

CATARINA AND THE NEW FORMULAS FOR EXPRESSING THE CONTEMPORARY TRAGEDY

There are theatre performances capable of contradicting the older sentences about the definitive death of tragedy and about the impossibility of authentic manifestation of the tragic on a contemporary theatre stage. The present paper is intended to be an analytical investigation of the ways in which Tiago Rodrigues' *Catarina* problematizes, by particular means, a theme of subtle catastrophes and the capacity of the modern spectator to intellectually experience new and uncomfortable formulas of the tragic.

Key-words: *Catarina, Tiago, Rodrigues, tragic, tragedy*

I have previously written other about this upsetting feeling that I, more intensely, more frequently, have been experiencing in the last couple of years: the tragedy is making a comeback². Customary in life, it seemed to not feel so comfortable among theatre genres. The death of tragedy, announced the decades ago³, has proved itself to be, however, just a phase of retreat or a disguise. Intimately connected to the word telling the story, the tragedy did not feel comfortable in postdramatic theatre⁴, although it had enough means to express it.

Tiago Rodrigues' production⁵, *Catarina and The Beauty of Killing Fascists*⁶, which we had the privilege to invite⁷, in the fall of 2023, at the National Theatre Festival, is one of examples strong enough to revive the theatrically-expressed tragedy. It announces, describes, and represents the catastrophe, the tragic impasse,

¹ “George Enescu” National University of Arts, Iași.

² I approached this topic in “The Conflict with the Other. Premises of the Rebirth of Tragedy”, in Călin Ciobotari, *Letters to Hamlet. Essays on Theatre*, translated by Teodora Medeleanu, Mircea Sorin Rusu, Dana Bădulescu, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2023, pp. 204-223.

³ The reference is, of course, to George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, translated by Rodica Tiniș, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008.

⁴ “Drama as an essentially dialectical genre is at the same time the exquisite place of the tragic. Theatre after drama, we might thus suspect, would be a theatre without the tragic.” – Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, London, New York, Routledge, 2007, p.42.

⁵ Tiago Rodrigues, recently appointed director of the Festival d'Avignon, came forward and imposed himself through a multitude of theatre hypostases: playwright, actor, performer, director, artistic director. Currently, he is one of the most important and influential European directors. More about his works on: <https://tiagorodrigues.eu/en/english/> In the Romanian space, apart from the performance in NTF 2023, this year, at the Sibiu International Theater Festival, the performance *As Far as Impossible* was also presented.

⁶ Produced in 2020 by Teatro Nacional D Maria II, Lisbon, in co-production with several other European theatres and festivals, having Festival d'Avignon as executive producer.

⁷ As a member of the team of curators of the National Theater Festival, 2023 edition, together with Mihaela Michailov and Oana Cristea Grigorescu.

the marshy ethical dilemmas, the existential dead-ends we seem to have reached or that we will soon arrive to. The playwriting draws the contours of a dystopia, one that does not, however, address a reassuring far future, but operates with an immediate one (the play takes place in 2028) in which we can already recognise the shadows, breaths, thinking reflexes from the present time we are living in. The complexity of Rodrigues' creation, the multitude of layers it is constructed on, the density of the topics he proposes demand reflections not only on the production itself, but also on the aesthetic formulas it advances, but also on what is happening to us in a *time out of joints* other than Hamlet's.

A series of contextual specifications is required. I watched the production in a climate where in Ukraine the evil has almost become mundane, with a war that has been going on for so long, that its victims no longer spark inside us anything more than an accounting interest, pointing out the casualties. In parallel, in what seems to be a media competition, we follow another war, the one in the Gaza Strip, with other hundreds of deaths, with kidnappings and hostages, with mass-murders, radically doubting humanism, and calling for histories from the distant past to justify today's cruelty... On the streets of Bucharest, on the very days of the two shows of *Catarina*, rallies of an extremist party with an alarming increase in sympathy prefaced the performance. It was post-faced by marches against violences and pro-tolerance. Widening the lens, in Europe, evergrowing islands of violence, risking to turning into continents. Drift, incertitude, unpredictability... And, in addition to the uncontrollable spectacle of history, *Catarina and The Beauty of Killing Fascists*, a production that places itself inside this world to retell it to us, Brechtian and not lacking irony, through theatrical means. The Shakespearean function of theatre, that of mirroring, is doubled by another: that of testing (certain reactions) and of warning (about something that is getting or has already got out of control).

Politics and Tragedy

One of the disconcerting elements of *Catarina*... is the ability of the director-playwright to mythologize, at sight, a tradition, the production being exemplary also through its almost laboratory-like observations that showcase us a process that stands as a basis for numerous mythifications of history, relativizing the truth of that history or generating newer and newer truths. It is the tradition of a Portuguese family, that, since 1954, periodically kills fascists, "fascists" naming the promoters, with different degrees of guilt, of certain extreme-right ideas that touch especially upon women's freedoms. The conventional, symbolic, feminisation of the characters can induce the background impression of a dispute between the sexes, especially because the victims are always men, never women. It is not clear whether the family's attitude towards a fascist woman would also be this radical, although the ritual, as a constant reenactment of the founding gesture (a woman kills a man who has murdered a woman), excludes gender variations of the actants.

The main element of this tradition is that great-grandmother who killed her fascist husband in front of her children, avenging his murder of Catarina Eufémia, a 26 year old woman⁸. The tradition is, thus, rooted in a historical reality, but also in a

⁸ Real character from the history of Portugal. „Catarina was born into a family of *jornaleiros* (dayworkers). By the age of 17 she was married and had already been working in the fields for years. By 1954 she was a mother of 3 children and pregnant with a fourth. From the mid 1940s

double murder, in a double act of extreme violence that places us in the middle of a neo-tragic scenario. It is a tragedy, if not impure, then of a different kind than the one delivered to us by the ancient Greeks. The Gods are completely absent, and the Justice is of a chilling relativism. The injustice the classical tragic hero must endure loses its meaning for the simple meaning that the justice-injustice ratio no longer has any consistency. Only the tradition is called to supplement it and to justify the ritualic murders that traverse this family's history. A veteran-testamentary air, with that "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," avenges murder through murder and celebrates life through death. Each member of the family, when they turn 26, on the day the first Catarina was killed, kills, in turn, a fascist. Not just anyhow, not just anywhere, but in a space and time rigorously organised: the family retreats somewhere in the countryside, far from the public area represented by the urban environment. Nature plays, in fact, a major role in Rodrigues' production: it intensifies the feeling of ancient ritual practices carried out par excellence outdoor, at the same time evoking the purity of certain primary energies; the soles of the one who kills have to be touching the ground barefoot, the joy of feeding on flesh, the allusions to the Dionysiac - through the not few wine bottles present on stage or through the red wine that is poured, also ritually, at a certain moment, the gravel thrown over the oak sapling, the house, herself articulated on the trunk of an oak, the bodies of fascists feeding the vegetation, the tree barks we see scattered on the stage, gloomingly lit by the stage lights, the society of the barn swallows we are obsessively told about – all these package⁹ the representation of the catastrophe that lies in wait in the shadows.

The ritual is not a social-quotidian one, it does not have anything of the banality of the day-to-day mechanical behaviour of the individual captive in the predetermined frameworks of society. Its exceptional character derives, primarily, from the fact that it is "a family ritual," a secret one, based on trusting the blood ties of a group that acts as a single individual (all of them, including the men, are called Catarina), in spite of the differences between the members of this family (the production begins with a funny-domestic dispute between the vegetarians and the meat-eaters of this clan). It is not motivated by personal pleasures, but by duties, it is

onwards, agricultural workers raised economic demands, usually just before the harvest. In 1954 they demanded an increase in pay from 16 escudos to 23, still a pitiful amount. The landowners not only refused to pay but also hired other labour from different parts of the region. On hearing that the other agricultural labourers had been hired, Catarina and 14 women workers went to address them as they arrived and appealed for solidarity. However, the police had already arrived. Undeterred, Catarina approached the workers but was stopped by a GNR who asked her what she wanted. « Only bread and work » was the reply. The agent, considering the reply as « impudent » gunned her down with a machine gun. She died minutes later and the 8 month child she was carrying in her arms was also injured. The agent was never prosecuted", <https://www.thelleftberlin.com/helen-macfarlane-and-catarina-eufemia/>.

⁹ The tragedy is intimately linked in Rodrigues' works to the beauty of words, to the memory of the text. In the performance *By Heart*, Rodrigues asks ten audience members to memorise a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX. The performance will not end until the entire sonnet has been recited, from memory, by the audience. "The difference here is what Rodrigues leads us to in the end: a statement about how the texts we hold in our memory become « the decoration of the house of our interior », according to the literary critic George Steiner, whom Rodrigues quotes at length" (Maya Phillips, „*By Heart* Commits Community to Memory”, in *The New York Times*, 13th of October, 2021).

not optional, but compulsory. It is not performed just anytime, but, as I previously noted, on a certain day. On the other hand, however, it is also not burdened with useless complications. In its essence, the ritual of the killing is simple: shooting the victim, a victim that is not tortured beforehand, is not interrogated, as, just as true, is not given the possibility to defend itself. The only deceit the ritual resorts to in relation to the victim is the ephemeral illusion of a glimmer of hope: the one who will be sacrificed is given the chance to write on a note the name of somebody who is “more fascist” than them, in exchange to this denunciation being promised release. The group thus acquires information and hints about their next victims, a drop of cruelty that seems to amuse the one in charge of the game of freedom.

The members of this strange *genetic sect* (the analogies that can be formulated between genetics and ideologies are interesting) seem, moreover, to be foreign to them. They behave like normal people, ready to enjoy a good meal, a good wine, a pleasant evening summer, a conversation, the fact of being together. The tricks they play on each other are almost tender, and their existences seem outright serene. We can imagine them, beyond the ritual, in “civilian,” living their ordinary lives, with ordinary jobs, ordinary pastimes, and so on. For such people, the ritual also becomes a “moment of glory,” an annual compensation of the anonymity they decided to live in. Once a year, they put on traditional clothing, set up a festive table on which they write “No passing,” and kill a man whom they bury, marking the spot with an oak sapling.

The playwriting explores an ethical paradox: how far can one go with sanctioning violence? Is violence a solution for punishing violence? Is death a consolation for another death? Of course, these moral plights are not new, even if we only take into account the discussions on the capital punishment several states of the modern world faced or are still facing or, on an even more general note, on the philosophies of punishment and surveillance (Foucault). The novelty consists, however, in the way in which Rodrigues moves these ideas into an area of ideologies, the productions becoming, gradually, an upsetting picture in which we glimpse the extremes of the notable political axis (or political spectrum) theorised by the European culture¹⁰. The Portuguese family is, explicitly, left-wing. The frequent and not accidental quotations from Brecht, the references to the Soviet Socialism (the fragment from *The Internationale* and the melodic lines of a Katyusha with nuanced adaptations are part of the new chorus pieces of the new tragedy), and even the image of a nontraditional family welded around tradition rapidly cast doubt upon the sympathy that, initially¹¹, one was feeling for Catarina & co.

¹⁰ Political “left” and “right” are venerable terms, over two centuries old. They originate in the French Revolution of the end of the 18th century, indicating the placement in the physical space (right or left) of those for and against the king.

¹¹ We are facing a situation where the analysis of the production strongly depends on the political orientation of the one conducting this analysis. From the post-show talk in Romania, it quickly became obvious that for the left-wing critics the meanings of the show were completely different than for the right-wing ones. Therefore, I feel obliged to specify that, from a political point of view, the author of this paper is a follower of centrism, of moderation that excludes extremism, a position that, in this production, seems to be attributed to the youngest Catarina, the one who does not want to continue the tradition of the killing. Her centrism, however, does not come from political convictions, but rather from convictions of a moral

Calling for Brecht in this neotragic parabola is as interesting as it can be. He does not only legitimise an anti-fascist, left-wing thinking, but also procures a strange theatricality, a convention that, cautiously Rodrigues emphasises from the very beginning of the production, as a form of safety net for effects he intuits the finale will have on the spectators. The quotations from Brecht demand us to stay in a state of alert, vigilant, not lost in just some story, but lucid and detached observers. Inviting Brecht into a production that operates with formulas of the tragedy, in a production where the characters wear long, ritualic dresses, evoking the ceremonials we suspect in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, represents exactly the “distance” that Rodrigues places between the old and the new tragedy, between the former implacability of the destiny and some radicalisations of today’s human thought. Brecht is a sign of a paradigm shift, fragments of his works being rendered to us on almost prophetic tonalities, he is now a sort of neo-Tiresias who can see in the future, describing exactly the time of the Portuguese production’s dystopia.

Against the backdrop of this terrible dispute between extremes, the festive setting for a new and *beautiful* murder (the reference to the beauty of the murder Ibsen’s Hedda talks about is only one of the theatrical allusions noted by the commenters of the production¹²) is being prepared for a new Catarina (all of this family’s women receive this name, in the memory of the victim from the starting point of the tradition). The father, the uncle, the narrator-cousin are all ready for what they consider to be a form of spiritual elevation. The killing, says the mother who has reached the seventh murdered fascist, does not deliver pleasure, but rather it lets you experience the satisfaction of a fulfilled duty. Isolated, pensive, the captive fascist, discreet, almost a conventional stage presence, silently awaits his death.

But the new Catarina is different. Terrified, disturbed, the family listens to her pleading against murder, pleading for reinterpreting tradition, pleading for disenchantment and exiting the mythology. Here intervenes the false topic of the girl’s sacrifice, overlaying sacrificing the fascist. It is a very skillful game, with multiple meanings, that the playwright carries out between *sacrifice* and *sacrificing*, and also between the manipulatory forgeries of these two terms. Catarina is willing to give up her own life to defend that of someone in whom she sees not a fascist, but a lonely, cornered man, which, in fact, is what is actually happening. Her sacrifice loses its value, however, through its utter futility. Catarina’s death represents more than just a page of Beckettian absurd; it indicates, clearly, the failure of any attempt to intervene, the dusk of any hope of returning to what used to be called normality¹³. Catarina’s

nature. Her gesture is, therefore, not a political, but a moral one.

¹² “We could allude to the various references of canonic dramatic literature that Tiago Rodrigues places on the performance: the ghostly Hamletian image of Catarina Eufémia calling for revenge; the Chekhovian situation of the family gathered in the countryside; the literal quotations of Brecht’s aphorisms; the metaphor of considering the curious household as a flock of swallows – which me resembles the same symbolic game between uniqueness and fragility played in Chekhov’s *The Seagull* or Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*. We could. We could also evoke the dialogue that F. Ribeiro’s powerful setting establishes with brechtian devices (fundamental to understanding the game between truth and artifice during the unforgettable *coup-de-théâtre* in the final twenty minutes of the performance...). But it is the tradition of tragedy that Rodrigues is dealing with.”, Rui Pina Coleho, “The Ritual of Killing Fascists: Theatre and Sacrifice”, *Critical Stages/ Scènes critiques*, no.23, June/Juin 2021.

¹³ In one of his interviews on his view on theatre, Rodrigues insists on the association between

failure is the failure of those who still believe there still is a chance, that balance is still possible. A post-existentialist, post-Sartrean atmosphere establishes itself on the stage: with the exception of one character, all the family members die, shooting each other; a change of polarities, coup de théâtre: the fascist has now the word...

The contours of the catastrophe¹⁴ become evident at this point. New deities, abstract, but with intense presences, claim their right to existence. A blood-thirsty god on the left, another god, treacherous, cruel, manipulative on the right. Between them, distraught mortals, helplessly witnessing the collapse of a world they thought was safe, founded on indestructible foundations, the foundations of culture, of spirit, of civilization. The extremes have now taken control, the call to reason, to the venerable human virtues, to the long-trodden middle grounds becoming as irrelevant as this Catarina's death.

Incidentally, one of the most subtle signs of catastrophe is the way one operates with the doubt. Paradoxically, the tragedy does not derive, as for Hamlet, from incertitude, but, on the contrary, from its absence. Catarina alone, the only apolitical character of the play, has doubts, only she resorts to this obsolete instrument of the humane, questioning tradition, the legitimacy of murder, the family-stranger relation. Politics, on the other hand, do not have doubts. The absolute conviction with which the sides support their points of view is distressing and implicitly announces an abrupt process of dehumanisation. The old Cartesian reasoning that directly links doubt with existence is overturned: only those who no longer doubt can claim existence. The characters in *Catarina and The Beauty of Killing Fascists* do not even have madness as an excuse; the thoroughness of the premeditation, the internal coherence of the arguments, the poisoned lucidity from within which they speak complicate this "new normality," which brings with it a new logic, a new morality, a redefinition of the human. Catarina's death therefore equates with an apocalypse of doubt...

Is the production a political one? Yes, to the extent that the previously mentioned general picture is crossed by political colours and forces you to interpret it in the light of your own political beliefs. No, to the extent that the director/playwright requires us, if we (still) can, to place ourselves beyond politics, beyond the axis, to observe and meditate on the horrors of politics. Yes, to the extent that his dystopia describes a bipolar society, a Janus Bifrons with equally hideous faces, a two-headed mutant terrifying in its conduct, a creature in which we recognize disturbingly familiar reflections, dangerously close adjacencies. No, to the extent that, nevertheless, the mechanisms of power no longer represent a stake to be demonstrated, but an almost natural, chronic reflex, organically embedded in contemporary human being. Yes, to

Catarina and normality: "I wonder if we can trust in democratic norms. The play is animated by several of these questions. When I think about the character of Catarina, I see someone who is calling into question what we think of as normal today" (Claire Bonnot, interview with Tiago Rodrigues, <https://exhibition-magazine.com/articles/claire-bonnot-interviews-tiago-rodrigues>).

¹⁴ As the author of productions in which the topic of the catastrophe is prominently insinuated, Tiago Rodrigues does not hesitate to indicate and name the tragedy. In *As Far as Impossible* (2020), an emotional incursion into the world of humanitarian personnel, the last line is: "The simple fact that humanitarian missions exist, even continue to persist, creates a tragic picture of humanity" (apud Irina Wolf, "Just a thin line separates the possible from the impossible," Scena.ro, March 21, 2022).

the extent that we admit the omnipresence of the political, the complete political contamination of modern societies, and, implicitly, of the art of our time. No, to the extent that the show is not campaigning for anything in particular, it is simply displaying the shortcomings we have reached. As an aside, it is worth mentioning here the Chekhovian tenderness with which Rodrigues treats his characters; not only does he not judge them, not only does he let them express themselves unhindered, but he looks at them with compassion, almost as if they were victims of something above them.

The last half hour tests the viewer's reactions by putting them in a position to take a stance on why it is happening, or, rather, on what is being said on stage. The hall is lit now, the audience sees and sees itself. Romeu Costa, the actor playing the fascist, comes to the edge of the stage and, during a brilliantly performed monologue, in a dramatic crescendo, synthesises all the newer and older theses of extreme right-wing thinking, from the ostracism of minorities to the promise of a New Republic. The acting allows glimpses of the madness of Hitler's delusions, pathological fanaticism, but also the manipulative skill of the well-versed politician who knows what the common man wants to hear. The character's speech is, from the perspective of the content, one of history, but also of the present. There is a striking freshness in it, something fascinating that evokes, in places, that enigmatic force of seduction by which Hitler and others like him persuaded the masses to follow them. Rodrigues and his actor showcase us this speech like a museum exhibit, we are armed with the Brechtianism from the start and know, of course, that we are in a performance hall. On the other hand, however, the distance between the stage and the audience seems to cancel out, so that everything that is said in those tense moments becomes a matter that goes beyond theatre, something that involves us personally, individually. The range of means by which the fascist character tries to convince us of his truths is dangerously large: from the manifest passion he puts into words, to the humour through which, in a few lines, he almost wins our sympathy. We watch it, become aware of our sympathy, feel ashamed of it, feel guilty, and possibly feel the need to self-censor other possible reactions¹⁵.

At times, his speech is applauded by the audience and what really bothers is that one does not quite know if the audience is applauding the actor's performance or the ideas the character is conveying. Or if the sympathy for the actor does not actually hide, in fact, an unacknowledged, not even to one's self, sympathy for the character... Another part of the audience heckles, protests, and demands that the actor stops this

¹⁵ Certainly not true for all viewers. Individual political beliefs come into play again. In a Facebook post, one day after the show in Bucharest, Iulia Popovici, a left-wing theatre critic, insisted on this relativism of interpretation: "I am absolutely sure that, if in *Catarina and The Beauty of Killing Fascists*, the title was about 'the beauty of killing communists,' and the "tradition" of the family was to kill a communist every year (of the dictatorship and after that), we wouldn't have had these discussions now in Bucharest. I was wondering even during the performance at the opening of the NTF, how are the Romanian defenders of the autonomy of 'value' and theatre aesthetics perplexed every time Brecht's name was said on stage (not to mention the Soviet songs, more specifically *Katyusha* plus *The Internationale*)". It is, however, amusing to note how left-wing commentators downplay the topic of reparative murder and the actions of murderers who quote from... Brecht.

poisonous speech¹⁶. Embarrassed, other spectators chime in: “We're, still, at the theatre.” There also are, I have no doubt, audience members who believe that these are the very ideas that the director himself promotes and who see in the show a form of contemporary, neo-Nazi propaganda. Other people in the audience perfectly understand that Rodrigues only presents us facets of extremism, but do not allow themselves to enjoy the luxury of having a reaction, remembering that they have not in any way sanctioned the criminal impulses of the left-wing characters, the members of the family who ritualistically kill fascists; to holler at some and keep quiet about others is, essentially, to consider the latter the lesser evil, or, to put it another way, that one extremism is less harmful than another. However, when it comes to murder, the lesser evil equation has no solution...

It is only during the curtain call that we breathe a sigh of relief and, understanding what we have been through, release ourselves, channelling our energies into celebrating some truly remarkable actors. It looks like we are happy, but, again, we cannot clearly tell if our happiness was occasioned by the encounter with very high-quality theatre or if we are simply happy that this exercise of testing the limits of the present is over. And, more than once, the sound of palms hitting each other, in applause, is akin to the sound of weapons being fired... We salute art, but the breeze of catastrophe blows uncertainly in the air between us and art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ciobotari, Călin, *Letters to Hamlet. Essays on Theatre*, translated into English by Teodora Medeleanu, Mircea Sorin Rusu, Dana Bădulescu, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2023.

Coleho, Rui Pina, “The Ritual of Killing Fascists: Theatre and Sacrifice,” in *Critical Stages/ Scènes critiques*, no.23, June/Juin 2021.

Pais, Ana, “To Kill or Die For”, in *Performance Research*, 27:2, , 2022

Phillips, Maya, „By Heart Commits Community to Memory”, in The New York Times, 13th of October, 2021.

Steiner, George, *The Death of Tragedy*, translated into Romanian by Rodica Tinis, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008.

Wolf, Irina, “Just a thin line separates the possible from the impossible,” *Scena.ro*, March 21, 2022.

¹⁶ This happens in most of the countries where the show is performed, but, from media reports, it seems that the show causes the most intense effects in Portugal. “Audiences in Portugal have loudly booed the fascist deputy, shouted back insults, hummed political protest songs or left the room entirely. Encouraged by a subtle lightening up of the auditorium and pressed by the interminable length of the speech, spectators feel entitled to express their unease and profound discomfort with the deputy's monologue, thus transforming the theatre into a political assembly. [...] The audience in Setúbal also had a strong reaction: some protested and insulted the actor, telling him to stop talking and leave; others sniffed and cried silently.” (Ana Pais, “To Kill or Die For”, *Performance Research*, 27:2, 2022, pp. 81-90). On other occasions, Romeu Costa does not manage to finish his monologue, so vehement are the reactions.