

# QUEERNESS IN BERNARDO SANTARENO'S THEATRE

## A QUEERIZAÇÃO NO TEATRO DE BERNARDO SANTARENO

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines Bernardo Santareno's *A promessa* (1957) and *Os marginais e a revolução* (1979), arguing that the earlier play foreshadows a concern with sexual and gender relationships and expressions of queerness that only comes completely 'out of the closet' after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 1974. Taking particular religious and political constraints into account, and using Santareno's plays as a starting point, I will explore the complex ways in which gender and sexuality, significant components of individual identity and identity relations, act as a means of dissolving barriers and uncover the many ways Santareno questions essentialist conceptualisations of gender and sexuality.

**KEYWORDS:** Bernardo Santareno, *A promessa*, *Os marginais e a revolução*, theatre e queering.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo investiga as peças teatrais *A promessa* (1957) e *Os marginais e a revolução* (1979) de Bernardo Santareno, argumentando que a primeira peça prefigura uma preocupação com relações sexuais e de género e expressões de queerização, que só sai completamente "fora do armário", após o 25 de Abril de 1974. Considerando-se em particular as restrições religiosas e políticas, e usando as peças teatrais de Santareno como ponto de partida, explorarei as formas complexas em que o género e a sexualidade contribuem como aspetos significativos da identidade individual e das relações identitárias e como estas rompem com barreiras, revelando conceitualizações essencialistas de género e sexualidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Bernardo Santareno, *A promessa*, *Os marginais e a revolução*, teatro e queerização.

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*A promessa* (*The Promise*) is a play written by Bernardo Santareno [Antônio Martinho do Rosário, 1920 – 1980] in 1957 and staged in that same year by the Teatro Experimental do Porto, although the play only ran for ten days before it was taken off stage by the Estado Novo censors.<sup>1</sup> This play openly challenged the ‘holy trinity’ of ‘Deus, Pátria e Família’ and was therefore condemned as immoral. *A promessa* presents the consequences of a promise made to the Virgin Mary by José, a fisherman, and his wife Maria do Mar, in order to save José’s father (Salvador) from a storm at sea. The couple live in a fishing village called Nazaré, with Salvador and José’s younger brother Jesus, who is blind. The plot of this play involves the human cost of the young couple’s promise to remain chaste after their wedding. Although Salvador has been saved by an apparent miracle, Maria is profoundly unhappy and resentful, as demonstrated in the opening scene:

Salvador: “[...]até penso que tu me tens ódio, rapariga!”

Maria do Mar (crispada): “E porquê? Por que razão havia eu de odiá-lo, senhor?!”

Salvador: Que eu saiba, nunca te fiz mal...

Maria do Mar (num grito): Fez!

Salvador: “Eu?! (Pausa. Triste). Ah, já sei... é por causa da promessa, não é?”<sup>2</sup>  
(SANTARENO, 1984, p. 7)

The situation of sexual abstinence is taking its toll on Maria do Mar who feels as if she is being punished for the promise that she made to Virgin Mary. In one exchange with her mother, she reveals the depth of the frustration caused by unfulfilled sexual desire for her husband:

Ai, minha mãe, eu não entendo, o meu homem: ele não é como os outros... Talvez seja melhor, não digo que não: mas eu rebento, não aguento isto, não sou capaz! (Envergonhada.) Toda a noite ali, deitado ao pé de mim ... (Explodindo a cabeça levantada). É como se eu dormisse com um peixe morto, já podre. (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 43)

<sup>1</sup> 23/11/1957 according to CETBase. In: <<http://ww3.fl.ul.pt/CETbase/>>. Assessed on 21 Jun 2017.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are taken from Santareno, *A promessa*, in *Obras completas*, vol.1, Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1984.

As Patricia Odber de Baubeta states: “é [...] como se José tivesse prometido o seu amor à Virgem, em vez de à mulher” (ODBER DE BAUBETA, 1994, p. 141). Furthermore, in another passage Maria do Mar says the following to her mother: “Cheire, mãe, cheire os meus lençóis: cheiram a incenso, a cera da igreja ... não cheirem a homem, minha mãe, não cheiram a homem!” (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 63). The tension between religious values and sexual fulfilment is so powerful that it can only end in some expression of physical violence: at one point Maria reveals to Jesus how she has been mortifying her flesh, like a medieval nun. However, with the appearance of a new character, the action of the play shifts towards a different kind of a conflict. Labareda, a smuggler who has been shot by the police, is rescued by Maria do Mar and her mother who take him to the marital home, where he remains until his wounds are healed. During this time, Maria do Mar becomes calmer and happier, a difference that is noticed by her mother and the rest of the family, and which, it is revealed to the audience, is the direct consequence of the sexual attraction that has grown up between Maria do Mar and Labareda:

Labareda (sensual): Tu já não podes mais, Maria do Mar eu bem o sinto.... (Avança uns passos.) Ninguém, ninguém te toca?<sup>3</sup>

Maria do Mar: Só o meu homem, o meu marido.

Labareda (outra vez junto de Maria do Mar): Nem ele, nem ele!

[...]

Labareda: Gatinha ... gatinha brava! ... Tu já não dormes... Tu já não comes... Tu só pensas em mim... só em mim... és minha, Maria do Mar... tu és minha! (Beijam-se raivosamente). (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 97)

However, is not only Maria do Mar whose behaviour is changing: her husband José begins to suspect that is something going on between Maria and Labareda. By the end of the play, (Act III scene III), driven by jealousy, José finds Labareda in the countryside, castrates and kills him. Even though José is described by Maria do Mar as religiously observant (“Ele não é como os mais, não é como eu, mãe:

<sup>3</sup> The intimacy between them is indicated by the inappropriate use of the familiar form of address by Labareda.

é puro, é ... como os santos!” (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 26), his jealousy leads him to murder his wife’s presumed lover, then to force himself on her.

Labareda is described as a very handsome man by the women of the play, who offer comments and commentary after the manner of a Greek chorus. For example, in the words of the First Old Woman: “Bendita mãe que tal filho pariu! Aquilo é peixe do alto, peixe grosso e desenxovalhado!” (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 75). Thus *A promessa* not only places men as the object of the female gaze and desire – like Labareda – but also represents women who want to have sexual relations but are repressed by religious or social precepts. If they do throw off these constraints, they are considered to be “más mulheres, possuídas pelo demónio” (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 54), as Maria do Mar is perceived by most of the villagers. Furthermore, by embodying desire in Maria do Mar, Santareno seems to represent a heteronormative and even religious system that represses and condemns this kind of sexual desire, but does not, however, condemn physical violence against women, since at the end of this play Maria do Mar is raped by her husband.

In the final scene José is arrested by the police for murdering Labareda, and announces to the rest of the villagers that Maria do Mar was indeed a virgin. As stated by Graça Corrêa, this scene offers: “a bleak picture of rural Portuguese society in the late 1950s” (CORRÊA, 2007, p. 4), far from ready for sexual liberation due to the influence of the Church, social conservatism and, of course, Salazar’s Estado Novo ideology.

However, Santareno also introduces a certain ambiguity when depicting the relationship of Labareda and Jesus, making possible a queer reading of the play; in fact, several passages in the play suggest this interpretation to the reader. For example, when in Act II Scene V, Labareda and Maria Mar kiss each other, even the blind Jesus is aware of something happening between the two of them and confronts the couple, demanding that the intruder leave the village:

Labareda (sinceramente triste, a olhar intensamente para Maria do Mar: esta os cabelos caídos, está transida, estática): Pois sim, Jesus. Eu vou-me me embora.

Jesus (infantil, outra vez apaixonado): É melhor, Labareda, é melhor. (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 72)

This word, 'apaixonado', is crucial for the queerness of this play, because it is the only textual clue to Jesus' feelings for Labareda. Labareda blithely uses his charm to attract both men and women, and from the use of 'apaixonado', it can be assumed that Jesus is gay.

In contrast, Labareda is constructed as a figure of masculine power, conforming to prevalent societal notions of masculinity at this time, in Raewyn Connell's words, "the particular type of masculinity that is in power in a particular society, set in a specific time period" (CONNELL, 1985, p. 34). However, this character incorporates both homo- and heterosexual desire, for Maria do Mar on the one hand (heterosexual desire) and Jesus on the other hand (homosexual desire), even if this it is not made explicit in the text.

When Maria do Mar wants to run away with Labareda (Act III, Scene I), Jesus tells her: "Mente, o Labareda mente sempre: também me prometeu a mim", to which Maria do Mar replies: "E para quê, para que te queria ele?" (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 59). As Odber de Baubeta suggests: "Talvez a insinuação se deva ao facto de que sendo Labareda tão amoral, e com tanta falta de escrúpulos, eleja como vítima alguém ainda mais vulnerável; tem como fito levar as pessoas a apaixonarem-se por ele" (ODBER DE BAUBETA, 1994, p. 142).

It seems likely that the character's sexual identity is depicted ambiguously in order to escape the mechanisms of Estado Novo censorship. Then, as now, homosexuality was viewed as a sin by the Catholic Church, a condemnation that was also enshrined in law. Concomitantly, the representation of homosexuals in the arts was prohibited until the end of the Estado Novo, even after the introduction of the new, democratic regime<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence, homosexual characters and relationships were commonly inferred through stereotypes and an encoded structure of signs through which homosexuality could be deciphered.

Arguably, in *A promessa*, Santareno constructs a double performance: on the one hand, the heterosexual performance is highly visible; on the other hand, the homosexual performance, the richer of the two in terms of possible readings and interpretations, occupies a place in the subtext – hidden behind the doors of Salazar's Estado Novo. Nor is this the only work by Santareno to introduce homosexual themes and motifs. This theme can be found in several works of Santareno such as *A excomungada* (1957); *O bailarino* (1957); *Antônio Marinheiro*

<sup>4</sup> For background information, see São José de Almeida (2010).

(1960); *O pecado de João Agonia* (1961) and, as mentioned above, *Os marginais e a revolução* (1979), plays that disrupt the normativities of sexuality and gender (as discussed by Francisco Filho and Solange Santana).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with *A promessa*, Santareno uses a very different language and situation in *Os marginais e a revolução*, one of his last plays, published five years after the Carnation Revolution. This theatre play has not been the subject of any significant critical attention to date; the focus of the approach adopted here is to identify differences between the two plays in relation to the treatment of gender and sexuality before and after the revolution.

*Os marginais e a revolução* is an extremely provocative play, because it places drugs, lesbians, gays and transgenders centre stage for the first time in post-dictatorial Portugal. The play text consists of into four one-act plays: “Restos”, “A confissão”, “Monsanto” and “Vida breve em três fotografias”. The four plays deal with questions of sexuality, politics, social class and race, given the constraints of space, discussion here will centre on “A confissão”.

Divided into two sections, the first part of “A confissão” focuses on an unnamed woman who wants to leave her husband. Throughout her confession to the priest she complains that her husband does not want to work and so her four children have nothing to eat. The priest, not unexpectedly, tries to convince her that she should remain with her husband. For example, the priest says: “Mais sofreu Deus nosso Senhor, por ti. Aproveita o sofrimento, mulher, fá-lo render em teu favor”<sup>6</sup> (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 52); and he continues to say that these are the consequences of freedom: “Tu não vês o que se passa por aí, à nossa volta, nesta cidade de Lisboa, neste país ... desde que deitaram os remos ao mar e deixaram o barco à deriva? [...] Liberdade para pecar, liberdade para vestir a pele ranhosa do Diabo” (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 52). As we can see, the priest is alluding to the past of the Portuguese Empire, and he is criticizing that after Portugal lost the colonies, Portugal became a place of sin. Thus, the priest exalts the greatness of Portugal Empire and blames the new democratic regime for the current situation that the country itself. Also, through the dialogue between the priest and the woman, we can see that the priest blames the freedom that

<sup>5</sup> These plays will be the subject of a future project.

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from this play are taken from Santareno, *Os marginais e a revolução*. Lisbon: Ática, 1979.

was brought by the Carnation Revolution. Furthermore, the priest uses Catholic dogma to assure the woman that what she is going through is normal, because just as Christ suffered for the people, people also need to suffer.

In another scene, the same woman also complains that her husband wants to enjoy different “kinds” of sexual act:

Confessor: Diferentes do costume?

Mulher: Sim...

Confessor: Compreendo. Vamos, coragem! Ele obriga-te a fazer-lhe coisas sexuais com a boca?

Mulher: Não...

Confessor (quase decepcionado): Então?! (Pausa). Ouve, escuta, ele quer ter relações contigo por detrás?

Mulher (Choro convulsivo): Sim... Quer!

Confessor (Vitorioso): Ah é isso! (Pausa). E tu, deixas?

Mulher: Não... Mas ele bate-me, obriga-me!

Confessor: Se ele te obriga, não tens culpa, não pecas. (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 61-62)

Through his speech, we can see how the priest tries to embody the power of God and epitomise the social body that consistently aims to frame, make and regulate. Michel Foucault states the following about the act of confession:

[Confession] is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated. (FOUCAULT, 1990, p. 61–62)

The Church thus wields extensive power over the individual, as demonstrated in the scene between the female parishioner and the priest. Moreover, religious beliefs are shown to lead to repression, as I demonstrated in *A promessa*, and the Church reinforces patriarchal control of women’s bodies. In this particular

play the woman is absolved of sin because she is ‘doing her duty’ by obeying her husband, which shows an inherent hypocrisy. Santareno thus criticizes the power that the Catholic Church exerted over Portuguese society. Furthermore, as Antonio Cirurgião states:

In a more or less, explicit way Maria do Mar is named because she belongs to the sea and is obsessed by the sea; José because he resembles Saint Joseph in his love for chastity, symbolized by the white lily; Jesus because he looked like the Child Jesus and was named that when he was born; Labareda, because he suggests fire, able to burn anything that he touches. (CIRURGIÃO, 1982, p. 49)

Nevertheless, it is important to note that these characters do not live up to their biblical roles (OLIVEIRA, 1986, p. 27), for example when Maria do Mar says to José that since they are married for a year they should have a picture of themselves together:

“Eu sentada assim (executa) com um grande manto azul de seda e uma grinalda aqui, por trás de mim, com um lírio branco na mão ... Não é bonito, Zé? Um lírio, sim senhores: tal qual como S. José!” (SANTARENO, 1984, p. 20)

Through irony Santareno satirizes and criticises religious symbols and rituals; in this particular scene, with her imagined blue cloak, Maria do Mar seems like a travesty the Virgin in religious paintings. However, it is important to highlight that there is a difference between the two plays. The priest in *A promessa* is not unhelpful since he is willing to release Maria do Mar and José from the promise. The priest in “A confissão”, on the other hand, refuses the woman permission to defy her husband, thus introducing a double standard: sex was only licit as an act of reproduction, of which there is no possibility here; the man goes unpunished because he is not in the confession box.

This second part of the play presents the confession of Françoise who is transgender, but also a transvestite. Françoise is awaiting gender reassignment in London as she says: “Já tenho a operação marcada, em Londres” (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 68). She goes to the church to confess her sins, following two suicide attempts after her lover Toni has left her. Françoise also wants to confess that she has stolen a silver bag from the owner of the club where she works as a drag

queen. However, on arriving, she hesitates, because she is supposed to sit in the women's place, then goes to the men's place. This breach of the 'norms' angers the priest, who tells her:

Confessor (irritado, contendo-se): Desculpe, mas não deve ajoelhar-se aqui. As senhoras confessam-se daquele lado, por detrás da separatória. Aqui, só posso confessar os homens. Françoise (suspirando, trágica): Mas eu sou homem...

Confessor (espantado): Como, homem?!

Françoise: Sou. Infelizmente. Melhor dizendo. Sou uma mulher com corpo de homem. É este o meu grande drama!

Confessor (que julga compreender): Ah, compreendo...! É uma mulher homossexual, é isso?

Françoise (exagerada): Não padre, que horror! Eu só gosto de homens.

Confessor: Mas então?!... Fale claro, por amor de Deus! É um homem vestido de mulher? Será possível?!

Françoise: Sim, Padre, para meu sofrimento, (batendo no peito) meu grande, meu tão grande sofrimento!

Confessor (bruto): E vem confessar-se assim, nessa figura?! A confissão é um sacramento, não é uma teatrada, ou um jogo de carnaval! Não posso confessar nesse estado.

Françoise (aflita): Qual estado?

Confessor: Assim com vestes de mulher!

Françoise: Mas eu, verdadeiramente, sou mulher! É a minha natureza autêntica, mais profunda. (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 64-65)

This theatrical act of transvestism in *A confissão* operates as a critique of the assumption that there is "a proper gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense, that sex's cultural property" (BUTLER, 1990, p. 21). Also, as Butler states: "The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender and gender and performance" (BUTLER, 2007, p. 175). Thus, in this performance Françoise's body exposes the falseness of gender that is naturalized in the normalization of heterosexuality, since she confuses the priest with her physical appearance. Also, by emulating

gender, Françoise as a transvestite informs the imitations of gender itself and its possibilities. In this way, the drag performance has a political power that disturbs the barriers of *what* is understood as a man and *what* is considered as a woman.

Camp as political strategy is also employed in this work. Throughout the play, there are numerous dialogues in which Françoise uses his campiness as a powerful political reaction against oppression, defying heteronormativity and religious values. For example, in one of the lines of this confession the priest says the following to Françoise:

Confessor (batendo os pés, furioso): Não posso mais! Diga 'entusiasmado', fale no masculino, o senhor é um homem!

Françoise: Não sou. E só de o ouvir chamar-me homem, fico toda arrepiadinha! (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 90)

Through his campiness, Françoise challenges heteronormativity and the homophobia present in the character of the priest, and simultaneously promotes a queer identity. For Didier Eribon, camp is not only a particular gay sensibility, but it is mainly a strategy of defiance in relation to heteronormativity by appropriating effeminacy as a powerful tool of subversion (ERIBON, 2004, p. 91). In this passage Françoise's campiness is exactly that: a theatrical gay sensibility that when faced with heteronormative hostility by his priest is projected against that oppressive force. As Jack Babuscio explains:

I define gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, and defined by the fact of one's gayness. (BABUSCIO, 1999, p. 118)

In one of the last scenes, after the priest has refused to absolve Françoise of her sins, the transvestite tells him the following:

Françoise: Eu não sou Francisco, sou Françoise! La belle Françoise! [...] Santa sou eu, que sou bela e doce, macia como uma pétala de rosa e fresca, como a brisa do mar! (Batendo com a mão no peito:) Santa, santa, santa! (Gargalhada:) A santa do

‘travestis!’ La belle Françoise regressa à frente de combate: Venham banqueiros e condes, industriais e ministros, eu lhes darei a minha bênção! (Dois passos. Pára, voltando-se:) Você é mesmo feio! Um sapo [...] Viva la belle Françoise (Gargalhada. Desaparece). (SANTARENO, 1979, p. 106-107)

Françoise’s campiness is political in so far as it acknowledges the power of normative social rules, while it simultaneously undermines the rules by mocking (through parody) their false claim to authenticity. The inscription of homosexuality within such a religious structure is inevitable parodic, and the campiness of such a fusion of the Catholic context with the contemporary gay male’s acerbic wit is both ironic and poignant. According to Jack Babuscio, camp parody is: “a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity” (BABUSCIO, 2002, p. 126). This juxtaposition of gay culture and identity with religious rituals is intended to problematize the transience of epistemological structures of “truth” and “value”: a plot is tenuously aligned with seemingly “real” depictions of contemporary life. Santareno’s play text revels in the deviance of an act of queering. When Françoise says to the priest that she will giving them her blessing, she also subverts the religious values, since she is assuming the role of Our Lady. This because we have a man who is a transsexual and also dresses as a woman, thus reappropriating the role of the “divine”. By so doing, she is placing herself above men now she will be the one to “judge” them. Camp is then placed within queer discourses, and functions as a politicised form of queer parody, pastiche and performance.

*A confissão* sets out to blur the distinction between the personal and the political, the homosexual refuses to be closeted, the play undermines the category of the “normal”, and questions the fixedness and stability of every sexual identity. As Francisco Filho states: “As personagens de Santareno acabam por funcionar como oráculos trágicos voltados para o desvelar de uma falsa moral e de uma perversa hipocrisia regentes da vida e dos destinos portugueses, em uma constante tentativa de libertar almas aprisionadas no vazio das aparências” (FILHO, 2009, p. 14). As we can see, both the wife and Françoise are victims: of gender because both of them try to disrupt the patriarchal system by not conforming to it; of society since they do not meet the expectations of what was considered the role of women and men; and of the Church because both of them want to subvert the religious doctrine.

To conclude, Santareno's plays emerge precisely at the point where Salazarism and revolutionary sentiment meet. Through the dramatic techniques employed by Santareno in his plays, including stage directions, symbolism, conflicts, among others, he shows the affinities between the rituals of Catholicism and the sexual-lumpen (women, queer), illuminating the passivity of Christ, showing the inconfessable attraction between the smuggler and the queer. Santareno highlights the limits of the sexual liberation that began to operate as policies of identity in Portugal post-dictatorship. Moreover, Santareno reconstructs a new discourse combining queer identities and Catholic notions –since he mixes the “pathological” (homosexual) and religious, social norms – that intensifies and displaces, to the point of denaturalising them, Catholic rituals and masculinity and femininity, at the same time revealing the complicity which maintains the social hegemony of religion, national, gender or sexual identity.

Through his plays Santareno gives voice to the marginalized minority that did not fit into the ideological construction of Salazar's regime; his work reveals the anguish experienced by men and women unable to find any kind of personal identification in this structure. *A promessa* and *Os marginais e a revolução* are revolutionary, as the title of the latter may explicitly suggests, portraying the oppressed people in Portugal before and after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974. Simultaneously, these plays allow the audience to understand oppressive constructs by promoting a critical consciousness of the political, religious and even ideological context in which they live. Arguably, Santareno's work sets out to empower those members of society who are usually lacking in defences because of their marginalised position, encouraging them to accept their sexual identity and sexual desires. Finally, he also challenges the traditional canon of literature by giving voice to these marginalised characters and placing them at the centre of action.

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