The Spanish Golden Age: Crash Course Theater #19

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=pDFiY81TLIM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/pDFiY81TLIM

(Intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is CrashCourse: Theater, and that's right, pal, today we're gonna be discussing the golden age of Spanish drama and Spaniards are prolific, like, tens of thousands of plays prolific, and we have lots of them, so hey, that's fun.

We'll examine the origins and style of the Spanish drama, check out its unique theater design, and uh, cucumber throwing. We'll meet a couple of golden age literary heavyweights and take a closer look at Life is a Dream, Pedro Calderon de la Barca's beautiful, allegorical mind-mash of a play. Get your cloaks, your swords, and your pageant wagons ready--vamos a Espana!

(CrashCourse Intro)

The Spanish Renaissance starts in the 15th century, when Isabella of Castille marries Ferdinand II of (?~0:55) and humanism really comes into vogue. You may remember humanism from our Italian Renaissance episode as the idea that Earthly life isn't just some garbage that happens on the way to heaven but maybe, like, kind of cool in its own right, so make a few things and be good to each other, yeah?

Except, then, in this case, we immediately get the Spanish Inquisition, so yes, art and literature, but also the prosecution of 150,000 and execution of thousands of Jews and Moors in the name of Christian orthodoxy, which is the opposite of being good to each other. What this meant for theater was that while England's stages saw a disconnect from religion with plays on spiritual themes explicitly outlawed, in Spain, sacred and secular drama remained closely intertwined. Most playwrights wrote in both genres.

The most active genre was a religious drama called the autos sacramentales, or "sacramental acts". Autos originated in the late medieval period and have some serious overlap with English morality plays. They're allegorical dramas concerned with virtue and vice. Autos were supposed to focus on the mystery of the Eucharist or communion and how bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, but topics varied a lot. Trade guilds staged plays at first, then cities took over, hiring professional troupes and encouraging playwrights to create new scripts. In Madrid, which became the capital of Spain in 1560, three or four autos were produced every year, usually a mix of new plays and revivals.

The plays were performed using elaborate two-story pageant wagons called carros. These would parade around the city, pulled by bulls with gilded horns and accompanied by musicians, jugglers, and giant paper puppets. When the carros reached a playing site, they were joined by another wagon, which opened and became the stage. The autos were performed in Spain until 1765 when, real shocker here, they were outlawed for being unholy. Too much dancing, too many farcical interludes, too much fun.

While they autos were going strong though, secular drama began to crystallize. The first important play was not actually a play--it was Calisto and Melibea, aka La Celestina, a novel in dialogue written around 1500. In it, a bachelor enlists a procuress, aka a madame, to woo a young, sheltered woman. The bachelor's servants kill the madame in a botched sort of double cross. The bachelor then falls off a ladder and dies while visiting his love and she commits suicide in despair. This takes 16 acts, 21 in the revised edition so, yeah, no one's gonna be staging that, but it was widely read and other writers were inspired by its mix of high drama and low comedy.

Around the same time, a few Spanish dramatists who'd spent some time in Italy started writing comedies and pastorals. These plays were about shepherds and shepherdesses and country life, though were only ever presented at the court, so their influence was limited, but late in the 16th century, a professional theater emerged alongside countless new forms.

Spanish playwrights loved new forms. We've got chivalric plays about knights and ladies, we've got plays about the minor nobility, we got situation comedies and comedies of manners, we've got mythology plays and miracle plays and a whole genre of plays about corpses. Yeah, I bet you could get a part. I mean, you'd have to work on your range a little bit and you know, like, delivering lines.

Spain also had a pretty unusual theater design. Some of the best seats in the house were actually in a house. The first professional theaters were built in the 1570s and they're called corrales, or courtyards, because they were built in courtyards. The houses on either side were the walls of the theater and the middle patio was for standing spectators and if you had a little bit more money, you could sit in the gradas, or rows of seats with rooves or...roofs? Roof--roof--roofs? Whichever one you like, either way, covered. Covers overhead. In the back of the theater was a snack bar that sold fruit and drinks and above it, a gallery where women sat and sometimes threw fruit. Also cucumbers. Sometimes there were police to keep the women from getting too rowdy.

The windows of the houses helped to form private boxes or aposentos, usually grills were placed over the windows so that residents couldn't sneak in, though some homeowners made special arrangements for box seats. The boxes were the only places where men and women could sit together and even then, they had to prove they were members of the same family and even then, the women still usually wore masks. Audiences were lively and noisy and if they liked a performance, they would shout 'victor'. They brought whistles and rattles with them. Plays were scheduled every day except Saturday, beginning in the afternoon. They usually featured a bunch of singing and dancing before the action.

There were eight to twelve professional companies licensed by the court. Most of them had about 20 actors and a few young apprentices. Women acted, though sometimes there were laws against it and the church remained worried about immorality and cross-dressing. Spain had a lot of playwrights, and you're gonna need a lot of playwrights if you're gonna write 30,000 plays in 100 years. Yeah. You heard right. That's one estimate of the Spanish golden age, or siglio de oro, and guess what? We have most of them.

There are so many that scholars haven't even studied them all. It's like Frank Zappa records or R.L. Stine novels. Fans of the Spanish golden age are spoiled for choice. Cervantes, when he wasn't writing both parts of Don Quixote, wrote some great plays. So did (?~6:36) who gave us a long version of the Don Juan legend, but today, we're gonna take a brief look at two dramatists: Felix Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderon de la Barca.

Lope was born in Madrid in 1562. Cervantes called him "the phoenix of wits" for his unparalleled output. He's one of the most prolific literary figures in all of history, having written nearly a thousand plays, of which we have 450. He also wrote 3000 sonnets. Shakespeare only wrote 154. What a slacker.

Remember how I said that most Spanish plays were about love and honor? Yeah, that was because of Lope. That's his bag. He was into juicy female roles, funny lowlife characters, and suspenseful plots that magically end happily. A few of his plays are still performed, including Fuenteovejuna or "the sheep well" where some abused villagers come together to kill a rapey ruler.

Calderon, born in 1600, eventually became even more popular than Lope. We have 100 of his plays and 80 of those were autos

sacramentales. For more than 30 years, his autos were the only ones performed in Madrid. They are beautiful. In terms of secular plays, he specialized in cape and sword comedies and philosophical dramas. His plays aren't as light or eventful as Lope's, but they are more thoughtful and often more elegant. They have really beautiful poetry so we're gonna look more closely at one of Calderon's plays, 1635's Life is a Dream, or "La Vida Es Sueno." Let's dream together, Thought Bubble.

A woman, disguised as a man, is wandering through the hills of Poland, as you do, when she finds a man chained to a tower. That beardy guy is (?~8:18). It turns out that he is the heir to the Polish throne. Congrats! Meanwhile, back at the palace, King Basilio is conveniently explaining why he had to chain a dude up, when (?~8:28) was born, the king received a prophecy that (?~8:31) would kill him and destroy the country, so he tried to prevent it. Haven't we seen this in Greek tragedy somewhere? King Basilio has decided to give (?~8:41) a chance. He has a tutor drug (?~8:44) and carry him to the palace. When (?~8:47) wakes up, he's told that he's a prince and should go and do some princely things and it doesn't go so well. He gets lustful, he gets angry, he throws a servant off of a balcony. He challenges a nobleman to a duel. So the king has him sedated again and returned to his tower. (?~9:05) wakes up believing that his time at the palace was just a dream. He tells his tutor about the dream and the tutor tells him that even in dreams we have to try to act nobly and not throw people off balconies. The people find out about the king's experiment and that they have a prince. They rebel because succession is super important to them, I guess, and (?~9:27) gets a chance for revenge and his royal right. But (?~9:32) spares. So the King, realizing that (?~9:34) has changed, acknowledges him as a son and heir and (?~9:40) promises to behave with goodness and virtue, asleep or awake. Thanks, Thought Bubble!

At the end, (?~9:47) says "What is life? A frenzy. What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a fiction, and the greatest good is small. For all of life is a dream and dreams are only dreams." It's nice, right? This is a religious allegory, based on the idea that life is a dream until death awakens us to a great life with God. It's also an invitation to us, the audience, to think about our own lives and how we should conduct them, whether we're directing our actions toward an eventual heaven or working towards making life better here on Earth.

Calderon died in 1681 and the golden age of Spanish theater kinda died with him, but don't start crying (?~10:29) just yet, because next time, we're gonna drop in on France, where neoclassicism, based on some pretty weird readings of Aristotle, is going strong. But until then, curtain.

CrashCourse Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows like The Art Assignment and Eons and It's Okay to be Smart. CrashCourse Theater is filmed in the Chad and Stacy Emigholtz studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe. CrashCourse exists thanks to the generous support of our Patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation and help keep CrashCourse free for everyone, forever. Thanks for watching.