

CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE THEATER: A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

DAVID J. VIEIRA
(Tennessee Technological University)

Portuguese drama suffers today from the past failure to educate Portuguese in the value of their literature, especially the theater. But the most serious obstacle to its success is its failure to form part of twentieth-century Portugal's social and political infrastructure. Despised and censored by a dictatorial government for forty-eight years, playwrights and theater professionals battled to keep theater alive, and rallied under European master playwrights to express their desire for freedom and the democratization of culture. They continue their struggle today to bring theater to their people, to guarantee freedom from fascist governments, to study and encourage theater aesthetics so that one day their democratic country may boast a national theater comparable to the leading theaters of other European countries.

The 28 May 1926 revolution ended the First Republic (1917-1918) and the Democratic party rule in Portugal (1918-1926). A new government, the New State, developed into a fascist regime under Antonio Salazar (1889-1970) and introduced censorship directed first at journals and later at theater, cinema, radio, television. Playwrights were jailed and their plays scrutinized (Rebello, **Combate** 31). In addition, in order to stage plays the government required a license, which was no guarantee that plays would not be canceled the night of dress rehearsal or after a few performances.¹

Censors objected mostly to social and political references, works that demystified Catholic beliefs and Portugal's historical figures, and contemporary themes such as existential freedom and homosexuality. They also revoked avant-garde and plays they thought would cause a popular revolt (Rebello, **Combate** 34). Therefore, classics (Shakespeare's **Julius Caesar**) and modern works by Brecht, Sartre, and Peter Weiss were banned.

¹ On one occasion theater people sent a letter of protest to the government: *La censure au/Censorship in/Portugal*, *World Theatre* 14.2 (1965): 163-65.

Theater censorship, however, was inconsistent. After World War II, the regime relaxed its regulations so that Portugal would appear more democratic. This change allowed dramatists to create the Salitre Theater-Studio (1946-1950), where they staged innovative plays (Rebello, **Modern Portuguese Theatre** 34-35). However, censorship increased in 1950, when the Cold War began and Portugal joined NATO, and especially in 1961 when the Portuguese colonial war in Africa began.

Censors eased prohibitions in 1969, when Marcel Caetano replaced Salazar. However, in 1971 censors again began restricting plays. The frustration of Portuguese playwrights reached an extreme between 1972 and April 1974, when only one national play was staged (Rebello, **O Teatro Português Actual** 237).

On 25 April 1974 an Armed Forces revolution ended dictatorship and abolished censorship, whose demoralizing effect caused modernists and leading authors such as Costa Ferreira² to abandon writing plays. The most successful Portuguese playwrights, however, conveyed their ideologies and social convictions through Brecht's theories and plays and through the theater of the absurd. They preferred "o recurso a uma linguagem críptica, a personagens e situações abstractas, que deformavam até ao absurdo a realidade circunstante, por um lado, e por outro a transposição do presente para factos e figuras exemplares do passado histórico, o que, directamente, a censura não consentia que se dissesse" (Rebello, **100 Anos** 25).

Writers such as Romeu Correia used devices such as puppets in his **Vagabundo das Mãos de Ouro** (1962) and a carnival setting in plays he wrote in the 1970s to disguise reality. A number of Portuguese dramatists preferred Brecht's epic theater also borrowing techniques from Peter Weiss. They took historical and literary figures (Ines de Castro,³ King Sebastian,⁴ Camões⁵) or historical events (repression under the Marques of Pombal⁶) to criticize the state of affairs in contemporary Portugal. In some cases they created positive images of historical figures, considered rebels, iconoclasts, or jokers.⁷

² Costa Ferreira stopped writing for the theater in 1961. Rebello, **100 Anos**, 72-73, cites plays he wrote after the 1974 coup.

³ Fernando Luso Soares, **A Outra Morte de Inês** (Lisboa: Europa-América, 1968).

⁴ Natália Correia, **O Encoberto** (Lisboa: Quadrante, 1969).

⁵ Natália Correia, **Erros Meus, Má Fortuna, Amor Ardente** (Lisboa: Afrodite, 1981); José Saramago, **Que Farei com Este Livro?** (Lisboa: Caminho, 1980).

⁶ Franco's **O Motim** (Lisboa: Teatro, 1963).

⁷ Manuel Maria Barbosa du Bocage (1765-1805), a poet, is the protagonist of two plays: Romeu Correia, **Bocage** (Barcelos: Ulissia, 1965); Luzia Martins, **Bocage—Alma sem Mundo** (Lisboa: Europa-América, 1967).

After the 1974 coup, Portuguese playwrights wrote unconstrained by erratic censors. However, they required time and distance from the revolution to develop perspective and to shake off years of auto-censorship (Porto 53; Cunha 147). They also needed affiliation with theater groups, formed shortly before and after the revolt. Some playwrights continued to use the 1974 revolution itself as a setting while others focused on the social and economic problems that became more patent after the revolution, such as the latifundium and intermediaries. Two tendencies remained during this period: Brecht's influence and the use of historical and literary personages to examine Portugal's past.

Theater censorship had caused further problems, mainly cultural and geographic. Since censors feared a revolt of the masses, theater outside the capital was much restricted. More specifically, a total of fourteen drama centers were located in Lisbon and two in Oporto. Applying these figures to the year 1974, José Oliveira Barata calculated that in Lisbon there was one performance per 143,000 persons, compared to one per 5,385,000 in the rest of Portugal (Barata 7).

Although censorship is no longer a problem, these theater groups have had to face other difficulties, mostly economic. Before the 1974 revolt, there was a lack of acting talent in Portugal. Today, despite low salaries, good actors and actresses have emerged from groups like "A Barraca."⁸ J. Motta, director of the "Comuna" group, reported that in 1988, the average salary of this thirty-person unit was about four hundred dollars per month. Therefore, some of these professionals must either seek part-time work outside the theater or move from group to group (Cruz 506).

Along with the lack of theaters and centralization, Portuguese playwrights and theater professionals saw the absence of training schools for producers, directors, and stage technicians as a leading problem in pre-1974 Portuguese theater. In his study on problems in the Portuguese theater before 1960, Alexandre Babo pointed out that there were only two professional drama schools (excluding university groups), the National Theater Conservatory (Lisbon) and the "Círculo de Cultura Teatral" in Oporto. The former taught outmoded acting techniques and did not offer a single course for producers, directors, or stage technicians. The latter offered only one course in drama (Babo 6). Babo and theater critic Tomás Ribas advocated re-structuring courses

⁸ This traveling group, which took its name and purpose from García-Lorca's traveling theater group, brings plays to people in rural areas who have never seen a professional group perform. It has won international fame in Spain and South America and has had among its producers the internationally known Augusto Boal.

on theater at these two professional drama schools and in schools throughout Portugal, and awarding scholarships to Portuguese for theater study in Portugal and foreign countries (Babo 6-8; Cruz 68).

The most serious problem of pre-1974 Portuguese theater was its failure to reach the people. Besides censorship, other factors aggravated this problem: the neglect of modern literature instruction in the schools and the high cost of theater tickets. The public therefore abandoned theater, regarding it as a diversion for the wealthy or intellectuals, and instead attended the revue.

Portuguese playwrights and professionals attempted to bring the public back to the theater by lowering admission costs and by encouraging government subsidies for theater groups, changes introduced after 1974. However, they disagreed on how to educate the public on the theater. Some, for example, José Régio and actress Maria Germana Tänger, recommended educating the Portuguese about national literature of all centuries to develop their critical sensibilities (Cruz 507, 511). More specifically, Alexandre Babo held intellectuals in rural areas responsible for bringing culture to the poor in villages (Babo 15-16). Influenced by Brecht's theories and the didactic theater, Bernardo Santareno and others insisted that theater writers and personnel not wait until the public developed knowledge of literature and artistic sophistication. Santareno advocated pursuing the public and making the theater a protest. In his plays published after 1966, he insisted on audience involvement, especially in **O Judeu** and **Escritor, Português, 45 Anos de Idade**. Portuguese theater writers and groups have put Santareno's beliefs (inherited from Brecht and Weiss) into practice, although financial problems hinder them from reaching a larger audience.

Theater managers and critics also share some blame for the crisis in modern Portuguese theater. With few exceptions, theater owners and managers before 1974, reluctant to stage original and innovative works but eager to guarantee a profit at the box-office, often chose outmoded and inferior plays that were familiar and appealed to the public. To bring together a sizable audience, managers often contracted one leading actor or actress, but to economize they hired inexperienced producers, directors, and stage crews. In short, managerial decisions made on an economic rather than an aesthetic basis resulted in poorly staged plays. Post revolution theater groups and companies showed a preference for staging foreign, especially European plays, based on economic factors, ideological pressures, and the acclaim of foreign authors. In doing so they have learned from their foreign counterparts to confront problems in works by master international playwrights.

Leading authorities on the modern Portuguese theater have also faulted theater critics in Portugal for complacency and lack of knowledge of theater

aesthetics (Cruz 130-31). Ribas commented in a 1969 interview: “salvo uma ou outra exceção, o crítico teatral português não pode ser um julgador de artistas, nem pode desempenhar a sua função de orientador do público porque, de uma maneira geral, desconhece a complexa problemática do teatro, não conhece intrinsecamente o teatro” (Cruz 70). This problem has also been ameliorated since the 1974 revolution through education, contact with theater professionals, and a knowledge of international theater.

Although modern playwrights, theater professionals and enthusiasts have struggled with some success to develop theater in Portugal and bring it to the public, setbacks have often occurred. When another coup (25 November 1975) drew the government from left to center, an advisory committee created by the previous government in September 1974 was dissolved, leaving Portugal without a much needed cultural program and support for the theater. Nevertheless, a few of the committee’s recommendations, such as decentralization of the theater and government grants for theater groups, were put into effect when the government hired as a consultant Mario Barradas, a theater producer who decentralized theaters and increased performances. New theaters were constructed in Evora, Almada, and Setubal and theater groups formed, such as the “Seiva-Trupe” of Oporto. Others such as the “Comuna” and “Cornúopia” of Lisbon, both organized the year before the revolution, felt free to stage previously censored plays.

Unlike some counterparts in the European Community, Portugal has had no policy for the support of their culture. After the 1974 revolt, however, the transition Portuguese government provided financial support for theater personnel and companies. The Secretary of State for Culture (SEC) later reduced and even suspended grants to theater groups, a decision that resulted in the collapse of one theater company (“Teatro-Estúdio” of Lisbon) and financial woes for others (Rebello, *O Teatro Português Actual* 251). The inauguration of the National Theater (Lisbon) in 1978, which had been destroyed by fire in the mid-1960s, was not well received by some Portuguese theater professionals, writers, and critics for several reasons: bureaucratic control; failure to present works by Portuguese dramatists; failure to keep the name Almeida Garrett Theater, given to it by the Republic in honor of this national playwright (Rebello, *História* 44-45).

In 1992 the SEC revealed to the press newly approved biennial subsidies for theaters and theater groups. Among the criteria for distribution was decentralization of the theater from Lisbon and its surrounding area, for example, Cascais; support for autarchy and new theater groups. However, the criteria for allocating subsidies were, in many cases, not followed. Lisbon-based theater groups got most of the allotment [820,385 escudos to the Teatro

Nacional (National Theater Company) and 369,600 for other Lisbon area theater groups as compared to 147,410 for theater groups outside of Lisbon]. In addition, groups from the capital received added funds for coproducing plays with the National Theater Company. The **Jornal de Lisboa** (11 February 1992) reproduced interviews with several theater managers and producers and an article by Carlos Porto, a leading theater critic, charging the SEC of prejudicial and discriminatory judgments. They argued that Oporto, the second largest, received only a small allotment. However, groups receiving the smallest share were those backed by leftist politicians. An extreme example is the leftist “A Barraca”, which has been denied subsidies for eight years. These groups stage plays by modern Portuguese writers rather than classical or international playwrights. Thus they believe they should receive larger subsidies. Also, traveling theater groups receive less money from SEC, which often does not communicate directly with these troupes on the matter of subsidies. Some theater managers, producers, and critics argue that regulators of theater subsidies do not frequent theaters and therefore should not award monies on the basis of quality of stage productions.

On the positive side, Dr. Luiz Francisco Rebello informed us that in April 1991, the Senate of the University of Lisbon approved a program in theater studies, which was to go into effect during the 1993-1994 school year. Students who enter this program may choose from two specializations, to quote the document: “Teatro e Acção Cultural” and “Escrita de Teatro”. Both the universities of Lisbon and Coimbra already had in place departments of History of the Theater.⁹

Internationally, the unification of Europe has brought hope to these professionals. For example, theater professionals from Portugal and Spain have come together in Merida, Coimbra and other cities to discuss problems and share knowledge. Both groups have met with their counterparts from other Mediterranean countries, including several Arab states. To Portuguese playwrights today, many of whom lived through the years of dictatorship and censorship, the unity and cooperation among nations to further knowledge of international theater is indeed encouraging.

⁹ The document entitled *Estudos de Teatro/Curso de Especialização/Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa* was drawn up by Osório Mateus and Maria João Brilhante.

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