

## Themes and Directions of the Brazilian Theatre: 1973-1978

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Last August I returned to Brazil after an eight-year absence. Although I had kept in touch through reading and correspondence, the visit afforded me a brief but in-depth opportunity to get an overview of the theatre activity of the last five years. I saw and talked at length with such theatre critics as Décio de Almeida Prado, Sábado Magaldi, Bárbara Heliodora Mendonça de Morais, and Yan Michalski. The picture I gathered was curiously mixed, with both positive and negative trends. As always, the socio-political atmosphere had everything to do with the art of drama in Brazil. Despite an apparent effort during the Geisel regime toward some kinds of increased liberty (the end of press censorship, for instance), theatre censorship had severely hampered national dramaturgy.

The Teatro Novo, the autobiographical theatre with strong existential overtones, which I have studied elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> had gradually faded by about 1973. The principal authors, José Vicente, Antônio Bivar, Leilah Assunção, et al., were responsible for only one or two successful works over the five-year period of 1968-1973. *O Assalto*, *Fala Baixo Senão Eu Grito*, *O Cão Siamês* were effective and powerful plays, although they had neither the architectonic qualities of the best of Jorge Andrade, nor the directorial penache of *O Rei da Vela* as presented in 1968 by José Celso Martinez Correa. The later plays by these young dramatists revealed their shortcomings as writers and their lack of background in the theatre milieu. They had not served an apprenticeship, as such leaders of the art as Gianfrancesco Guarnieri had at the Arena. With the possible exception of Leilah, whose turn to humor in *Jorginho o Machão* and later plays proved longer lasting,<sup>2</sup> José Vicente in *Os Convalescentes* (1970) and *Hoje é Dia de Rock* (1971) and Antônio Bivar with *Longe Daqui*, *Aqui Mesmo* (1971) revealed that they were playwrights with a single message.

Coincident with the Teatro Novo, the late 1960's and early 1970's were a period of "Director's Theatre." This trend was spurred in part by Peter

Brook's collaborator, the Argentine Víctor García, who in cooperation with Ruth Escobar staged a spectacular production of Genet's *The Balcony* and Arrabal's *Automobile Graveyard*. José Celso and his Oficina group enjoyed critical success with his "Teatro de Agressão" while Augusto Boal continued to lead the Arena with such productions as *Arena Conta Bolívar*, *Teatro Jornal*, and Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, featuring Gianfrancesco Guarnieri in the title role. In Rio, the team of Ivan de Albuquerque and Rubens Correia established their Teatro Ipanema and presented Arrabal's *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* and an experimental group under the leadership of Amir Haddad performed in the Museu de Arte Moderna.

Between 1971 and 1973 a series of events marked the end of the period. Augusto Boal was kidnapped by the police and after an international protest, was sent into exile, never to return. Without him, the Arena was unable to survive. José Celso and the Oficina joined forces with the visiting Living Theatre in 1971. Their retreat to Ouro Preto culminated in an inevitable drug arrest and imprisonment. The subsequent disillusionment with foreign models led to a period of communal improvisation. The result of their collective creativity, *Gracias, Senhor*, was presented in 1971-72. Shortly afterward José Celso left Brazil and spent the next five years in voluntary exile, never to assume the mantle of leadership again. Similarly, the leaders of the Ipanema—Correia and Albuquerque—spent some time abroad and went into an unproductive phase of interior questioning and little activity.

While the censors drove the works of such talented and established writers as Plínio Marcos and Dias Gomes off the stage and onto the television screen, the same political process made possible two appointments that served as beacons in an otherwise dark panorama. Sábado Magaldi, critic of the *Jornal da Tarde* and author of numerous books on the theatre, was named Secretary of Education and Culture of the Municipality of São Paulo. His considerable experience on the State Theatre Commission and his training as a lawyer, combined with the good will with which he is viewed by artists of all disciplines, gave him a chance to carry out a number of programs. The major successes of his term, which came to a halt in March, 1979 with the change of administrations, were in the area of outreach, precisely the gap which has developed since the Revolution of 1964. Street theatre, popular performances, dialogues between artists and their public were encouraged and funded under Magaldi. It is not known what will follow under the new mayor and considerable anxiety accompanies the process of transition.

On the national level, the appointment of Orlando Miranda de Carvalho as the Director of the National Theatre Service marked a reversal of the policy of patronage which had prevailed since its establishment under Getúlio Vargas. Miranda is a former actor, impresario, owner of the Princesa Isabela Theatre in Rio and also a published playwright.<sup>3</sup> His accomplishments have been quite remarkable even given his background, transforming a do-nothing agency into a beehive of activity. The old offices above the Teatro Nacional de Comédia on Rio Branco are filled with skilled staff, as publications have multiplied in number and improved in quality. The clipping and filing service, a haphazard

one during my first visit, is now a model of efficiency. The indices alone were impressive and everything published in any journal or newspaper which deals with the theatre appears in their collection.

Another excellent project, as yet incomplete, is an *Índice de Autores e Peças da Dramaturgia Brasileira*, begun in late 1976. This locates, gives a synopsis of, and lists all Brazilian plays in alphabetical order by author.

Just as Magaldi was able to increase the funding for the arts significantly in São Paulo, Miranda carried out his program by obtaining impressive budgets for the SNT. In 1977, for instance, the Agency sponsored 27 productions in Rio alone as well as 27 children's shows with a 575,000 cruzeiro subsidy. In terms of theatres, it acquired the Dulcina and spent 7.5 million cruzeiros in construction and improvements. It gave a number of seminars including one by the Juilliard Theatre Group.

Ironically, one of the Agency's greatest contributions served to underline the contradictory role of the government in the arts. Having revived the annual contest for best play, first it awarded the first prize to *Rasga-Coração* by the late Oduvaldo Viana Filho in 1974-75 only to have it banned from performance and publication. The next year, the winner, *Patética*, by João Ribeiro Chaves Netto, based on the kidnapping and subsequent death of journalist Wladimir Herzog, was confiscated by the authorities, snatched out of the very headquarters of the Serviço Nacional do Teatro.

As part of this process of critical consolidation, a number of important books have appeared during the last several years. Among the most significant are Miroel Silveira's *A Contribuição Italiana ao Teatro Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Ministério de Educação e Cultura, 1976); *Teatro e Criatividade* by Luisa Barreto Leite (Serviço Nacional de Teatro, 1975); *Moderno Teatro Brasileiro: Crônicas das Suas Raízes* by Gustavo Dória (SNT, 1975); the second edition of Sábato Magaldi's *Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro* (SNT, 1976) and my forthcoming *O Teatro Brasileiro: Testemunha Social e Elaboração Artística* (São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1979).

In terms of dramaturgy there were only a few productions that can be considered a critical success, to which we can add several more plays which may have to wait for the end of the current regime to be staged. Among the outstanding works to reach the boards in the last few years we would mention *Gota D'Água* by Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes and *Ponto de Partida* by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri.

In a change of style reminiscent of some of the early works of the modern Brazilian theatre, such as Vinícius de Moraes' *Orfeu da Conceição*, these new plays use the double edge of myth and "a atualidade brasileira." *Gota* is a Medea of the *favelas*, and is a tragedy not just of the heroine on whom such playwrights as Euripides, Seneca, Corneille, and Anouilh based their works, but of the Brazilian people themselves. At the same time, the authors brought language back to the center of the dramatic experience. This trend had already begun in the lyrical flights of fancy of the "novos." Here, however, we see a return to verse and rhyme as well. As the authors said in the Introduction, "Nós escrevemos a peça em versos, intensificando poeticamente um diálogo que

podia ser realista, um pouco porque a poesia exprime melhor a densidade de sentimentos que move os personagens. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Although Euripides is never far from our mind, the setting is uniquely that of the *favela* and the language as well. Jason, like Tião of *Eles Não Usam Black-Tie* is the author of the title song, a samba. The use of the chorus is enriched by the variety of speech offered by the "Galego" (whose Portuguese is really slightly modified Spanish), and others who are individually differentiated by their *metier* and its *argot*. In this regard one is immediately reminded of Dias Gomes' *O Pagador de Promessas*.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of a king, Creon is portrayed as an arch capitalist, intent on exploiting the *favelados* who live in his properties in the Vila do Meio-Dia. By charging them "correções" or surcharges that adjust their rent upwards with the spiraling inflation, they are never able to get out of his debt. Egeu, the radio repairman, is chief spokesman for the poor. He weakens his position as a political leader by setting himself up as a defender of Joana (Medea), whom Creon has vengefully determined to have put out of her home. He cleverly accedes to the demands of his lessees for improved facilities in Vila do Meio-Dia, and sets aside Joana's case as an individual and personal one. In the time honored technique of the demagogue, Creon, much in the manner of the leaders of the Brazilian government, knows how to divide and eliminate the opposition.

The pairing of the personal tragedy of Joana with the social commentary is not an entirely successful dramatic device. The reasons for Jason's leaving Joana for Alma (the Glauce in the myth) are not clearly defined. It would not seem to be for the comfort which Creon's money could provide. In the final confrontation, Jason explains that neither was Joana's greater age a factor. It was her intensity—her energy—which intimidated him. She was too serious for his fun-loving nature. She responds to him on socio-political terms, "essa ansiedade . . . não é coisa minha não, é do infeliz do teu povo" (p. 126).<sup>6</sup> It is that connection to the common people that had led Jason to his only achievement, the writing of "Gota D'Água," his hit samba. As Creon's henchman, charged with controlling Egeu and convincing Joana to move out, he is a lackey of the capitalist system, and enemy of the people. He, an artist of popular inspiration, has allowed himself to be, like so many "artistas, estudantes e intelectuais . . . arrancado do povo, a fonte de concretude de seu trabalho creador" (xvii).

The classical tone is set from the beginning by the use of the two choruses: the men in the *botequim* and the women, the *vizinhas*, who are doing the wash. The latter describe Joana's fate—the daily indignities of her impoverished existence. The former present the basic economic and social message of Creon's power, and see Jason's affair with Alma as a means of access to the seat of authority. Egeu makes much of the metaphor of Jason's sitting on Creon's throne/chair. Egeu then foments a demonstration, thinking that Jason will be a fifth columnist of the people. The two choruses provide a masculine/feminine counterpoint; while the women rue Jason's unfaithfulness, the men at the bottom of the social ladder observe, "Também não é crime, Jasão, mudar de classe . . ." (p. 15).

Throughout Joana is portrayed in a sympathetic manner, "more sinned against than sinning" and her powers of sorcery are alluded to only in passing. She is indeed a victim, not only of Jason's inconstancy but of the economic system. The dénouement points this up. In the myth Medea survives, having killed Glauce, Jason's new love, and Creon; the children carry the poison to their father in the Corneille version while in Euripides' she kills them and serves them in a poison stew to their father and stepmother. In contrast, in *Gota* she poisons the children and takes her own life, leaving Jason to enjoy the fruits of his perfidy.

On balance *Gota D'Agua* is an effective adaptation which incorporates song, dance, and language in the best Brazilian tradition. In its marriage of social testimony and artistic elaboration, it does not represent a departure from precedent. As evidenced by such plays in the past as *Dr. Getúlio* by Dias Gomes, *Gota* indicates a return to a style involving a total theatre, not the sparse and spiny "teatro de um tempo mau" of Plínio Marcos and the alienated work of the "novos."

Gianfrancesco Guarnieri is the only playwright of those who emerged in the 1950's who has survived in a major way. While television absorbed Marcos and Dias Gomes, Jorge Andrade directed his energies first into a novel, *Labirinto*, and a play, *Milagre na Cela*, which is more the product of his increasing radicalization than of his skill as a dramatic craftsman. The completion of his *Marta, A Árvore e o Relógio* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1970) seems to have had the effect he foresaw of exhausting his theatrical vein.

Between *Castro Alves Pedre Passagem* (1971) and his recent *Ponto de Partida*, despite some false starts (*Grito Parado no Ar* and *Botequim*, 1973), Guarnieri has maintained his integrity in all aspects of the theatre. As the director Fernando Peixoto points out in his ideological introduction, *Ponto* like *Gota* utilizes a classical form. Instead of a myth, it is a parable, "a fictitious narrative used to typify moral relations; allegory."<sup>7</sup> The debt to Bertolt Brecht is at least as great as *Gota's* to Euripides, which is not surprising given Guarnieri and Peixoto's origins in São Paulo's theatre of "Proletarian Protest" and the Arena. Although the chorus is not used, the community is represented by characters who typify their social class. The death of Birdo, the poet/intellectual who serves as social conscience, creates a solidarity which pits all classes against authority in the search for justice. This confrontation is the point of departure of the title toward a better society. From Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, to Carlos Solórzano's *Las manos de Dios* and Brazil's prime example, *Pedreira das Almas* of Jorge Andrade, the reader is reminded of dramatic parallels.

Felix, the leader, and his wife, Aída, representing the military and civilian branches of authority, are compelled to investigate the death of Birdo and his relationship with their daughter, Maíra. Her grief is as great as that of the deceased's father, Aínon, the Blacksmith. The crux of the plot is the exploration of Maíra's relationship with Birdo and the right of the people to know all the facts in order to assign the blame for his death. Initially it was assumed that Birdo had taken his own life. His death was that of "a voz da aldeia que morre, seu canto, sua poesia, seu humor . . ." (p. 25).<sup>8</sup> The memory of Birdo, whose

name is derived from "bird" in English, is preserved through song just as Jason's samba "Gota D'Agua" is the theme and title of Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes' play. It is obvious that along with music, language is central to both plays as the protagonists are lyricists, marrying words to music like the Greek poets. Paulo Pontes' stated purpose in *Gota D'Agua* is also achieved masterfully in the verse drama by Guarnieri, to create "um teatro que ambiciona readquirir sua capacidade de compreender, tem que entregar, novamente, à múltipla eloqüência da palavra o centro do fenômeno dramático."<sup>9</sup>

As Felix carries out the investigation (as in *King Lear* and *Oedipus Rex*) he has lost his sight, yet he says "Sem ter olhos, vejo no interior das almas" (p. 21). It is the apparently mad Shepherd, Dodo, representative of the peasants, who witnesses the murder and finally comes forth to reveal Aída's complicity in the crime. She first tries to intimidate the Blacksmith and the Shepherd, accusing them of subversion. "Meu marido é tolerante e justo, mas jamais permitirá a mais leve insinuação de rebeldia" (p. 63). She serves as the prosecutor, attacking the reputation of Birdo as a wild radical. It is in this manner that the civil authorities exercise their coercion over the artists and intellectuals. Birdo's madness was that of a man of conscience, demonstrating against injustices without thought of his own benefit or welfare.

The prime motive against Birdo's having taken his own life was the fact that Maíra was expecting a child. Even that hope, of joining art with power, is snuffed out by Aída's brutal aborting of the fetus. There is no solution offered by Guarnieri, only a "ponto de partida."

The principal shortcoming of the play resides in the fine line between psychological versimilitude and the allegorical and symbolic function of the characters. The play suffers in the lack of gradations between those who are morally good and bad. In a way, it uses the same simplistic formulae as the "Teatro Festivo" of the 1960's, as exemplified by *A Primeira Feira de Opinião*.

Another effective play, as yet unstaged, is the controversial *Patética* by João Ribeiro Chaves Netto. It employs a dramatic device like the parable of *Ponto de Partida*. The action takes place in a circus, thus creating several narrative levels. We should point out that this is quite credible since the circus has traditionally served as the source for popular theatre throughout Brazil. The effect is ironic, however, since the play deals with tragic elements instead of the comic ones conjured up by the image of clowns.

Based on a real life event, the disappearance and murder of journalist Wladimir Herzog, the play examines the persecution of the Horowitz family. Their flight from nazism had been incomplete. As the mother says, "Posso estar enganada até. Mas me parece que o mundo de vocês é muito parecido com aquele de onde eu vim" (p. 90).<sup>10</sup> This indictment of Brazilian justice is delivered in a convincing and dramatic manner while utilizing the various narrative levels. The familial relationships and their mutual devotion hold the reader's sympathy. Hans and Ana had fled on a boat from their native Yugoslavia. Their son, Glauco, is a television reporter who interviews Joana de Criméia, a *mineira* actress of meager education in the circus. Of Shakespeare she says, "sei que escreveu o Otelo e a Megera, duas peças que fiz aqui. Sucesso

todas duas" (p. 49). Of Brazilian theatre she adds, "Foi assim com a peça de Zé Vicente. Aquela que morria todo mundo no fim" (p. 50). Then Joana offers to show a role she is working on and enters into the character of Ana Horowitz, the mother.

The scenes in which Glauco is first interrogated and then tortured to death are those which provoked the National Security Forces to seize the play after the jury awarded it the SNT's first prize. In *Patética* as in *Ponto de Partida* the authorities have no intention of revealing the truth and attempt to cover up the protagonists' death by claiming that the cause was suicide. We hope that the real circumstances to which these plays allude change sufficiently to permit Chaves Netto's play to be staged in the not-too-distant future.

*Rasga-Coração*, the least known of the plays we are examining, has yet to be published or produced despite its recognition by a jury headed by Yan Michalski, who lent me the manuscript. It has more in common with the satire of Oswald de Andrade than with the neo-classical works already discussed, as can be gleaned by the names of some of the characters (Manguari Pistolão, Lorde Bundinha). The playwright Oduvaldo Viana Filho, a charter member of the Arena, skillfully juggles several generations, ranging from the Revolution of 1930 through the Vargas era to the present. The central figure, Custódio Manhão, Júnior, is a government bureaucrat, with roots in the labor movement. His father, Custódio, Sênior, is identified by his number, Fiscal 666 of the Health Service of Rio. Luis Carlos, or Luca, is his son. Each time there is a confrontation between father and son we are presented with flashbacks, indicating the cyclical nature of life.

Manguari Pistolão, as Custódio Junior is known, had been a radical in his youth, but he encourages his son to be a conformist. For instance, he wants Luca to submit to a haircut for school and even intervenes with the headmaster, Castro Cott, an old opponent and "integralista" or Brazilian fascist. Luca refuses to compromise and drops out just as his father had in his time. The action has a constant counterpoint provided by Lorde Bundinha, or Luis Campofiorito, a male dancer who is a kind of satirical conscience, commenting on the course of events. Nena, the wife, and Milena, Luca's girlfriend, provide the feminine point of view. The language and some of the scenes reveal a sexual frankness that must have upset the censors. It is certainly not exploitive, but humorous, as in the scene in which Manguari catches his father, "666" in the act. "Pai, essa môça está nua!" "Nua? Claro . . . está nua . . . estou fazendo uma desinfecção nela . . . o cinema fez vocês pensarem indecências!" (p. 11).

The younger generation keeps the older honest, in the constant tug between security and morality. Finally Custódio sends Luca to fend for himself as his father had done to him. Yet they part with a kiss, because love and family are more important than any differences that come between them. The dialogue reflects Viana's deft ability to capture the characters through the living language. Music and dance are employed throughout, including the title song that poetically refers to the frankly sentimental nature of the play:

"Se tu queres ver a imensidão do céu e mar  
refletindo a prismação da luz solar

Rasgo o coração, vem te debruçar  
sobre a vastidão do meu penar."

The panorama of Brazilian theatre for the last five years is a mixed one. While the obstacles to national dramaturgy are severe and many of the more established playwrights have been silenced, several positive elements can be noted. We described the accomplishments of the National Theatre Service and the Secretariat of Education and Culture in São Paulo under distinguished theatre figures. In a recent letter from Yan Michalski he informed me that he is writing a short book on the history of censorship in the Brazilian theatre during the last 15 years. The very fact that he could undertake the study speaks optimistically about the current atmosphere.<sup>11</sup> A number of previously banned plays have been released, such as Oduvaldo Viana Filho's *Papa Highirte*. But things are still in flux.

As we have seen in this study, several plays from the period 1973-1978 stand out for their dramatic qualities as productions and/or texts. They differ from the works of the preceding quinquennium in tone and technique. The social content of all these plays and the skillful dramatic treatment they received encourage the critical judgment that, although hampered, the Brazilian social theatre is alive and waiting for a more receptive environment to burst into bloom again.

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## Notes

1. Paper given at the Northeast Modern Language Association in April, 1975 in Montreal; on Leilah Assunção and other women playwrights in "Women in Latin American Theatre," a Conference held at Temple University on April 15, 1977 under the topic, "Brazilian Theatre—the Distaff Side"; for a comparative view of the "novos" in relation to Spanish America in the specific example of *Flores de Papel* of Egon Wolff, I gave a paper entitled "Isolation and Rage: Recent Theatre in Brazil and Spanish America," in the Modern Brazilian Theatre section of the Modern Language Association in Chicago, December 1977.

2. See Alcides João de Barros, "A Situação Social da Mulher no Teatro de Consuelo de Castro e Leilah Assunção," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 9/2 (Spring 1976), 13-20.

3. See Teresinha Alves Pereira, "Novo Diretor para o Serviço Nacional de Teatro," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 8/1 (Fall 1974), 4.

4. Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes, *Gota D'Água* (Civilização Brasileira, 1975), p. xix.

5. In this work the Coro consists of the commentators on the action in the Galego's store and a Roda de Capoeira under Manoelzinho Sua-Mãe. See especially the third act, Alfredo Dias Gomes, *O Pagador de Promessas* (Agir, 1961).

6. Here as elsewhere page numbers refer to previously cited work. Pontes and Buarque, *Gota D'Água*.

7. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (3rd Edition, 1934), p. 828.

8. Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, *Ponto de Partida* (Brasiliense, 1976).

9. Buarque and Pontes, *Gota D'Água* and quoted in Yan Michalski, "Os Perigos das Verdades," *Jornal do Brasil*, April 12, 1977.

10. João Ribeiro Chaves Netto, *Patética* (Civilização Brasileira, 1977).

11. Letter to the author from Yan Michalski, April 9, 1979. "Como você vê, as coisas parecem ter entrado mesmo numa fase amena, se um livro como esse já pode ser publicado . . . Mas algum tempo há de se passar ainda antes que tenhamos uma idéia mais clara da situação."