



UPDATING AND EXPERIMENT

Two Portuguese Theatre Anthologies

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The history of Portuguese theatre during the first half of the 20th century is characterized by a constant backwardness in relation to the most contemporary European ideas and by some impetuous efforts to bring it up to date. Italian historian Luciana Stegagno Picchio argues that Portuguese theatre was around fifty years behind the rest of Europe's at this time. We could identify several reasons for this fact, but none as effective as the censorship that was imposed on Portuguese theatre on 1926. Under the fascist dictatorship (1926-1974), theatre suffered a constraint that endangered all renovation efforts. The stages were dominated by versions and translations of French and Spanish plays (mainly light comedies) and theatre was considered a mere entertainment.

In spite of this frame, there were efforts to renovate and modernize theatre. There were brief adventures just at the beginning of the century such as Araújo Pereira's *Teatro Livre* (1904) and *Teatro*

Moderno

(1905), the outdoor experience of

Teatro da Natureza

(1911) and

Teatro da Juvénia

(1924) an amateur's theatre school directed again by Araújo Pereira - considered by many as the first "Portuguese modern director"- ; and

Teatro Novo

(1925), a polemic (though very ephemeral) initiative created by António Ferro (the future director of Salazar's National Ministry for Propaganda in 1933). Although they had a significant mark on Portuguese theatre they were soon forgotten.

Only during the post-Second World War period can we speak about a movement of experimental theatre. The loss of the fascist movements forced a softening on the peninsular dictatorships. This allowed several groups to engage on "experimental theatre". Groups such as "Teatro Estúdio do Salitre", "Casa da Comédia", "Companheiros do Pátio das Comédias", "Grupo Dramático Lisbonense", "Grupo de Teatro Experimental" (usually known as Teatro da Rua da Fé), "Teatro Experimental do Porto" (usually known as TEP) and Teatro d'Arte de Lisboa.

This Post War Portuguese experimentalism consisted in isolated efforts, made essentially by amateurs and limited to the intellectual Lisbon elite. It was expressed through an enlightenment attitude, translated in the propagation of plays and playwrights, and the divulgation and promotion of some of the most contemporary ideas of European theatre at the time. They organized talks, published essays, gave conferences and wrote guides and manuals. Their goal was to enlighten their (professional) peers.

This didactic posture is what presided the two anthologies that I want to discuss in this article: Redondo Júnior's *O teatro e a sua estética* [*Theatre and its aesthetic*] (Lisboa: Editora Arcádia, 1963/1964) and Luiz Francisco Rebello's

Teatro Moderno: Caminhos e figuras

[
Modern Theatre: Paths and Figures

] (Lisboa: Prelo, 1957, 2^a ed. 1964).

The first anthology - *O teatro e a sua estética* - is a collection of writings of several authors that wrote on themes such as theatre aesthetics, theatre architecture, decoration, direction and actor's work. All texts were selected, translated, introduced and commented by Redondo Júnior (1914-1991), a journalist, a theatre critic, a theatre theoritian and a playwright

[\[1\]](#)

It's a two volume anthology. The first one was published in 1963 and the second one in 1964 on the label "Arcádia", in a collection dedicated to theatre, under the direction of Redondo Júnior which intended to introduce modern theatre ideas and to promote renovation on Portuguese stages.

The first volume of *O teatro e a sua estética* (1963) is divided into two parts. The first one deals with questions related to the "Actor and the Art of Performing". Júnior collects short essays by relevant theatre directors and authors, such as Gaston Batty, Louis Jouvet, Jacques Copeau, André Frank, Jean-Louis Barrault, André Villiers, Charles Dullin, Sudakov, Vakhtangov, Brecht, Michel Vinaver and Sonia Moore. All texts deal with the evolution of actor's work and debate different types of actor's methods, different approaches to characters and different ways of training.

The second part of this volume is devoted to "Theatre Direction". The figure of the Director was established in the beginning of the 20th century. However in Portugal, even in the sixties, this figure was not completely understood. Therefore, these texts filled a huge gap. In the second part of the volume there were texts by André Veinstein, Boris Zakhava, Otto Brahn, Meyerhold, Denis Bablet, Ossia Triling, Constantin Fedine, André Muller, Piscator, Nina Gourfinkel and Giorgio Strehler. The most innovative questions raised are the ones that are concerned with the avant-garde movements in Germany and Russia : reflections on Expressionism, Political Theatre, Dramaturgy, Stanislavski's method; all these issues could be finally read in Portuguese.

The second volume of *O Teatro e a sua estética* presents texts on theatre architecture, stage design and decoration. The texts debate different approaches to stage design and the use of theatrical spaces. This was the field where Portuguese theatre was completely outdated. Redondo Júnior selected texts by important scene designers (such as René Allio, Yves-Bonnat, Josef Svoboda, Robert Edmond Jones, Pierre Sonrel, Aksenov, Ilinsky, Abb'El Kader Farrah, Mokoulski, Militza Pojarskaia). He also collected theatre directors' notes (by Louis Jouvet and Roger Planchon), historical overviews made by various directors (Sylvain Dhomme, Giulio Pacuvio, Joachin Tenschert), contributions made by art historians (Raymond Cogniat, Moussignat), theatre theorists (Sorriau, Denis Bablet), theatre critics (Georges Lerminier), and playwrights (Arthur Adamov).

These texts made possible to some practitioners to consider new techniques, new materials, and new approaches towards space in theatre. On the introduction note, Redondo Júnior clearly expresses the aim of his anthology, quoting a conversation he had with a friend: "Do not worry about theatre professionals [his friend said]. They are not recoverable. Continue your work with

others, to those who really love theatre and may serve it without constraints, to those who understand your efforts and that discuss your books. Professionals will never be able to confess what they have learned with you – simply because you're not one of them. But who cares? Only the others really matter" [my translation].

In this previous note, Júnior states the Portuguese backwardness and the silence that the majority of the renovation efforts were voted to, including his previous theatre theory texts. Therefore, this anthology is presented as a complement to explain his previous works and his generation efforts on modernizing theatre, offering the sources in first hand. The aim is clear: "We intent that the reader may become aware of these undeniable truths, that he may understand them and may collaborate in the urgent demystification movement for saving what can still be saved in Portuguese theatre" [my translation].

Teatro Moderno: Caminhos e figuras was a seminal work that introduced, collected, translated and explained some of the most important authors of the 20

th

century theatre. Luiz Francisco Rebello compiled essays, prefaces, plays, illustrations and performance pictures.

This anthology was first published in short volumes at irregular periods during the year of 1957 by "Círculo do Livro", a label that belonged to Vítor Palla (1922-2006) and Orlando Costa (1929-2006). Palla was a multi-skilled artist and a respected figure in the Portuguese cultural scene. He was an architect and one of the most credited photographers of his generation. Orlando Costa was a poet, a writer and a playwright. He joined the Portuguese Communist Party in 1954, when it was still outlawed. With this background, "Círculo do Livro" was clearly a label with a determined social interventionist ambition.

Luiz Francisco Rebello [\[2\]](#) is up-today the most credited Portuguese theatre historian. He has many works published on theatre history and theatre criticism and he is also a prolific playwright. Furthermore, he was a founder and a member of the direction of several experimental theatre groups. In 1946 he is one of the founders of the "Teatro-Estúdio do Salitre" and in 1948 of the "Companheiros do Pátio das Comédias" two of the most important experimental groups of the post-war period.

The 2nd edition, published in 1964 was printed on the label "Prelo", on a theatre collection directed by LFR himself. It is, in fact, a new book that is presented. The introductory texts,

written by Rebello, are improved and extended. Some new essays are added (those by Shaw, Jarry, Synge, Piscator, Oskar Schlemmer, Meyerhold, Giraudoux and Sartre), and some new plays are published (those by Strindberg, Wedekind, Kokoschka, O'Casey and Beckett).

On the introductory note of this 2nd edition Rebello states: "Published in 1957, when the interest of the Portuguese public towards modern theatre forms, which had been promoted ten years before by the experimental movement, was again manifested,

Teatro Moderno: caminhos e figuras

corresponded to that demand. (...) Unfortunately, those signs of hope soon faded away – and the reality, harsh and hostile, came again to obscure and narrow the foreseen horizon. (...)

Unsatisfied, the young (...) looked in the pages of the books the real and authentic theatre they could not see on stages" [my translation].

This introduction note will end with a sentence that clearly expresses what Rebello's generation hoped for and what the ultimate aim of this anthology was: "I don't want to end this note [he writes] without expressing a sincere vote of hope -, that when the clouds that compromise our present and threaten our future fade away, - Portuguese theatre may found, finally, the ways – risky but fascinating – of true modernity" [my translation].

Luiz Francisco Rebello's anthology is divided in 7 chapters: "The Peak and Crisis of Realism", "The Symbolist Adventure", "A Crossroad (1900-1914)", "The Time for Revolt", "The Dissolution of Individual Conscience", "Theatre in the Heart of the City", "Ways and Shortcuts of the Post-War". *Modern Theatre – Paths and figures* also collects several short plays. They are all representative of different moments and tendencies of Modern drama and were staged by groups related with the Portuguese Experimental movement. But the fundamental aspect of publishing these plays is that once they were published, everyone could have access to them. Therefore, amateur groups that would have a more difficult access to these translations, from then on could use them. And they did. And this is how this anthology survived its time.

Both works, *Teatro Moderno: Caminhos e figuras* and *O teatro e a sua estética*, were groundbreaking and their contribution to the renovation and modernization of Portuguese theatre was undeniable. By reading them, we may picture what would have been the theatre that these authors envisaged. We can not see here "

mise-en-scène"

, but we could speak on something like "

mise-en-anthologie

". They could not see their theatre on the stage, so, they created a repertoire on anthologies. The renovation experiences remained, for many years, locked inside these pages. More than

paying homage to the past and to the great creators of the 20th

century, these anthologies looked anxiously towards the future.

[1] Redondo Júnior wrote *O atrevido* and *Lar...*, staged by Teatro Estúdio do Salitre (1948).

[2] Although some of his plays were forbidden by the fascist regime on account of his progressive ideas, he was often staged by amateurs, experimental groups and even by the National Theatre. He also translated Shakespeare, Brecht, Beckett, Strindberg, Miller, Ibsen, among many others. From 1973 to 2005, he was the president of the SPA (Portuguese Authors Society).