

Chapter 81

Companhia Teatro Moderno de Lisboa (TML): engagement, resistance and cultural creation in the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

Social theatre and politically engaged theatre are two designations that gained acceptance amid a lively debate that went on throughout the late 19th century and consolidated in the 20th century. Its turning point lay in the structure of the relations between theatre and politics or even between theatre and propaganda. This text addresses what resistance and political-cultural protest meant to Grupo Teatro Moderno de Lisboa (TML), from Lisbon/Portugal, in the 1960s, based on the interviews and discourses about their collective creation processes, theoretical research, and social intervention. According to many interpreters, the Group broke with the theater establishment of 1960 and came out as one generation's great movement. It only lasted for 4 years, from 1961 to 1965. During this time, TML staged theatrical texts by Carlos Muniz, Dostoyevsky, Miguel Mihura, John Steinbeck, Luiz Francisco Rebello, William Shakespeare, and José Carlos Pires. These artists made up and remade different universes according to their purposes and wishes. By reading the above authors' texts in the 1960s, these Portuguese artists gave new meanings to

the present and to the past itself – recalling here Brecht's "past and present in one". The political and aesthetic issues in the plays were updated through debates between the theater group and the audience — quite a difficult task in a period when a political-cultural protest against the "Estado Novo" dictatorship was increasingly strong and constant, and in which official censorship, always vigilant against heterodox artistic manifestations, was stifling. Being active in the politically engaged theater then meant looking for different staging places and other points of view on the years of lead. Utilizing its actions, it is a ground principle, and its practices, TML would sow the seeds of the independent theatre group movement, having taken the first steps in the pathway toward an intervention theater that, later on, these groups took upon themselves to continue with.

Despite adversities, theatrical experiments that go against the grain of prevailing thoughts are still tenaciously current on the agenda. Doing theater amid commercial pressure is, undoubtedly, a form of provocation, of insubordination to the "hit parade" market, to which Comuna – Teatro Pesquisa, Teatro da Cornucópia, O Bando, Casa da Comédia, A Barraca, the Évora Culture Center and SeivaTrupestill resort.

Keywords: Teatro Moderno de Lisboa, resistance, engagement.

1 INTRODUCTION

Scene I: art and engagement

Popular theater and engaged theater are two denominations that gained shape through a lively debate that went through the end of the 19th century and was consolidated in the 20th century. Their point of convergence lay in the texture of the relationship between theater and politics, or even between theater and advertising. For the English critic Eric Bentley (1969), political theater refers both to the theatrical text and to when, where, and how it is represented. At times condemned as escapist, at other times incensed as a tool of revolutionary liberation, art, in general, continues to be a hot topic both in academia and beyond.

Incidentally, it is not too much to remember that different theatrical groups, since the end of the 19th century, (re)put movements against the grain on stage or, if you like, experimentation exercises, marks of another type of theatricality, of another aesthetic and — for what not to say? — of another form of intervention in the social field. In Germany and France, just to exemplify, proposals such as the *Freie Bühne* (Free Scene), from 1889, or the *Théâtre du Peuple* (People's Theater), from 1885, intended to go beyond the mere lowering of the cost of admission. At the same time, there were numerous initiatives linked to workers' associations and clubs in different European countries. The new dramaturgy pointed out, as its main characteristic, the celebration of the worker as a theme and interpreter, allied to the perspective of rescuing, for the theater, social themes.

Turning attention to the American theater of the first half of the 20th century, several stories can be retold. It is enough to return to the theatrical movement of the American workers, forgotten by the tradition that conceived the official history and aesthetics of the theater. Theater groups such as *Artef* (1925), *Workers Drama League* (1926), *Workers Laboratory Theater* (1930), and *Group Theater* (1931) showed not only their links with anarchists, socialists, and communists — including some rapprochement between intellectuals, artists and left-wing militants —, as well as registering the influences of Piscator's political theater proposals.

When welcoming the presence of engaged theater in the 1960s in the United States, Eric Bentley recalls that the theatrical phenomenon in itself is subversive:

wherever 'two or three people gather' a blow is struck against the abstract non-gatherings of the TV audience, as well as the digestive gatherings of exhausted merchants on Broadway. [...] The subversion, the rebellion, and the revolution in the theater are not a mere question of program, and even less can they be defined in terms of a particular genre of play (BENTLEY, 1969, p. 178).

In an article from 1968, Dias Gomes declares:

All art is therefore political. The difference is that, in the theater, this act is practiced in front of the audience. [...] the theater is the only art [...] that uses the human creature as a means of expression. [...] This character of a political-social act of theatrical representation, an act that takes place at that moment and with the participation of the public, cannot be forgotten (GOMES, 1968, p. 10).

For this reason, in Gomes' understanding, the theater had a prominent role in the fight against the dictatorship implemented in Brazil in 1964. After all, since *Anchieta* — “our first playwright” (GOMES, 1968, p. 13) —, theater and politics are umbilically linked to the question of the social function of art. The defense of engagement, therefore, assumes that authors who talk about Brazilian reality (from different perspectives) are engaged. This means that theater is a way of the knowledge of society. Thus, even those who proclaim themselves to be non-engaged or apolitical assume a political position as well.

The experiences of the working-class theater, the *Arena*, the *Popular Cultural Centers* (CPCS), the *Oficina*, and the *Opinião* in search of the political and the popular led to a broad cultural movement that involved groups, directors, authors, and casts — a group that suffered a violent setback with the civil-

military coup and, in particular, after the AI-5 was enacted in 1968. From then on, for numerous groups, making a popular theater meant assuming a position of rebellion against commercial theater — the *teatrão* — and the political regime; and it is even possible to detect some expressions for this form of agitation, such as independent theater and/or alternative theater.

Concerning the field of culture, especially in theater in post-1964 Brazil, it is interesting to point out that, while most artists were professionally linked to the cultural industry, others were temporarily seeking exile and some were still trying to resist conservative modernization of society, including the advancement of the cultural industry. These sought to articulate with the so-called new social movements that, little by little, were organized even with the repression (especially in some unions and neighborhood communities) and often in activities associated with left-wing sectors of the Catholic Church. In Santo André, for example, the Grupo de Teatro da Cidade (GTC) was founded in 1968. With other theatrical groups set up on the outskirts of São Paulo (such as Núcleo Expressão de Osasco, Teatro-Circo Alegria dos Pobres, Núcleo Independente, Teatro União and Olho Vivo, Grupo Importação de Teatro, and Grupo de Teatro Forja), the GTC constituted the “theater of militancy” — in the expression of Silvana Garcia. By the way, in this author's opinion, the traits that “brought these groups closer together and would set the tone for the independent movement” would be: “to produce collectively; act outside the professional scope; take the theater to the public in the periphery; produce a popular theater; establish a commitment of solidarity with the spectator and his reality”. These aspects should not elide the “subtlety of the differences” between the groups that guarantee the specificity of each one and marks the “divergences among themselves” (GARCIA, 2004, p. 124).

Several of these groups, such as Teatro União and Olho Vivo, Tool and Forja, were linked to neighborhood social movements, trade unions, and grassroots communities, merging politics and culture in the reorganization of civil society under the dictatorship.

Scene 2: TML: a theater of combat

In Portugal, in the early 1960s, the situation under the dictatorial regime of Antônio Oliveira Salazar was not at all easy. Attempts to change the cultural landscape, coming from both cinema and theater, encountered strong resistance. In this sense, the formation of the Grupo Teatro Moderno de Lisboa, in 1961, followed on from companies that sought, in some way, to innovate in terms of repertoire and working methods, such as Comediantes de Lisboa, from 1944, Companheiros do Pátio das Comédias, from 1948, Teatro do Povo, from 1936, and Teatro Nacional Popular, from 1957. This type of challenge to a theater “sclerotic and divorced from Portuguese reality” was also made among amateur and university groups, less subject to censorship action, notably, for example, in Coimbra, the *Círculo de Iniciação Teatral da Academia de Coimbra (CITAC)* and the *Teatro dos Estudantes da Universidade de Coimbra (TEUC)* and, in Lisbon, the *Scenics of Law and Letters*.

It is interesting to verify, in this period, the presence of Brazilian companies circulating with their shows in Portuguese lands. It is worth mentioning

the great impact of the coming to Lisbon of TUCA [Teatro da Universidade Católica de São Paulo], which would perform, in 1966, at Teatro Avenida, with this touching and interventionist *Vida e morte Severina* by João Cabral de Mello Neto, with music by a composer who was then promisingly beginning — Chico Buarque de Holanda (LÍVIO, 2009, p. 30).

Despite Salazarism, the theories of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett were embodied in some theater groups. The playwright Luiz Francisco Rebello emphasizes:

the year 68 was what we could call a pivotal year. Moment of a dialectical process in which quantity gains new quality.

In the framework of the global contestation of the consumer society, the traditional forms of theater would also have to be called into question.

But — and here is the novelty — this calling into question did not only affect bourgeois theater, that false theater, easy and false, [...] denounced by Antonin Artaud more than sixty years ago; it also aimed at the so-called avant-garde theater, which, born under the sign of non-conformism, was little by little accepted, and then recovered by the same ones who at first rejected it, [...] and finally came to institutionalize it. if.

So, from rupture to rupture, from explosion to explosion, the problem of an alternative theater arises [...] (REBELLO apud Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1988, p. 26, emphasis added).

This work addresses the meanings of resistance and political-cultural contestation of Companhia Teatro Moderno de Lisboa (TML) / Portugal, in the 1960s, taking into account the interviews and speeches produced about their collective processes of creation, theoretical research, and intervention Social.

Crossing the seas, then, I intend to highlight another production and research experience. TML for many performers “broke the established order of theatrical life in the 1960s and asserted itself as the great movement of a generation” (LÍVIO, 2009, p. 201). It lasted only four years, from 1961 to 1965. During this period, the group presented theatrical texts by Carlos Muniz, Dostoyevsky, Miguel Mihura, John Steinbeck, Luiz Francisco Rebello, William Shakespeare, and José Carlos Pires. These theatrical readers composed and recomposed different universes according to their intentions and desires. They gave, “past and present in one” (BRECHT, 2000, p. 233), the synonym of combining the reading (with new meanings) of texts, filled with social criticism in a given context, to the representation of a group of Portuguese actors. As Fredric Jameson recalls — apropos of the film *News from Ideological Antiquity*, by Alexander Kluge —, what matters is the “miscellaneous” or “montage of feelings” (JAMESON, 2010, p. 69).

The political and aesthetic issues contained in the plays were updated by the debate between the theater group and the audience — a very difficult task in a period in which the political and cultural contestation of the “Estado Novo” dictatorship became stronger and more constant and in which The repression of the official censorship, always vigilant towards heterodox artistic manifestations, made itself felt in an asphyxiating way. Recalling Natalie Davis' idea here, these men and women were “active users and interpreters” of the printed texts they read and listened to and which they also helped “to shape” (DAVIS, 1990, p. 184).

It is worth mentioning, once again, that the 1960s would bring new and rich directions for theater, from the Living Theater, its rituals, and happenings to the theories of the Polish Jerzy Grotowski, author of a more stripped current, giving great importance to the expression of the scenic body, the so-called “poor theatre”, passing through the young angry men of England to Peter Brook and his peculiar notion of theatrical space and a new stage/audience relationship. These movements, observed in part by the Western world, corresponded to a mutual desire of creators, artists, and young audiences who no longer recognized themselves in traditional theater, questioning it and seeking other and more challenging alternatives, often transforming the theater into a laboratory. , permeable to different experiences and the fusion of scenic elements from other cultures.

A new theater was called for, demanding a distinct relationship between the text, the public, and the creators (actors and directors), something that, in the USA, was evident in the action of Elia Kazan, first in the Group Theater (1931) and later (1961) at Lincoln Center, with the creation of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, which would greatly influence the younger generations – the case of Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee. By the way, the programmatic bases of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater were very close to those defined, in the same year, by Teatro Moderno de Lisboa:

We form a group of human beings who want to make art and not money... It will be a committed theater group... It will defend creation against sterility, freedom against slavery, research against dogma, impulse against repression. .. Life against death (LÍVIO, 2009, p. 28).

The TML, therefore, collaborated to establish a field of circulation and cultural exchanges. The actors tried, in some way, to innovate in terms of repertoire and working methods, fleeing “light comedy” and/or “dramatic theatre”, “divorced” from “Portuguese reality” (LOURENÇO apud LÍVIO, 2009, p. 202). Prestigious actors such as Carmen Dolores, Rogério Paulo, Armando Cortez, Ruy de Carvalho, and Fernando Gusmão got together to form a company outside the commercial circuits and with cultural objectives completely different from those of the theater that was then being performed.

The creation of Teatro Moderno de Lisboa was one of the most beautiful and exultant moments of my life. I was one of its most enthusiastic and committed founders. I was so fed up with doing commercial theater, whose importance, incidentally, I recognize, but both I and the other companions of this authentic adventure, now wanted to turn to a theater of great texts chosen by us, modern as its name indicated, and which, therefore, would give us great pleasure to interpret (CARVALHO apud LÍVIO, 2009, p. 178).

Fundamentally, it broke with, let's say, conventional theatre. It was the first independent theater group in a society of artists that existed in Portugal, and from which all the others arise: Grupo 4, A Cornucópia, A Comuna, Os Bonecreiros, Teatro Experimental de Cascais, etc. [...] At a certain point, the Núcleo dos Amigos do Teatro Moderno de Lisboa was created. We reached around 10,000 members, and these friends often organized conferences and debates after the show. The importance in political and social terms is enormous [...] (CALDAS apud Jornal Avante!, 2008, p. 3).

In addition to revealing new national and foreign playwrights, TML's declaration of intentions included a different approach to the classics. According to the operating rules, each member would propose pieces that were within the parameters of the company's Manifesto, not least because he would have to send a large batch of originals for prior censorship examination, knowing in advance that only a few would be approved. Thus, for example, it was Tomás de Macedo who made known and suggested to the group, the play *O tinteiro*, by the Spanish playwright Carlos Muñiz.

Thus, in 1961, at Cinema Império, where the matinees were held, the newly formed Portuguese company premiered *O tinteiro* — a play about freedom during the dictatorship. It should be noted that businessman José Gil, owner of the cinema, one of the most prestigious theaters in Lisbon, provided the space for TML to stage its plays in their free time, that is, on the second matinees, at 6:30 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and on Fridays and at 11:30 am on Sundays. The Empire, by the way, was considered a “cathedral of cinematographic, theatrical and musical celebration”. This “counterculture” place has recently become the headquarters of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

The plot of the play focuses on the action of three employees obedient to an unfair and overbearing boss who torments, in particular, the existence of the main character, the inkwell Crock, crushed in an office by the absurdity of the laws that prohibited joy, love, a simple flower in a vase. “Is it possible to work and smell the spring flowers? [...] Can we like poetry, even if it's the numbers of some accounting that fill our days at the desk? These are some of the questions that Crock raises in an environment where the watchword is “to obey without questioning” (MUÑIZ, 2005, p. 42).

Antônio Costa Ferreira who, according to his confession, due to his physique, was often called for hateful roles, such as Frank, from *O tinteiro*, claims that it was with great pleasure that he “dressed” him on stage:

It was a miserable department head, in a threadbare coat with alpaca cuffs and a big black jacket for solemn moments, who coldly tortured his subordinates. With the outfit of a big black jacket and fancy pants, then used in the solemn afternoons of the Estado Novo and by the Gambrinus table chiefs, I wanted to convey the mediocrity of the fascist tyrant. With the Hitler mustache, the ambition of despotic and universal power, and with the sibilant voice, the suggestion of Salazar's voice that, when he called the Portuguese on the radio, gave us the certainty of having a little less hope. Incidentally, the very clear staging by Rogério Pulo placed Frank, not as the ultimate beneficiary of tragic exploitation, but as an employee of abstract power, in a tailcoat and dark glasses, which could not fail to be capitalism. The hatred of Salazar gave authenticity to this role, as the Method teaches (FERREIRA apud LÍVIO, 2009, p. 65).

For actor Armando Caldas,

Tinteiro was a real bomb, not only in Lisbon but in Portugal (we covered almost the whole country). Just consult the newspapers of the time. The success of this show had, as a consequence, scared the political power at the time, because from then on, it was noticed implacability of the censorship for the pieces that we sent for their approval. What also bothered the rulers a lot was the fact that we created the “Núcleo de Amigos do TML”, where thousands of people identified with our programming signed up and who often organized excursions to see our shows and promoted the performance of others, in various locations where debates were often held about what they had just seen. [...] as someone said, “the Teatro Moderno de Lisboa was a big stone in the puddle of cultural stagnation in Portugal” (CALDAS apud LÍVIO, 2009, p. 177).

It is important to remember that in 1961 the war began in Angola and that it took more than fifteen years for Portuguese pieces to appear about this tragic event. Many contemporary Portuguese playwrights wrote, knowing that it was very difficult for their plays to be performed, as any text that had some social concern or some motive aimed at individual freedom was soon banned by censorship. José Cardoso Pires defined the 1960s as “the consulate of terror for Paulo Rodrigues”, deputy minister of Salazar, who boasted, when he died, of having been “a mechanical pencil in the hands of His Excellency”. “A mechanical pencil that did not limit itself to writing what the owner dictated to it, but that crossed out and cut what others wrote...” (PIRES apud LÍVIO, 2009, p. 18).

Even to put a photograph on the door of the theater with a scene from the play, whatever the scene it was, it was necessary to submit it to the Commission of Spectacles, a department linked to censorship, and wait for the stamp of the respective authorization. Nor could theater be performed in a place that was not, in principle, suitable for it. It was up to the General Directorate of Spectacles to decide who could have space to perform. Under these conditions, any new initiative died in its infancy or had to be embraced by the entrepreneurs of the so-called commercial theater and devirtualized in its content.

However, even with so many obstacles, the TML would form actors, and audiences, reveal new values of national dramaturgy (such as Cardoso Pires) and foreign (Carlos Muniz and Miguel Mihura), new directors (Rogério Paulo, Fernando Gusmão, Costa Ferreira, Armando Cortez, Paulo Renato), plastic artists (Octávio Clérigo, Luís Jardim) and even stage musicians (Carlos Paredes, Antônio Vitorino de Almeida), in such a way that, for the theater critic Tito Lívio,

it can be said, without exaggeration, that, amid salazarism, the creation of Teatro Moderno de Lisboa was a kind of theatrical “spring”, ephemeral, but remarkable, since it would end sooner than the will of its founders intended, due to a series of obstacles they encountered along their path (LÍVIO, 2009, p. 64).

For Tito Lívio, the theatrical spring at TML can be organized into three seasons, taking into account the departure and/or entry of actors/“partners”: the first, from 1961 to 1962, with the staging of *O tinteiro e os Humilhados e, offended*, by Dostoyevsky and André Charpak; the second, from 1962 to 1963, with *The three tall hats*, by Miguel Mihura, *Of mice and men*, by John Steinbeck and George C. Kaufman, *Don't walk in that figure*, by Armando Cortez, *The next day*, by Luiz Francisco Rebello, *The Pariah*, by Strindberg, and *Professor Taranne*, by Adamov; the third, from 1964 to 1965, with *Tooth by tooth*, by W. Shakespeare, and *O render dos heroes*, by José Cardoso Pires.

Due to its action, fundamental principles, and practices, the TML would sow the seeds of the movement of independent theater groups, having started the path of an intervention theater that they, later, were responsible for continuing. In this sense, it is interesting to note that in the 1960s, Portuguese playwrights read and acted according to their sociocultural repertoire. This complex process was expanded and strengthened with the discussions and debates promoted after the groups' presentations. It was one more opportunity to exchange ideas about the staged texts. By the way, when referring to the different literary

genres, Benoît Denis points out that the theater is an important “place” of engagement, because, through representation, “the relations between the author and the public are established as in real-time, in a kind of immediacy of exchange, a bit like the way an orator galvanizes his audience or engages him in the cause he defends” (DENIS, 2002, p. 83).

In this way, TML, as well as other theater groups in Portugal that fought both the dictatorship and the imposed censorship, acted in different cultural circuits. Doing engaged theater in that period consisted of looking for other texts, other actors, varied audience(s), different places of staging, as well as other perspectives on the years of lead. Remembering Carl Schorske (2000), “thinking with history” opens the possibility of examining processes and cultural productions in distant historical moments and spaces. In this sense, expressions, images, metaphors, allegories, and other figures were merged that, together, made up a significant scenario of articulations of a way of thinking and acting, a vision of the world. These companies were able to combine, in such difficult times, art, inventiveness, and political rebellion

Iná Camargo Costa, on the cover of the book *Atuação Crítica*, warns that even in “times of total colonization of sensibility and imagination by the cultural industry; practical and theoretical challenges (are) always posed to those who are willing to do theater or any form of consequential art [...] (COSTA apud CARVALHO, 2009). Fortunately, despite modern times and the difficulties arising from them, theatrical experiences that go against the grain of dominant thinking remain on the agenda and the agenda with incredible tenacity. Doing theater under commercial pressures is, without a doubt, a form of provocation, of insubordination to the “success charts” market, which Comuna – Teatro Pesquisa, Teatro da Cornucópia, O Bando, Casa da Comédia, A Barraca, Évora Cultural Center and Seiva Trupe.

Remembering Crock, from *The Inkwell*, “in the world there is still spring”. Despite everyday difficulties, we can still breathe other air. For this very reason, paraphrasing Bertolt Brecht, despite everything, even when we are defeated, we still have the alternative of lucidity. In other words, despite savage capitalism — forgive me for the redundancy — what matters is to keep fighting to understand what is going on.

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