ACTORS AND ACCENTS IN SHAKESPEAREAN PERFORMANCES IN BRAZIL: AN INCIPIENT NATIONAL THEATER

DRA. LIANA DE CAMARGO LEÃO
Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR)
Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil
(lianaleao@me.com)

DRA. MAIL MARQUES DE AZEVEDO
Centro Universitário Campos de Andrade, UNIANDRADE
Curitiba, Paraná, Brasil.
(mail_marques@uol.com.br)

ABSTRACT: The main objective of this work is to sketch a concise panorama of Shakespearean performances in Brazil and their influence on an incipient Brazilian theater. After a historical preamble about the initial prevailing French tradition, it concentrates on the role of João Caetano dos Santos as the hegemonic figure in mid nineteenth-century theatrical pursuits. Caetano’s memorable performances of Othello, his master role, are examined in the theatrical context of his time: parodied by Martins Pena and praised by Machado de Assis. References to European companies touring Brazil, and to the relevance of Paschoal Carlos Magno’s creation of the TEB for a theater with a truly Brazilian accent, lead to final succinct remarks about the twenty-first century scenery.

Keywords: Shakespeare. Performances. Brazilian Theater.


1 This paper was first presented at the World Shakespeare Congress 2016 of the International Shakespeare Association, in Stratford-upon-Avon.
ATORES E SOTAQUES EM ENCENAÇÕES DE SHAKESPEARE NO BRASIL: UM TEATRO NACIONAL INCIPiente

RESUMO: O objetivo principal deste trabalho é traçar um panorama conciso das performances shakespearianas no Brasil e sua influência sobre um teatro brasileiro incipiente. Após um preâmbulo histórico sobre a tradição francesa predominante inicialmente, concentra-se sobre o papel de João Caetano dos Santos como figura hegemônica nas atividades teatrais de meados do século dezenove. As performances memoráveis de Caetano como Otelo são examinadas no contexto teatral da época: parodiadas por Martins Pena e elogiadas por Machado de Assis. Referências a companhias europeias que passam pelo Brasil, e à relevância da criação do TEB, por Pachoal Carlos Magno, para um teatro com um sotaque verdadeiramente brasileiro, levam a considerações finais sucintas sobre o cenário no século vinte e um.


Brazil has spoken the language of Prospero with a variety of accents since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when European companies toured the Americas. Plays like Romeo and Juliet and Othello were performed both in Portuguese translations and in the actors’ own language, generally French or Italian, while the supporting cast spoke the language of the audience. But in both cases the sources were melodramatic adaptations by Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816) and Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863).

To fulfill the aims of this article – furnishing researchers with a succinct, but comprehensive study of Shakespeare’s influence over Brazilian dramatic tradition – we opted for a diachronic approach going back to the very beginning.
of the nineteenth century, the year 1808 specifically. It is further structured in sections corresponding to phases of Shakespearean productions in Brazil.

1808 – A HISTORICAL PREAMBLE

“How a mad queen, a pusillanimous prince and a corrupt court succeeded in fooling Napoleon and changing the history of Portugal and Brazil” is the subtitle of the historical novel titled 1808 (2008), by Brazilian writer Laurentino Gomes. Those few well chosen words encapsulate aptly the spectacular transfer to Rio de Janeiro of the Portuguese Royal family in toto, – the Mad Queen Maria I, the Regent Prince, Dom João, his wife and children – plus heads of the government and a whole entourage of courtiers, soldiers, craftsmen, and servants which eventually turned the backward colonial town into the economical, political and cultural center of the kingdom.

Seven years later, in 1815, Rio de Janeiro was officially elevated from its former status to that of center of the Reino Unido de Portugal, Brasil e Algarves. Of necessity, help had to be looked for in Europe to improve the conditions of a colonial town called overnight to provide the requirements of a metropolis. Political changes determined again the cultural perspectives of Brazil, as top-level French artists were willing to leave their country to avoid the turmoil caused by Napoleon’s fall, the restoration of the Bourbons and, in rapid succession, the exiled Emperor’s return at the head of a powerful army, and his final defeat in Waterloo.

The expressive contingent of French artists who accepted Prince Dom João’s invitation gave effective impulse to the arts in Brazil. The so-called French Artistic Mission of 1815 focused specifically on the visual arts – painting, sculpture, architecture and engraving – but affected every artistic and intellectual area, including the theater. As Brazil breathed the air of France, French artistic and intellectual tastes and parameters were consequently adopted. It was to be expected, therefore, that European models should be followed in the first attempts at stage productions, meant to attract and initiate audiences into the appreciation of dramatic art.

The proximity with France – a corollary of the preexisting Portuguese affiliation with French dramaturgy, which was reaffirmed and intensified by the influence of the French Mission – prevailed undisputed well into the twentieth century. Ties with the French theater were also particularly noticeable, therefore, in the first performances of Shakespeare in Brazil.
Entering Othello

Going back to the fateful year 1808, a fact of apparently unremarkable nature, but of cardinal relevance for the Brazilian theater, occurred in the ordinary household of a captain under the service of Dom João, the birth of a child, baptized João Caetano dos Santos. As usual with children from the lower classes, the boy had little formal education and was compelled to follow a “sensible” career, in the Army. Back from the failed expedition sent to retrieve from Spanish rule the Provincia Cisplatina (a region beyond the River Plate, which is now part of Uruguay), João Caetano dos Santos was able to follow his inclination for the stage, as an amateur actor in small private theaters, or touring the provinces, playing title roles. In 1833, with the support of patrons, Caetano founded in Niteroi, a city across the entrance of the Guanabara Bay from Rio de Janeiro, the first Brazilian dramatic company (O’Shea, 2005, p. 25-36).

João Caetano was, thus, a pioneer in the history of the Brazilian theater, not only for his exceptional talent as an actor but also for his capacity to perform successfully the diverse functions of impresario, theater manager, producer and director. As Brazil’s first Shakespearean actor, who was at the center of Brazilian dramatic activity for at least three decades (1835-1863), “he may be accorded the title of ‘father’ of the Brazilian national theater, despite the contrary argument that a national theater must use indigenous forms” (O’Shea, 2005, p. 25).

Most scholars actually argue that the Brazilian national theater, as an integrated system comprising playwrights, actors, dramatic works and theatrical audiences only came into being in the Romantic period, in the wave of patriotic enthusiasm following the political independence from Portugal, in 1822, and of the consequent striving for an autonomous literary and dramatic art. Be that as it may, it is impossible to ignore João Caetano’s fundamental role in the history of Brazilian theater: as director-manager one of his first decisions was to accord parts solely to Brazilian actors, in substitution for overrated Portuguese performers. Accents heard on Brazilian stages were never the same after that.

As mentioned above, Shakespearean or pseudo-Shakespearean plays were produced in Portuguese, translated from French adaptations. Staging Shakespeare in adapted translations, mainly to Italian or French, was a common practice in 19th century Europe, still under the spell of supposedly Aristotelian neoclassical rules. Thus, the uncouth Bard’s plays were purged of

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2 Marcia A.P. Martins observes that Ducis actually practiced a type of free translation called “imitation”, widely used in the heyday of the Roman Empire and in the Middle
violence and disciplined into bombastic “ridiculous mimicry”,3 meant to edify audiences and drive them to delirious applause.

With only one exception, says prominent critic Barbara Heliodora, the plays with Shakespearean titles performed by our first great actor were adapted versions by Jean François Ducis (1733-1816). Contrary to that practice, as early as 1835, Caetano exceptionally gave us a Hamlet translated directly from English, by Oliveira e Silva (HELIODORA, 2008, p. 322).

Disappointed by the unfavorable reception, Caetano came to adopt Ducis’s imitations. The now enthusiastic reaction of the public merited severe commentaries by Pires de Almeida, the renowned historian of the Brazilian theater: “O público, o mesmo público que tanto se horrorizava das cenas sombrias da tragédia de Shakespeare, converteu agora em estrepitosas ovações as más impressões de outrora” (ALMEIDA, in GOMES, 1960, p. 13).4 Eugênio Gomes subsequently observes that Almeida meant the public in general, as great exponents of modern culture in Brazil – Gonçalves Dias, Álvares de Azevedo, Machado de Assis and Joaquim Nabuco – abhorred Ducis’s mediocre imitations (p. 14). Prominent novelist Machado de Assis (1839-1908) obliquely complains: “Our João Caetano, who is a genius, performed three of those tragedies and managed to brilliantly give them the life that Ducis had taken away” (ASSIS, 1871).

João Caetano, nevertheless, would never return to Oliveira e Silva’s translation of Hamlet. It was the impact of his anthological performances of a Frenchified Othello that brought him fame, and would determine his later approach to Shakespeare.

When he turned to Othello, in 1837, he opted for a translation by José Antonio de Freitas of Alfred de Vigny’s adaptation. A year later, in 1838, prompted by the success of this production, Caetano again mounted Othello, this time in a translation by Gonçalves de Magalhães of Jean François Ducis’s version. The Moor would in time become Caetano’s greatest Shakespearean role, to which he would go back twenty six times between 1837 and 1860.

The actor played Othello with such enthusiasm that life and art merged in his performance. In the first of his Lições dramáticas (Dramatic lessons) Caetano relates that in the scene of the murder he had once thrown the young actress who played Desdemona violently to the floor, kneeled on her chest and started strangling her with her own hair, raving aloud “Die, you devil”. He had

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3 Expression applied by Eugênio Gomes to Ducis’s versions.
4 “The public, the same public that rejected in horror the somber scenes of Shakespeare’s tragedy now transformed into loud acclaim their former bad impression”.

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to be restrained by his fellow actors while the audience rose screaming to their feet.5

Theatrical theorist João Roberto Faria sees the auspicious encounter between an actor and two writers, in 1838, as the first important step in the formation of the Brazilian national theater, when João Caetano interpreted with great success the title role of the tragedy *Antonio José ou O poeta e a inquisição* (*Antonio José or The Poet and the Inquisition*), written by Brazilian romantic poet and playwright Gonçalves de Magalhães (1811-1882) (FARIA, in MATE and SCHWARCZ, 2012).

Caetano’s next staging of a Brazilian playwright, – the one-act comedy *O juiz de paz da roça* (*The Hillbilly Judge*) by Martins Pena (1815-1848) – was not received with equal enthusiasm. The public laughed at the sharp witty exchanges among characters in the play introduced to relieve the somber atmosphere left by the preceding tragedy in the program, but did not take it or its author seriously. Audiences were completely unaware that the realistic hilarious depiction of ill-functioning institutions was in the heart of the only indigenous tradition to develop in nineteenth century Brazilian theater, the comedy of manners.

In 1839, Caetano mounted a French version of *Macbeth*, translated by José Pinheiro Guimarães probably from an adaptation by Ducis. He would revisit the role twice, in 1843 and in 1846, in a new translation of the same French version by José Amaro de Lemos Magalhães. His production of *Hamlet* in 1840, in an equally adapted version – a memorable success – confirmed both the taste of the Brazilian public for vociferous melodrama and the shrewdness of Caetano’s choice.

The actor was known for his physical attributes and exerted an attraction of an “almost sexual nature”. His major asset was a wide vocal span that allowed him to express from sweet feelings to stentorian rages. An interesting commentary about the use of vocal registers in *Othello* can be found in Caetano’s dramatic lessons, as related by Barbara Heliodora:

(...) I understood that when such a tragic human being spoke his voice must sound to the audience like the roar of an African lion, and that I should not speak in the medium pitch of my voice: I resorted, therefore, to bass tones and realized I was able to sustain this throughout the whole performance. (2008, p. 324)

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5 João Caetano would later marry his Desdemona, actress Estela Sezefreda.
João Caetano comments further that every actor who played Othello in Rio at that time, tried to do the same, but failed. Although light-skinned by Brazilian standards, the actor chose to represent Othello in his original dark color. In this aspect he diverged from the French adaptation that had made the character a white man, out of respect for the susceptibilities of an aristocratic European society. The dark somber features coupled with the stentorian “roar of an African lion” were both the object of negative criticism and the material for satire. Exaggeration in pre-romantic and romantic adaptations did not go by unscathed.

In his comedy Os ciúmes de um pedestre (The Jealousies of a Footsoldier) Martins Pena irreverently mocks the extravagant melodramatic tones of Brazilian Shakespearean productions. The Footsoldier is a ridiculous facsimile of the jealous Moor who locks his wife up before leaving the house. Martins Pena leaves no doubts as to his parodic intentions: the Footsoldier explicitly compares his plight to that of Othello’s which he declares less painful than his own.

“I saw Othello many times in the theatre (...). Othello’s crime is nothing, a small thing, compared to mine... To cuckold me! Even she! Ah, I don’t know what I would be capable of doing! To tie her and her lover, and send them as a present to the devil; they would end their lives in my dagger, in my nails, in the spurns of my boots!”

In yet another passage of Pena’s comedy, a dialogue between the Footsoldier and his wife Anacleta imitates the grandiloquent style, tone and attitude of the Brazilian staging of Othello, in a kind of parodical mimicry with derisive purposes.

FOOTSOLDIER Answer my question. Who visits this house?
ANACLETA When you are out, don’t you lock all the doors and leave us inside? How can anybody come in?
FOOTSOLDIER Locked doors! What is the use of locked doors? What is the use of locked doors? Don’t the locks have key holes?
ANACLETA (Aside) What type of man did I marry!
FOOTSOLDIER (Aside) I will find out some keyholes without the holes... (To her) Anacleta, hear me. You know me and know what I am capable of doing what I

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6 Barbara Heliodora points out a curious parallel to Caetano’s commentary. More than a hundred years afterwards, the great Laurence Olivier would train hard to lower his voice pitch to that of baritone which he deemed more adequate for a representation of the Moor, “although he did not think in terms of a lion roar” (2008, p. 325).
say I will do. And more. My eyes are always on the alert. And even with all these cares, Balbina fooled me.

Barbara Heliodora argues that Pena’s comedy reveals not only his familiarity with the story of the Moor but also his knowledge of *The Merchant of Venice*, as the solution of both plays includes the arrival of “three ships laden with gold” (2008, p. 326).

A life-size bronze statue of João Caetano, dating from the 1890s, and representing the actor in the title role of Arnault’s tragedy, *Oscar, Son of Ossian*, can now be seen in front of the theater house named after him, in Tiradentes square, in Rio de Janeiro. Another mention to Caetano’s *Lições* is made by José Roberto O’Shea (2005, p. 31) *a propos* the scene immortalized in the statue: “The fine moment of Oscar, based on which the great sculptor Francisco Chaves Pinheiro . . . made my statue, represents Oscar’s recognition of his own sword, exclaiming: ‘It’s mine!’ shocked by the realization that he has killed his best friend.” The average carioca most certainly ignores who the model was. It is an important task of theater scholars to keep alive the memory of Caetano’s unforgettable role in the development of modern dramatic art in Brazil.

According to Décio de Almeida Prado, in the subject of the art of the actor and the theatrical spectacle, João Caetano dominated undisputedly the Brazilian stage in his lifetime.

**ENTER THE ITALIAN AMBASSADORS**

Only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century did the *esprit du temps* begin to change with the recurrent visits of European companies – mostly Italian, but also Spanish and Portuguese – touring Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and, later on, Porto Alegre. Famous interpreters visited the country: Italian Giacinta Pezanna Gualtieri played *Hamlet* in 1882; Constant Conquelin Ainé brought a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1907; and Gabriel Trabulsi interpreted *Hamlet* in 1918, among many other productions. The Brazilian public benefited, therefore, from the so-called star system which promoted already famous actors, who were certain box-office attractions. The stars performed in Italian supported by local casts who used the audience’s language. It is possible to say that Caetano himself made use of the star system, that is, he explored his popularity “arguably in order to disseminate a new, national Brazilian identity”, in the words of O’Shea (2005, p. 26). World War I interrupted these international tours, which were resumed from the mid-twenties onwards.
ENTER “THE WITCH OF COSME VELHO”

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis — nicknamed “O bruxo do Cosme Velho”7 — is that rare phenomenon, a unanimity in Brazilian letters, praised equally by critics and scholars of diverse critical currents. Although his attempts at drama did not reach the level of his novels, he stands alone as the paradigm itself of prose writing in Brazil. The epithet “witch” refers also to Machado’s ability in deceiving readers and critics with sophisticated sleight of hand manipulation of narrative voices.

In spite of the negative reception, he went on to write a good many light comedies, although his ambition in the dramatic field, as stated in the preface to his book Theatre, was “to progress (...) to comedy of greater compass in which character study will be conscientious and accurate, and the observation of society wedded to a practical command of the genre” (MACHADO, in CALDWELL, 1970, p. 37-38). Paradoxically, his comedies fell short of his admittedly profound understanding of the mechanics of drama and dramatic representation, which can be ascertained from his theatrical criticism.

The inclusion of Machado in this article has a twofold reason: his recurrent use of Shakespeare to expose a deep moral vein in his protagonists – Othello alone figures in twenty-eight stories, plays and articles –; and his accurate observations about the theater of his time. Machado’s references to Shakespeare’s plays span from 1859 to 1908, the year of his death. The role of Machado de Assis as a textual mouthpiece for Shakespeare’s immortal oeuvre is on a par with João Caetano’s pioneer representation of his characters on the stage. Researchers have examined Shakespeare’s presence in Machado’s discursive writings, but were unable to determine why Machado chose Shakespeare as a recurrent motif or the extent of the Bard’s influence on his skills as a writer.

We have to be satisfied with the obvious intertextual references in his prose fiction. American scholar Helen Caldwell, for example, denominates Machado’s novel Dom Casmurro “the Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis”, which is also the title of her study of that novel. Caldwell points out Othello’s extensive influence on Dom Casmurro and how a careful consideration of the tragedy helps to understand the novel’s structure as well as its main issue, the heroine’s guilt as an adulteress.

7 “The witch of Cosme Velho”. Cosme Velho is a quarter in Rio where the already famous Machado bought a house. The legend goes that Machado’s habit of burning discarded papers in a big cauldron in his front yard earned him the epithet “O bruxo do Cosme Velho” later immortalized in a poem by Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

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At around the same time that European touring companies came back to Brazil after the First World War, a Brazilian poet on diplomatic service, Paschoal Carlos Magno (1906-1980), having lived several years in England, decided it was high time to mount Shakespeare in Brazil discarding the French influence. With the Teatro do Estudante do Brasil (TEB), Magno produced a very successful Romeo and Juliet, followed, in 1942, by As you like it, and culminating, in 1948, with the landmark production of Hamlet, directed by Hoffmann Harnisch. This Hamlet launched the careers of remarkable Brazilian performers such as Sérgio Cardoso (1925-1972), who played the title role, Maria Fernanda (1928-) and Sérgio Britto (1923-2010). Harnisch’s and Cardoso’s Hamlet became a landmark in the history of theatrical performances in our country: the quality of Shakespeare on the Brazilian stage changed forever.

Throughout the centuries, the political vocation of Shakespeare’s tragedies and historical plays has been asserting itself in the production of numerous adaptations that fit the context of different countries and states. Their obvious purpose is to condemn unjust tyrannical rule. A reversal of the indicting purposes of professionals of the stage occurred in Brazil at the time of the military rule – from March 31st 1964 to the first free election in 1985.

The new military government gave full support to the festivities that celebrated the date of Shakespeare’s 400th birthday, as a means to divert the people’s attention from the political unrest that swept the country. Important British actors were invited to visit, and perform in, the country. Barbara Jefford and Ralph Richards came, bringing The Merchant of Venice and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the whole company being financed by the Brazilian government and applauded by audiences both in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. University professors and their students from other states had all their expenses paid to attend the performances. Rather than a display of admiration for Shakespeare this measure was an instance of putting the Bard’s name to political use.

Freedom of expression was severely curtailed later on both in the press and all kinds of artistic activities, particularly in the theater, TV and cinema, which were the object of constant vigilance and censorship. Shakespeare’s plays, however, were not censored, mistakenly judged to be free of revolutionary stirrings.
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SCENERY

Nearly eighty years after the creation of the TEB, by Paschoal Carlos Magno, the theatrical scene has changed thoroughly. Shakespeare is performed throughout Brazil by Brazilian troupes; texts are translated from English, without the mediation of French or any other European culture. Recent theatrical productions are unique because they are not afeard to transpose the text to their own local cultural realities, appropriating Shakespeare, mixing the plays with Brazilian matter, coloring them with sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. The voices of the schools of samba, of the circus, and of street theater; the harsh reality of the favelas; the twangling berimbau and the martial dance of the capoeira from Bahia; the traditional culture of Minas Gerais, are some of the many riches ready to lend new accents to the plays. Considering Brazil’s continental size and that Shakespeare can be, and often is, recreated in so many different ways, it becomes therefore nearly impossible to establish what a Brazilian Shakespeare would sound or look like.

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