

Coelho Neto: Introduction of African Culture into Brazilian Drama

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Negro characters played an important role in Brazilian drama in the nineteenth century. The first of the modern Brazilian dramas to include a Negro character, Daniel,¹ was *O Cego* (1849) by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo (1820-1882); the first Negro as protagonist appeared in Agrário de Menezes's (1834-1863) *Calabar* (1858). Both plays are in verse and neither touches on the problem of slavery, although Macedo's does deal with a contemporary problem: the marriage of convenience. Later, in the thesis play, José de Alencar (1829-1877) created, with telling effect, two realistic Negro characters in several plays with an antislavery theme: Pedro, a house slave, in *O Demônio Familiar* (1857) and Joana, a former slave, in *Mãe* (1860). Pinheiro Guimarães (1832-1877) with *História de uma Moça Rica* (1861) depicted an evil, conniving mulatto woman, Bráulia (who was to become, unintentionally, the stereotype of the untrustworthy mulatto).² *Gonzaga ou a Revolução de Minas* (1867), an antislavery play by Castro Alves (1847-1871), had two sympathetically-portrayed Negroes: Luís, a freedman, and his daughter, Carlota. The play treated a problem that is pertinent today: the place in society of the educated Negro. Artur Azevedo (1855-1908) wrote two anti-slavery potboilers: *O Liberato* (1881) and *O Escravocrata* (1882), although no slave makes an actual appearance on stage in the former. In the tradition of the realistic comedy of Martins Pena (1815-1848), França Júnior (1838-1890) in his play, *Direito por Linhas Tortas* (1870), created a mulatto girl, Felisberta, who, unlike the infamous *macuma* of *História de uma Moça Rica*, was refined, delicate and faithful to her master, even in adversity.

One can see even from this partial list of plays and characters that Negroes were no strangers to the nineteenth-century stage in Brazil. Some, as already mentioned in the case of Bráulia, became stereotypes—not the original intent of their creators—that were to appear time and again in numerous plays and books. For example, Alencar's Pedro, with his mischievous intrigues, became a stock

character in later books and periodicals³; and França Júnior's Felisberta became the stereotype of the sensual, provocative mulatto, who whetted the appetite of Brazilian men's lascivious fantasies.⁴

Nowhere, however, in any of these plays, whether the characters are original or merely stereotyped, is there the slightest hint of those aspects of African culture: *candomblé*, *orixás* and African dances and music, among others, which together have asserted such profound influence on Brazilian life.

It was Henrique Coelho Neto (1864-1934), using the subgenre of the Brazilian realistic comedy, who introduced Africans and their culture into Brazilian drama with two plays: *O Relicário* (1899) and *O Diabo no Corpo* (1905). Nor did he merely present aspects of African culture on stage: dialects, cults and music; more importantly, he showed (in comic fashion) the direct influence that they exerted on all social strata in Brazil—the hypocritical façade of the white middle class, feigning ignorance of the very existence of African customs but affected by them at every turn.

*O Relicário*⁵ is a three-act farce first presented on 24 March 1889 in the Teatro Lucinda. The theme is satire of a characteristic aspect of everyday Brazilian life: the prevalence of superstition in varying degrees among all Brazilians who consult *orixás*, African idols with magic powers, and the Negroes who interpret their wishes. The comical plot is very simple and the tempo is fast moving. Engrácia, the wife of Severo, a professor of “línguas mortas,” wants to recover her missing family “relic,” which consists of—in her words—“dos dentes do meu avô, da unha da minha avó, dos cabelos de Segismundo” (II, xi). However, Severo, unknown to his wife, has given the amulet to his mistress. The recovery, then, of the *relicário* is the basis for the merriment on stage which includes such familiar techniques as: hiding in closets, voices behind curtains, mistaken identities and many asides, all quite reminiscent of the French bedroom farces, particularly those of Feydeau. As for the language, there are many puns, plays on words and double-entendres. The superstitious mulatto family maid, Tomásia, persuades Engrácia to visit Pai Ambrósio, a Negro priest of the *orixá*. The Negro followers of Pai Ambrósio deal with the magic powers; the mulatto servants believe in the powers; and the white middle class, though professing to disbelieve in public, puts a great deal of credence in them in private:

Tomásia—É o santo.

Engrácia—Que santo?

Tomásia—O pai de quimbande. Vosmecê não imagina como ele é bom, são os invejosos que andam em cima dele. Se eu soubesse que aquela carta era uma denúncia . . . (lamentando-se). Não deixe meu amor ir lá, Pai Ambrósio não faz mal a ninguém. (com mistério). Eu mesma já quis falar a minh'ama para se entendesse com Pai Ambrósio, descobre o ladrão, minh'ama, por Deus do céu! Pai Ambrósio descobre! Ele tem descoberto outras coisas mais atrapalhadas.

Engrácia—Quem?

Tomásia—Pai Ambrósio. Ele descobre, minh'ama.

Engrácia (com interesse)—Achas? (I, xiii)

As the conversation ends, the dramatist reveals his main point about the enormous influence that the various occult beliefs of the untutored Negroes have upon

the official Catholicism of the white middle class and the rather facile manner in which they are interchanged:

Engrácia (só)—Vou mesmo. Sempre ouvi dizer que esses negros fazem maravilhas. Já prometi a Santo Antônio um ror de coisas e Santo Antônio, nada! Vou ver se sou mais feliz com o negro. Que tem? Ora! vai lá tanta gente boa . . . (Severo entra de sobrecasaca e cartola). Olha, tu hoje não podes ir à casa do feiteiro.

Severo—Não posso! porque?

Engrácia—Porque hoje é um dia que eu respeito muito: é o aniversário da morte de meu tio, que foi comido pelos mundurucus. (I, xiii & xiv)

With this very comical excuse, consistent with the almost hilarious dialogue throughout the play, the puns and plays on words, Engrácia goes to the *orixá* (as Severo does, also, despite his disparaging comments).

The second act finds everyone together, although ignorant of one another's presence, in the house of Pai Ambrósio. The setting is described in detail and is important not only for comic effect within the act itself, but also gives the modern reader an excellent idea of how Brazilians lived:

Casa de Pai Ambrósio. A cena é dividida em duas partes: sala à direita, cubículo à esquerda. No cubículo, ao fundo, sob a janela, uma cômoda, com uma salva para dinheiro e várias bugigangas; à esquerda, grosseiro altar do orixá, ídolo disforme, entre flores e oblações, iluminado por uma lamparina. Porta à direita comunicando com a sala. Na sala—porta ao fundo e à direita; compridos bancos de pinho. (II stage setting)

Coelho Neto distinguishes each social class by its speech. For instance, the Negro followers of Pai Ambrósio speak in a very pronounced dialect which indicates that they are Africans:

Fidelis—Bamo, sinhô. Zêri vem aí i vai rezá p'r'u orisá. 'Scondi, sinhô; 'scondi ditraz di cortina. (Severo esconde-se precipitadamente atrás da cortina). Ninguém ve vamcê. (II, v)

This is also the act in which all the slapstick stage action so familiar in Martins Pena occurs: for example, hiding in closets, or behind curtains, jumping out of windows and mistaking identities.

In this same act Coelho Neto also lampoons Rio's upper social stratum for its belief in the *orixá*. All types, from aristocrats and professionals to high government officials as well as poor people are represented in the waiting room. In the following passage (slightly shortened) Simão, a fop, is talking to himself about the people who have come to see Pai Ambrósio:

Simão—Se me não engano aquele que ali está, de óculos verdes, é o comendador Pancário. Conheço-o pelo papo. Não há papo igual no Rio de Janeiro, nem mesmo na Papuasía. Que virá ele aqui buscar? virá por causa do papo? talvez. Consta-me que anda a fazer a corte a uma menina de quinze anos. Uhm! está a procurar mais excrescência; o papo não lhe chega . . . E hoje há concorrência, há mesmo toilettes de gosto. Aquela que ali está por exemplo, parece vestir uma grande dama. Ah! que elas não desdenham Pai Ambrósio, isso não. Já aqui encontrei a baronesa do Furo e a mulher do banqueiro Simas. Aquela que ali está cheira-me a

Laranjeiras. (Vai ao fundo com o monóculo encravado no olho e põe-se a examinar impertinentemente as senhoras.) (II, i)

There is even one unmarried young lady whose problem becomes the theme and plot of the dramatist's next major play of this type, *O Diabo no Corpo*:

Clementina (à Basília)—A senhora vem por moléstia?

Basília (respirando)—Infelizmente! O fígado de minha filha tem crescido tanto que ela já não pode apertar o colete.

Clementina—Ela é casada?

Basília—Solteira.

Clementina—Mas será mesmo o fígado?

Honória (chorando)—É sim, senhora. Pois que há de ser? Eu, então, não posso ter fígado? uma coisa que todo o mundo tem. . . . (II, i)

In the third and last act, Severo's peccadillo escapes detection; Engrácia regains her "relic" through Pai Ambrósio's "miracle," and their daughter, who was the principal in a subplot of romance with her dance teacher, is allowed to marry him and everything ends on a happy note.

O Diabo no Corpo,⁶ a three-act comedy, was first staged on 11 August 1905 in the Teatro Lucinda. The first and third acts take place on the *fazenda* of Anatólio do Espírito Santo while the second act is situated in a boarding house in Rio. The author once again shows the influence of superstition, involving Negro cults, on Brazilian life, and how it blends easily with Catholicism. Not only do Blacks, such as the *curandeira*, Nhá Rita, appear, but in the first and last acts there is frequent African music, a new technique in the local color comedy: "ao subir a pano ouve-se o 'tan tan' longínquo do caxambu e a toada melancólica da cantilena dos negros." Unlike *O Relicário*, this play has no main theme. Rather, the play is sustained by the plot, which is very simple: Valentina, Anatólio's daughter, is pregnant and unmarried; in order to hide the fact, the village priest, Vigário Bonifácio, invents the tale that she has "o diabo no corpo." The ingenuousness of the parents coupled with various events which lead to her being married to her seducer, Octávio (who, it turns out in the end, is the priest's son), are the basis for the comic situations. Also, unlike *O Relicário*, the dramatist makes use of several characters for political and social satire. The *fazendeiro*, Anatólio, for instance, comments on several aspects of politics and society, and in one long monologue expatiates on the lack of honesty in newspapers, all of which is very reminiscent of the thesis play.⁷ The Blacks are included in this category, for Nhá Rita lauds emancipation as well as demonstrating that she is not to be ordered about by anyone—white *fazendeiro* or not:

Anatólio (frenético)—Mas eu não quero que se saiba, entende a senhora? não quero! Cada um manda no que é seu.

Nhá Rita (espantada)—Mas que é isso? quem foi que matou seus cachorrinhos? Então eu venho aqui a chamado para ser recebida assim com duas pedras na mão? Isso não! o tempo dos escravos acabou e eu nunca fui cativa, graças a Deus! Minha mãe não me botou no mundo para eu ouvir desaforos dos outros. Menos essa . . . ! Vou por onde vim.

Anatólio (acalmando-a)—Venha cá, Nhá Rita, perdoe-me. Eu estou nervoso, nem sei que digo. Essa história tem posto a minha cabeça em tal revolução que, às vezes, chego a pensar que estou maluco.

Nhá Rita—E é o que parece. (I, vii)

Although the influence of African culture is shown as more pervasive in rural Brazil than in big cities like Rio and the whites are depicted as being in awe of its mystical aspects, Coelho Neto does manifest the social stratification that exists among Blacks themselves. In the following passage, Sabina is a house maid (originally from a “big city”), while Pedro is a rural Black:

Pedro (à parte, delambido, a escovar um casaco)—Quá! capitá é outra cõsa! Oia só esse mulatinha . . . (A Sabina, dengoso) Vamcê é d’aqui mému?

Sabina—Eu? eu sou da Bahia; não vê logo?

Pedro (de beijo caído)—Tá vendu, tá. Êh . . . Ituru lá é assim?

Sabina—Tudo quê?

Pedro—Mulatinha?

Sabina—Tu não te enxergas, negro? Comigo é nove! Não sou mulata p’rós teus beijos. Iche! diabo do tição! Vai-te lavar, tio.

Pedro—Uai! antonce só branco é qu’ê genti?

Sabina—De certo. (Movimento de desprezo) Não vê que eu me sujo?
(II, i)

Between the second and third acts, Valentina has her child and Octávio promises to marry her and take her to Europe with him where he will study medicine. Such is the happy ending in the play. It has been argued correctly that because of the overall farcical tone and the joy which the child causes in the household, the extremely understanding attitude of the *fazendeiro* to the whole affair is very natural.⁸ Of course, the entire treatment of the question must be related to time and place. But more important still from our perspective is the tableau presented as the curtain falls: the newborn baby, representing a new generation of *fazendeiros*, is being nursed by a maid—an African:

Margarida (pé ante pé)—Psiu!

Anatólio—Que é?

Nhá Rita—É Maria Caxambu que está ninando o pequeno.

Anatólio—Ah!

Vigário—Lá está quem te há-de amansar, meu velho.

Anatólio—A mim?

Vigário—Sim, a ti.

Nhá Rita—Não falem tão alto!

Margarida—Que gente . . . !

Anatólio (em voz sumida)—É Bonifácio.

Voz (à direita)

Tu tur lu tu tu

Atrás do murundu,

Leva este menino

Pr’a covinha do tatu.

(O pano desce lentamente sobre o êxtase de todos)

Brazil’s most original contribution to nineteenth and early twentieth-century Luso-Brazilian drama was the realistic comedy; and certainly, it was the type of drama that Coelho Neto wrote best.⁹ But his use of Africans (or African cultural influence) had wider implications, for before his plays, Africans had held the

unenviable position accorded American Blacks, until recently, in Western movies (or in other media dealing with the "winning of the West"): they simply did not exist. Coelho Neto's most lasting contribution was to show that the enormous influence of African subculture on life in Brazil was proper subject matter for the stage.

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Notes

1. Raymond S. Sayers, *The Negro in Brazilian Literature* (New York, 1956), p. 145.
2. Sayers, pp. 151-153.
3. Sayers, pp. 146-147.
4. Sábato Magaldi, *Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro* (São Paulo, 1962), p. 135.
5. In *Teatro* (São Paulo, 1911).
6. In *Teatro*.
7. *O Diabo no Corpo*, I, xix.
8. Magaldi, p. 160.
9. Magaldi, p. 165.