

An Update on Theatre in Brazil

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I. The Decline of National Dramaturgy and the Rise of the *Encenador*

The special issue of the *Revista USP* on theatre published in the summer of 1992 confirmed a schism that critics and scholars of the theatre in Brazil had been observing since the mid-1980's. As Alberto Guzik stated in an interview, "houve um divórcio entre a dramaturgia e a produção teatral" with production values and spectacle dominating the stage while national dramaturgy dedicated to examining social issues fell silent. The creators of this new theatre of spectacle are *encenadores*, multi-faceted individuals who assume the roles of director, set designer, and scriptwriter and who took to the stages in the early eighties while national dramatists active during the 1960's-70's tried to respond to the new working conditions. Of the eighteen articles dedicated to the status of the Brazilian theatre, only *one* article mentions the productions of national dramatists, the remaining address acting, set design, and the careers and successes of the *encenadores*. When *encenadores* occupied the space left empty by national dramatists, they assumed not only the stages of São Paulo and Rio, but the place of national dramatists as spokespersons for the issues and topics of importance in post-*abertura* Brazil. While they can be credited with bringing vitality to the theatre and attracting new audiences, they have not offered support to their cohorts, choosing instead to adapt European classics or resuscitate Brazilian masters. Unlike traditional directors who work within the framework of dramatic texts turning the written word into a living story, the *encenadores* become the major creative force, shaping the performance to their will irrespective of the written or implied demands of the text. Such a creative stance makes cooperative relationships between *encenadores* and living dramatists difficult, since what *encenadores* see as creativity would be labeled corruption by the dramatist.

The problem is not just that there is less Brazilian dramaturgy being produced, but that the reigning theatrical values may be dangerous to the health of national playwrights. As Sábato Magaldi observes in his introductory essay

to the special issue, national dramatists have not kept up with the growing interest in spectacle (8). As a result of this change in theatrical values, living national dramatists are finding fewer stages and fewer directors interested in staging their plays. The one exception to the reigning disinterest in national dramatists is Nelson Rodrigues whose plays, *crônicas*, and biography have received critical attention and artistic interpretation. Even the most recalcitrant of directors, Gerald Thomas, has admitted an appreciation for the work of Rodrigues. Recognition notwithstanding, directors working with Rodrigues' plays, most notably Antunes Filho, have reworked them into variations on the originals making changes that the author might not have allowed.

The healthy presence of *encenadores* as compared to the relative obscurity of all but a few national dramatists, the most notable exception being Maria Adelaide Amaral, creates the impression that national dramatists have become risky economic ventures. Further complicating the financial picture is the fact that the coffers of the state and federal governments no longer support national theatre as they once did during the dictatorship. The options left open to dramatists in São Paulo and Rio are either to produce and/or direct their own plays, absorbing the financial risk, or to continue writing plays in the hopes of better days. An intermediate step, combining talents with a known director or *encenador* in the hopes of attracting financial backing has functioned on several occasions, but it requires personalities and talents that can cooperate rather than compete.

The impact of writing plays and not staging them is the loss of both income and recognition for national dramatists. But more importantly, when plays cannot be publicly performed the dramatist perceives his/her art as frivolous and isolated from the world (Castro). Without interaction with the public, dramatists cannot develop their talents nor communicate their perceptions of timely topics. For dramatists from the older generation who persevered during the dictatorship it is an unexpected hardship to find no stages or producers for their plays in times free of censorship and interference from the government. For the younger generation the hardships are causing a change in career plans. Dramatists already writing scripts are attracted to writing for television where the audience and the work are more regular, leaving their theatrical careers as a hobby. Students enrolling in Brazil's theatre schools prefer course work in directing and acting rather than play writing (Vincenzo). Today's theatre students have many more examples from the careers of directors like Moacir Goes, Gabriel Vilella, William Pereira, Cacá Rosset, Bia Lessa, and Iacov Hillel, among others, to emulate than the careers of rising or existing Brazilian dramatists (Litto and Mercado 35).

In defense of their art Brazilian dramatists have organized workshops, that is, readings and laboratories to support each other and those wanting to enter the

profession. Public readings, conducted in restaurants like *Eduardo's* in São Paulo or the *Jornada de Leituras* in Rio (Souza) and private readings held in dramatist's homes are providing an informal stage for writers' scripts. At *Eduardo's* and the *Jornada* professional actors read the plays and the audience then debates the strengths and weaknesses of the script. Playwrights such as Naum Alves de Souza, Leilah Assunção, Zeno Wilde, Renato Borges, Fauzi Arap, Plínio Marcos, Consuelo de Castro and others have participated in regularly scheduled events in homes and in front of an audience. The comradeship of the participants and the opportunity to hear the plays out loud provides the dramatists with needed feedback and moral support. Unfortunately, in these last years that readings have been popular, few if any plays have been produced. The other formal response to a depressed market has been in the work of the laboratory Teatro de Arena, recreating since 1989 the work of the Seminário de Dramaturgia of the late 1950's: encouraging young dramatists to explore a theatrical language in which to talk about Brazilian concerns. Fauzi Arap, Francisco Medeiros, and now Gianfrancesco Guarnieri have been mentors to dramatists participating in the laboratory (Lima 21).

While the immediate situation of national dramatists may look dreary and the unstable economy defies reason and planning, the theatre as a whole is booming. Plays are opening at the rate of three to four per week in the sixty theatres of metropolitan São Paulo and the variety of productions is increasing. As Albuquerque notes in his 1992 article in LATR, Brazil's traditional forte, the comedy of manners, is staging a healthy return (26). Other popular forms, puppet theatre and the circus, are also celebrating a rebirth. In São Paulo, Marcos Caruso and Jandira Martini, the audience favorites for several seasons, have three comedies running concurrently. The most popular, in content and with the audiences, *Trair e Coçar . . . É Só Começar* has been playing since August of 1989. Caruso and Martini also offer intelligent criticism of Brazil's socio-economic difficulties and political troubles in *Porca Miséria* which has played to full houses since January of 1993. Without the traditional presence of national dramaturgy and without a consistent national focus in the works of *encenadores* comedy writers like Caruso and Martini have assumed some of the responsibility for treating urgent national topics.

II. The Audience

On the surface it might appear that the audiences, both the young and the affluent, prefer light-hearted entertainment with little intellectual content over socially critical and realistic drama. After all, crude reality can be found not far outside the doors of the theatre and is lived by many Brazilians every day. While

this may be true, it is also true that the audiences' tastes have changed and so has the function of theatre in their lives. Television may be responsible for creating new tastes, especially the preference for visual spectacle and a linear style of presentation or the desire to attend the theatre in order to see a favorite television star rather than the work of a particular dramatist. But now that the theatre no longer is needed as a critical force against a repressive government, theatre audiences attend with different expectations. Alberto Guzik affirms that entertainment became the immediate goal of the theatre of the eighties, contrasting sharply with a theatre that once had been the focus of resistance to the dictatorship (12). Today there are enough people interested in the theatre to fill playhouses offering both the sensorial stimulation of *encenadores* and theatre that addresses Brazilian social problems, if only more of that national theatre were being staged (Guzik).

III. The Theatrical Values of the *Encenador*

It seems more appropriate in the 1990's to state that it is the individual vision of the director that has taken the stage in Brazil in contrast to themes about the individual that characterized the theatre of the early 1980's (Albuquerque 28). It is now the director who recreates and remakes other worlds in response to his/her own individual creative perceptions. Many of the scholars who contributed to the special issue of *Revista USP* lament the individualism of the *encenadores* vision, claiming that the liberty to choose what is important leads to the reduction or destruction of the dramatic text. Sussekind refers to the "impulso monológico" of the director (44) who seems to be much more interested in hearing him/herself speak than in communicating with others. Lima, too, decries the loss of dialog between characters and with the audience (19). Brandão portrays the individualism as "hegemonia incontestada do director-encenador enquanto presença centralizadora, absoluta, até mesmo autoritária" (29).

Critics in the *Revista USP* mention Brazilian topics/themes and the actors as the two traditional components most damaged by the individualism of *encenadores*. They point out that most *encenadores* do not worry about training or even using actors in conventional ways that mature their talents for psychological development. There is a perception that actors are utilized for the expressiveness of their bodies on stage, but not their ability to make a role come to life (Brandão 30) and that adaptations of Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, and other plays from the world canon become mouthpieces for the director and his/her own creative image of the world. This has been noticed most readily in the

works of Gerald Thomas whose recorded voice narrates and comments on the play as it is underway.

These criticisms reflect how the theatre of the 60's and 70's, a theatre of social message, contrasts with the visual spectacle of the 80's and 90's. While earlier works were aimed at developing a language, characters, and a conflict that would incarnate the unspoken wrongs of the dictatorship, more recent theatre has abandoned those constraints. Freedom from censorship, repression and even economic collapse seems to have unleashed the creative liberty of directors to respond to something other than external forces.

It is important to realize that the *encenadores* phenomenon is not strictly a generational conflict between youthful directors of the 80's and 90's and national dramatists of the 60's and 70's nor is it strictly comprised of self-absorbed directors. The two oldest participants in the *encenadores* theatrical movement, José Celso of Teatro Oficina and Antunes Filho of the Centro de Pesquisa Teatral, have origins that go deep into the theatre of the 1960's and 70's. Their adaptations to new times have resulted in some of the most original contributions to the renewal of the theatre. However, these older directors do share a respect for some traditional theatrical values that younger directors have discarded. Antunes Filho is committed to developing the skills of his actors and to treating only Brazilian topics. Directors José Celso and Antônio Abujamra, who went to the world theatre canon for their 1994 offerings of *Hamlet* (rewritten *Ham-let*) and Gorky's *The Inspector General*, respectively, focused on plays about government corruption and cover-up. Certainly these are topics of great interest to Brazilians because of the recent scandals and investigations of corruption among elected representatives. Together with Caruso and Martini these older *encenadores* are staging plays that speak not only about themselves but Brazil as well.

IV. The Status of Criticism and Research

Critics shaped by the aesthetics of the 60's and 70's are struggling with their own past when faced with the new aesthetics of spectacle, much as are national dramatists. As Albuquerque noted some critics have been particularly harsh on established dramatists like Plínio Marcos and Augusto Boal for experimenting with new forms and topics. He proposes that critics may have fallen victim to their own stereotyped expectations (25). The *Revista USP* essays reveal the uneasiness critics feel with the work of the *encenadores*. The theatrical elements that critics find lacking in their creations, strong character development and nationally oriented themes, represent the strengths of Brazilian theatre during the 60's and 70's. Uncomfortable with the efforts of seasoned dramatists, yet not

quite resigned to the over-emphasis on production, theatre critics also are looking for new grounds on which to evaluate Brazilian theatre.

While Brazilian directors lead the renaissance of Brazil's new theatre through their dominance on the stages, a dominance echoed in drama schools, the history of theatrical performances recorded in the newspapers and archives languishes, echoing the poor fortunes of Brazilian dramatists. Newspapers and magazines such as *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Veja* have greatly reduced or reassigned the space allotted for theatre reviews, preferring descriptive paragraphs that inform the public about time, location, and content of the play over theatre criticism. In addition, space reserved for theatre commentary is shared with photographs and advertising which often take up more space than the commentary. For example, the impressive listing for the 4th International Theatre Festival organized by Ruth Escobar for May-June, 1994 occupied far more space on the page of the *Estadão* than the review of one of its performances by the Bread and Puppet Theatre written by critic Mariângela Alves de Lima. And half of the space allotted to the review was taken by a photograph.

The down-sizing of print criticism may have a harmful impact on theatre critics, students of theatre, dramatists, and the public. When the print media pay little attention to the theatre they communicate to the reading public that there is little to report or little of importance being staged (Faria 68-69). In fact, theatre critics reported that they are attempting to attend as many performances as possible and write thoughtful criticism. However, there is no guaranteed space for their theatre criticism. This means that even though critics are writing up their reviews and critiques, neither the public nor students of the theatre are guaranteed to have access to that work. Thoughtful criticism can influence the audience. More importantly, several dramatists mentioned that they depend on the serious critic for reactions to their plays. Without on-going interaction theatrical life can become a solitary pursuit both for dramatists and critics. Furthermore, without comprehensive and thoughtful criticism the history of Brazilian theatre, so necessary to the training of future scholars and reviewers, will consist of less information written by less competent individuals and summarized in a few lines and a photograph.

Hard times also have befallen the archives that conserve photographs, newspaper articles, and play programs. They are overwhelmed by increasing demands placed on them from students and researchers and by budget cuts that have lowered the number of staff members. This is complicated by the fact that the specialized training required to do the job, including library skills, photography, and sound recording, is not properly compensated. As a result the maintenance of major collections is seriously compromised. In São Paulo the Biblioteca Jenny Segall, associated with the Museu Lasar Segall, cannot keep up

with the cataloging and filing of incoming materials and the library of Artes Cênicas housed at the Centro Cultural cannot photograph or record live performances or microfilm materials. Without adequate staff or a budget for preservation techniques, the libraries must attempt to catch up with the backlog as possible, protect the materials they have, and call upon the theatre community to bring in materials that can be used to fill in the gaps. Researchers are still assisted by knowledgeable and generous staff members, but good will cannot replace missing documents.

V. Directions for the Future

Brazil's recent economic woes have made experimentation a risky financial proposition for producers and national playwrights. Individual producers depend on the financial success of each production, thus lowering their willingness to take creative risks. There are few theatre groups that offer continuity and security for writers, actors, or directors. Better economic conditions would improve the chances of the formation and persistence of theatre groups, either with or without government backing, in order to guarantee a venue for dramatists' and actors' efforts. Theatre groups can alternate the risk of producing unknown dramatists with that of more popular and revenue producing shows, thus guaranteeing greater financial and artistic flexibility. Critics have noted that producers hoping to secure financial success and demonstrate their ability to keep abreast of new currents are importing hit shows from the USA and Europe to the Brazilian stage without making any appreciable changes (Vincenzo, Souza). When each play must generate good revenue theatre producers choose foreign successes over local art, even if the dramatist is seasoned.

Brazilian theatre is constantly cycling and recycling so that the current phase of adaptations of the classics by *encenadores* is part of a natural process of regeneration. The reign of the *encenadores* may be extinguishing itself. The headline in the *Veja São Paulo* of 25 May 1994 "As novas piadas velhas de Cacá" and the ensuing critique raises the question of this *encenador's* ability to keep audiences happy repeating the same formula developed in the early 1980's. Several critics that I interviewed expressed optimism about signs suggesting the return or rejuvenation of social and politically conscious dramaturgy. Lima and Guzik believed that the public readings are important and will lead to some staging of national dramatists. They also stated that the interest in Nelson Rodrigues, and more recently Jorge Andrade through a magnificent production of *Vereda da Salvação* by Antunes Filho, will also lead to a rediscovery of national dramatists. The successes of groups like TAPA (Teatro Amador Produções Artísticas) in São Paulo to bring to the stage classic playwrights like

Martins Pena and living classics like Plínio Marcos confirm that there is an audience and an interest in Brazilian drama.

National dramatists and theatre critics agree that there are many topics yet to be explored on Brazil's stages that are of immediate interest to the public. Both agree that the theatre still retains its power to respond quickly to current events and to give them expression and emotion. Both agree that there is an audience willing to attend performances about Brazil's social reality. The presence of *encenadores* has challenged both critics and dramatists to examine the content and form of drama and the economic infrastructure that finances productions and controls access to the country's stages. From the dramatist's perspective Brazil's economy and the policies of the government have caused the crisis in national dramaturgy by limiting resources to stage plays. From the critics' standpoint national dramatists have failed to respond to a new creative trend and therefore have been left behind in the renovation of Brazilian theatre. Some dramatists have experimented with either the form of their plays, choosing comedy or musicals rather than traditional realistic formats, or with the financial structure by producing and directing their own plays. What many seem unwilling to explore is a theatrical format that might alter their roles as creators of the play working with directors who value and respect their work.

Is it possible to bridge the gap between the values of the spectacle represented by the works of *encenadores* and the social messages favored by national dramatists of an earlier generation? Will more *encenadores* find empathy with Brazilian theatre or find adaptations that speak more directly to Brazil's great questions and concerns? Will the comedy of manners become the new outlet for writers wanting to say something about Brazil?

Castro and Lima were the least optimistic about a healthy return of Brazilian dramatists from the 1960's and '70's to the stages of Brazil's great cities. If we accept their view that there is no resolution for the aesthetic differences between national dramatists and *encenadores*, then Brazilian theatre will take the stage in a new form, possibly through adaptations of the comedy of manners or as a result of outside influences. But if we accept Guzik's view that national dramatists have a potential audience but do not yet have a drama for the times, then there is hope for a return of some of the voices of the past.

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