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Dossier – Fighting Back: Contemporary Theatre in Brazil

Introduction

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This text introduces our dossier on contemporary theatre in Brazil, highlighting the ways it fights back against social and political injustice.

Since the middle of 2019, when the IFTR conference took place in Shanghai, we nurtured the idea of producing a text, featuring researchers from different Brazilian universities, that would offer a glimpse into the some of the pressing concerns of performing arts in Brazil. The desire was boosted by Jair Bolsonaro rising to power as the new president, through lawful (though not democratic) elections. The new government took office in January 2019, and by July of the same year it was clear that this administration already meant a disaster for the arts, education, humanities and science fields, characterized by the dismantling, abuse and draining of resources that have only worsened since.

What emerged in that encounter between us (who managed to get to China despite a lack of governmental resources for the internationalization of Brazilian research and the discouragement we each felt) and the editor of *Theatre Research International* was the certainty that the 'situation' of academic and scientific research and higher education in the performing arts in Brazil was getting worse. This seemed to reflect a kind of global movement 'backwards' that puts democratic and republican institutions on the line at the same time as it devalues science and research, positing ultraconservative faith and neoliberal greed in their place. While the state should care for all, under this regime it sees in theatre a dangerous collectivity desirous of freedom – a threat that should be wiped out.

We can even say that this degeneration has deeper roots still. Since 2017, when we hosted the IFTR conference in São Paulo, Brazil has seen social inequalities deepen more and more. Since the unfair deposition of legitimate president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the domination project of the elite gained a fertile environment for its devastating and cowardly spread. However, it was from 2019 onwards that the unfavourable prognoses for the 'situation' of Brazil became an unfortunate reality. This worsened in 2020 with

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the authoritarian and reckless posturing of the federal government in the face of the coronavirus pandemic that led to one of the highest death tolls in the world.

The consequences of this 'little flu' (as President Bolsonaro scornfully named the pandemic) are not assessed in this dossier's writings, which were conceptualized shortly before the first cases were diagnosed in the country.[1] But some of problems that the COVID-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated are apparent across the texts. In the words of Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle, Brazil does not have necropolitics any more, but a Suicidal State, where the government and parts of the population flirt, continuously and hazardously, with their own destruction.[2] Because of its cispatriarchal features, we can also name this as *necapolitics*:[3] a politics of a toxic phallic power in which the word of the elite, white, cisgender male from the south-west of the country is privileged.

We have chosen four areas through which to highlight the intersection of performing arts and politics in Brazil: transgender experience, feminism, blackness and indigenous culture. The articles highlight how performance operates as a vehicle for dissident subjects to resist and fight back against their own oppression, subjects whose bodies oppose the image of citizenship imposed by the cisnormative, racist and genocideal political forces ruling in Brazil nowadays. In the four texts gathered here, we witness the denunciation of authoritarianisms, but also the essential role of performance practice and its research in the acceptance of other worldviews and the embrace of plurality.

Cibele Forjaz Simões discusses theatrical processes with indigenous peoples of the Amazon (Araweté, Juruna/Yudjá and Kamayurá). She demonstrates how the knowledge and resilience of these populations have precious (and threatened) values that teach us the limits of what we call humanity. Further, Forjaz shows how theatricality is intrinsic to the storytelling rituals of the Amerindian people.

Soraya Martins Patrocínio presents us with the history of the *teatros negros* (black theatres) in Brazil, focusing on the Black Experimental Theatre (Teatro Experimental do Negro – TEN) and Collective Tropeço. These black Brazilian theatres deploy a fabular medium that allows for the emergence of performances that create and re-create stories and identities.

Lúcia R. V. Romano provides an overview of how the dismantling of public policies and funding in Brazil for theatre and education have negatively impacted women. Given the advance of censorship and other coercive mechanisms practised by the current Brazilian government, which has misogynistic and anti-liberal values as driving forces, the Brazilian feminist theatre, oppressed after 1964 but blooming again since the 1980s, is again preparing to fight back. Or die.

Dodi T. B. Leal examines theatrical work in which it is apparent that gender in Brazil is dangerous, deploying the word *transdanger* to highlight the position of transgender people on- and offstage. Leal reflects upon how select works critique cisgender norms in the performing arts, highlighting the transfeminist project of the *teatra*.

In a previous editorial for this journal, Fintan Walsh refers to Brazilian artist Augusto Boal's claim that crisis involves danger and opportunity. Walsh reminds us that 'political crisis endangers people and cultures, and … it supplies the pre-conditions

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for regeneration and renewal'.[4] In thinking about the crises affecting contemporary Brazil, we stay close to this definition, focusing not just on dysfunction and injury, but on how the performing arts can resist and fight back against injustices.

NOTES

1 'Relembre o que Bolsonaro já disse sobre a pandemia, de gripezinha e país de maricas a frescura e mimimi', *Jornal Folha de São Paulo*, 5 March 2021, at www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/03/relembre-o-que-bolsonaro-ja-disse-sobre-a-pandemia-de-gripezinha-e-pais-de-maricas-a-frescura-e-mimimi.shtml (accessed 31 May 2021).

2 Vladimir Safatle, 'Bem vindo ao Estado Suicidário', *Pandemia Crítica (São Paulo)*, 1 (2020), pp. 1–8.

3 In the Pajubá sociolect (transgender linguistic variant intersectional with iorubá, which has Afro-Brazilian origins), the word *neca* means penis, therefore necapolitics is, literally, the politics ruled by the phallus.

4 Fintan Walsh, 'Editorial: Scenes of Political Crisis', *Theatre Research International*, 44, 3 (October 2019), pp. 227–9, here p. 227.

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