

VIRGÍLIO MARTINHO

(Lisbon, 18/09/1928 – Almada, 04/12/1994)

Novelist and translator, Virgílio Martinho dedicated himself to literature when still quite young, but a chance visit to the theatre in Campolide was to change his destiny (Benite 1994: 7).

The author spent his childhood in Setúbal, Grândola and Barreiro, moving with his family whenever his father, a railway worker, changed position. He later returned to Lisbon, where he attended high school and completed a professional course qualifying him in technical design. From early on he developed a keen political awareness that drove him to actively oppose Salazar's dictatorial regime. He became involved in the youth organisation MUD Juvenil and was arrested for his political activities, serving a one-year sentence in Aljube prison when he was only 21 years old.

Towards the end of the 1950s he frequented the Café Gelo in Rossio, and the Royal in Cais do Sodré, mixing with writers who were part of the poetic movement of *surrealismo-abjeccionismo*. In this initial phase of his literary education, he embraced the influence of the irreverent writing of the so called «second generation of Portuguese surrealism». Moreover, it would be Mário Cesariny, one of the movement's principal proponents, who would publish Martinho's first text, *Festa pública*, in a collection that included several authors, entitled *A antologia em 1958* (1958). In this period, the writer wrote the preface for *Crítica de circunstância* (1966) by Luiz Pacheco, and organised, with Ernesto Sampaio, the *Antologia de humor português* (1969). In a tribute to his friend, the poet António José Fortes, Virgílio Martinho recalled these times: «we were militants of a life that we dreamed could be different, seeing poetry as the shining source of all our youthful existence. To change life, transform the world. Rimbaud and Marx: the golden promise» (Martinho 2013: 187).

Discovering theatre as the perfect place to give voice to his political and social ideas, a conviction that would never leave him, changed the literary path of this author, who had already produced the book of short stories *Orlando em trípico e aventuras* (1961) and the novel *O grande cidadão* (1963)

It was Joaquim Joaquim Benite, founder of the Grupo de Campolide, based in the Campolide Atlético Clube, who drew him to the theatre, inviting him to adapt *A vida do grande Dom Quixote de la Mancha e do gordo Sancho Pança*, by António José de Silva. The play opened for the first time in 1972, however «the group had to move to the Hall of the Sociedade de Belas-Artes (Fine Arts Society) in order to accommodate all the people who wanted to see the play. It was the birth – so rare – of a new Portuguese playwright» (Benite 1994: 8). The play toured the country, presenting over 60 performances. «This is the essence of theatre», said the playwright, «[g]iving it to be seen [is] the goal. Entertaining and teaching. Teaching and motivating. Popular theatre is the option at play here» (Cruz *apud* Martinho 1973: 196).

From that year on, Virgílio Martinho became the theatre collective's resident playwright, working as author, playwright and adapter of texts for more than 20 years, a relationship he maintained throughout his career. In 1978 he moved with them when the

Grupo de Campolide relocated to the theatre of Academia Almadense, changing its name to Companhia de Teatro de Almada (CTA) .

His first original play, the satire *Filopópulos* – «published in 1970 in the magazine *Grifo*, and which Virgílio Martinho had written 10 years earlier, inspired on his readings of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*» (Benite 1994: 7) –, premiered in 1973, directed by Joaquim Benite. Carlos Porto describes it as «[a] Greek tragedy turned inside out; the caricature of a Shakespearean tragedy; a political satire; a criticism of “bad manners”, an infernal “vaudeville”» (Porto *apud* Martinho 1973: back cover). In his turn, Urbano Tavares Rodrigues praises the playwright, and the show in which he denounces false democrats, remarking on «the talent, caustic and sometimes provocative irony, penchant for tragic farce, raw romantic lyricism, epic propensity and flights of surrealism and above all acerbic and unexpected clarity [...]» (Rodrigues 1995: 64). More recently, Selda Soares discerns in the play the « experience gathered from the Cesariny group», a tendency which expressed itself irregularly throughout his complete dramatic production (Soares 2002: 29).

In 1974, Virgílio Martinho translated *Fulgor e morte de Joaquim Murieta* (*The Splendour and Death of Joaquim Murieta*) by Pablo Neruda, and in the years leading up to the April Revolution his writing intensified. He began working with other groups, both with original texts (*Os três patrões bons*, part of the programme for *Aqui é que a porca torce o rabo*, for the theatre company, Seiva Trupe, 1975; *O herói chegado da guerra*, included in *Notícias do poder*, by the Grupo Teatro Proposta, 1976), as well as adaptations (*A cidade dourada ou nem tudo o que luz é ouro*, by Teatro de la Candelaria, for A Barraca, 1976). In the same year, he adapted his own novel of the same name *O grande cidadão* for the Grupo de Campolide, intensifying his warnings against fascism «through the discussion of the text, the setting of the characters in our own historical context, through the political moment we are traversing, once again working through a collective process, an intensive group work which begins with the writing and ends with the performance piece (Martinho 1976: 161).

In 1977 the Grupo de Campolide turned professional and staged *1383*, an adaptation of the Chronicles of King João I by Fernão Lopes, at the Teatro da Trindade. The play retraces the events of 1383-1385, seen as the first bourgeois revolution, recreating the past to stimulate thought on the present, in the style of Brechtian theatre.

A brief incursion into cinema resulted in the writing of the script for a short film by Sérgio Ferreira *O prisioneiro* (1977). However, it was in the two texts already mentioned – the allegory *O grande cidadão* and the historical fresco *1383* –, that Luiz Francisco Rebello identifies the two guiding principles of Virgílio Martinho's work: «poetic invention and civic commitment, both impregnated with a fierce love of freedom learnt in the aesthetic school of surrealism and in anti-fascist militancy » (Rebello 1995: 23).

Already at the Academia Almadense, Joaquim Benite directed a new adaptation by Martinho, *As aventuras de Till Eulenspiegel* (1978), based on *Légende de Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzack au pays de Flandres et ailleurs* (1868) by Charles de Coster. Carlos Porto, always attentive to the literary quality of his plays, views it as «a major work, a model of the popular novel of which VM has written a masterly synthesis [...]» (Porto 1995: 32). However, his adaptation of *O navio dentro da cidade* (1979) by André Kedros remained unpublished (Anon. 1995: 75).

At the beginning of the eighties, the author continued to produce dramaturgy, but his theatrical writing was now channelled towards publication, with the printing of *A sagrada família* (1980) and *O herói chegado da guerra e outros textos em teatro* (1981), which contained seven plays. The author himself divided them up into those he attributed to his imagination (*António José da Silva, O herói chegado da guerra e Os vampiros*), and those based on interviews, newspaper chronicles, news bulletins or conversations (*Catarina, Morte em terras de Montemor, Mulher, aqui estou como um cão perdido* and *Um povo amigo de lutar*). In this theatre, which he wanted to be one «intervention and condemnation», the playwright gives voice to the grievances and experiences of others: «[...] the workers of my time, factory workers, rural workers, emigrants, in a struggle for their daily lives, for the transformation of the world, for the future» (Martinho 1981: back cover).

In 1982 he wrote *Pão de mel, Lda*, but although the play entered rehearsals it was never performed (Anon. 1995: 75-76). The following year Joaquim Benite received a new version of *1383* and another destined for younger audiences, *1383zinho*, which were part of the commemorations for the sixth Centenary of the beginning of the 1383 revolution. In the same year, *Fernão, sim ou não?*, toured the primary schools in the area of Almada, and *Abite, abite aqui dos de abite* was performed by Grupo Cénico da Sociedade Operária de Instrução e Recreio Joaquim António d' Aguiar.

Throughout the 80s and up until his death, Virgílio Martinho's collaboration with the Companhia de Teatro de Almada continued on a regular basis, including the writing of texts for theatre programmes. He also continued to adapt and rewrite, in what Luiz Francisco Rebello describes as «one of the most intelligent exercises in the theatrical transcription of works not originally conceived for stage in our dramatic literature» (Rebello 1995: 23). With Joaquim Benite, Virgílio Martinho adapted *Hughie/Antes do pequeno-almoço* (1984), based on texts by Eugene O'Neill, and participated in the dramaturgical construction of *Réus e juízes* (1985), based on texts by Gil Vicente and António José da Silva, directed by José Martins. Two original plays for younger audiences – *De pequenino é que se torce o pepino* (Grupo de Intervenção Cultural, 1988), and *Valentim e Valentina* (CTA, 1989) –, were followed by *Amor a quanto obrigas* (CTA, 1990), inspired on Gil Vicente, directed by Vítor Gonçalves. In 1991 he created *O gelo à mesa* (posthumously presented by Miguel Moreira in 2001) and in 1992, 20 years after its premiere and by the same director, *A vida do grande D. Quixote de la Mancha e do gordo Sancho Pança* constituted CTA's 52nd production.

Joaquim Benite found the words to astutely sum up the writer's dramaturgical production: «the characters behave as poetic entities, who are concerned with reality but who do not try to constitute realistic portrayals. It is almost a theatre of puppets, of dolls, of symbolic characters that constantly express the essential confrontation between the individual and intuition. They are critical plays, in which the most violent humour and unforgiving satire is mixed with lyricism and the fraternal recognition of an excluded humanity» (Benite 1994: 8).

Commenting on the unusual status of resident playwright that Virgílio Martinho occupied during this period, Selda Soares points to the intense dialogue between the labour of writing and the theatrical work, the consequences of which are «texts created on stage», in which «the phases of the writing process [are indistinguishable]. His [these] texts are a result of an experience in and with the staging, a result of the voices of the

actors, the director's hand, and a knowledge that comes from the stage area and the lighting, the bodies and the voices, which no other writer in Portugal has been able to experiment with in such a continuous and productive way» (Soares 2001: 35).

Issue n.º 10 of the magazine *Cadernos* (1995) was dedicated entirely to the writer and in 2006, on receiving the Medalha de Ouro (Golden Medal) from the town of Almada, Joaquim Benite remembered his friend as one of the anchors and most important inspirations of his work.

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