CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE THEATRE
EXPERIMENTALISM, POLITICS AND UTOPIA
[WORKING TITLE]
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COORDINATION
Rui Pina Coelho
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The Geographic and Affective Territories of Comédias do Minho and Teatro do Vestido

Monstro — Parte 1: Calamidade, co-creation by Gonçalo Alegria, Joana Craveiro and Tânia Guerreiro | dir. Joana Craveiro
Teatro do Vestido/Citemor, 2012 | (Tânia Guerreiro, Joana Craveiro and Gonçalo Alegria) | photo João Tuna
Over the course of Portuguese theatre history, the path taken has been an eminently political one. Florian Malzacher, in the introduction to *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (2015), emphatically affirms that in the West, following a significant period of narrative theatre during the 1970s and 80s and a subsequent period in the 1990s of post-dramatic forms focusing on the exposition of the mechanism of theatre, we today encounter “a strong desire for a theatre that not only gets a grip on pressing political issues but also becomes a political space, a public sphere, in itself” (Malzacher, 2015: 12). The specific circumstances of the history of theatre in Portugal were such that the political dimension never really completely vanished. Even when experimentation in European theatre was, for the most part, more enthusiastically engaged in more formal exploratory processes and procedures, Portuguese stagecraft — still energised by post-Revolution fervour and, after that, busy discussing the country’s joining the European Community — continued to maintain a firm hold on the relevant political issues of the time. This enthusiasm was not only triggered by the discovery of a previously banned repertory (namely Brecht) but also intensified by the conflict between revolutionary values and their alleged incompatibility with the desired return to normalcy of public life, as attempts were made to assess how well the promises of the April 1974 Carnation Revolution were being kept.

Thus, as social life began to stabilise, theatre insisted (some theatre, of course) on keeping the dialogue focused on the future of the country and the state of the nation. And whilst the Habermasian notion of the “public space” was eroding, the theatre attempted to invent, construct, and preserve a space where discussion on the themes of interest to everyone — issues vital to the City — was still possible and necessary.

In Portugal, one of the forms with which to construct this “public sphere” has dealt with the exploration of the common territory (geographical and affective) and the collective memory. For more recent theatre makers, the examples such as João Brites’s Teatro O Bando or Madalena Victorino’s community choreographies serve as inspirational role models. Yet in these enterprises, in addition to the inevitable aesthetic idiosyncrasies inherent in each artist, there is to be found a frequent and recurring fascination with non-dramatic textual materials, collaboration with non-actors, interest in creating permanent or long-lasting contact with the community, a preferential relationship with specific audiences (of a certain geographic, professional, or social community), and recourse to gathering documents and memories via interviews or close bonds with the general public.

With one of their most visible work priorities being the examination of how to relate their artistic undertakings with the fabric of the surrounding community, both Teatro do Vestido and Comédias do Minho propose two very different ways of understanding the subject as they employ territory and memory as determining components of their work. Although the course of the two groups’ individual histories (TdV, founded in 2001; CdM, 2003) is testament to the rather
distinct ways they have established themselves artistically in the community, their work with specific groups — from a specific geographical, professional or social context — is a recurrent theme which attracts both collectives.

Comédias do Minho maintain a more “traditional” relationship with the community. Founded as a joint initiative bringing together five municipalities in the Minho River Valley (Melgaço, Monção, Paredes de Coura, Valença and Vila Nova de Cerveira) and the Teatro do Noroeste (later replaced with the Caixa de Crédito Agrícola), they are a unique case in Portugal where several cities pooled their resources for a project in the performing arts. Their goal is to provide the region with its own cultural entity, one focusing on three areas of action: a theatre company, an educational and a community project. Although its purpose was threefold in nature, the group’s action indeed responded to the essence of a close relationship with its community: 1) in the theatre company, the emphasis was “on the continuous contact of Portuguese theatre makers with their international counterparts, in articulation with a diversified selection of performances whose scope is non-paternalistic, thought-provoking, and daring (in terms of proposals, themes, theatre makers, and languages)”; 2) the educational project envisioned offering “opportunities for learning and for spending leisure time which could enhance the life-long development of cognitive, critical reasoning, creative, affective, and social skills and combine its interventions with the artistic worlds of the theatre company and the community project.

Inês Negra, by Miguel Castro Caldas
dir. Gonçalo Amorim | Comédias do Minho, 2009
(Tânia Almeida, Celeste Domingues, Mónica Tavares and Tânia Pereira) | photo Susana Neves
in a common drive to democratise access to the arts”; 3) the community project was characterised “by the collaboration in the programming, education, dynamisation, and artistic creation within the amateur theatre groups in the region, throughout the year and via the scheduled community-organised performances, with significant involvement from the general public and the fabric of local civic associations”, respectively, and as defined by the group (Domingues & Vaz, 2014: 17, 67, 151). Thus, the project was clearly conceived to emphasise the territory and the community. In a statement made to the newspaper Público¹, Isabel Alves Costa recalled the need to create “a close relationship with the population”.

Teatro do Vestido, from Lisbon, was founded by a team from multi-disciplinary backgrounds with the ambition to produce both their own dramatic texts and all the elements required for the performances, and although their recurrent theatrical practice is inscribed upon the territory, their inclination is more clearly one of a singular relationship with memory and archival documents. Featuring the impressive playwriting of Joana Craveiro as its driving force, the group’s first performances often relied on poetic metaphors and on a nostalgic and introspective environment, as well as a penchant for composition made up of fragments and stories from people’s lives (fictional and real) which included photographs, notebooks, household items, and other personal bits of memorabilia. In more recent work, TdV seems to be at the helm of a creative movement operating on a more permanent basis within the context of communities
— and quite expressively — with the memory of these contexts, whether they are a city or a generation, thus abandoning a more introspective framework and embracing an outlook that is more committed to the public sphere.

2.

Speaking at the ceremony of the Portuguese Association of Theatre Critics’ Awards and presenting the prize given to Comédias do Minho, in 2011, Alexandra Moreira da Silva pointed to the Comédias do Minho as being the embryo of an “artistic movement” in the Upper Minho region, which implied “from the outset, a network of communicative vessels which has taken to the Minho River Valley [...] theatre makers as diverse as Pedro Penim, Madalena Victorino, Sílvia Real, Igor Gandra, and Marcos Barbosa, or more recently Nuno Cardoso and Joana Providência” (Silva, 2012: 11). To this list we might well add now the collaborations with Gonçalo Amorim, John Mowat, Leonor Barata, Ricardo Alves and Lee Beagley, among many others. In fact, this is one of the most impressive features of the company: the permanent intermixing of the regular artists (actors Gonçalo Fonseca, Luís Filipe Silva, Mónica Tavares², Rui Mendonça and Tânia Almeida), the invited guest artists (directors, actors, musicians) and the local amateur artists. This traffic flow guarantees artistic freshness for the work presented, providing substantial diversity to the design of the repertory.

The artistic intervention of Comédias do Minho is also inscribed in a political discourse which calls for a “new cultural centrality” — a term used by Isabel Alves Costa, the mentor of the project in its present configuration. This “new centrality” runs contrary to the policies of decentralisation timidly applied in Portugal since the 1970s, and it is achieved via the creation of new cultural centres which are built with their own resources and project planning (logistical and artistic) that are quite distinguishable from the hegemonic projects of the country’s large urban centres. Indeed, for the most part, Portugal’s socio-cultural fabric is still determined by resources in Lisbon and Oporto. The uniqueness of the artistic enterprise which is the Comédias, therefore, is found precisely in the way it has established a relationship between the centre and the outlying areas. For João Pedro Vaz, artistic director at the Comédias from October 2009 to 2016:

The project is designed for each new model/territory, and the ambition is to create new paradigms of cultural programming there, acting with absolute power despite localism, and even working with the localism as a factor of originality and valorisation. [...] According to the needs of the moment, artists (with their remarkable mobility), concepts, or languages are bought in. The formats may even be highly transferable, but it is the territory of action which offers the ultimate keys for interpretation (or the initial ones). And what is done out there is unique for that very reason. (Vaz, 2014: 171)

Comédias are obviously not the only artistic collective in Portugal located outside of Lisbon, Oporto,
or other urban centres. But the manner in which they articulate their artistic, political, and civic project reflects a particular singularity, as described by Helena Santos: “The theatre, itself, is the core issue of this Project, the fulcrum of a multi-faceted action between a territory, its inhabitants and its culture on the one hand, and contemporary artistic creation on the other” (Santos, 2016: 58). In other words, bringing the Berlin sky to the Minho River Valley, to recall the statement made by the Mayor of Paredes de Coura in 2014 on the occasion of the company’s 10th anniversary: “with the Comédias do Minho, our obsession with the sky of Berlin has got a lot smaller. […] I am absolutely convinced that this project is a school in disguise.” (Pereira, 2014: 11)

These two aspects — the circulation of artists of different aesthetics and work methodologies and the support for a new centrality — confirm the premise expressed by Helena Santos that the Comédias “configure the encounter between a cultural policy and artistic practice” (Santos, 2016: 64). In a personal interview given to the author of this chapter in February 2017, João Pedro Vaz, artistic director of the Comédias from 2009 to 2016, affirms:

There are various levels of concerns at the Comédias. […] There was always the desire to create projects of contemporary artistic creation with some sense of rupture — not necessarily in breaking with what you might expect to find in a rural context, but at the same time with a feeling of a re-encounter, something festive — a project that, given the diversity of the audiences it welcomes, in the end is the sum of the various programming events. The goal is to be both generalist and avant-garde, featuring some of the canon of the performing arts — a type of broad-reaching public service — a cultural centre in the landscape.

Indeed, the practice of this collective seems to point to this very thing: the connection between the application of a cultural policy to enhance the power of the audience/citizen and the artistic practice founded on professionalism and artistic freedom. Thus, Comédias do Minho can be described as a project built around a core group, one which many outside collaborators gravitated to (both amateur and invited professional actors, up-and-coming and well-known), without a heavy-handed artistic director imposing his personal preferences (instead allowing for more democratic teamwork). In its different areas of intervention, there is no specific separation made within the collective, as they interweave creation, training, and reflection in a healthy way, safeguard bonds of conviviality, intimacy and artistic rigour with the region, stress participation from the community, and reject folkloric or simplistic approaches. In essence, this is a cultural project “intimately linked to a political project for the region, without it becoming hostage to direct political action” (Paiva, 2014: 43).

Comédias do Minho, founded in 2003, began their theatrical activity a year later, under the direction of José Martins. Their inaugural performance — Era Uma Vez no Vale do Minho [Once Upon a Time in the Minho
River Valley] (directed by the group, 2004) — was followed by *O Espelho Único* [The Only Mirror] by António Torrado (dir. José Martins, 2004), *A Farsa do Mestre Pathelin* [The Farce of Maistre Pierre Pathelin] (dir. José Martins, 2005), *Mosquete* [La Moscheta], by Ângelo Beolco (dir. Pedro Giestas, 2005) and Molière’s *O Marido Confundido* [The Confounded Husband] (dir. José Jorge Duarte, 2005). In 2006, management of the company passed to actor and director Nuno Pino Custódio, an artist with strong links to the *commedia dell’arte* tradition and mask theatre. Under his direction, the following were performed: *A Festa* [The Party] by Spiro Scimone (dir. Pedro Luzindro, 2006), *Antskupanabra*, adapted from Karl Valentin (directed by the group, 2006) and Dario Fo’s *Mistério Bufo* [Misterio Buffo] (dir. Filipe Crawford, 2006). The popular, comic, and farcical nature of the first performances was quite clear. Following the change in artistic director, an “Artistic Commission” was formed, consisting of Nuno Pino Custódio, theatre director and set designer Nuno Carinhas, and theatre historian, critic and dramatist Jorge Louraço Figueira.

The company, nevertheless, underwent a restructuring in late 2006. Isabel Alves Costa and Miguel Honrado were asked to form a new Artistic Commission with the help of French director, playwright, and educator Pierre Voltz, at which time the three previously mentioned areas of action were defined. It was from this time onwards that the Comédias would come to adopt the structuring features that characterise the company today, operating within a mode of restoring the relationship amongst the territory, the audiences,
and the community. Isabel Alves Costa would assume the role of artistic director until her death in 2009, when she was replaced by young actor and theatre director João Pedro Vaz, founder of the Oporto-based company Assédio, in 1998. Strictly speaking, this was a return for João Pedro Vaz as it was just one year earlier, in 2008, that he directed the play Auto da Paixão [The Passion Play], a popular depiction of the Passion of Christ, at the Comédias. At the time of the play’s premiere, he commented to the local newspaper Notícias de Coura³ on his enthusiasm and compatibility with the project, saying that it is “quite important to decentralise theatre, to take it to all types of audiences but still keep the same level of expertise and the same quality in terms of professionalism, regardless of the context of where theatre is performed”.

The administration led by João Pedro Vaz offered continuity to the project begun by Isabel Alves Costa, but it would be under his leadership that the Comédias do Minho would achieve recognition as a theatre collective of noteworthy status in Portugal’s cultural landscape. It would be confirmed as a prime venue for artistic experimentation, allowing for a highly original confluence of audiences, artists and scholars coming from quite diverse backgrounds in terms of sensivities and territories (geographical, affective and aesthetic).

One of the examples of this “decentralised” experience was the performance El Dorado (2008), directed by Pedro Penim, one of the members of Teatro Praga. In the narrative logic of the play, “Eldorado” would represent a type of paradise, a place where anxiety
and panic would afflict no one. The plot device was decidedly simple: five characters, young people from the bored urban middle class, expressed their worries, fears, and the paradoxes of life, in other words, what unnerves them to a state of panic. On a table in the background were two items, veritable icons in the homes of today’s middle class: a plasma television and a coffee-maker of the chic capsule variety. The overlapping of territories was precisely illustrated in the blending of imagery both urban and rural, popular and educated, producing a mix of references — quite to the liking of eclectic theatre maker, Pedro Penim — that resulted in a performance that pulsed in a fairy-like, almost circus-like way. What stood out most about the performance was that it refused to be labelled as being from some aesthetic hinterlands and that it built itself upon its own individual language and style. This ability would later become indispensable to a company which would make the regular presence of directors coming from diverse aesthetic backgrounds one of their trademark styles and which, at the same time, would not turn away from assuming a strong individual identity.

This facet of identity was particularly reinforced by the creative team’s continued presence in the region where the company was active. This successful integration of the creators into the context of the territory eliminated any feelings of strangeness toward the artists who regularly arrived there. The company’s identity was also strongly sustained through the work carried out within the scope of the educational and community projects. Indeed, the performances which involved the local population and civic associations and which rekindled popular artistic traditions — as in FITA V ALE, the Festival Itinerante de Teatro Amador do Vale do Minho [Itinerant Amateur Theatre Festival of the Minho River Valley] (since 2011) where amateur theatre groups have worked with members of the Comédias to present their work (each CdM actor assigned to direct and organise the amateurs from each location) — constituted instruments for community-building based on a shared, identity-based experience. Thus, a true common territory was built where the surrounding community’s expectations would converge. “The idea of community does not exist. It is activated and de-activated over and over with respect to the projects that are created”, noted João Pedro Vaz, in the personal interview given to the author of this chapter, commenting on the critical need to conceive of a long-term plan for a permanent presence in the region.

In February 2016, the Comédias do Minho performed in Lisbon, at the D. Maria II National Theatre, during an initiative entitled “Ocupação Minhota” [The Occupation from Minho]. In addition to the premiere of *Os Doze Pares de França* [The Twelve Peers of France], a popular play from the Carolingian Cycle directed by João Pedro Vaz (and a co-production with the TNDM II), other events also took place, such as performances, exhibitions, documentaries, workshops, debates, and even regional food and wine tasting. This would come to be a crucial moment that gained wider exposure for the Comédias, although it occurred shortly before João Pedro Vaz’s departure to become
Os Doze Pares de França, traditional play
(Ana Valente) | photo Filipe Ferreira/TNDM II
director of the Teatro Oficina in Guimarães. This brought the cycle immediately following the 10-year anniversary of the company (2004-2014) to an end, a two-year period that was more closed, more centred, and without as many involvement-based projects. Curiously, during this “occupation” there were enormous tarpaulins draped on the façades of the TNDM II with the slogan from the season’s first 3-month period: “From the Parish Council to the Milky Way.” For João Pedro Vaz, accustomed to having his plays performed in the community halls in the boroughs dotting the Minho River Valley, this phrase written boldly across the front of the National Theatre in Lisbon was “nearly a victory because it undoes the hierarchy, it dilutes what is peripheral and what is central, let alone open up a discussion, a query”.

3.

During the performance of Um Mini-Museu Vivo de Memórias do Portugal Recente [A Living Mini-Museum of Recent Memories of Portugal] by Joana Craveiro/Teatro do Vestido, presented at the Fábrica das Artes at the Belém Cultural Centre (2017) — a shortened version intended for younger audiences of Um Museu Vivo de Memórias Pequenas e Esquecidas [A Living Museum of Small and Forgotten Memories] (2014), a 5-hour long lecture-performance which became emblematic of the political theatre depicting Portugal under the yoke of austerity — the sole performer asks her father: “When it comes to a historical event, how much time has to pass before you’re allowed to talk about it?” In this same question is a reformulation of the underlying concern that accompanied the first years of the Troika in Portugal, expressed in one of the dramaturgical pillars from Um Museu Vivo... and a source of the principal apprehension depicted in the trilogy Monstro (Calamidade, 2012; Hecatombe, 2013; Apocalipse, 2013) [Monster (Calamity, 2012; Hecatomb, 2013; Apocalypse, 2013)]: “How did it come to this? Or in other words, where do we come from and how did we get here?”

With these plays Teatro do Vestido began a new cycle in which the themes it chose to examine were ones about the economic crisis, the recent history of Portugal, and quite decidedly, collective memory. In Monstro — Parte 1: Calamidade [Monster — Part 1: Calamity], Joana Craveiro and Tânia Guerreiro, their backs to a peeling wall in Room B at Citemor — Festival de Teatro de Montemor-o-Velho, involved with Gonçalo Alegria’s disturbing soundtrack, spatial and ethereal, began by listening to a recording of a speech made by Marcelo Caetano about the Caldas da Rainha uprising, a failed coup attempt which took place on 16th March 1974, a month before the fall of the dictatorship in the Carnation Revolution. Further on, Craveiro, forlorn, asks, “What do you do to keep yourself from feeling dirty on the inside? When your country disgusts you, what do you do?” Along the way there were family memories, revolutionary songs, the theme song to Ruy, O Pequeno Cid [Roderigo, The Little Cid], news clippings, and stories about the country and other odd bits found in the rubbish along some avenue in Lisbon, where, amongst other things, there was a letter written by a soldier from the colonial war and a boy’s drawing...
of the Founding of the Republic (a holiday that had just been abolished by the government of Pedro Passos Coelho in favour of greater domestic productivity) — all of which resounded in a tone of clear confession and a clash with reality.

This thematic and formal investigation had significant moments as in Labor #1, a first attempt at the lecture-performance format (2013) and Retornos, Exílios e Alguns Que Ficaram [The Returnees, the Exiled and Some Who Stayed] (2014). But its high point was certainly the lecture-performance Um Museu Vivo de Memórias Pequenas e Esquecidas where Joana Craveiro, in a prologue and seven lectures “on the Dictatorship, the Revolution and the PREC [Ongoing Revolutionary Process]”, seated at a table, holding a camera, projecting images of pages from books and notebooks, showing transparencies on a projector, quoting newspapers, listening to records or handling small objects like a radio, little boxes or toy cars, is able to intertwine the intimate and the public, the subjective and the factual, and the poetic and the journalistic in an unabashedly personal way, combining her own family’s history with the main historical events occurring during the Salazar dictatorship (1926–1974) and up to the present day. In the playbill she described her objectives:

Knowing how the transmission of these memories is done in Portugal — what are the omissions, revisions, erasures over what is happening, and on the other hand, what other versions and what other narratives are out there circulating or being silenced — these were some of initial questions raised in this project, which assumes its role as historical, ethnographical, affective, and even performance-oriented research. (Craveiro, 2015)

With this performance, TdV confirmed its interest in documentary theatre of a highly autobiographical nature and manifestly political, a theatre which has been described by Carol Martin as “theatre of the real”: “created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc.” (Martin, 2006: 9) A theatre whose functions, again according to Carol Martin, can be summarised in the following six points:

1) To reopen trials in order to critique justice; 2) To create additional historical accounts; 3) To reconstruct an event; 4) To intermingle autobiography with history; 5) To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction; 6) To elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology. (Martin, 2006: 12–13)

With this cycle, the TdV distanced itself from a more rigid language, especially through its scenic lyricism, poetic introspection, and its narrative derivations, in order to seek out a perspective more openly committed to reality, politics, the history of the country and more clearly, to collective memory. This analysis notwithstanding, the playbill from Nunca Serei Bom Rapaz [I Will Never Be A Good Boy], based
Um Museu Vivo de Memórias Pequenas e Esquecidas, by Joana Craveiro
Teatro do Vestido, 2014
(Joana Craveiro) | photo João Tuna
on the prison letters of George Jackson, noted that the TdV:

[...] believes in a theatre that is not divorced from reality, instead facing it without fear and with an indomitable desire to change it. Injustice prevails; war prevails; discrimination prevails. Whilst this state of siege prevails, the theatre, the way we understand it and practice it, will be a weapon meant for construction, accusation, and transformation.

The years of the economic crisis from 2008 onward, in addition to the financial constraints and the ever touted austerity measures, brought with them a need to find bonds of identity which could in some way make life more bearable. Multiplying in number throughout the country were small associations, working groups, isolated flash points of resistance that guaranteed that the social fabric would not unravel. In the theatre, politics returned in force as an acutely relevant theme. The performances coming out of the TdV — confessional and decidedly protest-oriented in nature — became the bare nerve, sensitive to the general bitterness, the indifference of the ratings agencies, the mute response of “the markets”, and the lack of understanding from European authorities. The conversations with the audience which followed each performance of Um Museu Vivo..., incredibly well attended, became veritable public forums which served as the catharsis to much of the nation’s recent history and where examination of the issues in the performance continued, the result
of which was the discovery, at that very moment, of a community with a common heritage and affective territory that could be neither ignored nor disparaged.

The TdV manifesto, published online and written around 2002, addresses the idea of community directly: “the Teatro do Vestido is a company committed to doing theatre in an ethical manner and positions itself in similar fashion with respect to art in general and its relationship with communities.” (TdV, 2017)

And further:

It is our conviction that supporting the development of cultural projects can be a form of sustained and continuous intervention in a heritage that we create to be common, beneficial, and sharable, a cultural heritage, very often unable to be expressed in monetary terms but much more wide-reaching and more precious. In a world that is increasingly de-characterised and given the accelerated speed at which references are lost, perhaps it is only cultural heritage which, in the end, will assess the losses and gains. And will invite reflexion on what is increasingly necessary and urgent. (TdV, 2017)

In this same “Manifesto”, dealing with the question of the company’s relationship with the community, the Teatro do Vestido committed to “working continuously and permanently” with young audiences as well as with underprivileged communities and outside Lisbon, as they found this to be in keeping with cultural decentralisation “and the only way that we see to put this into practice” (TdV, 2017). Although this area of activity has not been its most expressive over the years, the TdV discovered other ways to make progress in this area. From early on, what the company found in the establishment of relationships with “decentralised” structures – what they defended as a “new centrality” – was a way to find a space to discover special communities and to establish artist-in-residence programmes, experimental formats or more exploratory periods for work. Cases of this are:

- CAPA — Centro de Artes Performativas do Algarve [Centre for the Performing Arts in the Algarve] (Faro), where in 2002 they premiered the manifesto-performance (and the company’s third) entitled Lugar Nenhum — Quatro Dias de Uma Jornada Para a Utopia [Nowhere — Four Days on a Journey to Utopia];
- CENTA — Centro de Estudos de Novas Tendências Artísticas [Centre for the Study of New Artistic Trends] in Vila Velha de Ródão, where Cinzento/Grey (2003) was prepared and premiered; and
- Escrita na Paisagem — Festival de Performance e Artes da Terra [Festival of Performance and Arts of the Land] (Évora), directed by José Alberto Ferreira, where Walden (2005) was produced in Colos de Odemira, performed in an abandoned olive oil press following a one-week artist-in-residence. The last of the three examples would become just the first of many collaborations with this unique festival. To be added to the list are the more recent close bonds established with the Teatro Viriato (Viseu) and with Citemor — Festival de Teatro in Montemor-o-Velho as well as various creations in Oporto, not only with collaborations at the TNSJ but also the work done with the residents of the Leal District in Oporto.
The question of a relationship with the community has translated into performances that were the result of ongoing contact with certain communities (as in some performances from the series *Esta É a Minha Cidade e Eu Quero Viver Nela* [This Is My City and I Want to Live in It], Oporto, 2012; Viseu, 2013; Lisbon, 2016; Labor #2, Barreiro, Moita, Vale de Santarém, 2015; and *Viajantes Solitários* [Solitary Travellers], produced after doing research on long distance lorry drivers, and performed in Viseu, 2015). These performances were created by weaving together the local poetics and combining it with the company’s playwriting projects.

But to make it this far, the Teatro do Vestido has had to travel quite a long way. *Lugar Nenhum* (2002) was a play which reconfigured the structure of the company. Premiering first in Faro at CAPA — Centro de Artes Performativas do Algarve (Faro) and later presented at CENTA as a “theatre marathon” divided into four parts, four short plays framed by the theme: the “construction of the world”. There was also a moment of reckoning. Thus, before *Lugar Nenhum*, a realisation was made that “this is quite a sacrifice — to make a living out of this will take quite some time — and this sacrifice means working on other things but always with the higher goal of this community being created here”, Craveiro said in an interview given to the author of this chapter.

That performance was clearly the first for a company now committed to making a go of it in the long term. And strictly speaking, the company...
was born of the writing partnership between Joana Craveiro and Susana Gonçalves, who used to meet once a week in order to write together.

Since its first creation, the TdV has been a company dedicated to the written word. They have nevertheless sought out dramatic literature different from what is seen on most stages in Lisbon. “I always felt that the already existing plays [in Western drama] were very limiting to me”, Joana Craveiro commented in the same interview. “The project which led to the founding of the Teatro do Vestido has as its fundamental and utmost premise the writing of original texts produced in partnership, or not, by Joana Craveiro and Susana Gonçalves”, as noted in the aforementioned “Artistic Manifesto and Project for the Teatro do Vestido” and published in the playbill of Skyscapes — Todas as Direcções [Skyscapes — All the Directions] (2002). Indeed, Tua [Yours] — the inaugural performance from 2001 — and Skyscapes were produced from texts written by the two women (and directed by Joana Craveiro). Yet, in late 2002, the project would once again be reconfigured, with Susana Gonçalves leaving the group.

With Lugar Nenhum and the new configuration at the TdV came a work methodology which underwent refinement. Joana Craveiro’s affinity for the unique playwriting of Carlos J. Pessoa (she was an actress at the Teatro da Garagem from 1998 to 2000) was, she confesses, like “a second school”. To write for actors in particular, to focus on a dramaturgy free from the worries of dramatic economy, and to feel confident in the transfiguring power of the written word left their indelible mark on Craveiro’s writing.

Lugar Nenhum, text and dir. Joana Craveiro
Teatro do Vestido/CENTA, 2002
(Joana Craveiro and Tânia Guerreiro) | photo Artur Samueiro
Being a playwright as well, her contact with the “collaborative performance” group Goat Island in Chicago, was both inspirational and important “pedagogically, ethically and in terms of creation and collaboration” (Craveiro, 2013: 30). In the performance work at this prestigious American company, active from 1987 to 2009, all participants contributed to the conception, research, writing, choreography, documentation, and educational requirements of the artistic projects undertaken. They chose non-conventional spaces to perform their work, characterised by a scenic grammar which combined both choreographed and everyday gestures and mixed historical and contemporary themes through the text and the movement. The research done at Goat Island could also lead to lectures at public events or work published in specialized journals. All of these experiences, in one way or another, would ultimately come to be echoed in the Teatro do Vestido’s scenic and pedagogical practices.

Craveiro’s manner and practice would assume more idiosyncrasies. Actors were asked to fulfil certain tasks which would be translated into a presentation, formal or not: a performance, an installation, a report; several pieces were created from artists-in-residence and the ongoing contact with certain communities; writing was done bearing in mind the specificity of each project and each actor and in collaboration with all parties in a collaborative process of creation. However, “we have a direction, and it is important to state this. We don’t produce collective creations. We collaborate, which I see as being something different” (Craveiro, 2013: 31). The multi-disciplinary nature of the group’s work, for the most part, gravitates around Joana Craveiro’s writing, which amasses and solidifies all the areas. This stage writing, generally speaking, employs nostalgic and poetic imagery but also has a matriarchal, umbilical force to it, a biographical boldness that unmistakably looks at history, the City, ideas, and things of the world.

4.

For Joana Craveiro, the idea that there might exist an empowered community, a community that is activated by the performance and afterwards is disbanded, is quite attractive: “I like the idea of changing people’s lives, for a few hours or days perhaps”, she confesses in the same interview given to the author of this chapter. For its part, Comédias do Minho share the notion of community as being an integral part in its discourse and its daily activity. Within the context of extreme precariousness of those in the theatre and the erosion of the notion of the public sphere and theatre collectives’ diminishing capacity for intervention and with growing ignorance of history, collectives such as Comédias do Minho and Teatro do Vestido, in radically different ways, have built bridges with the City, fighting against the corrosion of memory, of the sense of belonging, and of community. In their theatrical endeavours and in the manner in which they occupy the territory, both geographical and affective, they show themselves to be unrepentant advocates engaged in constructing a civic, public, and democratic edifice for the country. An indispensable endeavour.
NOTES

1 Cf. Ípsilon, Público 3rd April 2009.
2 At the CdM from 2004 to 2014.
4 João Pedro Vaz would later be replaced by Magda Henriques as director of the Comédias do Minho.
5 Personal statements made during an interview with the author of this chapter in February 2017.
6 A Spanish cartoon series which told the story of a historical character, a boy named Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (El Cid Campeador), popular in Portugal in the early 1980s.
7 Published for the first time in the playbill to accompany the performance of Skyscapes (2002) and later updated on the company’s website. [http://teatrodovestido.org/blog/].
8 From an interview conducted by the author of this chapter in February 2017.
10 Joana Craveiro attended the Goat Island Summer School at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where she was a full-time student of the programme (2008); in her second summer school (2009), in the meantime re-baptised as the Abandoned Practices Institute but at the same location, she worked with Mathew Goulish, Lin Hixson and Mark Jeffrey, then re-established as Every House Has a Door.
11 The company structure was organised on the trio of Joana Craveiro, Tânia Guerreiro and Gonçalo Alegria, with a group of regulars collaborating with the group. Following Gonçalo Alegria’s departure in 2013, the company adopted a structure comprising four regular members (Craveiro, Tânia Guerreiro, Rosinda Costa and Cláudia Teixeira, handling production).

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


