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FAR BEYOND CARANDIRU:
indisciplinary processes in theater, prison and abolition

MUITO ALÉM DO CARANDIRU:
processos indisciplinares em teatro, prisão e abolição

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Far beyond Carandiru:
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Abstract: This text presents a historical and conceptual approach to the experiments in the field of performing arts pedagogy carried out in the Carandiru Complex starting in 1940. Drawing parallels with the philosophy of penal abolitionism, the text aims to update some reflections on theater, imprisonment, and abolitionism.
Keywords: Carandiru; theater; penal abolitionism.

Muito além do Carandiru:
processos indisciplinares em teatro, prisão e abolição

Resumo: o presente texto faz uma abordagem histórica e conceitual acerca das experimentações no campo da pedagogia das artes cênicas realizadas no Complexo do Carandiru, a partir de 1940. Traçando paralelos com a filosofia do abolicionismo penal, o texto tenta atualizar algumas reflexões sobre teatro, prisão e abolicionismo.
Palavras-chave: Carandiru; teatro; abolicionismo penal.

1. Subterranean corpographies of resistance: the Maafa of prisons and penal abolitionism

"E arte aqui sempre é de primeira
No samba, no rap sei que é normal
vários manos na cadeia pagam pau
O Carandiru é escola de bandido
Mas de repente tem a falta de incentivo"
(Excerpt from the song Oitavo Pavilhão, Comunidade Carcerária)

We are living in times of chaos… Times of death… Of fear… Dreadful times… Witnesses to the End of the World, we experience constant disarrangements that completely divert our perspectives. While science fiction films imagined the apocalypse through hordes of zombies, meteors, or alien domination, reality disappointed us by showing that a very strong flu could bring the end of the world. We discovered that we could die from a sneeze…

This was how the global population experienced 2020, during the global health crisis of COVID-19, which forced a large portion of humanity to endure social isolation. People locked in their homes, panicked over their food supplies and hand sanitizer, or at least those families who could afford to do so, as many were left to fend for themselves, forced to ignore isolation just to eat. The sense of hysteria was constant. Fiction and reality blurred into such a surreal dimension that even today, at times, we no longer feel capable of discerning what is sensationalism and what is a matter of public health.

An agony that grips our bodies, making us lose all sense of what is or is not real. This horror of feeling like background actors in our own stories, in a violent and chaotic horror movie forgotten on some Netflix category. When our lives feels unreal, as if everything is a science fiction script in which writers seem to revel in throwing in plot twists that completely bury any hope we might expect for our story having a happy ending. Fascism out in the open, fake news, viral plagues crossing continents.

This metaphor of social isolation during the pandemic is often used by our social movements in the fight against prisons to remind people who have never been incarcerated of the many catastrophes that afflict survivors of the prison system. Even today, we live with many of aftereffects of social isolation, affecting our families, the way we relate to the outside world, and our physical, emotional, and mental health. We engage in this exercise as a community to call on the social imagination to think, empathetically and responsibly, on whether we can still call justice what we do with prisons.

Only those who have been to a prison know what it is like to experience this internalized, daily horror devouring both one's mind and soul in a daily basis. The difference is that there are no sympathetic news on TV, no institutional instructions for harm reduction or self-care protocols. The only answer to the desperate cries of imprisoned people is the echo and abandonment.

Imprisonment survivors know all too well what it is like to live through an apocalypse. Stripped of all their rights, usually for being poor, Black, and/or gender nonconforming, such marginalized communities by the state, have created subterranean corpographies of resistance to avoid madness, to persist in living when survival is already so difficult.

I borrow the concept of subterranean corpographies of resistance from political scientist and actress Dina Alves (2020), who in turn borrows the concept of corpography as discussed by authors such as Paola Berenstein Jacques (2008), Fabiana Dultra Britto (2013), and Gabrielle Vivian Bittelbrun (2018). I use this concept to explore the phenomenon of choreographic and physical repertoires produced by communities in extreme situations of oppression and crisis. According to Alves:

> corpography relates to the political and transitory interaction of bodies within the city and their impacts on urban experiences […] as vehicles for cartographic inscriptions of bodies. The experience of structural-State violence geolocates the body as a repository of terror, while at the same time producing through their experiences a type of empowerment, resistance, and agency in the refusal of victimization, aiming not only at denouncing State terrorism, but fundamentally at the production of subterranean corpographies of resistances.

When one loses the condition of human beings and, consequently all their rights and guarantees of minimal dignity, the world must be reinvented in order to remain within it. This research focuses on the creative forms of invention by survivors of institutional incarceration as this perspective shifts our thinking towards understanding imprisoned individuals and/or survivors of the prison system (or any other group made vulnerable by the colonial machine) as more than passive bodies subjected to precarious conditions and intense torture.

We are talking about bodies-as-documents that carry memory, history and resistance. Beatriz Nascimento (2018) and Alex Ratts (2016) discuss the concept of the body-document, asserting that the body is not just a biological entity but also a space where personal and collective narratives are inscribed. It is seen as a document that records and expresses experiences of individuals and groups to which they belong. This includes resistance, traditions, and cultural practices that are passed down through generations.

Bringing this concept closer to theatrical critique and analysis, researchers Aza Njeri and Thiago Catarino invoke the theory of the body-document as a tool for estranging Western logic in our world writings. According to them:

> The expected goal when dealing with the category of the body-document is to speak […] from locations and agendas stemming from another, non-Western, repertoire. […] We aim to challenge the dichotomy of Self vs. Other through the circumscriptions arising from the presence/absence of Black bodies, with their histories, memories, and subjectivities. Thus, distancing from the European ideals perpetuated in the cultural industry and homogenized educational centers driven by supremacist actions, we promote the sharing of experiences inherent to peripheral realities imbued with Black-African traditions (Njeri, 2024, p.228-229).

The condition of Maafa forces these imprisoned bodies to use creativity and inventiveness to collapse the synapses of an archaic system grounded in punitive logic and socially legitimized torture, thereby creating their own aesthetics, ethics, and language—born out of the urgency of life and a state of communal survival. Maafa is a Swahili term that means "great tragedy" and is used to describe the history and ongoing effects of atrocities committed against African people, especially in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and the Arab slave trade. The term was popularized in the 1990s by author Marimba Ani (1994) and encompasses not only slavery but also imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression that persist to this day. Maafa reflects the destruction of African humanity and the poisoning of relationships among peoples, damaging the possibilities of truly human relations.

There is no other way to counter the Maafa of highly structured oligarchies, whose resources are stratified by slavery and the subservience of peoples in racial/gender/sexuality/class dissidence. The exception is through the production of inventive arsenals that dream and materialize new forms of (re)use/consumption of materials and re-signify collective relations, in opposition to the hegemonic project forced down our throats as the only possible and normal one.

Culture and narrative production are fundamental elements in the weaving of these subterranean corpographies of resistance, considering the overwhelming power of the abduction of the common imagination, which is performed daily in the fabric of our society through mass media. Hegemonic communication vehicles manage and propagate the dramaturgy of a false war on drugs and the "terrible few," as Ruth W. Gilmore (2024) puts it, which haunt the middle class, leading them to applaud and legitimize prisons. We are daily bombarded with sensationalist news making us fear the danger that crime whispers through the keyhole of our doors. Television programs are continually broadcasting, in an emblematic way, brutal scenes of violence and panic that play on loops on all the screens that accompany our lives in the contemporary digital world.

How many movies, books, series, and podcasts immortalize violent crimes in Brazil, such as the cases of the Nardoni family or Suzane von Richthofen?

These very cases, these "terrible few," are used by hegemonic media to legitimize the removal of (even more) rights from people brutally massacred by the prison system, as seen in the Constitutional Amendment Bill 2,253/2022[1], aimed at ending temporary release for prisoners in semi-open regimes.

1 The Brazilian National Congress approved the Amendment Bill 2,253/2022 in March 2024, restricting the benefit of temporary release, implying several damages to the prison population. Firstly, the measure could aggravate prison overcrowding, since fewer inmates will have access to this benefit, increasing the pressure on the prison system. Furthermore, the restriction could hinder the social reintegration of prisoners, as temporary release is an important tool for developing self-discipline and preparing inmates for their return to social life. The lack of this benefit could also increase tension and violence inside prisons, since inmates will lose an incentive to maintain good behavior. Finally, the measure could result in higher costs for the State, due to the need for electronic monitoring and other control measures.

Science fiction writer, activist, and penal abolitionist Walidah Imarisha invokes the silenced narratives faintly echoing in the long lines formed on visitation days at prisons to contextualize the situation, saying:

> In my most dramatic moments, I imagine myself and others challenging the prison system like Cassandras, cursed by the gods to foresee the future and not be heard, as our predictions of the destruction of Troy by the Spartans slowly drive us mad. There are thousands of Cassandras in the visitation lines at this moment. I consider our visions of devastation as terrible as the fate of Troy, in the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world. Prisons are this society's Trojan horses, prophesied as the end of the 'war on drugs.' We have accepted this and the devastating consequences that follow (Imarisha, 2023, p. 56).

From popular resistance and the legacy of Brazil's anti-slavery struggle, organized in *quilombos* by abolitionist communities, emerged a critical line of thought against the punitive system and the logic of punishment, known as penal abolitionism. This branch is the practical and theoretical record of subterranean corpographies of resistance that questions the effectiveness and justice of the prison system, arguing that criminalization and incarceration do not address the root causes of crime and often perpetuate discrimination and social inequality.

According to Liat Ben-Moshe (2018), the concept of penal abolitionism operates as a form of knowledge and an ethical stance. The author argues that this knowledge is rooted in *maroonage* (communities of runaway slaves), highlighting the importance of producing abolitionist knowledge from intersectional perspectives. She also proposes that we can understand abolitionism as a de-epistemology, rejecting ways of knowing tied to certainty, optimism, and certain notions of futurity and temporality.

This movement critiques the selectivity of the justice system, which often disproportionately penalizes the most vulnerable groups in society, such as poor and Black people. Additionally, it points to the precarious conditions of prisons and the lack of effectiveness in rehabilitating individuals. Penal abolitionism therefore seeks a radical transformation in how society addresses crime and criminal justice.

Another recurring theme in penal abolitionism is the notion that slavery and the prison system share a historical continuity, where mass incarceration has been used as a tool of social control, especially over Black and marginalized populations (Santos et al., 2022).

2 Carandiru and theater against prison

Angela Alonso (2012) reminds us that theater was a fundamental subterranean corpography of resistance for the abolition of slavery in Brazil. Theater groups performed at the doors of churches after Sunday Mass to spread the abolitionist ideal to the masses and raise funds to pay for slaves' manumission.

Although it has not received as much visibility as other movements in the history of performing arts, this legacy of abolitionist theater continues to this day, shaping different methodologies,

poetics, and strategies that build a true aesthetic arsenal in the fight against punishment and mass incarceration.

Such corpographies are carried out in groups, communally and collectively, for entering a war alone is suicide, martyrdom, or just another performance of White Christian saviorism. White saviorism (Cammarota, 2011) is a critical term that describes the attitude of white people who see themselves as liberators or saviors of non-White people, often in contexts of poverty or crisis. This stance is criticized for perpetuating an unequal power dynamic, where non-white people are seen as incapable of solving their own problems and must always rely on white help. The term suggests that this mentality is an extension of colonialism and racism, ignoring the agency and capacity of non-White communities.

Theater in prisons can be a fertile ground for both the production of resistance corpographies and the propagation of white saviorism. It is equally possible to create spaces for critical production and the collective gestation of popular rebellions, as well as to foster spaces for Christian charity, the worship of saviors, and the production of intellectual, emotional, and affective dependency.

To avoid romanticizing theater within prison institutions or universalizing the performing arts as something necessarily productive and powerful in the abolitionist context, the anarcho-feminist Maria Galindo argues that:

> The performing arts are playing different roles at the same time. There is a disciplining role played by the performing arts. It is impressive, for example, how the neoliberal administration of culture uses the performing arts to contain marginalized populations. […] You cannot hold an assembly, but you can hold a theater workshop. There is a domestication. Theater seems to be a useful tool to tame those below. However, the theater these groups produce interests no one. It is a theater, let us say, of generally poor quality, which serves the process of domestication (Gaulês *et al.*, 2024, p. 14).

Reflecting on the possible pitfalls of theatrical practice in contexts of extreme vulnerability and systemic oppression is essential for organizing liberatory work methodologies. Hence, the fundamental importance of joint articulations that do not violate the pacts of producing autonomies throughout the process, so that all agents involved can exercise their potential communally and independently.

We intend to focus on in this text these organized articulations in performing arts projects of various kinds in collaboration with the prison population in Brazil, with particular emphasis on those conducted in the state of São Paulo.

According to SENAPPEN data (2023), out of 644,305 incarcerated people in Brazil's prison institutions, 195,787 are in the state of São Paulo, representing nearly one-third of Brazilian prisoners. Often considered the "United States" of Brazil's prison system, São Paulo reflects many of the challenges faced by the national prison system, such as overcrowding, violence, and the dominance of criminal factions. The state is also a key reference point for studies and analyses of

the prison system, serving as an example of the complexities and problems that characterize the prison system throughout Brazil.

Additionally, the construction of the State Penitentiary (now the Santana Women's Penitentiary) in São Paulo's capital, in the Carandiru region, opened up intense debate about the Brazilian prison system, in which important experiences at the intersection of theater and prison took place. According to the heritage listing report on the Carandiru Complex presented by historian Silvia Heskel (2005), the State Penitentiary was inaugurated in 1920, designed by architect Ramos de Azevedo, who also designed the Theatro Municipal de São Paulo. Designed to be a model penitentiary, the complex featured residential pavilions, workshops, a school, a kitchen, a bakery, among other structures, and was surrounded by a wall approximately 1,450 meters long.

Ramos de Azevedo's architectural project for the penitentiary reflected a vision considered modern and humane for the prison system at the time, focusing on the rehabilitation of inmates through work and education. The efficiency and innovation of this prison system attracted international attention, drawing intellectuals from around the world interested in prison policy and culture. Notable visitors included anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and writer Stefan Zweig. Among the many reflections and initiatives present in this context, theater played a significant role, sustained by artists engaged in the fight for social change. This legacy began in the 1940s with Abdias Nascimento's *Teatro do Sentenciado*.

The *Teatro do Sentenciado* was a pioneering artistic movement created within the State Penitentiary, representing one of the first documented experiences of theater in prisons in Brazil. It marked a significant moment in the history of Brazilian theater, particularly concerning the inclusion of popular classes and the discussion of racial issues. Inmates created, rehearsed, and performed their own plays, which served as a form of resistance and affirmation of identity within a context of oppression and marginalization.

Denise Carrascosa (Carrascosa, 2023) reflected on the importance of Abdias Nascimento's work and his contribution to Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Atlantic culture, highlighting his experience in the Carandiru Penitentiary. It also comprised how he used writing to project his intellectual condition and resist state oppression. The plays performed by the Sentenciados and Abdias's records are true testimonies of the living conditions of racialized and marginalized bodies.

The work of the inmates was crucial to the modernization of Brazilian theater. Professor and researcher Viviane Narvaes (2020) analyzes the plays created by the group to highlight the importance of the voices of the men who participated in this process, in contrast to the erasure of the history of popular-class theater. The conditions of theatrical production by the inmates and the connections of this production with the history of the relationship between art and imprisonment help us to more broadly understand the role of theater as a tool for social transformation at the time. However, Abdias "still didn't grasp the serious gender problem [that

inhabits prisons to this day], replicating stereotypes" (Carrascosa, 2023, p. 17), which does not diminish his importance as a fundamental narrator and fighter against the structures of state genocide.

The expansion of the Carandiru Complex involved the construction of the Feminine Penitentiary of the Capital, the Criminological Observation Center (COC), and the São Paulo Detention Center, which expanded the prison territory inaugurated by the State Penitentiary. Other initiatives stood out regarding the role of theater in the prison context of that region, strongly influencing the language of prison theater in Brazil.

In a pioneering study for its time, actor and researcher Vicente Concílio (2008) organized the theater initiatives carried out in these prison facilities during that period. We first cite the initiative by Frei Betto (Freire; Betto, 2000), who was imprisoned during the military dictatorship in Brazil, between 1969 and 1973, and during his time in the prisons of the state of São Paulo, including Carandiru, developed cultural and educational activities with other inmates. While incarcerated, he helped organize Bible study groups, theater groups, painting workshops, and educational courses. These activities were part of a broader effort to provide prisoners with a form of expression and personal development, even in such a restrictive environment as the prison system, greatly inspired by the libertarian philosophy of liberation theology.

In 1978, actress Maria Rita Freire Costa coordinated the project "Art as a Process of Recreation in Prisons," which was responsible for creating five theatrical performances with female inmates at the Feminine Penitentiary of the Capital. Maria Rita Freire Costa's work is recognized for assigning social and artistic relevance to theatrical art, advocating for its presence in prisons as a tool capable of providing an aesthetic experience that promotes awareness arising from group coexistence and the challenge of creating a performance. The theatrical practices she coordinated aimed to bring important themes from the prison universe to society, mediated by a theatrical performance, seeking alternatives for lives impacted by the prison system.

According to Maria Rita:

> This work is a risk. If we didn't take risks, we would always be repeating the same old, worn-out, and obsolete things that solve nothing and change nothing. Change inherently involves risk (PRISÃO MULHER, 1986).

This project was interrupted in 1983, after being accused of facilitating the escape of two participants during transportation to an external performance outside the prison.

Maria Rita Freire Costa and Elias Andreato also developed projects to introduce theater in prisons in Recife, which resulted in sold-out performances open to the public, running longer than expected. This work is an example of the vitality of theatrical practices built within punitive institutions during a delicate moment in national politics, marked by censorship and the fight for human rights.

> The experience was interrupted by the escape of three inmates before a performance at the São Paulo Cultural Center. During its active period, five performances were staged: Criação Coletiva (1978), Favor Não Jogar Amendoim (1979), Cela Forte Mulher (1980), Fala Só de Malandragem (1982), and Nós de Valor… Nós de Fato (1983) (Nosé, 2021, p. 172).

Finally, actress Ruth Escobar (1982) also played a role in the prison theater scene during this period. As part of her commitment to the democratization of art and social reform, Ruth Escobar's work in prisons involved conducting theater classes for inmates, providing them with a form of artistic expression and a means of reflecting on their own lives and experiences. At the time, these activities were understood as a form of re-education and a step toward the social reintegration of prisoners. During the classes, Ruth encouraged the inmates to create their own dramaturgies and perform them through the communal sharing of their life experiences and trajectories. This sparked critical awareness within the prison population, which began to intensify as they became conscious of their subjugation based on race and class. In 1981, Escobar was even prosecuted by the State, accused of being responsible for the rebellion that took place on December 25, 1980, at the State Penitentiary (Image 1). This was due to her political influence at the time, as well as the fact that her work led her to become a popular advocate for complaints of mistreatment and atrocities happening inside the prison, which were shared with her through letters delivered by inmates and staff.

Image 1 - Jornal da Tarde, article from 01/21/1981

JORNAL DA TARDE
21-01-81

Ruth Escobar, responsável pela rebelião?

O diretor da Penitenciária diz que, com seu trabalho junto aos presos, a atriz levou-os à rebelião. Mas ela se defende.

A atriz Ruth Escobar é a responsável pela rebelião de presos ocorrida na tarde de Natal na Penitenciária de São Paulo? Este foi o resultado final da sindicância interna realizada no presídio, anunciado pelo diretor da Penitenciária, Bruno Ireneu Vinotto. Mas a atriz já está se defendendo dessas acusações.

Ruth contrariou ontem mesmo os serviços do advogado criminal Iberê Bandeira de Mello, que vai avaliar até que ponto as declarações de Vinotto à imprensa podem afetar sua honra pessoal e integridade profissional, uma vez que foi responsabilizada por um grave incidente que envolveu vidas humanas", e, se for o caso, interpelar o diretor da Penitenciária na Justiça.

Vinotto afirmou que o trabalho do grupo teatral de Ruth na prisão, durante oito meses, em 1980 foi pernicioso e "a principal causa da rebelião ocorrida no Natal; o motim estabava incubado prestes a eclodir, faltava apenas um pretexto, que foi o término do jogo de futebol. Parecia incrível que houvesse um tumulto tão grande por causa de um motivo tão pequeno", disse o diretor.

— O que para nós pode parecer um motivo insignificante, para os presos, reduzidos à condição de crianças, débeis mentais, é motivo até para uma rebelião. Agora, rebeliões ocorreram em outros presídios de São Paulo e no mundo inteiro. Será que eu também fui culpada? — defende-se Ruth Escobar.

A seu favor a atriz diz ter cerca de dez horas de filme gravadas no interior da prisão, documentando todo o processo de seu longo trabalho, a apresentação da peça "Aqui Há Ordem e Progresso", escrita e encenada pelos presos, e inclusive as denúncias dos constantes espancamento e arbitrariedades sofridas pelos condenados. O filme será transformado em longa-metragem e exibido a partir de março, a princípio no próprio teatro Ruth Escobar.

A atriz lembra ainda que, das cinco pessoas acusadas de iniciar o motim, nenhuma pertencia ao seu grupo teatral, composto de 50 presos, dos quais "nenhum se encontrava no pátio no início da revolta. 40 desses presos já foram transferidos para prisões do Interior". De qualquer maneira, Ruth acredita que a sindicância "carece de qualquer valor", e, para mostrar isso, exibe uma carta da OAB de São Paulo enviada à comissão de investigação: a OAB, convidada a participar da sindicância, foi chamada apenas para ouvir o último depoimento.

O mais grave, entretanto, fica por conta das diversas denúncias que Ruth tem recebido de presos, funcionários e familiares, de que os depoimentos na sindicância foram obtidos sob coação física e psicológica. A atriz garante ter provas disso — inclusive escritas — que serão apresentadas de acordo com a orientação de seu advogado. Este é um trecho de uma das cartas que recebeu de um dos detentos envolvidos na sindicância:

"Sou preso, sei por experiência própria que a palavra de um preso nada vale em frente à palavra de uma autoridade mas Deus está presente onde há lágrimas e a verdade há de prevalecer, pois neste momento meu coração está chorando, e pedindo Justiça".

"Se teu coração permitir perdoe-me; Eu não tive outra saída."

"Se eu não fizesse esse depoimento que me indiciaram amanhã a comissão viria aqui e ao perguntar por mim diriam. Coitado! Está na cela, de segurança no hospital; Perdeu a razão, ficou louco, investiu contra tudo e todos e tivemos de trancá-lo e medicá-lo e quem diria que não..."

O preso pede ainda que a longa carta seja mostrada às autoridades "para anular as acusações".

Manuel Pedro Pimentel, ex-secretário da Justiça, acredita que "Ruth Escobar estava imbuída das melhores intenções, mas o seu método foi sua culpa". Segundo ele, "quem não conhece o sistema penitenciário pode atrapalhar muito, mesmo querendo ajudar". Dois meses antes de motim, lembra Pimentel, Ruth foi avisada do quanto seu trabalho poderia ser perigoso:

— Na maquina infernal que é a prisão de segurança máxima, preso bom é o preso anulado em sua personalidade, totalmente submisso ao regime totalitário e repressivo, com perda total do respeito individual. De maneira nenhuma Ruth insuflou a rebelião, mas com sua generosidade de idéias começou a dar aos presos a conscientização de sua individualidade, de seu valor como homem, seus direitos, o que é um estímulo perigosíssimo, é levá-los ao castigo, porque a única maneira do preso reivindicar é insubordinando-se, e, fazendo isso, ele sofre a repressão do sistema, onde a primeira regra é a anulação do respeito individual.

A sindicância chegou ontem às mãos do coordenador dos Estabelecimentos Penitenciários, Omar Cassin, que vai submetê-la a seus assessores antes de dar um parecer e enviar ao secretário da Justiça, José Carlos Ferreira de Oliveira, e ao juiz corregedor de Presídios e da Polícia Judiciária, Renato Laércio Talli.

Afirmando que seria "precipitado" comentar o resultado da sindicância antes de estudar "profundamente" as provas e depoimentos, Cassin limitou-se a afirmar que não acredita que a causa da rebelião foi o despreparo dos guardas carcerários, "os mais treinados e experientes dos 14 presídios de São Paulo":

— Se o motim ocorreu é porque tinha de ocorrer, mas se existia um motivo incubado eu não sei. O preso é revoltado, está sempre insatisfeito com sua condição. Um motivo insignificante para nós aqui fora pode ser a gota d'água para eles, em determinado momento psicológico

Source: ESCOBAR, 1982, p. 180

These initiatives share some common elements that help us understand this second historical phase of theater arts training processes carried out in the Carandiru Complex, involving individuals who were victims of the prison system.

The political and subversive nature present in the performances of these three initiatives shows a growing awareness and a collective/community movement that became threatening to the

status quo. While Abdias Nascimento's Sentenced Theater went unnoticed by the system, the seeds of his work became dangerous to the corrupt government. Moreover, during the dictatorial period after 1964, Brazilian theater underwent a reinvention process to deal with censorship, creating clever systems to address political issues with the masses, using allegories, symbols, and metaphors. In contrast, the prison system was not under such scrutiny at that time, and the possibility of a more open and frank debate about the oppressions plaguing the country allowed for a different nature in the formation of communities of meaning within the prison system. Theater became a space for uniting people, not only physically but also from a political and ideological standpoint.

The regime and censorship's inability to grasp the danger that theater posed from within the walls served as a pretext for these initiatives to soar in both aesthetic and political terms. On one hand, theatrical experiences were developing in terms of language within the prison, while on the other, incarcerated people could leave their confinement for a few days to present their artistic work in venues such as Teatro Oficina or the São Paulo Cultural Center, in projects like those organized by Ruth and Maria Rita.

These outings, besides offering a reprieve from the Carandiru prison complex, which no longer upheld the idea of redemption through labor or being a model penitentiary, provided visibility to bodies repressed by the state. These individuals were able to take spaces where they were attentively listened to (something rare for those deprived of their basic human rights).

It was evident that the cracks created by theater in the physical and symbolic prison walls would allow the light to shine through. This light enabled incarcerated people to look each other in the eyes and recognize their differences. This is how communities are formed.

However, the abolitionist penal thought and the political goal of ending prisons were not present in the creations and processes at the time. Whether due to the absence of this debate—which is still scarce and needs more dissemination—or due to the actors' desire to see their craft thrive even in spaces where nothing seems to grow, the struggle to end prisons did not occupy the scenes of that historical moment.

"In the end, everyone just wanted to do theater, to be an actor or actress," Vicente Concílio once told me as we discussed his experiences as an actor during his internship in the project Jorge Spínola carried out at Carandiru.

But this path has consequences, and they manifested through cracks, edges, and blind spots. Or at least until the moment when these cracks began to make the walls tremble, either through the stronger demands of the prison population or through rebellions that so frighten those in power, who do not want to see us united in the fight for dignity.

The absence of discussion about what Angela Davis (2018) calls the "prison-industrial complex," that is, the understanding of prisons as a network of relationships involving corporations, government, correctional communities, and the media. This network benefits from mass

incarceration and, therefore, needs to be deinstitutionalized. This also led to unpleasant moments in the encounters between theater and prison in Carandiru.

At the end of the 1990s, Teatro da Vertigem was in the process of creating the play Apocalipse 1:11, which referenced the Carandiru Massacre and its 111 victims (and many others unreported), exterminated in a police massacre on October 2, 1992. To carry out the process, the group conducted a series of visits and rehearsals at the former São Paulo House of Detention, the scene of the aforementioned genocide. Among the participating actors, the group worked with artists Kric Cruz and Flaviano Souza (Mc F.W.), inmates of the institution at the time and co-founders of the Rap Group *Comunidade Carcerária*, with whom we had the privilege of working between 2021 and 2023 (Images 2 and 3).

Image 2 - Kric Cruz and Teatro da Vertigem at the São Paulo House of Detention

Source: Diário do MC F.W

Image 3 - MC F.W. with Teatro da Vertigem at the São Paulo House of Detention

Source: Diário do MC F.W

Kric and F.W. told me about their dedication during the creation process with the theater collective. They spoke of their dreams and the eagerness to present their lived experiences from inside the prison walls on a professional theater stage alongside renowned actors.

The cultural activities at the São Paulo House of Detention at that time were concentrated in pavilion 8, which was a sector for repeat offenders and people with longer sentences to serve. According to the artists, theater, as well as rap and samba, were the main cultural expressions in the prison. They were also one of the few escapes from the repetitive and torturous daily life of incarceration.

However, the dream ended just weeks before the play's premiere. According to Kric, the director of the collective called him in for a conversation, explaining that the execution judge had received a report claiming that the incarcerated performers were planning to escape during the performance. As a result, the authorization for the prisoners to leave for the performance was revoked. He told me that he was informed the show would go on as planned, but performers from the House of Detention would have to be replaced by actors. Kric was also tasked to deliver the news to the remaining prisoners, and had to quell an attempted rebellion due to the inmates' frustration with the cancellation.

Around the same time, actress Sophia Bisilliat was developing the project *Talentos Aprisionados* (Imprisoned Talents), which offered theater classes to inmates at Carandiru.

> Sophia Bisilliat and Inês Castro began their work at Carandiru through Funap/SP with the project *Teatro em Presídios* (Theater in Prisons), producing several plays with the prisoners. Later, when the project ended, Sophia continued as a volunteer at Carandiru until its demolition in 2002. Through the *Talentos Aprisionados* project, the actress promoted various cultural activities in the prison and helped the rap group 509-E record their first album. The project also enabled Luis Alberto Mendes to publish the book *Memórias de um Sobrevivente* (Memories of a Survivor) while he was still incarcerated at Carandiru (Nosé, 2021, p. 173).

The activities developed during the project culminated in the publication of the book *Aqui Dentro - Páginas de uma Memória: Carandiru* (Inside Here—Pages of a Memory: Carandiru), organized by Sophia's mother, the photographer Maureen Bisilliat (2003), which also led to the creation of the *Espaço Memória Carandiru* (Carandiru Memory Space).

Created in 2007, by decree 52112 from the then-governor of São Paulo, José Serra, the space is dedicated to preserving the history of the former Carandiru Penitentiary Complex. It houses a permanent exhibition titled *Sobre Vivências—Os* Últimos *Anos do Carandiru* (On Experiences—The Last Years of Carandiru), which includes objects donated from Maureen and Sophia's personal collection to the Centro Paula Souza (the institution that currently manages the space), such as artistically painted doors, paintings, kitchen utensils, a tattoo machine, religious items, and soccer jerseys.

The space and its exhibition have been the target of disputes by organized social movements

and prison system survivors due to the historical erasure it promotes through its collection by downplaying the events surrounding the Carandiru Massacre. For example, the exhibition features a timeline mural (Image 4) documenting the complex's history, where the year 1992 is conspicuously absent, completely erasing the largest prison genocide in Brazil's history

Image 4 - Chronology printed in plaster in the permanent exhibition of Carandiru Memory Space

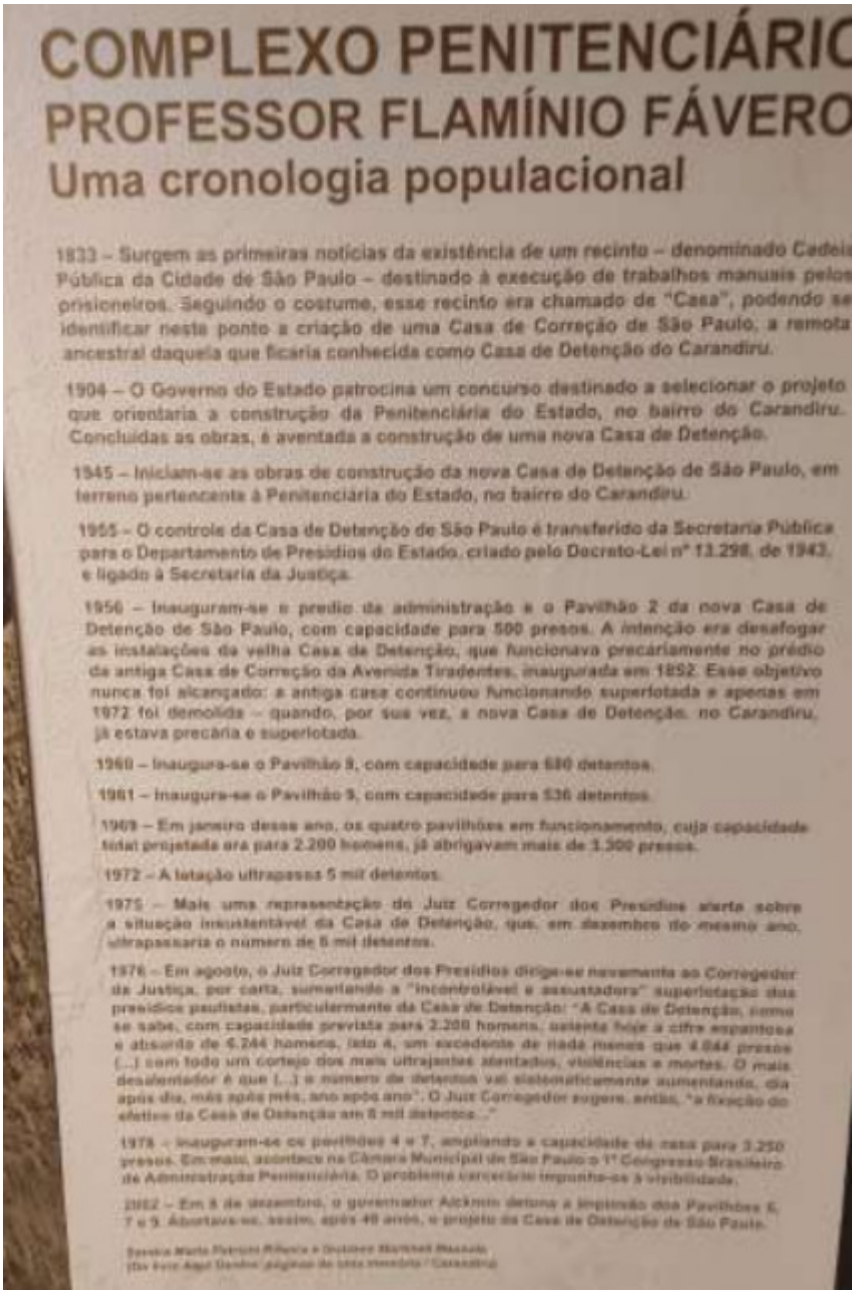

Photo: Acervo pessoal

Episodes like these made us reflect on the responsibility we, as artists and educators in theatrical language, have when entering spaces of deprivation of liberty. The same applies to engaging with the abolitionist/anti-prison debate in order to perform a politically coherent role in prison theater.

In this context, we must ask: How revolutionary can our practices with performing arts be in spaces of deprivation of liberty? What dangers inhabit this intersection between art and life? This question reminds me of an episode narrated by Augusto Boal during his journeys with his Theater of the Oppressed:

> We had put on a show, just for peasants, which ended with the actors singing frantic revolutionary greetings, left arm raised, fist clenched. 'The land belongs to those who toil! We must give our blood to reclaim it from the landowners!' Things that everyone thought and we thought were appropriate to repeat. Art of the time.
>
> That was when Virgílio, a peasant, enthusiastically moved by our message, asked me, with tears in his eyes, if we would go with him and his comrades to fight against the gunmen of a colonel, an invader of lands, alongside them, with our cast and rifles. When we told him that the rifles were fake, stage props, not real guns, and that we, the artists, were the only thing that was real, Virgílio did not hesitate and said that if we were indeed real, we did not have to worry: they had rifles for everyone. All we needed to do was fight by their side. When we told him that we were real artists and not real peasants, Virgílio reflected and said that when we, real artists, spoke of giving our blood, we were actually talking about them giving their blood, the peasants, and not us, the artists, since we would return comfortably to our homes.
>
> This episode made me understand the falsehood in the messenger form of political theater, making me realize that we have no right to incite anyone to do what we are not prepared to do ourselves (Boal, 2014, p. 36).

3 Conversations with Jorge Spínola

> What if abolitionism is neither about destruction nor something devastating and an event for wrecking balls? Would abolition be something that springs from the wet places in our eyes, from the broken places in our skin [...] Would it be something that grows? (Gumbs *apud* Kuo, 2020).

I think it is important to emphasize that the epistemology that shapes the word crime falls under the theoretical umbrella of punitive colonial thought, and precisely because of this, it is important to denormalize the use of this term. Think with me, the state calls anything that harms property or disturbs the tranquility of the cisgender, heterosexual, elitist, urban whiteness project a crime. But on the contrary, acts committed against humanity in the form of the gentrification of spaces, the exploitative degradation of nature, or enrichment through interest on the poverty that has been established are called profit. If the perpetrator is someone highly privileged in the Western scale, we might call the act an "accident."

The accident that culminated in the end of the prison model dream occurred on October 2, 1992, and led to the extermination of at least 111 prisoners at the old São Paulo House of Detention. This event became known in Brazilian history as the Carandiru Massacre. It was during this period that educator and theater director Jorge Spínola began his work at the COC, providing

ongoing theater training for prisoners, which would eventually lead to the formation of the theater group. *Grupo Panóptico de Teatro.*

Upon entering the prison system as a teacher, coming from the interior of the Brazilian state of Bahia, Jorge Spínola (2022) felt as if he were stepping onto the Moon, a completely unfamiliar territory for him. Taking his role as an educator seriously, he soon realized that education in prisons was merely a facade. In his quest for change, he decided to introduce theater as an educational tool, bringing performances inside the penitentiaries.

Jorge recounts that, as he gazed within the massive walls surrounding the House of Detention, he realized that the place functioned like an entire city, with its various rooms, tribes, languages, and activities. This revealed to him the scale of the prison population, mostly composed of poor and black men, many of whom resembled him, as a Northeastern man. The epiphany came when, amidst this oppressive structure, Spínola noticed a fern growing vigorously, a symbol of life and hope in such a desolate environment. "There is life here!" (Spínola, 2022).

This moment was crucial for his connection to the humanity of the prisoners, strongly recalling the iconic phrase from penal abolitionist Louk Hulsman, reminding us that:

> If I remove from my garden the obstacles that prevent the sun and water from nourishing the soil, soon plants will emerge whose existence I did not even suspect. In the same way, the disappearance of the state punitive system will open, in a healthier and more dynamic coexistence, the paths to a new justice (Hulsman, 1993, p. 25).

From this revelation, Spínola lost his fear and gained a new perspective on his work, recognizing that prisons, in their essence, serve to dehumanize and stigmatize rather than rehabilitate

Before his time at the Carandiru Complex, Jorge recalled his experience at the Adriano Marrey prison, in the Guarulhos region (SP), near the Dutra Highway, where he had a significant encounter with a group of prisoners working in the school library. This provocative and intelligent group challenged conventional notions of education and crime. One of the prisoners, known as Carlinhos Queimado, who has already passed away, handed the director a copy of Ariano Suassuna's *Auto da Compadecida* (The Rogue's Trial):

> - If you go down this path, everything will happen.
> - This Suassuna book is great, replied Jorge. But is this book yours?
> - No, it is from the library, but you can have it
> - But I will have to leave with the book stolen?
> - We can steal flowers and books. It makes life better!
> (UMA EXPERIÊNCIA, 2022).

At the COC, Spínola was prohibited by the administration from addressing political topics in his productions with the prisoners. The previous experience with Ruth Escobar at the State Penitentiary had left the administration cautious on such proposals. Inspired by the stolen book

from Carlinhos Queimado, Jorge proposed his first production as a theater director: Suassuna's text, in place of his original idea to stage a Sartre play. It is important to note that, given what had happened earlier at Carandiru, the freedom to work with dramaturgical creation or collective authorship adaptations was restricted by the prison's directors. The full text had to be presented for approval before any project could be conducted with the prison population, as is still the case today.

This choice marked the beginning of his journey in prison theater, which soon gained momentum and recognition. In 1999, during the production of *A pena e a lei* (The Pen and the Law), also by Suassuna, Spínola and his team achieved a remarkable feat by introducing actors and actresses from outside the prison to perform alongside the inmate cast—something unprecedented at the time, especially considering the male prison context. This move led to the production of the third play in the project, The King of the Candle by Oswald de Andrade in 2001, expanding theatrical activities beyond the prisons and reaching theaters and universities, as had happened with Ruth and Rita's projects.

After the closure of the COC, Spínola continued his legacy as a theater director inside the prisons, staging the play *Mulheres de Papel* (Paper Women) at the Women's Penitentiary of the Capital of São Paulo. Shortly after, with the support of the *Fomento ao Teatro* (Theater Development Law) from the Municipal Department of Culture of São Paulo, Spínola created the Grupo Panóptico de Teatro, an important milestone that facilitated collaboration among survivors of the prison system, semi-open regime prisoners, and invited actors, an innovative practice for the time.

The experience of the Grupo Panóptico de Teatro, now outside the prison walls, was marked by the confrontation with the social stigma that accompanies survivors of incarceration. Spínola described this stigma as being just as harmful as the prison itself, as it reflects the cruelty and dehumanization present in the prevailing social model. Inside prisons, despite the adverse conditions, there was a certain protection from society's judgment.

Despite the challenges, the *Panóptico* made history as the first theater group formed by survivors of the prison system to be awarded a project under the Theater Development Law, one of the largest funding programs for theatrical production in Brazil

This meant a great deal, as working inside the penitentiaries during that time required negotiations that, to this day, put any theater artist/educator in a very delicate position. They had to be present and sharing moments and emotions with incarcerated people who were denied such things at every turn, while at the same time needing to "be the prison" to ensure the continuation of their work within a space governed by absurd rules that must be absorbed. This meant playing against the system by pretending to be part of it and, at times, echoing its authoritarian voice.

By ensuring that work could be done outside the prison walls, the Panóptico opened a new front in the territory focused on prison survivors. This is a major issue within penal abolitionism, as we know how difficult it is to create care spaces that prevent members of our communities from being reintegrated into the system after they are free. This introduces a new element to the aesthetic

arsenal of underground body-corpographies of resistance within prison theater.

The Panóptico ended its activities, largely because those in the cast who had already gained their freedom no longer wanted to be associated with the idea of being ex-prisoners. The lack of support networks and a careful abolitionist movement prevented this project from continuing, but this in no way diminishes its importance for the legacy of theater, activism, and the anti-prison struggle.

Currently, groups like *CiA dXs TeRrOrIsTaS* and the *Projeto Mulheres Possíveis* (Possible Women Project), both from São Paulo, carry out work in the territory, directly or indirectly influenced by the legacy that preceded them. *CiA dXs TeRrOrIsTaS* seeks to build relationships with LGBTQIA+ people who are survivors of the prison system through creations made on the outside. The Possible Women Project develops training and production work in multiple languages at the Santana Women's Penitentiary, formerly the State Penitentiary of São Paulo, where Abdias started it all. Both collectives carry forward the lessons of their predecessors and work alongside social movements fighting for the abolition of prisons. They engaged in a dialogue that breaks with the idea of theater as a space for humanizing prisons, instead establishing it as a territory of organization and rehearsal for the revolutions that will tear down the walls that divide us.

The corpographies organized here are the result of exchanges of struggle carried out over years of ancestral networking, which existed before any of us and continues in the flow of life. That is why much of what is shared comes from oral tradition and practical experience with creative processes in war/apartheid contexts, knowledge not found in books. Sharing these technologies—through philosophical exchanges for survival—is a deeply practical-reflective movement. This movement has nothing to do with conventional and outdated modes of knowledge production from European academia, which posits itself as a space for the consumption and retention of knowledge as a tool for maintaining power. What is proposed in this exchange is the possibility of reflecting on and spreading our actions to expand their flows. We wish such actions be reinvented according to the demands of each people in struggle, enabling a plurality of actions that will collapse a solid, structured system designed to grind the flesh of dissident bodies to feed the greed of the powerful.

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