

THE FIRST THEATRICAL COMPANY IN AMERICA

BY A. S. W. ROSENBACH

THE sixteenth century was drawing near its close. In England, Elizabeth reigned supreme. The victory over the Armada of Spain was still ringing in everyone's ears. Drake and Hawkins had already died. Raleigh, though his Roanoke colony had failed, had sailed on to find the fabulous wealth of El Dorado in Guiana. Marlowe had been killed six years before in a tavern brawl. Shakespeare was flourishing in London as an actor-manager. His first play "Titus Andronicus," had appeared in 1594; in 1597 were published "Richard II," "Richard III," and "Romeo and Juliet"; in 1598 "Loves Labors Lost," and "Henry IV." To be sure, other of his plays had been produced by 1599, for Francis Meres, in the excessively rare "Palladis Tamia," mentions ten. The theater, having passed through the stages of mere religious celebrations, the homely biblical cycles of merchant guilds, the morality plays and the interludes, had finally reached its maturity.

The first English comedy, the "Interlude of Calisto and Melibea," probably by John Rastell, had appeared about 1525, based upon the "Celestina," the famous play by Fernando de Rojas, which first saw the light in 1499. The Spanish stage, like the English, was going through a transition from the moralities. It was not until 1554 that we first hear of the father of the Spanish stage, Lope de Rueda. The earliest reference to him is a most curious document, dated July 6, 1554, in which he and his wife Mariana bring suit against the heir and successor of Don Gaston de la

Cerda, Duke of Medinaceli, for services rendered by the said Mariana to the late Duke. Mariana had been a dancer who had attracted the attention of the rich nobleman, as dancers have a habit of doing. She had remained in his household, furnishing him with recreation, singing and dancing, but, apparently, had not received cash on the line for these delightful services. Shortly after the Duke died she married Lope de Rueda and in 1554 the husband and wife entered suit. Cervantes saw this great theatrical pioneer in Valladolid, and such was the impression that the rather crude performance made upon his youthful mind that in 1615, fifty years later, in the prologue to a volume of his "Comedias," the author of "Don Quixote" recalls the great Lope de Rueda, and gives a charming description of the performance he remembered.

Whereas Lope de Rueda was the first, Lope de Vega was the greatest of the Spanish dramatists of the sixteenth century. Lope de Vega wrote over fifteen hundred plays, of which only a third have survived, while Shakespeare has but thirty-six plays to his credit. Lope de Vega found in Spain an unorganized comedy, badly versified and limited in plot. He left Spain with a heritage of rich drama, of poetry, fine character studies and a kaleidoscopic field of subject matter. His private life too has a peculiarly modern theatrical flavor. He was banished from Madrid in 1588 for circulating criminal libels against his mistress; he defied the law by coming back to elope with the sister of Philip II's herald, and after marrying her by proxy, ran away to join the Invincible Armada, just setting sail to conquer England. His wife died in 1595, and the following year he was prosecuted for criminal conversation. He married a second time in 1598, and after the death of his wife in 1613, he took priest's orders, and became the literary dictator of Spain. His fame spread and in 1627 he was honored by Pope Urban VIII. Such was the curious career of the "Phoenix of Spain," Lope de Vega.

Peru, in 1599, stood in the same position to Spain as did California to the United States after the discovery of gold in 1849. Every great treasure ship brought back to Spain the gold of America and exciting tales of the great new country. We can well believe that the conquistadores and their immediate successors, their pockets filled with gold, desired something more than precious jewels, paintings, ornaments and objets d'art. These hardy early pioneers wanted to be amused. Thus to the New World trooped actors and actresses, quite ready to entertain and at the same time to reap their share of the golden harvest.

We know from a recently recovered manuscript that in 1599 a number of comedians came to South America and formed themselves into a stage company.

This hitherto unknown document is the earliest record of any theatrical company in the Western Hemisphere. Nothing has previously been known in the annals of the theatre in the New World of this first association of actors. There were in all probability some forms of drama present in the religious festivals celebrated in Peru. Certainly in Spain from the Middle Ages, mummary and loosely constructed religious dramas had been acted, especially on the Feast of Corpus Christi. They combined pageant, ritual and biblical history. That such religious dramas existed in Lima we know, from Luis A. Sanchez's "*La literatura peruana*," where it is stated that the first Council at Lima prohibited in 1582 plays treating with religious matters. Perhaps these dramas were suppressed because as they developed, they became less religious, more worldly.

Dances were introduced and songs, we can imagine, much like a modern musical comedy where the plot is subordinated to the latest song. Quite naturally the priests could not allow that kind of stage performance to go on, so the show was censored. The morals of the actors and actresses—for in Spain women trod the boards while in England the voluptuous Cleopatra had

to be impersonated by a beardless youth—were notoriously bad. It required a woman of some boldness to act and change her clothes in the semi-publicity atmosphere of the sixteenth century greenroom and to travel around in the gypsy fashion of the troupers.

When these theatrical folk acted in religious dramas, the contrast between their private lives and their virtuous roles became too much for honest clergymen to stomach. One Spanish Jesuit cited the case of an actress who took the part of Magdalena (a very fitting role for her) in one of these *comedias de santos*, or holy comedies, and of the actor who played Christ, both of whom he says were notoriously immoral, "which was all the worse, inasmuch as they were famous players, and had often brought tears to the eyes of the spectators."

When Francisco Perez de Robles and his company of comedians came to Peru we do not know. They probably left Spain after the royal edict of May 2, 1598, prohibiting stage performances for the time being. On June 28, 1599, however, they drew up in Callao articles of partnership forming a *compania de parte*, a company in which the players worked on shares. Rennert, in his great book "The Spanish Stage In the Time of Lope de Vega," 1909, sets down in full the agreement of a company organized in 1614 by the well-known *autor*, or theatrical manager, and dramatist, Andres de Claramonte, which in form resembles this earlier American contract.

The names of these first American actors should be enrolled among the immortals of the New World. They are revealed for the first time in this document which was executed by Julián Bravo, Notary Public in the Port of Callao in the City of the Kings, on June 28, 1599. They were Francisco Perez de Robles, the manager and the prime mover of the company; his wife, Isabel de Los Angeles; Andres Gonzales; Miguel de Burgos; Juan Chrisostomo; Bernardo Martinez; Luis de Mayorga, who represented both himself and

his wife, and Bartholome Suarez. These actors, who in the document describe themselves as "comedians, at present resident with license and express consent in this port of Callao of the City of the Kings (Lima)" agree that they will "form and act as a troupe, together, for the time and space of three years which shall run and be counted from the present day, for the performance of comedies as well in this City of the Kings as in the rest of the districts where it may be to our interest." The company is to be formed under certain stated conditions. First, the capital is to be all the costumes and ornaments necessary for the presentation of the comedies, which belong to Francisco Perez de Robles, and which are appraised at 668 pesos, a part of the gate to be deducted until Francisco Perez de Robles is completely repaid for his investment.

Secondly, the division of the profits is to be made as follows: one part for costumes, one part to Francisco Perez de Robles, a part and a half to his wife, Isabel de Los Angeles (she must have been a great attraction), a part to Miguel de Burgos, a part to Bernardo Martinez, a part to Juan Chrisostomo, half a part to Bartholome Suarez, and a part and a quarter to Luis de Mayorga and his wife which they were to split fifty-fifty. That makes eight and a quarter parts which sounds like complicated mathematics when the pay-off is to come.

The third condition is that the company, jointly and as individuals, obligate themselves to pay the musicians according to a contract, apparently made previously in Chuquiago, except for Andres Gonzales who is for some reason exempted from his share of the obligation.

Fourthly, the company binds itself to pay to one Francisco de Meneses a sum of money contracted by Andres Gonzales in the City of the Kings.

The fifth clause simplifies the division, for by it Francisco Perez de Robles gets an additional quarter part "for the care that he shall have taken in seeing

that everything necessary to the comedies be provided for."

The next provision declares that the costumes, valued at 668 pesos, are to be kept by Francisco de Robles until he has been paid in the amount of 668 pesos when they shall be given outright to the members of the company.

The seventh clause gives each member the right to sell his own part of the costumes at the end of three years "to whom he pleases and as he sees fit."

Next, the contract sets up a penalty for breaking any of the provisions of the document, and promises to seek legal action of any breach. Then the document provides that if any member of the company shall be expelled from the troupe he will be paid for what services he has rendered. To prevent a sudden break-up in case one member tries to collect a debt from another member, the tenth clause provides that "if during the term of this company any one of us should owe any sum of money to another companion, he may not be imprisoned nor exacted for it."

Pursuant to the necessary and legal conventions usual in such matters, each member of the company signed the contract except Isabel de Los Angeles, the prima donna, who, unable to write, authorized one of the witnesses to sign on her behalf. We are fortunate in having the actual signatures on this contract of the first regular actors in the New World.

Such then is the gist of the earliest document known relative to the stage in America. In wealth of detail, there are few documents in the whole history of the drama to be compared with it. It is written in ink on six folio leaves. It was probably at one time among the papers of the notary Julián Bravo. I secured the document from that indefatigable collector and remarkable student of early American history, the late Bertram T. Lee.

We can assume that the repertory of the Peruvian company included mostly plays by Lope de Vega, al-

though no mention is made of the repertory they planned to present. Lope never set foot on American soil, although he was in the Azores in 1582. Indeed that playwright took the Araucanian war, which raged between the Spanish and the Indians of Chile from 1550 until the end of the century, as the subject of one of his plays, and one of his epic poems, "La Dragon-tea," 1598, deals with the raids of the marauder Drake upon the Spanish ports of America. It is probable that the plays by Lope selected for production in Peru were of the type known as *comedias de capa y espada*, those based upon contemporary life and character, and *comedias de teatro*, in which the majesty of kings was displayed with great dramatic effect. It was exactly at this time, 1599, that Shakespeare's "histories," dealing with the two Richards and the two Henrys were at the height of their popularity in London.

A printing press had been established at Lima in 1583, and a dramatic company was in existence before the turn of the century. So we see an advanced stage of European civilization existed in Peru during the Golden Age of both the Spanish and English drama, before there was a single permanent English colony in North America. Three years before Bartholomew Gosnold came to New England and named Cape Cod, a company of players from the land of Castile, had drawn up articles of agreement to present comedies in Peru. Whereas we can be sure this company produced the dramas of Lope de Vega in South America, no play of Shakespeare is known to have been staged in North America until Thomas Kean opened in "Richard III" at the theater in Nassau Street in New York City in 1750. Yet one hundred and fifty years earlier, in 1599, the hitherto unknown and unsung company of Francisco Perez de Robles was organized and performed plays at Callao, in the new land of the Conquistadores.

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