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Technology Takes Center Stage in Four Plays from the Current Decade

By Laureano Corces

Abstract

This article reviews selected Hispanic and Hispanic-inspired plays where technology plays a key role in the plot and character development: from a Pulitzer Prize-winning American play, to rewritten versions of Spanish classics, to a contemporary play where virtually all of the action takes place in cyberspace. This study is written with a particular eye to how technology is represented in the text, how technology touches on key aspects of character development, and how it invites readers/spectators to reevaluate the power of theater to represent daily life. Chat rooms, the internet, and other contemporary media are represented as forums that may build communities, while at the same time exploring the alienating forces of such technologies. These and other considerations are addressed as I attempt to unveil what happens to one of the oldest art forms when technology takes center stage.

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INTRODUCTION

Given the prevalence of technology in everyday life, it only stands to reason that the devices and activities that connect individuals in our present day lives should make their way into contemporary plays and inform the performances of these texts. To be sure, theatrical performances often rely on the latest visual and sound technology, but for the most part, especially in twentieth century performances, the most recent advances in technology had only served the purpose of staging the dramatic text. The effects of the digital revolution had scarcely made their way into the plays of the last century; the internet had hardly become an important element informing the plots of these texts. However, in more recent plays, contemporary technology comes to the fore as a force to be reckoned with. In some cases, its presence cannot be disassociated from the development of the plot and the actions of the characters. In this article, I will assess four plays where this is the case. In these texts, and their performances, technology takes center stage. In this more recent theater (all four works are from the last decade) technology's ubiquitous presence in daily life is mirrored in plays that cross international and digital borders.

The first two plays I will discuss are original contemporary works. Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful* (Pulitzer Prize 2012) represents the internet as an integral part of the dramatic action. Splintered lives in Philadelphia intersect and are brought together thanks to a chat room, and the dialogue juxtaposes internet discussions with the

face-to-face dialogue of everyday life. Contemporary Spanish playwright Luis Araújo's *Dios está muy lejos*, performed at San Juan's Teatro Victoria Espinosa one year before Hudes's Pulitzer recognition, also focuses on how the internet connects people in a text offering several possibilities for performance, but where each one involves the internet in essential ways.

In complement to these contemporary pieces, reviewing how two Spanish classics are revisited and reshaped by the inclusion of technology sheds light on how rewriting in the second decade of the twenty-first century becomes an opportunity to explore the most popular and timely modes of communication. Simon Stone's version of *Yerma* situates Federico Garcia Lorca's Andalusian play in contemporary London where blogs and Facebook replace small-town street gossip. Similarly, *Divinas Palabras Revolution* is a new version by Manuel Cortés and Xesús Ron (usually known by his stage name "Xron") of Ramón de Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras*.¹ This time the dramatic action has not been transposed to another location, but rather remains in Galicia, albeit today's Galicia. In the rewritten version, reality TV informs the representation, multiple screens appear on stage, and the dialogue resonates with mentions of the internet as technology exposes private lives to mass audiences. To be sure, in both *Yerma* and *Divinas Palabras Revolution*, the dramatic tensions and anxieties that were originally set in rural communities are now mediated by digital technology.

In all four plays the audience confronts how technology is changing communication. It sees how the internet can build community and also how it can destroy lives. Images on screens, internet dialogue, and constant references to the activities of cyberspace shape these plays in

¹ It is important to note that Manuel Cortés's version of *Divinas Palabras Revolution* (DPR) is in Galician – one of Spain's five official languages – while the original play is in Spanish. The performances at Madrid's Teatro Español, one of Spain's national theaters, was in Galician with subtitles in Castilian – another of Spain's official languages.

numerous important ways. In addition, these texts demonstrate how technology is taking center stage in the daily performances of our lives and how theater can find ways to reveal the intricacies of this new reality.

STAGING TECHNOLOGY: PERFORMANCE AND THEATRICAL CRITICISM

Dramatic performance has always been shaped by the technology that exists during the specific time period of the theatrical representation. Whether it be the pulleys and cables of Elizabethan theater or the modern lighting of contemporary productions, the technology available to theater artists shapes the staging of plays and other types of performance. At the same time, existing technology often appears in dramatic texts as an element in the plot. For example, in *El reloj y genios de la venta*, a Spanish Golden Age play, Pedro Calderón de la Barca includes a portable clock, a prelude to the handwatch, to perk up the comic action in this interlude. Indeed, one of the characters is simply identified as “the man with the clock/watch.”² Similarly, close to four centuries later, the telephone is indispensable in Jean Cocteau’s *La voix humaine*, in which a woman, alone on stage, has her last conversation with her departing lover over the phone. One could argue that both dramatists were before their time in featuring these devices in their respective texts, yet moving forward in time both watches and telephones would become just another stage prop, as common as a chair or a table, with no need to underscore their presence in any particular way.

Needless to say, the last couple of generations have witnessed a technological revolution whose results are evidenced in even the most minor activities of daily life. These technological advances are all in some

² The Spanish word *reloj* refers to both watch and clock, yet the stage directions point to a device that is carried by this character not to one that is on his wrist.

way connected to the digital revolution, and advances in digital technology. Therefore, in this paper when we refer to technology or contemporary/recent technology we are essentially referring to digital technology. The proliferation of personal computers, the omnipresence of cell phones, and the social media practices that are facilitated by these machines have changed the ways in which people communicate all over the globe. As a result of these changes, we find an evolution in theatrical practices and texts incorporating the most recent technologies as indissoluble elements of the plot. Examining the four plays in this study may well offer a prelude of things to come.

WATER BY THE SPOONFUL: STAGING A CHAT ROOM COMMUNITY

In reviewing the plays awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama between 2008 and 2018, only one, *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegría Hudes, evidences how technology, more specifically the internet chat room, shapes the fabric of contemporary society. Moreover, in analyzing Hudes's play, we quickly see how including the latest technologies can result in a dynamic and effective dramatic work. In *Water by the Spoonful*, spatial boundaries collapse and a family in Philadelphia coexists with individuals in different parts of the world, and in representing the importance of cyber-communication, dramatic representation is also affected. The ways characters interact, the spaces they inhabit and how these are represented – indeed the dialogue in individual scenes and the very plot itself are shaped by the confluence of real and virtual realities.

Water by the Spoonful focuses on a Puerto Rican family in Philadelphia whose lives intersect with individuals who participate in a chat room support group for substance abusers. The Ortiz family in

Philadelphia is composed of Odessa, who leads the chat room; her son Elliot, who has recently returned from the Iraq War; and her niece Yasmin, a music professor. Odessa's sister, Aunt Ginny, who raised Elliot due to Odessa's drug addiction, has just died, and her passing has inflated family tensions. Throughout the play, the dialogue between members of the Ortiz family is interspersed with chat room conversation with participants in Philadelphia, San Diego, and Japan discussing ways of addressing addiction and engaging in other conversations. These individuals are represented by actors who appear on stage as well as by computer screens above the representational space exhibiting their respective icons. Thus, online activity is highlighted as the audience witnesses chat room entrances and exits on screens, yet Hudes's stage directions request that each individual chat room participant go on with daily chores, normal movements, as each individual chats with the rest of the group.

However, additional stage directions reveal how information in the dramatic text does not easily translate to the stage. Hudes informs her readers that "The stage has two worlds. The 'real world' is populated with chairs. (...) They all have the worn-in feel of life. (...) while the 'online world' is an empty space. A space that connects the chairs" (Hudes 6). While it is virtually impossible to stage her directions (i.e., the "online world" is not an empty space, but rather is represented by abundant chat room dialogue that emanates from the very same spaces the characters inhabit), I do believe Hudes alludes to an essential tension in her play. In *Water by the Spoonful*, the "real world" is frayed and messy and the online world is neat and functional. In other words, two worlds collide on stage as technology allows the characters to communicate with each other while they continue to exist in their individual spaces with their unique challenges. The internet communication, however, is more clearly structured and more positive than what takes place in normal daily life; at

least this is the atmosphere the chat room strives toward creating. So, for example, the chat room dialogue is monitored and content is censored. It is also worth mentioning that there is not any confusion as to “real” versus “virtual” communication. The reader/spectator knows when the chat room characters are online, as computer screens light up, cyberspace jingles are heard, and the usernames of the chat room participants are clearly represented. These dialogues are clearly differentiated from face-to-face chats that do not take place online. So, for example, the characters have chat room names such as Orangutan, Chutes&Ladders, and Fountainhead who meet up with Haikumom, Odessa’s online alias. Their chat room names are only used when they are online.

The stage directions describe Odessa as living “one notch above squalor,” (Hudes 5) and old and beat up furniture pieces are the material representations of her disordered life. At the same time, Elliot’s post-traumatic experience and Yasmin’s impending divorce and her problems at the university complement the feelings of misgiving, as if the family were on a downward spiral that will define the dramatic action. Yet, running parallel to this, the intermittent presence of the chat room participants reveals their desire to rise above addiction, to stay clean, and to live balanced and functional lives. The online dialogue is marked by optimism, as crisp and clean images on computer screens introduce the characters who also inhabit the same representational space as the Ortiz family members. In cyberspace, Odessa shares life-affirming haikus with her chat room community; on the other hand her relationship with her son is fraught with difficulty as negative experiences from the past continue to shape their present relationship. To be sure, representational space is used in a fluid fashion where the stage represents Odessa’s home, Iraq, the individual locations of the chat room participants, Swarthmore College, and other overlapping spaces. The fact that the stage blurs the

distinctions between cyberspace and the three-dimensional spaces of the real world points to a new relationship with space resulting from technology that collapses distance and brings individuals and experiences together in new ways. Indeed, the chat room participants, despite their distance, play important roles in Odessa's and her family's life. Thus technology also blurs the distinction between protagonists and secondary characters, and this is evidenced toward the climax of the play.

In one of the final scenes, Odessa has relapsed into addiction and one of the chat room participants, Fountainhead – whose real name is John – comes to her assistance. Her son's insistence that she share the expenses of Aunt Ginny's funeral has resulted in her selling her computer. Here, losing access to her chat room friends separates her from her main support group. Devoid of her computer, Odessa is diminished and no longer has the strength to stay sober. When she falls back into addiction, however, she will find full support in John who also lives in Philadelphia and will come to her rescue, joining her in her rundown apartment in a tender scene where he bathes her. Technology has connected two individuals who would probably never have met, as John lives in the upscale Mainline section of Philadelphia and Odessa lives miles away in a lower income Hispanic enclave. At the same time, Hudes illustrates the power of cyberspace to physically connect individuals across international boundaries as the IRS employee from Seattle (Chutes&Ladders) will travel to meet the Japanese student (Orangutan) in Japan. It seems as if the chat room is a prelude to deeper involvement and contact in the real world. With experience defined by both "real" and "virtual" episodes, the possibilities for communication and connection are expanded. As a result, any one character can play an essential role in the life of another as access to each other is heightened and communication in the virtual world is as important as face-to-face coexistence.

Here, the communicative aspect of the internet is underscored as developing friendships are staged. The limitations imposed on individuals as a result of social class and ethnicity are breached by technology. In representing these unions, the play becomes the locus where disparate characters can meet. The fragmentation characterizing much of American society is subverted as the creation of a new community is represented. At the same time, dramatic dialogue can expand to match the new horizons extended by technology. Individual scenes are no longer anchored to a specific space and the circumstances linked to that specific space and time, but rather all spaces represented are tentative as they may be invaded by a chat room call, thus conjoining spaces that are miles apart. Ultimately, audiences witness a greater fluidity in performance where the representational space can be many things at the same time, and where identity is shaped by this. *Water by the Spoonful* offers a dynamic example in mainstream theater where the dramatic representation mirrors the way the latest technology has expanded our worlds in many directions.

***DIOS ESTÁ MUY LEJOS*³: BRIDGING THE VIRTUAL WITH THE REAL**

Luis Araújo's *Dios está muy lejos* offers an excellent opportunity to assess how technology can inform a dramatic text in its entirety, as internet activity is represented from the beginning through the end of this drama. The reality and action represented, a gay chat room, is the only "space" the reader/spectator encounters, other than the theater itself, which is used for the last scene as a metatheatrical device.

The innovative nature of this play becomes evident early on in a note from the author regarding future stage productions. Araújo informs readers, including future directors, that the play may be represented in

³ A direct translation of the title is: *God is very far*.

several manners: with only one actor on stage playing the role of Damian, and the other characters appearing on screens through pre-taped video; with actors on stage playing the role of each individual character; with only one actor on stage playing Damian, and the other actors' live participation on the internet; and finally, with only one actor on stage playing Damian, and the other actors in different parts of the world, as is the case with the characters they play, representing their roles on the internet. The playwright indicates that he prefers the last possibility since he has written the play as global theater in its strictest sense.

As occurs in *Water by the Spoonful*, technology in Araújo's play unites characters from different parts of the world to chat about topics that they might not feel comfortable discussing in person. In both plays internet activity is integral to the plot. While in *Water by the Spoonful*, the chat room coexists with, and online dialogue is juxtaposed to, the face-to-face communication of the Ortiz family, in *Dios está muy lejos* all of the communication is through the internet except for a couple of moments in which Damian, the protagonist, addresses the audience directly. Secondly, chat room discourse in Hudes's play is monitored and devoid of profanity, but Araújo's work is replete with sexual comments that are expressed in a direct manner. In most instances, irreverent dialogue connects Damian, a 32-year-old Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico; Luisa XXX, a 53-year-old transsexual woman in Argentina; Anonimus, a 60-year-old Mexican; Militar Cachondo⁴, a 24-year-old Puerto Rican serving in Iraq; and, Kanario, a 17-year-old Spaniard in Spain. At first, the chat room participants are somewhat reticent to reveal too much about their lives; yet, as they gain trust, intimate episodes are shared. Chat room names such as Anonimus (a satiric misspelling) and Kanario (another satiric misspelling that refers to

⁴ *Cachondo* means both fun-loving and horny.

his home in the Canary Islands) disguise their real identities, but toward the end, the real names of some of the characters are revealed. The discussions range from playful to irreverent; the dialogue broaches topics such as oral sex, penis size, and dark room encounters, along with intimations on the individual lives of the characters. Sharing obscenities functions as a bonding mechanism as well as a cathartic experience. As the chat room banter continues, a plot begins to emerge in bits and pieces. Damian discovered his best friend from childhood, Carlos, with his partner, Gustavo, in the shower. He also realizes that Gustavo and Carlos had been keeping their affair secret for some time. As a result, Damian and Gustavo separate and Damian subsequently isolates himself. Stunned by the actions of his partner and his best friend, his pain limits his contact with the outside world to his new chat room friends. (A moment of on-screen celebration marks the six month anniversary of the chat room, but no information is offered as to when each of the individual participants entered the chat.) Damian's room is the only space the stage directions describe, as the other characters appear on screens without further detail as to their individual spaces. He is in a sort of workshop that seems to be a room in his home where disassembled computers, monitors, and antennas are dispersed. So, from the very first scene, the reader/spectator comes in contact with the world of technology; both the objects on stage and the dialogue point to dramatic action where technology will be a key player.

Diana M. De Paco Serrano, a Spanish playwright who has also written plays that are shaped in fundamental ways by technology, states that in analyzing the effects that virtual communication could have, she understood that in many cases these were similar to the effects of a drug or alcohol when consumed in certain quantities. She describes this online communication as fostering human bonds, that open up one's soul to others with a certain uninhibited complicity similar to the effects of these

substances⁵ (De Paco Serrano 185). Her words accurately describe what takes place in Araújo's play as the addictive nature of online communication is underscored. It seems that all of the characters frequently join the chat room and, especially in the case of Damian, online activity has eclipsed other types of communication in their lives. Similarly, it becomes clear that the chat room participants are sharing things with each other that they do not dare speak in "real" life. The anonymity of each participant and the distance between them fosters such intimate revelations. This play demonstrates, once again, how the internet connects disparate characters who would otherwise might never have met.

The benefits of technology, more specifically a virtual chat room, are particularly important when subjects wish to communicate, yet maintain a certain degree of anonymity. This is often the case when individuals feel that their communication may compromise, complicate, or even endanger their very existence. In the case of the chat room participants, one is a youngster still living at home with a homophobic father and another is serving in the military in Iraq, hence they may seek anonymity due to their specific circumstances. It is also important to note that LGBT rights are not the same across national boundaries. This is alluded to in the play as Luisa XXX informs the other participants that same-sex marriage has been legalized in Argentina, yet she is surprised to discover that Spain had such legislation well before Argentina. There are also references to bullying and physical aggression as the dialogue underscores a worrisome reality: violence against the LGBT community exists everywhere. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the chat

⁵Here, I am paraphrasing from the following original Spanish text: "al analizar los efectos que la comunicación virtual puede llegar a tener, comprendí que en muchos casos eran semejantes a los de una droga o a los del alcohol en determinadas cantidades que provocaban el acercamiento humano, la apertura de las almas al otro y la complicidad deshinibida gracias al efecto de ciertas sustancias [...]"

room participants are comfortable with each other and willing to share information that often confirms similar experiences. The internet is represented as a space where, despite the enormous distance that may exist between communicators, specific cohorts may come together on common ground as shared interests cement their relationships. In addition to the chat room participants, the individuals we have listed above, we also hear the voice of Kanario's father and briefly encounter Gustavo. In a harrowing scene Kanario's father discovers that his son is dating his teacher, and that he participates in a gay chat room, and physically abuses him. The attack takes place during an online session, and results in Kanario's being cut off from the chat. Another violent episode, with bombs falling near his site in Iraq, also results in Militar Cachondo's disappearance on the computer screens. As noted earlier, the chat room provides comfort, and these examples of "external" violence highlight the difference between a loving community and a world that can be harsh and destructive. However, Araújo's vision of cyber-communication is not utopic or naïve. As the play progresses, Damian's isolation becomes cause for concern. The reader/spectator encounters the signs of this alienation in his increasingly unkempt appearance, his drunken states, and his rambling messages. Indeed, the chat room participants begin to perceive themselves as enablers and agree to end their cyber-relationship with Damian. So, they eventually decide to go off-line as soon as they see that Damian has entered the chat room.

Their decision does have positive results and ultimately helps Damian engage with the "real" world. At the end of the play, he addresses the audience directly: "Hello, real people. Is their space among you for a friend?"⁶ The stage directions indicate that he should exit the stage, come

⁶ Throughout the play, a good number of chat room entrances are introduced with the line, "Is there space for a friend?"

down into the audience and shake the hands of some of the spectators. Shattering the fourth wall and highlighting the performative aspect of theater serves as an allegory for true connectedness. Technology has functioned as a prelude to that engagement, a safe space where Damian could begin to heal prior to taking additional steps toward more complete social engagement.

As Damian greets the audience, Araújo requests that verses from Lorca's *Poet in New York* appear on a screen. These are words from the poem "Grito hacia Roma." It ends with the following verses, which I have translated to English: "Because we want each day our daily bread/ alder flower and enduring unsheathed tenderness/because we want the Earth's will to be done,/that gives its fruits to all".⁷ Technology, the will of the characters, and poetry have come together to reclaim the fruits of the Earth for one and all. The reader/spectator is privy to an experience where alienation is left behind toward participation in a larger community. It is as happy an ending as one can imagine for Damian as he ventures out into the real world in search of greater fulfillment, fortified by the comfort of virtual communication.

YERMA BY SIMON STONE: STAGING VOYEURISM AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

The themes Federico García Lorca explores may be considered the antithesis of technology. To begin with, his most famous plays take place in rural Andalusia, where small towns and nature frame the passions of his characters. Moreover, the plots of these rural plays (*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*) strategically situate nature and

⁷ "Porque queremos el pan nuestro de cada día,/ flor de aliso y perenne ternura desgranada,/ porque queremos que se cumpla la voluntad de la Tierra/ que da sus frutos para todos" (Araújo,131).

natural instincts, in opposition to societal and cultural constraints. Human passions come up against the rules by which we live and the result is always tragic. It is also evident, that Lorca sides with nature in his *Poet in New York*, a book of poems resulting from his 1929 visit to New York City, where his dystopian vision of this metropolis has much to do with the city's modernity. In contrast, the "heroes" of these poems are the inhabitants of Harlem, who take on quasi-mythical dimensions as individuals who symbolize the opposite of Manhattan's dehumanizing forces. Concrete constructions and mechanical velocity are the enemies of human experience and true human expression. So, it does come as a surprise to find Simon Stone's *Yerma* living in London and posting on Facebook in this rewritten version of the Spanish classic.

Lorca's 1934 play *Yerma* takes place in small-town Andalusia and the surrounding countryside. The titular protagonist represents an average woman from the south of Spain, one whose very existence in the earlier part of the twentieth century was linked to the household and procreation. Yet, *Yerma* is not fertile. The rural atmosphere of the play is represented with dialogue that includes references to shepherds, orchards, farm labor, and other indications that point to an agrarian community. However, the depiction of country life is far from being utopian, as *Yerma* explains: "The girls who grow up in the country, as I did, have all doors closed to them."⁸ In this scene, early on in the play, she is specifically referring to blocked communication as her conversation with an old village woman has not resulted in the latter's sharing the wisdom that *Yerma* yearns for. *Yerma* believes that this woman may have some knowledge regarding fertility and may help her overcome the sterility she faces, yet the woman chooses to hold back any information that may be

⁸ "Las muchachas que se crían en el campo como yo tienen cerradas todas las puertas" (Lorca, 57) My translation.

helpful. Indeed, lack of communication, repressive social mores, and individuals who are cut off from the natural flow of things are all well represented in Lorca's plays. Extrapolating from Lorca's discourse and sensibility, one could posit that, had personal computers existed in his society, most of his characters would not have been allowed to go online. In much the same way that doors are shut in his rural plays, clearly delimiting the private sphere from all public incursions, references to the internet, or chat rooms, would have provided the Spanish author with many opportunities to reveal how banning cyberspace access can function as an effective allegory signifying repression. How society controls individual actions, especially when these result from passionate love or other impulses whose fulfillment would subvert societal strictures, is a central theme in Lorcan drama.

The continued relevance of many of Lorca's plays is associated with their treatment of universal archetypes. Indeed, the struggle between freedom and repression and its representation in dramatic characters and situations is at the core of these texts. In Simon Stone's reimagining of *Yerma*, the action takes place in contemporary London where Yerma is a journalist. Instead of running about, as she did in her Andalusian village, Stone's Yerma takes to the internet, and blogs to share her angst at not being able to conceive. The text credits both Simon Stone and Federico García Lorca as authors, and while the Stone version retains many elements of the original, the rewriting has substantially changed the play, including a new ending for this classical drama. The characters chat with the speech of contemporary London, they dress in urban wear, and the set is boxed off in glass; yet, despite the transpositions and regardless of cultural difference, Stone's version continues to reveal a barren landscape.

Yerma's sterility and her ensuing alienation does not deter the protagonist from feverish cyberspace activity – in this case, blogging.⁹ Her personal confessions are now made in cyberspace and their effects are far-reaching as the dialogue evidences that a number of individuals are privy to the intimate details of her life exposed on her blogs. These blogs expose intimate details regarding her husband, who seems to be more upset at the exposure of their private lives than the actual circumstances that they are facing. He describes his angst in a moment of anger where he states that "I can deal with the fucking cracks in us. I can deal with not knowing what version of the woman I used to know I'm coming home to (...) What I cannot deal with is the fucking world laughing behind my back" (Stone 53). In other words, in Stone's version, it is the activity on the internet that is mostly to blame for the conflict between Yerma and John.

In Lorca's version, Yerma's desperation results in the murder of her husband. Throughout the play it had become clear that Yerma feels little passion for this man. Their sterility is an allegory for mismatched coupling; they have joined in marriage as a result of social pressures, as often occurs in Lorca's theater, where marriage is designed to build larger estates and not to unite passionate lovers. While the verisimilitude of Lorca's denouement has been questioned, the fact that Yerma succeeds in strangling a strong young man, the psychological aspects of such a decision do ring true. Yerma's sterility has made her a destructive force and her focusing her anger on her husband is perfectly believable. However, Stone's ending is more ambiguous. In his version, Yerma tells John to "GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU GET OUT" (87). Stage directions do not inform us as to exactly what happens after Yerma's command. The play ends with these words. What is clear,

⁹ It is important to note that although the title of Simon Stone's text is *Yerma*, he refers to the protagonist as "Her."

however, is that Yerma's obsession with a non-existent infant, a ghostly presence throughout the play, has destroyed her marriage, and that cyberspace has exacerbated the situation and helped propel the movement toward destruction.

DIVINAS PALABRAS: EXPANDING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION AUDIENCES

Ramón de Valle-Inclán, like Lorca, set many of his plays in rural communities; however, his terrain is the green misty lands of Galicia in the northwestern part of the Spanish peninsula. Like Lorca's Andalusia, Valle-Inclán's Galicia is backward and poor. These and other characteristics result in a society that is far-removed from the advances of technology. Yet, unlike the more repressive male-dominated southern region that Lorca depicts, Galicia, partly due to its strong Celtic influence, features women who have traditionally had more power. In Valle-Inclán's plays, the representation of uninhibited feminine sexuality is directly linked to the culture of Galicia. Where in Lorca's theater women are under constant surveillance and their every movement is carefully controlled, in the Galician setting some women are able to choose promiscuity and their society does not punish them for their actions. In this regard, revisiting Valle-Inclán's plays introduces us to characters whose lives are more similar to the lives of twenty-first century readers and spectators, especially when considering gender. Nevertheless, the decision to have technology play an essential role in a new version continues to be daring and innovative, for like Lorca, Valle-Inclán brings the rural communities of Spain, and sometimes urban scenes, in the early part of the twentieth century to mind.

Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras* was first published in 1919 and has had important stagings throughout the world, including, for example,

performances directed by Ingmar Bergman in Stockholm, as well as Mexican and Spanish film versions. Indeed, in recent years, Valle-Inclán is one of the few playwrights of his generation whose plays have been performed in Spain on a regular basis. When the *Centro Dramático Galego* was founded thirty years ago, this regional theater expressed an interest in staging Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras* in Galician. The play was originally written in Spanish or Castilian, despite the fact that it depicts rural life in Galicia, a region that has its own language, Galician, in addition to Spanish which is widely-spoken. With the rise of regional nationalism in Spain resulting from democratic governance and new freedoms for the autonomous communities, and with new repertory companies performing in Spain's other languages, e.g. Catalan, Galician, and Basque, it was only fitting that there would be requests to perform Valle-Inclán in Galician. However, the playwright's family refused to allow performances in Galician, so the *Centro Dramático Galego* had to wait until 2017 when the play became public domain to stage Valle-Inclán in the native language of this region.

In spring 2018 this Galician repertory company performed Valle-Inclán's emblematic play at the *Teatro Español*, one of Spain's national theaters, as *Divinas palabras Revolution*. The new version by Manuel Cortés and Xron is quite loyal to Valle-Inclán's original despite the fact that the rural play is now represented in a modern household with cameras filming all events for a reality television show. While the essential messages of Valle-Inclán's original dialogue have remained the same, they have been tweaked to include references to contemporary technology, including social media, as essential elements in the plot. Both versions tell tales of greed, lust, and death, the vectors informing many of Valle-Inclán's plays.

The action takes place in Galicia, and represents a period of several months after the death of Juana la Reina. Her passing has left Laureano, her deformed son, whom she would exhibit at town fairs, an orphan. He travelled with his mother from fair to fair as a sort of freak-show attraction in what appears to have been a lucrative business. Juana is survived by her brother, Pedro Gailo, who is married to Mari Gaila. She is also survived by her sister, Marica del Reino. Both parties are interested in inheriting Laureano and the cart that transports him from fair to fair so as to continue making money on the young man. Their individual desires to full custody of Laureano result in a dispute which is resolved when a neighbor recommends that they share his custody. He is to spend certain days with Pedro Gailo, his uncle, but namely in the hands of his wife Mari Gaila, who has taken an active role in the inheritance; and other days with Marica del Reino, his aunt. Mari Gaila, who is in full control of her household, however, does not properly care for the child, as she lets her passions take hold of her and is having an affair with Lucero, a vagabond mischief-maker. Her involvement with Lucero results in her abandoning Laureano, and while she is away from him some fairgoers force him to drink great amounts of alcohol, leading to the young man's death. When the folks in town learn about his death they blame Mari Gaila and she becomes persona non grata both for abandoning Laureano and for her adulterous behavior. These individuals surround Mari Gaila and are about to stone her when Pedro Gailo, a sacristan or church custodian, addresses the crowd in Latin. He utters the divine words that give this play its title: *Que sine peccato est vestru, primus in illam lapidum mittat.*¹⁰ The action concludes with Pedro Gailo taking his wife back after the crowd has forgiven her.

¹⁰ Let s/he who is without sin cast the first stone.

In this play, Valle-Inclán depicts a cruel and sordid reality, and, in general, his plays are not always well-received by today's audiences due to their treatment of taboo subjects and unmitigated representations of violence. Nevertheless, the fact that tabloid talk shows and reality television also wallow in sleazy and foul actions allows for a twenty-first century connection to be established between the original text and these popular programs. Indeed, Manuel Cortés and Xron have found their inspiration in television, and *Divinas Palabras Revolution* has been transferred to a home in our decade in a reality TV show. The aforementioned plot continues to inform the rewritten text and hardly departs from its essential characteristics. However, the action is being filmed and Pedro Gailo's family shares the space with Marica del Reino and other characters who hail from the original text, but the many town characters that Valle-Inclán had included in his original play have been reduced to three.

Like *Dios está muy lejos*, here the audience/spectator confronts technology from the very beginning. Lucero functions as the host of the reality TV show, and also joins the household to play the role of Mari Gailo's lover as per the original text. Before the story unfolds, he addresses the audience directly, introducing himself by listing the other names that he goes by in Valle-Inclán's version, namely Séptimo Miau, and Lucero. He also describes himself as a celebrity, a famous character, and an eye that sees everything. The pan-optic reference clearly alludes to the many cameras positioned all over the house. Yet, the original text's allusions to his diabolic nature remain in the rewritten version, both with the name Lucero, a name that also refers to Lucifer, and his other alias Séptimo Miau (or Seventh Meow), a name that references superstitions related to a cat's seven lives (nine in Anglo-Saxon cultures). After this brief introduction, Juana appears on a large screen informing the television audience how to

send money to support Laureano. Her death is covered by a local news channel and the segment is projected on a screen. Afterwards, another scene reveals how Mari Gaila is looking through passwords and other computer information to access funds linked to Laureano's appearances. In this more contemporary version, the protagonists no longer travel from town to town, but rather avail themselves of technology to essentially do what Valle-Inclán had plotted out for them: use Laureano for self-gain.

The reality television program represented in *Divinas palabras Revolution* functions like a play within a play. Theater audiences are viewing the filming of a television program that is apparently projected on television screens across the nation. So, a hall of mirrors effect takes place where the boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred. The reality television show seems real as its representation within a play creates this effect. Here, dramatic performance serves to demonstrate how fundamental human passions and actions do not change very much over time. And as the lines between pop culture and high culture blur, technology is complicit with theater in revealing how the images and discourse in the play, as well as similar images and discourses elsewhere, are constantly available to a wider audience.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated by these four plays, digital technology can play an essential role in dramatic literature that expands the possibilities of theater and in no way diminishes the power of physical human interaction. On the contrary, the presence of screens and the dialogue from internet chats can strengthen the impact of dramatic action. The force of one of the final scenes in *Water by the Spoonful* is directly linked to the fact that two internet friends have come together on the stage to share a very

human moment. The metatheatrical scene at the end of *Dios está muy lejos* gains its force namely because an actor playing the protagonist breaks his virtual connection and the fourth wall to connect with the audience. In all four plays, we see how cyberspace can build community, and we are also reminded of the dangers of virtual communication. We also witness how the presence of digital technology can magnify the impact of individual scenes. Moreover, by juxtaposing rewritten works to their originals we can appreciate how the inclusion of technology renders old classics in new and exciting versions where technology itself plays an essential role in revamping the plot for today's audiences. Playwrights have greater flexibility as technology alters the relationship between characters and space and time. Moreover, the reader/spectator fully understands these representations with the knowledge that human experience in our contemporary societies is largely shaped by digital technology. The plays studied herein reveal the power of theater to address new ways of communicating and being, and how lives that are mediated by technology can be effectively represented in one of the oldest art forms.

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