

Excerpt terms and conditions

This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest you read the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

THE GREAT THEATRE OF THE WORLD

by
CALDERÓN

Adapted
by
ADRIAN MITCHELL



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty fees are given in our current catalogue and are subject to change without notice. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed anytime it is acted before an audience. All inquiries concerning amateur and stock rights should be addressed to:

DRAMATIC PUBLISHING

P. O. Box 129, Woodstock, Illinois 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including but not limited to the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication, and reading are reserved. *On all programs this notice should appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

©MCMXC

Translation/Adaptation ADRIAN MITCHELL

Printed in the United States of America

All Rights Reserved

(THE GREAT THEATRE OF THE WORLD)

Cover design by Susan Carle

ISBN 0-87129-292-0

INTRODUCTION

Calderón de la Barca

or **How I learned to stop worrying and love the Spanish Golden Age.**

This introduction is not for scholars. They know far more about Calderón than I do. It is for those people who find themselves intimidated by the strangeness of Spain, even contemporary Spain, let alone the 17th Century Spain.

I felt that same nervousness only a few years ago. When I first read about the plays of the Spanish Golden Age—from around 1500 to 1681, the period in which Calderón, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Tirso de Molina and Rojas Zorrilla flourished—I was dumbfounded by the system of values, especially the “Honour” system which seemed to dominate the drama. It was only when I began to read the plays thoroughly that I discovered that you have to know very little about such matters to understand many of the greatest plays. Honour is such a strange word in England these days. Good name and reputation are still far easier to handle.

But when you read or act or watch *The Mayor of Zalamea* you need to know about human beings, not about social codes. Of course, the more you know about the social background the more you’ll understand and enjoy. But most of us live in a world which doesn’t allow time for historical research in between work or looking for work and going to the theatre. *The Mayor of Zalamea* was the first Spanish play I attempted, using a literal translation by Gwenda Pandolfi, sticking very closely to the text, using a kind of syllabic verse. This was commissioned by the National Theatre. When I read the play for the second time I knew that given a half-decent production, it must be popular. Michael Bogdanov’s production was spare and strong and had at its centre a perfor-

mance of pure gold by Michael Bryant. The production proved that there is no difficulty for an English audience with at least one of the Golden Age plays. It started at the Cottesloe and transferred to the Olivier because more seats were needed.

After its success the National suggested another Calderón, *Life's a Dream*. But just as I was completing my version it was discovered that the Royal Shakespeare Company was about to stage a version of the same play by John Barton. I rang John, whom I didn't know at the time, to confirm that this was true, since the National had decided to scrap its plans. He is the most generous of bears and said something like: "Come on over and I'll show you mine and you show me yours." We both liked each other's versions. He'd solved problems I had been stumped by. I'd laid down some mean verse. John suggested mixing the versions together and that's what we did. He kept a kind of record of whose line was whose and it worked out about forty-six per cent John, forty-six per cent Adrian and eight per cent lines which were a mixture of the two. His production was highly acclaimed both in Stratford and London and once again the availability of Spanish drama to an English audience was proved.

The Great Theatre of the World was commissioned by the Mediaeval Players. The metaphor of the play, in which God is a theatre director and the World is his stage manager, appealed to me strongly. So did the humour and the pathos and the poetic wonder of the play—it is a Christian play but a pretty undogmatic one, naturally, since Calderón could take it for granted that he had a Christian audience.

The theatre is a real world. This has advantages and disadvantages. One given factor for this production was that the Players have developed many circus skills like juggling and stilt-walking. We used this by giving the play an interlude

half way through in which, since the play is much possessed by death, skeletons danced and played, giant skeletons walked on bone-like stilts and juggler skeletons demonstrated their art with skulls and bones. Disadvantages—the Players' grant couldn't stretch to a complete cast. One character, I was told, had to be left out. I chose the one which I felt was least relevant to a modern audience, the character Discretion, who chooses a contemplative life. Don't blame me, blame Mrs. Thatcher. I suppose I could have written back Discretion into the play for this published edition. I decided not to. This is a version for Philistine Britain where even a very funny and affecting play about eternal truths has to lose, if not a limb, then a few fingers in the cause of cost-effectiveness.

Calderón lived from 1600 to 1681. To find out about his life and work, read his entry in the "Oxford Companion to Spanish Literature" and Gerald Brenan's wonderful "The Literature of the Spanish People."

His work is sometimes characterised as formal, intellectual, spiritual, maybe somewhat cold. All these things are true, but there is far more to his plays. They're certainly not cold, they simply seem comparatively cool when you place them beside the red-hot passion of Lope de Vega. But there is a slow-burning passion in Calderón and also a lovely humour which is often forgotten. Lope de Vega (1562-1635) was surely a mixture of earth and fire. Calderón is air and water, a most beautiful fountain. And often, a fiery fountain.

ADRIAN MITCHELL

This collection is dedicated to all the theatre people involved in the first productions of these versions, with many thanks and much admiration.

This version of *The Great Theatre of the World* was commissioned by The Mediaeval Players and was toured by them from Autumn 1984 to Spring 1985 with the following cast:

Elizabeth Downes
Mark Heap
Martin Pople

Mark Saban
Bridget Thornborrow
Roy Weskin

Musicians Susan Addison
David Allen
Michael Harrison
Stephen Jones
Simon Mansfield
Martin Page

Administrator Judith Clough
Costume Designer Cath Fitzgerald
Assistant Musical Director Giles Lewin
Company Stage Manager Neil Marcus
Set Designer Bettina Munzer
Assistant Director Laurence Sach
Musical Director Andrew Watts
Artistic Director Carl Heap
Director Dick McCaw

THE GREAT THEATRE OF THE WORLD

A Play in Two Parts
For 4 Men, 2 Women, Two Men or Women

Characters

THE DIRECTOR
THE WORLD
KING
BEAUTY
RICH MAN
PEASANT
BEGGAR
CHILD
VOICE

NOTES

The Music

All the lyrics are written to tunes on Side One of the **Hesperion** tape of Spanish music from 1547-1616. I have lettered these tunes from A to V and refer to them in that way, since I don't know the titles. If this music is not available, you may create your own music or simply speak the lyrics, possibly using an underscore of your choice.

The Cast

The Child may be represented by a naked doll, but it should be beautiful, carved from wood and painted. If this device is used, the World should speak the lines of the Child.

PART ONE

(The COMPANY assemble round the stage.)

THE COMPANY *(sing)*.

Saints and sinners, hear our song!
Rogues and angels, none must stay.
All and sundry, come along
To the universal play.
For the great theatre
For the great theatre
Yes the great theatre of the world
Is opening today.

Gentlefolk of every age
Leave your labour, come away.
See yourself upon the stage
In a most amazing play.
For the great theatre
For the great theatre
Yes the great theatre of the world
Is opening today. *(Exit COMPANY.)*

(Enter the DIRECTOR, with a starry gown and nine rays on his hat.)

DIRECTOR. My little planet, my lovely planet,
I made you with these two hands.

My darling planet, my darkling planet,
You steal your light and heat from my heavens.
Your millions on millions of beautiful flowers
Reflect my millions of stars,
But their glowing, petalled galaxies
Are rooted in earth, and drink from the earth
And return to the earth when they fade into death.

My blue and green planet, my favourite planet,
You're a battlefield where earth, fire, air and
water clash,
Where mountains, thunderbolts, oceans and
hurricanes
Fight it out; where the albatross
Like a white ship struggles to ride your winds;
Squadrons of salmon soar in your rivers and seas;
Volcanoes explode and splash their scarlet
All over the black paint of the night;
People and animals stride freely on your
mountains.

My ever-changing planet, my happy planet,
You are my whirling, my wonderful one,
Today, for all time, I will give you a name.
I have decided to call you—The World.

(The WORLD appears.)

WORLD. Who's calling me?
Who woke me up?
Who drags me out of my warm bedroom
Down in the centre of the globe?

Who pulls me out of myself?

Who's calling me?

DIRECTOR. Your Director is calling you.
Your all-powerful Director.
I whisper—and your forests dance.
I raise my hand—your hills take shape.

WORLD. Well, what do you plan to do?
Is there anything I can do for you?

DIRECTOR. World, I am your Director.
You shall be my Stage Manager.
I've had a marvellous idea for a show
Which you shall stage so cleverly
That the whole Universe will applaud.

WORLD. Well, I'll certainly do my best.

DIRECTOR. I want you to make a festival
To celebrate my power
So when my greatness is made manifest
All Nature will rejoice.
Everyone loves it when a show really works
And the audience shouts "Bravo!"
Human life is nothing but acting, so
Let Heaven sit in the best seats
To watch a play on your stage, World.

As I'm Director and the play is mine,
It shall be acted by my company
Whether they want to act or not.
As I chose human beings to be

The most important creatures of all
They'll be the members of my company
And they shall act out, as well as they can,
The story of the play that's called The World.
I shall cast each in a suitable role.
Now an entertainment of this kind
Needs beautiful props and transformations
And richly-decorated costumes.
So now I want you, cheerfully,
To create all these and to make some sets
Which will stagger the chilliest audience.
Work quick as light, for I'm Director,
You are Stage Manager, humans the actors.

WORLD. Great Director, the actors and I
Will obey your every word.
I am the Great Theatre of the World
And I am your Stage Manager
Here to carry out your orders,
For though the scenery is mine, the play is yours.
I'm here so each actor may act on me
And provide what each scene requires.

First I will draw a black curtain across
To represent the turmoil of Chaos,
For it is best to hide away
Our set till we begin the play.
And then the mists shall disappear
And putting the vapours of darkness to flight,
Two lights shall shine out, bright and clear,
For there's no entertainment without light.
One is the golden lamp of day,
The other is that diamond

Upon the forehead of the night
Which casts a subtle silver ray.

The first act shown upon our stage
Shall represent a simple age
When Nature ruled life's gentle dawn.
And then, about the time that Time is born
A shining garden shall be shown
With burning colours and sweeping line—
Prodigies of natural design.

Branchfuls of blossoms, pink in the pink light,
Will open up, amazed by their first sight
Of the sun climbing up the sky.
The trees will yawn and stretch their roots
And they shall bear delicious fruits
Unpoisoned as yet by the serpent's lie.
A hundred crystal streams shall travel gaily
Over a thousand pebbles and flow on,
Meandering among the fields where, daily,
A million pearls sing in the Dawn.
Rolling meadows shall make this place
A heaven for the human race.
If hills and valleys are needed, you decide—
Hills and valleys shall be supplied.
The earth shall open up giant furrows,
I'll lay down rivers in all these sections
Which, like rabbits chased out of burrows,
Shall scoot off in all directions.

That was all Act One Scene One, but
As yet no building, house or hut
Has been observed upon the earth. But you

Wait for this—Act One Scene Two!
Flash! And I sunmon up cities and ports,
Palaces, temples, farms and forts.
And when the earth cries out for rest
From the weight of all this stone on her breast,
The entire stage I shall transform
To one almighty thunderstorm,
With avalanches of foaming mud,
Whirlwinds of hail and a great flood.

Then, through that pandemonium,
A curved ship with a roof shall come,
Lost on the trackless waters so
It trembles, not knowing where to go.
But safely down in its wooden womb,
Humans and animals shall find room.
And the sign of peace shall leap across the sky—
Red, orange, yellow, green and blue,
Indigo and violet shall shine through,
Ordering the army of the waves to dry.
And the great earth itself shall shake
Like a dog when it steps out of a lake.

The Law of Nature we call Act One
And now its distance has been run.
Director, let Act Two commence,
It's called the Law of the Commandments.
This act, as well as an excellent text,
Shall have spectacular effects,
For I shall unbutton the Red Sea's waves
And out of Egypt, her former slaves,
The Israelites, shall bravely tramp
Nor ever get their sandals damp.

Not only that, but every night
A pillar of fire I shall light.
Each day a cloud-pillar shall cross the sand
To lead them towards their Promised Land.

Moses in a swift cloud shall fly
To collect the Law from Mount Sinai.
And the second act shall be done
With a fierce eclipse of the sun
When the sun shall turn blood-red
And then go black and appear to be dead
And the skies shall be shattered, the mountains
rumble,
The woods shall wither and the cities crumble
And after this frenzied act shall pass
There'll be nothing left but ruins and the grass.

Now the third act shall take place.
Act Three, which we call The Law of Grace.
The last act is the greatest one
And many miracles shall be done.

Act One: The Law of Nature.
Act Two: The Law of the Commandments.
Act Three: The Law of Grace.

And then we come to the end of the play
And the World will burn both night and day
So that, from a million miles away
The earth shall look like one flame, one pure ray.
I'm sorry, but when I think of that day,
My tongue dries up, what I feel I can't say.
My body shudders when I think of it.

My mind **shakes** when I imagine it.
I am **astonished** I can even say it...
I feel myself **burning** when I picture it.
Oh let this scene of pain and rage
Be postponed to some far distant age
And then postponed again, so people may
Never **see** their planet burned away!

Three acts, and wonders shall be done
And I promise you, not one
Shall fail through any carelessness of mine—
And I'll make sure the actors are on time...
The stage is ready now, and without doubt
You have the wardrobe all worked out,
For unborn folk assemble in your mind
And there they have their parts assigned.

Exits and entrances? There's two—
Cradle and Grave—I think they'll do.
Costumes and props? All written down.
For the King—robes and a crown.
For the fine lady—dangerous good looks.
For the minister—schools and books.
For the Captain—courage and a sword.
For the nobleman—the title, Lord.
Scourges for monks, for thieves—bad deeds.
For the peasant—tools and seeds,
[Because of that fool Adam's disgrace
The peasant must work till he's red in the face].
The ordinary folk? Well, let them do
Whatever they find they are free to do.
Only the poor I will not dress
For their correct uniform is nakedness.

All of this preparation stops
Complaints that lack of certain props
Or the appropriate hat or garments
Hampered some actor in his performance.
Anyone who acts inefficiently
Can put the blame upon themselves, not me.
So come on, humans, get yourselves dressed,
My great theatre shall be your test!
(*Exit WORLD.*)

DIRECTOR. Mortals, I shall call you though you've not
been born,
For before you are born you live in my brain.
Although you cannot hear my voice,
Come to this green garden place
Where, among cedars and palms
I wait for you, to give you your parts.

(*Enter the RICH MAN, the KING, the PEASANT, the BEGGAR, BEAUTY and the CHILD.*)

KING. Director, we are here in your control.
We have neither life, reason nor soul.
We're the dust at your feet and that's a fact.
Breathe on this dust so that we may act.

BEAUTY. We are only an idea of yours,
Neither life nor breath are ours.
We cannot feel cold or touch wood.
We do not know either bad or good.
But if we're on our way to the world to act
You can give us our roles and that's a fact.

And then, whatever character we've got,
What can we do but accept our lot?

PEASANT. Greatest Director, I'm at your command.
You created me with your hand.
You know how well I can act and sing—
You must do, for you know everything.
If my performance turns out limp or lame,
I'll be the only one to blame.

DIRECTOR. I always knew that if all had a say
In which particular role they'd play
None would choose sadness or suffering—
Everybody would want to play the King.
The King's part—I can see the great attraction,
But it's an acting part, not real action.
Still I am Director and it is true
That I know which part suits each one of you.
Now I will cast you. You take the King's part.
*(DIRECTOR presents each with a scroll of paper
as their parts are named.)*

KING. Sir, I thank you with all my heart.

DIRECTOR. You play the part of Beauty in this play.

BEAUTY. Thank you. This is my lucky day!

DIRECTOR. You play the Rich Man, full of power.

RICH MAN. I too was born in a lucky hour.

DIRECTOR. You there, you must play the Peasant.

PEASANT. Is that a job? Or is it pleasant?

DIRECTOR. Hard work, long hours and miserably paid.

PEASANT. I won't be much good at that, I'm afraid.
Though Adam was my father, Lord, I ask
Please grant me a different, easier task.
I am ambitious and I've no doubt
I'd make a marvellous rich layabout.
I don't know this part, I'm hopeless with ploughs,
I hate shifting muck and I'm scared of cows.
If it was worth saying "Leave me out"
I'd say it, but I haven't much doubt
That "Leave me out" would be thought rude
By a director of your magnitude.
I'll be the lousiest actor of the lot.
For natural gifts, all I seem to have got
Are a thick skin and the sense to keep
My thoughts to myself when they run too deep.
I ask for wool and you send me snow.
But they say you are fair, that's just how
things go,
So I won't grumble, I'll simply try to live.
And since you love me, will you please forgive
A little slowness in my part today?
I don't want to finish before the play.

DIRECTOR. You play the Beggar, in raw poverty.

BEGGAR. Is that the role you give to me?

CHILD. What will I be when it comes to my turn?