



Harlequin Companies: the retrieval of a forgotten popular tradition in the fairs of Lisbon

Paula Gomes Magalhães¹

¹Centro de Estudos de Teatro da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa – Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT – Harlequin Companies: the retrieval of a forgotten popular tradition in the fairs of Lisbon – In Lisbon, the fairs and their amusements were one of the most popular manifestations of popular culture during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Among the entertainment on offer, theater was one of the most appreciated, but history has only kept the memory of the shacks that, in the fairs, began to feature a recited repertoire (comedies, parodies, magic and revues). The tents of harlequins and *saltimbancos*, itinerant troupes that went from place-to-place performing acrobatics, pantomimes, and comic sketches, were forgotten. This article aims to highlight popular theater practices that were once ‘forgotten’, such as the troupes of harlequins and their shows, redefining their importance in the context of the time and the history of theater in Portugal.

Keywords: **Fairs. Theatre. Harlequins. Gymnasts. Parade.**

RESUMÉ – Troupes d’Arlequins: sauver une tradition populaire oubliée dans les foires de Lisbonne – À Lisbonne, les foires et leurs divertissements ont été l’une des manifestations les plus fréquentées de la culture populaire au cours de seconde moitié du XIXe siècle et le début du XXe siècle. Parmi les divertissements proposés, le théâtre était l’un des plus appréciés, mais l’histoire n’a gardé que le souvenir des échoppes qui, dans les foires, commençaient à présenter un répertoire récité (comédies, parodies, fêtes et revues). Les tentes des arlequins et des saltimbancos, troupes itinérantes qui, d’un pays à l’autre, présentaient des acrobaties, des pantomimes et des scènes comiques, ont été oubliées. Cet article vise à remettre en lumière des pratiques théâtrales populaires autrefois ‘oubliées’, telles que les troupes d’arlequins et leurs spectacles, en redéfinissant leur importance dans le contexte de l’époque et de l’histoire du théâtre au Portugal.

Mots-clés: **Foires. Théâtre. Arlequins. Gymnastes. Parade.**

RESUMO – Companhias de Arlequins: o resgate de uma tradição popular esquecida nas feiras de Lisboa – Em Lisboa, as feiras e os seus divertimentos foram uma das mais concorridas manifestações da cultura popular durante a segunda metade do século XIX e o início do século XX. Entre os divertimentos oferecidos, o teatro era um dos mais apreciados, mas a história apenas guardou a memória das barracas que, nas feiras, passaram a apresentar repertório declamado (comédias, paródias, mágicas e revistas). Votadas ao esquecimento ficaram as barracas de arlequins e saltimbancos, trupes ambulantes que, de terra em terra, apresentavam acrobacias, pantomimas e cenas cómicas. Este artigo pretende trazer à ribalta práticas de teatro popular outrora ‘esquecidas’, como as trupes de arlequins e os seus espetáculos, redefinindo a sua importância no contexto da época e da História do Teatro em Portugal.

Palavras-chave: **Feiras. Teatro. Arlequins. Ginastas. Parada.**

“– Come on in, gentlemen! Come on in! The show’s about to begin. It’s starting. Buy your tickets!” (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 26-10-1860, p. 2). This was how the clowns shouted from the balcony of the harlequin and *saltimbanco* stalls that were springing up in Lisbon’s fairs, advertising the show that was always about to begin but would not start until the room was well filled: “– Listen, the show’s about to start, only two more people to go!” (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 26-10-1860, p. 2) Then the music would start, with two acrobats “playing trumpets”, the “snare drum” clown, the chief harlequin desperately banging the cymbals and the dancers leaning “against the door of the establishment on a platform to tempt the audience with their charms” (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 26-10-1860, p. 2). Inside the tents the hustle and bustle was no less with a parade of gymnastic exercises, trapeze work, somersaults, pantomimes, dances, poetry, and the always infernal music of the tambourine, clarinets, and trombones in the background.

From where it sprang, from where the vast *harlequinade* that filled the fairs and that went from land to land to the sound of a trumpet and a drum, was a question to which few had an answer. Many were already ‘born’ harlequins, between the jumps and somersaults in a fairground and the clowns in some square on festive days, leaving them with no choice but to follow in the footsteps of their father and mother, also harlequins by ‘birth’. Others, almost all coming from the most disadvantaged strata of the population, soon became wandering performers, finding in the travelling troupes a chance of survival and subsistence or the possibility to show the skills to which they had dedicated themselves. In the fairs of Lisbon (and the rest of the country), they came to dominate the entertainment scene for several years, with an increase in the number of companies and the voices that would erupt from the stalls’ balconies on show nights.

In Lisbon, in the mid-19th century, harlequin companies began by setting up at the Amoreiras Fair (during spring), then moved on to the Belém Fair (during the summer months), ending the season at the Campo Grande Fair (in autumn). Among the list of entertainment on offer at the fairs, theater was always one of the most appreciated, but this predilection was left out of the writings of the then elite and consequently of the narratives of theater history in Portugal. Although some authors approach the subject in a broader way, as is the case of Mário Costa (1950), in the work

Feiras e outros Divertimentos Populares de Lisboa (Lisbon's Fairs and other Popular Amusements), they do so in a less precise way, with more extensive references to the theaters built from the 1870s, when, at the fairs, some troupes began to replicate the repertoire of the most popular theaters in the city, presenting comedies, dramas and melodramas. Cast into oblivion was the previous tradition of pantomimes and acrobatics, mixed with satirical sketches, publicized in the famous parades, mimicked from the French fair theater.

This article aims to retrieve the practice of harlequins and saltimbancos, an essentially circus theater, with the well-loved funambulists, gymnasts and prestidigitators, but also the indispensable comedians and dancers, who used recitation, music, mime and dance to tell their stories. The article is the result of a more comprehensive study – the doctoral thesis *É entrar senhores, é entrar! Teatro de Feira em Lisboa: 1850 e 1919*¹ – based on intense documentary research in national (*Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo and Biblioteca Nacional*) and municipal (*Arquivo Municipal de Lisboa - Historical, Arco do Cego e Fotográfico – Arquivo Municipal de Loures and Gabinete de Estudos Olisiponenses*, etc.) archives and libraries, but also the systematic consultation of newspapers and journals, in order to ensure the most exhaustive mapping of the practice. Several writings, produced by journalists and chroniclers who closely experienced the reality, show that this tradition cannot and should not be sidelined, as it was an inescapable practice between 1850 and 1880 and the genesis of what would later be considered fairground theater.

The essence of the first harlequin and saltimbancos stalls in the fairs of Lisbon lay in the shows, which resembled the representations from earlier times – acrobatics, pantomimes, dances and clowning, mixed with scenes in the manner of the Middle Ages' soties and the Lusitanian “*arremedilhos* (imitations) and *escarneos* (skits)” (Pinheiro Chagas, 1872, p. 1) – but also in the parades, with their *reclamista* (propagandist/caller) clowns, so called because they would perform in the balconies of the harlequin theaters speaking, shouting or singing about the show with the help of the loudest instruments. The parades were so popular that many of these clowns would eventually become famous, thanks to the enthusiastic, hilarious, and noisy performances they gave to attract the audience to the show. Joaquim Con-

feiteiro and Tainha Charuteiro, ‘propagandists’ from the stalls of the Dallot brothers – two French brothers who worked in various circuses before setting up their own shack theaters – would be remembered long after the end of the famous fairs.

In the primitive shacks, companies in the style of those described in works such as Paul Scarron’s *Roman Comique* (1651-1657) (1757) or Théophile Gautier’s *Le Capitaine Fracasse* (1863) (1866) performed: traveling troupes that went from place to place, presenting shows with few scripts but sufficiently attractive to capture the audience’s attention. The model, heir to the *commedia dell’arte* and the fairground theater in France, has more distant vestiges, going back to the popular culture of the Middle Ages or perhaps to classical antiquity, with the figure who during the 16th century would gain the name of Harlequin (one of the Zanni from the *commedia dell’arte*) to the fore.

The ancestral characteristics of Harlequin – a friendly and amusing clown acrobat – or the influence that the *commedia dell’arte* and its most famous figure (specifically because of the skills they were able to develop) exerted on the companies of funambulists, may be at the origin of the generic designation of ‘harlequins’, later extended to the saltimbancos who didn’t include acrobatics in their repertoire only and couldn’t even perform wearing the costume of the most famous Zanni from Italian comedy. It is difficult to identify the exact time when the traveling acrobats also began to be called harlequins – one of the many names they had over time –, although their relationship with the *commedia dell’arte* companies and with the ‘appropriation’ of the gestures, costumes and comicality of one of their most popular figures is almost certain.

The name seems to date back to the time when Italian comedians were already performing in various parts of Europe, especially France, where their influence extended to fairground shows. In the Parisian performances, the character of Harlequin – undoubtedly one of the favorites of those who attended the shows – dominated most of the Italian companies’ presentations, and the proliferation of the famous servant from Bergamo in the performances was common. In fact, when it settled in France permanently, the Italian comedy and its characters underwent some changes, mainly related to the difficulty of the spectators in understanding a language that was not their

own: “While in Italy the comedians could count on a constant attendance of spectators familiar with their works, who could enjoy the different ways in which the actors improvised the scenes, in France they had to study other methods to attract the audience”² (Nicoll, 1977, p. 180). According to Allardyce Nicoll (1977, p. 180-182), these methods involved above all spectacular stage effects, with the presence of a variety of machinery (which in Italy was only used in tragic works), the increase of individual performances, and the expansion of pantomime in performances. Characters like Harlequin, whose accentuated physicality was already part of the character requirement, gained contours that further intensified the histrionic movement.

No wonder, therefore, that at the fairs of Saint-Laurent and Saint-Germain, long before the expulsion of the Italian comics from the Hotel de Bourgogne³, the funambulists were already making use of the characteristics of the characters who were most successful, with special emphasis on the figure of Harlequin. To perform their skills, close to the acrobatic gestures of Italian comedy’s servant, the saltimbancos did not hesitate to wear the famous outfit of colored patches, also “appropriating” the clumsy gestures that amused the Parisians so much, introducing a comic element in the funambulist exercises, which did not exist until then. In the Allard⁴ company, for example, it was common for the two brothers, Charles and Pierre, to perform their exercises “one in Harlequin costume and the other in Scaramouche costume”⁵ (Vissière, 2000, p. 7). After the expulsion of Italian comedians (in 1697), the funambulist companies established in the Parisian fairs began, more insistently, to integrate comic skills into their shows and to mix acrobatic exercises with short dialogued scenes. In the big companies, the evolution of the shows converted the acrobat Harlequin into an actor in the comedies of Lesage and Orneval, while in the small troupes the tradition of the saltimbancos was perpetuated, in which the figure of Harlequin remained that of the comic acrobat.

The first known news of the passage of a harlequin company through Lisbon dates from 1596, when two rope dancers presented their skills in the Portuguese capital, although the term “harlequins” is attributed, afterwards, by Ribeiro Guimarães (1873), during the 19th century (and not when the artists passed through the Portuguese capital). The date is commonly referred to as the earliest root of the circus show in Portugal, since the exercis-

es were closer to those presented by circus troupes than by theatrical ones, although at the fairs this boundary practically did not exist. For many years, the harlequins were the only model of theater recognized in that context and from which the shows were reconfigured (with successive transformations) until they became primarily recited.

According to Ribeiro Guimarães, a curious collection of manuscript news, mostly from the second half of the 16th century, tells of the passage through the Portuguese capital of an Italian company of volatin acrobats, in the aforementioned year of 1596. According to Ribeiro Guimarães (1873, p. 167), it seems that until that year “volatins or rope dancers” had never come to Lisbon, despite the fact that it is a very old amusement or exercise, even presented by the Romans. In *Sumário de Vária História*, the author expresses his admiration for the fact that only that year did such harlequins pass through Portuguese territory, since similar exercises had long been performed in France and the rest of Europe. Ribeiro Guimarães (1873, p. 167) continues: “With so many foreigners coming to Lisbon at that time, it was strange that the harlequins did not take part in the pompous parties” that were held in the city. He calls the Italian duo harlequins, but the name is given in the light of the 19th century, when these companies were a regular presence at fairs and circus squares. It seems certain that, during the 19th century, the companies of funambulists or acrobats received the generic designation of harlequins (a term that encompassed a vast number of activities), with burlantins or volatins being the men who danced on the maroma, the name given to the rope where they performed the exercise. At a time when “it was thought that only by diabolical arts could one dance on the rope,” the author of the 16th century news report describes what he saw as “admirable and amazing” (apud Guimarães, 1873, p. 168).

As the years went by, companies of acrobats and funambulists became more regular in Portuguese lands. The harlequins (sometimes called funambulists, volantins, rope dancers or acrobats) performed in fairs, festivals or, during the 18th century, in theaters, bullrings or circus arenas. In the last quarter of the 18th century there are several reports of acrobat companies performing in Lisbon. In the first half of the 19th century, harlequin shows intensified with performances taking place in theatres and then also in circus arenas (permanent or itinerant) that were being built: Circo Olí-

mpico, Praça do Salitre, Circo Madrid, Circo Nacional Amor da Pátria, Circo Lisbonense, Praça da Rua da Procissão, Novo Ginásio Lisbonense, among many others. In the 1830s and 1840s there were several requests in documentation from the *Ministério do Reino* (*Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo*) for gymnastic shows to be held, namely at the Circo Olímpico, Praça do Salitre and Circo Madrid. There are also requests for the presentation of gymnastic shows in small theaters set up in the city, as is the case with the request from the Frenchman João Baptista Menay who, in 1849, requested a license to present gymnastic exercises in a small theater he had established in Rua Larga de S. Roque (Portugal, 1849, Book 1224, f. 211). This theater would most likely be very similar to the wooden shacks that were being set up in the fairgrounds of Lisbon around this time.

As the number of venues increased, so did the number of gymnastic shows and the number of artists dedicated to their practice, swelling the requirements for the performance of this type of exercise. However, it was not until the 1850s that specific requests for the presentation of harlequin (or gymnastic) shows at Lisbon's fairs, more precisely at the Campo Grande Fair, began to appear. It is quite likely that, before then, some companies had already displayed their skills in the capital's fairs, such was the circulation of artists in the circus squares, but it was not possible to confirm this presence in any of the fairs that took place, at that time, in Lisbon, either due to the absence of licensing requests in the documentation of the *Ministério do Reino* and the *Arquivo Municipal de Lisboa*, dated before 1850, or due to the small number of reports on such events in the national journals. In fact, until 1869 – the year in which the granting of licenses for theaters and public shows became the responsibility of the Civil Government – the requests to hold shows at fairs (Campo Grande, Amoreiras or Belém) were quite small in number, with most requests being to perform for a certain period (three months, six months or a year), anywhere in the kingdom. Many harlequin companies (or companies referred to as gymnastic companies) would certainly have presented their shows at Lisbon fairs, even without requesting the respective license to do so. In principle, it would not have been necessary to obtain a specific license to perform in fairs when the company had already secured the license from the Inspectorate General of Theatres to perform in any part of the kingdom, but it would have been

necessary to get a new authorization to set up the show at the fair, from the entity responsible for the event, just as in the case of shacks selling a wide variety of products.

At the Campo Grande Fair – which in the mid-nineteenth century was one of the most crowded, since it was the one where bourgeois families stocked up on various products – the first petitions in the documentation of the *Ministério do Reino* date back to 1850, although it is quite likely that harlequins were already established there well before that date. In 1850, during the month of October, Joaquim da Costa de Oliveira requested a license to “to hold harlequin shows at Campo Grande, during the fair” (Portugal, 1850, Book 1225, f. 21, 03-10) that would take place there, while Julia Bosco requested authorization to, during the whole month of October, “hold fencing and gymnastic shows at Campo Grande, in order to gain the means to obtain a new license” (Portugal, 1850, Book 1225, f. 19, 11-10). In the case of Julia Bosco, although the application does not specify if it was the fair, it is most likely that it was there that she presented her shows, since the fair was held during October. In the previous year, the same Julia Bosco had already requested that she be allowed to “give gymnastic shows with a company” of which she was the director, in addition to the authorization she had obtained “to give foil (fencing) lessons” (Portugal, 1849, Book 1224, f. 230, 27-08). With authorization to put on shows anywhere in the kingdom for a year, it is possible that, as early as 1849, Júlia Bosco had been with her gymnastics company at the Campo Grande Fair.

In the following years, there was a succession of requests from gymnastic companies to perform at the Campo Grande Fair, in the capital or in any other part of the kingdom. In 1851, António Morais, director of a gymnastic artists’ company, requested a license to set up a tent at the Campo Grande Fair to give performances during the period the event was taking place (Portugal, 1851, Maço 3557, proc. 349, 08-10). The following year (1852), Vicente Vítor, a representative of a gymnastics company, applied to present his show at the Campo Grande Fair and anywhere in the kingdom. A clarification included in the letter from Lisbon’s Civil Governor suggests that Vicente Vítor’s company must have been at the fair in previous years, although no request to that effect appears in the applicant’s name:

I must inform Your Excellency that, having heard about this application from the Administrator of the Alfama District⁶, inspector of the aforementioned Fair, this Magistrate declares, in a letter dated today, that since the company in question has worked in previous years in that locality, without any inconveniences resulting, it appears that there is no reason not to grant the license requested (Portugal, 1852, Maço 3560, proc. 418, 25-09).

Licensing requests for gymnastic or harlequin companies gradually increased as the years went by. The presence at fairs became more attractive when these shows extended their duration by one or two months, allowing the companies to generate a large income, without the need for large displacements. When the Amoreiras Fair began in 1866, the *Gazeta de Portugal* (22-05-1866, p. 2) reported that there were “amusements for all tastes”, namely “harlequins, cosmoramas, physics rooms, singing rooms, etc., etc. And all cheap!”. The inviting prices of these popular diversions brought a growing audience to the fairs, enabling them to multiply, expand, and diversify, harlequin shacks included. In 1866, one of the harlequin companies set up at the Amoreiras Fair was “lyrical-gymnastics⁷” (*As Notícias*, 03-07-1866, p. 2), while in Campo Grande there were “two harlequin tents, with heavenly music composed of base drum, trombones, cymbals, snare drums and melodious clarinets” (*Diário de Notícias*, 16-10-1866, p. 2). In Belém, according to the statistics of the structures set up, in 1866 there were four gymnastic tents and a cosmorama⁸.

From 1866 on, the licensing applications for the Dallot brothers’ company – two French brothers who became veritable stars in the Lisbon fairs – became regular, as well as their presence at the fairs, particularly at the Amoreiras Fair, where they soon began to stand out among the other harlequin tents. In 1867, the *Jornal de Lisboa* (15-06-1867, p. 3) refers to the “French harlequin tent” (possibly that of the Dallot brothers) as one that “undeniably” stood out for its “good taste, cleanliness, good gas lighting,” but above all for the funny way it attracted the spectators, most likely referring to its parades. According to the periodical, it was in that shack that “the best amusements” could be found. Also in 1866, at the Campo Grande Fair, two harlequin companies were set up, one of which, according to the *Diário de Notícias*, belonged to José António Paixão:

The Harlequin booth entitled *Companhia das Maravilhas das Montanhas de Penas Cozas* (Company of the Wonders of the Cozas Feathered Mountains)

is displayed among tarps of various colors and several pictures of dog exercises in high school, and I believe that for the sake of rhyming they have added "*Não é parola*" (It's no joke). There are the harlequins and jugglers of Mr. José Antonio Paixão, who, to surprise the stunned mob, addresses the audience by saying *Gentlemen, this company has arrived from English America*, a geographical point that all the artists from the aforementioned ignore (*Diário de Notícias*, 17-10-1867, p. 2).

In subsequent years, the pace of licensing applications continued, with several companies further diversifying their operations (certainly to cope with the heightened competition) and applying for more than one license during the year. For 1867, for example, we identified 15 license applications:

- Júlio Mariani and Henrique Hertansani: six-month license to continue presenting a collection of wise rats, different ferocious animals and gymnastic pieces (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3635, proc. 342, 17-03);
- Joaquim António Paixão: six-month license to present a traveling company of gymnastics, comics and wax figures exhibition (Portugal, 1867, Batch 3635, proc. 442, 30-04);
- Marcos Cazalli: one-year license to give shows 'composed of equestrian, gymnastic and acrobatic exercises' (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3635, proc. 485, 13-05);
- Joseph Dallot: six-month license to present the exercises of the travelling, gymnastic, physical and mechanical theater company, of which he is the director (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3635, proc. 512, 18-05);
- José Bazolla: six-month license to give shows with a gymnastic and equestrian company 223 (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3635, proc. 540, 23-05);
- António José Machado: six-month license to present his gymnastic company, a collection of wax figures and a mechanical theater (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3635, proc. 540, 07-06);
- José Arnosi: license to give public shows of horses and living pictures (Portugal, 1867, Batch 3637, proc. 788, 23-07);
- Carlos Simões de Oliveira: six-month license to work with his company 'Dramatic, Gymnastic, Acrobatic, Physical and Wax Figures' (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3637, proc. 995, 14-09);
- Domingos da Costa: three-month license to give shows of gymnastic exercises and to make a public exhibition of a collection of wax figures (Lisbon, 1867, Book 11, Reg. 106, f. 9 v and 10, 14-09);
- Romão Martins: six-month license to give shows of gymnastics, physics, comic sketches and to publicly exhibit a cosmorama and other circus shows (Portugal, 1867, Book 3637, proc. 1035, 01-10);

- Julio Mariani: six-month license to give shows of physics, gymnastics, wise rats and to publicly exhibit a cosmorama, as well as an exhibition of various animals and other circus shows (Portugal, 1867, Batch 3637, proc. 1039, 02-10);
- José Bazolla: one-year license to give performances of dance, gymnastics, horizontal strong rope, physics, horse company, cosmorama and other entertainment typical of the circus (Portugal, 1867, folio 3638, proc. 1206, 12-11);
- Francisco Aranda and Company, gymnastic artists: six-month license to 'work for their art and also with puppets' (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3638, proc. 1276, 23-11);
- Frutuoso de Sousa: a six-month license to give performances of mechanical theater, gymnastics, physics and dissolving pictures and others typical of the circus (Portugal, 1867, Maço 3638, proc. 1335, 11-12);
- Manuel Lopez Gaston: six-month license to give performances with an equestrian company and gymnastics (Lisboa, 1867, Livro 11, Reg. 142, f. 22v and 23, 04-12).

According to the *Diário Popular* (02-06-1868, p. 2), in 1868 the Amoreiras Fair had “three harlequin shacks and another where a sea tiger was exhibited”, while at the Belém Fair, among other attractions, there were three harlequin shacks, two wax figure tents, a circus and two cycloramas (*Diário Popular*, 15-09-1868, p. 2). Among the amusements, the newspaper highlights the mechanical theater of Francisco Aranda and José Lorador (which, according to the license requested, would also present gymnastic shows).

The last licensing applications we could find in the documentation from the *Ministério do Reino* (Ministry of the Kingdom) were from 1868. When the responsibility for granting licenses for theaters and public shows passed to the Civil Government, the applications disappeared from the archives of the *Ministério do Reino*, and we were unable to find them in the documentation from the Civil Government of Lisbon. In 1868, 11 licensing applications for gymnastics companies were identified.

Like the first funambulists at Parisian fairs, the harlequin companies that populated Lisbon's fairs in the 19th century performed their exercises in wooden shacks with minimal facilities. As Mário Costa (1950, p. 128) describes them, they were “simple planks lined with worn-out canvas”, with the upper part lined with “even older cloth”, and the stage was “very rudimentary”, composed only of “rough boards nailed to rough beams on an

earthen floor”. In front of the tent, a small platform or veranda was set up (in the more elaborate tents) to serve as a parade, where the clowns or harlequins, with the help of a bass drum and a trumpet played by the company’s musicians, “proclaimed” arguments in a loud voice to entice the audience to the performance.

A complete harlequin company, such as the one that the journalist and columnist Júlio César Machado found, in 1860, set up in Nazaré for the local festivities, had no more than one clown, one rope dancer, “[... two very ugly ladies, two strong men for the Arabian fights, three boys for the trapeze entertainment, and a witty guy to promote and explain the beauties of the entertainment to the *salaios* (rednecks)” (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 13-03-1860, p. 1). The troupe had a tent,

[...] set up in the square, which served as their dressing room during the performance, and as their home the rest of the time. Their only property was that tent and a donkey that traveled with them carrying their luggage. The luggage was a pair of velvet corsets, thongs, an Arabian drum, a white suit with rattles, and a box of chalk for the clown. (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 13-03-1860, p. 1).

Besides Portugal, the troupes came from Spain, Italy or France. When they requested the mandatory license from the *Ministério do Reino* to perform their activities, they sometimes referred to themselves as harlequin companies, and other times as gymnastic artists, with frequent mention of economic difficulties. In 1853, four gymnastics performers – João José d’Amil, António Joaquim das Chagas, Francisco de Paula Amor and Pedro dos Santos – requested a free license, citing financial difficulties, in order to be able to perform their shows at Feira do Campo Grande:

Madam,

The undersigned gymnastic artists and members of the National Corps of this Capital, lacking the means of subsistence, came up with the idea of establishing at the next Feira do Campo Grande a small and limited shack to perform the works of their art; but since it cannot be set up without the proper license, and we are lacking the means to obtain it: therefore, trusting in your philanthropic heart, you always seek to wipe away the tears of the unfortunate, we ask you to have mercy on our sad situation [...]147, by ordering that a provisional license be given to us free of charge, just for the duration of the fair. Accordingly, we beg of you to grant us the requested permit.

September 13, 1853 (Portugal, 1853, Maço 3560, proc. 399).

Rarely were these requests granted, and the law was enforced, which did not authorize the attribution of a license without the respective payment of representation rights.

Many of those who left distant lands, like the Italian subject José Basalo⁹ (who arrived in Lisbon in March 1866) (Portugal, 1866, Maço 3631, proc. 192), brought with them their families and the need to support them, not hesitating to mention this fact when applying for a license. Most of them started out as family-owned companies, which was common among the itinerant saltimbancos, whose life was in constant movement.

Júlio César Machado, a confessed admirer of these popular artists, never ceased to be saddened by the life many led. Regarding the meager belongings of the company based in Nazaré, he writes:

All they have on earth is this: they have nothing more; they will have nothing more. And they always laugh, and live to make people laugh! They eat and drink wine, when they can afford it: when there is none, they drink water and air. Air! It is a holy thing, at least, that God gives us air without us buying it.

A harlequin, who sometimes didn't have enough to feed his children, used to tell them at night

– Attention! The one who goes to bed without eating will have five réis.

They all extended their hands, received five réis, and went to bed without eating. The next day, the harlequin said to his hungry children: "Hello!

– Hello! Which one of you wants to have lunch today?

– I do! Me! Me, Daddy!

– So, the one who wants lunch has to give me five réis!

And each one handed over the five réis, which thus served for two meals!

When I mounted my horse to leave, I met them: they were going on foot with a bundle each, out of pity for their little donkey, who was struggling to keep up with them. I found them happy in the midst of their misfortune, and I recognized that there is something even worse than being a harlequin – it's being a harlequin's donkey! (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 13-03-1860, p. 1).

It was no easy life for the companies of harlequins who showed their skills in the fairs of Lisbon, and who were then forced to look for new locations, wherever it was possible to set up the tiny wooden booths with canvas coverings. Although they also presented themselves as saltimbancos, some chronicles from the period demonstrate an evident distance between the harlequins and other itinerant companies, although it is not possible to determine to what extent this difference was materialized, except in the dis-

tancing that some of them tried to make in relation to the unavoidable life of the acrobatic harlequins. It is the saltimbancos themselves who established the gap, as happened in Italy during the 16th century, when, according to M. A. Katritzky, the first *dell'arte* comedians were constantly struggling “to dissociate themselves from the stigma attached to *buffoni*, street players and mountebanks”.¹⁰ When passing in front of the harlequin stands, according to Júlio César Machado, the saltimbancos”

[...] they must feel noble and proud of not being like them; they were perhaps left fatherless and motherless when they were little and soon joined the travelling companies, people of chance, faces that have their Egyptian touch, creatures for whom there are no parties except those to amuse others at fairs, which no one sees except at those times, because for them there is no walking in the streets, nor watching processions, nor inaugurations - there are only pantomimes, gymnastics, trapeze, trampoline; But they work, support their wives and children, and do not spend what they earn for bread on wine (*Diário de Notícias*, 20-06-1872, p. 1).

The same Júlio César Machado outlined their physiology in the pages of *A Revolução de Setembro* (04-08-1854, p. 1), complaining about the disregard with which artists were treated, for whom the trapeze and the somersault were “a kind of daily and unalterable meat and potatoes”. They always performed under the minimal conditions, and still enjoyed the appreciation of the public, who never stopped visiting them – today in a small village, tomorrow in a town, and then in a city – just as the harlequins never stopped, for as long as they could, to entertain them with their comic and acrobatic skills. In the parades or inside the shacks, they were always amusing, “[...] dancing on the rope, playing on the swinging wire, jumping on a trampoline or putting chalk on the ballerinas’ shoes, peeking up her skirt” (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 13-03-1860, p. 1).

Faced with the proliferation of fairground attractions, the parades of the harlequin shacks gained crucial importance. Without being comparable to the companies at the Parisian fairs or the theaters on the Boulevard du Temple, they accomplished perfectly the goal of bringing the audience to the show, amid the frenzy of people, music, and voices at the fairs of Amoreiras, Belém, and Campo Grande.

As companies of few means, the performance of the first harlequins was set up on simple platforms, mounted in front of simple wooden stalls,

which were replaced by small balconies or verandas, where clowns, acrobats and dancers strutted around, forming a real racket of voices, trumpets and drums, in an attempt to attract the crowd that looked on in amazement,

[...] as if they were watching them in a *tutti li mundi* and were shadows dancing in front of us, leg up, leg down, pirouette here, somersault there - all with wide-open mouths, the little ones bursting with the desire to go see the party, the mothers very entertained, the fathers enjoying it without looking like it, and even, in some ranch or other - very happy to remember their old times - some old man who can no longer move, all bent in two like an upturned U (*Diário de Notícias*, 20-06-1872, p. 1).

The clown was responsible for extolling the virtues of the show that would take place inside the shack, using his skills as a caller-declamer (obligatory for the role) but also the comedy associated with the character, assisted by the small but noisy orchestras and the company's dancers and chorus girls. Covered by cotton maillots (required by the decency of the time), the girls wore over them "bow petticoats, made of ordinary fabric, adorned with sequins", "high boots, full of costumes" and "wigs of tow fibre or faded plaits" (Costa, 1950, p. 127). With reddish faces (the result of coarse makeup), "they danced with ease, art, and elegance and sang within their narrow range of talent", one or two "numbers of greater pleasure, set to music by a modest band" consisting of three or four elements (Costa, 1950, p. 127). The parades were dominated by publicity and satirical declarations, with challenges to the audience in a provocative tone, like Tabarin who, instead of ointments, tried to sell tickets for the upcoming performance. Just as on the podium where the most famous charlatan of the streets of Paris developed "impossible dialogues, filled with insults and nonsense" to "engage the audience"¹¹ (Fournel, 1863, p. 250), the protesting clowns never tired of appealing to the visitors of the Lisbon fairs, using jokes, slurs and vituperation, to slow them down at the shacks, make them laugh non-stop, and, finally, to (voluntarily) force them to enter the theatre-booth.



Figure 1 – The parade of a harlequin theater, illustration by Manuel de Macedo.
Source: *Diário Ilustrado* (17-07-1872, p. 1).

A drawing by Manuel de Macedo (Figure 1), accompanying a piece by Pinheiro Chagas, published in the *Diário Ilustrado* (17-07-1872, p. 1), evokes the ancestral tradition of the parades. The image shows the entrance, the ticket booth and part of the outside counter of a wooden shack, where a figure, who by his clothes (striped maillot) resembles a Harlequin or clown, and two musicians (both wearing vests), with a bass drummer (the one with a ribbon on his head) and a horn player (the one with the hat), seem to invite the crowd below to the show. There is a poster behind the musicians on which, although not all the letters are perceptible, the phrase *Grande Função* (Great Show) is written. On another part of the balcony, near the entrance, five people, who look like they are part of the company preparing for the performance, appear to be waiting for the audience to enter. Two of these figures – the one sitting on the balcony, in the area closest to the possible Harlequin or clown, and another in the background – are wearing a dress and a kind of scarf or cap on their heads. The remaining members

(apparently two boys and a girl, although the distinction is not very clear), wear a hat, vest, shorts or skirt (the one sitting on the balcony), a ribbon or hat (the one you can see between the two figures sitting on the balcony), a maillot and a kind of cloth, cape or strange coat down to the feet (the one leaning against the entrance door). Even though it is difficult to define what functions each one performs in the troupe (dancers, acrobats, or actors), we may conclude that they are elements of the company who are there on the balcony to help attract the audience, probably by performing some small act. Below, among the crowd, a man with a cane or umbrella under his arm can be seen buying a ticket for the performance, while the other members wait their turn to buy a ticket or simply watch the performance.

Manuel de Macedo's drawing "reproduces" the parade of a theater at the Amoreiras Fair (according to the legend and to the piece that accompanies the illustration), showing part of one of the many wooden shacks that were set up near the Capela de Monserrate by troupes of harlequins, where the caller tries to entice the audience to the show, with the help of two musicians. All three wear simple costumes, as was the practice of these companies: while the Harlequin's (or clown's) outfit is limited to a striped maillot, the musicians don't wear any particular article of clothing, besides a hat and a headband, distinguished from the other elements of the troupe by the instruments – the bass drum and the horn. As for the figures on the right side, most likely actors, dancers/ chorus girls and acrobats, although at the moment the drawing is defined they are not in action, it can be assumed that they have already performed or are still waiting to do so. In many parades, the clowns and musicians were accompanied by dancers or other members of the troupe, who themselves came to perform small numbers or simply smile at the audience. In his description of these companies, Alfredo de Mesquita (1994, p. 107) mentions that the troupe members would appear on the balcony as they dressed:

The more well-nourished actresses fitted their bodies with a ballerina's maillot and petticoat, lavishly rubbed their elbows with white lead and showed off their breasts through the neckline of their sequined satin bodies, sprinkling a deciliter of olive oil on their hairstyles, and then came smiling to the crowd.

Manuel de Macedo's drawing also reveals the small size of the shacks (although it does not show a full view of the space) and the confusion that

reigned near these small theaters, with the clown's calls, the sound of the horn and the bass drum and the hustle and bustle of the people who crowded around to watch the performances. Several chroniclers and pamphleteers, who frequented the fairs in those days, recall these primitive theaters, their parades, and the hustle and bustle that would be generated by the clowns' calls, as in the case of Júlio César Machado (1873, p. 195-196):

– *Come on in, gentlemen! Come in!* ... shouts from above, from the top of the proscenium railing of the parade, a harlequin with a good voice, half hanging in the air, brother of the comets and stars, walking in the ether like the gods, and shouting the following phrase, simple and large - This is the booth frequented by diplomatic ladies!

The people stare at him in amazement and listen to him in awe; but before long they don't know which way to turn when another one calls him, surrounded by ballerinas in short skirts and pink pantaloons, and another one with his drum, socking it to him, as if he were taking revenge according to the trumpets, whose lips are already swollen from blowing the monster's belly!

– *It's about to begin, gentlemen!*

– *The great symphony is going to be played, and the show is about to begin!*

– *Play the music!* shouts one of those Ciceros from the fair, breaking into eloquence. *Buy your tickets, gentlemen; today's performance is the best. It's admirable! It's admirable! All the artists of the company enter.*

It's a delirium. The three stalls at the entrance, the *Great Cosmorama* with its war scenes, the Theater and the Harlequins, are shaking with jubilation and uproar! It's the whole machine gun of the musical fury, opening with the brass, which is the background piece of the harmony, *so loud, so loud*, until there is no more strength left to play the drums, and blow the nose of the fife stick with the lips!...

And the clown shouts over that inferno:

– *Come in, gentlemen! Take advantage of the few seats that are still available and take your places in the middle of the numerous and chosen society, who are inside waiting for the curtain to rise!*

Through the illustration, published in the *Diário Ilustrado*, we can also appreciate the simplicity of the audience attending these theaters, evident in the modest clothing of most of them – men and women –, despite the author's attempt to portray some diversity of social strata.

When the harlequins and their parades reigned in the fairs, despite the scant references to these shows in the periodicals of the time, several chroni-

clers and writers were not indifferent to the inventive calls that burst forth from the balconies of the simple stalls. According to Júlio César Machado, the company he encountered in 1860, in Nazaré, did “nothing but drum to gather the audience,” as soon as “dawn broke,” making use of the virtues of the parade (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 02-10-1860, p. 2). The stage was set up at the door, “and one of the mimes delivered a speech to the people”:

– Come on in, guys! Come in if you want to see what you have never seen before and will never see again in your life! If I were to tell you everything that is done here, I wouldn't be able to finish the story! We have always worked for sixteen cents, for another kind of people that you are not: today, however, we want you to see everything, and we have set this up for peanuts, so that you don't die without having admired us! Let's go! Let's go! Come in people! One *pataco* per head. If you don't have a head... you pay nothing.

And then it was an uproar, a bang, a roar, a veritable assault on the tranquility of a poor, moderate, well-meaning devil (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 02-10-1860, p. 2).

It was up to them to praise “the merits of the show, which was always about to begin,” but how many times did the audience not have to wait more than an hour, “sitting on the hard boards of the upper stage, or with some nail tips sticking into their flesh, before the curtain went up” (Mesquita, 1994, p. 108). “Hey, the show's about to start, only two more people to go”, shouted the director of a harlequin company at the Campo Grande Fair, also in 1860:

If you want to have fun, come in; three twenty cents for the upper level, plenty of seats, and the nose of the audience is right on top of the stage. For thirty réis you can go to the general seats, and frankly that's even better, because you can stand or squat. Anyone who wants can come in, here no one is being forced, I wish I had more space to receive the customers. – Come on in, the show is starting, there are only two places left (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 26-10-1860, p. 2).

In the theatrical parades of Lisbon's fairs both the clown and the caller could be seen (almost always taking the limelight), as well as the tenor and the prima donna from a “lyrical-gymnastic” company, at the Amoreiras Fair, in trombone, bass drum and cymbals routines (*As Notícias*, 03-07-1866, p. 2), the “trumpets and drums” that fought to be heard at the Belém Fair (*Diário de Notícias*, 10-09-1867, p. 3), the “heavenly songs” from two harlequin shacks

“made up of drums, trombones, cymbals and melodious clarinets” at the Belém Fair (*Diário de Notícias*, 10-09-1867, p. 4). 3), at the Campo Grande Fair (*Diário de Notícias*, 16-10-1866, p. 2), or the white man playing the black man (Germano José Lopes) at the harlequin stand of José Antônio Paixão, who played cymbals and drums and shouted: “It’s one pataco! It’s one pataco, the show’s about to begin! Everybody in! Everybody in! Those who have no head don’t pay anything” (*Diário de Notícias*, 18-11-1866, p. 1). These harlequins spoke with “an abundance of gestures and words”, with a logic all their own, capable of persuading the crowd of people passing by to “enter their shacks”. (*A Revolução de Setembro*, 28-05-1871, p. 2).

The peak of the harlequins, in the late 1860s and early 1870s, with fairs always crowded with people, eager to see these amusing shows, would eventually determine the beginning of many companies’ decline (those that could not keep up with the changes imposed by the times, such as the mandatory development of shows and stalls) and provide a “new life” to all those that, in tow of the ever growing audience and the new theaters that were set up in the fairs, were improving and changing their repertoires. The tradition of harlequins did not disappear from the fairs with the first declamatory theaters, but the tendency would be the multiplication of shacks seeking to draw closer to the second order theaters. In the early years of the 20th century, when the Alcântara Fair had replaced the Amoreiras Fair, the August Fair replaced the Belém Fair, and the theaters presented mostly comedies, parodies, magic and revues, there was little left but the memory of the time when harlequins caused a real stir, although the tradition continued, in part, in the parades that some declamatory theaters maintained, and in the varieties – singing, dancing, and visual effects – that were always presented as the essence of fair theater.

During the years 1927 and 1928, the comedian Penha Coutinho discussed the fair theaters and the artists who performed in them in the *Bohemias Teatrais*, chronicles published weekly, over a year, in the magazine ABC, but voluntarily leaves out the time when, in the capital’s gatherings, only harlequin shacks were set up, since he considered that there was little to be said “in terms of theater” (ABC, 19-05-1927, p. 18). For the chronicler, it was at the Belém Fair, in the early 1870s, that “the art of Talma” began “to show itself worthy of some interest,” more precisely with the D.

Afonso and D. Luís theaters, the oldest shacks that, in his view, “resembled” theaters at the capital’s fairs (ABC, 19-05-1927, p. 18). Penha Coutinho, like so many other individuals of his time and throughout time, did not recognize in the previous tradition of harlequins and saltimbancos any theatrical model, identifying it without emphasizing its importance in the context of Lisbon’s fairs. However, the data retrieved from archives and periodicals contradict this interpretation, highlight the importance of the practice and enable us to define it as a fair theater, a theater that evolved from the multifaceted harlequin shows to a model of declamatory repertoire, with consequent changes in the structure of the companies and the very construction of the theaters, while maintaining a common identity. Although they later disappeared almost completely, for many years it was the harlequins who reigned supreme in the fairs, with their unmistakable declamations: “*Come on in! Come in! The show’s about to begin. It’s starting. Get your tickets!*”.

Notes

- ¹ Doctoral thesis in Theater Studies, presented to the Arts Faculty of Universidade de Lisboa, in 2017. Within the scope of the research, the following articles were published: *Teatro de Feira: O genuíno popular do público erudito*, in *Diffractions - Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture*, Issue 4, Spring 2015 and *Teatro de Feira: Entre a prática e a representação*, in *Théâtre: esthétique et pouvoir (Tome 1): De L’antiquité classique au XIX siècle*. Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, 2016, p. 329-342.
- ² In the original: “Mientras que en Italia los comediantes podían contar con una constante asistencia de espectadores familiarizados con las obras y que disfrutaban con las diferentes formas en que los actores improvisaban las escenas, en Francia tenían que estudiar otros métodos de atraer el público” (Nicoll, 1977, p. 180).
- ³ The first Italian companies entered France during the reign of Charles IX, under Catherine d’Medici. The troupes of Zan Ganassa, Gelosi, Accesi and Fidei, among many others, were successful, and from the middle of the 17th century they began to give regular performances in the French capital. They attracted a great crowd to the Petit-Bourbon and the Palais Royal (spaces they shared with Molière) and, later, to the Hotel de Bourgogne, where they settled

in 1680 and remained until 1697, the year in which "[...] several indiscreet comments in one of their works [*La Fausse Prude*] provoked the anger of Madame de Maintenon, the king's favorite, and a royal order forced them to leave with tears in their eyes" (Nicoll, 1977, p. 179).

- ⁴ One of the companies that performed at the fairs in France.
- ⁵ In the original: "l'un sous le costume d'Arlequin et l'autre, sous celui de Scar-amouche" (Vissière; Vissière, 2000, p.7).
- ⁶ At the time, Lisbon was divided into 34 parishes, spread over four neighbourhoods or criminal districts – Alcântara, Alfama, Bairro Alto and Rossio –, to better manage the policing and functioning of justice.
- ⁷ If we look at the license applications from 1866, it is possible that it is the company of José Arjona, which requested a license on May 17 (the fair started on May 20), for shows of physics, gymnastics, and singing (Portugal, 1866, Maço 3632, proc. 404, 17-05).
- ⁸ Lisbon Municipal Archive - Historical Archive, Câmara Municipal de Belém, separate documentation relating to *Fairs and Markets*.
- ⁹ Although he is referred to as José Basalo, it is likely that this is the spelling of Bazolla, in whose name there are later license applications.
- ¹⁰ (Katritzky, 2006, p. 35).
- ¹¹ In the original: "ces conversations impossibles, farcies de quoliberts et de coq-à-l'âne, qu'ils engagent avec leurs maîtres pour mettre le public en train" (Fournel, 1863, p. 250).

References

- COSTA, Mário. **Feiras e outros Divertimentos Populares de Lisboa**. Lisboa: Município de Lisboa, 1950.
- FOURNEL, Victor. **Tableau du Vieux Paris**. Les Spectacles Populaires et les Artistes des Rues. Paris: E. Dentu, 1863.
- GAUTIER, Théophile. **Le Capitaine Fracasse**. (1^a ed. 1863). Paris: Charpentier, Libraire-Éditeur, 1866.
- GUIMARÃES, J. Ribeiro. **Sumário de vária história**. V. 3. Lisboa: Rolland & Semiond, 1873.

KATRITZKY, M. A. **The Art of Commedia**: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with special Reference to the Visual Records. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006.

LISBOA. Governo Civil de Lisboa. **Registo de alvarás expedidos**. NT 184 NR 0506. Lisboa, 1867.

MACHADO, Júlio César. **Manhãs e Noites**. Lisboa: Livraria Moderna, 1873.

MESQUITA, Alfredo de. **Alfacinhas**. 2. ed. (1.^a ed. 1910). Lisboa: Veja, 1994.

NICOLL, Allardyce. **El Mundo de Arlequín**: Estudio Crítico de la Commedia dell'arte. Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1977.

PINHEIRO CHAGAS, Manuel. **Diário Ilustrado**, Lisboa, p. 1, 17 jul. 1872.

PORTUGAL. Ministério do Reino. **Relação dos livros e documentos do Archivo deste Ministério recolhidos ao Archivo da Torre do Tombo**. Lisboa: ANTT, 1849.

PORTUGAL. Ministério do Reino. **Relação dos livros e documentos do Archivo deste Ministério recolhidos ao Archivo da Torre do Tombo**. Lisboa: ANTT, 1850.

PORTUGAL. Ministério do Reino. **Relação dos livros e documentos do Archivo deste Ministério recolhidos ao Archivo da Torre do Tombo**. Lisboa: ANTT, 1853.

PORTUGAL. Ministério do Reino. **Relação dos livros e documentos do Archivo deste Ministério recolhidos ao Archivo da Torre do Tombo**. Lisboa: ANTT, 1866.

PORTUGAL. Ministério do Reino. **Relação dos livros e documentos do Archivo deste Ministério recolhidos ao Archivo da Torre do Tombo**. Lisboa: ANTT, 1867.

SCARRON, Paul. **Roman Comique**. 3 v. (1.^a ed. 1651-1657) Paris: Durant, Pissot, 1757.

VISSIÉRE, Isabelle; VISSIÉRE, Jean-Louis (Int. e Notas). **Théâtre de la Foire**. Lisboa: Desjonquères, 2000.

Paula Gomes Magalhães holds a doctorate and a master's degree in Theatre Studies from the Faculty of Arts, Universidade de Lisboa. She is a researcher at the Center for Theater Studies at the same University. She has a degree in Communication Sciences from the Social and Human Sciences Faculty of Univer-



cidade Nova de Lisboa. She is a member of ArteViva - Barreiro Theater Group, where, for about 30 years, she has been active as an actress, trainer and director.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2171-9634>

E-mail: paula.magalhaes@campus.ul.pt

Availability of research data: the dataset supporting the results of this study is published in this article.

This original paper, translated by Tony O'Sullivan, is also published in Portuguese in this issue of the journal.

Received on January 30, 2023

Accepted on May 22, 2023

Editor in charge: Gilberto Icle

