

Encenador Gerald Thomas's *Flash and Crash Days*: Nelson Rodrigues without Words¹

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Readers of *LATR* have heard occasional comments in these pages about the controversial phenomenon of the encenador, the all-powerful director-designer – and sometimes author – whose progenitor was Antunes Filho and who include Bia Lessa, Gabriel Villela, Márcio Vianna, and Moacyr Góes, Antunes Filho's former assistant. The most admired – and despised – member of this group is Gerald Thomas, who has made “the most valuable individual contribution to the revitalization of *mise-en-scène* in Brazilian theatre in the decade of the eighties” (Albuquerque, 32).² On the other hand, writes Margo Milleret, the encenadores “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” (“Update” 123). Brazilian critics and scholars have been arguing these issues for a decade. Sábato Magaldi has maintained that the “current phase in which the encenador takes precedence. . . is the consequence of a legitimate theoretical stance, based on the recognition of theatre's artistic autonomy, which is not merely a branch of literature” (“Teatro” 7).

Gerald Thomas has an international background: the son of German and Welsh-Jewish parents, he grew up in Rio but spent his formative artistic years in London and New York, where he began his theatre career directing Samuel Beckett's plays at La Mama. He returned to Rio in 1985 and commenced his reign as Brazil's leading encenador and – due to his penchant for making outrageous public statements – *enfant terrible*. He divides his time between Brazil, where he directs his Companhia da Ópera Seca and stages his own plays, and Europe, where he directs mainly opera.³ He also showcases his work in New York.⁴ His indisputable internationalism has led

many to view his work in terms of a resentful tupiniquim xenophobia, as does, for example, critic José Carlos Camargo, in an acrimonious review of Thomas's play *Mattogrosso*: "Brazil, for 'Mr. Thomas,' deserves its mediocre audiences and its stagnant culture, while the arts charge forward in the civilized world. The solution, therefore, is to take *Mattogrosso* to that world" (*Mattogrosso*).

In the light of these omens of trouble boiling and bubbling on the Brazilian stage, it may be useful to provide readers a close scrutiny of a Gerald Thomas production so that they can make up their own minds about the nature of his work. I have chosen *Flash and Crash Days – Tempestade e Fúria*, perhaps Thomas's most controversial play, in part for its content and in part because it attracted one of the largest audiences in Brazilian theatrical history, therefore drawing more critical comment than any production since Antunes Filho's 1978 *Macunaíma*. The work bears Gerald Thomas's trademark postmodernist multi-referentiality. One of the most intriguing references is to the work of Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues, in that the production is filled with archetypal, mythological, and cinematic allusions. Other references in Thomas's play include Wagnerian opera as a central musical and dramatic sign. The play is also the most non-verbal of Thomas's stagings. While many of the plays he directs – his own and those by established playwrights – are quite talkative, *Flash and Crash Days* eschews verbal text in favor of movement, onomatopoeic vocalization, and audio-visual effects. The reasons for this approach, outlined below, pertain to an aggressive avant-garde stance, postmodernist de-emphasis of the verbal, and the play's dream-like structure.

Flash & Crash, as I will henceforth call it, was created and directed by Gerald Thomas – he also designed the lighting – with set and costumes by Daniela Thomas. The production opened in Rio on 8 December 1991, performed in New York in 1992, at the Lincoln Center's "Serious Fun" festival, and subsequently toured to Europe. The two nameless protagonists, whom I will simply call Mother and Daughter, are played by a mother-daughter tandem of renowned actresses: Fernanda Montenegro, the *grande dame* of the Brazilian stage, and Fernanda Torres, winner of a Cannes Festival Best Actress Award.

As one might expect, Thomas puts this tandem to good use, and therefore acting is the centerpiece of *Flash & Crash* in spite of its spectacular visual effects. The performance style is not Stanislavskian, it does not create an illusion of reality, but is in many ways reminiscent of expressionism, particularly films of the silent era. That is, the actors' gestural style of

movement, facial expressions, and intonations mirror inner states, some of which are accessible to the audience, some which can only be guessed at – or analyzed using the tools of psychoanalysis – but which nonetheless strike a powerful chord. Like expressionism, the actors' histrionics verge on melodrama. The expressionist gestural style also characterizes Nelson Rodrigues's theatre. Acting is very physical and occasionally very comic in *Flash & Crash*, and in this way integrates the commedia dell'arte tradition. Other traditional forms of slapstick come to mind as well, such as the Punch and Judy show, albeit a Punch and Judy in the manner of grand guignol. One might also think of grotesque comic theatre pieces such as Federico García Lorca's *El retablillo de don Cristóbal* in which the protagonist commits mass murder when he discovers the infidelities of Doña Rosita, his betrothed.

The cinematic soundtrack for Thomas's play provides an almost continuous backdrop of emotion and presence. The music tends to be loud, insistent, and dissonant, with a preponderance of violins, as if the bathtub scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* had lasted for nearly the entire movie (the association is not arbitrary, given *Flash & Crash's* allusions to horror films). Compositions include segments by Wagner, Philip Glass, and Thomas himself. Voice-overs, often distorted electronically, reverberate throughout the play. The actors' voices are also heard, sometimes live, other times recorded.

Daniela Thomas's set design initially displays the New York skyline with a lighted window in the Empire State Building. As if a camera had zoomed through the lighted window, the scenes that follow take place in a room with tall doors, windows, and transparent walls. The set also includes a volcano placed upstage, a constant menacing presence, variously symbolizing eruptions of violent emotion, blood, and repressed sexual craving. The volcano suggests unconscious impulses which may explode at any moment. The smoke that spews from it continually drifts across the stage. The lava running down the side of the volcano is one shade in a palette of reds: costume pieces range from scarlet to crimson and heavily gelled lights frequently bathe the stage in red. It is, obviously, the color of blood, and *Flash & Crash* is as blood-soaked as any horror flick. Other effects include circles of light projected on the stage which periodically isolate the characters. Daniela Thomas says this about her set and costume design: "My work is a recycling of the world. . ." (Quoted in Galvão, 59). The idea of recycling images places the designer squarely within the postmodernist current.

As the lights come up on the set, Thomas's voice-over, from beyond the tomb, explains that he had been trapped in a building, the deserted city beset by warnings of a volcanic eruption. The narrator had been observing a

woman living in the Empire State Building. The voice proclaims that, suddenly, it was no longer himself present there: he had been transformed into the woman. Flora Süssekind writes that this voice-over structures the whole play, that it is the monologic self that invades the other characters and their dialogue. It is the invisible subject of the play (“Imaginação” 44). This monologic self is an earmark of the postmodernist artist.

Contrary to what critics have written about many of Thomas’s productions, design is not the central focus of *Flash & Crash*; rather, it provides an ever-shifting and oneiric environment for the psychic and mythic interplay of the main characters. While the monologic voice-over repeats “I...I...” the first character appears onstage; it is Mother, played by Fernanda Montenegro. She wears a medieval costume in purple and brownish tones, with a high conical hat, an apron, and a dress covered by a red plastic cloak. An arrow pierces her throat, she staggers about in agony, as Gerald Thomas’s characters often do. This choreography of anguish is the movement of nightmares, the dance macabre of helplessness and impending doom.

Mother crawls to a dummy with an arrow in its heart. Motifs are foreshadowed, repeated, mirrored, echoed throughout the production, in this case the arrow and especially the heart. Mother rises and moves with arms outstretched, lightning crashes – the “flash and crash” of the title – and she falls to the stage. Two sinister “archangels” appear dressed in jumpsuits – at other times they wear business suits – miners’ helmets with flashlights, and wings are strapped to their backs. During the course of the play they will serve as helpmates for Mother and Daughter in their endless and deadly clashes. The archangels are archetypes, but ironically not of transcendence; instead they hold the characters down, dragging them back into their murderous combat.

Mother has attempted to abort Daughter, whom we first glimpse as she slowly crosses the stage, her face twisted in agony, carrying a bucket, a symbol of filial subservience. Her costume, also medieval, is red. She kneels, puts her face in the bucket and vomits; Mother has tried to poison her. A look of horror, then sadness, crosses her face, her mouth opens, she silently mouths words, her expression changes to pathetic. This rapid metamorphosis of emotions is a constant in the play; it corresponds to the fluctuation of dreams and the mood swings of childhood.

In the following scenes Mother and Daughter torment each other between acts of incest. The two angels approach in the darkness behind Daughter, their flashlights illuminate her, their oneiric movements simultaneous and in slow-motion; she looks back in terror. Lightning crashes

and Mother appears in a fright wig like the bride of Frankenstein: horror movies constitute one of the main allusions in the play's postmodernist multi-referentiality. Daughter tries to escape Mother but the angels grab her and hold her down. Daughter makes incoherent childlike sounds while she masturbates and mumbles, "I don't know what my name is, I don't have one," which is repeated later by a slow, low-pitched electronic voice. Her namelessness gives her archetypal status, perhaps in a Jungian sense as I suggest below. Daughter reaches orgasm and Mother sucks avidly on a lollipop. Daughter lies in a fetal position. Mother hides behind the volcano and screams at the angel, "água, águaaa," while Daughter performs a ballet, dancing around Mother and taunting her with a goblet of water. Daughter subsequently grabs her by the throat and chokes her, smiling. She gets on top of Mother and simulates sex with her. Both protagonists, in their continual convulsions, deaths, and resurrections, remind one of the typical horror movie monster that refuses to die. This monster flick, with its tongue-in-cheek – no pun intended here – SM overtones, hints at the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

The angels enter with birthday cakes, which they place on the stage. But this will be no child's birthday party: the music stops, the audience hears a recorded heartbeat. The angels, in one of the most startling moments in *Flash & Crash*, remove Mother's heart from her breast and throw it to Daughter. Her bloody hands arise from behind the volcano, then her face, the heart in her mouth. She is completely covered with blood. She eats the heart and spits out pieces of flesh, smiles at the archangels, and impishly offers to share with them. Her expression changes to distress. She creeps toward Mother, falls in her lap, tries to embrace her, and the angels pull her off. Suddenly, Mother yanks Daughter's head off. Daughter writhes, Mother and the angels play catch with the head, the violins stop, the audience titters. Blackout. The birthday cake scene ending up in mutilation brings to mind myriad references: countless films and stories have based their horror on childhood innocence contrasted with or transformed into demonic abomination, from Grimm's fairy tales to B movies such as *Village of the Damned*.

Daughter, her head back in place, returns to the stage. Gerald Thomas's monologic electronic voice, lip-synched by Daughter, states: "Goodness, ma'am, how poorly you slept last night." The humorous reference – "it was all a dream" – resonates beyond this moment when one realizes that the nightmare will go on throughout the performance. Mother and Daughter begin a demented card game which provides comic relief from the recurring

nightmares and which produces eruptions of laughter in audiences. Daughter sits next to Mother and they play with exaggerated gestures, fiendishly trying to cheat each other. Mother puts a foot in Daughter's face to keep her from peeking, they snicker mockingly at each other while throwing down cards, Daughter sobs angrily at Mother, who cackles. This card game is as mad as the tea party in *Alice in Wonderland*; it is also highly reminiscent of commedia dell'arte, with its hyperbolic and grotesque gestures and droll one-upmanship.

In a later scene, Daughter, like an adolescent, smokes a cigarette and puts on makeup. Mother pantomimes Daughter; she looks in a mirror and sees Daughter's face, Mother and Daughter stare at each other, they slowly come together and mirror each other's gestures, hands up to face, touching lips, hands down to hips. As the play nears its close, Mother turns over a dummy with an arrow in its throat, collapses, and dies. Daughter appears suddenly with an arrow through her neck, transferred from the dummy. An angel pulls a heart from his jacket, approaches Mother and places the heart in her breast, she revives, rises, triumphal music plays. The angels, now blind men with canes, lead Mother across the stage; she staggers toward Daughter who is trapped behind a scrim. She pantomimes Mother's movements, music fades, and lights dim. There is a curtain call to a standing ovation. Gerald Thomas comes on stage to thunderous applause. He summons Daniela Thomas and they both bow.

The reader can imagine the perplexity of many audience members and critics:

Surely Director Gerald Thomas could have found some more subtle image to represent a daughter's hostility toward her mother than to have the younger woman strangle the older one; then stab her, rip out her heart and later eat it. . . . Except to proclaim that some mothers and daughters don't get along, it's unclear what 'The Flash and Crash Days' is about, other than poses, stage smoke and strangeness. . . in this aggressively obscure piece. (Jacobson)

According to an unsigned review in the Brazilian newsweekly *Veja*, the spectator has to "endure a ruthlessly incomprehensible spectacle. There's not a thing to make sense out of..." ("Ginástica" 67).

Not all critics scorned the production: "It is a simpler, tighter, more comprehensible play. To say that it is comprehensible may be an exaggeration. One cannot understand everything. But at least one can follow the action

onstage – in the same way we follow a dance program with our eyes, or listen to a musical composition” (Coelho).

One way to make sense out of *Flash & Crash* is to compare it to certain works of playwright Nelson Rodrigues in terms of archetypal and mythical structures, themes such as murderous and incestuous families, and innovative stagecraft. One may say, therefore, that *Flash & Crash* is “Nelson Rodrigues without words.” Several writers have examined the Jungian archetypal dimensions of Nelson Rodrigues’s plays, which pertain equally to Gerald Thomas’s work.

Thomas says this about what he is trying to communicate:
My plays are my own personal problem, and my problem above and beyond that personal problem is to turn both into metaphors that audiences in general can grasp, through fantasy, through a code of seduction. Because nightmarish images aren’t always that seductive. [It is] a Machiavellian process by which you turn something terrible into something visually beautiful, into a dream, a fantasy, in which the audience can be included . . . (Documentary).

Flash & Crash, then, is clearly intended as a nightmare. The dream designed to include the audience takes on a collective aspect, and Jungian analysis provides a useful means to examine its structure.

Carl Jung posited the existence of a collective unconscious that generates a set of symbolic images known as archetypes, which take human form in dreams and represent facets of the dreamer’s personality or psyche. Jung defined many of the archetypes as gender-specific, the “anima,” for example, representing supposedly female qualities and the “animus” male characteristics. Although his theories have been attacked in recent years for alleged gender stereotyping, it is important to remember that what he was aiming at was a balance of the male and the female in each individual. The man, he believed, must counterbalance his masculine traits with the feminine, and the woman must reconcile her femaleness with the male in her. Most important, the end result of this male-female reconciliation – Jung called this process “individuation” – is the mature individual in contact with all aspects of his or her psyche, including both the conscious and unconscious realms.

The narrator at the beginning of *Flash & Crash* has stated that he saw himself transformed into a woman (the Mother character). The anima symbol, in Jung’s system, is the man’s inner woman, and in dreams represents the dreamer’s mother, but not necessarily his “real” mother; rather, the internal

mother, who emerges from the depths of the collective unconscious and enters the individual dreamer's psyche. So who is Mother in *Flash & Crash Days*? The encenador's mother? The Daughter's? The answer is both. She is the author's anima mother, but for Daughter she represents another archetype, the "shadow," which appears as the same sex of the dreamer and symbolizes aspects of the psyche which have not been integrated, which are repressed and surface in dreams. The mother's murderous impulses, particularly, are a shadow projection of Daughter's own repressed desires. Who, then, is Daughter? For the dreamer she represents another anima figure, a different stage, as it were, of the female component of his unconscious. And she is herself a dreamer, and what she dreams is the dance macabre with her own homicidal passions. The angels are her male animus figures, who alternately rescue and destroy her. Their wings represent the search for transcendence, for growth, but their maleness pins her to the earth.

The anima, according to Jung, is manifested at different levels and in varying stages of development. It is the mother to the infant, but not necessarily the nurturer; it may embody the forces impeding development, maintaining the individual in an eternal infantile state. Daughter is such an anima: puerile, impetuous. She is turned inward away from the world, as evidenced by her fetal positions and especially by her onanism. And when she projects sexuality outward it is only Mother she sees, the infant's immediate source of gratification. The infantile anima tries to grow into adolescence, as when Daughter attempts to smoke a cigarette and put on makeup. The anima, according to Jung, may be a menacing, even murderous figure. Daughter eats Mother's heart, greedily devouring her love and yet annihilating the obstacle to her growth. She delights in smearing herself with the blood, as an infant may play with mud or feces. Daughter cannibalizes her enemy to gain her power.⁵

The mother anima is at times a death demon; Mother is annihilated and she annihilates, pulling off Daughter's head. Mother and Daughter are manifestations of the same anima; they repeat each other's actions, they are mirror images. As the play closes Daughter, dream-like behind a scrim, pantomimes Mother's movements. In the end they have merged, each a dream image of the other.⁶

The dream of the encenador is expressed through the oneiric quality of his stagecraft: the liberal use of scrim and smoke which blur actors and objects; electronic distortion of voices and music; the non-naturalistic movement and choreography; constant metamorphosis – the arrow transferred from the dummy to Daughter; the disembodied voice that shapes the action

and its circular logic; timelessness or breakdown of linear time – medieval costumes-flashlights-modernist cityscape; and most of all, the realms of the unconscious in which dreams are played out.

Thomas and Rodrigues share features of stagecraft. Both make use of expressionist acting styles and distortion to produce shock. The voice-overs that Rodrigues introduced to the Brazilian stage in *Wedding Gown* (*Vestido de Noiva*) and *All Nakedness will Be Punished* (*Toda Nudez Será Castigada*) are used extravagantly by Thomas; Rodrigues's *Nakedness* begins with, and its structure is informed by, the protagonist Geni's voice from beyond the tomb, while *Flash & Crash* is informed by a such a voice as well. The cinematic techniques and the oneiric atmosphere which were Rodrigues innovations are second nature to Thomas.

All of these dream-like effects bring to mind in particular Nelson Rodrigues's plays *Wedding Gown* and *Family Album* (*Álbum de Família*), which shattered the facade of rationalism – and theatrical naturalism – and laid bare the secret realm of unconscious desire. His plays probed the forbidden and the perverse, turned sexual repression on its head, and exposed the incestuous family coil, with its often brutal, even murderous consequences. Nelson Rodrigues was a Brazilian expressionist whose plays are filled with acute passions and grotesque hyperbole bordering on the melodramatic and which make use of both a complex verbal structure and cinematic stage directions. Gerald Thomas, in *Flash & Crash*, presents the same themes and produces similar effects in his own unique visual style. The modernist and the postmodernist converge: Rodrigues's incestuous and murderous family ties are pushed to the limit and exploded in Thomas's production; both Rodrigues and Thomas parody the Brazilian genre known as *comédia de costumes* (comedy of manners) based usually on family trials and tribulations; characters in Rodrigues's plays speak from the deepest recesses of the unconscious, while Thomas's characters act directly out of those recesses when Daughter devours Mother's heart and the latter beholds the former. Nelson Rodrigues and the encenador are concerned with a fundamental problem of guilt and repression; in Thomas's words: "My theatre is done entirely in secret as if some great repressor were to appear there and ordered the lights turned on and caught everyone red-handed. . . as if some kind of guilt surrounded the actors' performance" (Documentary).

Nelson Rodrigues brought into his plays material he had gathered as a crime reporter. Gerald Thomas also uses external reality as a subtext for *Flash & Crash*. The obvious psychological level of the mother/daughter relationship, the "psychic combat of eroticism and violence" (Mitchell, 55),

the rites of birth/death/renewal, and the daughter's attempt to break the mother's hold and forge her own identity are derived in part from the relationship of the real-life mother/daughter actress team. As Robert Myers reports in his *New York Times* piece, the play is a "domestic drama that draws on the real-life mother-daughter relationship of Miss Montenegro and Fernanda Torres." He quotes Fernanda filha's take on the relationship as a source: "But my mother is also a monster to me. . . and Gerald understood that and used it. The play between being a monster and a real person is what the work is about" (Myers). The word "monster" in English, however, does not convey all of the meanings of "monstro" in Portuguese, which in the full form Ms. Torres alludes to, "monstro sagrado," refers to the diva, to the mythical status of her mother as an actress.

However significant Thomas's sources in "real life," his theatre derives in the main from art itself. The Wagnerian element, present in so much of Thomas's work, is as much a point of departure as the mother-daughter relationship and, indeed, as the encenador's own internal psychic sources. *Flash & Crash* is based loosely on the final part of Wagner's *Ring* tetralogy, *Götterdämmerung* or *The Twilight of the Gods*. Wagner is present in the recorded music, with orchestral selections also from the "Ring" cycle, particularly in the final climactic moments. Mother's role, as initially conceived, is manifest in the title Thomas originally contemplated for the production: *A Imolação de Brunhilde*. As Wagner's Brunhilde is surrounded by the ring of fire that would immolate her, so too is Mother surrounded by the sinister forces that would destroy her: the fiery volcano, the daughter's murderous designs. There is no Siegfried to rescue Mother, but only the sinister archangels, who are both tormentors and rescuers. The transcendent hero figure undergoes deconstruction in postmodernist manner, becoming ambiguous, corrupted. The clash between the two Fernandas, nonetheless, maintains a Wagnerian mythic quality as a battle of the gods (or goddesses, as it were). But these are not the gods of Valhalla, and given Gerald Thomas's penchant for multilevel aesthetic puns we may be witnessing a battle between mythical goddesses of the acting world in a kind of Wagnerian telenovela.

Mythical elements in the production, including Wagner's Nordic sources, inform the very structure of the play. The same could be said of many of Nelson Rodrigues's works. Indeed, Sábato Magaldi, in his four-volume edition of Rodrigues's plays, gives volume two the subtitle *Peças Míticas*. Myths take place outside of time, *in illo tempore*, and so, too, does *Flash & Crash* suspend linear time. The interminable altercations between the two protagonists mirror the clash of titans, the warring of the gods in

universal origin myths, whether Greco-Roman, Norse, Amerindian, or Afro-Brazilian. The two archangels reinforce the mythological space inhabited by the protagonists in Thomas's production. The supernatural dimension of myth extends to fairy tales and legends, which proliferate, directly or indirectly, in *Flash & Crash*. In fairy tales the protagonist must overcome nearly impossible obstacles in order to fulfill a quest. Daughter's obstacles are supplied by Mother; she must even overcome mutilation and death. Her quest? To grow and develop by freeing herself from the dragon, her enemy – Mother – and by destroying her. Does she succeed? Her quest remains unresolved by the end of the production, for *Flash & Crash* is meta-myth, meta-fairy tale, meta-legend, a postmodernist layering of signs.

Brazilian legends based mostly on Amerindian sources, which children are immersed in and which Gerald Thomas grew up with, constitute one layer. Following are a few examples of legends involving female characters possessing many of the traits of Mother and Daughter and which Mário de Andrade also utilizes in his seminal modernista work, *Macunaíma*. The Iara, or *mãe d'água* ("mother of the water"), is a kind of siren who lures the hero Macunaíma into a pool, where she mutilates him. The evil serpent Maria Caninana, from a tale known as "Cobra Norato," poisons the breast of Macunaíma's lover Ci and kills their child. The Icamíabas, or Amazons, are warrior women who aid Macunaíma on his quest. There is the Caipora, or Caapora, a monster of the forest, which in some forms of the legend takes female form as Ceiuci, a gluttonous old woman who pursues and attempts to devour Macunaíma. Another traditional figure in Brazilian legend is the *mula-sem-cabeça* (headless mule); it is the fate of young women of bad conduct to become *mulas-sem-cabeça*. A theme that runs through all these legends, and that by extension informs both *Macunaíma* and *Flash & Crash*, is mutilation. Mother at times takes on the form of Ceiuci in her ruthless pursuit of Daughter; like the evil serpent Maria Caninana she poisons her child; disobedient Daughter after her beheading becomes a *mula-sem-cabeça*. The two protagonists are Iaras luring each other to destruction, and both are Icamíabas, warrior women in a continual state of battle. Other legendary sources inscribed in the production are much more familiar to non-Brazilian readers. Mother and Daughter, for example, are tricksters who fall prey to each other and themselves. Western myths and fairy tales are easily accessible here: in addition to the Nordic myths recreated by Wagner, one thinks of Snow White and the cruel queen who attempts to murder her, and of Cinderella and the wicked stepmother. The latter two stories, which have been recycled in Disney films, are especially pertinent here because Gerald Thomas, like other postmodern artists, is fond of mixing pop references into his cultural melange.

Nelson Rodrigues, though he never used pop references, acknowledged that his plays owed a considerable debt to the cinema, especially the expressionist films of the silent era. Like Nelson Rodrigues, Thomas has been influenced by films such as Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu* and the 1919 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. There are further multiple allusions to cinema in *Flash & Crash*, especially the horror genre. Mother in her fright wig is the bride of Frankenstein; blood-smeared Daughter is a vampire; at other times she is the young daughter possessed by the devil in *The Exorcist*; the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, with its continual dream-state metamorphosis, may have been an inspiration; there is a parodic allusion to the spate of slasher films spewed out by Hollywood in recent years (Fernanda Torres herself compares her role to that of Jason in the "Friday the 13th" series). The soundtrack and heavy reliance on music are, as I observed earlier, cinematic, as are the voice-overs, the special effects, and the overall privileging of the visual over the verbal. Jumpcutting through lighting effects and actors' transitions – another Nelson Rodrigues trademark – characterizes the action, in contrast to the theatrical tradition of linear, naturalistic plot design and movement. Scrimms, gels, and smoke serve the equivalent functions of camera lens filters.

To conclude, both Nelson Rodrigues and Gerald Thomas have practiced a pure theatre, a total theatre, without the spatial and temporal constraints of realism, a theatre unconcerned with verisimilitude that appeals to imagination and fantasy. Both have generated heated controversy; both have had remarkable successes and dismal failures. Does Gerald Thomas pay homage to Rodrigues or does he deconstruct the latter's work? Both perhaps, but if there is deconstruction it is affectionate, and relates not to theme or style but to the structure of the verbal text. However visual and cinematic Rodrigues's plays may be, he himself was a journalist and his texts reflect that experience. Gerald Thomas, on the other hand, rails against the notion of a theatrical verbal text: "Why does theatre have to be verbal? Who came up with the idiotic notion that theatre is text? Newspapers are text. Theatre is everything" (Documentary). Nelson Rodrigues would have agreed that theatre is everything; he would not have accepted the view that theatre is not fundamentally verbal text.

Flash & Crash Days occupies a peculiar position in the annals of the Brazilian stage. While its parallels with Nelson Rodrigues are clear, it is also an esoteric avant-garde exercise, filled with references to many areas of the arts – not always easily ferreted out – a difficult and challenging play which, though praised by some critics, was panned by many others. Critics, one would think, would enjoy intellectual and aesthetic playfulness and punning.

The irony deepens when one considers that *Flash & Crash* was a huge box-office hit in Brazil, tremendously popular with spectators, who numbered, according to several reports, over one hundred thousand. Not all supported the production, but many were seduced by the powerful images, the black comedy, and the duet macabre performed grandly by mother/Mother and daughter/Daughter. To repeat that art is often one step ahead of the critics is a cliché, but sometimes audiences are ahead, too.⁷

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Notes

1. This article stems from research on Brazilian theatre in the post-dictatorship period supported by a 1995 National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for College Teachers.

2. All the translations in this article are my own.

3. An exception was his play entitled *Chief Butterknife*, which premiered in January of 1996, during the opening of Copenhagen-96, European Cultural Capital.

4. My analysis of Thomas's work is based on live performances, video tapes, interviews, and printed material. Gerald Thomas has generously supplied videotapes of his productions, his press book, and through faxes and telephone conversations has kept me abreast of his activities.

5. This scene is also a reference to the cannibalism or anthropophagy which informed the 1967 staging of *O Rei da Vela* by José Celso, Gerald Thomas's admired predecessor.

6. Not everyone would agree with a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Flash & Crash*, but at least one participant perceives a Jungian archetypal element in the production: "A reader of the psychologist Jung, Fernanda sees in the plays 'a pulsation of archaic entities.'" (Lima, "Fernandas")

7. Lest my comments in this article suggest that Gerald Thomas has been disengaged from the political and social arena, let me set the record straight. Thomas has aided Amnesty International's investigations of human rights abuses in Brazil at the hands of the military dictatorship. And he has taken courageous political stands in situations that would intimidate many other artists. In 1987 — the generals had been out of power for only two years — when Thomas staged Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*, Mário Henrique Simonsen, former minister of finance during the dictatorship, wrote a diatribe condemning the production. Thomas shot back that Simonsen had colluded with the "fascist generals," had destroyed the nation's economy, and was well versed in repression. Nevertheless, Thomas the political citizen rarely brings overtly political issues into his art, and for that reason he has received criticism in some quarters.

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