

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.

Open Schools:

An Education "Revolution" with Valmir & Miró

By Raphael Soifer

I can't remember what Valmir said that brought the conversation to a halt. We were sitting at the white plastic table of a bar in Olinda's Mercado Eufrásio Barbosa, already at work on a third or fourth beer and our second round of cachaça, when he said it. Whatever it was, it was classic Valmir: pithy, punny and intensely clever. It was enough to make the four of us at the table — Valmir, Miró, Seu Vitão and me — shut up for a minute to think through all of its possibilities.

Miró was the first to break the silence. "You know what that is, Valmir? It's *marketing*, pure *marketing*!" (Miró used the English word).

"That's our problem, brother," Valmir shot back. "We should have been advertising executives...we would have made a fortune!" Valmir Jordão and Miró are two of Recife's best-known poets. Their "marketing" strategy, though of a decidedly alternative bent, is impressive in its scope. It's also a testament to the poets' stamina. In the past three decades, both have hit the pavement relentlessly, drawing ever larger, more diverse audiences.

Miró and Valmir have fans and supporters in Recife's favelas, in the city's public markets, and on the faculty at UFPE, the Federal University of Pernambuco. Most recently, they've sought to attract the attention of educators in the state's public school system, hoping to marry their lively, democratic approach to poetry with a need to pay their not insignificant bar tabs.

In a recent profile of Valmir, the national left-wing cultural journal *Caros Amigos* (Dear Friends) said that his work has "become so



Valmir and Miró

well known that it's almost entered the public domain." By that Saturday morning in late April, I'd met folks in the interior of Rio Grande do Norte, two states away, who could recite his haiku "Justiça Total" (Total Justice), though they couldn't name the author.

Coca para os ricos
Cola para os pobres
Coca-Cola é isso aí!

Coca (coke) for the rich
Cola (glue) for the poor
Coca-Cola is that there!

The poem is a quick but detailed deconstruction of global capitalism: the rich sniff the expensive stuff, the poor get strung out on the cheapest high available, the profits go to the fat cats, and the world keeps on turning. "Justiça Total" has become a well-worn popular verse, passed among the Northeast's bohemians in a modern-day oral tradition, like the best rhyming *cordel* pamphlets that are still ubiquitous at newspaper kiosks and booksellers' stalls. Valmir's

poem also has the simplicity and staying power of a commercial jingle. As Miró pointed out, the place that he and Valmir occupy in the public consciousness — historically that of folk poets, musicians, and puppeteers — is these days increasingly being taken over by commercialized pop music and product jingles.

Valmir and Miró find themselves somewhere between these two worlds, though no one would mistake them for advertising executives. Their free-spirited and frequently exuberant lifestyle has much more in common with itinerant *forró* musicians and *cordel* authors. In addition to being two of Recife's best-known poets, they're also two of the city's most renowned barflies. It's pretty much impossible to picture either one getting up early to put on a suit and work in a cubicle. They set their own hours, selling books at bars in the city's public markets, and making guest appearances at events ranging from Recife's prestigious annual Literary Festival to the informal monthly recitals that some of their friends host. As a consequence, they're frequently broke. When the funding works out — which, normally, it doesn't — they also give literary workshops in community centers and public schools.

The chronically cash-strapped poets' first major gig in 2008 came through in April as part of the *Escola Aberta* (Open School) program, a national educational enrichment initiative that Lula introduced during his first term. The program opens schools to outside instructors who teach weekend classes in subjects that don't get regular space or funding in public school curricula. It also opens these instructors' classrooms to the community. After choosing a new workshop for a given school (usually based in part on the community's suggestions), the program advertises the opportunity throughout the neighborhood. Although currently enrolled students have preference in signing up for classes, any community member can take part.

Putting Valmir and Miró at the head of a classroom serves as a powerful recognition of the poets' roles in Recife's cultural life and in its neighborhoods. In an era when a former metalworker can be Brazil's president, *Escola Aberta* highlights an ideal that any public school student cannot only aspire to understand literature, but also — like Valmir and Miró — to produce it. In a country where public schools have struggled for decades to reach potential students and to offer even the basics of a core curriculum, the program envisions a Brazil in which education reform goes beyond providing the bare minimum,

and in which creativity has a place in the classroom.

Escola Aberta began as a UNESCO partnership carried out in three states (including Pernambuco) starting in 2000. Lula's administration consolidated and nationalized the program, which still has ties to UNESCO, and which currently operates in 22 of Brazil's 27 states and territories. Like most of the current government's signature initiatives, *Escola Aberta* is an occasional target of sniping from both the mainstream, right-leaning press and the disillusioned hard left. Shortly before Lula was elected in 2002, I remember reading an interview with a member of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's outgoing administration. Lula, he said, had new ideas and good ideas, "but the good ideas aren't new, and the new ideas aren't good." Critics sometimes characterize *Escola Aberta* as yet another wasteful social program, but whenever a similar initiative shows impressive results, cynics are quick to point out that it was never really Lula's idea in the first place.

When I mentioned Valmir and Miró's workshops to friends who know the poets, everyone thought that sending the two somewhat decadent poets into classrooms was



a major sign of improvement in the state's education system. Although accompanying the Saturday and Sunday classes was a bit like following two Brazilian Bukowskis into Pernambuco's public schools, I agree. Miró and Valmir looked out of place during their first session, fidgeting at the front of a brightly decorated elementary school classroom in Peixinhos, a poor neighborhood near Olinda's boundary with Recife. They made shy conversation with their students — about 18 girls, aged eight to twelve, and one 72-year-old man who had recently learned to read — and looked at each other nervously. André, a doctoral student co-teaching the workshop, helped to break the ice the first week



Reciting newly written work in Peixinhos.

(he missed the rest of the sessions, sick with dengue). He led Valmir and Miró in reciting short poems (including “Justiça Total”) for the class, which received the work with warm — if slightly shell-shocked — applause. Miró and Valmir had been expecting high school kids, so their lesson the first day was a bit haphazard. Every few minutes, they huddled at the back with André, going over photocopied handouts and trying to remember poems that were age appropriate.

By the next weekend, though, the poets were on a roll. In Peixinhos, most of the same elementary-school-aged girls showed up for each session of the four-week workshop, which gave the class more continuity than most (the 72-year-old never made it back, though a couple of older teenage boys attended a single session each). At first, the kids completed obediently the simple writing exercises that Miró and Valmir had prepared, mostly copying down the examples that Valmir wrote on the scuffed blackboard. As the day went on, though, the girls began to realize that the poets would let them write whatever they wanted. Some girls wrote poems that interspersed lines about the night sky with their fears of the endemic violence in Peixinhos. Others took advantage of Valmir and Miró's permissiveness to write short, vaguely rhyming verses of poop jokes.

The workshops didn't go as well in other schools. In Alto José do Pinho — a poor community in Recife well known for local arts initiatives like its *maracatu* groups and pirate radio station — school coordinators were waiting to welcome Valmir and Miró for their first Sunday-morning class. They had to apologize for all the empty

chairs, though. The poets held forth anyway, leading an intense discussion about literature and identity with two adolescent students, interrupted frequently by 7-year-olds who wandered absentmindedly in and out of the classroom. That afternoon, in an office the size of a broom closet somewhere in Recife's North Zone, André argued patiently with a school administrator who wouldn't let them teach that day because, he explained irritably, they hadn't signed all the right forms. Would-be workshop participants rode down the newly cleaned corridors on their bikes, finally parking them against the wall as they joined a student-led “praise dance” in the school's central hall that combined hip-hop moves with Evangelical lyrics.

Each Saturday and Sunday, Valmir and Miró would teach morning and afternoon sessions in different schools, mostly in different cities. Seu Vitão, a professional driver for the state government, picked them up at home and took them to each session. Between classes, we would stop in strategically placed bars (never hard to find in Pernambuco), where the poets would improvise short compositions, get up from the table and dance, and test their charm by trying to order another round on credit. Valmir, editing three poetry anthologies, has recently begun attracting a new wave of interest in the local and national press, and a documentary film profiling Miró was set to premiere at the Pernambuco Film Festival (where it eventually won the prize for Best Short). Still, in April, the poets' financial situation was especially “complicated” (in Valmir's words). Valmir was waiting for his next book launch, and Miró had already spent most of the money from his a few months earlier. He had plenty of orders for the t-shirts that he prints by hand, but he couldn't afford the materials to make a fresh

batch. (Each t-shirt features one of Miró's slogan-like poems in big, bold font. "Whoever invented the bullet/ deserves to be shot," is the most popular). Both men, who are well into their 40s, were living at home with their mothers.

One Sunday, in the Encruzilhada market in Recife's North Zone, we ran into one of Valmir's old friends, who bought both of the books that Miró had with him for 20 *reais*. Over beers and an *arrumadinha* — a platter of rice, beans, meat, and diced vegetables — Valmir remembered how he'd met his friend in 1981, when they were both dedicated activists in Pernambuco's nascent PT (Lula's Workers' Party). Valmir was closely involved in the party until last year, but always dedicated more time to his poetry. While his friend was an insider with a well-paid political job, Valmir muttered, "I lost 26 years of my life to the PT." If he had known better, he said, he could have spent his young, idealistic years going to grad school instead of being a party activist. There was no bitterness in his voice, though. He stared into space for a second, and then poured himself another glass of beer.

Valmir was mulling over his own history within the PT, but his political criticisms aren't limited to pointing out where his better-connected friends have made it. He's one of many Brazilians who worked for change, and who is disappointed both in the pace of reform and in the shape it's taken during the current administration. Lula's approval ratings remain sky-high, especially in the Northeast, but the "people's president" continues to take plenty of hits at ground level both for his pragmatism and his idealism. The most devout hardliners on the left have abandoned the PT for more radical "micro-parties," but many of the party

faithful are also disillusioned with Lula's preference for balanced budgets and steady economic growth over more dramatic social reforms.

Brazil has long struggled to provide educational opportunities in poor, marginalized, and hard-to-reach communities. Today, UNESCO polls and government surveys indicate that nearly 96 percent of school-age children are receiving some basic instruction. Public schools often have a hard time keeping up with the new influx of pupils. In Pernambuco, class sizes frequently exceed the legal limit of one teacher for every 40 students. Programs like Escola Aberta, therefore, highlight a key change in policy, in which quality and depth of education — rather than just building schools or hiring teachers — are major priorities. Escola Aberta in particular also creates significant changes in the relationships between public schools and their communities. The program promotes a greater openness in what subjects are taught, and a new vision of community members' access to the public schools, both as students and as instructors. (Several of my artist friends in Olinda have designed Escola Aberta workshops that are scheduled to start later this year).

Like most of the current government's reforms, Escola Aberta is still in its infancy, and it will take time and plenty of trial-and-error to determine its lasting benefits. The program's limited scope and budget are significant obstacles. The four weekly workshop sessions let kids whet their appetite, or, at most, have a chance to take home a few tricks they've learned, without offering the opportunity for them to deepen their interests. Holding enrichment classes during the weekend doesn't help, either. Every time we

returned to Alto do José do Pinho, another Sunday morning activity — like church, or an impromptu football match — had claimed most of the potential younger students, while many of the teenagers were still in bed after one all-night dance party or another. The afternoon sessions competed directly with *Caldeirão do Huck* and *Dominação do Faustão*, the cheesy variety shows that take over TVs throughout Brazil for hours every weekend.

Everyone involved in the workshops I watched — instructors as well as students — would have benefited from weekday classes integrated into the regular curriculum, and from a program with greater structure and support. After their shaky first lesson, Miró and Valmir looked increasingly at ease in the classroom.



Miró — one of the Northeast's premiere performance poets — coaches a student in recitation.



Dancing in the rain after a cancelled workshop (and a protracted visit to a local bar) in Alto José do Pinho, Recife.

book to chronicle their writing over the course of the workshop. Valmir and Miró left, confident that they could play an important role for their students. But it's hard to imagine that many of the kids' will have access to the books and the kind of instruction that would let them develop more fully, or at least that they'll continue to find such access in the public school system. Miró and Valmir both managed, but many of the obstacles they encountered growing up — underserved or non-existent school libraries, and incompetent, racist, or absentee teachers — are still there to confront their current students.

In Recife, no one is shy about taking the current government to task for its many perceived failures. Yet whenever anyone starts a conversation critical of

By the time their third crop of four-week workshops rolled around, Valmir told me that they had a solid lesson plan, and intimated that they were cutting down on the boozing between sessions. Still, the responsibility of looking after a classroom remains a challenge for the poets. Escola Aberta essentially throws its instructors in front of a group of students and expects them to manage. Coupled with an experienced teacher, Valmir and Miró would be freer to concentrate on poetry, rather than the fine points of classroom management that they've never really picked up (and that run counter to most of their instincts).

Lula and his administration, there's always someone close by to point out how many problems and inequalities the current government inherited from its predecessors. "He's had six years," I heard someone scolding a table full of friends recently. "Did you expect him to fix five centuries of colonialism in six years?" School administrators, students, and outside teachers like Valmir and Miró are doing their best. Still, it's hard to say whether Escola Aberta, since its introduction in 2006, has managed to overturn even three

There's a naivety in the assumption that bringing poets into a school will automatically create a greater understanding of literature, and a lot of cynicism in the idea that meaningful reform can be accomplished in short, sporadic workshops. At the central secondary school in Abreu e Lima, a city on the northern edge of the Recife metropolitan area, Valmir and Miró showed up for their first workshop session to find at least a dozen eager adolescents waiting for them. Most had brought pages of their own poetry, typed out or written carefully by hand. Their introduction to the poets was a major event for the kids, and an obvious inspiration. Before the first class ended, students were debating how to publish an Escola Aberta chap-



Miró, Seu Vitão, Derrek, and a stray dog: nearly half of the recital's participants.

years' worth of the cynicism and neglect that have long dominated Brazilian public education.

Three weeks into the workshops, everyone lost track of the time between classes. We left the bar in Olinda late and showed up tipsy in Abreu e Lima 40 minutes after the class was supposed to start. That day, though, only one 16-year-old student had bothered to show up, and he was still waiting patiently. The week before, he told us, the school's Escola Aberta coordinator had informed the class that only students enrolled in the school where the workshop was being held could have their work published in the much-anticipated chapbook. Most of the aspiring poets had transferred to other schools, and they decided to boycott the workshop. Weidison, the one student who came for the class, had transferred, too, but he liked Valmir and Miró enough to come even after learning that he wouldn't be able to publish his work. When he'd studied in the school where the workshop was being held, he explained, he'd arrive to empty classrooms at 7:30 in the morning. Most days, he studied by himself in the library until the final bell rang at noon, since his teachers either stayed at home, or spent class time reading magazines or chatting on their cell phones.

Valmir and Miró had been embarrassed to show up

very late and a little boozy. After talking with Weidison, though, they were fired up and ready to go. They resolved to complain to Escola Aberta's administration, and asked the 16-year-old to try to get his friends to come back for the final class one week later. Miró told Weidison that he and Valmir didn't know how to teach to just one student, but that they



Valmir and Miró at the impromptu schoolyard recital in Abreu e Lima.

were determined to hold a workshop anyway. He gathered a small audience — me, Valmir, Weidison, Seu Vitão and a couple of elementary school-aged students — and announced that we would have a poetry recital in the schoolyard. "It's in support of Weidison," he said after he'd recited the first couple of poems. "It's in honor of poetry."

"In honor of revolution!" Valmir shouted.

Derrek, an energetic 10-year-old who had insisted that he didn't know how to read until Miró gave him a copy of his book to recite from, looked at Miró, who had already launched into another poem. "What's 'revolution?'"

Miró stopped. "Revolution is what we're doing now," he told Derrek. "It's

when people get together to make a difference."

Valmir — irrepressibly irreverent, and always ready with a one-liner — shook his head, grinning. "Hey, Derrek!" he hollered. "Revolution is when you grab a cop by the ass!" □

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.

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.

Recently Appointed

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.

Eve Fairbanks • SOUTH AFRICA

March 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 Congress since 1992 and the 2008 presidential 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