

Performing Reform: The Bourbon Quest for Refinement, Decency and Good Taste at Mexico City's Royal Theater, 1752-1821

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During the first half of the eighteenth century, Mexico City's *Real Coliseo* (Royal Theater) was ugly and uncomfortable. It was also dangerous, built from burnt wood culled from the ashes of its unfortunate predecessor.¹ By the early 1750s, Viceroy Revillagigedo the first had received word that Spanish authorities had converted the plazas *La Pacheca* and *El Príncipe* in Madrid into elegant theaters. Perhaps in part inspired by the Spanish example, in 1752 Revillagigedo spent more than 20,000 pesos on the construction of a new, attractive, comfortable theater, "worthy of the capital of New Spain."² The viceroy likely hoped that the new *Coliseo* would serve as the reflected image of a refined and prosperous modern city, a visible symbol of New Spain's self-improvement.

Making Mexico City's progress and civility visible was of the utmost importance in the mid-eighteenth century. During this time, the viceroyalty was in the midst of an intensive reform process at the behest of Spain's Bourbon monarchs. As royal officials implemented massive political, economic and social changes for the greater efficiency of the viceroyalty and the empire, the elegant new theater would make those changes manifest, by showing off Mexico City's refinement, respectability and good taste.

Yet, what went on inside the building was far from elegant. Theatrical functions were rowdy social affairs. During performances, audience members chatted amongst themselves, and often moved around the theater. Vendors selling snacks and drinks shouted to advertise the

¹ The previous *Real Coliseo* had burned down in 1722. Officials arranged for the construction of a new theater in the same place, next to the *Hospital Real de los Naturales* (Royal Indian Hospital). However, the noise from the theater bothered the hospital's patients, which prompted authorities to build a new theater in a different location in 1725. This building remained the *Real Coliseo* until 1752. Manuel Mañón, *Historia del Teatro Principal de México* (México: Editorial "Cvltura," 1932), 15-16.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

goods they had available. Spectators occasionally fought, sometimes in retaliation against some audience member who had spat or thrown fruit peels or cigarette butts from one of the balconies. The performance itself was often not the primary focus of the event; audiences were at least as occupied with their own conversations as with the spectacle in front of them.

Nevertheless, theatergoers sought entertainment from the performances, which tended to be fantastical, lewd, and satirical. The boundary between performer and spectator was not firmly set: audience members shouted at actors and requested repetitions of pieces they enjoyed, and actors often made signs to their friends in the audience. Performers also tended to chat with one another onstage, and as a result sometimes missed their cues or lines from the prompter. Actors had difficulty recovering from such failures, since they often had not rehearsed their parts.³ Both onstage and off, the Royal Theater's functions were chaotic and unruly—a far cry from the refinement and civility that Revillagigedo the first hoped the new building would manifest.

In the late eighteenth century, New Spain's royal authorities decided that such rowdy, disorderly functions were unbecoming of a civilized capital city. To remedy the situation, they implemented a comprehensive theater reform program, as part of a larger effort by officials and Enlightened intellectuals to refine the arts and impose order in New Spain.⁴ By imposing extensive regulations and keeping a watchful eye over the theater, officials hoped to establish order and decency at its functions, instill “good taste” in Mexico City's citizenry, and keep the masses contentedly distracted from the rumblings of revolution in other parts of the world.

³ Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico*, trans. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), 44-45.

⁴ Regarding efforts in New Spain to cultivate art that abided by the rules of “good taste,” see chapter eight of Kelly Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008). On the Bourbon obsession with order, see Magali M. Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

This essay analyzes and evaluates the Bourbon effort to transform Mexico City's Royal Theater and the population's artistic predilections. After outlining the reform program, it examines the ways *Coliseo* impresarios, performers, and audiences reacted and responded to the new regulations. Royal orders, negotiations between officials, impresarios and performers, and letters to the editor in the newspaper *Diario de México* (Mexico Daily) demonstrate that theatrical reform efforts did not bring about the intended effects. Performances continued to be rowdy, "indecent" and "unrefined," and the majority of theatergoers continued to prefer this sort of theater over the more "civilized" shows that royal officials and Enlightenment-inspired intellectuals promoted. Royal authorities did not have the power to control the theater effectively, nor to effect a transformation in the public's theatrical preferences.

A handful of scholars have examined Mexico City's *Real Coliseo* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their works, however, do not expose the limitations of royal authority over the theater and the tastes of attendees. For instance, Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari and Manuel Mañón have written extensive narratives of the Royal Theater's development during this time. These provide helpful overviews of much of the available primary documentation, but lack analysis of that material.⁵ In a pair of articles on the 1790 and 1791 theater seasons, Irving Leonard places the *Coliseo*'s performances in the broader context of Viceroy Revillagigedo the second's reform project. Leonard argues that the theater's productions remained "decadent" and of poor quality through this period, but he fails to acknowledge that the majority of audience members did not share royal officials' taste in theater.⁶ Dalía Hernández Reyes recognizes that the audience's predilection for the baroque style that reformers hoped to

⁵ Enrique de Olavarría y Ferrari, *Reseña Histórica del Teatro en México, 1538-1911*, 3rd edition (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1961) and Mañón.

⁶ Irving A. Leonard, "The 1790 Theater Season of the Mexico City Coliseo," *Hispanic Review* 19 (1951), 104-120 and "The Theater Season of 1791-1792 in Mexico City," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 31 (1951), 349-364.

eradicate persisted, and that this preference induced the continued performance of “vulgar” baroque comedies. However, she focuses more on the intellectual debate in the *Diario de México* over neoclassical and baroque styles than on the official reform project or its failure.⁷

Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán provides the only comprehensive analysis of the Bourbon project to reform public taste and behavior at the Royal Theater. In *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico*, he argues that this mission ultimately failed, but that it could have succeeded if not for the economic strain of the *Hospital Real de los Naturales* (Royal Indian Hospital) and the turmoil of the Independence War. The hospital depended upon the theater’s revenues for funding, which meant that royal authorities sometimes had to contradict their own reforms in order to maintain attendance at the theater. Mexico’s Independence War, which lasted from 1810 to 1821, further sidetracked the reform effort by diverting officials’ attention away from reforms and towards suppressing revolt. Viqueira Albán places particular emphasis on the issue of funding the hospital. He contends that, “the reformers would have been able to achieve more if not for the permanent shortage of funds at the Coliseum. This situation made them so dependent on the plebeian spectators...” Consequently, he argues, although progress was “substantial,” it was also “fragile.”⁸

Reformers did not accomplish as much as Viqueira Albán claims, nor were the hospital and the Independence War the only variables that thwarted their efforts. Even if these obstacles had not existed, royal officials simply did not have the effective, authoritarian power they would have required in order to implement the theatrical reform program. The viceroy’s ability to manipulate performances was tenuous, and he and his officials had little to no authority over

⁷ Dalia Hernández Reyes, “La Renovación Teatral en las Postremerías del Virreinato Novohispano: Los Concursos del *Diario de México*,” in *El teatro en la Hispanoamérica colonial*, ed. Ignacio Arellano and José Antonio Rodríguez Garrido (Madrid: Editorial Iberoamericana, Universidad de Navarra, 2008), 395-414.

⁸ Viqueira Albán, 88-89.

public taste. Altering the preferences and behaviors of the theater's employees and audiences turned out to be far more complex than reformers had expected, and forcing impresarios and performers to succumb to their will was difficult, if not impossible. Changing popular taste was an even more ambitious endeavor: effecting such a massive transformation in the minds of the public was well beyond the capacity of a few royal officials and intellectuals.

Orders from Spain

The project to reform and control Mexico City's Royal Theater started in Spain, with a series of decrees that applied not only to the peninsula but also to its viceroyalties. The Spanish Crown began its project to regulate the kingdom's theatrical productions in the 1750s. It issued a *Real resolución* (Royal resolution) in 1753, followed by a *Real orden* (Royal order) in 1763, both of which concerned the performance of comedies in royal theaters.⁹ These two decrees stipulated in detail how theatrical administrators should run the production, and how performers and audiences should conduct themselves during the show. The Crown issued additional edicts later in the century, which announced orders concerning audience behavior at theatrical functions.

With these decrees, Spanish officials attempted to mold royal theaters into models for public behavior, decency and culture. Theater, they hoped, would teach spectators to be virtuous, compliant citizens, who comported themselves with civility. For reformers, the ideal theatrical performance entailed rational and moral physical organization, separation of the sexes, constant visibility of all audience members, concentration on the performance, separation between stage

⁹ This law's title in the *Novísima Recopilación de las Leyes de España* is "Precautions that must be observed for the representation of comedies in the court." A 1788 document indicates that this law applied not only to the royal court in Madrid, but also to Mexico City's Royal Theater, and presumably to other royal theaters throughout the kingdom. AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 2776, exp 011.

and audience, and strict royal control over the pieces performed. With detailed decrees and regulations, Spanish authorities hoped to micromanage the kingdom's theatrical functions, molding them into models of respectability and good taste.

Officials attempted to impose rational order upon theaters, in part for greater efficiency of movement, but also to reduce the chaos that made it difficult for royal guards to maintain control of the audience. For this purpose, reformers strove to place spectators' bodies in what they deemed to be the proper places at the proper times. For instance, in hopes of minimizing disorder before and after the show, the Crown ordered theater guards to ensure that coaches did not remain by the theater doors after dropping people off, and to maintain order while audiences exited the building after the performance.¹⁰

The Crown sought to control the physical placement of spectators not only to rationalize and organize the function, but also to enforce Bourbon ideals of sexual morality. The very shape of royal theaters in Spain and its viceroyalties during the eighteenth century encouraged separation of the sexes: every theater had two *cazuelas* (galleries), one for women, and the other for men. Spanish decrees prohibited what reformers considered indecent interaction between men and women. For instance, before and after the performance, men could not loiter around the corners and doors of royal theaters, especially at the doors where women exited.¹¹ Men also could not enter the women's *cazuela*, or even speak to women in the *cazuela* from other sections of the theater.¹² This concern for the separation of genders applied to performers, as well: the Crown ordered that dressing rooms must have "suitable and sufficient separation," to hide undressing actresses from the prying eyes of male actors. This restriction of sexual explicitness also extended to the stage, where performances—especially dances, *sainetes* (short comic plays),

¹⁰ *Novísima Recopilación de las Leyes de España* (Madrid: 1805), Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Leyes IX and XI.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley IX.

¹² *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Leyes IX and XI.

and *tonadillas* (musical interludes)—had to maintain “due modesty,” and avoid provocative or indecent gestures.¹³

In part to discourage fraternization between sexes at theatrical performances, the Crown demanded that all audience members be constantly visible, both to authorities and to other spectators. One of Spain’s decrees stipulated that the *apostas* (boxes) could not have high blinds, which suggests that authorities were concerned that spectators could take advantage of the privacy of the boxes to practice forbidden behaviors. Other decrees ordered women not to cover their faces with veils, obscuring their identities.¹⁴ With these laws, Spanish reformers sought to define the theater as a purely public space, where spectators’ behaviors and identities were constantly visible to all in attendance.

Spain’s Bourbon reformers also strove to redefine the way audiences appreciated theatrical performances. According to Bourbon standards of refinement and civility, spectators had to pay attention to the performance onstage, rather than concern themselves primarily with socializing. A number of the Crown’s prohibitions, or so the edicts claimed, would ensure that no one “ruined” the experience of the performance for other audience members—which meant preventing fellow spectators from seeing, hearing, and paying full attention to the stage. Royal edicts also ordered audiences to “observe corresponding composure, rule, tranquility and good order, in order not to inhibit the entertainment of the performance,” suggesting that indecent behavior prevented fellow spectators from enjoying the show.¹⁵ Additionally, regulations prohibited audience members from “using movements, shouts, or words that can offend the decency, good order, tranquility, and diversion of others present.” They also ordered audience members to refrain from yelling at spectators in the boxes, and men to remove their hats during

¹³ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley IX. Translation mine.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Leyes IX and XI.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley XI. Translation mine.

the show to avoid obstructing the view of others.¹⁶ With these edicts, reformers attempted to transform the experience of theater, redirecting spectators' focus from social frivolity to the performance onstage.

Bourbon reformers' ideal theatrical function also involved a strict boundary between performer and spectator, and between stage and audience. To this end, they prohibited all communication between performers and spectators during the show. The Crown's decrees barred performers from submitting to audience requests for them to repeat certain pieces, or for preferred actors to return to the stage.¹⁷ They also prohibited audience members from throwing paper, money, sweets, or other things on stage, and from talking to the actors. Actors, in turn, could not talk back to audience members, or make signs to them. The decrees also forbid yelling at the actors, even if they made mistakes in the performance, "for being against the decency owed to the public."¹⁸ These prohibitions indicate that Spain's reformers wanted, first, for actors to focus on playing their roles, and second, for the stage to appear as a separate world, upon which the audience had little to no influence. Orderly diversions, where actors performed and spectators watched and occasionally clapped politely, would be far easier to control than rowdy, chaotic social functions.

Reducing the audience's influence upon performances would also make it easier for the Crown to attain complete control over their content. To ensure that shows were decent and exhibited "good taste," the Crown ordered the authors of comedies, skits and songs to submit their pieces to the *Sala de Alcaldes* (the court of high justice) for approval before allowing actors and dancers to perform them for the public. *Alcaldes*, or mayors, had jurisdiction over not only the content of the songs and plays, but also the conduct of performers and audiences at the show.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley XI. Translation mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Leyes IX and XI.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley XI. Translation mine.

The Crown expected at least one *alcalde* to attend each performance, to observe and ensure that everyone, onstage and off, adhered to royal laws concerning public order and decency at the theater.¹⁹

Since the 1750s, Spain's Bourbon monarchs had ordered a strict series of theatrical regulations that applied to the entire kingdom. With these decrees, reformers sought to control and refine performances in royal theaters. The empire was in the process of modernizing, improving, civilizing, and increasing in efficiency, or so the Bourbon kings hoped. Spain's officials evidently expected the kingdom's royal theaters to reflect these changes, and at the same time help to educate and control the masses. However, authorities in Spain had little ability to enforce their theatrical reforms in the viceroyalties. Consequently, later calls for theatrical reform in New Spain would come from the viceroy.

Reform in New Spain

Although Spanish regulation began in the 1750s, royal authorities in New Spain did not begin to implement an intensive reform program until the 1780s and 1790s. During this time, New Spain's viceroys and other royal officials began to regulate vigorously Mexico City's theater with rules and prohibitions that in part reflected those that the Spanish Crown had decreed. Through these regulations, they attempted to "civilize" both public behavior and popular taste, as well as encourage complacency, virtue, and adherence to colonial hierarchy.

Royal authorities in New Spain had multiple motives for reforming the *Coliseo*. In part, they hoped to use the theater to mold better citizens. The idea that the theater could and should be an educational tool was in vogue at the time amongst Enlightenment intellectuals, in both

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Libro XII, Título XXXIII, Ley IX. Authorities in Spain or New Spain must have ordered *alcaldes* to attend performances prior to the 1750s; Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid's 1786 list of orders for Mexico City's *Real Coliseo* notes that *alcaldes* had complained in 1746 that they did not have time to attend the performances.

Europe and New Spain. Believing that theater was a powerful tool of communication and influence, they thought that performances could teach audiences to live their lives with virtue, reason and decency.²⁰ This was one of the goals of the theatrical reform effort. In addition to setting an example for decency and virtue, officials hoped to “raise” the general populace to the cultural level of the Enlightened intelligentsia, on the premise that a refined capital city required a culturally refined citizenry. According to reformers and intellectuals, the “vulgar” tastes of the masses did not reflect well upon Mexico City, or upon the viceroyalty as a whole.

Reformers also saw the theater as a tool of social control. Theater was the most common diversion in Mexico City at the time, and royal officials sought to capitalize upon this popularity by attempting to secure the *Coliseo*'s monopoly upon the city's theatrical productions.²¹ The Royal Theater thus provided reformers with an opportunity not only to expose spectators to examples of morality and reason through art, but also to “distract [audiences] for some time in blameless leisure,” and divert their attention from other, more mischievous activities.²²

This idea of using theater to divert the attention of the masses was common during the mid- to late-eighteenth century. In a work released during this period, Spanish intellectual Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos explained that a good government should provide moral diversions to distract the population from less useful, more morally questionable forms of entertainment. Wealth and luxury, he said, could lead people into “a slack and pleasurable lifestyle whose principal goal is to spend a good part of the day contentedly”—a lifestyle that was unproductive for the empire. Therefore, he argued, “it behooves the government to furnish

²⁰ Adam Versényi, *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, politics, and culture from Cortés to the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50 and “Teatro,” *Diario de México*, 17 October 1805, 65-67.

²¹ For example, in 1760, royal authorities in New Spain prohibited street entertainments, due to the “prejudice” they caused against the *Coliseo*. Viqueira Albán, 68.

²² Mañon, 22. Translation mine.

innocent and public diversions to offset pleasures more dark and pernicious.”²³ Ideas from intellectuals like Jovellanos likely influenced the initiatives of royal officials in both Spain and its viceroyalties in the New World. Providing the masses with respectable entertainment at the Royal Theater would distract them from more immoral, indulgent diversions, thereby helping to mold an efficient and productive citizenry.

Royal officials also hoped to distract the people of Mexico City from revolutionary ideas of democracy and republicanism that were spreading throughout Europe and the Americas. This was of particular concern to Spanish officials after the French Revolution in 1789. In 1790, Viceroy Revillagigedo the second reported to Madrid that he intended to divert the attention of New Spain’s citizens away from thoughts of dissent and revolution by “undertaking public works of common utility, comfort and beauty.” He expected that these would attract people’s attention, “please them, and fill them with satisfaction.”²⁴

Revillagigedo and other royal officials hoped that virtuous and decent, yet entertaining theatrical functions could induce complacency. A happy, virtuous population, they thought, would not concern itself with attempting to throw off the yoke of colonial rule. Controlling the theater was also a means of restricting freedom of thought. Revolutionaries could spread the seed of dissent through entertainment; if royal authorities could monopolize and control the content of the most popular diversion, they could make it more difficult to disseminate anti-colonial ideas.

New Spain’s theater reform program began in earnest in 1786, when Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid composed a list of rules and orders for the Royal Theater’s administrators, performers and audiences. He noted that the Spanish government had already issued edicts to ensure that the theater’s diversions involved the “decency, decorum, and order proper to good

²³ Daniel Frost, *Cultivating Madrid: Public Space and Middle-Class Culture in the Spanish Capital, 1833-1890* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2008), 86. Translation his.

²⁴ Leonard, “The 1790 Theater Season of the Mexico City Coliseo,” 105. Translation mine.

customs with respect to both the dramatic pieces that are executed and their spectators.”

However, complained Gálvez, despite such precautions, “excesses” and “abuses” still occurred frequently. The purpose of the 1786 list of regulations was to correct what Gálvez saw as violations of good customs, and to bring the Royal Theater’s functions in line with Bourbon ideals.²⁵

Gálvez’s 1786 regulations dealt with many of the same topics as the earlier Spanish edicts. For instance, like the Spanish laws, the 1786 decree obliged performers to act modestly and decently on stage, and demanded separation between dressing rooms for actors and actresses. Gálvez expected the audience to exhibit decency and civility as well: he prohibited spectators to wear hats or veils during the show, banned men from entering the women’s *cazuela*, and ordered audiences not to request repetitions of pieces. Gálvez also prohibited actors from communicating with spectators, ordered guards to prevent drivers from leaving their coaches outside, and required authors to submit their pieces to government authorities before allowing their performance. These orders reflected those that the Spanish Crown had previously decreed.

Gálvez’s regulations also included a variety of rules that had not appeared in Spain’s legislation. Most of these new regulations were similar to the Spanish ones, prohibiting and ordering slightly different actions, but towards the same end of turning theatrical functions into “decent” cultural events that were worthy of their “civilized” audiences. By issuing extensive decrees and creating new government positions centered on the Royal Theater, reformers hoped

²⁵ Mañon, 22. Translation mine. Royal authorities in New Spain might have issued regulations for the *Coliseo* that were separate from the Spanish ones prior to 1786, but it is difficult to tell. One 1784 document refers to the “this list of regulations” (“este reglamento”), but it does not specify where these regulations came from. Official complaints and orders regarding the *Coliseo* go back at least as far as 1779, but documentation is relatively sparse until 1786, which suggests that no serious reform effort existed until that year. AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 4422 exp 010, f. 6r-7v (1784) and INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 153, f. 206-207 (1779).

to transform its performances from rowdy social events into models for morality, good taste, and hierarchical order.

Unlike the Spanish decrees, Gálvez's 1786 regulations stipulated specifically that actors had to practice and know their parts well. It ordered the theater's administrators to create a list at the beginning of each month of pieces they intended to present over the coming weeks. This, Gálvez stated, would ensure that performers had enough time to learn their lines. Actors would be subject to fines for not knowing their parts by show time. Moreover, they had to attend rehearsals daily, whether or not they had already memorized their lines, so that rehearsals would be complete. The 1786 regulations stated that performers who did not attend practices would go to prison. These rehearsals, Gálvez ordered, must occur with closed doors, and exclude non-performers from attending, since they tended to distract the actors with conversations and "extraneous matters," thus preventing them from learning the pieces.²⁶ Gálvez also demanded that the theater's performers fulfill their obligations each season, barring sickness or some other "just motive."²⁷ The government's expectations of performers had changed considerably. Laws now obliged them to fulfill their contracts and remember their lines, or face punishment from the viceroy.

The 1786 regulations obliged performers to take a variety of other precautions to ensure, first, that the show went as planned, and second, that the stage seemed a world entirely separate from that of the audience—something spectators could watch, but not contribute to in an active way. In his regulations, Gálvez complained of the constant tardiness of actors, singers and other performers, and ordered them to be present in the dressing room at the show's scheduled start

²⁶ Mañon, 25-26. Translation mine.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26. Translation mine.

time, in order to avoid delays.²⁸ His edict also prohibited actors from exposing themselves to the sight of the public offstage or from sitting behind the curtains, in order to avoid inhibiting the movement of other actors or the general conduct of the performance.²⁹ Additionally, he banned “uproar” and “racket” in the dressing rooms, as this often interrupted the show, preventing actors from hearing their cues.³⁰ Gálvez evidently hoped for performances at the Royal Theater that were orderly, or at least appeared as such.

Gálvez attempted to impose orderliness upon the theater’s spectators, as well. In hopes of subduing the chaotic noise that emanated from the audience during performances, he gave theatergoers specific instructions as to how they should express their appreciation of a performance. The 1786 orders dictated that, without oppressing the “festive release and civil liberty” with which audiences expressed their satisfaction with a piece, they were not permitted to cause “racket” or “noisiness” that might disturb their fellow spectators. The viceroy would only permit applause after the actors had completed the deserving passage of the comedy. Gálvez threatened eight days in jail for anyone who disturbed the performance with “audacious voices” or made fun of the actors.³¹

The 1786 decrees also added to Spanish regulations that concerned decency and modesty on stage. As the alternative to more scandalous forms of entertainment, the Royal Theater’s shows had to embody what reformers considered “proper” sexual morals. Therefore, Gálvez ordered actresses to wear decent clothing, in order to set an example of good customs for audiences.³² The enforcement of respectable sexual conduct would also involve musical reform:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹ Or, if the offender was a “distinguished person,” guards were to bring him or her to the viceroy. *Ibid.*, 26. Translation mine.

³² *Ibid.*, 23-24.

Gálvez demanded that, to help prevent scandalous dances on stage, the theater's musicians should ensure that their rhythms were "honest," forming "colorful and pleasing figures," without "provocative movements."³³

More than the Spanish regulations, the 1786 code made clear that reformers hoped for strictly hierarchical audience seating. One of the regulations stated that the seats in the *luneta*, the section right in front of the orchestra, were the most special and distinguished seats, and thus those who sat there must be dressed decently.³⁴ *Luneta* seats were costly, and sold by the month, rather than per show. At six pesos monthly—compared to one real per night for a *cazuela* seat—*luneta* seats were far beyond the budget of Mexico City's regular citizens.³⁵ Gálvez evidently hoped that, with their clothing, the upper-class spectators in the *luneta* would visually demonstrate their superiority, as well as the superiority of their seating.

Although seating was hierarchical, royal officials did not expect this hierarchy to include all of Mexico City's citizens. Some people, reformers thought, were not visually or socially respectable enough even to set foot on the *Coliseo* premises. In 1799, Viceroy Miguel José de Azanza ordered the theater's guards and impresario to ensure that people who were not wearing sufficiently decent clothing did not enter the building. He decreed, "The theater is one of the public places in which the attendance of people of all classes makes the decency of the attendees more necessary, and therefore the shameful and voluntary nudity of some plebeian individuals of this city more intolerable." He therefore prohibited the entrance of anyone dressed only in blankets or sheets, "or other filthy rags," since such quasi-nudity was "contrary to the decorum

³³ "...solo admitan que al compass de los instrumentos se hagan mudanzas honestas, formando con éllas vistosas y agradables figuras; prohibiéndose, como se prohíbe desde luego estrechísimamente, cualquier agregado que se haya inventado, como el que llaman cuchillada, salto ú otros movimientos provocativos..." *Ibid.*, 23. Translation mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁵ For full price list, see *Ibid.*, 30.

of a grand and opulent capital.”³⁶ Evidently, Azanza hoped to exclude the poorest of the poor from the theater.

In order to enforce his regulations effectively, Gálvez took measures to ensure that government authorities kept a close eye on the theater’s performances. His 1786 orders dictated that the *corregidor* and *alcaldes ordinarios* (municipal magistrates) should take turns acting as the *Juez de Teatro* (theater judge). The designated *juez* would be responsible for attending every performance at the theater, to ensure that performers and audience members complied with the rules. Previously, the *oidor* (judge of the *audiencia*, the high court) who held the position of *juez* of hospitals had taken up the duty of overseeing the theater’s productions. Royal authorities determined, however, that this obligation conflicted with that *juez*’s primary duties with the hospitals. Therefore, these authorities agreed that royal magistrates should take turns holding the position of *juez de teatro*, with no other similar obligations, so that the designated individual would be able to devote the necessary time to ensuring order at the theater’s functions.³⁷

Royal authorities sought to control the Royal Theater’s productions not only by ensuring the attendance of an official, but also by censoring the comedies and other pieces performed. In 1790 Viceroy Revillagigedo the second appointed what was likely New Spain’s first royal *revisor* (censor), whose job was to inspect the content of all the theater’s comedies and interludes.³⁸ The creation of the positions of *juez de teatro* and *revisor* attest to the significance that viceroys Gálvez and Revillagigedo ascribed to the theater. By way of these new officials, viceroys hoped to micromanage the behaviors of audiences and performers and the substance of the *Coliseo*’s shows.

³⁶ AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 4344, exp 009. Translation mine.

³⁷ Mañón, 30-31. In practice, an *oidor* sometimes held the position of *juez de teatro*.

³⁸ Olavarría y Ferrari, 77.

The censor's responsibility was not only moral, but also artistic. His job, as Viqueira Albán describes it, was to be the “watchdog of good taste for the cultivated public.”³⁹ According to New Spain's first *revisor*, Father Ramón Fernández de Rincón, Viceroy Revillagigedo intended for the *Real Coliseo* to put on performances that were “worthy of the attention of a civilized crowd.”⁴⁰ This meant, according to Rincón, that the comedies had to be “suitable” and “pleasurable” (“de conveniencia y agrado”).⁴¹ In particular, they needed to be logical and believable—and if they failed to exhibit rationality, they should at least embody excellent literary skill.

Rationality was Rincón's primary concern. If the “civilized” public would not believe it, then, he thought, it was not worthy of their attention. He refused to allow the theater's administration to present *Troya Abrassada* (Burnt Troy) because it portrayed a 10-year-long war in a show of only two or three hours. Rincón thought it impossible to persuade the public that 10 years could elapse in the brief span of a theatrical performance. He found the piece “all so absurd, so nonsensical, and so contrary to good judgment and sound reason, that it seemed to me that it would lose the respect of the public if they were given a show of this character, capable only of entertaining clowns.”⁴² Rincón barred the company from performing *El Más Honrado el Más Loco* (The Most Honored, the Most Crazy) for the same reason. It had two plots, one of which took place in Naples, the other in Aragón, and a principal character appeared in both. For this and other irrationalities, he contended, “the whole play is a mixture of ineptitude and nonsense that is not worthy of the attention of any man who makes use of his reason.”⁴³

³⁹ Viqueira Albán, 77.

⁴⁰ Olavarría y Ferrari, 78. Translation mine.

⁴¹ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 151, f. 187r. Translation mine.

⁴² INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 151, f.185r-189v. Translation mine.

⁴³ Olavarría y Ferrari, 77 and Viqueira Albán, 77. Translation taken from Viqueira Albán.

Magic, Rincón believed, was particularly unacceptable in comedies. He found “black magic,” which involved irreligious acts such as pacts with the Devil, especially heinous. Rincón banned both *El Maxio Catalan* (The Catalonian Magician) and Cristóbal de Monroy’s *Encanto por los Zelos y Fuente de la Judia* (The Enchantment of Jealousy and Source of the Jewess) for containing black magic.⁴⁴ He provides no specific explanation as to why he would not allow black magic in the theater’s performances, but he presumably considered it contrary to both Catholic doctrine and rationality.

Rincón also sought literary beauty in comedies. If he found a piece sufficiently artistic, he would occasionally consider this a redeeming factor, and approve the work despite elements of irrationality. In his diatribe against *Troya Abrassada*, he admitted that many other comedies contained errors of history, geography and chronology. He argued, however, that such comedies had “delicacies” (*primores*) in the versification and sentences that offset their violations of “the precepts of drama.” In *Troya Abrassada*, on the other hand, “one does not find the least merit so that it could be performed in front of people brought up well, and who make use of their reason.”⁴⁵

Rincón forwarded similar rationale for his rejection of *El Más Honrado el Más Loco*. In other comedies, he argued, “the fluidity and naturalness of the meter, the beauty of the thoughts, the weight of many opportune sentences, the timely linking of some incident with other various details, make tolerable the other defects and even hide them from the eyes of the less intelligent.” In *El Más Honrado*, however, he could find no redeeming factors: “the essential laws of drama are not observed, the versification is forced, the concepts are vile and vulgar, the expressions lazy and some impious and irreligious, the jesting insipid and crude, and all of this a heap of

⁴⁴ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 151, f.185r-189v and f. 195r-198v.

⁴⁵ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 151, f.185r-189v. Translation mine.

foolishness.”⁴⁶ In Rincón’s view, a comedy had to be rational, beautiful, or both. If a piece lacked both of these elements, he would deem it unworthy of the theater’s “civilized” audience.

The artistic principles that Rincón sought in the *Coliseo*’s comedies were far from arbitrary. His aesthetics of “good taste” matched the artistic predilections of upper caste Enlightenment intellectuals. These principles also, conveniently, lent themselves well to legitimating social distinctions. In one instance, Rincón explicitly linked rationality with social status. He banned *Astucias por Heredar un Sobrino a un Tío* (Tricks for a Nephew to Inherit From his Uncle) in part because he thought it too unlikely that the plot’s events could take place in only two and a half hours. More importantly, he found it incredulous that the maid, Luisa, would treat her master, Lucas, with such insolence; he thought it inconceivable and absurd that a maid could be so impudent, and that a master would put up with such behavior.⁴⁷

Considering that one of the motivations for the theater reforms was to divert the attention of New Spain’s citizens away from revolutionary ideas, it comes as no surprise that Rincón censored such a comedy, in which a maid disobeyed and her master conceded. For the *revisor*, and the Bourbon government in general, rational order meant ordered hierarchy. Social distinctions had an intellectual justification: hierarchy was rational and intelligent, and actions and behaviors that upset the social order were ridiculous and illogical.

Offstage, too, reformers probably hoped to use the hierarchical seating arrangement and the notion of “good taste” to help legitimize social differences in the eyes of all the theater’s attendees. Royal officials determined good taste by aligning it with social status, defining it based on the artistic preferences and ideals of the upper caste intelligentsia. The rationality, modesty and virtue that Rincón sought in comedies were not only aesthetic values, but also

⁴⁶ Olavarría y Ferrari, 77-78. Translation mine.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

indicators of high social stature. Reformers likely hoped that, by imposing the artistic principles of the elite intelligentsia upon the masses, they could teach theater attendees to associate wealth and high social stature with cultural superiority.⁴⁸

Hierarchical seating, in which those who sat in the most expensive sections were ideally the best dressed, would also promote this association. If royal authorities could convince audiences to prefer the upper-class intelligentsia's definition of good taste, and they could see the connection between the refined production in front of them and the upper classes in the *luneta* and the boxes, perhaps they would learn to associate great art with great wealth. In other words, the masses would ideally come to perceive the upper class as not only wealthy, but also *better*, due to their superior taste.

Preventing the poorest of the poor from entering dressed only in rags would also encourage spectators to link good cultural production with class and respectability. The *Coliseo* was, ideally, place of social and cultural refinement, in which rags had no place. If royal officials could convince the masses of the truthfulness of these associations, social hierarchy would appear all the more rational and understandable to the general public. If the citizens of Mexico City believed in hierarchy, then perhaps they would be satisfied with the colonial order, and would ignore the calls for revolution and independence that were stirring trouble in other parts of the world.

In sum, through intensive regulation, supervision and censorship, New Spain's royal authorities sought to turn the theater's productions into civilized functions, where "decent" social conduct and the "superior" tastes of the upper classes reigned supreme. In doing so, reformers hoped to mold and refine the tastes of the public, bringing them into conformity with the artistic

⁴⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

values of the Enlightened intelligentsia. This, in turn, would promote complacency, and distract theatergoers from other, more harmful activities and ideas. However, the reform project ultimately failed, which meant that royal authorities never achieved these lofty goals. The project to control the theater and popular artistic preferences would require a level of control over the actions and ideas of *Coliseo* employees and audiences that, in reality, officials did not have.

Responses to Reform: Impresarios and Performers

Controlling the *Coliseo*'s performances turned out to be a difficult endeavor. Many of the impresarios and performers of Mexico City's Royal Theater did not take kindly to officials' attempt to reform the theater. After Gálvez released his regulations in 1786, viceroys and *jueces de teatro* issued a plethora of decrees, rules and complaints, most of which were repetitions of various portions of the 1786 document. This constant stream of repetitive orders and charges of misconduct from royal authorities demonstrates that the theater's managers and performers often refused to comply with reform orders. The viceroy's power to micromanage the theater's employees, and by extension, its performances, was limited. He could issue regulations and punish those who disobeyed, but ultimately the viceroy could not force the theater's impresarios and performers to do as he wished. To a certain extent, royal authorities depended upon these employees to implement the reform program. They were sometimes unwilling to accept regulations, and, consequently, made it impossible for officials to impose their artistic wishes.

The theater's impresarios did not always agree with the rules that viceroys imposed upon them, much to the dismay of the viceroys and theater judges. On multiple occasions, these authorities expressed their frustration with impresarios for repeatedly failing to comply with royal orders. In 1796, for instance, the *juez de teatro*, Francisco Alonso Feran, issued a stern

reminder to the theater's impresario that the rules obliged him to hand in a list of every piece he planned to present in the theater for examination beforehand. This document, he demanded, should include not only comedies but also the *sainetes* (short plays), *tonadillas* (musical interludes) and *seguidillas* (a style of Spanish song and dance) performed between acts of the play. The *juez* complained that the impresario had only been providing royal authorities with the comedies, and not the intermediary pieces. Because royal authorities had not had the opportunity to censor these short performances, he complained, many of them contained "some indecent words in this Kingdom, lacking respect for Superiority or for the Public..."⁴⁹

Viceroy Branciforte also issued reminders to the impresario in 1796. At least twice that year, Branciforte accused him of following his own interests rather than adhering to viceregal orders. He also complained of the "decadent" state of the Royal Theater, and lamented that the impresario had repeatedly failed to provide the public with "good functions." He reminded the impresario that his job required him to ensure that the theater's productions were "the most complete, decorous, and decent functions possible."⁵⁰

On one hand, these letters from the viceroy and *juez de teatro* demonstrate that Branciforte and Feran kept a keen eye on the theater's performances in an effort to ensure that these shows occurred according to regulations. On the other, they show that the success of theatrical reforms relied heavily upon the actions of the impresario. He had the power to decide whether to provide "complete, decorous, and decent" performances according to regulations, or to forgo orders in favor of attracting larger audiences. Some impresarios might have behaved better than others; the theater's impresario changed annually, when the Royal Indian Hospital

⁴⁹ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 152, f. 72r-73v. Translation mine. The *juez*'s complaint was not new, either: a previous *juez de teatro* had reiterated the order to submit all pieces for revision in 1790. INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 151, f. 83r-86r.

⁵⁰ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 152, f. 69-71; 83-87. Translation mine.

leased the management rights out to the highest bidder. Still, in spite of the severity of royal orders, complaints from the *juez* and the viceroy make clear that impresarios did not always choose to comply.

On at least one occasion, an impresario spoke out directly against royal orders. In 1788, Manuel Lozano, the impresario at the time, wrote to the *juez de teatro* complaining of an order to use a certain kind of oil for lighting in the theater, due to its high cost.⁵¹ Lozano's complaint was not without consequences: in response, the *juez* sternly, and at length, reprimanded him for questioning his authority and that of the viceroy.⁵² Lozano apparently did not protest about the lighting thereafter, but the fact that he complained to begin with illustrates that he saw nothing wrong with asserting his disagreement with royal regulations.

Like the impresarios, the *Coliseo*'s performers did not always acquiesce to the demands of royal authorities. Viceroys and theater judges issued a multitude of decrees and complaints about performers' disobedience. In 1790, *juez de teatro* Cosme de Mier y Trespalacios released a new set of regulations, many of which reiterated or rephrased orders from Gálvez's 1786 decree. Almost all of the regulations in this 1790 document concerned actors. For instance, Mier y Trespalacios ordered actors to remain silent in the dressing rooms, wear clothing appropriate to the roles they were playing, refrain from introducing new lines or verses, observe "modesty, precision, and composure," refrain from smoking, and fulfill their contractual obligations.⁵³ Like the 1786 regulations, those from 1790 did not successfully force actors into compliance: in 1794, Viceroy Revillagigedo the second issued multiple decrees demanding that actors correct the

⁵¹ According to the *juez*, this sort of lighting caused less discomfort to audiences and performers than the materials they had normally used in the past.

⁵² AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 2776, exp 011.

⁵³ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 151, f. 83-86. Translation mine.

“defects” and “improprieties” in their performances, and dress decently on stage.⁵⁴ Then, in a 1795 letter, the *juez de teatro* at the time, Bernardo Bonavia y Zapata, criticized the company’s actors and musicians for consistently showing up late to performances, delaying the show.⁵⁵ No matter how many orders viceroys and theater judges issued, and how many times they repeated them, actors appear to have consistently disregarded them.

The actions of some performers indicate that they did not have the respect for hierarchy and royal authority that the viceroy expected. In 1796, Viceroy Branciforte issued a decree demanding that actors bow or curtsy (“*hacer cortesía*”) to him, and only him, when he was present, both at the beginning and at the end of the production. He complained that actors had been paying this honor to the audience members seated in the *patio* (pit), as well—a move that signified grave disrespect towards the viceroy, since this action, he thought, should be reserved only for him.⁵⁶ In another decree, Branciforte demanded that actors refrain from repeating a song or dance unless they had his permission. Apparently, actors had been doing so at the request of the audience, which both contradicted regulations and offended the viceroy.⁵⁷ In both these cases, Branciforte accused the *impresario* of not instructing the actors well enough. Whether the *impresario* or the actors were to blame, the latter evidently felt no need to pay respect to royal hierarchy over the audience.

Like the *impresario* Lozano, some actors spoke out directly against royal orders. In 1793, Viceroy Revillagigedo the second notified the Royal Theater’s actors that he was granting them benefits. In actuality, this meant that he was obliging them to work extra performances during the next theater season, for very little additional pay. Seven performers voiced complaints in

⁵⁴ Mañón, 41. Translation mine.

⁵⁵ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 152, f. 91-93.

⁵⁶ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 152, f. 75r-78v.

⁵⁷ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 152, f. 79r-82v.

response, stating that they could not perform the extra shows due to illness, or because they needed their few days off. For instance, one actor, Juan Moreno, expressed his gratitude for the “benefit,” but stated that he could not accept it, since Saturdays and Wednesdays were the only days that allowed him to rest. The actors’ complaints infuriated Revillagigedo, who expelled actor Mariano Arizar from the *Coliseo*’s company and banned him from working in any other theater in the kingdom. The viceroy threatened the others with similar punishments. For instance, he told Moreno that if he did not wish to comply with his orders, then he should turn in his acting license. Some performers held out longer than others, but eventually all conceded to Revillagigedo’s request.⁵⁸

Although the actors did not win their struggle, their willingness to stand up for themselves against the viceroy’s demands is telling. Like the 1796 incidents in which performers paid respect to the *patio* and neglected to obtain the viceroy’s permission to repeat parts, actors’ complaints about their “benefits” indicate a distinct lack of respect for the viceroy’s authority. Even more importantly, they thought they had the power to contest his proclamations. In a sense, they did. Although Revillagigedo eventually forced the actors into accepting their “benefits,” he nonetheless did not get his way in the end: absences due to illness continued unabated, and actors apparently let the quality of their performances slide considerably due to dissatisfaction with their labor conditions.⁵⁹

Even colonial authorities complicated Revillagigedo’s mission to control the behaviors and actions of the theater’s impresarios and performers. Each year, the Royal Indian Hospital leased the theater out to the highest bidder, who would take responsibility for the theater’s administration. Perhaps because of the financial failure of the 1790 season, all bids for the 1791

⁵⁸ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 152, f. 130r-149v and Mañon, 40.

⁵⁹ Mañon, 40.

season were extremely low. Consequently, Revillagigedo took over the management of the theater that year. Although he managed to increase profits significantly, his direct intervention displeased municipal officials and members of the *Real Audiencia* (Royal Court), who complained to Spain's Council of the Indies.⁶⁰

The viceroy's power was a delicate balancing act, especially during the Bourbon reform period. As a part of its effort to centralize the empire, the Crown took measures to curtail viceregal authority. By the late eighteenth century, Spanish authorities evidently thought that assuming direct control over the management of the *Coliseo* was outside the viceroy's jurisdiction.

Revillagigedo's power was far from absolute. He could interfere with management, issue regulations, and punish disobedient actors, but these actions could provoke the indignation of performers or other authorities. If he was to get his way, he had to take into consideration the interests of others, from the highest council members to the seemingly powerless actors.

Because the viceroy's power was limited, the theater reform effort proved unsuccessful. Despite the constant stream of complaints from viceroys and *jueces de teatro* about the conduct of impresarios and actors during mid-1790s, disobedience did not cease after that time. In 1819, for instance, a judge (*alcalde*) issued a statement concerning a rumor he had heard, that for an upcoming function the theater's actors intended to dress as women, and the actresses as men. The *alcalde* warned the actors not to carry out their plan, and it is unclear whether they did so or not.⁶¹ Regardless of the outcome, years of royal attempts to instill "proper" behavior amongst Royal Theater employees evidently had not succeeded. Officials did not have the power to force

⁶⁰ Leonard, "The Theater Season of 1791-1792 in Mexico City," 352.

⁶¹ AGN, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda, Vol 252, Exp 10.

impresarios and performers to carry out their wishes. Consequently, shows at the theater often did not conform to the standards of decency and refinement that reformers had hoped to impose.

Responses to Reform: Audiences

Edicts and complaints from royal authorities and letters published in the *Diario de México* provide an indication as to how audiences reacted to shows at the *Coliseo*, and to Bourbon efforts to reform those performances. Just as Bourbon reformers could not control the theater's impresarios and performers, they were unable to impose "decent" behavior or "good taste" upon audience members, who had varying expectations of theatrical productions. A small intelligentsia of Enlightenment thinkers approved of the Bourbon reform program and expected shows to conform to royal regulations, while the rest of the *Coliseo*'s spectators largely preferred plays that were not so rational, "decent" or "modest." Because such a large portion of the audience did not care for comedies that met Bourbon standards, royal officials and theater managers sometimes let regulations slide in order to maintain good attendance.

Spectators responded in mixed ways to behavioral regulations at the theater. One elite theatergoer wrote in to the *Diario de Mexico* in 1806 that he found the Royal Theater comfortable, because "in it good order reigns, due to the vigilance of the *jueces*."⁶² At the same time, repeated decrees from the viceroy indicate that the theater's audience did not always manifest "good order." In 1794, for instance, Viceroy Revillagigedo the second issued a notice to the public, "for greater safety, decency, and good order in the audience at the diversions of this Theater." The notice included a list of regulations for audience behavior, almost all of which were reiterations of previous decrees. Among other demands, Revillagigedo's notice ordered audience members to remove their hats during the show, refrain from making noise and express

⁶² "Concluye el resumen histórico," *Diario de México*, 11 March 1806, 278-279. Translation mine.

their satisfaction with “moderation and decorum,” and also prohibited men from entering the women’s *cazuela* and vice versa.⁶³

Later decrees and complaints from royal authorities, from as late as 1820, indicate that many audience members continued to behave indecently according to Bourbon standards.⁶⁴ Many letters in the *Diario* suggest the same, in spite of the 1806 statement in the *Diario* that good order reigned at the theater. For instance, in 1805, another theater attendee wrote a letter to the *Diario* complaining of the constant murmuring during performances, which made it difficult to hear the actors.⁶⁵ Overall, government decrees and letters to the editor in the *Diario* suggest that viceroys and *jueces de teatro* were unable to impose discipline upon the theater’s audiences.

Some audience members probably conducted themselves according to Bourbon regulations, while others did not. Behavior likely differed between sections of the theater. Those who sat in the expensive sections of the theater, like the *palcos* (boxes) and *lunetas*, may have adhered more closely to regulations than the “riff-raff” in the *cazuelas*, *mosquete* and *patio*. An 1820 decree from Mexico City’s district court (*Sala Capitular*) noted that audience members in the *patio* had continued to shout at the actors, requesting repetitions of parts they enjoyed. The order did not mention any such actions in other, more expensive sections of the theater.⁶⁶

Diario readers, too, believed there was a distinct difference in behavior between those in the upper-class seats and those in the lower-class ones. For example, one letter explained why royal authorities prohibited the “dangerous mix of men and women” in the *cazuela*, but not in the more coveted third-level *palcos*. The author argued that “one must not confuse the nobles with the plebes, that all those disorders are of the riff-raff that occupies those places [the *cazuelas*],

⁶³ AGN, Bandos, Vol. 17, exp 76, f. 311r. Translation mine.

⁶⁴ For the 1820 example, see AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 6038, exp 24.

⁶⁵ “Policia del teatro,” *Diario de México*, 27 November 1805, 241-243.

⁶⁶ AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, caja 6038, exp 24.

but not of the people civilized in modern taste... the passions of the nobles are more obedient to reason than those of the plebes...”⁶⁷ Although this elite’s comments may be in part a product of bias, they nevertheless suggest that the lower classes were less apt to maintain “decency” and “good order” than were the more “civilized” nobles.

Audience reactions to the performance onstage also varied significantly. The intellectuals who wrote to the *Diario*, for example, enthusiastically approved of the Bourbon program to bring rationality, “decency” and “modesty” into the Royal Theater’s performances. In one letter, the author noted that, “directed towards the end of instructing and correcting the public, [the theater] is useful, as it was in ancient Greece. If the theater has been abominable in Rome, it was for the disgraces and impieties that they performed.”⁶⁸ Another referred to the theater as “the school of all the classes of society,” where audiences should receive “the most essential lessons.” He argued that theater, more than any other “arts of imitation,” had the ability to “speak conjunctively to the spirit and the heart, and the power to communicate wholesome instruction under the attractive appearance of pleasure.” Therefore, he thought, the *Coliseo*’s management had a responsibility to use its performances to set an example of “humanity, detestation of vice and love of virtue, of blind obedience to superiors, and not implausible things...”⁶⁹ Like the viceroys, *jueces de teatro* and *revisores*, intellectuals who wrote to the *Diario* had Enlightenment-inspired standards for theater.

Diario readers linked their expectations of the theater to their patriotism. One argued that the dramatic arts, “in a well-governed country, deserve particular encouragement; however, we

⁶⁷ “Sigue el apunte de las materias,” *Diario de México*, 5 November 1805, 141-142. Translation mine.

⁶⁸ “Examen histórico de las diversiones publicas de las naciones,” *Diario de México*, 10 March 1806, 273-275. Translation mine.

⁶⁹ “Teatro,” *Diario de México*, 17 October 1805, 65-67. Translation mine.

must confess in good faith, that in this Kingdom this is almost unknown, or has degenerated.”⁷⁰

Another contended that “depraved taste... should be banished in a century, and in a country as enlightened as ours...”⁷¹ These *Diario* readers expected the theater’s performances to reflect what they saw as the good governance and enlightened taste of New Spain, but felt that many of its shows did not fulfill that obligation. The theater’s impresarios and performers had failed to live up to the enlightened elite’s expectations—in other words, they had not been conforming to royal regulations.

The opinions of intellectuals who wrote letters to the *Diario* did not reflect those of the entire audience. On the contrary, many spectators apparently did not share their Enlightenment ideals, much to the dismay of many *Diario* readers. According to these elite intellectuals, much of the *Coliseo*’s regular audience did not appreciate the rationality and decency of Enlightenment theater. The author of one letter lamented that “the majority of theater aficionados do not see the show but as an object of rest, and prefer madness or indecency to the moderate festivity that [the theater] teaches.”⁷² Another asked, “Why does the sensible part of the audience merge in applauding some interludes that are performed only to sympathize with the inferior plebeians?”⁷³ While this elite’s distaste for the lower castes clearly informed his observation, it is nevertheless evident that many audience members preferred performances that did not entirely adhere to Bourbon artistic ideals. Otherwise, the impresario would not have bothered to include “indecent” interludes to indulge their supposedly inferior tastes.

Censorship negotiations between the Royal Theater’s administrator, the *revisor*, and the *juez de teatro* confirm that audience tastes did not entirely line up with Bourbon ideals. These

⁷⁰ “Teatro,” *Diario de México*, 17 October 1805, 65-67. Translation mine.

⁷¹ “Concluye el resumen histórico,” *Diario de México*, 11 March 1806, 278-279. Translation mine.

⁷² “Teatro,” *Diario de México*, 17 October 1805, 65-67. Translation mine.

⁷³ “Concluye el resumen histórico,” *Diario de México*, 11 March 1806, 278-279. Translation mine.

negotiations also show that the *revisor* and *juez de teatro* were sometimes willing to bend the Enlightenment rules of art in order to appease spectators. Keeping audiences happy was crucial, since the Royal Indian Hospital depended upon the theater's revenues for funding. Low ticket sales could therefore seriously compromise the colonial administration's ability to provide health care to natives. A large number of epidemics hit Mexico City during the eighteenth century, making the Hospital's effectiveness—and therefore, ticket sales—essential.⁷⁴ Additionally, low attendance at *Coliseo* productions would negate royal officials' attempt to centralize entertainment, improve taste, and distract the masses from immoral diversions or revolutionary ideas. Reformers failed to transform public predilections, and sometimes had no choice but to accede to popular “vulgar” tastes in order to sell tickets.

Twice in 1791, the theater's administrator, Miguel Menezes, asked the *revisor* and the *juez de teatro* to reconsider their condemnation of certain comedies. One of these requests was for the aforementioned *Troya Abrassada* and *El Maxio Catalan*. Menezes argued that *Troya Abrassada*'s only flaw was the irrationality of its timeframe, and that it was otherwise a good play. He defended *El Maxio Catalan* on the grounds that the magic in it was not black magic, as it involved no clearly discernable pact with the devil. The administrator's argument convinced Rincón, the *revisor*, who approved the plays for performance at the theater.⁷⁵

On another occasion in 1791, Menezes made the same argument for *Encanto por los Zelos y Fuente de la Judia* (The Enchantment of Jealousy and Source of the Jewess) as for *El Maxio Catalan*. Because it contained no explicit pact with the devil, and because it appealed to the public (“de gusto al público”), he requested that Rincón allow him to arrange its performance

⁷⁴ Jay Kinsbruner, *The Colonial Spanish-American City: Urban Life in the Age of Atlantic Capitalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 61-62.

⁷⁵ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio, vol. 151, f.185r-189v.

at the Royal Theater. Once again, Rincón and the *juez de teatro* approved Menezes' request.⁷⁶ Presumably, it would have been easy enough for Menezes to find plays to replace *Troya Abrassada*, *El Maxio Catalan* and *Encanto por los Zelos...* that conformed to Rincón's expectations. Yet, he chose instead to dispute the *revisor's* censorship, because *Encanto por los Zelos...*, and presumably the other two comedies, appealed to the public.

Menezes' decision to defend these plays indicates that the majority of the audience preferred these magical and irrational comedies to those that Rincón had initially approved. In spite of Rincón's seemingly strict Enlightenment standards, he was willing to bow to audience preferences, so long as Menezes could provide evidence that the plays were in fact not so contrary to Bourbon artistic ideals. That evidence was shaky in the case of the two plays involving magic: Menezes clearly expended much effort revealing the subtle differences between black magic and the "safe" magic in these comedies, and neither he nor Rincón indicated that the irrationality of magic, black or not, was problematic. Menezes' decision to defend these plays, and Rincón's choice to approve them, clearly had little to do with whether or not they met the standards of Enlightenment theater. They allowed *Troya Abrassada*, *El Maxio Catalan* and *Encanto por los Zelos...* to pass inspection in order to fill more seats at the theater.

Royal officials acquiesced to audience tastes at other times, as well. In 1794, Viceroy Revillagigedo and Rincón decided to ban dancing from the *Coliseo*. They argued that paying the dancers cost more money than it was worth, but also implicit in their reasoning was the fact that dancers often did not comply with the viceroy's standards of decency. The dance ban caused a considerable drop in attendance, which prompted Revillagigedo to retract the ban only three days after he had ordered it. His reasoning was that he did not want to inhibit either the public's

⁷⁶ INAH, Colección Colegio de San Gregorio vol. 151, f. 195r-198v.

enjoyment or the interests of the Royal Indian Hospital.⁷⁷ The viceroy had no choice but to accede to the audience's fondness of dance; he could do nothing to persuade the public of the inferiority of such "vulgar" performances.

A 1790 scandal demonstrates that the theatrical reform initiative also failed to instill widespread respect for colonial authority. While Rincón was briefly absent from his post, he entrusted his responsibilities as *revisor* to the accountant general of the tobacco company, Silvestre Díaz de la Vega. During this time, the theater's management submitted a comedy called *México Rebelado* (Mexico in Rebellion) to Díaz de la Vega for approval. The play centered upon the Spanish *conquistadores'* capture and execution of Cuauhtémoc during the Conquest of Mexico, and did not portray Hernán Cortés, the Spanish leader of the Conquest, as a hero. Yet, lacking Rincón's guidance, Díaz de la Vega thought that merely changing the title to *México Segunda Vez Conquistado* (Mexico Conquered a Second Time) would suffice to lessen the play's implicit threat towards Spanish authorities.

Tickets for the performance sold extremely well, but the show itself divided spectators. At certain points when characters representing indigenous peoples spoke their lines, parts of the audience applauded wildly. This response reportedly disturbed many of the Spanish attendees, who left the theater, appalled at these rebellious, anti-Spanish sentiments.⁷⁸ Clearly, reformers' attempt to distract the citizens of the capital from revolutionary ideas had failed. Dissent and anti-colonial attitudes proliferated amongst much of the theater's audience, and royal authorities could do little to change them.

Ultimately, royal officials found that they were unable to impose "decent" behavior upon the general public, or foster "good taste" amongst them. Enlightenment intellectuals, who had

⁷⁷ INAH, Colección Hospital Real de los Naturales, vol. 103, f. 204-205 and Viqueira Albán, 66.

⁷⁸ Viqueira Albán, 78 and Leonard, "The 1790 Theater Season of the Mexico City Coliseo," 112.

defined “good taste” to begin with, likely complied with orders concerning social comportment at the Royal Theater, but many other spectators continued to act the way they always had at theatrical productions. Good taste was even more difficult to impose than good behavior. The “vulgar” artistic predilections of the masses persisted, and when the *revisor* censored comedies, songs and dances, audience tastes did not change. Instead, they simply stopped attending. Finding it impossible to transform public artistic preferences, royal authorities sometimes had to bend their regulations in order to keep ticket sales up, for the sake of the Royal Indian Hospital.

Results

By the early nineteenth century, it was evident that the Bourbon effort to reform the *Coliseo*'s performances and popular taste had failed. Letters to the editor that appeared in the *Diario de México* newspaper confirm that performances generally did not conform to Bourbon ideals. In 1805, one author complained of the vice and indecency he had observed in recent theatrical functions. He noted that he had taken his 14-year-old daughter to a show there the previous night, and that the comedy was too “detestable” and “unseemly” to be appropriate for a spectator of such a tender age. He lamented, “Can happiness not exist without madness, actors without indecency, or jest without impurity?”⁷⁹ His and other *Diario* readers' complaints indicate that the tastes of the “inferior plebe” had more or less prevailed at the Royal Theater. Intellectuals blamed the vulgarity of the theater's shows for its consistently low attendance during the early nineteenth century.⁸⁰

In hopes of remedying the quality of performances and low ticket sales, the viceregal government issued a prospectus in 1810 for the establishment of schools of music and dance.

⁷⁹ “Teatro,” *Diario de México*, 17 October 1805, 65-67. Translation mine.

⁸⁰ AGN, ‘Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 2780, Expediente 003 and “Señor Diarista,” *Diario de México*, 9 October 1805, 35.

The purpose of these schools would be to teach singers and dancers, young and old, the “art and method” of their profession. By way of instruction, the document stated, the city’s singers and dancers would improve, and would therefore be able to provide the “commendable public” with well-executed theatrical functions.⁸¹

Given that Mexico’s Independence War began that same year, it is unlikely that royal officials managed to establish these schools. Regardless, academies of music and dance almost certainly would not have raised performances and popular taste to the standards of “respectability” that reformers hoped for. The skill of the performers was not the problem. One *Diario* reader even noted that some of the actors and singers who worked at the theater “could shine in Madrid or Naples.”⁸² The theater reform effort failed not because performers lacked training, but because the whole endeavor was well beyond the means of royal officials. Even with a *juez de teatro* and a *revisor* to assist him, the viceroy could not possibly assert authoritative control over the *Coliseo*’s theatrical functions, nor over popular taste.

The viceroy had the power to issue regulations and dole out punishments, but this was the extent of his capacity to control the Royal Theater’s performances. The implementation of his regulations depended on a multitude of people, including the *juez de teatro*, the *revisor*, the *impresario*, the administrator, the authors of plays and songs, the performers, and the audiences. *Impresarios* and performers did not always respect the authority of the viceroys or *jueces de teatro*, and sometimes did as they saw fit, regardless of regulations. The viceroy or *juez* could punish them, but this would not necessarily bring about the effect they desired. When actors refused to accept Viceroy Revillagigedo’s order to perform extra shows in 1793, he was able to threaten them into submission. Consequently, from either fatigue and sickness or willful neglect,

⁸¹ AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 2780, Expediente 003. Translation mine.

⁸² “Concluye el resumen histórico,” *Diario de México*, 11 March 1806, 278-279. Translation mine.

actor absences continued, and their performances began to falter. The viceroy could force performers to accept conditions, but only at the expense of the quality of the performances.

Transforming popular artistic predilections was even more complicated. Even if viceroys had been able to control the content and style of the theater's shows effectively, they likely would not have been able to influence the tastes of the public. When Revillagigedo banned dances, and when Rincón censored comedies strictly, audiences did not change their artistic preferences to match. Instead, they stopped attending. Because the theater's ticket sales provided funding for the Royal Indian Hospital, royal officials sometimes had to accede to the tastes of the public, approving performances they would not have allowed otherwise.

Yet, the hospital was not the sole barrier to the success of the theatrical reforms. Even if financial circumstances had not forced royal officials to bend to the "depraved" tastes of the public, they did not have the power to change those tastes. Altering popular culture would have required a massive transformation in the minds of Mexico City's citizenry. It appears that only a minority upper-class intelligentsia preferred the reformed brand of theater. Only they subscribed to the imaginary link between high social stature and cultural superiority. The rest of the Royal Theater's audiences, it seems, did not care about the social and cultural connotations the upper classes assigned to productions that were decent, virtuous and rational. A select few royal officials and a small minority intelligentsia could not possibly have convinced the majority to alter drastically their expectations of entertainment.

Both controlling the *Coliseo* and transforming popular taste proved beyond the capabilities of New Spain's authorities. Officials had hoped that their reform effort would consolidate the colonial hierarchy and increase their ability to rule efficiently and authoritatively. Yet, because they could not rule with an iron fist, reformers were unable to implement the

initiative effectively. One result was a Royal Theater whose performances were largely just as messy, disorderly and “distasteful” as they had always been. The other was a large body of performers and spectators who disliked or even resented reformers’ efforts to micromanage the theater, censor performances and transform entertainment. Consequently, the theatrical reform initiative in Mexico City ultimately did more harm than good for the Bourbon government.

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