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Between Transgression and Institutionalization: Teatro Comuna's *Measure for Measure*

Democratic states and theatrical subsidies

Whilst much critical attention has been given to the ways in which theatre has operated under totalitarian regimes or on the cusp of revolutionary change, there has been less attention given to the ways in which it has responded to the challenges of creating under democracy, especially in relatively recent democracies like the Portuguese. Nevertheless, there are important historical, political and ethical questions relating to theatrical production in a democracy, not the least of which is the role of the democratic state itself. In the Portuguese context, the sociologist João Teixeira Lopes has identified a continuing oscillation in the role of the state between “a figure that guarantees the independence of artistic creation and the old patronising temptation of interference and the imposition of canons which seeks in the arts a mirror where power can see itself reflected in all its majesty” (110). Moreover, in a context where the democratic state in Portugal is merely thirty years old, wider European structures have been able to superimpose themselves over the vacuum left by the years of the Salazar dictatorship to function alongside the national state apparatus.

Much of the debate concerning the relationship between theatre and the democratic state in Portugal has focused on the thorny question of state funding. If such funding has enabled theatre work to happen, it has also extended the control of the state into what is performed, by whom and where. Criticisms are often voiced by theatre practitioners that criteria for subsidies are arbitrary

or incoherent and that long-term planning of theatre work is made more difficult by short-term, irregular funding.

Yet, to what extent does the attribution of state subsidies actually affect theatrical practice and in what ways? Evidently, the non-attribution of a subsidy can lead to theatrical work becoming impossible and the irregularity of state funding can make theatre work erratic, but does regular state funding inevitably constrain performance in the ways those critical of such subsidies suggest? What might be the theatrical consequences of such constraints? This article looks at a Portuguese company closely connected with the revolutionary movement of 1974, Teatro Comuna, at a moment in history when their funding was put on a more regular basis. It analyzes their production of *Measure for Measure* in 1997, the first Shakespeare they had performed. The article describes the ways in which the company negotiated the contradictions between the closer relationship with the state, implied by more regular funding, and their radical past and focuses particularly on the implications of such a negotiation for the women involved in the production.

The 1974 Revolution and its aftermath

The Salazar dictatorship was overthrown by a military-led popular revolution in 1974. Theatre censorship was soon abolished and many forms of theatre mushroomed in the immediate aftermath. An important consequence of such transformations was the consolidation of the independent theatre sector, which Maria Helena Serôdio has referred to as “the true backbone of theatrical life in Portugal” (15).¹ As one of these independent companies, the Revolution provided Teatro Comuna with both their audience and their premises (they occupied an abandoned Home for Single Mothers after one of their performances) whilst the collectivist, experimental ethos of the period helped to shape their theatrical project.

In 1997, Teatro Comuna performed *Measure for Measure* to celebrate twenty-five years of theatrical activity. The timing of the production is significant because it comes just one year after the newly-elected Socialist government finally recognized the contribution of the independent theatre sector and put what had previously been an *ad hoc* system of state funding on a more regular footing. As a result, the major independent companies were now to receive

¹ Carlos Porto defines independent theatre as having as its main premise “a desire on the part of those responsible for it to conceive and put into practice projects which were autonomous, whether aesthetically, ideologically or institutionally, and which conflicted with the practices of the State and commercial theatre of the period as well as the Salazar-Caetano regime” (19). All translations from Portuguese texts that appear in this article are mine.

funding on a three-yearly basis rather than having to apply for funding every year. This would seem to indicate that Teatro Comuna had much to celebrate. Yet, in an interview with the journalist Marina Ramos in the same year, the leading figure in the company, João Mota, spoke of his concern that the tendency to “stick” too closely to power impacted negatively on “the only valid form of creation, which is transgression” (Ramos 27). Moreover, the company remained openly critical of both the Socialist government and regressive tendencies within Portuguese society in the material that accompanied the production. Drawing a parallel between the Vienna depicted in the play and 1990s Portugal, Mota claimed there was “something rotten in both kingdoms” (Ramos 27).

He elaborated on this parallel in the company's press release, claiming that the periods shared a common context of “religious obsession, sickness, promiscuity, corruption and hypocrisy” (Comuna n.p.), best exemplified by the recently defeated proposal to decriminalize abortion. The sordid reality of life in the 1990s was then contrasted with the valuable lessons to be learnt from the theatrical experience:

We live in a time where mediocrity reigns. It is a time where superficiality lies at the heart of the family unit and where people are chosen not according to their qualities but according to who they know. Theatre, on the other hand, teaches us to take our time: acting teaches us how to enter into dialogue with others; how to listen, keep our eyes open and express doubts. (Comuna n.p.).

These quotes indicate two divergent notions of the relationship between theatre and historical process feeding into the play which also represent two different approaches to staging the “political”. In one, the world of the play is “like” 1990s Portugal in a suggestively mimetic fashion. In the other, theatre exists as a utopian space which functions as the antithesis of the social reality of the 1990s. In the latter scenario, the theatrical process is offered up as a kind of laboratory space where social alternatives can be experimented and prefigured onstage.

Such a tension is, I would argue, characteristic of radical theatrical performance under a recently-created and still uneven democracy, as notions of “alternative” theatre outside the system jostle with notions of “resistant” theatre within it. I suggest in my title that the challenges and constraints evidenced in and around the production placed it in a position “between transgression and institutionalization”. This position was common to several independent companies in Portugal at the end of the last millennium, but was felt with particular force by a group like Comuna because of their overtly political stance. With the dictatorship removed, the force that had unified the independent theatre companies in the 1970s had dissipated by the 1990s, with each company pursuing their particular vision of theatre in the intervening years. What it meant to be an

“independent” theatre company had changed radically by the 1990s when the state was now actively involved in subsidizing theatre work. Teatro Comuna sought to maintain their independence from the State, even in these changed circumstances. However, to what extent could their performance of *Measure for Measure* qualify as an important political intervention when it was produced within a context of celebration? Did not their choice of Shakespeare represent instead a “coming of age” for the company within the theatrical mainstream?

Performing Shakespeare in the 1990s: mediating between past and present

The 1990s were a crucial decade for the performance of Shakespeare in Portugal. More productions of the plays by a variety of national and international theatre companies were seen during this period, and, by the new millennium, the choice of Shakespeare plays was diversifying away from the major tragedies and the more palatable comedies. This new prominence of Shakespeare should be seen within a context where Portugal’s sense of itself as “European” increases (it joined the European Community in 1986). In such a context, there was a heightened *political* sense of the *cultural* currency of performances of Shakespeare as a means of mediating Portugal’s new-found role as a European partner. Performances of Shakespeare became a prime marker of both modernity and “Europeanness” for what remained essentially a “weak” theatrical culture.

Such developments were more clearly visible within the national theatre network, but they also influenced independent companies like Comuna. As a company that had travelled extensively since its formation, they were conscious of changing theatrical developments in several European countries. Moreover, as the head of the main acting school in Portugal, João Mota was also well-placed to reflect the new modernity through the occasional integration of the school’s students within Comuna projects. In the case of *Measure for Measure*, for example, students designed both the sets and the costumes, and the actress who played Isabella had previously been taught by Mota.

Yet, if this indicates a healthy process of self-renewal built into the very structure of the company, there nevertheless, remained obstacles to more far-reaching change. These had more to do with the “way things tended to be done” at Comuna and their “house style” than with a deliberate blocking of change, but, nevertheless, they were sufficiently entrenched as to hold back wider transformations. Evidently, the consolidation of such a “house style” had much to do with the attribution of subsidies in the preceding years which bolstered up a certain insularity prevalent in many theatre companies of this generation. Within the company, the consolidation of this “house style” was

very much connected with the dominance of key male theatre practitioners. Like other independent theatre groups, Comuna were structured around one charismatic male figure, in this case actor-director João Mota. For this particular production of *Measure for Measure*, another founding member of the group, Carlos Paulo, returned to play the Duke, and the presence of these two “founding fathers” ensured the continuity of a “house style” based on a patriarchal matrix of theatrical exchange. This inflected not only relationships between company members offstage, but relationships between characters onstage as well. For example, 21-year-old Carla Chambel, who played Isabella, spoke of the “awe” which surrounded the figure of Carlos Paulo (Chambel 2002) which made it more difficult to approach him with questions on how they were to play their roles. It was not mere coincidence, therefore, that the Duke was played as a benign father-figure and Chambel was encouraged to play her role as if she were almost a child. This paternalistic vision of the Duke is made explicit in the press release for the production, which states, “[t]his is what the character of the Duke does: *he leads each person to reveal their inner selves*, because all the characters in the play, like us, live their lives behind masks” (Comuna n.p.; my emphasis). Such a statement is surprising from a group with Comuna’s history of mistrust of those in political authority.

Chambel also noted that whereas the younger actors systematically did voice and movement warm-ups before each performance, the older actors did not join in with these (Chambel 2002). As this indicates, generational and gender differences between the actors were expressed in differing acting styles. In Ana Paula Homem’s review of the play, an explicit contrast was drawn between the more natural acting styles of the younger actors and the more old-fashioned, declamatory style of some of the older members of the company (Homem 22). Similarly, in João Carneiro’s *Expresso* review, the actresses in the production were singled out “not only for their competence, but also for a frankly contemporary overall attitude” (Carneiro 41). As such, the production revealed something of a transition within the company in terms of acting styles along gendered lines.

Mota had told the actors and actresses to ally simplicity and truthfulness in their acting with “the technique of the word”.² For Chambel, this encouraged an acting style she termed “naturalistic” (Chambel 2002). It is revealing that although Mota’s pronouncements in the public realm emphasize the political resonances of the play, his guidelines to his actors and actresses are primarily technical. This helps to explain the rather curious absence of the political in the production itself. However, there are important political ramifications in the choice of a “naturalistic” acting style for women. The “naturalistic” tends

² Mota’s “technique of the word” has to do with special care and attention being focused on the words of the text and their expression onstage.

to reinforce the mimetic vision of staging the “political” outlined earlier, where the “natural” can easily veer into the “conventional” or the “normal”. This creates problems for a character like Isabella who represents the very antithesis of the “natural” trajectory for women. Within a patriarchal matrix of theatrical exchange, such an acting style prompted an emphasis on Isabella’s innocence at the expense of her skill. In her first scene with Angelo (2.2), for instance, the stage direction in Chambel’s script for Isabella’s powerful speech on authority called for her to deliver the speech in a manner that was “innocent like clear water”. Chambel noted that Mota had told her to delay any anger at Angelo until the end of the play when she thinks her brother is dead. However, she also admitted that, when her anger finally emerged, it was “more contained than explosive” (Chambel 2002). Playing Isabella as innocent in these early scenes may well have contributed towards this later containment.

Maria João and Rocha Afonso’s prose translation reinforced this containment of the actress playing Isabella. The decision to translate only into prose was an individual one, but can also be explained by company priorities.³ There was a wish to avoid unnecessarily obtuse language in a play that already has a complex plot for an audience to follow, especially as *Measure for Measure* is not a well-known play in Portugal. In a sense, this was quite a democratic move, placing the need for simplicity and clarity above the desire to create poetry. Nevertheless, there are also negative consequences in translating solely into prose. As Peter Brook has pointed out, the distinction between verse and prose in the text corresponds to a distinction between the “rough” and the “holy” (99). The “alienating and humanizing” (Brook 99) humour of the low-life characters does much to debunk the platitudes of those in power, but also creates a context against which Isabella’s radical valuation of her chastity makes some sort of sense. Within the pseudo-egalitarian world created by the prose translation, however, Isabella’s decision makes no sense at all, for the prose effaces real differences between characters and situations.

It was not just the younger actresses who were contained within the production, as can be seen with the figure of Mistress Overdone played by Cristina Cavalinhos. If any company might be expected to have an understanding of what it means to be a marginal figure, that company would be Comuna. Similarly, given their own transition from cultural marginality to a form of cultural centrality, the figure of Mistress Overdone might have functioned as a magnet for some of their current concerns. However, João Mota himself played Pompey and tended, like in the text, to take the lead in the comic duo, leaving Cavalinhos to play the “fall guy”. Moreover, it is worth remembering that the production’s press release placed together somewhat ambiguously “religious obsession, sickness,

³ Rocha Afonso refuses to translate into verse, considering that it is better to produce a good prose version of the plays rather than a bad translation in verse (Afonso 2004).

promiscuity, corruption and hypocrisy". With promiscuity tagged as a contemporary social "ill", the character of Mistress Overdone was veiled in a certain amount of prudery. The most visible sign of this was Cavalinhos's costume. It consisted of a curtain wrapped around her body which itched terribly and, according to one reviewer, "bordered on disrespect for the actress wearing it" (Carneiro 41). This representation sidelined Cavalinhos's own understanding of the enormity of the transgression for those schooled in the Catholic faith of a woman who is both whore and surrogate mother, an understanding that did not make the transition from the preparatory phase to the stage (Cavalinhos 2003).

Feminist *gestus*: interrupting the smooth flow of naturalism in performance

Nevertheless, the containment of women within the production did not go unchallenged by the women themselves. In coming to question such representations of women, they were moving into a position where they themselves were becoming transgressors against those like Mota and Carlos Paulo who had been the transgressors of the previous generation. Such moments were rare, for the women had little control over the production overall, but they were significant.

In her illuminating intertextual reading of Brechtian and gender theory, Elin Diamond points out that when spectators "see" gender in a performance, they are more often than not reading into it "the gender ideology of the culture" (Diamond 123). However, when gender is "alienated or foregrounded", "[t]he spectator is enabled to see a sign system as a sign system – the appearance, words, gestures, ideas, attitudes, etc. that comprise the gender lexicon become so many illusionistic trappings to be put on or shed at will" (Diamond 131, 133). Diamond refers to such moments of alienation as moments of feminist *gestus*. They are instances in performance when "the gendered bodies of spectator, actor/subject, and character" are all working together but "*never harmoniously*" (my emphasis) in order that "the sex/gender system, theatre politics, and social history cathect and become visible". Such moments of feminist *gestus* function in a way that is similar to the utopian space Mota claims theatre can promote. They indicate the unnaturalness of the purportedly natural and thus make its transformation possible. They are spaces of performative possibilities. In this particular production, they can be seen as moments which interrupted the smooth flow of the naturalistic so that the gender politics of the dramatic text and the theatrical context were temporarily "put on show".

One such moment can be identified in Rocha Afonso's translation (1996/97: 52–53), where Angelo makes his proposal to Isabella in a scene explicitly concerned with the way power is exercised sexually (2.4). Here, the translator takes on a more active role in the text and comments on the gender mechanics

of the encounter, in what might be termed a movement of translation “slippage”. Isabella states in the Shakespearean text “Women, help heaven! Men their creation mar in profiting by them” (2.4.128–29). The gender ambiguity of “their” in English is resolved in Afonso’s translation with the use of the feminine “aviltam-*nas*”.⁴ The emphasis, then, is already on the damage men do to women rather than to themselves. Soon after, Isabella chides Angelo with the words. “I know your virtue hath a licence in’t/Which seems a little fouler than it is/To pluck on others” (2.4.146–48). Rocha Afonso translates “To pluck on others” as “Mas é uma armadilha” [but this is a trap] (Afonso 53). While in the Shakespearean text, Isabella’s chastisement seems designed to make Angelo reconsider his words, the translation suggests that what Isabella begins to perceive is the trap of gender itself, specifically female gender. In performance, this warning is transmitted via the actress to the audience in something of a feminist “look out, he’s behind you” which alerts the audience explicitly to Angelo’s manipulative attempt to trap Isabella as either “woman” or “none” (nun).

Another moment of feminist *gestus* came at the end of the Comuna production. Performances by English actresses like Juliet Stevenson and Paola Dionisotti have helped to establish something of a performance tradition of open-endedness at this point. This is true to such an extent that contemporary directors more often have to justify why Isabella should marry the Duke than why she should not. Chambel explained that Mota had told her to wait twenty seconds after the Duke had made his proposal and then take his hand in a gesture of acceptance (Chambel 2002). Chambel’s stage direction in the script reads “my hand is the answer”. Yet although the wider decision as to whether Isabella accepted the Duke’s proposal was taken, quite literally, out of the actress’ hands, her physical and verbal responses to the proposal varied from performance to performance. More often than not, Chambel reacted to the Duke as more of a father figure than a potential husband. Only in one performance did she verbalize a “yes” for the first and only time. In other performances, she used the substantial room for manoeuvre offered by physical movement and facial gestures to indicate a wide range of different emotions. This negotiation of the ending was prompted by Mota referring to an English production where the actress had been allowed to make up her own mind about the Duke’s proposal right up until the first night (in Chambel 2002). Thus, the kind of redefinitional work undertaken by earlier generations of English actresses so that the “happy ending” not be taken for granted, was now influencing later performances like

⁴ In another recent translation, for instance, it is men who mar *their* creation in attempting to profit from women. When I suggested to Rocha Afonso that she might have taken on a more active role in the translation of this scene, she replied that it was not something she was conscious of, but considering her views on the subjection of women by men in such situations, it was quite possible that this had happened (1996/97: 52).

that of Chambel. Such forms of exchange were functioning as an alternative way of passing on theatrical experience to the paternalistic model described earlier, despite being mediated through male directors.

Transforming history into memory

The question I sought to address in this article was how a history of transgression and a present of increasing institutionalization might interact theatrically within a specific production of Shakespeare. It seems at first glance that more consistent state funding made little real difference to the work of the company, as it merely regularized a situation which existed informally for many years. Indeed, the public pronouncements of the director remained overtly critical of the very government that had instituted this reform. Yet it is also true that the relationship between the internal dynamics of the company and wider social and historical change continued to be mediated through the vagaries of state funding and that more regular state funding cannot be divorced from a certain institutionalization of working practices.

It is clear that there is a disjunction between the very political public pronouncements of the director and the primarily technical instructions he gave to those involved in the production. The space thus opened up between the wider public realm and the theatrical context of the production shaped the company's negotiation of transgression and institutionalization, for if the public pronouncements invoked an almost nostalgic memory of transgression, the staging of the play remained perfectly consistent with the newer demands of institutionalization.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that the staging of the play was itself a location for a related but separate negotiation between transgression and institutionalisation, interweaving vestiges of a historical past, current concerns and fugitive glimpses of the future. It involved an incipient recognition of the ways in which the standardization of Comuna's theatrical practice had come to limit its ability to respond to social and historical change. The years during which theatrical "fathers" had handed down their theatrical experience orally to their theatrical "daughters" and thus maintained control over the representations of women characters in productions, as well as the women who translated for them, were being challenged not only by the women's own attempts to foreground their containment, but also by the increase in theatrical information that accompanied membership of Europe. Carla Chambel, for instance, later saw a Nottingham Playhouse touring production of the play in Portugal which prompted her to reconsider notions of Isabella's innocence. Such processes put pressure on the patriarchal, locally-based matrix which had tended to define productions at Comuna.

This raises the important question of what exactly is being celebrated in this production. Is it just the transformation of past historical experience into the less tangible stuff of memory? Were the company only able to make sense of the present through recourse to such memory? Considering that none of the women mentioned here have remained permanently within Comuna while the same male figures that determined this production continue to run the company, this would certainly seem to be the case. However, this would also be to ignore the positive ways in which history continues to depend on memory. The production illustrated processes of history in the making with women beginning to redefine their roles within Portuguese theatre, aided by the experiences of women performers in other European contexts. The success of such challenges would inevitably depend on the accumulated theatrical memory garnered from productions such as these.

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