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**HOW TO BUILD WITH RUBBLE:
an interview with Vinicius Calderoni**

COMO CONSTRUIR COM ESCOMBROS:
uma entrevista com Vinicius Calderoni

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Abstract: Interview with director and playwright Vinicius Calderoni about *Museu Nacional – Todas As Vozes do Fogo*, a musical about the fire that destroyed the São Cristóvão Palace, the museum's headquarters located in Rio de Janeiro. Calderoni reflects on the creative process, the dramaturgical construction, the staging choices, and the references for the project. The play problematizes the role of the museum and its relationship with society.

Keywords: National Museum; fire; theater; staging; dramaturgy.

**Como construir com escombros:
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Resumo: Entrevista com o diretor e dramaturgo Vinicius Calderoni sobre *Museu Nacional – Todas As Vozes do Fogo*, musical a respeito do incêndio que atingiu o Palácio de São Cristóvão, sede do museu localizada no Rio de Janeiro. Calderoni reflete sobre seu processo de criação, a construção dramaturgical, as escolhas da encenação e as referências para o projeto. O espetáculo problematiza o papel do museu e sua relação com a sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Museu Nacional; incêndio; teatro; encenação; dramaturgia.



Author, director, screenwriter, musician, and actor. Vinicius Calderoni, a multi-artist from São Paulo, is considered one of the exponents of contemporary Brazilian theater. Together with Rafael Gomes, he founded the company Empório de Teatro Sortido in 2010. As a playwright, he wrote six adult and two children's plays. Winner of the Shell Award for Best Author for *Árrã* (2015) and the APCA Award in the same category for *Os Arqueólogos* (2016) and *Elza* (2018); he was elected by *Folha de S.Paulo* as one of the ten most important playwrights in the country in an anthology dedicated to the 2010s. Credentials aside, everything makes even more sense when one gets into Calderoni's thought. As enthusiast of the word, he writes to share a worldview through reflection on his craft. In this interview, conducted by email between June and July 2023, he gives us access to his creative process, marked by constant dialogue with collaborators and an unshakable belief in theatrical making.

For my part, I was interested in his work after the premiere of his latest project as a director and playwright: *Museu Nacional – Todas as Vozes do Fogo*. Made with Barca dos Corações Partidos, it is an unorthodox musical about the fire that destroyed the São Cristóvão Palace, located in Quinta da Boa Vista, northern Rio de Janeiro. The fire turned about 90% of the collection of the oldest scientific-cultural institution in Brazil into ashes on September 2, 2018. The artistic representation of the tragedy was the object of my postdoctoral research at the Postgraduate Program in Communication and Culture at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (PPGCOM-UFRJ), with funding from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

Calderoni sets out to face a striking challenge: to account more than 200 years of the museum's history—an institution seen by many as static and hermetic—using a theatrical language based on music and dance. In other words, to transform a museum exhibit into a theatrical play, as he emphasizes in the text. Divided into three acts, although not explicitly marked, the spectacle balances between the lament of the colossal loss and the need to rebuild not only the museum, but society, this time hoping to make it less unequal. The play premiered in October 2022, with seasons in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and its text was published as a book by Cobogó in early 2024.

As a unique aesthetic-discursive experiment, *Museu Nacional – Todas as Vozes do Fogo* deserves scrutiny for setting fire to the superficiality in this debate on its own. Its mission, on the contrary, is to make things more complex. As we get inside the head of its creator, we have the opportunity to try to find alternatives to what has survived. "The great question that arises at the end of the experiment is precisely one of the last sentences of the text: how to build with rubble? It is, at the same time, a convocation: the final phrase of the show is 'Shall we build with rubble?'. A call to life, despite all the pain," Calderoni explains. Between ruins, the audience must decide their own fate.



GC (Guilherme Carréra). The play *Museu Nacional – Todas as Vozes do Fogo* deals with the fire that struck the institution on September 2, 2018, destroying practically its entire collection. Why turn this event a theatrical play? What is only theater capable of?

VC (Vinicius Calderoni). Theater can do anything: go everywhere, talk about any subject, investigate, excavate, transcend. I have always felt in my own physical and psychic experience, first as a spectator and then as the creator, that being in the theater is one of the ways to feel more alive in life, it is a privileged and cathartic space to experience the human condition, because it is shared. Therefore, I think that every event or any subject can give rise to a theatrical spectacle—not only events whose dramatic outlines are more evident, in an Aristotelian way. This speaks a little about how the spark of wanting to stage a play after the National Museum fire arose.

Initially, as a powerless spectator of the tragedy through television images, I was disturbed, mainly because I felt that the image contained a myriad of meanings, a kind of image-synthesis of a dark time about to approach the country. I was left with the desire to do something like a simple performance: to put a microphone in a square or cultural space and perpetually read all the collection's items that burned in the fire. Shortly after, however, I realized that it was an impossible task, first because of the magnitude of the collection of almost twenty million items, but also because of the lack of a centralized cataloguing that could name a significant part of what was lost.

The idea was put aside but resurfaced a little more than a year and a half later, when I was provoked by my partner Andréa Alves. She is the founder of Sarau and production director and/or creator of all the projects of Barca dos Corações Partidos,¹ and she asked if I had any idea for a new project for the group. That seemed like a great opportunity to talk about a recent event and an emblematic building, whose origins refer to the very formation of Brazil, in the fullness of its powers and also of its violence, its entrails of slavery and genocide. At the same time, I found this premise of a play about a museum fascinating: the theater, which is essentially movement, talking about a building, a large piece of stone stuck in the ground. 'How to make the museum move?', it was what I wondered at that moment.

GC. Your dramaturgy seems to be contaminated by the before and after the fire. The first act of the play is more structured, narrating the museum, its collection, and characters in an almost educational way, mirroring a facet of the institution itself. The second act is fragmentary, with scenes that are not necessarily narratively linked, as if presenting a museum in pieces after the fire. How was the process of dramaturgical construction of the show?

¹ Barca dos Corações Partidos – Companhia Brasileira de Movimento e Som is a theater company from Rio de Janeiro. Active since 2012, it has staged the musicals *Gonzagão – A Lenda*, *Suassuna – O Auto do Reino do Sol*, *Ópera do Malandro* and *Macunatima*, among others.



VC. For me, a big leap in dramaturgical understanding came about three weeks or a month into the process. It had to do with establishing a certain dramaturgical backbone in three acts. The first act deals with the National Museum seen through the materiality of the building and everything around its orbit: the composition of the collection, the museum's employees, the bureaucracy of the public service, the sectors that compose it, its visitors. In short: a careful look at this ecosystem narrated by Luzia, the oldest inhabitant of this country, and the most celebrated item in the collection. Luzia behaves almost like the stage manager of *Our Town*.² She approaches and distances, highlights, evokes, starts and concludes the scenes. Little by little, it became clear that the keyword of this act is lyricism, and through this filter one would look at all the scenes, assigning a more contemplative character to the act and presenting the museum's physicality, as well as the human dimension that constitutes it—not by chance, the act ends with two very poetic scenes. One tries to scrutinize everything that goes on inside a visitor's mind when observing an item on display. The other talks about overlapping of times, small everyday situations that happened in that same physical space over more than two hundred years, but staged in an overlapping way.

The second act is a moment when the walls of the museum break down and the National Museum ceases to be a building to become a metaphor for the memory of Brazil's formation. The act begins precisely with the unavoidable reminder that the São Cristóvão Palace was built by a slave trader and donated to Dom João VI, becoming the official residence of the imperial family;³ a clear demonstration of how national identity is based, literally, on the land of slave owners and how slavery is a constitutive characteristic in the country's formation. From then on, the act discusses more deeply the savage contradictions contained in Brazil, addressing the perverse theater of the elites, the slavery and genocide of the native peoples, the profusion of misfortunes that constitutes us. The keywords of this act are parody or satire: everything lies on a threshold of playfulness, putting a finger on an open wound through the strangeness that laughter evokes. It is more extravagant, much more violent, with aberrant colors and a multiplicity of voices (one of the scenes, about the Museum of the Future, was written by actresses Ana Carbatti and Luiza Loroza, developing a scene premise that had been born in rehearsal room).

The third and final act is almost an epilogue, joining both ends in the present: what now that the museum has burned? What now that Brazil has burned? (despite the country being on fire for more than 500 years, the notion of scorched earth was particularly palpable at the end of Bolsonaro's administration, probably the most tragic and destructive one in Brazil's republican history). It was a kind of rite, a collective ceremony, where, together, we can look at the wreckage, make an inventory of losses and think about what to do with what was lost. The keyword here is

² *Our Town* is a 1938 play written by American playwright Thornton Wilder. Composed of three acts, it presents the daily life of the fictional American town of Grover's Corners. The protagonist is the *stage manager* of the theater, who breaks the fourth wall and dialogues with the audience.

³ Previously belonging to the Jesuits, the land was acquired by Elias Antônio Lopes in 1803. The Portuguese-Lebanese merchant and slave trader built the first part of the house and then ceded it to the Portuguese royal family in 1808 (O MAIOR [...]).



realism: everything is seen through rawness, without artifice, which is intensified by the performers wearing everyday clothes, in contrast to the extremely elaborate and complex costumes, by Kika Lopes and Rocio Moure, of the previous acts. The great question that arises at the end of the experiment is precisely one of the last sentences of the text: how to build with rubble? It is, at the same time, a convocation: the final phrase of the show is “Shall we build with rubble?”. A call to life, in spite of all the pain.

GC. One of the merits of the project is deconstructing the stereotype that museums are spaces of immobility—a place frozen in time. It brings out notion of movement both by what is said by the characters, as well as by how they occupy the stage. What strategies were adopted to reinforce dramaturgical intentions by staging?

VC. I have not started the process with certainties and dogmas in relation to dramaturgy, much less regarding staging. For me, to stage is to move living bodies in a three-dimensionality giving way to dramaturgy. It is not that the staging is subordinate to the text: there are several images in the staging that exist by themselves, by their own strength and power. But I feel that, because my text moves all the time, the staging often needs to help in the understanding of the meaning. We naturally came up with possible solutions: I reach for compositions that are a bit geometric in terms of space distribution, arrangement of the choirs and composition of the images. Another important parameter was that the twelve performers on stage formed a dimension of a living scenography, a human panel. Choosing the large stone/cloud designed by André Cortez was a decisive scenography choice, a visually stimulating and impactful object. However, it did not take away space for constant movement of the actors but served as a frame, so that the living part of the scenography (the performers) could move and create different images and multiple textures, joined by the propositional lighting, created by Wagner Antônio. I believe that it is this sum of facts that builds a permanent movement sensation by the play, which deconstructs the image of immobility that museums, in general, carry.

GC. At a certain point in the text, one of the characters refers to the terms “museum art piece” and “theatrical play” as very different from each other. “Museum art piece” would refer to the constant and the enduring, whereas “play” would allude to impermanence and the ephemeral. This duality seems like an asset to me, as it brings the museum closer to the theater, transforming the play into a record about a museum that no longer exists. To what extent did this dialogue between the two spaces fuel the idealization of the project?

VC. As I said before, the challenge of dramatizing the supposed immobility of a building has always disturbed and instigated me. But, as the process unfolded and the dramaturgy was built, the conceptual tension between permanence and impermanence, between material and immaterial heritage, conversations that are small pigeonholes within the great closet of memory



and its preservation, became clearer. By doing theater and talking about a museum, it was inevitable to think about how the preservation of memory takes place in each of these media. A museum is a struggle against the natural perishability of each item, since conservation is artificial and perishing is natural. Theater turns its ephemerality, the singularity of its manifestation, into a way of lasting in memory and time. It became clear that the play would feed on this discussion and that it was not a tension that needed to be resolved or answered, but rather enunciated and explored, as it would give us a lot of fuel. And it did.

GC. Through a red light reflected against a sculptural piece and the sound of burning fire, the show chooses to represent the fire indirectly. At the same time, the use of sensory elements communicates what happened very well. How did you decide how to stage the fire? Did you want to get away from a more graphic depiction of the tragedy?

VC. The prologue already enunciates it: in a kind of letter of intent, a way of saying how we arrived at the show, as if the flame of the fire were the spark to our creation. In all the scenes, even those that do not mention it directly, it is there, as a context, as a backdrop, as a memory, even because it is such a strong, tragic, and definitive event that assigned new meaning to everything in place. So, I always felt that the fire, when it appeared on the scene itself, did not need to be represented with words. A sense of an event that language cannot handle; it needs to overflow. Thus, everything naturally moved towards the idea of a fire that is seen in the form of music and choreography, a sensory explosion where words are insufficient. To me, it also seemed more scenically powerful, grander and operatic, and it made better use of the strength and talent of our choreographer and movement director, Fabricio Licursi, as well as the performers and musicians in the cast. Regarding the idea of escaping from a more graphic representation, it seems to me that the strength of theater lies much more in its allusive capacity than in the eagerness to illustrate. Cinema, photography, the visual arts, they achieve graphic with strength and power—it has to do with the core of their language and driving force. But theater needs to look for its own path, to where the surprise and bewilderment it can cause lie. Theater forces the spectator to move, to engage actively, to be an accomplice, not just a passive receiver.

GC. At the end of the show, there is a passage about a work under construction looking like a ruin and a ruin looking like a work under construction—an idea referred in Caetano Veloso's line "Here everything seems to be still a construction and already a ruin," inspired by the thought of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. What artistic and academic references were fundamental to the final result?



VC. Since before the beginning of the research and writing process, a central notion was the concept of Lévi-Strauss⁴ that echoes in Caetano Veloso's song *Fora da Ordem*. It spoke directly to the heart of what happened at the National Museum, but it also portrayed a certain *modus operandi* of what has always been happening in Brazil. I would go so far as to say that this notion even helped to guide the dramaturgy research headed and conducted by Luísa Valentini, an anthropologist and researcher from São Paulo, who was a great partner in the process. Another fundamental partner was the professor, researcher, and screenwriter Aza Njeri, who made important dramaturgical interventions and problematizations based on the text.

Regarding references, I can highlight works by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (a scholar trained at the School of Anthropology of the National Museum) such as *Metafísicas Canibais* (2018), *Há Mundo Por Vir?* (2017), *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem* (2015) and the article *Os Involuntários da Pátria* (2017). Also *No Tempo das Catástrofes*, by Isabelle Stengers (2015), and *A Queda do Céu*, by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert (2015). The book *Racismo Brasileiro: Uma História da Formação do País*, by Ynaê Lopes dos Santos (2022), and the podcast *Projeto Querino*, by Tiago Rogero (2022), are references not only for this project, but for the minimum of racial literacy to current-day Brazil. There was also a vast bibliography of different origins and formats from museum archives to academic articles and theses, researched and compiled by Luísa Valentini.

Regarding the artistic references, I can list some that were quite central. Much of what was created was under the aegis of Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Aqui* (2017). It is a book in which all the action takes place in the same square meter as the living room of a house, but it moves forward and backward in chronological time. From there came this notion of overlapping times, very strong within the National Museum. I also think of *Our Town*, a text by Thornton Wilder (2013), especially regarding the idea of the *stage manager*. As I said, Luzia is a kind of *stage manager*. More than a narrator, she is an organizer of time. She interrupts, she questions, she puts herself into the play. Among many others, it is worth mentioning *The Power of Yes*, a play by English playwright David Hare (2019) about the economic crisis of 2008. Hare gave me the necessary strength and many devices of documentary theater to simply portray certain things and address certain subjects without fear of didacticism at various times. He does that in an intelligent way that transcends any of that supposed didacticism.

GC. The show points the finger at the neglecting government regarding scientific-cultural institutions, even mentioning facts from the country's recent history. On the other hand, it puts the audience itself in the hot seat, when it breaks the fourth wall and questions

⁴ In the classic *Triste Tropicues*, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1996), in addition to documenting his research on the native peoples of Brazil, shares his impressions of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. For him, the cities of the so-called New World would be *perpetually young but never healthy*, emphasizing an impermanent urban landscape due to constant demolitions.



their position. By that, anti-racist discourse becomes action, targeting the elitism of Whiteness. What precautions have you taken to adopt a critical tone without falling into proselytism?

VC. I have the feeling that a scene becomes proselytizing when the denunciation gains the proscenium and the dramaturgy goes to the sidelines. If there is only denunciation and no dramaturgy, it becomes a pamphlet, because it causes an *ex machina* sensation in the spectator. I think the challenge for us, who knew the need to address a series of unavoidable issues and to denounce them, was always to find a way to insert this in a sufficiently stimulating way into the dramaturgy, both in relation to the text and staging and the tone of the performances. Therefore, it is impossible to say what the precautions were. I think the path was always to be in permanent dialogue with the cast and crew, being transparent and sharing with each one when I felt there was this danger, and then evaluating case by case, so that solutions would emerge collectively. It made the representation of these themes more nuanced when necessary during dramaturgical progress.

GC. In addition to elaborating on what was destroyed by the fire, the play offers some paths regarding how we could build a new museum and, ultimately, a new society. How can it become a real museum of tomorrow in such an eternal country of the future?

VC. I feel that I cannot, that I do not know, and that it is not up to me to answer. The strength of the play lies in giving multiple elements for each spectator to formulate within themselves their own answer to this question—and to create a stimulus for the response to take place as collective action, not just in an introjected abstract notion. I do think that there are some unavoidable parameters for this museum of tomorrow: diversity, inclusion, plurality and polyphony are some of the words that should guide me in any possible future museum. One which casts a horizontal and not a vertical look. Dialectical and not aseptic, so it does not repeat the same old Eurocentric or Anglo-Saxon narratives, without giving space to a decolonial approach. A museum that problematizes itself, rather than offering answers or chewed up narratives. But I think that the real answer can only be given through the dialectical exercise of action itself. That is what we have to throw ourselves into, and that is the provocation and call intended by the play.



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