

Sábato Magaldi: Interpreter, Chronicler, Arbiter

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Theatre critic Sábato Magaldi was inducted into the Academia Brasileira de Letras on 25 July 1995, at the Academy's headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, the first of his profession to have received such an honor.¹ Poet Lêdo Ivo, in his presentation speech on the occasion of Dr. Magaldi's induction, attempts to explain why a theatre critic has been chosen, stating that in his writings, one observes "a fusão esplêndida do crítico da noite que passa com o historiador do dia que ambiciona permanecer na memória dos homens – e ainda a do jornalista e repórter atento às minúcias significativas" (77). That is, Sábato Magaldi has followed two related but usually disparate paths: the scholar-historian who doubles as a journalistic reviewer. Ivo gives further evidence of Dr. Magaldi's distinction when he asserts that he has not only laid the scholarly foundation for the study of the works of Nelson Rodrigues, but that he has "invented" the myth of that playwright.

Lêdo Ivo's words only scratch the surface of this remarkable man's career, whose influence on the Brazilian stage has persisted now for nearly fifty years, and whose contributions include the first complete history of Brazilian theatre, the conceptualization of a uniquely Brazilian dramaturgy, the creation of the scholarly field of Brazilian theatrical history, the training of a whole generation of theatre critics and scholars, as well as the influence, direct or indirect, on three distinct generations of theatre artists, those who came before the 1964 military coup, those who struggled during the dark night of the generals, and those who labored to reconstruct the theatrical edifice in the post-dictatorship period. His numerous honors, culminating in his election to the Academia Brasileira de Letras, are too lengthy to enumerate, but a few are worth mentioning in order to give the measure of the man. From 1975 to 1979, he served as the city of São Paulo's first Minister of Culture. He has held myriad influential positions in state and local arts councils and received awards from such organizations as the São Paulo Association of Theatre Critics, São Paulo PEN Club, National Foundation of Theatre Arts, Brazilian Writers Union, Brazilian Association of Literary Criticism,

São Paulo Theatre Producers, Brazilian Society of Theatrical Authors, and last but not least, two awards from the French Government (Chevalier des Arts et Lettres and Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite).

Let us go, now, back to the beginning: Sábado Antônio Magaldi was born into an Italian family, on 9 May 1927, in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state. At age 17 he joined the Communist Party, partly in defiance of Brazil's fascist dictator Getúlio Vargas. Within a few months, Sábado Magaldi broke with the Party, chaffing under its ideological rigidity, not wishing to see his creative freedom as a writer compromised. His socio-political concerns, coupled with a distaste for dogmatism, have characterized his work throughout his career.

By late adolescence he had become the youngest member of a brilliant *mineira* (Minas Gerais) generation of writers and intellectuals whose members include Francisco Iglesias, Autran Dourado, Hélio Pellegrino, Fernando Sabino, Otto Lara Resende, Paulo Mendes Campos, among others, and who published a journal called *Edifício*. Dr. Magaldi's interest in theatre dates back to that period: “. . . já naquela ocasião me interessava por teatro. Por exemplo, eu acho que o primerio artigo sobre o Sartre, e sobre uma peça de Sartre, *La Putain Respecteuse*, eu publiquei em 1945 ou 46” (Interview, 1995).

Sábado Magaldi left Minas Gerais in 1948 – he would receive his law degree in 1949 – for Rio, where he launched his career as drama critic for the newspaper *Diário Carioca*. He began working as a reviewer at the precise moment when Brazilian theatre was coming into its own. The Rio company Os Comediantes had brought the national stage into the modern era with its revolutionary staging of Nelson Rodrigues's *Vestido de Noiva* in 1943. That epochal event was followed by other innovative productions by Os Comediantes and other groups, in Rio and in São Paulo, so that by 1950 it was possible to say that Brazilian theatre had become as *courant* as the other arts. From that point on, the national stage would establish a shining legacy, of which Sábado Magaldi would become an integral part: supporter, interpreter, chronicler, and, in some ways, arbiter.

In 1952-53 Dr. Magaldi studied aesthetics at the Sorbonne, with a fellowship awarded by the French Embassy. In addition to his studies in Paris, he saw many of the pivotal plays of the Modernist canon: Büchner's *Death of Anton*; one of the very first performances of *Waiting for Godot*, in a nearly empty theatre; performances of works by Montherlant, Pirandello, Merimée, Ionesco, Giraudoux, Genet, Anouilh. He also attended productions of the classics in the Comédie Française: Molière, Racine, Marivaux, Corneille. Dr. Magaldi observed the work of Jean Vilar's National Popular

French Theatre. He wrote four reviews a week on French theatre for the *Diário Carioca* during this period.

In 1953 he transferred to São Paulo, at the behest of Alfredo Mesquita, who invited him to teach history of theatre at Escola de Arte Dramática, which he had founded in 1948 and which had quickly become Brazil's foremost school of the performing arts. Along with its sister institution, the School of Communications and Arts – they are now housed in the same building at the University of São Paulo – it would train, and continues to train, some of Brazil's most important playwrights, directors, designers, and actors. In 1962 Prof. Magaldi would introduce a new discipline to the curriculum: History of Brazilian Theatre, a vital contribution to an area that was in the early stages of self-discovery. In 1967 he was invited to become Professor of History of Universal Theatre in the School of Communications and Arts. There he would teach, until 1991, a wide array of undergraduate and graduate courses on such topics as theatre criticism, theatrical legislation and ethics, and Brazilian dramaturgy and theatrical companies. From 1985 to 1987 he would be visiting professor at the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle), and from 1989-91 at the University of Provence in Aix-en-Provence. His academic career also included mentoring and/or directing dissertations with some of Brazil's most distinguished new generation of critics, scholars, playwrights, and directors; for example, playwright and professor Renata Pallottini, director Celso Nunes, scholar and professor Armando Sérgio da Silva, critic and novelist Alberto Guzik (who would eventually replace him, based upon Dr. Magaldi's recommendation, as drama critic for the São Paulo newspaper *Jornal da Tarde*). Sábato Magaldi has also given hundreds of talks and symposia on myriad aspects of Brazilian and world theatre in Brazil and other parts of Latin America, Europe, and the United States (including a State Department sponsored visit). He would also further his academic career by writing and defending, in the Brazilian tradition, theses for the doctorate, associate professorship, and full professorship. He thus became Brazil's first full professor in the discipline of Brazilian theatre.

The year 1953 would mark the continuation of another dimension of Dr. Magaldi's multi-faceted career. For a brief period he worked as drama critic for the magazine *Anhembi* and was editor-in-chief and critic for the journal *Teatro Brasileiro*. He also became, in 1956, theatre editor of the literary supplement of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, which published both reviews and extensive essays well beyond the scope of the play review format. The prime example of the latter is a seminal series entitled *Cem Anos de Teatro em São Paulo*, which Sábato Magaldi co-authored with Maria Thereza

Vargas and which the *O Estado de S. Paulo* ran in 1975-76, in commemoration of the paper's centennial. The piece ran after he had left the supplement (in 1972) to become drama critic for the newly founded São Paulo daily *Jornal da Tarde*; he retired from that position in 1988.

His work as a reviewer made him both witness to and participant in the most crucial developments in his nation's theatre, both in terms of stagecraft and play writing. In the first place, studies on Brazilian theatre – produced in Brazil and abroad – almost always cite Sábato Magaldi's reviews as the definitive sources, the ones that defined the moment. He almost unfailingly spotted new trends; for example, it was he who recognized that the women playwrights in the “new dramaturgy” movement, which burst on the scene in 1969, provide the “mais pungente pintura da condição feminina na dramaturgia brasileira, num retrato fiel que supera a classe média para ser o espelho de quase toda mulher.”²

He contributed in other ways as well: he introduced Augusto Boal into São Paulo's Teatro de Arena, where Boal would flourish for a time as one of Brazil's leading directors; he participated in Teatro de Arena's renowned play writing workshop, or *Seminário de Dramaturgia*, the first systematic attempt in Brazil to develop the art of play writing;³ he was a long-time supporter of Arena's principal engagé theatre rival, Teatro Oficina, which revolutionized Brazilian stagecraft in the 1960s. He wrote the lead article in the program notes and the book that accompanied Oficina's defining moment, its 1967 production of Oswald de Andrade's *O Rei da Vela*.

More recently, he has been one of the principal supporters of Grupo Macunaíma, which renewed the Brazilian stage in the 1980s, after the bleak years of the military dictatorship. His reviews and commentary are often included in the program notes of the productions of Grupo Macunaíma and other post-dictatorship companies and playwrights. Professor Magaldi has been the first to recognize Maria Adelaide Amaral as perhaps Brazil's foremost living dramatist.⁴

Sábato Magaldi's countless publications include pioneering scholarly works which have made him a unique voice in national letters and for which he was honored with his election to the Brazilian Academy. I mentioned above his series on 100 Years of São Paulo Theatre. This work provided the first in-depth examination of the development of the stage and drama of Brazil's largest city and cultural center. In 1962 he published the book *Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro* (2nd edition 1977, 3rd edition 1997). Through this work he defined and shaped for the first time the conception of a unique Brazilian dramaturgy. It is still the definitive “history” – although Professor

Magaldi prefers not to categorize it as such – of Brazilian theatre. He has also published several books on international drama, including *O Texto no Teatro*, which have conceptualized a unique Brazilian way of interpreting classical and modern works and schools.

Although his publications are too numerous to examine here (see bibliography), perhaps his most significant legacy is his writings on Nelson Rodrigues, in particular his 1987 *Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações*, as well as his editions of the playwright's work: 1) a four-volume edition with critical commentary, published between 1981 and 1989; 2) his 1993 edition of Rodrigues's *Teatro Completo*, which includes Dr. Magaldi's own critical introduction, the complete plays, and a selection of some of the finest scholarly analyses of the playwright's work. The late Nelson Rodrigues, who gained instant fame in 1943 when his play *Vestido de Noiva* revolutionized the Brazilian stage, eventually became marginalized. Sábado Magaldi's seminal studies of his work, many observers believe, rescued the playwright from oblivion and transformed him posthumously into an icon, the most widely staged playwright in Brazil today. That is, if Dr. Magaldi's "atenção e uma reflexão crítica avizinhada do fervor não tivessem convergido, de modo tão avassalador, para a criação teatral de Nelson Rodrigues, outro teria sido o destino do autor de *Vestido de Noiva*" (Ivo 78). The critic, in short, transformed the "autor maldito num clássico," saving for Rodrigues a "fulgurante" or resplendent posterity and opening the way for ambitious directors to throw the full weight of their imagination and creativity into widely divergent productions. Among the directors Ivo mentions are some of the brightest lights in the theatre of the post-dictatorship period: Antunes Filho, Luiz Arthur Nunes, Eduardo Tolentino, Ulysses Cruz, Gabriel Villela. These are unusual claims to make about the influence of a critic, especially coming from the mouth of a poet. How could Sábado Magaldi have had such an impact on the historical position of the playwright, as well as the widespread staging and interpretation of his works? Ivo compares criticism to a kind of fiction, "uma memorável ou portentosa mitografia. O crítico literário seria para o autor como o encenador para o texto teatral, vendo nele o embrião ou pretexto de sua reflexão criadora ou de sua imaginação sibilina." (Ivo 78)

It was Sábado Magaldi who first recognized that, although Oswald de Andrade was Brazil's first modern playwright, Nelson Rodrigues had an profound impact on stagecraft and introduced theatrical innovation to the broader public. "A dramaturgia rodriguiana constitui o mais amplo painel teatral da sociedade urbana brasileira. . . . Por meio da linguagem límpida, sucinta, vibrátil, e da capacidade de expor os desvãos menos confessáveis de

suas personagens, Nelson abriu caminho para todos os dramaturgos surgidos nas últimas décadas.” (Magaldi, *Dramaturgia* 18). Nelson Rodrigues was singular, as the critic has shown, in that he introduced Expressionism to Brazilian theatre by laying bare on the stage the hidden zones of the subconscious and of social behavior. He examined taboo subjects such as incest and sexual abuse. He put forth the revolutionary idea that women are sexual beings. For all these bold innovations he was marginalized, even censored for his “immorality” and “perversion.” He was also rejected by the left as “reactionary.” All of this in spite of such revolutionary notions of stagecraft – ferreted out by Sábato Magaldi – as extensive use of the flashback, break with linear plot and present time frame, removal of the fourth wall, psychoanalytic techniques applied to characters’ unconscious motivations, and cinematic effects. Sábato Magaldi also came up with the definitive typology for Rodrigues’s plays, which he places in three categories: psychological plays, mythic plays, and Carioca tragedies. He follows these categories in his four-volume edition of the playwright’s works. In sum, the pioneering studies of Sábato Magaldi, along with a few ingenious stagings of the playwright’s works – especially by Antunes Filho and his Grupo Macunaíma –, not only brought Nelson Rodrigues into the mainstream, but made him the sacred – or to some, still, accursed – icon of the modern Brazilian stage.

In addition to Dr. Magaldi’s scholarly contributions, his journalistic activity deserves scrutiny. But let the journalist himself tell this story, not the account of his thousands of reviews but the tale of his profession in Brazil, its rise and fall, which he illuminates in a 1987 article entitled “O Teatro e a Função da Crítica.” He begins with this assumption:

Não é fácil conceituar a função da crítica. Um espetáculo pode, perfeitamente, preencher seus objetivos, realizando-se como arte e atingindo o público, sem receber um só comentário da imprensa. Acresce que, se examinarmos o papel desempenhado pela crítica através dos tempos, seremos coagidos a concluir que suas manifestações representam uma história de equívocos.⁵

It is typical of the self-effacing Sábato Magaldi to proclaim at the outset that the profession in which he has been the leading light is extraneous and flawed.

In Brazil, the role of reviewing is a function of the nation’s artistic and political history. Critics have often supported new trends before there was public support:

A renovação estética empreendida no palco brasileiro, desde a década de quarenta, encontraria maiores obstáculos, se não recebesse o apoio imediato da crítica. [Em] São Paulo como no Rio de Janeiro os críticos

sustentaram a luta contra os velhos procedimentos do astro dominando o elenco, para que se impusesse o conceito de teatro de equipe, sob o comando do encenador, com um repertório de melhor qualidade e harmonizados em unidade artística os demais elementos, a exemplo da cenografia e da indumentária.

Professor Magaldi speaks to one of the principles that has grounded his life and work: avoidance of dogmatism. He relates this to his profession, affirming that critics must not be aesthetically dogmatic or they will be operating in a vacuum, out of synch with artists; rather, they must be open and flexible. To explain this, Dr. Magaldi gives a capsule summary of recent trends in Brazilian theatre:

Num momento, [o crítico] ressalta a figura do encenador e o teatro de equipe. Logo vê que essa fórmula é insatisfatória: contra o domínio do repertório estrangeiro, deve prestigiar-se o autor nacional.

Transformada a peça brasileira em moeda corrente dos elencos, cabe ser mais rigoroso no seu juízo e ligar as antenas para as preocupações que nascem. Começam, por toda parte, a experiência da criação coletiva e a aventura de um novo espaço, desvinculado do edifício tradicional.

In the light of this constantly shifting tableau, the critic must detect and nurture new trends until they have matured. "Não se trata de visão camaleônica da crítica, mas da consciência de que as escolas, os movimentos e os ideais estéticos observam um ciclo, que acaba por esgotar-se." Speaking specifically of Brazil, he states that no critic today defends the "conceito do bom gosto, herdado de certa norma européia, e admite o mau gosto como componente do nosso estilo tropical."

Corollaries to flexibility are that the critic be honest, write well, know the ins and outs of stagecraft, and have a broad cultural background. The latter quality will enable the critic to distinguish between the hackneyed and the original. The critic, therefore, must continually update his knowledge and viewpoints or be left behind. In regard to intimate knowledge of stagecraft, the critic must pay attention to all aspects of the play and not only the verbal text. He should emphasize those aspects of a particular spectacle that are most significant, whether the director's overall conception, acting, design, or the text itself.

He also compares the mission of the critic in Brazil and abroad:

A crítica jornalística de centros como Nova York, Paris ou Londres é normalmente cautelosa, porque reflete de maneira muito mais estrita o suposto gosto do público. Nessas cidades, o teatro comercial tem

peso bastante forte, ao qual o crítico se rende, sem o menor signo de desprezo. Ou por sermos mais jovens, libertos de tradição, ou por nos considerarmos comprometidos com a vanguarda, costumamos torcer o nariz para o que se rotule de simples divertimento. Tudo o que fuja aos anseios renovadores é tachado pejorativamente de ‘teatrão,’ ainda que se faça a ressalva de que bem feito. O crítico, lá fora, identifica-se com a estética e a ideologia do leitor e do veículo em que escreve, sob pena de logo tornar-se corpo estranho no processo de comunicação.

The tendency of reviewers in Brazil to be less conservative than owners and editors is a legacy of the dictatorship when the former had to struggle against censorship. Brazilian critics, as opposed to their counterparts in New York, Paris, and London, do not carry the burden of determining the success or failure of a play after opening night. Freed from the tyranny of the opening night review, they are more at liberty to express themselves.

In spite of those positive features, there is a crisis facing newspaper reviewing in Brazil, which has suffered because of changing economic circumstances, while the space allotted to it has been reduced due to competition from video, TV, pop music, and so forth. “Era natural que o teatro fosse despojado de sua soberania absoluta.” Complicating this situation, the number of new plays has steadily increased and in-depth analysis and full coverage have suffered, and Dr. Magaldi laments the severing of the dual role traditionally occupied by the critics of his generation, that of the essayist/reviewer: “a atual filosofia da imprensa recomenda o comentário sucinto, leve, de leitura agradável. . . ficando os ensaios por conta de outras publicações [que] não existem ou são insuficientes.” Likewise, fewer and fewer reviewers are employed full-time, which threatens the profession itself.

In the way of a conclusion, I reproduce here the closing paragraph from “O Teatro e a Função da Crítica,” which sums up both Sábato Magaldi’s views on theatre criticism and his own life’s work:

crítico sério participa do processo teatral, atua para o aprimoramento da arte. Não é necessário citar as numerosas campanhas que ele patrocinou ou apoiou, para a melhoria das condições dos que trabalham no palco. Alega-se, às vezes, que haveria um prazer sádico em destruir, quando é muito mais difícil a construção. Não creio que os críticos padeçam desse mal. Na minha longa carreira, sempre fiz restrições com extremo desgosto, sentindo-me contente ao elogiar. Porque o crítico, à semelhança de qualquer espectador, gosta de ver um bom espetáculo, e sente perda a noite, se não aproveitou nada

do que viu. Até para o deleite pessoal, o crítico encara o seu papel como o de parceiro do artista criador, irmanados na permanente construção do teatro.

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Notes

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

2. Sábato Magaldi, writing in the literary supplement of the *Estado de São Paulo*, 1969, quoted in Cunha de Vincenzo, 87.

3. The *Seminário* launched a whole new generation of Brazilian playwrights, including Oduvaldo Vianna Filho and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri.

4. Maria Adelaide Amaral's award-winning plays include *Bodas de Papel: Filhos do Milagre Econômico* (1978), *A Resistência* (1981), *Chiquinha Gonzaga* (1983), *De Braços Abertos* (1984), *Intensa Magia* (1994), *Querida Mamãe* (1995).

5. This and all subsequent quotes in this article are from Sábato Magaldi's piece "O Teatro e a Função da Crítica."

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