

## Professional Theatre Education in Brazil

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Without some idea of the historical backdrop that gave rise to the distinctive Brazilian culture, in many ways different from the cultures of its neighbors in the hemisphere of the Americas, it would not be possible to understand fully the development of efforts at preparing professionals for the Brazilian theatre. "Discovered" by a Portuguese navigator in 1500, and thereafter colonized and exploited for its vast natural resources, Brazil was kept under an exceedingly rigid social control, as exemplified by the fact that only in 1808 did it become possible to publish books and newspapers on native soil. From the earliest times, the Brazilian elite turned its back on the rest of North and South America and sought its inspiration for cultural affairs, for social organization and for artistic standards only in Europe. The plantation culture, abetted by slavery, made it possible for the elite to join in such habits as play-reading in the living room of the main house, much as George Washington and his young friends did in Virginia. Likewise, there is evidence that when emancipation came to Brazil in 1889, a number of former slaves, bearing Portuguese names, returned to Nigeria, where, in addition to founding a "Brazilian School" of house-building in Lagos, they gave dramatic performances of the standard European repertory of the period.<sup>1</sup> If Calvinistic Protestantism hindered the development of theatre in the United States, the Catholic Church in Brazil, similarly concerned with morals and the dangers of freedom of expression, also yielded little space for the performing arts.

Just as in the United States with relation to Great Britain, Brazil throughout the 19th century slowly began breaking away from its cultural mentor, Portugal, and developing a new dramatic literature with nationalistic features. Both began to depict native types and scenarios that were distinctively local. But the theatre as an institution in Brazil remained essentially European in all other aspects. The favored repertory was confined to French, Italian and Portuguese dramatic

literature (or their native equivalents) and visiting theatrical, operatic and dance troupes from those countries frequently played in the major Brazilian capitals such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Campinas, Santos, Campos, Porto Alegre, Salvador, Recife and Belem. So popular were these performances at the turn of the century that to house them properly, many cities in the Northeast of the country, such as Fortaleza, João Pessoa e Natal, purchased and erected pre-fabricated, several-storied, iron theatre structures from companies in Ireland and Scotland, most of which are still standing and in use today. The advent of railroads from the late 19th century on permitted these visiting troupes to perform in the private theatres belonging to the coffee and sugar barons throughout the country.

But while North American drama progressed into Realism and plots based on psychological subject-matter, Brazilian drama well into the twentieth century continued to emphasize Romantic melodrama, native comedies and old-fashioned farces. Until Nelson Rodrigues in the 1940's, there was no O'Neill in Brazil to point toward new directions, to free artistic expression from its roots in the worn paradigm of nineteenth-century European dramaturgy and representation.

The professional theatre in Brazil, nevertheless, remained vigorous as an institution. The comedies and dramas of Martins Pena, Franca Junior, Artur Azevedo, Coelho Netto, Oduvaldo Vianna and Joracy Camargo, to name just a few of the popular playwrights, together with the superb Romantic acting of João Caetano (a figure much like Edwin Forrest on the North American stage), Leopoldo Froes, Italia Fausta, Apolonia Pinto, Procopio Ferreira, Jayme Costa, Conchita and Dulcina de Moraes and Rodolfo Meyer and many others represent important contributions to maintaining the professional theatre alive throughout the country from the later nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. João Caetano even wrote and published a series of lectures, *Lições Dramáticas*,<sup>2</sup> almost a manual for actor-training, which offers the modern reader a unique view into the mind and art of a most interesting theatre artist and into the secrets of a style of acting based on rhetorical emphasis, on declamation and on what today would be considered posturing.

Until the beginning of this century, actors had to learn their art from private teachers, most of whose names are now lost to us, and mainly from apprenticeships within theatrical companies. For the social elite of the time, it was acceptable to permit its youngsters to take classes in declamation; but there was little tolerance for the study of acting as such. In fact, the requirement that professional actresses carry pink health cards, similar to those of prostitutes, was officially abandoned only in the late 1940's.

The first formal approach to actor training was the creation, in 1908, of the *Escola Dramática Municipal* in Rio de Janeiro (today called the *Escola de Teatro*

Martins Pena), directed by the writer Coelho Netto, which is perhaps the oldest drama school in South America. In 1939, the Serviço Nacional de Teatro opened its own theatre conservatory (Curso Prático de Teatro), which in 1969 became the drama school of the Universidade do Rio de Janeiro (Uni-Rio). Other theatre courses were later established by Renato Viana (in Rio and Porto Alegre) and Paschoal Carlos Magno, in his Teatro do Estudante. Set design was informally taught in Rio de Janeiro by the renowned Santa Rosa, who transmitted to his disciples and colleagues the latest theories and techniques in this field. Barbara Heliodora, who had studied at the Connecticut College for Women, began her career as Brazil's foremost Shakespearean translator and scholar, and in addition to regular theatre reviewing for various publications, she continues to teach play analysis to present-day theatre students in Rio de Janeiro.

But it was in the 1940's, with the arrival in Brazil of several young European theatre professionals, that the form of dramaturgy, of production and of theatre training radically changed. These foreign actors, directors, scene and costume designers, some as refugees fleeing the imminent catastrophe in Europe and others later fleeing post-war economic difficulties, brought to Brazil the new ideas that had been current in their home countries--and the practice of theatre took on new life. Zbigniew Ziembinsky from Poland, Eugenio Kusnet from the Soviet Union, Maurice Vanneau from Belgium, and from Italy Ruggiero Jacobbi, Adolfo Celi, Luciano Salce, Flaminio Bollini-Cerri, Gianni Ratto, Alberto D'Aversa, Luciana Petrucelli, Tullio Costa and Aldo Calvo introduced the young generation to the ideas and practices of Stanislavski, the Expressionists, Piscator, Brecht, and a host of other modern innovators, as well as to the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* and the latest trends of European and North American drama. Through them, the very idea of direction reached the Brazilian stage for the first time, together with new concepts in play analysis, ensemble playing and modern techniques of lighting, sound and set design.

The simultaneous arrival of an emotional Brecht and a dialectical Stanislavski induced an explosive burst of theatrical activity in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where these talented foreigners first settled and were quickly absorbed by the intellectual and socio-economic elite. With their help, new professional companies developed with a modern repertory, modern production techniques and in-house actor-training, foremost among which were Os Comediantes in Rio and the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia (T.B.C.) in São Paulo, which over time were found to be significant breeding grounds for new talents in the theatre. As Décio de Almeida Prado has remarked, "Começava o teatro moderno no Brasil. O problema agora era alcançar a Europa em alguns saltos de gigante, refazendo exitada, desordenadamente, em quatro ou cinco anos, quatro ou cinco décadas de experiência estética estrangeira."<sup>3</sup>

In the same spirit, the founding in 1949 of the Escola de Arte Dramática by Alfredo Mesquita, the scion of a traditional São Paulo family, was a distinctive effort at creating formal education for theatre professionals. A three-year, high-school level institution, the E.A.D. in its early years enjoyed a faculty that would inspire envy in many university-level institutions in more advanced countries: in dramatic criticism, theory and theatre history, Anatol Rosenfeld, a brilliant young immigrant who had studied at the University of Berlin before having to flee Germany, João Guinsburg, who also had a foot in the publishing world, Décio de Almeida Prado, a theatre critic and editor of the city's leading newspaper literary supplement, Sábado Magaldi, also a critic, and Alberto D'Aversa. Along with the teachers of acting and directing (the leading actress of the T.B.C., Cacilda Becker, and Eugenio Kusnet, among others) and Augusto Boal in playwriting, this faculty produced throughout the decades of the fifties and sixties many of the foremost exponents of the Brazilian theatre. In the early 1970's, due to the continued financial difficulties which beset the E.A.D., the school was incorporated into the University of São Paulo, where it continues to function, adjacent on the campus to the university-level Escola de Comunicações e Artes, but in no way integrated into the bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programs of the latter, nor in any other significant way into the life of the University.

Following the example of the E.A.D. in São Paulo, other theatre courses were created in Rio de Janeiro during the 1950's, such as Dulcina de Moraes' Fundação Brasileira de Teatro and Maria Clara de Machado's O Tablado, both still active and productive to this day.

In 1955, a forward-looking Rector of the University of Bahia, Roberto Santos, invited Martim Gonçalves (one of the founders of O Tablado in Rio) to establish within the University a theatre school with a high standard of excellence. Through the help, over a number of years, of the Fulbright Commission, which partially financed the effort, a number of North American directors and teachers were brought to Bahia to contribute to the building of this school, which produced important generations of professionals, and remains one of the leading forces of the theatre in the Northeast.

Also in the late 1950's, Ruggiero Jacobbi went to Porto Alegre, in the far south of the country, to direct the Center of Theatre Studies of the University of Rio Grande do Sul, which was instrumental to the development of theatre in the state and later served as the basis for the creation of the Scenic Arts Department within the Institute of Arts of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. And Haydee Bittencourt, a paulista, went to Belo Horizonte to direct the theatre school, at the pre-university level, which was a part of the Federal University of Minas Gerais.

Two sources of informal professional theatre training in São Paulo in the fifties and sixties were the Teatro de Arena, led by Augusto Boal, who had studied with John Gassner at Columbia University, and the Teatro Oficina, led by José Celso Martínez Correa.<sup>4</sup> Both organizations had a steady following among university students, intellectuals and progressive members of the middle class, and both held numerous workshops to prepare future collaborators in their endeavors. Many of today's leading playwrights, actors and actresses, directors and designers in the theatre, television and cinema in Brazil received their introduction to the theatre arts in those seminars and workshops. The Arena had its greatest successes in the preparation of playwrights and actors with a distinctive Brechtian background, and the Oficina in the training of actors in the Stanislavsky tradition. Both groups developed original contributions to actor-training, described and published by Boal and Kusnet.<sup>5</sup>

The period of Military Rule in Brazil, generally considered to run from 1964 to 1984, had a devastating effect on theatre activities in general throughout the country (which at this point had a population of approximately 120,000,000), due to a strict policy of political and moral censorship. Both the professional theatre and the university-student groups consistently maintained an attitude of protest against the military regime through the production of plays which contested the regime's right to censure all aspects of literary, artistic, journalistic and academic expression. The imprisonment and torture of hundreds of individuals created an atmosphere of intimidation and fear which found its way into the dramaturgy, into the selection of plays to be produced, and into the teaching of classes in the theatre schools. It was in this period that the university student population of the country grew from 100,000 to 1,500,000, and that the general shape of university education took the form it presently has.

Before the period of the military regime, the few universities that existed had faculties with higher degrees principally from Europe, curricula which required well-rounded liberal arts studies for those in any one of the humanistic or social science fields (it should be noted that Medicine, Dentistry and allied health fields, Law, Journalism and Library Science were, and still are, undergraduate courses in Brazil, and have no liberal arts requirements for their students), and libraries and laboratories adequate to the needs of a small elite of intellectually well-prepared students from the upper classes.

The new government, in an attempt to raise the country to a social and economic level approximating that of a nation of the First World, facilitated the creation of over a thousand new institutions of higher learning, improvised tens of thousands of instructors from among politically-acceptable professionals from varying fields, the self-taught and recent graduates; it permitted the rapid "qualification" of university teachers through the granting of doctoral degrees

merely as the result of presenting a thesis (a handful of these works turned out to be of real quality and the rest of very doubtful merit), closed its eyes to the question of requiring adequate libraries and laboratories on new campuses, and proclaimed a national minimum curriculum for most academic subjects, that for theatre proving to be a barrier to proper development.

The major problem of the national minimum curriculum lowered by the Ministry of Education in the early 1970's, when there were practically no graduate courses in theatre available, and which must be followed by all academic institutions even today, is that it pushed down to the undergraduate level of study those career specializations which normally would be followed only after a generalized, theoretical/practical bachelor's degree in theatre (namely: acting, directing, scene design, playwriting and criticism).

This premature specialization disregards the actual needs of the Brazilian stage and the regional unevenness of the country. The lack of a qualified faculty able to cover all the specific disciplines of the minimum curriculum for each theatrical career confined the professional drama schools to a few universities in the major urban centers: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Porto Alegre, Brasilia, Campinas and Belo Horizonte. Other universities throughout the country offer, instead of a bachelor's degree in theatre, licenciaturas (theatre education degrees), in courses which are essentially teacher-training grounds, with a far less demanding minimum curriculum, and in which the educational process is given emphasis over the artistic product. In these courses, there is less concern with the learning of aesthetic criteria and technical competence than with pedagogy and techniques of art education (especially those appropriate to the Third World Environment).

The minimum curriculum also subjects the drama courses to an impoverishing uniformity by rubbing out the traditional regional markings distinctive of each institution, and giving their graduates an indistinguishable profile. On the other hand, the early career specializations do not find an adequate counterpart either in the dramatic background of the students or in the reality of the professional job market. Since there is no community theatre movement in Brazil, there is no "feeding" process of students into theatre courses and no "job market" for those who graduate, except the competitive professional theatre and television environments in Rio and São Paulo, or else a teaching career in the few public and private high schools which have the means and desire to have dramatic activities in their curricula.

A study commissioned by the Brazilian National Research Council in 1981, which sought to diagnose the situation of the teaching of the arts in the country, concluded that the rapid growth in the 1970's had lowered the quality of learning in general, that instantaneous graduate degrees had produced little significant

research and few positive perspectives for the future, and that most undergraduate courses in theatre were merely "about" theatre because they offered relatively little practical experience in the art.<sup>6</sup>

Other problems which confront the university-level teaching of theatre in Brazil: endogeny is a common feature, with most instructors having graduated from the same institutions where they now teach; practically no movement of faculty members from one institution to another occurs (not only is there no "raiding," but there are very few visiting professorships for anyone other than a rare foreign professor, normally a Fulbright grantee); only one academic journal, recently initiated, and dedicated to theatre studies exists in the country; just one organization of theatre professors, embryonic, exists at either the national or regional levels, offering only a single annual meeting for the exchange of ideas. All in all, everything concerning the academic teaching of theatre is still incipient.

But the number of candidates for theatre studies grows steadily year after year. The return of many students and teachers from the United States and Europe, some holding degrees from prestigious institutions, would suggest the expectation of a substantial increase in the academic quality of the drama courses throughout the country. Likewise, the master's and doctoral programs in theatre at the University of São Paulo, initiated in 1971, have proved over the years to be a significant source of theatrical research and faculty qualification, particularly in the more theoretical areas such as dramatic literature, criticism and historical aspects of the Brazilian theatre. In the present decade, the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) in São Paulo and the University of Rio de Janeiro (Uni-Rio), a Federal institution, have established their own master's programs, and a few post-baccalaureate specialist courses have been offered, since the late 1970's, in other Brazilian institutions. The major weakness of all these graduate programs is the lack of adequate facilities, equipment and resources for practical work, causing the studies to be kept essentially at the theoretical level.

Dramatic theory, theatre aesthetics, criticism, playwrighting, dramatic literature and Brazilian theatre history are also the stronger assets of the undergraduate course at the University of São Paulo (USP). Its academic tradition, library resources and qualified faculty place USP high above all other drama departments in these areas of study.

The leading centers for the study of scene and costume design are Rio de Janeiro (at Uni-Rio and at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) and Salvador (at the Federal University of Bahia), mainly because of the professional expertise and academic backgrounds of their teaching staff. There is no specific course for lighting design or other technical careers, production and theatre administration, which are considered secondary-school professions by Federal law. It might be

mentioned here that the figure of the stage manager does not exist in the Brazilian theatre.

The directing course of USP and Uni-Rio have been the source of a new generation of Brazilian directors (Moacir Goes, Gabriel Vilella, William Pereira, Cacá Rosset, Iacov Hillel, and the late Luiz Roberto Galizia among others). But the schools of Bahia, Brasilia and Rio Grande do Sul also have a strong influence in the regional theatre, both in this field and in the training of actors. According to Brazilian law, acting may be taught either as an undergraduate specialization or as a high school level course. This second option is clearly preferred by those students who aim at a professional career on the stage or television screen. There are courses of all kinds, purposes and reputations, as everywhere in the world. The minimum period required by law is two and a half years of part-time study, and the curriculum is far less demanding than its university equivalent, especially as concerns the theoretical disciplines. On the other hand, the teaching is more intense, down-to-earth and professionally oriented than in academia, consequently attracting a larger number of candidates and providing the stage with most of its young performers. Two of these professional schools stand out for their prestige: the traditional E.A.D. in São Paulo and the C.A.L. (Casa das Artes de Laranjeiras) in Rio, founded by the late critic Yan Michalski in 1981. Among the acting courses in universities, the most respected are those of USP (São Paulo), Unicamp (Campinas), and the Federal Universities of Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul. The virtues and flaws of all these courses are not to be found in their facilities, curricula or methodology, but in the excellence (or lack of it . . .) of their faculty members. As a whole, they all suffer from methodological eclecticism, which stems from the diverse background of the instructors (Stanislavski, Brecht, Grotowski, Meyerhold, Borba, et al.). Movement is usually a strong point in the program, while dance, voice and singing have serious teaching deficiencies.

There are no acting studios (such as Stella Adler's, or the Actors') in Brazil, but workshops are frequently offered in most areas of performance and production, conducted by foreign specialists or leading professionals. In São Paulo, the internationally-renowned Centro de Pesquisas Teatrais (C.P.T.), led by director Antunes Filho, offers a practical training ground highly disputed by young actors and actresses.

An analysis of the licenciaturas in scenic arts (theatre education), widespread throughout the country, reveals problems very similar to those of the academic acting courses, worsened by the lack of adequate facilities, practical training and qualified faculty in the smaller institutions. In fact, after two decades of existence, these licenciaturas have not demonstrated that they have had any significant impact on the artistic consciousness of the students of primary and



secondary schools. A different profile for the licenciado is the aim of a new course at the Federal University of Uberlândia (Minas Gerais), chiefly structured around current international production and performance styles, and designed to provide a wide theoretical/practical basis for the learning of the theatre arts.

Professional theatre education in Brazil is still in the process of shaping a system appropriate to the country's specific needs and potential. The recently-approved "Law of Educational Guidelines and Bases," which allows greater flexibility and independence to the schools and universities in the structuring of their curricula, together with a new generation of qualified teachers, the impressive expansion of specialized bibliography, the growing demand for theatre courses, the improvement of existing facilities and a proper stimulus to innovative experiences may contribute to bring that ultimate goal closer to becoming a reality.

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*Federal University of Uberlândia*

## Notes

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2. João Caetano dos Santos, *Lições Dramáticas*. Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional do Teatro, Ministério da Educação, 1962.
3. Décio de Almeida Prado, *O Teatro Brasileiro Moderno* São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1988.
4. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books, 1979. See also his *200 Exercícios e Jogos para o Ator e o Não-Ator com Vontade de Dizer Algo Através do Teatro*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1980.
5. Eugenio Kusnet, *Introdução ao "Método da Ação Inconsciente"* São Paulo: Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado, 1971. See also his *Ator e Método*. Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional do Teatro, Ministério da Educação, 1975.
6. Fredric M. Litto, *Avaliação e Perspectivas. As Artes*. Brasília: Secretaria de Planejamento, CNPq-Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, 1982.

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