

GRUPO GALPÃO RIDES
UM TREM CHAMADO DESEJO

Junia C.M. Alves
Unicentro Newton Paiva

Maria José Motta Viana
Instituto J. Andrade

Translated by Marcia Noe and Junia C.M. Alves

With the coming of cinema there was a world outcry: "Theatre is going to die!" And later television arrived. Immediately, other prophets announced that television also would bring about the end of theatre. See how theatre experiences deaths and resurrections. From time to time someone comes along and signs its death certificate. But theatre is a very healthy corpse.

Nelson Rodrigues

Grupo Galpão's *Um trem chamado desejo* (A Train Named Desire) functions as a nostalgic reminiscence of revista theatre¹ and as an agent of cultural change as well, for it ironically showcases the process of globalization seen in early twentieth-century Brazil, the period in which the play is set.

From the start, the playgoer who lives in a globalized world already can establish a link between *Um trem chamado desejo* and Tennessee Williams's well-known and universally suc-

cessful *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh brought to the screen in a famous version in 1951. However, it is likely that the similarities between the two works are limited to little more than the names of the plays. The anthropophagic² appropriation of the title of the American play and the re-reading of the revista genre are the first two cultural objects exhibited for the customers peering into Galpão's display window. Actually, the choice of the name once again reiterates, in an original way, the theatre company's decision to ground its theatre practice in Mineiro³ culture, customs and unique features of oral speech. In this case "trem" means "object" or "thing" – something which can be either concrete, abstract, or imaginary, indeed, anything one wants to name but whose designation does not come immediately to one's mind. Thus, in Minas Gerais, sentences like these are often heard: "I want this train", "What train is this?" "Pass me that train, please", "What a crazy train!", "Isn't that train running?" There is an infinite number of usages in which the term appears, so much so that it constitutes a hallmark of Mineira linguistic identity. The case of the trolley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is different in that the word "streetcar," while used metaphorically by Blanche and Stella to discuss obliquely the subject of desire, also carries the literal meaning of a means of transportation called Desire that travels through New Orleans, the setting of Williams's play. Nevertheless, the similarity of the titles emphasizes desire as a common element linking the two works, a concept as wide-ranging as is dissatisfaction in the constitution of the human being as desiring subject.

Thus, the title of Galpão's play, inspired by one chosen by a foreign playwright, becomes a transrepresentation⁴ of a North American literary artifact into Mineira culture, which is commonly seen in the Brazilian intellectual universe as countrified or provincial. In this way, Grupo Galpão's production legitimates orality, giving it cultural value. The show also foregrounds its connection with a time and a place in which the past and the present interact. Thirdly, the play emphatically links Galpão's theatre practice to popular forms of expression rather than to academic or theoretical concerns.

The Mineiro troupe's comedy debuted on November 28, 2000, at the company's home base, Galpão Cine Horto, in Belo Horizonte. At that time they had completed an eighteen-year trajectory marked by successes that placed them at the pinnacle of the nation's theatre pyramid and among those companies most recognized internationally. The plot arose from storylines created by the actors themselves. At the beginning of their research, they worked with materials from the archive of Brazilian theatre icon Procópio Ferreira,⁵ which contained articles predicting the demise of the stage because of the success enjoyed by movies (see Soares). Playwright Luis Alberto de Abreu then took Galpão's efforts and wove them into a complete play-text. Márcio Medina, who created the costumes and set design, won the Shell Prize for the latter in 2002, as did Tim Rescala, who wrote the music. In Belo Horizonte, the play also garnered eight Bom Sucesso statuettes in 2002,⁶ and Inês Peixoto, who played actress Ana Florisbela, won a Brazilian Quality award for best actress as well (Reis, 2002, 6). Critics have been generally enthusiastic about the play since its debut.⁷

Directed by Chico Pelúcio, a member of the company since 1984, the show places eleven actors onstage to present, through its representation of the Belo Horizonte of the 1920s and '30s, the ups and downs of a theatre company called Alcantil das Alterosas⁸ as it struggles to define itself in light of the coming of the new art of cinema. Since the players are putting on a show called "Curral del Rey," an early name for the city of Belo Horizonte, it seems that the Alcantil das Alterosas company also represents Grupo Galpão itself, highlighting the contemporary troupe's stated objective of mounting productions grounded in Mineira culture. But that isn't all. Intermixed with the story of a fictitious group of players facing the competition of films is a backstage comedy, full of surprises, critique, and fantasy, creating, as Márcio Medina says, "an inside-out" way of making theatre, reversing the cloth of the spectacle to expose the sensual desires and dalliances of the cast (Reis, 2000, 5). Throughout its many levels of meaning, the play emphasizes the deep love for the stage. Thus, the dramatic culture of light theatre is contextualized in this work as part of the life of the contemporary Mineira company. As Alcantil das Alterosas's stagehand, Seu Coisinha, says:

Theatre comes to life by means of actors, a stage, the public and the passion that is generated when these things come together. I love actors, actresses, and the public for this power. And I want to die on this stage, where this alchemy happens. And I ask more, my God. I ask that when my body descends to earth, that my soul not rise to Heaven, but remain here, wandering through those curtains, sitting in one of those seats, creaking across the stage when my spirit walks upon it, until the end of time. And at the end of time, My God, if only I could leave the stage for your breast, if being on the stage doesn't already put me with you (part 2, scene 4, p. 34)

These are the axes upon which the play turns. Music is a supplementary narrative element; although, chronologically speaking, the play is set in the early twentieth century, Fernando Muzzi's arrangements glance back and forth from past to present, combining the rhythms of the twenties and thirties – such as the maxixe, the lundu,⁹ the waltz, and the foxtrot – with original melodies and lyrics in a hybridity that could be called postmodern.

Multiculturalism is valorized as the production recapitulates the French model of light theatre, considered by prejudiced critics as a lesser dramatic art. The interculturalism suggested by the title meanders through innumerable by-ways before finally shaping this Mineira musical comedy into a legitimating element of exchange among cultures. Thus, the play is the result of a long process of cultural interchange among Brazil, France, and Minas Gerais, of a kind of *latu sensu*, or mimetic repetition of a genre perfected by Galpão's theatre practice.

The show recaptures the concept of mambembe¹⁰ art and its rapport with the audience, using metatheatrical resources. The play is divided into four temporalities. The first focuses on the stage, where there is an always-disrupted attempt to rehearse the spectacle that is supposed to debut in half an hour. The second is that show itself, improvised because the aforementioned rehearsal does not fulfill its role of defining the nature of the performance, imagined differently by the director and by the actors, until the cast realizes that the virtual audi-

ence has left unsatisfied. In the third, a curious fusion occurs among the real spectators of Galpão's play, who make present the alchemy of transformation in theatre and in cinema, and the frustrated cast, which tries to find again the success and recognition of a big audience. At this point, the real audience and the cast and crew of Alcantil das Alterosas become the spectators of a movie that is not concluded because the projector malfunctions. Thus, there is a fourth part, in which the Alterosas actors recapture their power on the stage by replacing their high-tech rival and consequently surpassing the cinema in performative efficiency, demonstrated by the enthusiastic acceptance of the audience.

We see, therefore, that the plot of this comedy is founded on and sustained by a process of carnivalization through which an inversion of representational norms drives the show. The dramatic universe is inverted: the wings become a stage, the private lives of the Alcantil das Alterosas actors are exposed to the audience, and the fictitious work of theatre they mount has no power to captivate the virtual spectator, and so it becomes an act of frustration. However, this frustration does interest the real audience, for whom the Alcantil actors pretend not to be performing. Recognizing their failure onstage, they witness the dethroning of the fictional, as it cedes scepter and crown to everyday reality, with its mundane mediocrities and dissatisfactions.

The play deals with the weakness of theatre, using a carnivalized version of theatre itself as a catapult to thrust the theatrical act at the spectator without any mediation. There is no dramatic distance between the real audience and the actor-characters; thus, the latter become observers of their own failure, due to their poor reception by the virtual public. Spatial boundaries grow confused and diluted. These developments unmask the place of the fictional that drama usually occupies. The laws that determine the order of backstage life, usually forbidden to the public, are revoked in this play, as is the hierarchical system that usually orders the making of a theatre piece. The stagehand is usually an unseen figure; however, his direct contact with the composition of the play and with the actor-characters establishes an alternate order, or, rather, the kind of

disorder that Bakhtin termed the carnivalized experience of literature, in this case, of theatre.

It is not difficult to discover, therefore, that in *Um trem chamado desejo* an inversion of laws profanes the theatrical universe, but it is a productive profanation that brings the audience inside the show, as the cloth out of which stage life is constructed is turned inside out. In this way, a relativity of order and power is established, and in the bi-planarity that the play sustains, a new network of images of dramatic art is built, revitalizing itself and moving forward to another time, definitely, tirelessly, and endlessly postponing the death of dramatic art, the oldest ritualized art in human existence.

Even though *Um trem chamado desejo* chooses a differentiated discourse that drives the production of new objects, its main thrust is the conscious return to the musical variety shows of the nineteenth century, originating, as Machado de Assis¹¹ termed it, a “marketplace theatre” (quoted in Mencarelli 113) that was staged in the streets, plazas and popular showhouses that attracted the lowest levels of society: the privileged space of carnivalesque theatre that Bakhtin describes. The fairs were the place in the city where the most heterogeneous public was concentrated. Since the end of the Middle Ages, popular artists, such as acrobats, tightrope walkers, and animal tamers, performed in the Parisian markets of St. Lawrence and St. Germaine (Mencarelli 113-117). The artists inherited the techniques and philosophy of *commedia dell’arte* that, according to Neyde Veneziano, “opposed itself to the luxurious shows that were fashionable in Renaissance times” (22). Above all else, *Um trem chamado desejo* functions as a homage to the most famous and successful Carioca¹² show of that era, the *revista* (review) of the year. Although considered by many to be a lesser form of theatre, this carnivalized genre originated in Brazil during the Belle Époque, the fruit of historic Eurocentricism. It developed in almost all of the main cities of Europe and the Americas before the appearance of cinema. This show survives for practical reasons and even for some methodological ones, with a vigor of permanent magnetism, all over the contemporary world, including Las Vegas.

In Brazil, during the nineteenth century, this realist mode of theatre began with the appropriation of commonplace, polemical, notorious and interesting facts of life as lived in the city of Rio de Janeiro and proceeded to sketch an ironic portrait of urban behavior and of the practical politics of its inhabitants. Because it dealt with these themes in an almost journalistic way, revista had great popular appeal. The purpose of this kind of show was to make people laugh and to satirize the events that were published in the local papers. Revista aimed, then, at an uncompromised amusement, as much for the general public as for the more sophisticated theatregoers. The revistas exercised a performative effect overall, eschewing the didacticism characteristic of the problem-focused play. They did not intend to explore ideas, but rather to place them in concrete-sensory contact, transforming life through the show and through rituals that could be lived and represented.

Arthur Azevedo, the most well-known author-producer of this kind of popular comedy, dominated the cultural scene in Rio at the turn of the century. A founder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Azevedo was a citizen-participant of the social stratum that could be described as that of the intellectuals and the elite of his day. His first and biggest success, written in collaboration with Moreira Sampaio, was *O bilontra*, which initiated a series of nineteen revistas by the duo that sold out Carioca playhouses. These spectacles gave work to those involved with their productions; they brought substantial profits to the authors, actors, and producers, and they amused the city with caricatures of Rio itself as well as of people in public life. For the first time, this type of Brazilian comical show developed, apparently free and clear of its French source, but in reality always linked to it, at the nexus of being Brazilian and being French, the intersection at which one culture becomes the other.

Thus, as a musical review, *Um trem chamado desejo* is inspired by the episodic conventions of revista theatre, evident in the apparent naïveté with which the casts' crucial problems of survival are treated; nevertheless, the play never completely loses its comic verve. For the critic, the old issue of reverence for artistic-literary value re-emerges with respect to this dra-

matic genre; consequently, the artistic value of *Um trem* is called into question. The problem turns on the relationship between art, light theatre, and aesthetic representation, since in the traditional way of thinking, beauty is not considered relative – as some might view it today, one value among others – nor is the notion of art as part of a cultural system brought into play. Another aspect of this question of literary quality turns on the investigation of what is canonical and what is literary, distinctions that are today problematized by groups who seek to redefine differences and thus reduce the distance between the erudite and the popular.

One of the many responses to these questions is made by Arthur Azevedo in his article “Theatre” (1896). He argues that the quality of a stage production is not linked to the genre in which it is classified but rather to the manner in which it is written and eventually produced, that is, to its dramatic construction and to the talents of its creators. His opinion coincides with that of the German theorist Walter Benjamin, who asserts in “The Task of the Translator” (1992) that the poetry of a work of art is not related to its theme or message but to its form. The French writer Francisque Sarcey, a renowned theatre critic and shaper of Parisian public opinion during the second half of the nineteenth century, shares this point of view. His argument strengthens the notion that the primary objective of the play is to please the audience and, therefore, not to be cryptic, hermetic, or obscure. For him, the spectator defines the value of the work: “The public is always right” (quoted in Mencarelli 96). Art historian Arnold Hauser (1982) also maintains that the theatre piece is not linked directly to literature but obeys its own logic and its own laws; therefore, the poetic element of drama is independent of the written text that accompanies it.

The intention of *Um trem chamado desejo* echoes, *mutatis mutandi*, that of revista theatre, the goal of which, according to Arthur Azevedo, was to mirror satirically the notorious acts of Fluminense¹³ life as a point of departure for a critical reflection on the larger Brazilian social universe, and thus contributing to the national dramatic literature. Although critics such as Coelho

Neto, José Veríssimo, and Machado de Assis called revista a decadent form of Brazilian theatre, Azevedo refuted this view, since for him a national theatre did not exist: "Even if we admit that there is decadence in that which does not yet exist, the causes of this decadence are so complex that it would take too long to explain them in detail," he argues (quoted in Mencarelli 49). Moreover, this type of analysis valorizes the written text to the detriment of a wider vision of theatre as spectacle (emphasizing nonverbal elements) and as cultural phenomenon (the view of postmodern literary criticism).

Azevedo further asserts that the alleged decadence of Brazilian theatre, so widely promulgated by the monocultural view of his opponents, was the product of the light plays which were staged beginning in 1846 in the form of popular French operetta that became established successfully in Brazil (Mencarelli 49). Oswald de Andrade would coin the term "anthropophagy" in the twenties, the perfect word to convey the representativeness of these shows in the Brazilian artistic universe. They inspired a new dramatic configuration that, according to some, lacked country or nationality, mixing styles, challenging classifications, and, especially, capable of sustaining a theatrical, and consequently, an aesthetic and a cultural identity for Brazil. Azevedo also observes that in the genre of light theatre, which for him is capable of artistic excellence when well written and well staged, the accomplishment of its actors better satisfied the public, who rejected classical theatre because the comedies "more refined, more literary, less showy" were poorly produced (as quoted in Mencarelli 71). The spectator as much as the Brazilian actor, in the oftentimes ambiguous vision of Azevedo, had a greater affinity with light theatre – represented by revista – than with classical comedies and tragedies.

With this multicultural rationale, we conclude that all genres are good. We don't exclude light theatre from the category of art; revista can have beauty. Consequently, for the sake of the critic-observer, whose aesthetic criteria go beyond pleasing the audience, *Um trem chamado desejo* not only deals with national customs, but also promotes good music, possesses an intricate metatheatrical structure in which form and theme are

seamlessly intertwined, and juxtaposes with originality and virtuosity a wide range of linguistic registers, thus exhibiting the necessary specifications to meet the formal requirements that would define it as good literature. Paradoxically, *Um trem* is also a play in which cultures are recognized by projections of alterity.

That polysemic relation among author, actor, dramatic genre, text, public, popular taste, artistic effect and resulting profits for the market interests knits a semiotic texture that invites the exercise of hermeneutics in search of the understanding of the facts that catalyzed Grupo Galpão's reinterpretation of revista theatre. Taking this theatrical path, *Um trem chamado desejo* caricatures the changes that the city of Belo Horizonte experienced, starting with its founding as the town of Curral del Rey, and presenting a mixture of review, comedy, observation and satire of customs, and literary focus.

To understand the techniques through which Galpão's show functions, as well as its significance as critical gesture and revisited social and cultural product, we need to consider the relevance of the complex relations between the dramatic genre (light theatre); the members of the troupe (engaged in the defense, valorization, and promulgation of popular theatre), the work itself (script, characters, plot, set design, spoken or sung story, autobiographical element), and the needs of the audience (above all, entertainment and identification). All these components add up to a metatheatrical montage (metatheatrical because in this play a film is shown and a play is staged). Those relations are deepened and emphasized due to the fact that the members of Grupo Galpão themselves collaborated to produce the script. Even more, the cultural, social and economic diversity of the receiving public gives the show an elevated level of ambiguity and a multiplicity of meaning.

One of the main reasons for the success of this comedy is the presentation of a number of diverse registers, linguistic relations, facts, characters and social behaviors. Another contributing factor is that this type of show aims primarily at the immediate entertainment and pleasure of the audience; consequently, it does not appear at first glance to be linked to any immediate literary, philosophical or political aim. Its overall objective is re-

lated to the farces of *commedia dell'arte*, to circus, and to carnivalized festivals, and its language unpretentiously defines it as a representative of mass culture. The objective is to succeed in winning the audience's empathy by using formulas capable of involving them emotionally as accomplices. There is no evident thesis to be defended by the story, nor is there a dominant concept or voice. What the play does effect is the establishment of a joyful relativity of national values and truths, as well as those borrowed from another culture. One of the ways *Um trem* accomplishes this feat is through thematic music that is lively and seductive, an integral part of the narrative that is appropriate to convey to the audience the many voices of a diverse society.

Um trem chamado desejo returns to a dramatic style from the second half of the nineteenth century, utilizing a dialectical game between past and present, and revives, in a Mineiro way, the musical shows that thrilled the public of Rio. However, *Um trem* maintains the thread of contact with classical theatre, as seen in the music, which exemplifies the classical criterion of unity, functioning as *um coro de bilros*,¹⁴ as it weaves disparate parts of the production together. The text avails itself of the interstitial nature of art to mix, as is the group's custom, music, singing, and dancing, as they tell various stories of Minas Gerais that are related to urban popular culture. The work's fragmented action and comic-satiric tone turn on the spine suggested by its title: the desire for theatre, the love of theatre, desire and love as motivating factors, the life of the stage, desire as it unfolds in innumerable forms disseminated throughout various social strata.

Seu Coisinha, Alcantil das Alterosas's man-of-all-work and thus a character of relatively low social status, is at the same time the most significant character in the play because he represents the voice of Grupo Galpão itself. Coisinha opens the first scene by relating, in song and in prose, his ambition, dedication, desires, and vanities:

Oh, if I could only stop the wheel of time and turn back the fleeing minutes. If I could only join the threads of the past to the eternity of the present moment. If I could return to my youth, those blissful days! And sip now that

sincere love of yesterday that flows in my soul like a fountain. Ah, theatre thrills me, moves me like this! (*he opens the box of Graçinha's trombone*). Dona Graçinha! If only I could be an actor, I would love you as my greatest character! (part 1, scene 1, p. 1).

If one day Dona Graçinha should love me
I will ask for her hand
In exchange for what I will offer her
My world and my heart

Dona Graçinha, I should like so much to be able to walk in the park with you. See, there are loving kisses everywhere. God carves a smile on each flower. Dona Graçinha, I will give you a forest with a little house in it, with everything good that exists. A mix-master, a round bed, mirrors on the ceiling... there we will live happily. Dona Graçinha, I want you to be happy.

Before the cast arrives
Everything returns to normal
I arrange everything; I get everything ready
Before giving the signal [to begin the play]
Ah, the theatre. I want to die on the stage (part 1, scene 1, p. 1-2).

The ecstatic, ingenuous, and tender desires of Seu Coisinha (as much material and sexual as spiritual and lyrical) converge upon unattainable places, ideas, moments, and people, and these desires culminate in a platonic and true love that he dedicates to Dona Graçinha and to the theatre, his alter ego. The stagehand embodies the theatre and paradoxically converses with it, growing into a character who is at the same time realistic and poetic, the most striking and complex in the play, so much so that he becomes the hub on whom the action turns. Coisinha knows the secrets and anxieties of the actor-characters; he solves their problems and offers solicitous advice to each. A mixture of prop guy, announcer, commentator, singer, and narrator, the others depend on him, but he seems to depend on no one. Moreover, the duality of language, in which the colloquial and the unique animate his poetic verve – in contrast with the dramatic irony contained in the text of this scene – makes Seu Coisinha the intersection at which the ambivalence of the play is concentrated.

Other desires become evident in the love triangles that dominate the first part of the play. The theme of betrayal is represented satirically through the figure of the cuckold (the man sexually betrayed by his wife, mistress, or girlfriend), seen in the following clusters:

1. Meireles (cuckolded husband)/ Dona Ana Florisbela (unfaithful wife) /Madeira (lover);
2. Cashier for the Bank of Brazil (fiancé)/ Abigail (indecisive object of desire)/ Lopes (smitten suitor);
3. Sandoval (unfaithful husband)/ D. Graçinha (lover)/ Seu Coisinha (platonic lover).

The characters, as described in the above parentheses, are typified and caricatured, and as these characters are also actors and actresses, the audience is made conscious of the metatheatrical nature of this play.

The desires for success, wealth, and stardom that invade the Alcantil das Alterosas company are linked to the survival of each of its members and to the endurance of theatre as a form of spectacle. All of this is interwoven, as Deleuze and Guattari might say, in a rhizomatic semiosis in which the signs undergo modification without, nevertheless, losing their original quality that is always at the node of the rhizome: the actors' genuine and unequivocal love for the stage. The various desires of the characters, in turn, control the movement of the play. The fictional company (Alcantil das Alterosas) replicates, metatheatrically, the objective of the real-life company (Grupo Galpão) to celebrate theatre arts, Brazilian culture in general, and Mineiro culture in particular, personified by the figure of Belo Horizonte, as articulated by Praxedes, the company's director, author, and prompter:

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| PRAXEDES: | I want a musical about our mountains full of gold, about our childhood, about the chiming of our church bells. I want a play about Curral del Rey. |
| MADEIRA: | That's enough, Praxedes. You may be the author, but you're not the boss. A Brazilian musical has to have a mulatta and a tambourine. This |

is what the public wants... Do you propose to re-invent the musical? (part 1, scene 3, p. 5).

Praxedes continues to describe a theatre aesthetic firmly grounded in regional culture: "It was my idea of a genuinely Mineiro musical that got Sandoval excited" (part 1, scene 4, p. 6)... "A new, different kind of musical! A reflection of our own culture!" (part 1, scene 3, p. 7)... "In ten minutes we're going to do the curral scene" (part 1, scene 6, p. 14)... "Let's go to the set for the construction of the city. Everyone take your places!" (part 1, scene 6, p. 15).

It might seem strange to the real-life audience that a play about to debut hasn't yet managed to define the dramatic genre in which it will be staged, not to mention acted. This tone of complete improvisation suffuses the whole show right up to the happy ending. Scene seven, according to the last directions of Praxedes, centers on an ecologue that celebrates geography, weather, peace, nature, the people, and the bucolic character of the location chosen at the end of the first millenium for the new capital of Minas Gerais, thus recalling, at the beginning of the third, the Belo Horizonte that was newly built a little over one hundred years ago, with its myths of Mineiridade¹⁵ sung in a careless, awkward, and syncopated musical style by ridiculous mooing cows:

Mu-mu-mu-mu-mu/Curral del Rey
Mu-mu-mu-mu-mu/it's my homeland
Mu-mu-mu-mu-mu/it's the moonlight of my countryside
We have water carriers/we have guitar players/we have waterfalls here, too
We have mule drivers/we have cowboys/and we also have the sources of rivers
Mu-mu-mu-mu-mu/we have cachaça/we have good people/ we have friendship, too
We have minerals/ we have orchards/ we have pretty landscapes too
Curral del Rey is Paradise itself./ God made it and put us here to take care of it

And when Judgment Day comes/ we will be close to God (Part 1, scene 7, p. 17).

This song, purportedly an ode in praise of the historic origins of Belo Horizonte and of Mineiro identity as well, becomes, in performance, an anti-ode, for in it reside broad-brushed regional stereotypes of people, geography, and rural landscapes that effect a good-humored critique of the city. The register and rhythm of the hillbilly Portuguese is used here in a completely merry way, as heard in the following dialogue between a married couple coming from the interior of Minas to discover the delightful curves of Belo's Avenida do Contorno:

HILLBILLY WOMAN: Lookee there, Chico! Ain't that there a big curvy street?
Lookit the way she wraps herself around Curral del Rey!

HILLBILLY MAN: Wow, she sure is nice and big! I'm fixin't' mosey over there so I can see her curves a sight better!

HILLBILLY WOMAN: Don't you dare! If you so much as put your little finger in one of her curves....

HILLBILLY MAN: I'm gonna do it! Whoooo-ee! Everybody in this place is headin' over there. This baby sure is young and smooth!
Like a pussy with clipped hair. I'd sure enough like t' get t' know her.

HILLBILLY WOMAN: Fuck you! You'd a damn sight better stay here and be happy with this old woman (part 1, scene seven, p. 18).

In this scene, the metaphor of sensuality, constructed by the description of the curvy design of the Avenida do Contorno, which encircles the Mineiro capital city, is deconstructed by the literal, slangy, vulgar, direct and mixed metaphorical style of the hillbilly couple's language. Thus, the figure of a curvy, voluptuous woman represents the land itself, and the images that this figure allows are negated, forbidden, and therefore, inoperative. The explicit sensuality of the hillbillies' me-

metaphoric description of the street is counterposed to the threatening literalness of the country wife's language and by the trope of ugliness and disinterest that she represents for her husband. But before this scene from the play-within-a-play can conclude, it is interrupted by one from the main play, as the stagehand announces that the virtual audience has walked out and that Praxedes's musical about Minas Gerais, metonymically represented by Belo Horizonte, is a failure. And since the show cannot be remade, since the cows and hillbillies (allegorical figures) are stereotyped to the limit, and the music is dissonant, these moments, in and of themselves, testify to the theatrical creativity of Galpão and the company's skill in producing the intended comic effect of undermining simplistic notions of Mineiridade.

The power of the comedy derives in great part from the way it is mounted. Everything is put crudely on the stage, at the mercy of the real audience's judgment, to interrogate the decline of theatre and of revista, as well as notions of region and nation, but also to pay homage by means of pastiche to this dramatic genre that once found itself threatened with extinction by the arrival of cinema, an art at that time considered a rival but that eventually, in the epilogue of the playtext, is elevated to the level of sister art by means of a very successful improvisation.

In fact, what seems to be a representation that has been carelessly stitched together turns out to be an elaborately embroidered metatheatrical discussion about what should be staged, what will or will not work onstage, and what is worthy of being staged. Moreover, these interminable arguments, interspersed between attempts at rehearsal that never come together, give the show a fragmented, ruptured, unfinished quality that suggest Grupo Galpão's ongoing efforts to recompose fictionalized memory in order to define their own nature and purpose. We know that one of the fundamental characteristics of memory is its broken, disjointed, reinvented nature. What is made explicit as fiction is the fact that Grupo Galpão, in telling its own story, accomplishes this feat by means of the story of the other: the theatre itself, the story of revista, plagiarized, adapted, transrepresented by Brazilian culture, a

culture once accused of not being, not existing, but that finally conquered its profile, its contours, in its hungry, anthropophagic capacity that swallows and transforms everything into ironic and good-humored artifacts of national expression, a quality that, paradoxically, is transhistorical and transliterary in its representation of the local and the global. This sums up the search for theatre's *raison d'être* and its complex finality – contradictory, inclusive and plural – staged democratically by a group of actor-characters who are socio-culturally and economically different and who also have different interests in play, as well as multiple and contradictory visions.

The latter point is well illustrated by the characters' articulations of their concepts of what theatre should be. For Praxedes, the theatre should reflect the culture of the region:

The voice of our culture
Our way of being
A big mirror of Belo Horizonte
That is what theatre should be (part 1, scene 4, p. 8).

For Meireles, theatre is the place to discuss great philosophical questions that move human feelings:

In fact, theatre seeks a route
That makes applause resound
The classics will always be my choice
I don't want to stage light comedies
Home of great tragedies
That nurture and elevate our being
Universal and eternal values
This is what theatre should be (part 1, scene 4, p. 8).

For Madeira, theatre should accommodate the public taste that is identified with a musical *à moda brasileira* built on provocative themes:

A variety show
Invites complete pleasure
Like they do in other capitals
This is what theatre should be (part 1, scene 4, p. 8).

Nevertheless, there is a fine thread, made of silk and steel, perhaps, because it represents both subtlety and resistance, that is made evident through the apparently delicate and fragile character of Seu Coisinha, in whom are basted together desire, love, and a Shakespearian passion for the theatre and for what it means as the source of social and cultural representation, with all of its incoherences, hybridities, and, above all, anthropophagies, inevitable in a globalized world. Thus, for Seu Coisinha, theatre, because it is art, opens a space in which desires, dreams, and fantasies of love, of completeness, and of the reconciliation of opposites can be accomplished. His function seems to be to mediate between the spectator and the production, describing the way theatre works, emphasizing a critical behavior, or even making the backstage misadventures of the Alcantil das Alterosas actors apparent to the real audience. All of these stances and positions are quite evidently filtered through Galpão's experience and are presented to a public that then encounters these elements for discussion and debate. We need to emphasize that none of the actress-characters of the fictional company are given a voice in this "intellectual" discussion of what theatre should be. While the actors are interested in abstract questions of love, desire, and the nature of the theatre, the actresses are focused on the more pragmatic aspects of these issues: will Florisbela's Arabian number be included in the musical? Will Sandoval divorce his wife, marry Graçinha and give her a honeymoon in Punta del Este? Should Abigail marry the cashier from the Bank of Brazil or choose Lopes, the insolvent but charming ex-circus clown? The concerns that motivate them are the concerns of the moment, of *carpe diem*: the practical affairs of daily life, as revealed throughout the course of the play. The actress-characters are linked to questions of immediate survival; they need to solve problems and find ways to escape from their daily prisons, the prosaic, day-to-day uncertainties of theatrical and personal life. Whether this is an intended critique of the extremely patriarchal and macho nature of Brazilian culture, or an unintentional manifestation of that culture is arguable.

Another arguable point is emphasized by the actor-characters' previously mentioned debate about what theatre should be. This debate, of course, references an earlier such

discussion engaged in by nineteenth-century writers and critics. *Um trem chamado desejo* thus presents a provocative treatment of this topic, sustained by satirical, parodic, ironic, and even lyrical textual features, all of which are found in the tradition of comic theatre since the time of Aristotle, recaptured and restudied by Bakhtin in his brilliant analysis of the carnivalesque in modern literature. Moreover, Galpão's playtext designs a joyful, fantastic, and apparently unengaged story with great ideas and with verisimilitude, in which we can recognize clear traces on Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization. We can find such examples not only in the belly-dancing scene in which Florisbela's Arabian choreography contains samba moves, but also in another scene, equally metatheatrical, in which the false fortuneteller, Madame Zoroastra, played by unfaithful wife Ana Florisbela, tries to manipulate the behavior of her husband-client-cuckold Aristides, played by Meireles; both characters express themselves in a Spanish so corrupted that it becomes more hilarious than ironic. These Bakhtinian images are rendered within a carnivalesque *mise-en-abyme* in which a real theatre company (Grupo Galpão) puts on a play about a fictitious theatre company (Alcantil das Alterosas) that is putting on a play about the city where the real theatre company is headquartered (Belo Horizonte). The Bakhtinian images and dramatic structure thus constitute one aspect of the globalization theme discussed earlier, carnivalized and ironized throughout the course of the production:

FLORISBELA (as Zoroaster): What do you want?

MEIRELES: (as Aristides): I want to know if I am being cuckolded, if I ever was cuckolded, if I ever will be cuckolded.

FLORIS (worried): What can I say except the truth? And the truth is that all is possible.

MEIRELES (tense): Aristides, with the despair dictated by fury, didn't know if he wanted to kill himself or kill his wife!

FLORIS (still frightened): In the first place, don't kill anyone! In the second place, you don't need to die. I said, "All is possible." It is possible that you are a cuckold,

and it is possible that you are not. Let me take a better look (*she cleans her crystal ball and looks at her cards*). It's not possible. I don't see death in your future, understand?

Not your death, and even more unlikely, not the death of your wife. That's what's in the crystal ball, and the crystal ball never lies.

MEIRELES: But man can change fate! I will never be a cuckold.

(*Floribela, frightened, moves away and Meireles leaves*). (part 2, scene 2, p. 28-29).

Again, images of dethroning and deposing contend with those of coronation in the carnivalesque tradition exemplified here. The truth is a big lie in the mouth of the fortune teller, supposedly knowledgeable about human destiny but shown up as a manipulator of reality, and the man, normally submissive to relentless luck, believes himself capable of taking his fate into his own hands. In this scene, the boundaries between the world of the theatre and of real life become blurred and attenuated. The spaces grow confused and exchanged in the materiality of this staging. At times the actors are performing for a virtual public and have their backs turned to the real spectators; at other times they're seen in backstage "actuality" by a real audience. The stage fuses with the dressing rooms and wings. The dialogue between the actor-characters that connects the attempts at rehearsals shows the gossiping, intrigues, ridicule, and vices that exist behind the curtain; the two playing spaces fight a sarcastic duel that undermines any notion of the glamour of show business that may linger in the spectator's mind. These dialogues also mock the hypocrisy of married life in modern times and are characterized by a comic force and a picturesque joy that sustains them. Even more, they are characterized by the simple language of everyday life, by oral registers from the streets themselves, where light theatre took its first steps. The thematic ingenuity, the humor and the fantasy, and the irreverent form guarantee *Um trem chamado desejo* a wide public, bigger than that which usually attends the theatre. The music, too, gives the show an uncommon freedom of scenic movement, and the members of Galpão, splendid and

versatile, easily make the transition from speech to song and from song to dance, interchanging reality and theatricality. The score is as good as the playtext; the old techniques of revista are made new in this show.

Thus, light theatre – a theatre of surprises, critique, improvisation, and imagination, a theatre that once suffered so many accusations of superficiality, reviled as a lesser theatre art, and condemned as a destroyer of the intellectual character of the nation – is here transported to a twenty-first-century stage in Belo Horizonte and thus ends by participating in the formation of an urban mass culture. With its tone of corrosive and satirical humor, Galpão's brand of revista opens up, by means of ridicule and argument, a public space for the discussion of different visions of love, desire, theatre and the big city, the latter a metonym for the region and the nation. New languages arise, inspired by the revista formula, aiming at the spread of popular music, and prompted by the Brazilian ideological model. Because it is a popular genre that purports to interact with the consumer public, revista's extensive audience has always included not only wealthy and middle-class people but members of the working class and illiterates. This European model of theatre acquires its own characteristics in Brazil, and in the hands, or better, in the performance of Grupo Galpão, is presented here as "a musical comedy of Mineiro customs" with the more specific objective of reflecting the Brazilian cultural identity.

NOTAS

¹ Revista theatre, which offered a satirical "review of the year", interspersed with musical numbers, was derived from French operetta and dominated the Brazilian stage, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This theatre enjoyed much success but was criticized by members of the Brazilian intellectual establishment as an unworthy dramatic genre. The most well-known creator of revista was Arthur Nabantino Gonçalves de Azevedo (1855-1808), born in São Luís do Maranhão, a journalist who moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1873, where he taught and wrote for newspapers and magazines. His first play was *Uma véspera de reis* (1876); his most famous one was *O bilontra* (1886).

² Anthropophagy is a concept developed by Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954), one of the leaders of Brazil's modernist movement. In his "Manifesto antropófago" (1928), one of the foundational texts of Brazilian modernism,

Andrade admonished Brazilian artists not to imitate Western literature and art but rather to devour them and spit them out as modified and therefore uniquely Brazilian works.

³ Mineiro refers to a native or inhabitant of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Its capital is Belo Horizonte, home to three million mineiros. This mountainous region of Brazil, today largely agricultural, was the site of an eighteenth-century gold rush and also yielded diamonds and precious stones. Its rich cultural patrimony includes a number of churches in the colonial cities that exemplify baroque architecture and contain exquisite works of painting and sculpture.

⁴ Transrepresentation is a theoretical concept that describes the process of transmitting a work of art from one culture to another. The resulting text is not a literal rendering of the original, rather, it has become a new work of art that has taken on aspects of the receiving culture. See Viana and Alves 107–123.

⁵ João Álvaro de Jesus Quental Ferreira (1898–1979), a native of Rio de Janeiro, acted under the name of Procópio Ferreira for six decades on the Brazilian stage, appearing in Joraci Carmargo's *Deus lhe pague* (1932) and Molière's *The Miser* (1969) among other hits.

⁶ These awards were all for *Um trem chamado desejo*: Best Play, *Um trem chamado desejo*; Best Director, Chico Pelúcio; Best Script, Luis Alberto de Abreu; Best Actress, Inês Perceira; Best Supporting Actress, Teuda Bara; Best Music, Tim Rescala; Best Set Design, Márcio Medina; and Best Lighting, Alexandre Galvão and Wladimir Medeiros.

⁷ "The good old Galpão is back!" rejoiced Clara Arreguy in *Estado de Minas*, noting that the staging conveyed the tone of unsophisticated farce characteristics of the group's early plays. Arreguy had praise for actors Teuda Bara, Lydia del Picchia, and Paulo André, as well as for the music and the use of film within the play. ("Um trem movido a desejo," November 30, 2000, 10). Most other critics were equally enthusiastic. Miguel Anunciação called the production "coherent, delightful and very worthy" ("Texto do espetáculo compartilha ficção e um tanto de contissão", *Hoje em Dia*, December 1, 2000, Caderno Cultura, 5.) Humberto Slowick wrote that the show was "simply a delight" ("Homenagem musical ao teatro", *Gazeta do Povo*, Caderno, March 28, 2001, 1. A dissenting voice was that of Wagner Carvalho, who felt that the troupe's inclusion of a character in blackface was disrespectful of persons of African heritage ("Teatro e discriminação", *Estado de Minas*, December 16, 2000, Pensar, 4).

⁸ Alcantil das Alterosas literally means "precipice of the highlands"; it refers to Belo Horizonte's mountainous location. In earlier times, a woman from Belo was called an alterosa.

⁹ The maxixe is an intricate form of ballroom dancing, similar to the tango, that originated during the second half of the nineteenth century. The lundu is a sensuous dance of African origin brought to Brazil from Angola.

¹⁰ The mambembe tradition on Brazilian drama refers to the troupes of traveling players who took light theatre to the towns and cities in the interior of the country. To the actors and actresses in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, who performed in serious plays, mambembe was a lesser form of theatre.

¹¹ Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839-1908) was born in Rio de Janeiro. He wrote poems, plays, novels and literary criticism. Two of his most well-known novels are *Memórias postumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) and *Dom Casmurro* (1900). Today he is considered one of the giants of Brazilian literature, admired for his psychological perspicuity and innovations in narrative form.

¹² A Carioca is a native of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

¹³ A Fluminense is a native of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁴ This term literally means "a chorus of bobbing" and refers to the art of Brazilian lacemaking, in which the lacemakers manipulate very quickly and dexterously a number of wooden bobbins.

¹⁵ Mineiridade is a noun with positive connotations that refers to the good qualities of Mineira culture.

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