**Teatro da Experiência**

Teatro da Experiência was a 275-seat theater housed in the Clube dos Artistas Modernos, a controversial club for ‘modern artists’ in São Paulo, Brazil that served as a site of intense intellectual and political activity from November 1932 to December 1933. Directed by the architect and multimedia artist Flávio de Carvalho, it played an important (if often overlooked) role as one of only a handful of theater projects linked to the movement known as Brazilian *modernismo*. In November 1932, only days after opening its doors, the theater was forced to shut down when police interrupted a performance of *Bailado do Deus Morto* (Dance of the Dead God), a ritualistic performance piece written by Carvalho and enacted by an almost entirely black cast. The closure of Teatro da Experiência was a sign of the increasingly repressive atmosphere that had begun to develop under the soon-to-be dictator Getúlio Vargas, and it spelled the end of efforts to stage experimental theater in Brazil for a decade to come.

Teatro da Experiência marked a radical departure from theatrical conventions in Brazil. In its emphasis on abstraction and the sensorial ‘experience’ of media convergence, it resembled other modernist and avant-garde endeavors such as the TotalTheater project led by Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus school in Germany. Years later, Flávio de Carvalho recalled that in his initial proposal for a permit he had described the theater as a ‘laboratory’ designed to ‘form a practical base for the psychology of entertainment’. Its purpose was to explore ‘the world of ideas’ by experimenting with ‘settings, modes of diction, mimesis, the dramatization of new elements of expression, problems of lighting and sound, conjugated to the movement of abstract forms’ (Carvalho 42).

Planning began in the summer of 1933 under the direction of Oswaldo Sampaio, a future film director, and Carvalho, who had gained notoriety two years earlier for an ‘experiment’ that involved testing Freud's theory of mass psychology by joining a Corpus Christi procession while wearing a hat (a strict taboo) and yelling profanities. Carvalho drew on his architectural training in order to transform what had once been a storefront on the first floor of the Clube dos Artistas Modernos headquarters. Following months of hype in the press, Teatro da Experiência opened its doors on November 15, 1933 with a performance of *Bailado do Deus Morto*, a collaborative creation by Carvalho and Henricão, a black chauffer who was also an up-and-coming samba composer. The piece, which was seemingly influenced by Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, featured Afro-Brazilian instruments and a cast of amateur black actors; the one exception was Hugo Adami, a white actor who played the titular dead god.

On the evening of November 16, the artists defied an order prohibiting further performances of the piece, which had not received prior approval from the board of censors. Police arrived in the middle of the performance and stayed until the end but later shut down the theater. Officially, Teatro da Experiência was accused of public indecency for its use of profanities and anti-religious speech, though another obvious cause was its incorporation of elements from Afro-Brazilian rituals. As archival documents by an undercover informant for the political police reveal, authorities had also become alarmed by the activities of the Clube dos Artistas Modernos, which drew an eclectic array of prominent intellectuals, working-class immigrants, and Communist, Trotskyist, and anarchist activists—a mix which became even more volatile with the participation of black artists in the theater (see Townsend).

While a judge decided their fate, Teatro da Experiência managed to host an evening of Russian dances by Lubov Soumarokova as well as ‘Coisas de negro’, a show directed by Henricão and Francisco Pires that included ‘dances from the era of slavery’ such as *macumbas*, *urucungos*, and *tambús*. The avant-garde writer Oswald de Andrade also gave a reading of scenes from *O Homem e o Cavalo* (Man and the Horse), an anti-fascist spectacle featuring such characters as Cleopatra, Fu-Man-Chu, Madame Jesus, talking horses, the Voice of Stalin, and a black inventor who is ‘disembodied’ by a Poet-Soldier. Despite an outcry among intellectuals and a petition signed by artists as far as Buenos Aires, the judge upheld the police order on the grounds that the theater posed a threat to public order. Teatro da Experiência ceased to operate and as a result, neither *O Homem e o Cavalo* nor *O Rei da Vela (The Candle King)*, a second play by Oswald de Andrade, would be performed. Within a few weeks of the judicial ruling, the Clube dos Artistas Modernos had also closed its doors.

**List of Works**

Andrade, Oswald de. (1990) *O Homem e o Cavalo*, São Paulo: Secretaría de Estado de Cultura de São Paulo.

--------- (1967) *O Rei da Vela*, São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro.[In English: *The Candle King*, trans. Ana Bernstein and Sarah J. Townsend, in *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance*, ed. Diana Taylor and Sarah J. Townsend, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 152-172.]

Carvalho, Flávio de. (1973) *A origem animal de Deus* e *O Bailado do Deus Morto,* São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro.

**References and Further Reading**

Carvalho, Flávio de. (1939) ‘A epopéa do Teatro da Experiência e o *Bailado do Deus Morto*,’ *Revista Anual do Salão de Maio* 1: 42-47.

Toledo, J. (1994) *Flávio de Carvalho: O comedor de emoções*, São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense.

Townsend, S. (2009) “Total Theater and the Missing Pieces of the Brazilian Avant-Garde,” *Modernism/Modernity* 16 (2): 329-355.

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**IMAGES**

**Note: I acquired all of these images from newspapers held at the Arquivo do Estado de São Paulo in São Paulo, Brazil. They are in the public domain. (I have used one of them in an article, along with several other images acquired at the archive.)**

**Image 1:**

*O Bailado do Deus Morto* (Dance of the Dead God), performed at the Teatro da Experiência in São Paulo by an almost entirely black cast. *Diário da Noite*,15 November 1933: 5. Courtesy of the Archivo do Estado de São Paulo.

**Image 2:**

A drawing by Oswaldo Sampaio showing an example of the type of innovative stage design he intended to develop for Teatro da Experiência. *Folha da Noite,* 21 November 1933: 4. Courtesy of the Archivo do Estado de São Paulo.

**Image 3:**

An image of the exterior of the Teatro da Experiência as the officer in charge of enforcing public morality arrives to witness the performance of *O Bailado do Deus Morto*. *Diário da Noite*, 17 November 1933: 8. Courtesy of the Archivo do Estado de São Paulo.

**Image 4:**

Francisco Pires, one of the directors of the ‘Coisas de negro’ (Black Things) show at the Teatro da Experiência. *Folha da Noite*, 5 December 1933: 4. Courtesy of the Archivo do Estado de São Paulo.