

Book Review

Rufino dos Santos, Joel. *A história do negro no teatro brasileiro.* Novas Direções, 2015.

Joel Rufino dos Santos here provides a much-anticipated contribution to the study of the presence of Afro-Brazilians in the national theater. The author investigates the ways in which Afro-Brazilians are authors, characters, objects, and types—both onstage and off. In addition to offering an overview of the role of race in the history of Afro-Brazilian theater and drama, the book also contains many invaluable images that serve to illustrate as well as add insight to the written pages, filling a much-needed gap in critical studies of Brazilian theater.

Rufino dos Santos starts the book by offering an overview of the influence of Portuguese theater, which brought the tradition of *Autos* to Brazil. He focuses on Bento Teixeira's *O rico avarento* and *O Lázaro pobre*. He also shows how popular theatrical performances have shaped modern Brazilian theater. Theater, in the popular sense of street cultural productions, has structured itself as local to the place where it is staged; it has not been confined to a set, closed space, or building. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, theater was appropriated by the bourgeoisie, conferring high social status to those who could attend the performances. This cemented a boundary between popular and erudite theatrical forms that was not present before. Rufino dos Santos also explores a duality in Brazilian theater performances; since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Afro-Brazilians have occupied marginal spaces (as servants, helpers, buffoons) in the closed theaters of the elites, but central spaces in the theatrical street productions geared to most of the population.

As an overall framework, Rufino dos Santos proposes a theoretical distinction between drama and theater, in relation to the role played by Afro-Brazilians in Brazilian dramaturgy. Focusing on the fact that Afro-Brazilians have been discriminated against in the theater as agents, actors, directors, and playwrights, but have been present in plays as characters or types since Brazilian

theater's inception during the colonial period, he affirms that “neste livro se verá que, discriminado no teatro, o negro dominou o drama” (69).

The book is divided into four main chapters with the following thematic focus: popular theater, as agents/authors of mostly street performances; black men and women as characters on stage (before the 1950s); contemporary black theater; and finally, theater groups and stage performances. The organizing structure of the book reflects what the author considers to be important milestones among Afro-Brazilian theater voices, which starts with the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN). These milestones are influenced not only by historical factors but also by the desire to be seen on stage, to fund, to conceive, and to infuse plays with sensibilities largely inspired by black activism and its movements for social change.

The first two chapters are instructive; however, as Rufino dos Santos admits at the beginning of the introduction, they tend to be overly simplistic in scope. In fact, the book aims to look at plays or performances that mark what Rufino dos Santos calls “phases of change” for Afro-Brazilians, especially changes in the social arena, as opposed to investigating the phases themselves. Moreover, taking an in-depth look at one of the phases, such as Afro-Brazilian folk traditions, would not have been possible within the scope of one book (not to mention that fact that this research is already available in countless other books). The first chapters offer an overview of a few folk traditions that follow a dramatic structure, such as *Bumba Meu Boi*, *Congada* and *Carnival*. The second chapter looks at a few important playwrights of the nineteenth century who presented black characters on stage, such as José de Alencar, Martins Pena, and Arthur Azevedo. As an introduction to the topic, Rufino dos Santos's book offers instructive images as well as important insights into some of the plays. Besides the more detailed descriptions, the text offers an overview of how Afro-Brazilians have been changing and merging into the Brazilian social fabric. He touches upon the history of slavery, abolitionism, and the concept of the mulatto as escape hatch. He concludes this first part by exploring the emergence of the social movements of resistance that allowed for more active leadership and participation of Afro-Brazilian voices on stage.

The last two chapters before the conclusion present the founding of TEN by Abdias do Nascimento as an important milestone. Rufino dos Santos considers it a milestone not just for its aesthetic influence but also for its socio-political

impact. Nascimento envisioned the theatrical group as an example for black movements due to its large scope of influence. Rufino dos Santos goes on to affirm that there had never been Black Theater in Brazil without a political movement to go with it, exposing the racism embedded in the Brazilian social structure. The last part of the book offers the reader an overview of major contemporary theater groups, companies, and performances geared towards the affirmation of Afro-Brazilian culture and presence onstage. These include Bando de Teatro Olodum, Nós do Morro, Cia. Black & Preto, and Grupo Caixa Preta. Overall, the Rufino dos Santos seamlessly explores a series of writers, actors, directors, and companies that have shaped the political consciousness and artistry of Afro-Brazilian theatrical self-reflections over the past fifty years.

In the theater, Rufino dos Santos states that “o negro se tornou irremediavelmente visível, alçando-se à representação do brasileiro, ao lado do branco, encerrando de vez o negro objeto como mero figurante” (234). This struggle for visibility and inclusion, although not without measured success, continues to encounter opposition. For its large scope and theoretical rigor, Rufino dos Santos’s book merits attention from scholars and students of race relations and Brazilian theater. In fact, this is a book that would prove an invaluable pedagogical tool in the classroom, due to its rich visual component and its concise and clear prose.

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