

Performing arts and rurality: The search for the spirit of the territory

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Artes performativas e ruralidade: A busca do espírito de um território

“The process of community building is difficult, has nuances and must be continued over time. It is not for everyone” (Gurian 2002).

Museums, communities and social heritage

The concept of cultural heritage has undergone considerable change in recent decades. At the turn of the millennium, heritage studies began to formalize and constitute the idea that heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects, but includes living traditions and expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants such as oral traditions, performing arts, social or ritual practices, festive events, knowledge and practices about nature or the universe or knowledge and skills for producing traditional arts. In 2003 UNESCO established the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage* considering that, despite being fragile, heritage is a relevant factor to maintain cultural diversity. The importance of an intangible cultural heritage lies not only in the cultural manifestation itself, but also in the wealth of knowledge and know-how that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. Intangible cultural heritage is simultaneously traditional, contemporary and living – it represents not only traditions inherited from the past, but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups participate. It is inclusive because it considers all cultural practices passed down from generation to generation, irrespective of changes in their context. These social and cultural practices are thought to contribute to a sense of identity and continuity by providing a link from the past through the present to the future. Intangible cultural heritage contributes to social cohesion by encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility that helps individuals feel a part of one or several communities, and society in general. It is also representative, as it is not merely assessed as a cultural asset for its exceptional value. It thrives based in communities and depends on transmission – of traditions, skills and customs – to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or between different communities. It is community-based, since it is only considered heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities themselves, groups or individuals who create, maintain and transmit it. Without

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Data de submissão 12 Julho 2022

Data de aprovação 17 Outubro 2022

his or her recognition, no one can confer the value of heritage on a particular social expression or practice.

Many contemporary authors draw on these principles to state that, aware of globalization, communities are increasingly focused on the promotion and safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage, recognizing its role in shaping their local identity and the “spirit of place” (Corsane et al. 2008). For Meining (1979 cited in Corsane et al 2008), it is from the way tangible and intangible elements are related and the meanings that result from it, that a sense of continuity and identity is provided to a community, a sense of place. In this context, as remembered by the same authors, it is important to think about the strong relationship that exists between heritage, community and place or territory, and their relationship with the sense of belonging and pride (Corsane et al. 2008). The history of a region's heritage goes hand in hand with the history of a certain tradition lived intensely by the community and therefore the spirit of place increases if communities are involved in the heritage safeguarding process, and if this safeguarding is done in relation to heritage that is part of their everyday life, making the community “an active guardian of heritage” (Corsane et al. 2008).

As said by Peter Davis (1999) the concept of museum is used to include a wide range of heritage projects and community initiatives, which bear little resemblance to the concept of an institution established to collect, conserve and display material culture within its walls, but instead serves to include intangible heritage, natural heritage and historic built environments (Watson 2005). It is therefore important to think community heritage processes from an “expanded field” – appropriating Krauss’ expression which appeared in another context (Krauss 1979) – of concepts such as museum, heritage, territory, community and memory, in order to explore new realities that are diverse, unstable and constantly changing and, therefore, difficult to define. We will now put these conceptualisations into practice by showing the impact that a particular cultural practice like theatre has in the life of an intermunicipal community located in the rural Portuguese landscape of the Minho Valley.

Comédias do Minho: A performative gesture in the Minho Valley landscape

The Minho Valley region is located in northern Portugal, with a territory of about 800 km², consisting of five municipalities and 103 parishes, occupied by a population of 62,373 thousand inhabitants (Census 2011). It is also a locality highly affected by social isolation and depopulation caused by migratory movements and the progressive ageing of the population. This reality has resulted in low development in the cultural field, accentuated by the closure of rural communities and deepening the intergenerational break ensuing in a crisis of self-esteem and identity in these populations.

The cultural project *Comédias do Minho* is a unique cultural project in Portugal, created in 2003 as a result of a specific social, political and cultural context, and thanks to the political will, investment and collaboration of the five municipalities of the Minho Valley (Melgaço, Monção, Paredes de Coura, Valença, Vila Nova de Cerveira). Together with *Teatro do Noroeste* – the theater company located in the neighbouring city of Viana do Castelo – these rural territories joined forces to form a cultural network in a region of the country where, until then, cultural offerings were rare. The theatre company of *Comédias do Minho* started its professional activity in 2004, under the artistic direction of the actor José Martins, who directed

programming until 2005 and staged the first productions. In 2006, the actor and stage director Nuno Pino Custódio took over as the project leader and invited stage director Nuno Carinhas to be his consultant. At the end of 2006, the cultural programmers Isabel Alves Costa and Miguel Honrado founded an artistic commission with a view to restructuring the cultural project and counted, at that time, on the collaboration of Pierre Voltz, a fundamental figure in European theatre, particularly community theatre. In the words of Isabel Alves Costa, in a statement for the film *Contrabando* directed by Olga Ramos (2009):

This project was born because five mayors (Monção, Melgaço, Paredes de Coura, Valença and Vila Nova de Cerveira) decided that, having the basic problems of the populations more or less solved, what was needed was to have a theatre company that would take the theatre to the villages...This is something completely new. I had never encountered mayors with this vision (my translation).

This restructuring of the project led to the implementation of three different axes of intervention with their own objectives, but articulated between them – the Theatre Company, the Pedagogical Project and the Community Project – which, involving amateur theatre groups and local associations, served to promote a cultural project adapted to the socio-economic reality of the region, and the involvement of the populations. Later, Isabel Alves Costa took over the artistic direction of the project until she passed away in August 2009. At that time, João Pedro Vaz, who remained with the Company until 2016, assumed *Comédias do Minho* artistic direction. According to the artistic director interviewed via the online platform *Zoom* in November 2020,

When I entered the axis of work that best fulfilled the mission of the *Comédias do Minho* was the pedagogical project because of the democratic access to art that it allowed to the different audiences. What I proposed was to contaminate the whole cultural project with the philosophy of the pedagogical project. This axis already had a series of relations created with the network of local collaborators of the town councils that were very solid, and fulfilled the formative functions with the educational agents, the cultural employees of the town councils, and therefore they were doing very important work from scratch in the territory. At the same time the resident actors and the theatre company were also approaching the pedagogical project, making the *Comédias do Minho* an integrated project, with less departmentalisation and more mixture²

In 2016 the current artistic director, Magda Henriques, replaced João Pedro Vaz. During an interview in 2020 she reminds us that:

This project was created because five mayors decided that, after the so-called guaranteed basic needs, it was necessary to create a theatre company that would take the theatre to the villages (...) [A]fter all these years the mayors have changed, the parties have changed and the project remains. The project is based on a relationship of trust with the communities that was created over time and this relationship is very streamlined because there are a number of team elements of

² All interviews and informal conversations collected during fieldwork and transcribed in this article were translated from Portuguese by the author.

Comédias do Minho that have been around for a long time. Some of these people have been around since the founding of the project, and then the municipal technicians who are the bridge between us [*Comédias do Minho*] and each of the municipalities³.

Throughout the year, the activities of *Comédias do Minho* include the creation of shows that circulate in the five municipalities of the Minho Valley (some with the involvement of the populations themselves). They rehearse and present plays with the five amateur theatre groups from the associated municipalities, develop training for the public and for local technicians, artistic creation workshops, open talks and rehearsals, and also train local technicians. This cultural project promotes networking with informal working groups and communities, political leaders, cultural technicians, educational agents, territorial agents, amateur and professional artists, young people and populations. As Augusto Seabra has said, with the creation of this cultural project, a commitment began to take root in the region through “cultural inscriptions in the territory that are always changing” (2007, my translation) . The virtual museum project that we will describe hereafter proposes to map these changes that have been taking place in the territory since the arrival of the *Comédias do Minho*. It will do so by collecting the testimonies of different people involved in this cultural project over the years up to the present.

At the beginning of this museum project, in December 2018, some of the permanent members of the professional theatre company were interviewed together with the aim of capturing the opinions of this group of people who work everyday for the success of this cultural project.

Vasco Ferreira, the technical director, spoke first, being the oldest on the job, having arrived in 2005. For him “(...) there is no routine in the Company (...). The routine is madness. (...) The day grows. It grows into night, it grows into morning, it grows into afternoon, and it grows everywhere!” He defines *Comédias do Minho* as “a dive in the territory”. Luís Silva, resident actor who started working at *Comédias do Minho* in 2006 adds: “(...) it was the understanding of the *Comédias do Minho* as a “cultural center in the landscape with its headquarters in Paredes de Coura, a notion brought by the previous artistic director João Pedro Vaz, but spreading to the Minho Valley (...) that made the barriers cease to exist”. Joana Magalhães, the youngest actress of the company, then reveals: “I was living in Porto until 2016, I was creating, but I felt that what I was doing had no impact, and I felt I needed to give more meaning to what I was doing, and this project has an impact because it has many facilities that were built over time. Someone who comes here to work knows that it’s possible to do a lot of things. Of course it is complicated because there are very few people to do a lot of things, but at the same time people stretch themselves and there is also a lot of openness in the community to help”. Luís complements: “This project [*Comédias do Minho*] is from the five municipalities that created it. We are internal agents. We are an extension of the cultural work of the municipality. And at the same time we all go to the same cafés, the same restaurants” and Rui

³ Excerpt from an interview by Magda Henriques to the performing arts dissemination platform *CoffeePaste* on 13 January 2020.

Mendonça, the oldest resident actor, who arrived in 2005, adds “that is why a close relationship is created and sometimes it is so easy to make things happen”.

A built-together museum: notes on a participatory methodology

The initiative of creating a virtual museum for *Comédias do Minho* aimed to highlight the organic, collaborative and participatory character of this cultural project. This project appropriates the concept introduced by Corsane (2008) of “spirit of place” and transforms it by introducing the notion of “territory” often evoked by our interlocutors. Thus, this project seeks to capture the “spirit of the territory” of Alto Minho. This is a process-museum conceived as a space created to reflect on the past and future of this cultural project. Through this platform, it is intended to show the activities developed by each of the five municipalities over time, presenting simultaneously the presence of multiple voices in constant growth and mutation. This project is divided into three main sources: people, moments and places. The phases of collection, analysis and treatment of data presented an open and permeable methodology to the different perspectives found in the treated context, the Minho Valley. A first identification, characterisation and organisation of the documental and audiovisual materials existing in the Company's archive allowed for the subsequent realisation of a set of interviews, informal conversations and group discussions recorded in audiovisual format. The audiovisual collection phase was based on the methodology of the anthropologist and ethnographer Sarah Pink who advocates “sensorial ethnography” using technology (image, video and audio) as the privileged means of registering the research. As the author defends, through interviews and participatory approaches, which can be conducted virtually or online, the researcher sees what happens, hears what is said, raises questions and collects data (Pink 2009).

This project is also grounded on the memory studies field, inspired particularly by David Manier's concept of “conversational remembering” (2004) based on a study in which he could conclude that “when groups, such as families, get together to talk about the past, they tend to organise their interactions in such a way that certain members take special responsibility for the reported narrative of a past event” (2004, 252). For the author, “remembering is a communication in the present of something past” (2004, p. 258). In previous work, Manier (1997) further states that when we reconstruct past events during conversations, the roles adopted by different group members will affect what is remembered. The context of “conversational remembering” is, according to the author, shaped by other influences such as language conventions, aspects of interethnic communication and distinct cultural conceptions among different group members (Manier 2004).

Jo Gondar reflects on the concept of “social memory” (Gondar and Dodebei 2005) as a process that brings together “ways of feeling, wanting, small gestures, practices of the self, innovative political actions” (2005, 24). According to the author “we can articulate affection and representation in the production of memory as integral parts of the same process” (2005, 24). As Jean Davallon (1999) observes, it is not enough to remember an event or knowledge for a social memory to be mobilized. There is a need for the remembered event to rediscover its vivacity, and above all, it is necessary that it be reconstructed based on data and notions common to the different members of the social community (Morigi 2015).

First Action: Personal objects and collective memories

In the context of this research, and with the objective of gauging the impact of this artistic project in the life of these communities, we propose an activity to launch the fieldwork from October 2019, following the methodological approach of Sarah Pink (2009). We contacted the residents from the five municipalities that created *Comédias do Minho* virtually and by telephone, asking for an object that was somehow related to one or several activities that they witnessed proposed by the company. Each person was also asked to show up at the cultural centre or central auditorium of his or her area of residence. Thus, when each of the people contacted arrived at the venue on the previously arranged day, they were individually directed to an improvised “scenario”. There, they received a set of instructions posed by us, the team responsible for conducting the interview and audiovisual recording. People were asked their name, age, profession, how long they had known *Comédias do Minho*, and what object they were carrying and why. With the spotlight on, the stories were told and recorded one by one. The museum thus began to be built within the community, which enthusiastically recounted moments spent in the activities promoted by *Comédias do Minho*. The object brought with it the memory of a performance, a game, a rehearsal or a gathering.



Fig.1 - Solo interview with Maria José Rodrigues, 65 years old, retired from Monção, 2019. @ *Comédias do Minho*

The individual interviews confirmed how sharing a living practice increases the sense of belonging, and encourages sharing within a community. In the first part of this article we will explore the results of this first activity by focusing on a group of four people from Vila Nova de Cerveira representing a wide age range (from 9 to 67).

Cândido Malheiro, 67 and retired, brought the cane he used as a prop in the last *Fitavale* [Annual Amateur Theatre Festival] in the play *Rinoceronte* by Eugène Ionesco:

Our premiere was in Paredes de Coura and then we did the play for our audience in Vila Nova de Cerveira. The play is funny, the audience also had fun and that's what we need to bring to the theatre. We actors need to feel good and make

the audience understand the message. I give this object – the cane – away for three reasons: first because I had a lot of difficulty with it during the rehearsals, but then I incorporated it as mine and I became fulfilled! Second, because one day my wife might remember to hit me with it (...). The third reason is my granddaughter, who is now a year and a half old and is already starting to talk; her name is Laura. When Laura goes to the room where all the props that I used in the shows are – there are already a lot of them – she immediately takes this cane and goes around the house hitting everything. (...) The last play we did is the one that is most present in my memory, but they were all fantastic. With people who are, who were, and who are no longer, but who tomorrow could be again in the group of theatre amateurs. The *Outra Cena* [Other Scene] is a very difficult group to characterise because there are always lots of new people coming in, who leave because they have to go to university and for various reasons they are no longer here. But there is still a group of resisters like me!

Hugo Ribeiro, a 23-year-old judicial officer, says:

I wanted to bring another object, but I couldn't find it. It was a t-shirt that was ordered for the 1st play by the group *Outra Cena, Cerveira's Got Talent*, with my name on it. So I brought two photographs (...) The first is a photograph that represents the pedagogical project *Além das Margens* [Beyond the Margins] programmed by the pedagogical project of *Comédias do Minho* in Paredes de Coura. For one week, different members of amateur theatre groups got together to prepare and present a play about nature. The other object I brought is related to the last *Fitavale*. The last play that I did with *Comédias do Minho* and the amateur theatre group *Outra Cena* was *Ivone* and, in this case, the presentation was in the village of Verdoejo. My connection with *Comédias do Minho* has been going on for some years. It started with a *Queima de Judas* [Judas Burning]⁴ in which I acted as an extra representing the Boy Scout group. Theatre and acting was always something that was inside me and we ended up getting together. When I entered the project *Comédias do Minho*, I brought people with me and we ended up forming an amateur theatre group *Outra Cena*. Unfortunately, for professional reasons, I had to leave. From rehearsals in which light bulbs were broken because I kicked a ball, to celebrating goals from my football club in the middle of a rehearsal... There were very good moments that I had here. It is undoubtedly gratifying to belong to this group of people, because, although I am more disconnected, I feel that I belong to this family that is the *Comédias do Minho*, and I have grown a lot within this family because they have accompanied my growth throughout all these years. I started here. I was here for eight years effectively accompanying the activities of the older ones [the professional company of *Comédias do Minho*] and doing amateur theatre. I'm from here. I'm from this village, so I always

⁴ It is a typically profane festival, originating in Christian imagery, according to which Judas handed Jesus over to death, thus becoming a traitor. Celebrated on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter).

try to participate in everything that interests me. Theatre has always been one of the things that have captivated me: doing and watching theatre.

Gabriel Malheiro, a 9-year-old, student, also presented his experience in the amateur group, saying:

I remember playing a guard. I don't know what I was guarding; I think I was guarding a microphone. Here we go [He begins reading his line in the play *Queima Marciana* (*Marcian Burning* presented publicly in 2019)]: "I do not wish to appear anguished from the top of this hill, crying out for the saviour who can free from pain the afflicted, the wronged, the misunderstood, the innocent, the children". [Stops and smiles for the camera] That's how it was!

[Do you remember anything that you felt, that you thought about in that show?]

My legs were shaking! I was nervous. – He answers.

Baltazar Esmeriz, 20 years old and unemployed, also tells us about his memories:

This object was the poster image for the show, and it was with this object that the play began. The play *Nin* was about the theatre of the absurd, and it started with me coming in and throwing this ball in the air. This ball had to do with life; it symbolised the structure of life. Then I had various sketches: I had a sketch with my mother, another with my brother, a sketch only by myself, and in rehearsals we had a lot of improvisations. Half of the rehearsals didn't even have to do with the sketches we performed in the play.

[But what was that show about, do you remember?]

It was really a series of random sketches. I had one that was about the privatization of water; another one where I came in saying I was going to tell a story that was so short that there wasn't even a story left. They were really random things. It didn't have a specific theme. It was only about the absurd.

After giving their individual testimony, all participants were led one by one into the auditorium where on stage a table with several chairs around it foreshadowed a collective presence. After the previously interviewed participants had gathered on the stage, all we told them was to tell the story of their objects again to each other, adding that, during this process, they could interrupt each other. Suddenly, from one story several emerged, the moments multiplied and became more detailed. There was loud talking, gestures and laughter, lines were said and texts were recited by heart. The table, illuminated with a glaring light, outlined the contours of the bodies seated with their backs to the darkened audience. On the other side, we watched the conversation as if we were watching a film or a play. The various objects brought by the participants served as triggers of collective memory, reminding us of the community dimension they carry as storytellers. Their active, provocative and relational character becomes evident, as they bring people together and appear as references for discussion, as they are truly surprising to those who encounter them, inviting interpersonal use (Simon 2010).



Fig. 2 - Group meeting in Melgaço, 2019. @ *Comédias do Minho*

At the end, the participants were also asked to summarise *Comédias do Minho* in one word, a drawing, a sentence or paper folding. The blank papers laid on the table were accompanied by colored filter pens that were quickly chosen, following a strict palette that expressed the gender difference: yellows, pinks, lilacs and oranges on one side, blues, greens, browns and blacks on the other. Only the purples and the reds came out neutral from this natural selection. The adults, seized by a sudden enthusiasm, turned into children and quickly drew people, landscapes, vans and stages, wrote phrases or loose words, and folded papers into aeroplane shapes. Their messages served each other, completing each other, and coming closer in a game of colours, symbols, words and shapes.



Fig. 3 - Example of a drawing made during a group meeting in Vila Nova de Cerveira, 2019. @ *Comédias do Minho*

This first action of gathering testimonies described above allows us to understand better the importance of the practice of amateur theatre for these rural communities. Of all the people interviewed during this first activity in the five municipalities, around 85% belonged – or had already belonged – to an amateur theatre group. This active participation in the creation of plays makes people identify themselves with *Comédias do Minho*, arouses a sense of community proved by the regular use of the collective term “we” when referring to moments spent with this cultural project. The feeling of belonging to the community is thus expressed: “I am always saying I’m going to leave and I have always stayed” Humberto Sousa told us in an interview recorded in Melgaço. This 67-year-old man is already retired and belongs to the group “Os Simples” [The Simple Ones] of this village for 15 years. When asked some questions about his relationship with this cultural project, he confirms that the “spirit of the place” is activated from the practice, inserted in a living culture, with dynamic traditions. When talking with the actors and technicians of the company, we also realised that the existence of this “spirit of Minho Valley” is dependent on the “close relationship and trust” of the Company with the local communities, as in the case of “(...) the owner [of a neighbouring shop] (...) gave the key for [the actors of the Company] to use the space for two days” as confirmed by the resident actor Rui Mendonça. This set of community interviews also revealed how theatre practice helps to define the individual identity and self-esteem of the individuals involved, as confessed by Maria José Rodrigues, 65 years old, a member of the amateur group of Monção: “I was shy; theatre uninhibited me!” Olívia Lima, 54, from the amateur group of Melgaço shyly stated: “theatre helped me to know myself better”.

Second Action: Collective Objects and Personal Memories

On the second action of fieldwork we took the museum project to the most isolated villages of Alto Minho by creating a portable and participative museum structure inside a van with a set of collective objects that are part of the company's history like props, costumes, posters and flyers. We transformed the interior of the van into a recording studio, removed the back seats and placed a metallic grid where each of the interviewees were shown objects selected by them from the collection of work materials of *Comédias do Minho*. The main objective of this was again to use the objects as a vehicle for the transmission of personal memories that linked the interviewees with the history of *Comédias do Minho*. The selection process was slow, and the placement of the objects in the space was judicious. To each poster, the interviewees matched different objects, and sometimes even the place where the van was parked evoked specific memories. The van was parked in churchyards, inside the backyards of people's houses, and on the side of roads overlooking valleys. We drove up and down hills and saw haystacks, paintings and altars with animal skulls found on the mountain. We were followed by cows and dogs and also offered tea and honey. We entered the private life of the population. There follows some of the episodes experienced during some of these trips that took place in February 2020 just before the Covid-19 pandemic started.



Fig. 4 - Solo interview with Fernando Barbosa, 77 years old, retired from Bico, Paredes de Coura, 2020. @ *Comédias do Minho*

Conceição Torres, a 67-year-old domestic, lives in Parada do Monte, a place in the village of Verdoejo in the parish of Valença. She has known *Comédias do Minho* for 11 years, and sees all the shows she can when she has a lift because “of course those who have a car go, those who don't...”.. [What are the roles you most like to play when you take part in plays?] “Those that are easier because I'm not an artist and sometimes I'm very slow-witted. I wish I had a good mind and was intelligent, but I do what I can”.

[Do you think theatre makes you happier?]

I think everyone should go to the theatre, even the kids. It's very good for them. A few years ago, if I was in a group of people, or if I had to go and talk to people, I wouldn't go; I was afraid. Nowadays I don't have any problems. I think theatre is excellent. We need it a lot. I am one of the first actors of amateur theatre; there were elements who had already left, who have come again, others have left and never came again. Since I have been in amateur theatre, I have only missed two months once because I was ill.

[What changes have you felt in all these years that you have accompanied the activity of the theatre company?]

Many really. It may seem like a small thing, but for me it's a lot. Being more at ease, more sociable, a lot of good things. We are a group of older people and also young people. I feel young among them and I never heard: – “Look, I'm going to be with old people”. – You never hear that, and that is

excellent. Sometimes I become sad for some reason; it's normal, but when I come back from rehearsals, I always come home with a different spirit!

Maria Elisabete Sousa, 48 years old, works in the museum and library of Castro Laboreiro, a village in the municipality of Melgaço. When asked about the importance of *Comédias do Minho* for the community, she replies:

For the villages, the arrival of the project *Comédias do Minho* was an added value. People started seeing things they had never seen before. People here didn't go to the theatre; where did they go to see theatre? Nowhere. So, as the theatre came to them, people began to realize things that they didn't even know existed, and they themselves started giving opinions. Many people don't go to see the plays because they are too old and can't walk anymore, but most people like it; this way they have something to do and they are not alone at home. [She stops for a bit and continues.] In fact, we have a lot of tourism. Most of the tourists that come here go to the theatre. Maybe in the cities they don't go, but here they go. The old ladies in the village talk to the actors during plays, and woe betide them if they don't greet them. During the plays, they interact with the actors, respond and interrupt them. Sometimes it's impossible not to laugh. You can tell people are very comfortable watching the plays.

Manuel António Cunha, 61 years old, a fine artist from Portelinha, a village in the parish of Melgaço, told us that, above all, the *Comédias do Minho* project takes people out of their homes and gets them to interact with theatre:

Most of the plays I have seen here, I always see that people want to be part of it. Seeing theatre forces one to examine one's own existence and yearn for more people to come to us because this isolation is bad. If you don't have anything else to do and a group that makes cinema, theatre or circus arrives, that creates a reason to get out of the house. That's great! This project also leaves the comfort of the conventional theatre and makes us go up the hill to enjoy smelling and feeling nature; we can touch the actors, hug them. It's great.

Manuel Gonçalves, 68 years old, retired from banking, living in Bela, a village in the parish of Monção, tells us: "People here basically want comedy, just want to laugh and say some stupid things that then force the actors to be quiet and wait for a moment, because the noise is more from the audience than on the stage".

[Do you remember any episode that you want to tell us about?]

I confess that it's not easy to remember because when I remember I might be mixing things up.

[Why did you make posters by hand to announce the activities of *Comédias do Minho*?]

This way I had to go to the places to put them up; people would come up and ask what it was about, and I knew that if it was on the counter of a café, people would take it like someone takes a napkin. When I put up these posters I would say, "Look, there's going to be this play, come here, come and see this". It's different. It's face-to-face. Because *Facebook*, at that time, wasn't that widespread yet - and who has *Facebook*? Intellectuals. No offence, but the more humble people don't have *Facebook*. And when the younger ones come home, they don't talk about it; they have other things to think about.

[Whenever *Comédias do Minho* brought plays to Bela, the team always has been wonderfully received. Why do you make a point of welcoming them this way?]

People came to bring us something new. I think it's good to know how to welcome people, and not only that: for those who bring us something new, especially culture, we should be grateful, and we don't do anything special, we do our duty and we are satisfied with that. With a full stomach...[he stops nostalgic] Good times we've had!

Carla Lima from Padornelo, a village in the parish of Paredes de Coura, is a 40-year-old teacher. When asked how her relationship with *Comédias do Minho* had started, she answered:

We have established a relationship in which the team of *Comédias do Minho* arrive, get the key from the café, come in, settle in and then, at night, we come and watch the play and bring a late snack for everyone at the end. It's convenient! [She laughs] The audience is not numerous, but it is loyal. Here in Padornelo we don't get a very full house, we don't attract large crowds, but when *Comédias* come here it's with great satisfaction, curiosity, a certain...[Carla runs out of words to describe it]. We like to see theatre, and so it's a privilege that from time to time we are lucky enough to be chosen to receive them here in our "house". That's why we lend the key and do everything to make it easier because it's always an opportunity we never want to miss. I remember most the comical plays, but the weird ones also stay for some reason. I remember a play *Comédias do Minho* presented in the village of Bico in people's homes where they took care of the cattle sheds. I never imagined I could be inside a cattle shed watching theatre! It was something very out of the ordinary, out of what we thought theatre was, and that play stayed very much in the memory of the people here. I remember we finished in another house in the same parish, with sheep around, recreating the memories of the family that owned the house, eating soup at the end, all in communion, and I think no one was indifferent to that moment.

Isabel Barreto, 46 years old, from parish of Bico, Paredes de Coura, works at the Corno de Bico Environmental Interpretation Centre:

I've seen the growth of *Comédias do Minho*, a project that began as a tiny thing and today even goes to Lisbon to present plays; it's expanding rapidly. I always thought this project was very bold for a territory like ours; we are talking about a place in the interior of the country, and therefore what some mayors thought and made concrete ended up being an added value for the territory. For Paredes de Coura, as well as for the remaining municipalities, because it makes a connection between municipalities, it circulates, creates bonds and cultural exchanges. Being from Paredes de Coura is not the same as being from Melgaço or Valença, or being from Vila Nova de Cerveira or Monção - each place has its particularities - and this exchange of knowledge that this cultural project provided us ends up being fantastic. The territory already had some tradition of theatre, but only village theatre. The plays were written by us, some comedies, some satires about the people of the village and the municipality, but we had nothing formal at all. When we wanted to see something, we always had to go to other territories. *Comédias do Minho* brought the theatre to our region. They often bring the plays to the villages, include local people in the plays, which helped a lot to strengthen the relationship with the actors, and people were exposed to something completely different. Naturally, the directors arrive here with other baggage; they bring different things, and I think that they themselves end up absorbing what is happening in our territory, because we are talking about a proximity theatre, and I think that both of them – the audience and the actors and directors – benefited a lot from that.



Fig. 5 - Solo interview with Isabel Barreto, 46 years old, from Bico, Paredes de Coura, works at the Corno de Bico Environmental Interpretation Centre, 2020.

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This second action gave us a perception of the extension of the territory covered by this cultural project. For a week, the days started very early in the morning and ended when the sun was already down. We covered kilometres that seemed endless and visited villages where everyone knows each other, where the neighbourhood relations are visible. We went to meet the landscapes and places that inspire the artistic creations of this cultural project, and experienced different smells, colours and even rituals. This experience made it possible to realise the importance of this cultural offering in a practically deserted, abandoned territory where the largest percentage of elderly people live and subsist on what the land offers. Some studied, others didn't. Some have emigrated; others have lived in other parts of the country and returned; others have never left. These small communities live surrounded by nature and move by its time and laws.

Third Action: Memories and Virtuality

The third and final interview session took place online on the *Zoom* platform due to constraints caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. During these interviews, a wide group of professional collaborators of the *Comédias do Minho* project were interviewed, such as educational agents from the town halls, teachers, former collaborators (actors and technicians), former artistic directors and mayors. The current artistic and technical team of *Comédias do Minho* and students that attend the company's activities were also interviewed.

This format of online interviews allowed investigating the impact of the project *Comédias do Minho* in the territory to continue, even if limited by the physical distance that was imposed. Through the testimony of local collaborators, it was possible to understand the relevance of a project like this in the training of municipal technicians and students in the formation of their sensitivity towards theatre and the arts in general. By talking with former collaborators, artistic directors and mayors, we understood how this project was born and evolved, and finally, the current team gave us an insight into the possibilities and constraints of a cultural project of this nature. This last session of interviews that will not be detailed in this article enabled another kind of encounter - this time a digital one - that helped reconstruct the history of *Comédias do Minho*. However, the connection was not the same. The Internet failed, slowed down and interrupted speeches. Memories were left even more fragmented. We quickly concluded that nothing replaces the physical presence. In this kind of virtual experience, gestures, expressions and interjections are lost. The words that a look tells us are lost, those that, so often, say more than all the others.

Final Notes

This museum project is making it possible to recognise the importance of the performing arts in this remote region of Portugal, revealing simultaneously the multiple versions of reality (Pink, 2009) and voices that exist inside a social, geographical and cultural context. At the end of the *Zoom* interviews we asked how people would sum up a project like *Comédias do Minho*. Some participants came up with words like striking, surprising, utopian, overwhelming, enveloping, absorbing, love, territory, school, singular, fragility, discomfort, unique, disquieting, disaccommodating, dream, adventure, enthusiasm, complicity, passion, democracy, to cite some of the words that were said. Others, like Tânia, one of the resident actresses, couldn't find

a word, choosing to describe a moment through a set of words: "National Theatre cast, Covas Parish Council, stormy day, power failure, ending the show with the light from the audience's mobile phones. For me this is *Comédias do Minho*".

This collection of palimpsest memoryscapes (Basu 2007) highlighted a web of relationships between people, places and practices often unknown and undervalued at national and international level. Although it is planned to offer a virtual experience, this project of social patrimonialization can thus be described as community-based experience created to recover the past of this cultural project but, more importantly, analyse the present in order to project a better future.

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