

“The Don Quixote of the Streets”: Social Justice Theater in São Paulo, Brazil

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Preguntémonos quién es Alonso Quijano.

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IN A 2007 BLOG entry, Peterson Xavier—a former intern at the infamous São Paulo juvenile detention center, the Fundação Estadual para o Bem-Estar do Menor (“State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors”), generally known as FEBEM—explained how he escaped certain life imprisonment or even death as a young career criminal by becoming a “Dom Quixote das ruas” (“Don Quixote of the streets”) (Xavier). His transformation began with his performance of the crazed knight-errant on a particularly special evening. On October 11, 2000, at Oscar Niemeyer’s Memorial da América Latina in São Paulo, Brazil, some 150 FEBEM interns staged Mario García-Guillén’s adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, entitled *Num Lugar de la Mancha*. Valéria di Pietro conceived and directed the project and cast Peterson Xavier—not without some initial hesitation due to his unruly behavior—in the title role. With dozens of interns freely moving about the stage and hundreds of relatives and friends in the over three-quarters full 1600-seat Simón Bolívar auditorium, security forces were as on edge as the performers themselves.

In the end, the performance turned out to be a resounding success, and the cast earned thunderous applause. In a rare turn of events, not only relatives and friends, but also audience members and, most strikingly, security guards praised the young amateur actors for their intel-

lectual and artistic worth. Despite the security detail, the acting crew quickly dispersed and mingled with the audience, receiving *parabens* (“congratulations”) from family, friends, and guards alike. Through the power of *Don Quixote*’s story, the young actors were endowed that evening with a renewed sense of pride and dignity. For once, their (on-stage) performance was appreciated rather than repudiated, as they were closely watched in admiration rather than fear. In this case, as in Diane Conrad’s work with incarcerated youth in Alberta, Canada, the act of practicing theater in prison helped to awaken “the potential for making positive change in our lives and [to contribute] to a greater social transformation” (Conrad 139). By performing Cervantes’s characters, the actors had themselves experienced self-transformation. At least for one evening, their public persona had changed in the eyes of both relatives and security officers, and thus, the rigid societal structure of prison was dramatically altered.

Performing the character of Don Quixote indeed transformed Peterson Xavier’s life. After his release, Xavier became a professional actor and community activist, and today remains committed to his work with at-risk children and juveniles at the Instituto Religare in the Barra Funda district of São Paulo. The father of two, Xavier undertook a journey of self-transformation that turned him into a new, hybrid being, as he explains in his blog: “eu o dom Quixote das ruas [...] eu o dom Quixote educador com espada e escudo derrotando gigantes, eu Peterson Xavier Quixote de la Mancha” (“I, the Don Quixote of the streets [...] I, Don Quixote the educator with a sword and a shield defeating giants, I, Peterson Xavier Quixote of La Mancha”).

Xavier’s dramatic transformation from troubled youth to professional actor and activist lends a human face to a number of social justice organizations in São Paulo and around Brazil that employ Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as a central icon in their work with at-risk children and youth. Among the numerous groups and schools that have recently staged adaptations of *Don Quixote* in São Paulo, I am focusing here only on those organizations and theater companies that have a track record of reaching large audiences (counted in the thousands) through an extended performance schedule. They are: Valéria

di Pietro's Instituto Religare; Telma Dias and Robson Vellado's Grupo Permanente de Pesquisa; and Andréia de Almeida's Circo Navegador.¹

With dozens of performances of *Num Lugar de la Mancha* both on prison grounds and throughout the city, Valéria di Pietro continued and expanded her groundbreaking work with FEBEM interns between 2000 and 2005 through the Instituto Religare, which was established in the Barra Funda district in 2002. On another corner of São Paulo's gargantuan downtown area, Telma Dias and Robson Vellado's Grupo Permanente de Pesquisa has offered nearly a hundred performances of Dias's *Dom Quixote* in numerous schools and theaters around the city, as well as in their own Teatro Ressurreição in the *bairro* Jabacuará. Lastly, Andréia de Almeida and Luciano Draetta's Circo Navegador has presented de Almeida and Carlos Lotto's *Quixotes* in a variety of venues—streets, public squares, schools, and theaters—throughout the city of São Paulo, as well as in other parts of the state. With a street theater feel and minimalist staging, Circo Navegador has reached thousands with their dozens of performances in open spaces as well as in theaters. The centerpiece of Andréia de Almeida's *Don Quixote*-themed initiatives, which also include youth workshops through her Espaço Quixote-Oficina dos Sonhos project, *Quixotes* received a 2010 federal grant to perform weekly between January and March of 2011 at the legendary Teatro Arena in São Paulo.

Although widely different in style, casting choices, and target audience, these present-day Brazilian stage adaptations share three remarkable features. First, the authors liberally adapt and resequence various scenes and characters from the original text. Besides some of Don Quixote's most recognizable adventures, such as the wonderfully theatrical charge against the windmills, these plays also explore lesser-known episodes in Cervantes's text. In personal interviews conducted during 2009, Valéria di Pietro, Andréia de Almeida, and Telma Dias all underscored their explicit commitment to adapting the book as

1 I would like to thank Telma Dias and Andréia de Almeida for making available to me their unpublished play scripts. I would also like to thank Valéria di Pietro, Telma Dias, Robson Vellado, and Andréia de Almeida for kindly accepting my request to be interviewed on two separate occasions in June and November of 2009.

comprehensively as they possibly could within their respective technical and financial constraints. In preparation for the challenge of staging *Don Quixote*, they all read it several times, conducted extensive research, and pondered every episode and character as potential stage material.

Their loyalty to the original text did not preclude them, however, from speaking directly to the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Brazil, and more specifically to the challenges that at-risk children and youth face in São Paulo and the country at large. Their adaptations of *Don Quixote* reveal a clear social and political goal that underscores the quixotic nature of the fight against social injustice and that fosters the empowerment of at-risk youth. The musical score, visual appeal, script, and casting choices all reflect a concerted effort to adapt Cervantes's world to a young Brazilian audience. While maintaining knight-errantry as central to Don Quixote's enterprise, these plays tailor their social justice-oriented message to the very specific socio-economic and cultural circumstances of at-risk children and youth.

Although influenced by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and functioning as a practical application of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, these plays never quite adopt Boal's dramatic techniques, first developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their "poetics of liberation" certainly does not rely on liberating the spectator through his or her involvement in the theatrical performance itself, as Boal requires (*Theatre* 155). Even de Almeida's *Quixotes*, often performed in the streets and squares of São Paulo, and more recently in the Teatro Arena that Boal himself directed in the 1960s, maintains a clear separation between actors and spectators. At the same time, nonetheless, the three plays portray Don Quixote as an actor who himself does practice, *avant la lettre*, Boal's basic tenet. By giving up his passive role as a mere spectator (a reader of chivalric books), Alonso Quijano becomes an actor to perform a role, that of the knight-errant Don Quixote, that will transform him and those around him. Ultimately, Cervantes's story confirms—at least in the social justice-oriented interpretations of *Don Quixote* that I discuss here—that "s/he who transforms reality [through the creation of art] is transformed by the very action of transforming" (Boal, "Aesthetic Education of the Oppressed").

Besides freely adapting a multitude of episodes from the original text and exhibiting a context-specific and socially progressive point of view, the three plays thus begin in a strikingly similar and unexpected way. They all shed light on a character that seemingly only occupies a prominent role in the first and last few pages of Cervantes's book: Alonso Quijano. By dramatizing the moment in which Alonso Quijano becomes Don Quixote, the three plays focus on a theme that permeates what I am inclined to describe as the most characteristically Brazilian motto of (quixotic) community activism: transformation. In the next few pages I will examine how São Paulo-based, *Don Quixote*-themed theater and non-for-profit organizations reappropriate Don Quixote as a symbol for personal and social transformation in present-day Brazil. In doing so, these plays draw on the guiding principles of Paulo Freire's and Augusto Boal's theories of the oppressed. Due to space constraints, I will keep my theoretical references to a minimum and will examine only the first scene of the three aforementioned plays.

In order to grasp the influence of *Don Quixote* in Brazil, and more specifically in São Paulo, it is imperative, as one of *Num Lugar de la Mancha's* musical acts demands, to "soltar a imaginação" ("free your imagination"). How can a 400-year-old Spanish book radically transform an imprisoned teenager such as Peterson Xavier? Does culture in general and theater in particular possess the ability to fundamentally alter the course of a young life?

In early June of 2009, I traveled to São Paulo to visit the Projeto Quixote, a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 1996 to provide educational, social, and clinical support to children and youth in high-risk social situations. Upon arrival, I headed towards my hotel on Avenida Paulista, dropped off my luggage, and took a walk to stretch my legs. Right next to my hotel, I fortuitously ran into an exhibition at the Instituto Cervantes of Chilean Surrealist master Roberto Matta's illustrations of *Don Quixote*. A couple minutes in the other direction, I encountered an enormous statue of Don Quixote on horseback and Sancho presiding over the entrance hall of a high-end shopping mall. In a city of some twenty-three million people, I was, after just ten minutes of an improvised walking tour of Avenida

Paulista, literally surrounded by Don Quixote. The two figures in the mall—the intellectual creation of “Cooperaacs,” a self-described non-profit co-operative of artisans—were made of recycled materials under the inspirational umbrella-concept of what was already emerging as the major theme in Brazilian readings of *Don Quixote*. As explained in a free-standing sign adjacent to the bulky sculpture, the “aventura quixotesca” which inspired the Cervantine tribute to recycling—or perhaps a recycling tribute to Cervantes?—sought the “transformação” of trash into art (“lixo em arte”) and people through art (“pessoas através da arte”).

The topic of “transformação” (transformation) or “mudança” (change) equally lies at the core of *Don Quixote*-themed Brazilian theater. Quadro I (first scene) of *Num Lugar de la Mancha* has “Ator Dom Quixote só no palco” (“the actor Don Quixote alone on stage”) intently stating: “Vou me transformar num outro homem” (“I’m going to transform myself into a new man”). Behind the subject pronoun of “vou” (“eu,” or “I”), there is a character who is not yet Don Quixote. For him to become the “outro homem,” the knight-errant Don Quixote, he must undergo a transformational process as a first step towards radical individual and social change. From this perspective, the fact that he is described as an actor may not be just a mere redundancy. As laid out in this first stage direction, Don Quixote (Alonso Quijano?) sets out to play the role of a knight-errant.

The *Dom Quixote* by Grupo Permanente de Pesquisa, adapted for the stage by Telma Dias, and co-directed by the playwright and Robson Vellado, similarly identifies the intrinsic duality of the main character as the starting point of quixotic activism. The play begins with a lone man on stage: “A cena [...] começa na penumbra. Vemos um homem magro, velho e cansado perdido em uma imensa biblioteca folheando avidamente livros e mais livros” (“The scene [...] begins in the dark. We see a thin, tired old man, lost in an immense library avidly leafing through books and more books”) (3). Consumed and inspired by his chivalric books, the thin old man embodies in this stage direction a new kind of hero for Brazilian youth. Before he engages in any battles to better the world, the old hidalgo must transform himself in a way

that relates only peripherally to swords and giants. The protagonist's desire to change society starts with his own transformation through the act of reading. The consumption of art induces the production of a new social entity. Alonso Quijano recycles himself into the seemingly heroic Don Quixote, and thus changes his identity through art, as the "Cooperaacs" artists intended with their Don Quixote and Sancho monument to recycling.

The reappropriation of Cervantes's character by social justice-oriented Brazilian activists thus gives new meaning to arguably the most overlooked, disregarded character in the entire book: the hidalgo who transforms himself into the knight-errant Don Quixote. The book's first paragraph can indeed be read as a meticulous attempt to mask a character whose place of origin, family name, and age are deliberately elided by the narrator. The titles of parts one and two further illustrate this process through the obliteration of the ordinary character who breathes life into Don Quixote. Part one, *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, presents a contradiction in terms since the "ingenioso hidalgo" cannot *be* but only *act* as the knight-errant ("caballero") Don Quixote. As underscored by Mário García-Guillén's description of his main character as "*ator* Dom Quixote," the title of Cervantes's first volume fails to erase the theatrical nature of an hidalgo whose obsessive reading habits transform him into a performer of knight-errantry. In part two, this process of the eradication of the hidalgo comes full circle. *El ingenioso caballero don Quijote de la Mancha* still emphasizes the "ingenioso" nature of Don Quixote, but coherently refers to Don Quixote as "caballero"; the "hidalgo" has disappeared altogether. His transformative process now complete, Alonso Quijano fades into the scenery and only his more flamboyant self remains fully visible.

Exposing his dual nature, Telma Dias's character proves aware that he is challenging the existing social order by shifting from one stratum ("hidalgo") to a wholly different one, that of "caballero": "Hoje mesmo vou me transformar num cavaleiro andante" ("This very day I am going to transform myself into a knight-errant") (3). The urgent ("hoje mesmo") and deliberate nature of the hidalgo's transformation ("vou me transformar") renders explicit a socially progressive message which

echoes García-Guillén's "Vou me transformar num outro homem." While Brazilian activists emphasize the hidalgo's deliberate change of social identity, Cervantes goes to great lengths to conceal his main character's very transformation. Without the hidalgo there is no alteration of the stratified social fabric of the ancien régime; Don Quixote's madness annuls the subversive nature of Alonso Quijano's imaginative re-birth. Without the hidalgo, we only see the ridiculous knight-errant Don Quixote in his willful, yet deeply flawed, quest to improve society. What Cervantes conceals, Telma Dias and García-Guillén expose.

But can anyone truly reinvent her or his social identity? If social change stems from personal transformation, how does an individual escape stereotyping and social determination? More specifically, can at-risk youth rewrite the social script that assigns them a subaltern and often criminal role? In Telma Dias's adaptation, the hidalgo who wants to become a knight "pega um papel o põe-se a escrever" ("grabs a piece of paper and starts writing") (4). Using only his imagination and profound knowledge of chivalric literature, the skinny, nameless, and aged hidalgo rewrites his place in society in order to insert himself into a world of knight-errantry. Significantly, in Dias's *Dom Quixote* he does so on a piece of paper and not just on his own body as in Cervantes's book. Staging this simple act of grabbing paper foregrounds the literary and self-created nature of Don Quixote's new persona. Dias does not ignore the role that madness plays in Don Quixote's act, but chooses to shed light on the foundational and self-aware imaginative process that ignites the hidalgo's transformation. Her unlikely hero lacks all the features of traditional candidates to knighthood: the youth, physical strength, good looks, and royal ancestry expected of literary knights-errant. Instead, he achieves knighthood through the literary self-refashioning and deliberate rewriting of his role in society. Even if his mental stability remains questionable, to say the least, the hidalgo's intellectual prowess ought to be credited with the breaking of petrified social molds. In contrast to Cervantes's intentional subtlety in promptly dismissing the hidalgo, Telma Dias turns Alonso Quijano's revolutionary act into a physical gesture (grabbing a piece of paper and writing) that plays out on stage before the eyes of its typically young

audience. The message is not missed. Assuming control of one's role in society requires an education and a great dose of imagination, madness, and effort. In order for at-risk youth to overcome the ominous odds stacked against them, according to Dias, they must develop the art of writing and transform themselves on the social stage.

In Cervantes's own book, the *hidalgo's* message of discursive transformation inspires other characters to change. Most notably, by imitating (though not always accurately) his master, Sancho acquires new powers to alter reality through discourse. While he voluntarily relinquishes the fictional governorship of Barataria (2.53:957-58), throughout part two Sancho fully exploits his newly-discovered ability with fictional discourse. Following Don Quixote's lead, his squire learns to alter the relationship between things and words, to use Michel de Foucault's well-known formulation (46-77). Instead of pursuing his worldly ambitions (i.e., social recognition and wealth), Sancho fully throws himself into his master's game of writing and acting. Never quite conversant in chivalric and other literary conventions, Sancho's description of Dulcinea (2.10:618-23) and his conversation with Teresa (2.5:581-87) nonetheless prove his aptitude for full participation in Don Quixote's transformational scheme.

If Don Quixote's ability to change the world resides in his use of words, then Cervantes's proposal to improve society does not rely on a military solution, but rather on a discursive tactic. Self-transformation precedes change, which can only be achieved through a rewriting of personal and social identity. Mastering literary and cultural codes certainly does not spare the hero from a few beatings. Yet, as more and more characters join the simultaneously playful and subversive game of wordplay, Don Quixote's stature, his ability to transform the world around him, only increases. Ultimately, the chorus of characters performing the alternate, fictional roles that increasingly populate the pages of *Don Quixote* reveal Cervantes's masterwork as fiction that explores the power of fiction. As the story progresses, *Don Quixote* weaves a discursive matrix that continuously generates alternative realities.

The *Don Quixote*-themed plays written for—and sometimes even performed by—Brazilian at-risk children and youth recognize this

metafictional, self-reflective force in Cervantes's text as the single most powerful tool for social change. The hidalgo/knight—who is also reader, writer, and principal character of his own fiction—attacks innocent people, is twice excommunicated, and fails to achieve a just resolution to the troubles of Andresillo, the galley slaves, or the Dueña Dolorida, to note but three well-known examples. Don Quixote's ideological and military solutions to concrete problems, as well as to the larger issue of Spain's imperial standing, usually result in chaos and breed further injustice for the characters he professes to aid. Nevertheless, by impersonating his literary creation, Alonso Quijano does achieve a phenomenal success among his peer characters in the book, and captivates a readership that spans four centuries and knows no linguistic or cultural borders. In chapter one the hidalgo dives into his readings to emerge renewed, armed with words, and ultimately transformed. And it is this process of education and self-renewal that opens and permeates social justice-oriented Brazilian stage adaptations of *Don Quixote*.

Since 2005, the 400th anniversary of *Don Quixote*, Circo Navegador has performed Andréia de Almeida and Carlos Lotto's *Quixotes* close to a hundred times. Heavily drawing from the metafictional elements of Cervantes's original text, the characters in this play are not Don Quixote and Sancho, but an "atriz" ("actress") and an "ator" ("actor") who recount the story of their dramatization of *Don Quixote*. Furthermore, Sancho is performed by a woman; a casting choice that demands an overt suspension of disbelief. The whole play unfolds as theater turned inside out. The spectators, many of them just bystanders who happen upon a street performance of *Quixotes*, witness the work of two actors openly discussing how to play Cervantes's two iconic characters. Both actors and audience become involved in the sort of (meta)fictional process that enabled Alonso Quijano to become Don Quixote in the first place; they all must perform a role, and reflect on the act of performing.

In this play, words are the weapon of choice for social change. The "Atriz" admits to loving "the man" (the hidalgo, the knight?), but fears the incommensurable power of his words: "Me encantava aquela pessoa, mas as suas palavras me assustavam" ("I loved the man, but his words scared me"). Through words, the "Ator" invites a process of self-

transformation aimed at exploring society in order to change it: "Deixa teu mundinho e vamos conhecer o mundão" ("leave your own little world behind and let's explore the great wide world") (4). Is this "great wide world" the theatrical fiction that they are enacting, or the "real" world off stage (the very public spaces where they so often perform), or a combination of both? Embodying the very Cervantine and more generally Baroque commonplace of "el teatro del mundo" or "the world as stage," Circo Navegador blurs the lines between world and theater, as well as between reality and fiction. In their playful and simultaneously uncanny metatheater, the actors unveil a reading of *Don Quixote* that above all celebrates fiction making. Like Don Quixote himself, they embody the very act of writing/acting as a form of street intervention, a direct call to arms for the cause of (re)invention. *Quixotes* (plural) distills the fictional essence of *Don Quixote's* challenge to societal norms, endowing the individual with the powerful and startling ability to enact transformation through play. If all the world's a stage, the actors seem to mischievously instruct their audience to take up the art of acting and play.

In its mission statement, the Projeto Quixote, the NGO that first sparked my interest in traveling to São Paulo, vows to "transformar a história de crianças, jovens e família em complexas situações de risco" ("transform the story of children, youth, and their families in complex high-risk social situations") ("Missão"). In order to rewrite society and empower subaltern actors, the Projeto Quixote professes that the rules of discourse must be both mastered and subverted. Embarked upon a quixotic quest for self-expression, marginalized youth may overcome the official narrative by publicly authoring and enacting their own stories. Overlapping with the Projeto Quixote's interpretation of Cervantes's masterpiece, *Don Quixote*-themed plays in São Paulo ultimately aim to enable Brazilian youth to write "uma outra história" ("another story") for themselves.

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