

CAMINO REAL, BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: A WELCOME
UPCOMING PRODUCTION IN SÃO PAULO

Maria Silvia Betti

In the periphery of capitalism and in a country of misplaced ideas like Brazil, the productions of plays by famous dramatists like Tennessee Williams are usually restricted to the titles previously acclaimed in the stages of Broadway or of foreign mainstream theaters on the U.S. or in Europe. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the copyright of an acclaimed playwright who has achieved world recognition is far beyond the financial conditions of most of the Brazilian theatre producers and/or companies.

In this context, the news of the upcoming opening of a *Camino Real* season in São Paulo is a more than welcome piece of news. *Camino Real* is one of the most controversial plays by Tennessee Williams, both for the aspects of form and for the implications of criticism as concerns the dominant American ideology. The director who has faced the challenge of such a daring initiative is the paulista Nelson Baskerville, ahead of the Antikatartika Theater Company.

The group started its activities in 2005 with “17 vezes Nelson”, the production of a compilation of seventeen scenes from plays by Brazil’s most canonical dramatist, Nelson Rodrigues. Baskerville had been a teacher at the School of Performing Arts (Escola de Arte Dramática), and had always had great interest in deepening his views on playwrighting.

In the years that preceded the organization of Antikatartika, Baskerville had participated in a group of researchers led by Luís Alberto de Abreu, an extremely representative dramatist of the Brazilian contemporary theater. Baskerville’s previous admiration for Tennessee Williams’s theater motivated him to research and to expand his readings and his knowledge of the dramatist’s works, and this process unequivocally indicated that, differently from what one might previously believe, the real dimension of Tennessee Williams’s works was far from being fully understood in Brazil. The recurrent view of Tennessee as the author of plays labeled as belonging to a trend of “psychological realism” proved to be greatly mistaken, once only a very small portion of his prolific body of works could effectively correspond to such category. Moreover, very few of his plays had actually been staged or even translated and published in Brazil.

As a result of these realizations and of the series of studies and debates that resulted from them, Baskerville and the recently formed Antikatartika, under his direction, decided to undertake the initiative of, for the first time in Brazil, bringing *Camino Real* to the stage.

A fortunate series of circumstances tookbrought the Antikatartika project to the knowledge of a reputable University where theater had always found stimulus and experienced remarkable productions: the Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, famous for the nationally recognized importance of its two theater buildings: TUCA, structured in the form of an

amphitheater with an Italian stage, and Tucarena, a smaller Arena Theater space.

Baskerville's idea of staging Tennessee Williams's play for the first time in Brazil was welcomed within the *Art in Residence Project*, an interesting initiative that consisted in having theater groups to develop continuous research and experimentation for a previously adjusted period of residence in the theatrical spaces of the University.

Antikatartika was, then, assigned the task of preparing the production within the period granted for its "residence" in recently remodeled areas assigned for performance and rehearsal at the PUC building. The period granted for the research and technical preparation started in October 2006, and extends until next June, when the play will open season as a professional production after eight months of intense research, body training and debates with theater directors and scholars of related areas.

Tennessee Williams wrote two versions of the plays: the first of them, named "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real", was created in 1946 mostly as a dramaturgical exercise, written in an attempt to explore forms of expression situated beyond the realm of individual psychology, within which the critics insisted on confining his theater. The second version, on the other hand, resulted from the encouragement of Elia Kazan, one of the directors of the Actors' Studio, who stimulated Tennessee to expand the material of the previous "Ten Blocks". The rewriting resulted not only in an extension of the material, but in a reorganization of the fictional elements.

Deeply interested in the use of symbols, and at the same time fascinated by the techniques of Strindberg's station dramas, he combined high lyricism and a blend of historical and literary elements to compose a fantasy contextualized in a fictional plaza located alongside of the road referred to in the title.

In a dreamlike atmosphere of a small Mexican-resembling village, characters like *Marguerite Gautier* (from Alexandre Dumas fils's novel), *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Panza* (from Cervantes's masterpiece), and *Baron de Charlus* (from Marcel Proust's *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*), originally taken from sources of great European bourgeois literary classics, interact with fictionally appropriate historical figures like that of Lord Byron, and non-literary characters like Killroy, a former boxing champion and American G.I. and a small militia of Street Cleaners under the command of a local dictator whose orders create a remarkably and non-coincidentally "McCarthyism" impregnated atmosphere.

One of the important points of reference for the preparation of the Antikatartika production has been the book entitled *Panorama do Rio Vermelho. Ensaios sobre o Teatro Norte-Americano Moderno*, an anthology of

essays by Iná Camargo Costa, published in 2000. In fact, Costa has had intense and frequent participation in the informal debates promoted by Baskerville on the theatre of Tennessee Williams, and was the first voice, among Brazilian scholars and critics, to have pointed out the artistic importance of Tennessee Williams's non dramatic playwriting, as well as the pertinence of the aspects of his intrinsically political criticism of the ideology of the American establishment.

The fact that, by the early 1970's, Tennessee had become publicly vocal in criticizing American imperialist foreign policies is ignored in Brazil, as well as the fact that he never missed the opportunity of pronouncing himself unequivocally on that matter. An illustration of this is the note he inserted in the theater program of *Slapstick Tragedy*, staged in 1966, denouncing American participation in the Vietnam War as incredibly cruel. He never spared bitterly critical remarks on the political role performed by the USA under Nixon's presidency, and decried the "atrocities of American involvement" and "Nixon's total lack of honesty and of a moral sense".

In the volume of *Conversations*, writing about his play *A House not Meant to Stand*, Tennessee pointed to the American participation in the Korean War, long before Kennedy's assassination, as having been the starting point of the "moral decay of America": "It's the moral decay of America, which really began with the Korean War, way before the Kennedy assassination. The main reason we were involved in Vietnam was so two hundred billion dollars worth of equipment could be destroyed and would have to be bought again. We're the death merchants of the world, this once great and beautiful democracy. People think I'm a communist, but I hate all bureaucracy, all isms. I'm a revolutionary only in the sense that I want to see us escape from this sort of trap.(p. 9) And so the title of his late play, *A House Not Meant to Stand* (1982), becomes – like Shaw's title *Heartbreak House* –" a metaphor for society in our times."

For Baskerville, the fact that the political stature of Tennessee as an artist is largely unknown in Brazil was a stimulus, rather than an obstacle. Long before having decided himself for the staging of *Camino Real*, Baskerville had pursued a form of theater which combined the search for a lyrically-oriented sense of performance to a politically aware criticism of the capitalist world. As the name of the theater group he directs indicates, Baskerville's points of reference were founded upon Bertolt Brecht's idea that theater should aim at interfering and changing the world, rather than at symbolically relieving the audiences through catharsis.

Having these topics in mind, the discovery of a play like *Camino Real* was a rather fortunate circumstance: Tennessee's text provided the group not only with a densely impregnated series of dreamlike expressionistic "blocks",

but also with richly composed dramaturgical material allusive to one of the most controversial contexts of the XX century, which is that of McCarthyism and of totalitarianism.

Baskerville's upcoming production of *Camino Real* is not aimed at evoking what may have been the conception of the original production: his biggest challenge has been, precisely, finding an adequate performing tone, having in mind that the Brazilian audiences will certainly be unfamiliar with many of the literary and also musical references interspersed in the play.

In this particular respect, the work of the translator, Ricardo Monteiro, was also crucially important, and consisted of having an eye on the text and another on the historical context of the play. "One of our biggest challenges", says Monteiro, "is that of having to choose between being faithful to the form, to the contents, or of being unfaithful to both".

Of all of Tennessee Williams's plays, *Camino Real* is the one that has suffered the most from the effects of conventional or unimaginative directions. Many of the daring conceptions of Tennessee Williams for the staging and characters were largely misunderstood by his contemporaries and underrated by the directors in the following decades. Tennessee's passion for romanticism and for creatures marginalized by society stimulated him to intensify the use of expressionism and lyricism in the play, and as a consequence, *Camino Real* depends greatly on the treatment of the material symbolically alluded to in the text.

For all these reasons, the Brazilian production of the Antikatartika to open at Tucarena in June is likely to be a more than welcome change in the patterns of the reception of Tennessee Williams's works in Brazil, and Nelson Baskerville's challenge opens the possibility of an interesting revision of the institutionalized views mainstream critics have established of his theater.