

**“Poverty and Trauma, Power and Violence in Plinio Marcos’ Social Drama:
The Road Taken to Contemporary Tragedy”**

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Abstract: If social drama dismissed tragedy to favor representations of middle class life, what could be said of a playwright who focused on the lives of miserable individuals inhabiting Brazilian urban ghettos?

In Plínio Marcos’ play, realism is more than just a dramatic option, absolute lack of domestic comfort becomes a symbol of social demands dictating tragic choices in an atmosphere evoking the fatalistic origins of the genre in its Greek realms: what fate could there be for characters exposed from birth to poverty and trauma? The language matches the concreteness of the minimalistic scenery, where nothing is what it should be – cardboards for beds, sex for affection, blood for gestures. Violence leading to tragic actions, social drama becomes a key to political criticism.

Keywords: Brazilian Drama – Social Drama – Plínio Marcos

Brazilian Modern Drama cannot be properly considered outside the domains of our own peculiar literary achievements resulting from the Modern Art Week of 1922. Even if participants of that artistic radical movement would take different trends in the years to come, and even if the single dramatic piece produced by a leader of the movement would be performed only three decades later,(2) an impending necessity to make Brazilian art speak forcefully about Brazilian matters determined the most laudable claims that would converge to our sense of being modern. From this perspective, it would still be important to consider that, even if the desire for a national art was broadly spread, and even if this general impulse toward a national artistic product was advocated by some from a strictly nationalistic standpoint, the tendency to an “anthropophagic” aesthetics has strongly prevailed among us, a conscious attempt to freely devour European and American traditions for the sake of our own artistic hunger, starving, as our authors were, for unlimited creative prospects from which to work out a new sense of being artistically Brazilian.

The road to Brazilian Modern Drama, however, was still to be built. Following the Week of Modern Art of 1922, Antônio de Alcântara Machado, a companion to Oswald de Andrade in the publication of the avant-garde *Revista de Antropofagia* (Magazine or Journal of Anthropophagy), proposed that the Brazilian Theatre should venture on a dialectical process searching for effective strategies that could promote both its nationalization and its internationalization, absorbing, from foreign authors, dramatic and theatrical techniques, but adapting them to expose our own conflicts and realities, our own subject matters being the “digestive enzymes” to ensure the creative and disruptive reprocessing of the foreign legacy.

Being, as they were, extremely slow, the changes in our theatre would still take long to produce valuable results. These propositions devised to enhance a genuine Brazilian modern theatre through a dialectical relation between international forms and domestic contents would only feed our drama almost twenty years later, with the creation and the success of the TBC –

Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia (Brazilian Theatre of Comedy), in 1948, when our playwrights, in close contacts with French and American pieces, began a gradual process of making international influences operate under national perspectives, a process that was to achieve full maturity only in 1958, with the production, by the Teatro de Arena (Arena Theatre)(3), of the play *Eles não usam Black-Tie* (They do not wear Black-Tie), and the consequent acclamation of its author, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, as an “authentic” national playwright.

As a consequence of this success, the artists connected to the Teatro de Arena would consolidate the basis for a cultural-political program in which the theatre would be directed to denounce the most immediate Brazilian problems, drama being an effective instrument to reveal the severe contradictions in Brazilian social structures, the performance treated as a direct strategy to induce the audience to political action, thus framing the basis for a possible socialistic revolution then present on the horizon of their ideological perspectives. This struggle, in theatrical terms, aimed at a dramaturgy consciously and objectively placed on the side of the masses, speaking for the poor and explored classes, searching for new forms of expression in which techniques were carefully designed to evoke critical responses and inspire political reactions.

Bearing in mind this consciously adopted political attitude, it is no surprise that Brecht’s principles concerning the didactic theatre assumed a leading position in the prevailing choices of the dramatists. The epic theatre became a chief source of influence for a significant number of experimental works which were to make our national theatre flourish in its modernity, a concept that would then ride tandem with social criticism aiming at political compromise.

However, due to the teleological aspect of this dramatic project, the social and political ends would certainly justify alternative dramatic solutions, which meant that, even if the epic theatre illumined a significant part of the dramatic production, Brechtian techniques would not rarely be mingled with the most traditional dramatic strategies if the result could be felt to be more politically productive. Thus, in a landmark of the Arena production in 1967, the play *Arena conta Tiradentes*, the epic contours of the piece contrasted severely with the mythical dimension of the protagonist, projected as a naturalistic hero, invested with a characterization process in which dramatic illusion is clearly sought, a theoretical contradiction which subverted the proper aim of Brecht’s negation of the pathetic hero and his claim for emotional distance, the *sympathos* in this mentioned case being projected on the hero as a dramatic strategy consciously planned to add political significance to the work.(4)

It becomes thus understandable that form would not be as substantial to define Brazilian Modern drama as social and political contents were, form being rather freely reinvented to serve the purposes of intended messages advancing social criticism and political action. And if form can be much used and abused for the sake of propagating social consciousness and political resistance, it is again not surprising that a significant part of our modern drama produced a modern façade in our theatre exactly when handling the most traditional forms, reaching out for the most moving of all genres, Tragedy, thus not only taking a route opposed to that retrieved by the epic theatre, but also making use of dramatic illusion and cathartic emotion as the shortest way to lead the audience to experience their own real vexing tragic conflicts, this aesthetic mirror being so important as to allow a certain critic to realize that, in Brazilian drama, if tragic, then modern, a statement applied to Nelson Rodrigues (Lopes, *Nelson Rodrigues: trágico, então moderno*), but certainly fit to label other dramatists, such as Dias Gomes and Plínio Marcos, in their defying handlings of tragic representations of degraded social environments.

These options for tragic representations would certainly reflect the influence of modern social drama in the very shape molded by Ibsen and his followers in the first half of the twentieth century, both in Europe and in the United States. But what impresses us most is the fact that, although in these original dramatic models the bourgeoisie was the class focused on by the dramatists, in Brazilian modern drama, the political process that, in the nineteenth century, had produced severe changes in the dramatic universe, beheading the great heroes and opulent monarchs to favor the theatrical representation of ordinary human beings, then viewed as the members of the middle and working classes – the pressing forces of the liberal revolutions – on our stages a new revolution was taking place, the theatre making the dramatic characters bow a second time, not to greet the bourgeoisie, but rather to give way to the most disfavored classes of our extremely unfair society. That is how Brazilian modern drama favored our most miserable subjects, by welcoming them to the middle of the tragic arena, trapping their representations in the extreme contrasts and dehumanizing conflicts of everyday life. And because this denouncing of the national problems took into account multiple aspects of our social misery, dramatic protagonists would then emerge from the most diverse marginal locations of our social landscape, the stage offering itself as an icon of the underworld, actors and actresses personifying an astonishing procession of fallen angels.

It is true that a relevant part of our modern drama would look at a portion of the low classes that could still experience life with a certain degree of dignity, as for instance, representatives of the proletariat, consciously fighting for their rights, or countryside folks or simple people, stubbornly defending traditional values, nobly defying the threatening forces of capitalistic excesses, ideological oppression or social apathy. But there is no denying the impact caused on our theatre by Plínio Marcos' aggressive dramatizations of our most miserably fallen fellows. In his dramas, the stage itself would be impoverished so as to become itself a ghetto, a brothel, a prison, life in the *lumpen* saying farewell to any minimal luxury expected by traditional realistic settings. In this case, realism itself becomes an illusionistic condition, since in the theatrical depiction of a realistic degraded scenario, nothing is exactly what it should be: a box for a table or chair, cardboards for beds, knives and pliers as major keys to resistance and survival. The elevated domains in which the great tragic heroes of the past fermented their tragic desires become, in Plínio Marcos' dramaturgy, the infected places of the underworld, the ancient buskins gone, the tragic actors march barefooted.

The scenery itself being degraded, realism becomes more than just a stylistic dramatic option, absolute lack of domestic comfort concretely symbolizing the social demands causing, if not justifying, tragic choices in an atmosphere which comes close to resembling the fatalistic origins of the genre in its original Greek realms: what other fate could there be for powerless people exposed from birth to extreme poverty and trauma? Tragedy and drama appear as a consequence of men's free will only to the extent that pure determinism would certainly spoil the political message, but the chances of escaping death or death in life are almost inexistent, the path to *pathos* being the one road to be taken. In *Abajur Lilás*, Dilma's struggle as a prostitute is recurrently referred to as her only means to save her child from a depriving and degrading life, a fight seen by her mates as a useless scheme, since, appraising their own experiences, sons of whores would become either "pimps" or "prostituted homosexuals", the *lumpen* having no way out. Here is a social condition forcing us to retrieve ancient routes of tragic drama, when the sons of a cursed character would themselves be fated to tragic damnation solely for the fact of being connected to a line of ancestry marked by *até*, a divine malediction sent by an angry god against a hero and aimed at affecting his forthcoming generations. The sense of social imprisoning in Plínio Marcos's plays is so intense that it approaches the edge of a fatalistic chiasm, the force of these scenes echoing the author's visceral rejection of social injustice.

In his famous trilogy, *Inútil Pranto para Anjos Caídos* (Useless Tears for Fallen Angels), the author's capacity for reinventing tradition as a means to reveal the deep layers of our social wounds makes him disrupt the central axis that had for centuries sustained dramatic action in the structure of the tragic genre. For his characters, angels fallen in the gutters of social life, the teleological projection of the human will towards a *finis* cannot advance beyond the insane struggle for their daily bread. This necessity, patent in every scene, stemming from past memories, reaffirmed in all coming situations, forges a chain of development of events in which circumstances follow one another only to lead characters down through a narrow corridor of a dark labyrinth in which human desire and free will prove to be entirely subjected to a dramatic process of constant reinvention, reformulation, negotiation of one's desires, making not the best, but the least evil choices in desperate attempts to avoid the inevitable final confrontation with the devouring Minotaur haunting life in the underworld.

The language of these plays also matches the concreteness of the minimalistic scenery and the violent and harsh attitudes of its inhabitants. Thus, as wooden boxes stand for chairs and cardboards for beds, there will also be sex for affection, aggression and pain for words, blood for gestures. It is then under the realms of a rather challenging penury that we make an earnest entreaty to perform a closer analysis of Plínio Marcos' dramatic language. Here we could possibly recall Novalis' complaints, when he said that there, where he searched for the absolute, he would find only things. Plínio Marcos seems to have experienced his own quest for truth, only to grasp the concreteness of ordinary things. Thus he captured and depicted the drama of life in vile, cheap, sharp objects, dissecting his heroes to expose characters who could not even possibly claim for a decent drama, for, in Neusa Sueli's words, in their decadent conditions, they could not even be sure they were entitled to humanity.

In relation to this semiotic operation of translating life through concrete and minimalistic objects, it would be interesting to notice that even in a situation in which there is a more clearly visible *telos*, as happens in *Dois Perdidos numa Noite Suja* (Two Lost in a Dirty Night), the character's aim, his *finis*, is pathetically objectified in Tonho's wish for a pair of shoes. Thus, while classical drama could be seen as the drama of logos, the word being the proper condition for dramatic struggle to take place, in Plínio Marcos' theatre, drama is so lowered as to negotiate the poetry of language for a poetics of things.

The rational pattern which better allows us to perceive the logical scheme guiding the author in the artistic procedures when plotting both the characters and their actions is the logic of a "game". Characters are presented as constantly playing a game. Thus, there is this unmovable necessity to know and obey the proper rules of the environment in which they move, each step having to be calculated, either to defend oneself or to attack the opponent, preferably to achieve both effects, if that could be possible. In a match, nothing can be freely done, which means that, if action is translated through words and gestures and if drama is to be captured through concrete objects, language itself will be reified to become the proper locus of dramatic conflict, each sentence being, at the same time, a move in the match and a concrete blow on the opponent's face. That's how power and violence emerge in the dramatic construction of the plays: through brutal, sadistic, aggressive language, vicious speeches in which words have the weight and opacity of material things.

The list of expressions present in the characters' speeches revealing this double artifice of serving as a move in a game and translating into concrete signs the drama of life would be enormous, sometimes embarrassing, and it would certainly escape the purposes of our paper to

furnish a thorough inventory of those speeches, but here are some emblematic representations of the author's style (with possible idiomatic translations):

- * Fecha essa latrina. (*Shut your dirty hole!*)
- * Você enche o saco. (*You are a pain in the ass.*)
- * O Negrão é fogo. (...) Ele come a tua alma. (*The Nigger is fired up. He will eat your bones.*)
- * Você podia quebrar meu galho... (*You could get me off the hook...*)
- * Então calça a moleira dele. (*Step on his head.*)
- * Homem de merda que você é... (*You're a piece of shit...*)
- * O Negrão é um cara sem eira nem beira... (*The Nigger doesn't have a pot to piss in...*)
- * Você está é com o rabo na mão... (*He scared the shit out of you...*)
- * Vai mijar pra trás? (*Are you pissing backwards? "bitching out"?*)
- * Está cheio de minhoca na cabeça... (*You got a head full of worms*)
- * Cala o bico. (*Pipe down.*)

In fact, *Dois Perdidos Numa Noite Suja* is a notable example of Plínio Marcos' peculiar handling of the tragic genre. Written in 1966 and performed in the same year for a reduced audience in the Bar Ponto de Encontro, later to be successfully performed in the Arena Theatre, the play takes great advantage of the international borrowings advocated by the leaders of Brazilian modernist movements, being inspired by a short story written by Alberto Moravia, an Italian writer who provided the Brazilian dramatist with a storyline from which the dramatic plot develops, in a rather modified way, thus legitimizing the mentioned *habitus* of a Brazilian anthropophagic digestion. Justifying our brief review of the Italian plot inspiring the dramatic piece, we could notice at once that the handling of the original material underwent radical changes already in the choice of the literary genre into which Moravia's text, *Il Terrore di Roma* (The terror of Rome), would be transformed, rewritten, reinvented. In the Italian story, the scenario denounces the degraded atmosphere of a post-war Rome. The two main characters move on through the plot eager to fulfill, each one, a materialistic desire with symbolic implications: one strives for a new pair of shoes, while the other dreams of a fife, a transversal flute associated to military or marching bands. The miserable shoes worn by the character who narrates the story in the first person will also prove to be signs echoing the war marches, which makes us plead that the short story strives to represent a pervading sense of loss and the absurdity of war, still haunting the characters. As the plot develops, the characters plan to assault one of the infatuated couples having their romantic *rendezvous* in the Villa Borghese. The result of the criminal incident, though not intentionally planned to end as a tragic plot, being inverted by a wrong gesture mistakenly interpreted by Lorusso as a sign for him to act violently, the outcome of the story leads both characters to prison.

In Plínio Marcos' dramatic remaking of the story, the circumstantial conditions provoking fear and terror, loss and violence, cease to be those of a temporary crisis derived from a transitory post-war period to become a permanent and unmovable feature of everyday life in the social ghetto he chooses to portray. According to some critics, the setting of the play is a fictional representation mirroring the suburban areas in the region of the Port of Santos, São Paulo, a place the author used to be familiar with, playing a significant part in his existential experiences as well as in his literary imagination. In the play we are examining, Tonho and Paco, inhabitants of this underworld, are confined in an infected room to make us follow, through the conflicts they will enact, an inevitable path to tragedy. In fact, the classical recommendations towards the confinement of the action to a single location here acquires a psychological depth unthinkable for

ancient dramatists: spatial confinement being in the play a way of trapping the antagonists into an imprisoning and oppressing locus, metonymically replacing the proper social sphere around which they seem to move in circles, only later to acknowledge that there will be no escaping except through a criminal climbing of the social walls.

But early in the play, there is still music, and dreams prevail. Paco plays his “gaita” (harmonica) while Tonho aspires for a better future. They fight from the very beginning, it is true, language is already aggressive, and gestures are violent from their first encounter on the stage; but then, we do not yet seem to be trained readers or spectators in that underground stage acting, so that we tend to be confounded by the humorous notes and sarcastic puns, which, in fact, will prevail throughout the text, dramatic irony being a central issue treated by the playwright, who has no discretion in offering us multiple exhibitions of how sarcastic life itself can be. But this tragic depth is not to be instantly felt: there is a process of sentimental education of a criminal(5) gradually preparing not only Paco and Tonho, but also the audience, for the pathetic outcome. In the beginning of the play, violence, not properly deciphered, makes us laugh:

TONHO: Ei, pára de tocar essa droga. (...) Não escutou o que eu disse? Pára com essa zoeira! (...) Estou aqui pra dormir
PACO: E daí ? Quer que eu toque uma canção de ninar? (Marcos, s.d., 65)

TONHO: Hey, stop playing this fucking flute (...) Haven't you heard what I said? Stop this noise! (...) I'm here to sleep.
PACO: So what? Do you want me to play a lullaby? (free translation)

The strategies leading us to appraise the relationships between *ethos* and action very much remind us of Shakespeare's ability to tear the hero apart, giving a share of heroic qualities to each of the two main characters, as happens to the pair Iago-Othello. In Plínio Marcos' play, Paco will be the man of action, already on the criminal path, while Tonho will be in charge of promoting empathy. Only later will the reader or spectator be aware of Paco's traumas, his troubled childhood having placed him on the way to delinquent behavior. Tonho, on the contrary, is the one to feed our sympathetic feelings and gratify our naïve philanthropy. An educated youth, he comes from a small town where his parents still live, projecting on him all their hopes for social redemption, a humble expectation, as Tonho's goals also seem to be: having a pair of shoes, so that he can present himself in a decent condition for a job interview. In his last attempt to get a job, he failed the interview even before it started, his low self-esteem crystallized in the shabby shoes making him unable to face the situation with a firm disposition. This desire for a decent pair of shoes will be extremely effective to build up and sustain our sympathetic feelings towards the fragile and helpless young man, Paco's behavior as a shrewd tramp making us forget the dreaming Tonho that once must have existed in Paco's own heart and soul. And if Tonho will be the agent to emotionally conduct us through a grave dramatic experience, each scene will be devoted to represent his downfall into criminality.

Paco's delinquent behavior has been magnificently understood by one of our most experienced Brazilian drama critics, Décio de Almeida Prado, who personally witnessed the first production of the play in 1967. In his words:

"Criado em reformatórios, estranhando que alguém possa ter pai e mãe (mãe é natural, pai já é um luxo algo ridículo), não conhece vida diversa, nem valores diversos. Não é um desesperado, porque nunca soube o que fosse a esperança. O seu modo habitual de expressão é a hostilidade (...). Qualquer concessão de

generosidade é sempre interpretada por ele como sinal de fraqueza, quando não, falta de virilidade. As suas normas de existência não admitem neutralidade: ele está sempre na ofensiva, ou na defensiva. Vencedor, procura espoliar e espezinhar o vencido. Vencido, aceita sem pestanejar os termos do vencedor, para poder continuar na luta. Paga, em suma, o duro preço que a vida diariamente lhe impõe, mas trata de cobrá-lo dos outros com juro". (Marcos, Official site)

“Raised in reformatories, finding it strange that a person might have a father and a mother (a mother is a natural fact, a father a luxury somehow ridiculous), does not know a diverse life, or diverse values. He is not a desperate, for he has never known what hope is (...) His habitual mode of expression is hostility. (...) Any concession of generosity is always interpreted as a sign of weakness, if not lack of virility. His norms for existence would not admit neutrality: He is always on the offensive or defensive. As a winner, he tries to despoil and despise the loser. As a loser, he instantly accepts the terms of the winner, so that he can go on fighting. He pays, to sum up, the high price life imposes on him, but is always ready to overcharge others with interests” (Free translation).

Tonho also suffers the miseries of a life he endeavors to escape from, but, contrarily to Paco, who has already learned the rules of this life-or-death game, Tonho is ingenuously moved by a permanent hope that his situation is only temporary, his pair of shoes being his passport to a better life. It is no surprise that his intellectual superiority, his sensibility, his idealistic behavior make him unfitted to survive in that hostile environment, Paco being, in that social framework, the strong player, always ready to attack Tonho in his vulnerable condition. In Prado’s view: *A exploração do melhor pelo pior, do mais forte pelo mais fraco, eis o tema que a peça desenvolve até a explosão final.* (The exploration of the better by the worse guy, of the stronger by the weaker, that is the theme the play develops up to the final explosion) (Marcos, Official site. Free translation).

Though the play develops through an increasing tension, quarrels and fights gradually acquiring more dramatic depth as the conflicts reveal there is no solution either for Paco and Tonho’s relationship or for their redemption in that world of chaos and injustice, no impact is so profound as the one produced by the dramatist when he traps these helpless youths’ lives in an efficient dramatic strategy he borrows from tradition, from classic tragedy, to be more precise. The fact is that, more serious complications having invaded Tonho’s routine, forcing him to replace his dreaming intellectual aspirations by hard physical work, unloading cargoes in the street market, obliged to give part of his daily wages to Negrão, a condition to escape physical violence, the empathic character will ultimately succumb to Paco’s psychological oppression.

As a response to Paco’s sarcastic reading of Tonho’s rendering his money to Negrão as a sign of homosexuality, the poor guy agrees to take part in an assault plotted by Paco, partly as a means to convince the other of his virility, which in the play is irrevocably associated to violence, partly as a last desperate attempt to get his pair of shoes. Still inexperienced in this sort of crime, we are told that Paco’s hitting the head of his victim had been so strong as to transform the assault into a homicide. Threatened by their own uncertainty as to the result of their criminal action, they appear in the opening of the second act, not only to make us informed of their entering into the criminal world, but also to share, in the eyes of the audience, the objects obtained from the assaulted couple. A pathetic mixture of violence and humour, sarcasm and

desperation, the scene shows us Paco's commanding the division of the objects, the woman's earrings going to Tonho, who is once more violently mocked and despised.

Centuries after the first Greek tragedies were performed, Aristotle's concepts formulated in his *Poetics* still prove to be critically productive, because there is no denying that, in this moment, Paco commits a *hamartia*, or tragic error, in the Aristotelean sense, an involuntary mistake to trigger the tragic outcome. Even if Paco's mocking attitude did not foresee Tonho's violent reaction (and *hamartia* is considered to be an involuntary error when the exact circumstances or expected results of the mistaken attitude are ignored), Tonho's recognition that the pair of robbed shoes do not fit his number inverts the course of dramatic action in Greek style: an *anagnorisis*, that is, the recognition of a certain truth, provokes a *peripeteia*, the inversion of the dramatic situation, and these effective dramatic strategies occur suddenly, in a single scene, as Aristotle himself recommended for a "perfect tragedy". No more would Tonho be abused, no more psychological or physical oppressions, the gun in his hand and a bullet strategically removed from his pocket will seal his sentimental education as a criminal: a point-blank shot not only kills Paco instantly, but restores the integrity of the torn tragic hero of the beginning of the play, Paco's capacity for action being at this climatic moment transferred to Tonho, a complete hero now, still barefoot, but able to manage mortal weapons and deadly words, because in the rough concreteness of desperation in this underworld, words can kill, as they can also invite us to political actions: *Por que você não ri agora, paspalho?* (The exploration of the better by the worse guy, of the stronger by the weaker, that is the theme the play develops up to the final explosion - Free translation) (134).

NOTES

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2) Oswald de Andrade's *O rei da vela*, our first Modernist Drama, written in 1933, only came to be performed in 1968, as a result of another radically creative artistic movement, the *Tropicalia*.

3) The Teatro de Arena (*Arena Theatre*) created in 1953. For an overview on the history of Brazilian modern drama, including the rarely studied theater of the Amazon, see Lima and Luna. "Paixão na Zona Franca: Márcio Souza e a dramaturgia na Amazônia".

4) A detailed study on the consequences of this use of a naturalistic hero in the play can be found in *O mito e o herói no moderno teatro brasileiro* by A. Rosenfeld, 18-36.

5) This expression, used by W. Benjamin, was adopted by Rainério dos Santos Lima in his dissertation on Plínio Marcos' trilogy, an adaptation of Flaubert's words to portray Tonho's path to criminality. See Lima, R. S. *Inútil pranto para anjos caídos: mimesis e representação social no teatro de Plínio Marcos*.

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