

Reconstructing scenography: the Portuguese dictatorship archives

Between 1933 and 1974, Portugal was governed by a nationalist, authoritarian, corporatist and conservative regime called Estado Novo (the New State). Its most prominent figure and political architect was António de Oliveira Salazar who held tightly to power until 1968, when he was succeeded by Marcello Caetano due to old age and physical debilitation. This totalitarian regime depended on a repressive state apparatus in which censorship played a major part. Its origins date back to 1926, year of the Military Coup that brought down the country's First Republic and established a military dictatorship.

Official discourse presented censorship as a means of “[...] preventing the misguidance of public opinion, in its quality of social force and it must defend it from all subjects that could deviate it from truth, justice, morality and good administration, thus avoiding attacks on the fundamental principles that rule society.”¹ The list of forbidden subjects turned more and more extensive, and it included not only political and ideological topics but also morality and public order. Luiz Francisco Rebello, an important portuguese theatre critic and historian, summed up in a brief but accurate way the primary concerns of censorship: “The reading of reports is enlightening regarding the censors’ motivation and can be reduced to two main parameters (with several variations and ramifications): political ideology and catholic morality.” (REBELLO 2009: 10)

Newspapers, magazines, books, movies, music, radio, tv programmes and performances were all subjected to a thorough surveillance in the name of the “nation’s greater good”, but considered by many as only based on ignorance and arbitrariness. Nevertheless, censorship thrived under Salazar’s regime entwined in a complex and powerful web of state bureaucracy. Its omnipresence resulted in a strong grip of all artistic productions and promoted an unhealthy stale atmosphere that proved to be inhibiting to artistic creation as denounced by - among many others - an important Portuguese writer as Ferreira de Castro:

[slide 2]

¹ Decree-law 22 469, April 11th 1933.

*In order to write according to the censorship canon, the novelist must pretend to ignore all the great restlessness of the man of our time and write some conventional novels, out of joint with his own time, some novels subjected to so many restrictions that it would be tiresome to name them all here, all the more so that they are well known. To write like this is truly a torture. Because the problem doesn't lie only in what's prohibited by censorship but also in the fear of what it can prohibit. Each one of us places, as we write, an imaginary censor at our working table – and that invisible and immaterial presence drains us from all our spontaneity, removes all our élan, forces us to slaughter our thinking if not to abandon it, always with that obsession: 'Will they let this through?'*²

This statement sheds some light on the many faces of censorship. Besides the official state-regulated surveillance there was also the problem of self-censorship discussed by Ferreira de Castro along side with individual informants that shared the political views of the regime or as we colloquially call them in Portugal: “bufos” – snitches. Two other forms of censorship were identified regarding theatrical activity: economic and geographic. Portugal's standard of living at the time did not allow the majority of the people to attend the theatre. Its audiences came essentially from an urban bourgeoisie. When it comes to the geographic constraint the major problem was the fact that theatre happened almost exclusively in the country's capital.

The legal framework and the naming of the institutions responsible for censorship suffered a considerable amount of changes over the nearly five decades of Estado Novo. It is, however, a complex topic to be addressed here today. Even so, I find it important to share with you that a Decree [n. 13 564] from as early as 1927 created the Inspeção Geral dos Teatros (General Surveillance of Theatres), a government institution responsible for the mandatory surveillance of theatrical activity as well as of other forms of

² AAVV., *Eleições legislativas: subsídios para a história da vida portuguesa (1945-1973)*, Lisboa, Delfos, p.31.

entertainment like *ballet*, circus, cinema, variety shows, concerts, dancing *soirées*, sports competitions, bullfighting, funfairs and other similar activities.

Surveillance existed before and after premiere and began with the submission of plays to the Censorship Committee by request of the theatre company or producer that found themselves forced to pay several service fees in order to get a performing license. After a play had been scrutinized it could be approved with or without cuts or simply prohibited. In the event of being cut it had to be rewritten so as not to give away the fact that it had been censored and then it had to be resubmitted for a new evaluation. This could happen more than once and could significantly delay the show's premiere giving way to a financial loss. Permission for rehearsals was only given after completing this process.

The scope of action of Censorship was not limited to the written word since performance was also surveilled before any première. Indeed, a dress rehearsal for inspectors was mandatory and could result in new cuts or in changes concerning costumes, scenography or even acting. However, this was not the final barrier: inspectors could come to a show with no warning to make sure everything was being done according to what had been laid out by censors as admissible. Any mistake, insubordination or simply the will to do so could bring performances to a precocious end as happened to the National Theatre's Company in 1965 while staging Miguel Franco's *O motim (The riot)* at Teatro Avenida or to Maria Della Costa's company in 1960 with Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* at Teatro Capitólio.

Theatre, more than any other art form, was closely watched due to being a privileged channel for direct communication with the audience and considered dangerous by the regime given its potentially subversive nature since it was done before a live audience and could stimulate immediate response and commitment. The possibility of displaying on stage small and uncontrollable ephemeral acts of resistance resulted in a tight control of performances. This risk was far superior in a genre with a strong presence of improvisation as was the case of the revue theatre.

This form of popular performance springs from social and political contexts to create a caricature of reality through the means of satire intermingled with music and dance. Its sexual content and ferocious social and

political criticism embodied everything that censorship strived to control and repress. Yet a moderate liberty was allowed thus differing from any other theatre genre. A certain complicity had been established between censorship and the writers that were responsible for this kind of theatre and also between actors and audience. This relationship, as Luiz Francisco Rebello recalls, was based upon “[...] a code of verbal and gestural signs through which the authors wrote in between lines, the actors would utter words in a way as to mean something different and the audience understood them effortlessly” (REBELLO 1984a: 28). This state of things allowed the genre to survive since stripping it from these characteristics was the same thing as emptying it and driving it to extinction, something that the regime would not want to do because it could well use the *revue* as a way of diminishing social pressure and coming across as tolerant. The popularity of this kind of performance – mainly achieved through its transgressive nature but also due to its visual, musical and coreographic elements – had also contributed to the freedom granted to its authors and performers by a regime that knew the consequences of the genre’s extinction would be far worse than the ones of tolerating it.

Revue’s authors developed strategies to avoid censorship cuts that partially contributed to the lack of originality and literary quality of the plays that were frequently composed of tested formulae collected from previously approved plays. Contrasting with the literary dimension, the visual elements of performance, in which producers invested a significant amount of money, were of capital importance in compensating literary repetitiveness since their development was fueled by originality and innovation.

Although it isn’t a subject as explored as literary censorship has been, scenography and costumes were also a target as demonstrated by the documents I bring with me today. They are a part of Torre do Tombo National Archives, specifically of the National Bureau of Information’s (Secretariado Nacional de Informação) records. These records span from 1929 to 1974 and comprise documentation concerning the Theatre Fund (Fundo de Teatro), a government agency that provided financial support to theatre production, the censorship files, the registry of the plays subjected to review and the minutes of the reunions of the censorship committee. Despite containing a large amount of

extremely important documentation essential to studying and understanding the Portuguese theatrical scene of the 20th century, it does not hold files for all the performances staged during those years. And among those that exist, some are not complete. A possible explanation for this is the destruction of paperwork related to Estado Novo's activity by its officials when the Carnation Revolution took place.

The discrepancy of information is evident when comparing the files of *É o fim da macacada* (1972) and *Tudo a nu* (1973), two performances that were meant to regenerate the *revue*. [slide 3-6 e 7-9] Produced by a group of theatre professionals – Mário Alberto, Francisco Nicholson, Gonçalves Preto and Pedro Osório – it deliberately drifted away from the structures that threatened to bring the genre to a standstill and chose the youthful path of nonconformity. [slide 3] The first play, *É o fim da macacada*, stands as an example of a complete record of the process of literary censorship in theatre, in which we can see all the common cuts repeated in so many other files but absent from the record of *Tudo a nu*. In this specific case, the text was cleansed of what the regime considered “imoralities” – jokes of sexual nature or even planned parenthood [slide 4] – and of its more subversive content, cutting out any political references, specifically the colonial war and the Vietnam war, as well as any mention of the existence of censorship, [slide 5 e 6] prominent regime figures and political prisoners. Mentioning issues as the desire for social and political change and references to national CEO's were also cut.

Regarding *Tudo a nu*, a *revue* that premiered on 21st September 1973, at Teatro ABC, in Lisbon's Parque Mayer, we notice a less common situation: the previously approved play gained a new and inconvenient meaning through Mário Alberto's scenography concept, as we can learn from the Censorship Committee's reunion minute n.º 37/73, dated from October 2nd 1973. [slide 7]

The testimony of the then President of Censorship Committee Dr. António Caetano de Carvalho that saw *Tudo a nu* makes clear, on page 2, [slide 8] that he perfectly understood “the difficulties that the committee's members might have had in examining the play in question, since its authors are informed people, conscious that *revue* can be a useful mean of communication for a particular criticism.” The restlessness felt by the Committee's President towards *Tudo a Nu*

is understandable especially after reading Mário Sérgio's review of the performance, published on the newspaper *República*, on 24th September 1973: [slide 10]

In a country where theatre is dying a slow death, the ones that genuinely love theatre as we do were truly happy with the affectionate and desperate appeal present [in Tudo a nu] to prevent the disappearance of an art that, like no other artform, possesses the great strength of establishing communication among men.

[...]

This revue possesses a good dose of the inconvenient spark that Molière used to employ in order to draw attention to the urgent need to bare it all.

Of greater relevance is, notwithstanding, the order given by the Committee's President himself to cut out an element of the show's scenography present in the scene entitled "À Procura do povo" –"Looking for the people" seen in this image. [slide 11] Here we can see that a structure similar to prison bars was used as part of the set. On page 3 of minute n.º 37/73 one can read the following:

[The] actors engage in audience communication in the scene that some people stand behind bars while an actor screams for the people, suggesting that the Portuguese people was made captive. In view of this, [the President] determined that the said bars will not stand on stage.

Thus, scenography created another level of signification, giving a new and subversive voice to a text that had been previously considered sufficiently innocuous for public presentation. The visual elements had shed a new light over the words and established an inconvenient dialogue with the audience alluding to the atmosphere of repression in which the Portuguese people lived under the yoke of a dictatorship.

Tudo a nu was performed a few times with the original set before the responsible authorities intervened. It premiered on 21st September and it was only on October 2nd that partial censorship of its scenography was decreed,

demonstrating the heavy state bureaucracy involved in theatre surveillance that allowed for those small acts of resistance that opened a gap in the dominant official discourse to exist.

When exploring censorship's files at the National Archives we find clues, like the ones addressed here today, that can elucidate us about the reach of censorship's action concerning the Portuguese theatre and help in finding out how it affected the visual elements of performance. These records can also be of use in an attempt to "reconstruct" those said elements, a challenging effort not only due to the fleeting nature of performance but also because of the lack of documentation held by theatre companies regarding scenography and costumes.

One of the resources for this task are scenography directions that can be found in the plays submitted to the Censorship Committee. These stage directions are significantly less detailed in *revue* than in other genres but they allow us, when we cross information with other archives rich in iconographic material (like the National Museum of Theatre and Dance or the National Theatre D. Maria II's library), to examine in what way they were materialized by set designers, to which extent they enjoyed creative freedom and how much of their personal style was put into the productions and in what way censorship influenced the performance's visual elements. It's also possible, through the crossing of information between archives, to aid in completing the process of cataloguing models for set designs that remain unidentified in National Museum of Theatre and Dance.

Censorship's archives present themselves not only as an indispensable tool to study Portuguese theatre of the 20th century and as proof of a mutilated artistic creation with serious repercussions in Portuguese contemporary culture but also as a source for artistic creation. In 2012 Tiago Rodrigues created *Three fingers bellow the knee*, [slide 12] a "collage based upon the reports by theatre censors of the National Bureau of Information, written between 1933 and 1974, but also upon fragments of censored works by August Strindberg, Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen, António Lopes Ribeiro, Molière, William Shakespeare, Aristophanes, Bernardo Santareno, Harold Pinter, Alfred Jarry, Edward Albee, Oscar Wilde, Jean Racine, Anton Tchekhov, among others and one sentence of an António de Oliveira Salazar's speech" (RODRIGUES 2013). [slide 13] Considered

by some as an excessively light treatment of such a serious subject that affected the lives of the vast majority of theatre professionals and threatened the survival of so many theatre companies, *Three fingers below the knee* is perhaps a form of collective exorcism through humor and certainly a way of sharing with a larger audience a small part of the national archives. It is also a way of redeeming memory in order to present such a dark past to younger generations for whom this reality seems almost fiction.

Documentation

Decree 11839, 05/07/1926

Decree 12008, 02/08/1926

Decree 13564, 06/05/1927

Decree 22469, 01/05/1933

Decree 22469, 29/06/1933

Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1933)

Minute of the reunion of the Censorship Committee, n. 37/73 (SNI/DGE – ANTT)

Process 9482 (SNI/DGE – ANTT)

MNT 113874 (National Museum of Theatre and Dance)

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Webography

<http://ww3.fl.ul.pt/CETbase/>