

LA FESTA D'ELX REVISITED:
Elx, August 2003

Pamela M. King

It is now eighteen years since I first visited Elche (*Elx* in Catalan) for the *Festa*, and seventeen since Asunción Salvador-Rabaza and I introduced it to readers of *Medieval English Theatre*. I returned this August after a break of nine years, chiefly in order to prepare ground for the 2004 SITM Congress and to meet and talk to members of the local organising committee, but of course I also saw the production. Five times, in fact, counting rehearsals. Many things have changed since the late 1980s. Those aiming to attend SITM will not be disappointed by the quality of the production itself. *Mestre de Capella* José Antonio Román, and director and stage manager, Joan Castaño, have just stood down after nine years, but the legacy of their winning combination is apparent. The quality of the singing is superb, and has an evenness which used to be engagingly absent. The adult actors are also now well-schooled in a confident and demonstrative style (look; gesture; sing) which again seems more assured and deliberate. All of the chapel of singers are rehearsed in teams, so that the best are capable of taking a number of the parts. Like premier-league football, it is revealed to no-one until the last moment who will play in what position in the final. Personally I enjoyed a sense of coming of age as an audience member when I recognised Santiago (St James the Great); last time I saw him he was playing the Virgin Mary. He has kept his voice – and his looks – and like many before him has grown up with the play. Perhaps only the *araceli*, and the Trinity, remain rather ragged, but then it is difficult singing, to say nothing of playing harp and guitar, while being dropped from a great height.

Details of the staging have been corrected by the *Festa's* most vigilant archivist and researcher, Joan Castaño. The *araceli* now collects the soul of the Virgin from the hands of a small angel messenger who brings it from her body, thereby dispensing with the nonsense of bringing it up from the tomb before her body had actually been buried. The fight with the Jews is also much more convincing, and St Peter plays a larger part in fending them off, true to legend. His part had been gradually usurped by St John when that role was played for years by Sixto Marco, life-long performer

and commentator, self-taught artist, and Elche's own legend, who sadly died earlier this year.

The renewal of props and costumes has been more contentious. 'Heaven', the diaphragm of canvas which is stretched across the base of the cupola and through which all heavenly machines make their entrances, has been replaced twice in recent years. It now sports multi-coloured puffy clouds and is peopled with cherubim with Beatle haircuts, and is not to my taste. The *mangrana*, the pomegranate machine in which the angel of the Assumption descends, has, however, been beautifully restored, and health and safety matters above heaven have been attended to, all ropes renewed, and the giddy doors of heaven kept well clear of curious spectators like me.

All the costumes are new. Broadly the Maries, angels, and cushion-bearers look the same, but the fabric has been selected better to reflect the strong lighting needed when productions are filmed. Angels still look blowsy, but, with the addition of an embroidered collar here and a sash there, less as if they are wearing adapted sheeting. Wings are white, very feathery, and convincingly flight-worthy. I still wish, however, that they would return to the style of the boned and dagged jerkins and breeches preserved in the museum. The Apostles' costumes are acceptable in their way, though drawn apparently from another pattern-book, all woollen cloth, natural neutral dyes, and drapery reminiscent of the tinted pictures in the children's Bibles of my childhood. Wigs and beards are much improved, and there is a fashion for grow-your-own with a significant minority. They still do not wear haloes with their names on, however, although again the museum demonstrates that they used to: another source of regret. The Jews are most altered. Really there is no way of making the funeral of the Virgin Mary PC, but gestures in that direction have been attempted. Gone is the dirty rabble in striped kitchen towelling in favour of a handful of impressive rabbis in tall hats, plaited beards, and long side curls, accompanied by a large crowd indistinguishable from the apostles in appearance but for crocheted skull-caps.

Developments peripheral to the event itself left me feeling more ambivalent, as it has continued to become more and more of a media event. There is evidence everywhere of the money that a prudent Patronato has accumulated as what used to be a local festival, known outside Spain to only a few historians of music, has now been accorded special recognition by UNESCO. Everywhere there are small gestures suggesting a changed self-awareness, an aspiration to star quality. For

example, the schoolboy-angels from the *araceli* are hustled out of the machine on to the roof terraces accompanied by television cameras while someone relieves them immediately of their wigs and provides them with fluffy towels for the twenty-metre walk back to their heavenly dressing room. All the stage-hands in heaven now wear matching beige polo-shirts with *Tramoiste* printed on the back.

In the 1980s the museum of the *Festa* was accommodated in an upstairs antechamber in the church itself, and Joan Castaño presided over traditional glass cases of exhibits neatly labelled with little cards. In those days too, the little medieval hermitage chapel of St Sebastian round the corner from the church was rigged up with makeshift curtains and used as the cast's dressing room. (I treasure my photograph of the Jews' card school which was convened in the apse there throughout the performance.) Now the chapel is just a facade and a shell in which visitors to the new *Museo de la Festa* can enjoy a multi-media experience projected on all walls with surround-sound. This does tell the story of the *Festa*, presumably for those who visit out of season, but has casually ruined the hermitage, is poorly edited, and has moments of high-kitsch, including most memorably the projection of one of the actors to explain events to the audience in an avuncular way disconcertingly reminiscent of Obi-Wan Kenobi. The Museum is run by the *Ajuntamiento*, the adjoining *Casa de la Festa*, with its modern dressing rooms, meeting rooms, and sleek atrium where persons of importance hang out, smoke and network, is owned and run by the *Patronato*. Both produce gifts and spin-offs, including guides to the *Festa* translated into numerous languages.

I am in danger of falling into the trap of sentimentalising 'my' *Festa*, because there can never be an experience to equal that first visit. Being over-precious about aesthetic detail is also to misunderstand the fundamental characteristics of this unique phenomenon which have made it such a robust survivor for over half a millennium. So I am pleased to report that *La Festa d'Elx* is alive and well, thriving at the centre of its latest evolutions. If you choose to experience it as part of your attendance at the 2004 SITM Colloquium, you may like and dislike aspects of what you encounter, but you will never forget it.

St Martin's College, Lancaster