

Brazil's New Social Theatre

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After a somewhat unsteady and generally undistinguished history the Brazilian theatre is giving signs of coming of age.¹ In recent years its dramatists have become more daring, more *engagés*, more socially-minded. Although they do not enjoy complete freedom from censorship, they have written and been allowed to present plays much more topical and critical than the usual fare offered in the years of the Brazilian theatre's existence. This added fiber and "muscle," found in a group of young writers whose philosophy leans toward the left, has brought new life, substance, meaning and promise to theatrical activity in that country. Indeed, this new generation has projected, in varying degrees of protest, a developing sense of involvement in contemporary problems not heretofore prominent in its country's dramatic activity.

A brief sketch of the background and history of Brazil's dramaturgy, so little known in general, will permit us to view this present activist expression in proper perspective, to clearly see that its emphasis and dedication are unprecedented, and to appreciate better its significance.² Previous socially-related dramatic efforts, protestations against general living conditions, opposition to social or political precepts, or attempts toward a reformation of society were either subordinate to another purpose, or were direct protests by would-be social dramatists whose cries were lost before the conflicting tastes and preferences of the public, which patronized a theatre generally detached from the problems and tribulations of its day.

The first notable attempts at dramatic performances occurred in the sixteenth century and were sponsored by the Jesuits, especially by Padre Anchieta, called the Apostle of Brazil. A society made up of varied and

low elements needed elevation as well as amalgamation. Thus, the extension of the principles of catechism and of the Gospel was aimed not solely at converting the natives, but it was also obviously directed at the colonists themselves in an effort to raise their standards and morals. In fact, such dramatic pieces as were performed were often off-color and the Church felt it had to combat them. Religious, moral, and didactic motives were blended, and the medium employed was the well-known *auto*, used so effectively in Portugal by Gil Vicente. In Brazil, however, the application was more direct. In these Jesuit productions in verse there was a mixture of the native language, Tupi, with Portuguese and Spanish, as the locale or occasion demanded. Native elements and folklore were combined with religious themes, all correlated to contemporary events and conditions. The first of these selections was probably Anchieta's *Auto de Pregação Universal* (Auto of the Universal Sermon), of which only two fragments have survived. However, other examples of this form are known, such as the *Auto da Crisma* (Confirmation Auto), reconstructed by Joaquim Ribeiro.³ These short selections served the purposes of the Jesuits, teaching and hopefully reforming as they entertained, but although they offer a valuable insight into conditions of the period, we cannot classify them as being primarily social theatre.

In our rapid survey we shall pass over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when conditions were not propitious and when there was only relatively insignificant theatre activity. Dramatic companies did not exist, nor theatres in which to perform. Churches (with their limitations) and public squares were used. In a search for official sanction and support, the theme of the stage as an educational force was projected. An important advancement was the construction of *casas da ópera* or *casa da comédia*. A few French plays were given although it was Spain's Golden Age dramas that held top popularity. The support of Dom João VI, then with the Portuguese court in Brazil as a result of the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian peninsula; the forming of theatre companies, especially João Caetano's; the erection of theatre buildings; and the invigorating stimulus provided by the cultural climate which pervaded the center of government (Portugal's as well as Brazil's), with Portuguese and foreign artists, musicians, and intellectuals now in the country—these all helped provide the spur needed by the stage. For the most part the audiences preferred light pieces. However, with the growing sentiment for independence (from Portugal) and later for more representative government, the stage at times served as a pulpit for political expression. When the country's emperor Dom Pedro I abdicated in 1831 there was a new surge of activity. One theatre was renamed the *Constitucional Fluminense* ("Rio de Janeiro's Constitutional Theatre"), and in celebration of the occasion the play given was *O Dia de Júbilo Para os Amantes da Liberdade ou A Queda do Tirano* (Happy Day for the

Lovers of Liberty or The Fall of the Tyrant). At times shouts of "Long Live the Republic!"⁴ were heard in the playhouses. Due to these and other demonstrations, and the low moral level which characterized some plays, first censorship procedures were established in 1824.⁵ Galante de Sousa says of these activities that "if political events often disturbed the progress of our theatrical activities, they contributed significantly, as in other sectors of national life, to form our awareness, now aroused, of a free nation, and to condition, up to a certain point, the first manifestations of a theatre of national themes. If there was, at first, much excess, and that is common in collective expressions, there is no doubt that it all helped to prepare the founding of the national theatre."⁶

Generally, 1838 is cited as the year of the birth of the Brazilian theatre. On March 13 of that year, there was performed what has been called the first play on a national theme written by a Brazilian. It was Gonçalves de Magalhães' *Antônio José ou O Poeta e a Inquisição* (Antônio José or The Poet and the Inquisition) and João Caetano played the main role. Actually, although born in Brazil, Antônio José da Silva, called "the Jew," had left the country at an early age to go to Portugal, where he became a victim of the Inquisition. In a sense, he belongs more to Portuguese than Brazilian literature. Gonçalves de Magalhães was not really a dramatist, nor his play a particularly good one. A more important reason for accepting this year as an initial point of development is that it also marked the debut (on October 4) of Martins Pena, the true founder of Brazil's theatre, especially of its comedy of manners. Following in the tradition of Gil Vicente's lighter moods, Martins Pena was generally content in treating human foibles and local conditions, more interested in entertaining than in projecting a message, more addicted to poking fun than to trying to modify mores or manners.⁷

Meanwhile, although comedy tended to reign, a curious situation was developing with respect to the public. Some serious, or even thesis, plays from outside, especially from France, works of Augier, Scribe, and Dumas Fils, were well received in their translated versions. The latter's *Dame aux Camélias* (Camille) was a particular favorite. Yet when Brazilian writers tried similar themes, but with a local flavor or application, there was either no interest or a reaction against them. It seemed that reality with its problems was acceptable only as long as it was not brought too close to home.

José de Alencar, one of the country's first important novelists, was to experience this attitude. Especially known for his Romantic Indian novels *Iracema* and *O Guarani*, Alencar had written other prose works in which he defended romantic love and a freer choice in marriage for women. He was also an abolitionist. Drawn by the stage, he ventured into this medium, his productions including several pieces of social content. In *O Demônio Familiar* (The Domestic Devil) the action revolves around a slave who has

been almost accepted into a family. Problems arise, made possible by the slave relationship and abetted by social attitudes. However, the author's thesis is somewhat weakened in that much of what happens is due to individual failings, and thus the play is as much or more an indictment of family mores and manners than of slavery itself. Much of what happens is due to the advantage the slave takes of his favored position and the ineptitude and limitations of his "protectors." A member of the household asserts that society, or exterior life, is threatening to destroy the family, or inner life. The slave is freed, ending one part of the relationship, but we do not feel that all will be right as a result.

Two other plays by the same author bore a marked resemblance to Dumas' *Camille*, the story of a fallen woman who makes a great sacrifice for the one she loves. In *As Asas de um Anjo* (Wings of an Angel) the dramatist portrays the fall of a girl, victim in his eyes of family neglect and abuse by her lovers. Finally she marries and this is meant to suggest rehabilitation. However, after three performances in 1858 the production was stopped by the police as immoral.

Alencar tried again two years later, this time not affixing his name to the play. Slavery, social prejudice, and sacrifice were the themes in *Mãe* (Mother). A Negro slave determines not to let her son or society know that she is his mother so that this relationship will not impede his chances for success and for marriage into an established family. She even takes her own life so as to remove herself from the scene. Although Machado de Assis considered it the best national drama produced in Brazil to that date, other critics were not so favorably impressed.⁸ The author's *O Jesuíta* (The Jesuit) a few years later ran into difficulties with the Drama Conservatory. This was all too much for Alencar. He had tried to defend his works but to no avail. Embittered by it all, considering national writers victims of discrimination, he abandoned this genre. This was most unfortunate, for José de Alencar had dared to write social drama and despite certain failings and certain exaggerations, including a melodramatic note now and then, he had demonstrated dramatic perception and technique which should have been allowed to develop. José Veríssimo, Brazilian literary critic, said of Alencar: "To him goes the honor of having brought to the Brazilian scene what was later called the theatre of ideas."⁹

But it is the present century that concerns us most. In 1932, with the world economic crisis felt in Brazil as in other countries, there appeared on the scene a play which had more punch than the usual drama, a play that was more related to the stress and social problems of the day. Its author was Joracy Camargo, who earlier had tried his hand at comedy and the musical review, hiding behind such pen names as Ícaro (Icarus) and João Moreno (John Brown). Its title was *Deus lhe Pague* (God Bless You).

The plot is rather simple. The script begins with the words of the title, as a beggar thanks a passer-by for his donation. Then we have the first of various dialogues in which this beggar relates to another the story of his life. As he philosophizes, the playwright uses the flashback technique for his past. Actually in good financial condition now, he explains how many years ago his boss had stolen his designs for a labor-saving machine, resulting in the mental illness of his wife and his own arrest for assault. Having recovered from these setbacks, he had undertaken a successful life as a beggar. The only conflict in the play is posed by a rather shallow young man who tempts the older man's beautiful mistress. However, she balks in the end, deciding to stay with old moneybags and we suppose they lived happily ever after.

The special attraction this dramatic work had was that, despite its feeble plot, it dared speak out in public, giving expression on the stage to much of the criticism of the day, repeating leftist ideas that many puzzled citizens were thinking and saying. In the dialogues, somewhat boring after a while, we have the formulation of certain liberal, socialist, and even Communist concepts, with capitalism as a favorite target. The beggar professes that he would prefer to work, but this is not always possible, so he had determined to beg, and even steal, to get what society owed him. After all, the so-called owners held what did not really belong to them. But they were weak and this would change. He knew, for he read Upton Sinclair and Karl Marx. The public, he asserts, demands the suppression of misery and hunger, much of which is attributable to capitalism, selfishness, and the concept of property. Asked by his companion if he is a Communist, he cautions silence, for the word is one used to frighten people. Interspersed are such homilies as, "There is no generosity in alms: there is interest. Sinners give to alleviate their sins; sufferers to merit God's grace. Furthermore, with a measly nickel they put off the revolt of the oppressed."¹⁰

Actually the play is not good from an esthetic point of view. It is exaggerated, its situation and attempts at humor are forced and the dialogues are more imposed than spontaneous. But the play was timely and outspoken at a time when such thoughts could be dangerous. Jorge Amado, Lins do Rêgo and other Brazilian writers of the period had seen jail, and Camargo himself at times had to keep moving to stay out of the reach of the police. This was theatre of ideas and chronologically it was another step in social theatre. Yet it was hardly a social manifesto and the impact of the selection itself must have been relatively limited. The philosophical beggar is more a long-winded old man than a revolutionist, and by no means do we feel the involvement or urge that comes, for example, in *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets. Yet the play did occasion discussion and debate and still has appeal. It is claimed that in a dozen years there were some 8,000 presentations of it in Brazil. It has also been played in many countries, including the

United States. In all justice we should add that Camargo's writing shows great variety in themes and that for his work as a whole he was awarded in 1964 the Brazilian Academy of Letters' Machado de Assis prize. He has also served as President of his country's leading theatre organization, the Sociedade Brasileira de Autores Teatrais.

One of Brazil's finest dramatists is Jorge Andrade. As his work was covered in detail in an earlier issue of the *Review*¹¹ I shall merely touch on it here. With proved artistry and good taste Andrade has treated social situations or problems, not as an activist deeply troubled inciting his readers to corrective action, but rather as a sociologically and nationalistically-minded, sensitive painter of Brazilian life. More often than not, this life is not satisfying, but his characters do not seem able to face or resolve it, usually not daring or not knowing how, seeking a solution in escape rather than confrontation. Successive generations are compared along with the difficulties they face in adapting to a changing society. His main plays are *O Telescópio* (The Telescope), *A Moratória* (The Moratorium), *Pedreira das Almas* (Quarry of Souls), *Vereda da Salvação* (Path to Salvation), *A Escada* (The Ladder), and *Os Ossos do Barão* (The Baron's Bones).

But the truly socially-minded generation of writers, "all out," emphatic and involved, is a group which has centered its activities in the last ten years or so around São Paulo's small but intimate Teatro de Arena, probably South America's first theatre with central staging. Its history has been unusual and interesting, although uneven. With José Renato as its mentor and guiding force, it has attracted special attention from time to time.

The most talented member of this association is Gianfrancesco Guarnieri who, true to his name, comes from a musical family, was born in Italy but was taken to Brazil while still an infant. Active in amateur theatrics, he soon developed a reputation as an actor, winning the best-actor award for his portrayal of the principal role in Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. He was seen on television, then won another prize for his performance in a movie. Professional work as author, director, and actor, particularly with the Teatro de Arena, followed.

In 1958 his *Êles Não Usam Black-tie* (They don't Wear Tuxedos) was performed in São Paulo's arena-type theatre with José Renato as director.¹² The drama is concerned with a labor struggle, a strike, and a conflict between the principles and convictions of father and son (the generation gap explored by Jorge Andrade in his works). The former is well steeped in the labor tradition, the strike-must-go-on theory, the welfare-of-the-union standard; the latter is more concerned with his own personal situation and a practical evaluation, thus putting personal interests, comforts, and future first. He cannot support the strike. The author's conviction is evident, for the son is left alone, abandoned even by his pregnant sweetheart, a rather harsh and severe

decision on her part, indeed an illogical one. (Again a similarity to Jorge Andrade may be mentioned, for in his *Pedreira das Almas* the daughter of an authoritarian mother decides to remain in the village, as her betrothed leaves for new horizons and hope for a better life.)

In the theatre program of a later production (1963), the author, in a foreword, makes clear his empathy with the forgotten worker who lives in the slums of the city: "Few think of the tired worker, the true shanty-dweller. I write about him." The play has a sprinkling of labor slogans and protestations: "Change the system and you'll see that things will get better"; "They'll get better all right, but only after a struggle"; "Diploma don' mean nothin'. Dat government you got dere is loaded wid diplomas!" And the author imparts some of the feeling of the slums and shanties and even their songs, as a samba advances the theme: "We don't wear tuxedos." Yet despite these convictions and expressions, it is Morena, the mother and practical realist, who seems more knowledgeable and sensible, as she exhorts the others to face life as it is. The truth of the matter is that despite the author's intention we are more likely to view his play not so much as a portrayal of poor social conditions and a protest against them, as rather a conflict of minds, of individuals. As such, it is hardly a forceful excoriation of the "system" itself. The play, although not displaying the craftsmanship of a work by Jorge Andrade, is lively and spirited enough to have won several theatre awards.

The same author's *Gimba*¹³ (1959) was less topical, less involved with labor problems, although it treated class and social conditions and was quite theatrical. It recalls, and no doubt owes much to, Antônio Callado's *Pedro Mico* (1957), a one-act selection about a colorful fugitive from the police, his apparent entrapment in the *favela*, a primitive shantytown in the hills, but his clever escape. This short dramatic piece presented, probably for the first time on the stage, this stratum of Brazilian living conditions. Readers who saw the film *Orfeu Negro* (Black Orpheus) had views of the district, but in a more romantic light.¹⁴

Guarnieri uses a similar background and theme. *Gimba* is being sought by the police of three states. There are legends about him and high admiration for him among the *favela* dwellers. His entrance is thus a most dramatic moment. Back again with his girl friend, after three years, he is growing weary of the chase, tired of being blamed for every robbery and killing that takes place. He wants to settle down to a calmer existence, even to work, and he has already been promised a job in the country. As in the other play, there is music and the dancing of a samba in an electrically-charged scene brought to a close by the sudden action of a jealous rival. There are even elements of *macumba*, Brazilian voodoo. But *Gimba's* dream is not to be, for he will not get out as did Pedro Mico. Betrayed by his rival, he falls

victim of the police, treacherously shot down as he is giving himself up. As in Callado's play, (and in the recent movie *Bonnie and Clyde*) sympathy lies with the pursued, although guilty, and the representatives of law and order are practically placed in the role of villains. This makes any moral or social lesson difficult to fathom. Living conditions are bad, true enough, but again we see that the author's theatre does not really stand out as an indictment of capitalism and conditions engendered by its way of life. It is more a delineation of human weaknesses and errors.

There are striking parallelisms not only with *Pedro Mico*, but also with *O Pagador de Promessas* of Alfredo Dias Gomes, but we will go into that play shortly.

Before leaving Guarnieri, let us mention some of his other plays. *A Semente* (The Seed) is closer to the lines of the first play in that it also is related to a strike, an unsuccessful one, but it is the seed from which other actions will stem in the movement toward better working conditions. In *O Filho do Cão* (The Dog's Scion) it is superstition and religious fanaticism mingled with folklore which dominate, and there is no apparent lesson unless the author means it to be a criticism of conditions which tend to breed such excesses. In *Arena Conta Zumbi* (Arena Narrates Zumbi), which he wrote with Augusto Boal and which has a musical score, the theme is evidently the struggle for liberty, for it is the historical revolt of Negro slaves and their refuge in Palmares which climaxes a documentary-like exposition of Negro slave life in Brazil.

Augusto Boal, also a member of the Arena group and a close companion of Guarnieri, shares a similar philosophy but his production is even less socially oriented, jumping from adaptations of Lope de Vega plays (*Las famosas asturianas* and *El mejor alcalde el rey*) to such light, frothy comedies as *Marido Magro e Mulher Chata* (Skinny Husband and Boring Wife), the somewhat improved *Revolução na América do Sul* (Revolution in South America), his humorous musical political satire *José, do Parto à Sepultura* (Joseph, from Birth to the Grave), and *Opinião* (Opinion), a popular "show" type play written with several other authors. Francisco de Assis writes in a similar vein, especially in his *O Testamento do Cangaceiro* (The Bandit's Testament). These writers experiment with form and substance, old and new themes, including some with social implications, blending comedy with serious material, at times verging on farce, adding music occasionally, thus lacking in balance, mood or definitive theme. In a sense they are would-be Brechts, impressed by the vogue the latter's works are experiencing over the world, but not attaining the level of the German dramatist. The fact is that these young men are typical of a generation that protests and has doubts relative to a system that under present conditions is much subject to criticism. Despite the artistic limitations which characterize much of their work, their

convictions and spirit have contributed substantially to a theatre much in need of life and new perspective. Theirs is not the extreme satire or travesty seen in this country recently in such works as *MacBird*. Indeed it is very doubtful that a play parallel to *MacBird* would be allowed in Brazil. Nor do these enthusiasts reach the more effective—yet sensitive and skillful—thematic presentation seen in other writers, for example in some of Arthur Miller's dramas. Using popular jargon, we might say that they fail to maintain the proper balance between the message and the medium. At any rate, they are active and every few months a new work appears.

One of the more extreme examples of political theatre in Brazil is *Liberdade, Liberdade* (Liberty, Liberty), given in the Teatro de Arena in 1965, which like Boal's *Opinião* before it is directed against the political regime and its hard line.¹⁵ Flávio Rangel, one of Brazil's top directors, and Millôr Fernandes, a leading humorist, are the authors of this daring work. Paulo Autran, Brazil's best actor, joined the small cast. The attacks on infractions of personal liberty are sugar-coated with humor and enlivened with music. The work is really a succession of scenes linked by the main idea of liberty. Readings, sketches and selections from other works portray the trial of Socrates, the assassination of Julius Caesar (adapted from Shakespeare), the death of Danton (adapted from Büchner's play, *Danton's Death*), the Spanish Civil War, the execution of Brazil's hero Tiradentes and others. Sprinkled throughout are quotations ranging from Voltaire to Barry Goldwater, songs recorded by Edith Piaf, Nat "King" Cole, and even a "freedom song" by Pete Seeger. And there is humor, some with social, economic or political implications:

"Speaking of the United States, did you know that there it's a crime for a woman to go through her husband's pockets?"

"Here it's merely a waste of time."¹⁶

"I don't know why you are all complaining so much. I think the country is much better."

(*Perplexed*) "What do you mean, better?"

"Much better than it will be next year."¹⁷

But although the work is loose, and is more a spectacle or simply entertainment than a play, the serious implications are apparent. It is a demonstration of deep concern in which the audience, close to the actors in the small theatre with its central staging, is moved, shares the enthusiasm of the presentation and obviously the concepts advanced. A criticism during a rehearsal led to the following insertion on opening night. It appears after the first few scenes. One of the actors says:

(*Quite seriously, but neutral, authoritatively*) And now, before continuing this show, we must make the following admonition to each and every one

of you. We believe it essential that each one of you take right now a definite position. Unless each one of you takes a definition position, we cannot continue. It is necessary that everybody take a position, either to the left or to the right. We'll even allow some of you to take a neutral position and to remain with your arms crossed. But it is imperative that everyone of you, once you take your position, *stick to it!* Otherwise, my friends, the theatre seats will squeak so much that nobody will hear anything.¹⁸

But there are more serious notes and implications. We hear that natural wealth should stay in the country, that liberty has not yet reached American soil. As the play is coming to an end, Paulo Autran explains that he is an actor called to sing of liberty and he invites others to join him. He continues that there may no longer be slaves, but there are still men who are oppressed. "Liberty is alive; liberty conquers; liberty is worth-while. Wherever there is a ray of hope, there will be an assumption of struggle."¹⁹ And the play closes with Prometheus' "I resist."

In my view, Alfredo Dias Gomes in his best work comes closest to presenting the happy medium: a strong socially-oriented play, well-structured and dramatically tenable. Contrary to the road taken by some of his predecessors (José de Alencar, Rachel de Queiroz, etc.) he failed in his attempts at the novel, but made his mark in the theatre. He would no doubt pay, as would many writers, including even Jorge Luis Borges, to have fire put to some first efforts. This would be true of his *Um Amor e Sete Pecados* (One Love and Seven Sins), *A Dama de Noite* (Lady of the Evening) and *Quando é Amanhã?* (When does Tomorrow Come?). The tone of the latter work is more serious, for it is an interrogation relative to justice and better conditions promised for after the war, but which were not fulfilled.

Abandoning these efforts in the novel, he tried the dramatic form. (He had written a prize-winning play at the age of 15.) There were selections for radio and television and then a bolder step. He was encouraged by the fact that such plays as Callado's *Pedro Mico*, Guarnieri's *Êles Não Usam Black-tie* and *Gimba*, and in a lesser vein socially, the works of Jorge Andrade, could be presented despite their evident criticism of society, with running comment in theatre programs, newspaper articles, and discussion. Earlier, good-natured fun had been poked at the country's problems, as in the comedies (in some cases "farces" would be the better word) of the late Silveira Sampaio. I remember well his satire centered around a new government official, *Sua Exa. em 26 Poses* (His Excellency in 26 Poses), which I attended in the cozy Teatro do Bólso in Ipanema. But the new trend was not so veiled, not so sugar-coated, and all would not necessarily be smooth sailing. As a matter of fact, one of Dias Gomes' plays *O Berço do Herói* (The Hero's Cradle) which had to do with the military, was banned by the censors. A colleague of mine related that he had scheduled a celebration on the occasion of the

play's première, with the author as guest of honor, a party at which he did not appear when he received the sad news, shortly before the performance, that the play could not be presented.

Yet other works of his did reach the boards, were well received and were granted various theatre prizes. I should like to select four of these plays for consideration, to enable us to understand what Dias Gomes was attempting to do and how he did it.

A Revolução dos Beatos (The Revolt of the Holy Men) is in the tradition of such works as *Vereda da Salvação* of Jorge Andrade, and indeed its roots can be traced back to Euclides da Cunha's classic prose work, *Os Sertões*. The cases of religious fanaticism encountered in Brazilian history are reflected from time to time in its literature. (Not long ago I saw a Brazilian film, *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, which also treated the same theme.) In the preface to the play, the author makes clear his objective: to produce a popular theatre, a theatre of the people. He feels that the theater "besides being popular, is also political."²⁰ One cannot be neutral: "If we indicate [to the oppressed public] ways in which it can free itself from oppression, if we arm it against the oppressor, we are on its side; if we merely entertain it—and consequently distract it from the struggle—we are against it."

The writer indicates the ingredients which went into his dramatic piece: an actual occurrence (the case of Father Cícero) furnished the story, location, and general milieu; a regional *auto* provided folklore, flavor and popular elements. The author describes the cult that centered around one of Brazil's fanatic religious leaders and how this worship is diverted toward an ox which is now credited with new "miracles," thus threatening the patron's reign and the political ambitions of his unscrupulous lieutenant. Finally, the ox is killed. Popular songs, superstition, blind worship, crowd scenes, a chorus—all contribute a feeling of spectacle to the action. There are a few references to politics. "Half of the local legislature can hardly sign their name. In politics, my friend, the most important thing is one's ability to draw from any happening the maximum advantage for one's self . . . I mean, for one's party."²¹ "In politics, truth is whatever is to our advantage."²² Money is all-powerful: "Money buys everything, Bastião. It buys a marriage certificate, it buys even virginity. (*He laughs*) The daughter of a poor man takes a bad step and she has fallen; the daughter of a *coronel* continues a virgin and is married in church."²³ But these references are few and although one is conscious of the author's feeling for these simple folk, victims of their own superstition and longing for miracles, and of the personal aspirations of others, the theme and carnival-like manner of presentation make social implications rather tenuous. It is interesting to note the similarities with some of the dramatist's other works: crowd scenes, music, folkloric and popular elements, vendors, commercial exploitation of sincere convictions, a vow made which must be kept, the important role of an animal related to

this vow, exploitation of common folk, the carrying of a cross, the grasping politician, and an ironic denouement.

A Invasão (The Invasion), like the play above, was performed shortly after 1960, the year of the great success of *O Pagador de Promessas*. In it the playwright used two planes for the action, as Arthur Miller had done in parts of his *Death of a Salesman*, or even before the latter, as Brazil's own Nelson Rodrigues had done with a three-plane set in his *Vestido de Noiva* (Wedding Dress), a play most important in Brazil for its pioneer role in staging and lighting. Jorge Andrade, no doubt impressed by both, had effectively used a two-plane set in *A Moratória* to contrast conditions in two different periods of time. In a technique also reminiscent of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* and, more recently, of William Saroyan's *The Cave Dwellers*, we have unfolded before us the conditions of a group of *favelados* who have taken over, much like squatters, an abandoned, uncompleted building (an occurrence witnessed from time to time in parts of Brazil). As in these plays, the Brazilian work leans more heavily on situation and characterization than on plot. Thus we see living in these bare quarters a range of rather colorful characters including a self-proclaimed mulatto prophet; a dashing Negro composer; a former soccer player whose only ambition is to see his son a star (in which hope he is to be disappointed); settlers from the northern part of the country who had left a parched climate only to find the inhospitable city; their daughter who finds a way out temporarily by living with a cheap politician, who, in turn, harangues the settlers and promises them everything but delivers nothing; an "operator" who insists on rent and excessive charges for slight services in a building on which he has no claims; a would-be organizer who proclaims mass action is the only way rights can be won; and again the police in an unsympathetic role. Before us unfold the tribulations, exploitation, rivalry, and comradeship of these beings "caged" in a situation brought about by a society that offers them little opportunity, and by their own inability to cope with it all. They do want to defend their rights, although they may not be sure as to what they are, and to present a unified front, to fight to stay; whereas, as one dweller puts it, they should be struggling to get out, to find a new life. In a highly theatrical scene the rent gouger is killed and his body is hidden by the dancing group as they give the guilty youth a chance to escape from the police, who have arrived on the scene. This part and certain others recall *Porgy and Bess*, which played in Brazil. The author has depicted the frustration and almost complete helplessness of these to-be-pitied people, again victims of society and of designing individuals. A temporary reprieve is granted them in the end and they will not have to leave the building just then, but in truth no real solution to their problem seems to be at hand.

O Pagador de Promessas (literally "The Redeemer of Pledges"; in the movie version, *The Given Word*), given in 1960, shortly before the two

plays discussed above, offers a more unified and forceful presentation of frustration and abandonment. Here Dias Gomes has blended his elements much better and focused his action and feeling on the main figure, Zé (Joe). This simple peasant, caught in the limited radius of his ignorance, superstition, religion, and sincerity, struggles to find sense in a world that is apparently senseless, and seeks to accomplish a personal mission while others interfere, driven on by their own interpretations, prejudices, and desire for selfish gain. The basic story is quite direct. All others means having failed, in order to save his best friend, Zé had finally appealed to voodoo. His wish granted, he now had to fulfill his vow to carry a large wooden cross from his backlands area to the church of St. Barbara in the city. Somewhat reluctantly, his attractive wife accompanies him. So far so good. But as he approaches his goal he meets representatives of society, of "the system." They misinterpret his action as a bid for publicity, perhaps for political purposes. When they learn that in his gratitude and unselfishness he has given some of his land to needy neighbors they exploit this as a campaign for agrarian reform and "against the exploitation of man by man."²⁴ Newspapermen and the radio build up the event, distorting the facts for their own purposes. A pimp sweet-talks his wife and lures her away for a while, shopkeepers and others gain from the commotion. Zé is even accused of passing himself off as a second Savior. Then, ironically, in a dramatic confrontation, an unbending, intolerant clergyman denies him entrance into the church. He has found out that not only had the pledge been made in behalf of an animal, a burro, but it had been given in a voodoo session, and this was sacrilegious. To the peasant the distinctions are meaningless, for to him, as to a good number of Brazilians, the tenets and saints of the Catholic church fuse with the rituals and idols of *macumba* and *candomblé*, or voodoo. Exploited at every turn, frustrated, Joe becomes a victim, in a final irony achieving only in death the goal he could not reach while alive.

Dias Gomes presents all this with a steadily developing dramatic pressure that leads to a most effective climax and crowning denouement, although not completely devoid of a melodramatic touch, as the dead peasant is carried into the church stretched out on his cross.

Certainly this is social theatre. The various types portrayed are unworthy, but often almost essential members, of a "system" which tends to thwart sincerity and decency, to take advantage of ignorance and superstition, and to stifle individual liberty. It dotes on selfish personal interest and often displays intolerance, lack of understanding or care. These ideas and others appear in the play, but they are incidental to the production itself, not dominating the drama at the cost of its integrity as a work of art. This is a fundamental and most important distinction that makes Dias Gomes stand out among others in the contemporary socially-minded group, for although

his plays do have a social commitment and dedication, although he is *engagé*, or *engajado* as the Brazilians would say, this is done within the demands of art, of good theatre. If an artist can express his convictions without degrading or prostituting his medium, then he has indeed accomplished much.

O Pagador de Promessas won numerous awards in Brazil, not only as best play and for its author as best dramatist, but its potential reflected itself in additional recognition for those involved in the production, with awards for best director, actor, and actress, as well as best production. In its filmed version it was awarded the Golden Palm at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1962 and also received first prize at the San Francisco Sixth Annual Film Festival in the same year. The play or filmed version has been seen in many countries including Spain, Italy, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

In the latest performed work of Dias Gomes, *O Santo Inquérito* (The Holy Inquisition) (1966) there is irony evident in the title itself. Here the mantle of liberty of conscience and freedom is worn by a girl, Branca Dias. The author has chosen as a starting point a historical figure and situation but he has taken poetic license in rendering his dramatic version. Branca, sincere, religious, and interested in marriage and family, becomes victim of a series of circumstances which, although innocent in themselves, in the interpretation of church officials and due to her refusal to admit guilt and ask for clemency, result in her execution by the Inquisition. Although the events are of another period, the implications for today are clear. Branca and her sweetheart Augusto stand for independence of spirit, for human dignity, and against intolerance. They lose, but remain faithful to these values. Without them there is no hope for mankind. Although there is something of Joan of Arc in Branca, she is no would-be heroine; she is more in the mold of Zé of *O Pagador de Promessas*. She has difficulty understanding what is going on: "I only know that the world, which seemed so simple to me, begins to be very complicated for me."²⁵ As to truth: "Each person knows only a part of the truth. Putting everybody together, we would have the entire truth. And the entire truth is God."²⁶ It is this truth that both she and Augusto adhere to, despite severe interrogation, torture and death. In their own minds they know what is right. Augusto proclaims, and Branca repeats later: "There is a minimum of dignity which man cannot negotiate, not even in exchange for liberty."²⁷ On the other side is the intolerance of the representatives of the Inquisition, who in their false piety and love insist on only one right, one interpretation; and who believe the end, the search for what they also label as "truth," justifies the means. There were also then, as there are today, those who refuse to become involved, who take the easy way, who acquiesce, as Branca's father does in the play. She upbraids him as she speaks of the wrong that can be done by omission: "I believe we are

guilty by omission when we know of injustice and fail to protest against it; I believe we are guilty by omission and we sin through omission when we remain silent, when we close our eyes and especially when we try to save our skin, at any price." The play recalls very much Arthur Miller, in the theme and situation of *The Crucible* and in the lighting, set, and general theatric technique of *Death of a Salesman* and *After the Fall*, all three plays well-known in Brazil.

So we can say that social theatre is finding a place in Brazil's cultural life. More important, for the first time we can speak of a generation of social dramatists who occupy a prominent place in the day's theatre activity. As has been pointed out, they have not all yet found the proper emphasis or projection, but the interest, purpose and resolve are there: to protest social ills and conditions, and the limitations on human freedom, many of the latter imposed by the "hard-line" policy of the Government. In some cases the impact is mollified by a lack of concentration on the primary themes pursued. In others, as with Dias Gomes, the author has come closer to the mark, with works that are dramatically tenable and effective. And these dramatists continue to write. In a recent letter Dias Gomes speaks of his latest work, which will be about Getúlio Vargas. Members of the ever-active Opinião and Teatro de Arena groups are grinding out further productions. Furthermore, new writers of talent have appeared on the scene, for example Roberto Freire and Plínio Marcos, and others will undoubtedly follow the trend. This is all to the good and the result should be a more invigorating, more responsive, and more meaningful theatre.

Notes

1. This paper is based on an address given at the University of Kansas, March 27, 1968, on the occasion of the University Theatre's production of *Payment as Promised*, my translation of *O Pagador de Promessas*, prize-winning play of Alfredo Dias Gomes.

2. The rise of the Brazilian theatre can be traced in such books as J. Galante de Sousa, *O Teatro no Brasil*, 2 vols. (Rio de Janeiro, 1960), Sábato Magaldi, *Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro* (São Paulo, 1962), Mário Nunes, *40 Anos de Teatro*, 3 vols. (Rio de Janeiro, 1956), and earlier works such as Carlos Süssekind de Mendonça, *História do Teatro Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro, 1926), and Múcio da Paixão, *O Teatro no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1936).

3. *Estética da Língua Portuguesa* (Rio de Janeiro, s.d.), pp. 288-96.

4. Galante de Sousa, I, 153-54.

5. See Anexo II of Galante de Sousa, I, 327-30 for the text of this decree.

6. Galante de Sousa, I, 156-57. In this and in other cases in this article, the translation is mine.

7. His works are available in a fine edition: Darcy Damasceno, *Teatro de Martins Pena, I Comédias*, II *Dramas* (Rio de Janeiro, 1956).

8. "O Teatro de José de Alencar," *Revista, Academia Brasileira de Letras*, XLV (Maio, 1934), 82.

9. *História da Literatura Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, 1916), p. 316.

10. *Teatro de Joracy Camargo* (São Paulo, 1961), *Deus lhe Pague*, p. 24.

11. Richard A. Mazaara, "The Theatre of Jorge Andrade," *Latin American Theatre Review*, I (Fall 1967), 3-18.

12. The text is available in the Sociedade Brasileira de Autores Teatrais' *Revista de Teatro*, Núms. 307-309 (Janeiro a Junho, 1959), "Coletânea Teatral," Caderno 54.

13. *Revista de Teatro*, Caderno 53.

14. The movie was based on the play *Orfeu da Conceição* by Vinícius de Moraes.
 15. *Liberdade, Liberdade* (Rio de Janeiro, 1965).
 16. *Liberdade, Liberdade*, pp. 115-16.
 17. *Liberdade, Liberdade*, p. 117.
 18. *Liberdade, Liberdade*, pp. 13-14.
 19. *Liberdade, Liberdade*, p. 151.
 20. Alfredo Dias Gomes, *A Invasão. A Revolução dos Beatos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1962), p. 131.
- See also Francis A. Dutra, "The Theatre of Dias Gomes: Brazil's Social Conscience," *Cithara*, IV, No. 2 (May 1965), 3-13.
21. *A Revolução dos Beatos*, pp. 193-94.
 22. *A Revolução dos Beatos*, p. 196.
 23. *A Revolução dos Beatos*, p. 195.
 24. Alfredo Dias Gomes, *O Pagador de Promessas* (Rio de Janeiro, 1962), p. 107.
 25. Alfredo Dias Gomes, *O Santo Inquérito* (Rio de Janeiro, 1966), p. 56.
 26. *O Santo Inquérito*, pp. 87-88.
 27. *O Santo Inquérito*, pp. 125, 145.
 28. *O Santo Inquérito*, p. 145.