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FOR THE 2016 Series, we are again asking friends and colleagues to send a check or visit PayPal to make a more substantial donation that will allow us to continue this vital work! Checks should be made payable to New Perspectives Theatre Company noting OHS as the beneficiary, and mailed to: New Perspectives Theatre Company, 456 West 37th Street, New York, NY 10018.

Credit Card donations may be made at <http://www.nptnyc.org/programs/ONHERSHOULDERS.htm>

#### THE 2015 SERIES

DATE	PLAY	AUTHOR	DIRECTOR	DRAMATURG
2/18/15	<i>The Suffrage Plays</i> <i>Lady Geraldine's Speech (1909), How The Vote Was Won (1909), The Mother's Meeting (1913)</i>	Mrs. Harlow Phibbs, Beatrice Harraden, Cicely Hamilton, Christopher St. John	Melissa Attebery	Barbara Cohen-Stratynner, Ph. D.
4/15/15	<i>Spunk (1926)</i>	Zora Neale Hurston	Aneesha Kudtarkar	Sadah "Espii" Proctor
9/23/15	<i>Overtones (1913)</i> <i>Fourteen (1920)</i>	Alice Erya Gerstenberg	Melissa Attebery	Mari Lyn Henry
12/4/15	<i>House of Desires (1683)</i>	Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz	Melody Brooks	Heather Violanti

#### About the New School for Drama

The creative home for the future of performing arts. **Agile. Engaged. Innovative. Multi-disciplinary.** The New School for Drama is home to a dynamic group of young directors, writers, actors, creative technologists, and award-winning faculty. With a core belief in rigorous creativity and collaborative learning, our programs embrace civic awareness across performance disciplines to create work imbued with professionalism, imagination and social context. For more information, please visit [www.newschool.edu/drama](http://www.newschool.edu/drama)

**The Play in Context**, the dramaturgical and scholarly presentation component for all of the readings, is sponsored in part by the League of Professional Theatre Women, a not-for-profit organization promoting visibility and increasing opportunities for women in theatre since 1982. [www.theatrewomen.org](http://www.theatrewomen.org)

LEAGUE OF PROFESSIONAL  
THEATRE  
WOMEN

**ON HER SHOULDERS**  
New Perspectives Theatre Company  
and The New School for Drama  
present

# House of Desires

by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz  
Translation by Catherine Boyle



Directed by Melody Brooks  
Dramaturgy by Heather Violanti

Friday, December 4, 2015  
**The New School**

Wollman Hall, 65 West 11th Street  
New York, New York



THE NEW SCHOOL  
**DRAMA**

## Women have been writing plays and contributing to the Western Theatrical Canon for 1,000 years.

### How many of the plays or playwrights can you name?

Total plays by women produced in commercial and regional theatres in the U.S. have remained below 20% for most of the 20th Century and now into the 21st. Yet many of these plays have been the most successful of their time, earning greater awards and box office income than their male counterparts.

At the first reading of **ON HER SHOULDERS** in May 2013, we surveyed the audience about their knowledge of the play and/or the playwright. Given that our audience is generally composed of theatre practitioners and those with an interest in women in theatre, the numbers were still shocking: only 40% had ever heard of Rachel Crothers; just 21% had read any of her plays, and only 7% had seen a production of one of them.

### With a general audience, we can imagine that these numbers would be even worse!



The goal of **ON HER SHOULDERS** is to remedy this situation. By presenting staged readings of plays from across the spectrum of time and place, with contemporary dramaturges adapting them for modern audiences, we are making it impossible to deny or ignore the great tradition and value of women's contribution to the theatrical canon.

Through our reading series we intend to motivate producers and directors to champion and produce these brilliant plays in New York and regionally, and to incite audiences to demand to see them.

In making history visible, we also shine the light on today's women playwrights and see their work as part of a continuum a thousand years long. They stand on the shoulders of giants--and in restoring our foremothers to their rightful place, we elevate all women playwrights.



**ON HER SHOULDERS** is also aligned with the goals and projects of 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists. This grassroots initiative was launched in August 2009 to work toward 50% representation for women playwrights and directors by the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage in the U.S.

**NEW PERSPECTIVES THEATRE COMPANY (NPTC)** is an award-winning, multi-racial company performing in the Theatre District and in communities throughout New York City. Our mission is to develop and produce new plays and playwrights, especially women and people of color, to present classic plays in a style that addresses contemporary issues, and to extend the benefits of theatre to young people and communities in need. **Our aim is not to exclude, but to cast a wider net.** Now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> season, notable NPTC productions have included *Richard III*, starring Austin Pendleton; *Exhibit #9* by Tracy Scott Wilson (1999 Audeco Award); *Jihad* by Ann Chamberlain (OOBR Award for Best Production); *The Taming of the Shrew* (OOBR Award for Best Production), *Admissions* by Tony Velella (10 Best Plays Backstage); the U.S. premiere of *Visit* by renowned Argentinean playwright Ricardo Monti; and the New York Premieres of Vaclav Havel's *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, OBIE-Winner Stephanie Berry's *The Shineequa Chronicles* (produced with Blackberry Productions), *Lemon Meringue Façade* by Ted Lange, and *MOTHER OF GOD!* by Michele Miller (Finalist, Princess Grace Foundation Award). [www.nptnyc.org](http://www.nptnyc.org)

questioned the right of women to study and write poetry. In the "Self Defense," Juana argued for women to be educated on equal footing with men:

"Do women not have rational soul like men? Then, why should they not also enjoy the privilege of the enlightenment of letters? Is a woman's soul not as open to God's grace and glory as a man's? They, why should it not be open to learning and the sciences, which are lesser than the glories of God? What divine revelation, what ruling of reason created such a severe law for us?"

Juana also began to write plays during this productive time. Her first comedy, *Los empeños de una casa* (was written in 1683 to celebrate the arrival of a new viceregal couple in New Spain. In *House of Desires*, Juana and toyed with the conventions of Golden Age comedies, re-examining the Spanish code of honor from a female perspective. This play's success led to her next dramatic work, *Amor es más labirinto* (*Love is a Greater Labyrinth*), a re-telling of the Minotaur myth written in collaboration with Juan de Guevara in 1689. She may have written, or at least contributed to, a third play, *La segunda Celestina* (*The Second Celestina*), a play written shortly before *House of Desires* and referenced during its intermission entertainments.



### A courtyard in Sor Juana's convent, now a university named after her

By the last decade of the 17th century, Juana began to tread on dangerous ground. The political and social climate in New Spain, while always precarious for women, became even more uncertain due to economic and governmental instability. In 1690, Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz published Juana's critique of a controversial sermon on the forms of Christ's love—without her permission. The Bishop prefaced it with a damning letter by "Sor Filotea" (actually the Bishop himself writing under a female pen name), urging Juana to abandon intellectual discourse and pursue less ambitious, less worldly activities more appropriate for a nun. In 1691, Juana responded with her famous "Respuesta de la poetica a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz," ("The Poet's Answer to the Most Illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz)—an astute and heartfelt defense of women's right to education and her own right to live life as she chose.

After the *Respuesta*, however, Juana lost her freedoms. Under pressure from convent and Church authorities, she gave up her library, renounced writing, and wrote a renewal of her religious vows in her own blood. At the same time, she wrote out her death certificate in blood—asking her sisters to fill in the date when the time came. They had not long to wait. Physically weakened and spiritually broken, Sor Juana fell ill while nursing her fellow sisters during an outbreak of plague. She died on April 17, 1695.

The high regard in which Sor Juana was held is reflected in the eulogies to her by more than 60 poets of Spain and New Spain. These tributes were collected by Juan Ignacio de Castorena y Ursúa and published five years after her death in *Fama y obras posthumas del Fénix de México dezima musa, poetisa americana, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (A celebration of and posthumous works by the Phoenix of Mexico and Tenth Muse, the Mexican poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz).



## The Tenth Muse by Heather Violanti

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (c.1651-1695) defied 17th century conventions to become one of the most prominent playwrights, poets, and scholars in the colony of New Spain (now Mexico)—until those conventions destroyed her.

She was born Juana Ramírez de Asbaje in 1651, in San Miguel de Nepantla, a town near Mexico City. Her mother, Isabel Ramírez de Santillana, was a *criolla*, meaning she was of Spanish descent but had been born in the colony. Her father, Pedro Manuel de Asbaje y Vargas Manchuca, was a Spanish soldier from the Basque region. On the surface, it might seem an advantageous match. In the evolving social and racial hierarchy of New Spain, *criollas* sought marriage with Europeans to raise their standing. Isabel and Pedro, however, were not married, and Pedro abandoned the family after Juana was born.

Both Juana's social background and gender could have kept her at the fringes of society, but she hungered for education. At age three, she followed her sister to school and demanded to be taught to read. At age six or seven, when she first heard about the universities of Mexico City, she begged her mother to allow her to study there. When she was told only males could attend, she wanted her mother to disguise her as a boy. As this was impossible she taught herself from her maternal grandfather's library.



In 1664, at age 13, Juana's precocious scholarship and beauty had caught the attention of the new viceregal couple. She was brought to their glittering court in Mexico City and became Vicereine Doña Leonor Carreto's favorite lady-in-waiting. Juana's poems, wit, and good looks charmed courtiers, but she soon tired

of the artifice of court life. She wanted to devote herself to writing and learning. The only way this was possible for a woman was to enter a convent. In 1667, dreaming of a scholarly life, Juana joined the Barefoot Carmelites of St. Joseph, but their rigorous asceticism proved too much for her delicate health. She returned to court briefly to recover. Then, in 1669, she entered the Convent of Saint Paula of the Order of St. Jerome, where she would remain for the rest of her life. This order initially allowed Juana the freedom to pursue her scholastic and literary ambitions. She could write, study, host salons, and hold court with visiting dignitaries and governing officials.

Juana began her literary career as a poet. By 1676, her song poems were being performed at church services and garnering acclaim. She was particularly known for her *villancicos*, a type of sung poem, or carol, with its roots in peasant songs. Spanish Golden Age poets such as Lope de Vega had made *villancicos* the height of fashion. Juana expanded the stylish *villancico* form, blending the expected lyricism and wordplay with surprising new elements—the language and cultural life of New Spain, everything from African dialect to indigenous legends and dances. She also began to develop her dramatic skills, creating songs that resembled miniature plays, complete with complex plots and rich characters. In 1677, her first collection of songs was published—the *Villancicos de San Pedro Nolasco*.

By the 1680's, Juana was at the height of her influence and literary powers, daring to publicly question male authority. In 1681, she wrote an impassioned "Spiritual Self Defense" criticizing Father Antonio Núñez de Miranda, her former confessor at the convent. Miranda had

## ON HER SHOULDERS

presents

### House of Desires

by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Doña Ana  
Celia  
Doña Leonor  
Don Carlos  
Castaño  
Don Pedro  
Don Rodrigo  
Hernando  
Don Juan

Aurea Tomesk†  
Zoe-Anastassiou†  
Colie McClellan  
Isreal McKinney Scott†  
Arisael Rivera†  
Federico Trigo\*†  
William Blechingberg\*  
Zoe-Anastassiou†  
Velson D'Souza†

†New School Alum \*Member AEA

Please join us after the reading for a Play in Context discussion and a glass of wine

**MELODY BROOKS** (*Director*) is the founder and Artistic Director of New Perspectives Theatre Company (NPTC), where she directs the Women's Work LAB, which develops short and full-length plays by 6-10 members per year; she also serves as Executive Producer for NPTC's *Voices From the Edge Festival*, which has showcased more than 75 new works by African-American writers and performers since 1998. In 25 years, Melody has developed, directed and produced more than 150 original and classic plays in locations ranging from large professional venues to city parks and schools in all NYC boroughs. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the League of Professional Theatre Women, serving on the Heritage and International Committees.

**HEATHER VIOLANTI** (*Dramaturg*) is a New York-based dramaturg and playwright. Favorite production dramaturgy includes *A Little Journey*, *Love Goes to Press*, and *Susan and God* at the Mint Theater. She has also worked with emerging playwrights in developing their plays in England and the United States. Heather is currently a member of the BMI Librettists Workshop and is attending the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. She holds an MFA in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from the Yale School of Drama and an MA, Writing for Stage and Broadcast Media, from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

**CATHERINE BOYLE** (*Translator*) is Professor of Latin American Cultural Studies at King's College London. She has published widely on Latin American culture, theatre and performance, with particular reference to Chile. She was a co-founder of the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*. She is co-director of the theatre translation and performance project, Out of the Wings ([www.outofthewings.org](http://www.outofthewings.org)). Her translation of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa* as *House of Desire* was premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2004 as part of its Spanish Golden Age Season, and has been performed on a number of occasions since. She is a translator of Latin American theatre and poetry, and her most recent work is on the meeting places of translation and cultural history.

## SEEING AND NOT SEEING: *HOUSE OF DESIRES* IN CONTEXT

by Heather Violanti



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (c.1651-1695) is considered one of the last great authors of the *Siglo de oro*, the “Golden Age” of literature that flourished in the Spanish-speaking world from the mid-sixteenth century to the last decades of the seventeenth. *House of Desires* ranks among Sor Juana’s masterpieces, reflecting both her feminist perspective and her desire to create great literature in the idiom of the “new” world, Mexico.

*House of Desires*, first performed on October 4, 1683 in Mexico City, was part of a *fiestejo*, a festival featuring a play, songs, and interactive performances. The *House of Desires fiestejo* is believed to be the only one to have survived in its entirety. It honors the then-current viceroy (governor) of New Spain, Don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, and celebrates the arrival of a new archbishop, Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas, into Mexico City.

Ironically, the bishop preached against the evils of theatre.

Following the traditions of the form, the *fiestejo* begins with a *loa*, brief dramatic/poetic piece typically written in praise of a saint or official. Sor Juana, who had excelled at crafting *loas* since childhood, wrote a song poem in which Merit, Diligence, Fortune, and Chance compete to see who is the greatest of joys.

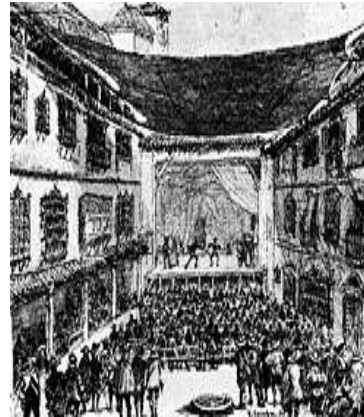
Another element of the *fiestejo* was the *sainete*, a short interlude performed between acts of the main play, whose themes echoed those of the play. Sor Juana used the *sainetes* for *House of Desires* to comment on life in New Spain. The first *sainete*, the *Sainete del palacio* (*Sainete of the Palace*), was a veiled critique on the artificiality of court life—prior to becoming a nun, Sor Juana had spent formative years in the viceregal court of Mexico City. In the *Sainete of the Palace*, the allegorical figures of Love, Respect, Courtesy, and Kindness compete to win the disdain of the palace ladies—only to be told, in the end, that they do not deserve such a dubious honor.

The play’s other *sainete*, simply called *Sainete segundo* (*Second Sainete*), ranks among the most innovative moments in Spanish theatre. Reflecting the Golden Age obsession with metatheatricality—the audience’s awareness that they are watching a play—this *sainete* features two “audience members,” Arias and Muñiz, who criticize the play they are watching. In a sly wink to the prejudices of New Spanish audiences, who were trained to think anything written in Spain was superior, they complain that it is not funny enough and is not as good as Spanish plays. They dismiss the play as *mestizo* (of mixed race). In an ever slier wink to the prejudices against women playwrights, they attribute it to a male contemporary of Sor Juana,



Acevedo (since a female author would be unthinkable, however much they dislike the play). Then, “Acevedo” himself appears, is hissed at by the audience, and dies of shame because his play has failed.

The performance concluded with a *sarao*, a masquerade with music and dance. Sor Juana concluded *House of Desires* with the *Sarao de cuatro naciones* (*Sarao of Four Nations*), an exploration of the complex relationships between the “old” and “new” world, between colonizer and colony. In this piece, four “nations”—Spain, Africa, Italy, and New Spain—comment on the play itself as well as their own cultures.



19th Century rendering of a 17th Century Spanish Theatre

*House of Desires* plays with the conventions of Spanish Golden Age comedy, which, like the comedies of Shakespeare, revolved around complicated love triangles, mistaken identities, and intrigue. Sor Juana both celebrates and parodies these conventions to craft a poetical exploration of the meaning of desire—and the place of women in society.

The play’s very title—*Los empeños de una casa* in Spanish—alludes to the title of a popular comedy by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Los empeños de un acaso* (*The Trials of Chance*). By playing with words, Sor Juana immediately acknowledges—and subverts—the work of the male “masters” who have preceded her.

Calderón was known for his “cloak and dagger” comedies, which featured elaborate love plots, elopements, disguises, witty word play, and thrilling sword fights. Sor Juana uses all these elements in *House of Desires* and makes them her own. Notably, it is women—Doña Ana and Leonor—who drive much of the intrigue. The play’s great comic moment—during which Carlos’ crafty servant, Castaño, disguises himself in Leonor’s clothes—honors the cloak and dagger tradition while adding a distinctly feminist perspective, making the audience aware of what it is like to experience the critical male gaze.

With its emphasis on mistaken identity, and its play on seeing and not seeing, *House of Desires* urges Sor Juana’s audience to notice what they might otherwise overlook—the real emotions obscured by the strict Spanish “honor code” (which emphasized the *appearance* of virtue above all else), and the talented women like Sor Juana, made invisible by a time and place that offered few opportunities for them to succeed. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out that the central character of Leonor, a beautiful woman with a brilliant mind, bears many similarities to Sor Juana herself.

Translator Catherine Boyle concludes “Writing from her convent, invisible at the performance of the play, Sor Juana writes herself into it; she forces us to see her.”

