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Isabel Bezelga and Lucilia Valente

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# “Brincas of Évora” Rituals of Carnival and Performance in the South of Portugal: Rural and Traditional Festivities in the Contemporary World

Isabel Bezelga, Universidade de Évora, Portugal  
Lucilia Valente, Universidade de Évora, Portugal

*Abstract: The “Brincas of Evora” is a dramatic performance using popular rhymes as the narrative plot, encompassing music, dance and poetry. It is a carnival celebration inspired by old winter rituals which were common through out Europe. This paper aims to describe, analyze and discuss the “Brincas of Évora”, a type of popular performance celebrated in the south of Portugal, looking at its theatrical features and the motivations of the participants. It also discusses the community relevance of “Brincas” in terms of social, emotional and esthetic experience. A mixed methodology has been used to integrate different voices – group elements, cultural and artistic leaders and the audiences.*

Keywords: Carnival Performance, Community Participation, Rural Traditions in the Contemporary World, Heritage and Identity

**T**HE ORIGINS AND significance of community theatre is a stimulating and controversial topic among scholars, artists and community based practitioners, from performance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999; Schechner 1985, 2002; Turner, 1982, 1996) to popular and traditional theatre (Berthold, 2004; Goody, 1999; Veneziano, 1996, 2006). Contributions come from areas such as community theatre, contemporary theatre and applied theatre (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Epskamp, 2006; Heritage, 2000; Nicholson, 2005; Nogueira, 1996, 2008; Schechter, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Schechner, 2004) and even dramatherapy (Orioli, 2001; Valente, 2005, 2009; Valente e Fontana, 1994, 1997).

Community theatre is essentially an approach that links experiences of a social, cultural, economic, and historical context. In the Portuguese context, the existing research in the area of theatre and community is still in the early stages, and only recently have we had more systematic studies in the area of socio-cultural animation (Bento, 2003; Cunha, 2004). However there are some practices that can be included in community theatre and amateur theatre. For instance, in the south of the country, in the Alentejo region, some pioneering projects within the practice of social intervention through theatre were developed immediately following the Portuguese democratization process brought about by the 1974 revolution.

One of the problems with some of these theatre practices is that very often they do not have an intentional artistic dimension. However, studies carried out in Portugal, such as Raposo (2003) show the interest of researchers in popular performances and how they have an impact on the construction of new artistic objects in theatre and dance, with an anthropological approach.

Within this line of research, the authors are carrying out a research project in the area of popular theatre, specifically the “Brincas of Évora”.

### **What are the “Brincas” of Évora?**

We may consider the “Brincas of Évora” performance as an example of contemporary folk theatre, a dramatic performance based on popular rhymes as a narrative plot, encompassing music, dance and poetry. It is a carnival celebration inspired by old winter rituals which were common in all of Europe. (Baroja, 1974; Picchio, 1969).

In earlier times this was a theatrical event performed only by men but today women also have a role to play. The recitation of the text (Fundamento) is heard as a kind of chanting emerging from a particular type of rhyme with ten lines. Its performative structure combines old oral epic themes with both local and global satiric contemporary situations. Although the epic themes are somewhat distant from contemporary life, the interactive, dynamic and multi-expressive qualities of the performance hold the interest of local communities who are trying to preserve this form of representation. After three months of rehearsals, held secret during the winter nights, the group appears with a new performance, during the four carnival days prior to lent.

Popular culture today is characterized by a decrease in ritual function and a progressive decontextualization. The aspect of sociability that performance held in the community has tended to disappear and to be replaced by other more “attractive” alternatives. At the same time we are witnessing the crystallization of traditional forms, in the name of an ‘imagined’ authenticity, compromising a natural innovation within tradition. Instead we observe a caricature and increasing standardization. The process of local iconization become showbiz (Bauman, 2003; Chartier, 1990; Raposo, 1998; Hobshawn & Ranger, 1983).

### **Structure and Codes of Theatricality**

The performance begins with the counter dance and parade followed by the “Mestre” “asking for permission” from the community leader, to start the dramatization of “Fundamento”. To suspend the play’s seriousness, the clown improvisation starts with a “fund raising ritual”, evoking the old starving days! The performance continues with the worship of the flag with the “Fundamento” song (singing and playing in a community circle dance) and finishes with the “farewell” parade. The performance gains public attention through the use of some theatrical strategies: 1. The use of prologue and epilogue (presentation of the story and characters by the “Mestre” before starting the action and a summary at the end); 2. No rigid separation between the acting and audience space (this spatial relationship is mediated by the “sacred” theatrical circular space, broken at moments when the actors and audience mix together); 3. Easy “Naïve characters” (identified by using simple shapes like a crown, a sword, a long skirt, a shawl, or cross stitch).

In the “Brincas” performance the rhyme gives primacy to the spoken word. The body attitude is tense and hieratic, used as a vehicle to project words in perfect cadence. The interpretative style is non-naturalistic according to the verse element. The narratives of “Fundamentos” are cryptic scripts and loosely deepen themes.

The performers’ main concern is focused on the rehearsed text, repeated a thousand times and properly designed to become audible in an outdoor setting. The clowns’ improvisations

provide spontaneous interaction with the audience. The humor relates the plot to current/contemporary issues linking the community, grotesque giving way to myth and ritualization.

The performance is punctuated by the accordion. All the participants are musicians, led by the accordionist and backed by the box drummer while the group develops simple choreographic forms.

The group's traditional costumes consist of dark jackets and trousers with multicolor lacings and decorated dark hats. Special characters use other simple costumes determined by their role. The scenes have very simple sets made by the group.

We can witness the “*hybrid*” feature patent in other types of events (Canclini, 1997), incorporating “*strange*” and foreign elements, especially in terms of costumes and props: the use of sunglasses and tennis shoes dialogue with the traditional clowns and characters costumes. The musical repertoires are inspired by global scenes and scenic objects and traditional musical instruments coexist side by side with those acquired at large discount stores.

### **Revitalization or Collapse of “Brincas”?**

The interest in popular performative solutions has been enhanced by the construction of new objects of art, through a reappropriation for further aesthetic development (Barba & Savarese 1999; Brook 2002; Watson 2002). The transformation of such events into “*cultural goods*” incurred in de-contextualization by emphasizing its spectacular nature and reducing the role of celebratory and social rituals (Raposo, 2003). However it seems that the end of “Brincas” has been brought about by the decline and degradation of the experience, passed down from generation to generation in the context of profound social changes, leading to the decline of traditional forms of narrative (Benjamin, 1994).

When these rituals are taken as expressions of a dying way of life, not bound by the experience of contemporary life, they appear impoverished, but the fact that they have not disappeared completely from human memory gives to the group a greater responsibility for keeping the tradition alive (Arendt, 2005). The “*quasi mortem*” status of these events, retained and studied as extinction species seems to turn it more interesting and stimulating to be researched (Certeau, 1990). If it is the case that folk theatre is dead, what is, then, this kind of theatre and who are the people who perform it?

References to “Brincas” are rare (Guerreiro, 1978; Laffon, 1994), although some sources account for its possible existence in the late nineteenth century, most authors refer to various groups operating in the 20's and 30's (Abelho, 1973). In the 70's, during a period of full-blown cultural campaigns, several groups of “Brincas” in the region of Évora where responsible for introducing innovations into its traditional format, in particular regarding the participation of women. There were also scenic innovations resulting from links with amateur theatre groups and voluntary socio-cultural organizations, but it is during the 80's that we witness a rising interest, corresponding to a moment of increased visibility followed by a steep decline (Arimateia, 1987; Matos, 1985).

It is worth mentioning an increase in the references to “Brincas” in the last few years and the proliferation of short texts, press releases, blog posts and sites in the virtual world, which give us the account of its existence, continuity and even its integration into cultural activities. Does this fact correspond to an increase in interest? Does it mean a rise in audiences? Does it convey an awareness of heritage value and identity? Or is it just the consequence of the democratization of the media, especially the easy use of the web?

Surprisingly this happens alongside a dramatic decrease in the number of active “Brincas” groups. Of the three existing groups, with some stability at the turn of the millennium, only one has been active since 1995 and still remains so - the group of “Brincas of Canaviais”.

### **“Brincas of Canaviais” as a Research Case Study**

Our study is concerned with the understanding of this cultural object that seems to be moribund for over eighty years. The inquiry is focused on the following research questions:

What is seen in the “Brincas” performance?

Who are the people who get involved and perform annually?

What prompts people with diverse occupational and educational backgrounds and life styles, to join and perform in public?

Who are the audience and how do they receive these events?

The “Brincas of Canaviais group” became a case study, as part of an ethnographic research aimed at identifying effective elements present in popular theatricality for training in educational and community theatre and to contribute to the artistic intervention with social issues (Bezelga e Valente, 2005; Bezelga, 2008). The study, mostly qualitative, included mixed-methods, using a diversity of instruments in a triangulation process. Thirty two interviews were carried out and informal statements collected together with field-notes drawn from participant observations of the event. Audio-visual data, photo-voice and photo-elicitation were used to register these processes thus allowing the construction of identity narratives (Lury, 2002; Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). In order to further explore some questions emerging from the interviews, a questionnaire was designed to gather information about the audiences, making it possible to include a large number of individuals and thus collecting more reliable data about their assessment of the performance (Costa, 2004; Helbo, Johansen, Pavis, Ubersfeld, 1991; Pavis, 1997). A team of collaborators were prepared to administrate the questionnaires in the open air, immediately after the performance. One hundred and forty three questionnaires (10% of the audience) were filled in, by a sample of spectators varied in terms of gender, age, and social status.

### **Research Results and Discussion**

The results are presented following the research questions, using combined data from questionnaires, participant observation field notes and interviews.

#### ***The “Brincas of Canaviais Group”***

The “Brincas of Canaviais group” includes twelve men from various generations with familial and residential neighborhood links. Most participants have a rural background and their forefathers have also been involved in “Brincas”. Their ages ranged from nine to fifty-eight years old. The social change of neighborhoods is reflected in the composition of the “Brincas group”. They are no longer represented only by the heirs of the countryside. We found some diversity at different levels: academic, cultural, professional as well as generational. The group members have no other artistic involvement, apart from the musicians; the accordion and the box drum players are connected with other musical activities and are band members.

Although the Group of “Brincas of Canaviais” assert themselves as an exclusively male group “*because it is the tradition!*”, unlike other recent groups of “Brincas”, which have begun to incorporate women into their presentations. We found the women involved in the group by ties of kinship and neighborhood, despite not taking part in the performance they considered themselves part of the group by virtue of carrying out other tasks: painting, sewing and supporting the scene.

The male group sees “Brincas” as a masculine initiation process characterized by a cooperative community of learning where all contribute trying to do their best! They present themselves as the representatives of a specific local identity.

It is noticeable among younger members who help each other to learn the skills of performing. They also learn from the older and more experienced members. The imitation process is then crucial: “Mestrinho” (little master) learns from his father to be a new “Mestre” (leader and group conductor). All the participants’ contributions are welcomed.

The group consists of: One Conductor “Mestre” and little “Mestrinho”, his son; one Musician (accordionist); one flag boy; three clowns and several participants/characters.

The analysis of the interview’s data and field-notes allowed us to characterize the origins of the participants’ motivation as such:

1. They share a strong awareness of being the bearers of a tradition which without them might disappear.
2. They search for public recognition (local, institutional).
3. The sense of “mastery” of the skills confers upon them a certain authority.
4. They see the “group of Brincas” as an alternative form of socialization.
5. The hierarchy of the social roles they perform brings them power.

“Brincas” in the Portuguese language is a sort of playful activity! The participants work together and share friendship, responsibility and the common wish of “*Playing*”. The enjoyment and pleasure brought upon by this ‘playing’ mode, allows the breaking routines and constitutes an alternative vehicle for contemporary sociability. There is a sense of community. The relationship between Group members assumes similar characteristics to “*communitas*” (Turner, 1982). It shows a relative and blurred hierarchy, only broken in the relationship with the Leader (“Mestre”). The performance is viewed by the participants and the cultural providers as a valid service to the preservation of a tradition.

### **Who are the “Brincas” Audience?**

The majority of the audience (respondents to questionnaires) were born (66.4%) and live (92.5%) in the district of Évora, but most do not live in the Canaviais neighborhood. This fact contradicts the idea that this kind of performance only mobilizes relatives, neighbors and friends, anchoring them in the strict context of the local neighborhood. The age range of the audience was between 11 and 88 years; young adults between 21 and 40 years, were the group most represented (49.3%).

There were no significant differences in the sample concerning gender. At the level of schooling / educational attainment the questionnaire results show that 38.6% of respondents had a higher education degree, being the most represented group. It is interesting to highlight this aspect as it contradicts the common idea that considers these events “entertainment for

illiterates.” In fact only 2.4% of respondents had not attended school and 13.4% had basic schooling (4 years of mandatory education required in Portugal during their school time). Concerning the occupational status of the audience, according to the occupation categories and construction of class (Knutsen, 2006) most of them were “Employed”, (70.7%), the “Unemployed Group” (mostly “retired” and “students”) represents 23.3% and only 6.0% of “Self-employed”. Within the “Employed” group, 25.9% were “middle management” (e.g. teachers and technicians); Within the “Employed Position”, 18.7 % working mainly at a desk (e.g. clerks); 13% represents “skilled manual workers. The “unskilled manual” workers represented 13.1% and only four respondents indicated “rural worker” associated with a low educational level.

Students and teachers each represented 13.3%, these being the most significant activities of the audience. The contemporary change in the social background is evident. This type of event does is no longer a rural event. The death of the countryside has given way to an urban way of life in a highly globalized world.

It is a faithful audience! ‘Regulars’ were 59% and only 35% had attended for the first time.

### ***What Motivates them to Attend the Performance?***

“Enjoy” was the most referred to reason (51.1%) for attending the “Brincas” performance. This motivation is significantly representative of the ‘regular’ audience. “*The opportunity to socialize with friends and family*” was also referred to 20.7%. The ones that were seeing the performance for the first time, 23% of the total sample, referred to “*Curiosity*”, as the main reason to attend “Brincas”. This group of newcomers included individuals with high academic qualifications who looked to these performances with curiosity, concerning local identity with a touch of exoticism. This reflects the contemporary issues concerning cultural recognition and preservation.

### ***How does the Audience Assess the ‘Brincas’ Performance?***

Concerning the quality of the performance, the audience was asked to rate different aspects of the performance form ‘poor’ to ‘very good’ on a four point scale. The survey included questions about the quality of the performance of the different participants; the quality of the interaction with the audience; the quality/interest of the plot ‘fundamento’; the quality of the music and dance components and the use of space.

There was a global positive appreciation of the Performance. This positive appreciation was particularly highly rated by the ‘regular’ audience.

Concerning the quality of the performance of the different participants, the audience highlighted the ‘Mestre’ performance (57.3% “very good” and 37.4 “good”). Data from interviews and field-notes allowed us to appreciate the ‘Mestre’s self-assurance and competence in conducting the group.

In this role he used some codes of conduct which incorporated gestures learned from old “Mestres”. These images bring to mind on one hand to the majorettes context and, on the other to the military commander context, conveying a mixture of ancient, religious and profane rituals.



The clowns performance was also highly evaluated by the audience (41.7% “very good” and 40.2% “good”). It is important to notice that the clowns in the “Brincas” punctuate a creative tension between the local and global context conveyed mainly through “updates” through out the discursive production. The interaction, mainly made by the clowns, was widely appreciated. This was corroborated by the evidence taken during the interviews and photo-elicitation: “*the clown has to be aware of the ground to see where to go and to make people laugh.*”(R.) “*...there are other people who like (the “Brincas”) more or less and are more aware of the clowns.*”(P.) “*In the course of the play to send a few jokes... sometimes to make some mistake (...) if the clown is sharp enough and knows how and when to introduce a joke, you get the point (...) the clowns have a very important role in our performance.*”(M.)

As far as repertoire is concerned there has been an increasing debate within the group, about the issues and types repertoires used, reflecting a concern of the participants with a greater link to current issues. In fact, the narrative (Fundamento) had a slightly lower level of appreciation (40,2% “very good” and “51.5% “good”). This might have happened due to a mismatch between the theme, local and chronologically situated and the contemporary concerns. Some people pointed out the lack of significance. This idea is also expressed by the elements of the “Brincas group”: “*the themes had no interest... maybe we should get other themes to attract ...*”(M.) “*The problem is: -who will write new texts? There is nobody to make it new*” (P.R).

Both the participants and the audience found that “Fundamentos” are very extensive. Some of the “Brincas” players found it very difficult to perform the full “Fundamentos” (some last for three hours) referring the difficulty to the length of the text “*This play was to big ...*” (F.) On the other hand they also expressed concern with the cutting processes that had been used to shorten the ‘fundamento’: “*When it was complete it must have been very good, the short version I don’t like much.*”(P.C.) “*There is a very rapid running of the plot and then it is wrapped up*”. (P.) “*The people don’t understand because it’s cut*”. (R).

It is a fact that we are witnessing the shredding of the text, eliminating many verses, corresponding to the impoverishment reported by Arendt (2005). Despite the concerns about the content and length of the ‘Fundamento’, the group still chose these mythic themes for their universality and meaning.

We should not forget that every year the group prepares the performance in secret and presents a new “Fundamento” (plot) to the community, wishing that it will surpass the previous year’s. In this way it is an invigorating stimulus to continue.

It is worth noticing that the grotesque and laughter in the present phenomenon of “carnivalization” enable the experience of a ritual transgression (Bakhtin, 2002; Eco, 1989). This together with the principle of renewal is vital to understanding the continuity of these events.

There’s a strong correlation between familiarity, appreciation and evaluation of the performance. The more familiar the audience is with the ‘Brincas’ the more they appreciate it. The group members also had the same perception: “*Most of the people do not know what “Brincas” are, never seen....only those who know value the significance of playing carnival*”. (E.) “*In the neighborhood we are always regarded with more attention. People here are much more certain to see if someone is wrong, if it is well performed.*” (M.) “*We only love what we know!*” (S.)

This fact raises new challenges to the development of projects in the contexts of training and education. There is a need to include work about patrimony, local culture, and popular

traditions in order to provide a full understanding and respect towards a diversity of cultural manifestations.

### ***What are the Meanings Assigned to the 'Brincas' in our Time?***

Our inquiry showed a change in the function of these events today. For instance, in the questions devised to access the importance assigned by these audiences to this kind of performance, 56.3% of respondents considered 'very important' the impact/effect in the community. The reasons for its importance appear listed in descending order as follows:

1 - Identity and fear that the memory/tradition will fade away

*"to keep it alive... a thing that is really ours, it is here and it is different"* (R.15)

*"It is our identity"* (R.125)

*"Keep the tradition"* (R.111)

2 - Heritage for future generations

*"It's a tradition that should not be lost and has to pass from generation to generation"* (R.1)

*"For the youngsters to remember"* (R.135)

3 - Community link

*"... it creates a vision and a spirit of conviviality"* (R.64)

*"It's one of the few traditions that bring people to the streets (...) it maintains the community spirit of the villages"* (R.93)

*"Maintaining a tradition of a unifying sense of community"* (R.95)

4 - Enjoyment and transgression

*"To relieve the weekly fatigue"* (R.8)

*"The people seem very happy with the event"* (R.91)

*"It is important to celebrate"* (R.96)

*"to preserve the spirit of carnival"* (R.23)

5 - Culture dissemination

*"The Folk tradition also develops interest in other areas of culture"* (R. 99)

*"Lets us show traditions that are no longer in current practice"* (R.28)

*"It's one way for people to make contact with another way of doing theatre ..."* (R.60)

Of the 135 respondents only 11 (8,1%) considered the impact on the community 'unimportant'. From these, only two did presented their reasons: *"Popular culture began to fade away with the impact of media in the universe"* (R.90) *"It does not attract anymore"* (R.134).

These motivations expressed by the audience (questionnaires) showed some links with the participants of the "Brincas" group's assessment (expressed in interviews) of the importance of the performance in their lives:

*"The motivation of the people in our group is not letting the tradition to die, and also to have a bit of fun."* (F) *"Is a time for meeting"* (J) *"The need to be together"*

again” (M.) “People meet with a goal which is to make a “Brinca” but also in order to be able to talk and exchange ideas, to meet and to see friends “(C.).

## Conclusion

We hypothesized at the beginning of our inquiry that performance is a quintessential venue for sociability and meeting and therefore had lots to offer fielding the area of community theatre, the broad field of our concern. The research results so far, seem to point to the fact that folk theatres like “Brincas” have meaning and relevance to the community despite the change in its function within the current context diversity of groups and audiences. Moreover during our study we have witnessed the effectiveness of the theatrical forms used to mobilize a connection with the community. From our observations it is clear that there is an updating, social criticism and “hybridism”, notably present in the humor, introduced by the clowns in infringing the theatrical conventions, allowing a creative tension between the local and global context. The inquiry to the groups involved in these practices made clear that there is a concern about Identity and also a fear that memory fades away. There is a strong consciousness of the importance of heritage for future generations. Furthermore and above all performance like “Brincas” provides a strong community link among people allowing enjoyment and transgression along with a role of culture dissemination.

The study permits us to affirm that although “Brincas” for some people are considered as a condemned tradition it still assumes nowadays, a venue 5.1%) for revitalizing tradition in future generations. The institution, community and peer recognition as well as the participants responsibility assumes a vital importance for the continuity of these cultural manifestations: “... we were left almost in tears with what the chairman of ‘People’s house’ said, ...I had tears in my eyes.... we lived this so strongly!” (C.) “People all know me:- He is from the “Brincas of Canaviais” (R.) “it seems that we are a family, despite we have never met before this.” (J.) “It’s a joke taken too seriously!” (R.)

Maybe the Community Theatre is the last of the ‘common people’s forums!

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### **About the Authors**

#### *Dr. Isabel Bezelga*

Isabel Bezelga, trained as art educator and theatre educator, she was actress and actually she is a lecturer at University of Évora , where she teaches drama in the teaching training programme and theatre in Education in Theatrical Studies. PhD 3<sup>o</sup> year student in the field of Community Theatre and Popular Theatre. She worked in different settings (special needs, adolescents, elderly ) in art education. She work with Education Department of Portugal in the curricular design of Drama and Theatre in Education. Leader of projects in the field of Intercultural Artistic Dialogue. Since, 1999 she is Director of a community project with different cultures presents in the region of Évora (gypsies, nomadic workers, rural and east immigrants) having focused research for master on intercultural arts education. She is member of the Chair Commity of the Menuhin Association in Portugal and MUS-E Project (Artists in Schools).

#### *Prof. Lucilia Valente*

Lucilia Valente, Associated Professor and Director of the Theatre Studies Course. ( Scenic Arts Department of the the University of Évora) . Postgraduate Studies from 1986 and 1991

as full time student at the University of Wales (UK). Ph.D. on Therapeutic Drama and Dramatherapy (1991). Coordinator of Research group of Arts , Education and Criativity. Research interest on Education through Art, Community Theatre and Dramatherapy. International activity in research and training. President of the Portuguese Movement of Artistic Intervention and Education through Art and President of the Portuguese Association of Integrative Dramatherapy.



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