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Raphael Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil.

Theatrical Revolutions:
Building a People's Theatre in Santo André

By Raphael Soifer

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ARMINDO PINTO DOESN'T EVER SLEEP, as far as I can tell, but that doesn't seem to slow him down. His enthusiasm is contagious, whether he's leading warm-ups for an auditorium full of first-time theatre-goers; holding forth on the history of class struggle in Brazil; or dressing down drivers who have the audacity to cut him off in São Paulo's notorious gridlock. A short man with a bushy white beard and sparkling eyes behind his wire-framed glasses, Armindo cuts a sort of Santa Claus figure in miniature, though slimmer, due in part to the pick-up football games he somehow manages to cram into his schedule once a week. Armindo seems incapable of keeping still for more than a few seconds. Whenever the conversation floundered briefly during one of our many car rides together during the past several months, he would quickly start whistling while accompanying himself by pounding a polyrhythmic beat on the steering wheel.

Armindo Pinto motions to the audience after a collective warm-up in the Municipal Theatre in Santo André.

The relentless urge to keep things moving and to stay ahead is, it seems, Armindo's guiding philosophy. Even by paulistano standards, his days are absurdly overloaded. When I began following his work, in July, he'd been refurbishing his old apartment and living out of a suitcase in a different neighborhood (he would finally move back in December, a few days before packing his bags to fly to Senegal for a conference). In the midst of the move, he had also begun studying for his second undergraduate degree — this one in theatre — at UNESP (Universidade Estadual Paulista), a state university where most of his classmates are at least 25 years his junior. Finally, and foremost on his list of priorities is Armindo's day job, which he sees as his life's work. For the past ten years, he has worked as the coordinator of the municipally-sponsored Theatre of the Oppressed program in Santo André, an industrial city of 600,000 just southeast of São Paulo.

Armindo's program has flourished in Santo André thanks to successive mandates for the PT (Workers' Party), uninterrupted by the 2002 assassination of Celso Daniel, the popular mayor who brought the party to power in the city. Armindo, a PT member since the party's founding in 1979, sees theatre as an outlet of expression for his program's members, an exercise in democracy for traditionally unheard groups. Santo André's Theatre of the Oppressed initiatives range from

Carnaval parades to participatory budget meetings in which residents, instead of city council members, choose how to allocate a fraction of public money. In order to keep the program focused on its participants, Armindo uses his considerable energy to adapt schedules, the exercises, and the script to the realities of his group members' lives. And he's had to tweak the traditional Theatre of the Oppressed Techniques to engage his group members and reflect the realities that they bring with them to the theatre.

Theatre of the Oppressed is a methodology that the Brazilian director, playwright, and theorist Augusto Boal developed during his exile from the country in the 1970s. Key to the technique is the "non-actor," who Boal feels is confined to a passive acceptance of whatever happens onstage. Boal's work presents the stories of these non-actors, people from groups rarely represented in the theatre. He aims to turn amateur participants into on-stage protagonists who present their own stories and struggles.

In Santo André, Armindo's "non-actors" come from a variety of backgrounds. They are factory workers, nursing home residents, and schoolchildren, turning their experiences into short plays that are presented throughout the city, in spaces ranging from classrooms to the downtown municipal theatre. The jewel of the program is Revolução Teatral (Theatrical Revolution), a group of adolescents introduced to the theatre through a technique for amateurs, but who increasingly see themselves as professional performers. Group members use Theatre of the Oppressed to express themselves while creating a theatrical language unique to the group.

Revolução Teatral meets at least twice a week in the community center in Cata Preta, a favela at the southern end of the city where simple red brick houses crowd the hills on either side of a thin, polluted stream. The group has a core of nine kids — ranging in age from 13 to 22 — who attend almost every rehearsal, and another six to eight who come when conditions permit, or when the mood strikes. All of the members of the core group live in or near Cata Preta, but group members come from throughout the city, at least when the budget works. If a city accounts supervisor is demoted or simply forgets, Armindo can lose the group's transportation allowance for several weeks at a time, effectively cutting off the three or four kids who make the hour-and-a-half trek to rehearsal by bus.

Almost all of Revolução Teatral's members are the children of migrants from Brazil's Northeast, and several made the journey south themselves. A list of the group's members — Jane, Jeniffer, Duoglas, Wesley, Erikson, Peterson — reads like an index of the primarily lower-class Brazilian habit of giving kids American-sounding names (frequently with idiosyncratic spellings), which seem to convey a sense of success and prosperity. Their families came south fleeing famine and drought or simply seeking better work, and many have found some degree of success in Brazil's richest state. Though all the kids live on Santo André's periphery, their living situations vary widely. Many of their families have managed, after significant time and investment, to move to brick and concrete houses on paved roads. Others live in what Armindo calls "real favelas" — wooden shacks in recently occupied plots, sometimes without consistent electricity and running water.

It's easy to see how Revolução Teatral became the focus of Armindo's efforts. The kids' exuberance mixes well with Armindo's own, and their combination of cocky adolescent confidence and an insatiable desire to learn more — to be "real actors" — meshes perfectly with Armindo's drive and approach as an educator. Getting teenage boys from a favela to participate in theatre is no easy task, especially because it's often seen as a "gay" activity. Armindo has the rare ability to not only draw them in, but even to get them working harder when he complains that the modern dance they've just executed looks like "a bunch of viadagem" (roughly, faggy-ness).

Members of Revolução Teatral introduce themselves to the audience after performing at the Municipal Theatre.

The group's current roster came together gradually. Armindo made recruitment presentations in Santo André's public schools; he left pamphlets in community centers around the city. Word of mouth did the rest. Armindo is determined not to turn any kids away. He is also committed to getting all onstage, regardless of experience or ability. He told me several times that, he'd like to put all the weakest actors in starring roles, both to increase their confidence and to show that a true people's theatre like

Armindo leads a Theatre of the Oppressed game at rehearsal in Cata Preta.

Theatre of the Oppressed has room for everyone.

Inclusion is foremost in the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal argues that the traditional Western separation of audience from actors disempowers the audience by reducing members to passive acceptance of the stories told on stage. In his Theatre of the Oppressed — a text that meanders from a history of Greek philosophy to a manifesto bashing Aristotle's Poetics to a practical guide for staging popular theatre — Boal writes:

> "Spectator" is a bad word! The spectator is less than a man and it is necessary to humanize him, to restore to him his capacity of action in all its fullness. He too must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors.[1]

Accordingly, Boal's methods are based on the "spect-actor," an audience member given the power not only to participate in the theatrical work, but also to intervene in and affect the course of the action.

Forum Theatre has become the signature method of the Theatre of the Oppressed. It consists of two main components: in the first, actors present a piece, ranging from a short skit to a full-length play. In the second, a "joker" — a sort of director-cum-community-organizer (in Revolução Teatral's case, Armindo) — invites audience members to identify an oppressive situation in the work they have just watched, and to name the characters who they see as the "oppressor" and "oppressed." The joker then invites audience members to step into the action in the role of the "oppressed" character, trying new strategies in an attempt to reverse the oppression.

Boal's training techniques, built around theatre games, are focused primarily on the body. By re-shaping participants' sensory experiences, Boal aims to give non-actors the means to break out of physical patterns of oppression. In Games for Actors and Non-Actors, a practical guide to Theatre of the Oppressed, he writes that, "in the body's battle with the world, the senses suffer."[2] The technique's exercises are based on re-stimulating the senses, re-familiarizing non-actors with their own bodies. Boal divides his games into groups based on their desired results: "Feeling what we touch;" "Listening to what we hear;" "Seeing what we look at." Outside of training Theatre of the Oppressed frequently loses its physical focus. Forum Theatre presentations are usually based primarily on dialogue. Especially when the audience intervenes, the technique can veer easily into a conversation that happens to be taking place on stage, and the physicality is easily lost.

Armindo, who used to work in a cushy advertising job for Nestlé, came to theatre through Boal, whom he saw lecture shortly after changing careers to work on Celso Daniel's first mayoral campaign. Armindo is a dedicated follower of Theatre of the Oppressed and an

Glue sniffers, evangelists, beggars, and rush: Revolução Teatral stages an image of downtown São Paulo in rehearsal.

1 Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. Translated by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, 1979. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985. p. 154-155

2 Boal, Augusto. Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Translated by Adrian Jackson. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 61

The death of a poor farmer, staged in rehearsal

admiring disciple of Boal, who he sees as second only to Bertolt Brecht in the evolution of 20th century theatre. With Revolução Teatral, however, Armindo has begun ambitiously mixing the methodology with modern dance techniques and other aesthetic innovations that are major divergences from the traditional method.

Revolução Teatral's most recent play, Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos (Stones, Clouds, Dreams) is the group's most radical departure from Theatre of the Oppressed convention. The actors dance the entire piece, with the exception of a narrator who appears at three or four junctures to announce changes in setting or time. The play's story of poverty and migration from the Northeast is a common narrative throughout Brazil, and the dances — cattle dying in a drought-stricken landscape, the funeral of a poor subsistence farmer, a crowded *pau-de-araura* (a makeshift bus, literally, a "macaw's perch") bound for São Paulo — consist mostly of images that any Brazilian audience could identify. Pedras, Nuvens, Sonhos depends, in large part, on this familiarity, it showcases the group's abilities. The kids choreographed most of the piece themselves, and the dance, at its best, highlights their natural affinity

The death of the farmer onstage, watched over by an unforgiving sun (on stilts).

for the stage. Revolução Teatral's focus on an all-dance performance extends into the participatory forum at the end, when the actors draw in the audience to dance with them.

The use of dance marks a significant departure from Theatre of the Oppressed tradition. And both the kids and Armindo are blurring the lines between amateur, community-building methodology and their own increasingly professional aspirations. The result is a populist theatre that's polished and aesthetically diverse. Boal — who since 2006 has been an "honorary citizen" of Santo André — has yet to see the group's work, and Armindo looks to the eventual encounter with a combination of dread and glee. In the meantime, though, he and the kids are building a technique with the delicious fervor of true heretics, so enraptured by what they're discovering that they barely seem to notice their departure from accepted Theatre of the Oppressed orthodoxy.

Rehearsal in Cata Preta

Santo André is like São Paulo in miniature, only with less charm, which is hard to imagine at first. The city center is arranged around City Hall, a skeletal framework of sad-looking steel, and the municipal theatre, a misshapen lump of concrete apparently inspired by larger and more impressively funded works of Brazilian modernism like the municipal cathedrals in Rio de Janeiro and Brasília. On rehearsal days, leaving the central plaza that contains both buildings, Armindo and I would pass quickly through the downtown middle-class enclave, composed of a couple of shopping malls and a collection of dull-colored, stubby high-rises. From there, we'd head southward on a tangle of highways. Once past the municipal soccer stadium, the city is a collection of mostly working-class and poor residential neighborhoods with their attendant bars, bakeries, and butcher shops.

Cata Preta is one of those poor neighborhoods, and like teenagers throughout the city, Revolução Teatral's members struggle to fend off the advances of violence and crime all around them. One group member, Armindo told me, had to move across the city when a local gang killed

Arriving in Rio, where the statue of Christ the Redeemer is being held up at gunpoint.

his brother and then continued to threaten his family. Another boy was showing signs of a growing drug problem, missing rehearsals for weeks at a time or showing up halfway through, goofy and stoned. His behavior affected the entire Revolução Teatral, especially for his girlfriend, also a group member, whose family had broken off the relationship. Armindo worked strenuously to get the boy off pot (and the stronger stuff that Armindo suspected he was starting to use), constantly talking to him on the phone and giving him more responsibility within the group. He even brought the boy along with the rest of the ensemble to a conference in the interior of São Paulo state in September, the first time that some of the group members had ever spent a night outside of Santo André. As of December, at least, the boy was reintegrated into the group, although Armindo reported occasional telephone conversations where he seemed to have relapsed.

Armindo stretched his own rules to bring the pot smoker back into the fold. He's adamant about some principles. Foremost is education. He tells the group repeatedly that, although any adolescent is welcome in Revolução Teatral, he won't work with anyone who isn't going to school. In private, though — and frequently with the group as well — Armindo laments the state of education in Santo André. The kids, he told me, usually go to class for four hours a day, at most, and José Serra — the governor of São Paulo state — recently rebuked a federal initiative to add philosophy and social science classes to a thin curriculum. Armindo suspects one group member — a witty, outgoing boy — of being functionally illiterate, and he is troubled by the gaps that he sees in the others' education.

The gaps aren't hard to see, though they come as a shock in a group filled with bright, ambitious adolescents. In one rehearsal, constructing a scene of a journey from the Northeast to São Paulo, the kids enthusiastically built montages of key stops along the way. "We'll do funk music for Rio, and then capoeira for Bahia," said Nando, as the group broke almost instantaneously into a grinding, gyrating imitation of carioca funk, a heavy, percussive dance music notorious for its frequently violent lyrics and lewd dancing. When I asked why, in a trek from north to south, they had put Rio de Janeiro — São Paulo's neighbor — before the largest state in the Northeast, several group members looked at me quizzically. "Bahia comes first?" someone asked, reflecting ignorance of Brazil's geography.

Armindo's approach to teaching and directing is highly personal. The group serves both as a forum for members to air their frustrations, and for Armindo to supplement their classroom experiences with his own sources. With the kids, he holds forth on the history of popular movements and uprisings in Brazil, while lending them books and CDs (ranging from northeastern folk music to Pink Floyd) that he considers indispensable.

Revolução Teatral's first dance-based piece, Retratos de Origem (Tales of Origin), shows Armindo's pedagogy in action, presenting a vision of Brazilian history based on successive incidents of racial domination. The piece opens in a pre-Columbian Brazil represented as an idyllic tropical paradise, complete with a dance set to indigenous music. Soon, inevitably, the dancers freeze, grim music sets in, and a Portuguese ship arrives to shatter the calm. The next twenty minutes are an all-dance overview of 500 years of racism in Brazil, intertwined with images of popular resistance. A scene of African slaves being whipped by a white overseer transforms to a victorious display of capoeira, a dance and martial art form that has become both a national sport and a symbol of Afro-Brazilian cultural resilience. Later, the image of a Portuguese overseer killing escaped slaves transforms into a survey of racist massacres in Brazil. Peterson lies motionless on the ground as Nando mimes shooting a gun. For each

A Portuguese ship arrives, and it's all downhill for the next 500 years or so.

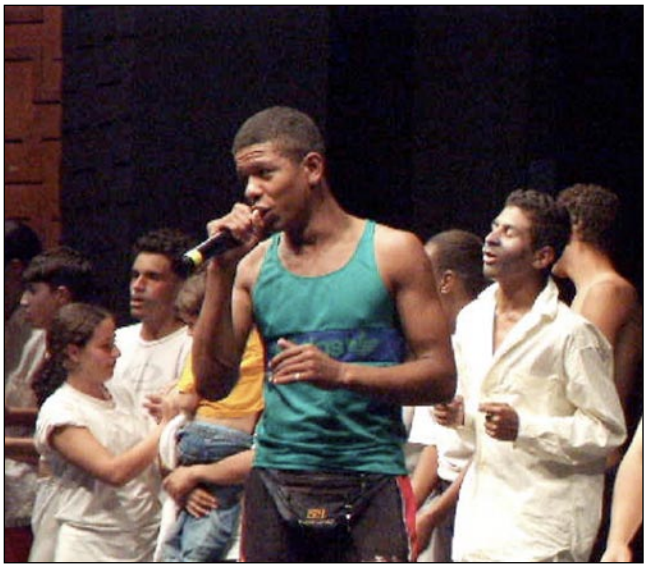
gunshot, the cast speaks another name in chorus: Canudos, a utopian community in Bahia that federal troops crushed in 1897; Candelária, a church in downtown Rio de Janeiro where police killed eight homeless kids in 1992; Vigário Geral, a favela in Rio where off-duty cops killed 29 residents later the same year.

Beyond his history lessons, Armindo is intent on opening the group to the everyday struggles of Revolução Teatral's members. Some of these fit easily into the group's productions: Retratos de Origem ends with a classroom argument between a young black student and a white teacher who ignores the racial slurs flying in her classroom. Other concerns, especially financial ones, are not as easily represented onstage, but have a major influence on the group's work.

Money problems are a constant worry. All of the kids are expected to contribute to their family's budgets, but earning opportunities are scarce. A few of the group members take part in the federally-sponsored Agente Jovem (Young Agent) program, a peer education initiative designed to give leadership opportunities and a small cash flow to kids from the poorest families. Outside of Agente Jovem, though, the kids are at the whims of whatever informal economy they can latch onto. Girls are especially likely to drop out of the group if a babysitting job becomes available — from which they're likely to earn 30-50 reais (US$18-$30) a week — or if their parents need them to clean the house or care for younger siblings.

Boys are less bound by their familial responsibility, but they jump at any chance they get. Peterson, one of Revolução Teatral's founding members, left the group in November for an off-the-books security guard job where he earns well below the national monthly minimum wage of 380 reais (about US$229), with no benefits. At the group's final meeting in December, Duoglas — one of the resident comedians — worried about how he'd be able to stay in the group in 2008. He had just turned 16, which meant that he'd lost the Bolsa Familia (Family Scholarship) funds that the federal government pays poor families to keep their kids in school. Because he was under 18, though, he was virtually shut out of the job market. He'd taken to hawking bread for a local bakery most afternoons, walking from his house near the community center to downtown and back (nearly two hours each way) to sell it.

Armindo can't offer solutions for the kids' financial problems, especially as they begin to come of age and look for work. The job market in São Paulo, though still stronger than in the rest of the country, is plagued by high unemployment, and since most of the group's members can't afford a private university education and won't have the test scores to get into a free public university or win a government grant, their future options seem limited. Armindo's response has been two-fold. First, he's increased



(Top,left) Jane (left, as the student) and Alessandra (right, as the teacher) face off at the end of Retratos de Origem *(Bottom, left) Forum Theatre in action: an audience member takes over the oppressed role in the same scene. (Above) Peterson, at the Municipal Theatre, leads the group in the rap he wrote for Revolução Teatral: "I know our life will change/ But we need to fight/The Oppressed will win."*

Armindo holds forth at the Municipal Theatre, as the cast looks on.

the responsibilities of group members, leaving them tasks ranging from setting up performances in their schools, to scheduling buses, to presenting proposals for new presentations to bureaucrats at City Hall, all by way of creating path toward "professionalization." Second — thanks in part to the money earned through kid-organized presentations, as well as hard-won additional municipal funding — he's been taking the group on the road, bringing them to Theatre of the Oppressed Festivals in Uruguay and Argentina over the course of 10 days. The trip was the first time that any of the kids had left the country, and Armindo was determined to use the experience to get them planning for their futures. Once they've seen where they can go, he told me, they'll work hard to create the same kind of opportunities for themselves outside the group.

Revolução Teatral's final meeting of the year, in early December, followed a major blowout between the kids before a performance that Armindo hadn't attended. Group members showed up late, and argued bitterly over which of the three shows in the group's repertoire to present, since no one had made a final decision. Armindo, who doesn't own a cell phone, fielded calls from group members all night, and resolved to figure out what went wrong without assigning blame. Rather than having the group talk through what had happened, Armindo ran an Image Theatre exercise, a classic Theatre of the Oppressed training technique. He had group members assume poses representing how they had felt when they arrived, when the argument began, and what they had done during the argument. Next, he had the whole group assume individual images. Still holding their poses, the group began to discuss what had happened, in a noticeably brighter mood than they had started. Finally, Armindo had them move from their individual images into a whole group "ideal image." Thirty minutes after the drill began, and with remarkably little conversation, the group came up with a contingency plan for future performances.

The major news at Revolução Teatral's meeting — which all of the group members had already heard — was not good. After Jane took part in yet another presentation during her school hours without permission, her mother had pulled her from the group. Armindo thought he'd be able to intervene in January, but the group members were clearly upset, and worried about what this indicated for the future of Revolução Teatral. Outside the community center, one group member told me that Jane hadn't made time for anything outside of the group as Armindo became increasingly ambitious in scheduling performances. Maybe Armindo's enthusiasm was a bit too contagious.

But the group was already organizing for 2008. Having made their first major trips in September and October, the kids were determined to keep moving. Armindo has begun dreaming of a major tour for the group, first to the Northeast to present Pedras, Sonhos, Nuvens, and then to Portugal, to work with a Theatre of the Oppressed group of teenage African immigrants on the outskirts of Lisbon. He has no idea where the money will come from, he told me, but Revolução Teatral will find a way to make it work. Meanwhile, Alessandra and Duoglas (the bread-seller) have started thinking beyond the next year. They're determined to take over an abandoned building in their neighborhood to start a free center for Theatre of the Oppressed, spreading word of a "people's theatre" that they've made their own. ❑

Current ICWA 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.

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

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director 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 Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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