

BENTO MÂNTUA

(Luanda, 26/09/1878 – Lisboa, 20/12/1932)

Bento Mântua was a senior civil servant at the Directorate-General of the Treasury, occupying the posts of director general and secretary general of the ministry of Finance (Anón. 1932). His enthusiasm for sports was reflected in nine successive mandates as president of Sport Lisboa, later to become Sport Lisboa e Benfica, from 1917 to 1926. However, it is as a playwright that he will be remembered.

He began writing for theatre during the time of the First Republic, producing texts that denounced the damages inflicted by an unjust social order. His plays were «carved out of sincerity, written with an austere bluntness of someone with a duty to perform, with little concern for the pleasure or displeasure they might provoke» (*ibid.*). The most significant part of his work is characterised by a dense naturalism explored in short acts that focus on social misery.

Bento Mântua's work dealt with human reality within its social framework and at certain moments, inclined toward the workers' theatre movement of the early 20th century. He began his career as a playwright through the director Araújo Pereira, who staged *Novo altar*, an anticlerical play performed at the Teatro Moderno on 31 July, 1905.

The Teatro Nacional – formerly the D. Maria II until the founding of the Republic, and then the Almeida Garrett – presented a part of the author's dramaturgy. In 1908 the regional drama *Má sina* opened, but was immediately withdrawn from the stage after only a single performance (Sequeira 1955: 502). However, at a later date it was said to have been «performed with success» (Rebello 1997:247). The openly antimilitaristic, political affirmations in *Ordinário... marche!* led to its rejection in 1913. However, after the First World War, the play was chosen by the drama group, Grupo Dramático Aurora Social of the Évora union of workers' syndicates, who announced «3 beautiful acts of painful lessons in which the distinguished writer indignantly dissects the degradation of present corrupt society, sinking under the deprivation of vice, egoism, and crime» (Anón. 1919: 22). The premier followed soon after, early in the following year at the Teatro Garcia de Resende, with proceeds going to the school, Escola Francisco Ferrer (Anón. 1920: 36).

Partly to compensate for the earlier debacle, the management of the Teatro Nacional authorised the play *O álcool* (1912; Sequeira 1955: 502), performed by students from the Escola da Arte de Representar (Acting School), and directed by António Pinheiro. It was hailed by Albino Forjaz de Sampaio as a «pioneering work of great and true theatre of the future, full of ideas and aspirations, a theatre-lesson, and therapeutic» (*apud* Rebello 1997: 2007). However, in the opinion of Luiz Francisco Rebello, the text «read today, appears to be a caricature of the naturalist stereotype» (*ibid.*). This was followed on the same stage by *Gente moça* (1913) and *Furtar* (1916). *O álcool* and *Gente moça* were published in 1913, the latter translated by the Lusitanian-Catalan Ribera y Rovira. Both were recommended to the readers of *O socialista* – n.º 455, 14 October, 1913 – as Beatriz Garcia points out, in her study on theatre and socialism during the First Republic (*apud* 2009: 297).

Other theatres received texts by Bento Mântua: *A morte* was staged at the Teatro Sá da Bandeira of Porto in 1912, and *O fado* was presented at the Teatro de S. Carlos on 15 March, 1915 as part of an arts festival programme organised by Henrique Alves. Mário Moreau records that before the performance «Ferreira da Silva read out an explanation of the play by the author. This was inspired on a painting by José Malhoa with the same title and on the fado “Canção das Perdidas” written by Augusto Gil. Both the painter and the poet watched the performance» (Moreau 1999:288). *O fado* would also be the play chosen for the commemorations for the 46th anniversary of the Paris Commune, which took place at the Teatro do Povo da Mouraria, as announced in *O Combate*, n.º 125, of 18 March, 1917 (*apud* Garcia 2009: 186). It would also be an inspiration for the film of the same name, directed by Maurice Mariaud in 1923, with Eduardo Brasão playing one of the main roles.

During the '20s, Bento Mântua's dramatic production tailed off, perhaps because of his involvement in promoting sports. He did, however, continue to maintain a relationship with writing and the stage, having authored the play *A freira* (1916), the «one act» *O passado* (1919) and the historical drama *O cerco de Tânger* (1923), written in collaboration with António Sacramento. *Quando manda o coração*, another one act play, premiered at the Teatro Avenida in Coimbra in 1925.

In the year of his sudden death, *Um homem* was staged at the Teatro Odéon (Anón. 1932), the dialogue in verse *Quem me dera ver* was published and, according to the date on the manuscript, he completed the one act comedy *Daqui a 30 anos* (Ferreira 1966: 150). Luiz Francisco Rebello mentions other plays by the author such as *A cigana* (with António Sacramento) and *Mulher, sempre mulher* (Rebello 1997: 247), and the manuscripts of *Terra mater* and *Nortada*, of which nothing was ever reported, but are stored in the archives of the Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança.

In spite of the gravity of the themes he approached in his work, especially in *A solo*, the author also wrote comedies and pieces for entertainment theatre. These include *A tríplice aliança*, with Salvador Marques, *A tia Ricardina*, with Ernesto Rodrigues, and the crime play *O Crime da Avenida 33* (Teatro do Ginásio, 1914), in collaboration with Luís Barreto da Cruz. He also put together an anthology of Portuguese and Brazilian poets *O livro das cortesãs* (1916) in partnership with Albino Forjaz Sampaio.

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