

CARLOS SELVAGEM

(Lisbon, 13/08/1890 – Lisbon, 04/06/1973)

The pseudonym of Carlos Tavares de Andrade Afonso dos Santos, officer, historian and playwright.

Carlos Selvagem was the nickname given to him at the Military College he attended between 1901 and 1907, and later adopted as the pen name with which he signed a vast body of recognised work. A soldier by career, the writer fought in the First World War in the north of Mozambique. Almost two decades later, he occupied high ranking posts in Africa, having been appointed governor of the district of Inhambane (1931-34) and of the district of Huíla (1934-35), as well as military commander of Cape Verde.

Entre giestas, a «rural drama» presented at the Teatro República (the former D. Amélia and future São Luiz) in 1917, marked the beginning of an important theatrical career which was to last until 1966. The play, well received by critics, was characteristic of the theatre of regionalist tendencies, most notable in some of the texts appreciated by the urban audiences in Lisbon, who were «delighted with episodes which supposedly bring the language, customs and atmosphere of the provinces to the Portuguese capital» (Bastos / Vasconcelos 2004: 108). In fact, as Luiz Francisco Rebello points out, most of the action in Carlos Selvagem's work takes place outside the capital: in Entre Douro and Minho (*Ninho de águias*, Teatro do Ginásio, 1920), in Beira Baixa (*O herdeiro*, Teatro Politeama, 1923), in Alentejo (*Miragem*, Teatro Nacional Almeida Garrett, 1925), and in a Beira border town (*O anjo rebelde*, Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, 1962). However, as Rebello notes, the playwright went much beyond picturesque regionalism, the location «being merely the frame that surrounded a conflict, which we could say was not rooted in a specific place» (2010: 250). And it is the «tutelary shadow of Ibsen» that the academic discerns in the «triptych consisting of *Ninho de águias*, *O herdeiro* (his apex) and *Miragem*. Where a society that seeks to lose itself and drown the tedium of its aimless existence in an outpouring of feelings is implacably placed on trial» (*ibid.*).

Appreciation for Carlos Selvagem was reflected in the regular performances of his plays on the stage of the Teatro Nacional (Almeida Garrett from 1910, renamed D. Maria II in 1939) up until 1964, when a fire destroyed the theatre. Besides the plays already mentioned, other plays were included in the theatre's repertory, such as *Cavalgada nas nuvens* (1922), described as an «historical episode» that revisits the battle of Alcácer Quibir, with a performance by Eduardo Brazão, as well as the comedy

Auspicioso enlace (1923), written in conjunction with André Brun, and directed by Augusto Melo. The regular staging of his plays continued when the Companhia Rey Colaço-Robles Monteiro took over the running of the Teatro Nacional. This company had already premiered *O herdeiro*, at the Teatro Politeama, and performed *Entre giestas* with success at the Teatro S. Carlos (1921), which was directed with impressive dramatic realism by António Pinheiro (Leal 2016: 30). As the new managers of the Teatro Nacional, the celebrated couple, Amélia Rey Colaço and Robles Monteiro, staged the premiere of the play in three acts *Telmo, o aventureiro* (1937), the bourgeois drama *A encruzilhada* (1941), the «heroic farce» *Dulcineia ou a última aventura de D. Quixote* (1944), with set and costumes designed by Almada Negreiros, *Balada de Outono* (1945) and the play in three acts *Espada de fogo* (1949).

Other theatres in the capital were also performing his plays: the pantomime-ballet *Serenata de Polichinelo* (written in 1927 [?]), demonstrated the writer's versatility; and the comedy in 3 acts *Charleston* (Teatro Politeama, 1929), written in conjunction with João Correia de Oliveira and Luís de Oliveira Guimarães; *A farsa do amor* (Teatro do Ginásio, 1951), written with Henrique Galvão, and staged by António Pedro; and *A Bela Impéria* (Teatro Avenida, 1966), Selvagem's last play, was performed once again by Amélia Rey Colaço in another production by the Companhia Rey Colaço-Robles Monteiro.

The playwright's interest in retracing history was also manifested in other plays that were never performed, such as the tragi-comedy *Os Távoras*, published in 1961, and *Garça Real*, which had remained unpublished until it appeared in the collection of unpublished plays, *Teatro Completo com peças inéditas* (1997), in two volumes, organised by Duarte Ivo Cruz, which also included the hitherto unpublished works *Noite de São Silvestre* and *D. Leonor - Flor de Altura*. Still within an historical framework, Carlos Selvagem wrote the novel *Ave-do-paraíso* (1928), the military and naval historical compendium *Portugal Militar* (1931), and another two studies on *Leonor Teles* (1956) and *D. Henrique* (1959). He also published children's stories, and together with Hernâni Cidade, wrote a series of books on Portuguese Culture.

A staunch nationalist, academic and defender of the colonial empire, Carlos Selvagem maintained a critical attitude, both in relation to the policies of the dictatorial regime, and the society of his times. His theatrical production reflects the social atmosphere in which he lived and his stance on the events he portrayed, a moral ideal cutting across the whole of his work and one « through which he attempted to conduct his life, on a personal and professional level » (Jorge 2007). Luiz Francisco Rebello distinguishes Selvagem as one of the best playwrights of his time and elects *O herdeiro*

as one of the most consistent and technically rigorous plays, placing it on a level with *Zilda e O lodo* by Alfredo Cortez, *Octávio* by Vitoriano Braga and *A vizinha do lado* by André Brun. In his time, Artur Portela, a critic not known for being consensual, considered Selvagem's first play, *Entre giestas*, " a masterpiece", whilst «*O herdeiro* was a play that one accepts and discusses, that ennobles the one who wrote it and the one who comments on it » (A. P. 1923: 4). Although the text reveals some weaknesses, for example in the construction of the protagonist, who «has form, character, even though it is at times somewhat feeble», but whose strong points arouse the greatest admiration: « the dialogue is of a formidable beauty [...] The language upholds itself at a height that, so far, no other in theatre has reached» (*ibid.*).

In 1944, on the occasion of the presentation of *Dulcineia ou a última aventura de D. Quixote*, João Pedro de Andrade wrote a long piece in which he recognised « the playwright's singular talents», the many symbols present «[in] a play for intellectuals and for the people, that repels the average comprehension that clings to routine» (Andrade 2004: 153-155). Except for certain weaknesses, «in which it is difficult to discern the part that came from the author from what was possibly imposed», there is a «crescendo of interest, which begins with the presentation of the ordinary, linear sentiments of puppet characters, rising to the complexity of situations in which they already begin to react like human beings, with the strings that move their limbs and heads transformed into sensitive fibres » (*ibid.*: 156), this being, in the end, "a European play, of universal themes» (*ibid.*: 164).

In the mid '50s, during a rerun of the play *O herdeiro*, João Pedro de Andrade, weighing the pros and cons, as he was accustomed to do, concluded this was the work of a «playwright of fibre, a writer of class», and that the weaknesses of the play were the « product of an excess of qualities. The quality of the dialogue, abundant in literary references, is excessive [...] which possibly stuns the audience, without interesting them» (Andrade 2004: 80-81). This, however, does not detract from its «powerful impact», far beyond the almost permanent amateurism of our dramaturgy. Ibsen inspires, from afar, that kind of social inconformity that becomes almost an indictment against such an elegantly selfish society [...] Shakespeare sets the tone of the dialogue in the third act [...] it is seldom that such esteemed mentors have united to steer such an integral and personal work» (*ibid.*)

After having retired from writing directly for the stage, Carlos Selvagem occupied the position of President of the Sociedade de Escritores e Compositores Teatrais Portugueses (Guild of Portuguese Theatrical Writers and Composers) from 1968 until his death in 1973.

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Rita Martins

Sebastiana Fadda

Translated by Amanda Booth