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Dossier

Introduction to Snapshot: Brazil

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This short dossier on contemporary Brazilian theatre offers the reader a snapshot of how artists have responded to the ongoing political crisis. The massive protests that erupted across the nation in June 2013 paved the way for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and left the economy in a shambles. Though flawed, the leftist political projects of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10) and of Rousseff, his successor in the presidency (2011–16), privileged social inclusion. A great part of the Brazilian middle and upper classes resented the resulting socio-economic ascension of historically underserved populations. Much like the reactions sparked by the spike in popularity of conservative leaders in Europe and the United States, the Brazilian opposition's political manoeuvre to oust Rousseff in 2016 has divided the nation. A solid majority of the artistic class has sided with compatriots who call the impeachment a coup, albeit not a military one. Historian Sydney Chalhoub has observed that Brazil is no longer a democracy, and scholar James Green noted that 'Dilma Rousseff's ouster raises concerns that the many social gains the Brazilian left has achieved over the last two decades could be quickly reversed'.[1] Nearly a year on from Rousseff's impeachment, corruption scandals abound, and the government of Michel Temer has effectively crippled the country's health, education and judicial systems. The Brazilian artistic *métier* has sustained its political activism during and beyond the impeachment process. For example, artists occupied the offices of the Ministry of Culture across the country – in Rio de Janeiro, the sit-in lasted 111 days – when, soon after being sworn in as the acting president in August 2016, Michel Temer moved to shut down this ministry.

The two essays commissioned for this dossier introduce the reader to some of the ramifications of the crisis, as well as to how Brazilian artists have taken a political stance. I note that the professional profiles of their authors demonstrate that the boundaries between the roles of artist, scholar, critic and activist are quite porous in Brazil. Adriana Schneider Alcure is a professor of theatre at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, an activist with the organization Reage, Artista!, and a director – the reader will find a review of her *Cidade Correria* in this dossier. Aimar Labaki is a playwright, director, translator and essayist living and working in São Paulo. He is the co-author, with Elena Vássina, of *Stanislávski: vida, obra, sistema* (Stanislavsky: Life, Work, System (2015)) and with Antonio Candengue of *Nelson Rodrigues: A Esfinge Investigada* (Nelson Rodrigues: A Sphinx Investigated (2006)). While Schneider Alcure's essay focuses on the roots of present-day activism and the use of *carnaval* practices in protests, Labaki's details the re-emergence of a Brazilian political theatre at this juncture.

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Creatively, the political crisis has prompted Brazilian theatre to find new ways to denounce social injustices and stimulate important conversations. The reviews collected here – all of them previously published in major Brazilian periodicals – discuss performances principally from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the two main theatre hubs in Brazil, but also include examples from the country's North East and South regions. These productions approach an array of politically relevant themes, from Brazil's starved public schools to its shameful record as the leading nation in hate crimes against transpersons in the world. *Conselho de Classe* (Faculty Meeting) by Rio de Janeiro's Cia. dos Atores and playwright Jô Bilac exposes the government's profound neglect of the Brazilian public education system, while using the numerous protests of June 2013 as a backdrop. Created by Silvero Pereira, *BR-Trans* is a solo documentary theatre piece based on his interviews with transpersons living in the north-eastern state of Ceará, where Pereira is originally from, and the southern Rio Grande do Sul. The prefix 'trans' in the performance's title shows us how in Brazil the term serves as an umbrella for a gamut of gender identities – not just transgender and transsexual people, but also *travestis* and *transformistas*.[2] The country's colonial past is at the heart of Aquela Cia.'s *Caranguejo Overdrive*, a production that links geographer Josué de Castro's fictional story about a man-crab living in the mangrove at Rio de Janeiro's Cidade Nova neighbourhood in the late 1800s, and the gentrification of the city during preparations for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. *Cidade Correria* (City Rat Race), by Rio de Janeiro's Coletivo Bonobando, explores class relationships and discrimination in large urban centres. São Paulo theatre group Club Noir's staging of the novel *Spilt Milk* (*Leite Derramado*) by Chico Buarque connects the military dictatorship to today's political disarray. Adassa Martins's solo performance *Iracema* reflects the recent rise of public concern with the rights of indigenous peoples in light of José de Alencar's 1865 eponymous novel. *PROJETO bRASIL*, a devised piece by director Marcio Abreu and Cia. Brasileira de Teatro of Curitiba, responds to the many different national realities experienced by the creative team as it travelled across Brazil's expansive territory.

This collection of writings does not attempt to provide a comprehensive grasp of contemporary Brazilian theatre; rather, and alongside a selection of performance photographs, it hopes to awaken the reader's interest in the aesthetic trends and plural political voices coming from that Latin American nation.

NOTES

1 Sydney Chalhoub, 'Brazilian Democracy and the Aftermath of the Impeachment', talk at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, held on 28 September 2016. James Green, 'Brazil: The Impeachment of a President and the Future of a Country', North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), at http://nacla.org/news/2016/09/07/brazil-impeachment-president-and-future-country, accessed 11 September 2016.

2 Though these definitions are quite fluid, in Brazil both *travestis* and *transformistas* are individuals assigned male identity at birth who construct a female identity, but the former group does so primarily in a performance context.

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