

RUI PINA COELHO

«TRAGEDY AND RISTORI WILL DIE THE SAME DAY».
CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE DEATH OF ROMANTIC
TRAGEDY AND THE BIRTH
OF ART THEATRE IN PORTUGAL

«Tragedy and Ristori will die the same day». It was in this hyperbolic and eloquent manner that António Feliciano de Castilho, the infamous ultra-Romantic Portuguese writer and polemicist refers to the great Adelaide Ristori, in an inflated article published in the «Revista contemporanea de Portugal e Brazil».¹

Very briefly, António Feliciano de Castilho (Lisbon, 28 January 1800–ivi, 18 June 1875) was a Portuguese Romantic author. Being considered as a writer of the Regime and a symbol of academicism, formalism, and ‘old’ practices, he was harshly attacked by the emerging young authors devoted to realism and naturalism, who rose against the ancient defenders of ultra-Romanticism (a debate later called as the ‘Coimbrã Question’ / ‘Questão Coimbrã’ in the final decades of the 19th century). Thus, Castilho was one of the last Romantic Portuguese writers, soon to be overcome by young realist talents such as Antero de Quental, Eça de Queiroz, Oliveira Martins and Ramalho Ortigão, among others.

Adelaide Ristori was in Lisbon – for her premiere in Portugal, as far as I gathered – in October and November 1859 (thus, prior to the ‘Questão Coimbrã’) to present Montanelli’s adaptation of *Medea*, d’après Ernest Legouvé), and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, at the Theatre of São Carlos, with the troupe directed by Mauro Corticelli (who was presenting Ristori around the world). Ristori played Lady Macbeth and Achille Majeroni played the male leading role. After their presentation at the São Carlos, Ristori played at the National Theatre D. Maria II. According to Gustavo Matos Sequeira, a reputed Portuguese theatre historian, Ristori «profoundly impressed Lisbon audiences and

1. A.F. DE CASTILHO, *Adelaide Ristori*, «Revista contemporanea de Portugal e Brazil», 1859, 8, pp. 345-352: 352.

the critics». ² After Lisbon, the Italian troupe went to Oporto, to gain similar success. While in Oporto, as Gustavo Matos Sequeira recalls:

[o]ur Emília das Neves [a famous Portuguese actress] [...] before the tragic Italian took Victor Hugo's *Angelo* to S. João [the National Theatre in Oporto], [as] already announced, she took that play to Baquet [another theatre in Oporto], always looking for a confrontation. And Ristori went to see her and applaud her, receiving the kiss [Emília] threw her from the stage, as she, later, returning the kindness, went to the Theatre S. João to bring her a laurel wreath the night Ristori played [Lady] *Macbeth*. Two reasons for the delirium of the Oporto audiences, to awaken the inspiration of the vates who found themselves in poetry and for the stages to be carpeted with flowers. ³

Luís da Câmara Leme, remembering that night, wrote: «Ristori is here. Filling herself with brio, Emília entered the scene in such an inspired way that the audience, all on their feet, frantically applauded the great Portuguese actress. Ristori and Majeroni followed them with equal delirium». ⁴

Although it was quite normal throughout 19th century for foreign companies to present their repertoire at Portuguese theatre venues (namely at Lisbon and Oporto), at the precise moment when Ristori performed in Portugal the context was not very favorable (to say the least). There had been a scandalous riot at Teatro Santa Justa on account of a play, *Los diamantes de la corona*, a zarzuela by the composer Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, with a libretto by Francisco Camprodón (1854), in which Portuguese pride was particularly challenged. In this play, the dramatic action takes place in Portugal during 1777. At this point, Queen Maria of Portugal (Catalina) had not yet come of age and the Count of Campomayor was her regent. To ease the poverty of the people, the Queen decides to sell the jewels of her royal collection, but – in the play's plot – secretly swaps the real jewels for fakes. This narrative 'originality' on Portuguese history was not well received by the authorities and it might have influenced the ministerial decision to forbid (some) performances by foreign theatre companies. In April 1857, D. António da Costa de Sousa de Macedo, writer, politician and, at the time commissioner at the Nacional Theatre D. Maria II, protested in Parliament against the excessive number of foreign artists who swarmed on the stage of D. Maria II, since these companies did not serve as a teaching model or pedagogical role. Even if tangentially, this epi-

2. G. DE MATOS SEQUEIRA, *História do Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II*, Lisboa, s.i.t., 1955, vol. 1, p. 208. All quotes from Portuguese references are translated by me.

3. Ivi, pp. 208-209.

4. L. DA CÂMARA LEME, *Emília das Neves. Documentos para a sua biografia por um dos seus admiradores*, Lisboa, Livraria Universal Silva Júnior, 1875, pp. 159-160.

sode reveals the importance attributed to theatre and live arts and its impact on public sphere.

The first half of the 19th century in Portugal was a period of many political and social transformations – in society and in performing arts. From the Liberal Revolution of 1820 (which marks the birth of the political press in Portugal and the succeeding development of newspapers in the country) to the Regeneration of 1851 (the year in which a new political moment began, which defined Portuguese political life during the second half of the century), Governments were constituted and then fell consecutively – quarrels, fights, civil war, armed insurrections, military risings... and, insidiously, in the meanwhile, an idea of a Portuguese National Theatre was being created (alongside the idea of ‘nation’). Thus, foreign theatre practitioners were not always welcome. But, nor surprisingly, this suspicion was not applied to Ristori. Her reputation preceded her and prevented further harm.

Ioanna Papageorgiou, dealing with *Adelaide Ristori’s Tour of the East Mediterranean (1864-1865)*, argues that the international tours of Ristori had a clear effect on the shaping of national identities around Europe:

For them, the Italian diva was not simply a cultural ambassador of Italy – as she intended to be received – but a representative of Western civilization in general. Greek spectators, in their majority unaccustomed to dramatic performances of high artistic and emotional effect, were profoundly affected by the actress’s extraordinary stage impact. Her performances showed them that dramatic art offered a powerful means for shaping the cultural and national identity they wished to promote.⁵

The clash of identities that Ioanna Papageorgiou analyses in her (illuminating) essay – a clash between those who perceived Adelaide Ristori as a patron of the social progress brought by Western Culture and those who considered Western Culture as vile economic exploitation of the Near East – that clash, I believe, was not present in Portuguese theatrical landscape. Broadly speaking, the international actors that presented their repertoire at Portuguese theatres were seen as representatives of a cultural (high) status and of a cultural patrimony that Portuguese artists and audiences wanted to mirror and emulate. To this cultural status, one must add that the repertoire chosen by Ristori for her Portuguese performances was mostly constituted by classical texts, which might grant, *a priori*, a non-conflictual ground.

5. I. PAPAGEORGIOU, *Adelaide Ristori’s Tour of the East Mediterranean (1864-1865) and the Discourse on the Formation of Modern Greek Theatre*, «Theatre Research International», xxxiii, 2008, 2, pp. 161-175: 161.

After her presentation at São Carlos, António Feliciano de Castilho depicts an elegant, hyperbolic short biography of the Italian actress, portrayed as the muse Melpômene. I will take these emphatic lines as a tool to perceive the manner actors and actresses were understood – and to consider Portuguese theatre criticism of this period.

Readers of the *Revista Contemporanea*, who applaud Ristori every night, more often and better with silence, with terror, and with tears, than not with clapping, with screams, and with the showers of flowers, calm down; I don't come to be your interpreter; I come as an interpreter of myself; I so little aspire to the impossible of adding to her glory; I only try to ensure that in the future it is not ignored that, having found us at the same point of time and space, she and I, the poet and poetry, poetry did not go on to continue its luminous turn, without the poet's greeting.⁶

This 'romantic way' to address the art of acting – emphatic, exaggerated, elusive, emotional, immensely subjective – was standard in theatre criticism in the 19th century. Ristori was received in Portugal with the same rhetoric ardour.

We can trace evidence of this approach to theatre criticism, amongst many other examples, in William Hazlitt's *On Actor and Acting* (first published in the «The Examiner», January 5, 1817, an essay chosen to go into his first book, *The Round Table*, 1815–1817). The way Hazlitt portrays the role and status of actors can be seen as a paradigm for this non-scientific approach to acting, depicting actors – as vaguely as powerfully – as the «motley representatives of human nature».

Players are 'the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time'; the motley representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites. Their life is a voluntary dream, a studied madness. The height of their ambition is to be beside themselves. To-day kings, to-morrow beggars, it is only when they are themselves, that they are nothing. Made up of mimic laughter and tears, passing from the extremes of joy or woe at the prompter's call, they wear the livery of other men's fortunes; their very thoughts are not their own. They are, as it were, trainbearers in the pageant of life, and hold a glass up to humanity, frailer than itself. We see ourselves at second-hand in them: they show us all that we are, all that we wish to be, and all that we dread to be. The stage is an epitome, a bettered likeness of the world, with the dull part left out: and, indeed, with this omission, it is nearly big enough to hold all the rest. What brings the resemblance nearer is, that, as they imitate us, we, in our turn, imitate them.⁷

6. DE CASTILHO, *Adelaide Ristori*, cit., p. 345.

7. W. HAZLITT, *On actors and acting*. Apud A.C. WARD, in *Specimens of English Dramatic Criticism: XVII-XX Centuries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1945, pp. 101.

The pages that António Feliciano de Castilho devotes to Adelaide Ristori after seeing her in Lisbon, in 1859, denote the same approach. She is more than just a mere woman or an actress.

This one, which you are fortunate enough to be contemplating, is for you. Adelaide Ristori; for me just Ristori. Your is still missing a laurel; mine already has a glow. In yours you hear a woman's name, which makes her look like the common to humanity, with the earth, with death, with oblivion; mine could be called Melpomene; alive, she enjoys the immortality of the daughters of memory; Greece, which gave Sapho the title of muse tenth, would proclaim to these with first honours.⁸

To Castilho, the story of the 'woman' Adelaide Ristori was not relevant. Her childhood, her first theatrical references and teachers, such as Carlota Marchionni or Amalia Bettini – none of that was important: «Ristori is indeed the queen of theatre, but her art nobody taught it to her, because nobody had it: she invented it, if he didn't already have it naturally in his compost».⁹ Ristori's 'love life' is also not relevant to Castilho. The relationships with Marques Capranica del Grillo and Pisenti are nothing compared to the role that the Goddess has to play in Italian Art: «Ristori returns to the temple in which she had opened her eyes never to forsake her again; revive with a hundredfold vivacity the holy fire, which, in its absence, had died down, and among its splendours it looms large, as if already enveloped in a superhuman halo».¹⁰

Not even her involvement in the war efforts, bringing comfort for those in need – «She lavishes balsam on the sick, consolations, vigils; to the needy souls; to the altars tears and supplications for the motherland»¹¹ not even these predicaments overshadowed her theatrical genius. Her talent, in Castilho's words, seems to be attributed by ancient gods themselves – something that she could not avoid (even if she wanted to).

She was given the most harmonious of all languages, in which mirrors from afar the ancient Greek, closely the ancient Roman, and which, more Roman than any other, still dominates by its tempered softness of energy. Allies called Homer to words; the Italian words would call winged and singers like the swallows. She babbled and played among artists, learning to compose since the first years before the mirror of the tremendous public. Those who might hate her as a future victor loved her, and they have served her, they applaud her, and they love her.¹²

8. DE CASTILHO, *Adelaide Ristori*, cit., p. 346.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ivi, p. 349.

Castilho's eulogy adopts the same tone that we can trace in Hazlitt's words. Castilho addresses Ristori's talent as an actress in the same imprecise, vague, and hyperbolic mood.

[S]eeded heart sensitivity and flowery of all affections; the eagle's glance does not perceive; the observation instinct; the need for perfection at the very least as at most ; this kind of sybaritism of the extreme indoles, that, if in the bed of roses a leaf was folded, loses sleep; the instantaneous and tenacious of memory; the voice, without cease to be feminine, strong and majestic like her stature, variable on an infinite scale, like the gestures, from the acute cry of the uproar, in happy love, to the icy, cavernous death rattle.¹³

Castilho goes on and on with more paragraphs like these: beautiful, heart-felt and moving. But – and that is my point – not very helpful if we want to trace the singularity of Ristori's presence on stage. Her existence was enough to state her work.

Each one of these components of Ristori's perfection of her biography is harvested, or achieved through good speech; but who could, if not she (and perhaps herself) to give a faithful account of the days, nights, years, working life, how mysterious and alone she undertook and consummated on herself; she the clay, she the Prometheus, and she the fire.¹⁴

I will hold my will to share more paragraphs of António Feliciano Castilho. I guess my argument, at this point is clear: 1) Portuguese theatre criticism (or theatre 'commenticism') at the middle of the 19th century is in sync with the Romantic theatre criticism around Europe; 2) it is anchored on impressive *frescos* of theatrical activity; 3) actors and actresses are perceived as channels for passions that live outside their own bodies; 4) it shows a strong cult on artists' personalities, largely perceived as deities.

You, the coming ones, you others to whom we have sent her portrait, will you want to know the strength, the magic, of this genius? Ristori resurrected tragedy, or rather Ristori was Pygmalion of this statue poetry, which will stand in the midst of this literature, as diverse in everything, as long as the fairy who evoked her survives. Tragedy and Ristori will die on the same day. November 17, 1859.¹⁵

13. Ibid.

14. Ivi, p. 350.

15. Ivi, p. 352.

Most surprisingly, in the same sense, Ramalho Ortigão, one of the key names of the emergent realist sensibility, when Adelaide Ristori presented *Isabel, Rainha de Inglaterra*, in November 1878, was also impressed with Ristori's presence:

Just look at her: she is an exception. She is on the morphological scale [...] an anomalous case of progressive differentiation. The generic type of the modern woman is not hers. Compare her with other contemporary actresses. The others are weak and fragile. They can neither with strong spiritualization nor with strong animality. [...] Ristori does not represent individual physiognomies: he represents human expressions and feelings.¹⁶

As moving as Castilho and Ortigão's words might be, the scientific approach to theatre criticism that the final decades of the 19th century will shatter this approach. The generation led by the works of Stanislavski, Antoine, Georg Fuchs, Paul Fort, Gordon Craig (in Portugal, Araújo Pereira), and many others, will pursue a different approach to theatre practice, looking for more scientific methods in actors training and, consequently, to criticism.

However, this transformation in Portuguese theatre will not be as fast as in other geographies – entering almost undamaged into the 20th century. Broadly speaking, the model for the Portuguese actors was that of the Italian and French actors who regularly performed in Lisbon, such as Adelaide Ristori, Ernesto Rossi, or Sarah Bernhardt.

Reviewing Rossi's *Hamlet* (presented in Lisbon for the first time in 1868), it is said that Rossi is an actor who «at that time of romanticism, stole, with his long, airy and abundant hair, a little mark on his chin, and his dreamy eyes».¹⁷ Ângela Pinto claims to be inspired by Sarah Bernhardt's famous transvestites, especially in *Hamlet*, which the Portuguese actress may have had the opportunity to see at Teatro D. Amélia, in 1899, although this interpretation can be inserted into a wider tradition of 'women's Hamlets'. What seemed to seduce the Portuguese actress the most was the figuration of the character she wanted to inherit from the 'Divine Sarah'. Her concern about clothing denoted exactly that. From Milan a cross sword was ordered and from London a black silk leotard, considered «absolute and unconditional prestige, especially when you have beautiful legs».¹⁸ Eduardo Brazão, in 1882, «brilliantly showed how much talent and persistent study can bring together», according to the critic Maximiliano de Azevedo. Encouraged by the good reception of this performance, he played Hamlet until he was almost 70 years old.

16. R. ORTIGÃO, *Ristori*, «Occidente», 15 November 1878.

17. A. ROSA, *Memórias e estudos*, pref. by E. SCHWALBACH, Lisboa, Livraria Ferreira, 1917, p. 51.

18. *Ângela Pinto no Hamlet*, in «Ilustração Portuguesa», 10 September 1906.

What makes the cases of Eduardo Brazão and Ângela Pinto paradigmatic is the fact that they take as references foreign actors of international reputation, which, in a way, attests the tendency of the Portuguese scene to import or imitate the aspects most in vogue in European theatre at the time.

Hazlitt, defending the singularity of his comments, explained: «My opinions have sometimes been classified as singular: but they are only sincere. I say what I think; and I think what I feel».¹⁹ The critical turn from ‘Does this play by the rules?’ to ‘What do I feel?’ opened the way for some eccentricity and subjectivity in the exercise of criticism and allowed the establishment of a (sometimes well-founded) lack of love for criticism among the theatrical production. The journey of theatrical criticism through the 20th century is, thus, one of experimenting with instruments for the analysis of performance. And here, theatre criticism will gain different functions and modulations.

The curious circumstance of the Portuguese scene and of the history of *Théâtre d'Art* in Portugal was timidly constituted since the beginning of the 20th century. From the outset, trying to interrupt the logic and dominance of a theatre guided mainly by commercial interests and by repertoires of easy consumption, the 20th century opens with the foundation of initiatives with a clear intention of theatrical renovation and republican connotations, inspired by André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* and by its theatrical naturalism of social nature: the Teatro Livre (1904) and the Teatro Moderno (1905). In both groups, with very similar artistic purposes, Araújo Pereira was the protagonist – considered by many to be the first Portuguese director of modern dimension.

Of more discreet – and even more ephemeral – relevance than these two groups, but denouncing the same desire for cultural renewal, will be the Teatro da Natureza that, in June 1911, under the direction of Alexandre de Azevedo and Augusto Pina will perform a series of open-air performances.

The military coup of 28 May 1926 – of a nationalist and anti-parliamentary nature, which ended the First Portuguese Republic and established a Military Dictatorship (which would become the fascist Estado Novo after the approval of the 1933 Constitution) and which would impose a prior censorship of theatrical performances – will be responsible for putting an end to these (and some others) timid attempts at theatrical experimentation.

Afonso Gayo, in the *Evolução do teatro português contemporâneo*, a conference held on March 25, 1923 in the room of the Sociedade Nacional de Belas Artes, concluded: «we are on the eve of a resurgence of Portuguese theatre».²⁰

19. R. McDONALD, *The Death of the Critic*, London, Continuum, 2007, p. 66.

20. A. GAYO, *Evolução do Teatro Português Contemporâneo*, Lisboa, Associação de Classe dos Trabalhadores de Teatro, 1923, p. 6.

This resurgence was, for Gayo, perceptible by several factors: the organization of the National Theatre; the construction of new theatres; the Portuguese adhesion, in 1911, to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (of 1886); the propaganda in favour of original texts; and by preventing the influence of repertoires presented by foreign companies that perform in Portugal.

But nothing of this happened. Despite these attempts, theatre in Portugal would continue to be dominated by predominantly commercial purposes, saturated by French comedies of proven success and by sweetened versions for the 'Portuguese taste' of universal classics. But that is another history.