

Tiago Rodrigues's Antony and Cleopatra

The production *Antoine et Cléopâtre* by Thiago Rodrigues and his company [Mundo Perfeito](#) was created in 2015, and was presented (in Portuguese) at the Avignon Festival. It was again presented, but in French, at the [Paris Autumn Festival 2016](#), at the Théâtre de la Bastille. It was produced by the Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, one of most important theatres in Lisbon, that Thiago Rodrigues directs currently. This production is interesting and original for a variety of reasons.

First of all it is a poetic and complex adaptation of Shakespeare's play, inspired in part by Plutarch's story of Marcus Antonius in *Parallel Lives*, in part by Mankiewicz's film *Cleopatra* (1963), as well as by the performances of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, but also by all the background stories accumulated about these characters, using many sources of inspiration, as (the director has noted) Shakespeare himself did. The multiplicity of spaces and of times and the transgressive aspect of the play inspired Rodrigues to make up his free adaptation of this story.

Rodrigues reduces the story to two main characters, Antony and Cleopatra. His production also adopts a different structure than does Shakespeare's play. It divides the play into nine cantos, like a long poem. In the first five cantos, there are mainly narrative lines and dialogues as in a poem, with a few parts in prose. The adaptation deals with the lovers' feelings for each other, when they are together and when they are separated. It describes with precision the characters' gestures, movements, feelings and even thoughts of daily life. It focuses on the physical aspects and movements, as if the narrator were watching the characters. Most of the time, lines help to picture precise and very small gestures, such as the ones to which somebody close to the person with whom they are in love could pay attention. The two characters are often together, repeating the same action.

The structure is repetitive and the lines are also often repeated. For example, often the sequences begin with the character's name. The images, simple at first, are progressively completed by repetitions that add new elements. When the image reaches its completion, another name or another image is mentioned; or the name of a character is repeated, followed by the diverse actions he carries out.

In the sixth canto and in the following ones, the initials of the actors appear in the written text, stressing the fact that there are actors telling the story, although in this canto, the lines correspond to the characters. The lines of the eighth canto seem also close to a real dialogue. When Antony is close to his death, and he is drawn to the tower to be again with Cleopatra, the dialogue becomes progressively more elliptic and ends in an exchange of single words, summarizing their situation and their feelings, repeated and changed very quickly, as if their entire life was passing rapidly, not in front of their eyes, but through their last dialogue.

Within this short text, many actions of Shakespeare's play are evoked or summarized. For example, in the second canto, the actions of act 1, scene 2 (Antony hears about his wife's death and decides to return to Rome) and of act 5, scene 2 (Cleopatra's death as a premonition) of

Shakespeare's play are mentioned; in the third canto, the scenes 1.5 (Cleopatra missing Antony), 2.2 (Antony with Cesar) and 2.3 (Antony is married to Octavie, Cesar's sister); in the fourth canto, the scene 2.5 (Cleopatra hears by a messenger that Antony married Octavie, in the Thiago Rodrigues adaptation she kills him); in the fifth canto, the scenes 1.4, 1.6, 1.7, and 3.4 are evoked (the scenes with Sextus Pompée); in the seventh canto the actions of the scenes 3.7, 3.9, 3.10, 4.5, 4.6, 4.10 (the preparation, the description of the battle, the betrayal and the suicide of Enobarbus, Antony's right-hand man); in the eighth canto the scenes 4.14, 4.15, 4.16 are evoked showing Cleopatra's despair and how the wounded Antony is carried close to her; the ninth canto evokes the scene 4.16 (Antony's death close to Cleopatra).

The actions of Shakespeare's play are mainly presented through the point of view of the characters and their passionate relationship. Even when they are compelled to react, the characters, although two people in love, remain mainly focused on themselves.

Time is one of the basic references of the adaptation: both lovers seem to be in the present, forgetting the past and avoiding thinking about the future. Their actions are often repeated, evoking an obsessive or even compulsive attitude, but also how ecstatic they feel and how time seems suspended for them: Antoine respire/Cléopâtre respire/Antoine respire/Cléopâtre respire... (Antony breathes/Cleopatra breathes). The repetition introduces a different time in the action, a poetic time depending on circular recurrences, reflecting the timelessness of the common presence of the lovers. The only real time is when the lovers are together: the arrival of Antony is expressed as: Antoine entre dans le présent (Antony enters into the present). Antoine a déjà oublié l'existence des autres dans le présent (Antony has already forgotten the presence of the others in the present). And when Cleopatra leaves: Cléopâtre sort du présent (Cleopatra leaves the present). As a poetic text, it also introduces some surprising and memorable images.

However, from the beginning, the dark premonition of Antony's suicide slithers within the dream: in the first canto, Antony imagines how a sword makes him bleed and how, wounded, he is attached to a rope and drawn suspended in the air up to the top of the tower where Cleopatra awaits (in Shakespeare's play: 4.16). But it is only an imaginary scene: after this nightmare, in the first canto, the lovers are alive, sharing a bath together.



Antoine et Cléopâtre. Photo: Magda Bizarro.

The simplicity and the sobriety of the production is really surprising compared to the sophistication of the text. With only a few set elements and only two actors, the production achieves much of the power of Shakespeare's tragedy. The set, by Ângela Rocha, is very simple: a grey and clear fabric covers the stage from the top backdrop to the upstage. At stage left, there is a table and on it a stereo system, a pitcher and two glasses, and the case of the vinyl records of the music of Mankiewicz's film; at stage right, close to the backdrop, there is a reproduction of a giant suspended mobile by Calder. It takes up half of the stage. Two yellow and two blue transparent disks are suspended, reflecting sometimes the audience, before the production begins. The mobile by Calder seems to stress the difficult balance, the constant movement, and the suspended situation of the couple.

One of the bewildering features of the production is the actors' distance from the text they deliver. The actors (Sofia Dias and Vítor Roriz, both also dancers and choreographers) play the lines to the audience, as if they were narrators of a story. The costumes (by Ângela Rocha and Magda Bizarro) are modern and casual: both actors are dressed almost in the same way, showing their similarity. The audience associates instinctively the actor with Antony and the actress to Cleopatra. But the production breaks this expectation. The actor explains to the audience the movements and the feelings of Cleopatra, and the actress narrates the movements, the thoughts and the deeds of Antony. The two characters are very clearly differentiated and move on an imaginary stage, remaining narrators bringing into the passionate

relationship of the lovers the distance of storytelling. At the beginning, although they repeat the same sentences, each actor brings something new in each repetition, with small variations in their acting, creating a surprise in every sentence. They seem to live obsessed with the other character, as in a perpetual mirror effect. Tiago Rodrigues explains in the program of the production that this was inspired by the ironic sentence of Plutarch commenting on Marcus Antonius's desertion from the battle of Actium following Cleopatra: "The soul of a lover lives in a foreign body."

The actors play with their bodies: with their extended arms, they locate both characters in space and show some of their movements, while they are describing their reactions. These movements are part of the narration. Together the actors create a subtle choreography in the space. They make delicate and graceful mimes of their movements. Although the adaptation repeatedly makes explicit their physical union (Antoine embrasse Cléopâtre/Cléopâtre embrasse Antoine, p.30), the production chooses a discreet, subtler representation. When Antony and Cleopatra are together, expressing their feelings of love, the actors are standing face to face, with their arms extended, interwoven without touching each other, showing with their image how close the characters are, but also how different, separated, and even opposed in contradiction to their words. Throughout the production, both actors preserve their complicity with but also their distance from each other (they never reach out to touch each other), avoiding all conventional affective movements showing also, in a very poetic way, the unavoidable distance of the audience from the tragedy.

Their movements always differentiate the action without being redundant or illustrative: for example, when they mention who takes part in the naval battle, the actors position on the stage each of the participants in it, and the situation at the beginning of the battle becomes visible to the audience. They establish a certain recurrent code in their movements: with their arms extended in front of them, they accompany the characters in their movements; with their arms and hands orientated to the floor, they locate characters in an imaginary space.

The position of the actors in relation to the characters varies subtly and quickly. At the beginning they are simple performers: the actors present themselves and show with their acting and their reactions what the other actor says, with slight hints of irony and a sense of humor: for instance, at one point, the actor in a seemingly comic way seems to try unsuccessfully to imitate the actress' shifting movements. But as the production unfolds, the division of the lines seem to reflect what each character is looking at, how they see their partner. The actors become closer to the characters, as if trapped in their narration. At times, they exchange their roles; they embody each other's character.

Being a poetic text, a slow pace that stresses its polysemic resonance could be expected; instead, the production chooses fluidity. After a calm beginning during the two first cantos, the production unfolds very quickly. The pace creates a striking rhythm but also stresses the impression of frailty. However, even if the pace of the production is rapid, the audience never loses the impression of peacefulness provided by their acting. From the beginning, the production shows some of the references that inspired the director, but also from which the production seems to keep a distance: before the actors enter the stage, the audience can hear the music of Mankiewicz's film. This monumental music contrasts with the economical set

design.

If the text has a very clear structure, the production only stresses the separation of the first cantos, emphasizing the distance between the action and the fiction: at the end of the first canto, both actors stop acting, and walk to the table; the actress turns on the music, and each of them takes a glass of water and speaks between themselves, an exchange the audience cannot hear. Then they turn the music down, and walk again to the middle of the stage, facing the public. The rest of the production, the progression of the play is subtly marked, in coherence with the shift of the actors from narrators to characters: the changes between sequences are underlined by few variations, mainly created by movements of the actors and variations of pace. For instance, the parts of the play that explain the actions of only one character after the third canto, when Cleopatra and Antony are separated, are said much more quickly, only by one actor, as if this period were not worth spending much time on.

The fictional situation is shown in a symbolic way by the movement onstage of the actors: the actors are separated on the stage when Antony is in Rome and Cleopatra remains in Egypt. In the fourth canto, the actress is upstage right, and slowly plays with the Calder mobile, while the actor is explaining how Cleopatra receives the messenger telling her that Antony had married Octavie, Cesar's sister. The violence of the action narrated contrasts with the delicate movements of the actress upstage, moving in circles. The actors are again at the same level onstage in the sixth canto when Antony returns to Egypt. Nonetheless, even separated, both characters are tied together by the similarity of their stylized movements.

Diverse lightening effects also mark the progression of the action, such as the bright light that comes from upstage right when Antony goes back to Cleopatra, contrasting with previous effects at the beginning of the sixth canto. In the seventh canto, the actress turns on the music of Mankiewicz's film when the narration of the battle begins, and turns it off at the end of it. Both actors are seated when they narrate how Antony sent his treasure to Enobarbus, who has betrayed him. At the opening of the production, the light separates the backdrop from floor of the stage with a large and bright line. As the action progresses, and the situation of Cleopatra and Antony becomes awkward, the illuminated part of the floor of the stage decreases, ending being a simple strip of light downstage while the rest of the stage is in shadow. This is in the seventh canto, when Antony commits suicide.

At the end of the eighth canto, in one of the most surprising moments from an acting point of view, when the dialogue becomes elliptic, both actors begin to say words describing their situation simultaneously. They pronounce them quickly. Both speak at the same time, like two simultaneous monologues, listening to the other in the resonances of their own words, expressing in this moving way the unavoidable tragedy.

After this moment, the actors again adopt a calm behavior, as narrators of this rapidly evolving story and of Antony's death. They are downstage left, watching the audience as in most of the production, and the rest of the stage is not illuminated. In this part, they repeat the lines quickly without variations, as if drawn by the urgency of a hopeless situation. Both characters are seated on the floor and they get up again to become the distant narrators of the last sentences: both actors exit together, ending this beautiful and short production of one hour and fifteen

minutes.

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