

Brazil's Festival de Teatro de Curitiba II—The Healthy State of the Art

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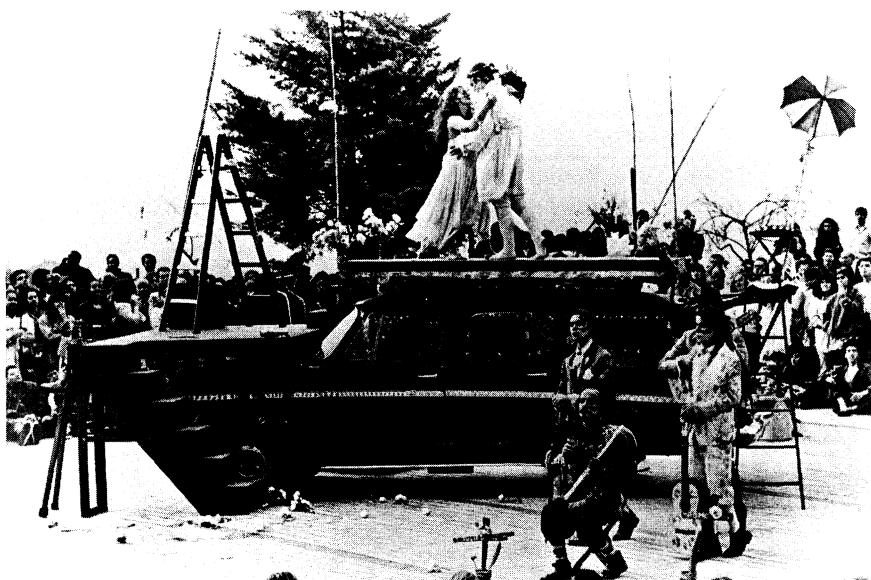
The second annual festival—18-28 March, 1993—held in the southern city of Curitiba, Paraná, has in its brief existence become Brazil's unofficial national theatre showcase. The 25 productions featured over a 10-day period demonstrated with dazzling clarity that the stage is alive and well in Latin America's largest country, that it has overcome the trauma of 20 years of military dictatorship, dismantling of arts funding agencies under the corrupt Collor administration, and *patrulha ideológica* epitomized by Augusto Boal's stifling dicta such as *teoria do coringa* and *teatro do oprimido*. A whole new generation has burst on to the Brazilian stage with creative vigor. Much of what is best in this generation was represented at Curitiba: directors Bia Lessa, Moacyr Góes, Gerald Thomas, and Gabriel Villela, as well as companies such as Belo Horizonte's Grupo Galpão. The rehabilitation of Nélson Rodrigues begun by Antunes Filho and his Grupo Macunaíma with their 1981 production *Nélson Rodrigues o eterno retorno* was reaffirmed at the festival. Another recent tendency in Brazilian theatre was also evident: the staging of classics both international and national. The most visually stunning example of the latter was director Enrique Dias's production of Oswald de Andrade's Modernist text *A morta*. Less stunning was the stage adaptation of João de Minas's *A mulher carioca aos 22 anos*, a novel from the same period but marginalized from the Modernist canon. This tedious production was justified by the author's status as a supposed forerunner of Nélson Rodrigues. Examples of international classics—dramatic and non dramatic texts—were productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *O Paraíso perdido (Paradise Lost)*, a Strindberg adaptation entitled *Epifanias*, as well as productions based on the writings of Artaud and Kafka. Nor was Brazil's engagé old guard unrepresented, with two productions of Plínio Marcos's works. There were, however, conspicuous absences. The distinguished post-*abertura* generation of playwrights was nowhere to be heard (e.g., Maria Adelaide Amaral, Naum Alves de Souza, Edla van Steen, Luís Alberto de Abreu, Mário Prata, Flávio de Souza, Alcides Nogueira, Juca de

Oliveira). And the two most important theatre companies, Grupo Macunaíma and Teatro do Ornitórrinco, did not participate in the festival.

There were revelations and falls from grace in Curitiba. The most striking example of the former was Grupo Galpão's *mambembe* production of *Romeo and Juliet*, presented both outdoors in true *mambembe* fashion and in the dazzling Ópera de Arame,¹ an architectural fantasy out of a thousand and one nights, a glass and wire auditorium featuring lagoons, illuminated waterfalls, and the sky visible through the ceiling (a handy visual escape for spectators bored or exasperated by the few tedious productions in the festival). Grupo Galpão's mixture of itinerant medieval theatre (a panel truck replaces the old horse-drawn wagon), commedia dell'arte, circus techniques, and the *mineiro* flavor of Guimarães Rosa resurrected Shakespeare's play from the dust of accumulated romantic clichés to the delight and fascination of audiences and critics alike. Grupo Galpão, which has been in existence for twelve years, collaborated on this production with director Gabriel Villela, whose previous resurrection of an international classic—Calderón's *La vida es sueño*—was one of the 1991-92 theatre season's most innovative productions. The Ópera de Arame also housed the festival's biggest disappointment, *O império das meias-verdades*, directed and scripted by perhaps the most audacious member of the theatrical avant-garde, Gerald Thomas, with his Companhia da Ópera Seca. *Império* was a confused



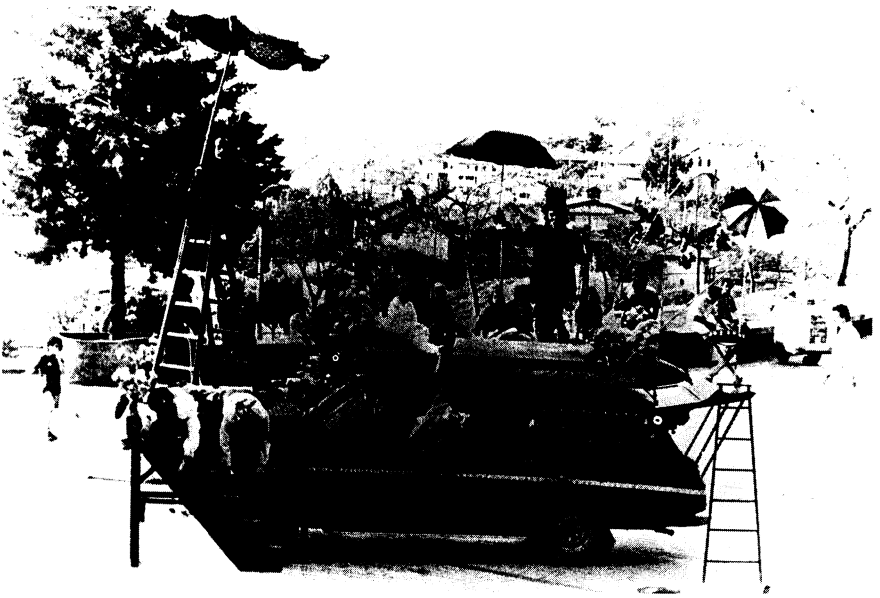
A vida Como Ela É. Foto: Eugenio Reis.



Romeu e Julieta. Foto: Adriana Cunha.

hodge-podge of theatre of the absurd, biblical myths (Adam and Eve), and pretentious narration blasting from powerful loudspeakers. Examples of the latter: "no Brasil não há poetas, não há encenadores," sprinkled with liberal doses of "fuck you" in English. Even Thomas's most ardent supporters were perplexed and concluded that either this was an *espetáculo de crise*, or as one eminent critic diplomatically put it, "todo grande artista tem direito de errar de vez em quando." The principal problem with the production may have been that as a work in progress it was simply not ready for an audience. During the month after the festival, however, Thomas completely revised *Império*, which opened in São Paulo on 30 April to critical acclaim.

One of the most intriguing presentations was a piece entitled *25 homens*, based on a Plínio Marcos short story about a group of men wallowing in filth and descending into madness in a tiny jail cell. If the subject matter sounds like the author's usual neo-naturalist depictions of the lumpen proletariat—*Dois perdidos numa noite suja* also played at the festival—it was in fact a production that emphasized mythical themes and the spiritual value of redemption. The production was based on Grotowskian poor-theatre techniques to create the purest visual poetry. Marcos's story was narrated by a single actor—Cacá Carvalho, who played Macunaíma in Antunes Filho's acclaimed 1979 production—with a single



Romeu e Julieta. Foto: Adriana Cunha.

stage light shining horizontally from downstage to up, a collapsible set of iron bars placed at certain moments in front of the light, a steel table and chair, shackles, matches, a cigarette, and oft-times barely perceptible movement. This most minimalist of stagings achieved a power that put more costly and elaborate productions to shame.

Another of the festival's most effective pieces, *A vida como ela é*, achieved a dual purpose. It brought Néelson Rodrigues's journalistic endeavors—his *crônicas*—to the stage and clearly illustrated their inextricable links to his drama. Directed by Luis Arthur Nunes, the production consisted of eleven vignettes featuring the usual Rodriguean themes of incest, confused sexual identity, puritanical repression of the libido, madness, and suicide, presented in the also usual Rodriguean high comic fashion, proving once again that the author, among his many other accomplishments, lifted the rock of patriarchal society and uncovered the dark creatures lurking beneath it. *A vida como ela é* displayed illuminated expressionist panels that summed up the action of each *crônica*, and fused them all with the panels lit simultaneously while the ensemble of actors assembled for a kind of family album pose at play's end. In short, a tour de force.

Another tour de force was director Bia Lessa's adaptation of a classic from Portuguese literature, the 17th-century *Cartas portuguesas*—also known as *Lettres portugaises*—based on the letters of a nun, Sister Mariana Alcoforado, written to an unattainable French lover. The set, however, did not represent the confining atmosphere of a convent, but in poetic contrast a forest and stream, symbolizing the nun's interior world. Lessa, in the forefront of a generation attempting to redefine Brazilian theatre in visual terms, utilized actual water, earth, and greenery to create the forest.

Along with the plays shown at the festival, there was a *ciclo de debates*, featuring for each day of the festival a panel of four theatre critics and/or practitioners, including Joffre Rodrigues (Nélson's son), critics Sábado Magaldi and Alberto Guzik, directors Gabriel Villela and Moacyr Góes, actors Paulo Goulart and Paulo Autran, and playwrights Marcos Caruso and Lauro César Muniz. Among the topics debated were Nélson Rodrigues's *unanimidade*, public funding of theatre, the role of ideology, and theatre in Curitiba. The *ciclo de debates*, held each day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. in a movie theatre, was one of the festival's most popular attractions. Seating was scarce, with some spectators consigned to aisles, floors, and alcoves off to the side. The give and take was always lively, with a brief presentation by each *debatedor*, questions, comments, and diatribes from the audience, and exchanges among the panel members that ranged from thoughtful commentary to irony and derision. The panel on which this author participated dealt with the theme, "Exportar é o que importa?" Gerald

Thomas and Bia Lessa were co-participants—Sábado Magaldi moderated—and the controversy surrounding Thomas's play was heated, and in the best Brazilian fashion, highly amusing.

There were parallel activities associated with the festival: 1) "*A mostra do teatro paranaense*" showcased local productions, which one newspaper called an "overdose" of Nélson Rodrigues (*A falecida*, *O beijo no asfalto*, *Perdoa-me por me traíres*); 2) a further overdose in the form of a Nélson Rodrigues film festival; 3) the establishment of *Rede Brasil*, an organization of independent promoters for the purpose of setting up a national network of theatrical production and exchange.

The festival was a model of efficient organization led by Yacoff Sarkovas, representing one of the two independent cultural promotion agencies that co-produced the event, which was almost entirely self-supporting through ticket sales and corporate sponsorship. The latter characteristic may be anathema to some, but it is the only way such a festival could be held in these days of lack of government support for the arts. The 1994 event—Festival de Teatro de Curitiba III—is already in the planning stages.

A number of things were clarified by the festival. First, the Brazilian stage is dominated at the present time by the *encenador* (director-dramaturge, director-author, and/or director-designer). Second, theatre's doors are now wide open to any and all themes and styles; there are no checks on artists' creative imaginations (except, of course, finances). Third, for good or for ill, the bias against foreign drama has all but disappeared. Fourth, despite its signs of vitality in the 1980s, Brazilian playwriting is not in the best of health at this moment. What does all this bode for the future? In this writer's opinion, the vitality of the theatre as an institution, its diversity and unflagging energy put to rest any notion that it is an art form on the wane. And if "serious" Brazilian playwrights are quiet these days, they are waiting in the wings and they will soon be heard from again.

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Note

1. Other venues included four local theatres, a park, a forest, and a church.