

# They're just rehearsing\*

BERNARDO CARVALHO

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They're just rehearsing. At the same time as the two actors exit the left wing and move across the platform towards the center of the stage, a man enters the dark hall, and with him, a flicker of five o'clock light through the crack in the door left ajar, separating the auditorium and the street, where the day continues its course with a buzzing of horns, motors, and sirens. The director, in the fifth row, reaches with his hand, touching the thigh of his assistant, to say something in her ear, while the lighting tech interrupts the joke he was whispering to the technician by his side on the mezzanine now that the scene has started again. When the two actors step out again, advancing from the left wing to center stage, and interrupting as well what they were whispering to each other offstage so as to project clearly the dialogue they have memorized, the man who has just entered from the back is even less than a faceless shadow because there is no longer even a flicker of five o'clock light to highlight him in the semi-darkness now that the door separating the dark auditorium from the street has closed. The director, with his hand on the thigh of his assistant, after whispering something in her ear that causes her to stifle a laugh, waits anxiously and for the umpteenth time to see if the actor will speak with the desired intonation, and the lighting tech on the mezzanine, for his part, waits for another interruption—deep down unconsciously hoping for another failed attempt so that he can finally finish the joke he was telling the other technician.

One actor says to the other, in the center of the stage: "You are the villain; and because of this I must know who you are, where you are, where you are from, and what you can do to hold such power and provoke me without warning, ravaging my green fields, and undermining my wall of support." And that's when the other, who despite not holding a scythe or a robe (they're just rehearsing), begins to open

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his mouth, and the director once more, taking his hand from his assistant's thigh, interrupts the scene with a gesture to ask in a purposefully inaudible tone, as irritated as he is, how many times he will have to explain.

He repeats, as if speaking to himself, that the text is from the fifteenth century, that the humble peasant invokes Death (represented here by a man) with the only words he has left, as a last resort, that he wants Death to take pity on him and return his beloved wife, a victim of the atrocities of war. The director repeats, irritated, that the actor's performance lacks vitality and desperation, and that it does not seem that the humble peasant is truly suffering or indignant at the injustice of the death of his wife in the flower of life. He says this to the two actors and then, while they return to the wings, whispers the same thing in the ear of his assistant, concluding with a witty remark that makes her shake in syncopated laughter.

Back in the wings, the actor playing the humble peasant takes advantage of the moment with his companion playing Death to resume the whispering that had been interrupted. He slams the director, says it's impossible to show despair with a text like that, so unrealistic, no one would talk to Death that way after losing his wife in a violent manner. He complains, under his breath, something about the kind of performance that the scene requires, in his opinion, and that it has to do with a certain detachment. Suddenly, mid-whispered-sentence, glancing at his watch (no need to remove it—they're just rehearsing), he complains about the time, says something about his own wife's delay, that she should have already arrived, and at the same time that he says this, the lighting tech on the mezzanine tries unsuccessfully to whisper the end of his joke because he's about to deliver the punchline as the two actors step back on stage, following the silent signals from the director's assistant, and the man at the back of the room, after stopping unnoticed in a shadow, now takes a few steps down the lateral aisle of the auditorium.

The actor playing the humble peasant turns to the other, who is playing Death, although without a scythe or a robe (they're just rehearsing), and is about to open his mouth when he notices that, instead of looking at him, the director, still with his hand on his assistant's thigh, whispers something in her ear that makes her lift a hand to her lips to stifle a laugh. He notices the director who is in the center of the hall, in the fifth row, but not the shadow advancing along the side in the darkness. Irritated, the actor repeats the scene exactly as he had done previously, uttering his lines with the same distancing effect that seems so appropriate to him,

to which the infuriated director stands and, waving his arms and shaking his head, silently indicates that it's horrible.

With the new interruption, the lighting tech tries to return to the joke he was telling the other technician, because each time he resumes, he starts over for fear that the interruption will disrupt the comic effect. His whisper is now rushed, as he tries to fit the entire joke into the space of time between the director's interruption and the return of the actors to the stage. In the wings, while glancing at his watch (they're just rehearsing), the actor playing the humble peasant repeats under his breath to the other, who's playing Death, that his wife should have arrived by now, as they had arranged, because he had told her himself that everything would be finished by five, and he could not have imagined that the director would reveal himself to be such an idiot precisely with this unrealistic text and that the rehearsal would go on so long.

The assistant gives the silent signal to start over and the lighting tech unhappily interrupts, once again, nearly at the end, the joke he was whispering to the technician on the mezzanine, which was running the risk of no longer being funny because of the repetition. The man who was walking slowly along the lateral aisle now stops just before the fifth row as he sees the two actors again take the stage. The humble peasant turns to Death and says: "You are the villain." The director asks them to stop. The sympathetic tone of his voice is just a disguise that the actor is tired of hearing and usually precedes a nervous breakdown. The director, trying to control himself, whispers: "Don't you understand? He has lost his wife in the flower of life, he's desperate, angry at the injustice of death and men, and for this reason he calls to Death; he still believes that he can convince him to return his beloved wife. No one says this with detachment."

The two leave the stage. Glancing at his watch, the humble peasant whispers again to Death without scythe or robe something about the delay of his wife, who at this point should already be seated in the audience. He does not understand why she has not yet arrived, as if it weren't enough that the rehearsal was going long, thanks to the imbecility of the director. And while the humble peasant whispers his indignation, the man who was merely a shadow now moves down the fifth row, now is beside the director and his assistant, who only see him when he is just a few seats away. He sits, to make himself less noticeable, because the assistant has already raised her arm, signaling to the actors that they can start again, and while he reveals to them in a hush what he came to announce from the world outside,

and which petrifies them, the lighting tech on the mezzanine comes close in a whisper to the conclusion of the joke.

The humble peasant wearing a watch and Death without a scythe or robe (they're just rehearsing) enter the stage. The peasant turns to Death and recommences his litany with the same intonation and detachment that to him seem most appropriate. But this time, to his surprise, the director does not interrupt him, because his eyes are wide open and he is pale, while the man, previously just a shadow, whispers something in his ear. And as he sees the man whispering in the director's ear, and the face of the director and his assistant, who for the first time do not interrupt him but continue to stare at him wide-eyed and aghast (the assistant with eyes full of tears before the peasant's supplication of Death) while they listen to what the other tells them in their ears, leaning over the chair, even though the intonation on stage was the same and should therefore, logically, have been interrupted once more, the actor himself interrupts the action and finally understands, terrified and at the same time, the sinister coincidence of the scene and the moment, what that shadow has come to announce about the world outside, with horns, motors, and sirens; he understands why his wife has not appeared and finally what the humble peasant feels; he understands why the director has not interrupted him this time, because he is finally perfect in the skin of the peasant in his supplication before Death; he understands that for one instant he in fact has embodied the peasant, that involuntarily and unconsciously, by a trick of fate, he has become the peasant himself because of what that shadow has come to announce; he understands everything in a second, even without knowing the details of the accident that killed her crossing the street two blocks from the theater, before the wide-open eyes of the director and the assistant, beneath the unrestrained laughter of the lighting tech and the technician on the mezzanine, coming to the end of the joke.

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One of Brazil's most celebrated contemporary novelists, Bernardo Carvalho (b. 1960) has received both national and international acclaim for his creative work. Born in Rio de Janeiro and based in São Paulo, Carvalho trained as a journalist and worked for many years as a correspondent for the *Folha de São Paulo*, one of Brazil's most respected and widely read newspapers. Given this experience, it is

perhaps unsurprising that Carvalho's creative writing mixes fact and fiction, intentionally drawing upon yet simultaneously obscuring the historical facts and current events referenced in his work. Carvalho's fiction constantly challenges readers to question narrative authority even as it foregrounds the urgent and indispensable role fiction plays in making sense of human experience. The author of numerous short stories and eleven novels, his most recent novel, *O ultimo gozo do mundo*, was published in 2021. Carvalho has one novel translated into English: *Nine Nights* (Vintage, 2008).

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Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Brigham Young University. He co-translated with James Green the memoir *A Mother's Cry: A Memoir of Politics, Prison, and Torture under the Brazilian Military Dictatorship* (Duke UP, 2010) by Lina Pena Sattamini, and he has translated an array of authors from Brazil and Portugal, including Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós, Euclides da Cunha, Sérgio Sant'Anna, Luiz Ruffato, Luís Filipe Silva, Lília Schwarcz, and Ferréz.