

**International Association of Theatre Critics  
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In Association with the Seoul International Performing Arts Festival**

**(Colloquium 2: Papers on Europe, 23 October, 9:30-13:00)**

**Between Drama and Dramaturgy, or What Is (Really) Changing in Portuguese Contemporary Theatre, or Should We Say the Performing Arts?**

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[**Title 1**] I have to start with a confession, which is intended to work like one of those very old-fashioned prologues through which a given character appealed to the indulgence of his audience. Only some days ago, when I finally set myself to writing this presentation, I read the summary I had sent in due time to the organization of this truly “extraordinary congress” – my sincere compliments to our Korean friends – and I realised how ambitious was my initial plan: according to that abstract, now printed in the programme, I had proposed myself not only to address some of the – at least for me – key issues raised by the stimulating subject of our meeting, “New Theatricality and Criticism”, but also to do it trying to tell you something relevant about the Portuguese theatrical scene. I know now that I won’t be able to do all that, or at least not as deeply and thoughtfully as I had previously intended and I have to apologise for a title that promised more than I can offer you. And that’s where my plea for your indulgence comes in. And I’ll start, like suggested in the mentioned abstract, with a reference to a personal, albeit also collective, Portuguese “critical” experience.

[**APCT 2**] When back at the beginning of January 2003 a group of theatre critics, journalists and academics proposed themselves to reinvigorate the Portuguese Association of Theatre Critics – which exists since the second half of the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – they confronted themselves with a heated discussion around the name of the association, particularly centred on these two alternatives: whether to keep it, maintaining the more traditional reference to “theatre”, or whether to change it into “Portuguese Association of Critics of the Performing Arts”. This discussion among those that dominantly report, criticise and study theatre practice – some of them with an equally devoted attention, for instances, to dance – proved symptomatic of the very fluid or hybrid nature of Portuguese current reality in the domain of the performing arts, thus reflecting the broader reality of the European and worldwide situation. The final decision to keep the reference to “theatre” – which was only reached after a vote, the result being taken by majority and not unanimously – had among its

strongest supporters, of which I was part, the idea that the concept of “theatre” had historically proven itself flexible enough to express a wide range of experiences and that it would be capable to keep on adapting itself to present and future developments. However the situation remains that we are increasingly dealing with very slippery objects as far as categorisation is concerned, that we are supposed to analyze and to evaluate in their own terms. As always in art and criticism, novelty and memory frequently intersect, in a way that is far from clear or sufficiently helpful to provide us with the necessary analytical and critical tools. Moreover, the global world we live in still preserves quite a good number of local, regional or national specificities that we have better be aware of, protecting our critical considerations from premature generalizations.

Let me also add some very brief notes for the benefit of a brief characterization of the Portuguese theatrical scene. As I’m sure it happens in all areas of the globe, the fact that Portugal is part of Europe doesn’t make it instantly “European” in the sense that our country would have shared the same crucial cultural and artistic developments during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Geography is seldom enough, and politics frequently play a more decisive role. Portugal lived under a repressive regime during 48 years, and not even the tremendous changes operated in the world in the aftermath of the Second World War saved it from the continuation of that experience until 1974, the year in which my country finally embraced the more attractive challenge of a democratic regime. So, from 1926 to 1974, Portugal suffered from what I would call a prolonged delay of some cultural experiences. Theatre, by the very public and collective nature of its demands, was one of the artistic forms that suffered the most from many of the repressive mechanisms used by the State like censorship. The plays by Brecht, for example, were completely forbidden on the Portuguese stage up to 1974, but also were those by Sean O’Casey.

In these last 32 years, the Portuguese theatrical scene has gone through enormous transformations, some of them so fast that what some artists regarded as “new” was already old-fashioned for many others. I’m well aware of the fact that the coexistence of many disparate expressions in a single moment of time is a phenomenon quite common to all societies, but I’m also sure that you’ll all agree that whenever a culture finally finds itself free from longstanding constricting mechanisms, the need and the will for change and renovation leads to a much more agitated succession of experiments. With some degree of historical abuse, I could say that Portugal only knew what “mise en scène” was or could be – and I’m deliberately using the French expression here to separate it from the more mechanical or ambiguous sense of “theatre directing” – in that decade of the seventies. That somehow meant

that very soon some of our most prestigious theatre directors – or “metteurs en scène” –, as well as the companies they created, started being questioned by other theatre artists that in the late eighties or beginning of the nineties were already exploring other understandings of theatre and the performing arts. Suffice to say that the Portuguese theatrical scene has come a long way in these 32 years and that it is currently characterized by a wide variety of experiences, reflecting the world-wide tendency to an expansion of boundaries and the need of theatre practitioners to meet new perceptions of themselves and the world, as well as to explore their own means of artistic expression.

This variety concerns not only models of production, but also, more importantly for the purpose of our congress, new or at least renewed understandings of theatre. As I suggested earlier, one of the most remarkable cultural developments in Portugal has been the development of the performing arts, there including not only dance in its most traditional forms and in its more audacious contemporary expressions, but also some other more hybrid experiments. These more hybrid experiments result, many times, from a more open attitude to the contributions of other artistic languages, thus alternatively using the concepts of “performance art”, “installation”, or, in a different and more popular directions, as might be the case with the techniques of stand up comedy. Above all, in some of the most radical cases, I would dare to suggest that what we get is a refusal of any remaining traces of “illusion” in theatre communication, opting for deliberate – and sometimes solipsistic – processes of what I would call, for lack of a better word, deconstruction of the very own means of expression used for those performative experiences.

**[The curtain 3]** Allow me now to lower the curtain to help us concentrate a bit more deeply on the topic of our congress. I would like now to suggest that many of the changes that have been affecting the landscape of the performing arts and most particularly of what we still call “theatre” could, perhaps be reduced to three large issues: first, the expansion or a renewed understanding of theatre’s intrinsic “interdisciplinarity”, something that concerns both the transformations in the balance and hierarchy of the many different languages or expressions traditionally used in theatre and the new, either technological or artistic, means whose expressiveness theatre has been trying to explore for its own benefit; secondly, the age old question of the permanently evolving relation between the text and the stage; and thirdly, the much more philosophical, but no less practical, problem, that is somehow the result of the previous two and that concerns both the generation of meaning and our own attitude to the perceptive experience of meaning or signification. Explored by theatre practitioners, these three dimensions concern all those involved in the activities of reviewing and studying

theatre, frequently questioning and challenging some of our most ingrained habits and convictions regarding perception and judgement. I'm well aware that the situation is much more complex than the one suggested by these three issues, but I'm also convinced that any serious discussion has to pay the necessary attention to the complex interaction of these three forces.

Hans-Thies Lehman's book titled *Postdramatic Theatre*, first published in Germany in 1999, and later translated into French in 2002 and into English in 2006, is undoubtedly the most influential source for the wide currency the expression of "postdramatic" – first suggested by Richard Schechner in 1988 – seems to be gaining in both academic and critical terms. It is, there's also no doubt about that, an informed and passionate study of many of the new theatre forms that have developed since the 1960s, capable of helping us to go through the renewed landscape of our times. However, his main argument, concentrated as it is on the way text seems to have been displaced by more ostensibly scenic experiments, is not more than a development of the insights that some other theatre theoreticians and critics have been presenting at least since the eighties. In a truly groundbreaking essay originally published in 1984, and written for a supplement of the *Enciclopedia Universalis*, the French critic and dramaturge Bernard Dort already suggested an "Einsteinian" revolution to describe the, and I quote, "generalized emancipation of all the factors of performance", insisting on the need to concentrate our critical attention on the stage, there including the texts among the other "factors of performance". And this was a "revolution" whose genealogy he persuasively traced back to many modernist visionaries like Edward Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud who, in very different ways, already envisaged the emancipation of theatre as an art not dependent on the demands of dramatic text. Craig, for instances, in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was already very adamant on refusing the characterization of the theatre director as an "interpreter". In his essay, Dort also drew attention to the fact every kind of text, and not only the dramatic one, could have its place on the stage.

In his theoretical studies of *mise en scène*, Patrice Pavis has also always insisted both on the idea that stage directing should never be understood as "the reduction or transformation of text into performance, but rather their confrontation" and on the need to further investigate the "modalities of this confrontation". According to his informed vision, "*mise en scène*, even at its simplest and most explicit, 'displaces' the text and makes it say what a critical commentary, spoken or written, could not say: it expresses, one could almost say, the inexpressible". In his book, published in 1996, dedicated to the analysis of performances, the French theoretician already addressed what he presented as the text-centred and the stage-

centred visions on this issue, advancing some doubts on Hans-Thies Lehmann's radical vision and calling for a more balanced approach. I can't help quoting one of his most inspired formulations: "Thus, *mise en scène* is no longer today a simple passage from text to the stage; it is sometimes an installation, that is, a *mise en presence* of different stage practices (light, visual arts, improvisations), without it being possible to establish a hierarchy among them and without the text playing the role of an attracting axis for the rest of the performance". What is particularly curious about Pavis formulation is both the reference to contemporary visual experiences like "installations" and the way he stresses that issue of the disturbed hierarchies among stage's different expressions and languages.

Since the 60s that performance art has been challenging our own understanding of what theatre might be, because it has questioned the boundaries and the mechanisms of representation, introducing issues like arbitrariness, unpredictability and the simple immanence of bodies and objects was a way to interrogate and to explore new ways of generating meaning in a postmodern reality where everything is acknowledged to be a representation. The fact that "theatre", in its more institutional and traditional sense, has been somehow initially reluctant to integrate performance art in its own sphere – quite the opposite to what happened with the visual arts – should be an important reminder to the dangers of practical and critical conservatism. Curiously enough, I would dare to suggest that the most extraordinary legacy that both Brecht and Beckett, two of the most important theatre figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, left to us – much more than their dramatic fictions – was precisely the way they, in their very different ways, explored and questioned the production of meaning on the stage. The different forms each of them came up with were not more than the result of that search. And forms, like Peter Szondi already reminded us in his own groundbreaking study on the theory of modern drama, are what really determine the evolution of art. In a gross simplification, it could somehow be suggested that all the artistic history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West is dominated by this impulse not so much to say new things, but to tell them in different ways and forms.

The question remains: how are we, as critics, supposed to deal with such a vast constellation of forms, with the widespread variety of proposals and expressions, how are we supposed to balance the descriptive imperative with the more specifically "critical" one? There are those, influenced by the philosophical dictum that the work of art has lost its aura, that recommend a reorientation of our intervention from the domain of aesthetics to the one of culture: according to this suggestion, the only legitimacy the critic would have is to speak about the way the work of art affects him or herself and his or her way of looking at the

world. The critic's only function should be the one of sharing the work of art after the personal and collective effects triggered by that same work. I have serious misgivings about this solution to deal with that vast constellation of forms and experiences. What I regard as a creative involvement in culture demands a more committed and both analytical and critical engagement in the discussion of the expressiveness of those same forms and experiences. I still subscribe to Josette Féral's suggestion that the critic is the one that "establishes connections [and] registers the interval within the aesthetic experience".

**[The eye 4]** Having lost the normative, stable and more logocentric dominance of drama in theatre, as well as the values of coherence, unity and synthesis for so long associated with the idea of artistic creation, I repeat, how are we supposed to deal with this "perpetual experimentation" that Hans-Thies Lehman so persuasively suggests to characterize the current condition of theatre once, like the other art forms, it started to reflect upon the potential of its latent means of artistic expression? There's surely no easy answer, and it will sound almost as a contradiction in terms to suggest that in such a postdramatic age the answer may lie on dramaturgy. Not on "dramaturgy" in the sense inaugurated by Lessing, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and so actively developed in the German and French theatres during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to that varied, and most of the times invisible, set of activities that, although geared to performance, developed around the text and its literary, historical, and cultural contexts and circumstances. No. I speak more of dramaturgy in the same way we can speak of the dramaturgy of a piece directed by the choreographer William Forsythe, and the same way we can still speak of the dramaturgy of a creation directed by Eimuntas Nekrosius, Romeo Castellucci or Jan Fabre, that is, the subtle and complex network that every work of art is supposed to include if it somehow wants to communicate, or to generate meaning, albeit in a radical and demanding way. We could call it differently, and speak about the "concept", the "programmatically presuppositions" or even the "architecture" of a given theatrical piece. Even if it is no longer the result of a single author, the theatre director, even if it is based on a more collective or improvisational logic of composition, even if it is deliberately engaged in the disparagement of meaning, there should always be some articulated concept graspable by the audience that would enable us both to feel, to re-construct and to convey an experience, distinguishing simple self-indulgence from a proficient and daring use of artistic forms. Even when theatre offers itself as simply eventful and energy, in an apparent denial of more codified and frequently ossified forms of signification, there's some strategy there that should enable us to participate. Although it could seem paradoxical, the fact is without the "drama" theatre needs to become more "dramaturgical", because there's an increasing need to address

the void left by that displacement of the central position of the text. Dramaturgy becomes then a much needed intervention in terms of structure, assessing and discussing the expressive potential and the articulation of the more or less numerous artistic means used in any performative creation.

Allow me now to raise the curtain – this historical expression of a certain idea of theatre, like our colleague Georges Banu has so stimulatingly explored in one of his most captivating books –, inviting you now, as if in an illustrated epilogue, to look very briefly at some other more varied images that hopefully will capture, in a still and silent way, the work developed by some Portuguese contemporary theatre practitioners.

A good example of a Portuguese theatre director that emerged just after our revolution in 1974 is **Ricardo Pais**, perhaps the most consistently questioning practitioner of his generation and the one that has had a more troubled relation with texts and their role in the construction of *mise en scène*. Back in 1988 he created one of the most extraordinary theatre experiences I've ever had the privilege of attending to out of the very fragmented poetic material that the Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa had left on the myth of Faust: the production was adequately titled ***Faust. Fernando. Fragments***. That was a remarkable example of stage or scenic dramaturgy being capable to overcome the almost inform nature of the textual material. More recently, in 2002, he directed a daring stage rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, titled ***one Hamlet more***, using video live projections to enhance the audience's intimacy with the troubled nature of the varied issues at stake in that play. And only last year, he combined Alfred Jarry's ***King Ubu*** with visual and musical motives inspired on a popular and almost kitschy idea of Portugal to create a proposal of extraordinary ironic power.

A quite different practice has been the one developed by a Lisbon theatre company, **Cão Solteiro** – in English “a dog that is single” – in collaboration with the director **Nuno Carinhas** in the exploration of poetic notions closer at the same to the universe of the visual arts and the theatre. The production inspired by the work and the writings of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, called in Portuguese ***Aguantar*** – a wordplay on a verb that means something like “to hold on” –, is a remarkable example of the traditional means of theatre being used for an exercise that is out of all the constrictions of narrative and dialogue, simultaneously capable of drawing on the more contemporary logic of the “installation” or of the performative act.

A very good example among us of the “deconstructive” tendency I mentioned a bit earlier would be work of a theatre company, created in 1995, under the name of **Teatro**

**Praga**, which is intended to mean “Plague”: the productions they have presented between 2002 and 2003 based on Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* or Turgueniev’s *A Month in the Country* still revealed the massive influence of the Belgian company TG Stan, but they also very eloquently introduced in the Portuguese scene a much needed playful questioning of the formulae, models and conventions of theatrical representation. In their best works, again, it the ensemble and the variety of the, frequently, surprising stage actions that shows itself capable of building a dramaturgy full of new perceptions on the fictional realities they both bring on to the stage and subvert.

A totally different situation, quite new in the Portuguese scene, is the powerful work developed by **Circolando**, another young company that has been trying to merge the different techniques of the circus and of puppetry with those of the traditional theatre. In this recent work, *Cavaterra* – something like “digging the earth” – inspired by the hard life of old Portuguese miners, words are not even used to convey to us lyrical expressions of both the hardship and the daily companionship of this ancient activity. Like it happens in dance, dramaturgy here is particularly important, because there are no words to give us more stable indications of the emotions and experiences at stake. This is an extraordinary example of scenic poetry at its most expressive possibilities.

A last and more problematic example is the one offered by a young actor, **Rogério Nuno Costa**, who has been exploring a project called *I’m going to your house*: as the title clearly suggests, it’s him who brings “theatre” to someone’s home, invading the privacy of his audience and inviting that same necessarily reduced audience to follow a given set of procedures. This is theatre as a performative act, using some of the concepts and strategies of site-specific art, and exploring the unpredictable nature of his audiences’ surroundings to interact with. Again, what we have in here is a plan based on the subversion of the conventional models of representation. Again, it all comes back to the way experiences are organized and the way we look at them. Let’s just hope we’ll be able to open the door to them, even if cautiously, instead of simply peering through the hole...

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