

JOÃO OSÓRIO DE CASTRO

(Lisbon, 17/06/1926 – Lisbon, 12/04/2007)

Entrepreneur and playwright, João Osório de Castro was one of the founders of the iconic Casa da Comédia.

A business manager and administrator, João Osório de Castro made his debut in writing for theatre with *Dom Henrique de Portugal* (1961, Teatro Nacional D. Maria II), a play that deals with the disaster of Tangiers and the tragic dilemma of the Infante (Prince Henry the Navigator): abandon Ceuta or sacrifice his brother, D. Fernando, held hostage by the Moroccans. The author, however, did not dwell «on the analysis of the interior drama, preferring to outline a broader picture» brought to life by the director Pedro Lemos, the effect of which is the emergence of «a huge fresco, whereby the contours of the figures are sharply defined, and by necessity unchanging, and their actions serving as symbols» (P. 1962: 4).

His next play, *Blusões negros* (1962), presented on the same stage and by the same director, differs substantially from the solemnity of historical figures to explore present-day topics, set in contemporary environments, in which the story is about the anger of a young man who succumbs to crime. In a harsh review of the play, Alice Ogando comments on the weakness of the plot, the superficial construction of characters, and the performance of the actors, who were unable to elevate the drama« which was meant to focus on cases of juvenile delinquency. Or rather it appears so, but we're not sure, and neither is the author» (Ogando 1962: 37). She also points to the lack of boldness of Osório de Castro, who raises problems of a social nature without showing any aptitude in resolving them: «if you really want to berate common practices, especially bad practices, mistakes in education, in regimes, in certain periods, you need the courage to displease. If you want to please for the benefit of your own convenience then you shouldn't choose a problem like this» (*idem*). The *Diário de Lisboa* refers to the mixture of genres – «an arrangement for a detective story, gangster adventure and conventional melodrama» –, as well as «a moralizing stance, that is somewhat vague, combined with a romantic naivety of the Portuguese variety» (A.de M. 1962: 13). However, the review of the play does mention the pace of the «almost cinematographic» direction, the laudable efforts of the director and the willingness of the actors, recognising that «[t]he play did not please everyone, but the performance as a whole, staged with integrity, and even a certain technical elegance, was well applauded, and the author was called to the stage at the end of the second and third acts » (*idem*).

In 1962, João Osório de Castro participated in the construction of the building of the Teatro de Bolso de Lisboa – Casa da Comédia, on Rua S. Francisco de Borja, n.º 24, near Janelas Verdes. He would be a loyal associate of Fernando Amado, its iconic director. Decorated by Almada Negreiros, with a seating capacity for around 100 spectators, the theatre opened its doors in July 1963 (Coelho 2009: 138). In this new venue, new playwrights were valued and aesthetic freedom encouraged, unlike the pressures of other more commercial theatres. It offered a haven to enthusiastic artists who would go on to become important figures in Portuguese theatre, such as Fernanda Lapa, Manuela de Freitas, Maria do Céu Guerra, Santos Manuel, Glória de Matos, Norberto Barroca and Jorge Listopad, among others. It was here that the farce *O baile*

dos mercadores (1965) premiered. In it, the playwright experimented with a new theatre genre that combined humour and criticism in a playful plot about the rivalry between two clothes shops. Luís d'Oliveira Nunes praised the enthusiasm of the young cast and the repertory of the Casa da Comédia, and noted that the work and the author «could at last find their natural habitat » (Nunes 1965: 5). The farce was «constructed, as everything indicates, within the framework of a bourgeois drama, although the staging appears to have focused on concealing this», and the structure of the characters, language and dialogue worked well together, «although Osório de Castro throws away a lot of situations, because the fluidity of ideas is lost in the long windedness of the words». Carlos Porto, in his review of the play directed by Manuel Couto Viana (*Estufa Fria*, 1970), defines it as «a satire on the corrupting power of money seen from the side of the shopkeeper», which presents « situations which are quite amusing», but which lack « a language that is both comic and poetic», but with a bold and imaginative staging (Porto 1970: 5).

In 1970 Osório de Castro returned to one of the projects of his partner and associate, Fernando Amando, who had since died, translating the works of Valle-Inclán – *A cabeça do Baptista*, *Laço de sangue* and *Sacrilégio* – and performing them at the Casa da Comédia. He immediately returned to writing his own plays with *Mestre Gil vai às escolas* (1972) and *Escola de domadores* (1973), which was first presented as part of a theatre project «Ao encontro do teatro» for primary and secondary school pupils (Coelho 2009: 297). Still in 1973, a loose adaptation of an episode of *Peregrinação* was published, *A primeira espingarda do Japão* (filmed for RTP- the Portuguese National broadcaster, in 1992). The play, reviewed by Osório Mateus, can be summed up as an«[e]xercise serving as an illustration for young people, and of a single “classical” page”: a text of an irremediable absence of modernity (returning to this once again), efficiency and relevance in what we could euphemistically call our *theatrical discourse*» (Mateus 1974: 87).

The author, meanwhile, had kept up his business activities, maintaining, for example, a graphic design company, Elo, where he published his plays. From 1987, he became a member of the Board of the Portuguese Industrial Association, introducing a Commission for Cultural Affairs, which in 1988 organised the First Cultural Industries Fair (Lisbon 1997: 467). Because of his professional duties at this time, Osório de Castro was obliged to give up writing until 1991, the year in which *Contos em memória* was published.

His dramaturgical production would be taken up again with texts publicised in rehearsed readings, such as *Lux Lucis* (Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, 1994) and *Garrett: Teatro* (Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores, 2000), and the occasional plays, as was the case with *A paixão segundo Santo António* (Museu Nacional do Traje, 1996), *Leonor, Santa Rainha (Laudário da Misericórdia)* (Museu de São Roque, 1999) and *Á nossa...! Branco ou tinto? ou os benefícios do vinho* (Quinta da Ribeirinha, Póvoa de Santarém, 2002, directed by Jorge Listopad). The publications at Elo also continued: *D. João II* (1998), *Cabeçudos e gigantes (Farsa trágica ou talvez não!)* and *Santo António Militar. Mágica em rima bárbara, para educação de governantes, seniores e principiantes* (both published in 2000), *A Giralдина* (2002) and *Ribeirinha meu amor...* (2003).

In spite of the irregularity that characterised Osório de Castro's artistic career, his perseverance denotes an enthusiasm for the theatre that would never fade. His work displays a notable eclecticism, accompanying an inventive exploration of styles and languages, suggested in the subtitles of some of his plays: «dramatic poem», «fantasy», «tragic farce or perhaps not». According to Jorge Listopad, the writer, «one of the most fertile and versatile in contemporary Portuguese dramaturgy», writes «as if he wanted to create a conflict between his plays; without limits, varying between transcendence and immanence, between mythology and comedy of manners, between extreme situations and dissolved circumstances when confronted with the ordinary» (Listopad 2006: 18). However, historic themes predominated and *Viriato Rey-Canto da Lusitânia*, «where the archetype intersects with the legend and the myth», would be the «first stone of the Iberian Nibelungen» (*idem*: 19). In this play, according to Rui Pina Coelho, the playwright «works on the empty spaces of narrative history, constructing the figure of a warring and fraternal hero, responding to the documental insufficiencies with poetic freedom » (Coelho 2006).

A year before he died, João Osório de Castro completed a project he had held close to his heart since 1997. *Viriato Rey*, directed by João Mota and with the set designed by José Manuel Castanheira, was presented at the Merida Classical Theatre Festival with a mixed Portuguese and Spanish cast of 45 members, who filled the Roman Theatre, giving voice and body to the victories and defeats of the Shepherd–Warrior. He was the first Portuguese playwright to debut at the famous festival.

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