from its origins (1583) to the construction of an eighteenth-century "coliseo a la italiana" (345; Italianate coliseum). He does not even overlook the introduction of the coffeehouse at the end of the century on the whim of the architect Juan de Villanueva, the reforms requested by the new bourgeois class, one of which was the royal box designed by Antonio López Aguado in 1816, or the safety measures for the building introduced by Pablo Aranda at

the beginning of the twentieth century, with the addition of extra space. In conclusion, the emphasis is upon how significant the architectural presence of the Teatro is today and how this presence extends beyond the 'original' building to include its surroundings which become a sort of network of collaborative entities. This is indeed the case of Las Naves del Español: theatre halls (numbers 10, 11 and 12) which were inaugurated from 2007 onwards inside the Matadero. This building was formerly a slaughterhouse built at the beginning of the twentieth century which was salvaged and has now become an important cultural centre. A gamble worth winning, linking the artistic heritage to the social redemption of an otherwise depressed area.

The Teatro Español has fallen victim to three fires during its long existence and in Chapter Ten "Tres incendios en el teatro" (Three fires in the theatre) Antonio Castro Jiménez recounts their history. The first one occurred on the 11th July 1802 after a performance of *El abate de l'Epée*. No-one in the public was hurt but the theatre was badly damaged and reconstruction work lasted four years. The origin of the fire was judged by many not to have been an accident but to have had something to do with a restoration project suggested by the Junta de Reforma (established two years previously), that in the end wasted 6000 *reali*. The determination to destroy the documents concerning this administration has been interpreted by the historian Emilio Cotarelo y Mori as being the root cause of the fire. More than a century later, on the 19th October 1975, during a rehearsal of the play *7000 gallinas y un camello* by Jesús Campos García another fire – also considered to be deliberate – destroyed the stage. It took the firemen almost four hours to get the better of the flames and they managed to save part of the structure. To avoid damage caused by water and by theft the artistic and documentary treasures in the building were temporarily transferred to the nearby Teatro de la Comedia. Finally, Jiménez reminds the reader of the much more recent third fire of the 14th July 1991 which stopped theatrical activities for six months. Various hypotheses were suggested for the cause of the accident such as negligence or simply a short circuit but these were never confirmed. The investigation which went on for two years was closed for lack of evidence.

The area surrounding the Teatro Español, whose streets and squares are often mentioned in literary anecdotes, is the subject of Chapter 11 "Un paseo histórico-anecdótico por los alrededores del Teatro Español" (A historical and anecdotal stroll in the vicinity of the Teatro Español) by Verónica Ripoll León. The stroll starts, of course, from the *calle del Príncipe* where the theatre is situated today, in the well-known *barrio de las Letras*. Nobody knows exactly which prince the name of the street is referring to, although some scholars believe he was Muley Xequé better known as Felipe de África, also called Príncipe Negro. The historian Gonzalo de Céspedes is of a different opinion – he thinks the name derives from the celebrations at the time for

the birth of Philip IV. Besides the *corrales* (the most famous one was the Pacheca) and the theatres, coffeehouses and *tertulias* (social circles) grew in importance and flourished in this area of the city. One of these was indeed the *café del Príncipe* which was active from 1807 to 1849 and was a meeting place for such celebrated writers as Moratín, Larra, Zorrilla and Espronceda. Another renowned *café* was the *Gato Negro* where Benavente, Valle Inclán, Jiménez and Machado used to meet. At number 7 in the same street there is the *Cuevas de Sésamo*, a coffeehouse which was opened in the upper part in 1950. The following year to people's great surprise the access to an underground cavern, uninhabited for about a century was discovered on the ground floor. This became the centre for Madrid's "bohemians" (398) during Franco's dictatorship and it was frequented by such great names as Cocteau, Hemingway, Ava Gardner and Juliette Gréco. Needless to say, such were the stories written about the area around the *calle del Príncipe* that legends began to develop – such as the one about the beautiful Prudencia Grilo – and statues were erected like the one of Lorca in the centrally located Plaza Santa Ana. Ripoli León's fascinating account makes sense of the hints and anecdotes about the other streets and squares round about: calle de Las Huertas, de San Sebastián, de La Cruz, de Álvarez Gato, Núñez de Arce, Plaza del Ángel and shows how and when they were crowded with "toda clase de artistas, pensadores, políticos y figuras claves . . . desde que Madrid era una villa hasta la actualidad" (416; every kind of artist, thinkers, politicians and key figures . . . since the time when Madrid was only a small town until the present day).

The first nights at the Teatro Español during the course of four centuries of performances that have filled their seats to capacity have often become occasions of public tension. Many of these moments are examined by Eduardo Pérez Rasilla in Chapter 12, entitled "De la solemnidad teatral al crimen del día: reacciones de la crítica ante los estrenos del Español" (From theatrical solemnity to crime of the day: reactions of the critics to the Español's first nights). Among the shows that have aroused admiration, enthusiasm, have confirmed aesthetic tendencies or, on the contrary, caused controversy, some are distinguished by the attention with which theatre critics and consequently the press submitted reviews and hatchet jobs but also meticulous analyses. A complete list of these articles would fill several volumes – however Rasilla's essay manages to give an idea of how things were when theatrical life was welcomed with fervour, and was understood as an essential element of society. Among the plays that attracted the greatest attention from contemporary newspapers was *Saúl* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, first performed on 20th October 1849. This was an ambitious production that was in fact also an attempt to model itself on French theatre and to become a benchmark for the Madrid stage. It was highly praised, especially by the periodical *La Esperanza* on 3rd November 1849, which commented "La representación de *Saúl* ha

sido una verdadera solemnidad teatral” (420; the production of *Saúl* was an example of true theatrical solemnity). The Queen herself came to the first night and at the moment of her leave-taking doves were released and people threw wreaths of flowers. However, for their effect upon the political and intellectual contexts Galdós’s *Electra* (30th January 1901) and Rafael Alberti’s *Fermín Galán* (1st June 1931) proved to be not less significant.

Chapter 13 by Noella Burgaleta Areces “De lo efímero que permanece, recuerdos del Teatro Español” (On the permanently ephemeral: memories of the Teatro Español). As the author informs us, unfortunately, the theatre archives have failed to keep the greater part of the posters advertising productions or theatre tickets of the time. But there is another category of documents that help to reconstruct with sufficient accuracy a series of facts about any of the typical days in past centuries spent at the Español. Thanks to the book *Productos y Gastos (Incomes and Expenses)* it is possible to learn how much any production earned. For example, during the season of 1731-32 the run of *La vida es sueño* put on by Juana Orozco’s company earned 578 *reali*: a pitiful sum when compared to the 1571 *reali* taken by Ignacio Zerquera and his company for the staging of the same play in 1737. Another source consulted by the author, *Los papeles de Barbieri*, reveals that the cost of an entry ticket varied: only 8 *reali* for a simple entry against about 37 for a reserved seat. The information about the actors of this same company and their pay-scales is also very interesting: in 1732 Antonia Mejía was paid 6 *reali* for a day’s acting, Luis Palencia only got 2 *reali* for a day whereas his wife Maria Orozco got 3. It is even recorded that in December 1731 Antonia Mejía received 62 *reali* as assistance after she had “malparido” (460), that is she had suffered a miscarriage. Burgaleta’s journey through time means she is also able to examine the reinterpretations of Lope de Vega’s plays: from *Peribáñez y el comendador de Ocaña* reproposed by Montalbán in 1720 (*La mujer de Peribáñez*) with the worst takings of the century to *La dama boba* by María Guerrero during the first half of the twentieth century, right up to the version of *Fuenteovejuna* by Valle Inclán and Manuel Bueno in 1903, and the one by Lorca in 1935.

In conclusion, the volume, which is intended as a contribution to the diffusion of the history of the Teatro Español, does indeed evince its international dimension. On the one hand, it outlines the suggestive and complex trajectory of an institution which is deeply rooted in Spanish culture; on the other, it represents the most up-to-date testimonial on this subject and is an obligatory starting point, for anyone who wishes to approach the study of the history of Spanish theatre and literature.

Translation by Susan Payne