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Andréia de Oliveira Souza

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In this text I analyze the research carried out for Laboratory II, Module I, of the Masters in Theater at the University of Évora, in which was worked on the preparation of the actor, according to Grotowski's methodology, and the study of Alentejo puppets for the creation of the play was developed "The enchanted girl of the 7 dresses". The presentation used the technique of stick puppet theater and a regional language to tell the story of "The enchanted girl with 7 dresses", who was kidnapped by the Snake and trapped in a saw. In a playful way, the play talks about the role of women at the present time.

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Classification: DDC Code: 813.4 LCC Code: PS1017

Language: English



London
Journals Press

LJP Copyright ID: 573333
Print ISSN: 2515-5784
Online ISSN: 2515-5792

London Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 22 | Issue 13 | Compilation 1.0



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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Brief Rationale of the Laboratory II Module I

In my work as an actress, playwright, puppeteer and director at “Cia. Teatro da Recusa”, I have in all the pieces of our repertoire, “Charivaro, A City of Puppets” (2017), “Segismundo and Geometric, A City of Puppets” (2018), “The disappearance of Segismundo” (2019), “The Talking Pill” (2019), “Memories of a Place – Solitude” (2020), and “Memories” (2021), related to puppet theater with the theme of popular culture.

During the scenic laboratory work, supervised by Prof. Dr. Ana Tamen¹, some questions arose: what

¹ Professor at the School of Arts (Scenic Arts) at the University of Évora. PhD in Communication Culture and Arts/Theater (University of Algarve - 2015). Master in Theater Arts/Actor/Director (University of Minnesota - 1989). Degree in Philosophy (Faculty of Letters - University of Lisbon - 1982)

is the role of choice² in the training of the actress? What to work on during the psychophysical training of the actress? How to develop this training? What results from this training? How to transform a popular tale into a current dramaturgy? What was the influence of Alentejo puppets on the Santo Aleixo Puppet Theater? Is it really necessary to keep the entire textual component rigid in a contemporary theatrical creation?

II. THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL TRAINING OF THE ACTRESS

On the first day of meeting with Prof. Dr. Ana Tamen, we started a study process on the body and psychophysical actions, according to the Grotowski method.

We started by isolating each part of the body, to try to awaken it to the expressive work that would come later. I already knew about my dramatic situations, but how do I find a way to be alive through my behavior?

This process was for me an awaken of my perceptions. There was no dedication to experimental or avant-garde theater, but a conduction by our teacher towards a solid and systematic work on the craft of actress and actor. After these moments, we sat down to talk, in order to investigate what it was like for each member to put their body into action. What are the comfort points? What part of the work-room was uncomfortable?

² Here in this question, choice is action. And its unfolding will be reflected in increasingly select choices.

For me, this module resulted in a possibility to renew artistic and personal discoveries.

After these first two days, we entered a phase where we practiced yoga, outdoors, in the small woods next to the work-room. This practice added to my work as an actress. A state of emptiness of tension points and an immediate disposition for concentration, which when entering the rehearsal, was organically delivered to that moment of creation.

I managed through this process to align my thinking with my action and to make increasingly conscious choices. It was possible to work on points that, due to the trip, from Brazil to Portugal, I had not yet been able to work. I felt the elimination of toxins. For a few days he was sweating like someone who was removing sentimental toxins from my body.

The rehearsals, moments shared with Gonçalo Ribeiro³, and often with the presence of our teacher, were not just the preparation for the presentation, but a field of investigations and discoveries, about me and my expressive possibilities with the theater of puppets.

According to Thomas Richard, in his book "Working with Grotowski on Physical Actions" (2012) "rehearsals are a great adventure when we work seriously". And so was my chance to test my own limits. Knowing what was still unknown, but that found space in my body. Have focus and concentration to dedicate time to the isolated study of the puppet's voice.

A process that totaled about 50 hours of actor training and rehearsal. Not to mention the hours dedicated at home to the study and construction of dramaturgy, the symbology of the popular tale, and the making of the puppets and small altarpiece.

III. FROM THE POPULAR TALE TO DRAMATURGY FOR PUPPET THEATER

This phase, from a popular tale to dramaturgy, was undoubtedly the most decisive moment for the construction of the expressive phase of this process.

Months before the start of the meetings, the Prof. Dr. Ana Tamen, already in web meetings, motivated everyone to search for their repertoire. We start from a very particular point: what kind of theater would each like to do? And what kind of theater wouldn't we like to do ?

In response, I said that I would like to make a theater that is alive and that represents the context in which I am inserted, and that, if possible, would be performed through the language of puppet theater.

I presented some contents referring to my previous research, the work with the Brazilian popular puppet theater, the relationship of a dramaturgy with the popular theater.

As a suggestion, the teacher, who also acted as advisor and director, presented two archives of popular tales, one of traditional gypsy tales and the other, popular tales from the Alentejo.

I spent a few weeks reading these stories, recognizing the dramatic potential of each story, and finally I chose an Alentejo story; "The enchanted girl of the seven dresses".

A fairy tale or enchantment, with text was taken from volume XIV, series III, from Arquivo de Beja. A story where the wonderful predominates, taken "from a time that includes one of the popular Portuguese stories, passed from generation to generation by oral tradition, like the 'Conto da Carochinha⁴'" (Pedroso, 1996, p.39).

This story was collected orally by an informant, who did not give a title, only determining how to tell it, and according to her, she had already kept

³ Actor and Master's student in Theater at the University of Évora.

⁴ Uma história onde predomina o maravilhoso, retirada de um tempo que "compreende também as histórias da carochinha" (Pedroso, 1996, p.39).

this story with her for seventy years. She had heard it from an uncle who told many stories.

She was a lady who had not been to school as she had to take care of a younger sister so her mother could go to work.

“I didn't go to school. Because I had a younger sister and my mother had no one, and I always had to carry her, because, my mother had to work and at that time nobody gave us anything⁵.” (Arquivo de Beja, 2000, p.84)

For the transposition of the popular tale to the dramaturgy, I organized a script that contained physical characteristics and archetypes of the characters, and other plot elements.

This process that culminated in the dramaturgical text, we do not understand dramaturgy in its classical sense, as an action that is close to the text, and that will be transported to the stage.

According to the Pavis dictionary, it identifies as the classic sense of dramaturgy:

“Classical dramaturgy exclusively examines the work of the author and the narrative structure of the work. It is not directly concerned with the scenic performance of the show” (PAVIS, 2008, p. 113)⁶.

Contrary to this definition, we saw dramaturgy as an expanded possibility. Modern definition given by Bernard Dort (2013), when he writes about emancipated staging and to justify his choices he uses the book “The Ignorant Master”, by Jacques Rancière (2010).

This choice involved think about dramaturgy as a broad and complex process. Be attentive to the movements of the puppets, their entrances, exits,

⁵ “Ê não andi à escola. Porque eu tinha uma irmanita mais pequena e minha mãe não tinha ninguém, e eu tinha que andar sempre com ela às costas, pois então⁸, minha mãe tinha que trabalhar e nesse tempo ninguém dava nada à gente.” (Arquivo de Beja, 2000, p.84). *Written in Alentejo dialect.

⁶ “A dramaturgia clássica examina exclusivamente o trabalho do autor e a estrutura narrativa da obra. Ela não se preocupa diretamente com a realização cênica do espetáculo” (PAVIS, 2008, p. 113).

displacements through the scenic space. The function of the dialogues, the fabric of the costumes, the music, the materiality of the puppet, the lighting, the positioning of the actors behind the altarpiece. Everything aesthetic and ethical was treated as dramaturgy.

Artaud defended that directors and actors should not submit to the text, but rather appropriate it and even violate it, change it, if necessary: “The enslavement of the author, submission to the text, what a funeral boat! But each text has infinite possibilities. The spirit and not the letter of the text!” (Artaud, 2006, p. 25).

IV. THE ALENTEJO PUPPETS AND THE PLAY “THE ENCHANTED GIRL OF THE 7 DRESSES”

In March 2022 I participated in a four-day training on the *Bonecos de Santo Aleixo*, produced by Tarumba and CENDREV⁷, at Theater São Luiz, in Lisbon. And I was able to get to know some secrets that this tradition keeps.

Representatives of the popular European tradition of stick puppets, the Alentejo marionettes still carry traces of medieval religious drama. Present in the theatrical environment of the city of Évora through the *Bonecos de Santo Aleixo*. They keep the rarity, and the memory of a people.

According to researcher John McCormick (2015) “in it we can find much of what, in other places, has already disappeared or is in the process of disappearing”⁸.

Heirs of the crib theater, the *Bonecos de Santo Aleixo*, maintain the expression of a people in the form of dolls. They express their beliefs, dreams, conflicts, values, the accent of a people, of a region. It is the theater that speaks of its territory, with a lot of humor and scenes of improvisation with the public.

About this theater that speaks from its territory, the researcher Maria Clara de Almeida Lucas, in her article “The Individual Creation and the

⁷ Évora Drama Center

⁸ “(...) nele podemos encontrar muito do que, noutros lados, já desapareceu ou está em vias de desaparecer.”

Collective Rite⁹”, creates the concept of a textual component of the externalization of a *modus vivendi*. When the theatrical text undergoes changes to make room for the voice of the people of that place.

“Initially, there is always an individual creation, leaving us after adoption [by the linguistic community] with a text that is ritualized little by little and undergoes the changes that the voice of the people imposes on it. (...) That initial text is now nothing more than a mere reason for the externalization of a *modus vivendi* that the community lends and transmits to us.” (Lucas 1981, p. 106)¹⁰

From these references I made, with the material I had available, in my improvised studio, in Évora, the stick puppets, of the five characters present in the dramaturgy of the play “The girl with the 7 dresses”.

⁹ Article published in Revista Lusitana (Reprint), Nova Série, nº 2, Lisbon, 1981.

¹⁰ “Existe de início sempre uma criação individual, restando-nos depois da adopção [pela comunidade linguística] um texto que se ritualiza a pouco e pouco e sofre as alterações que a voz do povo lhe vai imprimindo. Simultaneamente a obra individual que se gerou vai-se perdendo na distância e acabará e acabará por desaparecer o seu autor, o que, contudo, não significa que seja ‘anônima’. Viverá uma longa vida acidentada, em que “recitadores” vários e possíveis escribas irão alterar aqui e ali a forma mas não o conteúdo. Este permanecerá inalterado ao longo de vários momentos de uma vida comunitária que marcará apenas a expressão de que se reveste. A alfabetização e as migrações são outros tantos fatores que têm muito a ver com essa evolução do texto oral. Aquele texto inicial não passa agora de mero motivo para a exteriorização de um *modus vivendi* que a coletividade lhe empresta e nos transmite. Isto significa que ela o adotou, e fez dele seu porta-voz!” (Lucas 1981, p. 106)



Figure 1: Bonecos de Santo Aleixo

The heads were sculpted from styrofoam, the hands and feet modeled with putty, and the body made with foam and fabric rolls. The costumes were inspired by the characteristics that the Alentejo tale already proposed, in its social, geographic and economic context.

The music, performed live, was composed by Gonçalo Ribeiro, served as an element of dialogue with the spectators, and also of narrative of the plot. Thematic parody was used, with the intonation of the Alentejo chant, and the *bailinho*¹¹ was offered to a spectator present in the room.

In Passos (1999) it is possible to find the following description of the Bailinhos present in the Bonecos de Santo Aleixo:

“These popular balls were (and are) always preceded by the same ceremonial: four dolls entered the stage who established a dialogue with the public, in which the Master-Salas also intervened, and to whom he asked “if they wanted a bailinho” and if anyone wanted to see whichever one was represented (and the

¹¹ About the bailinho, it is important to emphasize its presence in the Alentejo puppets. These were popular dances, which still take place during the staging, mediated by female puppets, who established a dialogue with the audience.



Figure 2: Stick puppets from the popular tale

rural public who were used to puppet shows would be aware of the entire repertoire), chose him or her. (Passos, 1999, p.170)¹²

“These popular dances are a pretext for dialogues and even skirmishes between puppets and spectators, filled with indecorous and satirical allusions, social criticism, jokes and personal banter.” (Passos, 1999, p.171)¹³

Within the original structure of the popular tale, “The enchanted girl with 7 dresses” lives in a situation of submission to the family, society and patriarchy.

This question bothered me a lot and accompanied the investigation in all other phases.

As a woman, I thought about the lack of utility in reproducing in the theater of present a character

¹² “Estes bailes populares era (e são) sempre precedidos do mesmo cerimonial: entravam no palco quatro bonecas que estabeleciam diálogo com o público, no qual intervinham igualmente o Mestre-Salas, e a quem perguntava “se queriam bailinho” e se alguém pretendia ver qualquer deles representado (e o público rural habituê dos espetáculos dos bonecos estaria a par de todo o repertório), escolhia-o. (Passos, 1999, p.170)

¹³ “Estes bailinhos populares são pretexto para diálogos e mesmo despiques entre títeres e espectadores, recheados de alusões indecorosas e satíricas, crítica social, motejos e remoques pessoais.” (Passos, 1999, p.171)

with these characteristics so rooted in a past that exists only in the popular tale because even Alentejo society has already changed as a conception of women's rights and place in society.

What's the point of continuing to repeat a history that no longer corresponds to the rights, experiences and coexistence conquered by portions of the population understood as minorities? What is the use of representing in the theater today a woman who has no voice? What's the point of not being aligned with the ONU sustainable development issues? I, who am a foreigner, are investigating, today, the dramatic possibilities of stick puppets in Portugal; where do I start? What is a staging that has tradition and modernity inserted in the scenic action?

After several discussions with the group, we decided that in our proposal, the "Girl enchanted with the 7 dresses" would make her decisions, according to her conscience and desires. For the woman of today would be aligned. We seek to build an emancipated woman and different from the original text, we create another end for the character.

In Brazil, within the *Teatro de Mamulengo*¹⁴, as playing artists of a traditional and popular practice of puppet theater, all these processes of transposition of a traditional textual component to the present day, which were discussed and accepted by the masters of tradition.

Considering that the tradition goes back to an ancient time, in a world where women didn't have the rights they have today, it was necessary to bring to the theatrical creation these issues that had already been overcome in the political and social debate on human rights.

To end the play with this great change, we used Gloria Gaynor, *I will survive*, which referred to the scope of women's rights and freedom to be able to marry whoever they want, when they think they should.

¹⁴ The Teatro de Mamulengo, is part of the Brazilian popular puppet theater, which originated through the nativity scene, inserted in Brazil through the navigators of the Iberian Peninsula in the 16th century, and like the BSA, has in its theatrical component the expression of a people.

For the scenic space, a fundamental space in this theatrical representation of Alentejo puppets, I tried to reproduce a small altarpiece, which was built with a cardboard box¹⁵, lined with fabrics and illuminated by a light source on the proscenium.

About the altarpiece in the composition of the *Bonecos de Santo Aleixo*, in Passos (1999), it is possible to find the following descriptions:

“The representation space is composed of this altarpiece, whose scene, in the form of an isosceles trapeze, has in the middle, in the closest part of the proscenium, a semicircular opening with a radius of 18 centimeters [...]. The “floor” of the scene measures 1.48 cm at the front; 0.67cm at the bottom and 0.90cm at the sides. In front, two frames of the front of the stage are mounted vertically, the first having 47 cotton threads stretched in the direction of the height, and the second 39 (order to be considered from the spectators); are about 40 cm apart from each other. And the wires are 4 cm apart” (Passos, 1999, p.215)¹⁶

¹⁵ Model suggested by Zé Alegria, at a meeting on 05/27/2022.

¹⁶ “O espaço de representação é composto por esse retábulo, cuja cena, em forma de trapézio isósceles, tem ao meio, na parte mais aproximada do proscênio, uma abertura semicircular de 18 centímetros de raio [...]. O “chão” da cena mede 1,48 cm na frente; 0,67cm ao fundo e 0,90cm dos lados. Em frente são montados, verticalmente, dois quadros de boca de cena, tendo, o primeiro, 47 fios de algodão esticados no sentido da altura, e o segundo 39 (ordem a considerar a partir dos espectadores); distam um do outro cerca de 40 cm. E os fios têm uma distância entre si de 4 cm” (Passos, 1999, p.215)



Figure 3: Small altarpiece of the piece “The enchanted girl with the 7 dresses”.

V. CONCLUSION

In considerations and notes, for the completion of this brief work of academic investigation, I understand the successive transformations that resulted in the dramaturgy and staging of the play “The enchanted girl of the 7 dresses”. From my psychophysical training processes to find my creative energy to the closing of dramaturgy and staging.

Means and methodologies were developed as first attempts to understand the formal academic language to make and think about Alentejo puppets and their relationship with stick puppets in Europe and their popular character.

I suggest that other research, whose theme is specifically, to deal with the figuration of Alentejo puppets, should arise, so that they do not end with the Bonecos de Santo Aleixo. Alongside the BSA, according to the catalog “Mestre Salas presents... Portuguese Puppet Exhibition” (2007), there was, “since the 1930s, another puppet set in the Alentejo: Orada¹⁷”.

¹⁷ (...) existia, “desde os anos 30 do século passado, um outro estojo de títeres no Alentejo: o de Orada”.

The sum of knowledge and studies, with the recovery of historical data, by Passos (1999) and Lucas (1981), reflects this process for structure new dramaturgies that express other and new stories of these brave people, who are the Alentejo people.

Finally this is the end of this writing and I hope it can generate propagations and discoveries about a popular stick puppet theater, which still has a lot to (self) discover.

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