

The Impact of Brecht on Chico Buarque and His Brazilian Street Opera

Written by Joe Lopes

Tuesday, 20 March 2007 22:32



"I have never acknowledged the difference between 'serious' music and 'light' music. There is only good music and bad music...the great classical composers wrote for their contemporary audiences. They wanted those who heard their music to understand it, and they did."

- Kurt Weill, in an interview in The New York Sun, February 1940

"It seems to me that the American popular song, growing out of American folk music, is the basis of the American musical theater...it is quite legitimate to use the form of the popular song and gradually fill it out with new musical content."

- Kurt Weill, in a letter to music critic Olin Downes, 1949

Two quotes, two different occasions, two strikingly similar views on music's universality and appeal. Both of these enlightened commentaries, spaced almost a decade apart, as they were, issued forth from the mouth of a German-Jewish immigrant to the U.S. noted for his enthusiastic embrace of American citizenship in spite of Old Country ties to Europe.

Nevertheless, his candid claim to the Sun could have been tailor-made to fit the most recent addition to the 20th century's stagnant operatic repertoire, Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas* - a 1996 Latin American homage to a fictional *Fat Lady* that has become rightly popular with contemporary audiences, as well as reflecting the "good" music we've come to expect from this hemisphere's dwindling supply of classical composers.

Without a doubt, anyone hearing this lovely score in the flesh can easily come to understand, and be moved by, and its emotional impact on listeners.

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In like manner, Weill's riposte to the critic Downes concerning the symbiotic relationship between popular song and musical theater also embraces the notion, so strongly held by writer-musician Michael Anthony Lahue, that "music, in the post-modern world, has become increasingly inter- and multi-disciplinary, [with] Brazilian musicians and composers commonly active in both the popular and the classical genres simultaneously."

Apropos of the above, the likeliest question to be posed now is this: why has there not been a work written about a fictional Fat Man - a Brazilian Fat Man, for that matter - to entice lower and middle-class patrons, along with their more "sophisticated" opera-loving counterparts, into revisiting their local theaters after so many unproductive years in limbo?

In a word, such an attractive stage subject would be pure manna from musical heaven to the average blue-collar type, not to mention a major cross-section of Brazil's avid theatergoers, still curious enough to take a chance on a domestic working-class drama they could more readily absorb and grab on to.

How about a play starring a character from the country's cultural past, say, the 1940 war years? A fellow straight out of its most famous natural urban setting; that takes place in the city's colorful, lowlife section, specifically the old bohemian district of Lapa, a neighborhood once populated by loose women and loose morals, petty thieves and petty scoundrels, and even more perilous law enforcement officials?

A world reminiscent of the one German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his collaborator, the redoubtable Mr. Weill, so brilliantly encapsulated in their 1928 "cabaret musical," The Threepenny Opera- itself a decadent Weimar Republic takeoff on English poet John Gay's 1728 masterpiece, The Beggar's Opera, and still widely regarded by reviewers as the "granddaddy of all the singing, stinging portraits of fat societies on their eves of destruction."

It just so happens that such an extravaganza already exists. In fact, on August 15, 2003, the work celebrated the 25th anniversary of its world-premiere engagement (at the Carlos Gomes Theater, no less) in the region of its ignoble "birth," lovely downtown Rio de Janeiro.

The piece in question, with the rather crude title of "perá do Malandro ("The Street

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Hustler's Opera"), was revived by the team of Charles Moeller and Cláudio Botelho (Cole Porter: He Never Said He Loved Me) - the Brazilian equivalent, shall we say, of the Great White Way's Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim (A Little Night Music, Sweeney Todd), or, from a previous generation, Robert Wright and George Forrest (Song of Norway, Kismet).

It could only have been conceived by a true, native-born Carioca - and who better to have brought the spectacle to vivid life than one of Rio's most celebrated citizens: singer, songwriter, poet, playwright and producer, Francisco Buarque de Hollanda, better known to fans as Chico.

Indeed it was that, in 1978, a full half-century after its bawdy Brecht-Weill predecessor held Berliners in thrall before Hitler's storm troopers goose-stepped their way in, and nearly 250 years since the original bowed in Britain during the reign of George II, did Malandro make its initial impression on an unsuspecting - and still military-governed - Brazil.

Described as a "landmark of Brazilian musical theater," it established the publicity-shy Mr. Buarque (who incidentally had spent his formative years in dual residency among the denizens of São Paulo and Rome, respectively) as a "true innovator on the national arts scene."

The show's premise, an adaptation of the two earlier versions of the tawdry tale, features criminal Max Overseas - a stand-in for the notorious "Mack the Knife" of stage, screen and popular-song fame- pitted against Duran, the fearsome owner of Lapa's houses of ill repute, with Lúcia and Teresinha set up as rival love interests, and a fifth character, the transvestite prostitute Geni ("Jenny"), thrown into the stew as Max's ultimate betrayer.

With such memorable numbers as "A Volta do Malandro," "Viver do Amor," "Teresinha," "Folhetim," "O Meu Amor," "Palavra de Mulher," "Geni e o Zepelim," "Pedaco de Mim," and the seven-minute-forty-six-second finale "Ápera," based on the "Toreador Song" from Bizet's Carmen, this irreverent pastiche cleverly mixes the sexy tangos and chords of the era with seventies-style samba canções and sugary pop ballads.

Bragged the play's musical director Cláudio Botelho, "No recent musicals, not even those

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on Broadway, have had as many hit tunes as this one."

Produced on what most insiders would consider a shoestring budget ("At the start, we didn't even have money for bus fare," Botelho recalled), it boasted a cast of 20 singers and actors, 12 full-time musicians, 75 specially crafted costumes, and a three-tiered revolving stage platform.

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Turning Back the Musical Clock

As the name alternately implied, however, Malandro might have spelled a good deal of trouble in Rio city right from its opening night - a time just after severe artistic repression had placed the still reeling Brazilian nation firmly in the grip of the military.

Always a foil of the dictatorial regime's restrictive rightwing policies, the leftist-leaning Chico, along with dozens of other politically active performers, including colleagues Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, were forced to confront the rigid censorship practices heaped upon their creative output.

Consequently, many of Chico's productions from that period, among them *Roda Viva* (1967), a story about a pop singer feasted on by his fans; *Calabar* (1973), a historical pageant about a Portuguese traitor; and, most especially, the biting *Gota d'Água* (1975), a modern re-imagining of the Jason and Medea fable, drew the ire of the ruling class, what with their unique blend of social satire, ironic wit, and keen, metaphorical observances of life under the generals - themes that were guaranteed not to win him friends in high places.

In the middle of this political maelstrom, Chico resolved in 1969 to cool things down a bit with the brass by leaving Brazil for a self-imposed European exile. Returning a year later to Rio, he found the country still under the Army's sway and only slightly less intolerant of his polemical song structures.

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Having so far succeeded in thumbing his nose at the authorities - an attitude dictated by his standing in Brazil's intellectual community, to include lyricist Vinicius de Moraes and his own father, historian and sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda - the unrepentant Chico kept up a steady stream of compositions ("Apesar de Você," "Bolsa de Amores," "Samba de Orly," "Acorda Amor";) that barely passed muster with the censors.

By the time the 1980s rolled around, he had realized the need to break free from his previous pathway and ventured forth into uncharted territory, first as a children's book author (Chapeuzinho Amarelo, 1979), a film-score composer (Bye, Bye Brasil, 1980), a screenwriter (Saltimbancos Trapalhães, 1981; Para Viver um Grande Amor, 1983), and a best-selling fiction novelist (Estorvo, 1991).

Once a purveyor of so-called protest material that was, in the words of journalist Larry Rohter, "full of untranslatable puns and double meanings," he resisted the urge to constantly wear his social consciousness on his sleeve and devoted himself instead to the creation of those "undulating sambas and love songs brimming with romance" that were symbolic of the next phase of his multifaceted career - o arroz e feijão ("the rice and beans"), so to speak, of his lasting fame and fortune.

As Chico himself put it, "Even the handful of my songs most often cited as examples of political resistance," those individual tunes that relied upon "artifices that seem incomprehensible today," were, after all, "sambas with a happy sound. People may be protesting, but they are dancing while they do it."

"In that sense, Chico's songs are more traditional than the bossa nova," wrote Mario Osava in Arts Weekly Brazil, "which reflected the euphoria of the prosperous and growing middle class in Rio's beach neighborhoods in the 1950s and early 1960s."

This was quite removed from the disillusionment felt throughout the remainder of the sixties, on into the seventies and beyond. Paradoxically, with the government's later (and welcome) change in attitude about his life's work, Chico eventually went on to become "the towering figure of national unanimity," observed fellow entertainer Caetano Veloso, "the fabulous and seductive composer-singer. He was also the great synthesizer of bossa nova's modernizing advances with the hopes for a return to the traditional samba of the thirties."

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Danish-born columnist Kirsten Weinoldt, who has written extensively on the subject of Brazilian Popular Music, agrees with Veloso's shrewd assessment: "His first love were the traditional sambas of Noel Rosa, Ismael Silva, and Ataulfo Alves," the very icons of the 1930s he grew up listening to and enjoying in his carefree youth.

While nostalgia has played a conspicuous part in the show's successful stage run, both in Brazil and abroad, it can also be argued that "Ópera do Malandro was Chico's first real attempt at a return as well to those earlier, simpler times - a bid, as it were, for his own personal trip down memory lane in using the form of Brazilian popular song and filling it out with new musical content, as composer Weill once suggested.

Whether by design or not, what many failed to detect at the time of Malandro's debut was the overpowering (and much downplayed) allure of the German theater on Buarque's writing and art, particularly the philosophy present in the plays of Weill's onetime stage-partner, Bertolt Brecht.

(To be continued...)

Joe Lopes, a naturalized American citizen born in Brazil, was raised and educated in New York City, where he worked for many years in the financial sector. In 1996, he moved to Brazil with his wife and daughters. In 2001, he returned to the U.S. and now resides in North Carolina with his family. He is a lover of all types of music, especially opera and jazz, as well as an incurable fan of classic and contemporary films. You can email your comments to JosmarLopes@msn.com .