

Theatre and counter-memory: identity and resistance in the censorship archives of the Estado Novo

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, Portuguese theatre faced successive moments of constraint, negotiation and occasional openness with regard to artistic freedom and freedom of thought. During the Estado Novo regime (1933-1974), the combined action of censorship bodies and law enforcement agencies not only restricted the circulation of dramatic texts, but also regulated theatrical performance as a public event, extending censorship from the script itself to rehearsal, staging and scenic realisation. In doing so, it also intervened in the ways in which the citizens of Portugal and its overseas territories could remember their past and imagine their future. In this sense, censorship did more than prohibit or authorise plays: by interrupting the public circulation of certain experiences, it also weakened the social bonds through which those experiences could be shared and remembered.

This article examines two Portuguese plays censored between 1973 and 1974, *Lisboa 72* (ANTT, proc. 9498, 1973) and *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974), selected from files preserved in the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo (ANTT) and the Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança (MNTD). The hypothesis guiding this research is that these plays destabilise the homogeneous national identity promoted by the regime by bringing to the stage memories and experiences that censorship sought to contain – including colonial war, political repression, economic precariousness and the marginalisation of certain groups – and by rendering them publicly legible. In this way, they reveal the plurality of subjects and narratives that made up Portuguese society on the eve of the 1974 Revolution.

These censorship files concern the theatrical event rather than the dramatic text alone, since they often include not only assessments on the scripts but also documentation relating to rehearsal, staging, classification, and public performance. In many cases, Portuguese theatrical censorship extended to the *ensaio de apuro*, a final rehearsal held shortly before performance in the presence of a censor or official delegate. Its purpose was not only to verify compliance with the approved script, but also to assess the scenic realisation of the production, including gesture, staging and the overall effect of the performance. The approach adopted here therefore combines close reading of the plays with an examination of the censorship opinions and the performative dimension of theatrical regulation, articulating the aesthetic and narrative plane with the institutional plane of censorship. The analysis is based on archival censorship files concerning *Lisboa 72* (ANTT, proc. 9498, 1973) and *Na Barca com*

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Mestre Gil (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974), together with related documentation preserved in the MNTD and in the SNI-IGE records. These materials include not only the dramatic texts submitted for approval, but also censorship views, classifications, decisions on cuts, and evidence concerning the scenic supervision of performance.¹

Analytical framework: memory, identity and theatrical censorship

Reflection on the relationship between memory and identity must begin from the conception that memory does not exist in a purely individual form. Maurice Halbwachs argues that remembering is always mediated by structures of social belonging, shared languages and reference groups. What a subject can recall depends on the ‘social frameworks of memory’ that organise recollection and give it meaning within a community. As Halbwachs writes, ‘it is impossible to conceive of the problem of memory and the location of memories without taking as a starting point the real social frameworks that serve as reference points for this reconstruction we call memory’ (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 8).

This relational dimension of memory becomes even clearer when Halbwachs notes that memories depend on belonging to a group, and tend to fade once that bond is broken, even when they concern lived experience. As he writes, ‘it is not enough that I witnessed or participated in a scene’ for that image to become fully meaningful as memory; it is through collective evocation that ‘the image is transformed into a memory’ (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 28). By interrupting the public circulation of certain experiences, censorship contributes precisely to this disconnection: it undermines the social conditions through which memories are preserved, shared and recognised by others. In this regard, any institutional intervention that regulates access to the past also helps shape those frameworks, determining which narratives may circulate in the public sphere and which are silenced, marginalised or left incomplete.

Based on this sociological foundation, Aleida Assmann proposes the notion of ‘cultural memory’ to reflect on how societies preserve, transmit and reactivate the past through material and symbolic media – texts, archives, monuments, rituals and performances (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 55). The author distinguishes between communicative memory, rooted in oral exchange and the experience of living generations, and cultural memory, which takes more durable forms and can be reactivated at different historical moments. Theatre, as an artistic practice that combines text, body and scene, is one of these privileged media: it conveys not only fictional stories, but also collective ways of representing and transmitting the past. When theatre is subjected to state control, the limits of memory are also redrawn, since censorship intervenes in which plays can circulate, which versions of events become publicly

¹ Over the last fifteen years, censorship files have gradually been made available to researchers, and their digitisation has progressed more recently through the updating of the ANTT’s Digitarq platform, where access to these materials remains limited, given that, of the more than 10,000 censorship files, fewer than 10% are currently available for online consultation. In practice, research still frequently depends on in-person consultation, particularly at the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo (ANTT) and the Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança (MNTD), since most files remain accessible only on site. This is particularly significant in a field in which scholarship grounded in these primary sources is still relatively recent and limited, given that earlier studies often relied instead on authors’ oral accounts and on selected minutes of the censorship commissions, rather than on the files themselves, which were not yet accessible.

legible, and which figures from the past and present are legitimised or silenced. Cultural memory is therefore not a stable repository of the past, but a field of dispute in which what may be remembered is continually reactivated, negotiated and contested (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 54-55).

Paul Ricœur's reflections on memory and identity are also relevant here. In *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricœur asks what is remembered and whose memory is at stake, thereby foregrounding the plurality of voices through which the past is narrated and contested (RICŒUR, 2000, p. 3). This perspective is useful for approaching theatrical texts as spaces in which competing versions of experience are organised into narrative form. In this regard, the notion of 'narrative identity' helps to illuminate how dramatic figures and collective subjects are constituted through stories that give continuity to experience while also exposing its silences, fractures and contradictions (RICŒUR, 2000, p. 437).

In the Portuguese case, these reflections on memory, identity and representation acquire particular relevance when read alongside Ana Cabrera's work, particularly *Censura Nunca Mais!* (2013), which is especially valuable in a historiography where studies grounded directly in the primary censorship files remain comparatively scarce. As Cabrera has shown, censorship files did not consist solely of dramatic texts submitted for approval, but also included the wider bureaucratic and institutional record through which theatrical production was examined, classified and controlled. She notes that the files of the Directorate-General for Censorship included administrative documentation relating to each application, correspondence with theatre managers, censors' assessments, appeals, final decisions and the classification of performances (CABRERA, 2013, p. 43).

To understand how these experiences and identities are regulated in the public sphere, Michel Foucault's contribution remains useful. Although he does not address theatrical censorship directly, his conception of power as a capillary network of relations that traverses the social fabric makes it possible to approach censorship as one device among others, designed to regulate what may be said and seen (FOUCAULT, 1975, p. 138). By delimiting the boundaries of legitimate discourse, censorship not only restricts the circulation of certain works, but also contributes to establishing a regime of visibility and acceptability in relation to the past and the present. From this perspective, once censorship is understood as a mechanism that regulates public expression, the archive can be read as a record of the institutional procedures through which memory and representation were controlled. It is within this theoretical framework that Portuguese theatre censored on the eve of 25 April may be interpreted, understanding both the stage and the censorship archive as privileged spaces for the production and containment of memory and identity.

Theatrical censorship and memory frames in the Portuguese Estado Novo

Censorship of the performing arts in Portugal's Estado Novo regime was part of a complex institutional framework involving bodies such as the Directorate-General for Entertainment Services, the Commission for the Examination and Classification of Performances (under the *Secretariado Nacional de Informação* - SNI) and the political police, first the PVDE and later the PIDE/DGS. Since the 1930s, the prior reading of dramatic texts, the supervision of rehearsals and the presence of delegates in the theatre were central instruments of surveillance over what could be said and shown on stage.

As recent research on the censorship processes of 1973 and 1974 by Portuguese theatre censorship specialist Ribeiro has shown, these mechanisms focused both on explicitly political content and on aspects considered moral, revealing a constant concern to control the image that theatre offered of Portuguese society (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 19).

From a procedural point of view, the censorship process generally followed three stages. First, the dramatic text was sent to the Commission for the Examination and Classification of Performances, where two or more censors read it and wrote individual opinions. These assessments could recommend approval without cuts, approval with cuts, or a complete ban on the play. In the case of cuts, the censor would mark passages to be deleted, indicate changes in vocabulary, or suggest the elimination of entire scenes. Second, once the text and age rating had been approved, the show could still be subject to inspection during a dress rehearsal or performance, with a delegate present to verify compliance with the previous determinations. As Ana Cabrera explains:

All performances were subject to prior censorship. In the case of theatre, the censors would read the plays and either approve them, reject them, or approve them subject to cuts. Rejected plays were banned from being performed anywhere in the country. Once approved, plays were still subject to further scrutiny: the dress rehearsal. This was mandatorily supervised by the same censors who had read the play. During this dress rehearsal, the censors' scrutiny focused on the text, to verify that the cuts had been made, on the sets, to ensure that all elements were appropriate, and on the props and costumes, which had to respect 'morality and decency'. (CABRERA, 2013, p. 31)²

Finally, in situations considered serious, the case could be referred to higher authorities – including the *Secretariado Nacional de Informação* (SNI) or even the Presidency of the Council – which prolonged negotiations between authors, directors and censors (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 29).

As Ana Cabrera has shown, this broad regulatory logic was already visible in earlier legislation. The decree that created the *Inspecção-Geral dos Teatros* defined state supervision over 'theatres and venues for public entertainments' and assigned the inspection services the task of repressing aspects considered offensive to 'law, morality and good customs' (CABRERA, 2013, p. 17). These formulations make clear that theatrical control was directed not solely at dramatic writing, but at public performance itself as a regulated social event. Cabrera's work is particularly valuable here because it is grounded directly in the censorship files themselves, drawing on legislation, SNI archives, the holdings of the MNTD, the processes of the *Direção-Geral de Censura*, and the minutes of the Censorship Committees. This material makes it possible to reconstruct different levels of censorial activity, from individual reports and views on specific plays to broader recommendations, conflicts and procedural decisions recorded in the weekly meetings of the commissions.

Cabrera (2013, p. 21-22) also notes that this early supervisory role did not yet amount to a fully stabilised censorship apparatus. In her account, the censorship processes were initially 'instructed

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Portuguese are my own.

in very simple terms': observations were often written directly on the pages, and lines across the text indicated the passages or pages to be cut. She stresses that this remained common until 1933 and that it was only 'over the course of the 1940s' that censorship of theatre and cinema became the object of a 'the progressive organisation of services and procedures' and of 'greater rigour in the conduct of the members'. Read in this light, theatrical censorship should not be understood as a fully coherent mechanism from the outset, but as a system that became progressively more structured, more centralised and more rigorous over time. This evolution becomes even clearer in her discussion of the transfer to the *Secretariado Nacional de Informação*, which she describes not as 'a simple name change' but as 'a structural reorganisation of the services', accompanied by 'a strengthening and expansion of censorship' in relation to theatre and cinema (CABRERA, 2013, p. 29).

The importance attributed to theatre within the Estado Novo's cultural apparatus also helps to explain the breadth of this control. Within the logic of the *Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional* (SPN), later renamed the *Secretariado Nacional de Informação* (SNI) in 1944, theatre was explicitly conceived alongside radio and cinema as one of the regime's central means of intervention (CABRERA, 2013, p. 20). This reinforced the need to monitor not only the play text, but also the public presentation of theatrical performance.

In addition to deciding whether a play should be approved, cut, or prohibited, the censorship authorities also classified performances according to age categories: group A, for all audiences; group B, for spectators aged over 10; group C, for those over 14; and group D, for those over 18. This system makes clear that theatrical censorship did not concern the dramatic text alone. By assigning each production to a specific category and age group, the authorities regulated not only what could be staged, but also who could attend it and under what conditions. In this respect, age classification could itself function as a censorial mechanism. A play classified in group D, for example, could only be staged in the evening performances, which drastically reduced its potential audience and limited its public reach. Moreover, performances could be prohibited not only in mainland Portugal, but also in the islands and in the *províncias ultramarinas*, the term then used by the regime to designate the colonies. Censorship therefore intervened directly in the public circulation of theatrical experience, controlling both the spectacle and the social formation of its audience.

Reading these opinions confirms that theatrical censorship directly intervened in the 'social frameworks of memory' referred to by the sociologist, selecting which images from the past and present could be shared in the public space (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 8). Among the experiences considered most dangerous, those linked to the colonial war stand out: characters traumatised by their return from Africa, allusions to desertion, and references to massacres or violence against colonised populations often gave rise to reservations, cuts or bans, as they contradicted the official narrative of the 'civilising mission' and the unity of the empire. As Ribeiro (2023, p. 35) observes, memories of poverty, labour disputes and precariousness — in the form of slums, strikes, dismissals or petty crime — were also regulated so as not to offer too stark a picture of social inequalities. Any evocation of organised political protest, whether by students or left-wing activists, was likewise subject to close scrutiny, given the fear that the stage might serve as a platform for the dissemination of opposition ideas.

On a moral level, the assessments reveal a systematic effort to preserve a model of national identity based on Catholic morality, the nuclear family, and obedience to civil and religious authorities, in continuity with earlier formulations that explicitly associated theatrical inspection with the repression of what was considered offensive to ‘the law, morality and public decency’. Sexually autonomous female characters, situations of adultery, references to abortion or prostitution, as well as homoerotic insinuations, are repeatedly flagged as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘indecent’, requiring cuts or rewrites. A particularly illustrative example is provided by the case of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (ANTT, proc. 9508, 1972), whose performance was proposed in Lisbon. The work sparked fierce controversy among censors, especially among members of the Catholic Church who were called upon to give their opinion. Among the surviving reports, that of Mafalda de Castro Vaz e Pinto stands out, since she described the play as ‘repugnant to my Christian beliefs’ and as a way of ‘playing with things that are too serious’. Several censors argued that the portrayal of the characters – particularly the relationship between Jesus and Judas – suggested homoerotic undertones that were entirely unacceptable to the regime and to the dominant Catholic morality, ultimately contributing to the complete ban on the show. The case demonstrates how theatrical censorship functioned not only to monitor religious orthodoxy, but also to exclude dissident representations of gender and sexuality capable of destabilising the heteronormative model promoted by the Estado Novo.

The censors’ discourse is particularly revealing of this management of counter-memory and identity. Formulaic expressions such as ‘it is not appropriate to reopen wounds that are still fresh’, ‘it offends public decency’ or ‘it should be suppressed because it suggests a negative image of the Portuguese soldier’ condense, in a few lines, the attempt to delimit what can be remembered and how. When an opinion recommends that a reference to police violence be removed so as ‘not to compromise the prestige of the authorities’ or that criticism of living conditions in an urban suburb be toned down because it ‘exaggerates the difficulties of the Portuguese people’, it is, in practice, redefining the field of legitimate lived experience, silencing certain aspects of collective experience. In Ricœur’s terms, such operations affect the very conditions under which the past may be interpreted and publicly articulated (RICŒUR, 2000, p. 86).

At the same time, the censorship archive has acquired retrospective value precisely because it preserves the traces of what the regime sought to suppress. It allows us to reconstruct not only what reached the stage, but also what was prevented from doing so, revealing the limits of what could be publicly seen and heard at a given historical moment.

Research on theatrical censorship in 1973 and 1974 also shows that this mechanism became particularly tense at the end of the dictatorship. On the one hand, the intensification of the economic crisis, the wear and tear of the colonial war and the growth of protest movements produced more directly confrontational dramatic texts, which brought to the stage the experiences of soldiers, workers, students and women in conflict with structures of power. On the other hand, censorship responded more harshly to these attempts to rewrite collective memory, increasing the number of substantial cuts and outright bans (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 23). The result was a theatrical field marked by strong ambivalence: even when mutilated, many plays reveal, between the lines, what could not be said openly.

From a Foucauldian perspective, theatrical censorship can be understood as a disciplinary mechanism operating not only on texts, but also on the bodies and practices of artists. The anticipation of censorship generated forms of self-censorship, allusive writing and scenic strategies based on metaphor, ellipsis and allegory. It is within this interplay between saying and not saying, between showing and suggesting, that the plays analysed in the following sections must be situated. The stage thus becomes a space where collective memories and identity conflicts emerge under the pressure of institutional control.

Conflicting memories – *Lisboa 72* – urban memory, independent theatre and collective identity

Among the plays that most clearly highlight the dispute surrounding the archive of experiences and national identity in the final years of the Estado Novo, *Lisboa 72* (ANTT, proc. 9498, 1973) occupies a central place. Conceived by Luzia Maria Martins and Helena Félix for the Teatro Estúdio de Lisboa (TEL), one of the independent companies that most actively challenged the cultural values upheld by the regime, the play emerged from a documentary practice of theatrical montage rather than from conventional linear dramaturgy (COSTA, 2021, p. 106; RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 52). According to the authors themselves, it was built from texts published, ‘without exception’, in official publications and reassembled in order to analyse eight years of theatrical activity against the backdrop of life in Lisbon (MARTINS; FÉLIX, 1972; RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 52). This procedure is analytically central, because it suggests that the play did not construct an external denunciation of the regime; rather, it reorganised the regime’s own discourse on stage and turned it into a critical portrait of the country, exposing the gap between official rhetoric and everyday urban experience.

From the perspective of documentary theatre, *Lisboa 72* can be read as a mechanism for the reorganisation of memory. By relocating official discourse within a new stage structure, the play transforms dispersed materials into a critical representation of late Estado Novo Lisbon. In this respect, it activates both communicative memory – the living recollections of those who experienced colonial war, emigration, surveillance – and cultural memory, sedimented in the regime’s own texts and archives (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 56). In Halbwachs’s terms, the play reworks the ‘social frameworks of memory’ by extracting official materials from their original contexts and reinserting them into a narrative that no longer confirms, but instead contests, the hegemonic image of the capital (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 37). As Luzia Maria Martins and Helena Félix explained in their letter to Marcello Caetano of 21 December 1972:

We have submitted a text entitled ‘Lisboa 72’, in which, drawing on a compilation of texts that were, without exception, published in official publications and disseminated through various media outlets, we have sought to analyse our activities over the course of eight years, with the life of Lisbon serving as the backdrop to this analysis.

This statement is important because it makes clear that the play drew on materials already authorised by the regime, yet reassembled them on stage in a way that exposed a more critical image of the city. As a result, official discourses of modernisation, public works, and prosperity are placed alongside precariousness, repression, and civic disillusionment.

In *Lisboa 72*, the city no longer appears as the orderly capital projected by the regime. What comes into view is a Lisbon closer to the one Martins and Félix themselves set out to examine when they placed ‘life in Lisbon’ at the centre of the piece: a city crossed by censorship, economic strain, and the difficulty of making Portuguese theatre speak directly to the problems of society. The figures who pass through the play – workers, office employees, families, and younger people – do not simply fit the roles expected of them. They move through a world in which public language asks for discipline and conformity, while daily life keeps exposing something more unstable and more unequal. Seen in this light, *Lisboa 72* does not offer a compact image of the capital, but a more fractured Lisbon, marked by social unease, class difference, and the pressures that censorship placed on cultural life.

It is precisely this operation of critical reassembly that helps explain the hostility of censorship toward *Lisboa 72*. After the play had been rejected more than once, Martins and Félix addressed a letter to the Prime Minister denouncing the Commission’s conduct and the increasingly narrow criteria through which a ‘responsible repertoire’ was being defined. The episode reveals more than a dispute over isolated passages. What was at stake was the critical force produced by documentary montage. In this sense, the case exposes a broader paradox of late Estado Novo censorship: the regime could tolerate the circulation of these statements while they remained separated in official publications and media outlets, yet now when theatre connected them and made their political implications visible. This reaction becomes even more significant when placed within the trajectory of the Teatro Estúdio de Lisboa, whose repertoire, as Patrícia Costa notes, ran against the cultural values upheld by the State and brought to the stage themes such as dysfunctional families, workers’ struggles, and the Vietnam War. Seen in this light, the prohibition of *Lisboa 72* was not merely an administrative decision about one play, but part of a wider attempt to contain a documentary and critical dramaturgy that sought to analyse, in Martins’ own words, ‘issues of concern to society’.

Drawing on Ricœur’s work, one may argue that *Lisboa 72* challenges the narrative identity of Lisbon itself (RICŒUR, 2000, p. 140). By bringing together scattered materials – news items, administrative decisions, propaganda slogans – the play reorganises recent experience into a shared account of the city and its tensions. It thereby restores to public view memories of war, emigration, and repression that official discourse sought to disperse or silence. The censors, in turn, attempt to prevent this account from entering counter-memory by blocking its circulation in the theatre, that is, in a space where it could be collectively received and debated (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 54).

Opinions on *Lisboa 72* thus reveal a deeper conflict over how recent experience could enter the public sphere. The play emerges as a site of conflicting memories, where recent Portuguese history could be retold from below, through the city, its inhabitants, and the limits imposed on theatrical communication by the dictatorship.

Conflicting memories – In *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* – canonical memory, centre and periphery

If *Lisboa 72* (ANTT, proc. 9498, 1973) reveals how censorship reacted against the theatrical re-organisation of contemporary experience, *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974) exposes

a related but distinct mechanism: the unequal distribution of canonical memory across the national territory. Based on *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, a text by Gil Vicente, considered the ‘father of Portuguese theatre’, the play is situated within one of the most consolidated layers of Portuguese cultural memory (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 63). This case is therefore particularly significant, as it shows that censorship in the final years of the Estado Novo regime did not only act on new or openly critical materials. It also intervened in the circulation of the theatrical past, regulating where, for whom, and under what conditions an established repertoire could be revived on stage. The request submitted by the Grupo de Teatro Popular de São Pedro do Sul, in the district of Viseu, in 1974, sought to bring that heritage to a provincial audience outside the main urban centres (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974).

The censorship file no. 9704 points in the opposite direction. Although the play had already been authorised elsewhere, its performance in São Pedro do Sul was rejected with the striking formulation: ‘The text is far too advanced for the province. And for that reason, I reject it’ (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974). The force of this judgement lies precisely in its brevity. Rather than offering a proper reading of the play, the report sidesteps it. It does not dwell on language, morality or political content in any sustained way. Instead, the report shifts attention away from the play itself and towards the audience deemed capable of receiving it. In the end, the report judges not only the play, but also the people thought likely to see it. Gil Vicente is not banned outright. What is being denied is the possibility that this particular audience, in this particular place, might have access to him.

The process becomes even more revealing when one observes that the objection is not directed solely at an untouchable canonical text in the abstract. One of the reports describes the production as an ‘adaptation’ composed of texts by Gil Vicente, Camões, and others, and characterises it as ‘highly biased and quite unsuitable for provincial audiences’ adding that any cuts should attenuate the ‘the play’s anticlericalism’ before concluding with the final decision to reject it (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974). This detail is important because it shows that the problem was not simply authorship, but performance, montage, and reception. As in *Lisboa 72*, what mattered to the censors was not only what text was being used, but how it was being recomposed for the stage, under what interpretive frame, and for which audience. Even culturally consecrated material could become problematic once it was theatrically activated in a way that exceeded the limits the regime considered appropriate for a given public.

Read through Halbwachs, this case concerns more than the fate of a single dramatic text. What is at stake is a community’s access to the cultural forms through which collective memory becomes publicly shareable. If memory depends on the social frameworks that sustain and reactivate it, then preventing *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* from being performed in a small town means restricting that community’s participation in a wider theatrical inheritance (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 37). In this sense, censorship was not simply limited to preventing a performance; it reinforced a hierarchy in which cultural authority remained concentrated in Lisbon. The question, therefore, was not only what could be represented, but who had the right to identify with what was considered common culture.

Assmann’s notion of cultural memory sharpens this problem further. As a text preserved in editions, archives, and literary history, Gil Vicente belongs, in principle, to the recognised heritage of Portuguese culture (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 53-55). Yet heritage remains abstract unless it is reactivated in practice. Theatre gives cultural memory one of its most concrete forms because it returns inherited

texts to living bodies, living voices, and living audiences. What the case of *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* demonstrates is that this reactivation was not equally available to all. A work accepted in Lisbon could still be judged ‘too advanced’ for the interior, as though provincial spectators had to be protected from a repertoire already recognised as canonical (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 63). The issue, then, is not simply literary canonisation, but the uneven conditions under which the canon could become performatively active. Seen in this light, the file becomes a particularly useful example of the limits of cultural democratisation under the late Estado Novo.

This suspicion toward Gil Vicente was not new. As Ana Cabrera has shown, the censorship authorities were already debating in 1954 whether Vicentian plays should be staged without cuts for a general audience. The minutes of the Commission record the question in especially revealing terms:

Therefore, before proceeding with the distribution of the aforementioned plays, he puts the following question to the assembly: should cuts be made to Gil Vicente’s plays, or not? [...] who were of the opinion that the full performance of these plays could only be permitted at state functions or for cultural purposes, because, in public performances, one must consider only the effect the performance has on the general public [...] all the more so because, in a diverse audience, it is natural that most people have no idea about Gil Vicente’s theatre (Book no. 7, Minutes of the Commission for the Censorship of Performances [Actas da Comissão de Censura dos Espectáculos], 20 Apr. 1954, SNI-IGE/ANTT).

Read against that earlier debate, the case of *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* in 1974 appears less as an isolated anomaly than as a later manifestation of a longer censorial unease toward the performative life of the canon. The issue was not simply Gil Vicente as literary heritage, but Gil Vicente in performance, before a broad and socially undifferentiated public. In this respect, the judgement that the text was ‘too advanced for the province’ repeats an older logic: classic status did not automatically neutralise the perceived danger of theatrical reception, especially when the audience lay outside the cultural spaces more closely controlled by the centre (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974).

The later trajectory of the file reinforces this reading. The material preserved in the process makes clear that the group did not accept the decision passively. In its appeal, the company described itself as an amateur rural group made up of ‘farmers, small shopkeepers, seamstresses, bricklayers, sawmill workers, and other local residents,’ and insisted that its work aimed to ‘promote Mestre Gil in rural areas’ (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974). The document is particularly important because it puts theatrical practice, rehearsal and collective work back at the heart of the matter. The group explains that it had worked for months on the production, rehearsing in difficult conditions after long working days, and explicitly rejected the idea that a rural public should be excluded from contact with Gil Vicente (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974). In this regard, the dispute centred not only on a text, but also on a local community’s right to bring canonical memory to life through performance and to claim its own place within Portuguese theatre culture.

That same appeal also reveals a striking awareness of the contradictions of the censorial system. The group argued that Gil Vicente was already taught in schools and discussed in books, and

even recalled that passages from Vicentian theatre had appeared on television, asking why it should be acceptable in those contexts but not in a local amateur performance (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974). This line of argument is reminiscent, in a different context, of the paradox already evident in *Lisboa 72*: materials tolerated within a particular circuit became unacceptable once the theatre brought them together in a public event capable of generating collective recognition (MARTINS; FÉLIX, 1972; RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 53). In *Lisboa 72*, the challenge lay in transforming a fragmented official discourse into a critical portrait of the present; in *Na Barca com Mestre Gil*, it lay in enabling a provincial audience to engage with a culturally recognised theatrical heritage as a living, shared and potentially unsettling experience.

Seen in these terms, *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* should not be read as an isolated anomaly, but as part of a broader censorial logic already visible in other decisions from the period. As Ribeiro notes, censorship repeatedly prevented certain works from circulating in popular or amateur contexts even when they had already been approved for professional companies in Lisbon (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 63). Ricœur's reflections on narrative identity are useful here, because they allow us to see that what was being controlled was not only a performance, but the right to participate in the narratives through which collective identity was formed and recognised (RICŒUR, 2000, p. 140). By restricting provincial audiences' access to a central text in Portuguese theatre history, the regime also restricted the possibility that those communities might recognise themselves as active participants in that history. Theatrical heritage, in this case, was preserved as prestige, but limited as practice. Taken together, *Lisboa 72* and *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* illuminate two complementary operations of censorship in the final years of the Estado Novo: the regulation of contemporary discourse and the policing of canonical memory (RIBEIRO, 2023, p. 52).

Final thoughts: theatre, memory and identities after 25 April

The analysis of *Lisboa 72* (ANTT, proc. 9498, 1973) and *Na Barca com Mestre Gil* (ANTT, proc. 9704, 1974) allow us to restate the central argument of the article in more precise terms: in the final years of the Estado Novo, Portuguese theatre was one of the places where memory, identity and public speech came most clearly into conflict under censorship. The files discussed here suggest that censorship was not only concerned with particular themes or passages. It also shaped the theatrical event more broadly: how materials were brought together on stage, who they were meant for, how repertoires circulated, and under what conditions certain experiences could become visible in public. These documents therefore tell us more than what the regime prohibited. They also show what it feared theatre might make present.

The two cases discussed here highlight different, though related, sides of that process. In *Lisboa 72*, censorship reacted against a documentary dramaturgy that reorganised official discourse in order to produce a critical image of contemporary Lisbon. What was at stake was not simply the content of a few lines, but the possibility of gathering dispersed materials into a shared stage capable of exposing the distance between the regime's rhetoric and lived urban experience. In *Na Barca com Mestre Gil*, by contrast, the conflict did not centre on the denunciation of the present, but on unequal access to a theatrical past already turned into canon. The file shows that even a recognised and culturally

legitimised repertory could be withheld from a provincial audience when performance moved beyond the metropolitan centre. Read together, the two cases show that censorship in the late Estado Novo intervened both in the representation of the present and in the distribution of the past.

On the eve of 25 April, Portuguese theatre was neither just a reflection of the regime nor a literary world apart from the stage. It was a tense and contested space, where texts, productions, audiences, institutions and territorial inequalities all came together. The documentation shows clearly that the regime wanted to control not only what plays said, but also where they could be staged, before whom and with what consequences. Theatre mattered, then, not only as text, but also as a public event – as rehearsal, performance and collective experience. This is what makes the censorship files so revealing.

The two plays also help to clarify what is meant here by theatre as counter-memory. *Lisboa 72* does so by bringing into public view experiences that official discourse tried to break apart or keep under control, including war, surveillance, social precariousness and urban disillusionment. *Na Barca com Mestre Gil*, meanwhile, shows that access to theatrical heritage was not equally available to everyone, and that the canon could serve not only as a shared inheritance, but also as a way of defining who had full access to cultural legitimacy. In both cases, memory is not treated as an abstract idea. It takes shape through archives, institutions, performance conditions and disputes over public recognition. Theatre becomes, in this sense, a place where the nation's image of itself is not simply repeated, but also questioned and reworked.

For that reason, censored theatre deserves a more central place in accounts of the late Estado Novo, as well as in wider discussions of memory in Lusophone cultural studies. These files do more than record acts of prohibition. They also show the pressures placed on theatrical thinking and practice at a moment when Portuguese society was already marked by war, inequality, political fatigue and growing pressure for change. What they preserve is the trace of a struggle over who had the authority to speak about the country, the city and the theatrical past. In the final years of the dictatorship, the stage was one of the places where that struggle came most clearly into view.

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Abstract/Resumo

Theatre and counter-memory: identity and resistance in the censorship archives of the Estado Novo

Marta Ribeiro

This article examines censored Portuguese theatre during the final years of the Estado Novo (1973-1974), focusing on the relationship between memory and identity. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's work on the 'social frameworks of memory' and Aleida Assmann's work on cultural memory; it argues that theatrical censorship helped to define what could be remembered and shared in the public sphere. National identity thus emerges not as a fixed reality, but as a construction shaped by conflicting narratives and forms of discourse control. The study combines an analysis of censorship files held at the Torre do Tombo National Archive and the National Museum of Theatre and Dance with an analysis of two plays, *Lisboa 72* and *Na Barca com Mestre Gil*. It demonstrates how these texts bring to the stage uncomfortable memories of the colonial war, social inequality and the hierarchy between centre and periphery, challenging the homogeneous model of identity promoted by the regime and reopening narratives about the dictatorial past.

Keywords: Portuguese theatre, theatrical censorship, collective memory, Estado Novo dictatorship, Lusophone literature.

Teatro e contra-memória: identidade e resistência no arquivo censório do Estado Novo

Marta Ribeiro

O artigo analisa o teatro português censurado nos anos finais do Estado Novo (1973-1974), centrando-se na relação entre memória e identidade. A partir dos contributos de Maurice Halbwachs sobre os "quadros sociais da memória" e de Aleida Assmann sobre a memória cultural, defende que a censura teatral ajudava a definir aquilo que podia ser lembrado e partilhado no espaço público. A identidade nacional surge, portanto, não como uma realidade fixa, mas como uma construção atravessada por narrativas em conflito e por formas de controlo do discurso. O estudo cruza a leitura de processos censórios conservados no Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo e no Museu Nacional do Teatro e da Dança com a análise de duas peças, *Lisboa 72* e *Na Barca com Mestre Gil*. Mostra, por fim, como estes textos trazem ao palco memórias incómodas da guerra colonial, da desigualdade social e da hierarquia entre centro e periferia, pondo em causa o modelo identitário homogéneo promovido pelo regime e reabrindo as narrativas sobre o passado ditatorial.

Palavras-chave: teatro português, censura teatral, memória coletiva, Estado Novo, literatura lusófona.