

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS



Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, he has worked in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd St. NW, Ste 311
Washington, D.C. 20016

Tel: 202-364-4068
Fax: 202-364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web: www.icwa.org

The Information contained in this publication may not be reprinted or republished without the express written consent of the Institute of Current World Affairs.

Taking the Stage in Manari

By Raphael Soifer



"We've come from Santo André to perform for you!" Armindo Pinto makes the rounds in Manari's central plaza.

"We've come from Santo André, in São Paulo, to perform for you!" Armindo Pinto shouted into the microphone of an old station wagon mounted with powerful speakers. "Our play is called *Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos* [Stones, Clouds, Dreams]. It talks about Manari! It talks about you! It's free! Tonight at seven o'clock!"

Armindo is the adult director of *Revolução Teatral* (Theatrical Revolution, profiled in RS-5), a Theatre of the Oppressed troop made up of adolescents from the periphery of Santo André, an industrial suburb of São Paulo. His actors are starting to become accustomed to road trips. The group has presented throughout southern and southeastern Brazil, and performed in Uruguay and Argentina in late 2007. The kids loved their earlier trips, which provided many of them their first opportunity to travel beyond metropolitan São Paulo.

During their previous tours, *Revolução*

Teatral's young actors performed for academic conferences, professional actors, and audiences that only spoke Spanish. Still, their July 7 arrival in Manari — a small town in the semi-arid *sertão* region of Pernambuco state — represented a new challenge. The kids had grown accustomed to unfamiliar audiences, but this trip would be a sort of family reunion, a homecoming. Many of the kids' parents migrated to Santo André from the northeast, particularly from the *sertão*, and Jane, the group's main female protagonist, was born in Manari.

The station wagon circled the town's central plaza a couple times before stopping to let Armindo out. As the driver headed back for another day of spreading store advertisements and political campaign songs into the still *sertão* air, he turned on the tape deck to play *Admirável Gado Novo* (Amazing New Cattle). The song is one of the most popular contemporary tunes in Brazil. Written by Zé Ramalho, a musician from

the northeastern state of Paraíba, it's a cutting reflection on the conditions of the country's poor:

*Vocês que fazem parte dessa massa
Que passa nos projetos do futuro
É duro tanto ter que caminhar
E dar muito mais do que receber...*

*Ê ô, vida de gado
Povo marcado é/Povo feliz*

You who make up part of this mass of people
Who pass on the projects of the future
It's hard to have to walk so much
And to give much more than you receive...

Hey, life of cattle
The marked [branded] people is/ A happy people

Ramalho's lyrics resonate throughout Brazil, but they're especially relevant in the *sertão*. Historically, the region has been home to some of the country's most crushing poverty, and to waves of severe drought that sent many locals looking for whatever opportunities they could find in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The northeastern interior is also notorious for a political culture dominated by *coroneis* (colonels), local landowners — usually with no military background — who exercise an essentially feudal power over their towns. *Coroneis* rule by force, meting out occasional favors to subservient locals, and clamping down violently against any opposition. The *povoão* (the masses; literally, "big people") have never been allowed much dignity anywhere in the country, but in the *sertão* especially, their lives have been almost as tormented and anonymous as those of the

thin cattle that dot the countryside and have always been the droughts' first victims.

Even in a region known for its poverty and unforgiving conditions, Manari stands out. A 2003 United Nations survey found that the little town of 16,000 near Pernambuco's southern border with Alagoas had the worst Human Development Index in the country. Word spread quickly that the municipality was the poorest in Brazil, with the lowest rates of literacy, income, and life expectancy.

Ironically, being identified as the worst in the country may have been one of the best things to happen to Manari. The news acted as potent publicity that attracted significant investments. The survey's timing was especially fortuitous, since the announcement came toward the beginning of Lula's first term. The president, who was born poor in small-town Pernambuco, has a special affinity for the northeast and made poverty reduction a centerpiece of his campaign. Soon after the announcement, state and federal government agencies began to focus on Manari, while NGOs multiplied their presence in the city. The progress has been modest, but significant. The city's two public schools — which also serve as *de facto* community centers — have both been renovated and expanded. In recent years, many houses in the center of the city have gained running water. And the long-time mayor — who mostly lives in Arcoverde — figured that it was finally time to buckle down and pave the streets in the city center.

Manari connects to the outside world through a single two-lane asphalt highway that links the town to Inajá, about an hour's drive to the west. In spite of Manari's improvements in recent years, the outgoing lane is still a lot



more active. Every morning, “Toyotas” — the catch-all name for pick-up trucks in the *sertão* — cram up to 18 people on short wooden benches in the back, taking them to the grocery store, bank, and post office in Inajá. The errand runners aren’t the only ones catching rides out of town. Manari continues to bleed residents, most of them heading out on the direct bus that leaves for São Paulo once a week.

The few outsiders who make the trek into Manari from Inajá are almost always government, NGO, or church workers who never stay for very long. *Revolução Teatral* was only in town for five days, but like outside aid workers, they hoped to leave a lasting impression. While other outside initiatives serving the town focus mostly on charitable giving, though, *Revolução Teatral* hoped that their play would involve locals as active participants. *Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos* was probably the town’s first-ever theatrical production. It was a play that told a local story, and one in which — the group hoped — local audience members would ultimately take the stage themselves.

The play, based on Jane’s mother’s childhood in Manari and migration to São Paulo as an adolescent, is the group’s most recent exploration in blending modern dance with the participatory Theatre of the Oppressed method. *Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos* is an example of Forum Theatre, a genre in which audience members enter the scene at the play’s conclusion to assume the roles of “oppressed” characters and improvise new endings. According to Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director who developed the Theatre of the Oppressed, Forum Theatre is intended to create plays in which the actors “present our world-view in the first act and where in the second act they, the audience...create a new world.”

In addition to breaking boundaries between actors and audience, Boal’s theories focus on stories and perspectives often overlooked in mainstream and classical theatre. *Revolução Teatral*’s members — none of whom had any exposure to theatre before joining the troop — exemplify this objective. The kids hoped that their example would inspire the local audience to take part as well. Since Manari became nationally known five years ago, outsiders’ perspectives of the town have made headlines in Pernambuco and across Brazil. Local voices, though, have largely gone unheard, either in reconstructing their town’s history or responding



A “Toyota” — nearly empty by local standards — en route to Inajá.

to the wave of improvement projects that have descended on Manari. *Revolução Teatral*’s proposal to bring locals into the final scenes of their thirty-minute performance may not seem remarkable, but their dedication to letting locals define Manari on their own terms was new to a town whose residents are unaccustomed to seeing themselves as protagonists.

Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos has always been a difficult play for the group. The piece begins as a story of northeastern migrants based on the kids’ parents’ experiences. From there, it jumps to a portrayal of the kids’ own challenges as first-generation southeasterners, struggling to balance their family’s expectations with opportunities and temptations that their parents never had. It’s an awkward transition within the play, and a subject with which the kids and many of their families are still struggling. Jane’s mother removed her daughter from the group in December 2007, arguing that her hectic schedule as an actor and dancer was keeping her out of school. Jane rejoined a couple of months later, but things remained tense during the group’s visit to Manari. Jane’s mom seemed determined to make sure Jane understood the hierarchy of family organization in the *sertão*, and frequently pulled her from rehearsals without warning, insisting that she clean the house or cook.

Armindo had hoped to bring *Revolução Teatral* to the northeast since the group began working on *Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos*. He’s a dedicated Boal disciple, and was convinced of the importance of bringing northeasterners into the action. In addition, he assumed that group members would gain a better understanding of their own histories by watching locals take over the characters they’d created. True to Boal’s

vision, Armindo imagined that the play would only become a complete creative venture by including first-person perspectives from the town on which it was based.

As the performance neared, though, Armindo began to wonder whether the Manari audience would be reluctant to join the group on stage and try to “create a new world.” Frankly, he worried that they might not come at all. A group of about fifty elementary school-aged had followed the teenage actors since the group’s arrival, but Armindo complained that the town’s adults couldn’t be bothered with the novelty. “They’ll probably just stay at home and watch TV,” he said. The group spent an afternoon readying the courtyard of the recently renovated elementary school for the performance, sweeping the hallways, marking off a playing space with pebbles, and making a banner for the group out of felt. An hour before the performance, we began to drag heavy wooden chairs from the nearby classrooms into the central courtyard where the group would perform. Armindo stopped us when 34 of them were in place.

At 7p.m., when the performance was scheduled to start, a few empty seats were left. Fifteen minutes later, though, the crowds began to arrive. By the time the show started more than half an hour behind schedule, almost 200 people had crammed into the courtyard, standing in the corridors or sitting on the floors when we ran out of chairs. Admit-



Dancing forró, complete with foam-rubber knock-offs of traditional leather hats from the sertão.

tedly, Jane’s cousins made up a decent percentage of the audience, but everyone in the crowd seemed especially interested to see what these city kids would have to say about the northeast, and — as Armindo had promised from the station wagon earlier that day — about them.

The audience was engaged throughout, sometimes riveted. *Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos* is a dance-based piece with little narration, so audience members sometimes exclaimed out loud when they understood a particular image. They

giggled at the *paulistas*’ hesitant *forró* dancing, and laughed uproariously at Mimi’s portrayal of a bumbling *pau-de-arara* (literally, a “macaw’s perch”: a precariously crowded truck used by northeastern migrants for much of the past century). For the most part though, they watched with a sense of solemn understanding as the main character — played by Jane — married as a young teenager and then, without any other options, moved to São Paulo shortly after giving birth.

Local girls seemed especially moved by the piece’s conclusion, which showed a *paulista* girl — obviously based on Jane — whose northeastern migrant parents wouldn’t allow her to take dance lessons, arguing that they didn’t understand what all the fuss was



Armindo coaches Jane’s cousin before she goes onstage.



Jane as an inexperienced teenage mom, a character based on her own mother.

about, and that anyway, she should be at home taking care of the house. (Meanwhile, her soccer-obsessed brother left to play whenever he wanted. “He’s worth gold,” the mother exclaimed, which drew big laughs from the crowd.) After significant prodding by Armindo, three audience members (two of whom were Jane’s cousins) entered the scene to complete the “forum,” standing in for the “oppressed” char-

acter and improvising new solutions. The “spect-actors” — Boal’s term for an audience participant — were unrelenting in the role of the *paulista* girl, arguing passionately to be allowed to follow their own ambitions. It’s unclear how much of the audience would agree in practice, but at least in the comfort of the elementary school courtyard, they roared their approval for the dancer character.

After the show, the kids groused about all the mistakes they’d made: missed music cues, dropped lines, bungled choreography. Armindo agreed, but assured them it didn’t matter. “The show was crap, but it was good,” he said, explaining that they’d brought nearly 200 people to the theatre who had never seen a play before. That experience alone, he told them, was their most important accomplishment that night. Furthermore, he argued, the play had shown locals that their own stories were worth telling. He reminded the cast that, as out-of-towners, their choice to present a play about Manari was especially powerful.

Armindo’s not the type to shy away from theatre’s more powerful possibilities, and faced with a local crowd, his provocative streak emerged. He had the kids change character names to correspond with members of Jane’s family, like her paternal grandfather, the owner of a local warehouse who had refused to help provide for Jane’s



Armindo Pinto and Jane’s relatives watch the afternoon performance on the family farm.

parents after she was born. After the show, Armindo was disappointed to find out that the grandfather had stayed home, explaining to his family that “someone has to guard the house from thieves.”

The other side of the family was out in force the next day for an afternoon performance on their small farm in the foothills, about a half-hour walk from the town center. Jane’s little brother and cousins played in the dirt as the rest of the family gathered in the shade of her father’s new four-door sedan. Although Douglas, another cast member, had explained at the beginning that the story was based on multiple families’ experiences, it was clear to both cast and audience that the performance was aimed at many of the real-life characters in the audience. As the action went on, discussions started to break out among the family. “It didn’t happen like that,” Vó Maria, Jane’s grandmother, would snap at a dance showing a forced marriage or children toiling in the fields. Invariably, one of her children would take up the argument, assuring her that a particular scene was entirely accurate.

After plenty of coaxing from Armindo, Jane’s aunt eventually entered the action at the play’s climax to try to find new solutions to the conflict. The most significant interaction, though, came after the play, when we all retreated into the shade of the family’s house for cold water and cashew fruit juice. The family reconstructed its own history through the

lens of the play, pointing out what had been inspired in reality and what had been exaggerated, arguing energetically but good-naturedly as they went over their own past. More telling than the events that Jane’s family members corrected, though, was the evolution of the discussion. They began addressing themselves respectfully toward Armindo. By the end of the afternoon, though, they were talking to each other, but usually looking right at Jane. Jane had been more than a little presumptuous presenting a version of her parents’ story (albeit with their permission) for *Revolução Teatral* to perform, but the family seemed to accept her as a new guardian of their history. Tell it however you want to, they told her. But make sure you know what our real story is.

Jane’s crowning moment came later that night, when she led a modern dance workshop for over 50 people in the school courtyard, based on the advanced training in Santo André for which she recently gained a scholarship. It was an exhilarating introduction to modern dance for a group of locals who might not have known exactly what that meant, but who seemed thrilled to participate. I was captivated by a man in his mid-50s, sporting the traditional fedora and moustache that men in Pernambuco’s interior always seem to wear. I’d seen him watching silently the night before, and now here he was, still in his fedora but barefoot, gliding over the tile floor of the courtyard with a shy grin.

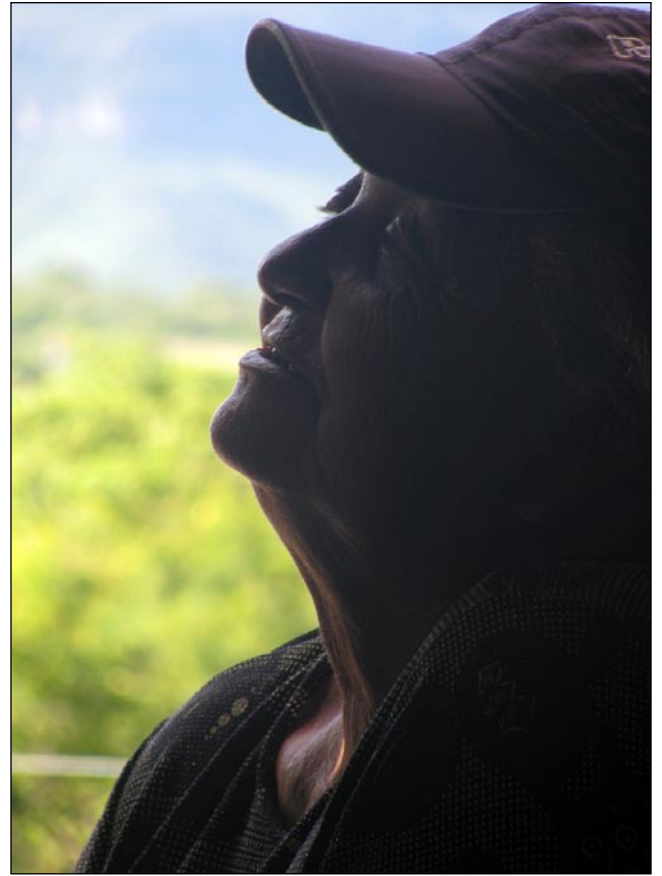
I caught up with him in the town market the next day.



*Watching *Revolução Teatral*'s final presentation at the public market.*

The kids were moving scenery and costume pieces to a central plaza, getting ready to perform an environmental-education clown play before our bus ride back to Arcoverde. I asked him if he'd enjoyed their work, and he said he'd loved it. He'd been to the theatre once before, he told me, while working in Santo André as a stonemason's assistant (the most common of migrants' jobs, often considered the least skilled occupation someone can hold). He'd been impressed by what Santo André had to offer, but he preferred to live in Manari. He'd said he'd been inspired by *Revolução Teatral*'s workshop, and was thinking of offering a similar opportunity to teach locals the traditional dances he'd learned as a child and presented around the town.

For the man-in-the-fedora's generation, as for many others in the *sertão*, opportunity usually meant leaving the northeast, forfeiting tradition to pursue material well-being. In his case, returning to Manari meant preserving his place in a community, and — with it — his opportunity to dance. For Jane and her peers, on the other hand, their parents' migration represented a blossoming of opportunities that never would have existed for them in the *sertão*. These days, several generations exist in a kind of flux between the *sertão* and the southeast. It's unlikely that Jane's generation will return to Manari to stay. After visiting, though, it seems impossible that the members of *Revolução Teatral* will lose sight of their connection to the region, or of the way their successes are grounded in the *sertão*'s past. □



Vó Maria

Current Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA

May 2008 - 2010

Elena will be living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Pooja Bhatia • HAITI

September 2008 - 2010

Pooja attended Harvard as an undergraduate, and then worked for the Wall Street Journal for a few years. She graduated from Harvard Law School. She was appointed Harvard Law School Satter Human Rights Fellow in 2007 and worked as an attorney with the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux, which advocates and litigates on behalf of Haiti's poor.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA

January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal, a staff writer for Springfield (Mass.) Republican and a Pulliam Fellow at The Arizona Republic. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY

April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the New York Observer, her work has also appeared in Salon, the New York Times Book Review, the Nation, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA

September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians

living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL

April 2007-2009

Raphi is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, he has worked in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

Recently Appointed

Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA

May 2009 - 2011

Eve is a New Republic staff writer interested in character and in how individuals fit themselves into new or changing societies. Through that lens, she will be writing about medicine and politics in the new South Africa. At the New Republic, she covered the first Democratic race; her book reviews have also appeared the New York Times. She graduated with a degree in political science from Yale, where she also studied music.

Cecilia Kline • CENTRAL AMERICA

January 2009 - 2011

Cecilia is a graduate of Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, and the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. In 2007 she began with Casa Alianza in Tegucigalpa, Honduras providing outreach for youth living on the street. As an ICWA Fellow she will write about youth-service programs from several Central American cities as a participant observer.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young women and men to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311, Washington, D.C. 20016. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers on our web site.

CONTACT:

Phone: (202) 364-4068

Fax: (202) 364-0498

E-mail: icwa@icwa.org

Website: www.icwa.org

STAFF:

Executive Director:
Steven Butler

Program Assistant/
Publications Manager:
Ellen Kozak

Administrative Assistant/
Bookkeeper: Meera Shah