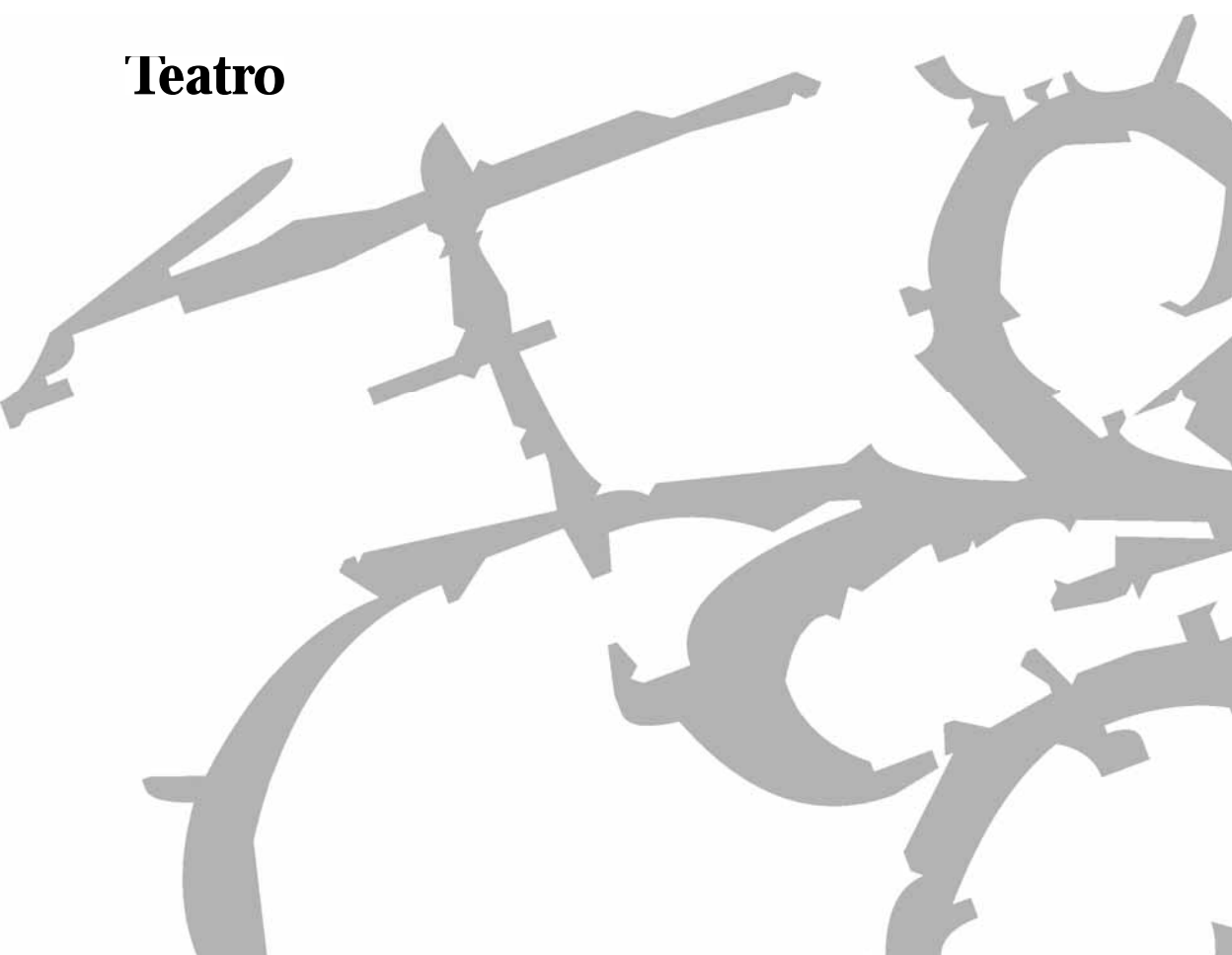


**Teatro**





# Venting the malaise of contemporary life: young voices in portuguese theatre\*

Ricardo Bigi de Aquino \*\*

“O vazio, o tremendo vazio que encheu as sociedades modernas...”  
[The emptiness, the tremendous emptiness that filled the modern societies.]  
António Pinto Leite (2002, p. 154)

“...o mal-estar que impede as pessoas de se amarem,  
a grande culpabilidade autoflageladora que  
habita em profundidade cada um de nós.”  
[...the malaise that keeps people from loving  
one another, the great autoflagellating  
culpability that deeply inhabits each one of us.]  
José Gil (2007, p. 91)

Castro Guedes (1954-), André Murraças (1976-) and José Maria Vieira Mendes (1976-) are three significant voices in contemporary Portuguese drama. Their work reflects or at least evokes what it means to be young in Portugal at the start of the new millenium. The plays we are about to comment – Guedes’ *À Esquerda do Teu Sorriso* (2005), Murraças’ *As Peças Amorosas* (2005) and Mendes’ *T1* (2004) – compose a revealing portrait of the country and its people today. This portrait has its particularities, however: it brings into focus the youth of the two major cities, Lisboa and Porto, and exposes its attitudes toward life, delving on subjects that are in everyone’s mind – sex, economic survival, and the pursuit of happiness amid the multiple offerings of a postindustrial capitalist society.

As can also be seen in António Pinto Leite’s chronicles, collected in the volume *Qual é o mal?* (p. 11), the above-mentioned plays evoke a “crise de convicções e de valores que devasta o nosso tempo, que devasta a nossa sociedade, que nos enrola, a nós, Portugueses ...” [crisis of convictions and values that devastates our time, that devastates our society, that involves us, Portuguese ...]. In his book, Leite purports himself to (p.12) “... percorrer as grandezas e misérias da alma portuguesa, a ansiedade misteriosa da nossa espiritualidade, a aparente fatalidade dos infernais sistemas de vida modernos, o vazio angustiante do consumismo, a crise da paternidade e da família, a ditadura do lucro nas nossas vidas, a brutalidade gratuita da nova sociedade mediática, a crise da civilização e por aí afora.” [...to traverse the glories and miseries of the Portuguese soul,

\* Article presented at the Tenth Anniversary Congress of the Mediterranean Studies Association, Universidade de Évora, Évora, Portugal, May 30 – June 2, 2007.

\*\* Ph.D. Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, ricbigi@yahoo.com.br

the mysterious anxiety of our spirituality, the apparent fatality of the infernal modern life systems, the anguish-ridden emptiness of consumerism, the crisis of paternity and the family, the dictatorship of profit in our lives, the gratuitous brutality of the new media-oriented society, the crisis of civilization and so on and so forth.] Guedes, Murraças and Mendes, to a greater or lesser degree, do the same in their dramaturgical works.

Although written by authors in possession of distinct artistic temperaments and literary styles, these plays have several things in common. First of all, one may say that they capture the malaise of contemporary life in a country experiencing a process of vertiginous transformation, caught between tradition and postmodernity, trying to play a relevant part as a member of the European Union while dealing with the difficulties of having a small economy in the context of an aggressively competitive world. Secondly, they deal with young men and women who share similar tastes and distinctly urban lifestyles, both of which show the influence of contemporary pop culture and consumer habits. Thirdly, they reveal a deep intergenerational chasm in the personal universes portrayed: parents and relatives are physically absent, being vehemently rejected by their offspring and next-of-kin whenever mentioned in the dialogue. Our purpose is to delve into these texts and comment on their effectiveness as manifestations of the anguish we associate with current times.

Of the three, *À Esquerda do Teu Sorriso* is the most traditional in terms of dramaturgical technique. Its 18 scenes cover a period of approximately 20 months, starting in July 1998 and ending in February 2000. The action takes place in Porto and concerns the relationship of three people who come together to share an apartment: Ana, a woman of 26, Miguel, a man of 31, and Mário, the older man who joins them as the new renter, aged 47. The play follows this relationship as it progresses, showing the interpersonal conflicts that surface in their daily exchanges as well as the gradual approximation that takes place and eventually unites these people, in spite of differences in age and temperament.

The period of adjustment is initially marked by clashes among the roommates. This is well illustrated in Scene 4 (p. 39-40):

ANA (...) Quanto menos intimidades entre nós, melhor...  
Melhor corre a partilha da casa, acho eu.

MIGUEL Discordo, Ana. Afinal, queiramos ou não, acabamos por ser uma família...

ANA Família?

MIGUEL Ou comuna, se preferes.

ANA Safa! A família é mesmo um empecilho. Eu nunca vou ter família. Já me chega a que tive. A família é mesmo a célula desta sociedade de merda em que vivemos... A minha liberdade pessoal é mais importante.

[ANA (...) The less intimacy between us, the better. Better goes the sharing of the house, I feel.

MIGUEL I disagree, Ana. After all, like it or not, we end up being a family...

ANA A family?

MIGUEL Or a comune, if you prefer.

ANA Off with you! The family is really a hindrance. I will never have a family. The one I had is enough. The family is indeed the cell of this crappy society in which we live... My personal freedom is more important.]

Along the play, Guedes sensitively shows how Ana, Miguel and Mário overcome their differences and start seeing themselves as a family, people bound by friendship and a sense of solidarity. Nowhere is this better illustrated as when Miguel develops AIDS and receives the attention and care of his roommates, especially Mário. The play is especially successful as it refuses to fall into the trap of mawkishness in its darkest moments.

À *Esquerda do Teu Sorriso* also presents a telling picture of the daily struggle for survival in which we all take part in today's world. The difficulties faced by workers in a country that has embraced the neoliberal policies of contemporary market economy lead Ana to protest (p. 57): "Vou fazer um artigo contra o trabalho precário: devemos ser o país da Europa com mais trabalhadores a prazo! Somos um país a prazo?!" [I am going to write an article against temporary jobs: we must be the country in Europe with more temporary workers! We are a temporary country?!]. It is probable that Ana would join Leite as the latter asks himself the fundamental question (p. 56): "No fundo, temos uma sociedade vocacionada para promover a felicidade das pessoas, ou, pela vertigem material e competitiva, confrontamos hoje com uma sociedade que se vocacionou para o seu êxito abstracto, estatístico, à custa da felicidade das pessoas?" [Deep down, we have a society with a vocation for promoting the happiness of people, or, due to the material and competitive vertigo, we confront ourselves today with a society with a vocation for its abstract, statistical success, at the expense of people's happiness?] According to Leite (p. 60), the end result is a "sensação surda de equívoco de vida" [dull sensation of an equivocated life].

The play follows the characters as they pursue their dreams and shows the compromises they make in order to keep going and simply live. Ana wants to reach the top as a journalist and write editorials advocating the causes in which she believes; she ends up finding success as an executive in a communications agency. Miguel failed to become an architect but satisfies his love of drawing working as a draftsman for an architectural firm. At night he indulges his love of music working as a DJ in a disco, an activity that is highly compatible with his lifestyle as a young gay man. Mário leads the simple life of a mathematics teacher who works in a secondary school; his only leisure is playing chess and taking part in chess tournaments. Coincidentally, all three characters lead unsuccessful love lives: Ana broke with her last boyfriend and has already had two abortions; Mário is alone after being married for 15 years and does not seem able or

willing to start a new relationship. Miguel is no longer in the closet but we know nothing about his sentimental life. He seems satisfied with having casual sex and never mentions the existence of a lover or a close companion in his more intimate exchanges with his friends.

André Murraças's work is also primarily concerned with love and sex. *As Peças Amorosas* is composed of 15 short texts, apparently numbered in an aleatory manner. They all deal with different situations described or narrated by a speaker, André. In the preface to the book the author avows that they are "qualquer coisa indefinida" [something undefined], neither short stories nor plays, rather something in-between (p. 6). The interest of Murraças' work resides in the multiple facets through which contemporary life is reflected as it is experienced by the youth of Lisbon. This is mostly a world of bars and discos, inhabited by a predominantly gay/GLS crowd, body-conscious, fashion-oriented, used to one-night stands and casual flirts, furiously fond of drinking and dancing until the early morning hours. This typical setting is well described in *Peça Amorosa # 6*, "o falhanço do DJ" [the DJ's fault], which opens the first section of the book (p. 11):

ANDRÉ:

(...)

São 5 horas e 22 minutos numa manhã de sábado. A pista da discoteca está cheia de gente a abanar os braços no ar, sem se ralar. Todos dançam loucamente, uns por gosto inato, outros movidos por certos consumíveis. As letras são sabidas de cor: *mais uma vez, se isto não é amor porque é que sabe tão bem?, mais uma vez, toca-me pela manhã, mais uma vez e onde tu fores eu seguir-te-ei... mais uma vez*. A música está por demais com o DJ esforçando-se há quase três horas para manter a casa aos saltos. A batida é sentida muito alta, o coração parece bater no corpo inteiro e podia vir tudo abaixo que ninguém dava por nada.

[ANDRÉ: (...) It is 5:22 of a Saturday morning. The disco floor is full of people waving their arms in the air, mindlessly. Everyone dances wildly, some for innate taste, others roused by certain articles of consumption. The lyrics are known by heart: *once more, if this is not love why do you know it so well?, once more, touch me in the morning, once more and where you go I will follow... once more*. The music is far out with the DJ doing his best to keep the house hopping along after almost three hours. The beat is felt very high, the heart seems to beat all over the body and everything could come crashing down that nobody would notice it.]

Murraças exposes its homoerotic rituals and fetiches with caustic humor and sympathetic wit, revealing its narcissistic core and hedonistic façade.

Murraças' work gives voice to a segment of Portuguese society that has been traditionally marginalized by the country's repressive

Catholic majority. Although not entirely concerned with gay themes, the playlets included in the volume could be seen as representative of the more open attitude toward sexuality sported by young people worldwide. The quotations and references we find in the text lead us to believe that the sexuality we see here has been processed by Wardell Pomeroy (1913-2001), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Camille Paglia (1947-): we meet with a world that has left most old notions and prejudices behind but still faces eternal questions, namely the quest for love, happiness, and meaning in life.

Philosopher José Gil, in his extraordinary book *Portugal, Hoje: O Medo de Existir*, speaks of the dreary, amorphous spaces of human interaction typical of control societies in the contemporary world. He observes (p.110): “No novo espaço liso das sociedades de controlo, os movimentos corporais desenvolvem-se sem entraves exteriores, mas fortemente inibidos na sua espontaneidade e no seu desejo.” [In the new smooth space of the societies of control, the bodily movements develop without exterior barriers but strongly inhibited in their spontaneity and in their desire.] These playlets illustrate this.

The fast lifestyle that characterizes the young men and women depicted in *As Peças Amorasas* is perhaps best described in *Peça Amorosa # 9*, “acordar com estranhos” [to wake up with strangers]. With fine ironic humor, Murraças speaks of the feelings one experiences **the morning after**, as one wakes up beside the stranger met the night before. As one gets ready to leave, quietly, without disturbing the other person who is still asleep (p. 17),

(...) A grande dúvida aparece. Deves ou não deixar o teu número de telemóvel? Será que ele, ou ela, te vão querer ligar depois? Porque é que devias deixar o teu número de telemóvel? Para depois te ligar alguém e dizer: *Olá, sou eu. Eu! Não te lembras? Dormimos ... juntos?* E tu tens de te pôr a pensar: Qual deles, ou delas, é que foi? Quando é que foi? Quem é que está do outro lado do telemóvel? E os nomes ... és terrível para te lembrares dos nomes. Mesmo assim ... acabas sempre por deixar o teu número de telemóvel. E eles, ou elas, geralmente nunca telefonam de volta. A não ser que sejas tu a telefonar-lhes. E para isso tinhas de ter o número dele, ou dela. E não vais agora acordar quem está a dormir só porque queres ficar com o telemóvel dele, ou dela – não é? Mesmo assim tens alguns números desses estranhos.

[(...) The great doubt appears. Should or should you not leave your mobile number? Will he, or she, want to call you later? Why should you leave your mobile number? So that afterwards someone will call you and say: *Hi, it's me. Me! Don't you remember? We slept ... together?* And you have to start thinking: Which one of them was it? When was it? Who is at the other end of the line? And the names ... you are terrible at remembering the names. Even so ... you always end up by leaving your mobile number. And he or she, generally,

never calls you back. Unless you are the one to call them. And for this you had to have his or her number. And now you will not wake up someone who is sleeping only because you want to have his or her number – will you? Even so you have some of the numbers of these strangers.]

The same playlet also touches on the anxiety one feels about having sex with strangers after the advent of AIDS (p. 17):

Pode ser que nunca lhes telefones, mas tens quase todos os números dos estranhos com quem dormiste. Da maior parte, pelo menos. Tu achas que se deve sempre ficar com os números. *Nunca se sabe o dia de amanhã*, pensas tu. Tens uma mania, é mais uma estupidez, mas achas que se algum dia adoeceres, desatas a ligar a todos esses estranhos para lhes perguntar se eles ou elas também estão doentes. Mesmo que já nem te lembres das caras desses estranhos. E acabas por esquecer, esqueces sempre. Podes lembrar-te de um ou de outra... Podes até vir a passar por eles na rua e pensar: *Donde é que eu te conheço? Ah, já sei...*

[Perhaps you will never call them, but you have almost all the numbers of the strangers you slept with. Of the most part, at least. You think that one should always keep the numbers. *You never know what can happen*, you think. You have an odd habit, it is kind of stupid, but you think that if you fall ill one day, you will start calling all these strangers to ask them if he or she are also ill. Even if you no longer remember the faces of these strangers. And you end up forgetting, you always forget. You may remember one or another... You may even walk by them in the street and think: *From where do I know you? Oh, I know...*]

Passages such as these offer a glimpse into a world where the continual search for novelty and self-satisfaction often keeps people from bonding and forging permanent relationships, which leads to feelings of alienation and loneliness. Leite observes (p. 77): "... na euforia de todos cada um fica no seu mundo, repetido mas isolado, integrado mas só." [...in everyone's euphoria each one remains in his/her world, repeated but isolated, integrated but alone.] He adds (p. 82): "Há algo de castrador no ar. É o vazio como referência, a oportunidade como critério, o prazer como padrão. É o império dos sentidos, submergindo o império dos valores." [There is something castrating in the air. It is emptiness as a reference, opportunity as a criterion, pleasure as a paradygm. It is the empire of the senses, submerging the empire of the values.]

Peça Amorosa # 16, "janela indiscreta" [indiscreet window], shows André as a **voyeur** wearing binoculars to pry into people's intimate lives. The scenes depicted offer a cross section of domestic microcosms, straight and gay, happy and sad, the usual canvas of the human comedy seen from an illicit but revealing perspective. Many of them are imbued of a feeling of loneliness, the sadness that is borne out of desires left unfulfilled. It is again Leite that offers his perceptions on the matter (p. 149):



O vazio agrava-se com a cultura da sexualidade atual, em que se fala mais de clitóris do que de respeito pelo outro, mais de erecção do que de entrega, mais de orgasmo precoce do que de ternura, mais de liberdade sexual do que de capacidade de amar. É o vazio, como a caminho dos 40 se percebe com tanta nitidez.

[The emptiness worsens with the current culture of sexuality, in which one speaks more often about the clitoris than about respect for the other, more about erection than about commitment, more about premature orgasm than about tenderness, more about sexual freedom than about the capacity to love. It is the emptiness, something one perceives clearly as one approaches 40.]

Referring to the narcissism that pervades contemporary life and makes itself visible in the cult of the body, Murraças (p. 23) lets a pumped, attractive young man speak in Peça Amorosa # 5, “garanhão” [stud]:

A minha cara transmite prazer e sofrimento. Uhhh, simmmmmmm, as veias saídas do meu pescoço mostram que todo o meu corpo bombeia como um órgão de igreja. Uh, tenho electricidade por baixo de toda a minha pele. Uhhh, passo tanta fome para ter um corpo destes... Uiiiiiii, estes braços... Mmmmm, gosto tanto do meu umbigo... Uuuuui, tenho o rabinho duro que nem um rochedo.

Mmmm, tenho o peito bem delineado... E as minhas pernas... São a parte mais bem trabalhada do meu corpo. Uiiiiiii, sou um sucesso quando saio à noite. E as miúdas quando me tocam ficam todas arrepiadas. Uiiiiiii, elas gostam de rapazes com tudo no sítio... Uiiiiiii, sou um sucesso quando saio à noite. Mmmmm...Uiiiiiii... Uuuuuuuu... Queres tocar-me? É? Queres tocar no meu corpo lindo? Tens de merecer este corpo... Primeiro, tens de me admirar muito... Tenho de te ouvir dizer que me queres muito, a mim e ao meu corpo... Mmmm... Eu sei que sou bom... Não consegues resistir a este corpinho lindo, pois não?...

[My face shows pleasure and pain. Ohhh, yesssssss, the veins that spring from my neck show that my whole body pumps like a church organ. Uh, I have electricity under my whole skin. Ohhh, I go so hungry in order to have a body like this... Ohhhh, these arms... Mmmmm, I like my navel so much... Ohhhhh, my little ass is as hard as a rock.

Mmmm, I have the chest so beautifully shaped... And my legs... Are the most exercised part of my body. Ohhhh, I am a success when I go out at night. And the chicks when they touch me become all gosepimpled. Ohhhhhh, they like boys who have everything in the proper place... Ohhhh, I am a success when I go out at night. Mmmmm...Ohhhhh... Oooooooooo... Do you want to touch me? Yes? Do you want to touch my beautiful body? You have to deserve this body... First, you have to admire

me a lot... I have to hear you say how much you want me, me and my body... Mmmm... I know that I am the best... You cannot resist this nice little body, can you?...

This apothecic, nearly paroxysmal scene of self-love does elevate the body beautiful to divine status. Murraças treats this orgasm-inducing discourse with an appropriately parodic touch. He also exposes the narcissistic element present in the way these youngsters dress and present themselves to the world. Addictive consumer habits seem to be the answer to a widely shared feeling of loneliness and a sense of unfulfillment. Leite keenly observes (p.154):

O consumismo de tudo, de bens, de imagens, de outros, denominador comum dos nossos quotidianos, não tem resistência para oferecer a imagens calculadas para não serem mais do que isso mesmo, imagens, destituídas de autenticidade ou de integridade mas fáceis de consumir e certas nos sentimentos que desencadeiam.

[The consumption of everything, goods, images, other people, common denominator of our daily lives, offers no resistance to images calculated to be no more than what they are, images, devoid of authenticity or integrity but easily consumed and effective on the feelings they unleash.]

Everywhere, publicity rules: this is a world where people eat Danone yoghurts and wear Dolce & Gabanna shirts. Fashion is, indeed, an element of tremendous importance in this context. However, the author is successful in endowing his characters' full bodied reality with the necessary shades. As a result, *As Peças Amorasas* offers an almost myriad viewpoint on the Portuguese youth culture of our time.

Different in mood from the two previous texts, Mendes' *T1* is a rather complex work showing the lives of four characters: Sara, Alberto, Chico and Vasco. The first three are in their twenties, the latter is in his thirties. On the surface this is a play about people who try to get by and be happy in a world that has few positive characteristics. The author uses the same set to portray four apartments. As the action evolves, the characters share this space, each scene composing a fragment of life in which personal feelings are bared in a coherent but not altogether realistic manner.

Sara and Alberto are lovers experiencing difficulties in their relationship: she is a woman who has just left her mother's house and is trying to secure her independence in every way; he is a hypochondriacal man of private means who can afford to lead a secluded existence and avoid going into the outside world. Chico is Alberto's childhood friend, a young man without skills who needs to work yet seems unable to find a way for himself in the job market. Vasco is recovering from a nervous breakdown, a crisis that apparently has been brought about by the end of his affair with a woman named Laura. He makes an effort to adjust to his new circumstances, return to his job as an accountant, and establish new relationships. Vasco

and Sara happen to live in the same building; eventually, they get to know one another. In time, all four characters interact and a mosaic starts to be formed out of these fragments of life. There are missing pieces, however.

Nothing can be verified in an objective, conventional manner in *T1*. As we said, this is not a realistic play. Although the dramatic action progresses in a somewhat logical pattern, there are things that are purposely left unexplained, undeveloped and inconclusive. We are here in a postmodern world indebted to the influences of James Joyce (1882-1941), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Harold Pinter (1930-). Rejecting the Aristotelian parameters of traditional dramaturgical technique, Mendes embraces the notion of theatre as performance. The presence of the actor, the way in which he or she inhabits the stage, generates a theatrical reality that exists by itself, apart from the real world. This is a fictional universe that possesses its shadowy areas, black holes into which the spectator can project whatever he or she deems appropriate in order to “complete” the reality that is being partially revealed before his or her eyes.

*T1* is not an imitation of life as we usually understand it in its quotidian colors and rhythms. The geographical setting is never clearly stated, even if the presence of the “river,” with its cranes and urban development projects, leads one to locate the action in Lisbon. The exactness of the location is immaterial, however. What matters is the quality of this urban environment as perceived by the characters.

Generally, there is little or no interaction between the characters and the outside world in *T1*. Whenever references are made to the physical and human environments of this urban space, they are portrayed as bleak, hostile or indifferent. Alberto thus describes his neighborhood to Chico (p. 42):

À noite, quando fui lá a baixo dar uma volta a seguir ao jantar, cheirava a sabonete. Parecia que a terra tinha andado a lavar-se. Os candeeiros estavam todos apagados. Ninguém na rua, as pessoas devem ter-se ido embora, foi tudo pra Espanha, deixaram isto e quando amanhã acordar só cá estou eu e a Sara.

[At night, when I went down there for a walk after dinner, it smelled like soap. It seemed that the earth had had a wash. The street lights were all out. No one in the street, people must have gone away, they all went to Spain, they left this and when I wake up tomorrow only myself and Sara will be left.]

Alberto continues his description of the surrounding environment (p. 42):

Fiquei a olhar para as obras do centro. Os guindastes todos junto ao rio. Aquilo vai ter umas quinhentas lojas. Vai ter tudo. O Continente e sei lá mais o quê. É enorme.

Comecei a ficar com frio, doíam-me os dedos dos pés. Havia um boi a pastar, um boi deste tamanho.

CHICO (a rir-se) Um boi?!

ALBERTO Ficou a olhar para mim. E uma lebre morta junto à estrada. Acho que era uma lebre. E passou uma moto.

CHICO Estamos num espaço de delinquência, uma área urbaníssima onde a qualquer momento –

[I went looking at the construction works downtown. All the cranes near the river. That will have some five hundred shops. It's gonna have everything. Continente and I do not know what else. It's huge. I got cold, my toes ached. There was a bull grazing, a bull as big as this.

CHICO (laughing) A bull?!

ALBERTO It kept looking at me. And a dead hare by the road. I think it was a hare. And a motorcycle went by.

CHICO We are in a space of delinquency, a most urban zone where at any time - ]

Adjectives such as “empty,” “dark” and “cold” qualify the environment described by Alberto. Chico adds a Pinteresque remark, saying that this urban milieu is also dangerous. There is a general impression of barrenness, a strangely apocalyptic quality to the world in which these characters live. Vasco remarks that people are no longer the way they used to be (p. 37): “...Aliás sou bastante velho, sou do tempo em que as bonecas eram o mais possível parecidas com as pessoas. Agora é o contrário.” [... Incidentally I'm quite old, I'm from the time when the dolls were made to resemble people. Now it's the opposite.] It is perhaps not coincidental that Vasco's perception of the milieu outside is somewhat similar to Alberto's (p. 44-45):

VASCO Tinha saído. Já há muito tempo que não saía de casa. Ia-me perdendo. Entrei dentro do café e ficou tudo a olhar para mim. Pessoal das obras. Estão a construir uma coisa enorme.

SARA É um centro comercial.

VASCO O jardim todo abandonado, deviam ter vergonha de abandonar assim o jardim, cheio de tijolos. Mas já ninguém diz nada, as pessoas estão cada vez mais caladas, mal se vêem pessoas, ainda encontrei umas cabras, mas pessoas não. Deve ser da chuva, tem chovido tanto, os ratos morrem se continua a chover assim.

SARA Tens a certeza que saíste de casa?

VASCO Os meus olhos saíram de dentro da cabeça. Estou a habituar-me à luz. Já não tropeço.

[VASCO I had gone out. It had been so long since I had left the house. I was about to get lost. I went into a coffee

house and everyone started staring at me. People from the works. They are building something huge.

SARA It's a shopping center.

VASCO The garden totally abandoned, they should be ashamed to leave the garden in such a state, full of bricks. But no one complains anymore, people are more and more silent, you seldom see them, I even found some goats but not people. Must have been the rain, it's rained so much, the rats will die if it keeps raining like this.

SARA Are you sure you left the house?

VASCO My eyes are no longer looking inside my head. I'm getting used to the light. I no longer stumble.]

In essence, Vasco sees the same landscape perceived by Alberto. For the most part, this is a world where people have become rarefied. They are no longer a significant presence in the urban milieu. Buildings are no longer built at the human scale. Animals (bulls, goats, rats) are mentioned as residual vestiges of life in an otherwise dehumanized universe. This is a city that is mostly devoid of what one could define as "normal" life. There are few allusions to the rituals of everyday living in Mendes' work. For all its domestic details, the physical and mental space of *T1* is akin to the Beckettian landscapes of *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957). The following dialogue between Vasco and Chico resonates with all the humor and pungency we find in *Waiting for Godot* (p. 61-63):

CHICO Queres ir para a Islândia?

VASCO (off) O quê?

CHICO Se queres ir para a Islândia?

VASCO (off) Fazer o quê?

CHICO Passear.

VASCO (entra com uma garrafa de cerveja) Passear na Islândia?

CHICO Eles pagam para tu ires viver para lá com os teus.

VASCO Os meus quê?

CHICO Família.

VASCO Eu não tenho família.

CHICO Seis meses de luz e seis meses de noite.

VASCO Quanto é que pagam?

CHICO Tenho de encontrar o meu pai. Ele anda por lá, o cabrão é que é esperto.

VASCO Não vale a pena, deixa-o estar.

*Dá a cerveja. CHICO limpa o gargalo à camisola.*

CHICO O cabrão.

VASCO Islândia...

Não sei se me apetece sair daqui. Não sei se estou com vontade.

CHICO Estás com vontade de ficar?

VASCO Também não.

CHICO Então?

VASCO Mas é mais fácil ficar do que ir.

CHICO O quê?

VASCO É mais fácil. Porque é que não ficas comigo, em minha casa?

CHICO Em casa.

VASCO Exacto. E podemos ir às putas juntos.

CHICO Às putas?

VASCO Uma vez por semana.

CHICO Tens dinheiro?

VASCO Vou voltar a trabalhar, vou voltar a fazer contas. Sabes fazer contas?

CHICO Nunca fui às putas.

VASCO E podemos ir passear. Organizar umas festas.

CHICO Não há pessoas.

VASCO Arranjam-se. Faz-se umas festas pequenas.

CHICO Em casa...

VASCO Há espaço.

CHICO Vá para dentro cá fora?

VASCO Exacto.

CHICO Mas a Islândia...

VASCO Vai dar ao mesmo. O que está ali está aqui.

CHICO O meu pai também.

VASCO Os sinos da igreja. O ventinho a dar no milho. O frufu dos vestidos.

CHICO E eu?

VASCO Piqueniques. O cheiro a hortelã. Um pé de mulher.

*Pausa.*

CHICO Então vamos.

VASCO *acciona o despertador, que toca durante algum tempo.*

VASCO e CHICO *olham para ele. Despertador cala-se.*

VASCO Já cá estamos.

*Ficam os dois.*

[CHICO Do you want to go to Iceland?

VASCO (off) What?

CHICO If you want to go to Iceland?

VASCO (off) To do what?

CHICO To go for a walk.

VASCO (enters with a bottle of beer) To go for a walk in Iceland?

CHICO They pay you to go live there with yours.

VASCO My what?

CHICO Family.

VASCO I have no family.

CHICO Six months of light and six months of night.

VASCO How much do they pay?

CHICO I must find my father. He is over there, the son of a bitch is smart.

VASCO It is not worth it, leave him be.

*Hands the beer. CHICO wipes the bottle in the t-shirt.*

CHICO The son of a bitch.

VASCO Iceland...

I don't know if I want to leave here. Don't know if I feel like it.

CHICO Do you feel like staying?

VASCO I don't, either.

CHICO So?

VASCO It's easier to stay than to go.

CHICO What?

VASCO It's easier. Why don't you stay with me, at my place?

CHICO At home.

VASCO Exactly. And we can go whoring together.

CHICO To the whores?

VASCO Once a week.

CHICO Do you have money?

VASCO I'll go back to work, I'll count again. Do you know how to count?

CHICO I've never been to the whores.

VASCO And we can go for walks. Throw some parties.

CHICO There is no one.

VASCO That can be fixed. We'll throw some small parties.

CHICO At home...

VASCO There's room.

CHICO Go inside out here?

VASCO Exactly.

CHICO But Iceland...

VASCO It's gonna be the same thing. What's there it's here.

CHICO My father too.

VASCO The church bells. The breeze on the corn. The frills in the dresses.

CHICO And me?

VASCO Picnics. The smell of mint. A woman's foot.

*Pause.*

CHICO Then let's go.

VASCO *starts the alarm clock, that rings for some time. VASCO e CHICO look at it. Alarm clock stops.*

VASCO Here we are.

*They both stay put.]*

Beckett is undoubtedly a seminal influence here. One is also reminded of early Pinter: *The Birthday Party* (1958) and *The Caretaker* (1960). In *T1* the streets are either empty or supposedly inhabited by drug dealers, prostitutes and petty criminals. Through the images evoked by the characters we catch glimpses of a desolate setting in which mammoth shopping malls spring out of a muddy world. Like Beckett and Pinter before him, Mendes has a gift for evoking this particular universe with brilliantly dark humor, the pervasive sense of desolation being tempered by a tendency to the jocose and the facetious.

As it happens, the world as we apprehend it is always filtered through the characters' minds. It is given shape and color by their psychological condition, which seems to fluctuate between total normalcy and utter madness. Alberto, who seldom goes out, feels alienated, out of touch with his surroundings. He confides to Chico (p. 17):

Quando saí há bocado de casa para vir aqui ter contigo reparei que já não me lembrava de uma data de coisas da minha rua, pormenores. E cruzei-me para aí com três pessoas que me cumprimentaram e eu não me lembrava de quem elas eram. Até acho que ... tenho certeza de que nunca as tinha visto.

[When I left the house a while ago to come here see you I noticed that I no longer remembered a lot of things about my street, details. And I crossed three people that greeted me and I did not recall who they were. I even think that ... I am sure that I had never seen them.]

Alberto experiences a deep inability to communicate with others. He sinks into a critical state as the action progresses and casually refers to cockroaches in his exchanges with other characters. Chico is also prone to depicting the world in a bizarre, violent, off-key manner. Introducing himself to Vasco as the neighborhood night watchman, he attempts to extract payment for securing Vasco's protection (p. 27):



Exatamente. Passo as noites à porta de sua casa zelando pelos seus interesses, defendendo aquilo que é seu, garantindo a segurança da zona que o senhor habita, expulsando ladrões e drogados e dealers e putas e chulos da sua área, zona perigosíssima, zona urbaníssima, zona onde antes se contavam relatos de assaltos, facadas, tráfico de droga, tiros, violações, raptos, enfim, uma variedade sem fim e agora, como deve ter reparado, desde que aqui estou, paz e sobretudo segurança, “segurança”, a palavra-chave, o meu lema, sou eu, é verdade, sou eu que o protejo a si e aos seus.

[Exactly. I spend the nights at the door of your house looking after your interests, defending that which is yours, ensuring the security of the zone where you live, expelling thieves and drug addicts and dealers and whores and bums from your area, a most dangerous zone, a most urban zone, zone where one used to tell tales of holdups, knife wounds, drug traffic, gun shots, rapes, abductions, in sum, an endless variety and now, as you must have noticed, since I am here, peace and above all security, “security,” the keyword, my motto, I am the one, it is true, I am the one who protects you and yours.]

The malaise experienced by the characters, their somewhat vague sense of distress, finds echo in Gil’s perception of what seems to lie at the root of the contemporary problem (p. 111):

Se os massacres do Kosovo quase nos deixaram indiferentes, por outro lado os espaços do nosso cotidiano enchem-se de terrores nascentes. Síndromas do pânico, como lhes chama a psiquiatria do stress contemporâneo: pequenos terrores no escritório, na empresa, no jornal, na universidade, terror de não estar à altura, de ser apontado a dedo, de ser punido, de perder o emprego, de engordar, de não engordar, de não saber (educar os filhos, ser mulher, ser alegre e dinâmica, atraente e sexy, etc., etc.).”

[If the Kosovo massacres almost left us indifferent, on the other side the spaces of our daily life are filled with new terrors. Panic syndromes, as the psychiatry of contemporary stress calls them: little terrors at the office, at the company, at the newspaper, at the university, terror of not being equal to a task, of being pointed at, of being punished, of losing one’s job, of growing fat, of not growing fat, of not knowing (how to educate one’s children, how to be a woman, how to be cheerful and dynamic, attractive and sexy, etc., etc.).]

Fear, then, is one of the main blocking agents, one of the major impediments in the way to happiness. Not unsurprisingly, this is also a world where jobs are either unpleasant or hard to come by. Leite questions the morality of the work ethic espoused by the neoliberal forces that play such a hegemonic role in today’s world (p. 76): “Esta

norma de final de milénio de que o que é preciso é vender seja o que for, seja a quem for, é, pensando na pessoa humana enquanto tal, uma obscenidade, mas a verdade é que a norma está em vigor.” [This end-of-millennium norm according to which it is necessary to sell absolutely anything to absolutely anyone is, considering the interests of human beings as such, an obscenity, but the truth is that the norm is being applied.] Vasco asks Sara whether she enjoys her work. She answers, laughing (p. 38): “Claro que não.” [Of course not.]

All in all, Sara emerges as the only coherent, realistic presence in the play but her interaction with the others does not set her necessarily apart. Returning home after burying the chicken bones that Vasco had given her, she says to Chico (p. 29): “Estive a enterrar o Papa.” [I just buried the Pope.] She inhabits this strange world and finds her place in it, especially at the end, when the four characters converge to the same space, a space that appears to be suspended, disconnected from everyday reality. The ending of *T1* is puzzling in the best tradition of the Absurd: the door bell rings, Sara gets up to answer the door, twice uttering the name “Laura.” The light goes down as Sara leans against the door, which remains closed.

Alfonso del Toro and other theorists who have studied the contemporary theater may offer an enlightening approach to the reading of texts such as *T1*. The concept of **paralanguage** is helpful here, as Mendes invites us to have a kind of theater experience that is heavily dependent on nonverbal communication. In Del Toro’s analysis of the work of Chilean dramatist Ramón Griffero (1952-) we find a clue to understand and better appreciate the universe that Mendes evokes in *T1*. Del Toro calls attention to the wide use of **paralanguage** in postmodern theater (1996, p. 122):

‘para-language’, de lo no dicho o no enteramente dicho, que desterritorializa su referente histórico, esto es, el teatro comprometido y de acusación política, recodificándolo en forma postmoderna, alusiva, intertextual, ambigua, fragmentaria y universal.

[‘paralanguage’, relating to that which is not said or not entirely said, that unterritorializes its historical referent, that is, the theatre that is socially and politically conscious, recodifying it in postmodern form, allusive, intertextual, ambiguous, fragmentary and universal.]

Mendes, albeit writing in a colloquial style that anchors his play in a deeply recognizable human setting, lets this world fluctuate into a kind of twilight zone where nothing is exactly what it seems. One might say that *T1* is especially successful as a play that takes us to the “other side” without totally alienating us from its characters.

Besides sharing similarities pertaining to the realms of social, professional and sexual behavior, a common trait to the three plays in review is the physical absence of members of the older generations. Several characters refer to their parents in disparaging terms. Ana expresses hatred and disgust toward her conservative, wealthy father

in *À Esquerda do Teu Sorriso*. Miguel is also emotionally disconnected from his entire family, feeling that he was the victim of its intolerance and homophobic disrespect. Sara does not have any memories of her father in *T1* and her relationship with her mother – a Spanish woman who lives with a jobless young body-builder and seems forever on crisis, calling Sara incessantly – is problematic in the extreme. After receiving one of her mother’s calls and trying to calm her down, she vents her anger (p. 15): “Merda para isto. Ainda não tenho idade para ser mãe da minha mãe” [Shit. I am not old enough to be my mother’s mother.] Also conflictive is Chico’s relationship with his father, a man whose path is hard to follow, being sometimes depicted as an undesirable who was thrown out of the house by his son, other times as someone who is needed to insure Chico’s subsistence, being sought in places as distant as Iceland.

The older generations are also peculiarly absent in *As Peças Amorasas*. All in all, the characters created by Guedes, Murraças and Mendes exist outside the traditional Catholic Portuguese universe, a universe whose values they totally reject. Ana is particularly vocal in this respect and many of her early clashes with Mário are due to the fact that she finds him unpleasantly conventional in his behavior, a presence forever reminiscent of her bourgeois father.

These works share yet another meaningful characteristic: a reliance on music as an expressive element of a very high order. In each case, music sets the tone to the various realities disclosed before our eyes. Freddy Mercury, the Beatles, Haendel, Frank Sinatra and Mahler punctuate the scenes of *À Esquerda do Teu Sorriso*, giving resonance and meaning to the different moods elicited by Guedes. Freddy Mercury is the singer identified with the emotional make-up of Miguel’s character; Mahler’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony brings a sad quality to the exchanges that take place when he falls ill. Murraças sees music as central to the structuring of *As Peças Amorasas*, resorting to a soundtrack in which rock, popular love songs – such as Isham Jones & Gus Kahn’s “It had to be you” – and pop stars like Jennifer Lopez appear as musical references in some of its scenes. Mendes is by far the author who extracts greatest impact from the musical component in his work. *T1* has a rich soundtrack encompassing the likes of The Animals, Lamb, Nirvana, Bach, U-Roy, Errol Dunkley, Flabba Holt and Young Gods. Sara listens to Lamb, “Lullaby,” and Alberto drinks tea while playing a Bach cantata. At one point, Chico destroys his apartment to the sound of Nirvana’s “Territorial Pissings;” later he dances to U-Roy with Errol Dunkley & Flabba Holt, “OK Fred.” The action ends with the four characters singing Young Gods, “Our house.” The text also makes references to Phil Collins, Bryan Adams and Jon Bon Jovi. In sum, these are plays that use music as part of their emotional aura.

In the three plays, and notably in *As Peças Amorasas* and *T1*, the malaise of contemporary life is intensely felt. The universes portrayed are inhabited by lonely young people, individuals who apparently are in search of something that will bring meaning to their lives. One may

say that most of these characters remain professionally frustrated. Even a successful career woman like Sara secretly hopes to be able to quit what she is doing to realize her dream of becoming a full-time journalist. For most, one senses that life is tough and that jobs do not come easily. Sadly, Gil (p. 41) may be right in affirming that the “empobrecimento do horizonte dos possíveis explicaria ... a apatia, a anestesia da sociedade portuguesa.” [The impoverishment of the horizon of possibles could ... explain the apathy, the anesthesia of Portuguese society.]

However particular these visions may be, however removed from the everyday reality of the average Portuguese person, the plays in question offer a richly textured canvas of contemporary urban life in Portugal.

## References

- GIL, José. *Portugal, Hoje: O Medo de Existir*. Lisboa: Relógio D' Água Editores, 2007.
- GUEDES, Castro. *À Esquerda do Teu Sorriso*. Porto: Campo das Letras, 2005.
- LEITE, António Pinto Leite. *Qual é o mal?* S. João do Estoril: Sopa de Letras, 2002.
- MENDES, José Maria Vieira. *T1; Se o mundo não fosse assim*. Lisboa: Artistas Unidos, 2004.
- MÓNICA, Maria Filomena et al. *Portugal, Identificação de um País*. Lisboa: Relógio d' Água Editores, 2007.
- MURRAÇAS, André. *As Peças Amorosas*. Lisboa: 101 Noites, 2005.
- TORO, Alfonso de. “Hacia un modelo para el teatro postmoderno”. *La Torre* V, 19. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991, 341-367.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “La poética y práctica del teatro de Griffero: lenguaje de imágenes.” In: *Variaciones sobre el Teatro Latinoamericano; tendencias y perspectivas*. Alfonso de Toro, Klaus Pörtl (Orgs.). Frankfurt, Madrid: Editorial Vervuert, Iberoamericana, 1996, p. 113-137.