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THEATRE IN THE STATE OF EXCEPTION

António Pinto Ribeiro

Retornados, Exiles and Some That Stayed Behind and *Children of Return* are recent plays by *Teatro do Vestido*, directed by Joana Craveiro. These works present an opportunity to reflect on a body of contemporary theatre in Portugal that is taking on memories of the dictatorship, the colonial war and the legacies of the Portuguese ex-empire. They also offer an important point of comparison with some Latin American theatre. Like Portugal, many Latin American countries lived through military dictatorships between the 1960s and 1980s. Those countries also experienced repressive ideological and economic colonization from the Cold War-era USA.

Artists in Portugal have only relatively recently taken up the colonial question. Cinematic work began to engage with these questions in the 1990s, and visual art in the noughties. The first play to address colonial issues, with racism as a central theme, was *Hotel Orpheu*, based on a 1993 script by Gabriel Ghadamosi. The play was put on at the Centro Cultural de Belém by the *Associação Cultural dos Novos Artistas Africanos* in 1997, directed and acted by the black Portuguese actors Miguel Hurst and Manuel Wiborg (Artistas Unidos). In 2000, the *Associação O Retorno das Caravelas*, the first self-proclaimed African theatre company, put on *The Museum of Black Wood*, at the Culturgest, written by António Tomás and directed by Miguel Hurst. The company disappeared soon afterwards. Meanwhile the Angolan director Rogério de Carvalho was, among other things, pioneering in its reflection on the black condition. This director has indeed been a determining presence in the latest theatre company founded by black actors, *Teatro Griot*. This company and its repertoire present an original and groundbreaking engagement with identity and inter-identities between Africa and Europe and the possible intersections between them. The work *Tempest, a dramatic composition by Shakespeare and Black People* is an example of this approach.

However, in this first phase of relatively generic engagements with colonialism and the black condition in Europe, there was quite little memorable creative production. More recently, though, theatrical work has emerged that brings research about colonial memories, and about the Portuguese dictatorship's mechanisms of repression, to the stage. These pieces deconstruct colonial propaganda and the negative consequences of decolonization that affected *retornados* and refugees. The trilogy *Portugal is not a small country, Passport and Liberation* by *Hotel Europa*, a company created by André Amalio and Tereza Havlickova is a good example, though their dramatic composition sometimes leaves something to be desired. The tension between representation and non-representation in this sort of documentary theatre requires more from the actors than they necessarily offer.

Jorge Andrade and his company *Mala Voadora* premiered their piece *Mozambique* in 2018. Their 2006 play, *Philatelie*, an ingenious and convincing piece of theatre, sought to deal with European colonialism by exploring how successive issuings of stamps express colonial expansion. *Mozambique* is a postcolonial fantasy which, in comic tones, dares to reflect critically on the ideological matrices and international neo-coloniality of Portuguese colonialism. We are told that the play is based on its director's autobiography, but *Mozambique* uses this to show that the 'truth' of stories is bound up not only with who is telling them, but also with who has the power to tell and impose a narrative, and that this must be deconstructed.

Children of Return by *Teatro do Vestido* will from now on be a reference work for all theatre that is made in Portugal and deals with the colonial question, but it is more than that too. It names the existence of *retornados* and engages with identity – better, multiple identities, whether personal, Portuguese or European – and with memories and how these are produced and transmitted. *Children of Return* can be understood as the first Portuguese play that inserts itself into the field of post-memory. That is, it assumes “the duty of memory” and takes up the contribution of the second and third post-colonial generations in today’s representations of the world. We see this in the explicit contradictions the play allows to exist in its narrative voyage and in the mixture of contradictory emotions that it addresses: colonial melancholy coexists with an acknowledgement of the right to independence of the peoples of the former colonies. The play deals too with the strangeness of return and never-ending dislocation. We are in 2018. It is disconcerting that this work has only just appeared. There will be many excuses for this, but the inability to deal with colonial history - which should have been interrogated long ago – constituted an epistemological obstacle in the academy and in the artistic and cultural media. They were so ready to “enter Europe” that they forgot colonized Africa, the most repressed of Portugal’s collective themes.

What has happened in other countries subject to ferocious dictatorships like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay? In Latin America the term “transition” is used to describe the move from dictatorships to democratic regimes beginning in the 90s. This period was characterized by the consolidation of democratic institutions, by the prioritization of social justice through more distributive economic programs, and by a radically altered everyday life that came with freedom of expression, respect for private life and the end of censorship. Nevertheless, the transition faltered in some respects, due not only to the continued presence of the military in positions of power but also to the difficulties both of doing justice to the atrocities committed by dictatorships and to establishing a globalized economy. In different ways – depending on the countries and their administrative structures – government programs and budgets institutionalised public cultural policies, but simultaneously reduced state investment into them. This state of affairs obliged actors to live in precarious conditions and to find sporadic, temporary work.

In Buenos Aires, where hundreds of plays debut each season, an actor often has to appear in three plays at a time to survive economically. On the other hand, in Rio de Janeiro, because of the predatory activity of *Globo*, few plays appear and those that do tend to be conceived primarily as entertainment.

They rarely address politics or the memory of the dictatorship. In Santiago de Chile, like in Buenos Aires, theatre is popular and a great diversity of styles and genres exist. A self-proclaimed body of political theatre, which is extremely popular, has both been exported overseas as a mark of internationalization and continues to function in the country as an expression of collective catharsis. Unsurprisingly, given its excellence, innovation, and the quality of actors, playwrights and directors, there is a lot of pride about this theatre. Its raw material is the history of the last decades, history in the making, and the memories of the protagonists, families and descendants.

We can say, albeit in a manner that generalises and simplifies, that the form of these works of contemporary theatre is profoundly based in text, and interpreting assemblages of materials. Most playwrights are also directors, some of whom are also actors, and scripts tend to be developed alongside a play's production. Producing a final edit of a script is not a priority for playwrights (when this happens, it is usually done post-hoc, after the play has been put on). Theatre companies themselves often train actors as a form of revenue. This plays an important role in the continued diversity of styles and themes. The archives and testimonies about real facts are important sources for writing and are mostly dealt with through a linguistically sophisticated documentary theatre. In *My Life After* and *The Year I Was Born*, plays by the Argentinian writer Lola Arias, young people born during the dictatorship reconstruct their parents' youth from photos, letters, recordings, used clothes, stories and erased memories. "What was my country like when I was born? What were my parents like at the time? How many versions exist about what happened when I was young, because I do not remember?" *Minefield*, also by Lola Arias, deals with a real meeting of six British and Argentine veterans of the Falklands / Malvinas War who, having been enemies, share their war-memories with one another.

The Chilean Guillermo Calderón is one of the most prolific authors and directors of the theatre of the memory of the fight against the dictatorship. Plays such as *School* and *Mateluna* centre around the life and actions of anti-dictatorship guerrillas and the memories of their children. The diptych *Villa + speech* deals with the children of the political police, set in Villa Grimaldi. This house was known in the Dictatorship as 'London 38', and was one of the Pinochet regime's shadowy spaces. The first play, *Speech*, tells the fictional story of President Michelle Bachelet's farewell as she leaves the Presidential Palace. It begins "Today I will not speak to you with docile and predictable words ..." There follows a manifesto about the exercise of power from the point of view of a character who identifies as a woman, a paediatrician, optimist and socialist. And yet it is the second play that justifies that *Speech* comes first.

The action takes place in the same house and with the same actresses and the theme is apparently simple: what to do with this space freighted with a history of torture and death. Calderón constructs one of the strongest, most profound, dramatic interventions into the place of the arts in memory, the validity of contemporary art, democratic debate, ideological conflict, the place of museology, and the fallibility of memories.

In this body of theatre certain characters recur: decisive figures in the dictatorships themselves; the disappeared; mothers of the disappeared or the murdered; torturers and their children; and guerrillas, as in *The Disappeared* by Rodrigo Pérez and in *END*, by Daniel Marabolí and Trinidad Pérez. This play takes the form of a radio documentary in which two detectives investigate a Chilean judicial case that took place 1985, listening to several witnesses, consulting archives and recordings, until they identify the political motive of the crime.

The comic treatment of aspects or figures of the dictatorship can constitute a strategy to overcome its trauma. One of the best examples is the play *Velorio Chileno* by Cristian Plana, which ridicules groups who are nostalgic for the Pinochet government.

Not surprisingly, the theme of dysfunctional families is very common in these portraits of societies marked by the violence of dictatorship, particularly in Argentine theatre. The Argentine director Claudio Tolcachir, associated with *Timbre4*, is a master at this type of construction. *Germany*, by Nacho Ciatti, tells the story a father's return, twenty years later, to a household to which he obviously no longer belongs, however hard he tries. *Gladys*, by the Chilean actress, playwright and director Elisa Zulueta, portrays the impact on the present when family secrets about reprehensible actions during the dictatorship are revealed: family cataclysm ensues. One of the striking aspects of this theatre, born in the "transition" era, is the quantity of new playwrights and new plays, as well as the frequent revising of texts forbidden during the dictatorship. Such is the case of *Fait Accompli*, based on a 1980 text by Juan Radrigán and directed by Alfredo de Castro. The play is a Beckettian vision of the dictatorship and a political rereading of a classic text that treats particular times and situations in comparative perspective. This is in the same vein as another play, *The Entire Time* that is based on, but rewrites, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

In Brazil, the conditions of theatre production are far from favourable for creative work. Furthermore, the memory of the dictatorship is a very constrained subject, as was obvious in the difficulties in taking to court perpetrators of crimes from those years. Two plays deserve mentions, however: first, *BaitMan*, by the *Companhia dos Actores*, a work that deals with the relationship between memories of the oppressor and the oppressed. It was written and staged by Gerald Thomas, and acted by Marcelo Olinto. Secondly, *Democracy*, staged by Felipe Hirsch from an Alejandro Zambra text. The play asks how it is possible to make theatre in a country that is still marked by the memory of the dictatorship even down to the most trivial aspects of daily life.

There exists, however, another historical and social reality that remains an enigma for Europeans: *O Índio*. Europeans cannot deal with the figure of the Indian in any way, either conceptually or in terms of questions of representation. In the last two decades, anthropologists, artists and social scientists, as well as indigenous people themselves, have been working on what we might call the opposite of Eurocentric narratives. They have been bringing up to date memories of subjugation and extermination from the conquest of the Americas. This pre-colonial indigenous figure has been a theme in theatre and dance and has perplexed South Americans accustomed to an official white supremacist history, albeit one that populations of colour had already destabilized. Indigenous peoples remain a mystery to them, but several works have begun to address the theme. In *The Meeting*, a play by the Chilean Trinidad González, the Catholic Queen Isabel discusses with Christopher Columbus how much the Indians should be subjugated. The Uruguayan choreographer Tamara Cubas, in *Fucking Rooster Conqueror*, rehabilitates the Indian presence in Uruguay, presenting them as the people with first rights to its land and traditions. The Brazilian choreographer Lia Rodrigues's *So that the sky does not fall* draws on the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa's story of the end of the world, which will befall everyone and not only the forest peoples.

These examples show the prevalence of multiple memories in contemporary creative work that is engaged in a process of uniting history and germinating the future. This theatre forged new mechanisms of production in order to exist: in particular, new collaborative modes of working between actors and directors. Audiences unaccustomed to this type of theatre will be surprised by the minimalist nature of the set design and by how close the audience is positioned to the stage. For this contemporary theatre, the scene represents an inheritance of ruins and plunder. The proximity of the audience implies how closely bound up they are with the themes addressed on stage. In this political theatre, the subject and its memories belong to, and are the responsibility of, everyone.



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Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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