



David Cabecinha

Alkantara Festival

<https://www.alkantarafestival.pt/>



# Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

## Alkantara Festival, and its aim to build a new type of artist community

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Since long before Lisbon became one of the biggest tourist destinations in Europe, Alkantara Festival has been held biannually as an international contemporary performing arts festival in the city. In this interview, we talk with the new co-director of the festival, David Cabecinha, who informs us about various topics, from how the Gulbenkian Foundation played a major role in the initial years of Portuguese New Dance to how the Alkantara Festival is presented and organized today.

Interviewer: Kyoko Iwaki [Journalist]

Portugal has become one of Europe's biggest tourist destinations in the past few years. In 2010, 6.8 million people visited the cities of Lisbon and Porto, but in 2016, this number increased to 18.2 million. It is an extraordinary 168 percent surge in number of tourists, and the only country with a more radical upsurge in tourism is Japan, as it prepares to host the Olympics and Paralympics in 2020. However, what greatly differs between Portugal and Japan is how the former is recovering from the economic recession. Compared to the economic decline that Portugal endured from 2003 till well after the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, I assume that you are now in the midst of an upward economic change?

Indeed, one can say that, roughly, for the past ten years, Portugal is experiencing a tourism boom. The boom has become such that now even Madonna and Michael Fassbender have settled down in Lisbon. On the one hand, it is very good that the city is open to these diverse kinds of people, but on the other hand, it is also true that the rent in the city has surged owing to the mass amount of privileged people moving in to Lisbon. Though we never know, we, the Alkantara Festival, will probably not connect with Madonna in the future. We are more interested in reaching out to the less privileged, because we sincerely believe in the concept of equality. Basic quality of life such as education, housing, and culture should be offered equally to all people in Lisbon.

Needless to say, from 1933, Portugal was long controlled by an authoritarian regime (*Estado Novo*) led by António de Oliveira Salazar. It was only after the achievement of the so-called Carnation Revolution in 25 April 1974, that you have become a truly democratic state. When considering that *Danças na Cidade* (*Dances in the City*), the precursor of Alkantara Festival, was founded in 1993, only two decades after the

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revolution, we can infer that the country started to change rapidly after the revolution. The festival could be understood as one evidence of Portugal's rapid democratic development, couldn't it?

As there was no democracy in Portugal until the mid-1970s, you could say that our country was greatly behind other European countries. Having said that, however, there were some artists who were doing experimental work even during the authoritarian era. Of course, there were a lot of regulations at the time, but they still went on experimenting by doing what they could do.

Even during the dictatorship, one of the institutions that contributed to the development of Portuguese art and culture was the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Calouste Gulbenkian, a British businessman of Armenian origin lived in Lisbon in his later years until his death, and following his will, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was established. Thanks to his private property gained in the oil business, the Foundation created an orchestra, a chorus, a museum, a science institution and even a ballet company that adopts his name. The foundation was pivotal in doing what the Portuguese state would only later undertake. For example, Ballet Gulbenkian was founded way before Companhia Nacional de Bailado (Portugal National Ballet Company). Ballet Gulbenkian was launched in 1961, and CNB was only founded in 1977.

Especially to note are the many talented dancers who were members of the Ballet Gulbenkian, who gradually started to work in international dance companies. From the 1980s, The Gulbenkian Foundation had a funding program that allowed these dancers to go and work in the Western countries. Many of the dancers ended up in New York and Paris: the two dance capitals during that time. In those two cities, they learnt and networked mainly with the post-modern dance choreographers. As experimental choreographers, in Lisbon this generation struggled to find places to show their works. So, in 1993, the choreographer/dancer Mónica Lapa decided to establish a platform called Danças na Cidade (Dances in the City).

So, what later became the Alcantara Festival, initially started as a dance platform?

Correct. It initially started as a seven-day event that was included in the city's summer ceremonies and commemorations. Vera Mantero, João Fiadeiro, Aldara Bizarro were some of those young talents back then who later developed what is now called the Portugal New Dance. These artists still work today, and in their works you can clearly see the influences of French and American Post-modern dance. If in the first few years Dances in the City was a national platform, it rapidly took the form of a festival inviting international choreographers, such as Meg Stuart, Jérôme Bel, Boris Charmatz and Steve Paxton among others. In 1996, Mark Deputter, from Belgium, joined Mónica, and became the co-director of the festival. Until 1997, the festival was held annually. From its early years, the group of people who organized Dances in the City were interested not only in supporting choreographers to produce and show their works, but also in stimulating the process of dance thinking. In the ensuing years, Dances in the City edited books with interviews, conversations, and essays of philosophers and artists. For example, the first book, *Movements*, edited in 1995, was a series of interviews by Maria de Assis with sixteen choreographers who were identified as being part of the Portuguese New Dance movement. André Lepecki, who is

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now a Professor at New York University, also had an important role in Dances in the City, both as writer and editor who conducted seminars during the festivals, and also as a dramaturg of many Portuguese choreographers, including Francisco Camacho.

### Why did Dances in the City adopt the biannual format from 1998?

I think that after running the festival for five years, Monica and Mark thought that only inviting artists, creating artworks and editing books was not enough for developing artist communities. That is why they started doing long-term residency programs during the year in which the festival was not held. They organized these residency programs abroad: by sending Portuguese artists to countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde and Brazil. These are countries that use Portuguese as one of their official languages, so the Portuguese artists could network and communicate smoothly with the local artists.

One thing to note is that this residency program was not built for the sake of Portuguese artists to teach the African and Brazilian artists. Rather, it was more of a symbiotic process: learning and working together. For example, a series of workshops could be held in Angola and then its outcome could be shown in Lisbon. A lot of these kinds of international programs materialized in those days. Dances in the City was not only influenced by those Western countries like France and the United States, but was equally acculturated by Africa and Brazil. This two-way interaction was conducted, quite determinately, by Monica and Mark.

### So the platform was determined to open up to, what shall we say, the ex-colonial countries, from the beginning?

Yes, there are very complicated issues attached to that word.

After the democratization, African countries like Mozambique and Angola regained their independence from Portugal. I could imagine that, even from back then, many liberal intellectuals in Portugal ethically cheered for the equal rights of the people in formerly colonized countries. And, perhaps, Monica and Mark were also engaged in these ethical issues?

From the beginning, they had this consciousness and awareness in terms of how communities in Portugal should be seen. And how artistic practice could be meaningful in terms of bringing people together. So, to answer your question, indeed, Dances in the City was very engaged in dealing with the issues that implied the relationships with the ex-colonies. They wished to create a proximity with the African and Brazilian artists, so that new and trustworthy relationships would develop from there. Of course, now, there are various understandings about what post-colonialism and decolonization means, and how the issue should be tackled. But back in those days, people did what they believed was most effective. Still today, countless numbers of people from ex-colonies live in Portugal. In their day-to-day lives, they face inequalities and discrimination. We should continue to tackle these issues also in our generation. That is what Carla (Nobre Sousa) and I both think about as co-directors of the Alcantara Festival.

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I know that this is an extremely naïve question to ask, but is it correct to say that after forty years of dictatorship, many liberal people consolidated a historical standpoint that they are not the victims of the authoritarian regime but rather the perpetrators of colonial violence? Though, of course, I know that you can never generalize about these kinds of historical issues.

It is extremely difficult to answer that question. There are numerous accounts of what is called “history”, and there are still a lot of misunderstandings and misrecognitions in terms of what happened back then. After the democratization in 1974, a lot of discussions have been publicly conducted with regard to colonial and ex-colonial history. And, on the basis of those discussions, we are now talking about how we should take responsibility for the diversity of the people that are now living in Portugal. Historical questions are extremely complicated and nuanced, and I do not think that there will be a day when everything will be completely resolved.

For example, from way back in the Fifteenth Century, following its expeditions, Portugal was one of the first countries from Europe to reach many continents and nations, and to claim these territories as belonging to Portugal. But can we say Portugal “discovered” these places? Recently, these topics are being revisited, as there is a plan to construct what is called a Museum of Discoveries in central Lisbon to portray the history of the era of exploration. Nowadays it should be clear that “discovery” is a very incorrect word, filled with misdirected meanings. And in using this word to name a museum, the misunderstandings continue to be reiterated. I mean, is it really right to “exhibit” those objects that we supposedly “discovered” in a Western museum? A good thing to note is that the number of activists in Portugal is on the rise for the past twenty years. And so, many previously latent issues are now given the opportunity to be discussed. This is very good. In Alkantara, we want to listen to as many different voices as possible, and create spaces ready for open discussions.

The word Alkantara derives from an Arabic linguistic origin, and means a “bridge” in Portuguese. So, the name itself implies that the festival has a mission to develop a rapport between different communities?

Yes. One of the reasons why I wanted to do a residency in Japan (for five weeks between October and November 2018) by becoming the Saison Foundation’s Visiting Fellow, is because I assumed that the Japanese art scene is similarly developing a bridge between other Asian countries. Although, now, after staying in Japan, I now also know that the Portuguese and Japanese contemporary art scenes are extremely different, to say the least. But, still, you do a lot of collaborations with other Asian artists and work together. In this sense, it resembles what we want to do in and through our festival. From the days we called ourselves Dances in the City, Alkantara has functioned as a place for encounters among artists from different backgrounds. And, that is what we want to continue doing in this rapidly changing society.

The biannual platform Dances in the City was renamed as the Alkantara Festival in 2004. How did this come about?

Due to several reasons, 2004 marked a transitional year, and instead of Dances in the City the event that took place was alternatively called Alkantara. At the time,

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Mark, who was alone in the direction capacity (since Mónica's death in 2003) didn't even consider the event of 2004 as a full edition of the festival. From there, Mark decided that the festival previously known as Dances in the City should evolve and include other performing arts and not only dance. Still today, we avoid categorizing the artworks by labeling them as either dance, theatre or anything else. In terms of directorial transition, Mark led the festival until 2008. And from 2009 till 2018 Thomas Walgrave, who is also Belgian, succeeded to the post. During that time, Production Directors such as Catarina Saraiva (1999 – 2009), Ricardo Carmona (2010 – 2012), Co-Director Sofia Campos (2011 – 2014), and various other people contributed to the festival. From the edition of 2020, Carla and I will be the artistic co-directors of the festival, joined by Ana Rita Osório as the executive director.

**Both you and Carla have already been members of the festival team, right?**

For Carla, yes. But, for me, the situation is a bit different. From 2016, Carla started working as the Production Coordinator of the festival, and from 2018, she worked alongside Thomas with everything happening in the festival so that she could be prepared to become the next Director. As for me, I was invited by Carla in 2017 to join the festival team. She asked if I would like to run the festival together with her. So, for the programming of the 2018 season, I have not been involved like Carla. I just had the opportunity to watch the operations from the inside, and how the festival was put together. I consider it as my internship period [laughs].

**Can you talk a little about your career trajectory. What kind of jobs and projects were you involved in before joining the Alkantara Festival?**

My background is in theatre. At university, I was trained as an actor in theatre. But, along the way, I also studied Communications Science. When I graduated from university, Portugal was in the midst of an economic crisis, and so people of my generation did not have many opportunities after graduation. It was a very gloomy time. Luckily, for me, I started getting involved in the works of the Mala Voadora company which I was very much interested in from when I was a student. The theatre projects that they developed were extremely experimental, both in terms of concept and practice. And, I worked in the company not only as an actor, but also as a dramaturge. By working closely with this company, and other random projects, I gradually expanded my professional network, and, in around two years after graduation, I knew most of the important people working in Lisbon's theatres and festivals.

Alongside with these experiences, I also started working in the movie industry. Although, again, I did not work only as an actor but contributed also as an assistant director. So, I was involved in the script-writing process, as well as in the development of the thematic concepts; in short, I was able to be involved in the conceptual part of the work, which always fascinated me. Then, at some point, I was invited to work with a festival in Lisbon called *Temps d'Images*. It is a festival for moving images and stage practices, which was co-sponsored and established by La Ferme du Buisson and ARTE (an art-focused broadcasting company that was established with French and German funds in 1992). In 2016 I worked as the artistic director of the festival, and in the following edition most of its projects were also programmed by me. Then, I joined Carla at the Alkantara Festival. I fully understand that there is a huge respon-

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sibility for me and Carla now to direct one of the biggest performing arts festivals in Portugal.

You seem to have climbed the career ladder at maximum speed! But, in terms of the scale of responsibility, perhaps, Alkantara is the biggest, as it is one of the longest-running contemporary performing arts festivals in Portugal?

In terms of theatre, there is The Almada International Theatre Festival, which has also been around town for decades. But, yes, in terms of contemporary performing arts, Alkantara is one of the longest-running festivals.

In 2018, Alkantara celebrated the festival's 25th anniversary. In the past quarter of a century, do you agree that the Portuguese performing arts scene has changed drastically? For instance, in recent years, various young talents have become the directors of important public theatres. Tiago Rodrigues, an experimental theatre director born in 1977, has become the head of the Teatro Nacional D. Maria II in 2014.

Yes, I agree. In the past two decades, the Portuguese performing arts scene has changed a lot. For example, as I have already mentioned, Dances in the City started off as a platform for showing the works of specific artists, rapidly evolving into a festival. But then, it later became a festival because other municipal theatres started presenting the works of the same artists. During that same time, in 1994, Cultural Centre of Belém (CCB), which also focuses on contemporary performing arts, was established. Whilst directing Dances in the City, Mark also worked as the Dance Programmer of this institution (1996 – 2004). Later on, Mark became the programmer of Teatro Camões (2006 – 2008). Additionally, as for the Gulbenkian Foundation, they started this experimental performing arts programming series called the Next Future, curated by António Pinto Ribeiro, which took place from 2009 to 2015. In addition to introducing African artists, in this program they shed light on South American and Caribbean artists.

As inviting international contemporary artists gradually became a norm in the regular programs of the venues in Portugal, many young directors and programmers started being appointed as the heads of public theatres. For example, after leaving Alkantara, Mark became the Artistic Director of Teatro Maria Matos: a municipal theatre in the city of Lisbon. Quite recently, Mark moved to the post of director of Culturgest, a private cultural organization funded by a bank, where he assumed leadership of its performing arts program. Tiago Rodrigues is one of those artists that Alkantara played an important role in introducing to the international audience. And, as you have said, he became the Artistic Director of a national theatre a couple of years ago. The same situation can be seen in Teatro Municipal do Porto. It used to be an extremely commercial theatre showing big musicals, but around four years ago, Tiago Guedes, a choreographer who also showed works at Alkantara became their Artistic Director and revolutionized the programming. Sofia Campos has recently been appointed to the post of director of our Companhia Nacional de Bailado (Portugal National Ballet Company). She was once co-director of Alkantara and worked in João Fiadeiro's structure. Prior to Sofia, the company was directed by Paulo Ribeiro, a choreographer who attended the first edition of Dances in the City, from 2016-2018. In short, there

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are so many people who were connected to Alkantara in the past, and who are now changing Portuguese performing arts scene!

If you live in Lisbon, you can enjoy an extremely rich cultural lifestyle. Even when there are no festivals happening in the city, you can see at least eighteen contemporary performance works per month, from small scale experimental theatre works to big productions like Gisèle Vienne. This number does not include any commercial productions. What is ironic is that many of the young talents now leading the scene were nurtured during the time of recession. When we had little money for arts, tiny projects popped up everywhere in Lisbon, and, from this tiny scratch of experiments, many artists started developing their careers.

Listening to you, I can assume that a budget of considerable scale is being provided for contemporary performing arts in Portugal.

Regarding the budget of the Portuguese Ministry of Culture, we are now getting back to the numbers we had before the crisis and the cuts in 2010. Still the performing arts scene is very lively, as I have just said, since national and municipal theatres are now hiring young artistic directors and are more engaged in contemporary programming. As for the funding by the Portuguese Ministry of Culture, the budget for independent projects for the cycle of 2018 – 2021, was recently announced: 83 million (approx. 20.75 million per year), rising from 45.4 million euros (approx. 11.35 million euros per year), of the previous cycle 2013 – 2016. This is just the money for larger independent projects lasting for two and four years. There are also calls for smaller projects that should be realized within twelve months (source: <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/>). Needless to say, the money is allocated to contemporary works of dance, theatre, visual arts, circus and interdisciplinary genre, which has nothing to do with traditional or folkloric elements. Even so, we still face a very difficult, even precarious, situation concerning the financing of independent structures that have been doing very consistent works.

The festival for 2020 will be the first edition you and Carla will be gathering. Can you tell us what we could expect at the moment?

Portugal has changed a lot, Lisbon has changed a lot, and our performing arts scene has also changed radically. And within that drastic evolution, the artists of Alkantara have always questioned and expanded the fixed borders of genres such as dance and theatre. Additionally, they have always dealt with political and social questions, and by doing so, reconsidered how the festival could critically address the issues and reconnect with certain communities. In the same line of thought but with slight adjustments, we are now in the midst of thinking about what kind of changes are necessary in the festival.

In my thinking, the ideal process of an artwork is that, first, artists from different communities meet and start a dialogue, and then, from there, a project proceeds. And through that project, a dialogue between artists and the audience could ensue. Taking this all into consideration, we are now questioning, for instance, if May and June are the best timing for the festival. Since students, one of the main target audience of our festival, are extremely busy during that time, bombarded with essays and evaluations

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at the end of the semester, they cannot fully enjoy the festival. Right now, we are thinking of moving the festival to a different period. In 2019, we are doing a residency program for both domestic and international artists. I came here to Japan in search of an artist who might be willing to join this residency. As for the curatorial theme of the festival, I think we do not want to be too rigid or narrow. Rather, we want to invite interesting artists from different backgrounds and with various disciplines and see what develops when those artists encounter each other.

In 2018, various artists gathered in Alkantara. For instance, from Japan, Toshiki Okada joined the festival.

Yes, he presented *Five Days in March* re-creation version. Apart from Okada, there was El Conde de Torrefiel, one of the most exciting Spanish artist groups; Antoine Defoort, a French artist who has presented works in most of our previous festivals; Bruno Beltrão, a Brazilian choreographer; Christiane Jatahy, a director also from Brazil; and, we also presented works by student-artists from Birzeit University, Palestine. Also, as this year commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the festival, we decided to invite three choreographers, Vera Mantéro, João Fiadeiro, Aldara Bizarro, who participated in the first edition of *Dances in the City*. By asking them to not fall into the pitfall of nostalgia, we requested that they create a new work. It was extremely exciting to see the chemistry come out of all these artists from different generations, nationalities and genres.

Lastly, to reconfirm, as the co-director of the Alkantara Festival, you will continue creating a bridge that bonds artists and people from diverse communities right? Can you say that is one of your main missions?

Yes, I can say that. During my stay in Japan, I have had a very interesting conversation with one artist who I cannot name. He confessed that, although he knows he is extremely privileged, working and living as an artist in Japan, he still feels somehow lost in society. I think this is a very honest comment. Artists are now living in an era of confusion. Whatever you do and whatever you say, you feel like it does not make any difference to society. Of course, you can feel lost and uncertain during these times. As a contemporary performing arts festival, Alkantara will not reject these feelings of uncertainty, but rather would want to accept them as they are, and see what can develop from there. With various misunderstandings, in our world today, freedom of expression is failing to serve as a tool that assists our lives. It navigates us to wrong places and answers. In order to develop forms of expression that truly nurture more freedom and understanding, I hope that Alkantara can become a place for artists that are feeling lost. And, make it a place where honest dialogue can become a catalyst for developing new communities.