



IDIOT IN THE ABSURD COUNTRY: The Brazilian Version for Bernard Shaw's *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* by Cia Ludens.

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Cia Ludens' third production, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, a play written by George Bernard Shaw, premiered on sixth of June, 2008 at Sala Crisantempo in São Paulo. Adapted to the Brazilian context this play, called here as *Idiota no País dos Absurdos (Idiot in the Absurd Country)*, gave the company the opportunity to continue and expand its project of staging Irish drama in Brazil. After producing the plays of two contemporary playwrights, *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel and *Stones in His Pockets* by Marie Jones, the company turned its attention to the past and put on the stage a play of one of the most important dramatists of the theatre written in English.

Founded with the sole purpose of staging contemporary Irish plays in Brazil and interested in establishing possible connections between the Irish social and political reality of today and the contemporary Brazilian society, Cia Ludens wanted with this project to investigate in which extent a writer of the past might be attractive to a contemporary audience. For that purpose, and encouraged by Rosalie Rahal Haddad who is a specialist in Shaw's plays and novels, the company undertook a long investigation on the dramatist's writings, and after a period of nearly a year in which almost all his plays were scrutinized and a great number of his Prefaces and other reflections investigated, a study on the author's later plays headed the company to *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, one of his most obscure scripts. Also subtitled *A Vision of Judgment*, this text was conceived during a trip to the West Indies when Shaw was 79 years old. The text attracted the company's attention first due to the themes discussed in it, and besides that because in this play Shaw was able to put into practice, in a very radical way, one of his dearest formal obsessions, pursued throughout his career as a dramatist, that was the creation of a drama "without plot". In practical terms, the result of such a pursuit appeared most of times in the form of an episodic theatre in which sometimes the parts are not quite tightly linked and the characters either disappear in the middle of the narrative or are transformed into persons that one can hardly recognize as the same ones previously portrayed. As a thinker and polemist, Shaw was rather interested in the intellectual improvement of the audiences of his time. However, by emphasizing the rational aspects of both his characters and narrative he ultimately turned

out to create extensive, wordy and didactic plays that might have little or no appeal for contemporary spectators.

Notwithstanding, these very aspects of Shaw's work were exactly what instigated Cia Ludens to investigate deeper and deeper into the play. Defined by Shaw as a fable (included in the volume entitled *Plays Extravagant*), *The Simpleton's* story set in a fictional island in the tropics seemed to be a perfect metaphor for the discussions of Brazilian contemporary questions in the fields of politics, religion, morality and social relationships. Because it consists of a prologue and two acts, and due to the lapses of time in between them, the episodic nature of the narrative becomes much more outstanding than in any other play written by the dramatist. The fable starts in the emigration office at a tropical port in the British Empire where a clerk and an officer argue with a young woman from Liverpool who wants to enter illegally the country. This scene evolves into the officer going out with the young woman to meet a native priest and his wife and another couple of English tourists; meanwhile in the office the clerk blows his brains out with a revolver. Twenty years later this group of six reappears as a multiple marriage religious-like community that has taken up the political power of the Unexpected Isles. The result of their marriage is four spoiled children who were raised as and feel themselves like deities. In the adaptation of the script into Portuguese, the four children were transformed in two underage adolescents who seduce a Clergyman, whose name is Idiot, who happens to be abandoned in the island by pirates who could not put up with him anymore.

The idea behind this adaptation of the original script was to introduce contemporary themes, such as pedophilia (although a bit inverted in this case, since the children are the ones who first harass the clergyman), homosexuality and incest: the two siblings' invention that they are only one person seems to be more than only an innocent and ingenuous device created by the author. Naturally Shaw was interested in discussing the polygamy of some Eastern societies in opposition to English Christian principles. But, in any case, although this theme is still a taboo for the Brazilian society, the decision of the company was to approach it in even a more provocative way, putting together two men and a woman in a polygamous marriage. Encouraged by the six parents, who want to use the Clergyman as an experiment, this marriage intends to be the continuation of their original project of founding a millennial world culture, started with their own eugenic experiments twenty years earlier. Nevertheless, a couple of years later, despite a war declared by neighboring islands outraged by the promiscuous behavior of the Unexpected Isles inhabitants, their project of creating a new society turns out to be a failure, for the children happened to be sterile and the clergyman proved to be impotent. And then out of the blue an Angel lands in their garden to announce the Day of Judgment that, contrary to the ideas present in the Gospels, is not the end of the world, but simply the day in which all men will be judged; those incapable of justifying their presence on the earth will vanish in the air. Thus, as soon as the Angel takes off, the children evaporate as well as many other people reported to be worthless to the evolution

of the humanity; among them corrupt politicians, lazy rich and poor people, fathers, doctors and journalists, etc... The audience is then left to question their own values and the reasons why some characters are left on the stage.

The comical extravagances depicted in *The Simpleton* proved in the end that the company was not wrong to think that a writer of the past such as Shaw could offer very contemporary material for audiences of today. But, besides this attempt to establish a parallel between the narrative as imagined by the dramatist and the Brazilian contemporary moment, the formal aspects of this play were of crucial importance to the company's decision of staging it. As mentioned above, in this text Shaw radicalized a procedure that should result in "a play without a plot". In *Shaw on Theatre*, published in 1958, in an article entitled "My Way with a Play", he declared that instead of planning his plays he let "them grow as they came, and hardly ever wrote a page foreknowing what the next page would be". Although it is clear that he is attacking the "constructed" plays, the so-called "well-made" plays that were fashionable in Paris and abundantly copied in London, it was very attractive to the company to think how it would be to deal, from an aesthetic point of view, with this notion of a play without a plot. This notion and the absurdities of the situations depicted in the narrative led the company to consider during its process of staging the play whether Shaw was not already flirting with what was later known as the absurd theatre. All in all, for performance purposes, despite any possible comment Shaw might have made on the subject, it eventually seemed to the company that there were no doubts that in a more positive key, in writing *The Simpleton* Shaw was more than ever in the field of nonsense and if the play had no resemblances whatsoever with the characteristics appointed by Esslin as the ones related to the absurd theatre, at least it was intriguing that in Shaw the term "absurd" could be understood as a synonym for "extravagant".

Another strong conceptual line explored by the group throughout the rehearsal period took into consideration the major idea presented in the play, that is, "the lives which have no use, no meaning, no purpose, will fade out. [People] will have to justify [their] existence or perish". The intention in terms of performance was to create a visual effect that could enable the audience to have the sensation that the characters did not enter the stage or exit from it, but that they appear and disappear on it. What was aimed by the group was that the audience could eventually understand that the judgment to be announced by the Angel in the end was already in course since the very beginning of the play. In the first minutes of the performance, after being said to stay in the office working and "be worth his salt" under the penalty of perishing, the clerk commits suicide and disappears forever. In other moments that character appears and disappears in different parts of the acting space up to the moment when the two children vanish in the air in front of everybody and the priest Pra and the priestess Prola are left waiting for the judgment. Then the last blackout occurs as a sign to indicate the possibility of their having disappeared as well, depending on what judgment the audience might have made on them.

The play was produced with private resources by Rosalie Rahal Haddad and was adapted and directed by Domingos Nunez. This production ran for two months and had the following crew: Gabriel Paiva (executive producer); André Cortez (setting designer); Marina Reis (costume designer); Aline Santini (lightning designer) and Gabriela Gonçalves (Choreographer). In the cast were Helio Cicero, Priscila Jorge, Fausto Franco, Chico Cardoso, Márcia Nunes, Eliseu Paranhos, Sylvia Jatobá, Xico Abreu, Liv Izar and Julio Cesar Pompeo.

Works Cited

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