

VASCO DE MENDONÇA ALVES

(Lisbon, 19/04/1883 – Lisbon, 04/12/1962)

Vasco de Mendonça Alves enjoyed a long career as a playwright, writing for the Portuguese theatres from 1909, the year of the premiere of *Último amor* (Teatro do Príncipe Real, Lisboa), to 1957, when the Empresa Teatral Avenida staged *Doutora em leis* (Teatro da Trindade).

Luiz Francisco Rebello points to the narrow circle of the bourgeois family that his work encompasses (2010: 253-254), and the patent defence of traditional values in *Filhos* (Teatro Nacional, 1910), *Promessa* (Teatro República, 1910), *A avó* (Teatro do Ginásio, 1913), *Noite de Santo António* (Teatro República, 1916), *Sedutores* (Teatro de S. Carlos, 1921), *Bodas de oiro* (Teatro Apolo, 1923), *Perdoai-nos, Senhor* (Teatro da Trindade, 1927), *Meninas* (Teatro Nacional Almeida Garrett, 1935) and *A hora do dinheiro* (Teatro Avenida, 1940). Even though the theatre industry celebrated him as an author of unqualified success, or perhaps for this very reason, his work was attacked with caustic verve by the modernist Almeida Negreiros in his famous *Manifesto anti-Dantas* (1916), which referred to «Vasco Mendonça Alves' little lies set in granny's time!». The traditionalism of the playwright, who defended the monarchy, was still inscribed in the historical themes he explored at the height of the Republican regime, with the plays *A conspiradora* and *Os marialvas* (both performed at the Teatro do Ginásio, in 1913), *Um Bragança* (Teatro Politeama, 1931) and *Vila Viçosa*, published by Livraria Didáctica in 1957.

In May 1923, the performance of *Bodas de oiro* received some harsh criticism from the press, igniting a debate that would go even further. Mário Costa wrote at the time: «Oh! It is not legitimate for anyone, especially the illustrious playwright sr. Vasco de Mendonça Alves, who has quite gained our sympathy and to whom we have done no harm – to torture us as he did, on the dreadful night of the 19th of this month» (*apud* Ribeiro 2015: 38). Artur Portela affirmed that « the critics disapproved unanimously », being certain that the author « having intended, whatever he might have said, to make his play, a problem play, had failed to do so, because of the lack of theatrical acuity it revealed, the fragmented action of the play, the antiquated process [...]» (Portela 1923: 4). The diatribe became so embittered that several outraged playwrights who supported the author wrote the pamphlet *Manifesto pelo Teatro Português contra os que, sistematicamente, o dificultam*, (*Manifesto for the Portuguese Theatre against those who systematically obstruct it*), signed by Vitoriano Braga, Carlos Selvagem, João Correia de

Oliveira and Alfredo Cortez, at a time in which the Theatre incited strong passions (Fadda 2017).

In spite of his aesthetically and ideologically conservative stance, Vasco de Mendonça Alves joined up with the founders of the *Círculo de Cultura Teatral* (1945), a theatre group uniting personalities of different political affinities, such as Alves Redol, Luiz Francisco Rebello, Gino and Grazia Saviotti or Jorge de Faria: «[I]t was a love of theatre that brought together these men and women from different generations, academic backgrounds, and ideological viewpoints» (Rebello 1996: 14). This would soon lead to the origins of the *Teatro-Estúdio do Salitre*, «a group committed to “theatrical essentialism”, which between 1946 and 1950 had a decisive influence on the national experimental theatre of the post war period» (Falcão 2008: 125). It was run by Luiz Francisco Rebello, Vasco de Mendonça Alves and Gino Saviotti, and based at the Italian Institute of Culture, at the time directed by Savotti, who afforded the group some protection because of the Institute’s extraterritorial status. It was here that *Viúvos* premiered as part of the new group’s first show in 1946. He continued to be involved in the project, and in 1947, Mendonça Alves directed the fourth «essentialist» show, which included his play *Sonho*, and in 1950, *Vésperas de exame* was staged there. Commenting on Vasco de Mendonça Alves’ «lovable shows», the critic of the *Seara Nova*, João Pedro de Andrade, in an article of May 1950, notes the absence of «any aesthetic or ideological innovation» (Andrade 2004: 342), an opinion shared by Luiz Francisco Rebello, who removed himself from the group’s «heterogeneous administration» after the *Estúdio do Salitre*’s 6th show in 1948 (Rebello 1996: 19).

Vasco de Mendonça Alves’ substantial dramaturgical production also fed the repertory of other companies, such as that of Ilda Stichini, who performed *Os hóspedes de D. Epifânia* (1931) and *Sonho de madrugada* (1931), or that of the *Teatro do Povo*, directed by Francisco Ribeiro, which presented *Ao peso da cruz* (1939) and *A rua* (1951). *Primeiro beijo* was staged at the *Teatro Nacional D. Maria II*, 1910 and *Flores que se desfolham* at the “house of Srs. Sequeira Bramão, on Rua da Eschola Polythecnica”, 1916; Anón. 1916: 1146). *Viva da Costa!* was included in the anthology, *Teatro português em um acto (1900-1945)*, organised by Luiz Francisco Rebello, who dates the play at 1925 (1997: 403). The academic also identifies, among others, the following one act plays: *A neta* (1919), *Sorte grande* [Teatro Politeama, 1932], *Um chá*, *Antigas relações*, *És Tu?*, *Lá no céu combinaram*, *Um Beijo*, *Primeiras impressões*, *Arlete e Estefânia*, *Um para o outro* and *Com muita pressa* (Rebello 1987: 38).

The National Museum of Theatre and dance preserves the manuscripts of his plays *Volta / A avó* (1909), *Duas noivas* (1914), *Provas públicas* (1937), *Quando canta o*

Pintassilgo (1937), *Quero casar* (s/d), *Sorte grande* (s/d) and *Quem fizer juras de amor* (s/d), as well as two typewritten copies containing parts of an operetta in 3 acts entitled *Cantiga de amor* (s/d). One of the most successful dramas in his long list of plays was *Meu amor é traiçoeiro* (Teatro Capitólio, 1935), performed by Ilda Stichini, and three decades later, by Laura Alves. It was twice adapted for cinema, first in 1976, directed by Correia Alves, and then in 1987, directed by Cecília Netto.

Two of his plays were televised by RTP - the national television broadcaster: *À porta da rua* (1943) in an adaptation by Armando Vieira Pinto, directed by Herlander Peyroteo in 1960, and *Rompia a manhã*, staged at the Teatro Carlos Alberto by Teatro do Povo in 1934, was broadcast in 1963.

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Rita Martins

Sebastiana Fadda

Translated by Amanda Booth