

FERNANDO PESSOA IN *FERNANDO AND HIS GRANDMOTHER*

Fernando Pessoa em *Menino de Sua Avó*

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the process of conception and elaboration of the figure of Fernando Pessoa as a character in the play *Menino de sua Avó* (*Fernando and his Grandmother*) by Portuguese playwright Armando Nascimento Rosa, staged by the company A Barraca. This research is based on an exegesis of the poet's work, which is essential for the creation of a Fernando Pessoa on stage, taking research data from Pessoa studies that prove to be essential for the actor's work.

Resumo

Este artigo pretende explicitar o processo de conceção e elaboração da figura de Fernando Pessoa, enquanto personagem da peça *Menino de sua Avó*, do dramaturgo português Armando Nascimento Rosa, levada à cena pela companhia A Barraca. Esta pesquisa parte da exegese da obra do poeta, essencial para a criação de um Fernando Pessoa no palco, tomando dados de pesquisa de estudos pessoanos, que se mostrem primordiais para o trabalho de ator.

Keywords: *Fernando Pessoa; Menino de sua Avó; Armando Nascimento Rosa; A Barraca Theater.*

Palavras-chave: *Fernando Pessoa; Menino de sua Avó; Armando Nascimento Rosa; Teatro A Barraca.*

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Fernando Pessoa in *Fernando and his Grandmother*

This article constitutes a very brief reflection on Fernando Pessoa as a character in the theatre project *Menino de sua Avó* (*Fernando and his Grandmother*, such is the title of the play in its English translation by Susannah Finzi) where the author of these lines shared the creation and scenic interpretation with the actress Maria do Céu Guerra. It is a contemporary Portuguese theatre production, by the theatre company A Barraca, premiered in April 2013 (with its most recent stage presentation in October 2019, Sintra, Portugal), which also included the composer António Victorino d'Almeida (author of the original music) and the set designer José Costa Reis (responsible for the set and costumes).

Fernando and his Grandmother, with a script by Armando Nascimento Rosa, is recognizable in the choices that characterize the profile of A Barraca's scenic and dramaturgical repertoire, especially in a vein that has given priority to works, figures, and historical themes of Portuguese culture.

In *Menino de sua Avó* (*Fernando and his Grandmother*), A Barraca once again brings Fernando Pessoa to life on stage, as it had already done in *O Menino de sua Mãe / The Boy of His Mother* (drawn from the title of a famous poem by Pessoa: “The Boy of his Mother”); a play from 1988, conceived by Maria do Céu Guerra, focusing on Pessoa's poetry, which shares some nexus of approach with *Fernando and his Grandmother*, traceable in the themes of madness, fixation on childhood utopia, and the central emergence of the feminine in Pessoa, especially through the mourners of *The Sailor* (in various excerpts included in the dramaturgy of the show, taken from the only playscript that Pessoa published during his lifetime, the static drama: *O Marinheiro*) and through the revelation of the impressive voice of the unique female heteronym of Pessoa, the hunchback Maria José (it is worth mentioning that it was in *The Boy of His Mother* that the “The Letter from the hunchback to the locksmith” had its absolute scenic premiere, two years before its first printed edition, by scholar Teresa Rita Lopes, in 1990).

In its turn, *Fernando and his Grandmother* is a scenic duet of Pessoa with his mad grandmother, dramatizing, between fiction and biographical-literary data, the arc of life and beyond death of both, through the bonds of blood and affection between the demented grandmother and the poet grandson. The show, presenting the seven encounters of the play, is divided into two parts (separated by an intermission), which almost mark two different shows: in the first part, we are faced with a family drama, in a line of Aristotelian

pathos and catharsis; in the second, fantastic realism takes over (due to the continuation of the dead grandmother appearing to the grandson and then both of them cohabiting posthumously, first in the tomb they share in Prazeres graveyard, and later, in the seventh and last encounter, in the visit that Dionísia pays to Fernando, disguised as Camões, at Monastery of Jerónimos, where both poets have their tombs), as well as a discontinuous fragmentation of dramatic time, heir to modernist experimentalism.

In his already extensive dramaturgy, Armando Nascimento Rosa often privileges themes analogous to those involving the Pessoa of *Fernando and his Grandmother*, such as the dialectics between the following binaries: life and death, madness and theatre, art and existence. In several of his dramatic works, it is common to find recognized names on stage, mainly from theatre, myth, and literature, which can present a confrontation between living and dead figures, and the emergence of ghostly characters is always seen as the necromantic continuation (a term to which the playwright often resorts) of someone's story who, although no longer inhabiting the stage of the living, still has reasons to visit it, acting alongside the living. Examples of this are various: the “ghostly mythodrama” *An Oedipus – The untold story* (2003; published in US in 2006, with companion essays by Marvin Carlson, Susan Rowland and Christine Downing); *O Eunuco de Inês de Castro – Teatro no País dos Mortos / The Eunuch of Inês de Castro - Theatre in the Land of the Dead* (2006); *Visita na Prisão ou O último sermão de António Vieira / Visit in Prison or The Last Sermon of António Vieira* (2009; distinguished in 2008 with Albufeira Literature Award); *Doctor Feelgood - A journey back to Belle Reve* (2012, awarded with National Theatre Prize Bernardo Santareno in 2011); and *Departure or the Fearless Woman* (2015). But Nascimento Rosa is also the author of dramatic texts predating *Fernando and his Grandmother* for which Fernando Pessoa had already been explicitly summoned, that is, the pair of plays, with remarkable musical apparatus, *Audition - with Daisy Live in Lisbon* (2002) and *Ofelia's Cabaret* (2007) – plays where Pessoa's poems, in Portuguese, French, and English, are set to music by the playwright-composer. Although he doesn't pursue the cabaret style of these two plays, *Fernando and his Grandmother* shares with them a strong socio-critical intention that ironically addresses both the present day (for example, the state of theatre as an art form in its employment and financial context) and episodes from the historical period that are part of the dramatic fable (such as the romance of Ophelia and Pessoa, the denunciation of the censorious society of the nascent Estado Novo, or the vicissitudes of the reception of literary works that revolutionise the dominant paradigms). Common to these three plays

on Pessoa's themes, theatre is a constant protagonist, in its eternal performative present, which finds resonance in the metatheatricality of drama-in-people, as a creation in which Pessoa shows his “nature of poet-actor” (Rosa, 2013a, p. 138). In 2024, a fourth Rosa’s play with Pessoa as character – this time through a fictitious plot depicting Pessoa’s youth in Durban, in a postcolonial dramatic approach – is going to premier: *O Rapto da Rainha Vitória / The Kidnapping of Queen Victoria*.

In Nascimento Rosa, and particularly in the work *Fernando and his Grandmother*, the characters’ masks rehearse the theatrical game of the multiplicity of personalities that Pessoa created, transformed by the playwright into characters that the actor interprets always starting from the biographical Fernando Pessoa. In Nascimento Rosa's metatheatrical game, the poet and the grandmother exercise the role of actors, and therefore we can consider that *Fernando and his Grandmother* could be an analysis of theatre itself, of what theatre possesses of drama-in-people: the great contribution of Pessoa's² work - the creation of various personalities through the poet's own depersonalization, that is, the masks of heteronymy.

It was through the path of theatre that I found Pessoa – one who, being plural like the universe (Pessoa, 1966, p. 94), was many for a single stage - and therefore, trying to multiply him without reducing him, the greatest pursuit and the great difficulty of the inventive process of interpretation was the search for plausible unity: Fernando Pessoa is known as different people, and he is simultaneously all the fictional people he brought to life through heteronymy. In this show, however, it is, so to speak, the orthonym (from youth to death) that takes to the stage in a poetic biography drawn by Nascimento Rosa. The axial persona of Pessoa in *Fernando and his Grandmother* is based on the orthonym although his voice, at times, sounds like Alexander Search, Moura Costa, or Álvaro de Campos, or even, with an expression assumed in the play of scenic masks, like a Rafael Baldaia, the astrologist.

² In her seminal work on the dramaturgical study of Pessoa, *Fernando Pessoa et le Drame Symboliste – héritage et création*, Teresa Rita Lopes delves into what constitutes the symbolist legacy in Pessoa's dramaturgical experiences, as well as what results in creation within the context of his artistic proposals and dialogues, which are not limited to a mere measurement of forces under the influence of the most influential of symbolist playwrights, Maurice Maeterlinck, with whom Pessoa's static theatre confronts. The writer and scholar Luísa Monteiro identified a decade ago (through the text and decryption of the title) a new, brief, and surprising play titled *Inércia / Inertia* (premiered and published in 2014), which allows us to grasp the scope of Pessoa's pioneering creative dimension, aesthetically, seeming to anticipate Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter in this rather peculiar two character play called *Inertia*.

The actor's work, in this interpretation project of a character that evolves and ages, within a register of poetic realism, led us to a line that intertwines Stanislavski and Grotowski. And first Stanislavski, because with him the method par excellence for the realism work of the actor required by the text and staging was established; because if on one hand the text proposed the approach in its biographical arc, from the beginning to the end of the show, the staging chose to build a character without compromising with verisimilitude, that is, a figure that, although fictionalized, would be humanly credible. Grotowski, on the other hand, arises from the rawness of the greater demand for the pursuit of the sanctity of the actor's scenic craft, which is intrinsic to the creation of the persona – as the only possibility for its creation and not reproduction – especially in a theme of performative presence, by the search for the Pessoa icon, not uncommon on our stages. The negative way (Grotowski, 1992, p. 107) filtered the multiple hypotheses that are numerous in Pessoa and infinite in theatre: I chose what I did not want to be in this Fernando Pessoa of *Fernando and his Grandmother*. I rejected controversy, I rejected caricature, I rejected an excess of signs, characteristics, and attitudes. I considered that the excess was indeed placed in the heteronyms (in the cerebral hypersensitivity of Álvaro de Campos, in Alexander Search's existential rebellion, in Moura Costa's anticlerical satire, in Ricardo Reis's stoicism, in Maria José's radical loneliness, and in the astrologer Rafael Baldaia's eccentricity), not in the experiential Fernando Pessoa. The excess stays on paper, it does not cross the man Fernando Pessoa to his social behaviour, as nothing points to him displaying such excessive behaviours externally.

The lessons learned from the works of these two masters of the actor's art indicated to me the path to enter a labyrinthine game of theatre within the theatre beyond Pirandello that Nascimento Rosa wove in the play, illuminating creative facets of a less popularized Fernando Pessoa, bringing to the stage some of his usually less explored heteronyms, especially in dramatic form (Search, Moura Costa, Baldaia, Maria José), among the 136 fictional authors (Pessoa, 2013) or literary personalities, as Teresa Rita Lopes designates them (Lopes, 1990).

In the first part, Fernando Pessoa is only nineteen years old and begins to show, in his writing, the first signs of fear of madness, through the heteronym Alexander Search, which erupts in parallel to his interaction with Dionísia. The young man we see here, between biographical data and fiction, is the faithful grandson who frequently interacts with his grandmother – a woman who was diagnosed with dementia.

As the scenes that mark the passing of years progress, the heteronymic characters are shaped because all heteronyms depart from Pessoa and to him all return; Álvaro de Campos or Bernardo Soares can be Pessoa himself, at the moment of his death, in the restlessness of crossing the street, with his multiple literary personalities. The representation of heteronymy has two distinct aspects, the first and most present in this first part (where grandmother and grandson are part of the living stage) originating from the Stanislavskian system, that is, from the so-called subtext. The second aspect becomes more evident from the third encounter with the phantasmagorical entering the scene, a fact that breaks the realistic component of the staging. From here on, Pessoa and Dionísia's characters often play the role of actors, that is, the characters they interpret always start from the base characters from which they emanate, grandmother and grandson bringing to the stage (as the play's text, humorously, enunciates) this concept theorized by Lionel Abel: metatheatre.

The creation of this character, as the work of a practitioner of an inhabited body art, germinated in the creation of physical life, submerged in the following interrogation: how to prepare the actor's body to give shape to Pessoa's cerebral hyperbolization, so that it becomes visible and communicable on stage? Throughout the creation period, I felt compelled to also be a man of purely mental life, renouncing affection, touch, and sex. Everything indicates that Fernando Pessoa was a man of eminently mental life and the concrete emergence of affections is something that destabilizes him; something that his psyche does not deal with calmly, in a disjunction from the body. I arrived at a man of internal action (like his theatre), and within this internal action, there is a dramatic action, by the actor/heteronyms (drama-in-people) that live in him, that are Pessoa, that Pessoa pretends to be. The question of pretense, deeply present in all of Pessoa's work, so assumed in his theatricality, is, in the end, the actor being the character and the character being the actor: the scenic materialization of Fernando Pessoa's own "Autopsicografia" / "Autopsychography" – a poem in which we can find a brilliant synthesis where the theses of Aristotle, Diderot, and Stanislavski about the mechanisms of theatrical representation coexist, for example.

I envision theatre as the promise of a new life, another life, a learning of a life brought to the stage. And until we get there, there is a long way of searching, studying, of aesthetic truth and pretense, as complex as life itself. Theatre renews me and the stage rebuilds me; thus, I recognize myself as an actor.

Whatever this interlude mimicked under the projector of the sun and the sequins of the stars may be, it certainly doesn't matter to know that it is an interlude; if what lies beyond the theatre doors is life, we will live; if it is death, we will die, and the play has nothing to do with it. (..)Everything is theatre. Ah, do I want the truth? I'll continue the novel ...(Pessoa, 2014, p. 288)

Image 1 - Your Grandmother's Boy, by Armando Nascimento Rosa, enc. Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes, A Barraca, 2013 (Adérito Lopes and Maria do Ceu Guerra)
[F] Pedro Soares



Image 2 - Your Grandmother's Boy, by Armando Nascimento Rosa, enc. Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes, A Barraca, 2013 (Adérito Lopes and Maria do Ceu Guerra)
[F] Luís Rocha



Image 3 and 4- Your Grandmother's Boy, by Armando Nascimento Rosa, by Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes, A Barraca, 2013 (Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes) [F] Luís Rocha





Image 5 - Your Grandmother's Boy, by Armando Nascimento Rosa, enc. Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes, A Barraca, 2013 (Maria do Ceu Guerra and Adérito Lopes) [F] Luís Rocha



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