

The Plot and Characters of *El Retrato Vivo*  
By Sarah Butler, BYU Student

El Retrato Vivo (“The Living Portrait”) is a story about a Spanish lady named Bernarda (also referred to as Doña Juana) and her extremely jealous husband, Cosme (also referred to as Juan Rana). Bernarda’s husband Cosme is so jealous, that he never leaves her alone in the house, he is constantly keeping watch on her. When Cosme’s behavior begins to get ridiculous to the point that Bernarda just cannot stand it anymore, she decides to play a clever joke on him to teach him a lesson.

The play begins with Bernarda telling her friend of the joke that she played on Cosme. Bernarda, with the help of a painter, convinced her husband that he is not actually himself, but rather is a portrait of himself, and that his real self is away on a hunting trip on the Zarzuela. Cosme completely believes the whole thing! He is absolutely convinced that he is really a portrait!

Things start to get more ridiculous as a number of visitors (invited by Bernarda and all aware of the joke she is playing on her husband) start arriving at the estate. First is a refined courtier who dotes upon Bernarda with a gift of lovely ribbons. Next comes a pompous valiant man, who attempts to pick a sword fight with the painting of Cosme. Then comes a mailman who brings a letter (written by Bernarda) that is supposedly from Cosme himself. Finally, in comes the painter, who riles the whole household into a sort of game where they dance around the “portrait” of Cosme, pointing out its imperfections and deviations from the “real” Cosme.

Amidst all the raucous, Cosme falls out of his picture frame. He finally realizes that he is not really a painting after all, and that his wife played this trick on him! Cosme realizes that he took his jealousy too far, and Bernarda realizes that perhaps she took her joke a little too far. The couple reconciles, and the play ends with all the characters dancing around the stage jubilantly.

As taken from Sarah Butler’s Lesson Plan, “The Plot and Characters of *El Retrato Vivo*” in BYU Golden Age Theater’s Outreach Plans, 2008.