

PLAYS

INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE

A photograph of two actors on a stage. On the left, Neil Dowden is dressed in a formal, shimmering blue tuxedo with a white ruffled shirt and a black bow tie. He has a wide, joyful expression. On the right, Bill Grantham is wearing a simple, light-colored tank top and has a large, dark beard and wild, dark hair. He is looking upwards with an intense expression, his right arm raised with fingers spread. The background is dark with some stage lights visible.

**Neil Dowden in London
at three versions of
A Midsummer Night's Dream**

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**Bill Grantham in Dublin
at Roddy Doyle's
Two Pints and The Snapper**

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**Alla Shenderova in Hamburg
at Checkpoint Woodstock**

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PLUS

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REPORTS, PICTURES
& WHAT'S ON IN
LONDON

Editorial



Dear readers,

My apologies. This autumn 2019 issue of *Plays International & Europe* (*PIE*) has arrived on your doorstep later than the three month interval we so assiduously maintain between issues. The autumn issue is (and always will be) the one with the shortest turnaround time since the goal is to include, to the extent possible, reports on both summer festivals and on new autumn openings in theatre capitals. This means a later critic-correspondents' deadline than for any other issue. The temptation is to panic and rush through the editing, but we have resisted this; hopefully you will find the present issue as accurately fact-checked as any of our others.

This Autumn 2019 issue of *PIE* is burning with references to an unasked question: "Why theatre?" Within the kingdom of the Europe Prize and all of the prestigious awards for huge-budget and entrenched and absolutely brilliant theatre, this is not the question to ask. The European Commission has decided that culture is valuable for the well-being of the European Commission and the Europe it envisages. We do not need to ask "Why theatre?" since "they" have already decided on the answer, which is: "Because we say so". This august institution has decided for us that theatre belongs to Culture and that, therefore, it is important to we who are the prosperous Europeans the way bread is important to the starving person. And so we must bend our heads and honour it. In that anonymous way we have so gotten accustomed to that we do not even give a mouse squeak when it happens over and over again, the eminent bodies of knowledge about theatre (preponderantly men, and further old men well set in their ways) have told us whom and what we are to admire without bothering to ask our opinion. We are not really part of the equation, those of us who dedicate their lives to running theatre magazines and those of us who attend theatre performances in the hope of finding an answer to the question that gnaws away like a stomach ulcer deep inside of us. The August Body has decided, and to hell if we are in deep December.

Never are the prizes awarded to inferior productions. That has to be said. Whether it be Regietheater performances blaring out at us through amplifying electronic instruments, text-based theatre sensitively performed on the harpsicord of yesteryear, or "happening" style chaotic events that were already invented and savoured in the long-dismantled '68 era, each of the big name prize-acruing directors, theatres, plays, and performances is worthy of the highest accolades. But, unfortunately, that does not answer the question: Why theatre?

When I interviewed the Almada Festival artistic director Rodrigo Francisco in Portugal this past July (see the article on the festival on page 34), Rodrigo said it is always a joy for him to interact with school-age children in classrooms in his theatre's outreach programs. To prove his point he told a story. He was talking to teenagers in a high-school in a tough neighbourhood, and he asked them: What is a novel? "A novel" a girl said,

standing up to answer him, "is when words are put together with love". To end his story, Rodrigo said he thought that what the girl had said was true. Born to working class parents who owned no books, he had himself found a kind of salvation when he discovered literature and its capacity to reveal "other worlds" – and from that discovery he had moved on into theatre.

When I think about that story, I think I have learned something. I ask if it could be that theatre seeks a fusion between performer and spectator, a curious reverse fusion where our unvoiced, perhaps hitherto unrecognized, private monologues and images – our most intimate and secret thoughts – are given form and density in a public space and are then reflected back on us, giving us ownership of these once elusive thoughts and joining us to one another in the process? And could it be that this magical exchange occurs only in a medium of love? Is that possible? Could theatre have such a skin-shedding meaning and such a human-nature-intrinsic psycho-biological purpose? Could it be about giving the individual, the spectator, the right to own those thoughts and images, to absorb them back into the private self? If this is so, then theatre-goers have little need to be intimidated by the great god, Culture.

What I think is that yes, this is so. And if you read attentively in the magazine you are holding in your hands, you will find that there are many many theatre practitioners around the world at this moment in history who are also answering: "Yes. This is so. This is why we practice our trade".

Dana Rufolo

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The thirty-sixth Festival of Almada from 4 through 18 July was a joy-filled, festive community event – as it was in the beginning back in 1984 and has never ceased to be. It is all about the actor – unchallenged by technology performing on a simple, unadorned stage. Sometimes the actors are very famous – Isabelle Huppert in Robert Wilson's *Mary disse o que disse* (Mary Said What She Said) and Bulle Ogier and Maria de Medeiros in *L'Amor Impossível* (An Impossible Love) – and sometimes they are students (the school of Cascais in *El Sueno* (The Dream Play)). But always it is the actors who carry the show. Performance is about them: the message they carry with their bodies and through their voices.

The Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite (Almada Theatre) and adjoining Escola D. António Da Costa esplanade at Palco Grande are the heart of the festival's performance area. They have become popular meeting places that announce themselves from afar with the savoury odours of home-style meals like rice-stuffed baked red peppers and fried sardines available for just over ten Euros. Further along, the theatre-goer wishing only a titbit can obtain beer, drinks, coffee, and local pastries. At the entrance, one is greeted with a smile and a paper sheet, *folha informativa*, a daily newsletter that tells about the events of the evening, critiques in magazines and newspapers, and interviews with theatre specialists. An outdoor temporary bandstand hosts various ethnic musical groups (Portuguese *Fado*, Turkish, Jewish *Klezmer*, Guinean...). A cost-free exhibit of the life and theatrical objects associated with this year's honoured man of the theatre, director Carlos Avilez titled *Gabinete de memórias e curiosidades com vista para o palco* stretched the length of the school's ground floor entrance space and led to the inner courtyard of the school where an enormous plastic-covered steeply raked set of bleachers looked onto an uncovered, rectangular, and relatively small stage space adorned with a few spotlights where the more popular performances took place.

Almada – an independent Portuguese city and not, as would be the case in Paris or London, a suburb – is across the Tago (Tagus) river from Lisbon; the Festival of Almada's audience, importantly, is drawn from Almada, Lisbon, and the surrounding regions of Portugal like Cascais – as opposed to festivals such as Edinburgh's which serves an international audience.

DR

Dana Rufolo in Portugal at the Festival of Almada

Almada residents view the festival as their own. They identify intensely with their community, their city. I talked with countless festival assistants who all repeated what a teenaged skateboarder and a middle aged taxi driver proudly told me: despite speaking flawless English which one would have thought was learned to facilitate travel, they had been born in and virtually never set foot outside of Almada. Clearly, then, the artistic director Rodrigo Francisco, himself Almada-born, chooses the festival's repertoire with an eye to what will please and inform the local population.

Under the direction of Ricardo Albéo, the Lisbon theatre companies Centro Cultural de Belém and the Teatro Nacional São João co-produced *A Boda*, Bertolt Brecht's farcical 1919 play *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, titled *The Respectable Wedding* in English. It was the Festival de Almada's opening premiere on 4 July taking place outdoors in the school yard that is contiguous to the theatre building. Almada is in the subtropics, and the air was dry, the sky pitch dark (as there is no problem of parasitic night lighting), and the night air cool by the opening time of ten in the evening.

O Boda had the audience in stitches. Farces are more likely to be chosen by audiences as favourites, and this interpretation held no holds barred in its clever use of humorous elements. Although directors recently have tended to start *The Respectable Wedding* with a wedding march, Brecht's play is scripted to begin in the middle of the wedding dinner, and Ricardo Albéo the

director, faithful to the script, had the play open with eight of the nine characters seated around a long rectangular table enjoying their soup. The sounds of soup spoons knocking against bowls and the murmur of conversation goes on for several minutes before the play opens. Daringly the bride and the groom are seated the farthest downstage but with their backs to the audience.

The first farcical element we notice is the extreme variety of characters' heights. The bride is enormously tall, taller than the groom, and we see at the far end of the table stage left a very short person who is obviously a grown-up but whose head barely appears above the table's laden surface. He plays the character of the boy, and is in fact a midget actor who additionally but temporarily is in a wheelchair.

The ninth character, the mother who has prepared the food even though the setting is her daughter's own residence, comes in with a dish of cod fish, and this starts a conversation initiated by her husband about a relation choking on a fish bone. The opening sets the tone for the rest of the play, as the story is not particularly apt at a wedding feast intended to celebrate a happy future. Additionally, the story recounted brings no cohesion among the guests. Other family members make many unsuccessful attempts to intervene and divert the father, but he persists throughout the play in recounting nostalgic and anxiety-creating stories. From the play's opening onwards, then, there is a clear distinction between subjects of conversation which tend to divide the characters

and their collective nonverbal sounds of laughter, approval, or disapproval. There are even periods of silence which were carefully timed to last just under the length of time that would make them appear to be the consequence of forgotten lines.

Although I could not understand the Portuguese, I know that the script advances by progressively inverting the romantic connotations of weddings; this reversal was played to the hilt with a bellowing, loud-mouthed, and far from fragile bride getting ever more irritated as the conversation degenerated into bawdry with each increasingly frequent opening of a wine bottle. A key absurdist action in Brecht's script is that the homemade furniture breaks into pieces. Here, the destruction begins subtly with a table leg that comes off and which the carpenter, who is the groom himself, shoves back into place. Then, the two-seater fauteuil collapses, followed by legs falling off of numerous chairs and a dangerous splinter ripping a guest's trouser leg. The cabinet's homemade lock fails to function. Throughout, the groom is indifferent about the collapse and the injuries to his guests, including the bride's sister who ends up limping.

The superb actors never accelerate the action. They maintain a slow and restrained rhythm as conversation and stage environment degenerate despite the claim in the programme that Brecht was inspired to write the play after seeing Karl Valentin. Especially the bride, pregnant by several months and therefore also



The Almada esplanade July 2019. Photo: David Best.

The Almada Theatre at night. Photo: David Best.



outside norm (additionally, by modern standards, behaving unwisely because she swills wine constantly), gives a Portuguese interpretation to the drama when she retires to a rear stage right corner of the room and sadly looks upon the havoc with the hopelessness and enervation associated with *Saudade*. There is a relatively poor, peasant-like family without much culture, but her overarching withdrawal into a disheartened recognition of inevitability suggests shadows of Portuguese political and cultural history.

One thing that is usually forgotten is that Brecht was born in the prosperous late nineteenth century where the bourgeoisie and its codified behaviour flourished, and he came to young adulthood just after the first world war when Germany was desperately scrambling to return to its post-world war bourgeoisie respectability, a time when reparations were already hanging heavily on the Germanic people making all semblance of bourgeois life virtually impossible to maintain. The play's metaphor of collapse has social and political reverberations which are today, in this production, seen to be more a reflection on the foppiness of the ritual of marriage.

Curiously, the bride and groom establish complicity after the guests leave. Together they laugh raucously about what has transpired. But all is not well still, for the groom collapses under the bride's weight when attempting to carry her across the threshold – in this case into the bedroom. Drunk and uncoordinated, they are physically incapable of intertwining arms – a ritual indicating bonding – when downing a final glass of spirits. Brecht instructed that we hear the home-made bed also break apart off-stage, but in this production the cracking sound was short and low, unconvincing. That might just have been a one-off technical problem, but anyhow we are left with the impression of marriage as a raw prelude to rough reality, utterly stripped of heart-plucking musical strains, cosmetics, and perfume.

One of the highlights of the Almada Festival, this thirty-sixth edition and previous ones, is the audience's right to vote for their favourite play of the festival. Last year, the audience chose *Dr. Nest*, a German satirical show by Familie Flöz of Berlin; as is the custom the company was invited back again this year to present the same show. The press officer Miguel Martins predicted that the burlesque show *Franito* from the Théâtre de Nîmes in France would most likely be voted the audience's favourite this year. It turned out that he guessed correctly.

In *Franito*, three people take possession of the outdoor stage: the tall and unconventional (since he speaks some words, in Spanish) mime Patrice Thibaud who plays the mother, the potbellied and short adult Spanish flamenco dancer Fran Espinosa who is physically ideally appropriate in this burlesque piece as the child son, and the guitarist (and flautist) Cédric Diot who remains quiet in shadow stage right and accompanies the action when required. They are a vibrant team. The narrative they tell of a devoted mom and a precious, loving son who is, like all children of his young age, glued to his mom's apron strings is hilarious but with an underlying tragic impulse that dominates in the final scene where the child can clack, stamp, and twirl with all his might but cannot retrieve his mom from the kingdom of death to which her arrested body belongs.

The comic business between these two performers was outstandingly imaginative. With the minimum of stage props – most importantly a kitchen table, a lit doorway frame, and a broom – the audience was plunged into a world of endearing intimacy. Mother Thibaud gives her son a (dry) bath; she sniffs, pats, and pokes him with the obsessive intensity of a mother who thinks only of getting her child clean as a whistle. For me, the business degenerated into vulgarity when she repeated, seemingly ad infinitum, her gesture of flipping earwax off of a spoon, but generally the kisses to the crown of the head, the

scrupulous hair trimming, and the bear hug embraces awakened everyone's memory of the solicitude of a fusal mother and child pair. Espinosa's body was an integral part, an extension, of Thibaud's. Equally hilarious and breath-taking was when each entertained the other: mother by pretending to be various animals he begged to see her enact into life, and he by dancing flamenco with verve and a palpable desire to please.

Lots of comic business with the broom reached an apotheosis when Mother Thibaud appeared to play it like a guitar and flute. Her hands moved up and down the broom stick while Diot precisely coordinated the musical sounds so perfectly that one was convinced the broomstick was those very instruments.

Thibaud has been in the comic circuit, performing often at the Montreux Festival du Rire, but never before has he created a team which fused so well together. The audience wept with laughter.

The French novel *L'Amour Impossible* by Christine Angot published by Flammarion in 2015 won the Prix Décembre in 2015 and was turned into a film directed by Catherine Corsini that premiered at the 2018 Festival du Film Francophone d'Angoulême; it uses an autobiographical style that may or may not be authentic (Angot is associated with intertextuality) and is a form of what I may be the first to call "Revenge Literature" that uses writing as a powerful weapon. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Angot describes her work as "performative".

The novel *Un Amour Impossible* points a finger at Pierre Angot, a follower of Friedrich Nietzsche. He is the absent father of the narrator Christine who relegated Rachel, Christine's mother, to the role of single mother and who sodomized Christine on the pretext of becoming involved in her life finally when she was a teenager and after he had been obliged to acknowledge her as his natural daughter,



The cast in *A Boda*. Photo: David Best.



The exterior of the theatre in Cascais, Portugal. Photo: David Best.

permitting her to carry his family name (Angot) instead of her mother's (Schwartz). The intellectual argument of the novel coincides with the mediatisation of anti-Semitism in France and again may be either factual or fictional: the father abused his daughter for the same reason that he refused to wed her mother; it is asserted that he was motivated by a guilt-free prejudice against those economically inferior to him and above all motivated by anti-Jewish racism.

Due to the success of this novel, the most recent of over twenty novels and several dramas, Christine Angot's revenge on the man her father who is portrayed as amoral – and especially on the name 'Angot' – is absolute, but it is a complex victory. It is not merely a feminist work, although critics have chosen to interpret it as such.

At the Festival de Almada, the play was presented by the Centre dramatique national de Besançon, France. It is the same production that opened at the Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe in February, 2017. The dialogue, identical to the novel's, was in French. However, the play was advertised under its Portuguese title, *Um amor impossível*. I was told that Portuguese people identify most naturally with France and its culture, and French was formerly the first foreign language they were taught, so a drama in French was not problematic for the audience.

The director Célie Pauthe used Christine Angot's stage adaptation of her own novel. It is a series of a few scenes transposed word for word to the stage environment and begins with the death of the mother Rachel's lover and Christine's father. Both roles were played by extremely well known French actresses – the mother is Rachel by Bulle Ogier who worked

extensively with Marguerite Duras in her youth and the daughter is Christine by Maria de Medeiros, a Portuguese actress who sees herself as "a citizen of Europe" best known for her role in the film *Pulp Fiction*. Christine tells her mother that despite having anticipated her natural father's death as a relief she is very sad, and Rachel replies that she feels nothing at all. Christine shouts that once again her mother has left her "completely alone", indicating that there is some troubled element to the relationship that has yet to be exposed.

The subsequent scenes re-stage the relationship between these two women when the father has reinserted himself into Christine's life, offering to share his wealth and educated sophistication – signs of the upper-class superiority that had facilitated his belief that it was natural to reject indigenous Christine when they were lovers. Instead of opening up to Christine the same world of culture he had given his own children by a more bourgeoisie marriage commensurate with his social status, he took advantage of and sodomized Christine.

Angot hasn't a dramatist's sense of language, yet. This is evident in the overly descriptive dialogue in her *Diner en ville*, produced in Paris at the Théâtre national de la Colline in 2017 where the dialogue in the novel often seems unnatural when spoken on stage by characters. A key scene in *L'amour impossible* was difficult to stage because of this problem, especially because the play requires an intimate space to give us proximity and elicit empathy (the Almada Theatre stage is long and broad). It is the scene where Christine returns from a week alone with her father. Pauthé strained to find the most credible way of staging Rachel blithely

ignoring the body language of her depressed, crushed daughter. To contrast the before-and-after-Christine, Pauthé had de Medeiros bounce up and down from bed or canapé and floor with surprising childish agility in a just prior scene; now she lowers herself to sit down on the same canapé gingerly like an old woman, evidently in pain. The solution found to make it plausible that the mother does not notice anything and urges her daughter to visit the father again – perhaps for a shorter period next time since Christine admits to her father having gotten irrationally angry with her during the visit – is to have Ogier stare directly forward, responding to her daughter but looking at the audience. It is not totally convincing.

The production counts on a large enough percentage of the audience being familiar with Angot's novel and knowing what to expect, for this adaptation of *An Impossible Love* jumps over years. Hence, the final scenes on stage where Christine has divorced and is raising her own daughter alone and Rachel is a necessary babysitter but has not yet been forgiven by Christine requires foreknowledge to be understood. For example, why there is a child, albeit only as an off-stage presence, is never explained in the course of the play.

We witness Christine's reproach of her mother gradually turn to an understanding of why she abandoned her daughter so completely: Rachel considered herself intellectually inferior to Pierre and was rejected by her own father. The apotheosis is achieved when the intellectual explanation for the abandonment I cited above is found to make sense to both women: the father Angot humiliated his daughter and rejected his



O Sonho curtain call with Carlos Avilez in white suit centre and Agnes 1 and 2 in white gowns on either side of him. Photo: David Best.

girlfriend Rachel as an inferior marriage partner because of the anti-Semitism prevalent in his class and family. This explanation accepted, the mother-daughter pair will have absorbed the trauma – indicating a happier future beyond the audience applause and the actors' bows.

August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, originally staged in 1907, is a masterpiece that is seldom produced professionally these days, but it was on the program of the Almada Festival as a student production under the direction of Carlos Avilez, the man of the theatre honoured in this year's festival, at the Experimental Theater of Cascais which he founded in 1965. A luxury resort town on the Atlantic sea thirty kilometres outside of Lisbon, Cascais is hardly where I would have expected to find one of Portugal's actor training academies, but in fact Avilez runs the resident Professional Theater School of Cascais there, and his first and second years students produced *La Sueno* as an end-of-term exercise.

Strindberg characterized his *A Dream Play* as a flowing on-stage revelation of the unpredictability of the dream: "The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, dissolve and merge". The dreamlike fluidity of the play was well captured in this production, the hundred and eighty actors having acquired the toe-gripping technique to effortlessly climb and descend the classical step-and-elevation rhythmic stage units associated with Adolphe Appia. Evident also was their extensive vocal projection techniques, meaning that the words sailed effortlessly into the audience. But this is not a school that concentrates on physical theatre, and while the physical movements were always regal and gracious they lacked the plasticity one would expect from young actors.

Above all, the direction and actors were in service of the text which is a bold and beautiful surrealist drama. It is a wonder why it is done so rarely; Katie Mitchell tackled it at the National Theatre as long ago as 2005. Religious music and

drum beats enhanced the sensuality of the scenes. The enormous cast meant that scenes repeated themselves in different guises seemingly endlessly, but the rhythms were so carefully orchestrated that the repetitions only added to the growing meaning that life is unendurable. "Poor humanity" Agnes repeats pitiingly. The role of Agnes, the daughter of the god Indra, was played by two young actresses with a sweetness and gentleness that suggested the character's otherworldly origins. Indra himself was magnificently costumed in gold cloth and was seated on a throne. The cast handled totemic objects such as fish nets, double-barred crosses, and oriental parasols on long poles not as utilitarian objects but as decorative items incorporated into ritual. It has been a long time since I have seen rituals evoked on stage, and the effect was startlingly touching. That the two daughters of Indra needed finally to flee the suffering earth so as not to suffocate and perish has particular poignancy in these present times of political and environmental uncertainty.

There is a connection between Strindberg's drama and Primo Levi's writings about the Holocaust; Levi describes his stunned arrival in the Auschwitz concentration camp as an Italian Jew using the following words: "Everything was as silent as an aquarium or as certain dream sequences". The repetitive action that constituted the camp world Levi describes in *Se isto é un homem* (*If this is a Man* is the English title and in America it is published as *Survival in Auschwitz*) is the most insane nightmare possible. Only one never woke up from it. Unlike in Strindberg's play, there is no escape – no rituals to calm mankind or godly understanding to pity humans. Levi was born one hundred years ago, and this production by the Companhia de Teatro de Almada is not alone in paying homage to this man's lucid descriptions of human depravity that represents Fascist racism. For instance, again as homage to the great author, I recently saw in Konstanz,

Germany an Italian production of an Italian production of *Il Versificatore* (*The Versifier*) that perceptively portrays the poet turning into a word-producing robot – this written in 1933, before the invention of the computer.

Alone before us, the brilliant actor Cláudio da Silva flawlessly recited from Levi's book for over an hour. He describes how Levi, the narrator, tells of surviving Auschwitz because he was a chemist and therefore more useful to the Nazis alive than dead. It was a tour de force. Virtually motionless with backlighting making his figure, distinguished by long arms and exceptionally large hands, da Silva conveyed the impression of being a cut-out paper doll, a transcendent representative of humankind. He calmly delivered those words of acid in Portuguese with superb articulation and no self-pity or sorrow, as they were written. The play was performed in an intimate small space called the Sala Experimental of the Almada theatre.

Street theatre is a traditional component of the Festival de Almada, and this year there were two offerings, both free and at a public downtown square. I was visiting when the Spanish Vero Cendoya Dance Company performed *A Partida*, a dance drama choreographed by Cendoya about commercial football. There were two teams on the playing field: five women in red uniforms and five men in white. The umpire was dressed in black. At one point, supernumeraries flooded the square, posing as fans; they were amateurs who had been recruited locally for this one street performance. The ball was passed, sides were challenged, scores were won, physical contact between teams occurred, and the umpire – whose prancing form of dance evoked evil and sorcery – intervened. Every gesture in their danced narrative was executed with remarkably unorthodox body movements. Especially the women danced against their body shape, exhibiting gestures of strength and confidence such as flexing their muscles while throwing



A scene from the street theatre performance *A partida*. Photo: David Best.

back their chests. The overriding objective was to ridicule football as a commercial sports event, but the impression left was of an indefatigable company of dancers dedicated to originality.

The Festival of Almada offered variety and professionalism of the highest order, and I regretted departing before having seen the other street theatre performance. I regretted,

also, not seeing the few pieces that were completely or partially in the English language. This festival naturally has strong ties to the Latin countries or even across the waters to South America. However, *Provisional Figures* devised by Renzo Barsotti and directed by Marco Martins was developed and presented by the British company Arena Ensemble. *Guerra e terebintina*

(*War and Turpentine*) about post traumatic shock by Belgian's Needcompany used English as one of its principle languages. Although Robert Wilson's *Mary disse o que disse* was presented in French, the play has American roots.

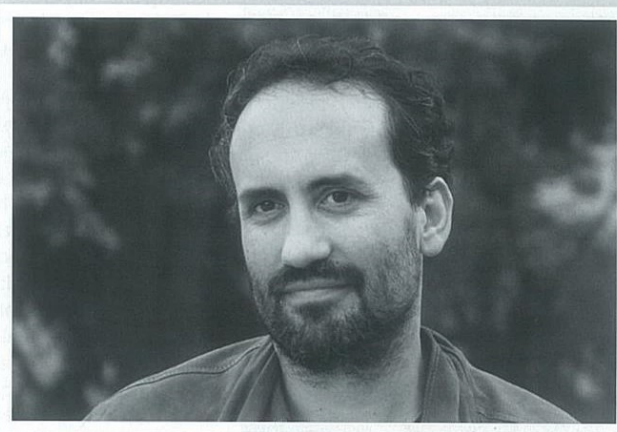
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Rodrigo Francisco, artistic director of the Festival of Almada

Interview by Dana Rufolo

Rodrigo Francisco, Artistic Director of the Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite of Almada (Almada Theatre), is also the artistic director of the Almada Festival. Along with the permanent theatre company, the Companhia de Teatro de Almada – which includes actors Teresa Gafeira, Miguel Martins, João Farraia, and Pedro Walter – he develops the annual festival program by researching and visiting companies, some of which are subsequently invited to Almada if he believes that their work will be popular and meaningful to the festival's mainly Portuguese audience.

As well, he invites international theatre personalities to the festival to run workshops that explore theatre history, theory, and practice. The German director Peter Stein, whose name is closely linked to the Berlin Schaubühne as he was its artistic director from 1970 until 1985, visited in 2015 to lecture young theatre people on "word and scene", and in 2017 the Norwegian actress and director Juni Dahr led an investigation into theatre as a "place of truth", while developing a performance approach to two scenes in Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler. The transcripts of both of these workshops are published in bilingual editions by the festival committee, extending



Rodrigo Francisco. Photo: David Best.

their outreach even further. This desire to facilitate access to the world of theatre in all its forms – as entertainment, buffoonery, passion, tragedy, social consciousness, theory, and practice – characterizes Francisco's dedication to dramatic art and his conviction that the theatrical experience kindles our confidence in our human right to question the necessity and function of our social habits.

What is the history of the Almada theatre and the Almada Festival? Who are you?

We are a theatre company. During the year we run the municipal theatre (the Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite del Almada); we work on our own creations, we welcome other theatre companies to come, and in July we

organize this festival. I think what makes this festival different from many others is that it is organized by a theatre company – by artists who receive other artists. We put them in communication with our audience. The festival audience are the same people who come to our shows during the year.

But you didn't found it thirty six years ago – you were a kid then. So when did you come into the scene?

I came into the scene in 1997. I had no idea about theatre. I'd never been to a theatre show. I was born in Almada. I knew that this festival was going on, and I went to the Almada Theatre to ask for a job, a summer job. I was sixteen. And then I stayed, forever. I worked as a technician's helper. I grew up with this festival, with the opening up of this new theatre; it was the life dream of Joaquim Benite. He invited me to be his assistant. I was his directing assistant from 2006 until he passed away in 2012. I learned everything there.

Who are you trying to attract to your Almada theatre festival?

Mostly people from Almada. It was a working class city when our company was established here in 1978. You had the shipbuilding industries down near the river. Nowadays it has changed, but we are not like Lisbon. We are surrounded by social neighbourhoods with people who came for the ex-colonies. During the year, the team from the theatre, we go to the high schools and to the neighbourhood associations saying "Why don't you come to the theatre; it's not only for rich, old, and cultured people; it's for you". That's our most important intention – to make people come. It's a festival that's inserted into the community. We sell more than five hundred subscriptions to the festival, so that for seventy-five euros they can see all the shows... which is next to nothing. But we know we are in Almada. We know we could sell these subscriptions more expensively, but then people from Almada wouldn't be able to pay.

So why did you invite somebody international, Plays International & Europe for example? When I write an article about the festival, it will go around the world. Are you thinking of becoming more international?

Well, when I think of internationalization, I think: bring the world to Almada. Not to export, not to have our productions go to all the same festivals that we know already. We want to invite the artists, the intellectuals, and the journalists. For us it's that we want to get to know other people; it is not a question of being known abroad

So you're not looking to have Americans travelling here, not necessarily?

I've noticed that they've started coming. French particularly, and they are very welcomed. But the festival is made for the people.

And that's why you have the public prize where the audience chooses the play it likes the best?

Yes, it was the idea of the father of the festival, Joaquim Benite. I think it is a very nice homage to democracy. You won't believe that when this company was founded, we were still living under fascism.

António de Oliveira Salazar was still in power?

Yes, this company was founded in a neighbourhood in Lisbon in 1971, and it existed four years under the dictatorship. They put on very courageous shows against the situation. The fact that people can choose on the last festival night which play they want to see again in the following year is engaging the people in the festival itself. About seventy per cent of the audience are from Almada.

How do you get your funding?

From the Portuguese government – in Lisbon (we are a small country and we don't have regions in Portugal). And from the municipality. And we have one sponsor, a foundation for educational projects (the Share Foundation). We organize with them the "Meaning of the Masters" series, this is the sixth edition- we will have Hajo Schüler from the German company Familie Flöz - they presented *Dr Nest*. In the past we've had Peter Stein. This year's masterclass with Hajo is a mask-making session.

Has the community changed since you began your theatre projects here?

We are not working class people anymore, because the industries are not here. Nowadays it is a city of people who mostly work in Lisbon in the services, not in industry. I belong to the generation of the working class. My father was a tailor. What happened was that after the revolution in

1974, it was possible for my generation – I was born in 1981 – to go to university. I was one of the first in my family who actually could go to the university, because before people couldn't afford it. You had to pay, and only the wealthy people could afford university. I found theatre and literature, there weren't any books in my house, and I found a kind of salvation in literature. I had other worlds to live in.

I wrote a play on that, *Bookends* (the idea comes from English poet Tony Harrison's *Book Ends*). I write about the pain... in my play, a father and a son are like bookends; the more books the son reads, the more they move apart.

How has the festival changed the people attending? Have they become more philosophical or cultured?

No, not that, but they are more open to tolerating difference. In the beginning the festival was not in this space (ie: the Almada Theatre and the school Escola D. António Da Costa with its outdoor spaces right next to the theatre). It was centred on the streets. There were performances in the streets to show people what theatre was. Many of the people did not know what theatre was. Now we have the open air theatre that has six hundred seats, but in the beginning it was in the old town of Almada for one hundred people. And the objective of the company from the beginning was to gain this new audience that was coming to see what these crazy men and women were doing in the summer nights of July. In that way we were building an audience for the theatre work that we do during the year. For me, loving theatre is loving the audience. They are the most important people.

Do you consider yourselves to be practicing Political Theatre?

We had forty-four years of dictatorship during the last century, and it makes a difference in the way we the Portuguese are. We are very obedient. But I wouldn't apply a Political Theatre label to our company. I believe every show is political, because it challenges and interferes with the *polis*, with the people, the city. It gives the opportunity to see the world in other ways. Still, we put on more plays of Brecht and Shakespeare than any other authors. We are a theatre of ideas; we are quite a text-based company.

But when I say "We don't do Political Theatre, we do theatre", I know of course theatre can play a role in keeping memory and starting debate, inviting reflection. In Portugal, we have more than one hundred theatres subsidized by the state. That is one of the things still lasting since the revolution of 1974. At that time theatre played an important role; many of the people in the resistance were associated with theatre groups, and they tried to establish a national theatre that was destroyed by the liberals in the 1980s.

This interview was conducted in English.

