

Review of Prof. Christopher Swift's Talk:  
"Performing Empire: Ritual, Spectacle, and Theatre in Late Medieval Spain"  
*Works in the Works Series*, Humanities Department

On April 18, 2023, Professor Christopher Swift delivered a Works in the Works presentation discussing his upcoming monograph, *Performing Empire*. An exploration of theatrical performances in Spain from 1248 to 1492, Prof. Swift's work highlights the stage as a pivotal site of interreligious exchange during a period of Castilian empire-building.

Prof. Swift began his research on medieval theater as a student, earning a Ph.D. from the CUNY Graduate Center in Theater History, with Doctoral Certificates in Medieval Studies and Renaissance Studies. There was a massive gap in English language research about Medieval Theater, and with his background in Fine Arts, Prof. Swift felt compelled to fill this gap. Since then, he has examined the enduring consequences of the creative explorations across religions and cultures in medieval Spain, and particularly in the city of Seville. Prof. Swift made Seville the center of his work, as it was a natural intersection where goods arrived and explorers left on ships to the Americas.

First and foremost, Prof. Swift clarified that the theater to which he refers in his talk was much more grandiose than what we typically think of as theater today. These were "public spectacles," he said, including public punishment, brutal self-discipline, and theatrical humiliation.

Remarkably, the differing values of Christians, Jews, and Muslims came together via theater in Seville, and as a result, members of the three faiths were able to negotiate and reform interreligious relationships, enact social controls, and preserve communal memories, all through public performances. Prof. Swift provided detailed case studies illustrating this blending, and described evidence of interfaith and cross-cultural in three categories:

1. Grafting: a purposeful combination of faiths in which contrasts between cultures are extremely evident
2. Hybridizing: a process of transculturation that results in a distinct, original artifact or practice
3. Invasive species: leaving only a ghost of the vanquished, an outline of what has been removed in the exchange

Prof. Swift's talk led to a lively Q&A session, during which faculty members of various disciplines were able to contribute their own knowledge to the topics at hand as well as ask Prof. Swift to dive deeper into some of the concepts he mentioned. The event closed with a discussion of the blurred line between performance and reality, a series of questions leaving much to be discovered—likely by Prof. Swift himself.

Review by Jaclyn Griffith