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BRAZILIAN OUTDOOR SHAKESPEARES: STREET THEATRE AS PUBLIC ART

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, theatre groups from different Brazilian regions, such as Grupo Galpão (Minas Gerais), Clowns de Shakespeare (Rio Grande do Norte) and the Ueba Troupe (Rio Grande do Sul) have tended to renegotiate the Shakespeare-function, theorized by Denise Albanese, by means of displacing his legacy from the realm of the elite. Their main objective is to adapt the bard's plays for popular audiences, performing them in the streets, squares, parks, marketplaces and other venues of great public circulation. Besides creating a ludic locus, these troupes also provide a socially liberating experience for people of all ranks of life. This paper proposes to discuss the emergence of Shakespeare productions in Brazilian street theatre, following the contemporary trend of popularization of the bard, also accomplished by film industry, graphic novels, new media and other manifestations of mass culture, in the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives.

Keywords: Shakespeare. Adaptation. Brazilian street theatre. Theatre Space. Grupo Galpão. Clowns de Shakespeare. Ueba Troupe. Popular culture. Regional accents. Public art.

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Introduction

In her recent book *Extramural Shakespeare* (2010), Denise Albanese argues that Shakespeare's position in American culture has changed in the years around the turn of the

millennium. He is no longer located at the top of highbrow culture, but has become public property. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" (1969), which demystifies authorship and establishes the concept of author-function, she coins an analogous term – Shakespeare-function – to account for "the sum of the myriad roles Shakespeare plays and is made to play institutionally and publicly" (Albanese 5) in our time. This change has become a global tendency which also applies to Brazil.

Shakespeare's texts have been adapted and appropriated to serve multiple purposes in different socio-cultural Brazilian contexts, in a movement of transtextual interplay of past and present that demands continual adjustment to new circumstances, ideologies and cultural imaginaries. In the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives, this paper proposes to discuss the emergence of Shakespeare productions in Brazilian street theatre, making reference, mainly, to Grupo Galpão's *Romeu e Julieta* (1992), Clowns de Shakespeare's *Sua Incelença, Ricardo III* (2010), and Grupo Ueba's *A megera domada* (2009).¹ Furthermore, arguments will be provided that these outdoor performances assume a similar function to that attached to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre which, as Albanese (2010) puts it, is "famous for its long-term ambition to desacralize Shakespeare and make the plays accessible to non-elite audiences" (Albanese 40).

Playing in the Open: When Place Becomes Theatre Space

Pat, pat; and here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house [...].

Shakespeare, 3.1.2-4

According to Michel de Certeau (2010), place is a fixed location as opposed to space which is socially constructed: while a street can be idealized by urban planning, it will depend on movement, change and interaction to be transformed into an active space. The French scholar postulates that "space is a practiced place" (Certeau 119) that acquires a *sui generis* dynamics, becoming space when appropriated for specific purposes during a period of time. Thus, when a play is performed at public venues, the chosen place for a short time becomes the theatre space, as Peter Quince asserts in his introductory speech in the rehearsal scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-1596), quoted in the epigraph. Or, as Peter Brook remarks in *The Empty Space* (1968): "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 9).

¹ Full videos with comments and subtitled scenes of these productions are available on the *Global Shakespeares* (MIT) open access archive.

Playing in the open is, actually, going back to the roots of theatre. In our time, outdoor performance of Shakespeare seems to have become a global trend again. While, in Britain, Shakespeare in the open is a movement that includes both professional and amateur companies, involving a range “from large professional set-ups like the New Shakespeare Company, based at the Open-Air Theatre in Regent’s Park in London [...] down to amateur groups as small as The Villagers, near Gosport in Hampshire [...] (Dobson 155); in Brazil, Shakespearean street theatre productions are undertaken mainly by professional theatre groups.

Outdoor Shakespeare Performance in Brazil

Brazil has witnessed considerable expansion of Shakespearean productions in the last two decades. The successful intercultural experiments by Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine have encouraged Brazilian theatre groups, whose participants generally hold university degrees on theatre and drama studies, to desacralize and/or brazilianize Shakespeare, rejecting orthodox theatre practices and presenting his plays in the open as public art, outside the walls of academia.

Since the 1990s, theatre groups from different Brazilian regions, such as Grupo Galpão (Minas Gerais), Clowns de Shakespeare (Rio Grande do Norte) and Grupo Ueba Produtos Notáveis (Rio Grande do Sul) have tended to renegotiate the Shakespeare-function in Brazil by means of displacing his legacy from the realm of the elite. Their main objective has been to adapt the bard’s plays for popular audiences, performing them in the streets, squares, parks, marketplaces and other venues of great public circulation and easy access. Besides creating a ludic locus that, for a brief period of time, disrupts the quotidian routine and order of the city, they also provide a socially liberating experience to people of all ranks of life who democratically come together as a community.

Grupo Galpão – Belo Horizonte MG

A decisive role was played by Grupo Galpão, a Southeastern Brazilian street theatre company, founded in 1982, whose groundbreaking *Romeu e Julieta* (1992), directed by Gabriel Villela, was twice successfully presented at London’s Globe Theatre (2000 and 2012). It is worth mentioning, however, that this intercultural spectacle was initially designed for the streets and performed in the open in Brazil and abroad, and that only much later it was adapted for indoor venues. Influenced by trends that view the theatre as a space of cultural recycling and negotiation between the global and the local, Grupo Galpão developed a hybrid performance aesthetics, freely appropriating elements from high art and popular culture, mixing and combining multiple forms, genres and styles, mainly “the vanguard movement of contemporary theatre with the production of the regional-cultural imagination inscribed in the Brazilian performative code [...] (Alves; Noe 265-266).

The play premièred in 1992, in the historical city of Ouro Preto, in Minas Gerais, receiving immediate popular and critical acclaim. The production transposes the tragic love-story of Romeo and Juliet to the *sertão* (remote Brazilian backlands), amalgamating the Shakespearean tradition with the cultural imaginary of Minas Gerais. In the heavily cut adaptation of Shakespeare's text for street audiences, a narrator was created, characterized as a clownish Shakespeare, who intervened between the scenes with narrative passages that mixed the Shakespearean idiom (in translation) with *sertanês* – the language of Guimarães Rosa, one of the most important Brazilian modernist writers. Besides the circus metaphor that runs through the production throughout, the spectacle was enriched with comic swordplay, puppetry, physical buffoonery, mimed physical action, well-known folksongs and popular music played by the actors themselves. The company starts the performance with a circus parade, singing and playing instruments to enhance the flow of energy from spectators to performers and back.

The spatial organization of the production, whether indoors or outdoors, relies on another metaphor that takes us back to the pageant wagons of travelling players touring the countryside in medieval England and in Shakespeare's time. These multi-functional carts were used as moveable stages, tiring-houses and means of transportation. The Brazilian troupe metamorphosed the pageant wagon into a decorated motorcar, a Veraneio in Brazil and a Volvo in the London performances at the Globe. The physicality of the motorcar provided the scenic space and playing areas that anchored the theatrical semiosis: some scenes were played on the flat upper stage, placed on the roof, to which wooden staircases provided access; others were enacted, by actors and puppets, through the side windows; and actors on stilts performed in the expanse of a chalk circle drawn in front of the automobile.

While the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe, Mark Rylance, remarked that the Brazilian company's carnivalized blending of tragedy and comedy was closer to Shakespeare than many native Shakespeare productions in Britain (Worthen 149), the most rigorous Brazilian critic, Barbara Heliodora, in her review, entitled "Perfection in infidelity", wrote that she believed Shakespeare "would perfectly understand the aim of this company, and feel delighted to be so much loved and treated with such intimacy" (Heliodora 80).

Clowns de Shakespeare – Natal RN

In the Northeast, the most prolific street theatre company is Clowns de Shakespeare (Shakespeare's Clowns), settled in Natal, who have been working on a collaborative basis since 1993. Like Grupo Galpão, they also draw on a wide range of art forms and performance practices, such as circus routines, masks, physical techniques inherited from *commedia dell'arte*, mime, puppetry, dance and music. Trailing the path of outdoor Shakespearean comedy, *Sonho de uma noite de verão* (1993 – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); *Noite de Reis* (1994 – *Twelfth Night*); *A megera do nada* (1996 – *The Taming of the Shrew*, retitled as *The Shrew of Nothingness*); and *Muito barulho por quase nada* (2003 – *Much Ado about Nothing*, retitled *Much Ado about Almost Nothing*) are part of their street repertoire.

In 2010, the group embraced a risky enterprise when they decided to adapt a historical play for outdoor audiences, choosing Shakespeare's *Richard III* (retitled *Sua Incelença, Ricardo III*). The term *incelença* relates to the traditional Northeastern Brazilian funeral mourning-chants of the backlands, but it also conveys the meaning of "His Excellency", a honorific title current at the time of the empire. The *incelenças*, chanted rhythmically to dramatize acts of violence, constitute a *Leitmotif* throughout the spectacle, since they recur each time a murder is perpetrated under Richard's command.

The spatial arrangement of the production, a circus-ring, with three gypsy wagons enclosed and used as acting spaces, established a dialogue with the thematic content of the play, inviting the audience to identify Richard as the ringmaster, performing his "circus of horrors".

The very title of the production announces that it is not a conventional rendering of Shakespeare's play, but an appropriation that shifts meanings in the process of transculturation. As far as cultural exchange in the theatre is concerned, Patrice Pavis (1992) argues that the receptive concretization of a text "is a transaction between the source and target situations of enunciation that may glance at the source, but that has its eye chiefly on the target" (Pavis 38).

In the Clowns' intercultural production, the core of the dramatic narrative of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, which tells the story of the ambition of a man who, to get power, hires professional murderers to eliminate several members of his family and associates, was translated into the northeastern Brazilian universe by inserting, into the performance, elements alluding to the phenomenon of the *Cangaço* (social banditism) that prevailed in the semi-arid Northeastern *sertão*, where a backward, almost feudal political organization prevailed up to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Ironic parallels are drawn between medieval Britain and Brazilian sociopolitical issues, since Richard is equated with a despotic, corrupt colonel (a rich landowner oppressing the working class), hiring a ruthless *cangaceiro* to eliminate all those standing between him and his aspirations (Camati; Leão 339-341).

Besides historicizing Shakespeare's text by exploring it in several contexts – from the Middle Ages and Elizabethan times to Brazil in the 19th and 20th centuries –, the Clowns also inserted popular Brazilian regional songs and contemporary English pop rock music by Queen and Supertramp into the performance to reinforce the intercultural dialogue between the source and target culture.

Ueba Produtos Notáveis – Caxias do Sul RS

In Southern Brazil, the Ueba Troupe, settled in Caxias do Sul (Rio Grande do Sul), was founded by the actors Jonas Piccoli and Aline Zilli, and is one of the many active street theatre ensembles touring in Brazil and Latin America. Just like Grupo Galpão and Clowns de

Shakespeare, they develop experimental acting techniques and methods by going back to popular sources, aiming to make their art accessible to everybody.

Owing to his experience with Shakespearean dramaturgy in alternative spaces, the Afro-Brazilian director Jessé de Oliveira was invited by the Ueba Troupe to direct their street spectacle of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* in 2009. Oliveira's prior Shakespeare production, entitled *Syncretic Hamlet* (2006), which premièred at the Psychiatric Hospital São Pedro in Porto Alegre, promoted a dialogue not only between the global and the local, but also between the historicity of the ancient building and the scenic realization of the moment, aggregating the semantics of space to the thematic contents of the text.

In Oliveira's recent book, entitled *Memory of Street Theatre in Porto Alegre*, he reports that the capital city of Rio Grande do Sul is one of the major street theatre poles in Brazil. A great number of groups, such as Ói Nós Aqui Traveiz, Oficina Perna-de-Pau, Trupe Bumba Meu Bobo, Grupo Manjeriçã, Bonecos Gigantes da Cidade, De Pernas Pro Ar, among others, have become part of Brazilian contemporary street theatre history. Most of the troupes mentioned receive grants from governmental institutions to finance their political and/or educational interventions designed for popular, non-elite audiences (Oliveira 11).

The exuberance, excess and carnivalesque energy released by Ueba's *A megera domada* (2009), a free adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592), was enriched by specificities and motives borrowed from the *commedia dell'arte*, a theatre tradition that is said to have influenced Shakespeare in his lifetime.

The street spectacle of the Ueba troupe can be equated with rough theatre, as defined by Peter Brook, a theatre whose arsenal of resources is limitless. Brook claims that "it is always the popular theatre that saves the day. Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common – a roughness. Salt, sweat, noise, smell; the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back [...]" (Brook 65). He adds that such spectacles take on a "socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretense" (68). The production aggregated most of the characteristics enumerated by Brook in his description of rough theatre and privileged aspects from the *commedia dell'arte*, among them the comic and/or grotesque acting techniques, stereotyped characterization, improvisation and theatre in the round with no separation between audience and performers.

Besides recreating the Shakespearean induction – the English travelling players were transmuted into a troupe of *commedia dell'arte* actors – the Ueba street production complicated identity issues by borrowing ideas and motifs from Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* (1743). They used one actor to incarnate the roles of Grumio, Petruccio's servant, responsible for most slapstick humor because he interprets his master's speeches in a most literal way, and

Biondello, Lucentio's second attendant, who always does exactly what he is told, pretending not to know that Tranio, disguised as Lucentio, is not his real master. The versatile actor who played both characters kept exchanging identical masks of different colours to confront the different masters, but most of the time he tended to confuse mask and role, a comic strategy that served as a Brechtian distancing device, underscoring the motif of mistaken identities. Furthermore, as the characters changed masks, robes and props in front of the spectators all the time, people were invited to reflect on the fluid nature of identity.

Another inventive device, used to supply the lack of a second actress for enacting Bianca, was the representation of her character by a series of dolls manipulated by male and female characters, a farcical invention that offered a comment on her own manipulative nature: she is represented as a tiny, inexpressive Barbie at first, then as a rag doll, gradually growing in size and dragged around, and finally reaching the shape of an erotic inflatable puppet.

Catarina's polemical final discourse was drastically reduced, however all the time her body language contradicted the spoken words, to offer evidence that her alleged domestication was part of a seduction and/or power game played and consented by husband and wife. In the end, Petruchio and Catarina, after many frustrated attempts to kiss, take off their masks that prevented them from enjoying their love relationship, a comic routine that invited laughter and applause on the part of the spectators.

Concluding remarks

Outdoor Shakespeare performance in Brazil follows the contemporary trend of popularization of the bard, also accomplished by the film industry, graphic novels, new media and other manifestations of popular and mass culture. Although Shakespeare is not a major performance focus of open-air productions in Brazil, since the 1990s he has assumed a prominent place in the repertoire of important street theatre companies throughout the country. The professional ensembles, introduced in this article, are representatives of a rich tradition not only in local terms, but also on a wider global scale, because they have successfully reframed and reinvested Shakespeare with the public character he used to hold in his time. They temporarily modify the cityscape, transforming urban sites into popular tribunals, where the themes presented provide elements for reflection and entertainment for passers-by who interrupt their quotidian routine to become active spectators.

Grupo Galpão and Clowns de Shakespeare, besides appropriating more sophisticated experimental techniques developed by theatre practitioners like Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal and Eugenio Barba, also remediate Elizabethan stage conventions and stylistic aspects from Shakespeare's dramaturgy. While both groups are more concerned with contemporary theatre's intercultural discourse, opting for a kind of expression that incorporates the popular traditions of the region they represent, the Ueba Troupe tends to

explore Shakespeare's dramaturgy to problematize issues of class, gender and sexuality, thus also restoring the political circle of street theatre.

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