

Shaw's Mrs Warren's Profession on the Brazilian Stage

Rosalie Rahal Haddad*

Abstract: *This article analyses the reception of Mrs Warren Profession in Brazil and is based on my book Bernard Shaw in Brazil: The Reception of Theatrical Productions, 1927-2013. (Peter Lang, 2016). My intent is to provide a general view of three productions, in the context of pertinent information about the political, economic, and cultural climate at the time they were staged in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. For several decades, theatre and theatre criticism in this country were precariously established; commercial considerations frequently prevailed over aesthetic concerns, and the theatregoer with no knowledge of English could have no guarantee that the translated text or adaptation bore any more than a passing resemblance to the original upon which it was based. In the 1950s, together with an acceleration of economic growth, there was an increasing development in its social and political infrastructure, such as the rise of the middle class, freely elected presidents, and the building of the new capital, Brasília, which resulted in a more optimistic view of Brazil's place in the world. Consequently, in 1960, the Brazilian audience witnessed the best production of a Shavian play to date, presented by a highly skilled director, excellent actors, and reviewed by well-informed and articulate critics. It is my purpose to demonstrate that Mrs Warren's Profession, produced in 1947, 1960 and 1998, reflects the trajectory of the Brazilian stage and its close relationship to the country's socioeconomic and political status.*

Keywords: *George Bernard Shaw; Mrs. Warren Profession; Brazilian stage.*

Brazilian Productions of Mrs Warren's Profession

Mrs Warren's Profession was first staged in Brazil in 1947. There have been three productions altogether: one in São Paulo and two in Rio de Janeiro, with a total of 140 performances. The first production in São Paulo was a single performance, in Italian (*La Professione Della Signora Warren*) by the Italian *Emma Gramatica Company*, at São Paulo's *Theatro Municipal*. In 1960, the Italian emigrant, Gianni Ratto, directed a production by the newly founded *Teatro dos Sete* [*Theatre of the Seven*], with a cast

* Associate Researcher at the William Butler Yeats Chair of Irish Studies/University of São Paulo.

including Fernanda Montengro,¹ Fernando Torres,² Ítalo Rossi,³ Sérgio Britto,⁴ Alfredo Souto de Almeida,⁵ Luciana Petrucelli⁶ and Gianni Ratto.⁷ The production ran from 30 April to 31 July. The most recent production ran from 12 June to 30 August 1998 and was directed by Eric Nielsen.

Mrs Warren's Profession would not have been considered an important play in Brazil if it had not been for the production by *Teatro dos Sete*. According to Tania Brandão, the history of the Brazilian theatre is full of mysteries. One of these is the lacuna in Rio de Janeiro which followed the success of *Os Comediantes* [*The Comedians*], which introduced modernism into the Brazilian theatre with Nelson Rodrigues's play *Vestido de Noiva* in 1943, until 1960, when *Teatro dos Sete* produced *Mrs Warren's Profession*. From the point of view of Brandão, the modern theatre in Rio can be considered as a very "late bloomer", as the stage in that city consistently produced plays beneath the quality of *O Vestido de Noiva*, becoming a "machine which repeated itself" in producing low-quality plays. The "modern" had its debut with the *Teatro dos Sete*, which was established in 1959, designed to be the first modern *Carioca* Company, in the sense that it did not represent a mere transposition of the theatrical scene from São Paulo. With the *Teatro dos Sete*, the "modern" gave birth to a theatre which deserves to be described as "a star factory".⁸

The 1940s

Even though São Paulo is the city with the largest number of Italian descendants in Brazil, it is quite a coincidence that the first production of *Mrs Warren's Profession* should have been by an Italian Company, the *Companhia Italiana Emma Gramatica*, who presented a single performance at the *Theatro Municipal*, in Italian, on 23 August 1947. The first Brazilian production of *Pygmalion* had also been staged in São Paulo at the *Theatro Municipal* by an Italian Company, the Tatiana Pawlova Italian Comedy Company, twenty years previously, in 1927. Due to the poor state of Brazilian archives for the 1920s, it is impossible to be sure whether *Pygmalion* was performed in Italian, though it seems likely.

The first production of *Mrs Warren's Profession* received a moderately enthusiastic review in the *Folha da Manhã*, under the title "Comic Heroines. Bernard Shaw's *La Professione Della Signora Warren* and *Quella* de C. G. Viola". Since the play was performed in Italian it is possible that the success of the Italian Company may be attributed to the fact that, up until 1940, the Italian colony was one of the largest in Brazil, with a total of 1,508,281 immigrants.⁹ The review indicates that the critic had at least read Shaw's *Unpleasant Plays*. However, his knowledge of the play itself was insufficient to save him from describing *Mrs Warren's Profession* as a "comedy". When Shaw wrote the play, he was at the height of his Fabian Socialist ideology, and he himself did not class his *Unpleasant Plays* as "comedies".

The 1960s

Given that Shaw wrote his play in 1894, it is striking that the first Portuguese-language production of the play to be staged in Brazil was almost three quarters of a century later, in 1960. Advance publicity was given in *Estado de São Paulo*, in the very first days of the new decade, on 5 January, when the newspaper informed its readers that Olga Navarro was in a production by the *Teatro dos Sete*, under the direction of Gianni Ratto, and that rehearsals would start two days later.

The newly formed company had a season at Rio de Janeiro's prestigious Copacabana Theatre, situated in the Copacabana Palace Hotel, Brazil's most elegant and expensive hotel at that time. The season opened with Artur Azevedo's popular farce, *O Mambembe* (1904), and *Mrs Warren's Profession* was to follow it in the first fortnight of April.

According to Michael Holroyd, Beatrice Webb, Shaw's friend and companion in the propagation of Fabian Socialism in London, suggested that "he should put on stage a real modern lady of the governing class – not the sort of thing that theatrical and critical authorities imagine such a lady to be". To which Shaw added: "I did so: and the result was Miss Vivie Warren."¹⁰

The actress for whom Shaw wrote the part of Vivie Warren, was Janet Achurch. Although, as a novelist, Shaw had already attempted to portray his ideal of a "new woman", it was only in this play that he completed his first sketch on this subject. Unconsciously or not, the character was also a self-portrait, so much so that contemporary critics commented that Vivie was Shaw's female counterpart. However, it has to be said that Shaw had perhaps not yet reached the ability of portraying a mature "new woman", and the end result was that Vivie was painted in black and white. Despite the fact that Shaw was never known for describing nuances in the psychological sphere, his later female characters are equally independent and strong-willed but do not serve so evidently as pamphleteers of his political ideology.

The critic Paulo Francis recognised the merit of the *Teatro dos Sete*; however, he was somewhat skeptical with regard to the potential for the group's success with Shaw's play. His reservations were not due to any doubt as to the competence of the group but, rather, to the prevailing conditions in the Brazilian theatre. The choice of *O Mambembe* as an inaugural production was certainly governed by its significance in the history of the Brazilian Theatre as much as by its commercial potential. First performed in 1904, the play is a *burlata*,¹¹ which deals with Arthur Azevedo's campaign to build a theatrical space in Rio de Janeiro so that Brazilian theatrical companies would no longer have to *mambembar* [tour third-rate venues] around the country in search of an audience in order to survive. Ironically, Azevedo's crusade failed because, when the building was constructed in 1909, it was not designed as a theatrical space.

However, the 1960 production was very successful, and very well-received by critics and audience. There is no doubt that the best reviews were written by Paulo Francis (1930-97), and one cannot help but be impressed by his knowledge of Shaw:

[...] Ratto's greatest merit is his simplicity. A dense simplicity, an economy achieved with great sacrifice. Is there anything more banal than having an actress turn her back when her character has to say something painful to herself? When Ratto uses this resource three times at the Copacabana, he reacquires his initial freshness, such is the precision in the choice of the moments. And the duality between Shaw's intellect and humanity is revealed through this type of simplicity [...] Cláudio Mello e Souza's translation works [...] The important thing, however, is that Cláudio Mello e Souza succeeded in translating into Portuguese the formal language of the play without impeding the necessary fluency of the language: in other words, the cultured way of speaking of most English characters is also translated into Portuguese speech, which is no mean thing: this is the merit of the translation [...].¹²

As a production of *Candida* had opened in Rio de Janeiro on 22 March, just over a month before the premiere of *Mrs Warren's Profession* on 30 April, there were now two Shaw productions on stage simultaneously. Brazilian critics could hardly believe their luck and reviews were abundant in the newspapers. However, many other Brazilian critics had a very limited knowledge of the play and were thus restricted to making superficial comments.

The theatre critic of the *Diário de Notícias*, Henrique Oscar, wrote a much less detailed review, which was published on 5 May 1960:

I do not have the original to hand, so I cannot assess the fidelity of Cláudio Mello e Souza's translation. But it seems fluent to me, with just a few corrections necessary, as in the use of the word *preconceitual*, which I cannot find in the dictionary, of *perversa* (more or less: "I am a perverse woman"), where *pervertida* seems more appropriate, if I am not mistaken, and a construction that puts two words together, in which the final syllable of one word and the first syllable of the other create a cacophony which, obviously, I am not going to repeat here.¹³

One wonders whether Oscar's admission that he did not "have the original to hand" when he was writing his review, meant that he had not read the play at all. His comments about the translation are so unclear that it is somewhat difficult to understand what he has in mind. Unfortunately, even in 1960, when the Brazilian theatre had its best reviewers, not all of them read the play they were reviewing, neither in the original language nor in translation. The difficulty of finding good translators had long been a problem in the theatrical milieu; but, even in this golden period for the Brazilian theatre, some of the critics were less than perfect too.

By a twist of historical fate, it was in 1960 that Jânio Quadros was elected as President. He was the choice of the *UDN* [*National Democratic Union*], a right-wing party. Elected to bring rampant inflation under control, the eccentric Quadros threatened to resign the year after his election and was surprised when his resignation was accepted.

He was replaced by the left-wing Vice President, João Goulart. Three years later, the military issued a manifesto denouncing Goulart as a subversive, and, on 1 April 1964, military units seized key government offices in Brasília and Rio. Within days, the new government had consolidated power and Brazil faced twenty-one years of dictatorship. The outcome of this political crisis was devastating to the performing arts, and for the next two decades the Brazilian theatre suffered heavy censorship. Furthermore, it seems that advances in word-processing technology of the new Millennium have brought with them a decline in literacy. The critics who wrote so perspicaciously about *Mrs Warren's Profession* are no longer with us. The last of their number was the notable critic, academic and translator, Barbara Heliodora, who died, at the age of 91, in 2015.

The 1990s

By the 1990s the number of Brazilian newspapers had been drastically reduced. In São Paulo, there were only two important ones, *O Estado de São Paulo* and the *Folha de São Paulo*. In Rio, there were *O Globo* and the *Jornal do Brasil*, and the latter suffered a serious financial setback, and, as of 2010, is now only available online.¹⁴ The weekly news magazine, *Veja*, which carries occasional theatre reviews, circulates both in São Paulo and in Rio de Janeiro. However, not surprisingly after the hiatus in theatrical activity during the dictatorship, the level of Brazilian theatre criticism bore no comparison with the quality it enjoyed in previous decades. Theatre reviews ceased to be published on a daily basis, and it is safe to say that there are no longer any critics with the level of those who reviewed the 1960 production of *Mrs Warren's Profession*.

It is also important to add that the Brazilian theatre has now been largely superseded by television soap operas, which had their debut in Brazil in 1951, the same year that television first became part of the lives of a few privileged upper-class citizens. Before the advent of television, soap operas were broadcast on radio. The first television network to produce soap operas was *TV Tupi*, which ran only two episodes a week. At that time, actors only made use of formal language, as if they were performing on stage, since most soap operas were literary adaptations of famous Brazilian writers such as Machado de Assis, José de Alencar and Erico Verissimo. In the 1960s, they became very popular, not because every house had a TV set but because householders who did shared it with neighbours and friends. As a result of increasing demand, from two episodes a week, soap operas began to be transmitted daily. From 1965 on, *Globo TV* entered the market of soap operas and became a major source of public entertainment, as well as a new and powerful source of employment for writers, directors and actors. Most of the other channels which used to compete with *Globo* closed their doors. Its major competitor today is *TV Record*, which consistently employs highly popular actors. Due to such intense competition, Brazilian soap opera fans now have no lack of options.¹⁵ On the other hand, to be on the *Globo TV* payroll is every actor's dream, and theatres find it increasingly difficult to attract actors. On the other hand, soap operas open the route to success and financial reward.

For all these reasons it is therefore not surprising that almost four decades were to pass before Brazil was to have the opportunity of seeing *Mrs Warren's Profession* once more. On 12 June 1998, a new production of the play, directed by Eric Nielsen, opened at the *Teatro Villa-Lobos* – which, by coincidence, is also in Copacabana. The text used was the same translation as that utilised in 1960. Although the director and his cast alike were naturally optimistic about the prospects for the revival, this last production was not nearly as good as the one in 1960. The director chose the play because it combined elements he had been searching for in productions such as *Blackout*. Apparently, he saw the play as some kind of thriller. Furthermore, there had been a radical decline in the quality of the production itself and in the background scene. During the 1990s Rio suffered a near collapse in basic factors such as security – due to the explosion of *favelas*, the heartland of drug traffic, and endemic corruption among politicians and the police force – education and health. In addition to all the setbacks, the transfer of the nation's capital to Brasília took its toll on the finances of Rio de Janeiro. Multinational companies and banks had gradually moved to São Paulo, which absorbed a previously unheard-of wave of *Cariocas* – much to the dismay of some *Paulistas*.

As a sign of the times, the number of reviews of the new production was far lower than had been the case four decades earlier. Advance publicity, penned by Debora Ghivelder who wrote a piece under the title “Hypocritical Morality”, and was printed in *Veja Rio* magazine, edition 1550, 10 June 1998, was the first Brazilian critic to make any mention of the topic of incest. This raises the possibility that the 1960 production cut the reference from the play or, more likely, that the critics ignored the subject intentionally. Ms Ghivelder's mention of incest may therefore be taken to signify that, in 1998, Brazilian society, especially in Rio, was more open to deal with certain taboo issues than before.

Even today it is a regrettable feature of Brazilian theatre that plays are expected to fit into a format of 90 minutes or less and, in general, it is understood that there should be no interval between acts. This is probably a concept that has spilled over from the cinema, and it reflects an anxiety that, if there is an interval, the audience may not return for the second half of the performance! Given that *Mrs Warren's Profession* is a four-act play, which could be expected to take well over two hours if performed in full, one shudders to imagine what it must have been like when reduced to a duration of just over one hour!

Another sign of the times was that performances of the play were from Thursdays to Sundays only. Back in 1960, the play had been performed on every day of the week, with a Sunday matinee as well. Nowadays, the Brazilian theatre only seems to operate from Friday to Sunday! Separated by almost forty years, the two productions of *Mrs Warren's Profession* reflect the cultural and economic context in which they were each staged. In 1960, Gianni Ratto rehearsed his actors as diligently as he had used to do in Italy. Even if some of them were not quite prepared to face such a rigorous schedule, the reviews suggest that Ratto succeeded in the end, being responsible for every detail on stage, striving for an impeccable outcome. The decline is further reflected in the