

RESEÑAS

SALSA CELESTINA (Musical theatre). Watford Palace, 11 June-3 July, 1993. Director: **Lou Stein**.

Billed as a 'dance musical,' **Lou Stein's *Salsa Celestina*** transposes Rojas's play to a nightclub in present-day Cuba, where the resident dancers reenact the story of Calisto (**Jason Riddington**) and Melibea (**Marie Theodore**) in honour of the namesake and the alleged ancestors of the club's owner.

The nightclub set, with a V-shaped apron jutting into the stalls and, stage left, a red-curtained alcove housing the band, is basically *Celestina's* space, but it is used ingeniously to represent the other three houses. It is installed in the shell of a colonial ruin which is also the decaying exterior of Pleberio's mansion: the nightclub entrance up a flight of steps centre back becomes the front door of Pleberio's house when a diptych opens up to reveal a double arc of fairy lights. Here Melibea, in a simple white dress, makes a memorable first appearance, framed like a Virgin in a kitsch shrine.

The excellent salsa band (Orquesta La Clave) is undoubtedly the cornerstone of the production, setting a mood of exuberant Latinity. Authentic salsa lyrics (sung in Spanish) accompany nearly all the dance routines and incidental music orchestrates other moments (drumbeats for the climax of *Celestina's* demonic trance and

Melibea's fainting fit). Dance arises naturally out of the action in the low-life scenes, providing the ideal showcase for Elicia (Debra Michaels) and Areúsa (Linda Mae Brewer), as well as an enviably simple solution to all the on-stage coupling.

The axing of Pleberio and Alisa (they are 'away' for all the relevant scenes) represents the most significant departure of the adaptation. Considering the whole is over in a two-hour stretch crammed with musical numbers, it gives a remarkably full and close account of the original. The script is freely rendered into idiomatic English, with some notable one-liners ('As for the actual screwing, rabbits have more fun') and occasional snatches of Spanish ('*Mamacita*, what time do you call this?'). Sometimes the translation respects the letter of the text even when this is flatly contradicted by the visual interpretation. Celestina (Dollie Henry), for example, we hear described as 'old lady,' complaining of poverty, frailty and loss of libido. But the Celestina we see, resplendent in black and gold, snapping the band into action, is some way off retirement age and very much in control. This is Celestina in her heyday, not her decline. Similarly, in the absence of Pleberio, there is no evidence of patriarchal authority to back up Melibea's threats or justify Celestina's fears. The tawdry opulence of the set, the costumes, and the sunny rhythms combine to foreground the values of the demi-monde as positive, dominant and unchallenged.

The basic outline of the plot follows the *Comedia*, involving one inversion and, in the second half, some schematic borrowing from the *Tragicomedia*. Thus the play proper opens with Celestina introducing herself to the audience with passages from Pármeno's 'puta vieja' speech, before setting the scene for the first encounter between the lovers. Sempronio (Omar F. Okal) and Pármeno (Paul J. Medford) are nicely characterized as wide boy and whiner, quickly establishing rapport with the audience at the expense of Calisto, whose calls for his guitar become a running joke. Both girls are raunchy rather than sluttish: we actually get to see Elicia two-timing it with Crito, courtesy of the lead singer from the band, and Areúsa makes an early appearance dancing out Pármeno's fantasy in the background to his *tête à tête* with Celestina. Later, Celestina and the two servants seal their alliance with a jaunty song-and-dance routine, 'Dinero' (English lyrics, Spanish refrain). The conjuration scene takes instant effect by transporting Celestina magically to Melibea's unchaperoned presence, though Lucrecia (Flip Webster) is soon seen

peeping round the door. (Lucrecia is the first surprise of the evening: a prim duenna of uncertain age, she is the only character to speak with an English accent and her voice and manner project a cynical aloofness associated in cinematic tradition with the British butler abroad.) Act 4 has been pared down to essentials, Melibea's acquiescence being secured more by witchcraft than persuasion. Acts 5 and 6 are run together as Celestina returns home to Sempronio with the *cordón* (a white silk scarf, which Melibea wears round her waist) and they are joined there by Pármeno and Calisto, who receives the *cordón* without comment, fondling it to his face like a long-lost security blanket.

The second half begins in the middle of Act 7, with Areúsa writhing in pain centre stage and her remedy fast approaching from the auditorium. Acts 8-11 follow in original sequence, all much abridged. Calisto goes alone to Melibea's house for the Act 12 assignation; her part in their hasty exchange is conducted from an upstairs window. After the murder, which is neatly choreographed (Pármeno does the deed while Sempronio struggles with Elicia) the lead singer steps down once again, this time as Sosia, to inform Calisto of the three deaths. A token debate with his conscience and he is ready to keep the appointment with Melibea. Act 14 opens with the dialogue from Act 16 in which Melibea counters the marriage rumour with an impassioned defence of free love. In the absence of her parents she is able to entertain Calisto in her house, which he enters by 'a ladder outside the garden window,' opened in the set for this scene only. Melibea offers no resistance to the seduction, which takes the form of a decorous ballroom shuffle whose symbolism is explained in a sardonic commentary by Lucrecia. The dance is prolonged wordlessly to represent their continuing liaison while Elicia and Areúsa, stage left, mourn Celestina, curse the lovers, and plot the revenge. A (rather quiet) scuffle in the street brings Calisto to his fatal fall, Melibea kneels to address her suicide speech to the audience *in loco Pleberii* and then steps up to the centre doorway where, instead of leaping into the void, she finds Calisto waiting for her and the pair embrace in a mist of dry ice. After this apotheosis, Elicia's resolve to put off mourning (from Act 17) leads smoothly into a finale for which Celestina is reincarnated in her original role as nightclub proprietress.

I thought the first half, fast-moving and funny, worked very well. However, things fell apart in the second half as plot development defeated expectations and the carnival mood, once

established, proved impossible to dispel. If audience response is anything to go by, Calisto's death was the highpoint of the evening. Lucrecia's complacent announcement 'Your lover has fallen off the ladder' was greeted by gales of delighted laughter.

Lucrecia's careful delivery of this line (and the next) was calculated to draw a laugh, but the audience's receptive callousness has to be blamed on the adaptation as a whole, in which Calisto and Melibea command as much interest and respect as the juvenile leads in a 'Carry On' film. In musical terms the love story is downgraded (Calisto and Melibea do not sing a love duet, for example), and severe cuts to their scenes inhibit our sympathy with either character. Having no illusions about Calisto, I enjoyed this portrait of the complete fall guy, but Melibea, surely, is treated unfairly by the script. In her uppity phase she is downright disagreeable (to both Calisto and Celestina) and the *volte face* through meltdown to liberation is too sudden to be convincing.

I felt the production would have worked better if the tragic outcome had been shunted off to an epilogue, played out in dumb show, or recounted by the survivors (why not have Elicia, for example, tell the whole story?). Or perhaps the director should have been bolder about eliminating the elements of his source incompatible with the upbeat treatment. For all its idiosyncrasies, this interpretation of the Celestina story provides much food for thought about the original. As used here, the interpolations from the *Tragicomedia* do much, by default, to suggest the artistic superiority of the sixteen-act version, with its swift and shocking decent into catastrophe. And if at the end of the evening the humour seemed vapid without its moral underpinning, a treatment that laid exclusive stress on the dark side would be equally unbalanced. More positively, and unforgettably, *Salsa Celestina* brings out the inherent theatricality of Rojas's play, its eminent stageability. The first half, in particular, by exploiting its natural affinities with pantomime and music hall, conveys very credibly the *Comedia's* roots in humanistic comedy.

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