

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

8:2 2022

Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzi, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Published in December 2022
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
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MARK BROWN*

From Auteur Directors to Mask Masters: Festival de Almada, 2022

Abstract

This article reviews the 2022 programme of Portugal's leading theatre showcase, Festival de Almada, which is held every summer in the city of Almada and, across the River Tagus, in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. The review begins with German director Peter Kleinert's Portuguese-language production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; before alighting on *Selvagem*, an anthropological work by Portuguese theatre-maker Marco Martins; *Hokuspus* by German mask-theatre company Familie Flöz; American director Robert Wilson's *I Was Sitting On My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating*; and, finally, *Hands Do Not Touch Your Precious Me* by Belgian movement-theatre maker Wim Vandekeybus. In doing so, the review seeks to give a sense of the breadth and internationalism of the festival's programme.

KEYWORDS: auteur; Peter Kleinert; Marco Martins; mask-theatre; Familie Flöz; Robert Wilson; Wim Vandekeybus

Festival de Almada, Portugal's premier theatre festival, is, surely, one of a small number of such showcases that can boast that it did not miss an edition during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, keeping carefully to government public health guidance, and with the high profile support of the President of the Republic, the Minister for Culture and the Mayor of Almada, the festival went ahead, albeit with a reduced, largely Portuguese programme. The 2021 programme had more of an international dimension: although, ironically, the Covid-related rescheduling by airlines meant that international guests (including myself) were more likely to face late cancellations of their flights than was the case in 2020. By July 2022 the festival programme – which included work by the great American auteur director Robert Wilson, a new piece by acclaimed German mask-theatre company Familie Flöz, and a Portuguese Shakespeare production directed by German master Peter Kleinert – was back to full strength.

One could not help but reflect that Festival de Almada's successful navigation of the turbulent waters of the coronavirus pandemic would have been a source of immense pride to its founding director Joaquim Benite. It is now ten years since Benite's passing. In that time his legacy has been fostered with great care

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and passion by Rodrigo Francisco (who had been Benite's assistant director of many years). Francisco has, with notable success, taken up the mantles of both director of Festival de Almada and artistic director of Companhia de Teatro de Almada, the company based in the superb theatre Benite created (which now bears the name Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite). The determined and thoughtful manner in which Francisco has brought the festival through the public health crisis is, surely, his greatest achievement thus far.

In 2022, as before the pandemic, such was the scale of the festival programme, that it took place, not only in Almada, but also across the River Tagus in the beautiful Portuguese capital of Lisbon. However, the flagship production of the festival's opening days – a Portuguese-language staging of Shakespeare's great comedy *Twelfth Night* (in which Companhia de Teatro de Almada was directed by Peter Kleinert) – was presented in the 'Blue Theatre', as the beautifully appointed Teatro Municipal is known in Almada (on account of the azure-coloured tiles that cover the building's exterior).

A liberal adaptation of Shakespeare's drama, Kleinert's production – which works from a Portuguese text by António M. Feijó – takes its lead from the play's famous opening line, in which the aristocrat Orsino says: "If music be the food of love, play on" (1.1.1). The show includes an eclectic soundtrack of recorded and live music (provided by on-stage musician Ariel Rodriguez, who is incorporated into the action) from the twentieth and twenty-first century pop music canon. The piece is performed in over-the-top modern dress: even before he is tricked into donning his famous yellow stockings, João Cabral's necklace-wearing, ornate waistcoat-adorned Malvolio is as image-conscious as he is authoritarian.



Fig. 1 João Cabral (centre) as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Photo: Rui Mateus

In most productions of this comedy, Countess Olivia (who is in deep mourning for the death of her brother), is a reserved, even conservative figure. Here, by contrast, Kleinert's postmodern inclinations transform her into an energetic, narcissistic party animal. I am blessed to have seen numerous productions of what is, to my mind, Shakespeare's finest comedy, but I have never before wit-

nessed an Olivia who would have the inclination – let alone the confidence – to halt the action of the play (as Érica Rodrigues’s countess does in the Almada production) by exclaiming, à la The Supremes, “Stop, in the name of love!”.

The conflict between the play’s comic ‘conspirators’ – led by the Falstaffian rogue Sir Toby Belch – and the killjoy steward Malvolio is the beating heart of *Twelfth Night*. It is – surely undeniably – a far more rewarding plot strand than those involving the shipwrecked and separated twins Viola and Sebastian or Orsino’s relentless pursuit of Olivia. Kleinert certainly places a premium on the comic potential of the conspiracy, not least in the famous letter scene.

In this scene Malvolio finds a letter, written by the conspiratorial servant Maria in handwriting that impersonates that of Olivia. The note suggests that Olivia is in love with him, and, moreover, that she wishes him to be even loftier and more dismissive than usual in his dealings with her errant kinsman Sir Toby and his friends. Indeed, the missive informs Malvolio that the countess longs to see him dressed in yellow stockings with crossed garters (a style that, in actuality, she detests).

The stage directions for this scene point towards the author’s metatheatrical intent. Sir Toby, with his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek and the servant Fabian, hides in what is described as a “box-tree” (2.5.13). From there the three observe Malvolio as he deciphers the letter with ever greater excitement. As he does so, the conspirators exclaim their comical rage, rendering themselves both visible and audible to the audience, but not to Malvolio, despite the fact that they are, in fact, closer to the hapless steward than they are to us, the audience. There are few better examples in classical drama of a playwright playing with the conventions of theatre, dispensing with the fourth wall between actors and theatregoers, and drawing deeply upon the audience’s willingness to suspend its disbelief.

In the Almada production, Kleinert stretches the inherent playfulness of the scene as if it were an elastic band. His conspirators not only make themselves ludicrously visible and audible. They actually leave their hiding place, getting ever closer to Malvolio, until they are all around the absurdly oblivious steward, even to the point of emptying out his pockets. The German director’s playing of this scene is a hilarious example of the comic possibilities embedded within the text of *Twelfth Night*. It also marks the highpoint of Kleinert’s postmodern Portuguese production.

It is difficult to imagine a stage work more different from the German’s director’s take on the Shakespeare comedy than *Selvagem* (“Wild”), Portuguese theatre-maker Marco Martins’s fascinating piece of anthropological theatre. The work – which reflects on age old performative rituals from Portuguese rural communities – purports to be performed by people who still live off the land in the places that gave rise to the traditions that Martins is recreating on stage. Presented, like Kleinert’s production, on the main stage of Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite, the show is contextualised by extraordinary, black and white documentary footage of the rituals as they were still being performed in the mid-twentieth century.

At the core of Martins's production is the role of masks in ritual. A series of characters represent such figures as the Wild Man, the Bear, the Goat and the Devil. Fascinatingly (and humorously), the documentary that precedes the stage performance shows us that – during the period of festival in rural communities – mask-wearing participants were entitled to drag unmasked men down to the village pub and require them to buy drinks for them.



Fig. 2 The Goat from *Selvagem*. Photo: Tiago Lopes

On stage, the piece seeks to avoid nostalgia. The performers wear their own workaday, contemporary attire, such as tracksuits and training shoes. The production is performed on a dusty stage that is akin to an outdoor rural playground. A somewhat sinister, low ceiling (looking like baked earth, with barely living trees protruding from it) slopes above the performers' heads, creating a slightly claustrophobic performance space. The soundtrack collides modern, electronic composition with noises and music that seem to have come down through the ages. These accompany physical rituals – from the evocation of the movement of a bull to the threatening, chastising appearance of a supernatural figure – that are captivatingly primordial. Certainly, they speak to a nature-oriented, European pantheism that predates the Abrahamic faiths and their monotheistic insistence on human mastery of nature.

The real beauty of the piece is that – brim full though it is with anthropological material – it is concerned, first-and-foremost, with ritual as living performance. Each element of the show – be it solo or collective – is presented with tremendous energy. As ever with mask performance, the covering of the face places great emphasis on the language of the body (an aspect of Martins's work that is amplified considerably by the experience of the Covid pandemic, during which the wearing of face coverings became commonplace for much of humanity). If the short biographies of the performers – which are given at the end of the production – are to be believed (and I see no reason why they should not be),

the piece is presented by people with such pastoral and artisanal employments as horse trainer and craft beer maker. It certainly seems unlikely that they are professional dancers.

Ultimately, *Selvagem* – rather than making hard-and-fast claims to historical or anthropological continuity – raises a series of interesting questions about the always dubious concept of cultural ‘authenticity’. In the process of doing so, however, it also creates a compelling work of theatre of masks, movement, sound and music.

Whether it was by coincidence or by design, the inclusion of *Hokuspokus*, by acclaimed German mask-theatre company Familie Flöz, in the same programme as Martins’s show, made for a fascinating and fruitful comparison. Whereas the narrative element in the ritualistic performances of *Selvagem* is minimal, the German company is renowned for the wordless storytelling of its work. Indeed, they are widely considered to be one of the finest exponents of the craft in contemporary world theatre, creating works that prove time and time again the popular understanding that a significant proportion of human communication is achieved through body language.

According to the famous formula developed by the great Armenian-Persian psychologist Albert Mehrabian,² only 7% of face-to-face human communication is achieved exclusively by words. Within the 55% of communication that is non-verbal, a considerable proportion is facial. Even in the Covid-era ‘new normal’ of increased communication by means of live video, we rely to a great degree on facial communication. However, theatrical communication is, for the most part, not face-to-face. In the theatre space – even that which is built around the speaking of words – the movement of the body takes on a far greater communicative responsibility than is the case in the day-to-day human interaction. If one adds to this – as, interestingly, the pandemic often did for many of us – the covering of much of the face, the importance of the physical gesture and movement is increased significantly. Cover the face completely and forbid speech, as much mask-theatre (including that of Familie Flöz) tends to do, and the body takes on an almost total responsibility for the expression of human experience, memory, emotions, psychology and sexuality.

The Familie Flöz masks are notably similar to each other. Exaggerations of archetypal features, their facial expression carefully indeterminate, the age of their associated characters is achieved only in small part by variations in the mask design. The addition of hair and accessories, such as glasses, also helps to identify the age and gender of the character. Costume, of course, plays a key role in assigning age and gender. However, the general personality and specific emotions of characters, from one moment to the next, are overwhelmingly conveyed by means of movement.

² According to Mehrabian: 55% of face-to-face human communication is achieved by nonverbal means, 38% is vocal, and only 7% is exclusively by words. Source: website of the University of Texas.



Fig. 3 A scene from *Hokuspokus*. Photo: Familie Flöz

In *Hokuspokus*, as so often in the company's work, we find the ancient methods of mask-theatre placed in a modern setting. The show (which was played in the outdoor auditorium at the D. António da Costa School in Almada) is a contemporary family drama, full of the heightened pathos, humour, conflict and sympathy that have always characterised Familie Flöz's work. Here, however, they choose, interestingly, to "show their workings". As the masked performers unfold their family drama – encompassing such human experiences as a young couple getting the keys to their new home, the birth of a first child, ageing and bereavement – the music and sound performers are on another part of the stage. The audience is free to witness the methods by which they provide, in Mehrabian's terms, nonlinguistic, but often verbal expression (including diverse, sometimes affectingly timeless song) to accompany and enhance the movement of the masked performers. To this on-stage juxtaposition of two sets of performers – one that is typically off-stage, the other the public, masked face of the company – is added unmasked performance and live drawing. The show's title, *Hokuspokus*, is a word associated with the illusions of magic. In this stage work, Familie Flöz open the toolbox of their ancient and modern art, allowing the audience a glimpse of the methods behind their brilliant aesthetics.

It speaks volumes to the stature of Festival de Almada that the productions discussed above jostled for audience attention in the 2022 programme with works by many other internationally renowned theatre artists. For example, Robert Wilson's intriguingly titled *I Was Sitting On My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating* (which is staged by the Parisian company Théâtre de la Ville) captivated audiences at Teatro Nacional D. Maria II in Lisbon. This highly distinctive piece boasts a combination of beautifully stylised, early-twentieth century visual aesthetics (including painted faces and lacquered hair that

give the actors doll-like appearances) and an exquisite, absurdist text that repeats and varies like a musical score by a modernist composer such as Webern or Schoenberg.



Fig. 4 Julie Shanahan in *I Was Sitting On My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating*. Photo: Lucie Jannsch

In stark contrast to the exquisiteness of Wilson's piece, famous choreographer Wim Vandekeybus (working with Olivier de Sagazan and Charo Calvo) offered *Hands Do Not Touch Your Precious Me* (presented at Teatro Municipal Joaquim Benite by Vandekeybus's Brussels-based company Ultima Vez). Described by the company as "a hymn by the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna to the goddess Inanna . . . [A] mythical tale of confrontation and transformation, light and darkness, death and rebirth", the work's mythological, even spiritual intentions are expressed through an elemental imagery that is often extremely ugly and horrific, yet, to my taste, curiously banal. There is no questioning the technical brilliance of Vandekeybus's dancers, nor the memorable nature of some of the images (especially one in which very careful application of chemistry enables a performer to set fire to their own head). Yet, somewhere in the show's welter of ideas and virtuosity, in its violence and histrionics, its capacity to compel one emotionally and psychologically gets lost.



Fig. 5 A scene from *Hands Do Not Touch Your Precious Me*. Photo: Danny Willems

That said, if Vandekeybus's piece was spectacular, yet frustratingly disappointing, the same cannot be said of Festival de Almada 2022 as a whole. The programme was a remarkable and admirable success for director Francisco and his team, and further proof that this Portuguese and international festival is a major player among the world's theatre showcases.

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