

As noites do Ginásio: Teatro e tensões culturais na Corte (1832–1868). By Silvia Cristina Martins de Souza. Coleção Várias Histórias, vol. 14. Campinas, Brazil: UNICAMP, 2002. Notes. Bibliography. 329 pp. Paper.

As they did with other forms of cultural production, nineteenth-century Brazilian intellectuals called upon theater to be an expression of the national in the wake of independence from Portugal. After all, many claimed, theater was particularly well suited for cultivating moral and cultural integrity. As Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis explained, if the tribunal, the press, and the stage were the three spaces best suited for the education of society, the latter stood out as most effective because it exposed audiences to “the naked truth” without “analysis” (Machado de Assis, cited on p. 69). Yet audiences, Machado also lamented, did not always appreciate the lessons it offered. Or, perhaps more to the point, audiences would not pay to be taught lessons that were not entertaining. “The people would rather go to the theater to laugh than to cry,” one contemporary observed (cited on p. 273). Thus, even as the theater became a popular and beloved pastime in Rio, Machado was driven to despair. “Today,” he wrote in 1873, “as public taste has reached the ultimate degree of decadence and perversion, there is no hope for someone who feels the vocation to compose serious works of art” (cited on p. 21).

Silvia Cristina Martins de Souza examines the “cultural tensions” produced by and expressed in this confrontation between elite agendas and popular expectations in this vivid and engaging history of theater in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. While previous theater histories have analyzed plays and playwrights, Martins de Souza offers a new social history of the theater that encompasses not only playwrights and their critics, but also actors, audiences, and producers (*empresários*), whose passion for the theater did not preclude the desire to profit from it. Impeccably researched, *Noites* testifies to the potentially illuminating encounters of social, cultural, and intellectual history.

The focus of this history is the Teatro Ginásio Dramático, a theater company founded in Rio in 1855. As its name indicates, the Ginásio embraced the mission to be what contemporaries referred to as a “school of manners” (*escola de costumes*) and sought to present superior productions. The company quickly gained a reputation among intellectuals for its dedication to both national playwrights and the realist comedy of manners. Like the French realism that served as inspiration, Brazilian realist playwrights strove to offer verisimilitude in their critical depictions of society. Actors, too, were expected to emulate social and domestic reality in their diction and gestures.

Thus, one of the highest forms of praise was the comparison of a play with an emerging technology of representation: the daguerreotype.

The Ginásio's most notable successes included the plays of José de Alencar, which portrayed the tribulations of love, marriage, and money in the context of slavery and indicted, one contemporary observed, the morally corrosive effects of the institution on the family. Realism's critics, however, expressed anxieties about the undue influence of French literature, as well as contradictory misgivings about realism itself. The subject of prostitution, it turned out, could be represented too realistically, while the manumission of a slave as a result of insubordination (a theme in one of Alencar's plays) was condemned as not realistic enough. As Martins de Souza explains, in this case the critic hoped that it had been seen that way by the audience, lest "the lesson" be interpreted too literally as an endorsement of manumission in similar contexts.

This intellectual mission to cultivate theater-going and discipline theater-goers also counted with the Conservatório Dramático Brasileiro, founded in 1843. Notwithstanding its professed dedication to supporting Brazilian playwrights and theater companies, the Conservatório was, ultimately, a censorship board. Martins de Souza's research reveals that while the intellectuals who comprised the board sought to raise literary standards, they spent much of their time either defending their authority to do so or debating the propriety of certain performances and the moral content of the plays.

Indeed, as part of an elite project to forge a national theater, both the Ginásio and the Conservatório failed. If the Conservatório could not articulate an aesthetic standard, by the 1860s the Ginásio's most successful productions diverged from the realist agenda. Critics proclaimed that national theater was decadent. Yet Martins de Souza's subtle analysis shows that out of these failures and confrontations between critics and popular audiences, a national theater did emerge, albeit not the one imagined by Machado. In the 1860s and 1870s, Rio's residents patronized theaters in unprecedented numbers—to see not "serious" works of art but rather, among other things, parodied adaptations of a French parody. It was this kind of popular theater, which "reproduced the sounds of the streets," Martins de Souza argues, that would have lasting resonance in Brazilian theater in years to come.

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