

On the topic of theatre in Portugal: 3 examples of scenography

José Capela . junho 2014

(1)

Over the last 30 years, Portuguese architecture has known many leading figures whose recognition also extends internationally. It is said that this phenomenon is associated with the materialization of a specifically Portuguese architectural “identity”. The quality of each architect’s work intensifies the collective phenomenon and the recognition of the collective’s quality creates a framework for the recognition of each individual. I am not going to discuss here how that identity is defined nor the concept of “identity” itself. Instead, I am interested in noting that, at the basis of this phenomenon lies a – Portuguese – cultural and architectural context where *authorship* is aspired to and appreciated. This seems to me like a good starting point to address Portuguese theatre.

In Portugal, the so-called “independent” theatre has an unusual quantitative relevance (beyond the qualitative one). Although there is some theatre for the masses, produced for commercial and recreational purposes and whose popularity is strongly stems from the presence of television actors, most theatre made in Portugal is *authorial theatre*. It is harder to identify a common denominator in the work produced by Portuguese theatre companies than in the work of Portuguese architects. Architecture gravitates around relatively univocal references. The fabric of theatre is far more plural. Contrasts between generations are more plainly visible. Artistic families are more contrasting. The audience is offered theatrical events with very diverse atmospheres. But most of all, there is a common ambition of elevating these events to the status of *authorial works* or, possibly, *art works*.

(2)

I have worked as a scenographer for 10 years, mostly in the company I am currently part of - mala voadora – but here I would like to talk about my favourite examples of Portuguese scenography, with the clear advantage of not having to speak about my own work. Among the very many cases I could take into consideration, I will refer three: the work of Rita Lopes Alves at A Capital, the work of Mónica Calle at Casa Conveniente and Teatro Praga.

Rita Lopes Alves is the scenographer for Artistas Unidos, the company directed by Jorge Silva Melo. During the time this company occupied the former headquarters of *A Capital* newspaper, the elements the building was made of were used as scenographic matter, like in a *readymade*. They could be: just used (a door is a door), fictionalized (the small door of a broom-closet under the stairs becomes a bar cabinet) or transformed (leftover cork agglomerate wall coverings are painted blue to resemble a map).

After a while and with every new staging, chances that the audience will not recognize the space are slim to none. To maintain unpredictability, new spaces were built with the appearance of having been found just like that. The audience accepted as genuine (the building) what was in fact false (the set) at a time when, due to force of habit by Artistas Unidos, the genuine (the building) was taken for false (the set). All of this pertains to sets – something for which the *realist* convention determines that false (the set) should be taken for genuine!

For many years, Mónica Calle had her *Casa Conveniente* in a former club in Cais do Sodré – a bohemian area in Lisbon. Responsible not only for the show's direction but also for its scenography and lighting, Calle has invented a *nocturnal* scenic atmosphere. Oblivious to aggrandizing resources that are dependent on large infra-structural means, Calle has grown accustomed to using light – or the absence of light – as a delicate matter: lighting just narrow sections of the shows in an overall dark atmosphere, a little like the paintings of Rembrandt. In addition to using simple household light bulbs, Calle covers the bulbs in cinefoil, thus limiting the emission of light in both direction and intensity. Calle takes these atmospheres with her when she occupies conventional performance venues, adapting the resources at her disposal as well as this very lyricism.

A few years ago, Teatro Praga defined their work as a cross between philosophy and MTV. More than “sets”, their acting spaces are *images* inside which the performances take place – like in a studio video-clip. And, just like in a video-clip, they have a “graphic” seduction power: shapes clearly outlined against a smooth background (the *white box* is a recurring feature); strong or luminous colours in vibrant contrasts; coexisting elements that keep their autonomy while creating, in relation to each other, the heteroclitic effect of a *collage*; verbal elements (the *letterification* inaugurated by Piscator and Brecht). Nothing in Portuguese theatre was ever this glossy.