

This insubstantial pageant:
De-historicizing Shakespeare in Brazil

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Good morning everyone. I would like to start by thanking professor Arthur Marotti for the invitation and for his extraordinary kindness as a host, and prof. Jamie Goodrich for her incredible support and patience;

This seminar invites us to discuss Shakespeare and his culture on the stage and on the page. I will be focusing on the stage. That is to say, I will be examining not what Shakespeare may have tried to do but, instead, what producers and directors have in fact decided to do with and to Shakespeare;

More specifically, I would like to briefly discuss three different uses of/approaches to Shakespeare in Brazilian history:

- 1) **the recent past** - from 1964 to late 1990s, when Shakespeare was primarily used as a tool to denounce authoritarian rule;
- 2) **the present:** from late 1990s to today, Shakespeare has been a vehicle to portray the angst of the post-modern individual. Productions of his texts have eschewed political themes to center on private concerns;
- 3) **the future or new trends:** there are signs that Shakespeare begins to be used as a means to voice a wholesale condemnation of political mores in Brazil;

The recent past: after the 1964 coup **[SLIDE 1]**, which brought the military to power and inaugurated an era of harsh censorship, theatre in Brazil served as a prime vehicle for political criticism.¹ Shakespeare's plays were very helpful in this context. Directors and actors would hide behind the Bard, so to speak, to denounce the brutality of the new regime. This often worked because, even for an authoritarian government wary of public speech, prohibiting the staging of Shakespeare text is something of an embarrassment;

An important example of this use of Shakespeare was Paulo Autran's 1973 rendering of *Coriolanus*.² **[SLIDE 2]** The story of the general who goes from savior of the republic to enemy of the people and who distrusts popular rule could not be more fitting to mirror life under military government. In the same year of *Coriolanus*, two major stars of the Brazilian theatre (Antunes Filho, director and Juca de Oliveira, actor) performed *Richard III*, focusing on the cunning of evil rulers.**[SLIDE 3]** The same duo, in 1966, had already presented *Julius Cesar*, while José Possi Neto and colleagues tried new dramatic forms for *Titus Andronicus* in 1971/72. Examples could be multiplied;

In the 1980s, Augusto Boal radically reinterpreted *The Tempest* (1981), **[SLIDE 4]** a celebrated performance which read like a libel against political oppression and social exclusion;

His lack of reverence for the authority of Shakespeare's text (which infuriated conservatives - one critic said that Boal was making *a tempest over a teapot*)

¹ Bernice W. Kliman, Rick J. Santos . Latin American Shakespeares.

² See BAUEN, Margarida. As resenas de Montagens de peças de Shakespeare no Brasil. Pitágoras 500; #7 Dezembro, 2014. Pp. 10-11.

encapsulated the connection between aesthetic transgression and political defiance, which informed much of Brazilian theatre at the time.³

It would be very hard not to see a connection between political context and the choice of plays to be performed, even more so because most of them (*Julius Cesar*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*) would afterwards virtually disappear from the Brazilian stage;

The present: The end of the military regime in 1988 utterly - and rapidly - transformed Brazil. **[SLIDE 5]** Democracy allowed for sensible economic policies. Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1994-2002) brought inflation down from astounding 80% a month (in 1993)⁴ to less than 2% a year (1998).⁵ Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's administration took advantage of the economic stability to invest in social inclusion policies, which resulted in over 40 million Brazilians entering the middle class;

For the theatre, these changes translated into a new context for both audiences and producers. On the one hand, the profile of the average crowd changed, due to the substantial growth in theatre attendance ⁶ which followed the bettering of economic conditions, mainly among the poorest;

Particularly important for the staging of plays is the fact that this new public's taste for drama had been shaped, to a great extent, by the language of TV, markedly by soap-operas. Its presence worked to reinforce an already existing trend of Brazilian theatre

³ Boa went on to create in 1986, after returning from 12-year exile in France, the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed-CTO-Brazil.

⁴ 2,477.15% a year (in 1993)

⁵ <http://www.fpabramo.org.br/fpadefato/?p=216>

⁶ <http://pnc.culturadigital.br/metast/aumento-em-60-no-numero-de-pessoas-que-frequentam-museu-centro-cultural-cinema-espetaculos-de-teatro-circo-danca-e-musica/>

audiences to shun complicated plots. As a result, an approach to theatre as light entertainment (rather than political critique) gradually gained strength;

On the other hand, the return to democracy made any rebuke of authoritarian government sound pointless. As a result, key themes in many of Shakespeare's plays (v.g. the nature of authority; the conditions for legitimate rebellion, and the right to depose tyrants) became much less appealing, as their capacity to resonate real life diminished;

At the same time, as democracy became routine in Brazil (anyone under 28 has never lived under authoritarian rule), public attitudes towards politics changed. There has been what some have called a Tocquevillian revolution in Brazil, a *privatization of public life*, with people becoming increasingly engrossed in their private affairs, with little or no interest in collective causes and broad political debate.

Shakespeare's plays, of course, have much material that relates to this quest for individualized self-assertion. It is along these lines that the staging of his plays has been changing in Brazil;

Productions have repeatedly softened or cut out references to political and historical issues (v.g. theological beliefs; social codes) while highlighting private concerns. Shakespeare, in current Brazilian theater, has more and more become a timeless chronicler of an equally timeless, ever repeated human tragedy. Specifics of the Elizabethan and Jacobean contexts have been all but erased;

A good example of this trend may be seen in Juca de Oliveira's rendering of King Lear. **[SLIDE 6]** Juca, who is 80, is an icon of Brazilian theatre and, as already seem, has played a very active part in the politically-charged performances of the 1970s and 1980s.

His 2015 version of *Lear*, however, stays away from political criticism and adopts an emotionally intimate, soul-searching tone. Juca, alone on stage, plays all the parts, but focuses almost exclusively on the character of *Lear* himself.

The text was adapted⁷ to fit in a one-hour performance, so numerous passages and events have been left out.**[SLIDE 7]** There is very little of Edmund, the fool, the three daughters, Gloucester, Kent or anyone else. Like the king's retinue in the play, lines by other characters are reduced to a minimum, to allow us to focus on the man and his suffering. Juca's *Lear* is a foolish *man*, not a foolish *king*.

A review in the most widely-read weekly magazine in Brazil expresses exactly this view, apparently in approving terms: *The sober wardrobe reinforces the idea of an ordinary man, frustrated because his values have become outdated. [...] The final scene opens a possibility for a modern reading of this classic of the English Bard. Away from his kingdom, Lear seems now to live in a retirement home, and this is maybe the worst cruelty*".⁸

The play functions very well and Juca's hour-long *tour de force* is amazing. The story it tells, however, is virtually oblivious to politics and to its role in the downfall of *Lear*. This is, above all, a private tragedy, not a public one.

[SLIDE 8] *The Tempest*, starring Celso Frateschi, follows the same pattern of downplaying politics and history. Taking advantage of the fact that it was presented in an arena theater, it incorporates many elements reminiscent of a circus. Sailors are dressed

⁷ By Geraldo Carneiro.

⁸ O figurino neutro reforça a imagem de um homem comum e inconformado por ver seus valores ultrapassados. [...] Na cena final, surge a possibilidade de uma leitura contemporânea para o clássico do bardo inglês. Afastado de seu reino, *Lear* parece viver agora em uma casa de repouso, e esse talvez seja o grande descaso.
<http://vejasp.abril.com.br/atracao/rei-lear>

up as clowns **[SLIDE 9]**, and antics abound. Ariel is a cross between a clown, a ballerina and a butterfly; **[SLIDE 10]**

The transition from one scene to another is marked by folk songs and lullabies, sung in chorus by the whole cast as a commentary on the action just seen. The scene of the shipwreck **[SLIDE 11]**, ends with a famous Brazilian lullaby about a canoe; (*the canoe has capsized/it was all your fault/for you cannot row*);

The political cunning of Prospero, the potentially explosive stance by the sailors vis-a-vis the king and the violent/tense relation of Prospero/Caliban are secondary to a (beautiful) staging that puts emphasis on quid-pro-quo and humorous sexual innuendos (audiences seem to never tire of those);

[SLIDE 12] Prospero's relation to Miranda and to Caliban is a private one, sometimes affectionate, sometimes angry, but void of political implications. The treachery of Antonio and the Duke of Naples is not emphasized as a political act, but presented as evidence of human frailty and selfishness. The whole effect is dream-like, playful and light and seems to hint at a general idea of "how foolish these humans are".;

Gabriel Villela, the director, explains, in an interview, the option for this a-historical, a-political reading of the play. He says that Shakespeare ultimately leads us back to the primeval clay we all came from. Actors carry clay objects throughout the play to reinforce this idea and to hint at a connection between island and self;

The play is a feast for the eyes and audiences love it. It stands in stark contrast, however, to Boal's already mentioned 1984 production, which stressed the socio-political implications of Prospero's mastery of Caliban and portrayed it as the model image of

Brazil's class structure, with the elite always exploiting the masses, as if this were a fact of Nature. Today's audiences seem less receptive to this kind of political discourse. The idea of Shakespeare as the inventor of the human has become omnipresent in Brazilian theatre;

The future: Things may be about to change. In spite of this still hegemonic mode of presenting Shakespeare, we may today be on the verge of seeing a swing back to a more political approach to his texts, though arguably quite different from the one we had under military rule. There are in fact signs that the mismanagement of the economy coupled with a serious deterioration of (the already problematic) ethical standards in politics is bringing the importance of political debate and critique back to the fore;[**SLIDE 13**]

Over the past decades, a profound distrust of political institutions has emerged in Brazil. Years of narrow-minded, petty self-serving political bickering alongside widespread corruption have translated into a strong (and I believe, dangerous) rejection not only of the political class, but of the very institutions within which it functions;

At the same time, the fast-paced worsening of every possible economic indicator has been largely perceived as a self-inflicted wound, not as the direct result of any external factor. Brazil's economy is in disarray, so say the majority of experts and so feels the population, because president Dilma Rousseff, who in 2015 was running for re-election, decided not to take the necessary – but unpopular – measures needed to prevent it;

This attitude strongly reinforced the idea that politicians, and political parties, are inevitably selfish self-serving beasts. Given all this, it is not a surprise to see that

Brazilians have all become Hamlets, pondering the rotten nature of humankind. *We are arrant knaves all, believe none of us* [Hamlet 3,1];

This certainly helps understand why a small number of productions in Brazil seem to be adopting anew a political tone, one that seems to derive more from a social than from an institutional standpoint. That is to say, they tend not to criticize the regime *per se*, but rather to point to the intrinsic corruption of any politician, of any political institution or party. In doing so, they end up sounding more like a moral denunciation than a political critique;

[SLIDE 14] Jo Soares' upcoming production of *Troilus and Cressid* may be the first example of this use of Shakespeare as a vehicle for broad, almost nihilistic criticism. Soares, one of the most important comedians in the country, went on to become Brazil's most important talk-show host.

His very decision to stage *Troilus and Cressid* may be proof that something new is happening. This will be the first ever Brazilian staging of this intriguing text. The reason for his choosing the play is that, for Soares, this is an unforgiving critique of society and the political class as a whole: Greek and Trojan, men and women, nobility and common people are equally arrogant, foolish, self-serving and corrupt;

I was fortunate enough to be invited by Soares to appraise his translation of the play and, later, to discuss it with the cast and to witness the first rehearsal (that was fun). During rehearsal, actors did their best to make Achilles, Agamemnon and the generals look ridiculous; Troilus was very funny as a gullible cuckold, and Cressida was played as a crass caricature of the most voluble, fame obsessed starlet;

Meaningfully enough, Soares has left out the famous passage on the role of authority and hierarchy (*Take but degree away, untune that string, And, hark, what discord follows!* 1,3). The political discourse that might – at least on the surface – have helped explain things in Early Modern England seems to have become inscrutable to present-day Brazilian audiences. It is authority itself that is at the root of the chaos the country seems to be heading into – or, at least, that is the way most people feel. References to it as a healing power could sound deeply farcical and senseless. Even before opening, the production has generated great interest;

The story of the staging of Shakespeare plays in Brazil seems thus to reinforce the idea that examining the context of individual productions is key to understanding the dynamics which has kept Shakespeare so deeply relevant for so long. His work is probably the highest expression of what theatre is all about. Not a text printed on the page, but a live, dialogic art, a performance to a specific audience, in a specific time-and-place, with meanings necessarily negotiated over and over again by all, directors, actors and the public;

In Brazil, the framework for such negotiation has varied greatly, and so have the Shakespeare productions that responded to it. Different political contexts have invited different renderings, a different canon, a different diction. That his text allows for so much reworking without losing any of its force is perhaps the ultimate compliment to Shakespeare's genius.**[SLIDE 15]**