

A National Theatre Reopens

By Marvin Carlson

The National Theatre of São João (TNSJ) in Porto, Portugal, has been, like theatres around the world, closed to the public throughout 2021, but unlike many of its sister theatres, it took advantage of the closing to undertake a series of major renovations, including a complete rebuilding of the stage and the addition of 450 new seats, at a total cost of over 2.5 million Euros. The reopening, on October 22, also marking the theatre's centenary, was therefore an occasion for multiple celebrations. It was marked by the premiere of a new production of *King Lear*, as well as a major exhibition of artifacts from the last century of the theatre's offerings, as well as a conference on the current role of national theatres, with directors from many such theatres meeting to exchange ideas and plans.

The inaugural production of *Lear*, created by Nuno Cardoso, one of Portugal's leading directors, was based on a design concept that originated with this unique moment in the theatre's history. The full expanse of the renovated stage was utilized, but the lower part, extending up to perhaps ten feet above the stage floor, was largely empty, but dotted with objects discarded from the renovated stage and backstage areas—a few chairs, an old refrigerator, some dressing room makeup tables, a number of upright and chest-like storage boxes mounted on wheels, and several wheeled costume racks, complete with old, mostly modern costumes. In the course of the production these units were moved into different configurations around the stage, abstractly suggesting different locations. Actors not performing stood or sat upstage or at the sides, sometimes watching the onstage action with interest, and sometimes simply relaxed, awaiting their turn. Not all of this was visible for the first act, which was played far downstage, with the act curtain lowered to about four feet above the floor, leaving a shallow forestage which the actors entered by stooping beneath the curtain, using simple scenic elements like the wheeled storage containers which they pushed out below the curtain.

The full stage was not revealed until the second act, when in contrast to the simple elements in the mostly empty lower part of the space, the fly area above was filled with a constructivist network of shining metal piping, criss-crossing the entire space. The effect was visually striking, but the symbolic relationship between the upper and lower parts of the stage was not entirely clear. The minimalist open area below with clearly reused storage elements suggested a somewhat improvised or rehearsed performance (although the detailed essentially modern costumes did not particularly support this) somewhat in the manner of Richard Burton's 1964 "dress rehearsal" *Hamlet*. The ultramodern maze of piping above seemed to bear no aesthetic relation to any of this, though I wondered if the combined effect might be referring less to *Lear* itself than to the occasion, with the lower stage representing the tradition and memories of the theatre and the upper the just-installed impressive new technology.



Lear, by William Shakespeare, directed by Nuno Cardoso. Photo: National Theatre of São João.

This symbolic ambiguity might well have been resolved had the complete production been presented, but it was not. The rather minimalist program provided announced a running time of 90 minutes, and my first assumption was that the production might be following the approach popular in Germany at the beginning of the century when Ibsen, Chekhov, and even Shakespeare were often cut down by Thalheimer and others to their “essence,” presented without intermission in versions about this long. In fact I found that the cutting and speed was fairly normal, and only the first two acts were presented at this official opening. The rest is scheduled to be added in early November.

Accustomed to a paucity or complete absence of live performance for much of the past year, I certainly felt half a *Lear* was better than none, but obviously any comments I make on the production will have to be qualified by the fact that I saw only part, and admittedly the less challenging part—without all the cruel extremities, physical and mental—occurring in the later scenes. I would have been especially interested to see the further development of *Lear* by the leading Portuguese actor António Durães. In the opening act his bursts of rage, vocally and physically, were overwhelming (in his first burst of anger against Kent (João Melo) he brutally crushed him against the proscenium arch and then, when pronouncing his banishment, literally hurled him off the stage into the central aisle of the auditorium. His mounting hysteria and struggles to contain it in the second act were powerfully shown, and it was a great disappointment not to see how they would be developed in the storm scene. The approaching storm was clearly suggested visually and aurally by rumblings and flickering lights among the hitherto neutral

tubing above the stage and here too one could only imagine how this effect might have been developed in the full production.



Lear, by William Shakespeare, directed by Nuno Cardoso. Photo: National Theatre of São João.

Lear's arbitrary and erratic violence was nicely seconded by four followers, who several times cornered the hapless Oswald (Antonio Parra) and surrounded him, beating and kicking his prone body. Regan (Margarida Carvalho) and Goneril's (Joana Carvalho) complaints against them seemed unusually well founded. Maria Leite offered an athletic and effectively sardonic female fool, in rather traditional motley, although the costumes were in general rather neutral modern dress. The only particularly contemporary production element (aside from the ceiling tubing) was a hand-held microphone, used by Lear to make official pronouncements and by Edmund for his soliloquies. Edmund's (Pedro Frias) deviations from normality were emphasized—he moved in an awkward, rather disjointed manner, although without any clear physical deformity, and at one point he popped out from behind a cabinet to seize Oswald for a quick but passionate homosexual embrace. This aspect of Edmund was not indicated at any other point in the section we saw and one could only speculate how it might have been developed in the unrepresented acts.

A seemingly much more arbitrary gender choice involved Kent. Preparing to return to the court in disguise, he riffled through one of the onstage costume racks and selected, rather surprisingly, a quite plain and loose fitting dress. With only this to alter his appearance he applied to Lear as a follower, who

shows no surprise at this obviously cross-dressed figure. This gives a whole new dimension to their opening exchange “How now, what are thou?” “A Man, sir.” But neither actor suggests in any way that the exchange refers to Kent’s appearance, and the following clearly male banter is also presented quite conventionally, leaving the audience to wonder if perhaps Lear is already mad, until other characters also accept Kent’s odd appearance without apparent surprise, leaving his choice of disguise a puzzle.

Frank Castorf has had a distinct influence on the modern Portuguese theatre, and this likely explains the production’s use of projected images from a hand-held video camera onstage—a favorite Castorf device. In this case however I did not feel that the extra perspective this offered really added significantly to the performance, especially since the images projected were identifiable, but not particularly clear or visually interesting. In the first act, the images are projected on the lowered curtain behind the performers, which is not a good reflecting surface, and are essentially closeups of Cordelia (Lisa Reis) as she crouches center stage under the weight of Lear’s attacks on her. During the second act the camera is generally carried about by the Fool, but for the most part it is not used to present the Fool’s view of the action, but rather self-image closeups of his own face. These are rather dimly projected onto the dark face of one of the upright storage cabinets scattered about the stage. Again, their weak definition and lack of clear relevance to the overall dynamics of the scene made them seem to me more of a distraction than addition to the performance.

All such misgivings of course have to be qualified by the fact that I witnessed only half of the production, with all of the most challenging scenes still ahead—Gloucester’s blinding, the storm, Lear’s madness and Poor Tom’s pseudo-madness, and the final reconciliation. Production choices that seemed to me unclear or ineffective may well have become appropriate and even memorable viewed in the context of the whole. To my Covid-deprived theatre soul, however, even half a *Lear* was distinctly better than none, the powerful interpretation of Durães alone making the evening a memorable one, and my congratulations and warmest thanks to the National Theatre of Porto and to its sister institutions around the world who are restoring the living theatre to us.

Marvin Carlson, Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center, is the author of many articles on theatrical theory and European theatre history, and dramatic literature. He is the 1994 recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism and the 1999 recipient of the American Society for Theatre Research Distinguished Scholar Award. His book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, which came out from University of Michigan Press in 2001, received the Callaway Prize. In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens. His most recent book is a theatrical autobiography, *10,000 Nights*, University of Michigan, 2017.



MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER PUBLICATIONS

European Stages, vol. 16, no. 1 (Fall 2021)

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©2021 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
The Graduate Center CUNY Graduate Center
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New York NY 10016

European Stages is a publication of the [Martin E. Segal Theatre Center](#) ©2021

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