

Gustavo Guenzburger

Transnationality, Sponsorship and Post-Drama: “The Flash and Crash Days” of Brazilian Theatre

Abstract

Based on a Brazilian case study, this paper comments on the influence that new paradigms and global circuits have exerted locally on the relationship between theatre aesthetics and production. Staged in 1991 by Gerald Thomas, *The Flash and Crash Days* went far beyond the context of Brazilian redemocratization and was included in the emerging international circuit of experimental productions. Thomas had brought from Europe and the United States a new proposal for the stage, through which the materialization of theatricality moved away from the idea of drama as it shifted from a focus on box office receipts to a new mode of production based on sponsorship. The analysis of this performance and its conditions may reveal an aesthetic and production change in the Brazilian theatre that is linked to the formation of global markets, whose new aesthetic paradigms point to a new role of theatre in society.

Author

Gustavo Guenzburger is an artist, activist, researcher and professor of Theater and Literature. Since 2015, he works at the Federal State University of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), where he teaches and develops postdoctoral research on “Theater, aesthetics and fostering policies”, with a FAPERJ scholarship (since 2016). He also teaches interpretation for singers, in the Casa do Choro. He holds a Master’s degree in Literary Theory and a PhD in Comparative Literature, both from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ – 2011/2015). In 2014 he held a split-site program at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University (Paris III) as part of his doctoral research on the relations between the aesthetics and socio-economics of the theater in Rio de Janeiro. Working since 1989 as an actor, singer and producer, he has also directed many shows such as “Crônicas de Nuestra América”, by Augusto Boal.

Keywords: Postdramatic Theatre, Global Circuits, Brazilian Theatre, Sociology of Theatre, Sponsorship

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1. Introduction

Based on a Brazilian case study, this paper comments on the influence that new paradigms and global circuits have exerted locally on the relationship between theatre

aesthetics and production. The underlying thesis here is that these two spheres, poetic and socioeconomic, are inseparable for the understanding of contemporary theatre, especially in terms of its political and transnational aspects.

The play chosen to explore this thesis is *The Flash and Crash Days*, staged in 1991 by Gerald Thomas. This work, whose innovative proposal could be considered hermetic, achieved great popularity because it relied on the real-life relationship of two famous actresses: Fernanda Torres and her mother Fernanda Montenegro, who is a symbol of the previous modern school of theatre and also a television star.

The symbolic language loaded with strong images, the almost mute mixture of Grand Guignol with performance art, allowed *The Flash and Crash Days* to go beyond the Brazilian context of the 1980s-1990s and to be included in the emerging international circuit of experimental productions that arose in those decades and endures to this day. Great media appeal, business logic based on sponsorship and tour-specific aesthetics made it possible for this show to be staged not only in eighteen Brazilian cities, but also in Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, as well as the Lincoln Centre in New York.¹ The analysis of this performance and the conditions under which it took place may reveal an aesthetic and production change in the Brazilian theatre that is linked to the formation of global markets, whose new aesthetic paradigms point to a new role of theatre in society. The methodology proposed here combines aesthetic, cultural, and socio-economic analysis tools in order to situate this play in the context of the complexity of the changes that have determined contemporary theatrical performance.

2. The “non-commercial” image theatre and the formation of a new global market.

In the late 1980s, theatre produced in the two largest cities of Brazil was in a period of transition, both aesthetically and in terms of its modes of production. The weakening of the direct relationship between the stage and the public, which until then had been responsible for sustaining the bulk of theatrical activity through the box office revenue, plunged the theatre into an unprecedented crisis.² Hyperinflation and the rise of violence in the megalopolises confined theatrical activity to cultural hubs and shopping centres. However, the main factor in the decline in the audience and revenue in the theatre during that period was the change in the symbiosis between the stage and television (Guenzburger 2017). Since the 1950s, Brazilian theatre had taken advantage of the great publicity that its stars obtained by participating in *telenovelas* (television soap operas). As television sets spread to most Brazilian homes in the 1980s, this symbiosis turned into competition, because the spectator who once went to the theatre to see his favourite television star, now chose to watch him at home.³

In terms of aesthetics, this period accentuated the ongoing process of disruption between entertainment theatre, which was still trying to inflate box office returns with the presence of television celebrities, and theatre that attempted to be characterized as artistic, as it detached itself from naturalistic television language. In this Brazilian “artistic theatre”, which still sought to be a going concern until the early 1990s, the realism of previous decades was increasingly squeezed by the need for new languages, specific to the stage and, later, also to the streets and other spaces. New groups, and even old professionals, embraced a new theatricalism that used all kinds of experiences,

involving traditional codes and forms (such as circus, melodrama and music hall), new narrative and rhapsodic techniques, as well as new global influences and languages of fine arts, performance art and contemporary dance.

The return of Brazilian director Gerald Thomas to Brazil in the mid-1980s, after a promising early career in the New York avant-garde scene, helped to trigger a large formal and thematic upheaval that was related to these changes in the socioeconomic conditions of the theatre. Thomas brought from Europe and the United States a new proposal for the stage, through which the materialization of theatricality moved away from the idea of drama and began to shift from a focus on box office receipts to a new mode of production based on sponsorship.

Having lived, studied and worked outside Brazil for many years, when their first successful plays emerged at La MaMa Theatre in New York, Brazilian duo Gerald Thomas (director) and Daniela Thomas (scenographer) immediately aroused the interest of leading figures of the Brazilian star system. The first plays by Gerald and Daniela Thomas in Brazil in 1985 and 1986 resulted from invitations by some of these experienced artist-entrepreneurs who wanted to open themselves to new international trends. In this way, Gerald and Daniela Thomas staged texts by Samuel Beckett and Heiner Müller in Rio, financed by the box office. In São Paulo, a great television star produced and starred in Gerald Thomas' first authorial show in Brazil, *Carmen com Filtro* (Carmen with Filter). In a 1986 interview, however, Thomas demonstrated his awareness of the nonconformity of his work to the Brazilian theatrical medium:

Works like this require a non-commercial theatre, but, in Brazil, there is no survival outside the commercial theatre. And this is not theatre's fault. It is the fault of the system that does not guarantee support, unlike what happens abroad, where there is funding for experimental theatre. All this ends up creating a very big gap between the First World and Brazil (Figueiredo 2017).⁴

Thomas' vision reinforced the idea that there were two types of theatre: a commercial one and an experimental one.⁵ Within the hierarchy "between the First World and Brazil" another hierarchy was embedded: between art and commerce. These hierarchizations bothered many Brazilian artists, especially young ones, who disputed his right to space in the media and in the market. Many of them went to the newspapers to mock the great radical novelty of the year and to denounce him as an impostor in search of success at any cost. The controversies that arose from this conflict guaranteed a place of absolute prominence to the "foreign" director. There were many long disputes that generated stories and readers for *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro's most important venue for cultural dissemination at that time. In 1986, Thomas wrote for, or was written about in, around 40 editions of the newspaper, appearing more than 50 times.⁶ These public fights helped to keep him at the top of the Brazilian cultural media for a number of years. Thomas knew how to take advantage of them by forging for himself an ambiguous "pop" persona, without compromise with truth or coherence. In his interviews and articles, he would use a subjective instability analogous to the "monologic imagination" (Süssekind 1996, p. 281) and the "work of the postmodern artist" (George 1996, 258) which critics identified in the narrative of his shows. The figure of the cosmopolitan director, who was respected in New York, mingled with that of a Brazilian charlatan, who invented stories about his own international success. The confusion Thomas himself would make between these two versions neutralized the accusations

against him, for he thus mocked the “naive” and “old-fashioned” narrative constructions of his rivals, and increased both the public interest in and the artistic legitimacy of his ambiguous figure.⁷

In *The Dynamics of the Fields*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that one of the results of Manichaeism in this type of internal dispute in the fields of cultural production is the mythification of the artist’s disinterested role.

By refusing to recognize any other relationship between the producer and his audience than cynical calculation or pure disinterestedness, writers and artists give themselves a convenient device for seeing themselves as disinterested, while exposing their adversaries as motivated by the lust for success at any price (Bourdieu 1984, p. 237).

Taking into account this strategy or impulse of self-legitimation through the delegitimation of the other, controversies between different theatrical generations or movements may become an important field of study for any research that attempts to combine aesthetics and socioeconomics in contemporary theatre. In the long run, the rival artist is usually the best analyst of the marketing expedients embedded in the aesthetics and discourse of his adversary.

A good starting point for an outline of the market relations implied in the emergence of a worldwide network of what Gerald Thomas calls “experimental theatre” is an article written by director and professor Pierre-Étienne Heymann for the French journal *Théâtre Public* in 1997. It carefully articulates changes in the mode of production of the so-called French public theatre from the 1970s to the 1990s (and its ascendant neoliberal ideological framework) with the aesthetics arising from these new realities.

According to Heymann, the main change that took place in the structure of patronage in the French theatrical public system was in terms of monetary distribution, which began to no longer prioritize increasing the size of the audiences, but instead, the capacity to reinforce the image of those who provided the subsidy. The central government and, primarily, the local ones became more and more interested in the media potential of plays and directors. As a result, most of the provincial theatres made efforts, often beyond their means, to be part of the globalized circuit of the great and prestigious international productions which, without spoken text or with subtitled lines, were staged in Berlin, New York, Paris, London etc.

Heymann assumes that this mercantile approach favoured the emergence of the genius director figure, and the proliferation of what was at the time called the image theatre. This theatre, which he says appears in the wake of the great successes of Tadeusz Kantor and Robert Wilson, would privilege

[...] a parade of pictures destined to impress the retina of the spectator by its plastic splendor, its sensitive glow, [...] luxury albums in which the text is nothing more than a legend of the images, and whose pages have no other subject but their own magnificence; an in-significant and non-signifying art, which is antipodal of Gestus Brechtian research laden with meaning.⁸

This generalizing and sometimes even biased view of the “theatre of images” has its roots in Brechtism and possible resentment on the part of Pierre-Étienne Heymann, who belongs to the previous generation, whose values, modes of production and aesthetics were being replaced by the neoliberal and postmodern winds. Perhaps for this very reason, he has a rare ability to link new artistic phenomena to economic changes in the public service mission of the theatre.

The one to whom the director of the theatre must show with ostentation that his money is well employed is now less the spectator than the financier, that is to say, the politician who entrusted the public money to the artist so that he would enhance the image of the State Sponsor [...] The decorative orgy that invaded the scenes is not only an art effect, it has a direct correlation with the weakening of the public service mission, and the new legitimation of the financing (Heymann 1999, p. 70).

The multiplication of the supply and demand of spectacles at all levels of government created in France a network of groups and professionals in competition for subsidy and support. Heymann called this phenomenon “a simulated market economy, since almost all of the funds invested in production and distribution were fed by the [public] subsidy” (Heymann 1999, p. 64). With regard to the spectators, it should be noted that, since the 1970s, the number of shows in the subsidized French theatre has multiplied, and the duration of the seasons has shortened from 6–8 weeks to 2–3 weeks (Pasquier 2017).

3. Global aesthetics, new politics and modes of production

In Brazil, there was not yet a net of public policies by means of which a politician could entrust “the public money to the artist so that he would enhance the image of the State Sponsor” (Heymann 1999, p. 70). Nevertheless, the media potential of Gerald Thomas’ work and image soon caught the attention of another kind of agent who would trigger a fundamental change in his trajectory and in the country’s artistic legitimization system, somewhat comparable to what Heymann says about France and Europe. This shift may be revealed by looking at the posters for Thomas’s shows. When he first arrived in Brazil, the posters prominently displayed the names of the famous actors who had hired him (see figure 1a). From the end of 1986, this was replaced by an unusual brand-linked structure which would become a mantra of professional Brazilian cultural production for the next 30 years: “[deodorant brand] ‘*Rastro*’ presents *Eletra com Creta* (Electra with Crete)”, followed by the technical credits (Fernandes and Guinsburg 1996, pp. 177–191) (See figure 1b).

The key to understanding this shift in poster design, which indicates a structural change in the means of production, is the presence of the *Artecultura* agency. By the late 1980s, Yakoff Sarkovas’ agency obtained sponsorship for the shows that Thomas staged at his Dry Opera Company, with strong visual impact and without famous actors. Sarkovas, as a consultant for major brands, helped to introduce the cultural marketing philosophy to Brazilian companies and international affiliates in Brazil such as PepsiCo, Santander, Fiat, Petrobras and Nestle (Edelman Significa 2017). His mission was to show these companies the advantages of joining their names to innovative and contemporary art and theatre. At the same time, as a producer and agent, he pioneered a new method of survival, through the creation and adaptation of cultural products, aiming for the professional qualification of branding and media return on the sponsor’s investment.⁹

The Brazilian theatrical research and the criticism that accompanied Thomas’ activities in this period focused on aesthetic aspects and ignored this shift in the modes of production and legitimation, in which Gerald Thomas and his play *The Flash...* took part.¹⁰ The researcher Sílvia Fernandes wrote a book¹¹ that is considered the prominent work on the theatre of Gerald Thomas. It has served as a kind of toolbox for the translation of many of the new international theatrical tendencies that were beginning to

arrive in Brazil (mainly, but not only, through Thomas). Nevertheless, a general influence from theatrical semiology led Brazilian theatre scholars to see Thomas' deconstruction of linear senses and narratives as a liberation for the Brazilian stage from the shackles of representation and drama.



Figures 1a and 1b: Posters from *Quartett* (1985) and *Electra com Creta* (1986), both shows created by Gerald Thomas. The shift in the highlights, from stage and TV stars to sponsoring companies, illustrates broader changes in the modes of production of Brazilian theatre. Source: private collection.

A decade later, Hans-Thies Lehmann's book on postdramatic theatre would arrive in Brazil and would attempt to name this idea of the theatre and its new libertarian tasks. This conception of liberty on stage has brought about a profound change in the perception of the political status of experimental theatre.

Bérénice Hamidi-Kim describes how, in France (and, one might say, part of Europe), in the 1980s, the idea of "poétique" (both poetic and political) became the motto of the theatre that sought new languages (Hamidi-Kim 2013). The argument of the ontological existence of the political status of theatre leads this kind of artist to identify its libertarian mission with the freedom to construct new forms, and thus to fabricate new worldviews, new questions for society. These new worldviews and perspectives should be provoked or expressed only by the poetry and beauty of new artistic forms, and never by the representation of reality in understandable narratives. Gerald Thomas seems to have been one of the most accomplished artists to import and adapt these formalist ideas about the purpose of theatre in society in Brazil.

The perception of the change in the political function of theatre, triggered or enhanced by Thomas' cosmopolitan figure, is nevertheless incomplete if he is understood only as a beacon emitting signs independent of context, as Brazilian criticism has done in general. One must try, for example, to link these new aesthetic claims to the loss of the potential for public debate by the theatre in Europe, pointed out by

Christopher Balme. According to Balme, the separation between theatre and the public sphere results from the view of the stage as a “black box”, as a private space, where the artist should be free of external ties (ethical, political, or symbolic) in order to express himself in the most innovative way possible (Balme 2014). This modern and contemporary artist may thus not necessarily represent any reality in his performance. Consequently, whatever happens on the stage may or may not be related to what happens in the outside world, for which the artist obviously shouldn't be held responsible.

One cannot ignore the fact that the kind of freedom which Gerald Thomas claims for his theatre is precisely the possibility of disconnection between theatrical and public spheres. Just when Brazil needed to formulate cultural policies, the theatre wanted to be the place for genius' subjectivity and the liberty to search for new forms; above all, it requested the right to take no responsibility in the debate about the unfair and complex society in the Brazilian post-dictatorship era.

Brazilian critic Alberto Guzik, culturally contextualizing Thomas' trajectory, arrives at a less libertarian, more individualistic and even pessimistic view:

In this individualistic world, in this hangover after the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the apparent and frightening victory of liberal economic models, at a time of local and national wars of violence comparable only to Nazi ferocity, Gerald Thomas presents himself as a selfish and arrogant radar. He stands as the Renaissance man of Leonardo Da Vinci, at the center of the universe of creation. [...] Gerald Thomas' world is neither friendly nor hopeful (Guzik 1996, 198–199).

What escaped the analyses of the stage that is closed in its own signs and narratives is that, when arriving as a prodigal son, or as a foreigner in his homeland, Gerald Thomas did not bring in his baggage only new knowledge, perceptions and aesthetic concepts. Along with all this, he brought the scepticism and self-centrism of the European artist, disenchanted in the 1980s as contraband. Most of all (and semiology was not able to perceive this), the “Anglo-Germanic-Jewish-Brazilian” director brought from abroad, along with a new way of working on stage, a whole new notion of how one should work off stage, so that the “new theatre” could exist in Brazil, institutionalized and with some constancy. Furthermore, this other baggage did not arrive separately from the stage. With light designs consisting of more than 180 spotlights controlled by the first imported digital equipment, settings that were giant installations, choreographic precision that presupposed months of work, detailed staging pre-project in a storyboard, total disengagement from an optimistic and captivating story for the middle class, this was a theatre that already expected or should have expected financial support not dependent on ticket sales.

4. The Flash and Crash Days

Older strategies were then redirected to qualify cultural projects for the new resources that emerged with corporate sponsorship. In 1989, the producer Sarkovas organized a meeting between Thomas and Fernanda Montenegro, at the time considered to be the most important Brazilian actress. Two years later, Banco do Brasil presented, in its recently-inaugurated cultural centre, *The Flash and Crash Days*, Thomas' biggest success on Brazilian and international stages, which would be presented in eight countries and in more than thirty cities, to more than 100.000 people (George 1996,

269). The show¹², as controversial as its creator, presented the diva Fernanda Montenegro in several situations of confrontation with her daughter, Fernanda Torres, at that time a young actress, but who had already received the Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Actress.¹³ Fernanda (the mother) begins the play with an arrow across her throat (see figure 2). There follows a scene in which Fernanda (the daughter) masturbates while the older woman observes her and sucks on a lollipop (see figure 3).



Figure 2: *Fernanda Montenegro, Ludoval Campos and Luis Damasceno in The Flash And Crash Days.*
Source: todoteatrocarrioca.com.br



Figure 3: *Fernanda Montenegro, Fernanda Torres, Ludoval Campos and Luis Damasceno in The Flash And Crash Days.* Source: todoteatrocarrioca.com.br

In another scene, the daughter rips out her mother's heart and eats it. The elder takes revenge and rips the girl's head off in order to play volleyball with it. The language of circus and mimicry, with few fragmented and recorded texts and no causal connection between the scenes, is full of cultural and philosophical references, international history of art and theatre, Wagnerian opera, psychoanalysis, the director's obsessions etc. An intense theatricality was the main result of this scenic game of death, consisting of few words and many repetitions between a mother and her daughter, between the old and the new or between Fernanda and Fernanda.

The Brazilian scholar Sílvia Fernandes identifies in Thomas' productions the occurrence of leitmotifs, which in *The Flash...* are materialized as struggles that lead to nothing other than the visual spatiality of the idea of conflict.¹⁴ These confrontations fade quickly and may be repeated, but because of the lack of a causal structure that could bind them, they are mainly doomed to impotence.

What seems to be at stake is precisely the contestation of the idea of conflict as the structuring mechanism of theatre. This means abandoning the idea of drama as a succession of events, facts or discourses that pose a question, develop it and direct it towards a resolution (Fernandes 1996, p. 159).

Following this denial of a temporal progression, there is in *The Flash and Crash Days* the juxtaposition of various temporal strata of the same mythical movement. A medieval-styled costume covers the suffering of a Greek heroine, whose heart will be torn out, and then will be supported by two Groucho Marx-like figures¹⁵, sporting wings inspired by the work of Wim Wenders. The competitions between archaic clowns who behave as in a silent film comedy of the early twentieth century alternate with the violence of a cartoon, with German cinematographic expressionism, with scenes from horror films or with movements from classical dance and *commedia dell' arte* performed by the young woman. She can also play cards with an older version of herself or with a farcical version of the villain that the audience recognizes from the soap opera in which her mother was working at that time.

This procedure reflects the conception of the role of the director as that of an archaeologist whose purpose, according to Sílvia Fernandes, was to “[...] rid of the dust of centuries the ruins of characters carved by playwrights, novelists, poets, librettists and composers” (Fernandes 1996, p. 107).¹⁶

The archaeologist Thomas seems to handle the end of dramatic time progression in order to better understand a world in whose logic of progress he disbelieves. This, however, is a doubt and an ambiguity that hangs over the show. As in a play by Samuel Beckett, at every resumption or every new conflict, the hope of a new progression is revived for the “characters”.

The question is whether there is any possibility of advancing in a disenchanted world, dissected by the end of drama and the idea of progress. For in *The Flash and Crash Days*, this doubt is enunciated and experienced by the Brazilian queen of dramatic interpretation, modern tradition and melodrama, television and realistic theatre, comedy of customs and modern comedy: Fernanda Montenegro. Fernanda is the one who makes us laugh and cry as we identify with characters that go through the worst or most bizarre situations in theatre and TV, often with their heads held high and their eyes glittering with hope. The presence of her young daughter Fernanda Torres embodies, at the very least, a future for these acting traditions. On the other hand, the figure of that

great actor embodying the civilizing mission of theatre, the one who historically would represent optimism about progress, is itself imprisoned here by the scenic device of repetitions and conflicts that go nowhere. Just as the image of Marilyn Monroe could work both as a criticism and an exaltation of the cultural industry for Andy Warhol, so Fernanda Montenegro as an institution is part of Thomas' plot. At the same time, she is a representation and theme, a criticism and an exaltation of the dramatic form. She and her daughter are themselves the theatre and its crisis. It would be impossible to change the cast without completely changing the complex meanings of the show, for example. This drives it away from modernist theatre straight towards contemporary performance and pop art.

Perhaps the conscious management of this encounter between different traditions of staging and acting is the greatest artistic achievement of Gerald Thomas' experimental production. This ambivalence is certainly at the heart of its enormous success because it opened the play up to both the cultural milieu that legitimates sponsorship and to the general public, who may have felt excluded from Thomas' previous plays because of the intertextualities that constantly necessitated prior knowledge of figures of Western high-culture such as Joseph K., Carmen, or Electra.¹⁷ However, in *The Flash...* everything was much simpler. Each member of the audience could make his or her own reading, because no previous knowledge about any of its figures was required. In this ambivalence may also lie the great effectiveness of the play.¹⁸ Where a critic or an actor saw a metaphor about the end of drama, a bank clerk may have seen only a very funny piece of slapstick. A mother's heart devoured on stage with a lot of blood can be a psychoanalytic problem or a grotesque scene of popular theatre (see figure 4). A daughter who has her head pulled off and points her gun at nowhere belongs to the universe of surrealist tradition and to Tom and Jerry.



Figure 4: Fernanda Torres in *The Flash And Crash Days*. Source: geraldthomas.com

This openness to different readings also permits an international reception for the play. Furthermore, although noisy, the actions in this play are not accompanied by words in this or that language. As Fernanda Montenegro told *The New York Times* in her US debut, the play can be seen either as a “[...] grotesquely funny cartoon or a terrifying children's story for adults” (Myers 1992).

For the audience of the Brazilian cultural milieu, the wordless Fernandas’ on stage, expressionist, clownish and melodramatic, left no doubt at every moment that the theme of the play was the theatre, because of the figures they represented off stage. This is reinforced by the way these two talented and extremely skilled actresses filled each conflict with a veritable breath of hope, which was frustrated and renewed indefinitely in the performance, as in a seesaw. At the end, there is one last beautiful and ambivalent image: a card game between the two women that will last forever. Separated by a transparent wall¹⁹, and similar to a play by Beckett, macabre gambling reminds us that conflicts, wars and meaningless walls will continue indefinitely to separate humanity, and that there is no solution in sight. In the Brazilian cultural context, however, for those who note the presence of a theatrical family on stage²⁰, the image also has another, more optimistic reading: despite everything, or because of everything, the theatre will always have the raw material which is necessary for its survival. Generation after generation of actors will continue to play the game of chance that, after all, and despite the constant changes and threats, does not run the risk of disappearing.

5. Conclusion

Gerald Thomas may have been the first Brazilian director to successfully match the importance of light, music, actors, scenography and text on the stage. While pursuing the deconstruction of drama as a structure for the stage, he may have tried to free the theatre from any social function. However, according to the methodology used in the present analysis, this conception of an autonomous art was as important and revealing as the graphic design of the show, the brand of the deodorant that sponsored it, the history of the producer, or the impressions of other artists who did not share his views. This same importance was given to the ideology and the interests of the journalist and the newspaper that helped to launch, through controversies, Thomas’ name in the cultural market of Rio de Janeiro. Aesthetic analysis amplified by cultural and socioeconomic contextualization²¹ allowed us to identify international trends implied in both artistic innovation and market pioneering, and especially in the connection between these two aspects of Gerald Thomas’ play. What can then be seen is a new theatrical mode of production that was already being experienced in other countries. This new system, based on sponsorship, proved to be inseparable from certain global aesthetic paradigms that accompanied it. Both had to be adapted to the Brazilian reality.

In this sense, *The Flash and Crash Days* certainly has a central place in the work of Gerald Thomas, but not only because it was his most acclaimed performance worldwide or the most watched in Brazil. According to the present analysis, it was also the most successful in terms of the director’s sort of “pop art” programme, which mixes elements of theatre history into the scenic construction, in order to cause controversy and break the boundaries of representation. In the case studied, the “pop” approach begins with the selection of a famous cast, who are identified with the Brazilian textual and dramatic tradition, to execute a wordless and innovative scenic mechanism of repetitions and

stagnation of the narrative flow. As we have seen, such a contradictory choice opened this play up to many different audiences. In this way, it was ideal for international tours, and was a success in various social circles and also in the curatorial system of critics and managers that legitimized the sponsorships.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the wordless aesthetics of the image theatre helped to form a transnational network of experimental theatre, bringing new approaches to drama and representation and, at times, also a certain disconnection from more local, concrete, or immediate political problems. Thomas had just begun his career in this cosmopolitan market, by staging Samuel Beckett's plays in New York, when he was invited by the local star system to make his debut in Brazil in the mid-1980s. He then directed with his Dry Opera Company some shows that made him famous in Brazil and were performed at international festivals. These performances were based on strong visuality, without famous actors, and were produced with the sponsorship of pioneer companies in the Brazilian cultural market. By the time *The Flash...* took off, Thomas was already being invited by European national theatres of cities such as Taormina, Munich, Vienna, Zurich and Stuttgart to present or to produce the plays of his Brazilian company, and also to create operas and performances with local casts. Nevertheless, the unprecedented link between sponsorship, experimentalism and television fame in *The Flash...* helped to define new directions in Brazilian theatre production.²² In trying to escape the crisis of a system financed by declining revenue from ticket sales, the theatre of Rio de Janeiro imported and created new artistic forms and new means of sustenance, appropriating everything it could from the previous system. Endorsed by the great lady of the Brazilian theatre and by its own great national and international consecration, *The Flash...* was part of a larger movement that negotiated with local theatrical traditions and contemporary global trends, in order to reformulate the Brazilian stage and help it attract the private and public investments needed for its survival. This reformed theatre has become aesthetically globalized and, in terms of survival, increasingly dependent on the power of curators, critics, prize juries, journalists, managers and, above all, sponsors.

If we look beyond the work of Gerald Thomas and the Brazilian theatre environment, this case study indicates that aesthetic criticism gains strength when it is supported and expanded by a cultural and socio-economic approach. It also suggests that if we are able to combine these methodologies, theatre research can improve the quality of debate on contemporary theatre, especially in its political and transnational dimension.

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Images

Figures 1a and 1b: Posters from *Quartett* (1985) and *Electra com Creta* (1986), both shows created by Gerald Thomas. The shift in the highlights, from stage and TV stars to sponsoring companies, illustrates broader changes in the modes of production of Brazilian theatre. Source: private collection.

Figure 2: Fernanda Montenegro, Ludoval Campos and Luis Damasceno in *The Flash And Crash Days*. Source: todoteatrocarioica.com.br

Figure 3: Fernanda Montenegro, Fernanda Torres, Ludoval Campos and Luis Damasceno in *The Flash And Crash Days*. Source: todoteatrocarioica.com.br

Figure 4: Fernanda Torres in *The Flash And Crash Days*. Source: geraldthomas.com

Endnotes

- ¹ Gerald Thomas. *Entre duas fileiras / Gerald Thomas*. (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2016), 123. See also Sílvia Fernandes, *Memória e invenção: Gerald Thomas em cena* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1996), 332–334.
- ² The diagnosis of this crisis is based on the many testimonies collected during the doctoral research that generated this article, since access to *bordereaux* and other documents that could provide positive numbers and statistics is difficult for theatre researchers.
- ³ According to the National Survey by Household Sample (PNAD) of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the number of households that had a television jumped from 56.10% in 1980 to 79.58% in 1991. José Eustáquio Dinis Alves. *As características dos domicílios brasileiros entre 1960 e 2000*. Rio de Janeiro: Escola Estadual Estatística, 2004. According to IBOPE, the soap opera *Roque Santeiro*, in 1985–86, obtained an average of 67 audience points and 95 in its last chapter. “Audiência detalhada ‘Roque Santeiro’, TVFOCO, accessed January 30, 2019, <<https://www.otvfoco.com.br/audiencia-detalhada-roque-santeiro/>>.
- ⁴ Claudio Figueiredo, “Ensaio: Nunca é tarde para experimentar,” in *Jornal do Brasil* (July 13, 1986). Accessed February 28, 2017, <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/118139>.

- ⁵ Thomas and some other artists associated the commercial character with theatre's dependence on ticket sales. This article argues that a new type of market was emerging at that time, based on the ability to attract sponsors rather than paying spectators.
- ⁶ It is important to note that this warm welcome to a "prodigal son", who came back from abroad, differs greatly from the one reserved for Augusto Boal, who returned, also famous, from his involuntary political exile of fifteen years, in the same period of 1985-86. In the last chapter of her book *O Exílio de Augusto Boal: Reflexões sobre um Teatro sem Fronteiras*, Clara de Andrade analyses the difficulties of Boal's return and the real campaign of *Jornal do Brasil* against his play *O Corsário do Rei* (The King's Corsair) in 1985, including a "debate" in the newspaper without the presence of the author. Andrade shows that this campaign involved, in addition to the ideological disagreements of the post-dictatorship period, urgent discussions about the cultural policies of the city.
- ⁷ Some of the main controversies can be followed in: Maurício Stycer, "Distante das modas: o fim de semana de cada um," in *Jornal do Brasil* (September 26, 1986). Accessed February 28, 2017. <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/122851>; Gerald Thomas, "Cartas: Gerald x Geraldo," *Jornal do Brasil*, October, 1, 1986a, accessed February 28, 2017, <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/123275>; Gerald Thomas, "Cartas: Gerald x Geraldo," *Jornal do Brasil*, October, 14, 1986b, accessed February 28, 2017, <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/124376>; Elizabeth Orsini, "Olga Wasislowa: o mistério de uma autora que é personagem," *Jornal do Brasil* (December 5, 1986). Accessed February 28, 2017. <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/127866>; and Claudio Figueiredo, "Ensaio: Nunca é tarde para experimentar," in *Jornal do Brasil* (July 13, 1986). Accessed February 28, 2017, <http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/030015_10/118139>.
- ⁸ Pierre-Etienne Heymann, "Le théâtre public saisi par le libéralisme," in *Théâtre/Public* 134 (1999): 70.
- ⁹ This way of financing the arts took inspiration from the experience of the US and other countries, and was formulated in tax rebate legislation for culture sponsors, enacted in 1991. After modifications in 1997, the "Rouanet" law turned into a bizarre, elitist and unique mechanism of arts funding, in which the marketing executives of the companies choose the cultural products to be sponsored, and the federal government pays the bill. Somewhat like in the French "Public Theatre", this mechanism has created a false or simulated market of cultural funding, in which producers and artists struggle (through big companies in Brazil) for investments that are fully governmental. Since then, the initial enthusiasm for experimental and innovative art has lost its power in Brazilian marketing departments, which tend to use this free government subsidy to sponsor big names in show business. Nowadays even Ministers of Culture and specialists in cultural marketing, such as Yacoff Sarkovas, say it is time to change the law. A reform act has been waiting in Congress since 2008. See Jucá Ferreira, "Jucá Ferreira abre fogo contra Lei Rouanet," in *O Globo* (February 6, 2015). Accessed February 28, 2017: <<http://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/juca-ferreira-abre-fogo-contra-lei-rouanet-15258675#ixzz3RrToOQSh>>. See also Yakov Sarkovas, "Uma herança incômoda," in *O Estado de São Paulo* (April 15, 2005), D-11.
- ¹⁰ Some of the most important works about Thomas are in Fernandes and Guinsburg, ed. *Um encenador*.
- ¹¹ Fernandes, *Memória e invenção*.
- ¹² The descriptions below are taken from the researcher's memories of the two times he attended the show, in 1991 and 1992, and especially from the complete video of the play, *The Flash and Crash Days*, Dir. Gerald Thomas. Perf. Fernanda Montenegro, Fernanda Torres, Ludoval Campos and Luiz Damasceno, Rio de Janeiro: SAT Vídeo, 1991, 1 VHS tape (70'): son., Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil/RJ collection.
- ¹³ At the age of 20, in 1986, Fernanda Torres was the first Brazilian actress to win the "Prix d'Interprétation Féminine" for her role in *Love me Forever or Never*. In 1999, her mother Fernanda Montenegro would become the first and only Brazilian actress to ever be nominated for the Academy Award (Oscar®) in the category of Best Actress for her performance in *Central Station*. For this work, Montenegro was also nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress – Motion Picture Drama and won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival.
- ¹⁴ Although lacking apprehension of the cultural and socioeconomic shift involved in Thomas' work, aesthetic reflections about his stagings by Sílvia Fernandes are still useful, as we can see twenty years after they were written.
- ¹⁵ Ludoval Campos and Luiz Damasceno completed the cast.
- ¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Thomas identified this very feature in the work of Henry Miller. Figueiredo, "Ensaio" (Fernandes, *Memória e invenção*, 107.)
- ¹⁷ Respectively from his "Kafka Trilogy", "Carmen with Filter 1 and 2" and "Electra with Creta". These are translated titles. In Portuguese, the last one works as a paronomasia with concrete art and poetry.
- ¹⁸ In an interview after the opening, Ziraldo, a Brazilian artist and father of the scenographer Daniela Thomas, said that the show was "hermetic, but for millions (of people)". Other artists and spectators share the same impression in this video-tape. *The Flash...*, VHS, 1991a.
- ¹⁹ These final seconds are the only time the performance uses this device. Until then, all of Thomas' stagings in Brazil were performed behind this kind of screen, which worked as a sort of trademark of the director.
- ²⁰ During the staging of the play (1991-1994), Thomas began a four-year relationship with Fernanda Torres.

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- ²¹ Legal and economic difficulties still hamper access to the accounting data of Brazilian theatre. This is a barrier that must be broken by researchers and institutions.
- ²² The list of productions sponsored by Banco do Brasil and staged at its cultural centre from 1991 to 2010 (after *The Flash...*) includes at least eighteen performances that also combine TV casting and a director identified with experimental theatre. The same phenomenon is observed in the French “théâtre publique” by Pierre-Etienne Heymann. Heyman, *Le théâtre publique*, 65.