

In 1884, a Portuguese merchant with noble pretensions named Miguel José de Lima e Silva initiated a lawsuit in Rio de Janeiro against a store clerk, Joaquim José de Oliveira. Knowing of Lima e Silva's dreams of social mobility, Oliveira had sold the wealthy but illiterate merchant a counterfeit baronial title. Playwright Arthur Azevedo caught wind of this dramatic judicial case and parlayed it into a popular theatrical success. Historian Fernando Antonio Mencarelli seizes the opportunity presented by this cause célèbre and its repercussions beyond the walls of the theater. He examines the reciprocal relationship between popular culture on the one hand and legal and political life on the other. Oliveira's attorney based much of his argument on the success of Azevedo's play, "O Bilontra," which satirized Lima e Silva's misfortune, contending that the public's amused reaction had already absolved his client. The jury "thought that the case was funny" and acquitted Oliveira; Azevedo's theatrical piece influenced the outcome of the trial on which it was based. Mencarelli's analysis of the production and reception of this play allows him to explore some of the most pressing issues in Brazil's late Empire: literary nationalism, nascent mass culture, and elite anxiety about work and idleness.

Intricately connected with mid- and late-nineteenth-century urban history and the development of print journalism, the *revista do ano* (annual review) was a genre of popular performance that Mencarelli likens to a "journalistic work by way of theater, registering the most relevant and picaresque facts that occupied the attention of the city during the past year" (p. 34–35). These plays brimmed with self-referential and satirical content, making fun of both real-world events and their depictions on stage, and permitted a "'kaleidoscopic' vision of . . . modern society" appropriate to the city's heterogeneous population (p. 34).

"O Bilontra" premiered in 1886 and became the prototype for the Brazilian *revista do ano*. Azevedo chose for his title the recent coinage *bilontra*, which denoted a trickster figure: usually a young man who relishes his life of leisure and seeks unconventional means of earning money. The dramatic tension in "O Bilontra" came from the question of whether its protagonist Faustino, who fooled the rich and naive Portuguese merchant, would embrace work or remain idle. To Mencarelli's credit, he sees ambivalence in both the intent and the reception of "O Bilontra," rather than the hegemonic imposition of a capitalist work ethic.

One of the book's most interesting contributions is its treatment of the tension between high and low culture. Azevedo himself epitomized this tension, as both founding member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and the progenitor of Rio's popular theater. Instead of a literary or semiotic analysis of *revistas do ano*, Mencarelli innovatively focuses on the intellectual and physical labor of producing them, as well as the experience of consuming them. He argues that we need to pay attention not just to writers but also to the audience, the actors, and the enormous diversity of artisans and laborers who collaborated in dramatizing the script. Since most of these workers came from the poorer classes and the audience was primarily comprised of working- and middle-class Brazilians, he suggests, the theater was a privileged site for cultural exchange between different social classes.

Mencarelli makes a strong case for the relevance of a holistic approach to studying popular performance but does not fully pursue the agenda that he sets. He relies on the published scripts of the plays, newspaper chronicles, and other journalistic and literary publications of Azevedo and his colleagues and critics. Mencarelli's reading of these sources has great depth, but one wonders if a broader sweep of archival cultural history sources—admittedly scarce in an era that predates the professionalization of entertainment workers, but not nonexistent—might have revealed more about the laborers and artisans in the theater and how they served as conduits between high and low culture. In general, his tight focus on "O Bilontra" and the polemics surrounding it gives the book an eminently readable quality but also impedes the author from opening up his analysis. A broader discussion of cultural history might have, for example, enabled him to treat the question of audience reception beyond conjecture or to pursue his fascinating but undeveloped discussion of the jury trial as a sort of performance, where the public took part in the circulation of ideas about citizenship, social mobility, and postabolition class tensions.

*Cena aberta* provides useful—and thoroughly enjoyable—reading for cultural historians of Brazil, dramaturges, and students of the theater. The author possesses a remarkable eye for detail and narrative flair. His analysis advances the collective effort of those interested in understanding society in late nineteenth-century urban Brazil, a milieu with a thriving public culture, yet exceedingly low rates of literacy. He shows that popular plays, although largely untapped by scholars, are exceptionally rich cultural artifacts when read with a keen eye for detail and context. Although it makes light of the world, comedy does not express disengagement from it; this book testifies to the benefits of taking humor seriously.