

Andrade's *Milagre na Cela*: Theatrical Space and Body Movement

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Contemporary Brazilian playwright Jorge Andrade has been esteemed as the recorder *par excellence* of his country's past and of its search for a coherent present. In *Marta, a Árvore e o Relógio*, a collection of ten plays written between 1951 and 1970, he develops several recurrent themes: the search for identity in the aftermath of the fall of the *fazendeiro* economy, the effects upon the human spirit produced by periods of rapid social change and the generation gap and disintegration in communication created by such epochs.¹ These plays also possess an underlying structural similarity: the dramatic antagonists—whether representative of different age groups or, in some plays, of different social classes—always arrive at a final impasse characterized by rigidity and alienation, bridging the gap between them only through fleeting moments of love or tolerance.

Andrade's recent play, *Milagre na Cela* (1978), presents a decisive shift in both theme and structure. In a work about the torture of a prisoner of conscience in a setting which is at the same time both highly contemporary and imbued with mythical resonance, the traditional Andradean opposition between two irreconcilable forces is dismantled in an elaborate interplay that relies heavily upon staging techniques. Thematically, the play rejects the timeless notion of martyrdom as a solution to the conflict between good and evil and projects a message of the search for human survival through communication—however tenuous and problematic. Traditional dichotomies between torturer-tortured, prisoner-jailer, nun-prostitute, insiders-outsiders are first inverted and then broken down, not only through dialogue but also through critical uses of theatrical space and character movements as extensions of the thematic struggle for human contact.

In Andrade's theatre, visual and spatial elements, as well as the physical movement of the actors, have always been significant. In *A Moratória* (1955), for example, the physical division of the stage represents different points in time and contributes to the play's theme of time and change. In *A Escada*

(1961), on the other hand, the physical division of the stage into a series of apartments develops the idea of the separations and connections among family members of different generations. In *Rasto Atrás* (1966), there is an interplay of temporal and spatial elements in the simultaneous presence on stage of the same character at different ages. Small details of physical movement have also been important in each of these plays, for example, in the contrast between Lucília's sewing and Joaquim's constant unravelling of material in *A Moratória*, important elements for the development of these two characters and of the play's central theme.

In *Milagre na Cela*, however, the uses of theatrical space and character movement are even more highly developed than in previous works. As the curtain rises, Irma Joana de Jesus Crucificado, a 35 year old nun and teacher in the *favelas*, is imprisoned by Daniel, a master-interrogator who seeks information about alleged subversive activities. Daniel is assisted by Cícero, a mindless and sadistic jail warden. Although Joana is worn down by her captors, she remains in control by going through a process of change. She is influenced by three people she meets in prison, two of whom Daniel tries to use for psychological harassment: Jupira, a prostitute who becomes Joana's ally, and Miguel, a habitual, adolescent criminal who is won over by her humane and maternal ways. The third friend is a nameless poet whose writings cover the walls of Joana's cell and in whose words she finds strength, support and a message for survival.

When Daniel fails to break Joana through his customary regimen, he ultimately confronts her with a broom and threatens sexual torture. Joana, who has been visibly changed by her stay in prison and whose initial martyr-like stance has softened into one of resourcefulness in the face of the demands of survival, challenges her torturer to discard his broom and confront her human to human using "O seu instrumento que Deus lhe deu. Aquele que faz nascer a vida."² In order to survive, Joana attempts to humanize her torturer by seducing him as the first act ends. In a short, quickly-paced second act, Daniel's agitation at Joana's continued psychological resistance is intensified. Joana, who views her relationship with Daniel both as a survival strategy and as a campaign to salvage a human life, inadvertently becomes his torturer. Ultimately, through a complex series of somewhat contrived events which tend to weaken the piece, Daniel is murdered by Miguel, who sees himself as Joana's avenging angel. Joana is released when she agrees to cover up the truth of the events, as well as to assert that Miguel — not her torturer — is the father of her unborn child. Once again, her compliance is directed toward survival, her own and that of her child.

Several initial elements of the play — Joana's name with the probable allusion to Joan of Arc, her words echoing those of Christ and her decision not to waver in the defense of her innocence — create an expectation of martyrdom. Ultimately, however, the designated martyr survives and her would-be-executioner is killed. This reversal and the inversion of roles between torturer and victim is not as unexpected as a simple literary reading of the text might suggest. Staging directions and actor movements underscore this interplay between traditionally opposed elements.

The set is described as a prison, reminiscent of a medieval structure,

which, when fully illuminated, looks like a cathedral. Within this structure one sees the rooms of the jailers and the prisoners' cells, with long corridors connecting them. In addition, although there are no specific directions for how they are to be set up, it is stated that "aparecem ainda a sala da casa de Daniel e a do Convento" (p. 14). How these stand in relationship to the cells is not specified, but during the action, these two separate spaces are at times illuminated simultaneously with the cells, and action takes place in both at once. This would suggest that Daniel's house and the convent are definitely conceived to be within the same theatrical space as the cells, that is, within the walls of the medieval structure. Most of the action, however, takes place within the cells, rooms and corridors of the prison itself.

The notion of a prison contained within a cathedral creates interpretive possibilities in the staging. A cathedral-like structure suggests great heights and a reaching upward to the heavens. Cells, on the other hand, whether they be prison cells or the cells of monastic life—and the ambiguity appears intentional—suggest low, enclosed spaces, hugging the earth and earthly things. The title word *cela* is also used textually to refer both to the prison cells and to the cells of the nuns in the convent. This juxtaposition of a religious space, particularly a cathedral, with a space associated with man's lowliness, captivity and isolation—self-imposed or otherwise—is highly suggestive. The interplay is substantiated textually in the words of Daniel when he warns Joana that "onde todo mundo tem que rastejar, ninguém pode querer voar" (p. 21).

The staging of the play underscores the textual ambiguity developed in the idea of "inside" versus "outside" worlds. The issue of where the real world really lies is introduced when we learn that Joana has lived in the convent, longing to be on the "outside." Daniel mocks her for her work in the outside world when she should be inside the convent where she belongs. He also tells his wife, attempting to justify his troubling relationship with Joana, that those who have taken religious vows should function in secluded environments and that those who choose to be on the "outside" must take the same risks as the others. Gradually, however, through contact with Jupira and Miguel, Joana learns that the prison world *is* the world outside, in that it encompasses all of the problems of reality.

This textual interplay between concepts of inside-outside is made visually explicit on stage. The world of the prison which presents several societal levels and is the site of a major confrontation between good and evil can be seen as a microcosm of the real world. The convent set, however, is explicitly described by its inhabitants as removed from the real world when several nuns refer to their fear of the "mundo lá fora." The convent, then, is Joana's world of seclusion, removed from reality.

Parallel to Joana's point of origin is Daniel's living room, a nest of tranquility, also removed from the real world. This idea of separateness, however, is placed into tension not only because the play's events invade these two isolated outposts, but also through their placement on stage *within* the large cathedral-like structure which encloses the theatrical space. The more evident this physical relationship is made through careful staging, the more ironic the words of the characters in the convent and in Daniel's living room as they talk about the problems of the world outside.

The lines between inside and outside worlds are further blurred as the two principal characters' secluded space—the convent and the home—are gradually replaced by the prison environment, particularly within Joana's cell. Here, Daniel creates a new "family" and Joana creates a new place of worship, not only in her acts of kindness to the other prisoners but also in a visually evident way: she improvises an altar in the corner of her cell. Within a church within a prison within a cathedral, the "real" world becomes more and more difficult to situate.

Minor characters also develop this inside-outside interplay. Cícero's room, for example, stands out because of the eternal presence of a perpetually running television set. Here we see the possibility of visual communicative contact with the world outside of the prison. Ironically, the only time we see Cícero involved with the television set is when he watches a violent crime program which permits him to tune out the violence and interaction among the prisoners going on around him at that very moment.

It is in the development of the themes of human isolation and communication, however, that the organization of theatrical space plays its most critical part. Three kinds of significant spatial elements are visible to the audience: *celas* and *salas* (all individually isolated from one another), long corridors and walls—particularly the walls of Joana's cell. Thus, the notion of individual isolation, developed similarly in other Andrade plays, is underscored in *Milagre na Cela* by the insistence on each character's having his own private space, for example, Joana's *cela*, Cícero's *sala* and Daniel's interrogation room. The corridors of the prison—and the action suggests that they should be extensive—connect individual cells.

The corridors are important centers of action in two sequences. The first involves a series of rapidly successive trips in which Cícero ushers Joana back and forth from her cell to the interrogation room. Four times, through the skillful use of lighting techniques, the audience sees Joana in her cell, then in the corridor, then in the interrogation room and on her way back. The sequence is rapid, demanding a versatile set and dexterous actors. Significantly, when Joana makes her rapid journeys through the halls, Daniel waits for her at one end with physical threats, and at the other end, Jupira waits with physical and moral support. The corridors also take on special importance when Cícero receives a visit from his nieces and nephews and these children parade through the halls looking at the prisoners in their cells with the same glee and gusto customarily reserved for their weekly trips to the zoo.

The corridors which visually connect the individual cells do not serve as routes for communication in the traditional sense. Instead they are avenues of torture and harassment. The real communication in the play takes place in two ways. The friendship between Joana and Jupira and between Joana and Miguel develops within Joana's cell, underscoring the fact that the characters really begin to break through into one another's worlds. Jupira's attitudes toward sexuality begin to affect Joana, and Joana's maternal instincts and gestures in turn affect both Jupira and Miguel. Thus the *cela* of isolation becomes a place of friendship. The culminating inversion of this type, however, is Joana's seduction of Daniel in a room designated for the dehumanization of one human being by another.

The most important symbolic expression of communication at the level of staging, however, is the wall of Joana's cell, in that it represents one of the play's most important characters, the poet who never appears on stage but whose presence is strongly felt through Joana's recitation of his writings on the wall and through the skillful use of illumination called for in the stage directions. Although the identity of the poet is never specified, it is suggested that he or she is an individual or collective being, human or divine, who has tried to communicate with subsequent generations through a tradition of writing.

It is significant that Joana, even from her time in the convent, has had a special relationship with walls, leaning on them for moral support and listening for sounds from the outside world. As one of the *freiras* points out, Joana "vivia agarrada às paredes ouvindo sons de passos e de vozes que passavam ou se distanciavam, de sinos tocando na cidade . . . como se esta estivesse chamando-a" (p. 24).

When she first arrives in her cell, Joana leans against the wall and asks for strength, her words resembling those of a martyr submitting to her fate: "Meu Deus! Entrego meu destino em suas maos. Imploro que ajude me a manter fiel a mim mesma até o fim. De-me forças para agüentar tudo o que acontecer" (p. 22).

Repeatedly, during the moments when she weakens, Joana leans against the walls for strength, touching them as she learns the words written on them. As she changes and develops, she is clearly affected by the message of support and survival which she receives. Drawing upon the strength, she ultimately rejects the notion of submission to her fate as a martyr and literally refuses to turn the other cheek. Instead, she sings out the message from the wall for all to hear:

É preciso sobreviver,
 E sobreviveremos
 Para o amanhã que virá.
 Não importa o cerrar da boca,
 ou que a voz caminhe incerta
 na garganta dolorida,
 se amanhã o protesto
 sairá da boca
 de milhoes.
 Ficou a crença no amanhã,
 hoje proibido!
 É preciso sobreviver,
 Para o amanhã que virá! (p. 93)

The staging of the play, then, parallels the thematic inversions. Individual *celas* become centers of human contact while walls, true physical barriers, become points of contact with a tradition of survival, a collective history of humanity and with hidden inner strengths. Through the action of the play, the traditional separations that abound—between torturer and victim, saint and prostitute—are broken down, and the connections with other human beings which the characters, particularly Joana, carry within them ultimately become more important than the barriers—physical, societal or symbolic—that separate them.

The theme of the importance of human communication in the search for survival is further developed on a level of interplay in the physical movement of the characters. Compared to earlier Andrade plays, the text for *Milagre na Cela* has an unusually large number of explicit instructions for physical movements of the characters, and, in fact, the characters spend a great deal of their time in motion.

Joana's development is important at the level of body language and this in turn enriches the idea of her search for a more viable solution to her predicament than martyrdom. In the opening scenes, she appears in the traditional stance of a martyr, tall and rigid, head held high. An interesting contrast is made when Joana and Jupira first appear on stage. Joana is standing straight and tall while those around her tear apart her convent cell looking for evidence of her alleged crimes. The scene immediately shifts, through the use of lighting, to Jupira, lying on the cot of her cell with her legs spread. Joana's ultimate solution is a compromise between these two positions.³

As Joana adapts to prison life, her body movements gradually change also. Not only do her movements become more Jupira-like as she begins to become aware of her own sexuality, but ultimately she tells Daniel that she has learned to use her body as a tool for survival and to control her body through her mind.

The physical attitude of Daniel also changes. In the initial interrogation scenes, his movements are highly mechanical and stylized, while extremely controlled. As he gradually becomes more frenzied, chiefly as a result of Joana's "humanization" campaign, his level of physical activity and tension increases to the point where his wife describes his behavior as that of a man whose "corpo ficava tomado por demônios" (p. 87).

Body movement is also significant in developing the interplay of roles between tortured and torturer, human and inhuman elements in the play. The contrast is developed through the continuous juxtaposition, using lighting shifts, of the predatory movements of the prison personnel with the affectionate gestures of the prisoners. The torturers, Daniel, Cícero and a number of karate experts who assist them, are characterized by a series of stylized, mechanical movements. What is significant about these series of movements is that they are repetitive and that they almost *never* involve direct physical contact. Cícero, when new prisoners arrive, carefully circles them, like an animal stalking its prey, inspects them, leans toward them but never touches. In the interrogation room, Daniel never threatens Joana directly (until the culminating broom scene) but instead uses the karate team which executes a stylized ballet around Joana, also never touching her:

De repente, Daniel faz um sinal. Instantaneamente, os homens começam a simular uma luta de Karatê em volta de Joana. Eles saltam no ar, jogando pés e punhos na direção de Joana, ao mesmo tempo em que gritam. Os pés e os punhos fechados passam a um palmo do rosto e do corpo de Joana . . . A luta simulada se transforma num bailado sinistro. O rosto dos homens são máscaras odientas. Seus gritos, sons primitivos. Daniel olha para eles como se fossem feras domesticadas. De repente, os homens param e voltam aos seus lugares, estáticos. Olham Joana com um desejo assassino, como se fossem cabeças da mesma hidra, do mesmo dragão.

(p. 37)⁴

This kind of movement is always accompanied by a series of predatory background sounds, including the barking of dogs and the sounds of sirens and karate chops. These movements are in juxtaposition, through constant shifting in lighting, to a series of affectionate movements and gestures that characterize the prisoners as they interact with one another. When Jupira and Joana first meet, for example, no words are exchanged, but Jupira finally reaches out and touches her. Other affectionate gestures are significant in Joana's relationship with the poetry-covered wall which she continually caresses. It is interesting that when Daniel tries to get Joana to admit that she desires him, she triumphantly leans against the wall (her true lover in the sense of real communication) and lets Daniel know that he has left her true self untouched.

The visible contrast between predatory movements lacking direct physical contact and the series of affectionate gestures that characterize the close relationships of the prisoners enriches the significance of Joana's challenge to Daniel that he assault her directly. Gradually the direct human contact between Joana and Daniel is increased, not only through their sexual encounters, but also because Daniel gradually eliminates his agents—or instruments of torture—the broom, Cícero and the karate experts.

Joana ultimately destroys her predator by confronting him directly and dealing face to face with his inhumanity. In some sense, she copes with the violence by withstanding and finally absorbing it. She views the child she carries as a synthesis of the good and evil she has experienced and a part of her which manifests her human qualities. The breakdown in traditional dichotomies, between torturer-tortured, nun-prostitute, prisoner-jailer, insiders-outsiders, culminates in a collective survival dance among all of the prisoners, led by Joana and Jupira. Joana, uncertain about the future, decides that to be human is to be possessed by contradictions and to live fully involves a confrontation with the best and the worst within her, and within the Jupiras, the Miguels and the Daniels she will meet. The *cela*, a physical space representing human isolation and withdrawal, here becomes the site of a true *milagre*: Joana's search for and discovery of her own intrinsic humanity and of those aspects of her nature that ultimately connect her with others.

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Notes

1. Gerald M. Moser discusses the thematic connections among these plays in "Jorge Andrade's Sao Paulo Cycle," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 5/1 (Fall 1971), 17-24.

2. Jorge Andrade in *Milagre na Cela* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra, 1977), p. 56. Subsequent references to this work will be made directly within the text.

3. It is interesting that this contrast between a saint and a prostitute not only brings into play the traditional alternative views of women in literary works, dating back to the Middle Ages, but also brings into focus a concern of Andrade's in earlier plays. Zilda, the reality oriented character in *A Escada*, declares that it would be better to throw herself into the street to the first man who comes along than to stay "como virgem intocável, Joana D'Arc, defensora da tradição." Andrade, *A Escada*, in *Marta, a Árvore e o Relógio* (Sao Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1970), p. 381.

4. A significant aspect of these scenes, not explored in detail here, is the Biblical and mythological allusion in the play to the story of the Virgin Mary in which Michael the Archangel saves her from a seven-headed monster. In subsequent scenes, Daniel is compared with such a monster. In addition, Joana tells this story to Miguel, whose literal interpretation leads to his attack upon Daniel.