

Theater of the Impressed: The Brazilian Stage in the Nineteenth Century

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Brazilian theater scholarship has traditionally regarded the nineteenth century as a dead zone, a period in which the theater was dominated by visiting foreign productions or slavish imitations of foreign methods and styles. This essay, however, seeks to challenge this assumption and to suggest how theater entered into the project of nation-building by providing a forum for discussion—among the elites—of topics such as slavery, the corruption of politics, the tension between the metropolitan and the rural, and resistance to the economic imperialism and gunboat diplomacy of European nations such as Britain. Whatever the aesthetic merits of the products of Brazilian theater at this time, and however twentieth-century Brazilian theater has been seen as disembodied from a historical corpus, the role theater played in the field of cultural production during the nineteenth century merits recuperation. The prominence of plays with abolitionist themes, such as João Julião Federado Gonnett's *O Marajó Virtuoso, ou os Horrores do Tráfico da Escravatura*, an historical drama exploring the horrors of the Middle Passage and partly extolling the virtues of the Portuguese, Brazilians, and British in fighting the cruel Spaniards who promote the slave trade, suggests how invested Brazilian theater of the period was in the issues of the day, as well as its implication in the liberal traditions of the urban elites, whose interests often conflicted with those of the landowners supporting the slavocracy.

The nineteenth-century Brazilian stage remains relatively unknown to modern audiences, and critical appraisal of it as debased and dated has helped obscure its revival. From Brazilian scholarship—such as Manuel Bandeira's *A Brief History of Brazilian Literature* (1958), which argues that there was no

dramatic tradition at all in the country, and J. Galante Sousa's canonical *O Teatro no Brasil* (1960)—to scholarship published in North America and Europe—such as *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* (1996)—Brazilian theater consistently plays second fiddle to other literary forms and nearly always suffers under the labels of “derivative” and “imitative.”¹ Nineteenth-century Brazilian theater, in fact, is the example that has come to serve as the epitome of Sílvio Romero's statement that

we Brazilians are a highly mediocre people; and I do not know whether the anathema of the British historian exaggerates things a bit in saying, when describing our great natural resources, ‘much is the flow and abundance of life by which Brazil is marked from all other countries of the earth. But amid all the pomp and splendour of Nature, no place is left for Man.’²

Or as Machado de Assis elegantly puts it, writing in 1873, “There is no Brazilian theater today, no national plays are being written, and it is even more rare for a national play to be performed... Today when public taste has reached the ultimate level of decadence and perversion, there is no hope for anyone who feels they have the vocation to compose serious works of art.”³

More recently, scholars have looked to the Brazilian stage in an effort to construct a history of the flourishing scene of the late-twentieth century and to insert Brazilian theater into a more general literary teleology of nationalism and development. Edwaldo Cafezeiro and Carmem Gadelha, for instance, in their suggestively titled *História do Teatro Brasileiro: Um Percurso de Anchieta a Nelson Rodrigues* (1996), open their work with the statement, “We are studying, from the point of view of dramaturgy, the political realities that Brazilian society produced in its fight for liberation. In this respect, the story of Brazilian theater traveled a parallel path to that of Brazilian history.”⁴ This Brazilian theater was inherently national and nationalistic in that, whatever its form and wherever the actors performing hailed from, the staging of dramatic spectacles evolved along with the nation and began at the moment of decolonization. As Chichorro da Gama explains in *Através do Teatro Brasileiro* (1907), “Up to the time of Independence, Brazil did not have what could be called a theater of its own.”⁵ Although this teleology may not be as straight-forward as Cafezeiro, Gadelha, Chichorro da Gama, and others imply, here I want to isolate the mid to late nineteenth-century as a crucial moment for Brazilian dramatics because of its absorption into, or implication

in, related projects of nationalism. These projects may lack historical continuity both with the past and the future of the Brazilian stage, but they suggest that the importance of theater in nineteenth-century Brazil has been downplayed unnecessarily. These projects embrace the literary, in the development of Romanticism and Naturalism (José de Alencar, for instance, was both a novelist and playwright); the political, in the royal patronage of certain kinds of theatricals; the economic, in the expansion of venues and forms both within the capital of Rio de Janeiro and in such regional centers as Salvador da Bahia, Recife, and, later, São Paulo; and even the architectural, in the construction of theaters as part of the overall remodeling of Rio as a national capital and in conjunction with the flourishing era of the “tropical *belle époque*.” Moreover, while not denying that much Brazilian theater of this period was derivative or performed by foreign actors and amateurs (even including visiting officers of the British Royal Navy, who in the 1860s gave a performance attended by the emperor and his family), I follow Homi Bhabha and others in suggesting that mimicry itself can be a powerful mode of resistance and reconstitution, an enabling mechanism for the staging of uniquely Brazilian concepts of subjectivity.⁶

In his seminal work *Lições Dramáticas*, João Caetano, the most famous dramaturge of the nineteenth century, explains the importance of theater to a nation that is developing both its resources and its sense of identity. He argues for a state-supported theater, performing in Portuguese, that will serve as an outlet for local talent and as a corrective to the standard imported European product performed in Italian or French or translated into (the lesser language of) Portuguese.⁷ Caetano’s first and foremost “lesson” is the premise that one can tell the state of a nation by its theater. Like Augusto Boal, Caetano credits theater with radical powers to instruct audiences in particular ways, and thus to construct citizenship; however, unlike Boal, he conceives of this citizenship in normative bourgeois terms: “Theater, when well-organized and well-directed, ought to be a real model for education, capable of inspiring youth to patriotism, morality, and good manners; and, either for this or other reasons, cultivated nations have done their best to perfect it...”⁸ Caetano therefore calls for the government to provide funding for a school, where actors can be trained to fulfill this educational role—a school which is to do for Brazilian theater what the Brazilian government ostensibly is doing in other realms: to effect “rapid progress, as is its due,” and to achieve the autonomy and the “certain level of perfection” that other

artistic forms have attained under the Empire. It is an appeal, of course, for financial support—and one which ultimately failed. Yet it is also an appeal to a notion of positivism and a theory of development under an enlightened monarch under which Brazil stands to overcome its inferiority complex with respect to Europe and take its rightful place among the world's great nations. Caetano concludes his work with a “Minute about the Necessity of a Dramatic School to Train People Who Dedicate Themselves to a Theatrical Career, Also Proving the Utility of a National Theater As Well As the Defects and Decay of the Current Situation,” which implicitly ties the fate of the theater to the fate of the nation, suggesting that a country which does not publicly support theater is in danger of the decline and decadence that forms the binary opposite to the state's motto and vaunted goal of “order and progress.”⁹

Historians often have followed Caetano by conceiving of him as the key force behind the emergence of indigenous theater in nineteenth-century Brazil: as the first director to create a fully Brazilian troupe, to encourage and stage works by Brazilian intellectuals, and to interpret in a truly original way the works of foreign writers such as Shakespeare.¹⁰ His company made its debut in Niterói, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, in the 1830s with the now-lost *O Príncipe Amante da Liberdade ou Independência da Escócia* (Cafezeiro and Gadelha 116). Caetano also owes his place in history to his successful promotion of the playwright José Carlos Martins Pena, the “Brazilian Molière”¹¹ heralded as the most important national playwright of the period. Martins Pena's works are credited with being the first to open a space for Brazilian drama on stage, an opening on which subsequent authors were then able to capitalize. Critics have also conceived of the failure of Caetano's bid to open a school and provide a permanent venue for national theater as a signal of Brazil's continued concession of cultural authority to the West and of the ultimate triumph of imitation over innovation.¹² According to this line of reasoning, Caetano was, in fact, the exceptional genius who proved the pervasive influence of mediocrity. As the periodical *O Espectador*, an “organ consecrated to the dramatic arts,” noted while commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the great dramaturge's death on August 26, 1883, “His name is that of the respected and popular artistic genius who disappeared after so many triumphs into the obscure arms of the tomb.”¹³

The real picture, of course, is somewhat more complicated, suggesting that to a certain degree the image of Brazilian drama as culturally and

aesthetically inferior stems as much from a desire on the part of more recent critics to assert their own anxieties about inferiority as it does from the actual inferiority of the work itself. A comparison with nineteenth-century British theater may be apt here, since its primary forms, such as melodrama, were also considered to be debased and inferior. The notion of what constitutes “good theater,” i.e. European theater, is thus always located in a more remote historical past—a historical past that Brazil, which only became a nation during the nineteenth century, can never lay claim to. A similar dialectic has functioned in the twentieth century and continues to function in the twenty-first; through Beckett, Brecht, and others, Europe as center continues to assert its influence over theater as a “high cultural” form in Brazil.¹⁴ Moreover, as Harold Bloom suggests in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the creative itself evolves out of patterns of misprision and misrepresentation. Conceived accordingly, Martins Pena’s imitation of the European “comedy of manners” produces new theatrical forms precisely in its failure to successfully replicate the European—a point made abundantly clear by a late, unfinished play about a rake written while the author was in Britain; the play is set in Britain, and entirely about British characters, among them the Duke, Sir Tockley, and Davidson Max-Irton, whose names and situations appear comical when juxtaposed with the lived experience of nineteenth-century Brazilians.

Thus the analysis of nineteenth-century Brazilian theater as purely derivative occludes a real richness in the context of the period and in the context of dominant forms of theater in Europe. Brazil enjoyed a more varied and older theatrical tradition than most other Latin American nations. Although theaters catered mainly to the elites, there were more theaters in Brazil than in many other places in the continent, as well as a greater dispersal of theaters or theatrical productions across the Empire.¹⁵

The first theaters flourished after the removal of the royal court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, following Napoleon’s invasion of Portugal, when Rio became the capital of the Portuguese Empire. Given the small population of the educated elite, a successful play in Rio might be performed only ten or twelve times, with additional performances in later months.¹⁶ For much of the nineteenth century, Brazilian theater did survive, in financial terms, on visiting foreign troupes and slavish imitations and translations of popular European works, mainly French or Italian, or, by the 1880s, even Shakespeare plays translated from the French. A good example of this type of work is the

Barão de Cosenza's *Os Doidos Fingidos* (1869), a "European" comedy, performed by an Italian company, and set abroad.

Yet parallel to this international tradition were national writers whose works signaled the ultimate failure of the imported to dominate the stage and dictate taste, as well as the need for local theater to respond to local conditions. These writers' works may not have been able to claim the same number of performances in theaters across the country, or may have been considered minor because of their interest in burlesque and farce ("lower" forms of theater that were also an important part of the repertoire in European centers). However, in retrospect, they belie the notions that Brazilians chose to express themselves solely through other media, especially the novel. Several major authors now considered canonical for their novels also wrote for the stage. Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, best known for *A Moreninha* (1844), also advanced his abolitionist program through dramas such as *Cobé* (1849).

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of Brazilian theater during this period is that it alone had the ability to respond quickly and publicly to political and cultural events in the country. For example, Manoel de Araújo Porto-Alegre's *A Estátua Amazônica: Comédia Arqueológica* topically lampoons the Count of Castlenau's "discovery" of an Amazonian figurine which he believed proved the existence of an ancient, great civilization in Brazil. A. de Castro Lopes' *Meu Marido Está Ministro*, presented at the Teatro Ginásio and published in 1864, comments particularly on the instability of governments at this particular moment and the cronyism and corruption that dominated Imperial politics. Similarly, Joaquim José da França Júnior's *Caiu o Ministério*, which appeared in late 1882, narrates events of a cabinet that controlled the government from January to July of that same year.¹⁷ Earlier in the century, a number of plays—among them the 1850 *Os Ingleses no Brasil* by a writer who called himself Lopes de la Vega—hit the stage in response to Britain's passage of the "Aberdeen Act" in 1845, which gave the British Navy wide powers of search and seizure over Brazilian ships suspected of involvement in slave trading. The war between Brazil and Paraguay provoked compositions such as Francisco Corrêa Vasques' *O Brasil e o Paraguai: Cena Patriótica o.d.c. aos Defensores da Pátria pelo Artista Francisco Corrêa Vasques* (1865), a monologue delivered by "Sr. Brasil" in defense of his country and ending with a recitation of the national anthem. The rapidity with which plays could be penned and produced thus allowed theater to

follow the press in discussing the immediate affairs of the state, which for a variety of reasons (including publishing constraints) could not easily appear in other literary genres like the novel.

The political, economic, or social influence of foreigners also formed an important theme for the nineteenth-century stage, providing as it did a perfect backdrop for scapegoating non-Brazilians and thus asserting the legitimacy of a Brazilian identity.¹⁸ Oftentimes, images of foreigners (particularly the British) centered on their false promises of industrialization. Martins Pena's *Os Dois, ou o Inglês Maquinista* (1845), for example, revolves around a British entrepreneur aptly named Gainer, who tries to promote his marvelous invention of a process that turns bones into sugar—in one of the world's largest sugar producing economies. Macedo's *A Torre em Concurso* (1863) similarly pokes fun at the Brazilian middle classes's love affair with all things or persons European. In this play, a Brazilian town without any foreign residents holds a competition open only to Englishmen to select a builder for a public project, prompting much farce when a slew of Brazilians pretend to be Englishmen in order to gain the commission. França Júnior's *Caiu o Ministério* itself centers around the figure of Mr. James, who proposes to build a railway line up Corcovado to be run by teams of dogs on treadwheels. (When the play was written, the government had just authorized two Brazilian engineers to build a railway up the mountain in what was to be the country's first railroad for the purposes of tourism.)¹⁹ The rejection of this sort of plan by França Júnior and his audiences—along with the rejection of Mr. James's planned act of miscegenation with the character of Beatriz—is a plea for Brazil to overcome its acritical acceptance of European or American superiority in technical or cultural realms. Thus, although ideologically more conservative, França Júnior shares with the late 1920s *anthropophagy* modernist movement the notion that Brazil needs to ingest and regurgitate what it had taken from the Old World to develop its own voice.

Stereotyping foreigners as a method of establishing a hegemonic Brazilian subjectivity appears in a variety of other sources, where it is advanced principally (though not exclusively) through language. In these works, linguistic incompetence marks other, more fundamental forms of incompetence and permits the assertion of the Brazilian voice as the voice of mastery. The comedy and farce engendered by linguistic and cultural misunderstandings proves not just an organizing principle for such plays, but also a means of imposing mimicry as a technique or problem of the (loosely

defined) colonizer, rather than the colonized. At the same time, it upholds Bloom's image of misprision as a creative force, in that this misprision generates the plots and comic situations of these plays, but it transfers real creative power to the Brazilians who are not themselves engaged in acts of misprision. *O Holandês, ou Pagar o Mal que não Fez* (1856) features a Dutchman named Kolk whose comic inability to understand Portuguese is taken advantage of by characters at the inn where he is staying as they successfully extort money out of him by calling into question his sexual propriety. Turning on its head traditional Brazilian notions of hospitality, the play suggests that those who cannot and will not work to understand Brazilian customs and language are fair game; it is the revenge of the Brazilian (importantly figured as lower-class in this example) in the economic dialectic between colonizer and colonized.

These plays are particularly interesting in the way in which they circumvent marriage between the Brazilian and foreign characters (and consequently assimilation). Macedo's *Luxo e Vaidade* (first performed in 1860) satirizes the French servant Petit and the English servant Fanny, who constantly complain in their comical Portuguese about Brazil—Fanny's refrain is "este não se úse n'Inglaterra" ("This no way is it in England")—and who only stay in the employ of their Europe-obsessed Brazilian family because of their affection for each other. The natural destiny of the foreigner is for other foreigners, thus maintaining the integrity of Brazilian society by closing its bloodlines to outside influences in acts of cultural endogamy. Even França Júnior's later play *O Defeito de Família*, performed at the Fênix Dramática in 1870, scorns assimilation through the portrayal of the servant Ruprecht Somernachtstraumenberg, whose dramatic bungling of the Portuguese language is reminiscent of the comic effect produced by the character Dogberry in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ruprecht represents an articulation of population shifts within Brazil that saw increasing immigration from Germany, Italy, and Switzerland, calling into question notions of essential Brazilian identity through birth and Portuguese heritage, but the play comes down on the side of maintaining cultural integrity. In the topsy-turvy world that these playwrights evoke, the European and not the Brazilian gets marked as inferior, inept, and impoverished through mimicry. The audience, meanwhile, is both within and outside of Bhabha's spectacle of hybridity through the final insistence on resistance to that which is most fundamental for producing hybridity—sexual union.

Ultimately, these plays and their essentializing of both Brazilians and foreigners point to some of the limitations of nineteenth-century Brazilian theater which are, in historical terms, almost as important as its achievements. First, the limited number of venues in which plays could be performed and their attendance by upper middle-class Brazilians primarily of Portuguese origin meant that audiences generally were confined to members of various elites. As a result, writers tailored their social and political critiques to issues pertinent to an educated, influential milieu, effectively preventing the popularization of theater that occurred in some European countries, such as Britain, with the growth of the music hall. This notion of audience also points to the (often direct) implication of these authors in the governing of the country: Martins Pena earned his living as a diplomat, while Alencar served as a senator. Thus, on a fundamental level, theater succeeded in fulfilling Caetano's vision of government sponsorship by effectively functioning as an extension of the bureaucratic apparatus. Second, because theater as an institution was located primarily in cities, dramatists produced specifically metropolitan products, oftentimes restricting the settings of their plays to the Rio environs familiar to their spectators. The metropolitan focus may help explain the relative absence of the rural plantation or jungle settings so popular in other forms of Brazilian literature—not to mention the conspicuous absence of the "Indian" in drama in comparison to his notable presence in such forms as the novel.²⁰ Third and finally, the very speed and ease with which the topical and the political could be staged meant that Brazilian theater dated quickly and allowed it to fall into obscurity, and hence justify aesthetic notions of inferiority based on the premise that good art is unbounded by the parameters of time and cultural context.

Nevertheless, reappraising nineteenth-century Brazilian theater on its own terms and through its historical and cultural context, rather than an aesthetic one, leads to the following conclusion: whatever its limitations, the Brazilian stage lived and lives on. "History lies," Antonio José Domingues proclaims in the sonnet he wrote in homage of João Caetano. Caetano and the boards he paced "did not die" and have not been sealed in the tombs of time. Instead, readers and critics are left, like Domingues, to listen for the reverberation of their echo in the auditorium: "Can you not hear that powerful voice on the stage, / Carrying its conviction deep into your soul?"²¹

Notes

¹ See Bandeira, *Brief History of Brazilian Literature*, trans. Ralph Edward Dimmick (Washington, DC: Pan American Union, 1958); J. Galante de Sousa, *O Teatro no Brasil*, 2 vols. (Rio: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1960); Severino João Albuquerque, "The Brazilian Theater up to 1900," *Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 240-260. See also Adam Versényi's *Theater in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), which ignores Brazil entirely, and Clovis Bevilacqua's "O Teatro Brasileiro e as Condições de sua Existência," *Épocas e Individualidades: Estudos Literários* (Recife: Livraria Quintas, 1889) 87-115. All translations of works in Portuguese are my own.

² Romero 157. Romero's quotation comes from Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, vol. 2. (London: John W. Parker, 1857) 95.

³ Assis 24.

⁴ Cafezeiro and Gadelha 10. Cafezeiro and Gadelha follow Melo Morais Filho and Sílvia Romero in positing seventeenth-century Jesuit *autos* and Anchieta's medieval mystery plays as the origin of Brazilian theater, despite the 250-year hiatus that followed.

⁵ Gama 5.

⁶ See Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996) and their discussion of the specific markers of post-colonial drama, located in notions of performativity.

⁷ For background on Caetano's position as the most important figure in Brazilian theater, see Macedo: "João Caetano shined like a genius, and [was] the meteorite of the Brazilian drama scene" (512).

⁸ Caetano, "Duas Palavras ao Respeitável Público" np.

⁹ Writes Caetano, "Under such conditions, national theater will never be able to equal that of foreign theaters, and will continue to vegetate, pulling it down to the indifference into which it has fallen and finds itself reduced; it calls out therefore for a prompt and decisive reform" (75).

¹⁰ Responding to criticism in Caetano's own period and subsequently that his work was derivative and showed an interest mainly in Italian, French, and British forms of theater, Roberto Seidl comments, "And if in fact he did little for a truly Brazilian theater, we must remember that this 'little' was 'everything' that it was in his power to do" (n.p.).

¹¹ Caetano himself coined the sobriquet "Brazilian Molière" to refer to Martins Pena (Lições 73).

¹² Veríssimo colludes in the notion of the inferiority of the Brazilian product, calling Martins Pena's work "vulgar" and concluding that Martins Pena "helped Magalhães and others to start a Brazilian theater and to initiate a national comedy. Certainly he initiated it as an inferior form" (64).

¹³ See also Moraes Filho: João Caetano was "Brazil's greatest actor"; "incomparable to this date, without model and masters, João Caetano achieved everything by the force of his talent, [and] sought to accomplish everything through the miracle of his genius" (12).

¹⁴ Street theater and the project of people like Boal and his *Teatro do Oprimido* group form an obvious "low culture" alternative in this explicitly bourgeois system of categorization.

¹⁵ A quick glance at regional newspapers confirms this view. During the Christie Affair, a diplomatic debacle between Brazil and Britain in the mid-1860s, the periodical *O Jequitinhonha* reported on the production of and printed the script of a short play entitled *John Bull*, suggesting that Brazilian theater had the potential to reach citizens outside major urban centers. See *O Jequitinhonha* 3.104 (7 February 1863) and 3.105 (14 February 1863) for reports of the production and the script of the play.

¹⁶ See Faria 106.

¹⁷ See Barman 252.

¹⁸ See Cafezeiro and Gadelha: "Brazilian comedy, laughing at the oppressors, marks and signals the path of independence, which entails both a critique [of oppression] and the capacity to formulate new alternatives" (211).

¹⁹ See Semenovitch 17-19.

²⁰ Agrário Menezes' *Calabar* (1859) is a poignant exception to this rule of Indian absence, as is Brazil's most famous theatrical export, Carlos Gomes' *Il Guarany* (1870), an opera based on Alencar's novel *O Guarani* and dealing specifically with originary constructions of identity interpolated through the indigene. See Doris Sommer, "O Guarani and *Iracema*: A National Romance (Con)Founded," *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 138-171.

²¹ Domingues 3.

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