

Attempts to Change the World: Building Assemblies in Portuguese Contemporary Theatre. The case of Gonçalo Amorim

by Rui Pina Coelho

We should not underestimate the power of performativity: speaking is a social action and language never only describes the world, but also creates one¹.

I. Building assemblies

After one year (and still counting) of worldwide intermittent theatre lockdowns due the Covid-19 pandemic, we all seem to start to understand now that, as communities, we really need theatre. With theatre venues and festivals systematically closed, performances continually postponed or cancelled, theatre performances became a mirage of a future we all expect to get back to (I am writing in March 2021, in Portugal, in a moment where theatre venues are all closed for almost two months now...). Technology, however, made possible for some theatres to carry on. Either on streaming, on zoom (or on some other digital platform), paid for or in open access, spontaneous or rehearsed, synchronous or non-synchronous, premiering new material or presenting old archives, performing arts have been making a move into the digital and we have all been able to maintain some spectatorship activity in our lives.

Yet, throughout the mosaic of online experiences that technology has provided us, something seems to be missing. The experience does not seem to be complete, and we tend to gloomily think: "this is not the same thing...". Florian Malzacher, a performing arts curator, dramaturge, and writer, has been putting it very clearly:

If we stripped away everything that isn't essential to theatre, what would be left? More than any other art form, theatre is a medium of assembly. A place to come together, to invent, try

¹ Stefan Blaske, Luanda Casella, Milo Rau & Lara Staal, "Editorial", *The Art of Resistance: On Theatre, Activism and Solidarity*. Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2020, p.11.

out, discuss. A medium of physical presence, an agonistic arena in which society can negotiate their conflicts and foster radical imagination. (Malzacher 2020: 170)

Theatre as a medium of assembly; theatre as a medium of physical presence: two features that we, globally, have been deprived of since the Covid pandemic started to impose restrictions to general gatherings. Even if we embrace the discussion proposed by Phillip Auslander in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999; 2008) where the quality of presence is discussed, co-presence of spectators and interpreters seem to hold some concord when one tries to define performance's ontology. Malzacher has been precisely stressing theatre's capacity for creating an assembly. In *No organum to follow: Possibilities of political theatre today* (2015), he states:

So where are we today? How can theatre still create spheres where alternatives can be collectively imagined, tried out, discussed, confronted? How can theatre create alternative models of how we might live together, or what kind of society or world we want? A look at the contemporary performing arts scene shows a strong desire for a theatre that not only focuses on pressing political issues, but also becomes a political space – a public sphere – in itself. (Malzacher 2015: 20)

This post-Habermasian approach to performance's social and political function, emphasises the vital need and irreplaceability of the experience one achieves and looks for in theatre and performance. What do we need theatre for? We need it to create alternative models to live together and to devise what kind of society or world we want.

If we agree that the bourgeois idea of a public sphere has been eroded throughout all the Twentieth and Twentieth-first centuries, and that it is something that we no longer can easily witness in our everyday lives, but that we still (vividly) need to survive as an ensemble, we may find some comfort in realizing that theatre as taken unto itself the creation of such a sphere. It does not match exactly to the bourgeois utopia of "public sphere", but it acts on the same principles: a place where we go to discuss and experiment with ideas that can be better for everybody and not only for ourselves or some of us, «believing that rationality would encourage humankind to overcome its individual interests» (Malzacher 2015: 26).

Theatre is a paradoxical machine that marks a sphere where things are real and not real at the same time and proposes situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at once. It does not enable an artificial outside of pure critically; nor is it able to lure its audience into mere immersive identification. The social spheres, the assemblies it can create offer the possibility of partaking and at the same time watching oneself from the outside. (Malzacher 2020: 172)

Thus, the "paradox" in theatre machinery is precisely what makes it such a powerful tool in social transformation. It is at the same time something that derives from playfulness, from artistic intelligence, from imagination. It is an immediate present pregnant of future. But simultaneously, it is also something concrete, that is actually happening in the lives of everybody that is involved. An experience that can last forever – even if its medium is ephemeral. In this line of thought, theatre assemblies are here understood as an impenitent school of resistance where we can learn how to build our arsenal of survival strategies for a collective future. More than conceiving theatre as a social laboratory or as a platform for political or discussions, theatre constructs an arena for the creation of utopian futures. Maybe later society can reach what theatre is succeeding in getting. As Florian Malzacher perceives it, Chantal Mouffe's concept of «agonistic pluralism» is at the core of this notion of theatre.

Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism therefore aims for democracy to be and arena in which we can act out our differences as adversaries without having to reconcile them. At a time in which the once frowned upon dictum 'you're either with us or against us' is having a renaissance on all sides of the political spectrum, we need playful (but serious) agonism where contradictions can not only be kept alive, but above all be freely articulated. Only through this can we prevent an antagonism that ends all negotiation. It is not by chance that Mouffe's concept draws its name from theatre, from 'agon', the game, the competition of arguments in Greek tragedy. (Malzacher 2020: 172-173)

Thus, revealing an endearing optimism and trust in the ability for society to digest and resolve its problems and dilemmas – «believing that rationality would encourage humankind to overcome its individual interests» (Malzacher 2015, 26). In a sense, it is in the same spirit that Terry Eagleton understands the function of criticism:

The role of the contemporary critic is to resist [the] dominance [of commodity] by re-connecting the symbolic to the political, engaging through both discourse and practice with the process by which repressed needs, interests and desires may assume the cultural forms which could weld them into a collective political force. The role of the contemporary critic, then, is a traditional one. [...] Moreover, it is possible to argue that such an enquiry might contribute in a modest way to our very survival. For it is surely becoming apparent that without a more profound understanding of such symbolic processes, through which political power is deployed, reinforced, resisted, at times subverted, we shall be incapable of unlocking the most lethal power-struggles now confronting us. (*Ibidem*: 123)

Theatre as inevitable and unavoidable for human survival and happiness. What presides in the arguments presented in this essay is the idea that Portuguese contemporary theatre has been creating the space and developing practices that we can envisage in the creation of assemblies implicated and interested in changing the world, pre-enacting a sphere for social discussion and debate. Thus, we would look at these attempts to change the world through the constructions of theatre assemblies in Portuguese contemporary theatre accordingly to the case of Gonçalo Amorim's Experimental Theatre from Oporto.

Thus, this essay aims to present and discuss some of the creative methodologies and processes undertaken in this theatre collective, namely the "discussions on stage" strategy. This specific way of creating a text/performance can be related, I believe, with what can be understood as way to manifest their world vision and their political beliefs.

II. Portuguese contemporary theatre

One of the most common refrains about Portuguese dramaturgy is that it does not exist – that we do not have the necessary "*tête dramatique*". Thus, a relatively robust narrative was constructed to justify the alleged absence of dramatic authors in Portugal. Twentieth first century Portuguese theatre and performance has witnessed a large number of stage writers that work exclusively with a particular theatre company or performers that become authors of their own textual material. Arguably, Portuguese contemporary theatre is currently pretty much grounded in new dramaturgy. Not necessarily rooted in drama, but in a theatre that envisages text as a structural means of expression, built on proximity to the stage and anchored in collaborative processes, devising strategies and autobiographic approaches.

The change – the so-called performative turn – arrived at Portuguese theatre in the 1990s. Portuguese theatre history has always, throughout the entire twentieth century and on into the Twentieth-first century, created propitious conditions for shaping an artistic scene unabashedly open to experimentation. Portugal's entry to the EEC – European Economic Community (1986), together with the country's first absolute parliamentary majority in 1987 which came with the election of the right-wing Social-Democrats led by Cavaco Silva, marked a new defining moment for the theatre fabric in Portugal. An authoritarian governmental policy giving top priority 'to anything built with cement' before paying attention to immaterial matters such as education and culture led to a reengagement with political matters on Portuguese theatre.

Thus the (re)definition of theatrical practices lead to innovative forms to relate with the audience, the space, and the text. During the 1990s, the work of the newly established theatres and younger artists achieved a level of success which then led them to greater exposure on the national stage thanks to their overall recognition and quality. These new directors, heirs elect to the successful experimental of the Seventies and Eighties, worked in non-conventional or especially adapted spaces, allying their inventiveness and creativity with ongoing research into the specificities of theatrical language, often working on the boundary between the arts, crisscrossing different artistic modelling, and navigating in and amongst theatre, narration, new dance, video, and artistic installations.

Without eroding the singularity of the artistic work achieved by any of this theatre artists, companies, or structures for theatrical production in question, we can trace some thematic axes, many shared concerns, and various modes for approaching substantial formal and aesthetic proximity. There is – and this is one of the most singular aspects of theatre today in Portugal – a constant circulation of artists working in a wide variety of projects and assuming different degrees of responsibility in each undertaking, which highlights the particularly high level of closeness, which denounces a singular generational complicity.

III. Gonçalo Amorim & Rui Pina Coelho's "discussions on stage"

Gonçalo Amorim (b. 1976) is an actor and director, and currently the artistic director of the Experimental Theatre from Oporto (TEP) and FITEI (International Theatre Festival of Iberian Expression). Gonçalo Amorim made his debut as an actor within the experimental Portuguese theatre of the Nineties, namely with *Útero*, directed by Miguel Moreira, and *Teatro O bando*,

directed by João Brites – multidisciplinary performances using mainly non-conventional sites and non-dramatic texts, exulting an uncontrollable desire for anarchic freedom. In the early noughts, Amorim co-founded the theatre company Primeiros Sintomas, and, parallel to his acting career, he gave his first steps in theatre direction. His first notorious performance would be Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, awarded with the Critics Prize by the Portuguese Association of Theatre Critics, in 2007. The performance that – decidedly – will condense many of the lines of force of its future activity will be *The Mother*, by Bertolt Brecht, presented in the renowned Lisbon theatre venue Culturgest, in 2009: an astonishing reflection on his generation's goals and losses, dominated by a sense of fun and carnivalization. In the following years, Amorim will start a regular collaboration with TEP, becoming its artistic director in 2013, impressively revitalizing the company's artistic project. Either addressing modern and contemporary playwrighting, or by staging original Portuguese contemporary dramaturgy, Amorim's venture addressed some clear dramaturgical points: a reflection on the individual's place in late capitalist society; and an investigation of the violence that the systemic forces of the capitalist model exert on individuals. Amorim's theatre is deliberately political and interventionist, actively dialoguing with its historical moment and which finds echo in an idea of popular theatre, seen here as a synonym for political, realistic, implicated, and necessary. From 2014 onwards, Amorim and myself, working as dramaturge, started to devise what we later called «discussions on stage» [«conversas em cena»]. This writing and staging methodology consists mainly in having, before the rehearsals, long periods for study and research (six to eight months) on a specific theme, concept, or idea. Then, in the rehearsal room, the entire creative team is expected to discuss and present arguments according to their own study. As every member of the creative team (director, dramaturge, actors, scenographer, light designer, sound artist, etc.) has been assigned to research and make specific enquiries and readings, each will be defending and presenting different points of view on a specific subject. These debates can be guided – we often introduce some cue cards with words, sentences, or ideas to be added to the discussion – or can happen more freely. Later, the discussions will be recorded and transcribed. After a series of recordings, the dramaturge will write on the several transcriptions. Thus, a "discussion" can result in a scene of a play or in new material to write upon.

We used this methodology in several performances: *Não dá trabalho nenhum* [No work whatsoever, 2014], a performance about the real living and working conditions of artists in Portugal based on the stories, memories, and experiences of precariat of all the creative team, specifically those of the

actor João Miguel Mota; *Casa Vaga* [*Vacant House*, 2013], a western about three Portuguese cowboys looking for better living conditions in North America in the 1820s. But, instead of guns, these cowboys had books: they were readers of the utopian socialists of the first half of the 20th century, such as Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, or Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The performance consisted in a series of conversations on how to create a new world, based on the utopian dreams of these authors, combined with our own.

Both performances were based on several hours of recorded conversations between the creative team. The transcription of these conversations served as a deploy for the writing of the play and for the creation of the performance.

But, most significantly, this methodology was used in the creation of the "Youth Trilogy" (2017-18), a set of three performances dedicated to associative, student and revolutionary movements in Portugal, in the 50s, 70s and 90s, respectively: *Grande Tratado de Encenação* [*The Great Treaty on Theatre Direction*]; *A Tecedeira que lia Zola* [*The weaver that read Zola*] and *Maioria Absoluta* [*Absolute Majority*].

The Great Treaty on Theatre Direction (2017) evokes António Pedro's book *Pequeno Tratado de Encenação* (1962), a work that will have a significant impact on the Portuguese theatre of his time, particularly among the generation that will be at the hinge of the formation of independent theatre in Portugal. António Pedro introduces in Portugal the modern notion of *mise-en-scène* and structures a discussion on the European *Théâtre d'Art*. Departing from the work of António Pedro, we built a dramatic situation where three young actors project the invention of a country that does not yet exist (I must remind that in the 1950s Portugal was under a totalitarian fascist regime...). They discuss the utopia of a new country, as if it were a new performance.

The weaver that read Zola (2017) was inspired by the revolutionary movements of the Seventies, when young Portuguese, bourgeois, urban and educated people decide to abandon their studies or their jobs and head towards the factories and fields to make the "cultural revolution". Clandestine, while preaching the revolution, pick up hoes and manoeuvring agricultural and factory machines. In the suitcase they hide the *Germinal* of Émile Zola, the *Red Book* of Mao Zedong, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and a great desire to change the world. A universe where youth, love, revolution, libido, and reality were confused and mixed with discipline, rules, capitalism, clandestine and utopia. *Absolute Majority* (2018) was set in Portugal, in the Nineties. After Cavaco Silva's election in 1987, by an absolute majority, the country will enter a new cycle. The money that will come from Brussels

will allow for a rapid growth of a consumer society and the stabilization of the quality of life of a middle class that will get used to new standards of living. Meanwhile, Cavaco Silva's neo-liberal policies were trying to throw the arts and culture into irrelevance.

The "Youth Trilogy" looked closely at the history of Portugal, and, at the genesis of the associative and opposition movement that would lead to the establishment of the TEP (Experimental Theatre from Oporto) in the 1950s; the deployments of young bourgeois revolutionaries linked to Marxist-Leninist movements during the Seventies; and the student movement to challenge tuition fees in the 1990s – a particularly important moment in resisting the surge of neo-liberal policies in Portugal. Working with a young cast (all actors were in their early twenties), the "Youth Trilogy" was, thus, the space to exercise and experiment the "discussions of stage" methodology. The creative team went through a long period of study on Portuguese theatre history and on political resistance movements in Portugal, interviewing and studying the role of several key political players in Portuguese History, in order to build the three performances. This helped us to establish a model for narrative composition, working in a more democratic and horizontal relationship between all the artists involved in the creation, combining documental theatre techniques, the study of archives and guided improvisations on historical content.

But more than an homage to the past struggles and its heroes, these performances were thought to create a micro-arena to imagine the future. The live debates that were taken on rehearsals (and later, on stage) were about the way theatre can be used to imagine a new political system, on the effects political undercover activity has on its militants, and how to overcome the grief and mourning over a lost fight. The set for the three performances was all the same (with nuances on the structure): an attic where young people discussed and engage in vivid arguments. The debates that were taken in that attic were about the past, but also, and most importantly, about the future: something that derives from imagination, but simultaneously, something that is happening in the lives of everybody that are involved. These performances acted, thus, as a pre-enactment of a debate we hoped to impregnate our social sphere, transforming the world around. These performances acted, thus, as a laboratory of hope.

What we undertook was a "fake" agonistic situation. We artificially created the sphere for a plural discussion. But, instead of a depiction of reality or a discussion with real members of society we made an effort of imagination. We created, one can argue, a "fake" assembly. But the (paradox) point was precisely that: «[t]heatre is a paradoxical machine that marks a sphere where things are

real and not real at the same time and proposes situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at once» (Malzacher 2020: 172). Our "discussions on stage" were minor attempts to change the world.

Theatre is often understood as mere fiction, as 'words, words, words' and acting 'as if'. But spaces of art can be places where we pre-enact, where we can search for and rehearse alternatives. We should not underestimate the power of performativity: speaking is a social action and language never only describes the world, but also creates one. (Blaske *et al.* 2020: 11)

When we discuss political theatre, it is common to find arguments that convey the idea that everything is political and that every theatrical performance is in itself a political act. The French scholar Olivier Neveux has been making a strong case for arguing the opposite. In *Contre le Théâtre Politique* (2019) he argues: «Se satisfaire de réciter que le théâtre est «par essence politique», assurer que le théâtre est politique ou il n'est pas théâtre produit chaque fois le même effet: évincer la politique» (Neveux, 2019: 10). Thus, we assume that there is some theatre that is not political, one may look more closely at the characteristics of political theatre.

Le théâtre, lui aussi, intervient dans une conjoncture. Elle s'appréhende à l'aide d'indices, variables, au gré des perspectives adoptées. Les signes, en l'occurrence, sont mobiles, fluctuants. Il n'y a pas de règles pour la déchiffrer sauf à rappeler que celle-ci s'étudie du point de vue de l'intervention à venir – et celles qui précèdent. Elle possède une dimension sensible. (Contre le théâtre politique: 192)

The methodology that we have been calling "discussions on stage" aims precisely at this. To create a fictional assembly that can repercuss in public sphere. A discussion that could inspire future movements of resistance. We created a fictional world inhabited by as "words, words, words" where we acted "as if". But we hoped to discover new ways to intervene and amplify our role as citizens within a project of transforming the world – through theatre.

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