



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 16 June 2018



untitled | 2018 | Ana Vidigal

MEMORIES OF PORTUGUESE COLONIALISM STAGED BY HOTEL EUROPA

Hélia Santos

“There is a way of remembering things. There is way of remembering things **collectively**...”. So begins a trilogy about the end of Portuguese empire in Africa, produced between 2015 and 2017 by the *Hotel Europa* theatre company. In *Portugal não é um País Pequeno* (‘Portugal is not a small country,’ 2015), *Passa-Porte* (‘Passport,’ 2017) and *Libertação* (‘Liberation,’ 2017), André Amálio puts written and audio-visual archive material into a sometimes conflictual dialogue with testimonies he has collected from people who lived through that period. Each piece explores one of the three movements of that history: colonization and the discourses that anachronistically prolonged it through war (in *Portugal não é um*



MEMORIES
OF PORTUGUESE COLONIALISM
STAGED BY HOTEL EUROPA

País Pequeno); the reconfiguration of identity of those people who travelled from the ex-colonies to Portugal between 1974 and 1976 (in *Passa-Porte*); and independence struggles (in *Libertação*). All three performances reflect critically on a momentous era in Portuguese history that has been often forgotten or wrongly figured as distant.

André Amálio, however, immediately shows that a great deal of knowledge does exist about this history. This quickly becomes clear, first of all, in his choice to write the plays as documentary theatre. He uses works of history, political science, philosophy and international relations about colonialism and its demise, a choice that reinforces the political tone of the performance, though does also produce some repetition and didacticism. The script is sometimes not quite as eloquent as the staging. Second, the author gestures to the proliferation of information about the end of colonialism through creative scenic and narrative techniques. The set of *Libertação*, for example, features stacks of books on a desk, on the floor, or, more significantly, hanging from the ceiling without touching the floor, visually registering the precarity and inaccessibility of knowledge that, although it exists everywhere, is inaccessibly organised and held up. The play's literal suspension of knowledge speaks to how it never lands in the collective memory.

The trilogy is born of the author's personal preoccupations and desire to contextualize the history of his parents, who lived in colonial Mozambique. It is deeply political and engages in an open confrontation with the dreamlike dimensions of Portuguese nationality. The performances go far beyond the personal and familiar to take up a public space on stage. Amálio wants to confront this public space and to think with it. In this process of dialogue between the personal and the public, the performances engage with what Marianne Hirsch has called post-memory. We see this in the interplay between private and public sources: Amálio juxtaposes family stories from his childhood and personal interviews he has collected with archival material, essays, and artistic work. These sources reach the audience already filtered through an organising consciousness that has never itself lived in the colonies, but which grew up flanked by memories and narratives of this space-time. Artists who work with post-memory do the particular work of contracting space and time in a movement through which the past becomes viscerally present. John Frow has convincingly argued that memory is not a relationship of truth with, but a desire for, the past. In the case of artists and writers who engage with post-memory this characterisation is often apt. They have not themselves experienced the traumatic past, but nevertheless establish a relationship with this absence in a way that inscribes that trauma into their identity. This relationship is sometimes obsessive, sometimes fortuitous, but always inescapable.



MEMORIES
OF PORTUGUESE COLONIALISM
STAGED BY HOTEL EUROPA

In their quest to better understand “where they come from” and “who they are” *Hotel Europa*'s creators and actors question national myths and identify colonial paradoxes in theatre that brings together empathy and irony, nostalgia and criticism, revolt and understanding, violence and dance, individual and collective. Ultimately, this trilogy complicates Portuguese identity, demanding that post-script to ‘The Discoveries’ that were celebrated on June 10 be reinscribed into the national imaginary. This demand is particularly audible in *Passa-Porte*, which explicitly considers national identity in the context of postcolonial Europe. The play, in dramatizing the experiences of non-white postcolonial communities, denounces the inaccessibility of a “European passport” and so emphasises the coloniality of the present.

In *Portugal não é um País Pequeno*, André Amálio concludes: “Portugal has been called a country without memory. A country that does not discuss its past, but lets it exist.” And for this reason, *Hotel Europa* entreats us to reflect. These are three performances with moments that might be hard to watch for audiences who arrive at the theatre with all the baggage of an inert and unexamined public memory, or those with the euphoric narrative of ‘Portugal the Discoverer’ passively in mind. Whether or not that’s the case for my readers here, I strongly recommend you go and see *Hotel Europa* at International Festival of Iberian Theatre in Porto next month, on June 20 and 21. Don’t miss it!

Translated by [Alexandra Reza](#)

[Hélia Santos](#) is a junior researcher at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. She is a member of the MEMOIRS project, under the auspices of which she is developing a PhD project entitled “Colonial Paradoxes: memory, post-memory and forgetting in second generation narratives,” supervised by António Sousa Ribeiro.