The Feminist Intuition in Late 19th-Century Brazilian Agitprop Theater[1]

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Enough of all this namby-pamby, all these half-baked arguments against our rights, our abilities, our freedom!
Josephina Alvares de Azevedo

Given the urgent need to ensure the permanent triumph of the 1917 Revolution - not just to expand it, but also to block the counterrevolutionary forces and inform the population at large - Russia experienced a period of intense mobilization of intellectuals, artists, and workers. The recently inaugurated Soviet state itself immediately began to back and promote the first strategies for artistic agitation and propaganda, with particular emphasis on what would become agitprop theater.[2]

Based on the self-active theater movement, i.e., theater staged at the initiative of groups belonging to workers' associations and clubs, many of which predated the Revolution, agitprop theater's main characteristics were its flexibility and preparedness vis-à-vis the historical process, especially in light of its goal to both educate the people and mobilize them to embrace and march forward with the revolutionary struggle. Such characteristics led agitprop theater to adopt formal versatility - in which short forms predominated - and to develop original forms, including **agitation processes** and the **living newspaper**.

The living newspaper was launched as an **agitform** par excellence. It was based on live editions of the Revolution's daily paper and was presented more as a variety show than as theater per se. Consisting of various sections corresponding to the layout of a printed newspaper, like headlines, an editorial, serials, and chronicles, the living newspaper took different theatrical approaches to these various modules based on their respective characteristics, employing various scenic resources either wholly or in part, including song, acrobatics, dance, readings and recitals, choruses, satirical strophes, monologues, and dialogues, in which the typified characters assumed Manichean, polarized social and ideological positions. Meanwhile, in the agitation processes, the spectacle was organized like a courtroom trial, purposely drawing the spectators into the play. Yet both forms employed the staging of live, current history.

A similar outstanding theatrical form was the **dialectical play**, a genre developed through *agitforms* aimed at promoting Soviet customs and combating social vice.

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[1] This article adds some thoughts to my previous study on the theater work of Josephina Alvares de Azevedo in my master's dissertation (presented at the UFSC in 1995), based on the course *Teatro político no Brasil* (Political theater in Brazil), given by Prof. Cláudia de Arruda Campos (USP) as part of the Graduate Course in Literature/Doctoral Course in Brazilian Literature at the UFPB from October to December 1996 and to whom I am particularly grateful for her valuable comments and suggestions.

[2] Cf. GARCIA, Silvana. *Teatro da Militância:* a intenção do popular no engajamento político. São Paulo: Perspectiva/EDUSP, 1990, p. 5. All references to the historical development of agitprop theater in this paper were from this book, a broad study on the various examples of this theatrical genre.

It was a new theater-of-customs whose basic theme took a non-deterministic perspective to explain the contradictions and uncertainties experienced by contemporary working-class youth. In the wake of this theater-of-customs, genreslike short comedies, vaudeville, and operettas were rediscovered and widely used.

As the living, dynamic seed of political theater - which only came to light in its fullest form after a three-decade gestation, in the hands of Bertold Brecht - agitprop theater began spreading through various European countries in the mid-1920s. Still, the weak beginnings of recently-founded national Communist Parties caused some delay in its initial development. Agitprop did not really begin to take off until the late 1920s (around 1928), when the CPs began making a more aggressive attempt to take full control over working-class cultural production.

Thus, despite some initial delay, agitprop theater flourished quite vigorously in Poland, Romania, France, Great Britain, and Germany, linked to the workers' movement theater which had already been developing since the late 19th century in some cases, like Poland and Great Britain.

The 1920s also witnessed the first echoes of agitprop in the United States, brought over in the trunks of immigrants connected to the workers' movement. The pioneering group in the United States was the Artef (Arbeiter Teater Farband), founded in 1925 within the Jewish community. It was not until 1932 that the Artef embraced agitprop's proposals, seeking to develop a theatrical genre focusing not only on working-class issues, but also on ethnic ones, like preservation of Jewish cultural values. Agitprop was to become famous through the work of a group of German immigrant proletarian activists, the Prolet Buehne. Founded in 1928, the group soon became one of the most active ones in the American theatrical movement, based on the strength of its street plays.

Agitprop would also find fertile ground in Brazil, but not until much later. The most radical example was in the early 1960s - thus with a two-generation delay in relation to the Soviet matrix. It was promoted by the CPC (Centro Popular de Cultura, or People's Cultural Center) under the UNE (União Nacional dos Estudantes, or National Student Union), whose most innovative activity focused on street theater.

Yet there have been other important moments for agitprop theater in Brazil, as explained so superbly by Silvana Garcia in her book *Teatro da Militância* (Militant Theater).[3] By identifying the main branches in the genealogical tree of Brazilian agitprop theater, the author highlights both the embryonic experience of workers' theater inspired by the anarchist movement and performed by European immigrants in the early 20th century and a more recent phase, in the 1970s, performed by independent groups in the poor and working-class outskirts of large Brazilian cities.

The former were forerunners and the latter heirs to the *cepecista* theater movement (the adjective derives from the 1960s People's Cultural Center acronym, *CPC* - T.N.), whose radical profile highlights it as a direct, albeit distant, descendent of Soviet agitprop, i.e., a *cabocla* (home-grown) version, in the words of Garcia.[4] Both theater movements (the early 20th-century anarchists and the 1970s peripheral urbanists) were similar to the *cepecistas* in that all three had the characteristics of militant people's theater, giving them a legitimate kinship, albeit expressed indirectly. Thus, whether due to a relative paucity of such traits among the anarchists or their diversification among the 1970s independents, the characteristics shared by the three perhaps shape a kind of kinship by affinity. In this sense, as Garcia has already pointed out[5], other Brazilian experiments - less disseminated and linked to other ideological movements - can also be identified, even showing advances as compared to the more directly political forms of agitprop. An example was the Communist-inspired Jewish theater,

[3] Idem. *Op. cit.*.

[4] Ibidem, p. xvi.

[5] Ib., p. 99.

with a marked presence through the 1930s in the activities of the Youth Club.

By going back several decades, more specifically to the late 19th century, we find one of these other experiences which, although short-lived and isolated, merits attention, precisely because it can be seen as a kind of preview for the theater work performed more than a half century later in its fullest form, by the People's Cultural Center (CPC) of the National Student Union (UNE). "Edited" by a woman, what this preview of Brazilian agitprop had as its hallmark was not exactly the so-called women's intuition, but another equally acute perception, inspired also by aspirations for social equality among women and men, and which I translate here as a kind of "feminist intuition". After all, it was the basis for a theater script, the comedy *O Voto Feminino* (Women's Vote), which openly served the author's propaganda (both on and off stage) in defense of Brazilian women's social and political rights. Furthermore, as with any good preview, this script gives us brief glimpses of some formal and stylistic resources characterizing agitprop theater in general and the *cepecista* movement in particular, although at the time it was written (in the early 1890s) not even Soviet agitprop was on the scene. Considered jointly, these appear to be sufficient reasons for including *O Voto Feminino* as a cousin (albeit distant) in the Brazilian agitprop genealogy.

Josephina's strategy

As an emblematic text in the recently-launched women's struggle for egalitarian social and political rights for both sexes in Brazil, *O Voto Feminino* was written by Josephina Alvares de Azevedo (1851-?)[6], a potential agitator, who in 1888 founded and who for nearly ten years headed and wrote one of the most militant and advanced feminist newspapers to emerge in late 19th-century Rio de Janeiro, entitled *A Família* (The Family).

Having used her newspaper from the beginning to promote the cause of women's education as a *sine qua non* for achieving the greater goal of women's emancipation after the Proclamation of the Republic (replacing the old Imperial regime and following abolition of slavery in 1888, the Brazilian Republic was proclaimed on November 15, 1889; one immediate result was the drafting of a new Constitution, referred to hereinafter - Translator's Note), the editor of *A Família* never failed to take an open, unequivocal stance in defending "the right of women to participate in elections, to elect and be elected, like men, under equal conditions".[7]

Having taken this stance, her newspaper became a veritable pamphleteering vehicle, used both for suffragist propaganda itself and to convince her contemporaries how urgent it was that each and every woman become a "staunch propagandist" for the cause, a pre-condition for them to "rise in society".[8] With this goal in mind, Josephina de Azevedo wrote and published a series of articles entitled *O Direito de Voto* (The Right to Vote), in which she developed her arguments in favor of women's suffrage, based on the premise that intellectual emancipation would fully prepare women to exercise their right to vote, without which the equality promised by the new regime would be nothing more than a utopia.[9]

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[6] Despite her famous last name and her place as a pioneering Brazilian feminist, there is very little information on this author. Most of what exists refers to her professional work and activity in jornalism and literature. See BLAKE, Augusto V. A. Sacramento. *Diccionario Bibliographico Brazileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Typ. Nacional, 1883-1902, v. 5, p. 237-8; OLIVEIRA, Américo L. de and VIANA, Mario G.. *Dicionário Mundial de Mulheres Notáveis*. Porto: Lello, 1967, p. 98; SOUTO-MAIOR, Valéria Andrade. *Índice de Dramaturgas Brasileiras do Século XIX*. Florianópolis: Mulheres, 1996, p. 36-7; __. *O Florete e a Máscara*: Josephina Alvares de Azevedo, dramaturga do século XIX. Curitiba: Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, 1998.

[7] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Família*, Nov. 30, 1889, p. 1.

[8] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina de. O Direito de Voto. *A Família*, Apr. 19, 1890, p. 1.

[9] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Família*, Nov. 30, 1889, p. 1.

Neither was Josephina de Azevedo content to wage her struggles exclusively through the press. Facing the imperious need to focus her suffragist propaganda on less ephemeral pages, and especially to redouble and bolster such propaganda, her first step was to a reedit an anthology of the articles she had already published in her newspaper on the issues of suffrage and women's education. The anthology was printed on the same press as her newspaper.[10]

Josephina took another initiative in the early 1890s to expand and diversify such channels in her struggle for women's right to vote. While publishing a new series of articles on voting, Josephina de Azevedo wrote a play, with an unequivocal title: *O Voto Feminino* (Women's Vote).

As a direct response to the Republican government's official statement in April against incorporating women's suffrage legislation into the new Constitutional draft, this sharp feminist did not hesitate to use theatrical language to criticize the government with the same no-nonsense approach she had used in her newspaper, mocking the government's official statement by wording it directly into her comedy. In little over a month, the heated debate on women's rights that had been raging in the press made it onto the stage, literally, since Josephina de Azevedo also took an excerpt from an article in favor of women's right to vote, apparently signed by a member of Congress in a mainstream newspaper[11], and quoted it in the play, too, just as she had done with the government's position, this time by having a character come on stage quoting out loud from the paper.

By literally staging various situations focusing on women's suffrage in Brazil, Josephina's play not only ridicules men's resistance to women's participation in the country's political affairs, but maintains that, despite it all, women should trust the members of Congress, whose Session to discuss and pass the new Constitution was scheduled for the latter half of the year. In her final line, a woman character in the play responds to male euphoria over the fact that the Women's Suffrage Bill had not passed by saying: "Don't get so worked up. We still have a recourse. Let's wait for the new Constitution" (i.e., although the Bill had not passed as such, there was still the possibility that its provisions could be drafted into the new Constitution - T.N.). Through her character, Josephina de Azevedo openly expressed her intent (already made explicit in her articles) to "continue pressuring members of the Constitutional Congress to approve once and for all a right so long denied to us".[12]

After its debut in the Recreio Dramático, one of the most popular theaters of the time in Rio de Janeiro, *O Voto Feminino* apparently never made it back on stage again: despite having been received with "widespread applause" by the crowded theater, the "interesting", "witty and scintillating comedy written by Madam Josephina de Azevedo"[13], in fact appeared not to have enthused the audience to the point of awakening interest in theater agents to stage it again. Six months went by before another presentation was announced, and even then, after numerous advertisements in *A Família* throughout the month of November, curiously enough the comedy was received with total silence.

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[10] Entitled *Retalhos*, this first booklet received widespread praise from the press critics in general, and its potential for use in the struggle was emphatically acknowledged by a member of the male wing who, albeit in the minority, openly defended women's rights. Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. Como nos Tratam. *A Família*, June 14, 1890, p. 3.

[11] Although the research has still not been done, a search in the issues of *Correio do Povo* immediately prior to the publication of the above-mentioned government statement could confirm this hypothesis, raised in the comment by the character Esmeralda: "Oh! What a beautiful article published by Dr. Florêncio, published in yesterday's *Correio do Povo*!" Concerning the probable authorship of said article, see footnote 25.

[12] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. Ainda o Nosso Direito. *A Família*, Apr. 26, 1890, p. 1.

[13] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Família*, Aug. 21, 1890, p.1; May 31, 1890, p. 2; May 17, 1890, p. 4.

Even before this happened, with no funds to produce her play again on stage, Josephina found a way to present it, outside the theater, not literally (as street theater, employed later by agitprop), but at least by publishing it in book form[14] and also as a serial in her newspaper, from August through November. Early in 1891, she published a new edition, this time as part of her second anthology, suggestively entitled *A Mulher Moderna*: trabalhos de propaganda (Modern woman and propaganda work).[15]

It is important to note Josephina's sense of strategy in each of these situations. Her unwavering goal was to bolster her suffragist propaganda, especially to pressure the country's main political leaders not to make the same mistake as in the 1824 Constitution and leave women's political rights out of the new Constitution. In publishing the comedy as a serial in her newspaper, it was no coincidence that she chose August to begin, since she had just written an article on recent news that the new Constitutional draft had been approved without including anything on women's civil and political rights.[16] As for the subsequent republishing of the play as part of her anthology, Josephina had just published an outraged article over the position taken by a two-thirds vote of the respective committee in the Constitutional Congress, refusing to include women's suffrage in the new draft. The committee was meeting when she published the play.

Josephina Alvares de Azevedo's acute awareness of the need to devise strategies for the struggle appears most clearly in her largely intuitive decisions regarding the structure of her first and only theatrical text, transposing into stage language her proposals for social reform, already widely circulated in the press.

Thus, with objectives analogous to those of the French school, i.e., to portray and correct society's customs through realist comedy, Josephina de Azevedo turned the stage into a tribunal, naturally using the voice of a *raisonneur* to discuss and defend the thesis that without suffrage, women's demands for social equality would never be met. Despite including these two typical elements from a French **thesis play**, *O Voto Feminino* was not exactly written in the same genre, since contrary to the former, one of Josephina's goals was to provoke laughter.

Josephina aimed to touch not only public opinion in general, but obviously that of women themselves, encouraging them to demand their political rights. The perspicacious journalist chose musical theater to pursue this goal. Although musicals were stigmatized by the critics as a second-class genre, they were the overwhelming favorite of the late 19th-century public, already tired of poring over serious contemporary social issues with proponents of the realist school and more inclined to celebrate the **joy of living**. According to Décio de Almeida Prado, "what the public really wanted was to laugh, listen to easy-to-whistle songs (there was no radio then), and watch scantily dressed women".[17] Theater entrepreneurs also preferred musicals for obvious reasons, and in the late 19th century they were becoming a productive vein for authors of plays, both men and women. Josephina

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[14] Information on this book is provided by BLAKE, op. cit. v. 5, p. 238, but thus far no copy of it has been located.

[15] AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Mulher Moderna*: trabalhos de propaganda. Rio de Janeiro: Typ. A Vapor, 1897.

[16] AZEVEDO, Josephina de. Constituição e Constituinte. *A Família*, July 5, 1890, p. 1.

[17] PRADO, Décio de Almeida. Posfácio. Do *Tribofe* à *Capital Federal*. In: AZEVEDO, Arthur. *O Tribofe*. Text, notes, and linguistic study by Rachel Teixeira Valença. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira/Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, 1986, p. 257-58; see also PRADO, Décio de Almeida. Evolução da Literatura Dramática. *In*: COUTINHO, Afrânio (Dir.) *A Literatura no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: J. Olympio/EDUFF, 1986, p. 22-23; HESSEL, Lothar and RAEDERS, Georges. *O Teatro no Brasil sob D. Pedro II*. 2nd. Part, Porto Alegre: Ed. UFRGS/IEL, 1986, p. 145; CACCIAGLIA, Mario. *Pequena História do Teatro no Brasil* (quatro séculos de teatro no Brasil). Presentation by Sábato Magaldi; translation by Carla de Queiroz. São Paulo: T. A. Queiroz/EDUSP, 1986, p. 83.

de Azevedo wrote a one-act play, with three short song numbers, two duets, and a final *ensemble*, based on the theatrical form of **burletta** or **musical farce**, whose direct, exaggerated comedy eliminated the risk of getting mired down in sentimental mush, thus fitting her aggressive style like a glove.

Yet there is no indication that Josephina meant to write a musical per se: as announced on the title page, *O Voto Feminino* was classified generically as a comedy, to the point that no mention was made of the music to be performed. Like other contemporary playwrights, both men and women, she probably used this strategic recourse to make her script more compatible both with the style of the spectacles staged at the Recreio theater and with popular taste.[18] Josephina herself suggested this in commenting on the positive reviews from a Parisian magazine, explaining modestly that she had written the play in the heat of the hour to be included in a benefit party for an actor hired by the theater, and that her comedy suffered from "a certain tendency to satisfy the uneducated taste of our audiences".[19]

As neither a burletta, nor much less a realist comedy, *O Voto Feminino* is much more of a hybrid play, combining traits from serious theater and musical comedy and thereby (regardless of how one classifies it) displaying the author's purpose not only of exposing the ridiculously shaky notion that "women were made to keep house and nothing more", but above all to reform society, educating the people to embrace the advances of liberty and equality supposedly launched by the Republican regime.

With its action based on contemporary events in Rio de Janeiro, *O Voto Feminino* recreates domestic life in the home of a well-to-do former Minister and former Counselor-of-State from the recently-defunct Imperial regime in which, over the space of several hours preceding dinner, three couples (the owners, their daughter and her husband, and a domestic servant and her fiancé) and a single man await the results of an inquiry submitted to a certain Minister concerning approval of the vote for women. Meanwhile, they experience and play out situations analogous to the well-known rivalry of the sexes, compounded then by the possibility of women's political and social emancipation.

With no plot per se, *O Voto Feminino* is actually constructed as a series of scenes, tenuously interwoven by a guiding thread, i.e., expectations as to the Republican government's approval of women's suffrage. The point of departure is a heated argument between former Minister Anastácio and his wife, Inês, sparked by his discovery that the corner grocery store has shortchanged them (by a pittance), turning into a tirade on woman's duties and rights. Permeating the entire play in subsequent discussions between the various couples (all hinging on the women's suffrage issue), the initial argument unveils a confrontation, which does not actually become a dramatic conflict, but which essentially poses women's claims to equal political rights against men's fear and refusal vis-à-vis losing their broad public and/or private rights. This lays the basic framework for confrontation between the groups, female and male.

When Anastácio catches Rafael remarking

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[18] The observation by Décio de Almeida Prado in the above-mentioned postface makes it clear that adapting a play's style to the circumstantial conveniences of the theater business also appears to have been a practice that was dictated by its box office yield. Arthur Azevedo, justifying the form chosen for his "comedy-operetta on Brazilian customs" in *A Capital Federal* (1897) stated: "Since a simple comedy would have fallen short of the genre employed by current spectacles at the Recreio Dramático theater, and since this was not in the interests of the owner, author, actors, or public, I decided to write a spectacular play, which would give our scenographers another opportunity to produce their fancy sets. Meanwhile, I took ample recourse to the indispensable spice of light music, but without stooping to the use of that musical genre known as the *maxixe* (a popular 19th-century Brazilian dance - T.N.)"; cf. *Revista de Teatro*, SBAT, nº 298, 1957, *apud* PRADO, Posfácio..., p. 271.

[19] Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina de. O Voto Feminino. *A Família*, oct. 23, 1890, p. 1.

that he agrees with the women's suffragist campaign (having been pressured by both his wife Esmeralda and his mother-in-law, Inês), the play's second argument begins, this time involving the two couples, with Anastácio badgering his son-in-law into joining his stand against such upstart female initiatives. Meanwhile, the audience catches the maid Joaquina daydreaming about moving up to a better job; she ends up issuing an ultimatum to her fiancé, Antonio, that she refuses to marry him until she gets a fancy job so that he can stay home and do the housework. In the next scene, Rafael and Antonio let themselves get carried away by Anastácio's quixotic plans to wage a "war for male honor" against women. Showing up at this precise moment for a customary visit, Dr. Florêncio lands in the middle of a new argument between the couples and tries to calm things down and convince everyone that women have a legitimate right to vote. Anastácio stomps out furiously. Rafael hints that his father-in-law has gone out to throw his political weight around to block approval of the Women's Suffrage Bill. But Anastácio stomps right back in brandishing a newspaper and reading the recently-published article with the current Minister's official anti-suffragist statement. With the exception of Dr. Florêncio, the men applaud this new victory, while Esmeralda reminds them that there is still the possibility of women's suffrage being worded into the new Constitution.

While this extremely simple plot (really more of a pseudo-plot) reveals a somewhat green playwright in her first dramaturgical attempt, Josephina has obviously perceived that simplification serves her purpose. Besides, the lack of a true plot especially reveals a militant feminist, concerned with reaching the public not so much through a 'well-woven' story, but rather through a quick glimpse of domestic scenes from Rio's contemporary daily life, which had no doubt been affected to a greater or lesser degree by recent events pertaining to women's rights. This glimpse was thus a theatrical version of facts taken from the 'real' contemporary present, which Josephina used as a living opportunity to develop her arguments and convictions on women's suffrage and the long-sought-after social equality between the sexes.

Fashioned to highlight not only the need to promote social equality between men and women, but especially the possibility and urgency of doing so, based on women exercising their political rights, the play's characters are portrayed as 'types' that appear to split into two blocks, taking a blatantly Manichean approach: women, basically intelligent, strong, and decided, and men, almost all egotistical, clumsy, unscrupulous, and opportunist. Led by Inês and Anastácio, respectively, these two factions reflect a strong antagonism highlighted by the supporting players, who reduplicate this basic pattern with nuances in social level and age bracket, in a typification of men as authoritarian and mentally backward and women as modern and conscious of their rights and duties as citizens.

The play also features a unique character, in the sense not only of having no pair or partner, but of strategically incarnating a singular image of the public man: level-headed, aware, with progressive ideas, idealized by the author to defend the cause of the vote for women, perhaps even in the National Congress. Acting as *raisonneur* - much better here than in the French school, since he enters and exits the stage too quickly to get boring[20] - Dr. Florêncio rationally defends Josephina de Azevedo's coherent ideas before the other characters, but obviously with the theater audience as his real target. While sharing this role of author's spokesperson with the female characters, the *raisonneur* is far from boring; although his lines are somewhat sententious,

[20] A typical *raisonneur* from the French-inspired realist school appears in *O Crédito* (1857), by José de Alencar, in the protagonist Rodrigo, whose exaggerated rhetoric and interminable lectures on the role of money in bourgeois society end up irreversibly jeopardizing the play's formal quality; cf. FARIA, João Roberto. *O Teatro Realista no Brasil: 1855-1865*. São Paulo: Perspectiva/EDUSP, 1993, p. 176.

they come across as short, often interrogative phrases blending easily into the quick pace of the comedy's dialogue, giving it an instigating tone, like a question-and-answer game, reminding the audience of courtroom dynamics.

The male characters come across as blatant caricatures, the basis for the play's comedy, emerging in its more caustic moments through mockery, jeering laughter, amusing the audience by unmasking poorly disguised human weaknesses[21], where men are demoralized and portrayed hyperbolically as intellectual and emotional oafs.

All this is exemplified by Anastácio, the image of a mediocre, prejudiced, authoritarian, backward, and intellectually stupid man, besides personifying male egotism itself. Josephina de Azevedo perceives such egotism as a source of trouble for the male spirit, making men "incapable of great generosity". She had already pointed this out numerous times, ever since her first articles on women's suffrage, as the only reason that women were still deprived of their civil rights.[22] She could hardly have done a better job at portraying this egotism in her play, beginning with the opening scene, through the ridiculous, despicable figure of a stingy man who despite all his wealth stoops to double-checking the grocery bill item by item, only to launch a tirade against his wife when he discovers they have been shortchanged by a few pennies.[23]

Another probable source of inspiration was one of her newspaper articles, written in response to a journalist whom she had dubbed as "fumbling" and "void of ideas", due to his lack of arguments on women's suffrage.[24] Josephina also included this laughable characteristic in Anastácio, branding him with a linguistic tick whereby he begins, ends, and intersperses every sentence with the expression "*ora figas!*" (the equivalent of "shucks!" or "gee whiz!" - T.N.), a totally meaningless interjection serving as a crutch for his intellectual ineptness.

Considering other examples, like the sole male defender of women's cause, Dr. Florêncio[25], and of course Inês herself (the author's alter ego), one would be justified in concluding that as Josephina was writing her comedy, she tapped her own newspaper articles for the raw material to shape the play's main characters. Although the other characters are superb, Anastácio is the best example of the results she achieved in her only experience as a playwright, displaying the talent she had for effective use of dramaturgical techniques, over which she had an obvious command.

She also made efficient use of strophes. Although they were few and extremely short, they served to shape the characters' personality and provide a kind of break in the dramatic action, as exemplified so well in the first duet. The strophe sung at the end of the 8th scene closes the first part of the

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[21] This characteristic of provoked laughter in *O Voto Feminino* refers one to Propp's theories, according to which the laughter of mockery, the basis for the vast field of satire, is always born of the unexpected unmasking of man's inner moral or spiritual flaws. Cf. PROPP, Vladimir. *Comicidade e Riso*. São Paulo: Ática, 1992.

[22] AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Família*, Dec. 14, 1889; Dec. 21, 1889; Apr. 19, 1890, p. 1; Apr. 26, 1890, p. 1; May 31, 1890, p. 1; Dec. 11, 1890, p.1.

[23] This author's creative skill in transposing linguistic forms was pointed out to me by Prof. Cláudia de Arruda Campos, who suggested the hypothesis that Josephina de Azevedo may have used her own articles as the main source of raw material for constructing her comedy.

[24] AZEVEDO, Josephina de. O Direito de Voto. *A Família*. Mar. 9, 1890, p. 1.

[25] The author most certainly based this character on the physician and journalist José Lopes da Silva Trovão (1848-1925), Deputy-Elect to the Constitutional Congress following the Proclamation of the Republic, where he spoke out in favor of women's suffrage and divorce. See HAHNER, June E.. *A Mulher Brasileira e suas Lutas Sociais e Políticas (1850-1937)*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1981, p. 87. In her articles, Josephina refers to some "respectable opinions" in favor of women's suffrage in the press, but without quoting him by name, as she had done months earlier, calling on her contemporaries to help elect a candidate whose plataform included women's right to vote. Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina de. As Mulheres e a Eleição. *A Família*, July 6, 1889, p. 1; Id. O Direito de Voto. *A Família*. Apr. 19, 1890, p. 1.

comedy, simultaneously acting as a pause that further highlights Inês' and Esmeralda's bellicose, firm, and rational character traits, using a vocabulary based specifically on the theme of war and the struggle for power. With terms like "struggle", "victory", "glory", "strong", and "vanquisher", this dispute is made totally explicit in the last stanza, when the two sing together: "Let men fall! And let us take/to the forefront, as we aspire./Our reign has come/the glorious reign of women!"

In the final *ensemble*, the author reviews the central issues covered in her comedy, briefly underscoring the female protagonist's superiority, the *raisonneur*'s unshakable conviction, and of course the intellectual and moral shortcomings of the antagonist, whose total lack of argumentative skill is laid bare once again in the meaningless interjection "*ora figas!*", virtually the extent of his part in the strophe. This Manichean polarization is stressed in the two final stanzas of this strophe, in which each group gives its final word, as if in a battle cry. Like little war hymns, the comedy's closing songs emphasize what has already been made explicit as the ongoing struggle and the respective positions taken in it by the male and female groups: on the one hand, men trusting in the eternal preservation of the *status quo*; on the other, women awaiting their chance to alter it, trusting in the triumph of reason.

Pioneer but unique experience

Structurally distinct from the theatrical form developed by Soviet agitprop and known internationally by the name "living newspaper", *O Voto Feminino* was actually a far cry from a spoken edition of a news medium for the feminist movement, but it does bear the birthmark of a certain kinship to this **agitform**: the explicit, literal airing of news on contemporary political events, as specifically linked to the play's theme. In addition, as both an isolated experience and one that never made it to the streets as a spectacle because of the limitations and prejudices of the time, *O Voto Feminino* also lacks an essential trait that would legitimate its kinship to agitprop theater: street activism.

However, this central contradiction is offset by a series of characteristics establishing its genealogical proximity to other experiments with theater and political propaganda: simplicity of dramatic structure; substitution of organicity with a montage or series of scenes; short and/or combined musical forms; hyperbolic, Manichean typification of characters; didacticism; and satirical humor. With no theatrical predecessors as a political weapon, Josephina Alvares de Azevedo is surprising in that she opted for such resources, nearly all of which originating in epic theater, which at least in Brazil would only be used for the same purpose much later, in the early 1960s, by authors who by that time had assimilated the Brechtian technical arsenal, especially one of the founders of the CPC (People's Cultural Center), Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, known as "Vianninha".

In one of his first plays, entitled *A Mais-Valia Vai Acabar, seu Edgar* (*Surplus value is on the way out, Joe* - T.N.), written and staged in 1961, and whose debut launched the history of the CPC itself, Vianninha presents a proposal which is startlingly analogous to *O Voto Feminino*, especially in the use of such resources, although he also employed additional theatrical elements of an epic nature, like posters and panels.

Starting with his fundamental goal of didactically explaining the concept of surplus value, the author constructs the play as a musical review, and through a sequence of juxtaposed scenes, he follows a worker moved by the desire to unravel the mechanisms behind profit and exploitation, visiting such diverse places as a conference on economics and an open-air market. The caricaturist, Manichean way in which his characters are constructed - Underdogs (i.e., workers), Capitalists, Market Stall Owners, Vendors, and Economists, divided basically into exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed, sets the heavily satirical tone predominating in *A Mais-Valia Vai Acabar, seu Edgar*. Unlike *O Voto Feminino*, Vianninha's play does not close

with a musical number, but both have closing scenes inciting the audience to struggle, projecting into the future a victory based on justice and social equality.[26]

In addition, Josephina de Azevedo's play bears a certain degree of similarity with the CPC agitprop repertoire in the process of textual creation per se. Although it was an individual creation, and in this respect unlike the CPC's collective creativity, *O Voto Feminino* was apparently produced with the same speed that characterized the CPC, as in the case of the play *Auto dos 99%*, written in just one week to tackle student movement issues in the 1960s traveling platform of the Brazilian National Student Union; until then the platform had included just one play on the workers' struggle and another on the agrarian issue in Brazil.[27] If the CPC had perceived the enormous gap in its platform with regard to the women's struggle (a struggle that unfortunately only flourished again in Brazil more than a decade later), an author like Josephina de Azevedo (perhaps someone like Leilah Assunção or Consuelo de Castro[28]) would no doubt have been ready to fill that historical gap.

There was another strong similarity between *O Voto Feminino* and the agitprop production of the CPC, in that both failed to achieve their objectives. In other words, the authors overestimated the power of theater as a tool for political action with immediate results: although the CPC made history and set examples, it did not win a revolution, it did not create revolutionary art, nor did it even succeed in promoting an alliance between the petite bourgeoisie and the masses, as pointed out by Garcia;[29] on the other hand, Josephina Alvares de Azevedo's goal of raising the awareness of the members of Congress who passed the 1891 Constitution was completely thwarted, since women's suffrage was only approved in Brazil in 1932, i.e., nearly a half century later. Despite the fact that Josephina de Azevedo hit her mark at times and made some relevant discoveries, she was not (nor did she have the slightest pretense of being) impartial in her comedy. Inappropriate for "good playwrights" according to Martin Esslin[30], such partiality was precisely the reason for the failure of those who turned to theater to back their causes. However, it was perfectly appropriate for 19th-century

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[26]The proposal to continue the struggle as presented in *O Voto Feminino* is perhaps more comparable to another musical, *Arena Conta Zumbi*, by Augusto Boal and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri. As Cláudia de Arruda Campos has pointed out, the play *Zumbi*, written and staged in 1965, acts as a metaphor for the 1964 military coup in Brazil, and as such, from beginning to end it "takes great care to play down any feeling of defeat, taking the setback not as definitive, but as just one episode in a war that can still be won." Cf. CAMPOS, Cláudia de Arruda. *Zumbi, Tiradentes* (e outras histórias contadas pelo Teatro de Arena de São Paulo). São Paulo: Perspectiva/EDUSP, 1988, p. 73-4.

[27]Cf. MARTINS, Carlos Estevam. História do CPC. *Arte em Revista*, São Paulo, v. 2, nº 3, p. 80, Mar. 1980. In the case of *O Voto Feminino*, what permits this supposition is the fact that a week after she published an article in her newspaper criticizing the government's statement against women's suffrage, Josephina de Azevedo published a note announcing her soon-to-be-released theater production. A week later, *A Família* announced that the Conservatório Dramático Brasileiro had just approved the play, "with great distinction". Cf. AZEVEDO, Josephina Alvares de. *A Família*, Apr. 10, 1890, p. 3; Apr. 19, 1890, p. 7.

[28]On these two authors, see VINCENZO, Elza Cunha de. *Um Teatro da Mulher*: dramaturgia feminina no palco brasileiro contemporâneo. São Paulo: Perspectiva/EDUSP, 1992, in which Brazilian women's playwriting from 1969 on is examined in depth and associated with "the achievement of one aspect from one of the most important goals of international and Brazilian feminism: the opening and expansion of areas for expression and action by women in non-private (not exclusively domestic) spheres.", p. 277.

[29] Cf. GARCIA, op. cit., p. 116. We should stress here the observation by Prof. Cláudia de Arruda Campos on the scope of influence exerted by *cepecista* theatrical production and political art in general in Brazil: spanning more than one generation, this influence was deep, and it most certainly left its mark in Brazilian theatrical art; in this sense, the sample left by Josephina de Azevedo shows that if her example had not been so isolated, her name would no doubt be remembered as one of the hallmarks of Brazilian theater.

[30] ESSLIN, Martin. *Uma Anatomia do Drama*. Translation by Barbara Heliodora. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1986, p. 105-6.

women writers (and not only for them); in their partiality, tendentious works like *O Voto Feminino* displayed, as Virginia Woolf pointed out, "(...) the presence of women, of someone offended by the treatment given to members of their sex and who demand their rights. This gives literature by women an element totally absent from that written by men, except when the author is a worker, a black, or any other man who for some reason or another has been treated unfairly. This element produces a distortion and is often the reason for a play's weakness. The desire to defend a personal cause or to turn a character into a spokesperson for some kind of discontent or personal redress always produces awful results, as if the point to which the reader's attention is directed suddenly splits in two, when in fact it should be only one" (retranslated from Portuguese into English - T.N.).[31]

In fact, whether she was on an "Esslin's list" or not was no great concern for a militant like Josephina de Azevedo. In her commentary (already quoted above) concerning the praise published for her comedy in the journal *Le Droit des Femmes*, after stating that *O Voto Feminino* was "not a play written with great care" and explaining the reasons for her haste, she conscientiously pointed out its "many flaws" and her "soft spot" for pleasing the public, stating how happy she was that "...the play's greatest merit is that Paris, the Areopagus of contemporary civilization, can now witness the toils of those of us working in a country where even now (men) have drafted laws leaving academe's doors closed to women".[32] Josephina de Azevedo was clearly beyond any pretense of producing a "great play" for the theater. What she really wanted with her little comedy was of course not just to intervene in the electoral process, as she explained on several occasions, but in the very social and political order of her time.

Thus, despite its short life and a few minor shortcomings in its composition, it would be unfair to call *O Voto Feminino* a weak play, especially when compared to certain others of a similar nature written by men during the same period. Especially when viewed as a forerunner for agitprop theater in Brazil, it becomes a forceful, gutsy comedy by an author viscerally involved in the struggle and paving one of the first roads for playwriting and social justice in our country, a road that many of us women can follow today with a little more certainty and success.

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[31] WOOLF, Virginia *apud* MUZART, Zahidé Lupinacci. Na Aprendizagem da Palavra: a mulher na ficção brasileira - século XIX. *In*: Fazendo Gênero - Seminário de Estudos Sobre a Mulher. *Anais*. Ponta Grossa: UFSC/UEPG, 1996, p. 81-2.

[32] AZEVEDO, Josephina de. O Voto Feminino. *A Família*, Oct. 23, 1890, p. 1. The author refers to the decree recently signed by the Minister of the Postal Service and Instruction, Benjamin Constant (1833-1891), prohibiting access by women to institutions of higher learning, against which she protested vehemently in the articles she signed and published in *A Família* under the title Decreto Iníquo e Absurdo; see AZEVEDO, Josephina de. Decreto Iníquo e Absurdo. *A Família*, Oct. 16, 1890, p. 1 and Oct. 30, 1890, p. 1.