

CARLOS COUTINHO

(Fornelos, 22/08/1943)

Carlos Alberto da Silva Coutinho is a journalist and writer. His political activism in the Portuguese Communists Party (PCP) prior to 25 April revolution, and his consequent involvement in the resistance movement against the «*Estado Novo*», the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano, were to have a lasting influence on his personal and professional life.

He attended the diocesan seminary of Vila Real for four years, but abandoned his studies, having opted for a secular life. After qualifying as a primary teacher he entered the teaching profession for a while, but was called up for his military service and later mobilised to take part in Portugal's colonial war. Stationed in Mozambique, he served as a military nurse in neuropsychiatry, ending up, however, by joining the local underground fight against colonialism and fascism. In 1969 he returned to Lisbon, where he began his career in journalism, becoming more deeply involved in efforts to oppose the regime. On 22 February 1973 he was arrested by the PIDE, the secret police and charged with being a member of the outlawed Communist Party. He was released almost immediately after the Carnation Revolution, on the 26th of April 1974, along with all other political prisoners. His principal activity is connected to journalism.

In relation to his dramaturgy, it was in a children's play in two acts, *Neve*, published in 1965 and signed under the name Carlos Alberto, that he first revealed his fascination for writing theatre. In 1970 he returned to it and refined it. This was the year he wrote his «literary excuse for theatre» *O herbicida*, published in 1972, which combines elements of theatre of the absurd and social activism.

In 1972 he wrote *A perda da reputação*, a play that has since disappeared, and in 1973, *A última semana antes da festa*, published in 1974. This is his best known and most disseminated theatre text, translated and published in other languages and countries. It appeared in magazine/book (in Russian: Moscow, 1977, translated by Anatolii Kuprikov; in Spanish: La Havana and Latin America [?], 1977 [?], on the initiative of Rogério Paulo*), as well as in anthologies (in German: Berlin, 1978, organised by José Luís de Freitas Branco; Hungarian: Budapest, 1980, org. John Benyhe; Italian: Rome, 2001, org. Sebastiana Fadda). In Portugal, it was presented to the public for the first time more than 20 years after it was written (Teatro da Malaposta, 1995, stage direction by Mário Jacques). It is «an allegory about how one survives (if one survives?) in a suffocating, heavily policed and censured space. An inquisitorial fascism inspired on Catholicism, where the slightest desire is repressed, where there is a constant fear of speaking, where the slightest action is noted down and duly punished [...]» (Gomes 1995: 2). An enclosed and repressive time and place, in which the characters manage as best they can, a few resisting, others resigned and the rest complicit with the system.

Condemnation of dysfunctional policies and societies characterised Carlos Coutinho's dramatic production until the end of the 70s, after which he began working on other literary genres more closely linked to the profession of journalism.

Before this, five one act plays were brought together and published in the collection *Teatro de circunstância* (1976): *O cartão*, *A teia*, *O telefonema*, *Ritual e Amanhecer*. Two of these had a life on stage. *A teia* was performed in 1977 by the Teatro Experimental do Porto and in 1990, by Teatro em Movimento, who took the performance on tour around the country, later taking part in the Portuguese Theatre Festival of Aubervillier; it was also presented by some amateur theatre groups. *O telefonema* premiered in 1979 by the Grupo de Intervenção Cultural da Covilhã. In 1980 both of these plays were published in Hungary.

The idea of examining specific situations from an historical, dialectical perspective continued, as evidenced in the plays he next wrote – *A estratégia do cinismo* and *O jantar do comissário* –, which appeared in a joint publication in 1977 and were staged in the same year: the first by the Bonecreiros; the second by Barraca, presented with *O telefonema*, along with other texts by various authors in the programme *Ao qu'isto chegou*, which was the subject of a degree thesis defended in Belgium.

At the end of the '70s he also wrote *O depoimento da família Martins* (1978; Grupo de Teatro Projector, 2015) and *Homem certo em casa certa* (1979, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Culture; performed by the independent companies Teatro Construção and Teatro de Ensaio Transmontano, 1980). They were published in a book in 2011. In the same year, the Teatro de Ensaio do Barreiro presented *Uma noite com Carlos Coutinho*, with performances of the plays *O telefonema* and *O jantar do comissário*.

The theatre of this playwright portrays cases, vicissitudes and aspects of an intolerable daily life, incompatible with respect for human dignity, with the aim of transforming the way reality is perceived. In this way, states of oppression, control, intimidation, mistrust and fear established to manipulate society both in its broadest sense and in its cellular microcosms – as in the case of the nuclear family, the workplace and social spaces – must be fought with the weapon of words which flow from the actors to the audience, spreading from mouth to mouth and inviting reflection and emancipation.

The playwright's political and literary militancy encompasses other genres, more closely connected to his work in journalism, which include *Recordações da casa dos mortos* (1976) and *No país da alegria* (1976), as well as the novels *Uma noite na guerra* (1978), *O que agora me inquieta* (1985; also translated and published in the United States) and *Os duros dias* (2001).

* Information provided by the author.

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This translation is based on the updated Portuguese version of the bio-bibliographical information relating to Carlos Coutinho edited in: Sebastiana Fadda (editor), *Teatro portoghese del XX secolo*, Roma, Bulzoni Editore, 2001, which includes the complete translation of the play *L'ultima settimana prima della festa*.

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