

THE LYRICAL ACTION IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

*A AÇÃO DO LÍRICO NA DRAMATURGIA
CONTEMPORÂNEA*

*LA ACCIÓN LÍRICA EN LA DRAMATURGIA
CONTEMPORÁNEA*

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Abstract

This article discusses the principles of some theories based on “drama crisis” that are guided solely by the presence of epic features in modern and contemporary drama, proposing the observation of recurring lyrical strategies in new forms of playwriting. With examples of Brazilian drama, the study suggests a critical-theoretical approach that recognizes the crucial role of lyrical procedures for the reconfiguration of the drama and the discursive plurality that marks the current production.

Keywords: Lyrical drama, Contemporary drama, Drama theories.

Resumo

O artigo reavalia pressupostos de algumas teorias baseadas na “crise do drama” que se orientam, exclusivamente, pela presença de recursos épicos na dramaturgia moderna e contemporânea, propondo o exame das estratégias líricas recorrentes em novas formas de escrita dramática. Com exemplos da dramaturgia brasileira, o estudo sugere uma abordagem crítico-teórica que reconheça o papel estruturante dos procedimentos líricos para a reconfiguração da forma dramática e para a pluralidade discursiva que marca a produção atual.

Palavras-chave: Drama lírico, Dramaturgia contemporânea, Teorias do drama.

Resumen

Este artículo cuestiona los principios de algunas teorías basadas en la “crisis del drama” que se guían únicamente por la presencia de características épicas en el drama moderno y contemporáneo, proponiendo la observación de los rasgos líricos recurrentes en nuevas formas de escritura dramática. Tomando ejemplos de la dramaturgia brasileña, este estudio sugiere un enfoque crítico-teórico que reconoce el papel fundamental de los procedimientos líricos para la reconfiguración del drama y para la pluralidad discursiva que marca la producción actual.

Palabras clave: Drama lírico, Dramaturgia contemporánea, Teorías del drama.

The observation of themes and lyrical procedures that emerge in the writing of plays since the dawn of the 20th century reveals recurrent composition

features in several possibilities of deconstruction and reconfiguration of the dramatic form, many of them still ongoing in the current dramaturgical production. Transformations that occurred in drama from the pioneering experience of Strindberg in his dreamlike pieces (*To Damascus*, *A Dream Play*, *The Great Highway*), and some developments in the expressionist Stationendrama (Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser), in the Panic Theater of Arrabal (*Fando y Lis*, *Prayer*, *Guernica*), in the scenic rituals of Jean Genet (*The Balcony*, *The Maids*, *The Blacks*) or on radical media condensation in Samuel Beckett (especially in the last “dramaticules”) put us in front of a hybrid form clearly **structured** by lyric strategies, although linked to epic resources in many cases.

However, only the epic aspect was properly identified and valued by the authors who pored over the multifaceted dramaturgical production that emerges in the first decades of the 20th century, and by shifting the Aristotelian and Hegelian paradigms, subverts the classic categories of genre, towards a revitalization and reinvention of the dramatic form that has not yet ceased to manifest its effects. The crucial reference for this exclusive recognition of epic trends in modern drama lies in the new classic work of Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama [1880-1950]*, published in Brazil in 2001, but whose first edition, by Suhrkamp Verlag, is from 1956, therefore previous to the immense variety of texts for the scene that emerged in the last fifty years.

Szondi's thesis, widely known, is that a “drama crisis” would have been installed from the late 19th century thanks to a growing internal contradiction between the dramatic form and the new content it would seek to assimilate in that historic moment. To the author, what constitutes the drama itself is “a particular form of poetry” that emerged in the Renaissance, developed in Elizabethan England and France in the 17th century, and survived through the German classicism. Szondi does not offer concrete examples of this “absolute” drama – except the mention, in a few lines, of characters by Corneille and Hebbel – and the theoretical description of their essential traits: the primary character of the dramatic relationship, which disconnects the staged world of everything external to it and make it “represent itself”, through an action always present, so that “the temporal course of drama is a sequence of absolute present times”. It is the total absence of the author that “speaks” only through the characters, hence the absolute domain of the dialogue, intersubjective

communication; requirement of the unity of time and place, as well as the causality in the link between the scenes, because any spatial or chronological displacement would broadcast the presence of an “epic persona” (SZONDI, 2001, p. 32-33).

This intersubjective dialectic, according to Szondi, would go through a crisis period in the works of dramaturgs like Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Maeterlink and Hauptmann (the five authors examined by him in the first chapter, entitled “The Drama Crisis”), with the increasing collapse of the constitutive traits of the action, the fable, the characters and, above all, the dialogue. To overcome the crisis, according to the German theorist, a progressive distance of the dramatic towards the theater epic form would be the answer.

Thereafter, the “modern epic drama” would emerge where “the social bourgeois play that once adopted the formal principle of the classic drama, becomes necessarily epic by the contradiction between form and content developed in the course of the 19th century” (Idem, p. 68). The curious thing is that this statement is made during an analysis of *The Ghost Sonata*, by Strindberg – an author of capital importance in the introduction of lyric resources in modern dramaturgy – and, despite that, the theoretical focuses exclusively on the epic detection and exaltation. Szondi regrets that, with the suicide of the character Hummel at the end of the second act, Strindberg has “deprived” the third act from the driving of this “epic subject”; so that the end of the play “had to fail because he should engender the dialogue again without the epic’s support” (Idem, p. 69).

Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, criticizing the reading of Szondi, recalls that “the subject of Strindberg’s subjective drama is not just epic; since it would be “alternately, or even simultaneously epic and dramatic” (SARRAZAC, 2012, p. 27). Later, he defends the third act of *The Ghost Sonata* as an “end of play in form of an opening characteristically lyrical”. Then he mentions, briefly, the issue that has relevance to the focus that I propose: “Here, Szondi does not seem to evaluate the importance of lyrical, alongside the dramatic and the epic, in the dramaturgic modern structures” (Idem, p. 28).

However, in spite of the valuable contribution of his critical-theoretical work to the current field of dramaturgical studies, Sarrazac himself has not given proper attention to lyric strategies in the analysis of modern and con-

temporary plays. Sarrazac, in his lucid critique of Szondi's book, disagrees with the teleological vision of the German theorist, that would imply an idea of "progress" towards the epic drama (the New), as an end to achieve the genre's evolutionary "improvement," as if the "crisis" of drama (the Old) had to be "overcome" (Idem, p. 24). But when he introduces his notion of rhapsody to understand the hybrid works of the contemporary dramatic writing, the latter arises "linked to the epic domain" (Idem, p. 152), omitting, once more, the lyric's presence and strength in these creations.

The intention here is not to replace the epic by the lyric on the horizon of drama, repeating formulations of teleological nature, as if the increasing lyricization encountered in current texts signaled some kind of "post-modernity" or "post-dramaticity" in the context of dramaturgy, or pointed an overcoming of the dramatic form. Without ignoring the importance of the epic features (in fact, since the Greek tragedies), an expansion of the critical and theoretical references is sought to obtain a more comprehensive vision of the current multiplicity of the dramaturgical production. To do so, certain habits in plays' analysis must be dislocated, such as to just recognize the lyric's presence in the language of replicas, in the making of the dialogue. This means that the aspect to be emphasized is the lyric role as a trend structuring multiple instances of the dramaturgic composition, in the design of situations, in the singular mode of the characters' action immersed in a process of subjectivation.

Traits usually pointed out as features of a current writing on dramaturgy suggest connections with some procedures that some theoreticians cite as characteristic of the lyric genre. There may be included: the predominance of the poetic function over the representative language; union of sound and sense, with an emphasis on the words' music; fusion of subject and object of perception; subjectivation of space and time; presence of repetition as a resource for maintaining the lyrical flow, with chorus and thematic variations; refusal of syntactical logic, with predilection for paratactic constructions (with coordinates, free of hierarchy), among others. In fact, it is possible to affirm that these features have been identified in the writing of texts for the scene, and they refer to, in many ways and aspects, a poetic configuration associated with the lyric. However, the overvaluation of the epic as "progress" and even "overcoming" of the dramatic form, as has been said, left no space for the contribution of

other genres and types of speeches to be recognized in the overall process of dramaturgy's renewal. From this results the scant literature production about the presence of lyrical in contemporary drama, even among academic studies.

Whether in the intrigue's instance, of characters or in the forms of enunciation, the traits constituting the strict or absolute drama show themselves as dissolved in texts that articulate lyric-dramatic features (not forgetting the contribution of other discursive genres). Such marks of an evident lyricization, associated with the processes of subjectivation in the themes, are present in the works of different authors — both in their writing and in the content of cultural inserts —, such as Thomas Bernhard, Bernard-Marie Koltès, Marguerite Duras, Wajdi Mouawad, Sarah Kane, Matéi Visniec, Jon Fosse, Enrique Buenaventura, Juan Mayorga, to name just a few already widely recognized by specialized critics.

In Brazil, the possibilities of lyric-dramatic miscegenation — with different implications for the diversity of texts brought to the scene — integrate the strategies of dramaturgs that emerged, especially in the last two decades, such as Cláudia Barral, Fernando Bonassi, Ana Maria Franco, Adelice Souza, Paulo Henrique Alcântara, Antônia Pereira, Dionísio Neto, Bosco Brasil, João Falcão, Marcos Barbosa, Cláudio Simões, João Sanchez, Gil Vicente Tavares, Leonardo Moreira, Rodrigo de Roure, Roberto Alvim, Fábio Mendes, among many others. Elements common to a large part of this production are: the predominance of the poetic function over referentiality; the fragmentation of everyday dialogue in emissions that seem to appear randomly, gradually allowing the outbreak of senses and ultimately achieve a curious effect from sparse replicas, silences or parallel voices; the permanence of situations as if suspended in time and space, without dramatic progression; the process of subjectivation that isolates the characters, dissolves the classic conflict and turns their enunciation into bundles of monologues or flows of reminiscences, causing language to acquire an unequivocal lyric force.

However, this is not a recent procedure in our dramaturgical production, since lyrical strategies are the structural basis already in texts of established authors such as Doroteia, or *Senhora dos Afogados*, by Nelson Rodrigues, *Rastro Atrás*, by Jorge Andrade, or the poetic plays of Hilda Hilst. Although keeping structural traits of the drama, as items of scenery and replicas that

are assigned to different characters, these plays work as spoken poems, with dominance of rhythm and lyrical repetition, in a polyphony of enunciative sources, such as *O rato no muro*, by Hilst. This type of textual and scenic construction approaches, in broad lines, the idea here proposed of a lyric drama.

This notion requires clarification, since the expression includes several meanings in the history of theater, as well as interfaces with the history of music. In general, it usually designates dramas with musical accompaniment, or musical theater, in which scenes with music and spoken scenes are inserted, and that sometimes contemplates from ancient texts that include choirs to *The Book of Christopher Columbus*, by Claudel. In the Spanish tradition, lyric drama refers to the “género chico”, a kind of subgenre of *zarzuela* or operetta. In France, the term *drame lyrique* arose in the 19th century to distinguish “serious” themed operas, with dramatic content, that move away from the grand opera model. On the other hand, Emil Staiger, alerting to the fact that traces of the three genres are not missing in any concrete work, makes the following illustration: “We use, for example, the expression ‘lyric drama.’ ‘Drama’ here means a composition for the stage and ‘lyric’ refers to tone, which is more important in the determination of the essence than in the ‘exteriority of the dramatic form’” (STAIGER, 1997, p. 14).

Facing this conceptual fluctuation, it is worth clarifying that my proposal of a lyric drama has a sense completely distinct from the previous examples, both the ones of scenic-musical tradition and of Staiger’s, as it takes into account the changes introduced in the “exteriority of the dramatic form”, when impregnated by lyric. Therefore, I am not referring only to tone, language style, not even to the “lyrical mood” (*lyrische Stimmung*) present in certain primarily dramatic works. With the term “lyric drama” I intend to conceptualize certain types of composition that are not only formal merged procedures of these genres, but to which the lyric provides structural traits that allow rewriting, sometimes radically, the dramatic conventions.

In an introductory study, published over three decades ago, I sought to draw a model of this form of drama (MENDES, 1981). In this article, I compare the different strategies between lyric and drama when dealing with time, space and action categories, to describe a type of composition in which formal traits of the two genres are articulated and produce a peculiar form of drama-

turgical writing. The theoretical model of lyric drama proposed by me elected as starting point the play *Waiting for Godot*, by Beckett, for the transparency with which this text exposes a recurring rhythm structure, based on circularity of the action and subjectivation of space (designed as a “interior stage”) and time (extended in never-ending spiral). But I already observed, at the end of the article, that it would be possible to “subscribe in this model a lot of the expressionist drama and of the so-called Theater of the Absurd” (Idem, p. 66).

Today, the observation of the dramaturgical texts that appeared in thirty years or so since the publication of this study requires the expansion of its boundaries to contemplate modalities of writing whose freedom surpasses the innovations emerged in the second half of the 20th century. In the diversity of this production, it is possible to observe as a common trait the effect of lyrical procedures in the transformations occurred and still ongoing in the dramatic form reconfiguration, through hybrid experiments, open to different ways of structuring narratives and genres of speech, in a polyphonic overflow that has not ceased to surprise readers/viewers.

The observation of phenomena typical of the lyric language – such as the fusion of sound and sense, rhythmic patterns of voiced recurrences, syntax’s fragmentation among others – presents itself today as one of the most productive optics for reading and interpreting texts for theater, when considered that the fictional dialogue does much more than just reproduce the occurrences of everyday speech. To create its own “language,” theater is able to magnify all the complexity existing in language use. However, the lyric action covers texts in which these strategies achieve not only the dialogue, focusing simultaneously on the subjectivation of space and time, the circularity of the situations, the composition (or decomposition) of fable, disseminated at the molecular level, in the mobile or undetermined identity of the characters, as the conflict fades away. The idea of action deserves to be reviewed in this context, to also understand the wandering of the poetic persona on the subjective stage.

The question of silence about the lyric and its role in the overall context of the modern drama’s renewal has not only aesthetic implications, but also ideological ones. In this sense, the criticism presented by Jean-Pierre Sarrazac to the thesis of Szondi (1954) is providential about the epic as “overcoming” a drama in crisis. For Sarrazac, Szondi’s book, for being “deeply rooted” in a He-

gelian-Marxist critical tradition that includes Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, could not “get completely rid of the decadence and formalism prejudices” that mark a great part of this sociological criticism lineage (SARRAZAC, 2012, p. 22).

The classic Hegelian formulation from which the drama gathers the epic’s objectivity and the lyric’s subjectivity was on the horizon of many attempts to understand the proliferation of deviant forms of the canonical model of the genre, from the modern drama. In the course of these theoretical efforts, the slope to the epic was seen as a possibility for drama to open its focus to a broader treatment of social issues, strengthening the objectivity of the time and space references and refusing the closing of intersubjective relations¹. On the other hand, the trend to lyric, in drama, remained linked to the inner life of the characters, the stasis of the action, the soliloquies in which the language is dedicated to the expression of “intimate” themes, more adapted to the problems of the isolated individual than to great socio-political issues.

Given this forced dichotomy, which has fueled theories aimed at the exclusive recognition of a future epic as a guarantee of the health of the drama, the rereading of certain capital texts is recommended. In the 1958 article entitled “On lyric poetry and society”, Theodor Adorno presents a social interpretation of lyric that creates remarkable displacement in traditional conceptions of this gender. After claiming that “the greatness of works of art consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides”, Adorno faces the skepticism of his listeners (“You conceive lyric as something opposed to society, as something fully individual”) to assert a “social essence of the lyric” based on the resistance of the poetic subject to the false consciousness:

This demand that is made to lyrics, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing

1. Iná Camargo Costa, discussing the Brazilian critical resistance to the epic theater, begins her incisive way of exposure: “In a very brief formula, we can say that the epic theater, of which Brecht is the most important emblem, was a kind of weapon formed between the end of last century and the first three decades of this by artists supporters of the cause of the proletarian revolution within cultural struggle” (1998, p. 75).

to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. [...] The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern age, and since the industrial revolution has become the dominant force in life (ADORNO apud COSTA LIMA, 1975, p. 345).

Written nearly half a century before certain dramatic texts not only influenced, but really structured by lyrical strategies, Adorno's words find admirable convergence with some current developments of the drama's poetics. In his latest book, Sarrazac revisits the idea of "intimate theater," starting from four chamber plays by Strindberg from the Intimate Theater's opening show, founded by the Swedish dramaturg in Stockholm in 1907. This intimate theater, in which the world and I are placed in tension, "lies in the Antipodes of any intimate theater," Sarrazac alerts, because this means "closing, enclosure, restriction of dramatic action to the sphere or to the phantasmatic barrier of the 'private life,' whereas, in the intimate theater, the interior, the inside space, manifests a social aspiration and cosmic to the exterior" (2013, p. 22). This is about conceiving the passage from an intersubjective to an intersubjective drama does not mean the closing on the secrets of an individuality and the isolation of the social theme, but the opening of the characters' intimacy for the world's show.

Lyrical action has the power to redraw the canonical forms of the dramatic making and to engender peculiar modes of dramaturgical composition. Discursive plurality that marks the current production includes strategies of the lyric genre that, in formal and thematic plans, play a key role in the configuration of subjective process that subverts the traditional categories of drama and can be included in the notion of lyric drama proposed here. The current theater, erasing borders and putting in tension several discursive genres, opening the interaction with the heterogeneity of the performing practices, becomes a fertile field for occurrences of complex phenomena enunciation. In this situation, the perception of structuring lyric traits in contemporary drama can contribute to amplify the current production's analysis with a repertoire of themes and techniques that has been absent from the most recent critical approaches.

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