

DAMASCENO, Leslie H. *Cultural space and theatrical conventions in the works of Oduvaldo Vianna Filho.* Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1996. 290 pages.

This is the first complete study, in both the U.S. and Brazil, of one of Latin America theatre's most significant theatrical practitioners (the book was first published in Brazil with the title *Espaço cultural e convenções teatrais na obra de Oduvaldo Vianna Filho*, Editora da UNICAMP, 1994). It corresponds to many different interests and perspectives. The first chapter contains a wealth of general background for understanding theatre and interconnected contexts, which the author gradually focuses on Spanish American and Brazilian theatre. In the view of Prof. Damasceno, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho's theory and practice can be best understood by placing them in the contexts of cultural space and theatrical conventions, which in turn have been shaped by historical forces. Prof. Damasceno avails herself of a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives to bolster her arguments, including, of course, Brecht, so important to understanding Brazil's engagé theatre in the 1960s and 1970s.

Prof. Damasceno's book leaves no stone unturned. Here we have not only a thorough grounding in the play writing and other theatrical activity of Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, but we have a seamless scholarly carpentry that fits together historical context, economic and political change, ideology, theatrical history, theatrical conventions (acting, directing, use of space, design, rise and fall of theatre companies, etc). The author moves smoothly from one context to another, while providing in-depth analysis of Vianna Filho's plays as dramatic

text and staging. Many of Vianna Filho's major works are examined, the most important of which, in my view, is *Rasga coração*. The play, though written during the darkest days of the military dictatorship, signaled the euphoria of the *abertura* with its immensely successful – and, sadly, posthumous – staging, featuring one of Brazil's finest actors, Raul Cortez. Prof. Damasceno also scrutinizes Vianna Filho's participation in significant contestatory theatre groups in the 1960s, particularly Teatro de Arena (São Paulo) and Grupo Opinião (Rio). The author also meets head on some of the ideological contradictions that arose with another organization Vianna Filho was associated with, the CPC, or Centro Popular de Cultura, whose ostensible purpose was to bring theatre to the *povo* in the streets. Infused with Marxist ideology and Brechtian technique, the CPC illustrates the ticklish problems of so-called popular culture during the 1960s. In their self-appointed role as popular liberators through theatre, members of the middle class attempted to prescribe to working-class people how to view reality through theatre. This school of engagé art espoused the notion that workers and peasants needed bourgeois heroes to guide them toward social enlightenment. The problem is, were groups such as the CPC popular or populist?

This book is surpassingly well written. A less talented writer would have been unable to juggle the theoretical complexity and multilayered contexts which Leslie Damasceno handles with ease. Style and structure are also strong points; indeed, the copy editor for this book must have had an easy time of it.

Few writers on Latin American theatre go beyond the textual approach; that is, they usually confine their analysis to the dramatic text, utilizing the same methods they would apply to narrative texts. Prof. Damasceno's book is one of the few written in this country that examines the complex relationships between dramatic text and theatrical praxis, and which furthermore contextualizes them in the broader areas of political and theatrical history.

This book has the advantage of providing an overview of modern Brazilian theatre in almost all its dimensions. All the important theatre companies, playwrights, actors, directors,

critics, and institutions are discussed. Theatrical activity is linked to popular culture, music, and television.

Most important, this book introduces us to the work and life of a pivotal figure in Brazilian theatre, who impresses us with the breadth of his participation in his nation's cultural and political life, and who moves us with his profound humanitarian and moral vision as he transcends sectarian squabbles and the potential rigidity of his own ideological commitments.

This book will be useful for a variety of readers, whether they are interested in Latin American theatre generally or Brazilian theatre specifically, in Brazilian culture, or in socio-critical approaches to literature. Because this book is so well written, it will interest the general reader in spite of its theoretical complexity. And a final pedagogical note: Prof. Damasceno's study would be appropriate as a classroom or supplementary text at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels.

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