**PECHAKUCHA: SPANISH GOLDEN AGE**

The term 'Golden Age' is used to describe what is broadly the Early Modern period in Spain, a time of extraordinary artistic flowering. The period stretches from the late 15th century to the death of the great playwright, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, in 1681. This is the period of the great writer Miguel Cervantes and the astonishing painter Diego de Velazquez. Spanish culture was spreading irresistibly to the New World and throughout the Old.

Spain’s unique and complex history is closely tied to its geographic location. It is bounded on the east by the Mediterranean, the west by Portugal, the north by the Pyrenees of France. Africa is just 9 miles south of Spain!

When King Ferdinand of Castile and Queen Isabel of Leon married, they united Spain. Though their reign is marked by religious intolerance, it was also a time of rising to World Power. They conquered other European lands and controlled the seas. By 1550, Spain was a leading power in Europe and poised for their “Golden Age” in conquest, commerce and the arts.

1492 is a significant year in their reign. The best known event is the voyage of Christopher Columbus. It is also the year that Ferdinand and Isabel drove the Jews out of Spain permanently. They were determined to have religious unanimity and worked to expel the Moors of Africa as well. Thanks to this expulsion, Spain lost some its most notable doctors, philosophers, merchants and scholars.

Society had very strict rules of etiquette and behavior during the Spanish Golden Age. Decorum and a code of honor were important. There were specific verbal and physical actions expected toward nobility. Professions dressed according to their social status. Nobility who felt they were disrespected could result in duels. Only the higher end of the social hierarchy and professions could read. Church was the social center for most Catholics.

Religious drama has been a part of Spanish culture since medieval times. During the Golden Age, a religious festival called Corpus Christi was host to the first auto sacramentales. “Auto” refers to one act and “sacramentales” refers to the sacraments. Autos sacramentales combined secular and religious sources but were required to underscore the validity of the church’s teachings. Though Corpus Christi is celebrated still today,autos sacramentales were banned by Charles III in 1765.

Religious plays were mounted on wagons called carros, which could be moved into place for a festival. Carros were very similar to the “mansion wagons” used in medieval Europe. Before 1647, three carros were used for each play and rolled together to form a stage. After 1647, they became much larger and more elaborate.

Later, non-religious plays were staged in public theatres called Corrales. Corrales were constructed in existing courtyards; like Elizabethan public theatres, they were open-air spaces with galleries and boxes protected by a roof. The yard floor, or patio, was primarily for standing, while seating was divided into classes and genders throughout other spaces.

Lope de Rueda was a professional actor, manager, playwright, and the most popular performer of early Spanish theatre. Rueda wrote autos sacramentales for Corpus Christi, but also began writing secular plays. They were very well-liked and helped spur the lively theatrical activity that was growing throughout Spain. As there were no permanent theatres during Rueda’s lifetime, he toured extensively.

Just after Rueda’s time, Miguel de Cervantes, best known for his novel *Don Quixote*, also wrote plays. Cervantes plays were not of the quality of those that came from later Golden Age playwrights. However, *Don Quixote* is one of the most popular works of art ever created and has been transformed from novel to plays, ballets, and operas.

By the end of the 1500’s, secular drama was also flourishing. The full-length plays of the Golden age were known as “comedias.” They were given this name whether they were serious, comic, or some mixture of the two. Comedias usually dealt with themes of love and honor, and the leading characters were often noblemen. This comedia was written by Lope de Vega…not to be confused with Lope de Rueda.

Lope de Vega, referred to commonly as LOPE, is one of the most prolific dramatists of all time. He wrote at least 800 plays! Lope established a distinctive episodic structure for Spanish drama, and it is one of history’s most fascinating coincidences that he lived at exactly the same time as Shakespeare and wrote in a similar form. As a dramatist, Lope had one aim: to please the audience.

*Fuente Ovejuna* was written by Lope in 1614. It is unique in that its hero is an entire village! *Fuente Ovejuna’s* commander is an evil womanizer who terrorizes all females in the village. When attempts to seek help are ignored, the villagers take matters into their own hands and dispatch the commander. Under threat of death and torture, the villagers stand together and are eventually pardoned.

After Lope de Vega died, Calderon became Spain’s most popular playwright. Calderon’s plays are written in a variety of styles. Many revolve around the favorite Spanish concerns—love and honor. He enjoyed developing the idea that humans are responsible for their own actions and must choose a path from a maze of possibilities. He wrote 111 plays and 70 autos sacramentales.

In form, plays of the Spanish Golden Age are very close to Elizabethan drama. There are differences in subject, however: Conflicts of love and honor, daring adventures, melodramatic confrontations and rescues and the essence of Spanish plays. These plays paved the way for swashbuckling 1940’s films, romantic novels and soap operas.

A lost form of Golden Age theatre is the Zarzuela. Zarzuela drew from mythology, dance and spoken word and borrowed from the Italian Renaissance operatic traditions. The zarzuela is not well-known outside of Spanish speaking countries. Though it has similarities with American musical comedy, it has been marginalized in chronicles of Theatre history.

Costuming in Spain was also similar to practices in Renaissance England. In most instances, contemporary clothes were worn. At times, mythical or historical figures would be dressed more elaborately; Moors were almost always portrayed as villains and would be dressed in a distinctive way. Where budget permitted, costumes were extremely lavish—but were generally owned by individual performers.

Acting troupes of the Golden Age consisted of 16-20 performers and did include women. They were regulated by the government; all plays and troupes had to be licensed. Actors played multiple roles. Typecasting was common, since the comedias had stock characters such as a gracioso (the witty fool) and barba (an old man).

Like many other European countries, women had been allowed to act in religious dramas in medieval Spain. This provided a natural outgrowth for women in Golden Age Theatre to perform. The church was leery of women performers and tried repeatedly to outlaw them. Restrictions were placed on what women could do onstage. Women were never banned completely though and remained a power influence on Spanish stage.

Despite its richness, Golden Age drama is not well known outside academic settings. When performed in translation it tends still to have a novelty value. The reasons for this are several: in Spain, the drama has been successively, although never universally, mistrusted, rejected as formally inept, rewritten, abused for political purposes, and misunderstood. Currently, there is renewed interest that can only help to erode the misconceptions and build respect for the Spanish Golden Age.

*PechaKucha originally created by Vanica Crane*