



Silvia Cristina Martins de Souza, **As noites do Ginásio: teatro e tensões culturais na Corte (1832-1868)**. Campinas, Ed. da UNICAMP, 2002.

*by John Gledson*

This is the fourteenth volume in the collection *Várias histórias*, published by the University of Campinas over the last four years; many have their origins in doctoral theses. They mostly concern the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many cross boundaries between disciplines, notably between history, social science and culture. They are varied in topic – a biography of Luiz Gama, the most important black abolitionist, another of the Regent Feijó, capoeira and the tradition of rebellion in Rio, the politics of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in its early years, medicine in Imperial Rio. A consistent effort has been made to publish accessible books, well written and genuinely interesting, and to get beneath the surface of traditional history. It is making a real contribution to a radical change in our views of the period.

This book centres on the Ginásio Theatre, which for a few years after 1855 was the standard-bearer of 'realist' drama in Brazil. The established view of the movement, represented by Décio de Almeida Prado and by João Roberto Faria in his definitive *O teatro realista no Brasil (1855-1865)*, is that this was a laudable attempt to bring serious drama to Brazil, which failed because the audience preferred mere entertainment. Machado de Assis said in a famous article in 1873 that Brazilian theatre was dead, and there was nothing to say about it.

From the beginning, Martins de Souza tries to subvert this view, by taking a wider perspective than Almeida Prado and Faria, whose views are more exclusively literary. She questions the prejudices behind the urge to 'civilise', which rest on the 'bourgeois' nature of the realist theatre imported from France, and taken up by Brazilians like José de Alencar. Behind her account, one senses larger issues very much alive in present-day Brazil and elsewhere: the elitist nature of culture, an unwillingness to understand 'inferior' forms of entertainment. These are crucial questions, of course, but it is pleasant to note that there is little direct polemic here between the 'literary' and the 'popular', between Faria and Martins de Souza – rather a respectful comparison of two perspectives.

The first of three chapters takes us through the meteoric rise and fall, between 1855 and 1860, of the Ginásio. Conceived, as its name implies, as an 'education' for its audiences, the latter's enthusiasm came and went as the realist genre showed its possibilities and limitations. Alencar is the central figure here – the five plays he wrote in this period show his desire to please, to instruct, but also to reflect local realities, including slavery. It was not slavery but prostitution which proved too much for the police, who shut *As asas de um anjo* down when it has been passed by the censorship. Much useful information is given about the theatres themselves, the length of the runs – nine performances was considered a success – the rivalries between actors and companies, and their political support.

The second chapter covers a longer period, going back into the past to look at the main organ of censorship, the Conservatório Dramático Brasileiro, and its vicissitudes, and concluding in the 1870s. Dominated by intellectuals, it had to contend with the Imperial government, the police (as seen in the case of *As asas de um anjo*) with whom it jostled for authority, actors who used obscene

gestures to liven up proceedings, and authors who resubmitted plays already rejected, relying on short memories. In the end, the Conservatório never reached beyond the stage of trying to establish its own authority in a recalcitrant artistic (and political, and social) world.

In the last chapter, we return to the theatre itself. Martins de Souza argues that the traditional view – that after the failure of the realist movement to achieve any lasting success on the stage, theatre simply fell into a decadence filled by superficial French imports and their imitators – too readily accepts the views of the intellectuals who dominated the Conservatório. In fact, some of these local adaptations were very successful: one such is *Orfeu na roça*, by the author/ actor Francisco Correia Vasques, “O Chico”, a parody of Offenbach’s *Orphée aux enfers*, itself a parody. There is, the author argues, a local, eclectic tradition linking Martins Pena in the 1830s to Artur Azevedo at the end of the century.

This is a very useful book, thoroughly researched, a valuable contribution to the history of Brazilian theatre. In many ways, it is a model of cultural history, admirably placing the drama in its social context. To my mind, some of the spotlight could be turned back onto the stage. It is a pity some of the works discussed are not described in more detail, especially those dealt with in the final chapter, some of which miraculously still exist in libraries. I make no apology for a regular complaint: why do these useful books lack indexes?

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