

Theatre in Rio de Janeiro, 1968

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All theatrical activities in Rio are, at present, going through a particularly difficult moment. Granted that the whole face of Brazil is, willy-nilly, changing, and that consequently all theatre is also changing, there are still some features that are strictly "carioca"—for so the inhabitants and usages of Rio are called—and these are of a peculiar nature. Basically, one must take into account that after eight years of Brasília, the full impact of no longer being the capital of the country is finally hitting the Most Loyal City of Saint Sebastian of Rio de Janeiro.

There are two basic consequences of that purely geographical change: one concerns the public directly, the other the relations between Rio theatre and the federal agency for aid to theatre, the National Theatre Service.

Until just a few years ago the so-called "Wonderful City" did not even have to try in order to get a considerable floating population. Anyone who had business with the federal government had to come to Rio; all domestic vacation plans naturally turned towards the capital, its beaches, its night-clubs and, even, its theatres. Now official business takes people to Brasília, where the federal government is, with more or less grace, gradually settling. And even vacationers, with the road development of the last few years, have recently been more tempted to discover other parts of this vast country.

As it happens, it was precisely the tired businessman and the eager vacationer who were most willing to support the bright, commercial comedies that gave Rio its reputation for gaiety. It would be false to say that all of the Rio theatre went that way, but it would be dishonest not to admit that committed theatre came earlier, and more steadily, to industrial São Paulo than to Rio. The young, non-star type of group has been shaping up in the ex-capital more recently, and is now going through the early, rather hectic, stages of the game.

The question of federal subsidy is the second point that has hit Rio hard.

Until Brasília, Rio was, after all, federal itself. It was therefore natural that all theatre groups should apply exclusively to the Serviço Nacional de Teatro (SNT). São Paulo was in fact the only other city in the country with regular professional theatre activity, but since the SNT was (and still is) located in Rio, for a number of years now the São Paulo theatre has looked more to its own state-level agency for subsidy, the State Theatre Commission. Since 1963, when Roberto Freire became its director, the SNT started changing its policy, in order to give more attention to theatre activities all over the country. Furthermore, the non-theatrically minded federal government has not raised the budget of the SNT in several years, and in the last two years federal aid has been for all practical purposes nonexistent.

Shorn of its status as capital, of part of its floating population, and of federal aid, theatre in Rio was inevitably due for a very tough time, particularly if one takes into consideration the fact that there has never been a real theatre-going tradition in the country, not even in its ex-capital. Theatre is, to begin with, expensive in view of average middle-class salaries; and the rich at first used to brag that if "one must go to the theatre one must do it in Paris or London or New York," and now refuse to attend plays that are so glaringly aggressive towards the bourgeoisie. There went another slice of public. Until about five years ago one could count on a public of about 50,000 for a smash hit; today, whoever gets about 27,000 is really lucky. The anti-inflationary measures of the government since 1964 have also contributed considerably to make theatre-going money scarcer.

The effects of the new type of play being done by the younger groups on the public are two-fold: one part of the public no longer wants to go to the theatre because it does not care to pay to be offended, and another part, which would be attuned to the sentiments and ideas expressed, simply cannot afford to attend. You can't win, from an economic point of view.

On the other hand, in spite of all their troubles, I believe that it can be honestly said that all those connected with theatre in Rio are now happier in their work, more united, more conscious of playing a part in the life of the country, of being justified in their choice of a profession than at any other time. The much smaller public seems to agree; its members are, on the average, maybe ten years younger than those of the old commercial productions, and the policy of charging only 50% of the price to students is beginning to form a new audience which, it is hoped, will keep on going to the theatre to see other than "digested" plays for the rest of their lives. Certainly at no other time in Brazilian history has theatre been so talked about by the young as it is now.

As if the above-mentioned troubles were not enough, in the last couple of years all of Brazilian theatre has been having the greatest problems it ever had with its worst enemy, censorship. It is highly indicative of the change in the type of play that is now staged that there were no outstanding examples of censorship trouble during the Vargas dictatorship. At that time the professional

Brazilian theatre literally never dealt with Brazilian problems (in fact it never staged any Brazilian plays except mild and unimportant comedies of manners) and was never more daring than when staging some little French bedroom farce.

Now things are somewhat different, as they are different in other countries. Importing Pinter is different from importing Noel Coward; if people want to play Brecht it is not for sheer admiration of his form; and a "good" Brazilian author is not someone who sings the charms of some little society intrigue, but someone who transposes to the stage the famine and exploitation of the Brazilian Northeast, or who comes out with a lively musical about the lot of the *sub-desenvolvido* (underdeveloped) or the undue interference of the United States in Brazilian domestic problems. The greatest change, the greatest achievement of contemporary Brazilian theatre, is precisely that it is now more Brazilian, more integrated into the society which is producing it, than ever before. Unfortunately, this change very often does not please the censorship.

Censorship is, in Brazil, in the hands of the Police. It is a department of the Federal Department of Public Security, under the Ministry of Justice. It is handled, in 95% of the cases, by people who are culturally unprepared to hold the job they do, provided one admits that censorship is necessary, which is not particularly the case of the present writer. In 1967 the censorship started being much more severe both in moral and political issues; but, worst of all, in December of that year it was suddenly decided that all texts of plays should be censored exclusively in Brasília (instead of at the regional offices) to "insure against excessive liberality of regional censors." The results have been appalling. Not only has it become either impossible or extremely expensive to argue away at least a part of the cuts that almost invariably maim the plays submitted, but also it may take up to three months to get the text back from Brasília. Meanwhile, the theatre is being affected economically because openings are postponed, plays are being banned outright, or being made unstageable due to the number of cuts. In the first semester of 1968 alone four plays were banned (three Brazilian texts and Leroi Jones' *Dutchman*). In February, when a company from Rio arrived in Brasília and the censorship imposed three cuts on a translation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which has been played by various groups ever since the play was written, the theatre people in Rio got together and went on strike, closing all theatres for two days. São Paulo joined the movement, and for two days actors, directors, authors, set-designers and drama students sat on the steps of the ornate opera houses of both Rio and São Paulo. Writers and artists also joined, and a delegation went to the Minister of Justice asking for basic changes in the censorship regulations.

A commission, appointed by the Minister of Justice, with representatives from theatre, films, music, visual arts and literature has, in fact, presented a project for censorship; but at the present writing, two months after the project was turned over to the Minister, everything is very much the same, and censorship incidents are as frequent as ever. The most recent decision of the theatre people

has been that of a form of civil disobedience: the theatre will start behaving as if the new regulations had already been accepted by the government. As far as theatre is concerned, the censorship will no longer have any power to cut or ban any text; its only job will be to determine minimum age levels for attendance (10, 14, 16 and 18 years of age).

It is only with the above information in view that one may even start trying to give readers of another country some sort of idea of the uneven and strange panorama of the theatre in Rio today.

To begin with, it must be kept in mind that theatre life is so limited, that there is really no clean-cut difference as between Broadway and off- or off-off-Broadway, for instance. True enough, one may say that it is the *companhias jovens* (young companies) that by and large can be named principally as the leaders of the new "revolution" in Brazilian theatre (the first one that actually marks the birth of that theatre in many ways dates from 1940); but many of the most established names, both directors and actors, have at least occasionally been instrumental in the furthering of the new forms of theatre. Since the producer, the figure of the impresario, is practically unknown in Brazil, well-known stars are very often their own producers, and these have more and more turned to the youngest generation of Brazilian directors, partly because of an authentic interest in the new themes and forms, partly from fear of turning "square" and consequently being unable to please the younger audiences on which the theatre depends to a large extent.

The main characteristics of this "new" theatre are partly of choice, partly imposed, as is practically everything else in the world. The basic choice was that of abandoning a theatre of pure entertainment, and as "choice" we may, for the moment, put the predominance of Brazilian themes, problems and plots, expressed very often in forms borrowed from the most genuine native traditions of popular culture. This latter is doubtful as "choice," since it is surely the obvious result of the whole change of outlook of the country in general: the theatre merely reflected the overall preoccupation with the revolt against imported, colonial forms of art, and the consequent preoccupation with finding out what we are and stand for as "Brazilians."

Once the choice had been made, the theatre was faced with its consequences, the most important of which was the loss of a considerable section of the public that used to keep the box-offices busy. A new public had to be conquered, new playwrights writing in the new modes had to be found, and new conceptions of directing and acting had to be developed. Suddenly the theatre was faced with what has been called "the crisis," the reasons for which were not always understood by those who were so passionately keen on what they were doing that they automatically expected to be universally backed in their endeavors. Little by little, theatre people became conscious of the consequences of their choice, but not even the "crisis" was enough to make them waver—the solution was to find a new public for a new theatre.

During that period another form of art had been reaching a particularly happy moment in Brazil: popular music. Through the forties and the fifties the old, pure form of *samba* had gone through a rather melancholy phase. Prior to the forties the musical accompaniments to *sambas* were extraordinarily naïve: a couple of guitars, a flute, and a tambourine were standard; but during the forties and fifties the impact of American and Mexican music, with their elaborate, sophisticated arrangements, eclipsed the native forms. It was only in the last years of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties that all of a sudden the "bossa nova" (which means in fact a "new knack" for playing the *samba*) brought the *samba* back to the top. The concern of intellectuals with things Brazilian and the popular forms led, for instance, the poet Vinicius de Moraes to write words for songs by people like Luis Bonfá and Tom Jobim (both of them living in the United States today). The richness of the new Brazilian music was extraordinary, and the use of that extremely popular music was one of the means that the theatre started using to bring in the new public.

The influence of music in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, patron saint of all young Brazilian theatre people, showed the way to what kind of use might be made of this new music in the new plays. And the use of music in the theatre is not in any way similar to the tradition of the American "musical." Except for a period in Rio at the turn of the century, when Artur Azevedo wrote a delightful group of *burletas*, music played no part in our theatre whatever until the attempt in the Teatro Municipal (the opera house of Rio) of *Orfeu da Conceição*, by Vinicius de Moraes with music by Luis Bonfá. The play was very poor, the music was memorable (for unknown reasons the French demanded an entirely new score when they turned the play into the film *Black Orpheus*, and that again produced some more very good songs). The set, incidentally, was designed by the architect Oscar Niemeyer, creator of all the buildings in Brasília.

The next to use it, in a much more Brechtian sense, was Augusto Boal in São Paulo, with his *Revolução na America do Sul*. And in Rio it was through early visits of the São Paulo groups that the new mode was introduced.

Protest, in music as well as text, was another way to reach the young public. This is recent indeed. During the Jango Goulart régime, which lasted from 1961 to 1964, the government itself set the tone for political change, and in Rio the National Student Union set up its nucleus of theatre, the Centro Popular de Cultura, which was given entirely to the staging of playlets of a rather Brechtian inspiration. Their productions were also influenced by the techniques of the Chinese revolutionary theatre, which is not at all concerned with being good theatre and is very much concerned with politization of the masses. With the conservative coup of 1964, which came at a time when Goulart himself had very little control over what was happening, all such groups were outlawed overnight; and those who worked with them, basically theatre people, eventually started the very difficult struggle towards the expression of their erstwhile views, or others similar to them, within a very different framework of government.

It is no wonder that there have been so many problems with censorship. It is very heartening, however, that—at great cost in arguments, artifice and cunning—the theatre has been able to say quite a bit in the last few years.

The struggles have not been all political. As a matter of fact public opinion is greatly more shocked by the freedom of language, by the frankness on sexual matters, by the use of so-called “obscenity,” than by the political radicalism of some of the plays. One may gather what the impact of this new form of freedom can mean in Brazil if one remembers that this is the only country in Latin America where there still exists no divorce law. And now, all of a sudden, the Victorian die-hards are rather appalled by the fact that they have not been able to convince their off-spring that “there are subjects that should not be mentioned,” namely, sex.

The truth of the matter is that these changes have come to the theatre much later than to the novel, for instance, and the theatre has run squarely against the hypocritical attitude that believes that it is possible to *read* about “shocking” subjects in private, but it is quite another matter to have them spoken and acted on a stage.

What can be the picture of theatre in Rio in view of all this?

In purely aesthetic terms I believe it is inevitable to admit that many of the present day performances are not up to the professional standards of five years ago. At that time we were reaping the harvest of the first basic change of the Brazilian theatre in 1940, which brought us up-to-date with what we may term a “good” international concept of dramatic art. We are beginning all over again, and since we are largely still finding out what we want to say through a theatrical medium, it is not very surprising that we cannot say it as well as when people knew what they wanted to say.

On the other hand, the lessons of the past were not in vain, and the search is starting from a much higher level than did the first one. True, under the label “experiment” we are subjected to cases of sheer incompetence; true, there are too many cliques, each one outdoing the other in theoretical statements, sometimes with surprisingly little relation to the finished products seen on stage; true, in the no man’s land of renewal too many people are called “genius” only to be found out in the second or third production; true, there are cases in which tricks have been hailed as new philosophies of the theatre. On the other hand, the theatre has never been so alive; never before have so many people in Brazil been aware of the existence of theatre as an integral part of our common culture; and many people in this country, the present writer for one, are much more concerned with the fact that so many new playwrights are appearing than with the fact that a good percentage of them is bad. The worth of these new authors is amply proved by the fact that practically all of the money-making “competent” writers of imitation-European theatre of ten or fifteen years ago have been completely driven off the professional stage by the simple fact that practically any

of the "bad" new plays is more interesting and more challenging than any of their efforts.

Along with those authors, the French "boulevard" and the Broadway comedy have also practically disappeared. A hit in New York or Paris, along those lines, is no longer a guarantee that it will make money in Rio or São Paulo. On the other hand never have so many contemporary English authors been played in Brazil. But certainly never before have so many Brazilian plays been performed, never have groups read so much looking for what they feel instinctively will be the way to a larger new public: a good Brazilian author.

It is difficult, under the circumstances, to have any clear idea of those authors that might have any sort of permanence, and it is even harder to try to assess plays for a non-Brazilian reader. A good part of the value of the recent authors is precisely their relevance to the Brazilian scene, be it in language, mood, or subject-matter. But a quick glimpse at what is going on in Rio at the time of writing might give some sort of idea of what the outlook is.

Plínio Marcos is a 30-year-old author who rocketed to fame in mid-1967 with the staging of *Dois Perdidos numa Noite Suja* (*Two Lost in a Dirty Night*), taken from a short story by Alberto Moravia. Marcos became the focus of attention of many of the censorship problems because of his very rich and colorful language, which is never used for showing off, however. His second play, *Navalha na Carne* (*Razor in the Flesh*), also in 1967, made him best author of the year, even though it was not up to the standard of *Dois Perdidos*, and made Tonia Carrero best actress of the year, after a long battle to have the play approved by the censorship. Two more plays by him were staged that same year, and both revealed hastiness in composition, with Marcos falling prey to his incredible facility for dialogue. Now comes a complete change: for the first time he is not writing near-realist plays about the victims of society. *Jornada de um Imbecil Até o Entendimento* (*The Journey of an Imbecile Towards Enlightenment*) is a parable against capitalism, but since he did not mention Brazil and agrarian reform, and just talked about one man having many hats and others no hat at all, apparently the censorship didn't get it. No cuts, no trouble, no nothing. The play is quite naïve, but most of us think it is a good thing that Plínio Marcos has broken away from having to write like himself all the time. It is rather bawdy, sometimes a little childish, but João das Neves, staging it for arena, has made fairly good use of circus techniques. There are songs with words by Ferreira Gullar and music by Denoy de Oliveira which are quite good; and there is a very good (and exhausting) performance by Milton Gonçalves, an outstanding Negro actor who plays the part of the priest, witch doctor, or what-have-you, who represents religion at the service of a ruling class, and getting a good percentage for making the proper spiritual threats against change or revolt. The imbecile of the title is an exploited worker who takes the typical old-fashioned position of the man who works but considers that it is

through the kindness of his employer that he makes a living. A fellow-worker does the enlightening.

It was presented by Grupo Opinião, which takes its name from the first post-1964 attempt at political protest-cum-music, *Opinião*. Their level of production is uneven: *Opinião* itself was effective but mostly through music; *Liberdade, Liberdade* was all quotations (Marx, Jesus Christ, Shakespeare and anyone else you may care to name), and they've had a couple of flops. Perhaps still the best thing to have been done by it is the play by Ferreira Gullar and Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, *Se Correr o Bicho Pega, Se Ficar o Bicho Come (If You Run The Beast Will Catch You, If You Stop The Beast Will Eat You)*, an elaborate way of saying "You Can't Win." Written after the fashion of the popular verse literature of the Brazilian Northeast, the play was intelligent, gay, and relevant. Full of farcical incidents, it was very difficult to stage in the round, and the authors called in Gianni Ratto, the only one of the crop of Italian directors imported 15 years ago to stay on in Brazil. A better man could not have been found. It was a contagiously happy performance, and the two authors were named best of the year. The music was by Jenny Marcondes.

But let us return to Rio "right now": Antonio Bivar, the author of *O Começo É Sempre Difícil, Cordélia Brasil, Vamos Tentar Outra Vez (The Beginning Is Always Difficult, Cordelia Brasil, Let Us Try Again)*, is a much younger man. Plínio Marcos had been knocking about the theatre and TV for a few years before he became famous (and after he stopped working as a longshoreman), but Bivar had completed only two of his three years at drama school when his very first play (with another equally long title), written with somebody else, was staged and was seen by practically no one. In his rather absent-minded way, the twenty-one-year-old author told this writer, "You know, I didn't really invite any of my friends, because it is all so bad that I didn't even want to see it myself." Well, *Cordelia Brasil* (as she is known for short) fared a little better, but not much. The play got its first chance in a playwriting contest which took place in Rio (sponsored by the state government). It was a hectic affair, but the play was presented in a brilliant reading directed by Fauzy Arap (who had equally brilliantly directed Plínio Marcos' *Navalha na Carne*, and unforgiveably was not "best of the year," which he was). If Plínio Marcos hits one through sheer force, violence, and indignant compassion, Antonio Bivar has a lyrical strain and a very personal turn of mind that keeps one very attentive for fear of missing the next unexpected bit of perfectly logical piece of illogic. Unfortunately, a series of incidents made a mess of the final—before the jury—reading of the play, and then Fauzy Arap gave up the idea of staging it; finally it was produced disastrously. A talented actor made it his first direction, and a director he is not likely to be ever. Out of three actors, two were making stage debuts, and the results were thoroughly amateurish. After a battle-royal with the censorship, the play had all the publicity it needed, and only that has given it a moderately

successful run. Bivar has written a new play, to open in São Paulo soon, under the direction of Fauzy Arap.

Arena Conta Tiradentes, written by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri and Augusto Boal, with music by four very well-known names in popular music, is a local production of a text presented in São Paulo more than one year ago. Written for the Teatro de Arena in S.P., it is part of a series in which *Arena Tells* (the story of). . . . This time the protagonist is Tiradentes, the hero of the first Brazilian attempt at independence in the late 18th century. Boal considers that he has made a definite contribution to playwriting by creating what he calls the *coringa* (the "joker" in a deck of cards). This *coringa* idea means that actors exchange roles throughout the play. The role of Tiradentes, for instance, is successively taken by various players. The basic reason for this idea lies, of course, in the concept that it is not the individual that counts; that anyone could fulfill a certain political role at a certain moment of the historical process; but no one seems to think that the "joker" is as important as Boal himself does. The Tiradentes production in Rio is not particularly good, and the play's weaknesses are laid bare by it. The director is Álvaro Guimarães, very young, and more enthusiastic than competent.

De Bocage a Nelson Rodrigues (From B. to N.R.) is the fourth show to be staged in the 90-seat Mini-Teatro. Like its predecessors, it tries to do a short play or part of a play, and contrast it (or somehow link it) with a non-theatrical author. They did Brecht and Stanislaw Ponte Preta (a Brazilian humorist), Feydeau and . . . , Max Frisch and . . . , and now they try to link the historically foul-mouthed Portuguese poet of the 18th century with the historically foul-mouthed Brazilian playwright of the 1940's. Jayme Barcelos, the director, manages to make things move in the tiny arena stage, and the promise of scandalous goings-on brings people in to see a fairly good performance, though not so scandalous.

In the tradition of comedy of manners, one may see in the Teatro Santa Rosa a new play by Ziraldo, cartoonist and humorist, who for sometime has been attracted by the theatre. *Este Banheiro é Pequeno Demais para Nós Dois (This Bathroom is Too Small for the Two of Us)* is the title, and it is in itself sufficient to show that this is not particularly in line with the politically-committed "new" theatre. It is rather in the line of any sophisticated comedy, relying on gags and so forth, and it will probably have a very successful run.

The winner of the playwriting contest mentioned above will open in another week: *Trágico Acidente Destronou Tereza (Tragical Accident Dethroned Thereza)*. By José Wilker, it has political intentions through the denunciation of beauty-contests. Because it has been largely rewritten since winning the prize, and has not opened so far, not much information may be given here. It is a first play, and the author is in his twenties.

Those represent the plays by Brazilian authors that may be seen in Rio in 1968. It is very significant, in view of what was said above about the dwindling

public for plays and the particularly happy moment for music, that three theatres where plays are regularly presented are now taken up by shows centered on singers or vocal groups. Last month it was five instead of three.

I believe that besides mentioning that things like Barrillet & Gredy's *40 Carats*, Arthur Miller's *The Price*, and a revival of *Angel Street* are doing all right at the box-office, it would be interesting to say something about the production of some non-Brazilian plays that seem to be relevant to the Brazilian moment.

Let us start with Molière. At the Maison de France Theatre, which is in the French Embassy building, Paulo Autran (one of—if not the—ranking Brazilian actors) is presenting (financed by the government of the state of Paraná) *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. It is perhaps better to call it an adaptation than a translation by Stanislaw Ponte Preta, who shocked the French members of the opening night audience by making M. Jourdain express his social-climbing uncouthness in the most up-to-the-minute "carioca" slang. Not only the French were shocked. Many Brazilians felt that "this is not Molière." Personally, this writer believes he would have enjoyed it. This is broad farce, and Ademar Guerra, one of the most brilliant of the young directors, has set a mad pace for his bad-actor-proof direction. The cast is uneven, but it is nearly impossible for its weaker elements to damage the performance, and Paulo Autran gives his best performance in years. The result is hilarious, the younger public loves it, and the criticism of M. Jourdain does not escape them. Why should Molière mind?

New to Rio is the Teatro Nôvo, a very large theatre recently refurbished and now starting a career as a privately-owned arts center, where music, ballet and theatre are presented. Besides housing its own activities, the Teatro Nôvo, under the general direction of Gianni Ratto, wants to welcome under its wing any worthy enterprises; and at this very moment, for instance, one may see there Niccoló Machiavelli's *The Mandrake* in a delightfully naïve rendering, the work of Luis Mendonça, a fairly young director who comes from the North of Brazil, and a cast entirely made up of workers in a plastics plant. The project was started some time ago, and their first production was Ariano Suassuna's *Auto da Compadecida* (published in the United States under the title of *The Rogue's Trial*). The director wisely tries to preserve, in all his projects, the lack of sophistication which characterizes his actors' reaction to the text. Not being used to attending the theatre, they come up with ideas that are untarnished by any put-on attitudes.

Most important of all, however, is a performance by students of the University of São Paulo which is visiting Rio with Brecht's *The Guns of Señora Carrar*. The direction is by Flávio Império, up to now one of the country's most important set-designers. His richly visual concept of the play, and the truly experimental frame of mind in which he worked with his student cast, are remarkable. Early this year we had, originating in Rio, a play that was a terrific box-office success: *Roda Viva* (*The Free Wheel*, or *The Whirlpool*). From a

what naïve script by Chico Buarque de Holanda (the most successful of popular composers) which tells the story of the rise and fall of a pop singer, or José Celso Martinez Corrêa (usually connected with the Teatro Oficina in São Paulo) built an extremely aggressive performance that often was rather outrageous and merely tricky. The name of Chico Buarque would insure success anyway. The direction added a "succès de scandale," and the set and costumes by Flávio Império were really exceptionally good. Everything that the author naively meant was projected by this visual backing of the director's idea of giving a violent theatrical performance. Without that backing it would have been a failure; with Flávio Império's work, it was easy. Now *Señora Carrar* chooses the designer as director, and a good one at that.

As mentioned above, it is hard to convey the "feel" of Rio theatre in printed words. We are being pulled and pushed in several directions; this or that feature may have for us a meaning that won't even be understandable to anyone else. In another five years and then—perhaps—this writer may be able to tell you what Rio theatre *was* in 1968.