

The Logic of the Backward and the Boomerang Effect: The Case of Ziembinski

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Different masks of the foreigner cover the career and personal history of the director and actor Zbigniew Ziembinski from the time he arrived in Rio de Janeiro as a war refugee in 1941, at the age of 33, to his death in 1978. Finding it impossible to continue with the journey on to New York, the actor and director—like many other immigrants of the period—was forced to seek work in a country where he had no friends and did not even speak the language. Nevertheless, within two years, he had transformed himself into a crucial figure for the revival of Brazilian theater. Already having overcome the image of the poor immigrant, in its place he fashioned an image for himself as the mouthpiece of European culture among a circle of influential intellectuals and the high society of Rio de Janeiro, at the time the Republic's capital.

In this milieu, the prevailing interpretation of the local problem was that Brazil was a backward-looking country, in comparison with Europe and North America. Such an interpretation meant assuming the perspective of the colonized, which in practice entailed conceding prestige and decision-making powers to representatives of "more civilized" centers. Ziembinski's role as an outsider therefore made it easier for him to begin demonstrating his abilities as a director and actor. The innovative form of his early efforts in Brazil were much more creative than his previous work in Poland, which—according to Yan Michalski in his detailed and well-documented biography of Ziembinski—had been "primarily commercial and conventional" (35). Brazil thus inspired Ziembinski to new uses of the considerable technical skill he had acquired in Poland. This image of him certainly offers a generalizing

and idealized representation of the “advanced stage” of European art, which then serves as a creative catalyst when transplanted to Brazil.

Ziembinski's association with the amateur group “Os Comediantes” led to his first season of productions, which consisted of Robert C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and the groundbreaking premiere of Nelson Rodrigues' *Vestido de Noiva* on December 28, 1943. The staging of *Vestido de Noiva* featured a new use of scenic space, involving not only a type of lighting never before seen in Brazil, but also hundreds of changes in the lighting that accompanied the action. The production also featured a set by the talented sculptor Santa Rosa. Another aspect of the production's success was that it evidenced Ziembinski's deep understanding of Nelson Rodrigues' work. The premiere of *Vestido de Noiva* transformed the two of them into well-known figures in Brazilian cultural life, and from that point on they collaborated on a variety of successful or controversial productions until the end of their lives. Ziembinski directed the first productions of two of Nelson Rodrigues' “unpleasant theater” plays, *Anjo Negro* (1949) and *Dorotéia* (1950). He also was the first to direct two of his “Rio tragedies,” *Boca de Ouro* (1960) and *Toda Nudez será Castigada* (1965). Chance may have brought the two close together in theater, but over the course of their artistic careers, both shared a similar fate in the reception of their efforts. Critics swung between extremes when evaluating their work, which at times was seen as representative of the avant-garde and at other times was viewed as subservient to market conditions. This sort of contradiction was symptomatic of the instability of criteria and positions in the field of cultural production during the period of their careers. To commemorate the tenth anniversary of Ziembinski's presence in Brazil, for instance, the critic Décio de Almeida Prado characterized the director's collaboration with “Os Comediantes” as a significant development in the history of Brazilian theater:

In practice, this very experimental director presided over a theatrical revolution: new writers, new scenarios, new techniques, and above all, a new mode of representation, a new conception of theater as spectacle. At last modern theater had arrived in Brazil, noisily, triumphantly, and more than fifty years too late. (qtd. in Michalski 202-03)

Almeida Prado's comments make it clear that, on the one hand, Ziembinski's successful first season had superseded the backwardness of the

country's theater; on the other hand, it indicated that local preconditions, such as the presence of talented professionals and daring perspectives, had facilitated Ziembinski's work as a director. The connection that this critic makes between this particular work and a larger project for a national theater and culture (even when that project represents a break with local traditions) suggests a parallel with the "engagement" that Antonio Candido argues was imposed on writers involved in the construction of Brazilian literature (Candido 26). In other words, as Mariângela Alves de Lima has noted, in the scenic arts, groups or individuals similarly felt compelled to engage in a national cultural project in their efforts to construct or reform Brazilian theater (Arrabal and Lima 98).

The prominence of internationalism or the appeal to universal values evident in some of the initiatives in which Ziembinski was involved does not negate this obligation to participate in a determined project to build a national culture. In this case, modernization or cosmopolitanism was incorporated into the project without considering the larger ideological questions this raised. Ziembinski's work was framed by the cultural project of a group of intellectuals and reflected their contradictions.

Indigenous Complexes

In keeping with the authoritarian modernization promoted in the 1930s by the Vargas regime and consolidated after 1937 in the *Estado Novo*, a group of intellectuals connected to public offices controlled theater and promoted the staging of spectacles based on international patterns. As I have tried to show in my earlier work, *A Musa Carrancuda*, these intellectuals and dramaturges grouped themselves around a particular discourse structuring some general viewpoint on Brazilian culture and social relations, which supported a project of organization of the cultural field in Brazil. This project was characterized by the implementation of practical methods that stimulated or supported theatrical troupes representing an alternative to what they saw as the "uncultured" forms that dominated Brazilian theater, such as *chanchada*, revue theater and the Trianon comedies. Their impoverished pattern of artistic expression was measured against the vigor of theater being produced in the great centers of Europe and North America. As Lima and Arrabal note, the groups with which Ziembinski was involved embraced a desire that cut across Brazilian theater since the days of the Empire, namely that of "being as good as" The proclamation "I am not an Indigenous" humorously

characterized this desire. "Behind this lay the ideal of universal communication attached to a pattern of perfect form" (Arrabal and Lima 98).

Ziembinski's method of executing this project resembles the process of cultural mimicry described by Homi Bhabha (85-92). In carrying out this process over a number of years and in different projects, Ziembinski exercised a key role, thanks to the authority given him by the mask of foreigner; a mask that he gladly accepted. While spreading and implanting new techniques, his work functioned as a fetish or emblem that upheld a notion of European cultural superiority. (He was a renowned master of lighting, and he imposed a unity on the spectacles he directed, despite using actor-oriented staging techniques and despite the sometimes dubious results he achieved.) As Bhabha points out, the logic of mimicry is based on an imperfect process of adaptation, on the disjunction between model and copy (86). Ziembinski's career seems to open up a gap between his efforts to give the country a model of what, as a foreigner, he judged representative and the pressure of dynamic, local forms of cultural expression. Therein lies the breach between these two spheres. The succession of masks and roles that the character of Ziembinski filled in the realms of theater and culture shows in a rather sad way how these disjunctions forced him to move from company to company. It also shows the changes going on in the symbolic position he occupied within the intellectual field.

From 1951 onward, Ziembinski served as a director and actor with the "Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia" (TBC) founded by Franco Zampari; in this capacity he played a decisive role in maintaining the company's image as a leading force behind the introduction of European patterns of quality to Brazil. TBC's owner developed a strong infrastructure for the company, which included a carpentry and costume-making shop and a special rehearsal room next to the theater on "Major Diogo" Road in São Paulo. These efforts at modernization went together with a rejection of any traces of Indigenous traditions of staging and audience. This starting from scratch even included a refusal to hire Brazilian professionals of long standing (Arrabal and Lima 100). Zampari hired a cast of amateurs, who were overseen by foreign (mostly Italian) directors, such as Adolfo Celi, Ruggero Jacobbi, Luciano Salce, Flávio Bollini and Gianni Ratto.

Through "Os Comediantes" and the TBC, the two principal laboratories for Ziembinski's work, the actor developed his style and revealed his talents. His work served as a contrast to the intuitive or native training in different

ideas of artistic interpretation then prevalent among Brazilian professionals. Many of his roles were seen as groundbreaking, particularly when he did not direct his own acting. Such was the case with the role of the pilgrim Luka in Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. (This production was an exception to the usual repertoire of the TBC, which under Zampari kept away from disturbing themes that might upset an audience drawn from the wealthier residents of São Paulo.) Michalski sees this role as one of the most brilliant of Ziembinski's career, recalling that the play was directed by the young Flaminio Bollini, an apt pupil of the Stanislavski method (Michalski 199-200).

As a director, Ziembinski faced allegations about the ways in which he sought to instill an imitation of his personal version of European culture; his techniques were particularly questioned during the 1960s. For example, he was accused of having adapted the Stanislavski method in such a way that instead of allowing actors to create their roles, he subjected them to a method of interpretation so personal that the actors were forced to imitate even his mispronunciation of Portuguese. The excessive slowness of his style as actor and director was also seen as a defect, one that was attributed to his cultural background. Michalski bolsters this argument by stating that Central and Eastern Europe lacked the "dynamism and agility that make up a part of our national profile" (384). Thus the mask of the foreigner, which opened many doors for him at the start of his career, later proved to hinder him or render him incapable of cultural understanding. However, this same critic adds that this difference in rhythm also came from "the secular literary tradition of European theater, in which the audience enjoys listening to an intelligently interpreted text delivered by actors with well-trained voices, even when the scenic translation of the text is realized in a static and sluggish manner" (384). This argument might explain why Ziembinski's involvement in staging Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, and Nelson Rodrigues' work—all of which privilege the role of the word—received such a positive reception.

One of Ziembinski's productions, that of Jules Renard's *Pinga-fogo*, made theater history because of his collaboration as actor and director with the actress Cacilda Becker. This work's great success among critics and audiences was seen to stem from the director's efficient way of acting with Becker, which showed the range of his professional abilities. They continued their work together in 1958 and 1959 in the actress' theater company "Teatro

Cacilda Becker.” In this and other prestigious companies formed following the success of the commercial model of the TBC, Ziembinski’s participation appears to have been decisive for the formation of a professional ethic. At a time when Brazil’s “star system” was in crisis, and when a director-centered model of staging was spreading across the country, Ziembinski’s strict control over rehearsals became legendary. At the same time, certain conceptions of staging had to be introduced in order to create a repertory in tune with the prevailing taste in the major centers. Thus Fernanda Montenegro states that Ziembinski “goes down in the history of Brazilian theater as being the man who taught us how to do characters; he also taught us for the first time what unity of spectacle is” (Michalski 366).

Revolutions and Boomerangs

The historical transformations that influenced cultural production in Brazil during the 1960s created the conditions for the reception of Ziembinski’s works, which were radically different from the Brazilian theatrical scenery previous to his arrival. The level of industrialization achieved, the tightening of relations with the United States, the participation in a pattern of cultural dissemination different from that of Europe, and above all the expansion of audiences with a higher degree of education all contributed to setting the stage for this reception. In addition, a new realization of the functions fulfilled by theater—intimately related to the politicization of the middle classes and of student culture—as well as the base of experiments offered by groups like the Teatro de Arena, provided the tools for critical interest in the kind of contributions being made by Ziembinski and the TBC. The notion of quality—formerly grounded in ideas of technical development and through a repertory of the so-called universal classics or works catering to middlebrow European taste—no longer corresponded to audience demands, which were not governed solely by comparison with European models. In the larger newspapers, some more informed critics followed this desire for renewal. The copy seemed to have gained sufficient autonomy from the model to escape its control, throwing the model itself out of balance.

Ziembinski’s sad return to Poland in 1963, at a time when he had lost favor with Brazil’s public and critics, proves that even there he was unable to find an adequate place for himself. For many Polish, he had become a stranger in his own country. They found his methods of directing and the repertory he presented during a season at several important theatrical venues

to be strange. The specter of backwardness in style and staging methods came back to haunt Ziembinski himself.

By 1971, Ziembinski recognized an impasse in projects to save national theater, which questioned the validity of the mission itself. Ignoring the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the country's theatrical traditions, Ziembinski developed a belief in the extremely radical potential of theater in Brazilian cultural life that deserves to be remembered today. At an important moment in the following interview, he declared:

What's happening is that the country is still searching for the right idea of what constitutes theatrical spectacle, although perhaps we should not call it theatrical spectacle any more, but the way in which a country conceives of itself through concepts like those of theater and adapts them to its temperament, its blood, its landscape, and its sense of harmony. The path, of course, is a long one, yet it's also a seductive one because a fantastic revolution can come from it. This revolution will create a theater that might no longer have a structure, or at least not a structure that has anything to do with the theatrical edifice, perhaps a meeting on the grass by the beach or a sort of pagan festival. Therefore we won't need to write 'Let's go to the theater' [the title of a government campaign to promote theater-going] because people will go spontaneously. (Michalski 344)

The old Ziembinski found a way out of his personal and professional impasse by dedicating himself as an actor and director to television, where he won public fame through his roles in various soap operas. Nevertheless, as was the case in theater, he himself sadly realized that the Brazilian public saw him as detached from the day-to-day concerns that occupied them.

There are still some questions about the so-called model of quality in the type of television drama that Ziembinski helped consolidate, which has been hailed as television's highest triumph. Is this model merely a reinstallation of a version of modernism adapted to a mid-level international taste that part of Brazilian theater has been rejecting since the 1960s (Costa 130)? Or is there some originality to it? At the heart of the debate at the end of the 1960s was a resurgence of interest in theatrical forms previously labeled as "backward" and culturally inferior, in contrast to the good-taste TBC model that was representative of a wave of reforms in the 1940s (Pereira 163-180).¹ The avant-garde during the 1960s demanded a radical revision of the terms of the 1940s theatrical reform. On another, more current level, the lessons in

technical dramaturgy and the predominance of middle-class models of taste (implanted in Brazil by the active participation of Italians and a Polish artist) remain visible in the form of the soap opera—a form that dominates the country's television screens, influences the local aesthetics of theater, and increasingly markets its products to European television networks. Is this the revenge of the Indigenous wielding a boomerang?

Ziembinski clearly had a part in setting off this chain of reactions, many of which rebounded on him, setting before him the contradictions of the various roles he played in Brazilian cultural life. As became clear from his reception during a brief return to his native Poland, his trajectory led him to the point at which it becomes possible to say that the foreigner himself became an Indigenous.

Notes

¹ In this context, it is necessary to recall José Celso Martinez Correa's memorable staging of Oswald de Andrade's *O Rei da Vela* in 1967 by the Grupo Oficina.

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