

Lampião and Maria Bonita: a Playwright's Approach to a Modern Brazilian Legend¹

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To give an account of my experience at shaping a very controversial episode of Brazilian history into the play *Auto de Angicos*², I should start by my recollection of learning a song: Like most Brazilians (at least those of my age or older), I picked up “Mulher Rendeira” (“Lacemaker”) still as a child and in such a spontaneous way that I cannot pin-point the first time I listened to it, who taught me the lyrics, who showed me how to dance to its tune. This song belongs to a common treasure-trove, to a popular art canon that is shared by Brazilians, especially those living in the Northeast of the country.

“Mulher Rendeira” can be now found in the album *Cantigas de Lampeão*³, sung by the husky voice of Antônio dos Santos, also known as Volta Sêca. Arrested by the Police of Bahia at the age of sixteen, as an outlaw, this man stayed in prison for twenty years and, later in life, in 1957, accepted the request to record a collection of songs that were representative of daily life – and death – of the *Cangaceiros*, rural bandits who terrified the Brazilian Northeast during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As a child, I was told that “Mulher Rendeira” was just a piece of folklore. It took years for me to learn that this bucolic song that tells us the story of a man who woos a lacemaker and who volunteers to learn from her the art of lacemaking in exchange for teaching her the art of loving had probably been composed by Virgolino Ferreira da Silva, better known in Brazilian history as Lampião (“The Lamp”), a bandit whose claim for glory shifts briskly and unceasingly from cruel savagery to social redemption in the chronicles that his numerous detractors and admirers have written about him over and over again since his death seventy years ago.

I wrote *Auto de Angicos*, a play about Lampião and the *Cangaceiros*, in 2003, after being invited to do so by Elisa Mendes, one of our most prominent theatre directors. At the time, Mendes and I were colleagues in the Postgraduate Studies Programme in Performing Arts at the Theatre School of the Universidade Federal da Bahia. For me, saying “yes” to that request immediately became a form of obsession, and I started to work on the script as if it were some kind of sacred mission.

It was probably around that time that I also started to become acquainted with Walter Benjamin's theory of a concept of history that invites us to understand the task of the historian as something akin to poetry or the divine and, furthermore, to conceive of history as a quest that unfolds an inner metaphysical dimension closely related to the waking of the dead and to the salvage of the past from the ruins of barbarity, as a means of redeeming the future.⁴

But, strictly speaking, how does a playwright relate to that? The writing of a play is something rough, basic, soily; it is a craft – as the word *playwright* points to – that has to do with *making, building, constructing*. Writing a play is a handicraft; it is neither theory nor abstraction. A play is solid, as a mountain is solid, and also as a gorge is solid. And if a play can sometimes strike the ineffability of epifany into us, we must never forget that the strike was, first and foremost, of a physical nature, it was rough, basic, soily; adjectives that could be perfectly used to describe a photograph that can be found in almost every school book of Brazilian history printed in the last decades, showing eleven human heads cut off from their bodies and carefully displayed for public visitation on the four frontsteps of the council house of a backwater town called Piranhas. That image is the work of an unknown photographer, but the heads can easily be identified as being those the local Police cut off from the body of Lampião and from the bodies of some of his followers just after his gang was defeated, once and for all, on a small farm called Angicos, on the border between the states of Sergipe and Alagoas, on July 28th, 1938.

The heads were salted for preservation and – kept in jars filled with a mixture of kerosene and limestone – went on to travel the country on public display, passing through many important cities in the Brazilian Northeast. Years later, the heads were donated, for scientific studies, to the Faculdade de Odontologia, at Universidade Federal da Bahia, and after about half a decade, they were sent to Museu Nina Rodrigues, also in Salvador, where they were exhibited until 1969, when the Brazilian justice system finally decided they should be buried.

Can such dead figures be re-awakened?

They too should be, I thought. And I wanted to do so, with a play. But how? A torrent of seventy years of narratives, and pictures, and films, and songs had already been accumulated regarding the history of Lampião and the *Cangaceiros*. How then, through a play, could I discover a fresh take on the myth, an angle that hadn't been covered by seventy years-worth of art, culture and barbarity?

At the time I was interested in dramatic structures whose strength lay in their simplicity. I am talking about one-act plays where the action remains uninterrupted all the way through. August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, would be the quintessence of that model. I believe that an interesting phenomenon takes place in the perception of spectators when confronted with artistically well executed plays of this sort. These plays trick the audience's sense of time and, although there are no apparent cuts or ellipsis, one has a difficult time to accept that the time spent on reading or

watching the play is the same time experienced by the characters in the play. It is a bit like the magician's ability to make big objects fit into small places, except we are talking about fitting the experience of a lifetime – or of a number of lives – into a couple of hours.

This is probably how I came to the idea of adopting the one-act play model to write *Auto de Angicos*. I say *probably* because as I try to organize my memories of the work I am driven to make sense and to draw lines of logic out of scattered pieces of experiences that were not primarily *understood* or *rationalized*, but rather *felt* or *lived*. Telling the story of writing a story is, forcibly, storytelling. It is not necessarily fiction, but it is always fictiveness, in the sense that Luiz Costa Lima applies to the term, pointing beyond the life-art dichotomy to a model that has at least three terms, where mimesis is both invention and perception in the realm of the imaginary.⁵

I chose to base the play on the final hour of Lampião's life. He was killed at dawn, we know that. But we also know that the *sertanejos*, the men and women who have moulded their habits to fit the severe social and environmental life conditions that have to be faced in the countryside of the Brazilian Northeast are not easily caught in bed at daybreak. So I assumed Lampião had already been awake for sometime when the siege came, and I set off, as a playwright, to temper the metal of a man's life, the metal of a culture and of a way of living, through the forge of drama, picturing what the last words of an outlaw could have been.

Maybe I should make a brief stop here to say that Brazil does not have a tradition of seeing its own history depicted on stage. Historical plays are in no shape or form a major trend in the country. We simply do not have a settled canon of historical plays which writers can use to find a model to adopt or to revolt against. One can meticulously examine the work of our most significant past writers without coming across anything that could be regarded as having the same significance in Brazil that the works of Shakespeare, Corneille, Lope de Vega, Schiller or Strindberg have had in their own homelands. In Portuguese-Brazilian culture, national history has always been primarily a subject for epic poets or novelists. This means that, in some way, playwrights here have to start from just anywhere, which can be terrifying. But it also means that, in some way, we *may* start from anywhere, which can be very liberating.

But if *anywhere* is a dubious startpoint, I believe it is the worst possible end point for playwrighting. I find no place in my heart for theatre that, once completed, is generic, unspecific, hybridized to the point of total dissolution. So, if the question of where to start was vague, the question of where to get to was of undeniable importance to me. Yet, it took me some time to accept that in writing *Auto de Angicos*, having started I-do-not-know-where, I ended up adopting a genre that I believe to be the core of our theatre tradition: the melodrama.

The word *melodrama* is now commonly used as an insult. In the common sense, melodrama is sheer exaggeration, falsity, base coaxing. In the theatre, melodrama is all that and also a transcendental formula to describe everything that theatre should not be.

But I believe there is a time to come when the critical works of Peter Szondi⁶, Eric Bentley⁷ and Jean-Marie Thomasseau⁸ will shed new light into this concept, and clarify that melodrama is not just an ocean of tears, coincidences and love letters on stage; it might also be our way of dealing with the sense of being at once splendid and impoverished, transcendental and base, all that in a world that has reduced us all to servants and deprived us all of the hope that at least amongst the nobles there could be life without daily spiritual and physical toil.

When that happens, when the word *melodrama* finally finds some redemption from the ruins of barbarity, we theatre-makers and theatre-enthusiasts will be at ease to accept, for instance, that if the last half page of *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen, had been lost forever, the play could be considered a model melodrama. We will be at ease to celebrate the great works of Federico Garcia Lorca, Tennessee Williams and Robert Hollman – to name but a few – as melodrama at its best.

To find a way into the noble genre of melodrama – I believe –, a playwright must be willing to accept as a virtue the occurrence of love, of human love, of the love that human beings experience for other human beings. I emphasize all that because the so-called high art has done its share on banning love from its pantheon. One cannot love in a post-modern world, one cannot love in a post-dramatic world; these environments are too concerned with forms and structures (even when questioning the existence of form and structure), to accept the occurrence of love. Love has no exquisite form. If it has a form at all it is something not worthy of scrutinizing or writing about. This is perhaps the central theme of Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*⁹: His key is not to write about love, but to write love itself, to write in love.

Auto de Angicos is a play immersed in this discourse. I could not have written it in any other way. The ceramicist artist Mestre Vitalino¹⁰ and his myriad of followers have set a hallmark in our culture: Lampião is to be represented as a double figure. His clay figurine is always accompanied by that of a woman, Maria Gomes de Oliveira, also known as Maria de Déa, better known as Maria Bonita, "Pretty Maria". Thus the iconic image of Lampião also represents love, human love, the love that a human being experiences for another human being, the love of a man for a woman who was to share with him the last years of his life in the hinterlands of the Brazilian Northeast, the woman who was to give birth to their daughter, Expedita Ferreira – whom I had the immense pleasure of meeting a few years ago, in Aracaju –, the woman who was to die with Lampião in Angicos, and whose body was also beheaded on the 28th of July, 1938 – perhaps while she was still alive.

Auto de Angicos was first produced in Salvador, 2003, characters being played by Fafá Meneses (Maria) and Widoto Áquila (Virgolino). The show went on tour in 2005, and it was staged in about a dozen cities throughout Brazil. When performed in Rio de Janeiro, the show was seen by Amir Haddad, a theatre director nationally recognized as one of our most important theatre artists, mostly known for his work with the theatre group *Tá na Rua*, which specialises in street performances. It was under

Haddad's direction that the play opened anew in Rio de Janeiro, in 2007. Transferred to São Paulo in 2008, this second production of *Auto de Angicos* is currently on tour (2008), with cast as follows: Adriana Esteves (Maria) and Marcos Palmeira (Virgolino).¹¹

At first glance, *Auto de Angicos* seems little more than an everyday conversation between Lampião and Maria Bonita. But I would not be so simplistic as to reduce the historical importance of those characters by limiting them to the level of "Good morning, did you have a good night's sleep?". My task as a playwright was then to find ways of making the big fit the small. We know that Lampião bought his ammunition from the Police, we know that a big part of the loyalty he found among small farmers was based on threats and terror, we know that he was offered political advancements to hunt communists hiding in the countryside. My task as playwright was then to find ways to let these questions flow through other aspects of Lampião's life; aspects that – although testified by history – are not usually remembered. We forget that Lampião changed the ethics of conduct of his small army to make marital life possible within the gang after he fell in love with Maria Bonita, we forget that he was a man haunted by premonitory dreams and who made important strategic decisions based on this, we forget he was an amateur accordionist and master of the art of embroidery. It was my task to bring these two visions of one man into unity, all that in the form of drama.

Of course, there is a fundamental question to be confronted when working with the story of a bandit-hero. History tends to limit this family of characters by narrowing the comprehension of them into the dicotomy of a judgement. Like Pancho Villa or Jesse James, Lampião's history, again and again, is simplified in terms of pardon or conviction. But drama needs more.

When writing, there are times I feel as if the hands know more than the mind. It is as if the electricity of dramatic action refused the filter of clear consciousness and found some direct connection with muscles and bones, and then I no longer deserve the merit of writing, because it is not what I usually call *I*, what I usually call *myself*, that is writing. Those brief and subtle moments are rare, and I have learned not to rush them, not to rely on them, but above all I have learned to respect them.

I was in one of those flows when a time came, in the writing of the play, to judge Lampião. I am talking about a passage where Maria Bonita appeals to her husband, asking him to name what in his soul drives him into war. She can only think about that on mystical terms that associate the hunger for war with a deed of the evil entity – the devil. The Lampião of the killings cannot be the same man she loves, so she begs for an answer. She wants him to name the sparkle of fierce power that sometimes changes one Lampião into another.

The eight to ten lines of dialogue that contain that passage were written in that sort of thrill I mentioned before. But the *I*, the *myself* was startled by the expectation of what the answer of Lampião would be, and then the flow stopped, and I was left with myself again, and had to face the question of Maria Bonita and therefore to judge

Lampião. His answer – *my* answer on his behalf – would be my sentence of what drove that man into war.

Would it be it a noble cause? Would it be a mere display of vanity or sheer passion for violence? Pardon or conviction?

As I said before, drama wants more. And as a playwright I had now to face the challenge of offering the character more than just a badge or a shackle. Lampião's answer to Maria Bonita's question ended up being: "It is a thing that has no name." Simple as it may be, it took me a long time to find those words. But after I had them, I was finally at ease with a line I believed could deserve a place in the life of drama.

I have mentioned previously that the structure of *Auto de Angicos* was that of a one-act uninterrupted play. This is only partially true, and therefore it is partially a lie; for I have scattered the structure of the one-act uninterrupted play in the very last page of the script, to portray the sequence of the killings as an expressionist flow of flash-like scenes. The end of the story of Lampião and Maria Bonita is common knowledge to a Brazilian audience. They know the outcome of the siege, as the ancient Greeks knew, before entering the Theatre of Dionysus, the fates of Oedipus and Medea. We have all seen reproductions of the photograph showing the cut-off heads on display before. Absorbed by Walter Benjamin's words as I now try to spin this thread of memory, I would like to think – and to say – that those flash-scenes, conceived to portray the killings, are to some extent an embodiment of the ruins of barbarity piling up high over the memories of Lampião and Maria Bonita. Ruins from which I had to rescue those characters by bringing them back to life...

But, to be quite honest, this would probably be just a palpable device, a reasonable but fictional way of saying that I simply did not want to see those characters killed. I wanted them resurrected.

So the play ends with a *da capo*. And the last we see from Lampião and Maria Bonita is the repetition of a scene previously shown to the audience; the moment when Lampião and Maria Bonita, a man and a woman, share their thoughts about their future together and about a relationship of love that yields to no rational explanation.

The actors now touring the country in Amir Haddad's production of the play are very famous in Brazil. Marcos Palmeira and Adriana Esteves are Brazilian TV stars, who made their way into fame by playing important parts in many soap-operas for the last fifteen years or so. I am always touched by the way they seem to become something else in the final moments of their performance in *Auto de Angicos*. The characters' after-death return adds to my eyes a mystical perspective, pointing to the word *auto* in the title of the play. The *auto* is the Spanish-Portuguese Medieval equivalent of the morality plays.

For me, in those final moments the actors seem to find the way I was looking for, out of the ruins of barbarity, to grow into looking like the clay figurines of Mestre Vitalino. The same clay figurines that have made Lampião and Maria Bonita, among other things, an icon of love.

I feel I should now ask the reader to forgive the words of a playwright who admits to find in melodrama a harbour for his literary work, the words of a writer of historical plays who admits to believe historical drama has to fulfil the sacred mission of waking the dead. So, if nothing else, I ask you to remember from this article not my words or my example, but those of a better playwright, whom I believe to have done, with genius and nobility, what I intended to do, as he shaped into wonderful scripts the history of his country, traces of his culture, and the living mirage of a – perhaps universal – possibility of love between human beings, as the incarnated memories of his characters seem to be strong enough to overcome base criticism or theory and, in a way, to save their past (maybe to redeem our future):

Boyle (*becoming enthusiastic*) Didn't they prevent the people in '47 from seizin' the corn, an' they starvin'; didn't they down Parnell; didn't they say that hell wasn't hot enough nor eternity long enough to punish the Fenians? We don't forget, we don't forget them things, Joxer. If they've taken everything else from us, Joxer, they've left us our memory.

Joxer (*emotionally*) For mem'ry's that only friend that grief can call its own, that grief... can... call... it's own!

Words of Sean O'Casey, in the play "Juno and the Paycock"¹².

Let us try and remember this.

Notes

- 1 This article is the development of a lecture of the same name, given on occasion of the Third Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, held at Universidade Federal da Bahia (Salvador, Brazil, September 10 to 12th, 2008).
- 2 Text available for download at [<http://www.marcosbarbosa.com.br>], accessed on September 15th, 2008.
- 3 Antônio dos Santos (Volta Sêca). *Cantigas de Lampeão*. São Paulo: Interacd Records, 2000.
- 4 "Sobre o conceito da História". In: Benjamin, Walter. *Magia e técnica, arte e política*. 7 ed. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994. 222-232.
- 5 Cf. Lima, Luiz Costa. *Mimesis: desafio ao pensamento*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2000. And Gabriele Schwab's "'Criando Realidades': a mimesis como produção da diferença." In: Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich, and Rocha, João Cezar de Castro (org.). *Máscaras da mimesis: a obra de Luiz Costa Lima*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1999.
- 6 Szondi, Peter. *Teoria do Drama Burguês*. São Paulo: Cosac e Naify, 2004.
- 7 Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama*. New York: Applause, 1991.
- 8 Thomasseau, Jean-Marie. *O Melodrama*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.
- 9 Bartes, Roland. *Fragmentos de um Discurso Amoroso*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2003.
- 10 Vitalino Pereira dos Santos (1909-1963), Brazilian ceramicist artist known for his naive representations of *sertanejos* and *cangaceiros* in terracota.

11 For further details on the second production of the play, refer directly to [<http://www.primeirapaginaproducoes.com.br/espeticulos/angicos/angicos.html>], accessed on September 15th, 2008.

12 In: O'Casey, Sean. *Plays 1*. London: Faber, 1998. 25.

