**RODRIGUES, NELSON (1912-1980)**

Nelson Rodrigues was a multifaceted writer now remembered as the man who ushered in modern theater in Brazil with the production of his play *O Vestido de Noiva* [*The Wedding Dress*] in 1943. A controversial figure who took equal delight in goading the censors and alienating the political Left, he aired the dirty laundry of Rio’s (lower) middle-class with salacious family dramas involving incest, infanticide, adultery, and homosexuality—all the sins of the classic Greek tragedies along with a few more. An avid admirer of Eugene O’Neill, he remains Brazil’s best-known playwright, and a number of his plays have inspired successful films. During his lifetime, however, his fame also rested on his work as a journalist, sports commentator, novelist, scriptwriter for movies and *telenovelas* (soap operas), and author of the popular column *A Vida Como Ela É* [*Life As It Is*].

Rodrigues was born in the northeastern city of Recife, but his family relocated to Rio when he was a child after his father Mario, a journalist, raised the ire of a powerful local politician. In Rio, Mario Rodrigues launched his own newspaper, which trafficked in sensationalist stories not unlike the plots of the plays his son would later pen. Nelson dropped out of secondary school to work as a reporter, and in 1929 his own life took a dramatic turn when he witnessed the murder of his older brother at the hands of a well-to-do woman who was outraged over the newspaper’s coverage of her divorce. His father died shortly thereafter and the family fell on hard times when the newspaper was shuttered in retaliation for its opposition to the Revolution of 1930.

In 1941 Rodrigues debuted his first play, *A Mulher Sem Pecado* [The Woman without Sin], to mixed reviews. His breakthrough would come two years later with *The Wedding Dress*, a drama in which the memories and hallucinations of a woman dying on an operating table play out alongside the clinical efforts to save her life. The production elicited both shock and admiration, not only for its depiction of the lurid hypocrisies hiding behind the virginal white dress, but also for the expressionist staging of Polish émigré director Zbigniew Ziembinski, who would go on to direct Rodrigues’s *Anjo Negro* [Black Angel] in 1948. This play, which revolves around an interracial couple driven to infanticide by societal pressures, was censored and could only be staged under the condition that the protagonist be played by a white man in blackface. Several of Rodrigues’s later *tragédias cariocas—*tragic tales about the residents of Rio*—*betray a similar preoccupation with the downfall of ordinary individuals crushed by the impersonal power of mass society. The title of *Boca de Ouro* [*The Golden Mouth*] refers to the gold dentures of its ill-fated protagonist, a mobster who runs the illegal gambling lottery known as *jogo do bicho* (the animal game). *Beijo no Asfalto* [*The Asphalt Kiss*] is about a man whose marriage and public reputation fall to pieces when he complies with a stranger’s dying wish for a kiss, only to have the sensationalist press twist his selfless act into a sordid tale of homosexuality.

Rodrigues’s plays (seventeen in total) were only one part of his prolific production. Throughout his career he remained active as a journalist, and in the fifties and sixties he gained a large following with his newspaper column *Life As Its Is* as well as his work as a football commentator on television. Early on he also published several romance novels under the pseudonym Suzana Flag, and he is credited with creating the first Brazilian *telenovela* (soap opera), a program called *A Morta sem Espelho* that aired on TV Rio in 1963.

Rodrigues’s penchant for moralism mixed with prurience partly explains his rocky relationship with the protagonists of the modernista avant-garde and the counterculture movement of the sixties and seventies. The principal reason for their animosity, however, was his vocal anti-Communism and eventual support for the military dictatorship that governed Brazil from 1964 to 1985. On television and in his newspaper column he regularly denounced opponents of the regime and championed its program of conservative modernization; yet the ambivalent nature of his own work is evident in the fact that several of his plays were adapted for the silver screen by openly leftist or left-leaning directors. In 1963, Nelson Pereira dos Santos drew on Brechtian techniques in his socially conscious adaptation of *The Golden Mouth*, and in the seventies Arnaldo Jabor gained acclaim for his cinematic version of Rodrigues’s play *Toda Nudez Será Castigada* [*All Nudity Shall Be Punished*] as well as a film based on the writer’s novel *O Casamento*.Rodrigues also revealed himself to be less dogmatic than some supposed when he joined several protests directed against the dictatorship’s censorship of oppositional artists, and by the late seventies his support of the dictatorship had started to wane—in part due to the experiences of his son, a political militant who was arrested and tortured. After decades of poor health caused by tuberculosis, Rodrigues died in 1980.

**Selected Works**

Plays

Rodrigues, N. (1943) *Vestido de Noiva*.

-------- (1946) *Álbum de Família*

-------- (1947) *Anjo Negro*

-------- (1953) *A Falecida*

-------- (1958) *Boca de Ouro*

-------- (1960) *Beijo no Asfalto*

-------- (1965) *Toda Nudez Será Castigada*

-------- (1973) *Anti-Nelson Rodrigues*

-------- (1980) *The Wedding Dress*, trans. Fred M. Clark, Valencia: Albatros.

-------- (2001) *The Theater of Nelson Rodrigues*, trans. Joffre Rodrigues, Rio de Janeiro: Funarte.

Novel

Rodrigues, N. (1966) *O Casamento*

Journalism and memoirs

Rodrigues, N. (1961) *Cem Contos Escolhidos;* *A Vida Como Ela É*

-------- (1977) *O Reacionário*

-------- (2009) *Life As It Is*, trans. Alex Ladd, Austin: Host Publications.

-------- (2012) *A Vida Como Ela É em 100 Inéditos*

**Further Reading**

Castro, R. (1992) *O Anjo Pornográfico: A Vida de Nelson Rodrigues.* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

Magaldi, S. (1987) *Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva.

Townsend, S. (2005) “Nelson Rodrigues: The Pornographic Angel Comes to NYC.” *The Brooklyn Rail*. 5 October.

**Sarah J. Townsend (The Pennsylvania State University)**

**Paratextual Material**

**There are numerous photos of Nelson Rodrigues circulating on the web without credit. I have attached one that is commonly seen, but there is no info on where it originally comes from.**

Taken from web site:

http://waytofamous.com/21274-nelson-rodrigues@imagenelson-rodrigues-02.jpg.html