Pre-Columbian Theater, Spanish Empire, and Sor Juana: Crash Course Theater #22

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=5gxHbYI0uy4
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/5gxHbYI0uy4

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater and today, we head to the Americas at a time when Broadway was just another unpaved part of not-yet-even New Amsterdam, so we're gonna head to Mexico to learn about a woman who brought the Spanish golden age to the so-called new world, and guess what, she was a nun. Why is it always the nuns, Yorick?

(Crash Course Theater intro)

We shouldn't get too far before being super clear--there was theater in central America way before any Europeans, and it will probably seem familiar. Pre-Columbian theater looks like religious ritual and is associated with various religious festivals. When Aztecs conducted a sacrifice, they did it in style, with costumes and parades and animals, though maybe don't get too attached to those animals or some of the people wearing the costumes?

In the 16th century, an indigenous onlooker whose words were later copied by a missionary descibed a celebration for the feathered serpent creator diety Quetzacotl. The actors came out and performed short comic pieces pretending to be deaf, afflicted with colds, halt, blind, and missing an arm, all coming to the idol to ask for health. The deaf ones would give foolish answers and those with colds coughed. The halt, limping about, described their miseries and complaints and made the people laugh heartily. Others came out representing vermin with some dressed as beetles, others as toads, others as lizards, and so on. After this was over, they performed a dance with all of these actors and the festival ended. There you have it, folks, ability-related comedy and vermin dance. Fun times for all?

But lizards aside, we don't have to look especially hard to draw connections between this and the kind of medieval comedy that informed the cycle plays, or even all the way back to ancient farce. Things change after the Spanish arrive, obviously, for a lot of reasons, not the least of which being genocide.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

If you've watched Crash Course World History, you'll know that the attitude of the Spaniards toward native religious practices was not exactly chill. Admittedly, some native religious practices did involve human sacrifice. The invading Spanish practice forced conversion, stamping out native Aztec rituals, often violently. Missionaries had native peoples perform bible stories and take part in historical pageants on fun topics like how the great and honorable Spaniards had conquered the evil and terrible Moors. Guess which side the indigenous peoples played.

Turns out, performance is a pretty useful way to spread religious and imperial propaganda and impose your preferred historical narratives. We know about some of this because of the Franciscan monk, Alonzo Ponce. From 1584 to 1589, he toured more than 170 convents and had his secretary write down all of the performances he saw. Ponce saw a lot of European style bible stories and battle re-enactments with indigenous actors basically acting out their own defeat, but the secretary also noted games and acrobatics, which had a non-European vibe and probably reflected earlier indigenous performance.

Throughout the 16th century, colonial authors translated religious dramas imported from Spain into indigenous languages and then began writing their own plays, also in local languages to proseletyze with. These were mostly religious allegories or takes on bible stories, such as The Three Kings or The Sacrifice of Isaac, but by the end of the century, Spanish was becoming the dominant language of theater and Mexico City was becoming the theatrical center of the Spanish empire. In 1565, the city established a prize for the best Corpus Christi play, and by the early 1600s, people were building Spanish-style theaters and starting professional acting companies. That brings us to Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, the first feminist of the Americans, the last great writer of the Spanish golden age, and the only one to get her own steamy Netflix show, Juana Ines.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Take that, Lope de Vega. Like (?~4:08), she too had some dope nicknames. The Tenth Muse. The Phoenix of America. And like (?~4:15), she wrote in a lot of genres, including philosophy, theology, a ton of poems, several carol sequences, and 27 plays, most of them introductions to autos sacramentales including the (?~4:27) of the divine Narcissus, which we'll look at in a minute. She wrote a few full-length comedies, including A Ponds of a House, which includes a strong-minded young woman who wants to become a nun, and Love is More A Labyringh about Theseus, Ariadne, and (?~4:41). It doesn't really sound like a comedy, but that hasn't stopped anyone yet.

Sor Juana was born in Mexico in 1648, the illegitimate daughter of a Spanish military officer. She was mostly self-educated and said that she wrote her first play at the age of eight, so she was pretty precocious, too. She later moved to Mexico City, where she begged to be allowed to dress as a boy so she could attend university, but she had to continue her education privately. She became a favorite of the Spanish viceroy and his wife and lived at court, where she continued her education, learning Latin and also (?~5:15). She spent a few years as a lady-in-waiting and then in 1669, she decided to join an order of Heronomite nuns, a comparatively relaxed order. She'd already received several offers of marriage but she knew that if she got married, she would have to devote herself to her family and be subservient to her husband. Boring. But if she became a nun, she could determine her own intellectual life and she did. Nice.

During her lifetime, one of her essays was published, though the bishop who published it also added a critique of it, saying that as a woman, she was wrong to concern herself with wordly stuff like writing and philosophy. The bishop also wrote the critique under the pseudonym Sor Philo Tea, pretending to be another nun. Sor Juana wrote a response to the response, reply to Sister Philo Tea and it's here that we find most of her biographical information, but basically she writes, heck no, Philo Tea.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

She quotes the mystic St. Teresa who said, "One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper" and wrote that if more women teach, maybe young girls could learn without being harrassed so much. The bishop censured her, not using a pseudonym this time, and later in her life, she probably had to give up writing to avoid punishment. She died in 1695 when she caught the Plague while caring for other afflicted nuns, which is heartbreaking but also righteous as heck.

Let's look at one of Sor Juana's plays, The Loa of the Divine Narcissus. The Loa, which comes from the Latin "Laus" or praise, began as a prologue at the beginning of a comedy that told the audience what the comedy would be about, but eventually, it evolved into a kind of short allegorical drama that emphasized Christian teachings and was typically associated with the autos sacramentales.

Lope, Calderon, (?~6:59) de Molina and all of those golden age

guys, they all wrote Loas, but Sor Juana's Loa does what Loas and autos are supposed to do: it celebrates humankind's redemption via the eucharist, but as a Mexican woman of Spanish descent, Juana's Loa also has a sneaky reverence for native cultural practices and might even function as a critique of doctrinaire colonial rule. Speak truth to power, Thought Bubble.

Occident, a crowned Aztec dude, enters alongside America, a queenly Aztec woman. Occident and America are regal as heck, and the first words of the play acknowledge that: "Oh noble Mexicans, whose ancient ancestry comes forth from the clear light and brilliance of the sun." The character of Music tells them that since it's harvest time, they must honor the great god of the sun and war, (?~7:49). How do they honor him? By mixing seeds with human blood, shaping it into a statue and then eating the statue.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Other figures enter, dressed in ponchos, and performed a (?~8:02), a kind of indigenous dance. Already the play acknowledges two cultures and two performance styles: European allegorical drama and Aztec dance. Now, the Spaniards show up. First, Religion appears as a Spanish woman and Zeal as as a Spanish conquistador. Religion is freaked out by the whole human sacrifice thing and Zeal is like, relax, I've got a sword, it's taken care of, and Religion goes, maybe we can try mercy before killing? So Religion is like, hey, Occident and America, maybe don't be heretics, and Occident and America respond, 'leave us alone, we are worshipping our god' so Zeal is like, okay, back to plan A. DIE, IMPUDENT AMERICA! There's a huge battle and yeah, no prize for guessing who wins, but Occident and America are still defiant saying, yes, they're defeated, but they're gonna go on worshipping their god their way, and Religion is like, look, your false god is just a huge theological misunderstanding of the true god so maybe we can all just get on the same page. We worship our god with bread and wine so maybe it's not so different after all and Occident and America are like, huh. Well argued. We'll adopt your god now. Let's all get baptized. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

In the loa of The Divine Narcissus' exciting conclusion, Religion is like, before we do the baptism, let's watch an auto to learn more about how great the eucharist is. We're gonna call this auto Divine Narcissus because in the Narcissus myth, Narcissus and Echo both worship false idols. Get it? And Zeal is all, Religion, as a woman in Mexico, isn't it wrong that you're writing autos sacramentales to be performed in Spain, and then Religion is like, it comes from my faith, so nope! We good! Lights down.

In the end, Christianity takes the win. The Aztecs are successfully converted but here's the thing. Occident and America aren't portrayed as savages and even though their ritual is definitely stomach-churning, unless you are a vampire who also is into whole grains, it isn't represented as violent or grotesque.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

As the character Religion makes it clear, it sounds a lot like the eucharist, if the blood of Christ thing wasn't at least partially symbolic. By incorporating indigenous forms of performance and treating native characters with dignity, the loa both emphasizes Christian teachings and critiques the forced conversion of native peoples, favoring a gentler and more respectful approach. It also includes a shoutout to Greek myth, an implicit acknowledgment of yet another faith tradition.

Guess what else Sor Juana does? By including the Tocotin, an indigenous dance performed using traditional music and costumes, she allows that performance style to continue on as even other Christians were busy stamping it out, which is a classy bit of subversion, so thanks Sor Juana. No wonder you made it onto the peso.

Thanks for watching. Next time, get your exaggerated eye makeup ready, because we are heading over to Japan for Kabuki, a wild, hilarious counterculture performance style which is pretty much the closest that a repressive 18th century society gets to punk rock, but until then, curtain.

America From Scratch, a new series that has joined the PBS Digital Studios family asks some pretty big questions, like should 12 year olds be allowed to vote? What if there were no states? Do we even really need a president? The host, Toussaint Morrison, looks at the many ways our country has and hasn't changed since its founding in 1776. Subscribe to America From Scratch at the link below.

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===== (12:00) to (12:04) =====