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Saturday, 7 December 2019



Que ainda alguém nos invente | 2018 | Sofia Berberan (courtesy of the artist)

THE CONTEMPORARY, PERFORMING ARTS AND FUNDING: LINGUISTIC ANACHRONISMS

Zia Soares

Teatro GRIOT is a company of actors. It was founded as this ten years ago because there was a need to produce shows that would enable black actors to work regularly. At the same time, though, it became clear that we needed to put the issues these actors faced in their everyday lives directly on stage.

Voice and body are an actor's basic instruments. Both are vehicles for discursive acts at different levels. This will always be central to the trajectory of *Teatro GRIOT*, both on and off the stage. The company's practice has rigorously analysed how common sense has established changing terminology in everyday language. This analysis has to be applied, too, to funding applications.



Epistemologically driven decolonization of the arts is important for a company like *Teatro Griot*. It is also important – even essential – for the dismantling of structures of power and obsolete worldviews. It can foster heterogeneous projects for heterogeneous publics coexisting in a single territory, in the context of the transformations of contemporary society.

If we are to talk about decolonizing the arts, we have to also reconsider how applications for funding are evaluated. Funding inevitably sets parameters for artistic structures. Models of evaluation reflect perspectives and languages that are anachronistic in the contexts of contemporary societies. It's impossible to decolonize the arts without decolonizing funding processes.

Across its 10 years, the company has received support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Director General for the Arts (DGArtes) - a central Portuguese arts funding body which has made various specific grants as well as a sustained two-year funding package – and from the European Union through the Creative Europe project, having travelled around Europe and Africa. In 10 years of sustained activity, *Teatro GRIOT* has developed a programmed organised around biennial themes. Both on and off the stage this has led to experimenting with the relations between the performing arts and the postcolonial world, between body and identity, and around the tension between body and territory. The remit of the questioning is broad, and continually open to new approaches which find expression and reflection in artistic practices and the public world.

Teatro GRIOT was not supported by DGArtes for the two years 2020-21. In spite of everything that is said about funding, it is enormously subjective. This is perhaps too often used as an argument, but subjectivity is compounded by the distance between those who evaluate and artistic practice. The structures that handle funding competitions must inevitably be rethought. However, what seems essential to us, because it goes beyond the application itself which we put forward, was the way in which the application was understood.

The jury said: “The fact that the *GRIOT* Cultural Association organizes their productions in principally non-urban places and beyond the stand-out venues in major cities is highlighted in this application. This aspect is important for understanding the project as a whole”. The *GRIOT* Cultural Association has in fact promoted, across the two years of 2020-21, as one of the central orientating features of the programme, the development of artistic and cultural activities in peripheral areas beyond the normal hegemonic circuits. This is a strategic articulation. Though the development of activities in peripheral locations is essential as a contribution to the expression of diversity of perspectives, projects and



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artistic objects, the company nevertheless continues to present in ‘stand-out’ centres in major cities. The jury’s assessment, therefore, seems strange to us.

Language describes, but it also carries a point of view. The jury’s assessment refers to the *GRIOT* Cultural Association developing activities alongside populations of “disadvantaged neighbourhoods”. The inclusion of “disadvantaged neighbourhoods” is understood as a symptom of their peripheral situation. This attests to the value of the bridges that *Teatro GRIOT* have built between territories through artistic projects.

The contemporary is a concept in permanent realization. It accompanies artistic, political and social movements. The evaluative models of DGArtes must align with the wider environment, and not resist it. Clearly a project supported by public funds must serve a public interest. But it cannot and should not be restricted to, conditioned by, or a function of an obsolete vision, in which the quantitative arbitrarily overrides the qualitative and in which curation is judged by how many boxes it ticks.

Artistic projects do not reflect a universalist vision of the world. There are splits, tensions, territories and perspectives that have repercussions on the artistic objects produced. This cannot and must not be ignored. Yes, *Teatro GRIOT* is part of an artistic counter-movement that does not let itself be condemned by what is obsolete. Yes, *Teatro GRIOT* is unpredictable. And no, we’re not afraid of the unknown.

Translated by Archie Davies

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