

*Tragic Echoes and Cries Multiplied:
Notes for a Production of Vincent Woods’
Version of the Deirdre Story by Cia
Ludens*

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Abstract: *Since its foundation in 2003, the Brazilian theatre company, Cia Ludens, has produced four plays by outstanding Irish dramatists: Brian Friel, Marie Jones and Bernard Shaw. During this period, research into Irish drama and history was done as part of the process of staging these plays. Three cycles of staged readings and the publication of translated short plays by Shaw were conceived to illustrate part of the material investigated for the major productions. The result has been a stimulating dialogue between past and present, text and vocal/gestural possibilities and, above all, Irish and Brazilian cultures. The continuation of such a dialogue is the ongoing process of producing A Cry from Heaven by Vincent Woods. The aim of this article is therefore to give an account of the multiple aspects considered for the production of the play by Cia Ludens, from the translation of the script into Portuguese and a study of tragedy up to the non-realistic conceptions for the staging of the text.*

Since its foundation in 2003, Cia Ludens has produced only plays by remarkable Irish dramatists. Working intensely on both theoretical and practical aspects of the theatre, the company has been interested not only in producing shows for the stage, but also in promoting wider debates about contemporary Irish theatre and its possible connections with the Brazilian political and cultural contexts. Aiming at such purposes, in the last seven years, the company has accomplished four cycles of staged readings and had a book published, containing four of Bernard Shaw’s short plays translated into Portuguese for the first time.

Stimulated from the outset by Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens*, Cia Ludens has been investigating the possibilities of putting into practice what Huizinga calls “the play element” in the “manipulation of certain images” (4), in the creation of an imagined reality which does not have recourse to virtual media. In the 2006 production of *Stones in his Pockets* by Marie Jones, two actors, without changing their costumes, embodied a dozen

characters on an almost bare stage, and told the story of a film inside a play by changing postures, modulating their voices and, above all, *playing* with articulated language. In 2008, with the production of *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, a fable written by Bernard Shaw in 1935, Cia Ludens had the chance of experiencing through the language of the absurd. One of the plays that Shaw called “extravagant,” *The Simpleton* allowed us to investigate alternative forms of body movements and speech. Approaching the play as a forerunner of what was later known as “the theatre of the absurd,” the company was able to interpret the term “contemporary” in a broader scope, as well as stage the play as a kind of perfect metaphor of present Brazilian issues concerning politics, religion, morality and social relationships.

Alongside the practical experiments and linguistic investigations carried out in these two productions, since the foundation of the company the development of three major theatrical projects has been under way. In a sense they have been undertaken in a more or less simultaneous way. One of them is the production of a tetralogy of Brian Friel’s plays, and the publication of a set of his scripts for the theatre, translated for the first time into Brazilian Portuguese. The aim of this project is to discuss and highlight, in Brazil, the career of this playwright who is considered one, if not the most prominent Irish playwright living today, since the beginning of his activities as a full-time writer up to the present day. Without following a strict chronology, but rather working in accordance with the company’s available funds, two of these plays have already been produced. The first, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, premiered in 2004; and *Faith Healer*, after its premiere last year, has now had three very successful runs and is currently on tour. The motivation for this project does not differ radically from the theoretical and practical matters that have driven the company’s choices in the other theatrical enterprises. The only significant contrast might be that the reality imagined by Friel’s narrative conventions is so solidly laid down in words, so entwined in the linguistic world, that, compared to the company’s other productions, much less had to be demanded from the performers’ physicality – to create what Tony Corbett calls Friel’s “grammar of reality” (107). The language spoken both in *Lughnasa* and *Faith Healer* is a language that “explores the way in which individuals construct themselves, and thus respond to external reality” (108). In *Lughnasa*, we explored the way in which memory organizes the reality linguistically, and verbalizes it in a symbolic written order, which is frequently represented by the images created by the bodies in movement on the stage. In *Faith Healer*, the central conflict, transferred almost entirely to the level of language, was approached in a psychoanalytical manner, giving scope for the interpretation of the four monologues of the play as four sessions of psychoanalysis.

The seeds for the other two projects have almost entirely emerged from the research processes carried out for these previous productions. There is a common thread in all the projects, in that the peculiarity has been noted that some contemporary Irish dramatists still seem to be following a tradition in Irish drama that mingles the tragic and the comic, but almost never in a balanced fashion. These features, however, although present in all the plays produced, were not at the centre of the artistic conceptions, but

have been employed as the main guidelines of the creative process. For this purpose two major studies have been undertaken: one about the comic elements, and the other about the tragic components, in the contemporary Irish theatre. Cia Ludens seeks to conclude to what extent the two can “converse” inside a play, and what sort of practical images for the stage can result from such a “conversation.” Until now two of Tom Murphy’s plays have been considered as a good starting point for the study of comedy, even though tragic notes in his plays always hover around his characters, and even underlie almost every comic trait of the scripts. For a study about tragedy in contemporary Irish drama, since the third cycle of staged readings held in 2006, when Vincent Woods’ script was translated and read for the first time, *A Cry from Heaven*, written in 2005, seems to be the most appropriate, most challenging and most intriguing material to deal with. In contrast to Murphy’s plays, any idea of comicality or comical aspects seems to be totally absent from Woods’ play. And it was precisely this notion that puzzled the company and propelled the first steps towards a conception for a future production.

At the present stage, very surprisingly, the ongoing studies have revealed that if comic aspects are hardly present in the linguistic tissue of Woods’ play, when we understand “comedy” not simply as a term linked to light-hearted situations, but as a description relating to certain theoretical aspects, it is possible to detect a poetics of comic style operating on two different levels inside his play: in the dramatist’s ultimate intentions with his script, in a general sense; and in the actions (described briefly in the stage directions) to be executed at the end of most of the scenes, in a more specific sense. The prospect of transforming this particular interpretation of comedy into scenic images mingled with the alternatives for the creation of a theatrical reality from the tragic aspects present in the subject-matter of the play, as well as in its linguistics and form, is what has stimulated us to produce it.

Vincent Woods’ version for the tragic story of the *Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* was written, like that of Yeats, in blank verse. For many critics, for over two hundred years the notion of verse was almost inseparable from tragic drama. In his proposition about Greek tragedy, Albin Lesky states that Greek verse was designed to reveal the tragic in distinct concepts: as a “totally tragic world view . . . a total tragic conflict, and a tragic situation.” While the world in the totally tragic view is “conceived as a place where forces and values...will inevitably be destroyed” without any explanation “by any transcendent purpose,” in a tragic situation “we find the same constituent elements... but this anguished awareness of the inescapable . . . need not be the end” (13-14). In George Steiner’s view, there are only a few plays within the *corpus* of the existing Greek tragedies which, in fact, “manifest tragedy” in an absolute form, which lend rigour and force to the word. For him, “ ‘tragedy’ in the radical sense is the dramatic representation or, more precisely, the dramatic testing of a view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world” (1996, xi).

Thus, despite Kitto’s argument that there is no such thing as “the form of Greek Tragedy,” that it is an “unreal figment . . . something which evolves historically and takes the individual plays with it” (vi), we tend to think that, at least on the linguistic

level, drama in verse is one of the forms inherent not only to Greek tragedies but also to that kind of tragic drama that we could call “high” or “aristocratic,” where “the stylization [of the language] imposes [itself] on the outward aspects of conduct [and] makes possible the moral, intellectual and emotional complications . . .” (Steiner 246)¹. This stylization of language and its moral, intellectual and emotional complications can be felt throughout *A Cry from Heaven*, in the magnificent verses that Woods puts in the mouth of his characters. However, it seems to Cia Ludens that this language does not conform with the very violent actions, wordless and subsequent to the characters’ verbal utterances, which, we think, would be more effective either if they were only narrated, or were part of a play in prose. This kind of physical action may limit and neutralize the effectiveness of the language spoken in the play, or be limited and neutralized by it. Therefore caution, and a firm conception in the mind, are necessary to avoid these scenes becoming preposterous and laughable, because in a strict sense, they pertain to the comic sphere.

We cannot properly say that we have a tragicomedy here, as in most of the plays written in blank verse by Shakespeare – even if we bear in mind that the Bard used to change the linguistic register to stress the way in which members of the lower classes express themselves, usually in prose. What interests us here is that there is something undemocratic “in the vision of tragedy.” As in the classic tragedies, Woods portrays the annihilation of kings and present and future queens and other members of the nobility, and because they are “royal and heroic characters [that] are set higher than we are in the chain of being . . . their style of utterance must reflect this elevation” (241). The spanking, rape and sex scenes so as they are positioned in the play are in accordance neither with the style the characters were themselves using for communication, minutes previously, nor with their collocation. The acts of lower men belong to comedy; it is comedy that “tends to dramatize those material circumstances and bodily functions which are banished from the tragic stage”; it is “the comic personage [that] does not transcend the flesh” (247), but is engrossed in it. It is in this sense that we can interpret and approach these moments in *A Cry from Heaven*, though very violent and, in any event, light-hearted, as comic. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Woods ascribes more dignity to the death scenes at the end of his play, when the sons of Uisnech are killed, and Deirdre, the heroine, commits suicide. These scenes are not expected to be enacted on the stage. They are simply narrated in the elevated tone of the verses by eyewitnesses who are on the battlements of the palace.

The radical change that Woods introduces at the end of his version, although externally as violent and unpleasant as the previous scenes briefly described in the stage directions, also flirts with comical codes. In almost all the play’s main features, Woods very closely follows the tale he used as inspiration, part of the Ulster Cycle narrated as a prologue of a fragmentary “epic-like saga” known shortly as *The Táin*. Similarly to that tale, *A Cry from Heaven* starts with Deirdre screaming in her mother’s womb, being accused of bringing destruction to Ulster and its king, who secretly fosters her until she is of marriageable age. Before that, though, she elopes with a nephew of the sovereign,

and two of his brothers, and they flee across Ireland and Scotland with the king's army at their back. When they return, the brothers are killed, and Deirdre commits suicide by smashing her head against a stone. The radical difference in the end of Woods' version is that before dying Deirdre has a baby, whose paternity is illegitimately reclaimed by the king. Intending to interrupt the vicious cycle of vengeance and bloodshed, Leabharcham, the companion to Deirdre, who has the custody of the baby, strangles it. Her act, although dreadful, touches a positive note that unveils the dramatist's optimistic view of the world. Even though Lesky admits in one of his conceptualizations that a Greek tragedy can finish more or less happily, for Steiner such an idea is unconceivable. For him "tragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering" (8). "The motion of tragedy is a constant descent . . . to suffering and chaos" (12), and if the ultimate intention is the ascension of the soul from shade to starry light, then we are in the domains of comedy. From this point of view *A Cry from Heaven* is a *commedia*, in the sense inferred by Dante in the title of his poem. Both the poem and play indicate that there is still hope; that amendments are feasible; and that a better life is about to rise on the horizon. After the baby's death, the king and his evil mother are arrested; and Leabharcham entices the people of Ulster to "give a single cry . . . to this passing", while the Bulls of Day and Night, the *leitmotiv* of *The Táin*, "face each other, embrace and kiss"; then the Bull of Night, who had been killed in the beginning of the play, "kills the Bull of the Day," who in his turn also resurrects, and "they lie down together" (Woods 114).

This necessary balance between dark and bright, *yin* and *yang*, embodied by the fight of the bulls, supplies a perfect image of the dramatist's intentions with his play. It is as if he were saying that the harmony of the contemporary world depends on an attentive observation of positive and negative poles, of which one is operating at a given moment, and of how we should dispose our movements and actions to be in accordance with their implacable laws. Any attempt to move in the contrary direction might result in disaster. That is exactly what happens in the play. The Night should have been the victor since the beginning, because that particular moment was black; but the king imposed an opposite force, and balance is regained only when the dark forces assume their command beside the bright ones. By the same token, the Bulls of Day and Night also represent the tragic and comic aspects detectable in the script. The way they can be combined and transformed into a theatrical reality is what we intend to try out in our production.

Since Woods' verses create the necessary and elevated atmosphere of a classic tragedy, any attempt to exacerbate the movements of the leading parts on the stage may be extremely excessive and unnecessary. The text is replete with references to contemporary moral and physical matters, inserted in the speeches and profiles of the characters: we hear abominable political negotiations; we understand the economic favouritisms; we accept the sexual pluralism and the contorted and the sometimes violent "modern" psyche that goes with it – lacking demand for any corporal rapture. That is the reason why in the company's conception the performers should recite their lines as if they were in a neoclassical drama, perhaps of Racine, where "the violence is all in the poetry,"

where there cannot be either “looseness of form” or spectacular external movement. The language must be “a constant summation of energy and meaning” (Steiner 91). It is even advisable that the actors and actresses remain motionless most of time, some of them standing on “lofty wooden shoes” in order to emphasize their hierarchical position (and also perhaps bring to mind that it was, possibly, standing on such shoes that Greek tragic actors used to perform).

Clearly we do not intend to ignore what we called the “comic elements” of the script. On the contrary; they will play an important part in the creation of visual images, and at the same time will work as a kind of counterbalance to the static aspects of the show. Woods invents the presence of mute soldiers in certain scenes. We imagine that these Soldiers of the Red Branch could be transformed into a kind of chorus that does not speak, but dance, and occasionally might even sing and utter all sort of unarticulated sounds, helping in this way to establish specific climatic tensions. These dancers will have a double function. At one level they must, as a group, physically stylize all those violent and sexual scenes that were to be performed by the protagonists, conferring artificiality and poetry on these prosaic circumstances. At another level they have to appear as a “sumptuous ‘lyric tapestry,’” according to Schiller’s definition for a tragic chorus, as a “background [against which] the action can unfold with proper majesty” (Steiner 233). In this function the chorus of dancers will acquire different roles: they will be the soldiers of the palace, the young warriors training and wrestling in a gymnasium, the animals of the forest, and the army as it pursues the lovers. Additionally, their choreographic presence can be visually useful in providing interludes to link scenes and acts.

Inspiration for their choreographies may be sought in different literary and pictorial sources, modern and classic, so that the dialogue Woods which established between old and modern forms can reverberate in other aspects of the production. The same could be said about costumes. As for the setting, we have to consider the organization of the play. Similarly to Shakespeare, Woods wrote a five-act play with an enormous number of scenes in different locations and times (but certainly more than in any single play by the Bard) – since *A Cry from Heaven* covers the whole life of the heroine, from birth to death. Even so, the architecture of the Shakespearean theatre can be an allusion of incalculable value. Stylized on a conventional stage, it can supply us with acting areas placed on three different levels: an “orchestra” level, a “medium” level, and a “balcony” level. Several alternatives and combinations are likely to be explored on these platforms, so that changes of place and time can be suggested.

Aspects concerning music have been so far the most problematic. Cia Ludens is still debating whether to mix modern and classical music; whether live songs in Gaelic and in Portuguese can have a stronger appeal to a Brazilian audience, or even whether some of the characters’ soliloquies should not perhaps be sung operatically. Work on the production is still under way and all these hypotheses are still to be dealt with. Until a final product comes true, these reflections will be re-considered, and tested over and over again, up to the moment when the show is ready to be shared with the audience.

Note

- 1 All quotations of George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* from now on were taken from the Faber and Faber edition of 1961.

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