

Acting into Action: Teatro Arena's *Zumbi*

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Teatro Arena de São Paulo was organized in 1953 as an experimental group dedicated to exploring the possibilities of the theatre-in-the-round stage. Over the eighteen years of its existence, Arena's members used their playhouse as a center for both the performance and discussion of cultural and social topics. The group was an integral part of the growth of the theatre during the 1950's and 1960's that included both playwrights such as Jorge Andrade, Ariano Suassuna, Alfredo Dias Gomes, and Plínio Marcos and theatre groups such as Teatro Oficina and Grupo Opinião.¹

The development of Arena's art was based on the search for a Brazilian dramatic form that would provide the best means for studying national social conditions. However, such goals were not immediately attainable. From 1953-58 the group struggled to gain recognition and economic security giving performances of European and American plays. By 1958 Arena had its own playhouse staffed with writers and actors who were prepared to initiate efforts at producing a national theatrical form for studying social issues. Arena adopted and adapted the existing dramatic models of realism and then later, Brecht's epic theatre, in order to create a moving portrayal of the Brazilian working class and its problems. Arena was interested in focusing on everyday situations that would characterize life as it was really lived and the actors worked extensively at reproducing the movements, habits, and language of the working class. Between 1962-64 Arena abandoned its national subjects in order to experiment with remaking or "Brazilianizing" versions of European classics, but immediately following the 1964 military coup the group resumed its interest in national subjects. The result was a new type of play, a musical that combined Brazilian history, Brechtian distancing techniques, and realism for the purpose of re-evaluating political

events of the sixties. The musical represented the culmination of Arena's efforts at developing a national dramatic form. But unlike earlier plays performed at Teatro Arena, the musicals were also meant to motivate the audience to act against the new military regime.

The audiences that first attended Arena's performances were members of the middle and affluent classes who were intrigued by the theatre-in-the-round format. Arena hoped to have an impact on these people, one that amounted to consciousness-raising, by putting them into very close physical contact with its interpretation of working-class life and hardships (Lima 45). Arena also began cultivating a second, separate audience from among the working class who attended performances given in neighborhood meeting halls. After the 1964 coup, Arena developed a third audience made up of leftist students and intellectuals. The repressive measure taken after the coup forced Arena to abandon its audience in the working class neighborhoods. At the same time the more conservative affluent audiences found other less politically compromising artistic events to attend. While those two audiences disappeared, Arena's politically active student audience grew.

There were both artistic and political benefits to be derived from the homogeneous student audience. According to Arena observer Roberto Schwarz, the increased number of students in the audience "aumentou o fundo comum de cultura entre palco e espectadores" (81). This new theatrical environment gave Arena the freedom to experiment in ways that the group had never been able to try before. Schwarz described it as "[uma] alusividade e agilidade, principalmente em política, antes desconhecidos" (81). The plays produced during this early post-coup period were, for Schwarz, in complete agreement with the point of view held by the audience: "Sem espaço ritual, mas com imaginação--e também sem grande tradição de métier e sem atores velhos--o teatro estava próximo dos estudantes; não havia abismo de idade, modo de viver ou formação" (81).

One of the most intriguing and popular plays produced for this student audience is *Arena Conta Zumbi*, which ran for over one and a half years in São Paulo. The uniqueness and popularity of the play made it an exemplary piece for Arena and the group gave performances throughout the Americas--in the United States and Mexico in 1969 and in Argentina and Peru in 1970. In 1971 Arena took *Zumbi* to France to participate in the Nancy Festival (*Revista* 29-30). Arena's director, Augusto Boal considers *Zumbi* to be an important play to the group because it represented the moment when the content of Arena's plays changed from reflecting reality to trying to influence reality (Necessidade 23).

Arena Conta Zumbi is based on accounts of events in Palmares, a

fertile region in northeastern Brazil, where, between 1630-1695, encampments founded by escaped slaves grew and prospered. Stories about the success of the settlements worried nearby plantation owners who feared that their slaves might run off to join the encampments. Eventually, military expeditions were sent to the region in an effort to ruin the communities and return the slaves. The warrior who led the African resistance against the Portuguese expeditions was a man called Zumbi, after whom the play was named (Carneiro 140-45).

Arena's version of the history of Zumbi, written by Boal, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Paulo José and musicians Edu Lobo and Vinicius de Moraes, evolved after extensive investigation into both historical documentation and appropriate methods of interpretation (Lima 58). The events dramatized in *Zumbi* follow the accounts provided by historians, although not necessarily in the correct order. The Portuguese colonists and administrators have been faithfully reproduced, even to the point of including quotations from speeches or letters. The ex-slaves, on the other hand, are the sole creation of Arena's playwrights and musicians since little documentation on them exists. Arena's dramatization of the history of Palmares involved reorganizing and emphasizing several episodes as well as adding numerous politically charged terms so that the play is transformed from a documentary into a political protest. Arena takes a very polemical stance in its treatment of this unknown episode in Brazilian history, by suggesting that the pursuit of freedom by the ex-slaves should be seen as an example to the recently defeated political activists.

Arena Conta Zumbi is also a highly experimental play that combines many of Brecht's distancing techniques, such as music as an element of plot, episodic structure, and role exchange with elements of Brazilian folk culture. The play is enacted by seven players, four men and three women, identically dressed in jeans and brightly colored sweat shirts, who portray all of the characters regardless of sex, age, or race. The set design consists of a bright red carpet covering the stage and three large stands, two positioned at the sides and one at the back of the stage. The performers remain on the stage during the performance even though not all of them are actually portraying a role at all times. The play is choreographed with very precise movements that include both individuals and groups. Some of the activity on stage contributes to making geometric images of triangles and v-shapes while the rest portrays the events occurring.² For example, when merchants and landowners decide to join forces against the ex-slaves, they show their agreement by joining hands in a circle around the Africans who then fall to the ground and thrust their arms and heads out of the jail bars created by their subjugators' legs (*Zumbi* 40).

The acting on stage is often accompanied by dancing, and by

music performed by a small group standing next to the stage. The music of the ex-slaves favors popular Afro-influenced forms like samba. But there are also solemn songs, such as the theme song, "Zumbi", which is like a chant. Its rhythm is accented with a tempo that imitates the cracking of a whip. The music used to accompany the colonists, on the other hand, is a mixture of classical and modern European music. Scenes that involve the Portuguese governor and his advisors are accented with traditional music from the seventeenth century while social gatherings among the colonists usually include popular music from the Beatles generation.

In order to make the portrayal of characters transferable from one actor to another, Boal re-trained the actors to portray general aspects of all the individuals in the play instead of concentrating on just one personality. Although this technique was already in use elsewhere in the world, Arena introduced it to Brazil under the name of the "máscara social" (Campos 13). The "máscara social" is a blending of the social, historical, and political aspects of an individual's character that can be projected to the audience by any single individual playing that character (Quiles 270). Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Arena actor and playwright, explains that the actors would exchange roles when the characters changed emotions or social situations. This meant that the actor who took over the role at any given point did so because he/she had the best manner of expressing that emotion. Guarnieri calls these transitions between actors and their roles "ágil" (*Depoimentos* 73).

Not only does the play utilize actors exchanging roles, it also employs a variety of dramatic presentations within each scene. Information is communicated in a melodramatic manner, or a farcical, tragic, or comic one. The changes occur rapidly as the play shifts from events in the community of ex-slaves to those at the plantations and in town at the governor's parties and meetings. Most of the "lower" dramatic forms, such as farce and melodrama, are reserved for the scenes involving the Portuguese. At the same time, the play also satirizes the colonists, showing them as "fresquíssimos, afetados, artificiais" (*Zumbi* 57). The more lyrical and tragic forms are used for the ex-slaves (Campos 13) who are always characterized as noble, industrious workers in search of a universal goal: "uma terra da amizade onde o homem ajuda o homem" (*Zumbi* 31).

Although the play introduced an unknown episode from Brazil's past presented in an unfamiliar dramatic context, the newness is made less threatening by the extensive use of popular elements from Brazilian life. For example, the history of Zumbi is told as if it were the story chosen by a samba school to be portrayed in a carnival parade. Sociologist Roberto da Matta's research on carnival and

specifically on the *samba de enredo* outlines the elements of this "festa popular" (45-101) that can also be seen in *Zumbi*. Just as in an "enredo," the characters of *Zumbi* are part of an aristocratic and possibly even mythic national past. The introductory song refers to the history of Zumbi as an "epopéia" (*Zumbi* 31). The conflict is presented in very simple, universal terms that Schwarz calls "opresor vs. oprimido" (83). Although the plot includes references to the population of Palmares, the conflict is between the hero, Zumbi, and the government-backed military forces. The presentation of events in the play moves quickly from scene to scene and includes changes in dramatic mode in addition to songs and dance. There are even short jokes and slightly risqué scenes to keep up interest in the story.

Zumbi differs from a *samba de enredo* in ways that point out its intent to criticize social conditions. For example, da Matta observed that in a *samba de enredo* there is "[uma] inversão entre o desfilante (um pobre, geralmente negro ou mulato) e a figura que ele representa no desfile (um nobre, um rei, uma figura mitológica)" (45). This concept of inversion applies to *Zumbi*, but not in the terms da Matta outlines. Both the characters within the play and the people playing those characters have assumed inverted social and racial positions. The subjects of most "enredos" are nobility or aristocrats from Brazil's past who are often engaged in a rather simplistic battle with individuals considered inferior to them. Yet, *Zumbi* portrays the nobility (governors, etc.) as the inferior individuals who are attempting to destroy a very noble, albeit ex-slave, community. The so-called inferior beings in *Zumbi*, the ex-slaves, are always presented as courageous and noble warriors forced into submission while the would-be superior European aristocrats are always seen as egotistic, short-sighted racists. Another interesting inversion occurs in the plot line. In *carnaval* stories the noblemen, aristocrats or mythic people, are pitted against the masses, slaves for example. Obviously the noble of character win. However in *Zumbi* the noble of character lose, even though the "noblemen" win. There is also an inversion in social status. Whereas *carnaval* allows people of low social status to portray aristocrats, *Zumbi* is acted out by white, middle-class university students who accept the roles of noble Africans and decadent Europeans.

Da Matta also suggests that the sociological function of both *carnaval* and the *samba de enredo* is one of softening or "domesticating" the tension that exists between the social classes. During *carnaval* distinctions are ignored, i.e. poor mulattos assume the clothing and manner of people in a higher social status but in a way that does not threaten to change the differences between those social positions. Da Matta contends that if the rich were presented as rich, rather than as noblemen, they would be satirized, the parade would

lose its neutral character and good behavior would be suspended allowing social hostilities to resume (46). *Zumbi* contains many examples in which the rich landowners and government officials are satirized, so that even though the play utilizes popular elements, it does not affect the audience in the same manner as a real *carnaval* parade. Arena uses its popular elements to call attention to the differences between social classes by exaggerating the inequities and injustices that *carnaval* tends to assuage.

Arena gave life and meaning to the history of *Zumbi* and the Palmares settlements by creating a very sympathetic portrayal of the escaped slaves that was enhanced by its carnivalesque format. At the same time, however, Arena used the story as a pretense for talking to and inspiring the members of the recently defeated political left. The relationship between past and present is made explicit in the introductory song "História de gente negra/ da luta pela razão/ que se parece ao presente/ pela verdade em questão" (*Zumbi* 31). But it is also communicated through the selection of certain terms that are heavily laden with meaning for the audience because they were employed by the military dictatorship and its supporters. For example, the merchants and landowners speak of the need to "exterminar a subversão" (40). Other expressions like "perigo negro" and "o negro é um perigo para a nossa tradição" (43) refer to the labels of "reds" and "communists" that were used to discredit social reformers and frighten the middle class into accepting a military coup. By building this tie between past and present, Arena hoped to instill in its audience a critical consciousness of the machinations of the conservatives and the military immediately preceding the coup.

The political message of *Zumbi* surpasses Arena's earlier goal of consciousness raising by uniting the viewers in an orchestrated demonstration of protest and resistance. The structure of the play, which is made up of two highly dissimilar acts, prepares the audience for that message. Act I is primarily expository in that no one particular scene dominates the stage too long because there is constant switching back and forth between Palmares, life on the plantations, the arrival of slave ships, the Portuguese governors trying to decide what to do about the slaves, and the worries of landowners and merchants as they see the Palmares community prospering. As a result, the act is quick-paced, humorous, and good-natured (Hewes 16).

On the other hand, Act II concentrates on only one thing, the repeated and intensifying efforts of the military forces to destroy Palmares and its noble, rebellious leader, *Zumbi*. Arena made noticeable changes in the historical materials regarding the order and severity of the Portuguese attacks against Palmares in order to strengthen the references to the repressive tactics of the Brazilian Armed Forces

at the time of the coup and later. The figures representing the government were transformed into more oppressive, ruthless individuals. In fact, the turning point in the play occurs when Dom Pedro, who has not taken an active interest in destroying the ex-slave community, is "overthrown" by Dom Ayres who advocates "repressive force" (*Zumbi* 45). Further changes in the record occur when Dom Ayres sends Fernão Carrilho on an unwarranted act of vengeance against a Portuguese community that did not support the expeditions with money or arms (48). Finally, *Zumbi* condenses all the violent attacks, including the invented one in which Carrilho destroys the village of Serinhaem, into a rapid sequence of events.

The expected response from the audience, that has been carefully prepared for this moment, is outrage. That feeling is directed first at the Portuguese officials in the play, but then by extension to the Brazilian military dictators who imposed their rule after the 1964 coup. The audience is called upon to assume a rebellious stance through identification with the slaves who reach out and taunt it at the end of the play. The stage directions describe the action "todos se viram para a platéia, de joelhos" and the actors repeat what might be called the motto of the play: "*Todos--Entendeu que lutar afinal/é um modo de criar/é um modo de ter/razão de ser*" (54). After a final reference to the power of the whip the actors "cerram os punhos em direção à platéia" (59).

Zumbi was an extremely popular play, not only because its music, movement, and color were very entertaining but also because it succeeded in meeting the political expectations of its audience that went to the theatre as an act of protest. As mentioned earlier, the conditions that existed in 1965 favored the building of a sense of community with a cohesiveness unknown to earlier theatrical environments. Arena became the home of a homogenous group of young people who were bound together and reinforced by activities at the playhouse. It was an audience heavily biased in Arena's favor. "O povo de palco era o mesmo povo da platéia" are Mostaço's words (77). Once inside the theatre it is likely that a special environment of conspiracy made the individuals there feel as if they were members of a secret brotherhood. After all, those in attendance understood each other and may have known each other as well. They shared a common interest in resisting the government, and they went to the theatre as a means of keeping that resistance alive. If all of this is true, then I suggest that *Zumbi* functioned much like a ritual in which, according to Graham-White, everyone *believes* that by participating in the ritual he/she can *change* conditions, and can produce results that lie beyond the ritual/performance itself (320-321). I do not want to abuse the term ritual here, but it is the best word to describe what I think

happened inside the Arena playhouse during 1965-66.

As the title "Acting into Action" suggests, one of Arena's goals was to use the acting on stage as a means of inspiring and motivating the audience to leave the theatre and participate in activity against the regime. Unfortunately, there is no documentation to confirm that the members of the audience really walked out of the performance and engaged in revolution. In fact, Arena has been criticized for fostering a false sense of power in its ability to undermine the dictatorship. One theatre critic went so far as to accuse Arena of deceiving its audience with "rituais cívico-esquerdizantes, algo como substituir as tarefas concretas de luta por uma ida ao teatro. . ." (Mostaço 86). While it is true that *Zumbi* probably did not have an enormous impact on the national political events of the post-coup period, it did contribute to sustaining the idea of resistance among the students and intellectuals of São Paulo and of other Brazilian cities where the play was performed. *Zumbi* was a success in 1965 because it integrated both the political and artistic concerns of its creators into a play and a performance ideally tailored to the intellectual resources and political needs of its audience (3).

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Notes

1. A selected bibliography on Teatro Arena would include the following titles: Lúcia MacDowell Soares, "O Teatro Político do Arena e de Guarnieri." *Monografias/1980*. (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Nacional de Artes Cênicas, 1983); Sábato Magaldi, *Um Palco Brasileiro: O Teatro Arena de São Paulo*. (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1984); Edélcio Mostaço, *Teatro e Política: Arena, Oficina e Opinião*. (São Paulo: Proposta Editorial, 1982); and special issues of *Dionysos* 24 (1978) and *Arte em Revista* 6 (1981).

2. In order to reconstruct the performances of 1965-66 I used the *Revista do Teatro* #378 of 1970, that published both a script and a list of choreographic movements; the music to the two most popular songs, "Zumbi" and "Upa, neguinho" from an album by Elis Regina; descriptions of the actual performance by Roberto Schwartz and Edélcio Mostaço; and information on the set design given by Flávio Império in an interview.

3. This is a revised version of a paper given at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference April 24-26, 1986.

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