

RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY RESTORATION IN THE THEATER OF THE PELOTAS MICROREGION

*RESISTÊNCIA E RESTAURAÇÃO DE IDENTIDADES NO
TEATRO DA MICRORREGIÃO DE PELOTAS*

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EL TEATRO DE LA MICRORREGIÓN DE PELOTAS*

Adriano Moraes de Oliveira

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Associate professor at the Federal University of Pelotas. Undergraduate in Performing Arts (interpretation) by UEL, master in Theater by UDESC and PhD in education by UFPEL



Abstract

This text is the result of the survey conducted between 2012 and 2014, whose aim was to map the theater groups active in the Pelotas microregion, Southern Brazil, with the interest of increasing the knowledge of theatrical practices of this geographical space. The mapping points to a theatrical practice in which the motivations are very close to those of the major economic centers, namely: language experimentation, research of poetics, memory preservation, and, obviously, theater as a commercial and entertainment enterprise. This text also presents the main theater features in the Pelotas microregion to indicate the actions of resistance to new models, but also the appreciation of acting models through reinforced identity restoration.

Keywords: Group theatre, Theatrical research, Gaucho theater.

Resumo

O presente texto é resultado de uma pesquisa realizada entre 2012 e 2014 com o objetivo de mapear os grupos teatrais em atividade na microrregião de Pelotas, com o interesse de ampliar o conhecimento sobre as práticas teatrais desse espaço geográfico. O mapeamento aponta para uma prática teatral em que as motivações são muito próximas daquelas dos grandes centros econômicos: experimentação de linguagem, investigação de poética, preservação da memória e, obviamente, teatro como empreendimento comercial e de entretenimento. São apresentadas, também, as principais características do teatro na microrregião de Pelotas, de modo a indicar as ações de resistência a novos modelos, mas também a valorização de modelos de atuação por meio da reiterada restauração identitária.

Palavras-chave: Teatro de grupo, Pesquisa teatral, Teatro gaúcho.

Resumen

Este artículo es el resultado de una investigación realizada entre 2012 y 2014, cuyo objetivo fue el de sondear a los grupos teatrales en actividad en la microrregión de Pelotas, con el propósito de ampliar el conocimiento sobre las prácticas teatrales de ese espacio geográfico. Este sondeo se dirige a una práctica teatral en que las motivaciones son muy cercanas a aquellas de los grandes centros económicos, o sea: la experimentación del lenguaje, la investigación sobre la poética, la preservación de la memoria y, evidentemente, el teatro como emprendimiento comercial y de entretenimiento. En este artículo también se presentan las principales características del teatro en la microrregión de Pelotas con la intención de señalar las acciones de resistencia a los nuevos modelos y al mismo tiempo la valorización de modelos de actuación a través de la reiterada restauración identitaria.

Palabras clave: Teatro de grupo, Investigación teatral, Teatro gaúcho.

Introduction

The starting point for the present reflection is a survey carried out between 2012 and 2014 that aimed to map the theater groups active in the southern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil. To this end, copies of the two newspapers of greatest circulation in that region were consulted, more than 20 municipalities were visited on-site and interviews with artists, producers and managers were recorded. The whole dataset is in the stage of processing and analysis, and the reflections of the first phase of the research were published in the book *Sobre o teatro na região de Pelotas: primeira abordagem de pesquisa* [On the theater in the region of Pelotas: first research approach] (2014).

Broaching the theater in the region of Pelotas was initially a personal political action with the clear intention of making explicit the almost complete lack of attention to the theatrical modes of production present in the city. This lack of attention is easily detectable. For example, of the seven theaters in operation until the 1960s, only one is – at this moment – in full operation. Among the theaters closed for more than five years is Teatro Sete de Abril, a building inaugurated in 1834 and a national historic landmark.

The idea of conducting a study that could map the conditions of theater workers and groups in the region of Pelotas, although originally started with a political and personal motivation, took different directions. The corollary of the investigation began to consider the ways in which theater artists and groups of this microregion resisted political and cultural obstacles and how the process of restoration of working modes of the past is present in most of the creative processes of local artists and groups.

In addition, the coordinator of the study is a professor-artist who started his career in a theater group of another inland city of the country. Thus, the study action, although supported by specific methods, was permeated by the research coordinator's experience with the theater practice away from the centers of greater economic resource concentration.

What this paper presents is a set of settings of the modes of being of the theater artists and groups mapped in the microregion that skirts the southern border of Brazil. It broaches the microregional theater in relation to the scope

and impact of the work. In this sense, the theater of a group was considered microrregional when its scope stayed within the limits of the cities that constitute the microregion of Pelotas.

Starting point and study references

The starting point for the study was the contradictory discourse in public means of dissemination about the strong theatrical tradition of the city and region of Pelotas. Because the discourses could be quickly dismissed due to the evident precariousness in most theater groups in the region, the work was based on theoretical references that ensured maximum exemption in relation to what common sense understands as theatrical tradition. First, the theories of the imagination were studied to understand the mythic structure and how it is consolidated and even crystallized in the apprehension of the everyday facts. On the other hand, we adopted Lipovetsky's idea of hypermodernity and, more precisely, the notion of "artistic capitalism" to understand the requirements of theater practice nowadays.

For the issues of the imaginary, Maffesoli's studies (2004, 2005 and 2010) were adopted. Their theoretical basis made possible the realization that the archaic structures of the imaginary are present today with new outward appearances. That is, based on Maffesoli's studies, it was impossible to refute the notion of theatrical tradition present in the discourse, but not in most of the practice.

For the theory of the imaginary, verbalization itself ensures presence. If there was a myth of the theatrical tradition, even if only in discourse, it was important to check its characteristics. With that, the very word "theater" was questioned and started being understood in its various meanings: ephemeral art with the main characteristic of the intentional presence of an action proposed by one or more artists in front of an audience, a space where spectators and performers of the scene are socially gathered, a social action used figuratively for communication, among others. This arbitrariness to adopt the discourses of the imaginary to understand the theater practice of the microregion of Pelotas enabled understanding this social fabric without refuting any possibility. For Maffesoli (2010),

It is precisely because what a society “should be” cannot be determined (as well as one or another of its members) that the sociologist needs to know how to consider, in their proportions and a priori without all the stories, all the justifications, all rationalizations that polyphonically constitute the discourse of the social (p. 92).

This demanded from the entire research team a stance of understanding in relation to the discourses of the supposed present theatrical tradition and dealing with artists and groups that, even in a situation of absolute precariousness, defended this tradition not so evident in their everyday lives. There was a tendency, in various stages of the research, to consider only the discourse, but since the cities that make up the microregion of Pelotas show important traces of strong theatrical manifestation – buildings, anecdotes, playwriting –, this tendency was halted. Rather than keeping ourselves closed to the tendency to refute a tradition not evident in the daily practice of the groups, we took on an opening that enabled accepting all theatrical manifestations as legitimate heirs of past tradition.

This comprehensive methodological stance expanded the research scope. It was not possible to consider only the conventional aspects of theatrical manifestations; it was necessary to also integrate them to the range of manifestations that showed some degree of theatricality, including those promoted by the beyond-art sphere, the sphere of artistic capitalism.

For Lipovetsky and Serroy, artistic capitalism is the stage of capitalism that takes aesthetics as the most important element to add value to a service or object. The process of aestheticization of the world – its spectacularization, dramatization etc. – is the most emblematic mark of this capitalism that encompasses any and every discourse and social practice by transforming it into a commodity. With artistic capitalism, theater as an art loses value and starts having a greater value in social action. It is not theater or a play itself that attracts more interest, but the aesthetic value of consuming theater or being at a spectacle that provides value. For Lipovetsky and Serroy (2015),

We must convince ourselves that artistic capitalism is not only a producer of goods and market services, it is at the same time “the main place of symbolic production”, the creator of a social imagination, of an ideology, of significant mythologies. The consumer society “is its own

myth” [Baudrillard], a myth without greatness, without exteriority, without transcendence, but that constitutes “a complete, autoprophetic discourse that society makes about itself, a global interpretation system,” an unprecedented constellation of values able to make the masses dream (p. 126).

The entering of this analysis of the global macroeconomic situation propelled us to think the theatrical manifestations of Pelotas and neighboring cities according to the symbolic local demand. With this, it was possible to build the settings of the images present in the theatrical production of Pelotas and its region. In general, the theatrical manifestations of the microregion of Pelotas can be classified in terms of matrix links, with the following scenarios: 1. A theater that seeks to restore past modes of practice; 2. A theater made from dialog with contemporary art matrices, mainly scholar or legitimated by specialized authorities; 3. A theater that meets the demands of trends and entertainment; 4. A theater linked to the nativism of Rio Grande do Sul and its popular traditions; and 5. An experimental and alternative theater – university theater.

Setting 01: the presence of the past

The common sense of the theater practice in the microregion of Pelotas is based on a past in which it was common and almost quotidian to have national and international shows in town. This past has promoted the creation of an imagination fairly consolidated by a strong cultural action and still present in the discourses of artists, managers and spectators.

The strong influence of European culture (mainly on the architecture of the city) and the significant number of music, theater and dance spectators that still attend the seasonal events contribute to maintain such mythology. Some of the facilities built in a period of cultural effervescence no longer exist, but the memory of the more than 10 midsize theaters (more than 500 seats each) of the microregion of Pelotas is very solid. The stories of a past of intense cultural movement are present in the conversations in the cafés and confectioneries of the city.

To illustrate this context of effervescence, I present some of the data we collected from city newspapers and that are in the analysis phase: between the

1930s and the 1950s, 727 plays were performed in the city of Pelotas. Among the theater companies that have been in the city are: Cia. de Revistas e Sainetes Sper, Cia. Nacional de Revistas Pinto Filho, Cia. Dulcina-Durães, Cia. Zaira Médici, Cia. Brasileira de Revistas, Cia. Palmeirim Cecy Medina, Cia. Teatro de Caboclo, Cia. Nacional de Comédias Darci Casarré, Cia. de Fantoques Ítalo-Brasileira, Cia. Dulcina Odilon, Cia. Iracema de Alencar, Cia. Cazarré-Elza-Delorges, Cia. Alvaro Moreyra, Cia. Lison Gaster, Cia. de Comédias Ribeiro Cancela, Cia. Alda Garrido, Cia. de Comédias Mesquitinha Alma Florinda, Cia. de Comédias Suzana Negri, Cia. Genésio Arruda, Cia. Portuguesa de Revistas Beatriz Costa, Cia. de Comédias Jaime Costa, Cia. Brasileira de Comédias, Cia. Lison Gaster, Cia. Renato Viana, Cia. Procópio Ferreira, Cia. Nino Nello, besides many operetta, circus-theater and dance companies.

The reason behind the visits of these companies from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, according to Faria (2001), may have been the constant presence of big foreign companies in those cities. According to this author and Prado (1999), the trips of Brazilian companies across the country were motivated by the competition caused by the presence of foreign artists and companies. Regardless of the motivation and the problems that led companies to take these trips, it is interesting to realize that a medium-sized town, at the time, was visited by theater companies, usually with comic shows and revue. The influence of these presences in the quotidian of local artists and groups can neither be measured nor denied.

This first setting allows us to affirm that the history of the theater in the city of Pelotas is very similar to the history of Brazilian theater until the 1960s. The city was prepared to welcome theater groups from anywhere and, according to the newspapers from that time, many seasons have had to be extended due to the number of spectators. There was even the presence of an important theater group – Teatro Escola de Pelotas (TEP), which remains active in the city since 1914. It is probably one of the oldest groups of Brazil still in activity, although with small circumstantial intervals.

This initial setting currently persists with TEP, but also in the way theatrical creation is still promoted traditionally, with the director being the creator-artist *par excellence*, the dramatic text understood as the fundamental creative principle and the theatrical space is openly the main limit to the imagination.

From this setting arisen in the 19th century and still very present in the modes of being of the theater of the microregion of Pelotas, we may understand that what is sought is also a restoration of a reality in which culture, particularly theater, received more investment. The big theaters – Teatro Sete de Abril and Teatro Guarany – continue to be the places of reference for most of the groups arisen from the practice of TEP. This is a setting that resists cultural and economic obstacles and that has increasing difficulties in its restoration processes.

Setting 02: the reference of art theater

Since 1962, with the decreased circulation of plays through the country (129 theatrical performances in the period from 1961 to 1970 against 232 performances in the period from 1951 to 1960), especially due to ideological control by the military dictatorship, there has been an emergence of organizations very important to the local theater: STEP (Sociedade de Teatro de Pelotas [Pelotas Theater Society]) and ASATEATRO (Associação do Atores de Pelotas [Pelotas Actors' Association]).

These associations were responsible for promoting an organized debate with theater institutions, groups and thinkers. The primary means found by associations to stimulate theater was the promotion of festivals in which local, regional, national and international artists met. The festivals were confirmed as important moments of knowledge exchange and incentive to the development of artists and audience.

In that period, Pelotas hosted important workshops and artistic residencies with groups from other Brazilian cities such as LUME (Campinas), Tribo de Atuadores Ói Nós Aqui Traveiz (Porto Alegre) and PROTEU (Londrina, now extinct), among others. Their presence stimulated the formation of local groups with interest to create plays that went beyond the traditional stage.

Two of them are iconic in terms of the impact that the festivals had on local production, especially in the city of Pelotas. The first one is “Estudo do feminino nº 1 – o belo indiferente” [Female study # 1 – the indifferent beauty] (2002), by Grupo Teatro de Areia, with actors Igor Simões and Vagner Vargas. The other is “Deu Libório na cabeça” [Libório for Mayor] (2004) by André

Macedo, with the actor Acevesmoreno. These works are iconic because they show a concern beyond entertainment and with art itself: the first by presenting nondramatic playwriting in one of the most traditional theaters of the city; the second by occupying an alternative space and for an innovative relationship between scene and audience.

Currently some groups continue to make performing experiments in alternative spaces, using contemporary references of the theater art clearly. The phase that began with the festivals of the 1970s and 1990s is always remembered for the renewal that the contact with other artists and groups promoted in the local production.

Setting 03: consumer and entertainment theater

Group theater geared to consume and entertainment has been the highlight of the region since the late 1990s. One of the most emblematic examples is the circus company “Grupo Tholl”, which, mimicking the work of Cirque Du Soleil, explores elements of circus, gymnastics, dance and theater. Based in Pelotas, Grupo Tholl has taken its product to many cities of RS and Brazil, besides, obviously, taking part in the most diverse events to promote enterprises and products.

In terms of scope, it does not integrate only microrregional theater, although its presence is significant in the region of Pelotas. The group has so much “media appeal” that the word “Tholl” has become a symbol of success of the city. Its slogan – *image and dream* – creates a perfect backdrop for the effect that the group production expects: visual impact, avoidance of reality, fluid entertainment.

The influence of Tholl in the region is significant in terms of the imagination supported by a discourse of success and entrepreneurship. Many artists adopt makeup, outfits and even some techniques to approach the success of the Tholl venture, which actually arised within another group, Teatro Escola de Pelotas (genuine representative of tradition). According to Santos (2012),

It is still in the 1990s that the Oficina Permanente de Técnicas Circenses [Permanent Workshop of Circus Techniques] (OPTC) rises within TEP. Led by João Bachilli, a prominent TEP actor, the group soon gained

autonomy and became a national hit onstage with the play *Tholl, imagem e sonho* [Tholl, image and dream] (p. 136).

This setting of consumer and entertainment theater obviously uses media and fashionable discourses to survive in the market. Consequently, the work of this group is much more present in the region's commercial events (festivities, business exhibitions etc.) than onstage. The group represents the success of entrepreneurship and its main job is to socially stimulate consumers. No wonder it is on the national media (mainly live-audience shows) and has followers, similarly to the big stars of show business.

Setting 04: popular theater and regionalist nativism

Two of the most significant popular expressions in the microregion of Pelotas can be found in two traditions: one nativist, whose principle is to keep the Rio Grande do Sul memory alive (mainly from rural areas), and the other, the circus-theater, a classic genre in the region that discusses everyday issues. The first one can be seen in Centros de Tradição Gaúcha [Centers of Rio Grande do Sul Tradition] (CTG) or Departamentos de Tradição Gaúcha [Departments of Rio Grande do Sul Tradition] (DTG, present in most schools of the basic education network); the second one is represented by a traditional circus-theater company led by the clown Bebé, Tchêatro do Bebé. I included both in the same topic because the audience of circus-theater and the participants of tradition centers are usually middle class.

Tchêatro do Bebé is a company with over 70 years of activity that follows the model of family work. Its repertoire consists of dramas and comedies in which the clown Bebé is the central character. The company performs throughout the southern region of RS, being based in the city of Pelotas.

The theater performed in CTG and DTG follows the regulations of Movimento Tradicionalista Gaúcho [Rio Grande do Sul Tradition Movement]. One of the icons of the region is the art group EnCenAção, from Piratini. Its repertoire narrates the whole saga of the Farroupilha revolution. The group,

based in the city that was the first capital of the Riograndense Republic (first half of the 19th century), seeks to keep alive the memory of RS heroism, but also the everyday life of the Pampas gaucho. This theater is emotionally emblematic for RS residents because it is an element of restoration of their ancestral memories. However, because the story narrated in CTG favors white characters and farm owners and disregards that the region had one of the largest contingents of black slaves in Brazil, this theater is target of criticism.

Setting 05: academic environment and university theater

Since the 1970s, universities have contributed significantly to the development of the theater art in the cities of the region. This contribution has taken place through workshops and performances of theater groups from three major universities of the region. Those with institutional work since the 1970s are the federal universities of Pelotas and Rio Grande and, since the 1980s, Universidade Católica de Pelotas and Instituto Federal Sul-Rio-Grandense. Together, these institutions regularly promote a series of actions that stimulate not only practice, but thinking about the theater. The universities maintain groups that enable students and community to participate in workshops and performances. The interesting thing about this setting is that the university genre remains alive with protest playwrighting, language experimentations and reinforcement of the social role of the theater.

In 2008, a BA in Theater with Licensure was created at the Universidade Federal de Pelotas. With that and the approximately 50 students enrolling every year, theater action gained momentum. There are numerous actions in communities, schools and other spaces of program projects. Some actions are focused on education – stimulating practices in classrooms, learning games, activities, very diverse and in line with the main methods discussed and experienced in Brazil. Other actions are focused on the scenic experimentation, presenting proposals for occupying public spaces, new playwrighting and specific theater poetics.

As theater setting in a microregion, higher education institutions have an important responsibility in the development of artists and audience simply because they keep alive the research questions that have mobilized artists over the centuries.

Microrregional theater

Thinking inland Brazilian theater from the microrregional perspective is the manner we found to start a narrative of its theatrical manifestations. In a period of marked ease of communicational and, consequently, cultural exchange, the theater produced in the various microregions of the country have peculiarities and, at the same time, tend to the global. Access to models, studies, images and plays is facilitated, and that interferes significantly in the way artists and groups organize themselves. Obviously, the torrential flow of information also creates enormous reading problems because the contexts of production are disregarded.

The profusion of modes of theater practice contributes significantly to the financial incentives from governments and local institutions to theater groups and spaces. The institutions usually require an offset from artists, spaces and groups on the basis of the existing national policy and according to what the market for aesthetic values prefers (based on global artistic capitalism). With that, the microrregional suffers in a similar manner to the theater of broader scope.

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