

Despina Angelovska

Associate Professor

Faculty of Dramatic Arts – Skopje, UKIM – Skopje

FACING THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION: TIAGO RODRIGUES' THEATER AS SPACE OF PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE, POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND ARTISTIC LIBERTY

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the contemporary theater creations, pervaded by philosophy and literature, of the Portuguese actor, director and playwright Tiago Rodrigues (1977), one of the most prominent and innovative figures of the European theatrical landscape today, current director of the Avignon's Theater Festival. His engaged plays, facing urgent global issues, use theater as a necessary – democratic – space for a shared philosophical, political and poetical reflection. In the era of globalization and consumerism, theater for Rodrigues becomes a space of debate and resistance, inviting spectators to become also actors of change. In our paper, we particularly consider some paradigmatic T. Rodrigues' plays coping with key issues regarding our society in the light of globalization, such as the current rise of extreme right politics in European democracies via the example of "Catarina or the beauty of killing fascists" (2020), or the threats on books, memory and cultural heritage in the era of digital technologies, artificial intelligence and commercialization of data, via the example of "By heart" (2013). Challenging the rapid and radical transformation of the globalized world, Rodrigues stands for a theater which recalls and revives the common – and European – philosophical, literary and cultural heritage, and makes of memory/ remembrance an act of artistic and political resistance.

KEY WORDS: globalization, philosophy, theater, Tiago Rodrigues, memory, cultural heritage, artistic resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THEATRUM MUNDI

In order to represent the whole world, its grandeur, we need the smallness of theater.
Antoine Vitez

In the context of the subject of this Conference, I will start my paper by a brief introduction on the relations between theater, philosophy and global issues. Relations of theater and philosophy are very ancient and complex. As highlighted also by Tom Stern, philosophy and theater emerged at the same place: Ancient Greece in the 6th century BC (Stern Preface IX). Already Plato in the Republic and Aristotle in the Poetics reflected on theater and mimesis and its crucial place in the polis (that is the world for them). The very word theater comes from the Ancient Greek: theatron is a place from where you can see - the stage/world, it derives from the Greek verb "theaomai" which means "to look, to contemplate". Theater has always been a space of contemplation and representation of the world: Theatrum Mundi. Numerous are the philosophers who write about theater, but even more numerous among them are those who write

plays in order to rethink and represent the world. Theater has the – philosophical – vocation to contain a whole world. The very shape of theatrical space, with its traditional division between the stage as a space of action, performance, and the auditorium as a space of contemplation, analysis, becomes a privileged – polysemous – space for reflection and its embodiment. The stage/the actors and the auditorium/the spectators are reflecting (on) each other, questioning the representations and the complex relations between imagination/fiction and reality, thoughts and actions. It is within this optic of the “inherent” vocation of theater to reflect (on) the world that I will discuss the creations of the contemporary Portuguese theater actor, director and playwright, Tiago Rodrigues (1977).

1.2. PRESENTATION OF TIAGO RODRIGUES AND HIS THEATER



Fig 1. Tiago Rodrigues after a repetition (Source: Diatkine n. pag. Photo credit: Pierre Grosbois)

Tiago Rodrigues (see fig.1) is one of the most prominent and interesting figures of the contemporary European theatrical landscape. Rodrigues started in the theater first as an actor who writes and often directs his own texts, then established himself as a theater author and director at the same time. In 2018 he is the laureate of the 15th European Theater Prize “Premio Europa Realtà teatrali”, awarded to authors who renew theater with their innovative approach. After twenty years of activity on the stage, today, Rodrigues, is considered as one of the most significant contemporary theater creators. In September 2022 he is the first “foreigner” to assume the position of artistic director of the renowned Theater festival of Avignon. Echoing the role of Ancient Greek theater in the heart of the polis and its preoccupations, Rodrigues’ engaged plays, facing important global issues, use theater as a necessary – democratic – space for a shared philosophical, political and poetical reflection. Inspired, among others, by the thought of the literature critic, philosopher and humanist, Georges Steiner, Rodrigues stands for a theater which recalls and revives the common – and European – cultural

heritage, and makes of memory/remembrance an act of artistic and political resistance.

In my paper, I will discuss some paradigmatic T. Rodrigues' plays coping with vital issues to our society in the light of globalization. In the first part of this study, I will consider the subject of transmission of memory, cultural heritage and books in the era of digital technologies via the example of the play *By heart* (2013), while, in a second part, I will focus on the play *Catarina or the beauty of killing fascists* (2020) that questions our democratic response capacities to the global rise of extreme right politics.

2. THE THEATER OF TIAGO RODRIGUEZ AS A SPACE OF PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY

Countering the threats of confiscation of memory and knowledge in the era of artificial intelligence and commercialization of data, challenging the rapid and radical transformation of the globalized world, T. Rodrigues plays reflect the urgency of preserving the common European cultural heritage and pays tribute to the great achievements of humanity such as books, literature and philosophy. Refuting the culture of mass entertainment in the digital age, resisting the dictate of images and new technologies, the theater of T. Rodrigues draws on the "good old" power of the written text and the word. In the era of "post-dramatic theater" (Lehman), Rodrigues rehabilitates the theater of the text, and asserts himself as a valued playwright. All of Rodrigues' creations refer to literary and philosophical heritage (especially European). His plays are built as a reflection around language, literature and discourse, hovering over their disappearance and oblivion in today's world undergoing fierce transformations. This is particularly evident in Rodrigues's plays that refer to literature and philosophical thought, such as the play I will focus on in this part of the paper, *By Heart*, build around Shakespeare's sonnet no. 30 in its center, with excerpts from B. Pasternak, O. Mandelstam, J. Brodsky, R. Bradbury and G. Steiner.

2.1. THE THEATER AS A SPACE OF MEMORY: BY HEART

In his short essay *The Silence of books*, Georges Steiner writes: "We tend to forget that books, extremely vulnerable, can be erased or destroyed. They have their own history, like all other human creations, a history whose very beginnings contain the germ of possibility, the eventuality of the end" (Steiner 7).

Prolonging this thought, the title of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, evoked in T. Rodrigues's play *By Heart*, indicates the temperature at which books – paper – spontaneously catch fire: 232 degrees Celsius. In this dystopian novel, books are outlawed and burned by "firemen". The novel was written by Bradbury during the McCarthy era, inspired, among others by the book burning in Nazi Germany and by threat of censorship in the United States. The novel has also been interpreted as a commentary on how mass media/television screens reduce interest in reading literature and books.

Reflecting on the importance of preservation of books, knowledge and memory in the contemporary context of their digitization (which is also the one of the "unbearable lightness" of their eventual erasure and confiscation), *By Heart*, is particularly representative of Rodrigues' work: it is a kind of "poetic and philosophical manifesto" of his theater (see fig. 2). This resourceful play/performance on the importance of poetry (literature, philosophy) and the transmission of memory is inspired by Rodrigues' personal life story and by the special relationship he had

with his grandmother Candida, born in 1919. Candida, who had always been a great reader, losing her sight at the age of 94, asked him to help her choose the last book to memorize so that she could continue to refer to it even when she would become blind.

This request made me both troubled and thrilled. To choose her “definitive” book was at the same time a love mission, but also a terrible one. That also reminded me of learning by heart, of the power of words, of my job as an actor, of the invisible bond between the great writers and my grandmother, this bond that crosses time and space. When I started looking for this book, in a kind of love and literary labyrinth, I immediately thought “this story that I am living touches so much on theater, on the question of memory and transmission that this must be shared one day (Rodrigues and Dautzenberg 4).



Fig. 2. By Heart (Source: Théâtre de la Bastille n. pag. Photo credit: Magda Bizarro)

One of the essential voices whose reflection was guiding T. Rodrigues in the labyrinthine search and the choice of this “right” book/text to be learned by heart by his grand-mother, and in the creation of his performance, was the one of the literary critic and philosopher George Steiner. In a TV interview with the Dutch journalist Wim Kayzer, *On beauty and consolation* (2014) – that T. Rodrigues learned by heart, like a “mantra”, Steiner recounted several anecdotes including that of the Russian writer and literary translator Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) during the Soviet Writers Congress in 1937, a dangerous year when Stalinist opponents disappeared every day, dropping like flies. In *By Heart*, T. Rodrigues quotes Steiner who narrates how Pasternak, warned by his friends and colleagues that he was the next one to be arrested and encouraged to take the floor by them, got up in front of the two thousand people present who turned silent immediately and gave a number :

A number. And two thousand people got up. It was a number of a certain

Shakespeare sonnet of which he had done a translation which the Russians say is [along] with Pushkin one of their greatest texts. When I summon up remembrance of things past, a sonnet of Shakespeare on memory, and they recited it by heart, the two thousand people, the Pasternak translation. It said everything, it said: 'you can't touch us, you can't destroy Shakespeare, you can't destroy the Russian language, you can't destroy the fact that we know by heart what Pasternak has given us'. And they didn't arrest him. (Rodrigues *By Heart* 19-20)

The second story, narrated by G. Steiner in his interview, and retold by T. Rodrigues, is the one of Nadejda Mandelstam, the wife of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam who was imprisoned by the Stalinist regime and died in a transit camp. From the moment when all her husband's books were confiscated, destroyed, Nadejda began to teach his poems to ten people at a time in her kitchen, making them learn the lines by heart. She did it for decades, as a way to continue printing in those people's memory these poems which could not be published (ibid 45). It is this gesture of transmission, but also of invisible publication, as an act of artistic and political resistance against the attempt of the totalitarian regime to erase memory and poetical/cultural legacy, that inspired Rodrigues for the creation of his play *By Heart*. As he points out via the quotation of Joseph Brodsky's obituary for Nadejda Mandelstam, what she did every day, in her kitchen, was an act of enormous theatricality because, in a certain way, it was a kind of resurrection theater, not only of the poetry and the words, but also of the voice and the presence of Ossip Mandelstam (ibid 46).

Remaking on stage what happened historically in Nadejda's kitchen, in *By Heart* Rodrigues also recreates the journey of his grand-mother Candida. In his performance he invites ten different spectators to join him on stage every night and helps them learn by heart Shakespeare's Sonnet number 30: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" (which is the sonnet that his grand-mother has also memorized before going blind and the sonnet recited by Pasternak), perpetuating the gesture of shared learning and constitution of common memory. Learning Shakespeare's sonnet by heart in Rodrigues's performance becomes a gesture of artistic and political resistance against oblivion that threatens the great texts from the European cultural heritage namely in the context of consumerism and digital entertainment : if ten spectators memorizes the sonnet every night and they continue its transmission, it will propagate like a "virus" (see fig.3).



Fig. 3. By Heart (Source: Festival d'Avignon n. pag. Photo credit: Christophe Raynaud de Lage)

Paying tribute on stage to different authors and books in their symbolic roles of guardians of memory and countering loss of meaning, Rodrigues' performance is also as a gesture of intimate resistance against time, against inevitable aging and decay on the body, as in the case of the playwright's grandmother. As always, Rodrigues theater mixes public and intimate. In *By Heart* the public becomes intimate and the intimate becomes public. To talk about the social preoccupations with poetry, in intimacy, that is another way of doing politics for Rodrigues. The words of G. Steiner's interview resonate in *By Heart*: "The greatest tribute we can pay to a poem or text we love is to learn it by heart. By heart, not by brain, not only with the head, but by heart, with our heart. (...) I believe that we are what we remember. And what is in us they cannot take from us" (ibid 28). Prolonging this reflection, in a radio interview from 2022, Rodrigues compares the learning of the text by heart – which the basis of the art of a theater actor – to the ritual of communion, enabling its incarnation. Saying the text aloud allows its resurrection, the rehabilitation of its meaning:

I always think that the moment of learning corresponds to eating the text so that it becomes a part of ourselves. (...) And I think that the moment we say it out loud, we resurrect the meaning of the text that we have learned in advance, (...). And then

when we say it out loud in front of other people, sharing it, in communion, it rises from our voice. The poem no longer belongs to the poet, but to the one who recites it. (Rodrigues and Richeux n. pag.).

3. THEATER AS SPACE OF PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL DEBATE: CATARINA AND THE BEAUTY OF KILLING FASCIST

In the contemporary post-ideological era, T. Rodrigues' creations question the loss of utopias, asserting his engaged theater as a space of philosophical debate and political resistance. Echoing ancient Greek theater's role within the polis, Rodrigues' creations are a reflection on vital questions regarding our democracies and human values facing the challenges of globalization. One of Rodrigues's latest creations, the play *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists* (2020), is a disturbing dystopia that takes place in the "near future", in 2028, in Portugal – or today and in whatever country where the play is performed – where a fascist party has just come to power. The play has already caused controversy because of its title and subject in the Portuguese media, even before the beginning of the repetitions, and was accused of constituting a "call to violence" (Rodrigues "Note d'intention" *Catarina* n.pag.). Indeed, the subject that Rodrigues tackles is not to be taken lightly, as it is sensitive and burning: the play reflects on what seems to be the inexorable rise of extreme-right populism and violence in Europe. The author confronts us with the dilemma whether we have the right to use violence in order to save democracy. Whether we should fight against fascism with its weapons and therefore enter into its game, or whether we should respect the rule of law and democratic institutions and eventually let fascism come into power. To address this subject, Rodrigues wrote a Bertolt Brecht-style parable, mixing it with ritual theater aesthetics, evoking the ancient Greek theater.

The performance opens in front of a rural house, that of the matriarch who established a traditional annual family gathering, by killing her first fascist, who was none other than her husband, 70 years ago. The play refers to a real event of the Portuguese history: on May 19, 1954, while the country was ruled by Salazar – one of the longest authoritarian regimes in 20th century Europe (1933-1974), Catarina Eufémia, a young day laborer, was shot three times in the back by a member of the Republican Guard during a farm workers' strike. In the play, it was because he did nothing to prevent this femicide perpetrated by one of his colleagues, that the great-grandfather was executed by his wife. She left a letter of legacy for her descendants: "May this heritage be used to never remain silent in the face of injustice. If necessary, never hesitate to do evil in order to practice good" (Rodrigues *Catarina* 38-39). Since then, each child in the family, boy or girl, has been named Catarina in honor of the deceased C. Eufémia and has to kill a fascist on the day he or she turned 26 years old: that day is a family holiday, a day of "beauty and death".



Fig. 4. Catarina and the Beauty of killing Fascists (Source: National Theater Festival n. pag., photo credit: Joseph Banderet)

The day the performance begins it is the family's daughter's birthday and hers the turn to shoot down her first fascist. In front of the audience, a large table is already set, embroidered on the white tablecloth two very large words: "não passarão" ("they will not pass") (see fig.4). At the end of the table, set for a feast, stands Pedro Antunes, the fascist who was kidnapped the day before to serve as Catarina's first trophy. The man is waiting almost unnoticed amid the general indifference, in front of the spectators, for the time of his execution. Catarina seems ready to perpetuate the family tradition and to contribute in the consecrated fight against fascism, but the second she has to pull the trigger, she lowers her gun, and refuses to shoot (see fig.5). Like a modern Antigone, she opposes the law of her family, expresses her doubt, and her desire to find another – a third – path of struggle (ibid 45).



Fig. 5. Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists (Source: National Theater Festival n. pag., photo credit: Joseph Banderet)

By her refusal and questioning she initiates a vivid debate between the members of her family on the efficacy or impotency of democratic means in countering fascism and on whether we become its accomplices if we do not take radical action against it. Refuting Catarina's democratic argument that even fascists should have the right to speak, her mother retorts: "That's how it all started. 'Everyone has their freedom of opinion.' For years we allowed these vulgarities to be expressed. And those vulgarities became popular. (...) Now they have won the elections (...) Because we let them speak, speak and speak." (ibid 65) When, in the finale, young Catarina puts herself in front of Antunes in order to prevent him from being killed, the performance ends with a mutual massacre of family members in a general confusion, while the only survivors are the narrator and the fascist who is finally free to speak! That marks the cathartic culmination of T. Rodrigues's play: the fascist politician saved from death by Catarina, adjusts his tie, puts his coat back on, comes to stand in the center of the stage and begins a long and particularly vehement speech, full of xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and homophobia. In order to write the final speech, Rodrigues and the actors of the play inspired them by speeches from populist leaders like Trump, Bolsonaro or Orbán (Rodrigues "Note d'intention" Catarina n. pag.). The escalating violence of the verbal logorrhea which pours into the theater provokes increasingly radical emotions in the spectators. Antunes continues to speak, threatening to expel the non-natives, accusing ecologists of being a minority who thinks they rule the world, accusing women and children of being responsible for domestic violence, democracy of destroying traditional family values, making an apology of the Party's Leader and finally announcing the change of the Constitution and the New Republic of Portugal (Rodrigues Catarina 94-105). The intention of T. Rodrigues is to make the audience more and more embarrassed by the speech and to react, it is what the spectators do vehemently: some try to drown out

the voice of hatred by any means possible, some others insult the actor forgetting that he is only an interpreter, some others get up and leave the theater, refusing to condone such comments any longer. In the middle of the general chaos, the extremist concludes his speech with these words: "And when six months ago we won the elections, my friends, when we won the parliamentary majority and formed a government, that day, no one had any doubt. This is not an illusion. We are reality. We are the future. (...) Long live the New Republic" (ibid 105)

The maneuver of Rodrigues echoes the model of Brechtian epic theater: as the populist speech reaches its crescendo, becoming abject and unbearable, it uplifts almost all of the spectators, ready to "lynch" the man, using the same methods as their "adversary", in the name of democracy. Even more, the audience, in that way, is put in the skin of the young Catarina in front of the famous dilemma, having to make a choice. Yet, at the same time, the actors and T. Rodrigues, as well as the spectators, are well aware that however real the speech is (echoing the real political danger), it is performed in a theater and they're all playing a role within the play. In that sense, in an online interview, T. Rodrigues says:

I think that theater takes place in the anteroom of action, the anteroom of life. It is part of the architecture of life, it is not adjacent to the world or to life, but, at the same time, it lives in a territory with other, mysterious rules. There is a suspension of everyday rules which allows us to go to a strange land whilst remaining in our own country. And that theatrical border is simultaneously a space of fiction and a human gathering where new ideas surge forth and lead us to action. (Rodrigues and Bonnot n. pag.)

In Catarina, theater becomes this shared - public and intimate - space of philosophical reflection, political debate and artistic resistance that prepares us to cope with reality.

As pointed out by theater critic Fabienne Darge in *Le Monde*, Catarina and the beauty of killing fascist returns discreetly echoes to a little-known play by Brecht: *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, written in 1937. Here the German playwright quite clearly called for people to take up arms against fascism, but he did so in the context of the Spanish civil War. Should Europe wait to enter into forms of civil war to find the means of action against a fascism "which eats away at democracy like acid"? (Darge n. pag.) Young Catarina wanted to find a third way. But is that third way possible? Brecht thought not. T. Rodrigues seems to leave the question open. At the same time, by ending his piece with a shocking finale, leaving the floor to the actor playing the fascist leader and to his programmatic speech, Rodrigues knowingly provokes unease, and sounds the alarm. Yet, the responsibility of finding an answer to the dilemma is left to each one of the spectators that are now actors in reality. Living the theater, that privileged space of reflection and resistance in the heart of the polis, spectators-actors are confronted with their own responsibility and invited to rethink and reconfigure the present.

4. CONCLUSION : THEATER, A PLACE OF RESISTANCE



Fig. 6 By Heart at the Festival d'Avignon (Source: Festival d'Avignon n. pag., Photo credit: Christophe Raynaud de Lage)

At the end of this paper, I would like to conclude by saying that with his theatrical creations, and today also with his engagement as a Director of the Festival in Avignon, Tiago Rodrigues strives for a popular and democratic theater, in continuity with the project of Jean Vilar, the Festival founder. For Rodrigues the main power of theater in digital times still resides in the fact that it is a life and vibrant "face-to-face community". He regards theater as a human assembly that is "an antechamber of political action", but primarily an essential place of reflection, a space of shared utopia, a niche of artistic freedom and resistance (see fig. 6).

As a space, theater is itself a place of resistance. When the audience chooses to go physically to a theater, I see this choice, this gesture, as an alternative choice to the majority dominant behavior and hence as a gesture of resistance. And, this aspect, I do not forget it when I consider the audience seated in the auditorium: I realize that these people assembled who do not know each other have this in common: having made their way to the theater (Rodrigues and Chailloux 5-6).

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