

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIA LUDENS AND ITS PRODUCTIONS OF IRISH PLAYS IN BRAZIL

**Domingos Nunez**

Cia Ludens

## **Abstract:**

This essay intends to give an account of the activities undertaken by Cia Ludens, a professional Brazilian theatre company, since its foundation in 2003 up to present days. With the sole purpose of translating and producing Irish plays in Brazil, mainly by contemporary dramatists, and establishing possible connections with the Brazilian reality, the company has so far produced four plays and three staged readings, designed to show part of its researching process. Interwoven by the concept of “play”, the reflections presented here reveal how some of Huizinga’s ideas influenced the company’s artistic choices in its various productions.

**Keywords:** Cia Ludens, contemporary theatre, performance, translation, play-concept.

Founded in 2003 with the sole purpose of translating and producing Irish plays in Brazil, Cia Ludens has so far produced three plays by outstanding Irish dramatists. Aiming to establish possible connections between the social and political realities of Ireland and Brazil, since its foundation, Cia Ludens has adopted a methodology of work involving

<b>Ilha do Desterro</b>	<b>Florianópolis</b>	<b>nº 58</b>	<b>p. 479-505</b>	<b>jan/jun. 2010</b>
-------------------------	----------------------	--------------	-------------------	----------------------

intense literary research, and physical and vocal training which can last several months, sometimes years. Some particularities of these research processes and their relationship with the local theatrical and academic context were encapsulated in three cycles of staged readings held as accompaniments to productions. In spite of the company's serious approach, in parallel it introduces a strong element of "play" throughout the creative process, from conception to performance of a show. This balance between seriousness and playfulness is the premise of an important study of the "play" element in culture undertaken by the Dutch historical philosopher Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*, and it is also the impulse that has stimulated the activities of the company whose name, clearly, derives from Huizinga's inspiring book. Alongside *Homo Sapiens* and *Homo Faber*, Huizinga postulates *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player, as at least equal in importance to those other anthropological approaches. And even though he says that the terms *play* and *seriousness* or *earnestness* are not of equal value because "play is positive, earnestness negative", he concludes that they somehow overlap inside the concept of play, because "if seriousness seeks to exclude play, play can very well include seriousness" (45).

I had come across Huizinga's study while writing my Master's dissertation, but it was only in 2003, while in Ireland researching for my PhD thesis, that, through the critical works of Stewart Parker, I approached Huizinga's idea of *ludo ergo sum* in a more revealing way. Parker, interpreting Huizinga, affirms that "play is how we test the world and register its realities. Play is how we experiment, imagine, invent and move forward" (6). This movement accurately reflected the innermost feelings of the people who happened to be part of the company at that time, and *Ludens* seemed the precise term to signal our deepest intentions in dealing with Irish and Brazilian contexts through the perspective of drama. The Latin term led us to make associations with other rich words that could be used as fruitful possibilities on the stage, such as the Latin *ludo*, *inlusio* and *illudere*; the Portuguese *lúdico* and *ludibriar*, and the English *ludicrous* and *illusion*. In his book, Huizinga detects the forms and elements of play

expressed in Language, Law, War, Poetry, Philosophy and Art, but it is in his discussions about theatre that he admits that “only drama, because of its intrinsically functional character, its quality of being an action, remains permanently linked to play” (144). Play presupposes strict rules, against the earnestness of which light-heartedness is placed to reach a balanced combination. This ideal has been at the basis of Cia Ludens’ activities, and has propelled all its decisions on artistic aspects of a production, from the translation of plays into Portuguese to acting, setting and costume design.

In 2003 we undertook a long study on Irish drama, starting at the turn of the twentieth century with the National Literary Theatre as conceived by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and their group, and finishing with some of Brian Friel’s most popular plays. But it was only in 2004 that Cia Ludens produced its first show, one of Friel’s best known works, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). This play, apart from being written by one of – if not the most important – Irish playwright writing at the time, seemed to be an appropriate choice for the young company’s first production. The formal components and ideas inherent to the play allowed us to put into practice both the company’s ideals and also the various possibilities of applying the concept of “play” over the several artistic aspects of the production. The result as a whole was extremely promising, and the “play” elements assumed distinct and sometimes surprising forms, starting, indeed, with the translated text. As a PhD student and the translator of the play into Portuguese, I was aware of the academic controversies involving the definition of “translation” and I therefore preferred a more playful concept and called my version for the text a “transposition”. The main intention was to get across the message that I was more interested in bringing the context depicted by Friel as close as possible to a Brazilian reality than in trying to stick to every single English word and its “whenever-possible-literal” equivalent in Portuguese.

With this in mind, the criteria used for our Brazilian production of the script were dictated by strictly personal factors. Because, as a group, we wanted the Brazilian audience to identify themselves with the

atmosphere of the original play, as the translator and director I suggested that Ballybeg, the fictional village imagined by Friel for the setting of his story, should be the home town of my infancy, a very small, cold and highly catholic city in the South of Brazil, and that the Mundy sisters should be my own five sisters. By extension, the whole cast was to do likewise, and exercise private connections with their own childhood environments, since most of them had been born in, and still lived in, relatively small towns. From a linguistic point of view the huge differences between the two languages, their particular lexicon and the consequent political and social complications, were strongly reinforced. As a consequence the original script was, first of all, shortened to be more pleasing to the taste of local theatregoers; and some parts were suppressed to diminish the overwhelming Chekhovian atmosphere, and emphasize the epic forms personified by the Narrator. Finally, practically all direct mention of Irish historical and political peculiarities was ignored. The final result was that Ballybeg became an even more remote village, open to all sorts of possible associations with the thousands of small towns spread all over Brazil, even though the name of the country was never mentioned.

The principle of adjusting some aspects of the play to a more local reality was also used in tackling the songs. After researching Brazilian music of the 1930s, we selected some love songs of the period, the same described by Friel, to replace the "English" scores sung and heard on the radio by the Mundy family. Instead of the political accent of songs such as "Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?" (*Plays Two* 11), the sisters sang and heard much more romantic, naïve and melodramatic melodies because there was no political propaganda in a musical format in the Brazilian context of that particular period. Despite the losses that resulted from this choice, due to hugely different forces naturally operating and moulding the realities of the two different nations, we concluded that this would be preferable to any attempt to displace the original time of the action in favour of a connection with more recent Brazilian political history (in which propagandistic music might have

found some reflection). We believed this impulse might have completely deformed the dramatist's original idea. And as it turned out, the tremendous acceptance by the audience, who were able to identify some of the songs, and be captivated by the nostalgic feelings they produced—an atmosphere similar to the one intended by Friel in his original script—proved that we were not entirely wrong in our choices. Apart from these specific songs, a great deal of incidental music was introduced during the narrative, especially during the narrator's monologues. We wanted to suggest an atmosphere with something of the quality of illusion, to be the “soundtrack” of the most frequently sad, but epic, stories rearranged by the narrator's memories. This effect was obtained by original music composed by an accordionist.

Since *Lughnasa* had been often categorized under the label of a “memory play”, we were instigated to experiment aesthetically with the presence of “play” elements in such a concept. Thus, the narrative was to be grasped through two different perspectives: a realistic/naturalistic one, in the manner of Chekov, and another more fantastical, in the field of illusion. What was supposed to be reality or memory should be intertwined. Two practical procedures were put in motion to achieve this. On the one hand the naturalistic approach developed by Stanislavsky was encouraged for the moments when the characters were dealing with their domestic affairs and talking about apparent trivialities—with a good amount of realistic props produced to lend more credibility to the performers' movements—while on the other hand, slow and artificial gestures were introduced throughout the performance in the moments when, in theory, a certain character or characters were not at the centre of the verbal conflict. At the beginning of the play, for instance, Maggie is arguing with Michael, the narrator, in the garden, while the other sisters are inside the kitchen, a part of the house not at this moment the centre of action. Hence, in the kitchen the sisters move very slowly, carrying “ghost” objects, to imply that they are momentarily out of or displaced from Michael's memories. There is a more illustrative example when Gerry is talking to Chris outside and the conversation is

interrupted from time to time by the other sisters in the kitchen. Michael's mind here travels from the garden to the kitchen and vice-versa, and a playful choreography interweaving naturalism and artificial movements, lighting and musical effects takes place on the stage. This idea of contrasting movements was radicalized during Michael's narrative monologues. In these moments all characters on stage immediately preceding the narrator's lines were kept motionless, as if in a photograph—but caught in positions showing them to be transfixed by some internal emotions, preferably opposite to those described by the narrator. The creation of a contradiction between the descriptive words and the frozen figures was intended to question the veracity of what was said, not only in the narrative moments, but in the whole play, and what the audience was actually seeing and could perceive as imagination or reality—within the limits of theatrical conventions.

Similar principles guided the conception of the setting. From a naturalistic point of view, there was the kitchen, with an iron range, table, chairs, buckets, bowls, etc... Most of these objects were brought by the performers, for the memory values they possessed for them; and during the rehearsal process the performers played a game of learning one another's memories through the exchange of these objects, which were eventually incorporated into their own characters' belongings. The steel knitting needles used by Agnes, for instance, had belonged to the grandmother of one of the actors; the Mundy sisters' iron range had stopped working, in my own mother's hands, after being exhaustively used by her own mother, for over thirty years; the radio set had been tuned for decades by the grandfather of another actor, until it stopped working altogether. As well as providing the cast with material to help in their characterizations, we wanted to have the theatre impregnated with an atmosphere of memory that might enable the audience to think of their own memories and, as the case may be, their own home places. Nevertheless, reinforcing an element of fantasy, imprecise and odd elements were added to the setting. The intention

was that the audience might realize that memory changes, rearranges and distorts not only facts and figures but also places and things. To convey this idea, a big, old, almost rotten canvas was spread over the entire acting area. The garden section was painted dark red, to represent the deep passions, desires and frustrations that soaked that soil. No division was drawn between the kitchen and the garden; no doors or windows were placed to delineate different sections: only a frame of a door here, an imaginary window there, and half of an uneven back wall of the kitchen, revealing the trunk of a tree, upstage. Once more the intention was to illustrate that memory and language, motivated by contradictory, sometimes biased feelings, manipulate all situations. Memory and language select, conclude and construct the world in accordance with the personal intentions and intellectual capacity of those who remember and narrate their memories.

Some lighting patterns were specially designed to give the various scenes tones of precision and imprecision, veracity and fantasy. Variations of dark red were used to symbolize the earth, and the passionate rural roots of the Mundy family; whites appeared to represent a possibility of reality, while gradations of amber and gold stained the scenes with contours aimed to convey the sensation of diffuse, distorted and invented landscapes likely to be created by memory. At the end, when Michael says he thinks of that summer of 1936 as dancing—"dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary [...]" (108)—only a faint light remains for an instant on the radio dial display, being extinguished with the narrator's last words. Everything is left in darkness for a while, as if those particular memories could finally succumb to a pleasant limbo, and Michael, being able to come to terms with his own past, could tune in to other wavelengths, and throw his past memories into the dark, possibly to reinvent them again under different lights and colours.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* ran for two seasons. According to several reports, the audiences were able not only to identify their own realities with the universe portrayed by Friel, but also to apprehend, in different

degrees, the aesthetic purposes that the company intended with this production. Most critics pointed out that the company was very successful in recreating Friel's atmospheres in Portuguese, and that the conception as a whole "was very delicate", and fulfilled the lyric requirements demanded by the original script. Their opinion was that the company achieved its goal in transforming Ballybeg into a global village. Thus Friel's play, with its emphasis on the human values and feelings that are common to all—or almost all—individuals, was able to touch a Brazilian audience as deeply as any other audience around the world.

Aiming to attract audiences interested in contemporary theatre, Irish theatre and in the work developed by Cia Ludens, the company organized the *First Cycle of Staged Readings—"Irish Theatre in the Twentieth Century"*—which ran simultaneously to the second run of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, in 2004. The scope of the programme was supposed to range from the foundation of National Literary Theatre in the first years of the twentieth century to the work of Brian Friel, and raise possible connections with the Brazilian context. Although the programme of this first event was intended to be broad, the plays actually read were selected obeying the requirement that they should be already available in Brazilian translations. It was neither practically nor financially possible to translate plays that could fill in the gaps of, and better illustrate, the historical period in question. This partly explains our choices: W. B. Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* and J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, both written in 1907; Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, written in 1924; and Friel's first great success *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, published in 1964. The plays were respectively translated by Maria Helena Kopschitz, a prominent scholar in the field of Irish Studies; Millôr Fernandes and Manuel Bandeira, both celebrated Brazilian writers; and myself. In a sense, my translation of *Philadelphia* in 2002 had been the founding moment of the company.

The continuity of the company's search for new "play-impulses" for future projects took a fruitful and many-sided form. The work of



more than a year of systematic studies and practical experiments was partially revealed in a six-day period in the *Second Cycle of Staged Readings*—“Irish Theatre in the Twenty-First Century: the Post-Beckett Generation”, which paid tribute to Samuel Beckett on the centenary of his birth, organized by Cia Ludens in 2006, with the participation of a guest cast and the financial support of Sesc São Paulo. The event aimed mainly to put in evidence plays written after the turn of the century by both already established playwrights, whose work had been recognized in the second half of the twentieth century, and also new dramatists who had established some sort of contact with Beckett’s theatre and taken a position in relation to it. This Second Cycle was also designed to revisit the authors presented in the first edition of the event—as a way to illustrate, again, what kind of plays had been written before Beckett—and to give visibility to plays written in the present century. The first day of readings, included, besides Beckett’s *Come and Go* (1965), translated by Maria Helena Kopschitz, *A Pound on Demand* (1932), by Sean O’Casey, adapted for radio and translated by Ivan Lessa; *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1929), by W. B. Yeats, translated by Paulo Mendes Campos and *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), by J. M. Synge, translated by Oswaldinho Marques. The subsequent days featured five scripts still unpublished in Brazilian Portuguese. Three of these were translated by me: *A Cry from Heaven* (2004), by Vincent Woods; *Alice Trilogy* (2005), by Tom Murphy and *Performances* (2004), by Brian Friel. *Whistling Psyche* (Fragments) (2004), by Sebastian Barry, and *Ariel* (2002), by Marina Carr, were translated by Munira H. Mutran and Zoraide Mesquita respectively. The debate was conducted by the translators and by the scholars Dr. Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos, Dr. Peter James Harris and Dr. Rosalie Rahal Haddad.

The *Second Cycle of Staged Readings*, like the *First*, was a complementary event to illustrate part of the activities undertaken by Cia Ludens in its process of staging a play. The company’s main production of 2006 was *Stones in His Pockets*, by Marie Jones, a play first produced in 1999 in Belfast and first published in 2000. The year in

which the play was first produced and published, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, was symbolic as a kind of metaphorical landmark to signal a historical new beginning, of another apparently very fertile moment in the Irish theatrical scenario, or the continuity of a similar shining period of more than fifty years whose reverberations could still be felt in 2006. We tried to demonstrate this through the main section of the *Second Cycle of Staged Readings* and through the discussions that sprung from it. But this was not, of course, the main reason why we chose to stage Jones's play. Apart from these peculiarities, the facts that she was one of the few female voices in the Irish theatre, that she was born and was producing in Northern Ireland, while the massive majority of her fellow citizens preferred the more stabilized system of producing in the Republic, and that her play achieved tremendous success worldwide weighed much more in our decision to stage this script in particular. Moreover, its structure and the challenges it offered in terms of investigating the presence of "play" elements, and their practical applicability in all artistic and technical aspects of the production, were decisive in our opting for it.

Defining the primary significance of "play", Huizinga says that it "is based on manipulation of certain images, on a certain 'imagination' of reality" (4). Nothing could describe better the atmosphere engendered by Jones, in which two actors embody a dozen or so characters and display them to the audience by manipulating images created basically through words—the immediate result of which is the construction of a certain reality that is only possible if the theatrical conventions are fully accepted. The representational "game" was made explicit, and its significance and rules were supposed to be grasped and valued gradually by the audience. Summing up the formal characteristics of play, Huizinga reinforces that it is "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life, [and this activity] absorbs the player intensely and utterly [...]. It proceeds within its proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (13). If the players are both the

actors on the stage and the audience that react to them, then the structure of the script as suggested by Jones offers a unique chance of tackling the “play” element and the play-impulses extensively discussed by Huizinga in his book. On the one hand, the spectators were invited to establish a mental dialogue with the “imagined reality” being constructed on the stage and at the same time to become intensely involved with it. On the other hand the possibilities for the two actors to “play the game” were almost endless, in that, to create the gestures, to modulate the different characters’ voices, and their appearances and reappearances in various settings and time along the narrative, they experimented with the various forms and propositions that the term “play” has conveyed in the long history of theatrical performance: from the “creation of a role”, as conceived by Stanislavsky, through “epic and dialect” characterisation, as per Brecht, and the “exercises” and “games” suggested respectively by Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, to the “new features” described by Hans-Thies Lehmann to delineate what he understands as post-dramatic theatre.

Apart from the possibilities of investigating the presence of “play” elements in this vast literature dedicated to the art of performance, and their practical implications in our production, we were also interested in the application of the play-concept in other aspects of the production, the first of which being the translation. As I have mentioned before (in “Beyond the Accent Limitations”) one of the biggest obstacles that might prevent anyone from translating *Stones in His Pockets* into another language is the way in which the play is built linguistically. One of the first questions posed by the company was whether such a play and its context would make any sense to a non-English-speaking audience. Although Jones wrote her play in Standard English, with a perceptible Irish lilt in most of the lines, the particularities of the fourteen characters featured are strongly demarcated by the various English accents, suggested to differentiate their places of origin. In the plot, all of them are part of the crew of a Hollywood blockbuster that is being filmed in a

scenic spot in Co. Kerry, Ireland. The use of English accents was devised with the intention of associating the social roles of the characters with the clichéd positions the countries they were born in occupy in the long history of colonization in Ireland. No wonder, then, that all extras in the film are Irish people playing dispossessed peasants; the director and one of his assistants are English; and the leading part is played by an American star, even though the character is an Irish girl educated in England.

A closer reading of the play, nonetheless, reveals that to a certain extent the use of accents had been devised as a metaphor of the power relations and political negotiations between the “developed” nations and the weaker ones. This kind of struggle between forces is also likely to occur among fellow countrymen from heterogeneous geographical regions but who speak the same language. Thus we did not try to find regional modes of speaking Portuguese as a substitute for the English accents suggested by Jones. In a Brazilian context such a procedure would sound like a biased and prejudiced choice. We preferred instead to emphasise this hierarchical, social and economic position of the characters in a capitalist system, and ignore any peculiar linguistic forms they might use as a means of communication. The fact that the film inside the play is American sufficed to get across the message of a “foreign” crew trying to interpret a “national” reality. To a certain extent the way of producing films in Hollywood, either about the themes of the United States itself or their interpretation of international ones, is very well known in Brazil; and American values and lifestyle are so widely disseminated in Brazil that the mere situation depicted in the play was enough to expose the criticism intended by the playwright accurately without any attempt to exacerbate it by the use of accents. Hollywood continues to be a prototype of success and wealth that has incited people’s imagination for decades. Therefore, it was clear that the circumstances involving the romantic Hollywood blockbuster in progress inside Jones’s play were not strange to a Brazilian audience (nor, no doubt, to almost any other audience around the world).

Perhaps more than the language, the explicit references to John Ford’s classic *The Quiet Man* and its counterpart in Jones’s script, the

parody *The Silent Valley*, were stronger elements in establishing the more relevant connections between Irish and Brazilian contexts. Such references permeate the whole plot, to the point of generating a dichotomy between a desired and idealized national status and an immediate, and not-so-pleasant, reality. The film inside the play is about peacefully giving back the land taken over long ago through an arranged marriage between a "foreign" rich girl and a "local" farmer. Meanwhile the whole crew is obliged to face reality when they are informed that a local boy committed suicide because he was not allowed to take part in the film, and the extras will not be given permission to go to his funeral because the production is behind schedule. The consequence of this episode is that the native people gradually start to be aware of their roles in the film and, by extension, their roles inside the system they live in. The boy who drowned himself in the same manner as Virginia Woolf unintentionally triggers a process of awareness about different, but still cruel, methods of colonizing people that include monetary power and cultural impositions. From that point on, the extras in the film begin to demand a better position inside the system, and to bargain for a different role in the history of their own lives, land and people. They become real active citizens and the protagonists of their own film, no matter how successful it might be.

This process of awareness, and the varying movements that lead the protagonists (ultimately, the two extras through whom all the other characters are filtered) towards it, was punctuated by three subtle changes in their costumes. At the beginning they are seen dressed in dull colours, and with their trousers and jackets inside out. At this moment they are only extras, accepting the rules imposed by the "foreigners" without any direct questioning. In a second stage, after a hard working day shooting in the fields, they go to the dressing room and take their clothes of just to put them on once more, this time the right way round. Right-side-out, their clothes are more colourful: the change intends to indicate that they have become, even if superficially, citizens not quite satisfied with the whole state of affairs, though still afraid of any kind of confrontation. This complete change of the side

they wear their clothes intends to show, at a connotative level, the first steps they were taking towards a demonstration that they did not simply belong to an expected obedient and anonymous gray mass of extras, but that they were individuals capable of an acute perception not only about their own position in that system, but also about their peers and superiors. After a night scene in a local pub among some other extras and part of the "foreign" crew, they are seen again in the dressing room putting their extras' costumes on again for another day of shooting. Here the indicative note is that they put only their jackets on inside out. The main idea here is to suggest that from that moment on they start an irreversible process of total consciousness, of sensing their power as local citizens, even though at this stage only their lower halves, the more instinctive, desire-identifying part of their selves, were convinced of the different future roles they might play.

But it is only when they change clothes again, putting their jackets on right-side-out once more, to go to the boy's funeral, that their upper halves, symbolizing their feelings and reason, are completely taken by the necessity and urgency of building their own history, and conducting their own destinies. As one of them says to the other: "for the first time in my life I felt I could do something [...]. They can only knock us if we don't believe in ourselves [...]" (55). This attitude was strongly illustrated in one of the last scenes in which they dance, for a take of the film in celebration of the marriage of the hero and the heroine and the happy end of the fictional story; but instead of being dressed with their extras' clothes as they were supposed to be, they were wearing the clothes of the funeral, their "citizen" costumes. Thus, even though acting as if they were extras, nothing in their countenances or clothes contributed to the veracity of such a picture. Their feelings and motivations had been radically transformed. And they end the play dressed as citizens determined to write and tell their own version of that story – which happened to be exactly the story the audience just saw paraded in front of its eyes. The play was, after all, the film they made or thought of making.

It was in the end extremely satisfactory to realize that we had made the right choice in changing our approach from the linguistic features of the original play to its emphatic aspects on social, interpersonal and commercial relationships between the characters and their environment. The production was very successful, and acclaimed by both the critics and the public, who thoroughly understood the potentialities and universality of that story. They grasped the relevance of the themes and questions proposed, and the possible connections we wanted to establish between an Irish cultural, political and historical reality and the Brazilian context. The first run of the play lasted three months, and it was later performed in two subsequent runs in major venues in the city of São Paulo.

As I have suggested above, the research and practical experiments undertaken after the production of *Lughnasa* were the factors that encouraged us not only to venture the production of *Stones in His Pockets* and the Second Staged Reading, but also to think of a third production, which in 2008 took the form of a play by George Bernard Shaw, a playwright born in Ireland but whose professional work was done in England, the country he adopted when he was 20 years old and where he died at the age of 94. Shaw's connections with his native country were very problematic and he wrote relatively little about it; but whether there implicitly existed an "Irish spirit" in his writings or not, and to what degree, was a question we did not try to answer. The fact was that the decision to stage one of his plays was a tremendous challenge, and an experiment never imagined before by a company whose initial aims included staging "contemporary" "Irish drama". The studies on the history of twentieth-century Irish drama, and the recurrent mention of dramatists such as Ibsen in the critical work by scholars of the importance of Christopher Murray and Nicholas Grene, as being one of the major influences on Irish playwrights since the late nineteenth century, were of crucial importance in directing us to Shaw and to the reevaluation of our notion of what could be the scope of the contemporary. Huizinga in the last chapter of his book affirms that "a mind historically focused

will embody in its idea of what is 'modern' and 'contemporary' a far larger section of the past than a mind living in the myopia of the moment". He adds that, therefore, in his sense "contemporary [...] goes deep into the nineteenth century" (195).

It was focusing on the "play" elements which this type of idea might contain, and on Ibsen's plays, that we happened to get interested in and involved with Shaw's life and universe. Besides being an admittedly wholehearted admirer of the Norwegian dramatist, Shaw was without any doubt one of the most controversial figures writing about and for the theatre produced at the turn of the Twentieth Century in England. At first we were bewildered by the fact that the material reality of producing a "serious" play in London, and the reaction of the audience and critics to it, as described by Shaw, at the beginning of last century, was in some aspects nearly identical to that of Brazilian theatrical production of today. The curiosity to know more about this, and Shaw's relationship with Irish political and social matters, led us to investigate his oeuvre more deeply. Encouraged and supported by Dr. Rosalie Rahal Haddad, we embarked on an investigation, first of Shaw's plays available in Portuguese, and afterwards those available only in English. After a period of nearly a year in which we examined almost all of Shaw's plays and a good number of his Prefaces and other writings, we came to the decision to stage one of his most obscure plays, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, written in 1935.

This particular play, also subtitled *A Vision of Judgment*, was conceived when Shaw was 79 years old, during a trip he made with his Irish wife to the West Indies, and it was through it that we could understand in a more conclusive way what the playwright meant by the theatre of ideas, which he had been aesthetically pursuing for a long time, and vehemently expressed in his writings when he attacked most of his contemporaries. His theatre of ideas could actually be translated as a long systematic writing practice with didactic purposes exposed through discourses which, although filled with ironies and other humoristic patterns, transformed most of his plays into theses



whose ultimate objective was to instruct the audience towards a more sophisticated model of entertainment. Most of Shaw's critical essays and Prefaces condemn the theatre in vogue at that time as preventing the ordinary citizen from forming the salutary "habit of playgoing."

The playwright was convinced that there was no theatre for ordinary cultivated people; hence his desire to take on such a task as his mission. Since he strongly believed that cultivated audiences did not go to the theatre because nobody was thinking of how to create new forms for a new drama, Shaw proposed himself to write this new drama which, just to start with, would demand a new type of performer, manager and critic. The result was that he pushed his project so far as to write, in the last phase of his creative process, plays such as *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, which completely puzzled journalists and critics when it was first performed. But it was precisely the possibility of playing with contradictory opinions, and the eventual strong connection we encountered between this play and the contemporary Brazilian context, that encouraged us to stage this play rather than any other. Also, it seemed to us very provocative not only to produce one of Shaw's plays that was practically unknown in Brazil, but also to express the conclusions we had reached about the place of this work in particular, and this moment of Shaw's career, in the history of the theory of drama.

Defined by Shaw as a fable and grouped as one of the "Plays Extravagant", *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* is a narrative set in a fictional island in the tropics. The place itself seemed to us perfect as a metaphor for discussions of contemporary Brazilian issues in politics, religion, morality and social relationships. In this play, which consists of a prologue and two acts, due to the lapses of time between the parts, the episodic nature of the narrative is much more evident than in most of the other plays written by the author. The fable starts in the immigration office at a tropical port in the British Empire, where a clerk and an officer ferociously argue with a young woman from Liverpool who wants to enter the country illegally. This scene evolves

into the officer going out with the young woman to meet a native priest and his wife, almost at the same time that they run into a couple of English tourists that end up joining the group. Meanwhile, in the office, the clerk blows his brains out with a revolver. Twenty years later this group of six reappears as a multiple-marriage religious-style community that has taken up the political power of the Unexpected Isles. The result of their marriage is four spoiled children who were raised as and believe themselves to be special deities. In our adaptation of the script into Portuguese (with a title that might be back-translated into English as something like *Idiot in the Country of Absurdities*), the four children are reduced to two underage adolescents, a boy and a girl, who seduce a Clergyman who happens to be abandoned on the island by pirates who could not put up with him anymore.

The idea behind this radical adaptation was to introduce very contemporary themes, laterally, as well as ancestral themes that have pleased and disturbed so many minds in the history of human civilisation and literature, such as paedophilia (although inverted in this case, since the children are the ones who first harass the clergyman), homosexuality and incest: the two siblings' invention that they are only one person could be interpreted in a less innocent and ingenuous perspective, since a sexual atmosphere pervades the first half of the play and prevails throughout the narrative. Shaw was originally interested in discussing the polygamy of some Eastern societies in opposition to English Christian principles. But, in any case, although this theme is still taboo for many societies, including Brazil's, our decision was to approach it in an even more provocative way, putting together two men and a woman in a polygamous marriage. Encouraged by the six parents, who want to use the Clergyman as an experiment, this marriage intends to be the continuation of their original project of founding a millennial world culture, started with their own eugenic experiments twenty years earlier. Nevertheless, some time afterwards, despite a war declared by neighbouring islands outraged by the promiscuous behaviour of the Unexpected Isles' inhabitants, their

project of creating a new society fails, for the children happened to be sterile and the clergyman proved to be impotent. And then, as a *deus ex machina*, the Angel lands in their garden to announce the Day of Judgment, which is not the end of the world, but simply the day in which all men will be valued and those incapable of justifying their presence on the earth will vanish into thin air. When the Angel takes off, the children evaporate, along with many other people reported to be worthless to the evolution of humanity, among them “members of the House of Commons and House of Lords, doctors, egregious professors, happy fathers and husbands, popular leaders of fashion and famous beauties” (*Plays Extravagant* 206-7). The audience is then left to question their own values, and their reasons for living, at the same time as they are invited to ask similar questions that might decide a fair destiny for the characters stranded on the stage.

These comical extravagances depicted by Shaw more than half a century ago offered us very contemporary material to try to establish a fruitful dialogue with audiences of our time. With *The Simpleton* we were almost stupefied to realise how the situation imagined by Shaw in 1935 could be used as a perfect metaphor for many of the most significant aspects of the present Brazilian situation. The “absurd” facts of Shaw’s *Unexpected Isles* were likely to be easily recognized by any Brazilian spectator. Cases of bribery among politicians, bankers and policemen, kidnappings of children ending in murder, negligence in all the essential public services, and drug dealers involved with the local political administration are just a few examples reported by the media every day that make any Brazilian strongly long for the “absurd” solution imagined by Shaw: getting rid of those who are not “worth their salt.” Moreover, the simpleton portrayed by Shaw, the clergyman whose name is not *Idiot* by chance, is the depositary of a happy, positive and naïve imagination, combined with a kind of unbelievable purity and blind religious belief. And like Shaw’s simpleton, Brazilian audiences are used to calling themselves, and feeling themselves to be, “idiots”, because although conscious of the arbitrary and

promiscuous political and economical system that favours only a few to the detriment of the majority, they cannot see how to change things. At the end of the fable, Shaw's clergyman decides to write another edifying sermon; as for the audience, we expected them at least to stop for a while to think about what action they could possibly take.

This attempt to establish a parallel between the narrative as imagined by Shaw and the current moment in Brazil, not to mention the possibility of exploiting the presence of sensual traits in this very controversial author, a feature as rarely associated with his work as his Irish origins, were major factors in our decision to produce this play in particular. However, the formal aspects of the play and the potentialities it offered in our dealing with elements of "play" – from the much freer adaptation of the original script to the choreographic and vocal training – were of crucial importance in making the process of staging this play the most challenging, thrilling and trying experience ever undertaken by the company. We understood that in this play Shaw radicalized the episodic construction which he had used with varied degrees of intensity in constructing most of his theatrical texts. He once said he was interested in writing plays without plots, that instead of planning his plays he "let them grow as they came, and hardly ever wrote a page foreknowing what the next page would be" (*Shaw on Theatre* 268). Clear as it was that he was attacking the so-called well-made plays that were made fashionable by Scribe in Paris and abundantly copied in London, we decided to take such a premise as the guideline to permeate all the aesthetic aspects of the production. Conceptually, this apparent absence of a rigid, well constructed plot reminded us of several situations depicted by some dramatists on whom the attribution of "representative voices of the absurd theatre" was later bestowed. Some similarities between the way these dramatists elaborated their plots and those forged by Shaw, or at least the version we made for *The Simpleton*, led us to believe that, even if he did not know it, Shaw was already flirting with "the theatre of the absurd." This controversial concept, coined by Martin Esslin to describe a kind of drama written in the post-war period, was of

course strange to Shaw. Even so, we were tempted to wonder whether Shaw, in a more positive key, with *The Simpleton* and the plays he wrote up to 1949, had not been a forerunner of the theatre of the absurd.

The absurdist line to guide us throughout the creative process was always in convergence with the major idea expressed by Shaw in his play, that is to say, that "lives which have no use, no meaning, no purpose, will fade out. [People] will have to justify [their] existence or perish" (*Plays Extravagant* 199). To create a suspense effect for the aesthetic likelihood of a phenomenon like this, the play was performed in a non-conventional venue so that the disposition of the setting, conceived to be a mix of a claustrophobic dusty office and the mountainous open spaces of the island, could conceal the precise dimension of the place. The lighting design, mixing dark atmospheres with colourful beams demarcating specific acting areas, was fundamental to the achievement of this spatial illusion. We aimed to give the audience the impression that the characters do not enter or exit the stage, but appear and vanish on it. The audience were ultimately expected to understand, or maybe only perceive by intuition, that the judgment to be announced by the Angel in the end was formally already in progress since the very beginning. In the prologue the clerk at the Customs, after being told to stay in the office working and "be worth his salt", under penalty of perishing, commits suicide and disappears forever. Every now and then the characters appear and disappear in the setting, fall literally down abysses or are "faded out" in different parts of the acting areas, thus conveying the idea that they, like the clerk, might "disintegrate" at any moment, as a form of punishment. At the end the two children are openly punished, and vanish inside a smoky cloud in front of the public, while the priest Pra and the priestess Prola are left waiting for the judgment. The last blackout on them is intended to indicate the possibility of their having ceased forever as well, depending on how the audience judges them.

The choreographic movements were likewise created from possible assumptions contained in the term "absurd", plus the "play"

elements derived from the “personal mythology” of every performer, who explored different sources to build his/her character. These sources ranged from Plato’s androgyne to the supposed cockroach described by Kafka. Gestures and mythologies influenced the characters’ composition, the rhythm of the narrative, and its lapses of time and logic, also helped to reinforce the conceptual line of the show. The characters’ comings and goings (or appearances and disappearances) called for corporal movements and attitudes able to evince the significance or redundancy of their lives on earth. This gestural and mythological investigation also determined the shape, size, volume and colours of the costumes and makeup, as well as their modifications in the frantic timeline inside which the characters were dramatically cast. The soundtrack was conceived in a similar fashion: alternation of massive colourful and jocose music and something more diaphanous, imponderable and religious set the tone for the show at the same time as it helped to punctuate the passing of the years from the tourists’ arrival on the island to the Day of Judgment. The performers also contributed vocally to this, starting to hum songs of enchantment, moving to ritual and frenzied shrills of initiation, and ended up screaming in panic as an answer to the Angel’s trumpet and its unfolding meanings.

The play’s reception was controversial. The audience was unanimous in applauding the production as one of the most provoking, hilarious and intelligent being played in town; meanwhile the critics were divided, stating completely opposite opinions—but instead of upsetting us, these opinions only made us imagine how Shaw must have felt in his own time, when some of his plays were first released, since it is well known that he was strongly criticized during his long and tireless crusade to transform, through his works, the social and cultural status of the people that he referred to as “half cultivated.”

Some particularities of this profound investigation of Shaw’s works and life have become the subject of the *Third Cycle of Staged Readings*, entitled “Four Short Plays by Bernard Shaw”, to be produced by the company

this year with financial support from the Cultural Department of São Paulo State. The programme focusing exclusively on Shaw will feature: *How She Lied to Her Husband*, written in 1904; *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, written in 1910; *O'Flaherty V. C.*, concluded in 1915; and *The Glimpse of Reality*, completed in 1910 but revised and published only in 1926. I was the translator of all the plays, but three other directors were invited to present them to the public, and a group of specialists in Irish literature were also asked to take an active part in the debate. The translations attracted the attention of a publisher who will soon have them printed.

Other projects of Cia Ludens include the production of *Faith Healer* (1979) by Brian Friel, one of the three plays selected to be sponsored by the 13th *Cultura Inglesa* Festival in São Paulo. A remote idea, born with the first steps taken by the company in producing a tetralogy that could illustrate Friel's career from his first great success *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* until the present day, came to light again with the production of the play for the Festival. *Faith Healer* is thus the second part (though not in chronological terms) of a project in which *Dancing at Lughnasa* was the first. The production of *A Cry from Heaven* by Vincent Woods, to be staged soon, will allow us to put into practice some aesthetic notions we had been discussing throughout our research processes: the constant mixture, almost never balanced, between tragic and comic components in the history of Irish playwriting. This long debate has created inside the company a strong desire to develop two other big projects: one about the presence of the play-concept in "tragedies", another of its presence in "comedies". Woods's script, mixing poetic, epic and tragic forms will be the place to which all findings and experiments about "play" elements in tragedies should converge. In the long term we hope we can apply a similar procedure to investigate "comical elements" in one (or more) of Tom Murphy's plays. However it turns out, we are sure that this lively game between Irish drama, its references and Cia Ludens' approach will not cease to be played any time soon.

## References

- Barry, Sebastian. *Whistling Psyche and Fred and Jane*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Assoviano para Psique* (fragments). Trans. Munira H. Mutran. Unpublished, 2006.
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Vaivém*. Trans. Maria Helena Kopschitz. *Junijornadas do Senhor Dom Flor*. São Paulo: Olavobrás/ABEI, 2002.
- Boal, Augusto. *Jogos para Atores e Não-Atores*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1999.
- Brecht, Bertold. *Estudos sobre Teatro*. Trans. Fiana Pais Brandão. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2005.
- Carr, Marina. *Ariel*. County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Books, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ariel*. Trans. Zoraide Mesquita. Unpublished, 2006.
- Esslin, Martin. *O Teatro do Absurdo*. Trans. Bárbara Heliodora. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1968.
- Friel, Brian. *Plays One*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Plays Two*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Performances*. County Meath, Ireland: Gallery Books, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Filadélfia, Lá Vou Eu!* Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Dançando em Lúnassa*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Performances*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *O Fantástico Reparador de Feridas*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2008.



- Greene, Nicholas. *The Politics of Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Haddad, Rosalie Rahal. *George Bernard Shaw e a Renovação do Teatro Inglês*, São Paulo: Olavobrás/ABEI, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Bernard Shaw's Novels, his Drama of Ideas in Embryo*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2004.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens, a study of play element in culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955.
- Jones, Marie. *Stones in His Pockets and A Night in November*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Pedras nos Bolsos*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2006.
- Kafka, Franz. *A Metamorphose*. Trans. Brenno Silveira. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1985.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Teatro Pós-dramático*. Trans. Pedro Süssekind. São Paulo: Cosacnaify, 2007.
- Murphy, Tom. *Alice Trilogy*. London: Methuen Drama, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Trilogia de Alice*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2006.
- Murray, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama - Mirror up to Nation*. Manchester: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Nunez, Domingos. "Beyond the Accent Limitations: Staging Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* to a Brazilian Audience". *ABEI Journal* 9 (2007): 119-125.
- O'Casey, Sean. *Three Plays*. New York: Macmillan, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Juno e o Pavão*. Trans. Manuel Bandeira. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Uma Libra em Dinheiro Vivo*. Trad. Ivan Lessa. *Cinco Peças para Rádio no Cinquentenário do Serviço Brasileiro*. BBC. London and São Paulo, 1998. Radio.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Uma Libra em Dinheiro Vivo*. Trad. Ivan Lessa. Adap. Domingos Nunez e Chico Cardoso. Unpublished, 2006.

Parker, Stewart. *Dramatis Personae. A John Malone Memorial Lecture*. Belfast: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986.

Platão. *Diálogos: O Banquete e Apologia de Sócrates*. Trans. Carlos Alberto Nunes. Belém: Editora da UFPA, 2001.

Shaw Bernard. *Plays Extravagant*. Penguin Books, London, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Short Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Shaw on Theatre*. Ed. E. J. West. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Idiota no País dos Absurdos*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Como Ele Mentiu para o Marido Dela*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Dama Negra dos Sonetos*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *O Recruta Dennis*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Um Quê de Realidade*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2008.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theatre*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.

Stanislavski, Constantin. *A Criação de um Papel*. Trans. Pontes de Paula Lima, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1984.

Synge, J. M. *Collected Works*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *O Prodígio do Mundo Ocidental*. Trans. Millôr Fernandes. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Sombra do Desfiladeiro*. Trans. Oswaldino Marques. São Paulo: Dyonisos, n.d.

Woods, Vincent. *A Cry from Heaven*. London: Methuen Drama, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Um Grito do Céu*. Trans. Domingos Nunez. Unpublished, 2006.

Yeats, W. B. *Selected Plays*. London: Penguin Books, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *O Poço do Falcão*. Trans. Maria Helena Kopschitz, Marcelo Tápia e Tereza Sarno, São Paulo: Olavobrás/ABEI, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Coleção dos Prêmios Nobel de Literatura: William Butler Yeats, Teatro*. Trans. Paulo Mendes Campos. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Delta, 1963.

