# *Pagador de Promessas*: A Brazilian Morality

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The Brazilian play, *Pagador de Promessas*, was first produced in São Paulo on July 29, 1960, by the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia. Written by Alfredo Dias Gomes, it won three Brazilian prizes during the year: the Prêmio Nacional de Teatro, the Prêmio Governador do Estado, and the Prêmio Melhor Peça Brasileira.[1] In 1962 Anselmo Duarte directed a film version which faithfully adhered to the play. The film was a surprise winner at Cannes that year and gathered laurels at six other festivals, including the grand prize at the Sixth Annual International Film Festival in San Francisco.[2] The film has been shown world wide and the play itself has been produced in several countries, including three short runs in the United States: two in 1964 of an adaptation by Stanley Richards called *Journey to Bahia*,[3] and the third a production in 1967 of a translation by Oscar Fernández called *Payment as Promised*.[4]

It seems useful to read the play as a kind of modern morality. Zé-do-Burro is the figure of the individual conscience assailed by symbolic representatives of selfish and exploiting men and of purblind institutions. The playwright himself saw the play as the conflict between the man of conscience and the men and institutions which abuse him:

> *Pagador de Promessas* was born primarily out of my own awareness of being exploited and impotent in the exercise of the liberty that, in principle, is given to me; of the battle that I have with society when I wish to make use of my right of choice, in order to follow my own path and not that which I am directed to follow; of the interior conflict that I am continually involved in, knowing that the price of my survival is a case of total or partial prostitution. Joe Burro does what I would like to do—to die so as not to yield. He does not prostitute himself. And his death is not useless or merely a gesture of individualistic affirmation; on the contrary it gives conscience to the people, who carry his corpse like a flag.[5]

Dias Gomes, instead of using Holy Church as the Comforter in his morality, has

made it the most prominent of his three oppressors. The others are the State, represented by the police, and the Press, represented by the reporter. As the Church moves to frustrate Zé's single act of individual conscience, it reveals itself to be a fossil, petrified by self-righteousness born of pride and tradition; the State has become a furtive agency of repression and the Press an instrument of distortion and a tool for politicians and promoters. All of these institutions are self-centered. But so are the individuals—such as the tavern owner, the poet, the procurer, and the voodoo priestess—who try to exploit Zé. Their response to his plight is no less self-serving than that of the agents of the Church, State and Press.

In still another way, it seems useful to think of the play as a morality: there is the traditional debate between the Soul and the Body. Zé-do-Burro is the willing Spirit, his wife the weak Flesh. He has pledged himself to fulfill a promise, a promise that has claims upon him which take precedence over and chasten those of the body. As his wife, Rosa must follow him wherever he goes, but she is, up until the closing minutes of his life, conscious only of the physical: of the relentless hours of marching, of the sleepless nights, and especially of the sexual starvation to which his dedication has brought her. She represents the physical element with its temper of rationalization and of accommodation which make the body potentially subversive to the spirit. Maynard Mack, in another connection, speaks of the dialogue between the spokesman for the values of the community and the principal actor, who speaks for the individual. "What matters to the community is obviously accommodation—all those adjustments and resiliences that enable it to survive; whereas what matters to the individual, at least in his heroic mood, is just as obviously integrity—all that enables him to remain an *individual*, one thing not many."[6]

It is that voice of the community which speaks through those whom Zé encounters. They have renounced the promptings of the spirit and rejected the subordination of the body to the soul. They have lost the informing intuition traditionally granted to the innocent. Because he is utterly guileless and unselfish, Zé is still able to act from an intuitive code of right and wrong; he still has the special divine grace which the primitive hero is expected to possess. Those who oppose him or exploit him respond to the clamor of the physical appetite, whether from the drive of passion or from the lust of power and position.

Throughout the play, Rosa, as this spirit of accommodation, tries to urge Zé into the easier path, to divert him from his pledge, to show him how the World responds (and how the World expects him to respond). She chides him for not having padded his now raw shoulders; she urges him to quit the cross for a few hours so that they may take a much-deserved rest in a decent bed; she argues that the promise has been fulfilled now that the cross is in the churchyard; she agrees with the guard who thinks the promise is unnecessarily complicated, and she sides with the Bishop, who orders Zé to renounce his promise and to seek the pardon of God (in effect, to exchange one promise for another). She begs him to see that his attempts to bring the affair to a conclusion have failed because the saint has abandoned him. (One recalls Job's wife urging him to curse God and die.) When he counters that perhaps the Saint is demanding a still greater show of devotion and that these provocations constitute further tests of faith, she uses

the same argument to justify her misconduct with Bonitão: the Saint has seen fit to use her, his own wife, to test him.

The most difficult task facing the playwright is to make the peasant a worthy symbol. Dias Gomes almost fails. He places him dangerously close to the ludicrous in the early scenes. In fact, Zé seems to be a comic figure of the most conventional kind—the country gull at the mercy of the city trickster. The first scenes are filled with dramatic irony; yet this set of ironies, by contrasting the simplicity of the peasant with the salaciousness of Bonitão and the fatuity of Padre Olavo, fill out the nobler dimensions of Zé's character as other expository devices might not. There is, for instance, the exchange between Bonitão and Zé about the respective "promises" which each has made. What is a serious act for the peasant is a mocking game for the seducer:

BONITÃO: . . . You might call me devout too. In fact, I once made a promise to Saint Anthony. . .

ZÉ: To help with a marriage?

BONITÃO: No. She was already married.

ZÉ: And was your plea granted?

BONITÃO: It was. The husband was away for more than a week. . .

ZÉ: And did you keep the promise?

BONITÃO: No. I was afraid I might compromise the Saint.

ZÉ: You should always keep a promise. Even when it's one that might compromise the Saint. I guarantee you that the next time Saint Anthony will be deaf to you. And he'd be right, too (pp. 26-27).

In the same scene, Bonitão contrives to have a moment alone with the peasant's wife (he is setting up the seduction). He urges Zé to check to see if the door of the church has now been opened. Zé, somewhat reluctantly, moves off, leaving his wife to look after the cross. As he leaves, Bonitão, looking more at the wife than at the husband, says, "You can go without worrying, for I'll take care of your cross . . . of both of them (p. 31)." The anti-innocent degrades everything he touches, distorts and profanes all human relationships. By this contrast of simplicity with cynicism, Dias Gomes establishes the spiritual ascendancy of the peasant.

In a parallel scene which follows, Dias Gomes again starts out comically and ironically. Zé explains to Padre Olavo his reasons for requesting entry to the church. Again we laugh at him; his devotion to his animal and his extreme homage to the saint seem like rash nonsense born of medieval ignorance. Padre Olavo's reaction is patently the only sensible and sophisticated one: bleeding is not halted by applying poultices of cow dung and spiders' webs, just as animals are not healed by divine intervention. Yet we again quietly perceive that it is Zé who has the true faith and the right instincts and not the learned Padre.

In addition to making Zé into a believable noble primitive, Dias Gomes has flirted with the obvious and portrayed him as a Christ figure, keeping him as such before us throughout the play. The peasant promises that he will carry a cross "as big as that of Christ's." His march from the backlands has stirred up a band of followers in every village through which he has passed. The priest accuses him of arrogantly presuming to play the role of Christ and the reporter

labels his journey a "Via Crucis" and calls the peasant a New Messiah. After his death, Zé is carried into the church in symbolic crucifixion.

Yet this almost too-blatant use of the Christ figure seems not to have offended the play's critics. What has disturbed them is their contention that Dias Gomes has made Padre Olavo too much the dark villain and has thus dealt unfairly with the Church. Viewed as a morality play, however, *Pagador de Promessas* seems less an attack on the Church than on institutions *per se* (and ultimately on all the forces that violate the individual conscience). The playwright focuses on the church because it, of all man's institutions, is the one which should be most concerned with the sanctity of the conscience.

All the church-related figures seem to point to this interpretation. Padre Olavo is a fanatic because he has no instinctive hold on that which is right. As Dias Gomes makes clear in his directions for the second act, Padre Olavo's religious convictions "are close to fanatical. Perhaps at bottom this is a proof of the absence of conviction and an act of self defense. His intolerance—which makes him at times collide headlong with principles of his own religion and to confuse as enemies those who are really on his side—is probably nothing more than a shield behind which he hides his lack of faith" (p. 44). He has delegated his judgment to the institution which he serves; its standards, however artificial or wrong, are the ones by which he must live, having abdicated all of his own.

The Monsignor's adamant support of the "official" position defends the power of the institution and the primacy of its codes rather than the rights of the individual and his conscience. The Beata (a stereotyped Good Catholic) is not so much concerned with church as with going-to-church. Her single preoccupation is that the sacristan rings the bells to announce early mass *before* he has opened the doors to admit those who answer their summons. Her spirituality primarily derives from unwavering devotion to the most superficial demands of the Church. Dias Gomes is careful to inform us that the sacristan suffers from myopia, but we may conclude that this loss of vision, like Olavo's failure to discern clearly and the Beata's confusion of the letter for the spirit, symbolizes the spiritual blindness imposed by the institution. Both high priest and laymen have delegated the functions of the human conscience.

It is Zé's perseverance to cause and conscience which ennobles and dignifies him. Zé is not cognizant of the political issues of agrarian reform, but his instincts tell him he must divide the little land he has with those who have still less. He is ignorant of the elaborate metaphysics of the Church, yet he knows that he has made a direct and binding agreement with the Divine. He is vaguely aware that Padre Olavo and the African priestess are locked in a power struggle, but he refuses to be the pawn of either, knowing that syncretism has nothing whatever to do with the demands of his insistent conscience.

It is inevitable that the overwhelming opposition should shake the peasant's simple faith; yet his frustration in no way diminishes his nobility. It is precisely when he concedes that his saint has abandoned him that he seems most heroic:

ZÉ: Santa Barbara has abandoned me, Rosa.

ROSA: If she has, then you can abandon your promise. Who knows? Perhaps this is her way of telling you you don't have to go on with it.

ZÉ: No. . . . Even if she has abandoned me, I've got to go on with it. Even if it is no longer for her sake . . . I still have to live with myself (pp. 160-161).

At the end, a gentle man dies by senseless violence. Yet his small martyrdom works its will. Body and Soul, the world of the physical and the world of the spirit, are brought to terms with each other. Rosa finally comprehends (as we are expected to comprehend) the magnitude of his quest and the importance of his sacrifice; she sees (as we are expected to see) that his sexual impotence was but a symbol for the total impotence of the individual in modern society; that his frustrations have been but shadows of the frustrations of all human beings who attempt to assert their individuality; and that his fate is to be a haunting reminder of the sordid boon man has received from society, not perhaps so much from having given his heart away, as from abandoning his finest instincts.

Seen as a modern morality play, the piece rises above its regional character, rising as well above any petty attack on church and state, to speak rather eloquently on behalf of the individual and of the autonomy of his conscience.

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## Notes

1. Alfredo Dias Gomes, *O Pagador de Promessas*, 2nd edition (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Agir Editôra, 1962), p. 5. All subsequent references to the play itself are from this edition and are to be found in the text itself; the translations are mine.

2. New York *Times*, November 14, 1962, p. 44. Incidentally, Gabriel Migliore's musical score for *Pagador* was selected by Darius Milhaud as the best at that same festival.

3. The Richards version was produced once in July at the Berkshire Playhouse, Stockbridge, Mass., and again in October, in Washington, D.C., the latter production (by the Actor's Company) under the sponsorship of the Brazilian-American Cultural Institute.

4. The Fernández version was produced at the Experimental Theatre of the University of Kansas in the spring of 1967, directed by F. M. Litto.

5. From Dias Gomes' note to the third edition of *Pagador de Promessas* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1967); translation by F. M. Litto.

6. Maynard Mack, "The Jacobean Shakespeare: Some Observations On The Construction of the Tragedies," in *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. J. R. Brown and Bernard Harris (London, 1969), p. 20.