

OCCUPATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF OLD WAREHOUSES AT RIO DE JANEIRO DOCKLANDS AREA INTO THEATRICAL SPACES. PERFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Introduction

The challenge for theatrical groups that are concerned with socially engaged theatre is to pave the way between the impasses of contemporary capitalism through performing artistic activities in alternative spaces in order to ensure the full exercise of citizenship. As a form of resistance and an alternative to the commodification of culture, some theatrical groups and their visionary directors have sought to occupy urban voids in peripheral areas. Some of those groups create their stages on the public spaces, but others prefer vacant structures.

The appropriation of spaces not originally intended to be theatrical spaces opened other possibilities for staging and the option of working at different scales and diverse audiences. Often, large spaces may also be required to achieve the desired effects, as demonstrated in this article, which is based on the creations of two theatrical companies wishing to reach different classes of spectators, including local populations, union-workers, and public-school students.

A city which is over 450 years old and former capital of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro presents uncountable properties of cultural value listed as cultural heritage, although unoccupied due to a process of deindustrialization. These urban voids are concentrated in the numerous industrial warehouses still existing near the

historic centre and specially in the old Docklands area, recently undergoing a regeneration project¹.

As other modern cities with a long urban history, Rio de Janeiro Docklands area and its neighborhoods are marked by strong contrasts, with different populations, with distinct lifestyles, which diversity can be defined by economic reasons, corresponding to income or social classes, and social reasons, such as immigration, strong Afro-descendant population, and other causes. The renovation works undertaken for the Olympic Games in 2016, strengthened problems of gentrification and segregation in the region.

Encompassing three districts, this region presents interesting architectures to develop performing arts practices, attracting those directors that no longer want to stage in the traditional proscenium arch theatre.

In the first chapter of her book *Event-Space*, entitled 'Disciplining the bourgeois glory machine', Dorita Hannah demonstrates the exhaustion of the Italianate stage pattern, in which the proscenium arch separates the audience from performers. Throughout the chapter, Hannah defends a more ephemeral theatre architecture, aiming at a dynamic and eventful character. She emphasizes that as performance became visceral, architecture became more disembodied.

For Bernard Tschumi, "architecture is as much about the events that take place in spaces as much as about the spaces themselves". Mentioning the interactions between architecture and performance in the 1970s, in an interview with Hannah e Khan, Tschumi points out that the discourse should be

(...) architecture in an expanded sense whereby the movement of bodies in space was just as important as space itself. Hence the definition of architecture as space, movement, and what happens in it, that is, the action or what I later called the 'event'. (Tschumi apud Hannah e Khan, 2008, p.52)

¹ In spite of the construction of a long, tree-lined boulevard and multiple roadworks, there has been no rehabilitation of the numerous empty, unused buildings in the area.

Grounded in this architect's description of event-space, Hannah formulated a new concept of non-representational spaces based on the generative convergence between architectural theory (as the discourse of space) and the performance theory (as the discourse of events). She states that her book aims to establish "a general theory of spatial performativity through the specificity of performance space, insisting that the built environment housing the event is itself an event" (Hannah, 2018, p.xvi-xviii).

The two studies examined in this paper discuss the flexibility of productions that can occur in different alternative spaces. In both cases, the troupes staged plays in industrial structures of historical value, with great repercussions among the spectators. Such structures, in the form of industrial warehouses, are true event-spaces that have brought together diverse and enthusiastic audiences in environments where, in the past, the dockworkers operated. As Marvin Carlson points out, social old spaces are already layered with several associations and memories before they are used for theatrical events (Carlson, 2003) and the two directors who chose the huge and old industrial structures to stage their plays knew how to explore the space as an event.

Through scenography, theatre has always transformed scenic boxes into different spaces, but in contemporary times, space itself has transformed theatre. This paper aims to shed light on the occupation and ephemeral transformation of old industrial warehouses-sheds at Rio de Janeiro docklands area into theatrical spaces, examining two productions: Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões (The Hinterlands)*, a production of the Oficina Group (2007), and Machiavelli's *La Mandragola*, staged by Companhia Ensaio Aberto (2019).

From the Oficina Theatre to a Warehouse: Zé Celso's Event-Space in *Os Sertões (The Hinterlands)*

The Oficina Group is a theatre company located in São Paulo, founded in 1958. Throughout its history the Oficina Theatre has existed in three different internal configurations: the first (1961-1966), designed by Joaquim Guedes, had two

seating areas with the stage in the middle, while the second (1967), designed by Flávio Império, had a revolving stage and concrete tiered seats. The third and current configuration, planned and built by architects Lina Bo Bardi and Edson Elito in the 1980s, transformed the building into its current ‘street-theatre’ configuration (Lima, 2018). In 1993, director José Celso Martinez Correa (known as Zé Celso) re-opened his Oficina Theatre in São Paulo featuring a revolutionary architecture².

Since the early 21st century, Zé Celso has developed his approach to stage drama that combines music, poetry recitation, dance, performance, epic theatre, popular game, party and carnival, which he calls ‘tragediacomediorgya’, revealed in productions such as *Os Sertões (The Hinterlands)*. It is worth remembering that the Oficina Theatre is currently a space designated to the democratization of culture, adopting a social approach and allowing a huge range of artistic and political manifestations to be spread among all people, no matter what social class they belong to. Architect Lina Bo Bardi’s design reused the old structure of the 1920s and created a ‘theatre as a street’ – with a longitudinal stage that connects the entrance to the backstage of the theatre, taking advantage of a very long, narrow building, whose interior was demolished. Metal parts support the new roofs and mezzanines superimposed on the background of the building. The metal galleries arranged along this walkway/stage, on both sides, have three levels, allowing actors to act as spectators. Besides, the audience can circulate among the machinery, the screens, the musicians and even the director’s office, which are visible to the audience, as the architects had designed (Lima, 2018). But this solution for a linear stage, allowing the audience to participate in the play from the scaffolding galleries or the walkway sides has become so peculiar to the Oficina Group that recently, Zé Celso has put together spaces similar to his Oficina Theatre sited in São Paulo in the different cities where he performed

² The Oficina Theatre was recently listed by *The Guardian* newspaper as one of the ten best theatres in the world.

his five plays based upon Euclides da Cunha's most famous epic novel *Os Sertões* (*The Hinterlands*)³. One of the cities he moved with those plays was Rio de Janeiro, from 2nd to 14th October 2007. At that occasion, Zé Celso specified,

We want to install a structure as close as possible to the original so that people feel that they are at the Oficina Theatre environment. So, we are concerned with suspending the floor in order to create an underground corridor and keep the galleries for aerial scenes. (Corrêa, 2012, online)

To perform Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* in Rio de Janeiro, Zé Celso chose the oldest storage building of the Docklands area in Rio de Janeiro⁴. On purpose or not, the chosen warehouse is very close to Morro da Providência (Providencia Hill), where the first carioca slum was settled, when soldiers returning from the Canudos War, the main issue of the play, established themselves⁵.

The building keeps historical and ethnographic values, for the importance of the Brazilian identity memory, as a symbol of a struggle for equity of rights and opportunities for the black population, still in slavery when it was built in 1871. Besides, it was designed by black engineer André Rebouças, who built the construction without the use of slave labor⁶. Its unique dimension and architectural structure consist of approximately 14.000 m² distributed among two very high floors and the internal space features 168 meters of extension and

³ José Celso Martinez Corrêa dramatized the novel *Os Sertões* (*The Hinterlands*) by Euclides da Cunha. The book is divided into three parts: "The Earth", "The Man" and "The Struggle", which, in the Oficina Theatre, were unfolded in five: Earth (The Shell Award 2005), The Man I; The Man II, The Struggle I and II.

⁴ This relevant industrial heritage was listed by the IPHAN - The National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute in 2016. The Galpão Docas Pedro II is the oldest in the Docklands area and is adjacent to the old *Cais do Valongo*, an ancient wharf where enslaved Africans landed in Rio de Janeiro for more than a century, so there is a strong relationship of belonging between the shed and the residents, mostly Afro-descendants.

⁵ Like other Oficina Theatre's productions, *Os Sertões* is another chapter of the group's struggle for many decades against a business group that plans to build a huge shopping center and skyscrapers suffocating the listed and historical theatre. It is the ancient struggle between culture and savage capitalism.

⁶ Slavery in Brazil was only extinguished in May 1888.

36 meters wide.

The ritualistic, dithyrambic features of this production have been perfectly adapted to the basilica shape of the building, which, such as a Paleo-Christian church, presents a very large and high central nave and two shorter lateral aisles, divided on two floors. The use of this old non-theatrical space to exhibit a play that has been performed during 26 hours in five days attests how architecture can interfere with dramaturgical meaning. The hard seats, arranged along the lateral aisles, suggest that the audience attend the theatre, not for comfort, but to stimulate thought and imagination.

Throughout the play, images of actors and audience were recorded in real time and projected on a large screen and interacted with a live musical band. No boundaries have been established between audience and stage. Sometimes the actors came up to the stands and spectators descended and came into the scenic area, fraternizing with the actors (Lima, 2017). Such 'found space' corresponds exactly to the concept of an architecture which is not limited to its dimensions and aesthetics but absorbs the dimensions of the bodies of the people who use it, as suggested by Andrew Filmer (2006, p.24).

How did the architecture of the deactivated warehouse contribute to the dramaturgy? Why do I consider this production to be a real proposal for a performance in motion?

In seeking to understand the nature of the *sertanejo* man who bravely resisted during the Canudos War, the writer Euclides da Cunha reviews the formation of Brazilian society, its indigenous origin and its beliefs in the masterful work *Os Sertões*. (Cunha, 2012 [1902]). Zé Celso's adaptation is an anthropophagic production and in constant transformation, understanding the anthropophagy introduced by Oswald de Andrade as the fight against the violence applied by the colonizer when imposing an imported culture, enslaving and killing the



Figure 1. Zé Celso himself acts as the main character of the Canudos War, the religious leader Antonio Conselheiro, as a Nietzschean “Zarathustra”, surprising all performers and audience together. 2007. Courtesy of Teatro Oficina

natives⁷ (Andrade, 1928).

In the episode *The Man I*, he shows the European colonizer copulating with the slaves since they entered the ships in Africa, originating the typical Brazilian man, a result of miscegenation. In Zé Celso and the team of Teatro Oficina’s viewpoint, it is the story of the Brazilian Man from colonial times up to the Canudos War when the Nietzschean “Zarathustra”⁸ appeared in the Northeastern “sertão”: the leading character of Antônio Conselheiro represented

⁷ Oswald de Carvalho was a Brazilian modernist scholar who wrote ‘The Manifesto Antropófago’ published in *Revista de Antropofagia*, No. 1, May 1928. This manifesto proposes the de-catechization of the Brazilian people, intending to “devour” culture and religion imposed on Brazil by the colonizer, proposing to “swallow” the European cultural legacy and “digest” it in the form of typically Brazilian art.
⁸ For Nietzsche, Zarathustra was a “dionysiac monster”. In *O Nascimento da Tragédia*, 1992, p. 27. (*Birth of Tragedy*).



Figure 2. One can notice the magic of the literature transformation into a sung spectacle, fully shared with the audience that occupies the steep bleachers installed on the side wings of the shed or standing along the central lane. 2007. Courtesy of Teatro Oficina

by Zé Celso himself, in his mature age⁹. Reflecting on the episodes of the civil war that took place in Canudos at the end of the 19th century, the production of *Os Sertões* is also a great poetic libel in favor of the struggle for the construction of the Stadium Theatre already conceived in the project by Lina Bo Bardi and Edson Elito in the years 1980. The proposal to expand the space for a Stadium Theatre, in the “Greek-tropical” way, according to José Celso Martinez Corrêa, was inspired by Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago* by (1928)¹⁰.

In addition to believing in the power of art in social intervention through the cult of Dionysus, also defended by Nietzsche (1992 [1872]), in the Brazilian

⁹ Antônio Conselheiro was a Brazilian religious leader who assumed a messianic dimension by leading the Arraial de Canudos, a small settlement in the hinterland of Bahia that attracted thousands of countrymen, among peasants, Indians, and newly freed slaves. The Republican Army destroyed the settlement in the so-called Canudos War in 1896. Both the Catholic Church and the wealthy colonels in the region abhorred Conselheiro.

¹⁰ See note 7.



Figure 3. The magnitude of the spectacle in constant movement transforms the shed into an event-space with actors and audience moving from the street to the interior of the huge warehouse. Courtesy of Teatro Oficina

solid relationship between politics and anthropophagy, Zé Celso is also inspired by the eschatological proposals of Antonin Artaud (1958 [1937]). As one can observe in *Os Sertões* the strong Artaudian influence is reflected in what the body has most relevant, including in many scenes, the naked body. When telling the story through songs and lyrics, the group is inspired by the Greek choir and the Nietzschean notion that Dionysius' creative and impetuous force comes from music. By transposing this powerful literary work to the theatre, Zé Celso generated a theatrical language that he called *Carnival Opera*. But the most amazing is that he transformed the play into a real fight, making a metaphor between the Canudos War and the Teatro Oficina fight against a well-known businessman, which has been carried on for more than 30 years¹¹.

¹¹ All the information can be confirmed in letters and manifestoes available in <http://teatroficina.com.br/uzyna-uzona/> Accessed Dec. 2019.

The very configuration that Zé Celso created inside the historic shed, with a central nave resembling a true temple, highlighted the ritualistic aspect of the Canudos War heroes'saga, which the director himself had already staged at the Oficina Theatre and in so many “found places” in several Brazilian cities, always in unusual spaces that left a strong mark on the history of Brazilian theatre in contemporary times, emphasizing how non-purposed built architecture can contribute to dramaturgy.

Machiavelli's *La Mandragola*: a Companhia Ensaio Aberto Production at the Armazém da Utopia

While in Zé Celso's production of *Os Sertões* at Docas D. Pedro II Warehouse Nietzsche's philosophical theories and Artaud's proposals for the Theatre of Cruelty emerge, in Luiz Fernando Lobo's production of *La Mandragola* at Armazém da Utopia it is Brecht's epic theatre that inspires the performance.

Directed by Luiz Fernando Lobo since 1992, the Companhia Ensaio Aberto is a theatre group located in Rio de Janeiro that performs a relevant cultural and social work to the city because of the social and transforming nature of its productions.

Focusing on the Brazilian political and economic reality, the group attracts an audience not habitually used to attend plays. Alongside intellectuals and habitual theatregoers, trade unionists and students always come to join the productions staged by the group, developing a politicized and critical view to discuss Brazilian people's reality. Grounded in Brechtian theories, the company established a new stage-audience relationship and abandoned the Italianate illusionist stage to foster recognition of the masses' transformative power.

Besides, to reach a larger audience, the company staged its first productions outside the purposed theatrical building and held open roundtables and lectures to discuss dramaturgy and social issues concerning authors and plays. The group's first production, *O Cemitério dos Vivos* (*The Cemetery of Living People*), was staged at the UFRJ – The Federal University of Rio de Janeiro old building,

which was a former hospice in which Lima Barreto, author of the original novel, had been a patient. Another production, called *The Mission*, was staged at the Imperial Palace, in the city centre, ‘to give greater access to the population working in downtown and to those who live on the outskirts of the city’, as stated by Luiz Fernando Lobo (2019). Those choices for staging in unusual places of the city already prove the mobility of the company’s productions.

To implement its international reference project, after years of struggle and resistance, the company occupied in 2016 Warehouse-Shed n.6 and its annex belonging to the Rio de Janeiro Dock Company (CDRJ) and named it *Armazém da Utopia* (Utopia Warehouse)¹². This industrial structure is currently the headquarters of the Companhia Ensaio Aberto, although the troupe constantly changes the different spaces within the huge shed to stage their productions.

In this paper I analyse Machiavelli’s popular comedy *La Mandragola*, which premiered on October 26, 2019, at the *Armazém da Utopia* with a free season, open to the general public, schools, and unions workers. As the scholar of modern political thought, Machiavelli emphasizes in his text the contradictions between public and private, the play was staged in a sole setting, featuring a public square in Florence, that is, no scene is private because everything happens on the street.

To house the *piazza* where the Renaissance comedy takes place, director Luiz Fernando Lobo built, inside the vacant warehouse-shed, specifically in its annex, a rough arena in a recessed rectangular space, surrounded by rustic wood bleachers, with three large tables and staircases as a *piazza*.

As the Companhia Ensaio Aberto’s staging departs from the tradition of improvised stages and orality, a troupe of minstrels and jokers are always on the scene, as ‘the people’. Reassuring the popular theatre tradition, the company is inspired by the Brechtian theatre, the epic theatre before Brecht, the fair theatre,

¹²The industrial structure stands out for its contrast between the massive masonry of exposed brick and the slenderness of the iron pillars. As the area is very extensive, the Company’s productions often move within the huge shed.

and, especially, by the narrative aspect of the production. On stage, the troupe, the devices and scenic lighting are also narrative. The company's director and creator, Luiz Fernando Lobo, refers to the design of the production,

It is the people in action. The people as a historical agent. The popular scene, from the story, told by the people. The people, as in Peter Burke's concept, who had no sense of individuality: the individual dispersed into the community. Or Bakhtin's concept of people: a popular, collective and genuine body. (Lobo, 2019, online)

The architect and set designer José Carlos Serroni knew how to explore the environment shaped by the industrial architecture of the shed in apparent brick and the effects of scenic lighting contributed to the atmosphere of the play, in which everything is shared by the spectator who participates intensively in the performance. The three transitional squares – actually very huge tables – denote the argument of the preponderance of the collective, since the work in chorus is fundamental for the epic theatre, so the whole troupe sings and dances at the lower level in relation to the *improvised stages*, putting in evidence the social subjects circulating in a Renaissance piazza in Florence. The wood – predominant in the scenography – refers to the platforms of *Comedia dell'Arte* and open up in different possibilities of relation and composition in the geometry of the space.

The location of the performance inside the old warehouse, the dynamism of the construction of the three improvised stages, the many stairs, and the performed sketches' fragmentation make the audience experiment the place as an 'event-space' emphasized by the scenic lighting creating silhouettes of unnaturalized bodies, not realistic, but articulated and grotesque bodies.

Everything is shown as a game, not as a representation (...). The ceiling over the stage opens and closes in front of the spectator, revealing all the warp –



Figure 4. *La Mandragola* illuminated setting (2019). The arrangement for the stage includes three large tables and staircases on which performers go up and down, also involving the audience. It followed an impromptu scheme denoting a moving space with different levels and enabling the participation of the audience sitting on rustic benches as if they were at the Renaissance square. 2019. Courtesy of Agnes de Freitas

the poles, the reflectors, their mechanism – through pulleys handled by the performers in front of the audience: magic and technique in a dialectical relationship. (Gadiolli, 2019, interview)

Referring to changes in understanding of *site-specific* in recent decades, Jorge Palinhos points out in his paper ‘Space and Performance – Researching place and gesture in real settings’, that space can be turned into metaphor *for something considered more important, like a political or social issue* (Palinhos, 2014, p.3). I believe that metaphor happened when Lobo wanted to emphasize the public space where all the classes can live together as Machiavelli highlights in his dramaturgy¹³. The audience around the *piazza* was similarly composed

¹³ I could notice that, in addition to literary aesthetics, the production reveals the social and political conditions at the beginning of the Renaissance, in special in the public space, allowing analogies connecting the Machiavelli’s play (*La Mandragola*) and his political treatise (*Il Principe*).



Figure 5. *La Mandragola* – At the end of the presentation, all the performers went up the improvised stages in a colourful and unusual movement with active audience participation. On the central stage stands director Luiz Fernando Lobo, who acted as the character of Messer Nicia, a symbol of the new rising bourgeoisie in the Florence of the Médicis, next to the characters of Calimaco, Lucrecia and Friar Timothy. 2019. Courtesy of Diego Padilha

of different classes, as it was a free entrance performance in a low-income neighborhood. Besides, it was so integrated to the performers that spectators acted as true citizens of Renaissance Florence sitting or standing around the *piazza*.

This creation had certainly a social and political approach and denoted a profound criticism of the class divisions within Rio de Janeiro society through Machiavelli's play. However, what I consider most meaningful is that this production is a sensible proposition for performance in motion, a genuine *event-space* in the docklands area.

Conclusion

Recent developments on the relation between non-theatrical spaces used for performance and theatre are this paper's main argument through the two case

studies. The question of eliminating illusionism and putting it into a discussion – with intense participation by spectators – the economic contradictions, social dramas, and oppressions of typical class-structured society exists since the modern theatre proposed by Bertolt Brecht, still staged in Italianate theatres. Nevertheless, in contemporary times other spaces in the city have taken on a fundamental role in ensuring stage-audience interrelation and the enjoyment of the relationship between bodies and built place.

It is a fact that unusual theatrical spaces begin to emerge in the Dockland area near Rio's historic centre, and that those warehouses – full of meanings and history of the Afro-descendant population and immigrants who had worked in the port area until the 1970s – can foster theatre and performance to an extensive audience.

The first production analysed in the former Galpão Docas Pedro II sought to maintain the poetic and Nietzschean relationship that exists in the physical structure of the Oficina Theatre itself, by staging the play along the central nave of the warehouse, which also functioned as a “street-theatre”. Due to the immense dimensions of the abandoned structure, the found space made it possible to reaffirm Zé Celso's struggle and desire to make a theatre for the crowds, just as he wishes to implement in the future the Stadium Theatre adjacent to the Oficina Theatre. Created from collective experiments, songs, public participation in open rehearsals and reading the work of Euclides da Cunha, the production transformed the fixed architecture of the dockland warehouse into a true *event-space*.

On the other hand, the production of *La Mandragola* set up in one of the many possible locations of *Armazém da Utopia* can also be considered an ‘event-space’ by creating a true Renaissance *piazza* where performers enter and leave, singing and dancing, in an original re-adaptation of the Machiavelli's play.

Therefore, I argue that both productions inside old deactivated warehouses reflect the idea of ‘event-space’ sustained by Hannah since they occupied ephemeral and moving unusual spaces, true dramaturgy in motion. In both productions,

spectators and performers were bodies in movement, unusual events in total harmony with the 'found spaces'. Those warehouses became *performance sites* enjoyed by numerous and heterogeneous audiences in an old and low-income area.

This paper attests that performing arts have moved from the traditional theatre building and transformed different spaces into eventual places to attend productions. This shift enables new experiences for the already interested audiences, but also attracts new different social classes to this theatre in motion.

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