

The History of Estrela Hall and the Lisbon Players

By Jonathan Weightman



Estrela Hall: corner of Rua Saraiva de Carvalho and Rua da Estrela

Introduction

For 74 years Estrela Hall was the home of the Lisbon Players, an unfunded amateur organization, whose participants have come from incredibly diverse national, ethnic, social and professional backgrounds. Since 1947 it has presented an uninterrupted theatre programme with a single objective: to produce theatre in English for Lisbon audiences.

It has been an extraordinary breeding-ground for talent, and there are many people working in various branches of the theatre arts in Britain, Portugal and other places who will remember their time working at Estrela Hall as a crucial learning experience and a launch pad for their professional lives. For many others from other professional fields, it has provided a unique contact with the world of theatre and performance.

The origins of Estrela Hall

Estrela Hall was built in 1906 on land belonging to the adjacent British Protestant School building, which became the British Hospital in 1910. The British Protestant School purchased the land in 1854 and in 1865 it was re-registered in the name of the British Protestant Episcopal Church i.e. St George's Anglican Church. The Estrela Hall building was initially intended to be some kind of church hall, school and community centre under the auspices of the adjoining St. George's Church.

Evidently this plan was never successful and, after passing through a number of uses – including that of a roller-skating rink and a cinema showing Allied propaganda films to the supposedly neutral Portuguese during the Second World War – in 1947 it was handed over to the recently-formed Lisbon Players with a rental agreement. The ownership of the building was always unclear, but for many years the landlord to whom the Lisbon Players paid rent was a London-registered charity called the British Protestant School Fund, whose trustees included the British Ambassador and representatives of St. George's Church.



The Estrela Hall with the British Hospital in the background: early 20th century

The Lisbon Players

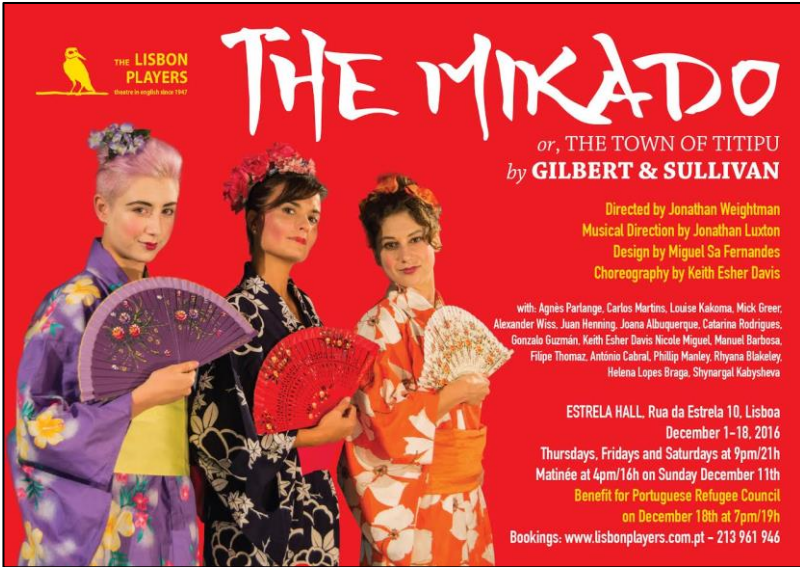
Founded in 1947, The Lisbon Players is the oldest and longest continuously running English language theatre association in Lisbon. With a steady roster of six full productions and assorted workshops and concerts, it is recognized both as a good training ground for people who want to go on to make a career in the performing arts and as a valuable educational resource for schools and universities.



In its early years the group had a distinctly British flavour, in terms of the performers and the audience; expatriates entertaining expatriates. However, demographic and social changes over the past thirty years or so have meant that the company has had to reinvent itself in many ways, though it retains its original brief of performing in the English language. Its audience and its membership have become far more international,



and Portuguese make up a large part of its audience as well as a sizeable proportion of performers and back-stage staff. Alain Oulman, Amália Rodrigues' composer and friend, directed many productions at Estrela Hall in the 1960s and 70s (the theatre features in Nicholas Oulman's 2009 film *Com que Voz*) and over the years many well-known Portuguese performers have appeared on its stage.



The performance of *Mikado* by the Lisbon Players in 2015



Play On: the 70th Anniversary Celebration on stage in 2017

The redevelopment of the ‘Estrela Site’

After a number of years of paying rent, the landlords agreed to waive the rent in lieu of the Lisbon Players taking responsibility for repairs to the building. This arrangement continued uncontested into the 1990s. Under this arrangement the Lisbon Players managed to convert and equip the building as a functioning theatre with funds raised through tickets sales and fundraising. The theatre’s original fabric was maintained, mains water was installed, and a new roof was made, all of which gradually improved and modernised the Estrela Hall theatre.

In about 2000 the British Government in London – through its ambassador who was one of the trustees of the Lisbon Players’ landlord, the British Protestant School Fund – decided it wanted to divest itself of all assets abroad ‘surplus to need’. This included all properties on the Estrela site, except the church and British cemetery. The Lisbon Players at the time approached the Ambassador, Sir John Holmes who very sensibly suggested that the best course forward would be to detach Estrela Hall from the site and make it over legally to the Lisbon Players Association. However with a change of Ambassador and pressure from Whitehall, the race was on for a sale and this suggestion was soon forgotten. The Lisbon Players, as one of the acknowledged “stakeholders” of the site, was called for meetings with the British Government representatives and the other stakeholders of the site, but the theatre’s refusal to sell its home without a suitable alternative fell on deaf ears.

In 2009 the Lisbon Players, faced with eviction and in the absence of any clear proof of ownership of the building, took legal advice and at their own expense went to court to try and claim ‘usucapião’ (a kind of squatters’ rights). The case for ‘usucapião’ was unsuccessful, as the British government had already managed to obtain ‘usucapião’ for itself, unbeknown to the Lisbon Players’ lawyers. Eviction was avoided as the Lisbon Players were deemed the legal occupiers, although not owners of the building. On the very day of the opening of the court case

the trustees had also closed down the charity in London that was the ostensible owner of Estrela Hall – the British Protestant School Fund.

The financial crash of 2008/9 gave the theatre a brief respite, but a relentless search for a buyer led to the entire site being sold for less than the original asking price. The eventual buyer was a Portuguese real estate company called Arquimelo, which presented a plan to redevelop the site, which included the demolition of Estrela Hall. The Lisbon Players immediately entered into urgent negotiations with Arquimelo to see whether a future could be salvaged for the theatre. A proposal to build a new theatre for the Lisbon Players inside the new building to be constructed on Rua da Estrela was put forward by the representatives of Arquimelo, which was accepted by the Lisbon Players, but this was soon dropped by the developers and came to nothing. The redevelopment of the site contains only upmarket housing.



Estrela Hall: corner of Rua Saraiva de Carvalho

Nevertheless the Lisbon Players remain strong and very much active and regularly puts on performances in nearby local theatres, including *O Teatro do Bairro* and *O Hangar*. Current information regarding the Lisbon Players can be found on its website: <https://lisbonplayers.com.pt/>.



The old auditorium in 2009



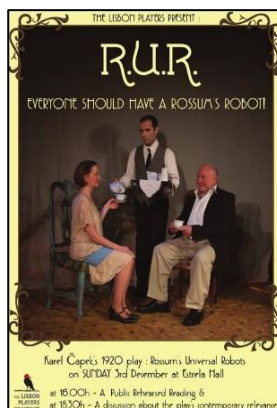
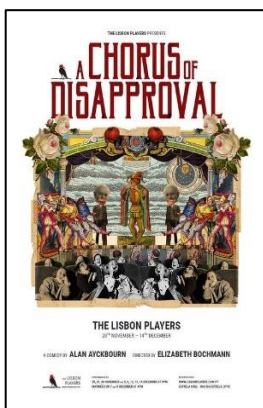
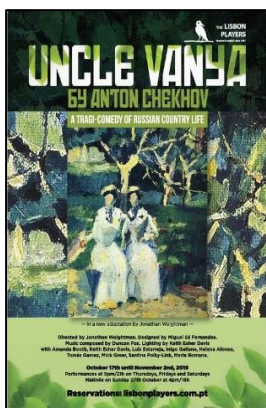
Rehearsing Hamlet in the street in 2009!

Appendix – Timeline of the Lisbon Players at Estrela Hall

- 1700s-1854** The Estrela “site” was gradually acquired through the purchase of various plots of land forming the cemetery, the first St. George’s Church in 1822, and the Parsonage. The cemetery was for the benefit of the foreign Protestant communities resident in Portugal, especially the British and Dutch. The final purchase was the land, including a manor house, which became the British Protestant School in 1854.
- 1889-1965** The second St George’s Church, 1889, the British Hospital (formerly the British Protestant School), Estrela Hall and The Royal British Club are all erected on site.
- 1906** Estrela Hall built by British Protestant School Fund.
- 1939** Shakespeare’s *‘A Winter’s Tale’* performed in Estrela Hall.
- 1940-1945** Estrela Hall used as cinema showing Allied war propaganda films by the British Government.
- 1945** The Lisbon Players performs *‘The Importance of Being Earnest’* at the Teatro Dona Maria II.
- 1947** February. The Lisbon Players formally established at Estrela Hall, initially paying rent to British Protestant School Fund.
- 1963** Theatre remodeled at the Lisbon Players expense, according to plans by the architect Manuel Igrejas. Seats acquired from São Jorge Cinema.
- 1965** Rey Colaço Robles Monteiro Company moves temporarily to Estrela Hall following fire at Teatro Dona Maria II.
- 1987** *‘Lisbon Players: Forty Years’* published by the British Historical Society.
- 1980s** Lisbon Players ceases paying rent in lieu of repairs to the building.
- 1994** The Lisbon Players officially constituted as a nonprofit association (Diário da República).
- 2000** Ambassador Sir John Holmes suggests Estrela Hall is detached from the site and made over to the Lisbon Players.
- 2003** Estrela Hall re-roofed as a result of Lisbon Players fund raising activities.
- 2005-2008** British Government initiates a series of informal unminuted meetings about the “disposal of the Estrela site” A representative from the Lisbon Players as stakeholder

- attends and the Association continually opposes the sale of Estrela Hall and suggests other solutions.
- 2006** The Lisbon Players becomes one of the two overseas members of the Little Theatre Guild (UK).
- 2008** August. Lisbon Players files a legal action against the British Government's claim to the building.
- 2008** December. The Estrela site, which includes the theatre, is placed on the market by agents CB Richard Ellis, despite opposition from the Lisbon Players as acknowledged stakeholder on the site. Online petition launched to preserve the theatre.
- 2009** August. The British Hospital, the theatre's neighbour for its entire existence, closes. Water supply installed at EH.
- 2008-2010** Phase I and II of building works programme carried out at Lisbon Players expense including installation of fire doors, fire detection system, renovation of WCs, installation of cast bathroom, repainting of foyer and auditorium and renovation of seating.
- 2009** Theatre licence issued by IGAC, valid until 2014 (later renewed until 2016).
- 2010** March 8. Preliminary hearing of the case against the British Government at the Palace of Justice, Lisbon.
- 2010** September 14. Date set for the hearing of the case against the British Government.
- 2010** September 14. The British Protestant School Fund is dissolved at the British Charity Commissioners in the UK as having registered no recent activity.
- 2010** Final Judgement of the court is published, establishing the British Government as legal owners of the site but rejecting the British Government's claims for compensation and payment of rent.
- 2013** The Câmara Municipal de Lisboa decreed in plenary session the *elevado interesse cultural dos Lisbon Players à cidade de Lisboa*, in recognition of our long years of work as an inclusive cultural organization.
- 2013** June. Letter received from British Government representative announcing the impending sale of building and the issuing of eviction notices. This sale later collapses and no eviction notices are issued.

- 2014** July. Phase III of building works. Exterior of building renovated and restored, roof insulated, fly-ropes renewed and kitchen renovated, all at The Lisbon Players' expense.
- 2015** March. Communication from Peter Abbott, the Counsellor at the Embassy, announcing that offers are being considered for the sale of the whole Estrela Site.
- 2016** March. The Estrela Site is sold to developer Arquimelo.
- 2016** 10th March. Public Meeting called at Estrela Hall to try to save the theatre.
- 2017** 1st July. Performance of '*Play On*', an all-day celebration of the 70th Anniversary of Estrela Hall.
- 2017-2018** Ongoing negotiations with Arquimelo, Lisbon City Council, and the Junta de Freguesia do Campo de Ourique.
- 2019** July. The developers start work on the old hospital building.
- 2019** 13th December. Final performance at Estrela Hall.
- 2019** '*We Came to Lisbon*' – a documentary about visitors to Lisbon, shot in the British Cemetery.
- 2020** 31st January. Keys handed over to the Arquimelo company.
- 2021** '*Off-Stage Stories*' film shot in Encarnaçao.
- 2022** Performance of Alan Bennett's play '*An Englishman Abroad*', at Teatro do Bairro.
- 2023** April: Performance of '*Things I know to be True*', at Teatro do Bairro.
- 2023** July. Performance of '*Lovesick*' at Hangar, in Campolide.





Jonathan Weightman is a founder member of Tagus Theatre, a Lisbon-based theatre group that performs in English. He also writes plays, including 'Waking Thoughts', a play about William Beckford's relationship with Franchi and also 'Pessoa Personae', a play based on the literary alter-egos of the modernist Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. He lives in Lisbon and is retired from the Faculdade de Letras at the Universidade de Lisboa. During lockdown he made two films. 'We Came to Lisbon' and 'Offstage Stories'. He has been cast in the title role of a film of King Lear, which is to be shot in July 2023 in Lisbon.