History Recycled: 
Contemporary Performances of Shakespeare’s 
Richard II at Portuguese National Theatres 

FRANCESC A CL ARE R AYNER 

Cultural Politics at the Turn of the New Millennium
In his 2003 ‘Shakespeare and the Cold War’, Dennis Kennedy compares Shakespearean performance in the post-war period with performances at the turn of the twenty-first century. He concludes that ‘compared to the postwar period much Shakespearean performance is adrift, either unexamined in its purpose or relying on heritage appeal, in keeping with postmodernist or consumerist notions of cultural production’. He ends with the deliberately polemical statement: ‘(i)n Shakespeare performance the Cold War is definitely over, and the capitalists have won.’

This view of fin-de-siècle cultural production as lacking a clear political direction is shared by many, including the Portuguese theatre critic Eugénia Vasques. In her retrospective discussion of Portuguese theatre in the 1990s, she is dismissive of its political and aesthetic significance. Categorizing the period as ‘a neo-Brechtian decade’, she describes it as a decade when:

[... o nervosismo do fim-de-século se oculta nas figuras de distorção grotesca, a identidade nos motivos da deconstrução e em que a referência e a citação, como materiais de intercâmbio e de conhecimento, deram lugar, estetica e eticamente, a processos de apropiação ’selvagem’ sem mâ consciência culturalista e muito menos preconceitos de profunda mediação criativa.]

[fin-de-siècle nervousness is hidden in grotesquely distorted figures, identity in deconstructionist impulses, and during which reference and citation, as materials of exchange and knowledge, give place, aesthetically and ethically, to processes of ‘frenzied’ appropriation without any cultural guilty conscience and much less any preconceived notions of deep creative mediation.]

Underlying both these assessments of theatre at the turn of the millennium is

1 Dennis Kennedy, ‘Shakespeare and the Cold War’, in Four Hundred Years of Shakespeare in Europe, ed. by A. Luis Pujante and Ton Hoenselaars (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), pp. 163–79 (pp. 176–77).
a view of political performance informed by the 1960s and 1970s. It is a view indebted to Brechtian and counter-cultural models of a theatre anchored in social and political realities whose aim is to dispel false consciousness in audiences, as a prelude to political action and a construction of the political in performance that can only cast contemporary performance as lacking. This ignores the fact that the 1990s in Portugal was a decade which democratized the performance of Shakespeare, with not only a far larger number of performances of the plays but a greater diversification of companies performing them. Moreover, it was also a decade when there was a significant reconfiguration of gender roles, particularly in the Shakespeares performed at the Teatro Nacional São João, in Porto. Therefore, any simple dismissal of the politics of performance in the new millennium — and there is certainly much that can be dismissed in this way — must be nuanced by a recognition of the ways in which understandings of the political were themselves in transformation.

In this essay I will question Kennedy’s dismissal of heritage and postmodern theatre through a focus on two contemporary performances of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* at Portuguese national theatres, in 1995 and 2007. I will argue that heritage theatre might have a more positive meaning in a theatrical context such as the Portuguese which does not have a consistent tradition of performing Shakespeare, and that any such performance invariably contains within it dominant and emergent understandings of Shakespeare and Shakespearean performance. Secondly, I will illustrate how Kennedy’s uncritical identification of postmodernism with consumerism sidelines the ways in which postmodern theatre’s recognition of its implication in the discourses it seeks to challenge can represent an oppositional stance. The 2007 performance of the play staged a politics of disaffection which de-legitimized masculine political authority although it did not propose strategies of resistance to it. As such, it forms part of the cultural politics of postmodernism outlined by Johannes Birringer which opens up ‘a space of intervention in which we may no longer see the revolution expected by Brecht, but realize the necessity to historicize the postmodern myths that postpone it’.

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3 For an extended discussion of the performance of Shakespeare in Portugal during the nineties, with a particular focus on questions of gender and sexuality, see Francesca Clare Rayner, *Caught in the Act: The Representation of Sexual Transgression in Three Portuguese Productions of Shakespeare* (Braga: Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho, 2005).

4 The former production of *Richard II* was directed by Carlos Avilez and performed at the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, Lisbon, from the 7 April 1995. The more recent *Richard II* was directed by Nuno Cardoso and was a co-production between the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II in Lisbon and the Teatro Carlos Alberto in Porto, sister theatre of the Teatro Nacional São João, also in Porto. It was first performed on 13 June 2007.

Comparison of these two performances also offers an opportunity to foreground important generational shifts in Portuguese performances of Shakespeare around the new millennium. The director of the 1995 performances, Carlos Avilez, was in his late fifties at the time and had constructed a successful career, notably as one of the founder members of the Teatro Experimental de Cascais in 1965, before becoming Artistic Director of the main national theatre, the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II in Lisbon. On the other hand, the director of the 2007 performances, Nuno Cardoso, was in his late thirties, had been Artistic Director of the Auditório Carlos Alberto in Porto and has been establishing a reputation as one of the most interesting young directors on the Portuguese theatrical scene. Avilez had already directed Shakespeare twice, while for Cardoso this was his first Shakespeare as a director. This generational shift brings with it significant transformations in terms of ways of working with the Shakespearean text and the actors. Cardoso works extensively through improvisation and makes more far-reaching changes and cuts to the text than Avilez, who tends to favour visual transpositions of the text to the stage. This reveals a parallel ideological shift from a more reverential approach to Shakespeare in the case of Avilez compared to Cardoso’s more ludic appropriations of the dramatist.

Heritage Theatre and Richard II at the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II (1995)

Although the notion of heritage is often invoked in conjunction with drama, it is in the area of cinema that the paradoxes of heritage performance have been analysed more extensively. In her introduction to the Sight and Sound collection Film/Literature/Heritage (2001), for instance, Ginette Vincendeau traces the historical transition from costume drama to heritage cinema. Films of this genre, she notes, are ‘shot with high budgets and production values by A-list directors and they use stars, polished lighting and camerawork, many changes of décor and extras, well-researched interior designs, and classical or classical-inspired music. She notes the cultural similarities of such performances with contemporary museum culture and themed events, and explores divergent

6 Avilez had directed Hamlet in 1987 and King Lear in 1990 and had also acted in Romeo and Juliet in 1987. He was Artistic Director of the Teatro Nacional D. Maria II from 1993 to 2000. Cardoso played Iago in performances of Othello in 2007, but his reputation was built on excellent stagings of Wedekind’s Spring Awakening and Büchner’s Woyzeck in Porto. He went on to direct a widely acclaimed Platonov by Chekhov at the São João in 2008.

7 Although he does not make use of the term ‘heritage theatre’, the work of W. B. Worthen does examine in some detail the heritage characteristics of contemporary productions of Shakespeare. See, for example, his chapter on performances at the reconstructed Globe theatre in his Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 79–116.

approaches to the politics of such performances. On the one hand, their unashamed nostalgia and uncritical celebration of the past mean the genre ‘has been condemned as conservative aesthetically and ideologically, promoting an idealized view of the past, and turning its back on contemporary issues’. On the other hand, she signals the importance of the films’ concentration on visual and aural pleasures and their recasting of ethnicity and gender as strategies to democratize the literary canon for contemporary audiences. She concludes that heritage films ‘emerge as a pervasive and popular mode of film-making, in tune with both a fin-de-siècle passion for “museum culture” and a postmodern recycling of an increasingly mixed literary repertoire.’

I would argue that a parallel critical notion of heritage theatre might usefully be applied to the Dona Maria II performances of Richard II in 1995. The political contradictions that Vincendeau foregrounds in heritage cinema are certainly pertinent here, where large-scale productions and production values acted as a smokescreen for political conservatism. However, while there are certainly good reasons to critique the politics of heritage theatre, it is also true that when such performances take place in countries like Portugal, where the performance of Shakespeare has been sporadic rather than consistent, heritage theatre assumes a pedagogical function that is more significant than in countries where Shakespeare is performed more regularly. Performances of this kind can thus play a vital role in introducing wider audiences to the plays of Shakespeare, previously only seen by a very small, elite audience. Performance of Shakespeare was inconsistent before the 1990s and played for quite select audiences. Moreover, performances tended to obey local rather than national interests. In such a context, the 1995 performances of Richard II presented for the first time on a national stage, constituted an invaluable opportunity to introduce audiences in Portugal to a little-known Shakespeare play.

The Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II Richard II was the first major production under the new Artistic Director, Carlos Avilez, and represented an obvious attempt to use the cultural currency of Shakespeare to stage a super-production which would confer legitimacy on the new administration. 1995 was also the

9 Ibid. p. xix.
10 Ibid. p. xxiv.
11 The cultural insularity and censorship of the Portuguese dictatorship was largely responsible for the lack of a tradition of performance of Shakespeare’s plays in Portugal from the very early 1930s up until the Revolution in 1974. Although the Salazar–Caetano dictatorship claimed to support the creation of a national culture and there were some performances of Shakespeare at the National Theatre during this period, Salazar’s sense of a national culture was of an insular, folkloric Portuguese cultural heritage which confirmed moral and political orthodoxy. Performances of Shakespeare were seen as marginal to this process.
12 For additional information on performances of Shakespeare in Portugal, consult the excellent Centro de Estudos de Teatro database at <http://www.fl.ul.pt/CETbase/default.htm> [accessed 17 March 2010].
13 Signs of the performances’ super-production pretensions can be seen in the use of ‘star actors’, the fact that a total of sixty-two people were involved in the production, the huge
year in which national elections brought António Guterres to power as Prime Minister, as he defeated Aníbal Cavaco Silva at the polls. These political events, according to the actor Luis Assis, who played Percy in the performances, impacted on Avilez’s thinking about the play.\(^{14}\) Assis recounts that when Avilez first spoke to the cast, he reinforced the topicality of the play by referring to the current political context. Reading between the lines, Assis felt this meant that Avilez saw the deposed Cavaco Silva as a sort of Richard II figure, deposed as a despot by the usurper Bullingbrook (read Guterres), who would then go on to become an even worse despot in the course of time. However, in a comment to the journalist Catarina Carvalho, Avilez himself preferred to stress the play’s parallels with recent political corruption scandals.\(^{15}\)

The performances were strongly characterized by aesthetic formalism. The magnificent scenography and elaborate costumes evoked the ceremony and ritual of a medieval court in all its splendour, with the lonely, mercurial figure of Richard (Carlos Daniel) at its centre. It is worth singling out in this respect the stunning but sparse set design by José Manuel Castanheira, an internationally recognized scenographer who had worked previously with Avilez on his King Lear, created around doors, bridges and elevatory mechanisms. A series of vivid onstage panels by the painter Graça Morais likened the gradual encirclement of Richard to a hunt where Richard was cast as a stag. A musical score was especially composed by the jazz composer António Pinho Vargas, based on the music of Handel and on French opera, reinforcing the ceremonial aspect of the performances towards the beginning, and Richard’s solitude later on. Costume design was meticulously researched in the National Portrait Gallery in London, once more by Graça Morais.

However, while these aspects of the staging made excellent use of some of the best contemporary practitioners in the arts, the background material published to accompany the performances consigned the political questions raised by the play to those of medieval England, notably the question of the divine right of kings and the limited scope within which subjects could legitimately rebel.\(^{16}\) The critical texts included in this material conveyed a sense of the history informing the play as consensual and orderly, and of the play as a great work of literature rather than a text written for performance. Apart from articles by Stanley Wells budget for the performances, and the fact that the performances lasted initially for a total of four hours with two intervals being added at a later stage. Critical reviews also reinforced its status as a super-production with descriptions of it as magnificent, luxurious, stunning and monumental. The amount of money spent on the performances was a matter of concern to some journalists, such as Carlos Porto, but even he was able to excuse this on the grounds of the rarity of such an event on the Portuguese stage, Jornal de Letras, 28 April 1995, p. 31.

\(^{14}\) Personal email communication from the actor. My thanks to Luis Assis for this suggestion.

\(^{15}\) Avilez commented that the play ‘nos faz lembrar escândalos políticos recentes’ [reminds us of recent political scandals] in an article by Catarina Carvalho, ‘Ricardo segundo Avilez’ in Diário de Notícias, 8 April 1995, p. 29.

and Fernando de Mello Moser, the material all preceded the 1980s. The longest extract, from E. M. W. Tillyard’s *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, was published in 1944. This is not to suggest these works did not continue to have their value, but it is telling that criticism from the 1980s onwards, particularly the work of the English cultural materialists and American new historicists, which is much more political in its approach, was absent from the thinking behind the play. It suggests not only a certain cultural insularity of the theatre, but also an unwillingness to politicize Shakespeare in such a way that his status — and therefore the theatre’s status in performing him — might be undermined.

However, in the overwhelmingly positive newspaper reviews of the performances, parallels were indeed drawn between the politics of the play and those of present day Portugal. Tito Livio’s review in *A Capital*, for instance, noted the highlighting of contemporary political questions such as ‘a perversão do poder e o clientelismo politico’ [the perversion of power and political clientelism]. Manuel João Gomes, in his article in the newspaper *Público* entitled ‘Trabalho de Shakespeare no Dona Maria’ remarked that ‘(apesar de vivermos em regime republicano e democrático, o perigo de identificação não está posto de lado’ [although we live in a Republican, democratic regime, this does not prevent audiences identifying with the regime on-stage]. This may have represented a reading of the play rather than the performances, but it illustrates that this first production of the play in Portugal on a national stage could be appropriated to debate present-day questions pertaining to the sphere of national politics.

More significantly, even if the dominant perspective in this example of

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18 The only negative review I have come across is one in *Visão*, 11 May 1995, p. 98, by Rosário Anselmo, who complains that the production would have benefited if Avilez had put more emphasis on conceptual rigour than what she labels ‘uma sobrevalorização formal’ [a formal over-valorization]. She also criticizes the ‘disparidade de estilos e leituras’ [disparity of styles and readings] among the actors and, like several other critics, singles out the weak acting of Fernando Luís as Bullingbrook against Carlos Daniel’s skilful Richard.

19 Tito Livio, review in *A Capital*, 4 May 1995, p. 54. In another review in *A Capital*, 8 April 1995, p. 20, under the title ‘Ricardo II leva esplendor cenográfico ao Nacional: Carlos Avilez encena Shakespeare politico’ [Richard II brings scenographic splendour to the National Theatre: Carlos Avilez stages a political Shakespeare], Rita Bertrand quotes the actor who played Bushy, Ricardo Carriço, as saying about his character: ‘É um deslumbrado, obcecado pelo poder e oportunista. Há muita gente como ele na nossa sociedade’ [He is dazzled, obsessed by power and an opportunist. There are many people like him in our society].

20 The quotation in the text from Manuel João Gomes is taken from his article ‘Trabalho de Shakespeare no Dona Maria’ in *Público*, 7 April 1995, *Zoom*, pp. 1–5 (p. 2). Many reviewers couched their political comments within a universalizing discourse. For example, João Carneiro’s review entitled ‘A noite luminosa’, in *Expresso*, 14 April 1995, *Revista*, p. 123, noted that ‘O poder é senspre motor de um desejo irressupresível, conseguido e mantido pela violência, pela traição e pelo assassinio’ [power always drives an irressupresible desire, achieved and maintained through violence, treachery and murder].
heritage theatre relied on an excessive aesthetic formalism to distance the politics of the play, other emergent perspectives can be glimpsed on the margins of the performances. As the theatre’s resident company had not undergone renewal for many years, the performances made use of the remit of the ‘artista convidada’ [invited performer], to counter the theatre’s long-term deficiencies by using artists outside the company structure for the production run. The painter Graça Morais and the choreographer Olga Roriz were both involved in the production on just such a one-off basis, as was the television and cinema actor, Fernando Luís, who played Bullingbrook. The translator and dramaturg Maria João da Rocha Afonso was also responsible for a new translation of the play. As such, although the integration of these artists enabled the Dona Maria in the short-term to claim a theatrical health it didn’t in fact possess, in the long-term, tendencies such as the greater involvement of women in Shakespearean productions, the prominence of freelancers, the nod to other media like the visual arts, television and cinema and the recourse to academics as translators and dramaturgs, all of which became so central in the theatre work of the late 1990s, suggest new directions in the performance of Shakespeare which were to question the dominant premises of text-based heritage theatre through a renewed interest in the visual and aural languages of the stage. In Maria João da Rocha Afonso’s contribution to the production programme, there is even a hint that future studies of Shakespeare should give equal status to both performance and text, and in her introduction, she argues that ‘a análise académica serve o palco, o palco enriquece o trabalho de aula’ [academic analysis serves the stage, and the stage enriches classroom work]. Moreover, it is noticeable that in comparison with the claims for the universality of a stable text, the brief section on performance of the plays in the background material is explicitly contingent, noting the ways in which interpretations of the play in performance have changed significantly over the years. In this sense, performance of Shakespeare is functioning as a ‘school’ where theatre practitioners can develop new ideas about Shakespearean performance, even within an apparently unchallenging set of performative circumstances.

Yet perhaps the most curious sign of things to come in these performances was a strongly homoerotic nude bathing scene between Richard (Carlos Daniel) and Aumerle (José Neves). Although its significance was little discussed in the reviews, nudity was certainly rare on the stage of the Teatro Nacional and homoeroticism was invariably played down. This might then seem somewhat

21 Maria João da Rocha Afonso, Production programme, p. 7 (‘Um desafio’).
22 Textos de Apoio, p. 16 (‘Ricardo II no Teatro’). Although the authors of the individual texts, edited by Maria João da Rocha Afonso, are not identified, this particular piece appears to draw on the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of Richard II, ed. by Michael Clamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
out of place in a production characterized by political conservatism, but it should be seen within the production’s general emphasis on visual splendour and, as such, represented little more than a slightly piquant moment in a predominantly safe production. While on the one hand this scene harked back to Avilez’s early reputation as an enfant terrible with a predilection for performing Genet, it also looked forward to more overt and diversified representations of dissident forms of sexuality towards the end of the millennium.24

The Politics of Postmodern Performance: Richard II at the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II and the Teatro Carlos Alberto (2007)

In contrast to the earlier Dona Maria performances, the 2007 co-production of the play at the Dona Maria II and the Teatro Carlos Alberto in Porto was strongly focused on the present and made use of a variety of postmodern techniques. In one of the few theoretical discussions of the politics of postmodern performance, Philip Auslander argues in his chapter ‘Towards a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre’ that while postmodernism ‘has not rendered political theatre impossible [...] it has made it necessary to rethink the whole project of political art’.25 He details the ways in which postmodernism has prompted a shift from ‘transgressive to resistant political art’, in other words, from a belief that it is possible to critique existing power structures from a position outside of them, as in the Brechtian political project, to a post-structuralist acknowledgement that political contestation is inevitably bound up in the discourses it seeks to challenge. Central to Auslander’s argument for the political efficacy of postmodern theatre is what he labels its ‘critique of presence’. This critique stems from a recognition that the presence, or what we might call the charisma, attributed to certain performers by their audiences is intimately tied in with the repetition of forms of illusionist theatre that uphold existing power structures in their claim to show things ‘as they are’ in ‘real life’. Charisma discourages the critical distance necessary to question that power by charming or frightening the audience into submission. A critique of presence therefore implies putting on show the mechanisms which construct charismatic presence, through which Auslander labels the performer’s ‘disinvestment of

24 Performances at the Teatro Nacional São João, such as their 1998 Noite de Reis, are examples of this trend. Cf. Francesca Clare Rayner, Caught in the Act.

In this way, the charismatic performance is deconstructed to reveal the unstable basis of both theatrical and political power.

What is striking about this contemporary understanding of postmodern political performance is how small a distance separates representation from a critique of representation, for performers must first place themselves in charismatic roles in order to deconstruct them. This means that it is often difficult to establish whether political interventions in postmodern performance point effectively towards alternatives or simply re-establish the status quo in a slightly modified form. Indeed, Auslander argues that such contradictions are inherent to his project of a resistant, postmodern, political performance practice as they illustrate how ‘if we’re to position ourselves politically, we must be prepared to contend with the commodification of politics which levels discourses and masks difference, and the mediatization by which the dominant ideology nullifies the counterhegemonic’.27

In the specific domain of gender, Auslander notes how performance’s association of the textual with male performers and the visual with female performers ‘occupies another uncomfortable space, neither clearly sexist nor clearly deconstructing’, although this does not lead to further discussion of ways in which gender inflects notions of charismatic presence.28 Yet, we need only consider the mediatized candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to understand the differential processes which construct distinct visions of charismatic men and women. One of the features of the 2007 Richard II that most interested me, therefore, was the ways in which its postmodern parody of presence was aimed at the obviously gendered bodies of male authority figures, thus disinvesting patriarchal power of its textual and political authority, whilst also enabling women performers temporarily to occupy these redefined spaces of male presence.

The critique of masculine presence

I would like to begin my discussion of the second performance of Richard II by examining a group photograph of the male performers (Fig. 1).29 With their ill-fitting clothes, they resemble a group of men meeting for a Sunday morning football match rather than the elite set of nobles who are to decide the destiny of a feudal English kingdom. Indeed the innovative set design by Fernando Ribeiro, who had worked with Cardoso on previous productions, was a representation of a football pitch complete with floodlights, a particularly fluid stage setting for the play.30 The central figure, the actor João Ricardo

26 Auslander, p. 67.
27 Ibid, p. 70.
28 Ibid, p. 65.
29 My thanks to the Teatro Nacional São João and its archivist Paula Braga for providing me with these production photographs. The photographer is Margarida Dias.
30 A reading of the performances as reinforcing parallels between the political sphere and

*Fig. 1* (above): Central figure King Richard II, played by João Ricardo.

*Fig. 2* (below): Foreground figure Bullingbrook, played by Gonçalo Amaral.
as Richard II, has obviously been drinking to excess, judging by the size of his stomach, and cannot hope to command respect from others in a pair of unflattering shorts with his socks around his ankles. While the actor playing Richard II is traditionally thin and rather effeminate, this corpulent, sweaty, very masculine performer signals his difference. Similarly, instead of the conventional ceremonial and highly stylized encounters between the characters in this play about medieval history, these male performers stormed round the stage at high speed, occasionally coming together in homoerotically charged groupings reminiscent of televised encounters between football teams.

By way of contrast (Fig. 2), we have the dangerously thin actor playing Bullingbrook (Gonçalo Amaral). The contrast between the fat Richard and the thin Bullingbrook evokes a series of volatile signifiers between fat, lack of control and self-indulgence on the one hand and thinness, self-denial, untrustworthiness and lack of sociability on the other. Neither appears to merit our confidence. Although the male characters behind Bullingbrook (and if you look carefully to the right of the picture you can see that some of them are played by actresses) continue to run round the makeshift football pitch under the glare of the floodlight, Bullingbrook himself seems decontextualized and uninterested in those desperately seeking the non-existent ball. The discarded shirts on the ground indicate that the team members have changed sides and changed leaders, but this seems to have made very little difference.

In what ways do such representations of masculine authority enact political interventions? In an interview published just before the opening performances, the director Nuno Cardoso suggested reasons why the politics of the play felt contemporary to him:

A peça interessa-me porque reflecte sobre uma dupla condição do indivíduo: o homem privado e o homem público, investido de poder. Depois, é um texto onde os mecanismos do poder são centrais: no núcleo da história há uma transferência de poder, que não é uma sucessão, mais uma deposição. E nos dias de hoje, o poder, a maneira como as pessoas o exercem e a forma como reagem aqueles sobre quem ele é exercido, é uma questão sobre a qual me parece que não reflectimos suficiente, em democracia.\(^\text{31}\)

the cultural in terms of the importance attributed to football in Portugal within the wider culture lies beyond the scope of this article, but would be an interesting topic for further research.

\(^\text{31}\) Unascribed article entitled 'Gosto de risco e arrisco constantantemente' in the Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II magazine Jornal de Teatro, 11 May 2007, p. 4. In an interview included in the production programme entitled 'O teatro é uma das artes em que a carnalidade é mais imediata', Cardoso hints at the way in which notions of politics and the politician had changed from the 1980s onwards: 'Em conversa com os actores, falávamos de uma certa forma de fazer política que descende das grandes esperanças do pós-25 de Abril e que de repente deu lugar ao aparecimento de um político mais tecnocrata, mais seco. Isso fez-se sentir em Portugal no final dos anos 80, início dos 90, e de certa forma permanece até hoje' [In conversation with the actors, we spoke about a certain way of doing politics which comes from the great expectations of the post-25 April period, and which suddenly gave
The play interests me because it reflects on the dual condition of the individual: the private man and the public man, invested with power. And then, it is a text where the mechanisms of power are central: at the core of the narrative there is a transfer of power, which is not a succession but a deposal. And in our own time, power, the way that people exercise it and the way in which those over whom it is exercised react, is a matter on which it seems to me that we do not reflect sufficiently, in our democracy.

This dual interest, not only in those who exercise power but also in those over whom it is exercised, indicates the ways in which the performance's parodic critique of charismatic male authority functioned politically. For if charisma is projected onto an authority figure by an audience of subjects who thus confirm their subjection, the deconstruction of presence disavows such projections and encourages what Vera Frenkel has characterized as 'a non-charismatic understanding which permits us not to believe so readily in the other as the keeper of our treasure and our disease'. As such, if political leaders only have power because their subjects make them powerful, then to have both Richard and Bullingbrook performed so uncharismatically makes the basis of their power appear not only unstable but, crucially, transformable.

The politics of gender and genre in performance

As Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin point out, in the second tetralogy of Shakespearean history plays which begins with Richard II, 'women's roles are further constricted. There are fewer female characters, they have less time on stage and less to say when they get there.' Contemporary performance can merely confirm women's textual absence or highlight the differences between the historical past and the contemporary present through rethinking performances strategies for women. This performance of Richard II was very much an ensemble creation and although specific roles such as the Queen, the Duchess of Gloucester and the Duchess of York were played by women performers, and the majority of male roles were played by male performers, the sparseness of the female roles was compensated for to a certain extent by way to the appearance of a more technocratic, more arid politician. This made itself felt in Portugal in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in a way persists until today] (p. 22). Cardoso also notes the responsibility of this generation of politicians in encouraging political apathy: 'Actualmente é comum alegar-se o desinteresse do cidadão em relação à política. Mas a forma como a política se exerce é de molde a deixar o cidadão completamente de fora' [At the moment a disengagement by the citizen towards politics is commonly alleged. But the way that politics is conducted is of a kind that leaves the citizen completely on the outside] (p. 23). Production programme for TNDM/TNSJ Ricardo II, Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, 2007.

32 *apud* Auslander, p. 63.
the actress who played the Duchess of Gloucester (Flávia Gusmão) doubling as the jailer, and the actress who played the Duchess of York (Marta Gorgulho) doubling as the noble Willoughby. These were minor roles, but such regendering or cross-gender casting has been rare in Portuguese theatre and thus represents a small but significant step towards ensuring theatrical equality for actors and actresses in the performance of Shakespeare — especially since the three actresses also took their places alongside the actors during the many ensemble scenes. Such moves further deconstructed connections between masculinity and theatrical and political authority by extending the performance of masculinity to women performers, although the irony of enabling women to occupy masculine subject positions only when they have been de-legitimized remains politically ambiguous. Perhaps the most visible sign of this ambiguity for women in the performances was their stage costumes. Cardoso worked with the radically inventive fashion design team ‘Storytailors’ to create outrageous, eclectic costumes for the woman characters which could not be related to any specific historical period. Yet however visually striking these costumes, it is also true that they were far more difficult to move about in and far more physically constricting than the costumes for the male characters.

The entrance of the Duchess of York towards the end of Richard II is usually credited with the eruption of domestic farce into the nobler genre of historical tragedy.34 Her embarrassing knelt appeal to Bullingbrook to save her son from execution irritates both Bullingbrook and the Duke of York as an unwelcome familial intervention in affairs of state. Yet in this performance, farce undermined historical tragedy throughout the play. The dominant political metaphor of the performances was the persistent transfer of the crown. At regular intervals, burlesque music started up an anarchic stage game where the crown was passed between actors and actresses in a circle until the music stopped. Through this wonderfully carnivalesque staging of the circularity of power, such sequences subverted the genre of historical tragedy by recasting transfers of power as farce, where characters spun round on what Nicoleta Cimpoes has called, ‘the dizzy merry-go-round of history’.35 Moreover, Richard’s emotional final speeches in prison were spoken by the actor face-down on the stage, deconstructing the intense pathos of these speeches through an apparent inability to communicate them.36 At the end of the performance

34 Howard and Rackin note the way in which the episode with the Duchess of York ‘lowers the tone to domestic comedy’, Engendering a Nation, p. 56. Leonard Barkan has also remarked on the textual elements of farce, bathos and ‘semi-comic dramaturgy’ that distinguish Bullingbrook’s rule from Richard’s in ‘The Theatrical Consistency of Richard II’, Shakespeare Quarterly, 29 (1975), pp. 5–19 (p. 17). These performances, however, suggested such elements were as present during Richard’s reign as they are in Bullingbrook’s.
36 I am assuming that this was intentional on the part of the actor and director and not just
(v. 6), the characters were paired together in a dance which extended the notion of the circularity of power beyond the text. The final couple were Bullingbrook and Richard who waltzed their way to the front of the stage where Richard stole Bullingbrook’s crown in performative revenge for his textual usurpation. Following the dance, this sense of power as farce keyed into the cynical contemporary mediatization of politics. When Bullingbrook addressed his plea for forgiveness for Richard’s coming murder to the audience rather than to the assembled cast around him (v. 6. 38–52), the plea was framed as just another example of political spin by an adroit, media-friendly new ruler. In a country like Portugal where the Socialist government, and in particular its leader, José Sócrates, is known to be acutely sensitive about its public image in the media, such an appropriation of the play represented a highly pertinent political intervention.

Yet if the performance de-legitimized contemporary male political authority through parody, what did it put in its place? Is there not a risk — to return to one of the most frequent critiques of postmodernism — that it merely aestheticizes political impotence in its suggestion that fundamentally all forms of politics and politicians are alike? Johannes Birringer has spoken of ‘the tenacious memory that the theatre can have of the history of dispossession’. Such micro-narratives of dispossession highlight the increasingly unequal political relationship between the powerful and the powerless. In this Richard II, ten or more suitcases were packed and repacked onstage at regular intervals as the soldiers of the two armies trooped wearily from place to place, a potent visual reminder of the consequences for the wider population of power struggles among elites. This also seemed an apt metaphor for the Portuguese theatrical performer in the current globalized marketplace, selling his or her intercultural wares out of a standardized suitcase to an audience which is, in the words of Herbert Blau, ‘declassified’ and whose power as an audience ‘is not the spontaneously live ideology but the fringe benefit of collective dispossession’. The current international financial and environmental crises are revealing the contradictions of late capitalism more starkly than theatre ever could.

a case of bad acting. In general, however, the disturbingly sinister performance of Gonçalo Amaral as Bullingbrook was vastly more subtle and effective than that of João Ricardo as Richard, perhaps emblematic of yet another generational shift in terms of acting skills.


38 Johannes Birringer, p. 166.

39 Herbert Blau, The Audience (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 357. Nuno Cardoso simultaneously worked on another performance of the play, R2, with the young people in the underprivileged Lisbon neighbourhood of Cova da Moura, explicitly indicating his concern with the contemporary dispossessed. Here the figure of Richard II became the Presidente da Junta de Freguesia.
Indeed, theatre is not immune to such processes as seen by the transformation of the Dona Maria II into a public limited company in the new millennium. Their 1995 performance of *Richard II* appears to endorse the negative views of the politics of performance suggested by Dennis Kennedy and Eugénia Vasques, particularly Kennedy’s view of performance during this period as ‘adrift’ and ‘unexamined in its purpose’, yet this would be to ignore the ways in which the performances were used by theatrical and artistic practitioners to create new autonomous spaces for the visual and aural languages of performance. The 2007 co-production of *Richard II*, on the other hand, suggests the emergence of a reconfigured notion of the political in the new millennium. What is intriguing about postmodern theatre work in the contemporary context is that its later appearance in Portuguese theatre coincides with its critique; in other words, as it begins to become visible, it also suggests what it might lack. In this particular instance, recognition that postmodern work has often ignored questions of gender coincided with concrete steps to foreground this through postmodern strategies which in turn pointed to the need to situate performance socially and historically. Such a multi-directional approach to the political may lack the certainties of the political theatre work of a Brecht or of an Augusto Boal. Nevertheless, it is a form of political theatre work in national theatres which is, in the words of Dan Rebellato ‘appropriate for an age in which the national political institutions are being overpowered by global capital, and the international institutions that might give contingent force to our developing cosmopolitan sense have not yet been built.’

*Universidade do Minho*

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