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Romeu e Julieta (Reprise): Grupo Galpão at the Globe, again.

This chapter reflects on my personal experience of attending this production at the Globe on two occasions, separated by a dozen years. I am an advocate of this production, and therefore its critic. Objectivity is sometimes thought necessary in criticism, but the whole motivation for this essay, and the effort to think about the production it documents, arises precisely from an experience of powerful involvement in it. And any insight I have to offer derives from that same involvement.

When I first saw Romeu e Julieta at the 2000 Globe to Globe festival, I was a member of staff at the Globe. I remember sobbing uncontrollably at more than one point in the performance, and the wry smiles on the faces of favourite former colleagues I spot in the same audience twelve years later tell me that others remember this too. Indeed, the return to the Globe of Romeu e Julieta in 2012 was for me a real reprise, a return to a beloved space, a pilgrimage to the scene of a cherished memory. And Romeu e Julieta is a production which understands and trades openly in the theatrical value of such feelings of nostalgia; it is a remarkable production in dialogue with the ghosts of its own past.

Grupo Galpão’s work on Romeu e Julieta began in 1991. David S. George, who saw this production at the 1993 Festival de Curitiba in southern Brazil praised the way the production ‘resurrected Shakespeare’s play from the dust of accumulated romantic clichés to the delight and fascination of audiences and critics alike’\(^1\). The same show has been in and out of production for nearly twenty years since that review, and with the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival/Globe to Globe season production coinciding with Grupo Galpão’s thirtieth anniversary as a company, I wondered whether the UK press would this time hail Galpão as global theatre veterans, or dismiss them as yesterday’s news. Maddy Costa’s generally positive review for the Guardian had a single reservation:

There is much to admire in this production, but it is let down by a fundamental flaw. At no point does it achieve the seriousness of tone that might provoke emotional resonance: the laughter never admits the possibility of tears. Perhaps the fault lies with a cheerful audience, who laugh at the unlikeliest of times.\(^2\)

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And Costa’s reservations chime with her Guardian colleague Michael Billington’s review of the troupe’s first visit to the Globe in 2000. While Billington’s assessment was also generally positive, he too complained that:

Grupo Galpão, a populist group whose origins lie in street theatre, never gets to grips with the tragic elements of the story.³

Accusations of this kind are surely an occupational hazard for any troupe who makes a habit of playing tragedy in clown make-up and red noses. But never mind the greasepaint, here’s the roar of the crowd; if the wider reception of this production may be gauged by either of the capacity crowds at the Globe of which I have been a part, this production has been a roaring success for a very long time.

Sounds

Scholars and voice coaches are fond of reminding us that Shakespeare’s first audiences went to “hear” a play, and the same premise seems to guide much of Grupo Galpão’s production. We hear the company before we see them, as a motley band strikes up on the Globe piazza before the doors to the yard swing open. Once inside, the troupe seizes the first available opportunity to recruit its audience, strumming, drumming, tooting, fluting and snaking through a packed yard of excited groundlings who clap them to the stage like a returning battalion of clown soldiers. Eduardo Moreira’s blog records his memory of the same moment, in language that suggests an altogether different relationship:

Let’s go. It’s time to confront the beast. The theatre’s doors open and we surprise the audience from behind, as if we caught an army from the rear. A ‘war’ starts in which actors and the audience must play together.⁴

Music’s ability to soothe savage beasts of all shapes and sizes if of course well-documented, but in this production music can do more than simply please or appease large excitable crowds. In fact, much of the narrative itself is carried by music. The production’s soundscape is founded on popular Brazilian serenades in dialogue with the text, and underscoring it in places. Grupo Galpão’s actors are accomplished musicians, and impressive multi-taskers. Some of them – notably Eduardo Moreira’s sad-faced Romeo – can sing, play an accordion, and walk around on giant stilts at the same time. Sung refrains return again and again, like tiny sonnets, and a lot of narrative work is done with a relatively few notes.

Moreira describes one collection of songs - Chiquinha Gonzaga’s “Lua Branca” (“White Moon”), André Filho’s “Cinzas” (“Ashes”) and “Última estrofe” (“Last stanza”) by Cândido das Neves - as ‘compositions of the “belle époque” of Brazilian music in the early twentieth century...heavily influenced by European salon music, especially waltzes’.⁵ These songs use the same

⁵ Eduardo Moreira, e-mail interview, translated by Renato Rocha, July 2012
instrumentation as a second strand of compositions taken from the *mineiro* folklore of the state of Minas Gerais, home to Grupo Galpão. These *serestras* and *modinhas* such as “É a ti, flor do céu” (“Are you the flower of heaven”) and “Amo-te muito” (“I love you too”) are typical of a folk tradition associated with the city of Dimantina, sung in the dialect of the *sertão*.6

Grupo Galpão incorporate both musical idioms in a richly contrapuntal exchange which both marks the development of the narrative over the production’s one hour and forty-five minute life-span, and presents a microcosm of Galpão’s practice over the last thirty years. This production uses a series of transactions between both European and Brazilian musical traditions, to respond to the formal and rhythmic considerations of the script. The musicology of the production is aligned to other aspects of the company’s practice, in that it draws equally from European and Brazilian traditions of composition and performance.

Two musical themes emerge with particular structural and narrative significance. The first, in a major key (“Flor, minha flor” or “Flower, my flower”) belongs to the Brazilian folk tradition7; the second, in a minor key, is the well-known Romanian waltz, “Waves of the Danube” (or “Ondas do Danúbio” in Portuguese), by Iosif Ivanovici. These two themes remain in dialogue with each other throughout the performance. The effect is of ongoing reflection, development, recollection, and recapitulation, with music that is a kind of shared reference point in collective memory of the audience, as Moreira notes in his blog post:

> As soon as the show starts we feel strong vibrations coming from the audience. The Brazilians react emotionally and express nostalgia for their childhood and native land, which is induced by the soundtrack.8

Tonal variation and orchestration matter, of course, but what perhaps matters even more for Grupo Galpão’s audience is the unmistakable sense that one has heard this all somewhere before.

Repetition is therefore central to an understanding of *Romeu e Julieta*, and by association, Bogart and Landau’s “Viewpoints” system9 – of which repetition is a key element - provides an apt technical vocabulary to read Grupo Galpão’s work within the context of twenty-first century American devised theatre. The “Viewpoints” system uses the idea of repetition to generate and recycle original, devised material with theatrical potency. And, as Shakespeare uses repetitions and variations on the sonnet form for both narrative development and dramatic effect, so Grupo Galpão uses repetitions of phrases and musical sequences to achieve the same ends. When these repetitions are added to one’s own memory of the much-loved performance a dozen years ago, the effect is overwhelming. Short and longer term memories cross-pollinate, collate and clash in interesting ways, and blur the distinction between immersion in the present moment and nostalgia for the same place, long ago.

So how does this work? It is the major-key instrumental iteration of “Flor, minha flor” which opens the piece, as the company wind their way through the groundlings toward the stage. This song

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6 Moreira, email interview, July 2012.
7 Moreira, email interview, July 2012
9 For more on the Viewpoints system, see Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2005).
surfaces again, at the Capulet’s ball. The refrain, sung this time by the whole company, underscores Romeo’s speech ‘O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright...’(Act 1, Scene 5, 43-52) but cuts out abruptly for the famous lines of the “shared sonnet” (Act 1, Scene 5, 92-105); striking up again immediately, the effect of the music is to highlight the narrative and stylistic significance of the shared sonnet form in the script.

“Ondas do Danúbio” is a familiar minor-key waltz, frequently used to underscore transitions between scenes or travelling steps danced by the company on their feet or on stilts, but it emerges first through a flute solo by the clown “Shakespeare”, and underscores the Nurse’s prose speech to Juliet extolling Romeo’s physical attributes (Act 2, Scene 4, 38-45). The effect here is to problematise the otherwise comic stylings of the Nurse (we’ve already seen her conducting the research which informs this speech, taking a good look under Romeo’s tunic). The same tune is played by Romeo on his piano-accordion as Juliet dons her bridal veil, and again as the couple descend to the stage level to be married by Friar Laurence. The same waltz underscores both Tybalt’s and Mercutio’s pantomimed deaths, the former involving the slow removal of Tybalt’s stilts by a grief-stricken Lady Capulet, the latter being an extended, broad and bawdy comic physical routine that could be the climax of any Bottom’s performance in “Pyramus and Thisby”.

It is at this point in the performance that the two central themes enter into a real dialogue with each other. The bodies of Mercutio and Tybalt are carried off to the minor key waltz played by Romeo, already banished, in solitary confinement under the stairs leading up to the first platform. What follows is a scene which simultaneously stages the business of Act 3, Scene 2 (‘Gallop apace...’) on top of the car, with that of Act 3, Scene 3 (Romeo banished in Friar Laurence’s cell), below. Later, the ensemble sings a slow-tempo “Flor, minha flor” serenade to accompany the couple’s fleeting attempts at lovemaking just before Romeo leaves in the morning for Mantua (Act 3, Scene 5). The minor key waltz does not return again, but the major refrain (“Flor, minha flor”) does, again at its slower tempo, to underscore the deaths of both Romeo and Juliet. Interestingly, the music is cut short in both these instances, as if failing to resolve.

Within this scheme of musical repetition, the serenade “E a ti, flor de ceu” doubles as the score for both the balcony scene, and for Juliet’s funeral. Mercutio leads the ensemble in the latter iteration, which also incorporates the text of the Capulets’ lament for their lost Juliet (Act 4, Scene 4, 41-122). Musically, the connection between love and death is consistent and unequivocal.

Juliet dies as a swan, in music (and in pointe shoes), leaving the company to bring back “Flor, minha flor” for one last time, at its regular up-beat tempo, for the curtain call, jig and exit cue as the company leave the stage and progress through the yard, picking up a train of groundlings following behind them as they do so.

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Sights

The set draws on what George calls a ‘mixture of itinerant medieval theater...commedia dell’arte, circus techniques, and the mineiro flavour of Guimarães Rosa’. A Volvo estate plastered with floral window-stickers, looking like a limousine at a clown-wedding, is parked on the Globe stage. A dozen

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10 George, Flash and Crash Days, 129.
years ago, the arrival of the car on the Globe stage seemed a provocative intervention, given the then Artistic Directorate’s experiments with “original stage practices”. In 2012, parked on a Globe stage which bears the marks of many structural interventions in the more recent past, the car looks more quaint than radical. This car supports a small stage platform, and the platform supports a step-ladder, as well as several bendy bamboo poles. On the end of the longest bamboo, a crescent moon dangles, like giant lunar bait.

What the set does is to turn the Globe stage into a sort of giant’s puppet theatre with a proscenium arch, and this invites some interesting shifts in scale and perspective at various junctures. The first example of this is when Prologue’s lines are preceded by a dolly-puppet show played out of mini-proscenium of the car’s downstage windows. As Lydia Del Picchia enters wearing ragdoll dress and make-up, she dances in front of the car like a giant dolly in an altogether larger puppet theatre.

Proscenium staging has also determined the gestural language of the production, with most of the communication happening en face, and with little or no attention paid to depth of field or to thrust staging. Instead, Grupo Galpão uses split-focus address: sometimes dialogue between performers is sent out over the heads of the groundlings, the response being bounced off the back wall of the house; elsewhere exchanges occur between two performers, one in hieroglyphic profile, one face on to the bulk of the audience.

This suggestive manipulation of spatial relationships (another component in the Viewpoints system) also allows the company to play with multiple or inverted levels: prime examples of this technique are the simultaneously staged scenes in Act 3 mentioned above, and the “balcony” scene (Act 2, Scene 1), in which Romeo lies on top of the car roof and speaks out to Juliet’s “balcony” below him, on the Volvo’s passenger seat.

Moreira traces this performance style to Grupo Galpão’s origins in street theatre, a performance tradition which

‘values direct play between the actors with the audience. This often justifies the use of direct address to the audience, rather than the characters facing each other directly. I think it’s a feature well suited to the popular theatre and the street.’

The stilts used by Romeo, Benvolio and Tybalt can be traced to the same tradition, of course. This being Grupo Galpão, the provenance of this street theatre idiom is both local and international. Galpão actors Teuda Bara, Antonio Edson, Wanda Fernandes and Eduardo Moreira first met in 1982 at a workshop led by Kurt Bildstein and George Frosher from the Munich Free Theatre. Moreira explains that the founding members of Galpão ‘worked with them on the street, and learned many techniques to work on the street, such as stilts, acrobatics, and circus techniques’. Describing these workshops as ‘the genesis of the group’, Moreira notes that

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11 Eduardo Moreira, email interview, July 2012.
13 Eduardo Moreira, email interview, July 2012.
The street has forced us to seek the acquisition of different techniques and languages related to the popular theatre, for example, work with the masks of the commedia dell’arte, music, melodrama, and epic narrative theatre, mime, pantomime, etc.\textsuperscript{14}

And, while emphasising the significance of local and street performance conventions, Moreira also acknowledges the role that Peter Brook’s writings have played in the development of the company. Moreira considers Brook essential to the work of the company because ‘he said that in today’s world the only place that it would be possible to recreate Shakespeare’s Elizabethan theatre audience would be the streets. This was essential to realize that we were on track.’\textsuperscript{15}

Brook’s influence may also be traced in the rigorous physical training for this production and the way in which this was integrated into the company’s approach to verse-speaking.

How might Shakespeare's poetry, written in the late sixteenth century, sound alive and vibrating in the actors’ bodies? When Brook did \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}, he put his actors to work with a trapeze, and their comments indicated how this training helped them to stop declaiming and start living the poetry. This was a fundamental observation. Then we read some research that called \textit{Romeo and Juliet} the tragedy of precipitation. The characters don’t think, they act. It is the tragedy of youth. This led us to create a system in which we were obligated to work the text and the songs on a very narrow plank about 2.5 metres above the ground. This meant that the words gained a nervousness, and a strong intensity. All the physical work is based on this premise: the characters are on the brink of a precipice brink, about to precipitate. The stilts and the ballet \textit{pointe} shoes come from this too.\textsuperscript{16}

Responding to the 2000 production at the Globe, W.B. Worthen used such connections with Brook’s practice to argue that the production was ‘deeply in dialogue with the First World theatrical avant-garde’\textsuperscript{17}, whereas Billington’s critique of the same suggested that what might cut it in Belo Horizonte was no longer good enough in London:

...the circus metaphor is in danger of becoming an exhausted cliché. In Brazil it may still have resonance. But in the west we have seen too many people, from Fellini, Brook and Anthony Newley to every avant-garde group you care to name, colonise it for it to have any residual life.\textsuperscript{18}

The use of “colonise” in this context prompted Worthen to tear something of a strip off Billington back in 2003\textsuperscript{19}, and so I don’t need to repeat that exercise here. But as Rome, Paris and London (where one might place Fellini, Brook, Newley and Billington) all lie to the east of Belo Horizonte, I can’t help wondering whether Billington is simply a weak geographer, or whether he – unlike Worthen - is rather uncomfortable with terms like “First World”, with reference to Peter Brook and theatre politics.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} W.B. Worthen, \textit{Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance} (CUP, 2003), 166.
\textsuperscript{18} Billington, \textit{Guardian} review.
\textsuperscript{19} Worthen, 160-161.
These days, I find Grupo Galpão’s practice is in dialogue with Bogart and Landau as much as with Brook. In addition to the use of repetition I discuss above, the compositional element referred to by Bogart and Landau as ‘revelation of space’ finds several expressions in Romeu e Julieta at the Globe. One example of this can be seen at the start of a dumbshow battle at the top of the show, as the feuding factions enter through, over or under the parked Volvo. Later, in a striking coup de metatheatre the discovery space at the Globe is itself discovered, as the Volvo car-platform rolled off to one side, like a stone before a tomb, to reveal the mourners seating within the discovery space at Juliet’s funeral. They advance to engage in a lament on the main stage, while Juliet herself lies on the Globe balcony, above. Graves marked out at the stage level allow for the interior and exterior to be revealed in a single moment.

Of course, the use of multiple simultaneous perspectives is not confined to modern theatre practice; the same compositional strategy may also be seen in artwork produced by small children, and Grupo Galpão incorporates the visual currency of childhood memories in a variety of interesting ways. A hilarious dumbshow shootout between rival clown-factions ends with the “dead” victims frozen, their limbs held in rigid “star” silhouettes, creating a tableau that could have been sketched by a four year old witness to the crime; this lends a brilliantly simple resonance to Juliet’s plea, “Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die/Take him and cut him out in little stars’ (Act 3, Scene, 21-22). The Nurse’s job-description is manifested by the two enormous satin, tasselled cushions hanging around her neck as comically amplified bosom-pillows, and the same appealing logic determines that Mercutio’s death and ascent into “heaven” involves solemnly switching his red clown nose for a white nose, to become a “ghost clown” version of his former self. Finally, and for me most movingly, the two lifesize chalk outlines drawn on the Globe stage to mark the lovers’ graves, also mark the spaces occupied by the younger Eduardo Moreira and Fernanda Vianna, twelve years before.

For Moreira, the production is the occasion for a profound and difficult dialogue with ghosts of his own. His original Juliet in 1992 was his wife Wanda Fernandes, who was killed in a car crash in 1994. The production’s return to the Globe prompts Moreira to reflect on the space Fernandes left in the troupe:

There are moments in which it is difficult to control our emotions. The voice becomes choked. The speech stumbles. The show brings up many remembrances, and staging it again at the Globe Theatre, after almost twelve years, evokes a very emotional movie. It brings back rehearsals in Morro Vermelho, the presence and loss of Wanda, dreams, achievements, scars and losses over thirty years on tour.21

Comments such as these surely indicate Moreira’s acute awareness of the “tragic elements” in Romeu e Julieta, but equally the chalk outlines of bodies on the stage invite his audience to project their own feelings of presence and loss into the spaces provided.

In closing, I will return to the sound of this production, to say something about language, and its capacity to move. I don’t have a lick of Portuguese, but listening to this familiar story in this unfamiliar language strikes me as the aural equivalent of watching actors perform in neutral masks.

20 Bogart and Landau Viewpoints, 150-151.
Actors may use masks to develop a kind of precision in somatic storytelling; the mask prompts the spectator to refocus their visual engagement, to find meaning in the actors’ movement and gestures, rather than in their facial expressions. Hearing this play in a language I do not understand similarly concentrates my ear on sounds rather than words. And, for the most part, the sounds I hear are vowels, which - as many voice teachers since Cicely Berry like to remind us - carry the emotional weight of the word. So I experience a song-stream of vowels, which takes me deeper into the grief and longing at the heart of this story I thought I knew so well. Listening to the groundlings join in a chorus of “Flor, minha flor...” as the actors exit through the yard for the final time, their progress impeded by countless impromptu embraces from both new and returning audience members, I consider how both the troupe and I have aged these past dozen years, before I decide to blame the vowels, or the music, or the occasion, or the ghosts, for the lump in my throat as I leave.