



GROWING UP AND GAINING VISIBILITY (1996-1999)

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Two main reasons may explain a certain liveliness felt over the past three seasons in the Portuguese theatre: a certain political stability (brought about by a Socialist government coming into office in 95) and some cultural commitments on an international scale. Together these two reasons helped to increase State funding for the theatre and to develop special programmes within the framework of some great cultural events, as was the case of the EXPO 98 in Lisbon.

It does not mean that all the electoral promises were actually carried out as expected (specially when privatisation and other neoliberal measures took the place of the previous pledge for a Welfare State), or that all theatre practitioners have approved every step of the new policy led by the present Ministry for Culture. Indeed, the amount of subsidies allotted to theatre is still considered insufficient, some of the criteria to grant them remain controversial, a certain distortion of standards tends to penalise some projects that most certainly should have been supported, and the need to preserve, restore or build venues especially in the regions (outside Lisbon and Oporto) with good technical equipment has not yet met a firm policy.

However there has been some improvement regarding both the appointment of an independent jury to evaluate applications for subsidies, and the idea that a certain stability should be provided to some «historical» companies (15, to be more precise) through granting a subsidy

for three years and thus sparing them the need to apply every year. But, of course, these two measures did not avoid some injustice done to certain projects and did not go without dispute.

But bearing in mind the most positive aspects of the general situation, we may perceive in an overall view three main trends in the theatrical liveliness mentioned above: regional dissemination, diversity of projects, and accordance of some cultural visibility to the theatre.

1.

Indeed, there has been a steady increase of companies operating in the regions, and though not all of them share the same quality, they may be responsible for spreading out some cultural activity in small towns, often organising theatre festivals or other events that attract young people and help to prepare and enlarge theatre audiences. Some of these theatre groups are made up of young practitioners coming out from theatre schools who may find it difficult to be accepted in a more professional environment, but some of them seem devoted to experiment with different audiences. Outdoor performances, touring programmes, experimenting with local traditions and the stimulating use of some historical monuments to house productions have been some of the ideas developed by these theatre companies. Such is the case of Fatias de Cá that used the convent of Tomar to house Razank's *T de Lempicka*, a performance, directed by Carlos Carvalheiro, or the case of Teatro ao Largo (dir. Stephen Johnston) that experiments with popular traditions as the grand guignol touring several villages in Alentejo where it raises a platform in the open air, or the case of Arte Pública (dir. Gisela Cañamero) set up in Beja and elaborating on some anthropological ideas, or the case of ACERT in Tondela (dir. José Rui Martins) stirring up theatrical life in the region both producing its own performances and inviting professional theatre companies to display their repertoire.

In Almada, a town in the surroundings of Lisbon across the river, the Companhia de Teatro de Almada (directed by Joaquim Benite, and one of the historical companies supported by the new policy of granting a three-year subsidy, but also financed by the municipality) not only keeps a regular theatre production, but also promotes an international theatre festival in July that is growing up in quality and attracting vast audiences, succeeding in stirring up the whole town over its two-week time. As for its own productions, three experiments with narrative fiction may be foregrounded: on the Skarmeta's novel around Pablo Neruda's postman (which inspired the film *Il postino*) adapted by Carlos Porto, on José Saramago's novel *Memorial de convento* (*Balthasar and Blimunda*), and on the romantic author Almeida Garrett's *Viagens na minha terra* (*Travels in my Land*), this one co-produced also by ACARTE.

But other theatre companies keep this same commitment both to their own productions and to support local festivals, sometimes with an international participation. It is the case of Évora (Cendrev, dir. Mário Barradas), of Portalegre (Companhia de Teatro de Portalegre, dir. José Mascarenhas), and Viana do Castelo (Companhia de Teatro do Noroeste, dir. José Martins), among others.

Oporto hosts several festivals, of which we should at least call attention to both FITEI and Po.N.T.I. The former (anagram of International Theatre Festival of Iberian speaking countries) is by now the oldest one operating in Portugal and has been responsible for inviting theatre companies from Spain, Latin America and African countries, which were former Portuguese colonies, like Mozambique (this last one represented by very active and interesting companies such as Mutumbela Gogo). The latter festival, whose name indicates that is held in Oporto by Christmas and is international, was launched two years ago and is supposed to be staged every two years. Organised around the National Theatre of S. João (dir. Ricardo Pais), it has managed, through a fairly generous budget, to attract some outstanding international artists and theatre companies.

The interest in keeping ties with the theatre done in other Portuguese speaking countries has inspired the project Cena Lusófona that binds together some directors and theatre groups in Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, S. Tomé, Cabo Verde and Guinea, holding various workshops, colloquia and co-productions.

2.

When alluding to a great diversity of projects operating in the theatrical field, I speak of three different efforts: trying out a kind of commercial theatre, resorting to occasional productions (divorced from formal theatre grouping) and looking for original solutions (in repertoire, location theatre, and scenic inventions).

As for commercial theatre, it has been proved over the past twenty years or so that, generally speaking, it has few chances of surviving, for the lack of important and committed sponsors other than the State, and for the decline of a special audience that used to attend the revue theatre which was fairly popular in the 1960s and early 1970s but is now fading fast. Several attempts were made, but they soon resorted either to cancel their schedule or to devise ways of

applying to State funding through various channels (municipalities, schools, etc.).

However, some curious experiences deserve attention. One was the popularity of a performance called *Conversa da treta (Trash Talk)* with actors António Feio and José Pedro Gomes, known as comic performers on television. It was made up of a random conversation, with many obscene innuendoes and spoken in bad Portuguese, showing two vicious characters of the lumpen. With practically no set - just two men sitting side by side with an ashtray in between the chairs - and no need of elaborate technical equipment, the production was not expensive and allowed easy touring. It was such a success that it turned out a weekly programme both for radio and television that has been running over a year.

Another case was *Art*, by Yasmine Reza, that was produced by the National Theatre in Oporto, but managed to be transferred to Lisbon where it ran almost a year with a vast and enthusiastic audience. It is not irrelevant the fact that it was performed by the same two actors mentioned above, together with Miguel Guilherme, who also became known through sitcoms on television.

A third case worth mentioning is the production of *Novo Grupo*, directed by João Lourenço, on Patrick Marber's *Closer (Quase)*, which brought together on stage other well known (also through television) young actors Diogo Infante and Virgílio Castelo, the actress Ana Nave (who has lately directed very interesting productions at Malaposta where she is resident actress) and a famous TV entertainer Catarina Furtado who made her début on the stage.

These three cases may point out the fact that a great deal of popularity rests on a *medium* like television, thus advising more investment on TV entertainment as indirect support on theatre. And it is true that some effort has been done in producing serials and sitcoms (unfortunately not all of them of the best quality), and the State has agreed to finance some of these projects (even on the private TV channels), although I think they should, for that reason, be obliged to meet certain quality standards.

As for occasional productions, they are mainly carried out by actors and directors who either did not succeed in entering more established groups for lack of opportunity (or interest in making a more individual career), or, even when devising a new group, were not granted an annual subsidy and, therefore, had to resort to this kind of occasional funding.

Some of these projects tend to invest in a kind of a performance-installation, as it has been the case with both Luís Castro and Lúcia Sigalho, often using a special underground art gallery such as Galeria Zé dos Bois in the heart of a popular and historical quarter of Lisbon, Bairro Alto. Beside their artistic interest, these performances have succeeded in bringing new and young audiences into the theatre.

Some of these occasional productions deal, with recent Anglo-Saxon drama as was the case of *Bouncers*

, by John Godber (directed by André Gago, that proved to be a great success), or based on authors like Mike Leigh, Alan Ball and Harvey Fierstein most of them writing in the form of a comedy of modern manners. Actually, and for understandable reasons, English speaking drama has been a steady source of inspiration for many productions in Portugal, as was also recently in Oporto with Martin McDonagh's

The Cripple of Inishmaan

, by Visões Úteis, though adapting the situation and pronunciation to those of our Azores islands, which gave the performance a certain regional flavour, but missed some of the points made by the play, and imposed on it a certain dragged rhythm, and in Lisbon with David Hare's *Skylights*

(with excellent João Perry in the leading role) or Barker's

Scenes from an Execution

(dir. São José Lapa).

But despite this repeated use of plays written in English (though of Irish, English or American origin), we may trace, more recently, an effort to reveal other less known dramaturgy such as Hungarian (Molnar and Tabori), Swedish (Lars Noren), Dutch (Rijnders) or Romanian (Anca Visdei).

Other attempts in finding a way out when a regular subsidy is not assigned were directed to a kind of grotesque and coarse humour, as was the case of *of Não há nada que se coma? (Isn't there anything to eat?)*, by actor

Francisco Pestana, depicting the sordid (but yet sometimes funny) life of a family in a low-down neighbourhood. Or in a more refined but absurd sense of humour as we find in Roland Dubillard, used by Filipe Crawford and Rui Paulo in their amusing performance

Monsters in shorts

.

And though it is not true that only comedy allows a success on stage, the fact is that a company like Companhia Teatral do Chiado (that was formed around one of our best actors, Mário

Viegas, recently deceased) saw its hilarious production *The Complete Work of William Shakespeare in 97 Minutes*, directed by Juvenal Garcês, becoming a major and unusual success.

Another type of comedy performed lately was the musical *Sweeney Todd*, a co-production of the National Theatre in Lisbon, the National Opera and Novo Grupo, directed by João Lourenço. Though this kind of entertainment is not very popular among us, it did meet some success due to the real qualities of the performance staged at Teatro D. Maria II in Lisbon.

3.

As for the visibility I mentioned above, it came about due to various reasons.

One of them was the possibility of using some of the important venues recently built: both the Cultural Centre at Belém (CCB), and the new site in East Lisbon arranged for the EXPO. In the former we had the chance to see, for the first time in Portugal, the Berliner Ensemble with *The Resistible Ascension of Arturo Ui*, as devised by late Heiner Müller and with the outstanding acting of Wuttke, which was a most celebrated event, and, for the second time in Portugal, the Piccolo Teatro with Goldoni's *Arlechino, Servitore di Due Padroni*. But besides this kind of luxury programme, CCB has also engaged in inviting less visible theatre companies (either because they are recent, or working in the regions) or producing its own performances by inviting directors for specific reasons. One of them was, for instance, a cycle of Portuguese writing, which included novelists like Almeida Faria or Lobo Antunes, among others, but it also went as far as producing Müller's *Germania 3*, by Jean Jourdeuil.

In Oporto, the National Theatre of S. João has created some important cultural events, from the International Festival to a diversified and imaginative programme, thus attracting good audiences. In its beautiful romantic venue (recently restored) we saw three luxurious productions: *Twelfth Night*, directed by Ricardo Pais, Corneille's *The Theatrical Illusion* by director Nuno Carinhas, and Pirandello's *Mountain Giants* by Corsetti.

But another and perhaps better reason to gain visibility was, and is, the public recognition of some of the «independent» theatre companies that have recently completed 25 years of age and are still mapping our artistic life, as is the case of Teatro da Cornucópia, Teatro da Comuna and O Bando.

These three companies have showed in their most recent productions the specific aesthetics we associate with them, but at the same time we could also recognise some interesting developments and side-tracks that deserve our attention. It was the case with Comuna, where its director João Mota put on stage a remarkable *Measure for Measure* and an energetic *Goldberg Variations*, thus proving the company's interest in complex and sombre plays, blending literary accuracy and careful stagecraft.

As for Cornucópia, it did carry out some curious experiments. Indeed it staged a text by Gertrude Stein (*A List*), directed by António Pires, a young and imaginative director, and did it in English, which sounded somewhat controversial, given the fact that this company has been a major reference for high cultural commitment. It went on, though in a different key, staging a medieval chronicle around the conquest of the Iberian peninsula to the Moors:

Lara's Sons

. It depicted a cruel and treacherous world, where women are devils and vengeance ferocious, and did it in a way that combined a unique literary and linguistic accuracy with a heroic male universe (both in its values and in the handsome presence of many actors on stage). This medieval world was in fact evoked through a certain elaborate image, that was admittedly a cultural construct, but it also favoured a display of a great capacity for speaking an archaic Portuguese, which was done with the most accurate pronunciation.

However, the most acclaimed productions by Cornucópia over these past three years were Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, Lorca's *As Five Years Pass*, Molnar's *Liliom* and Corneille's *Sertori*

us. The first two performances were magnificently directed by Luís Miguel Cintra and took place within the cultural event - the 100 days festival - before the EXPO. That allowed him a more comfortable budget and the artistic result was indeed superb. As for the other two, they were devised by French directors, respectively Christine Laurent and Brigitte Jacques, with whom both Luís Miguel and the company had already previously worked, and both performances confirmed the superior artistic quality of this company and of Luís Miguel Cintra as its leading actor.

O Bando went on doing some chamber productions, as an adaptation of Synge's *Well of Saints* (*Visões*), but it

caught wider attention through a huge performance in the open air -

Pilgrimage

- that, directed by João Brites, assembled several mobile sculptures (devised by different artists) that were daily shown at the EXPO during its five months period. This splendid creation, that aimed at commenting the sea saga of the Portuguese, may have ultimately inspired João Brites to leave Lisbon and settle down in Palmela (around 60 kms far from Lisbon, across the river), what was carried out in August 1999, thus hoping to have access to a larger space and trying out a different approach to a different audience.

Other historical «independent» companies carried on with their own repertoire policy as was the case of Novo Grupo, operating at Teatro Aberto. It programmed a cycle of plays for young people which proved to be highly interesting and successful: Howard Corder's *The Lights*, Nick Grosso's

Peaches

and Conor Mcpherson's

The Lime Tree Bower

were very good productions, with good acting by young artists like Ivo Canelas, Sylvie Rocha, Philippe Leroux or Sofia Portugal, among others.

Aiming at younger audiences was also a quite stimulating production by A Barraca on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

(adapted and directed by Helder Costa), as well as the constant effort of both Kim Cachopo and Fernando Gomes who have invented and directed a kind of musical theatre for children based on fairy tales or well known narratives such as

Sleeping Beauty

or

The Hunchback of Notre Dame

, which has been the regular and applauded work of the company TIL.

The Cendrev in Évora (dir. Mário Barradas) plays a careful repertoire, at the same time that it hosts a Theatre School, a unit for Marionettes (the famous Bonecos de Santo Aleixo) and publishes one of the finest theatre reviews in Portugal - *Adágio*.

Carlos César directing Teatro de Animação de Setúbal, Carlos Avilez at the Teatro Experimental de Cascais, and both António Reis and Júlio Cardoso at Seiva Trupe in Oporto, keep, as senior directors of regular companies with a sound artistic record, a steady pace in

their activity, confirming their audiences.

At Teatro da Malaposta, besides an *Uncle Vanya*, directed by Rui Mendes, there were two productions dealing with young people that met a great success: both

Class Enemy

, by Nigel Williams, and

I stand before you naked

, by Joyce Carol Oates, showed a great vigour and sensitivity on the part of young director Ana Nave.

Another woman director who has attracted much attention lately - Fernanda Lapa - did stage for her company Escola de Mulheres (School for Women) a most provocative and efficient *Cloud Nine*, by

Caryl Churchill, and (in a co-production with Ensemble Theatre, a group from Oporto) a very interesting play by Spanish author Lucia Sanchez,

Commonplace

Another theatre company formed by young women in Oporto, Boas raparigas (Good Girls), produced a fine adaptation of Genet's *Four Hours in Chatilla*, (a kind of poetic documentary and elegy), directed by Rogério de Carvalho, thus proving that great performances are not exclusively dependent on plays.

4.

Indeed, some experiments have been done on texts, prompting some directors to use Portuguese poetry as a basis for theatre productions. It was the case with Luís Miguel Cintra, who used Ruy Belo's poetry, but it was mainly Maria Emília Correia, a former actress who is now more devoted to direct her own company, O vermelho e o negro, who attracted more attention by adapting different poetic universes to performances.

Other experiments on texts brought to stage from other literary genres gave rise to male solos, as was the case of a fiction by Ian McEwan (*The Closet Man*) with Rui Madeira (Companhia de Teatro do Braga), one by Bohumil Hrabal (

A Much Too Noisy Loneliness

) with António Simão, or by a novel by Heinrich von Kleist (Michael Kohlhaas, that received the title

In a Country where my rights are not defended I do not want to live

) with Paulo Claro.

But speaking of plays, the visibility I mentioned above has also to do with the fact that for the first time in history a Portuguese speaking writer received the Nobel Prize for literature (1998). It was the case of José Saramago, a distinguished Portuguese novelist, who also wrote plays (four, up to now).

And although not widely recognised, Portuguese drama is indeed gaining some visibility lately. Among the senior writers with plays staged here and abroad, both Jaime Salazar Sampaio and Luiz Francisco Rebello deserve attention.

Other writers, best known for their novels, began writing for the theatre, as is the case of Luísa Costa Gomes, Mário Cláudio but more successfully Mário de Carvalho, who had his two latest plays staged at Teatro da Malaposta: *Let There Be Harmony* and *If someone asks for me, I'm not in*. The latter, directed by José Peixoto, is a funny comedy based on the idea that strange sounds in a block of apartments are identified as coming from a tiger that entered the building, and focuses the different reactions of neighbours facing danger. The fear it provokes points to the symbol of an imminent danger - a type of authoritarian or fascist order - and it works well not only by depicting the different characters and their possible reactions, but also by demonstrating that people tend to get used to fear. So, in the end, the tiger can turn out to be the fearful prevention against ... fear.

Two other texts that most certainly will stand as milestones in Portuguese drama, and for absolutely different reasons are *Prometheus Bound / Unbound*, by Jorge Silva Melo, and *Sometimes it snows in April*

, by sociologist João Santos Lopes. The former is a poetic meditation on the possibility of revolution, identifying the titan in many different revolutionaries of the twentieth century, specially Rosa Luxemburg, and was splendidly staged by the author for his company Artistas Unidos (United Artists). The latter is a brilliant play on a grim action taken by a group of young men in a suburb against a black girl. It is powerfully dramatic, and it studies racist behaviours with accuracy from both the sociological and political point of view, leading to a most provocative denouement: after the rape, finally the girl speaks, telling them that she is infected with AIDS. The performance, directed by João Lourenço at Teatro Aberto, was one of the most

arresting and intense, and did call attention, as Silva Melo's
Prometheus

, to the possibility of merging excellent performing and engaging political debate. Which, I think, can be a good reason to gain visibility!