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THE RELEVANCE OF ASJA LĀCIS'S KINDERTHEATER TODAY: A BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVE

Thinkers and artists linked with the dialectical tradition need always to confront two historical challenges: critical reception on their relevance in present times; and the manner in which, following Marx's known "Theses on Feuerbach", they strive not only to understand, but also transform, a world in constant change.

In this sense, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis were exemplary in their vision whereby theatre theory, philosophical criticism and political action should interact in addressing the fundamental issues of the times. We all know the extent to which the works of these authors, directly linked with the leftist tradition, constantly took on new forms, confronted new dilemmas and reacted to the changes in politics and the public, in an era of great turmoil.

Time has passed, the early Soviet Union, which served as a model and was the subject of thought for the three authors, no longer exists and new issues have emerged in the panorama of capitalism ever more complex and very different from that of the first half of the 20th century. We should then ask: do their works continue to be relevant and can they act towards the transformation of our present society? If so, how and why? Let us look at each of these three very important dialectical authors, briefly, from their reception in Brazil, a country where the contradictions of capitalism are extremely pronounced.

Since the 1980s, the work of Walter Benjamin has found wide reception in Brazil. (We note here that Benjamin tried immigrating to Brazil before his tragic death in 1940.) Almost all his writings have been translated into Portuguese, there are numerous academic studies on them, and the influence of his thought runs across all human and social sciences and the arts. His reception, however, is divided between a perspective more linked to his dialectical standings, with attention to the criticism of Nazism and the idea of bourgeois progress, and another, in which he is read in the post-structuralist and postcolonialist vein, as

an ideologist of new technologies and defender of the “subalterns” and the people who could not express or write their own histories. These perspectives get mixed and spread, making of the work of Benjamin required reading in various Latin-American university courses.

Brecht’s case is even more remarkable. The first important stagings of his plays date back to the 1960s and, ever since, the author has been omnipresent in the theatre scene and critical debates in Brazil. The history of his reception in Brazil raises highly relevant questions, which were discussed in an important essay by the eminent Brazilian dialectical literary critic Roberto Schwarz. Entitled “Altos e baixos da atualidade de Brecht” (“Brecht’s Relevance: Highs and Lows”) [Schwarz 1999], the essay follows the trajectory of the performances of Brecht’s plays in Brazil, from the “grand” period of theatre in the 1960s, to Brecht’s incorporation by theatrical groups resisting the Brazilian dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, through to his acclimatization in the traditional repertoire on the one hand, and, on the other, the politically interesting resumption of Brecht’s didactic and epic theatre in the 1990s and the first decade of our century. The immediate object of Schwarz’s analysis is the staging of the play “Saint Joan of the Stockyards” [Brecht 2001] by the Companhia do Latão Group, based in São Paulo, the metropolis that is yet the industrial and financial center of Brazil.

Schwarz argues that Brecht’s works must necessarily be “reinterpreted” so that their staging attains relevant political and artistic objectives. Such rereading is necessary due to changes that have been taking place in capitalism and its ideology over the past few decades. In light of “Saint Joan”, one of the aims of Brecht’s practice of dialectical theatre was the effect a critique of the ideology, based on a process of critical distancing which broke with the illusions of the economy as well as theatre itself. In his time, the main objective was to show that behind supposedly universal, religious and moral values, what was at stake was “the world of sausages”, monetary interest and the continual exploitation of the workers. If these values were defended by “the right”, the “left” sought to unveil what they masked, showing them as false, as elements of cultural and social domination.

But capitalism changed and the equation was inverted. Today the financial market’s liberalizing capitalist ideology makes a point of ever highlighting the need to think in economic terms, cost-benefit, and supply-demand. Even in culture the financial interest ceased being civilly hidden to become an object of unmasked pride and ostentation: the list of highest sales and highest salaries gains more importance than any assessment of an aesthetic order. In this totally marketable world, it is now for the left to defend “universal”, human, moral values.

The result is a short circuit, very well perceived in the Brazilian staging of Brecht’s “Saint Joan”. If we read Brecht’s text today, the workers would seem mere

caricatures and not at all heroic, out of keeping with his intentions; the capitalists, whom Brecht would have depicted as caricatures, are today complex, highly interesting characters, and tell more of the contradictions of the current economy and politics than do the idealized revolutionaries.

Following this lead, we may argue that Asja Lacis' trajectory is the opposite. Practically unknown to the Brazilian public, she reveals herself today, in our view, as an extremely interesting, highly relevant author, especially for her reflections and her theatre for children and adolescents. Her ideas and actions in this ambit (which reached us first through the writings of Walter Benjamin) carry important, powerful tools for thinking about the educational dilemmas of our youth in the present context of an education increasingly tuned to the market and the reification of consciences.

The state of vulnerability in which children find themselves today in Brazil and throughout Latin America is tremendous. Social vulnerability, but also the silent, paralyzing vulnerability related with the cultural industry to which children of whichever social class are exposed. In this context, to think of theatre as a possible means towards autonomous, critical and emancipatory learning in Brazil is not only coherent, but urgent and necessary.

We would like to discuss now briefly the relevance of Lacis ideas for the work that is developed in *Casa do Teatro*. Founded in São Paulo in 1983, it receives groups of children and adolescents, ages four to eighteen. As an extension of the course of practical action the *Casa do Teatro* carried out with children and adolescents, with the aim of developing a theoretical framework for this work, it was time to go back to researching in order to discover the identity of the Latvian woman who so profoundly inspired Walter Benjamin's "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" (2005). Moved by great curiosity, we came up against the near impossibility of finding in Brazil any material on Asja Lacis and her work. We take this opportunity to thank Eugenia Casini Ropa, Susan Ingram and Beata Paškevica, who have been fundamental in introducing and fostering understanding of Asja's work. Our admiration for the woman born here under the name Anna Liepiņa was immediate. The importance of what she created throughout her entire career as actress, stage director, educator, activist and intellectual did not correspond with the role carelessly ascribed to her by history. Her figure, when seen from this androcentric, superficial standpoint, is an example of the way in which actresses are frequently viewed.

Right at the outset of the research, the familiarity of her work and the work developed in *Casa do Teatro*, both in concept and practice, was startling. What surprised us was the work in such similar areas, the sharing in like educational concerns and, above all, the usage of very similar resources in directing processes,

despite being so distant geographically and in time. How in Brazil, and more precisely in São Paulo, can such a coincidence take place? The answer to this question shows the vitality and relevance of a leftist-oriented perspective of educational action, which surpasses frontiers.

The *Casa do Teatro* stems from the educational work/training begun in the 1960s by actress Célia Helena, who founded a theatre for young people who, isolated by the military dictatorship that took place in Brazil from 1964 to 1984, had neither space for meeting nor ways to express or act critically. The history of Brazilian theatre has been strongly marked by women who surpassed their roles as actresses, and were founders of theatres, theatre groups and companies, being responsible for many combative actions in our country. Célia Helena was one of them. Having worked with important European directors who arrived in Brazil fleeing the Second World War, she also had the chance to be directed by and to act with Russian actor and director Eugenio Kusneteff who, along with Italian director Ruggero Jacobbi, was to greatly influence her as an actress and theatre pedagogue. Born in 1898 in Russia, Kusneteff, after the Bolshevist victory, went to study in Moscow in some of the theatre studios, afterwards being invited to work as an actor in the Baltic countries, including Latvia. Settling in Brazil in 1926, Kusnet (this is how he adapted his name in Brazil) was responsible for the introduction of Russian theatre practice and pedagogy in São Paulo. There is a fascinating similarity between the concepts and stage management which Kusnet developed with his students and actors compared with the ways in which Asja Lacis describes her improvisations and her work as director and actress.

In regard to this background of longstanding practical activity, it was very important to get to know the program developed by Asja Lacis, which today can help us systemize the thinking and philosophical guidelines of educational theatre. Based on my experience (*Ligia Cortez*) as an actress and director working with children, and also on my reading about the way in which Asja worked, I recognize the actions which served as the starting point for Benjamin's concepts. He wrote about what he saw. One who works with children and derives from a time of fighting for social transformation understands and imagines the practical steps for this reflection. Having improvisation as the main tool for working with children and young people, we seek to collectivize the ideas and proposals of the groups as well as the stagings. We work with collective creations and also adaptations of plays and literary pieces carried out in groups. Some may stem from a book, a classical play or a play for children; others can arise out of the need to defend an idea, or from the life stories or backgrounds of the members in the group, the scenes being built during each encounter.

Memorized lines were never used, nor the repetition of written texts. As Benjamin cites in the beginning of the program, rote lines make no sense to a child. They must come from a previously built and incorporated thought. Improvisation creates the possibility for the child's autonomy; they think and speak for themselves, choose the words that best fit their ideas and don't simply repeat what others have already said. The practice of improvisation is involved in collective games, in the staging of plays, and is akin to that used by Asja Lacis (1971) to create the Meyerhold text for children, *Alinur*. Improvisation is one of the most powerful resources that theatre can provide.

Children should think beforehand about the work, the historical basis of the text and of the author, leading them to an understanding of the development of the plot. What happens, therefore, is a process of apprehending the story in order to talk, through it, about something which makes sense for the group to communicate, claim, and above all, share with the audience (many of the spectators are the same age as the group and their response is immediate!), which evokes the experience that Asja Lacis had with war orphans and street children, the *besprizorniki* in Orel.

It could be that Asja Lacis is the source of the work we develop today in São Paulo. Or perhaps she is only one of its origins, along with Meyerhold, Evreinov, Augusto Boal, the derivations of the theatre studios of Moscow and the Western counterculture movements. It could actually be that the very need of engagement and autonomy to confront the tough political moment which Brazil underwent, leading to very similar actions, is at the roots of our work being so much in tune with the program set forth by Walter Benjamin.

Considering the political and economic context of our era, we may conclude that the relevant ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin on the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics necessarily involve the awareness that our present political process is, above all, in need of a new political consciousness. Now, it is precisely Asia Lacis's theory which offers us the path for this renewal of political consciousness, because theatre is still a vigorous source of transformation and education for children. Inspired by Asja Lacis, we can contribute through the program so that, citing Benjamin, "the theater will unleash in children the most powerful energies of the future" [Benjamin 2005: 202].

For this reason it is extremely important that Asja Lacis be known by name in our country and throughout Latin America. Urgently.

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Abstract

The goal of the article is to show that Asja Lācis's theatre programme, which was based on her reasoning about historical, practical and political issues in the theatre for children and adolescents, can be significant in the development of modern youth theatre in Brazil. Walter Benjamin's Programme of the Proletarian Children's Theatre, which included and explained Asja Lācis's ideas, enhanced a better understanding of the involvement of art and theatre in politics, as well as the education based on emancipated artistic experience.

The article views these ideas from a historical perspective by studying the case of "Casa do Teatro". This institution is an heir to the tradition of education theatre, whose political dimension is associated with the resistance to Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1984). Through emphasising theatre activities as a type of conscious education, certain aspects of Asja Lācis's ideas gain the kind of significance that Brecht's and Benjamin's works have possibly lost in the context of contemporary politics and the latest trends in theatre development.

Keywords: *contradictions of capitalism, children and youth theatre, practice of improvisation, Asja Lācis, Brazil.*