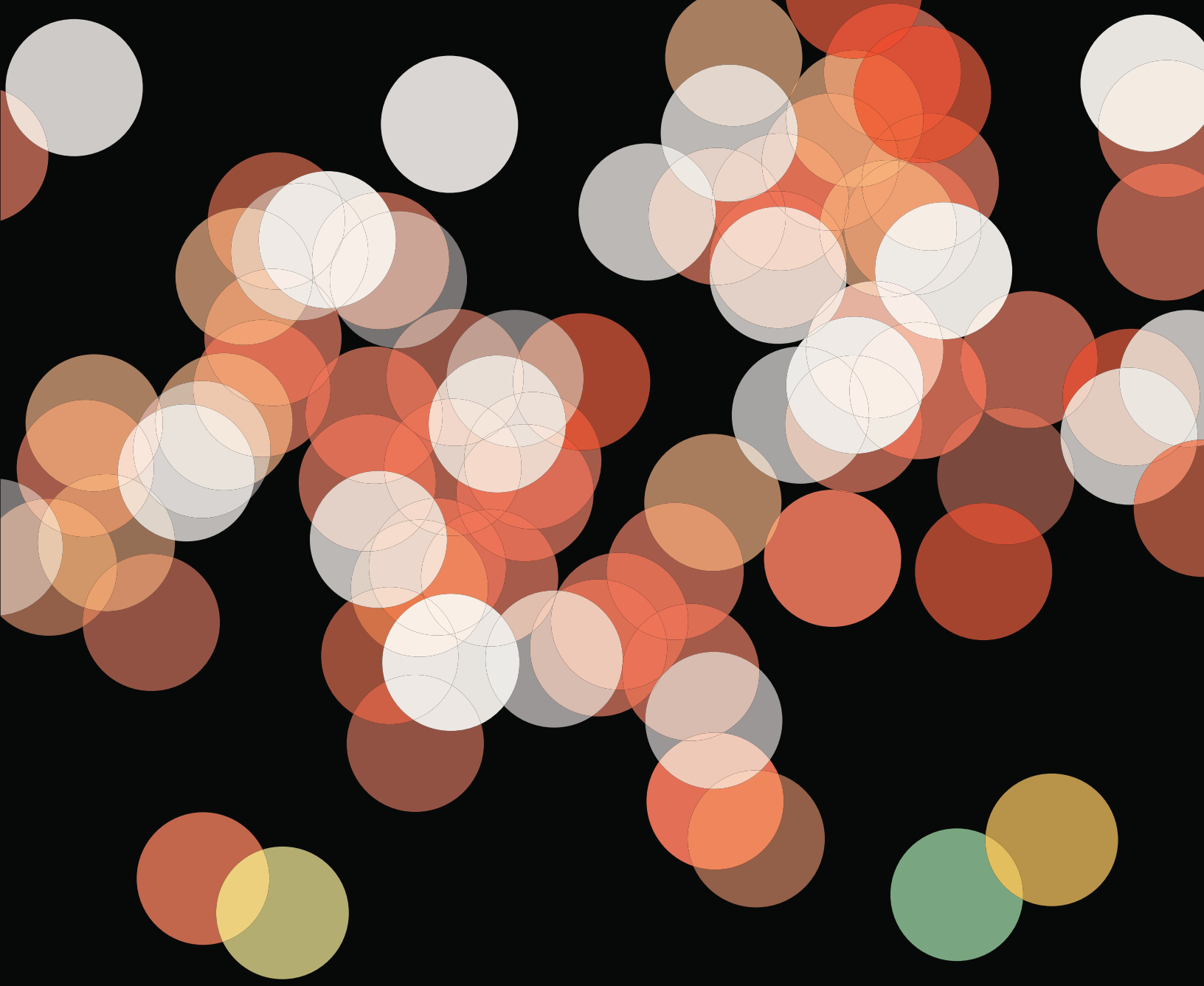

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History of the Theatre

Oscar G. Brockett Franklin J. Hildy

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ALWAYS LEARNING

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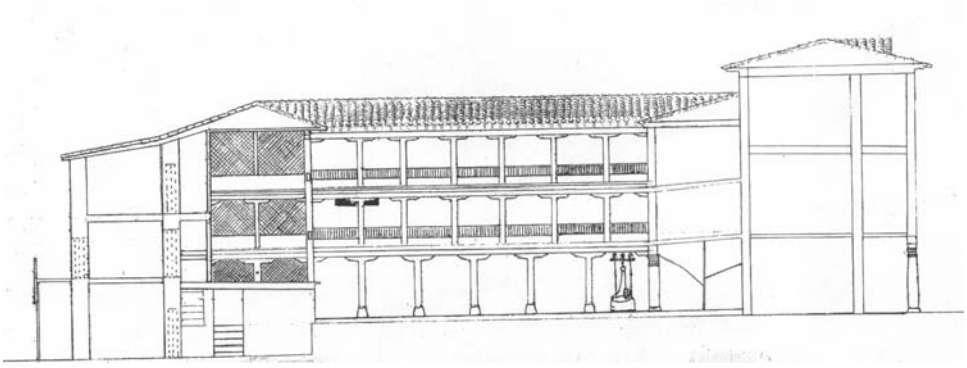

FIG. 4C
Section, *corral* theatre at Almagro. Based on survey by J. J. Allen and F. J. Hildy. Drawing by John Poole.

THE *CORRALES* AND *COLISEOS*

Early acting companies performed in the courtyards (*corrales*) that are a distinctive feature of Spanish urban architecture. City blocks are organized around a series of such courtyards. The term *corral,* therefore, came to be used for theatre. The first public theatre structure in Spain was built by the Italian architect Juan (Giovanni) Marin Modeñin Bellini in Seville in 1574. The last one was built at Almagro in 1628 for Don Leonardo de Oviedo, a priest who had it built within the courtyard of his inn, The Bull. (This is the only Golden Age theatre that still exists.) Between these two dates, *corral* theatres (and often more than one) were built in at least eighteen other cities in Spain and four in the Americas, and probably many more besides. Most of what we know about *corral* theatres concerns Madrid, however, and the account that follows is primarily about that city, although it is unclear to what extent Madrid's practices were typical. In Madrid, the *corrales* were at first under the direct control of three charitable "confraternities" like those which had presented religious plays throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. The Cofradía de la Pasión y Sangre de Jesucristo, founded in 1565 to feed and clothe the poor and support a hospital, was the first to be granted the privilege of operating a theatre as a means of raising money. By 1568 it was using a rented courtyard in the Calle de Sol for performances and soon added two others. In 1574 the Confradía de la Soledad de Nuestra Señora, founded in 1567, petitioned to have one of the existing courtyards placed under its control, a move which led to a sharing of revenues and expenses by the two *cofradías.* In 1583 the General Hospital of Madrid was also given a share in the revenues. These three organizations controlled the public theatres of Madrid until 1615. This made the theatre a means of raising money for charity, which helped to isolate it from public criticism.

A new phase in the career of the theatres began in 1615 when the City of Madrid was ordered to pay the hospitals an annual subsidy. After this time, the *cofradías* gave up direct control over theatrical management and leased the theatres to entrepreneurs, normally for four-year periods. In 1638 control of the *corrales* passed to the city, and two commissioners

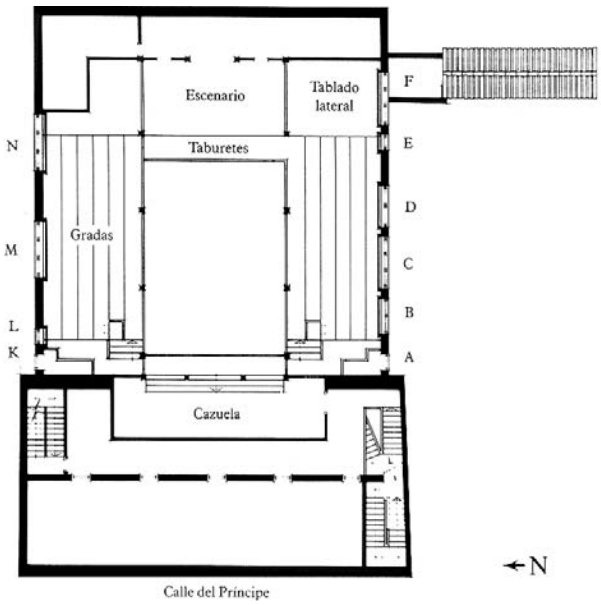

FIG. 5
Plan by J. J. Allen and Carlos Dorremochea of the second level of the Corral del Príncipe, *c.* 1697. The letters at the sides indicate boxes. The stage *(escenario)* and side stages *(tablado lateral)* are shown at top. Benches *(taburetes)* for seating in the *patio* are forward of the stage. Courtesy the University Presses of Florida and Mr. Allen.

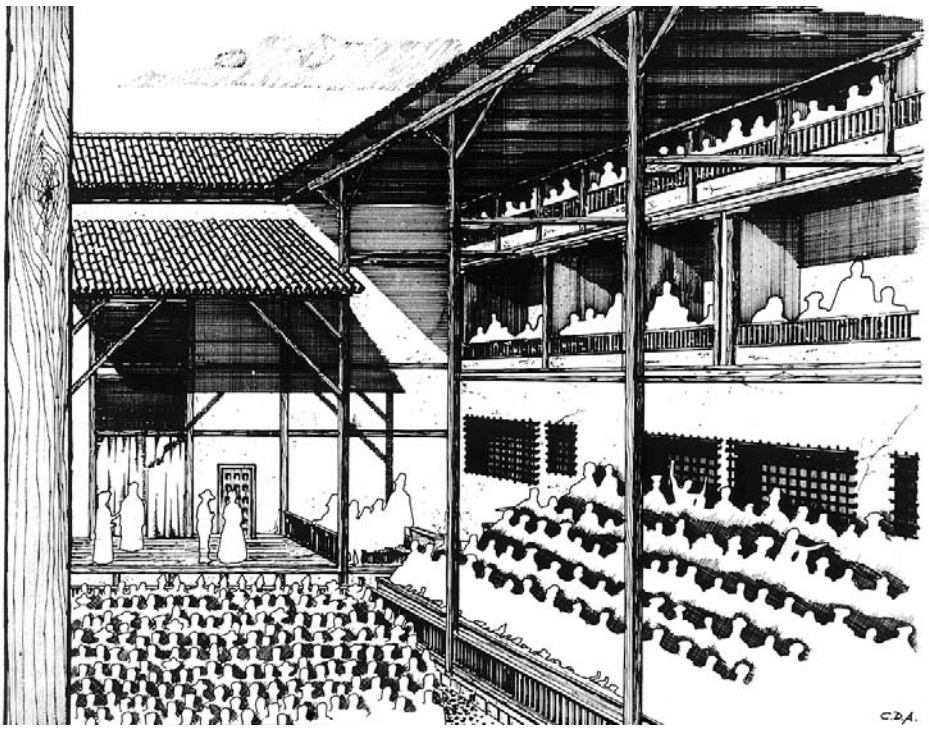

FIG. 6

Interior of the Corral del Príncipe, *c.* 1697. At center left is the main stage, and to the right of it one of the side stages (occupied by spectators). At bottom left is the *patio,* and at bottom right the *gradas* backed by the grated windows of the first level of boxes; at top right are the *desvánes* and below them a row of open boxes. Drawing by Carlos Dorremochea. From John J. Allen, *The Reconstruction of a Spanish Golden Age Playhouse* (Gainesville, Fla., 1983). Courtesy the University Presses of Florida and Mr. Allen.

were appointed to oversee them, although the theatres continued to be leased. Despite some alterations in the system during the eighteenth century, the theatres were used to finance charities until the mid-nineteenth century. At no time during the Golden Age did the actors control the *corrales,* which were occupied by them merely for short-term engagements under contracts with the theatres' lessees.

At first the *corrales* were temporary, at least five different ones being used in Madrid during the 1570s. The desirability of permanent theatres became evident after one was built in Seville in 1574, however, and in 1579 the Corral de la Cruz, the first permanent theatre in the capital, was opened in Madrid. It was followed by the Corral del Príncipe in 1583. After 1585 these were to be the only public theatres for drama in Madrid until the Coliseo, a court theatre but open to the public, was built in the Buen Retiro Palace in 1640. The Coliseo was roofed, and after its construction roofed theatres were commonly referred to as *coliseos* to distinguish them from the open-air *corrales*.

Madrid's *corrales* were built around a square or rectangular courtyard (unroofed until the eighteenth century). Adjustable awnings were used to shade the audience and provide some lighting effects, an innovation introduced by the Italian Ganassa company in 1574. A stage (*encenario*) with a tiring house (*vestuario*) behind it, occupied one end of the courtyard. The Madrid *corrales* had discovery spaces in the *vestuario* and side stages that could be used for medieval style mansions or for extra audience seating. These features were shared by some, but not all, of the *corrales* outside the capital.

The large central courtyard (*patio*) was occupied primarily by standing spectators, although by the mid-seventeenth century a row of benches (*taburetes*) had been set up immediately in front of the stage. Along each side of the *patio* was bleacher-style seating (*gradas*), divided from the *patio* by a railing and protected from the weather by an overhanging roof. The *gradas* extended up to the second-story level of the four-story houses that surrounded the *patio.* Each window in a house served as a theatre box (*aposento*),

and those on the second floor were fitted with grilles to prevent climbing into the theatre. The fourth-floor boxes were often called *desvanes* (attics) because of their location and cramped space.

At the rear of the *patio* was a refreshment booth (*alojeria*), above which was the gallery for unaccompanied women (the *cazuela*). Strict segregation of men and women was enforced by an *alcalde* (Justice of the Peace). Women were forbidden the *patio* and men the *cazuela.* Women could, however, sit in boxes if accompanied by an adult male member of their own family.

Above the *cazuela* were two other galleries, the first divided into boxes (two of which were assigned to the City of Madrid and the Council of Castile), and the other used at different stages of the theatre's development as a seating area for clergymen and intellectuals (*tertulia*) or as an upper *cazuela.*

Some of the theatres outside of Madrid deviated from this typical pattern. Some were roofed from the beginning. Some were purposely built as theatres and did not have to contend with surrounding houses. Many were only three-story rather than four. In most of these, the *aposentos* were replaced by open galleries divided into compartments like those later used in the Italian public opera houses; others had one row of *aposentos,* above which there were open galleries. Nevertheless, the basic arrangement—an enclosed courtyard—was the same everywhere.

Madrid's two theatres had several entrances; at each entrance there were two money takers, since two entrance fees were paid, one to the lessee and one to a representative of the charities. About three-fifths of the combined total income went to the lessee and the actors. The entrance fee admitted women to the *cazuela* and men to the *patio.* Additional fees were collected from the men if they wished to sit on the *gradas, taburetes,* or side stages. The theatre controlled all the boxes facing the stage, but the arrangement with the boxes located in the side houses varied. Some homeowners collected entrance fees for their boxes on certain days and the theatre lessee collected the fees on other days; some owners had sole rights to their boxes in return for allowing passageways through their property to other boxes; and some owners paid the theatre an annual fee for the right to watch the plays. (The problems created by such arrangements were a primary motivation for tearing down the *corrales* in the mid-eighteenth century and building self-contained theatres on the same sites.)

Until the 1580s performances were confined to Sundays and feast days. But in 1579 the Italian Ganassa troupe was permitted to play on a weekday, and this privilege was soon extended to Spanish companies. By the seventeenth century performances

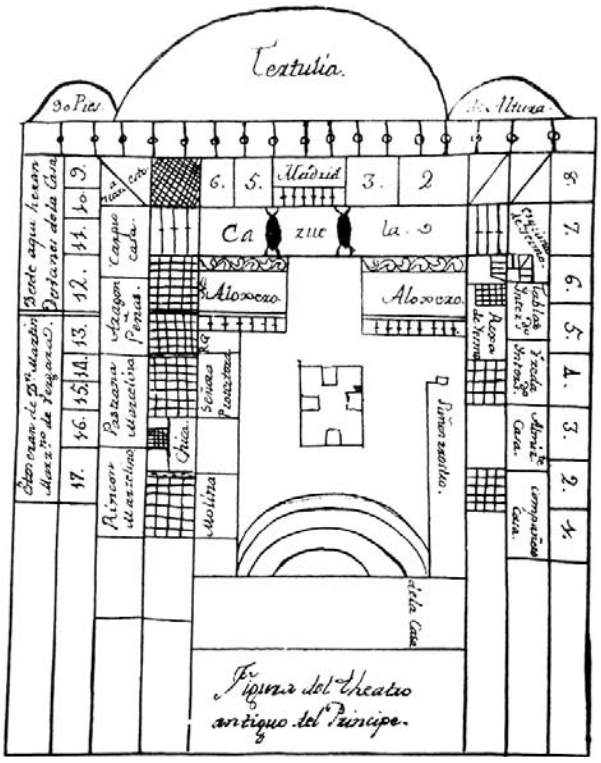

FIG. 7

A rough plan of the Corral del Príncipe made about 1730. The stage is shown at the bottom, and the refreshment booth, *cazuela,* and *tertulia* at the top; the side walls, showing the boxes, are drawn as though the various levels were side by side. From a plan published in 1881.

were allowed daily except on Saturdays. The theatrical season ran from September to Lent and from just after Easter until July. About 198 days each year were devoted to performances, but the theatres were often closed for periods of official mourning, plagues, and wars.

The Madrid *corrales* probably had a capacity of about 1000 when they opened, but this had increased to about 2000 by the 1630s, when Madrid's population stood at about 150,000. It has been estimated that roughly 350 places were reserved for unaccompanied women in the *cazuela,* but it is not known how many more may have been in the boxes at any one time. Performances began at 2 P.M. in the fall and winter season and at 3 to 4 P.M. during the spring; they were required to end at least one hour before nightfall. The daily bill began with music, singing, and dancing; next came the *loa,* or prologue, which was followed by another dance; then came the *comedia,* the acts of which were separated by *entremeses;* a dance concluded the performance.

Spectators, especially those in the *patio* and *cazuela,* were often noisy. The *mosqueteros* in the courtyard were usually the most unruly, but the women sometimes threw fruit at the actors, and both men and women carried such noisemakers as whistles, rattles, and bunches of keys. They were equally voluble in approval, which they demonstrated by applauding and shouting "Victor!" Refreshments, such as fruit, wafers, and drinks, were sold throughout performances. On any occasion when a full house was expected, the *alcalde* was seated on one side of the stage as a visual reminder that order would be enforced. He had a number of attendants (*alguaciles*) to assist him in case disturbances broke out.

THE STAGE AND SCENERY

Like the costuming and the theatres themselves, the stage and scenery of the Spanish public theatre were in many ways similar to those of England. The stage was a raised platform without a proscenium arch and was bounded at the back by a permanent façade. Since side-stage seating and *aposentos* extended up to that façade, the action was viewed from three sides, though the majority of spectators sat or stood in front of the stage.

Although the dimensions of the Corral de la Cruz are uncertain, its stage was probably about 26 feet wide by 16 feet deep. At each side of the stage were lateral platforms that could serve as additional seating for *capa y espada* plays and as space for scenic units, such as the commonly referred to "mountain" in *comedias de fábrica*. The stage at the Corral del Príncipe was about 28 feet wide by 14½ feet deep. (A semicircular extension about 5 feet deep was added to the front in the eighteenth century.) It too had lateral platforms for additional seating or special scenic pieces. At both theaters, the stage was raised about 5 to 6 feet above the *patio.* All *corrales* for which we have information on stage size roughly share these measurements (the smallest is 20 feet by 11½ feet). This open platform was backed by a façade of two

FIG. 8
Setting for *Los Celos hacen estrellas* by Juan Velez de Guevara at the court in 1672. Courtesy Bildarchiv, Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

or three levels. The lower level had three openings, those at the sides serving as entrances and the larger central space primarily as a place for "discoveries." The discovery space was about 13 feet deep at the Corral de la Cruz and about 8½ feet deep at the Príncipe. The upper levels, essentially galleries, could be used in a variety of ways, but normally represented towers, city walls, or hills. At times, discoveries were also made there by drawing curtains. It was sometimes necessary to go from the stage to an upper level in full view of the audience, and to meet this need portable stairs were brought on and then removed when no longer required.

For the most part, the simple staging conventions resembled those of the Elizabethan theatre. An exit and reentry was sufficient to mark a change of place. In addition, three different kinds of scenic background might be used. First, the façade often served as the sole background for the action. Second, curtains were drawn aside to reveal properties or scenic pieces set up in the discovery space when localization of the action was required. Third, medieval-like mansions were sometimes set up on the lateral platforms at the sides of the stage. Surviving scripts clearly show that scenic pieces were used at times to represent gardens, fountains, mountains, rocks, trees, forts, and castles. Sometimes they are specified when not strictly required by the action, while in other instances the spectators are requested to imagine some place not shown. It seems likely that practice was inconsistent and was guided more by the availability of scenic pieces than by any conscious theory of stage decoration. On the other hand, as spectacle increased after 1650, painted flats and practicable windows and doors began to be set into the façade in lieu of curtains. Except in rare instances, however, there was no attempt to use perspective painting. The stage was equipped with several trapdoors, while the roof over the stage housed machinery for flying, which was increasingly popular after 1650. Essentially, however, scenic practices changed little during the course of the Golden Age.

THEATRE IN THE AMERICAS

Once the voyages of Columbus brought the Americas into European consciousness, the Spanish set about to conquer this territory just as they had done the Iberian Peninsula. By 1519 they had conquered the Bahamas, the Caribbean islands, and Cuba; by 1522 the Aztec Empire of Mexico and Central America; by 1533 the Inca Empire of western South America. Florida came under their control by 1565. In 1581 Spain gained control of Portugal and along with it came Brazil (until 1668). Southeastern South America was added about the same time.

Among the hundreds of cultures they conquered, there were certainly traditions of storytelling, narrative dance, epic songs, rituals, ceremonies, and popular entertainment that would be of great interest to the study of theatre. Unfortunately the conquistadors had little interest in such things. By the time the Dominican and Franciscan friars recorded their observations of these cultures in the mid to late sixteenth century, much had already changed. As early as 1512 Europeans began to insert Christian elements into native performance traditions. By 1523 the Spanish were introducing large numbers of African slaves into the region, and their performance traditions soon merged with those of the native peoples. The Maya were already a fading culture before the Spanish arrived, and they, along with the other major cultures of the Americas, were soon experiencing near total collapse as European disease, deliberate genocide, and constant warfare (with both Europeans and other indigenous peoples) are thought to have destroyed as much as 90 percent of the native populations within just thirty years of colonization. Smaller cultures simply vanished. With the exception of the Maya and Aztecs (whose records were systematically destroyed), the cultures of the Americas were nonliterate and had not recorded their own traditions. It is therefore difficult to assess the remaining evidence for pre-Columbian performance traditions.

The Spanish recorded a type of farce called *baldzamil* among the Maya and described stages with staircases used for these performances. There is also a Mayan dramatic text from Guatemala for the epic dance-drama, *Man of the Rabinal Kingdom* (*Rabinal Achí*) or the *Dance of the Tun*. It was not recorded until 1856 (from the memory of a performer who had appeared in the work several times before 1820), but some scholars believe that it reflects performance traditions that go back to the fifteenth century. The play, which is still performed today in the Mayan *K'iche'* dialect, tells the story of the rebel *K'iche'* warrior, Cawek, who is captured by the Rabinal warrior and taken before the Rabinal ruler, Five Rains (*Cinco-Liuvias*). When the rebel warrior refuses to submit to Five Rains, he is condemned to death but granted his wish to return home first. When he returns to the Rabinal Kingdom, he is ritually slain by thirteen warriors of the eagle class and thirteen of the jaguar class. The dancers performing the three major roles wear heavy masks and elaborate costumes. Their performances are so demanding that, at least in modern productions, each role is played by more than one actor.

In Nicaragua sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, a comedy called *The Old Man* (*El Güegüence*) was composed incorporating what are thought to be pre-Columbian traditions of a comic buffoon character, but this play was not transcribed until 1883. A similar "buffoon" tradition was noted in conjunction with the ceremonial *kachina* dances of the Pueblo peoples when the Spanish encountered them in what is now the southwestern United States around 1540. The Spanish observed, as well, a thriving performance tradition of social satire among communities subjugated by the Incas in Peru. In the 1780s Antonio Valdés produced *Ollantay,* an epic drama he claimed was of pre-Columbian origin, which he had transcribed from the oral tradition of these people, but its authenticity is questioned by many scholars.

The earliest known performance of a European play in the Americas took place at a seminary in Puerto Rico in 1510. But the Dominican and Franciscan friars who set out to Christianize the Americas were soon adapting local performance traditions to Christian purposes just as had been done in Europe in the Middle Ages. They wrote numerous *autos,* generally in the local language, to be performed by those they were converting. Native dance, music, and costuming were incorporated into many of these. By 1543 the *autos* of New Spain (Mexico) had gained political overtones with *The Conquest of Rhodes* (*La conquista de Rodas*) done in Mexico City with Aztec performers, and *The Conquest of Jerusalem* (*La conquista de Jerusalén*) done in a nearby community with Tlaxcalan performers who had sided with Hernán Cortés in the war against the Aztecs. Over 1000 Indians were used as musicians and extras in these plays. In 1544 the archbishop of New Spain ordered an end to this kind of activity. But the evangelical use of theatre simply moved on to Peru in 1546 and Brazil by the 1570s, and it never really stopped even in New Spain.

México (Mexico City) established a prize for the best play at Corpus Christi in 1565. But the real turning point for theatre in the Americas came in 1574. At the consecration of the new archbishop, the first Spanish-language play to be written by a native-born dramatist was performed: *Spiritual Contract between the Shepherd Peter and the Mexican Church* by Juan Pérez Ramires (1545–?). The first plays of the first major dramatist of the New World, Spanish-born dramatist Fernán Gonzáles de Eslava (1534–*c.* 1601), were also performed for this event, which in addition is celebrated for the appearance of the first professional actor of the Americas.

In 1586 *autor* Alonso de Buenrostro brought his acting troupe from Spain, and by 1601 there were three acting companies based in Mexico City. In 1597 Francisco de León built the first *corral* theatre there. A second was built sometime before 1602, and others were built at Lima (Peru) and New Veracruz. Throughout the seventeenth century theatre was performed in many parts of the Spanish territories, but New Spain, and especially Mexico City, continued to be the focal point.

Three volumes of religious *comedias* attributed to Juan Bautista were published in New Spain in 1599. The Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (*c.* 1648–1695), a towering intellect of the period and one of the most admired women of her day, wrote her first play, *The Second Celestina,* in 1676. She also wrote *The Trials of a Noble House* (1683), which was thought to have achieved a lyric beauty matched only by Calderón. In the 1680s Juan del Valle y Caviedas (1652–1694) become the first playwright in Peru. His fame was quickly eclipsed, however, by Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo (1664–1743), who wrote full-length plays on French and Greek themes. These New World dramatists and the many others who surrounded them wrote fairly typical Spanish Golden Age plays of all types, but the local color and native characters they included made their works distinctive.

COURT ENTERTAINMENTS

Although court entertainments like those found elsewhere in Europe had been seen in Spain since the thirteenth century, it was not until the reign of Philip III (1598–1621) that theatrical performances were given regularly at court.

But the court theatre reached its height during the reign of Philip IV (1621–1665), who between 1623 and 1653 saw about 300 different plays there. Although Italianate scenery had been used occasionally since the sixteenth century, it did not become common until Cosme Lotti (?–1643), a student of the great Italian designer, Alfonso Parigi, was brought from Florence in 1626. Until the 1630s most of the court entertainments were staged in a large hall at the Alcázar or in the gardens at Aranjuez; after 1633 the new palace in Madrid, the Buen Retiro, became the center of court entertainments.

Many lavish outdoor productions were staged on the palace grounds. One of the most famous of these was Calderón's *The Greatest Enchantment Is Love* (1635), which treated Ulysses's encounter with the enchantress Circe. For this production Lotti built a floating stage on a lake. The special effects included a shipwreck, a triumphal chariot drawn across the water by dolphins,