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TRAGIC HEROINES
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ANTÓNIO PEDRO'S *ANTIGONE* ON STAGE¹

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Throughout the twentieth century Sophocles' *Antigone* was an inspiration to six Portuguese playwrights albeit born at different times and with different personalities². Curiously, four of these plays were written between the 1930s and the 1950s by men³ during troubled periods in Portuguese politics, and the last two by women⁴ in the 1990s. This discrepancy of time as well as the distinction between male and female productions seems somehow reflected in the message prevalent in each of the plays⁵. Men underline political issues by voicing the contemporary political context, as well by the natural connection between man and power (a main element in ancient Greek tragedy too); women on the other hand more emotional by nature (in the same way as in the Classical plays) put the emphasis in

¹ I would like to thank Mr. Júlio Gago, the present director of TEP, for all the information he kindly gave me, as well as for the images that he provided; I would like to thank also Prof. Carlos Morais for his enlightenments about António Pedro's *Antigone* new production in 2003.

² Cf. Silva, M. F. 2001: 141-160.

³ António Sérgio, *Antígona* (1930); Júlio Dantas, *Antígona* (1946); João de Castro Osório, *Antígona* (1954); António Pedro, *Antígona* (1954).

⁴ Hélia Correia, *Perdição. Exercício sobre Antígona* (1991); Eduarda Dionísio, *Antes que a Noite Venha* (1992).

⁵ João de Castro Osório's *Antigone*, a play not very close to the Sophoclean paradigm, is "a recreation of the myth under a Christian perspective" (Morais, C. 2001a: 9).

the conflict between male and female. So in a period when democracy has already been established in Portugal, issues addressing the family and the role of Antigone as a woman take the priority.

Six years ago, in 2003, the Teatro Experimental do Porto (TEP) included in the commemorations of its 50th anniversary a production of António Pedro's *Antigone*, as a mean of paying homage to the “the most emblematic personality of TEP's history and of the Portuguese theatre of the twentieth century”⁶, as referred to by its current director. Their aim was at the same time to show that *Antigone's* message is a contemporary one, even though the impact of its message had been even greater in Portugal in the 1950s whilst under the dictatorial regime during which António Pedro wrote and produced his *Antigone*. In any case the subject of fight for freedom is a message unfortunately still adequate in today's international context.

António Pedro, who would be one hundred years old in 2009, was just a year younger than Karolos Koun, and influenced modern Portuguese theatre in a significant way (like Koun did in Greece). He wrote his own version of *Antigone* which was performed by TEP, the company that was under his artistic direction since 1953. The play was performed in a close by theatre, the Teatro de S. João in Oporto, in front of an audience “made up of the finest citizens that Oporto had at that time”, according to the press (cf. Diário de Notícias from 19. 02. 1954).

⁶ Gago, J. 2003: VIII.

Writing a play to be performed by non professional actors from TEP⁷ meant that he had to pay special attention to the cast, choosing for the main roles actors that would later become a reference in the history of Portuguese stage – like Dalila Rocha (as Antigone) and João Guedes (as Creonte) who acted in the first production of *Antigone*. In 1956 however Dalila Rocha was replaced by another actress, Inês Palma, as she both looked and was younger. Age was an important factor when choosing the actor for the main character. But António Pedro who recognized Dalila Rocha's talent, kept her in the play by changing her role to that of servant Artemísia. He made this character more prominent than the one in the first version by recreating her role in a scene filled with deep emotion (cf. third act) – the servant's hands are shown tinged with the blood of prince Hemon whom she loved dearly.

Both changes clearly illustrate how much attention the artistic director of the TEP put into renovation when staging the play. With António Pedro's productions the role of the stage manager becomes decisive, in line with a growing perception in Europe of the relevance of this role since the beginning of the 20th century⁸.

António Pedro's "aesthetical revolution" (as told by the press of his time and more recently during the commemorations of TEP's 50th anniversary) inscribes his theatre in a modern staging characterized by the unity of all the elements associated to a production: from the

⁷ TEP became a professional company only since 1957.

⁸ Cf. Fischer-Lichte, E. 2008: 27 sqq.

actor's roles to the text, the props, the set design, etc. Before him, performances used to increase the status of some stars. António Pedro however wants his actors to realize that they belong to a team, working together towards the same goals. He calls their attention for the words that have to be emphasized, for the pauses that need to be made, for the right use of their voices, for the need of movement on stage. All these are components that must be developed by the stage manager's work, according to his own conception of theatre.

The attention to costumes is another characteristic of his productions. In a period dominated by political censure, he succeeded in importing Classical Greek atmosphere to the modern Portuguese world, suggesting that many questions put in the past still remain valid. Such is the case of Antigone's protest against tyranny, a symbol of his own opposition to the dictatorial regime enforced in Portugal since 1926 and of the underlying yearning of the Portuguese nation for freedom.

Scenography also underlines the same purposes, since António Pedro checks something that can suggest the global concept of a conventional setting, avoiding too many details in order to give force to the text (cf. picture 1: two ionic columns stand out in the stage)⁹.

⁹ Sound and light are also considered among António Pedro's innovations: if before the 1950s sounds were usually the result of traditional processes from the stage wings (cf. the sound of the wind, or of the rain), António Pedro profits from innovative studies about sound and gathers around him some of the best sound technicians in Portugal, like Carlos Fraga, from the National Radio (Emissora Nacional Portuguesa).

Light, on the other hand, served by projectors, was a way to

António Pedro tried hard to attract the enthusiasm of the Portuguese audience towards classical tragedy plays. In his prologue he gives the audience many indications about the conventions he is using: the traditional royal blood of the characters taken from classical tragedy; the introduction of a new character (Artemísia) because “it is decorative and it fits well in a bourgeois comedy”, so that a modern audience can understand the real aims of the production and establish an effective connection with it. His is a text to be performed for a specific society, underlining specific messages adjusted to modern times while metaphorically raising questions put by contemporary life.

This prologue is original and very expressive suggesting that António Pedro knew well the European theatre of his time¹⁰. It is surprising to see a stage manager able to establish a functional dialogue with an electrician and a chief engineer, three technical supporters, and at the same time also with some characters of the play itself, like the old men of the Chorus, or the servant Artemísia. The latter being a figure unfamiliar to those who knew the Sophoclean archetype, a kind of “projection of the spectator”¹¹ who adds an interesting human touch to

give unity to the performance, and not only a mean of general illumination, underlining for example the sequence of day and night. “Ordering the sky to be lit up is something amazing! More, give it more light. We are in Greece, where the sky has no clouds”, the stage manager says expressively to the electrician in the prologue.

¹⁰ About Pirandello’s influence over António Pedro, cf. Morais, C. 2001b: 94-96.

¹¹ Rodrigues, U. T. (1961), *Noites de Teatro*. Lisboa.

the action. In António Pedro's production, unlike in a classic Greek tragedy, technical indications about the performance are mixed with the account of the intrigue's background and its characters thus connecting reality and illusion in an involving way. In the prologue, one of the three old men from the Chorus summarizes the message of the play: this is a "tragedy of freedom". This announcement is very significant in the Portuguese context of that time, susceptible of political censure, censorship, but well shielded by the general remission of the play to Sophoclean tragedy.

"Ismene and Antigone represent two different ways of enduring tyranny", says the stage manager in the prologue. The decision to bury Polinices signals some kind of madness, according to Ismene, because it disrespects Creon's edict; for Antigone on the contrary it is a challenge based on legitimacy.

- "What can we do against men's law, against those who have the strength we are deprived of"? - Ismene asks Antigone, depicting her fragility, her impotence against male and institutional power; fear made her accommodated to it in the same way that the Portuguese society was to Salazar's authoritarian regime for a long part of the twentieth century.

Antigone's attitude however proves that it is possible to resist to tyrannical male power, even if the cost of freedom is her own life. Her determination is particularly important in a country dominated by a dictatorship for almost five decades, in a society where the woman's role is still irrelevant – and it expresses

the urgency of fighting for freedom. Antigone doesn't give up because, as the stage manager asserted in the prologue, "men fight for what they love".

Freedom is a key word in António Pedro's *Antigone* not only for the message it conveys but also for the innovation of its aesthetical, structural and functional aspects without losing sight of the Sophoclean paradigm, as C. Morais observes¹².

Antigone performance by TEP's actors received a huge applause from the audience and the press of that time, a success well corroborated by the successive performances in other Portuguese towns (e. g. Braga, Coimbra, Lisbon).

Norberto Barroca, TEP's current artistic director, staged António Pedro's *Antigone* in 2003 at the Auditório Municipal de Vila Nova de Gaia. He tried to convey to a modern audience the essence of the message of his antecessor's adaptation and in order to achieve that, he used the original text as well as Augusto Gomes' models, created for the second performance of António Pedro's *Antigone* in 1956. "Everything else is modern"¹³, from scenography to light, though still preserving the general classical atmosphere in his homage to António Pedro (cf. picture 2). Norberto Barroca had naturally more technical means at his disposal, such as the possibility of using the sub-stage from where he appears, dressed in a modern suit, assuming the role of the stage manager that he plays in this performance¹⁴.

¹² 2001a: 11 and 2001b: 93-94.

¹³ Gago, J. 2003: VIII.

¹⁴ Norberto Barroca also plays Creon's role in this performance.

It was a well achieved production on the whole, deserving Susana Sá's performance as Antigone a special mention (cf. picture 3), “for the adequate use of her voice, for her suitable gesture, for the dramatic intensity that she got with her interventions”¹⁵; also good was the Chorus' performance, “for the clarity of its elocutions, for the way it moved on stage and its use of silences”¹⁶.

Based on an everlasting play from the fifth century B.C. the performances of António Pedro's *Antigone* illustrate how “Greece may be no more than a scenic pretext. The plot really takes place on an intimate stage i.e. in each person's imagination”¹⁷, gaining real time and surpassing physical space, inviting a renovated audience to renovated ways of making theatre.



Picture 1 - Anonymous photo from the play *Antigone* written by António Pedro and staged by TEP in 1954.

¹⁵ Moraes, C. 2004: 42.

¹⁶ Moraes, C. 2004: 42.

¹⁷ António Pedro in a note before beginning his play.



Picture 2 - Photo taken by José Martins from the play *Antigone* written by António Pedro and staged in 2003 under the direction of Norberto Barroca.



Picture 3 - Photo taken in 2003 by José Martins from the play *Antigone* written by António Pedro and staged under the artistic direction of Norberto Barroca. Susana Sá plays Antigone and Norberto Barroca plays Creon.

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