

Exile in my own land by Jorge Loureiro Figueira

Portugal, as such, does not exist. Everybody knows that. However, nobody admits the obvious. Portugal does not exist. And nobody admits it. The repeated negation of that very evident fact (that Portugal does not exist), and the disproportionate means provided by the government, by the local authorities and, especially, by the tourism boards and the commercial product companies, at the disposal of the people of the whole country and worse, of the foreigner, all in order to contradict the fact that Portugal does not exist, and in that way prove the fantastical invention that Portugal exists, that negation and those means are, in the best of cases, the only Portugal that exists. Therefore, the paradox generates, obviously, that continuous unease of which the poets and some historians speak, an unease common to said Portuguese, to all those who take the adjective of Portuguese, because they speak Portuguese and say they come from Portugal and are Portuguese, and because they feel bad knowing that Portugal does not exist, despite it seeming, to them, that it must forcibly exist. This unease, which the reader may be feeling at this moment, and for which there is no cure, is what makes this thing move. And it was this problem which the Teatro do Vestido chose as inspiration for its work in the last few months, taking as its aegis the famous verse by Alexandre O'Neill (1924—1986), from the book *Feira Cabisbaixa*, from 1965, in the poem entitled Portugal: "Portugal: question that I have within me."*

What can a poem, which was written under the black wing of tyranny, have to do with the Teatro do Vestido shows, created in freedom, by people born in the 1970s? The work of the group seeks the wholeness of the theatrical experience, including the actors and spectators, giving themselves over, body and soul, to an original, owned and authentic scene. Each time they go to a new land, they create a new play. And in it they include what from the past is present, what is neither seen nor spoken, but is an integral part of what is within us. If the research and imagination of the past years' work was concentrated, above all, on what had happened to their parents' generation, born in the second half of the 20th century, this year's work goes in search of the grandparents. They went looking to relive the revolution, to find the fountain of youth. *Mãos Gretadas*, in Figueira da Foz, in July; *Silêncios Persistentes*, in Madrid, in June; *Paisagem com Pessoas, Ocupação* and *Era uma vez um país assim*, in Lisbon, in April, they lift up all the rocks to see what is hidden beneath them. *Viagem a Portugal* is based on interviews with people from Alcanena, about the spaces where it will be shown and the objects that can be found there. These things are seen as work material, from which to build a series of scenes. Those scenes and the respective editing were filtered by the group's interest in revealing the genealogy of those who took part in them and, in this way, reveal the origin and destination of Portugal and the countless places and people which make up the country. The expectation is that, by telling the story of the journey that we took to get here, currently, all together, we will have an idea of where we're going. We may even decide where we're going together, instead of waiting for the latest news and the latest social networks to push us around. One day, I read in a Portuguese History book, King D. Carlos asked some fishermen, whom he met out at sea, if they were from Portugal, and they responded that they weren't; that they were in fact from Póvoa de Varzim. Would the citizen of Alcanena or Minde or Cartaxo think twice, if they crossed paths with King D. Carlos? I am from the Intermunicipal Community of the Middle Tagus? It doesn't have the same appeal. Portugal always has books of history and poetry, there are war memories, from the French invasions to the colonial war, on emigration to Brazil, France and Switzerland, on what was left over, an idea of what was left behind, of what it is impossible to do in Portugal, of what is mandatory, of what is essential, and who might know how to respond to these questions. But the point is that the official Portugal, united and indivisible, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman, the Portugal of supermarket chains and souvenir shops, the Salazar Museum which the council president of Santa Comba Dão wants to have built in order to, perhaps, compete with Fátima in the number of lit church candles, that Portugal, registered trademark, does not exist, it dissolves in the air once acquired. If it existed and was solid, why would we need the propaganda of Portugal dos Pequenitos, and the contests for the seven wonders of this and that, and the national anthem? There may even be many portugals, in the plural, intimate, numerous, personal, written in lower case, and within them the image of a giant Portugal which can't

contain itself with happiness, I can even concede that. But Portugal? It doesn't exist. Actually, in this, one cannot distinguish the Portuguese from other citizens from other European countries, which also don't exist. The denial is so strong that all European countries invaded other lands, created and expanded empires, invented and harassed others, in order to, in the end, be able to say they exist in and of themselves. It is all a lie; nothing remains. Portugal is only a matter for the poets. Among them, at the head, the poets of the Teatro do Vestido, who insist on seeing things where they don't exist. They went in search of reliving the revolution; of finding the fountain of youth. That was **the question for O'Neill and remained** a question for Saramago. It is not in vain the generic title for this project, *Viagem a Portugal*, is admittedly stolen from the author of *Jangada de Pedra*, he who is, as a result of his voluntary exile, simultaneously the least and the most Portuguese of Portuguese writers. In a place dominated by the news and by social networks, there is an urgency in recapitulating and making public the real history of the adjective Portugal, the personal one, the lower case one. The question could be: — Is it possible that there will ever be a country named Portugal? Will the Portugal of my grandparents be the same as that of yours? What was the country of my parents like, from where I was irremediably exiled? Exiled from the country of our parents and grandparents, who isn't curious to know from where they came, in order to know where they are going? I am speaking of every one and of Portugal.

* (...) Portugal: question I carry within, /slash to the bone,
insatiable hunger, /trapped noseless pointer without a
partridge, /polished nag, /crestfallen fair, /my remorse, /
my remorse belonging to us all..
(verse translated by Elsa Vieira)