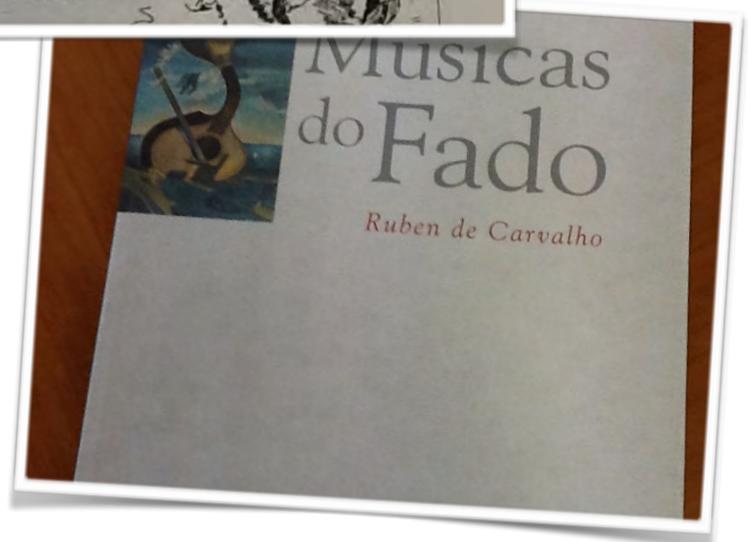
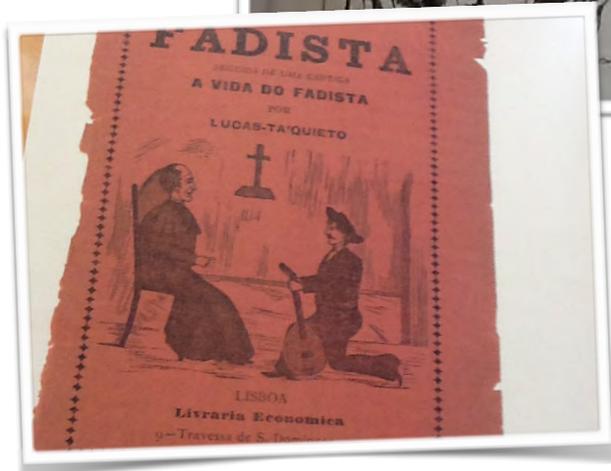


Fado and its missing Dance



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Report

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Nuno Silva

Having spent a week researching Fado and its missing links to Dance at the Fado Museum in Lisbon thanks to your generous grant, I discovered that there were a series of factors that contributed to the dance form of Fado to fade away, leaving its twin sister (the song) to shine alone.

It wasn't indeed an abrupt end to the movement quality, but a gradual change in temperament and of values in society, that prompted such thing. Even today we can see traces of those long forgotten movements in the postures of fado singers, like subtle echoes or shadows that linger like a long forgotten dream.

Unfortunately I discovered that there aren't a lot of written testimonies or sources relative to the beginnings of Fado. So much so that even today historians, musicians and connoisseurs alike don't seem to agree on a specific point of origin. (One Portuguese historian actually found a place in Brazil where they still dance Fado! Although this Fado might be a distant relative of what we, in Portugal, now call Fado).

To me this makes it more exciting rather than posing a problem because I am of the creative inclination, and having no intention on making a grand claim or a great announcement on Fado's origins linked to dance, my aim was (and is still) simply to lift the lid of history and with my findings, create a new piece.

But it is indeed fascinating stuff:

from the songs of the African slaves in the 16th century and the remnants of the more erudite medieval songs throughout Portugal, then across the Atlantic reaching the plantations in Brazil (the Fofa, the Lundum, the Fado, all different dances with song in Brazil throughout the 17th, 18th & 19th centuries, that, in consecutive waves, reached the shores of Portugal) to the social "cross-pollination" during those early colonial years, where the nobles would go down to the "terreiros" and sing and dance with the slaves.

But also the breakdown of society in mainland Portugal with the Napoleonic Invasions at the start of the 19th century, with the Court moving to Rio de Janeiro. Then, after the return in 1822 of most of those 20.000 court-related nobles, servants, bureaucrats and clergy that had fled in 1808, the once popular Brazilian dances fell from grace after Wellington helped secure peace for the Peninsula, giving way to the European dances à la mode de Paris.

Fado ,though, continued (or was indeed born like some claim) brewing in the brothels, bodegas and piers by the Tejo river. It was now a game of seduction, pride and violence danced and sung by pimps, prostitutes and lowlifes. This type of entertainment gradually infiltrated the other popular neighborhoods and started making appearances in festivities and holidays widely enjoyed and "practiced" by many.

With the advent of industrialization and city life, the workers who now sang and danced it, started having less and less time and inclination for the dance element (mainly due to the fact that they were now more tired and that there was competition for the dance aspect of the entertainment from the Fandango and its Accordion).

Then came the Radio at the turn of the 20th century, the recording industry and the banning of all impromptu forms of expression by the Dictatorship, giving Fado legal (and "proper") places where to "practice" it: Fado Houses. Where Fado is still sung (not danced) to this day.

So the dance element remains, if at all, only in certain shoulder shimmies and the straightened, stiff posture of the singer, reminiscent of the "game" Fado use to be: "Bater o Fado", where one person, generally a woman, would stand very still, singing mostly obscenities, and another person, usually a man, would go round making crude and/or sensual gestures/movements with the hips and arms, trying to hit the legs of the one who was still, with their legs, in order to make them lose balance and fall.

Originally I had planned to return to Lisbon at a later date in the year, with my findings, and engage in discussion/dialogue with musicians and Fadistas. Sadly that was not possible.

I still intend to go back one day and have those discussions.

In the meantime, my time spent in Lisbon was mainly at the Museum, reading and documenting all relevant information I could gather.

They were very kind to me and sympathetic to my query. The Director of the Museum had compiled a small folder on the subject and I had the use of one of the rooms to read it at will (alongside other books I found in the library).

Besides that there was no other contact in the Museum, no exchange of ideas, no discussion, which was a shame, but I was grateful all the same.

Another reality that impeded me from going out at night to the Fado Houses to talk to the practitioners (which was the second part of my proposal, that would take place at a later date) was the fact that there was no internet in the room I was conducting my research in at the Museum, so all other leads and information I wanted to explore (and there were a few I found online) I had to do in the evenings, when the Museum was closed, when I had an Internet connection.

On the 1st March I will be presenting "Fado: History and Soul" at King's College London. It will comprise of a Lecture on Fado's History @ 5pm, given by renowned Musicologist Rui Vieira Nery, and a Fado Evening @ 7pm in the Great Hall, which will feature "Destino", a new dance piece for 6 dancers and a Portuguese Guitar, "Soul of Fado" and "NuFado".

"Destino" is the first result of my week's research in Lisbon at the Fado Museum.

Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to dig a little deeper into my roots.

Nuno Silva