

MUTATING *MENINOS DA RUA*:
TEATRO RELIGARE, *DON QUIJOTE*
AND THE THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

Jose Julio Velez Sainz

Facultad de Filología

Universidad Complutense

Abstract: The following article analyzes two pieces by the collective theatrical troupe Teatro Religare (a contemporary staging of *Don Quijote* and *Mutatis*) in the tradition of Augusto Boal's *Theater of the oppressed* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The pieces capture the conscience of actors, technical personnel and public in order to train them critically and to make them enter the imaginary of power. These plays are intimately linked with notions of popular theater, the theater of agitation and propaganda, and psychodrama. They utilize the classic for the projection the contemporary situation: *Don Quijote* allows the boys to present instances of transformation and knowledge: a man can transform into another one by following his own dream. In *Mutatis*, the boys instantiate simultaneously a revolutionary and a pedagogic and social goal.

Keywords: Teatro Religare; Augusto Boal; Paulo Freire; Collective Theater; *Don Quijote*.

Resumo: O artigo seguinte analisa duas representações pela trupe teatral coletiva *Teatro Religare* (*Don Quijote* e *Mutatis*) na tradição do *Teatro do oprimido* de Augusto Boal e *Pedagogia do oprimido* de Paulo Freire. As peças capturam a consciência dos atores, pessoal técnico e público a fim de treiná-los criticamente e fazê-los ingressar no imaginário de poder. Estas peças são intimamente ligadas a noções do teatro popular, do teatro de agitação e propaganda, e do psicodrama. A trupe utiliza o clássico para projetar a situação contemporânea: *Don Quijote* permite que os meninos apresentem exemplos de transformação e conhecimento: um homem pode se transformar em outro ao seguir seu sonho. Em *Mutatis*, os meninos perseguem uma meta revolucionária, pedagógica e social, simultaneamente.

Palavras-chave: Teatro Religare; Augusto Boal; Paulo Freire; Teatro coletivo; *Don Quijote*.

Several theatrical traditions have disposed that drama, as an art, has a civic duty in which the formation of citizenship is primordial. Considering theater as an agent of literacy and empowerment, Augusto Boal's *Theater of the oppressed* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* attempt to create awareness of actors, technicians and public with the end to form them critically and bring awareness to the public.¹ In this paper, I will update the fundamental parameters of those theatrical trends that exemplify theater as a means of learning and future and of literacy. Then, I will present a specific example of a contemporary staging of *Don Quijote* and a later contemporary work called *Mutatis* that make the quixotic figure as a means of learning and empowerment of the Brazilian working class. This view of a Peninsular classic as theater of the oppressed sheds new light on the works and serves to underscore the sophisticated ways by which early modern works are staged contemporarily as well as the invalidity of some national labels applied to theatrical trends.

For Paulo Freire's groundbreaking *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, literacy is the whole of pedagogy as learning to read is learning your own word. And the human word imitates the divine: it is creative. Word is understood here as both word and action; it is not the term that arbitrarily points to a thought which, in turn, lives separated from existence. It is a signification produced by "praxis", a word whose discursivity flows in historicity, a live and dynamic word, not an inert and dead category. As Freire states: "There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (Freire, *Pedagogy* 87). Freire would continue this notion of literacy as conscience-making by the oppressed in his 1963 work *Alfabetização e conscientização* and *Educação como prática da liberdade* (Vieites García, "Construcción" 493-508). It is thus a word that speaks of and transforms the world².

¹ Some of these notions are already latent in popular theater, agit-prop and psychodrama. Likewise European currents of political theater following the path of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht or, in the Spanish case, the 1920's pedagogical missions, underscore theater's social functions and its capacity to create critical subjects (Rey Faraldós 153-64).

² Independently from Freire and Boal, pedagogues have analyzed how theater has served as means for literacy and have utilized drama as a facilitator of learning. Since M. Sendak's 1963 classic *Where the Wild Things Are* has arisen an important number of works that emphasize the role of theater as a means to language-building (McMaster), as tool for creative writing (Beehner, McNaughton,

Based on Freire, Augusto Boal developed the theory, aesthetics and technique of the theater of the oppressed during his political exile from 1971 to 1986 in Argentina and Peru. For Boal, theater of the oppressed functions both a theoretical formulation and an aesthetic method, based on different art-works. It combines a number of exercises, games and theatrical techniques that attempt to de-mechanize physically and intellectually their practitioners and thus achieve the democratization of drama. It aims at using the theater and the dramatic technologies as an effective instrument for the comprehension and the search of alternatives to social and interpersonal problems. It is a question of stimulating the participant non-actors to expressing their experiences of daily situations of oppression through theatre. From its pedagogic, social, cultural, political and therapeutic implications it proposes to transform spectators to spect-actors, protagonists of the dramatic action, fastening and stimulating their creativity and thinking about their past, modifying the reality in the present and creating their future. The spectator sees, represents; the spect-actor sees and acts, or rather, sees to act in the scene and in life. The theater of the oppressed intends for participants to think about relations of power, by means of the exploration and representation of histories between oppressors and the oppressed, which the public not only attends to but also partakes. The theatrical works are team-constructed from true stories telling the typical problems of a community, such as discrimination, prejudices, violence, and intolerance. Theater of the Oppressed is, first of all, an action-space that analyzes and proposes solutions against the oppression that individuals and communities undergo differently. Its goal is to transform and empower the actors in a way that is in itself transformative. "Transforming the scene I transform myself" is Boal's *leit motif* (*Theater* 95).

Since its first systematization in the 1970's as Journalistic Urgency Theatre, it has grown into several theatrical modalities: Invisible Theatre, Theater of the Image, Theater Forum, the Rainbow of the Desire (therapeutic theatre), Legislative Theatre, and, finally Aesthetics of the Oppressed. Because of it nowadays it is a practical and

Schneider & Jackson, Crumpler & Schneider), as formation of readership (Martinez, Woodson, Alber & Foil) and as model for intercultural teaching (Saltz & Johnson).

aesthetic system that represents “the integration of theatre, therapy, activism and education” (Schutzman and Soothsayer 15)³.

Such is the case of *Num lugar de la Mancha*, by Spanish author Mario García-Guillén (1995). With the apt subtitle of *As aventuras e amores de Dom Quixote*, (Dom Quixote’s adventures and loves) García-Guillén presents a “adaptação global” (global adaptation) of Cervantes’s work. Instead of cutting off chapters, he composes tableaux and creates characters by associating several scenes in one situation thus reuniting multiple images at the same time. García-Guillén utilizes a long running notion of particular Latin American Quijote criticism and interpretation that underscores the classic masterpiece’s ground for utopia. Miguel Ángel Asturias’s 1967 *Los dos Quijotes* (The two Quixotes) draws parallels between Don Quijote and Bartolomé de las Casas, who: “Con el hábito blanco, como una nube de sandalias ligeras cruza por las tierras de Veracruz y Chiapas, aquel loco—loco como quiere Menéndez Pidal—, pero loco como Jesús, loco como el Quijote, loco como Bolívar, que se llamó Bartolomé de las Casas” [With a white habit, like a cloud of slim sandals, he crosses the lands of Veracruz and Chiapas. That madman, as Menéndez Pidal puts it, mad as Jesus, mad as Quijote, mad as Bolívar, whose name is Bartolomé de las Casas] (García 199). Miguel Ángel Asturias links together a number of foundational figures of Latin American culture: Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and the *libertador* Simón Bolívar-- their common ground is a very Quixotic fight for freedom and justice in the shadow of Christ. Alejo Carpentier would also insist on the inherent Quixotism of the cultural construction of the New World.

Pronto conocido en toda Europa, don Quijote cruzó el océano para mostrarse a todo lo largo y ancho del Nuevo Mundo. Y, por encima de luchas y vicisitudes, sobrevolando los antagonismos históricos, siguió transitando sin trabas, por las tierras de América. Bolívar lo evocaba a menudo en los últimos días de su prodigiosa existencia. Y José Martí, el espíritu más universal y enciclopédico de todo el siglo XIX americano, tenía a su creador por uno de los caracteres más dignos y bellos de la historia. (García 257)

[Soon renowned in Europe, don Quijote crossed the ocean to show himself through the entire and large New World. Over all fights and vicissitudes, and overshadowing historical antagonisms, he walked undisturbed the lands of America. Bolívar often evoked him in the last days of his prodigious existence. And José Martí, the most universal and encyclopedic spirit of the American Nineteenth Century, considered its creator one of the most beautiful and dignified characters in History]

³ Vieites García has connected in several works Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed and Freire’s pedagogy updating both (“Educación” 77-101, “Augusto” 161-179, “Investigación” 11-30).

For this particular American trend Cervantes and Don Quijote are infused with universal human values in an utopian fantasy.⁴ Such were the sources for Valéria de Pietro when she intended to adapt the classic for the scene as part of her artistic collaboration with convicts of the extinct Febem or “Fundação Estadual para o Bem Estar do Menor”, an actual infamous prison for young delinquents in São Paulo. The play was performed in more than 50 occasions between the years 2000 and 2006. The protagonists were Paulo Autran, the musicians Chico César and Jarbas Mariz and the group of rap Jigaboo. 17 year-old André Luís Pereira was Sancho Panza and 18 year-old Peterson Xavier do Nascimento played Don Quijote. The project was divided into three phases. In the first phase a period of internment was held between the director Valéria de Pietro and 150 teenagers who were subjected to “socio-educational” measures. In a second phase, the montage was adapted for 40 teenagers, some of which were still prisoners and others who had gone away. The final assembly was constituted by 20 ex-boarders. Peterson Xavier do Nascimento summarizes the collaborative process that gave place to the production. Febem’s theatrical coordinator aimed at integrating all the cultural activities inside one spectacle. This way, arose the idea of staging *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Given his physical complexion Nascimento was called to read the text of the protagonist in translation. Like Don Quixote, he was of stout complexion, dry of meats and skinned of face (I.1). In a later piece, Xavier recalls how he got the role and began a type of creative madness:

Ganhei o papel e achei legal, muita gente falava que eu estava enlouquecendo, porque falava sozinho com um cabo de vassoura na mão. Incorporei mesmo, porque eu via no Dom Quixote muito dos meninos da Febem. O que passa na cabeça de todo mundo ali são sonhos, sonhos, sonhos... Que não se realizam por falta de caminhos ou por falta de estrutura. (“Viver” 69)

[I got the role and found it awesome. Many people said I had gone mad: alone with a broomstick in the hand, speaking to myself. I embodied him, because I saw in Don Quixote much of the children of Febem. What goes through all their minds: dreams, dreams, dreams... That are not realized for lack of ways or for lack of structure.]

⁴ For a *compte rendu* of the drive to americanize Don Quijote and Cervantes, see Julio Vélez-Sainz and Nieves Romero Díaz’s *Cervantes and/on/in the New World*. In the Brazilian case, see Rogelio Miñana’s articles (“Quixote” 159-70, “Don Quijote” 247-60). For an overall summary and criticism of the supposed utopianism of the American *cervantismo* see Héctor Brioso’s works (“Tristes” 247-278, “Novela” 5-32).

The performances took place inside a prison to minors who were going through socio-educational measures as well as all across the city, including the principal Theater (with approximately 1500 seats) of the Auditorium of Latin America. *Num lugar de la Mancha* was seen, according to the calculations of the director, by approximately 5.000 to 6.000 persons.

The reason behind choosing Cervantes's work lies partially in the very romantic conception that Cervantes was caught and taken to the jail in Seville where he initiated his work. The prison-origin and the transformational power of the work exercise a very interesting attraction to young persons who were there with accusations of rape, homicide and drug-trafficking. *Num lugar de la Mancha* praises don Quijote's figure as a tireless fighter for justice and shows the same enthusiasm for its transformational power. Paulo Freire's influential *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), a major actor of the Brazilian progressives, underlines the anxiety of individual transformation and social transformation. In Rogelio Miñana's words:

It is not the knight-errant that symbolizes the personal and social transformation but the gentleman who imagines and concretizes his own vital narrative. His immense creative power creates over reality performative vocabulary that literally materializes words. In that sense, Quijano realizes Paulo Freire's 400 year-younger recipe for a more equal society in the third chapter of his famous *Pedagogy of the oppressed*: a transformative word converted in praxis, in action. ("Don Quixote" 250)⁵

Num lugar de la Mancha codifies its message from the first scene. Alonso Quixana (the name most commonly associated to Quijote in the Brazilian tradition) says "vou me transformar num outro homem" ("I am going to transform myself into someone else") (1). The deliberate nature of the personal metamorphosis explicates a powerful subversive social message. Here the theatre of the oppressed meets the aforementioned Latin American reading of *Don Quijote* as tool to transform. Argentinean Alberto Gerchunoff had pointed to Cervantes's universalism in psychological fashion, and underscored *Don Quijote* as a representation of humankind's drive for self improvement (García 121). In 1948 Carlos Sabat Ercastry, from Uruguay, draws on a

⁵ Rogelio Miñana has devoted some interesting works to the experience. See now "Don Quijote de las Américas: activismo, teatro y el hidalgo Quijano en el Brasil contemporáneo" (247-260). This piece is indebted to his previous work.

parallel between Don Quijote and the conquistadors to emphasize Cervantes's capacity as a role model:

¿Qué conquista de España fue más grande y más duradera que la de Cervantes? ¿No fue más lejos que los Pizarros, que los Cortés, que los Balboas? Su hombre se hace humanidad. Sus criaturas se transmutan en universo. Sus esencias lo son en todas las patrias y ante todos los espíritus. (García 143-45)

[What Spanish conquest was bigger and more lasting than Cervantes's? Did he not go further than the Pizarros, the Cortes, the Balboas? His man is made humanity. His creatures are transformed in universe. Their essences are in all fatherlands and before all spirits]

Valéria di Pietro, adapter of Guillén's text has innumerable possibilities when dealing with Don Quijote's dreams. As the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* stated: "É aí que podemos inserir do pagode ao circo. É a atividade perfeita para recuperar o jovem" [It is there that we can insert the *pagode* as well as the circus. It is the perfect activity to recuperate the youth] ("Sonho").

A clear example of the transformation is Francisco Assis de Oliveira Júnior, dance-adviser of Ballet Stagium who takes part in the spectacle as a street dancer. In the mentioned interview he declares: "Eu me regenerei por completo e hoje sou um autêntico "B-Boy", um garoto do break. Dou aulas na Febem e passo para os menores tudo o que aprendi. A arte faz você parar de pensar em rebelião" ["I regenerated myself completely and today I am an authentic "B-Boy", a "break" boy. I pass everything I learned in classes to the minors at Febem. Art makes you stop thinking about revolt"] ("Sonho"). Di Pietro's work reinforces Augusto Boal's thesis of the theater of the oppressed, which attempts to bring the theatrical reality to places where it would never be normalized and manages to recover these persons by means of their commitment to the theatre. Seen from the distance of 20 years, we now can have a certain notion of exactly how successful was di Pietro's initiative. The taste is somewhat sweet and sour. The lad who was playing the role of Sancho, Andrés Luis Pereira, was detained in 2013 as suspect of taking part in a gunfire with deaths⁶.

⁶ Such is the information provided in the webpage JusBrasil.

See <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/topicos/27557993/andre-luis-pereira>, , last visit 7 november 2017. See also "So homem suspeito de participar de tiroteio com mortes em 2013" <http://www.redeto.com.br/noticia-8541-presos-homem-suspeito-de-participar-de-tiroteio-com-mortes-em-2013.html#.WVkcMYpLefU>

Francisco Assis de Oliveira Junior has a wide list of detentions for thievery and drug-possession ⁷.

Nevertheless, there is a very prominent case of recovery, that of the young man that portrayed don Quijote. Peterson Xavier do Nascimento is now an actor, producer and director of the Instituto Religare - Reciclagem Social e Cultural. His life was drastically altered by the experience, an aspect which he reports in the many occasions he has been interviewed ⁸. He openly recognizes that “aquilo que mudou minha vida: o teatro” [It changed my life: the theater]. In a recent interview, he explains that when he met Valéria he had the same impression as the rest of the inmates. None gave credit to the fact that she was in it just for humanitarian reasons:

Pensava que era um trabalho de política, falso e enganador. Mas quando saí e comecei a conhecer as pessoas de fora, percebi os benefícios que elas levavam para lá, principalmente a Valéria. Então pensei: “Tenho muitos sonhos na minha vida. Só quando fui para a Febem tive oportunidade de ser alguém e fazer alguma coisa”. Comecei a perceber que, no teatro, eu podia ajudar os outros da mesma forma que me ajudaram. Por que não passar isso para frente? [...] Hoje, mais de cinco anos depois desse fato sofrido e dessa fase de crescimento, não sinto vergonha nenhuma em dizer que fui interno da Febem e que sou um vencedor. (“Viver” 70)

[I thought that it was a work of politics, false and deceitful. But when I began to know the persons from the outside, I perceived the benefits that they were bringing to Febem, principally Valéria. Then I thought: "I have a lot of dreams in my life. Only when I went to Febem had I the opportunity to be someone and to do something". I began to perceive that, in the theatre, one could help others in the same way as I was helped. Why not pass this on? [...]] Today more than five years after this fact and this phase of growth, I feel no shame in saying that I was an intern in Febem and that I am a winner.]

Peterson did indeed go forward and he now works with teenagers in situation of risk and evicted from Febem.

Along these lines flows one of his more interesting productions: the theatrical spectacle *Mutatis* by the Religare Theater Group, with direction by Valéria di Pietro, music by Edvaldo Santana, Jarbas Mariz and Célio Pires. It is a drama designed for 10-year-old children and teenagers “em situação de rua”. *Mutatis* tells the story of young people in a gang from the “shaded times” (deprived of freedom) to the “tempos de transformação” [times of transformation] due to the power of art. Peterson Xavier do Nascimento states in his program:

⁷ Such is the information provided in the webpage JusBrasil. See <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/topicos/32537169/francisco-de-assis-de-oliveira-junior/atualizacoes>, last visit 7 november 2017.

⁸ Similar ideas are expressed in this later interviews: “Histórias” and “O Dom Quixote”.

lutando, sofrendo, furando cercos, quebrando barreiras, ultrapassando limites, bradando o grito de liberdade e vitória... Vivendo em meio à pobreza, eles lutam contra a desigualdade, sofrendo com a miséria humana, eles afrontam a injustiça, resistindo às armadilhas do mundo, eles chamam os seus, para juntarem-se à causa... Não à Redução da Idade Penal, Não à Injustiça, Não à Miséria!

[Fighting, suffering, deleting circles, breaking barriers, passing limits, yelling liberty and victory... Living amid poverty, they fight against inequality, suffering with human misery, they confront injustice, they resist the traps of the world, they call upon their own to join the cause. No to the reduction of the penal age, no to injustice, no to misery!]⁹

The Redução da Idade Penal (reduction of penal age) is related to the government's process titled penalização de menores de dezoito anos (penalization of 18-year old minors) inside the Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente (ECA). The ECA proved to be a very punitive law intended to control the actions of the youth. As the ECA intends: minors are considered “penalmente inimputáveis” and thus not obligated to respond in criminal court for their infractions. They can be interned in a “unidade de internação” provisionally for 45 days and go through socio-educational measures for a maximum of three years. Teatro Religare utilizes their work to confront these measures, which can be considered quite drastic for minors.¹⁰ At the same time, Teatro Religare's *Mutatis* rings well with Boal's organizing principle of the personal metamorphosis of the actors. Let us remember his words:

The goal of the theater of the oppressed is not to reach a stabilizing principle, but rather to the unbalance that drives action. Its objective is to dinamize. This is apprehended through concrete actions in scene: the act of transformation is itself transformative! Transforming the scene I transform myself. (Boal, *Theater* 95)

Mutatis is a piece that stages the transformation put forward in Boal's work. It actually adapts for the scene the main organizing principle behind the theater of the oppressed's notion of empowering the actors. Their “dreams” (quixotic in nature) are translated for the language of the theatre, with statements of courage that show a strategy of clash against marginality. In fact, along the work the children claim Xavier's motto “sou um vitorioso” [I am a victor]. The assembly uses, besides verbal language, corporeal work with choreographies derived from urban dances, popular

⁹ The program can be obtained at the clipping website:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5piut1W-nU>

¹⁰ The Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente can be obtained at:
<http://www.ebc.com.br/cidadania/2015/03/entenda-como-sao-punidos-os-infratores-menores-de-18-anos>, Rafael Madeira (CEDECA/DF) e Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público.

Brazilian dances and physical theater ¹¹. It is thus the story of triumph and personal engagement by Valéria di Pietro with an ultimate resounding answer by Peterson.

To sum up, di Pietro captures the conscience of actors, technical personnel and public in order to train them critically and to make them enter the “word”, a sort of imaginary of power, which necessarily goes through literacy. These plays are intimately linked with notions of popular theater, the theater of agitation and propaganda, and psychodrama. Both plays present a double use of theatrical political currents. On the earlier piece, di Pietro carried out a more traditional approximation in which she is interned with the boys of the jail at the jail. She utilizes the classic for the projection the contemporary situation: *Don Quijote* allows the boys to present instances of transformation and knowledge, a man can transform into another one by following his own dream. In the second piece, *Mutatis*, the boys instantiate simultaneously a revolutionary and a pedagogic and social goal. The oppressed learn, and along this learning they are transformed. Paraphrasing Freire and Boal: it is a live, practical, creative theater in all its magnificent social possibilities.

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¹¹ The last staging I have recorded took place in Friday, September 2, 2010: <http://www.nossasaopaulo.org.br/portal/node/11166>. There is a quite artisanal clipping of the piece in the collective's webpage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5piut1W-nU>. They can be contacted through their Facebook page. I want to thank them for their online availability.

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Jose Julio Velez Sainz has two PH.D. degrees: one in Romanistics (University of Chicago, 2002) and one in Hispanic Philology (University of Salamanca, 2008). He is Full Professor of Literature at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, with three six-years periods of research (one in the US, two in Spain), and Director of the Complutense Center for Theater Research (www.ucm.es/ITEM). He has published over a hundred articles ranging from medieval to contemporary literature as well as five monographs, six critical editions and several edited volumes. His current field of interest lies in contemporary version of Spanish classics.

Article received on March 14, 2018. Approved in May 5, 2018.