

## A BRAZILIAN COMI-TRAGEDY

**H**OW SHOULD critical thought respond to the ructions and turmoil, the clamour and confusion that have characterized Brazilian political life in recent years? Erupting with the urban protests of 2013, from the seeming sunlit placidity of mildly social-democratic PT rule—beneath which, new pressures were building—this discontent then drove the rise of a rabid new right, while a self-isolated Dilma government stuck to its austerity playbook as Brazil’s economy tanked. The combined prosecutorial, congressional and media assault upon her in 2016, the government of unelectables under Michel Temer (on a 7 per cent approval rating) and the imprisonment of Lula then cleared the path for the rise of Bolsonaro, the chaos of the pandemic—and the sudden reversal of juridical wisdom in March 2021, annulling Lula’s convictions and allowing him to fight this October’s election.

Is it possible, in these conditions, for critique to be as radical as reality itself? Roberto Schwarz’s reply is an epic comi-tragedy, *Rainha Lira*, which, in addition to the Queen of the title, features a popular uprising, a jailed King, a thuggish Thing and the Queen’s three daughters, a neoliberal, a nationalist and a former guerrilla. Schwarz, as NLR readers may know, is among the world’s finest living literary critics and a political commentator of rare insight and acuity.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of his literary essays is the elucidation of relations—interchange, conflict, dislocation—between classes in peripheral countries and those of the metropolitan centre, in art and in social life. Since those contrasting positions are the poles of a capitalist system, the essays are not only dialectical but characteristically tense. Schwarz starts from the present, but is alert to the perdurance of the archaic, be it in economic and political structures or in literary modes of expression. His avowed affiliations are with the European Marxist critical tradition, but also with the work of

the great Brazilian critic Antonio Candido and the early-sixties *Capital* seminar at the University of São Paulo, in which professors and students came together to study Brazilian backwardness as an integral part of the system of capitalist reproduction in the country.

Schwarz's critical writing owes much, as well, to biographical circumstances. Born in Vienna in 1938, he was taken to Brazil by his parents when still a baby. Jewish and Communist, they fled Nazism, settling finally in São Paulo. Moving between two languages, German and Portuguese, Schwarz studied social sciences at USP, then critical theory and comparative literature with René Wellek at Yale, returning to help Candido launch the USP Department of Literary Theory. Caught up in the mounting struggles that led to the military coup of 1964, he was an active participant in the cultural effervescence of the left, until it was crushed by the decisive hard turn of the dictatorship in 1968. At that point, Schwarz was forced into exile, spending the next ten years in Paris, where he continued his study of the novelist Machado de Assis, earning a doctorate from the Sorbonne. This was the making of a committed intellectual, who seeks to situate himself in a cosmos where the national and international interpenetrate, each shaping and illuminating the other: an incomer, amazed by the backward-yet-modern configuration of a peripheral country; and a Brazilian who, even in the academic centres of capitalism, is not deceived by metropolitan appearances.

Less well-known is Schwarz's artistic side. The translator of Bruckner, Schiller and, above all, Brecht, Schwarz has also published two books of poems, *Bird in the Drawer* (1959) and *Veteran Hearts* (1974), which retain the colloquialism of Brazilian modernism; humorous, sometimes obscene, resorting to prose at times; not directly political. Politics moved to the fore in his first play, *The Dustbin of History*, written in 1968–69 and published in 1977. The idea for *The Dustbin* came to him as he hid from the political police in the home of a friend with a good library. There he re-read Machado de Assis's short story, 'The Alienist', which Schwarz would later adapt for the stage, and Machiavelli's *Prince*. Both served as the basis for the political slapstick of *The Dustbin*. The play shared the restlessness

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the interview with Schwarz, 'Neo-Backwardness in Bolsonaro's Brazil', NLR 123, May–June 2020; his illuminating obituary of Antonio Candido (1918–2017) in NLR 107, Sept–Oct 2017; Franco Moretti's appreciation of his work, 'A New Intuition', NLR 131, Sept–Oct 2021; and many other essays by him published here over the years.

of the cultural movements in Brazil at the time, such as Glauber Rocha's Cinema Novo and the Tropicalismo of Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. It also undertook a critical-historical investigation of the Brazilian situation. Machado's unabashed descriptions of nineteenth-century class configurations remained highly relevant, Schwarz showed, while the staging of black puppets, which the characters kicked and punched, asserted the undischarged freight of the slave-owning past.

So perhaps it should not be a surprise that Schwarz has responded to the wild political lurches of today's Brazil with the publication of *Rainha Lira*. It is a far more complex work than *The Dustbin* because it explodes the interpretive schemas inherited from the past— notions of populism or neo-fascism, threadbare from over-use—to stage instead a contradictory, chaotic present. As in Arnold's *Dover Beach*, 'we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight / Where ignorant armies clash by night.' *Rainha Lira*'s title, of course, summons up *King Lear*, and the play features a Court in disarray, with a Fool to point the lesson. But the aim of the borrowing is strictly contemporary, as is the other major reference, to Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. Both plays help Schwarz expose the concrete clashes of classes today. It is political reality, mediated by the language of the new work, that gives pertinence to the classic drama. For a Brazilian audience, its relevance to what has occurred in the past ten years is paramount.

### *Staging the crisis*

*Rainha Lira* has sixteen scenes and dozens of characters. One of the innovations of the play is that—as never before in Brazilian literature with such intensity—it gives voice to the poor, who not only speak but act. They participate in a huge revolt against the royal order. However, they do not speak as a melodic choir and do not behave as a united class. There are conformist and rebellious characters; militants and prudent ones; teachers and students; people with clarity and others blind to reality; militiamen and bandits; even a black-bloc militant, Joey Riot.

The play opens in a small, working-class household in which a young man, Progressio, is arguing with his mother, Rita, a former communist. She is satisfied with the life the family leads:

We have a washing machine, a house, a car, and you have a diploma. And, as for what is missing, the television brings it here, in colour, for us to watch.

Progressio contests this:

It is as if it was ours, but it's not ours at all. I want much more.

The action moves to the Royal Palace, where Fidelino and Alves, financiers, big businessmen, ministerial candidates and economic advisors, are discussing their unsatisfactory treatment by the Queen. 'My economic expertise is useless if I don't know the government's decisions the day before they are taken', Fidelino complains. 'A top banker can't bet blindly like a goose.' With a fanfare, the Royal Family enters, with the Fool. The Queen announces:

I am Queen Lira of Brazilândia. I have three beloved daughters, who detest one another, with whom I will rebuild my sinking country.

As in Shakespeare, her constructive intentions are soon overwhelmed by quarrels among her daughters—and a popular uprising against the Palace, to which the Queen does not know how to respond. The Fool reflects:

Here is Queen Zigzag, also known as Zagzig. If she takes a step to the left, it's because she's going to the right. At heart she's a revolutionary, from experience she's resentful, but not entirely, which is more puzzling. Indecision is her business.

For Brazilians, the Queen is immediately associated with the former president Dilma Rousseff, who also had progressive objectives but, when beset by a revolt and by the right-wing forces that wanted to oust her, oscillated between increasingly paradoxical alternatives that failed to reckon with the complexity of the situation that confronted her. The Queen's daughters are mythical, but they represent the political and class options available to her. Each puts forward her own solution for Brazilândia. Valentina, the ex-guerrilla, 'took electric shocks, saw death face to face, and today nobody knows what she thinks, not even herself'. She is torn between locking up her sisters and their husbands and cutting a deal with them. Austéria, the neoliberal, attacks the laziness and lack of hygiene of the poor. The third daughter, Maria da Gloria, is a ranch owner and Brazilian nationalist—with a house in Miami—who proposes a middle way: 'In favour of property, but talking to the oppressed, who must not die of hunger or lose faith in the future.' All around, in the corridors and halls of the Palace, there are conspirators, flatterers and opportunists. They are ruling-class figures, even if one of them, Fidelino, is an ex-leftist.

The next scenes depict a protest march which grows larger and larger, turning into a general uprising. There are multiple speakers, but all the protesters want different things. Schwarz is sparing with the background details, but it is clear this draws upon the great revolt of June 2013, which began when a small autonomous group, the Free Pass Movement, demonstrated in São Paulo calling for a reduction in bus and train fares. Within days, the unrest spread to include millions of people in hundreds of cities. The rebels burned tyres, attacked television vans, slapped police officers' faces. In Brasilia, angry people climbed the dome of Congress. The Legislative Assembly in Rio de Janeiro, a den of mischief, was invaded by rebels. The state governments, under both the main parties, sent the police to attack the protesters with hailstorms of bombs, rubber bullets and blows. Dozens were injured and six died. The unrest did not abate and fares were finally reduced—a popular victory. Nevertheless, calm did not return to the streets. New demands emerged, such as the cancellation of an international soccer tournament, the Confederations Cup—unheard of in Brazil—in protest at the pharaonic stadiums built to house the games, and the transfer of public capital to big contractors, who in turn financed the political parties.

*Rainha Lira* offers a prism on the interior life of this movement: speeches from young students, a dogmatic Marxist history professor, Vera, who is sceptical about the movement—‘The revolution in your head is a high-school students’ brawl, not a better society’—and Progressio, who becomes the students’ leader. Much of the strength of *Rainha Lira* comes from Schwarz’s work with language. The characters’ lines function as miniature essays that merge popular diction, studded with slang, with the historical perspective opened up by the play. Each intervention is contradicted by the one that follows, and characters often begin by stating one position, only to finish by revealing the opposite. The whole thing is class struggle in the rough. Here are a few examples of the underlings, the many ‘voices’ in Schwarz’s crowd:

A VOICE: I was born to be a boss, but I’ve worked all my life as a housekeeper. I know how to read and write. Why can’t I be in charge?

ANOTHER VOICE: I recognize my life has got better. But it’s still unbearable, and my disgust has only grown.

ANOTHER: Not having a job is worse than not having a boss, which is already horrible. We have the right to be exploited.

ANOTHER: Does anyone think a gig is a job?

ANOTHER: Unemployed accountancy graduate dreams of being a day labourer in New York.

ANOTHER: Death to communism! The scraps we have are sacred and no one can take them away.

There are longer speeches, too, some in blank verse, others in prose, including a stinging attack on Brazil's poor-quality private higher-education system, delivered by 'Another Woman':

We know, with tears in our eyes, that we're ignorant. But you, who humiliate and exploit us as much as you can, do you do anything to make it better? We pay a lot—and we often miss a lot of sleep—to study at these crappy, lucrative colleges, to qualify for nightmarish jobs, underemployment or just unemployment. The owners of these traps, by the way, are you. Well, if that's the system, and it's not really about getting a decent salary, why don't they at least teach us something really interesting, worth understanding? Do you think we are moles, creatures of another species, born without curiosity, blind to the most inspiring things humanity has produced . . . ? In fact we are a hundred times better than you.

The Fool reflects that the confusion in the heads of the crowd—a *bagunça mental dos molambentos*: the mental mishmash of the ragged ones—is remarkably similar to that of the Queen. Maybe they will understand each other? If she could be persuaded to come out and lead the demonstration, marching in front of her people, she might even be able to hold back the crisis, put the thieving ministers in jail and send her coup-plotting daughters packing. But that remains a dream. As the scale of the demonstration grows, Fidelino and his cronies, Alves's far-right sons, find a vantage point to watch the police break up the crowd. Here is the view from those at the top:

FIDELINO: As Marx teaches, injustice is very great and cannot be sustained without a stick.

RICARDO ALVES: The crowd isn't thinking about revolution. They are furious at our incompetence and shamelessness, nothing more.

FIDELINO: Do they think that the cause of the general misfortune is us? We must courageously contradict them, explain the truth to them on TV at dinnertime, when families are at their most receptive. Hire good-looking, deep-voiced announcers, the type that inspires confidence, to explain to the

fools that the victims of the debacle in Brazulândia are not the workers, who have so very little to lose—the bulk of the damage is suffered by us, the propertied classes, from whose capital Her Majesty's thievery takes large chunks. That's why the poor and the property owners must march together against the Robber Queen.

A VOICE OF THE NEW TIMES: It's every man for himself and God for capital.

But the police violence against the protesters backfires; broadcast on TV, it creates a huge wave of public sympathy. The rising soon becomes an assault on power, with the invasion of the Royal Palace. The uproar provokes changes of position, both literal and figurative. Progressio is elevated to cult status. His mother Rita joins the revolt and tries to organize it, to give it meaning. At this point the popular struggle shakes the topmost elites. Contrasting voices are hard, rendering the class struggle as a cacophony that seeks to disclose the current state of the world.

The Queen and her daughters flee the Palace to hide in the *favela*. Here they encounter The Boss, who explains his recipe for law and order: 'Without terror, civilization does not progress. At home, on the street, in the Army, in the Administration.' Maria da Gloria ask whether he sells any other services, as well as protection.

THE BOSS: I work with illegal cooking gas, electricity, cable TV, internet connection, children's school transport, sports centres, and next year I'm opening a daycare centre. I'm in the land-grabbing business, in partnership with the police and other authorities.

Austéria is enthralled: 'Light where you least expect it . . . ! Brazilian society may disappoint for a time, but it always comes up with the goods.'

Meanwhile the popular movement is at an impasse. Progressio complains: 'We brought a million disaffected people onto the streets, occupied the Palace, expelled the Royal Family and now nobody knows what to do.' Rita proposes a 'transitional programme' under the slogan, Occupy and Produce! But Fidelino's people, armed with clubs, are already driving the left off the streets. 'The march will change faces. The relentless struggle for inequality will finally begin—on the pretext of fighting corruption.' After a tug-of-war between left and right, the penultimate scene is the Picnic of the Victors. Here, with Fidelino, Alves and

other bourgeois types, a new character is introduced, a former captain with a revolver in his belt—The Thing. ‘Nobody talks to me, but I’m not a foreign body at this party’, he tells the assembled guests. ‘Now that we’re partners, you’ll get used to my presence.’

The Boss and The Thing, with the features of Brazil’s President, Bolsonaro, allow Schwarz to represent a phenomenon that he hasn’t yet studied in his essays: that of a retired captain who, coming from the extra-legal underworld of capitalism, delivers to the poor in the periphery what the state withholds from them. The Boss and The Thing impose order in the favelas by force of arms, while providing those who submit to them with access to services and security. *Rainha Lira* shows how the big-business community, not knowing how to meet popular needs at variance with their own ways of thinking and acting, facilitates the ascent to power of The Thing, with support from both the favelas and the ruling class.

THE THING: There are some who bet on God, others on private property, others on socialism, others on skin colour, others on hard work, others on America, others on the left-overs of the rich. There are those who believe in China. I do business with everyone. My rule is to override the rule and go straight for the candy . . . Nobody is better than anyone else. When the time comes, everyone agrees to a deal. It’s not easy with me, but for better or worse, it’s a deal. No wonder I am known for my dead-fish eyes.

Some of the Victors are nervous—‘I’m a bourgeois, not a bandit! I don’t want to be embarrassed when I go to Europe’—but they are bluntly reminded, ‘The country is falling apart and there is no more money for anything. When income shrinks, you grab what you can—with a heavy hand, if need be.’ The Fool enters, to appeal to his compatriots: Brazil once promised something, it had charm, even some advanced aspects; now it promises nothing. The rich buy apartments in Miami or Portugal, send their children to foreign schools. ‘Why settle for this vagabond elite, with bankrupt universities, untrained workers, anti-people police, ditto army, diffuse gangsterism, riding roughshod on the downtrodden masses?’ The Thing sneers. A neo-patriot cracks open the Fool’s head. The Queen rushes in to tell the Fool he’s gone too far and is stabbed by Alves, while Vera and Progressio are murdered by Alves’s far-right son. The Thing’s henchman reports that the three princesses have died in a helicopter crash, while fleeing to the beach; no one believes it was an accident. The Thing celebrates the Queen’s ‘timely death’.



THE THING: Three cheers to the memory of the torturers who sacrificed their tranquillity to cleanse our land of communism . . . The coup is a thing of the past. Let's take a deep breath, for there has been a change in the ruling clique.

The slaughter is unspectacular and does not generate grandiloquent speeches. But some ordinary people, whether protesters or followers of The Thing, have words to say about the new boss:

A VOICE: He rips off morsels, like a shark. I've seen it.

ANOTHER: For him, the slightest civility smells of socialism and is queer stuff. Cooperation is a crime against freedom of the individual.

ANOTHER: Off the record, our boss is not a Christian, either here or in China. I'm scared stiff of going to Hell.

ANOTHER: This reign is not going to last.

ANOTHER: He thinks he is a multipliable module. We will be legions of Things, armed to the teeth, in a free-for-all. The idea is to create a new humanity for the next thousand years.

But the play is not over. In addition to its realism, *Rainha Lira* ventures two lyrical visions. One is a song sung by children throwing flowers in a favela:

I'm not white, I'm dark  
My ornaments are cheap  
My mother washes clothes for rich people  
And my father, I don't know who he is.

The other is a song from 1937, *Starry Floor*, a classic of Brazilian popular music:

Our common clothes hang  
On clothes-lines like flapping flags,  
They look like a strange festival,  
A festival of colourful rags  
Showing that in poorly dressed favelas  
It's always a national holiday.

These songs, which emphasize the beauty and the harshness of popular life on the periphery, have conformist undertones and do not offer images of a different future. The strength of the lyrics is overpowered

by the ugly reality. The present that leads decisively to the future lies in the final speech of the play, the one spoken by the King, about whom little is said—though the Queen does venture one nostalgic speech—and whose freedom is not demanded by the popular movement. It is the most polemical speech of all, because it is clear that the King is Lula, imprisoned for 580 days without any evidence against him. He speaks from his cell:

KING: Most depressing. What a downgrade! Does the pit have no bottom? Brazilândia is not as bad as that. Please, give me a chance; we are better than this. With all the misery, rascality and stupidity, we still have great things to show, for the good of humanity. We were the darlings of the world—but, it seems, no longer. Even the moneyed class, which, as has been proven, has no shame, is not going to accept that this peg-leg, this notorious nutcase, has the last word. I'm sure my current enemies, my future friends, will set me free. They need me to fix the damage they have done.

I sewed the patchwork quilt called Brazil with rotten cloth and a thick needle. Gratitude is what you are seeing. My arrest was a thoughtless (and suicidal) move by our ruling class, which couldn't even run a soccer club. But even in prison, I am still the wild card in the game, the only one in this country who can talk to everyone, from little people to big shots, from the left to the right, workers to bosses, whites to blacks, from the countryside to the capitals, ignoramuses to economists, from gays to the President of the United States.

The fact is—though they don't admit it—it's the workers who civilize a country, demanding a decent life. With me in jail, conciliation vanished, replaced by save-yourself-if-you-can. The beasts now whisper that only I can mend this tattered quilt. Modesty aside, maybe I can. But making it a passable country, one that's not a Frankenstein's monster in broad daylight, that's hard even to imagine. For my glory, I will be summoned—but I don't know the way. I'd like to not get booed on my departure.

### *Incongruities*

On that subdued note, *Rainha Lira* ends. The enormous vitality of this Brechtian-Brazilian polyphonic epic, and its rigorous refusal of even the faintest whisper of false hope, will be apparent. Fernanda Montenegro, one of Brazil's great actors, has greeted *Rainha Lira* as a return to the 'participatory theatre' of the 1960s—notably the 'theatre of the oppressed' of Augusto Boal's Arena group, of which she was a member. For her, Schwarz's play is social slapstick, rustic in a positive sense: it rejects the

legacies of nineteenth-century theatre, instead throwing the spectator into the ruckus of Brazil's twenty-first century. It seeks to create a theatrical current of political action, similar to that of the Arena Theatre, which brought together students and communist intellectuals. Montenegro's daughter Fernanda Torres, also an actor, has praised the play as 'a kind of comic opera reminiscent of Oswald de Andrade's *The Money-Lending King*'—first performed by the avant-garde group Oficina in the sixties, thirty years after its composition. 'It is a panorama of Brazil from 2013 to now. We are all lost, everyone on a sinking *Titanic*, left and right, each with their own vision of chaos'. In *Rainha Lira*, she judges, Schwarz 'has managed to write a play that is up to this moment'.

The references to Arena and Oficina are pertinent. In the sixties, both groups tried to give contemporary relevance to theatre, staging the Brazilian impasse and encouraging a stand against the dictatorship. They were successful with a mobilized middle-class and student audience, but their performances did not reach working people. Their inspirational figures, Boal and José Celso Martinez Corrêa, had to go into exile, and when they returned they found a 'normalized' political landscape in which the resonance of their work was muted: theatre was now elitist or commercial. Even Brecht's estrangement effect has lost its subversive charge, becoming a bland feature of even Hollywood cinema. The reference to the sixties makes *Rainha Lira* a hybrid work. In engaging with these traditions, it sometimes seems to miss the present, injecting the characters with a political consciousness that exists more in Schwarz's imagination than in public discussion in Brazil, be it that of students, artists or intellectuals.

Interspersing prose passages with blank verse, drawing on Shakespeare, Brecht and Oswald—and on the incongruities of Enlightenment thought and retrograde action in Machado's characters—the play hovers above Brazilian mix and mess, even though that mix and mess are its subjects. For example, there are no social networks and few evangelicals in the play, though they are certainly present in daily life. The test would be to stage the work, but this will not happen in the near future. Fernanda Torres and the Companhia do Latão, a Brechtian group, set out to produce it, but found neither official nor private sponsorship for the project. As Torres observed, 'It is a play with many characters, almost a Broadway musical. It is very difficult to find a space and money for something of this kind.'

Politically, the sting is in the tail. Not only does the King mimic some of what Lula has actually said, but his imagined interlocutor is the ruling class—the same one that put him in jail. Who can guarantee that when he returns to the presidential palace, he will not face sabotage and overthrow? The implication is that the King does not believe that working people can sustain him, and structural change in the country, by their own efforts. The speech reveals how far popular aspirations have been lowered, in comparison with the sixties: nobody expects anything from the future. Rather like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, Schwarz's 'late style' contemplates the wreckage that the class struggle heaps at his feet—and yet, he says, it moves.