

Grupo TAPA: An Overview of The Work of a Brazilian Repertory Theater Company

Grupo TAPA: Um panorama do trabalho de uma companhia brasileira de teatro de repertório

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Abstract: *This article contextualizes and briefly discusses the most important characteristics of Grupo TAPA's work and acting methods. Special emphasis is given to the formative process in the area of acting and to the involvement of the group with the translation of plays by particularly relevant playwrights like Tchecov and Tennessee Williams.*

Keywords: *Repertory Theater; Theater History; Translations.*

Resumo: *Este artigo contextualiza e discute brevemente as características mais importantes do trabalho e dos métodos de atuação do Grupo TAPA. Destaque especial é dado ao processo formativo na área de atuação e ao envolvimento do grupo com a tradução de peças de dramaturgos particularmente relevantes como Tchecov e Tennessee Williams.*

Palavras-chave: *Teatro de repertório; História do teatro; Traduções.*

TAPA is one of the longest-running theater companies in Brazil. Founded by Eduardo Tolentino de Araújo in Rio de Janeiro in 1974, its name was, initially, Teatro Amador Produções Artísticas (T.A.P.A.), an acronym that was changed to TAPA sometime later, when some of the amateur actors and actresses decided to become professionals.

In 1986 the group moved to São Paulo and became a resident theater company at the Teatro Aliança Francesa, a 350-seat theater in the central region of the city. Aliança Francesa was the group's theatrical residence for the following 15 years.

After forty-three years of uninterrupted work and more than sixty staged plays, TAPA stands out for its repertory theater, having staged foreign classics like “Solness, o construtor” (“The master builder”, by Ibsen, in 1988), “A megera domada” (“The

taming of the shrew”, by Shakespeare, in 1991), “Major Barbara” (by Bernard Shaw, in 2001), “Contos de Sedução” (seven sketches adapted from seven short stories by Guy de Maupassant, in 2001) “A importância de ser Fiel” (“The importance of being Earnest”, by Oscar Wilde, in 2002), “A mandrágora” (“The mandrake”, by Nicollò Machiavelli, in 2004 and online in 2021), “Camaradagem”, “Credores” and “Brincando com fogo” (“Comrades”, in 2006, “Creditors”, in 2014, and “Playing with fire”, in 2020, the three by August Strindberg), “Amargo Siciliano” (“Sicilian Limes”, by Luigi Pirandello, in 2008), “Alguns blues do Tennessee” (three one act plays by Tennessee Williams, in 2013), “O jardim das cerejeiras” (“The cherry orchard”, by Anton Chekhov, in 2019), “De todas as maneiras que há de amar” (“Counting the ways”, by Edward Albee, in 2019), “Anatol” (by Arthur Schnitzler, in 2018), and also Brazilian plays, ones like “O noviço” (“The novice”, by Martins Pena, in 1985), “Caiu o ministério” (“The ministry has fallen”, by Arthur Azevedo), “Rasto atrás” (“Back track”, by Jorge Andrade, in 1995), “Vestido de noiva”, “A serpente” and “Anti Néelson Rodrigues” (“Bridal Gown”, in 1994, “The serpent”, in 1999, and “Anti Néelson Rodrigues in 2014-2015, all of them by Nelson Rodrigues), “Corpo a corpo” and “Papa Highirte”, by Oduvaldo Vianna Filho (“Infighting” from 1995 to 2000 and “Papa Highirte” in 2022), “Querô, uma reportagem maldita” and “Navalha na carne” (“Querô, a damned reportage” and “Razor in the flesh”, by Plínio Marcos, respectively in 1993 and 1999).

The director, Eduardo Tolentino de Araújo, is deeply acquainted with the history of western theater and with the study of the cultural and social role theater has played in the European, American and Brazilian contexts. Some of his constant concerns are the interaction between theater texts and the staging styles, and the demands observed in the training practices within the group’s workshops, aimed at professionals and amateurs as well as at interested parties.

In its early years, there were 16 actors and actresses in TAPAS’s cast. The group’s focus was on children’s plays. In most of them, however, the number of characters was smaller than the number of TAPA’s members. It was very difficult to keep all of the members constantly engaged in all productions.

Trying to deal with this situation, a project aimed at schools and at the formation of young audiences was developed. It was called School Project, and all of the actors and actresses that had not been cast for the main productions were called to work in it.

The repertoire consisted of plays by Brazilian playwrights, and they were performed in most of the high schools in Rio de Janeiro and its suburbs. The first production was “O noviço” (“The novice”), one the best works by Martins Pena [1815-1848], the

nineteenth century genius of the comedies of manners in Brazil. The production was presented in cafeterias, soccer fields, classrooms and even theaters, in case there were theaters in the visited schools. “O noviço” was followed by “A Casa de Orates” (“The Madhouse”), by Arthur Azevedo [1855-1908], another master in the realm of comedies and of the chronicle of the social and political life of Rio de Janeiro as the capital of the Republic in the nineteenth century.

A kind of turnaround in the plans of the group would happen sometime later, when a totally unexpected invitation came as a stimulus for them to become professionals: the TAPA actors and actresses engaged in the School Project were invited to present the plays on alternative days and times at the Ipanema Theater, a professional theater in one of the most famous and fashionable districts of Rio de Janeiro. All of a sudden, a change had taken place in the direction originally intended, and TAPA’s performances staged on alternative days and times at the Ipanema Theater started to attract the audiences from the schools and suburbs, and to motivate them to go to that theater and attend professional productions there.

Eduardo Tolentino had always stimulated other members of TAPA, and also people who were not necessarily regular members, to direct productions of the group. Without knowing it, TAPA had started its way towards the formation of a small repertory theater company.

None of the members, at that time, was familiar with the idea or with the characteristics of repertory theater companies such as those in the European theater context. Unknowingly, these new work conditions led them to a type of practice that was similar to the one of repertory companies in the European theatrical world.

As this process internally consolidated, the actors and actresses gradually realized how relevant it was to discuss and analyze Brazil through the staged plays, to dissect its society in depth and to delve into the different social and cultural aspects represented in Brazilian plays. This was perceived as something crucial for TAPA as a Brazilian theatrical ensemble, and eventually led to the development of a Festival of the Brazilian Drama, a project which, years later, was somehow absorbed into another one called Overview of the Brazilian Theater, which became a kind of distinctive mark of the group’s identity and work system.

“Overview of the Brazilian Theater” was the title of a book by Sábato Magaldi, one of the most prominent researchers of Brazilian drama, a reference for all those who wanted to study the history of the Brazilian dramaturgical production in depth. Sábato, who had also been one of the most important theater critics for many years, had just decided to

concentrate on his academic activities and was no longer working as a critic. Once asked whether he agreed on allowing TAPA to use the title of his book for the project, he promptly and warmly agreed.

Fifteen plays by Brazilian playwrights were staged in this project. While part of the actors and actresses cast in a season of one particular play, the others engaged in workshops and in the study and discussion of other plays that might be chosen to be staged and produced in the following season if considered mature enough in terms of acting. This system was used both for the study and analysis of texts and for the preparation and technical improvement of the members as well. This was the process that led to the production of Oduvaldo Vianna Filho's "Moço em estado de sítio" ("Besieged young man"), in 1998, illustrating how this system worked in practical terms: the play was studied by a group of young actors and actresses in one of the workshops, and was eventually chosen to be rehearsed and professionally produced next. Eduardo Tolentino says that, thanks to this internal system of work, TAPA could gradually develop its own identity as a group.

In 1998 there was a short interruption in the Overview of the Brazilian Theater when "Ivanov", by Anton Tchecov, was staged. Brazil was then in the middle of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's presidential term, and the dictatorship had been left behind. But neoliberal policies had greatly impoverished the Brazilian working class, and there was a general sense of lack of perspectives for the future. This context was similar to the one in Tchecov's play. Ivanov was an intellectual who felt surrounded by ignorance and corruption and had very similar feelings. TAPA wanted to probe into this world of social and moral dissolution and face the fact that the foundations of democracy in Brazil were not solid and were falling apart. "Ivanov" helped TAPA to face the challenge of investigating the mentality of the Brazilian colonialist elite.

"The case of Russia was a little different", Eduardo Tolentino says, "Russia was a feudal country with a strong religious background and with huge social inequality, but the Russian Revolution had a solid cultural basis. So, Russia was a country in which revolution would certainly be made in literature, music, arts and in the theater they had. The country was ready for a revolution. And it was a revolution that changed the face of the world. We in Brazil did not have that background. This was the idea that motivated us to study the elites, the ruling classes, in order to investigate this state of things."

Eduardo Tolentino had been reading and re-reading "Ivanov", by Tchecov, for many years and in different foreign editions. The text instigated him, but he realized there was not any really good translation of the text. With English and French translations at hand, as well a number of dictionaries of these languages, he started doing his own translation.

Arlete Cavaliere, a professor and researcher of Russian Language, Literature and Culture at the University of São Paulo, was then invited to translate the play from the Russian original into Brazilian Portuguese, and also to lecture on the Russian culture, literature and history to the actors and actresses from TAPA. The following step was the analysis and discussion of the two translations that had just been done. Both of them were read, and submitted to a comparative analysis, and very interesting perceptions came up about the use of colloquial expressions so as to avoid making them sound strange or unnatural to the ears of Brazilian Portuguese speakers.

TAPA's translation of Tchecov's "Ivanov" was eventually published by EDUSP (the publishing house of the University of São Paulo), and received a nomination for the Jabuti Prize, the most traditional literary prize in Brazil, granted by the Brazilian Book Chamber.

This was not the only important and successful incursion of TAPA in the area of translation: in 2010 a group of actors and actresses who were attending a workshop on Tennessee Williams's one act plays decided to work on their own translations of these plays straight from the original in English. There were no published editions of the translations of these one act plays in Brazil, but a number of translations informally done as exercises by students of performing arts were shared and circulated through the Internet, indicating there was latent interest in the plays. Many years before, students in a famous performing arts course in São Paulo, in a joint effort, had translated many of them from a Spanish anthology called "Piezas cortas de Tennessee Williams", published in Barcelona in 1970. Having been done from the Spanish and not from the original, these translations needed so many revisions and corrections that the TAPA actors and actresses attending the workshop decided to work on their own translations from the original texts in English. Each one of the TAPA translations was read and reread aloud by the group, and each of the challenging expressions and images in the texts were examined and discussed in detail in order to make sure they sounded as natural as possible in Portuguese on the stage.

In the following year, Editora É Realizações, having bought the rights for the publication of many of Tennessee Williams's works, heard of the workshop and of the ongoing translations, and invited TAPA to officially translate two volumes of one act plays by Tennessee Williams: "Mr Paradise and other one act plays" and "27 wagons full of cotton and other one act plays". In 2013 TAPA presented dramatic readings of most of the one act plays in these two volumes in the Arena Theater of São Paulo, and in the same year, three of them ("The dark room", "Summer at the lake" and "The lady of Larkspur lotion") were presented in a performance called "Alguns blues do Tennessee" directed by Eduardo Tolentino de Araújo.



“The cherry orchard”, by Anton Tchecov

Brian Penido Ross as Leonid Gayev and Clara Carvalho as Liuba Ranevsky

Sources: Grupo TAPA Archives and <https://revistapontojovem.com.br/grupo-tapa-faz-leituras-dramaticas-de-classicos-russos-no-teatro-alianca-francesa/>



“The bald prima donna” by Eugene Ionesco

Source: <https://prceu.usp.br/noticia/grupo-tapa-teatro-da-usp/>
(From left to right) Riba Carlovitch as Mr Martin; Brian Penido Ross as Mr Smith; Riba Carlovitch as Mr Martin; Clara Carvalho as Mrs Smith; Guilherme Santana as The fire chief.



“Counting the ways” (‘De todas as maneiras que há de amar’) by Edward Albee
Brian Penido Ross and Clara Carvalho (He and She)

Source: <https://www.satisfeitayolanda.com.br/blog/como-eu-te-amo-critica-do-espetaculo-do-grupo-tapa-de-todas-as-maneiras-que-ha-de-amar/>

Along its 43 years of existence, TAPA has cultivated deep interest in plays by Shaw, and “Major Bárbara” was one of them. The production was staged in 2001, the year the 9/11 attacks to the World Trade Center Towers in New York took place. As “Major Barbara” deals with the themes of weapons and religion, the group experienced a sort of internal crisis, which made everyone question whether that was the ideal moment to stage that particular play.

The group eventually realized that, intuitively and unintentionally, they had chosen a play that dealt with something that was then on the agenda in the discussions of contemporary international conflicts. The production was a great success in São Paulo.

“Shaw is very dialectical, very contradictory, very ambiguous in his project”, says Eduardo Tolentino, “and he paves the way for Brecht. There are contradictory heroes on one hand, and highly coherent villains on the other, and this adds to the play’s complexity and depth. In Brecht’s ‘Mother Courage’, for example,” he adds, “the protagonist is a mother, but she is also a predator. Shaw is the first dramatist to use this sort of protagonist. Politically speaking, he was a radical, even though he never admitted it. Shaw had written this play with its Salvation Army and its contradictions long before Before Brecht wrote “Happy End”.

TAPA’s production of Shaw’s “Major Barbara” motivated the group for the staging of Wilde’s “The importance of being Earnest” as well. Critics used to say that dramatists like Shaw and Wilde would never succeed in Brazil, but TAPA’s productions of plays by both of them were absolute hits for the group, Shaw in São Paulo and Wilde in the rest of Brazil. A superb veteran Brazilian actress, Natalia Thimberg, played Lady Bracknell in “The importance of being Earnest”, and it was one of the remarkable roles in her career.

Shaw was less commercially successful in Rio de Janeiro, though. This was something that had to do with Rio’s local culture. “The Rio de Janeiro season was short”, says Eduardo Tolentino, “and we didn’t have any press releases. Even though we had good reviews, there was less resonance and visibility. All in all, it wasn’t a good season.” Shortly after, “The importance of being Earnest” was presented again in a public theater in Rio, in a comparatively more successful season.

As a director, Eduardo Tolentino says that, even though he hasn’t been in Ireland, he is fascinated with Irish literature and drama. He compares the writers of the Irish literary canon to great Brazilian writers born in the state of Minas Gerais, in the Southeast of Brazil. Minas is a mountainous region, with valleys and small cities surrounded by hills, and it since the Colonial time it has been a region of ore and gold prospection.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade and João Guimarães Rosa, respectively the most prominent modernist poet and the greatest regionalist fiction writer, were born in this state. Minas born citizens are called “mineiros” in Portuguese, and Eduardo says that the Irish writers are the “mineiros” in the context of European literature: they too have an incredibly acute capacity for imaginative description, which can be regarded as the result of the influence of the topography, and, on the other hand, of their Celtic origin, considering that Celtic culture is a rich source of inspiration for the creation and writing of fables.

“Not having been able to visit Ireland yet is a gap in my cultural background”, says Eduardo Tolentino, “and I intend to fill it soon”. For him, something of great interest is to observe the variety of adaptations and reinterpretations that contemporaries, who are heirs of the Abbey Theater, make of the great nineteenth century authors like Tchekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg.

A very clear conclusion for anyone looking at the timeline and history of TAPA’s work is that an intense and unique training and study process was built from the experiences developed over the years, deepening the quality of the acting and the understanding of foreign and Brazilian dramaturgies.

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