



How to Stage a Theatrical Production of a Spanish Play with 0 Prior Experience and Very Minimal Budget

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Abstract

In the Fall of 2018, I staged a production of Spanish playwrights Enrique García Álvarez and Celso Lucio's one-act farce "El palco del Real" in its original language on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a cost of \$495. Prior to this, I had never acted, directed, stage-designed, costume-designed, or done anything of the sort. The intention of this paper and poster presentation is to describe the process as it unfolded to me, including its roadblocks and its happy accidents, in the hopes that anyone with a similar desire to bring theatre in Spanish (or in any foreign language, for that matter) to their college or university may see that in spite of the challenges that can crop up, it can be done and you don't have to be a professional actor or director to do it.

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In the Fall of 2018, I staged a production of Spanish playwrights Enrique García Álvarez and Celso Lucio's one-act farce "El palco del Real" [1] in its original language on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a cost of \$495. Prior to this, I had never acted, directed, stage-designed, costume-designed, or done anything of the sort. What follows is a description of the process as it unfolded to me, including its roadblocks and its happy accidents, in the hopes that anyone with a similar desire to bring theatre in Spanish (or in any foreign language, for that matter) to their college or university may see that in spite of the challenges that can crop up, it *can* be done and you don't have to be a professional actor or director to do it.

1. Step one: find a play

While re-reading an anthology of short Spanish theatrical pieces, I came across *El palco del Real*, and I thought: this play is actually kind of funny! As I kept reading it, I caught myself visualizing how one might stage it. Written and set in 1904, it took place in one location—a living room—and I thought that it might be easy enough to evoke an early twentieth-century urban, middle-class living room with easily-procurable objects. I had a few items in my closet that would give the impression of historically-appropriate women's wardrobing. I could procure garments from a thrift store and use my novice sewing skills to doctor them up. As I continued imagining the visual elements, other practicalities came to mind: the humorous nature of the play might provide a better likelihood of attracting actors and retaining them throughout weeks of rehearsals. The visual nature of the play's humor would make it accessible to audiences of Spanish language learners of all levels *and* Spanish speakers. Plus, there were seven parts, so the burden of memorizing lines would be more spread out than in a play with less characters.

2. Step two: get a performance space and rehearsal space(s)

My campus has professional-quality spaces for performing arts, but these are for the exclusive use of entities with which I am not affiliated. There *is* a lovely historical playhouse that is available for rental, but it costs upwards of a thousand dollars, even for university departments.

A possible solution to this problem came to me unexpectedly. I am an advisor for an officially-recognized campus student organization, which also happens to be a chapter of a national Spanish honor society. While attending a luncheon workshop for faculty advisors of student organizations, I learned that these can host events through the Events Services Office, which also rents ticketing services, security, and lighting services. I thought back to a performance of *The Vagina Monologues* by an amateur cast that I had seen a few years prior in an auditorium-style classroom, and I thought that this would be a logical route.

This route had its own set of problems. The auditorium that I wanted is also very popular for other student organizations' performances and rehearsals. I had to be somewhat flexible with the dates that I wanted for the performance weekend. This also meant that I had to seek other spaces for rehearsals. I obtained classrooms where we could move chairs around in a configuration roughly



similar to the arrangement of the set items on our 'real' stage. I carried the more vital props to each rehearsal in tote bags. Another challenge was posed by classroom reservations being managed by two separate entities: Student Organizations after 6pm and Classroom Scheduling from 8am to 5pm. This left a "no man's land" from 5-6. I reserved what I could and we stayed the extra hour before or after. Thankfully, I ran into few problems.

3. Step three: assemble a cast

I created a casting call and emailed it to the listservs of my colleagues, Spanish majors and minors, and Sigma Delta Pi; I emailed it to the Chair of the Department of Dramatic Arts and the president of a campus Latino/a student organization. I announced the opportunity to my classes. I visited one of my colleagues' classes. The email to the Chair of the Department of Dramatic Arts resulted in my lead male and one of my female actors. Thankfully, she had already been in a few shows, and so she served as my co-Director. These same actors later recruited two more. One more came from my Spanish Conversation class, and an adventurous colleague of mine volunteered.

This was not as easy as it sounds. I had to do a lot of persistent begging and pestering in multiple emails. I approached individual colleagues to no avail. A couple of actors dropped out and had to be replaced. After giving up on finding a leading lady, I decided to do it myself. The last role was not covered until three weeks away from the performance.

4. Step four: develop a rehearsal plan and get started!

For a one-act play with a one-hour runtime, we rehearsed twice a week for two hours each time for nine and a half weeks. Taking into account cancelations for a hurricane, fall break, and particularly exam-and-paper-heavy weeks, we held 16 meetings, plus one four-hour-long dress rehearsal.

Each rehearsal had a different focus. In the first two or three meetings, I gave a summary of the play in English and a bit of background on the historical period and setting, we read through the entire script scene-by-scene, with me translating after each line.

After those initial meetings, we began to focus on groupings of about four scenes per meeting. The first time working with a group of scenes, we would sit down and do a read-through, then a quick translate-through, and then another read-through. These read-and-translate-throughs, even though time-consuming, were indispensable for understanding colloquialisms and allusions to current events, politics, and societal structure in Spain in the early 1900s, even with a cast who had already taken at least five semesters of Spanish. Then we would begin "blocking" the scenes; in other words, establishing the grouping and movement of characters about the stage. Afterward, we would read our parts off while moving around our designated positions. We would aim to have those scenes memorized by one week later.

After getting the smaller groupings of scenes to a reasonable level, we rehashed larger groups of scenes, eventually covering about one-fourth of the play at the time, then half each time, and finally, after seven weeks, rough run-throughs of the entire play. We spent the last meetings fine-tuning.

5. Step five: find out how to pay for it

Luckily, my organization had some money saved up. This safety net allowed me to get started on recruiting actors and rehearsing. Meanwhile, I mentioned my project to my teaching supervisor, who suggested that I apply for monies that our department budgets for special events. After initially offering me \$290, eventually they awarded me \$800.

6. Step six: wardrobe and set

I needed a historically-appropriate set and wardrobe, and I needed it to be economical and easy to execute. Additionally, there was no storage at the venue, so everything would have to be portable and more-or-less easy to assemble and take down on the spot. I would have to get creative with items that I already had in my house and items already in the auditorium and supplement them with low-cost items. I would also have to consider lighting.

In the auditorium, there were folding chairs, a large whiteboard on rollers, an immovable podium, a piano, and a worktable. At my house, I had a card table and lightweight dining-room chairs. Never underestimate what you can do with large pieces of fabric (curtains, duvet covers, tablecloths, bedsheets) and big, metal clips from the office-supply store! To make a 'sofa', I draped and clamped fabric over three folding chairs arranged side-by-side. I draped my card table with a duvet cover and clamped it neatly around the sides to make a dining-room table. I draped a large tablecloth over the



worktable and put a china hutch from my local Habitat for Humanity Re-Store on top to make a cupboard. I clamped curtains over the whiteboard and used it to hide the piano and the podium. To make a working balcony door, I found scraps of wood, a door jamb, plastic shutters, and hinges at Habitat for Humanity and sawed, drilled, and painted in my living room.

I ‘faked’ an early twentieth-century women’s wardrobe with my basic sewing skills and garments already in my closet (shirts with poufy sleeves and lace collars and some long skirts), plus a few thrift shop items (an oversized straight skirt in which I sewed tucks to give the illusion of a long, full skirt; a poufy shirt; a vintage prom dress). Male characters used their own button-down shirts, khaki pants, bow ties, vests, etc., and I bought a bowler hat, top hat, newsboy hat, and fake moustaches from online costume shops. For a particular scene, where the mother and daughter characters are altering dresses, I made objects from fabric, fake flowers, and lace from a craft store to which I attached metal snaps so that they could be ‘sewn’ on quickly and then removed for the next show. YouTube was very useful for tutorials on stage makeup and historical hairstyles.

Events Services was going to charge several hundred dollars for lighting, so I checked out a lighting kit from the library and supplemented with (borrowed) clip-on study lamps, which I clipped to the front row of seats to serve as footlights. I brought many extension cords and power strips. Two folding doors hinged together served as a place to clamp study lamps to at different heights and doubled as another screen to hide the podium.

My mother helped me bring everything to the performance in her pickup truck.

7. Step seven: advertise the performance... and enjoy!

We advertised with mass emails to the same listservs as before, flyers posted around campus, Facebook pages, and a Facebook event. I contacted the Editor of our campus newspaper, and they published an article about the play in the online version. I invited the Chancellor. I invited my students to attend.

I was very pleased by the turnout—parents, siblings, neighbors, friends, a handful of my colleagues, and some of my and my colleagues’ students came out to support us. From the stage, I could hear laughter at the appropriate moments, the applause was thunderous, and we were approached afterward with congratulations.

8. Final budget

Of the \$495 total expenditure, \$178 was spent on wardrobe, \$95 on set and lighting, and \$51 on miscellaneous (printing). \$160 was spent on Events Services staff, a requirement for events open to the public.

References

- [1] Lucio, Celso and Enrique García Álvarez. *El palco del real: juguete cómico en un acto y en prosa*. Madrid, Velasco, 1904.