

Performing Utopia and Empire in Early Modern Spanish Drama
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Proposing that performance satisfies a human desire to reach for something better, theatre scholar Jill Dolan contends that theatre is a participatory forum in which social and political ideals can be affirmed in shared space and time. Dolan defines the “utopian performative” as the imagining of utopia in the collaborative atmosphere of live performance, showing how a culture moves away from the real into the performative to enact an ideal future or imagine what it would like to become.

In this paper, I discuss early modern Spanish drama in the context of the utopian performative, revealing the Spanish stage to be a kind of collective testimony that requires participation and affirmation from a theatrical audience. In this view, the *corral de comedias* becomes a microcosm of Spanish society, not only passively viewing, but also contributing actively to its own comprehension of early modern society and the role of the individual and the nation. Drawing examples from Cervantes’s *Numancia*, Lope de Vega’s *El nuevo mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón*, Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, and other plays that represent war, empire, and conquest, I will analyze the performative process by which playwrights and their audiences collaborate to envision ideal societies and the resolution, through fictive imagination, of early modern culture’s most violent and disturbing problems. In different ways, these playwrights utilize what Richard Schechner has termed the “gathering-performing-dispersing” moments of performance to propose an interactive referendum on the values of the Spanish nation.