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In the Beginning, There were Dragon(cillo)s: Using Shadow Puppetry to Engage Young Audiences

Esther Fernández, Department of Modern and Classical Literatures and Cultures, Rice University, US, esther.fernandez@rice.edu

Jonathan Wade, Department of World Languages and Cultures, Meredith College, US, wadejon@meredith.edu

Jared White, Department of Spanish, Hillsdale College, United States, US, jwhite1@hillsdale.edu

Jason Yancey, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Grand Valley State University, US, yanceyj@gvsu.edu

Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe was established in 2018 by Esther Fernández, Jonathan Wade, Jared White, and Jason Yancey. A staging of *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* at the 2018 Association for Hispanic and Classical Theater's (AHCT) yearly symposium marked their beginning as a troupe. This work, adapted by Yancey, focuses on the controversial Juan Rana character and was designed as an outreach initiative to bring early modern Spanish theater to schools using shadow puppetry. In 2019, *Dragoncillo* created a new performance for the Siglo de Oro Drama Festival and their community partners based on two *entremeses* written by Francisco de Quevedo. This essay details the formation of *Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe* and its early efforts to introduce early modern Hispanic literature and culture to various audiences across the United States. Furthermore, the essay reflects the process by which shows are conceived and staged and how those performances evolve over time. Finally, it imagines an expanded repertoire for the troupe that extends beyond the longstanding tradition of puppet theater in Spain to include other texts and contexts from Iberia and Latin America.



Puppets represent one of the oldest forms of entertainment. Long before moving from the stage to television, the artform's uncanny representations of life evolved from antiquity across the centuries until they had become a part of the artistic repertoire of every culture on the planet. The puppet's ability to transcend historical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries inspired the four authors of this article to form the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe in 2018 as a vehicle for reimagining the scholarship of early modern Hispanic theater. This article presents an overview of how the troupe began and the ways in which it pursued an artistic trajectory of visionary experimentation with ready-made, self-contained puppetry. By combining innovative performance practices with community-based outreach, Dragoncillo introduces early modern Hispanic literatures and cultures to diverse audiences across the United States.

An Unlikely Start

The troupe was born when Jason Yancey invited Esther Fernández, Jonathan Wade, and Jared White to perform *The Fabulous Johnny Frog*, a shadow-puppet show based on Yancey's translation and adaptation of several *entremeses* (short comic plays) that focus on the popular Juan Rana character of 17th-century Spain. The work was originally designed as an outreach initiative to bring Hispanic theater to schools using shadow puppetry. The invitation to collaborate with Yancey came a few months before the annual symposium of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater (AHCT) in El Paso, Texas. In the days leading up to the symposium, Yancey sent a follow-up message to the other three with additional information about the show (visuals, script, character assignments, etc.) as well as some straightforward information about shadow puppetry. As Yancey explained:

There are basically three rules to operating a shadow puppet: (1) always keep the puppet parallel with the screen. If it goes perpendicular it will disappear; (2) the puppet moves when it talks and generally holds still when it does not; and (3) the puppets should not overlap front-back. Think of them as those guys in the famous skyscraper lunch photo. There's only room for one person along the line in any given spot. Everyone else is either to the right or to the left. ('The Fabulous')

The email encouraged silliness, creativity, and hyperbole through exaggerated character choices and dynamic vocal performance. It also promised that a couple of hours of rehearsing would provide sufficient preparation. On Friday, 13 April 2018, the group—consisting of Esther Fernández, Jonathan Wade, Jared White, and Jason Yancey—gave a

40-minute performance for an audience of approximately 20 people. The fun, laughter, and spontaneity of the rehearsals were even more pronounced during the show.¹

At the time, collaboration on *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* seemed little more than a delightful, one-time invitation to enter Yancey's world for a few days. Although Fernández, Wade, and White had explored the intersection of pedagogy and performance in their own ways, none had experience using puppetry in the classroom or in the community to the same extent as Yancey, and so, although everyone enjoyed the journey, there was no immediate talk of carrying the project beyond the conference. Within a couple of months, however, Yancey sent an email that would change this outlook: 'I had so much fun working with you and would love to do it again. *Totally serious*. Any ideas for El Paso 2019?' ('The Fabulous ... now available'; Yancey's emphasis). The group replied immediately and enthusiastically in the affirmative. The conversation quickly turned towards the selection of a new play to adapt, with Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Dragoncillo* and Francisco de Quevedo's *El marión* emerging as early favorites. Yancey then put forward selection criteria that would help narrow the options: 'Short, sweet, simple, visual, small cast, one problem, one location, easy set-up, easy resolution' ('RE: The Fabulous'). Ultimately, the group decided on a couple of Quevedo's *entremeses*—*El marión* (*The Ladies' Man*) (1646) and *La ropavejera* (*Second Hands*) (1670)²—and generated two proposals for a return to El Paso the following year. The first proposed a panel discussion and performance at the AHCT's 2019 Golden Age Theater Symposium; the second proposed a series of educational outreach performances at area schools in conjunction with the Chamizal National Monument's Siglo de Oro Festival.

After careful collaboration, the group mutually decided on a name, crafted a mission statement, and divided responsibilities. Derived from Pedro Calderón de la Barca's playful *entremés*, *El dragoncillo*, the troupe's name attempts to harness the same creative and jocund energy of its namesake. The group's mission statement articulates its two-fold purpose: 'A puppet troupe dedicated to imaginative, bilingual storytelling that educates while it entertains' (*Dragoncillo*). The company also created a [webpage](#) and distributed responsibilities among the four members: Yancey would provide artistic direction for the show, build the puppets, and design additional content; White

¹ The following links provide the reader with access to two different scenes from *The Fabulous Johnny Frog*: '[Johnny Frog has a Baby](#)' and '[Johnny Frog Gets Arrested](#)'.

² In their edition of Quevedo's dramatic works, Ignacio Arellano and Celsa Carmen García Valdés explain how they arrived at each play's date of publication. Regarding *El marión*, they note that the earliest known source text is the 1646 edition published in Cádiz (97). In the absence of an actual manuscript for *La ropavejera*, they fixed a date according to its appearance in *Las tres musas últimas castellanas* (100).

would translate *La ropavejera*, create the website, and order t-shirts; Wade would translate *El marión*, make travel arrangements, and manage the budget; and Fernández would handle communications (with AHCT, Chamizal, community partners in El Paso, and other relevant persons) and offer scholarly expertise on puppetry in the Iberian context. Proposals, performances, and outreach would be shared by everyone in the troupe. What resulted from this collaboration is a production titled *Second Hands and The Ladies' Man*. The remainder of this essay elaborates on the creation of the puppets and their staging, the process of translation and adaptation, and the troupe's approach to educational outreach.

Envisioning Shadow Puppetry in a New Light

Over the course of 20-plus years working with theater and puppets in an academic setting, Yancey encountered two recurring issues that threaten to undermine every production. First, puppetry is an art form that requires a significant amount of time and energy to develop. Second, when the puppeteers are students, not only is time a scarce commodity, but all of the work invested in training them walks out the door with the diploma. Dragoncillo's approach to puppetry directly addresses these challenges by utilizing innovative techniques to minimize the troupe's reliance on the availability and skill level of the performer. Although extensive effort goes into the preparation of each show, in practice it requires no prior theatrical experience, no need for memorization, a flexible number of performers, and just two hours of rehearsal. The result is a ready-made production model that enables four scholars in four different states to operate a puppet troupe with the potential to engage students as both spectators and performers.

Like many shadow-puppet presentations, Dragoncillo's stage uses a nylon screen supported by pipe and drape masking. Where other companies typically rely on static-light sources such as bulbs or overhead projectors to illuminate their puppets, Dragoncillo employs an LCD projector, connected via HDMI to a laptop. This technical addition dramatically expands the visual potential for the screen. The entire presentation includes more than 50 PowerPoint slides that are designed to familiarize audiences with the texts and contexts of the show, to highlight the various theatrical practices informing the performance, and to introduce shadow puppetry. These slides often incorporate comedic or surprising video elements embedded over static images in a way that blurs the line between the informational and the theatrical. For audio, the troupe uses a compact mixing board to integrate sound from the laptop with two microphones and is played on a 22-inch sound bar. All of the production equipment—from the stage and puppets to the audio/visual apparatus—requires the use of only two suitcases for transport (See **Figure 1**).



Figure 1: A backstage view of the shadow puppet stage configuration, illustrating the projector situated behind the performers, the screen displaying the image in reverse, and the laptop, sound mixer, and microphones used to control the audio-visual elements of the performance.³

One of the most innovative aspects of Dragoncillo's approach is the use of an original film to enhance the performance aesthetic. Created in Final Cut Pro, Adobe Photoshop, and GarageBand and later embedded as a slide in the PowerPoint presentation, the film supplies both the backlight for the shadow puppets and detailed background images that change automatically throughout the performance, as well as built-in music and sound effects that accompany the action. Immediately below the scene, in a portion of the projection visible only to the puppeteers, the film displays two columns of scrolling dialogue and stage directions. This feature removes the need for memorization without relying on 'canned' or pre-recorded dialogue. The performers simply follow along with the film, manipulating the puppet in the light while reading their lines off the screen. Altogether, the integration of multiple technologies exceeds the production value of a typical shadow-puppet show while allowing the group to stage a 30-minute performance after just a few hours of rehearsal (See **Figure 2**).

³ Unless stated otherwise, all photographs are courtesy of Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe.



Figure 2: A backstage view of the puppeteers (from left to right: Wade, Yancey, Fernández, and White) reading the scrolling dialogue and manipulating the puppets. Photographed by Rodney Dunning.

Dragoncillo's puppets are designed for maximum expression with minimum input in the hands of a neophyte performer. In contrast to marionettes or wide-mouth puppets, shadow puppets generally are fast and cheap to build, require less space for travel and storage, and demand a far lower skill-level to operate. Designed and built by Yancey, each of Dragoncillo's puppets is cut from a thin sheet of black ABS plastic, which was selected for its high flexibility and durability at a low cost. The puppet is affixed to a 1/8-inch steel rod using a pair of machine screws and wing nuts that allow it to fit in travel-sized luggage once disassembled. For some puppets, the ABS cut-out is additionally glued to a sheet of clear acrylic where details like facial features are easily drawn using an enamel paint pen.⁴ Some of the puppets used in 2018's *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* included a mechanism that articulated a character's arm. Although simple, Yancey found that inexperienced, nervous fingers often struggled with the effect and either overused or completely ignored it (See Figure 3).

Second Hands and The Ladies' Man was conceived as a black and white cartoon from the 1930s, where characters flopped and stretched with such extreme plasticity that the

⁴ This video walks readers through the process Yancey used to build puppets for *Second Hands and The Ladies' Man*.



Figure 3: Shadow puppets in a scene from *The Fabulous Johnny Frog* as seen from the audience. Photographed by Rodney Dunning.

genre became known as ‘rubber hose animation.’ Dragoncillo literalized this figurative by creating their shadow puppets with actual latex tubing to join hands and feet to torsos, producing an effect that looked remarkably similar to the original animation style.⁵ Yancey introduced an aged film filter over a stylized black and white background to achieve the jittery, scratched, and sporadically blurred look associated with vintage film stock. The combined result of these elements in performance appeared like an interactive television screen playing cartoons from the 1930s (such as *Flip the Frog*, *Popeye*, or *Mickey Mouse*), where the shadow puppets bounced and wiggled about with an added measure of life regardless of the puppeteers’ skill at manipulation (See **Figure 4**).

Second Hands explores the notion of a second-hand shop where customers enter to purchase more attractive replacements for their undesired body parts. In order to realize these alterations on stage, Yancey created interchangeable heads and limbs held together with complementary rows of small but powerful neodymium magnets.

⁵ The following links connect readers to two different scenes from *Second Hands* and *The Ladies’ Man*: ‘[Ortega Gets a New Mustache](#)’ (*Second Hands*) and ‘[Draw Your Swords](#)’ (*The Ladies’ Man*).



Figure 4: 'María' from *The Ladies' Man*, showing limbs made from rubber tubing, acrylic pieces for drawn-on faces, magnets along the puppet's collar to secure inter-changeable heads, and a removable rod affixed with wing nuts.

As each character entered the stage and declared their intentions, the puppet's offending part was removed in full view of the audience and replaced with a more 'attractive' alternative. The character of the shopkeeper underwent a similar transformation for the stage. Rather than representing them as a puppet similar in size and appearance to the clientele, the shopkeeper was played in silhouette by an actor seen from the shoulders up who wore a special helmet that enlarged the shadow of their head to resemble the cartoonish ringmaster of a circus, complete with top hat. This approach not only made the shopkeeper larger than the other characters, but it also freed the actor's hands for the critical stagecraft of dismantling and reassembling their customers, an effect that enhanced the 17th-century source material, which originally conceived for actors to perform this action off-stage See **Figure 5**.

Building Community through Outreach

For more than a quarter-century, studies have consistently emphasized the growth of Hispanic populations in the United States.⁶ 'Over the next ten years', write Ortman

⁶ Referring to languages other than English, María M. Carreira acknowledges that '[w]ith over 40 million US speakers



Figure 5: A backstage view of *Second Hands* featuring the character of the ‘Seller’, as played by Fernández. Photographed by Rodney Dunning.

and Shin in 2011, ‘Spanish speakers are projected to represent about 13 percent of the total population ages 5 and over and to account for over 60 percent of the population that speaks a [language other than English in the home] in 2020’ (10). Given the rising generation of Spanish speakers, activities and programs that specifically engage this bilingual demographic are now in high demand.⁷ While there are numerous companies of distinction dedicated to children’s theater across the U.S., relatively few (e.g., Teatro SEA and GALA Hispanic Theatre) offer Spanish-language productions. Conversely, many organizations (e.g., The Center for Puppetry Arts and the Robert Rogers Puppet Company) feature puppets in their productions but offer little by way of Hispanic theater

(18% of the US population), [Spanish] is more widely spoken than all of the other languages combined. Remarkably, the United States is the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, after Mexico’ (7).

⁷ Cf. Janet Adamy’s ‘Dual-Language Classes for Kids Grow in Popularity’ (2017).

and/or the ability to travel outside of their home cities. Meanwhile, schools often lack the experience and resources required to provide students with the diverse range of educational benefits available through puppetry-based curricula. Dragoncillo's dual-language performances directly engage the Spanish-speaking community by celebrating some of its shared history, culture, and language through shadow puppetry.

Every Dragoncillo visit aims to introduce students to the Spanish Golden Age, to provide them with an opportunity to participate collectively in the creation of a shadow puppet, and to treat them to a performance. These visits, formally known as outreach, are the culminating experience of the Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe. Live audiences, primarily consisting of elementary and middle school-aged students, learn about an understudied time, place, and art form. They come away from the experience with a heightened appreciation for the arts and greater esteem for the Spanish language and the diverse cultures across the globe that claim it as their native tongue.

Professors looking for experiential learning opportunities for their students will discover that outreach through shadow puppets is an excellent way to connect their students to Spanish-speaking communities. This includes training students to become performers themselves.⁸ In just a few hours, an inexperienced cast of would-be puppeteers can learn how to perform with shadow puppets. In May 2019, Dragoncillo visited Buena Vista University and briefly rehearsed *Second Hands and the Ladies' Man* with university students, preparing them to perform at elementary schools in Storm Lake, Iowa, and the surrounding areas. The contagious laughter, thoughtful questions, and generous praise from the audience created a unique and beneficial experience for the performers and audience members alike. Each performer had the opportunity to practice using a shadow puppet, impart dialogue, and teach about a critical period of Hispanic theater history. Each audience member was able to experience a shadow-puppet performance, ask pertinent questions, and learn about Golden Age Spain.

Dragoncillo's bilingual approach to outreach ensures that students of all backgrounds recognize the rich cultural history and artistic inheritance of the Spanish language. By highlighting Spanish and Spanish speakers, the troupe aims to center the lives and experiences of students who may feel culturally and linguistically marginalized. Bilingual audiences, in fact, often comment to the group that they had never experienced theater performed in Spanish until they saw Dragoncillo. At present, all performances feature dramatic works from Spain's early modern period. Even though four centuries

⁸ For more information, see the following videos on [community engagement](#) and [performing outreach](#), wherein audience members talk about their lack of familiarity with shadow puppetry (much less a shadow puppet adaptation of a one-act play from the Spanish Golden Age) and student performers celebrate the opportunity to put on such a unique show.

separate the writing of these plays from Dragoncillo's performances, audiences have responded enthusiastically to their shows (see **Figure 6**). Each visit serves as an opportunity to build trusting relationships with the broader Hispanic community. From its inception in 2018 through the end of 2019, Dragoncillo performed for over 1,500 audience members at numerous locations across the United States, including Texas, Iowa, Florida, North Carolina, and Michigan (See **Figure 7**).

Adapting the Golden Age for 21st-Century Audiences

After the troupe settled on Francisco de Quevedo's *El marión* and *La ropavejera*, Wade and White began the task of translating and modernizing each work. Given the diverse nature of the audiences for whom Dragoncillo would be performing, everyone agreed that the original works would have to be adapted not only from Spanish to English, but also from 17th-century Spanish to modernized Spanish. The troupe risked alienating its target audiences by not adapting the plays to render them more contemporary and accessible to its young spectators. Both *entremeses* contain too many culturally specific references to justify a word-for-word translation. One might consider a semantic translation targeting the AHCT audience composed of Spanish Golden Age theater experts, but, in that case, there would be little reason to depart from the original at all.



Figure 6: Jared White leading an outreach at Crosby Elementary in El Paso, Texas.



Figure 7: Letter received from an ESL student at Alta-Aurelia Elementary School, in Alta, Iowa.

Given that *Dragoncillo*'s primary audiences would consist of elementary and middle school students, the need for accessibility was even more pronounced.

While the target audience played a pivotal role in the choices Wade and White would make in their respective adaptations, they also remained committed to preserving the integrity of the *entremés* and its irreverence, transgression, humor, and carnivalesque nature. In 17th-century Spain, *entremeses* typically appeared between the acts of full-length plays and functioned to relieve the tension engendered through dramatic performance via comedic interludes, dialogue, and music. As such, the adaptations needed to be lighthearted and to make audiences laugh. To elicit this reaction, each translation attempted to duplicate the inherent familiarity of *Siglo de Oro* works by tapping into easily recognizable themes and subjects for contemporary audiences. Adaptations are 'the "freest" form of translation,' as Peter Newmark observes, because even though they preserve themes, characters, and plot lines, 'the SL [source language] culture [is] converted to the TL [target language] culture and the text rewritten' (46). This passage captures the essence of Wade and White's work, in which the culture of the source language is 16th and 17th-century Spain, while that of the target language refers to 21st-century United States. Even with significant departures from the original plays, the themes, characters, plots, and flow of the *entremeses* were not compromised.

The opening scenes of *The Ladies' Man* demonstrate the kind of adaptation that is implemented in both translations. Here, the female suitors approach the balcony of their male love interest, Costanzo, and employ various means to get his attention: the first throws a rock, the second whistles, and the third brings music. The structure of each episode is nearly identical: the suitor makes her intentions known and takes action, prompting Costanzo to emerge and unleash a series of weaponized questions in response to the manner of his summoning. In each case, Costanzo's response draws parallels with references familiar to a 17th-century audience. The challenge in adapting these scenes was to find corresponding references for modern audiences to identify with Costanzo's fury:

MARÍA: ¡Oh calles cuyas piedras son diamantes! ¿Qué hará mi don Costanzo? Esta pedrada de continuo será dél almendrada.	MARÍA: Oh, paved streets of diamonds! What could my Don Costanzo be up to? This rock will be for him a delight.
<i>Tira y sale Don COSTANZO en lo alto.</i>	<i>She throws it and Don COSTANZO appears above.</i>
COSTANZO: ¿Soy yo san Esteban? ¿Soy yo Gonzalo Bustos? ¿Quién tira? (lines 1-6, 483-84) ⁹	COSTANZO: What am I, the border patrol? Is this some kind of riot? Who's throwing rocks?

The dark humor of the original would have been immediately apparent to Quevedo's audience familiar with Saint Stephen's fate in the New Testament, including the seven rocks that rained down on Gonzalo Busto every morning as a tragic reminder of the death of his seven sons. However, because this biblical reference is no longer popular knowledge, the adaptation instead relocates instances of rock-throwing to scenarios understood by today's audiences, such as the heated conflict at the United States-Mexico border.

In the following scene, Bernarda gets Costanzo's attention by whistling. Here again, the adaptation takes into consideration instances of whistling that would be familiar to 21st-century audiences:

⁹ All citations from Quevedo's *entremeses* derive from Arellano and García Valdés's 2011 edition of his *Teatro completo*. Each reference will include the page number where its corresponding text can be found in *Teatro completo*.

BERNARDA: ¿Si acaso está dormido El hijo del agüelo de mi amado? Todo está solo, todo está callado. <i>Da un silbo.</i>	BERNARDA: I wonder if the son of the grandpa of my loved one is sleeping? Everything's calm, everything's quiet. <i>She whistles.</i>
COSTANZO: ¿Soy yo culebra? ¿Soy yo culebrón? ¿Bebo en pilón? ¿Soy yo mala comedia? ¿Qué silbos son éstos? (lines 19- 24, 485)	COSTANZO: What am I, a dog? Perhaps you need a taxi? Or a game to referee? Where do you get off whistling?

The modified text still relies on a series of short questions, but the specifics put the audience in closer contact with cultural references akin to their knowledge and contemporary experience. Even these references, however, had to be adapted to enhance their intelligibility (and humor) across cultures. This explains why Dragoncillo's modernized Spanish version—created for a performance in Spain—reads somewhat differently than the version created in English. In the Spanish adaptation, Costanzo responds to Bernarda's advance with, '¿Soy yo un perro? ¿o un árbitro? / ¿Estamos en la Gomera?' (Am I a dog? or a referee? / Are we in La Gomera?). Whereas the dog reference retains its original meaning in both contexts, modern-day Spaniards, unlike their American counterparts, understand whistling as a method for communicating disapproval at sporting events, and, as such, the reference required alteration. The English, therefore, underscores what referees do and the Spanish emphasizes how fans respond when they disagree with them, with whistling as the common element in both instances. Finally, Wade decided that something uniquely Spanish would be better than a generic taxi reference, identifying La Gomera (Canary Islands) and its whistling language as a substitute both culturally relevant and true to the original.

The translation of *La ropavejera* likewise required significant adaptation from the source material. Initial attempts to translate the work led to examples of stilted descriptions, as seen when the musicians make their final appearance:

The original musical lexicon required to identify these songs and dances has disappeared over four centuries, creating the potential for confusion in a modern audience. In fact, some terms (*Escarramán* and *Santurde*) escaped White's best efforts at locating an English equivalent, resulting in a sonorous adaptation ('Scary Man') and a far too literal translation ('Holy Milker'). In the end, this scene, like many others,

<p><i>Descubre las mujeres y los bailarines, cada uno con su instrumento.</i></p> <p>Zarabanda, Pironda, la Chacona, Corruja y Vaquería; y los bailes aquí: Carretería, ¡Ay, ay!, Rastrojo, Escarramán, Santurde. (lines 130-33, 541)</p>	<p><i>Women and dancers appear, each one with their instrument.</i></p> <p>Sarabande, Pirouette, the Chaconne, Red-roar and Cow-lick; and the dances: Wheelbarrow, Ay, ay! Stubble, Scary Man, Holy Milker.</p>
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was cut to accommodate an audience unfamiliar with the *entremés*'s proclivity for unresolved, musical conclusions. While this affected the word-for-word quality of the translation, it did not have a significant impact on the show's reception or anticipated denouement, given that each production concluded with music and dancing.

During the creative process, the troupe experienced two distinct phases of adaptation: those made prior to performance, and those that emerged in response to performance. Even when the show began playing before audiences, Dragoncillo discovered that further revisions could enhance the overall impact for the spectator. As with any live production, the audience responded favorably to certain choices and less favorably to others, creating a feedback loop that encouraged both improvisation and experimentation in each of the translations. Consequently, after each day of educational outreach in El Paso in 2019, the group made new edits to the dialogue. Changes were made, for example, to the closing scene of *El marión*, with a portable radio replacing Teresa's traveling musicians. Ana's scene in *La ropavejera* was modified as well, with the elderly, woebegone bride-to-be now represented using the shadow puppet created by the audience during the introductory phase of the overall show. When read as a composite whole, these modifications do not significantly alter either play's inherent structure. Music, now played by a radio instead of a live band, still accompanies Teresa's scene with Costanzo and the festive nature of the finale. Ana, now a composite character based on audience choices instead of the withering effects of old age, still appears and advances the plot. As a guiding principle, therefore, Dragoncillo views the text as perpetually fluid and expects to continue adapting these works as long as they perform them.

New Opportunities, New Challenges

Dragoncillo anticipates a range of opportunities for expansion and growth in the coming years. After presenting their work at the *In the Beginning Were Puppets* conference organized by Prof. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner at University of Salzburg in collaboration

with the Salzburg Marionette Theatre in January 2020, Dragoncillo was anticipating its busiest year, with performances scheduled in California and Florida, as well as a potential performance at the Almagro Festival in Spain. Regrettably, the Coronavirus pandemic made these face-to-face visits impossible. Yancey, however, still managed to participate in both *LA Escena* (Los Angeles Festival of Hispanic Classical Theater) and *Loco for Love's* virtual festivals by sharing a recording of his 2016 hand-puppet adaptation of *Don Quixote* titled *Quijóteres*, among other contributions. Even before the onset of the pandemic, Dragoncillo was thinking about new ways to present existing material. Under the title of *¡Soy quien soy! (Me, Myself, Awry)*, for instance, the group combined the three *entremeses* discussed in this article (*The Fabulous Johnny Frog*, *The Ladies' Man*, and *Second Hands*) with two brief pedagogical workshops that introduce audiences more fully to the historical context of early modern Spain, the genre of the *entremés*, and the art of shadow puppetry See Figure 8.



Figure 8: Promotional poster for *¡Soy quien soy! (Me, Myself, Awry)*.

The main purpose of this effort was to reimagine each play as part of a larger whole, thereby giving the troupe a production lasting more than an hour (versus the shorter performances to which they were accustomed). Each *entremés* presents a carnivalesque world turned upside down where the protagonists play with multiple identities and social expectations are constantly under the microscope. Given how the plays subvert gender and beauty norms, the comical situations proposed by these three farces are visionary within their own context and relevant to 21st-century audiences.

The coming months and years will see Dragoncillo add to its repertoire of works from early modern Spain. Furthermore, Dragoncillo plans to develop projects that explore different genres (e.g., short stories and poetry) and literary traditions within Latin America and Iberia. These additions will transform the group's catalogue in a way that better reflects the rich literary legacy of Spanish-speaking countries, their diverse cultures, and the variety of experiences therein. This growth will depend on the troupe's ability to secure grants and other resources that will expedite the processes of creation, adaptation, and performance.

As they expand their temporal, geographic, and literary scope, Dragoncillo plans to collaborate not only with members of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater to offer workshops on puppet creation, translation, adaptation, and community outreach, but also with other organizations committed to public engagement and the arts. Given their inability to visit all of the places that may take an interest in Dragoncillo's work, the group is committed to finding ways to simplify the scale of productions. Working with a reduced cast to adapt shorter pieces (such as poems or short stories) on a smaller and simpler stage (such as their prototype mini-theater or *teatrino*) will reduce the labor investment needed to produce a show. Reducing scale would also allow the troupe's members to operate more independently and make it possible for educators and community organizers to apply Dragoncillo's methods and resources in their own way. See **Figure 9**. Related to the challenges of travel, production, and appropriate social distancing, Dragoncillo is beginning to envision a distance-learning program for supporting educators through online training and open access to teaching materials and other resources, e.g., videos and puppet designs, and reach communities they are unable to visit in person.

Beginning with the End in Mind

Puppets existed well before our time and will undoubtedly outlive us. It is our privilege to animate them for a time and, in so doing, move audiences to a greater appreciation for the arts in general, as well as the time, place, and authors of their creation. In harnessing



Figure 9: Images of the *Teatrino* (mini-theater), intended for smaller-scale shadow-puppet productions.

the potential of this unique performance tradition, Dragoncillo has intentionally moved within, across, and beyond its founders' respective universities and colleges in an effort to impact communities across the United States. Although the group aims to educate and entertain all audiences through imaginative, bilingual storytelling, its primary audience is children, whose enthusiasm and need for multicultural programming

fuel everything the troupe does. Involving college students in the initiative further enhances its overall impact. In the three years since Dragoncillo's first performance, these efforts have already yielded tremendous results, with the number of student performers totaling more than 50 and audiences numbering in the thousands. Were it not for a global pandemic, these numbers would likely be double.

During the 2020–21 academic year, the troupe initiated a new project that will expand the cultural, historical, and artistic focus of the company. The troupe is currently working on reconstructing a puppet show that Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca premiered in 1923 at his Granada home in celebration of his sister, Isabel's birthday. This show, which also featured composer Manuel de Falla and puppeteer Hermenegildo Lanz, combined an anonymous Iberian medieval allegorical play (*Play of the Three Wise Kings*), a 17th-century *entremés* by Miguel de Cervantes (*The Chatterboxes*), and a farce written by Lorca himself for the occasion (*The Girl Who Waters the Basil and the Inquisitive Prince*).¹⁰ The way that this particular production harnesses puppet theater's potential to transcend both time and space with the purpose of reaching a particular audience (i.e., Lorca's sister), captures the current direction of the troupe.

Reimagining Lorca, Falla, and Lanza's 1923 performance represents a bridge between the familiar dramatic world of the Spanish Golden Age and the various other texts and contexts of the Spanish-speaking world that the troupe endeavors to share with audiences in the future. It is at the intersection of literature, visual arts, and the languages of puppetry that Dragoncillo sees a unique opportunity to reach younger audiences and expand their cultural horizons. In his *entremés*, *El dragoncillo*, Pedro Calderón de la Barca speaks of a *compañía de dragones*, which in the context of the piece refers to a company of soldiers. Dragoncillo Puppet Troupe borrows that same expression to describe a very different kind of company, one that enlists a growing number of children, students, educators, and community partners to deliver high-impact learning experiences that are fun, informative, and culturally enriching for everyone involved. The result of this inspiring endeavor is a company far greater than the sum of its parts.

¹⁰ In their respective eras, Cervantes and Lorca were aware of the artistic richness and pedagogical potential of puppetry. They were both familiar with different types of puppets and manipulation techniques. Cervantes would have been familiar with Sicilian *pupi* after spending several months in the region in 1571 following the Battle of Lepanto. In chapters XXV and XXVI of the second part of *Don Quixote* (1615) and various interludes in his *Exemplary Novels* (1609), Cervantes refers to puppeteers and puppets, demonstrating his deep understanding of puppetry and its creative possibilities. Lorca, a native of Granada and popular culture enthusiast, had some knowledge of the *titeres de cachiporra*, the Spanish version of billy-club puppets. In addition to his participation in the above-mentioned show for his sister, Lorca wrote two puppet theater plays: *The Billy-Club Puppets* and *The Puppet Play of Don Cristóbal*.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare

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