Astucias Por HEREDAR
UN SOBRINO A UN TÍO

Study Guide
The last time Astucias por heredar was seen on the stage was in the early 19th century. Over two hundred years later, the show receives its first contemporary staging at Milagro in a commedia dell’arte style.

This play was the first play ever performed by Hispanic settlers in California in the area of Santa Cruz and Monterey where it was preserved in manuscript form until today. The original is in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

This study guide looks at the history of the play, some of the language, and provides a little insight into commedia dell’arte.

We hope this information informs your enjoyment of the production.
Context: Reygadas, Vestige of the Age of Revolution

Astucias por heredar un sobrino a un tío (Tricks to Inherit: A Nephew from his Uncle) will be performed for the first time in over two-hundred years as a result of the unique preservation of the original, banned, manuscript. Written in 1789, the scenarios and questions raised in the play regarding class, gender, politics, and religion led the Office of Censorship to refuse its license for performance in the Coliseum of Mexico City in New Spain. The play was performed, but in another territory: Alta California. In Branciforte, which today is part of Santa Cruz, the manuscript of Astucias por heredar un sobrino a un tío was in the hands of the Volunteers of Catalonia, a crew who moved from Mexico City to Branciforte. The Volunteers of Catalonia performed the play near the turn of the 19th Century in Alta California, perhaps in various emerging communities with secular populations such as Branciforte.¹

The author of Astucias, Fermín de Reygadas, was born in Santander, Spain in 1754. An immigrant to Nueva España (New Spain), Reygadas was a political thinker, writer, and mining engineer. In political spheres his forward thinking was opposed to the extent that “anti-Reygadas” was a political position. He is quoted with the thought that more important than whether a mayor is of indigenous or Spanish descent is the degree to which ethics are embodied in the post.

Astucias holds a significance of revolution. Being in fact an adaptation of a 1708 French play Le Légataire universel (The Heir Apparent) by Jean-François Regnard, Reygadas’ play was produced and performed in a time when the monarchies in Europe

were experiencing internal upheaval echoed by efforts in the colonial territories to form independent constitutions. In his adaptation, Reygadas includes class and gender revolution, augmenting the role of Lucía: in Astucias the female servant is opinionated and advocates for her right to inherit. Both her outspoken lines and presumption of gaining monetary wealth contributed to the radical nature of the play and to its censorship.

The play may be viewed as a metaphor for the larger scale, with factions in the colonies seeking independence much as the servants in the play seek empowerment and emancipation. In the Age of Revolution (approximately 1774 – 1849), the uprisings in France and around the globe redefined the path of power. Through the transition from monarchies to republics, ideas about the inheritance of ruling power were changing. Astucias asks what is right, morally, in the distribution of wealth and inheritance of power — a relevant question to this day.

The censorship of Astucias also came in a time and place where the act of theatre was only permitted in the context of charity — the Coliseum in the Christian settlement of Mexico City was a charity organization in which the theatre supported the attached NGO hospital, justifying Christian attendance of theatrical arts. Most plays from the time and region have been lost, some plays only noted briefly in censors’ files. The fact that the full manuscript remains is testament both to an intricate history in which preservation and access to patrimony are gated by cultural prejudice, and to the faculty of the playwright, today’s researchers and adapters, and the play to reach beyond borders and history to examine that which makes us human.

2. “Performing Spain from Colonial California: Astucias por Heredar (1789-1805),” Garcia-Caro, Pedro.
Plot Overview

Don Lucas, living in Madrid and nearing the end of his life, is surrounded by servants and a possible heir. Lucía, Don Lucas’s faithful servant of ten years, in conversation with Crispín, the servant of Don Lucas’s nephew Don Pedro, divulges that Don Lucas is stingy, constantly inventing ways to save money, but that she hopes to be rewarded for her service in his will. Don Lucas’s nephew, Don Pedro, and the servants discuss the situation and hatch a plan to convince Don Lucas to name Don Pedro as his heir to fortune, titles, and estates. Don Pedro, with much to gain, including the hand in marriage of Doña Isabel, as Doña Teresa requires the fortune before offering her hand, agrees to reward the servants and they set the plan in motion. Don Lucas, stubborn to leave this world, proposes his own marriage to Isabel and awaits visits from two other possible heirs so he may examine their worthiness. Through the servant’s tricks, Don Lucas deems that Don Pedro is the only worthy heir. The scribe arrives to take the testament, but is it too late? The servants, convinced Don Lucas has passed on and this is the only way to update the will, fake Don Lucas’s testament, benefited by the fact that it’s been years since Don Lucas signed anything himself. Crispín, pretending to be Don Lucas, wills himself 4,000 reales annually, an enormous sum, to which no one can protest given the situation. The celebration is halted by Don Lucas’s recovery. When Don Lucas learns of the updated will, the servants scramble to explain how, in his drowsiness, his memory of giving the testament must have vanished. In discussing the terms of the will, the characters muse on aspects of morality, saintly action, and status. Lucía argues that in passing to the next life it is impossible to take fortune “so why not, with an open and pious hand, rescue two servants from the tyranny of poverty,” given that Don Pedro is willing to share the inheritance. Don Lucas, seeing that everyone wishes to proceed with the forged will, agrees to uphold it and upon confirming the interest of Doña Isabel and Don Pedro to wed, asks them to take hands and invites everyone to celebrate the wedding.


Characters:
- Don Lucas, elderly
- Don Pedro, his nephew
- Lucía, Don Lucas’s servant
- Crispín, Don Pedro’s servant
- Doña Teresa
- Doña Isabel, her daughter
- Andrés, Doña Teresa’s footman
- Don Emeterio, the pharmacist
- Don Justo, scribe
Terms of Note

**Amo:** Spanish term for master, owner; specifically referring to class, slavery, ownership of another being. Etymology: from the masculine form of *ama* from the Hispanicized Latin “amma,” which in the 13th century was used for wet nurse and lady of the house (nodriza, dueña de la casa).

**Caquético:** To be in a state of malnutrition due to consumptive illnesses such as tuberculosis or cancer.

**Commedia dell’arte:** A form of improvised theater developed during the Italian Renaissance in the 16th century, with roots in Ancient Greek and Roman theater. Remaining popular through the 18th century, commedia dell’arte style continues today and is said to be the bread upon which you can you can put anything. Troupes performing in this style would travel between towns using masks, exaggerated features, mime techniques, and recognizable archetypes to connect with audiences regardless of language and class. Given the improvised nature, the performers were able to tailor performances to each audience, drawing on general plot outlines. Performed in the streets with no tickets for admission, the style lends itself to satire as the performance can be swiftly staged, denounced, and brought to the next town.

**Criada bachillera:** Lucía is referred to as the criada bachillera, a satire of contradiction. At the time the play was written, neither Lucía’s class nor gender corresponded with completing bachelor’s studies. Thus, adapting the word bachiller to the feminine bachillera expands upon the out-of-placeness of an educated servant, highlighting the disparity of gender and furthering the comical satire of the wise maid.

**Croesus (Creso):** The last king of Lydia in the 6th Century B.C. gained fame and became reference for wealth, power, and human vanity. In the play, Doña Isabel says to Don Pedro: “This whole naughty ploy that you do to be an heir of Don Lucas’s goods is useless, for I have a heart so gallant so full of heroic breath, that if you yourself weren’t worthy of my affections, I wouldn’t love you, even if you had more gold and silver than Croesus.”

**Enredo:** A key term explicitly referencing confusion of identity and dialogue characteristic of the theatrical genre of Astucias: “comedy of errors,” known in Spanish as “la comedia de enredo.”

**Fandango:** Popular couples dance from 18th century Spain that came to Mexico and California.

**Pelona/Pelada:** Death. Possible mexicanism.

**Pesos and reales:** While the play is set in Madrid, the Spanish peso “piece of eight” (real de a ocho) was also a standard coin in the Spanish colonies in North America. Also called the Spanish dollar, the peso was introduced in Spain in 1497 and was worth 8 reales. Scheming to benefit from Don Lucas’s fortune, the servants hope to inherit the following sums: Lucía, 500 pesos; Crispín, 4,000 reales annually. The inheritance by a servant of any wealth from a master was noted as “unbelievable” by the censor.

**Postrero:** The last one. The youngest child.

**Sinon (Sinón):** Warrior in Greek mythology often alluded to in Spanish Golden Age theatre (1590-1681); a symbol of treachery and fraud.

**Sopílfora:** Possible from the German: Smart, educated woman. Smart.

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Bibliography


Commedia dell'arte

Commedia dell'arte, (Italian: comedy of the profession or comedy of professional artists) is an Italian theatrical form that emerged in northern Italy in the fifteenth century and rapidly flourished throughout Europe from the 16th through the 18th century, usually performed outdoors by traveling companies with dialogue improvised by the actors. Performances were based on a basic, often familiar story. Outside Italy, the form had its greatest success in France, where it became the Comédie-Italienne. In England, elements from it were naturalized in the harlequinade in pantomime and in the Punch-and-Judy show, a puppet play involving the commedia dell'arte character Punch. The comical Hanswurst, of German folklore, was also a commedia dell'arte character.

The earliest known company formed in Padua in 1545, and by the turn of the seventeenth century some companies were known internationally. In France, the commedia became a favorite theme of artists such as Jean-Baptiste Joseph Pater (1695–1736) and Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) (49.7.54).

Source and further reading:


On your own

Stock characters, such as the Pantalone and the Innamorati, and masks are distinctive features of commedia dell’arte.

- Identify which stock characters are represented in Astucias...
- Why do some characters wear masks and others don’t?
Astucias por heredar un sobrino a un tío

By Fermín de Reygadas
Directed by Robi Arce

February 8 – March 3, 2018
Thursday–Saturday, 7:30 PM | Sunday, 2:00 PM

Milagro Theatre | 525 SE Stark Street, Portland

Tickets start at $27
Student, senior, and veteran discounts available
For group sales, contact us at 503-236-7253 x 117

Preview: Thursday February 8 at 7:30 PM
Opening night: Friday February 9 at 7:30 PM
followed by a reception in the café

Special Events
Sunday, February 11
Talk-back with the cast and creative team following the performance

Saturday February 17
Roundtable: Astucias por heredar: banned, forgotten, revived
in El Zócalo at El Centro Milagro
Moderated by Dr. Pedro García-Caro,
University of Oregon
3:00 – 5:00 PM; FREE

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