


**THE EXPERIMENTAL THEATER OF SESC:
Art, Politics, and Resistance in the Heart of the Amazon**

TEATRO EXPERIMENTAL DO SESC:
Arte, Política e Resistência no Coração da Amazônia

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 doi.org/10.70446/ephemera.v8i14.7969

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Abstract: This study investigates artistic practices in Manaus, focusing on the Experimental Theater of SESC Theater (TESC), a group active from 1968 to 2016 that stood out for its innovative theatrical project and its ability to navigate different political periods, achieving national recognition. This research introduces the theme by essential—yet still scarce—readings on theatrical production in Manaus and examines plays staged by TESC up to the mid-2000s, enabling readers to understand the group's trajectory of resistance. Grounded in cultural and theatrical studies, this research employs oral history as a central methodological tool, complemented by historical documents, performance records, and publications by the group. This approach expands the dialogue with northern Brazilian authors such as Márcio Souza, Selda Vale, and Ediney Azancoth, whose works are essential to understand the cultural and political context of TESC. This study shows how TESC used the stage as a space for resistance and expression during the years of repression under the military dictatorship and throughout the redemocratization period of Brazil, facing cultural challenges that are specific to the Amazon. By fostering a critical and pioneering perspective on local historical processes, the group established itself as a transformative force whose impact extended beyond regional borders. This research also highlights the importance of retrieving and valuing the artistic contributions of northern Brazil, which are often overlooked in national theater historiography. It thus underscores the necessity of democratizing and enriching Brazilian theater historiography by incorporating the voices and experiences of groups such as TESC. In doing so, this study addresses historiographical gaps and offers new perspectives on the role of theater as a tool for cultural resistance, contributing to the preservation of the theatrical memory of Manaus and the appreciation of the 'Brazilian cultural diversity.

Keywords: amazonian theater; northern theater; resistance theater; theatrical tradition.

Teatro Experimental do SESC: Arte, Política e Resistência no Coração da Amazônia

Resumo: Este estudo investiga as práticas artísticas em Manaus, com foco no Teatro Experimental do SESC Amazonas (TESC), grupo que atuou entre 1968 e 2016 e se destacou por seu projeto cênico inovador e sua capacidade de atravessar diferentes períodos políticos, alcançando projeção nacional. A pesquisa introduz o tema por meio de leituras essenciais—ainda escassas—sobre a produção teatral manauara e exemplifica peças encenadas pelo TESC até meados dos anos 2000, permitindo ao leitor compreender sua trajetória de resistência. Fundamentado em o trabalho utiliza a história oral como ferramenta metodológica central, complementada por documentos históricos, registros de apresentações e publicações do grupo. Essa abordagem amplia o diálogo com os autores nortistas Márcio Souza, Selda Vale e Ediney Azancoth, cujas obras são essenciais para compreender o contexto cultural e político em que o TESC se inseriu. O trabalho demonstra



como o TESC utilizou o palco como espaço de resistência e expressão, tanto durante os anos de repressão da ditadura militar quanto no período de redemocratização, enfrentando desafios culturais específicos da região amazônica. Ao promover uma perspectiva crítica e pioneira sobre os processos históricos locais, o grupo consolidou-se como um agente transformador, cuja atuação reverberou além das fronteiras regionais. A pesquisa também evidencia a importância de resgatar e valorizar as contribuições artísticas do Norte do Brasil, frequentemente negligenciadas na historiografia teatral nacional. Justifica-se, assim, a necessidade de democratizar e enriquecer a historiografia teatral brasileira, incorporando as vozes e experiências de grupos como o TESC. Ao fazer isso, este estudo não apenas preenche lacunas historiográficas, mas também oferece novas perspectivas sobre o papel do teatro como ferramenta de resistência cultural, contribuindo para a preservação da memória teatral de Manaus e para a valorização da diversidade cultural do país.

Palavras-chave: teatro amazônico; teatro nortista; teatro de resistência; tradição teatral.



1 Introduction

The Brazilian theatrical historiography often neglects theater in the Amazon and its expressive trajectory. Of the groups representing the region, the Social Service of Commerce (SESC) Amazonas Experimental Theater (TESC) stands out, whose performance crossed political periods, reaffirming the stage as a space for expression and struggle. This study seeks to shed light on the importance of TESC, analyzing some of its productions to highlight how its scenic practices challenged repression and the dilemmas of the democratic system, reaffirming theater as a tool for social transformation.

Founded in December 1968 as a project of the Regional Department of SESC Amazonas under a recrudescing civil-military dictatorship, TESC stood out as one of the most significant theatrical initiatives in Manaus, especially notable for its actions of cultural resistance during the years of repression.

This study reports significant episodes of TESC. Its justification stems from its dialogue between theater studies in the Brazilian North and the national theater historiography, contributing to its democratization and enrichment. For this, we seek to make visible authors and practices whose bibliography remains scarce or localized, filling important gaps in the field of theater studies.

The choice of the title *The Experimental Theater of SESC: Art, Politics, and Resistance in the Heart of the Amazon* seeks to stress TESC's central role in Manaus (Amazonas State capital) and its symbol of cultural and artistic resistance that reverberates throughout the Amazon. The term "heart" refers to a pulsating nucleus, which, although geographically located in the capital, radiates influences and inspirations to other regions, connecting them to a wider network of theatrical production. Throughout its phases, TESC remained irreverent and politically engaged, facing the political issues of its time with audacity and creativity.

Located within the SESC facilities in downtown Manaus, this small theater that was inaugurated in 1970 became a cultural meeting point that reflected the complexities of the period. This proximity created fruitful collaborations between artists and languages and generated tensions, especially when the artistic goals of the group clashed with the more conservative directives of the institution.

The group's first phase confronted the conventional theater in Manaus, staging acts that challenged the expectations of the public and the established norms. TESC adopted a more politicized line as Márcio Souza joined it, directly connecting itself to regional and national issues. Its work followed two central objectives in this period: the "defense of freedom of expression in Brazil"—a pressing need since the foundation of the group in 1968 during the civil-military dictatorship up to its interruption in 1982—and the "defense of Amazonian culture", often relegated to abandonment and extermination in the face of colonialist exploitation. As highlighted in the introduction to the book "Teatro indígena do Amazonas," the group took up these guidelines in its work (Souza, 1979, p. 3).



This duality of objectives reflects TESC's ambition to transcend the limitation of a regional group and respond to the political urgency of producing art in the Brazilian North. By placing the Indigenous issue at the heart of its discourse, the group denounced predatory social progress and reaffirmed the importance of the Amazon as a space of resistance and cultural identity. Thus, TESC consolidated itself as a theatrical group and transforming agent whose legacy continues to inspire and influence generations. Thus, the title of this study reflects the importance of TESC in the symbolic and geographical center of the Amazon as a catalyst for cultural and political transformations.

The methodology in this study follows my master's thesis, which is based on oral history and the analysis of historical documents¹. Interviews were conducted with group artists and members and were complemented by primary sources such as performance records, TESC publications, and physical archival documents². This multifaceted approach could reconstruct the trajectory of TESC in a more comprehensive and contextualized way.

To understand the trajectory of such a long-lived group, we resort to theories that highlight the importance of memory in the construction of historical knowledge. As per Peter Burke (2000), historians fulfill a primary function by serving as a reminder of the events and processes that shape culture. Thus, oral history emerges as a crucial tool that can instigate, re-evaluate, and compare primary and secondary data. As professor and researcher Carlos Sebe (2005) has pointed out, oral history offers a unique access to the voices and perspectives of those who have directly experienced the events, providing a personal and subjective dimension that enriches historical understanding. According to Sebe, "oral history offers a unique access to the voices and perspectives of those who directly experienced the events, providing a personal and subjective dimension that enriches historical understanding" (Sebe, 2005, p. 87). This approach goes against official narratives, which often show a progressive, linear view of history that tends to disregard alternative and subjective processes.

Complementing this perspective, social psychologist Domenico Unhg Hur (2013, p. 181) argues that memory operates by "temporal, dissymmetrical, and coexisting flows" that can transcend single and continuous explanations of facts. By adopting this view, we access a multiplicity of temporalities and subjectivities that enrich historical analysis. Thus, thinking about the theatrical historiography of Manaus meant uniting multiple sources, including the memories of those who lived those times. This approach is especially relevant in view of the absence or precariousness of theatrical group collections, the scarcity of specific bibliography, and the often-contradictory published data³.

1 The master's thesis in Performing Arts, defended in 2020 at Universidade de São Paulo, addresses the trajectory of TESC by broadly analyzing all its phases. It contains all interviews in full. See: (LEÃO, 2020).

2 The extinct group unfortunately has no official website. It has an out-of-date Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/share/g/18V1vkNn7J/>.

3 The research for the master's thesis found that some information regarding the TESC in the books by Selda Vale and Ediney Azancoth (2001; 2014) had dubious versions or controversial data, increasing the need to conduct the



The desire to explore the artistic scene of Manaus (especially its theater) arose from an experience⁴ in 2014. Artists from the Brazilian southeast who were curious about theatrical production⁵ in the Amazonas State capital asked me several thought-provoking questions: who were the main authors and scenic experiences that guided the theater in the municipality? How did the groups maintain themselves? Did the atmosphere of the forest, understood by many as mythical, influence artistic work in any way?

After debating these questions with other artists from Manaus, it became evident that many shared the same issues: the lack of knowledge of the theatrical history of Manaus, i.e., their own history. This finding necessitated a more in-depth and contextualized investigation of theatrical practices in the municipality; hence the need for an understanding that valued the cultural and geographical specificity of the region, recognizing the influences and particularities of artistic making. This rendered looking to the past as necessary.

The limited and scarce readings that maintained the theater scene of Manaus served as an essential starting point in my master's research, enabling a further development of this investigation and a more detailed exploration of the history of the local theater. Although insufficient for a complete understanding, these sources offered a fundamental initial basis. With this in mind, we describe below a selected bibliography, which will serve as an introductory guide for those who wish to learn more about the cultural panorama of Amazonas.

The books, the result of the partnership between Ediney Azancoth and Selda Vale, are considered the only records that portray the Amazonian theater scene since the second half of the 20th century. Divided into two complementary volumes, "Cena de Memórias" (2001) and "Amazônia em Cena" (2014), the former offers an overview of the first theater groups and houses in Manaus, showing a significant gap in theater production during the 1930s. The latter focuses on the groups that emerged in contemporary times following the transformations of the municipality. These books highlight important figures for the theater movement, such as author and actor Ediney Azancoth himself⁶, still unknown to many artists. Note that Ediney's story is intertwined in several ways with the Manaus theater: in the university theater movement, the TESC group, the film club,

interviews. The group no longer had either an official website or social media at the time.

4 I graduated from the first class of Theater at Universidade do Estado do Amazonas in 2014 and arrived in the São Paulo State capital in the same year. Explaining to my newly acquainted artist colleagues where I came from, I realized that many asked questions evinced an exotic vision and a lack of knowledge about the region.

5 Although the Amazonian theater remains mostly concentrated in the capital, it is important to emphasize that the sporadic productions yet to consolidate a theatrical movement from the inner state have shown creative potential and cultural relevance. This scenario is gradually transforming itself, especially due to Universidade do Estado do Amazonas actions to bring cultural and training actions to the inner regions of the state. Groups such as Olha Já from Parintins and Companhia D'art from Manacapuru stand out as prominent initiatives, although they still depend on commemorative dates or greater institutional support to establish themselves. This dynamic reflects the logistical and structural challenges the inner regions face and the need for public policies that foster the decentralization of cultural activities in the state.

6 Ediney Azancoth was a teacher, actor, director, writer, and playwright known for his significant contribution to the Amazonas theater. Participant in cultural movements in Manaus, he stood out at TESC.



and many other cultural initiatives. These texts described the theatrical scenario before TESC, situating it as a true “turning point” in its trajectory, as per their authors.

Selda Vale and Ediney Azancoht followed their productive partnership by publishing the book “TESC: Nos Bastidores da Lenda” (2009), a fundamental work that comprehensively records the group’s trajectory, tracing its path up to 1982. However, it leaves gaps regarding later years, which fails to diminish its relevance since it offers detailed and unpublished information about the period. This publication aroused my interest in revisiting the facts that remained scarcely explored or imprecise, especially regarding the decades following the end of the period in that book.

This study seeks to fill these gaps, proposing a more detailed and rigorous academic analysis of the history of TESC up to the 2000s. It aims to complement the pioneering work of “Nos Bastidores da Lenda” and to offer new perspectives on the group’s evolution, artistic contributions, and its role in the Amazonas cultural scene.

Azancoht’s biography “No palco nem tudo é verdade” (1993) combines his personal memories with the theatrical history of Manaus. Functioning as a diary of the great events that marked his life, it takes us through his adolescence in the municipality, reliving his adventures in cinemas and circuses and shows us a forgotten Manaus marked by electrical blackouts. It reports the student theater movement and TESC’s trips across festivals by unique anecdotes.

“O Palco Verde” (1984) by Márcio Souza⁷, an essential author to understand TESC and the Amazon, can be read as his personal manifesto, reporting his experiences as a director and playwright at the TESC and reporting the difficulties during the civil-military dictatorship with the arrival of the Free Trade Zone⁸. His gaze offers a unique perspective on the group. His main works are gathered in the volumes “Teatro I” and “Teatro II” (1997) and in “Teatro Indígena do Amazonas” (1979), a compilation of dramaturgies by theme, which contains *A Paixão de Ajuricaba*, the author’s first theatrical work.

“O Mostrador da Derrota” (2013) by Marcos Frederico Krüger and Alisson Leitão gathers essays that explore Souza’s literature, stressing an in-depth analysis of his best-known play *A Paixão de Ajuricaba* (1974). It examines the tragic story of its Indigenous hero Ajuricaba, addressing topics such as the effects of colonialism and the reverberations of the dictatorship in the Amazon. The authors also investigate the mythical figures in the play and Souza’s ability to mix fiction and history, marking his narrative with the acid humor that characterizes his writing.

In addition to theater, Márcio Souza offers a comprehensive overview of the Amazon in “Breve História da Amazônia” (2009). We highlight this book as it encompasses from the occupation of the first natives via colonization, the rubber cycle, and expansion projects such as the Trans-Amazonian

⁷ This writer, essayist, director, playwright, former director of the National Arts Foundation and Amazonian filmmaker occupied TESC’s main leadership figure from 1974 up to its end in 2016.

⁸ The Manaus Free Trade Zone was created in 1967 to economically develop the Amazon by offering tax incentives (such as exemptions) to attract businesses and investments.



Highway up to the installation of the Manaus Free Trade Zone in 1967. It consists of a significant effort to understand the history of the Amazon occupation, an excellent guide to the region. Another sold-out classic refers to “A Expressão Amazonense: do Colonialismo ao Neocolonialismo,” (1978) in which Souza critically analyzes the historical processes and modernization of Manaus and the ensuing sociocultural and political changes.

These publications hold interest to historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. They were also fundamental for the development of many TESC pieces, such as the musical show *As Folias do Látex* (1976), written and directed by Souza. Its humorous and irreverent plot used resources from the revue theater to denounce tragic aspects of the rubber cycle, the golden period of the municipality in the *Belle Époque*.

These references contributed to understanding the cultural, political, and sociological context of Manaus, offering essential clues to further our initial concerns. The studies Souza gathered, which shaped the ideological basis of TESC, reflected this influence in his works. By highlighting such sources, we highlight the deficit of publications about the Manaus theater and the need to broaden the discussion. The absence of canonical authors on this region perpetuates the false idea of no relevant theoretical production, hiding a historical silencing.

In “Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro” (2004), Sábato Magaldi recognized the impossibility of covering all the theatrical phenomena of the country due to its extension. At the conclusion of the book, Magaldi briefly mentioned Márcio Souza as one of the promising exponents of contemporary trends: “Among the most promising authors and representative of the new trends, I highlight the contribution of Márcio Souza, whose work reflects the cultural complexity of the Amazon” (Magaldi, 2004, p. 321). Magaldi’s recognition underlines the importance of highlighting the fountains and theatrical productions of the Brazilian North.

In the face of these initiatives, the desire to retrieve the echoes of the past considering subjects and facts that remained on the margins of official narratives finds support in Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” (1940). Benjamin invites us to question and revisit the past with a contemporary eye, highlighting the importance of bringing to light silenced experiences that, at the same time, illuminate fundamental aspects of our present. Benjamin argues that:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. (Benjamin, 1987, p. 224).

In line with this, historian Marc Bloch, in “Apology of History” (2001), concludes that the documents speak no words by themselves, requiring inquiries from us, who carry out the analysis. For Bloch, “the good historian resembles the ogre of legend. Wherever he senses human flesh, he knows that there lies his prey” (Bloch, 2001, p. 54). This implies that history configures an active construction rather than a simple record of facts.



Thus, this study aims to pave the way for new interpretations that broaden the understanding of the complexity of these historical experiences via TESC and its impact on the present. Next, we will focus our analysis on TESC, an exponent of theater in the Brazilian North. The group achieved national prominence and played a pioneering role in paving the way for subsequent generations in the local theater scene.

2 Behind the scenes of TESC legend

The philosophical approach that would contribute to TESC's ideology stemmed from a youth that sought to explore deep human questions and strove to transcend traditional realism, as per Décio de Almeida Prado: "an attempt was made to transfigure psychological analyses and social explanations into dramatic poetry" (Prado, 1996, p. 49). According to Aldísio Filgueiras (1972), a participant in TESC, the Amazonian youth, at the time, was immersed in a cultural effervescence directly influenced by contemporary movements in municipalities such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, New York, and London. These trends included the growth of the counterculture, the effects of Bahian tropicalism, Glauber Rocha's cinematographic work, the rediscovery of Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagy by the concrete poets of São Paulo, and the disruptive narratives of the Brazilian new cinema, exemplified in Rogério Sganzerla's "*O Bandido da Luz Vermelha*."

We consider that a resistance, irreverence, and engagement *ethos*⁹ defined TESC. Some members, involved with other movements in the municipality, were more politically active, such as Filgueiras: "We came to the theater through politics because we were all young and thin teenagers or post-teenagers. In 1968 I was 21 years old [...] we were concerned with the social" (Filgueiras, 2020). Not all participants had the same aspirations—as we will see later—but, in this context of repression, TESC provided a space for free artistic expression. This shaped the group's identity and guided its productions, often challenging the norms and limitations of the authoritarian regime.

Nielson Menão, from São Paulo, who lived in Manaus and had directed a successful Teatro Universitário do Amazonas production in 1967 took over the direction of the group. Menão was the only one with experience and some theatrical training, and, together with the other members, carried out the proposal to become an amateur group with institutional support from SESC. They first staged Gianfrancesco Guarnieri's 1969 *Eles Não Usam Black-Tie*. In Márcio Souza's analysis, "it was a stripped-down setting without sets or props. The cast wore heavy makeup—almost a mask—and the pace of the staging was fast" (Souza, 1984, p. 14). Such an inventive form was assumed by

9 This study uses "*ethos*" to describe the set of values and norms that define the character of TESC. According to Aristotle, *ethos* configures a persuasive means of influence based on the perceived character of speakers or writers. In the case of TESC, this refers to their commitment to cultural resistance and the promotion of social change (Aristóteles, 2017).



the direction of Nielson Menão in conducting the actors as a necessity since most had never done theater. The result surprised the Manaus audience.

Although the context of the time demanded resistance against the pressures of authoritarianism, political convictions were far from unanimous. According to Carlos Michiles (1979), an actor in the group in the initial phase, TESC thought showed an “eclectic and slippery liberalism”. In other words, not much clarity existed about the group’s political perspective, but the struggle against state repression kept them in tune in search of what would be a “political-aesthetic” work. Menão’s statement expresses this contradiction (2019):

And immediately I took the piece “Eles não usam black-tie” and said: “That’s it, let’s take it forward.” And then [...] I started to learn how to do theater, the theater I was suddenly looking for. So that was it, it was experimenting. The actor I have is this one, so what? Can’t he be an actor? He can! Of course you can. [...] And Aldísio understood this right away. Aldísio was the intellectual of the class, I was pure delirium, I was “wild” – we called it “wild” at the time. I didn’t rationalize things, I wanted to end the system, these crazy things, but it was great, it was very good (Menão, 2020).

The artistic class struggled against the authoritarianism and provincialism that dominated Manaus. However, Souza (1984) indicates that this posture configured more an attitude than a critical position that fell in line with the effervescent experiences of the youth of the period.

TESC’s aesthetic project, fueled by all these issues, came to fruition in the premiere of *Eles Não Usam Black-Tie* and of *Calígula ou Como Cansa Ser Romano nos Trópicos* (1969 version). The group would later stage Nielson Menão’s *Pastum* in 1970 and *Mikage, a Longa Viagem do Primata* in 1971. The latter unleashed a mythical, experimental side fueled by the hippie movement and the vigorous performances by groups such as Living Theatre. Metaphor and body language were also widely exploited resources to circumvent censorship.

Nielson Menão (2020) reports that TESC’s dynamic proposal was shaped by the experiences and the meaning of the work that emerged in practice, a striking characteristic of the group’s first phase. The audience, in turn, experienced new sensory and imagery situations in a pioneering way. The geographical isolation of Manaus meant that theatrical theories and traditions arrived in different ways, generating unique interpretations and gaining new meanings when applied in practice. The group productions took this objective to the extreme.

An iconic example of this approach is the *Calígula ou Como Cansa Ser Romano nos Trópicos* setting (1969), directed by Nielson Menão, which encapsulates the group’s internal discussion in an irreverent and poetic way.



3 The example of the irreverent *Caligula*

From a scenic point of view, the plays in Manaus often explored the relationship between actors and spectators in a frontal way, except for those staged on the streets or in alternative locations (which were isolated experiences). This aspect changes when *Caligula ou Como Cansa Ser Romano nos Trópicos*¹⁰ shows a naked stage and includes an audience who experiences staging from inside as they sit in small bleachers. Photos show that the set consisted of stairs and platforms that created different levels, forming bridges for the actors to interact with the audience. Aldísio Filgueiras and Nielson Menão created the text (more a kind of script) by adapting the original *Caligula* by Albert Camus, written from 1938 to 1939. The group repeatedly tried to be faithful to the original, but according to Costa and Azancoth (2009), wearing Greek clothes under a 40°C tropical sun on the outskirts of Brazil made no sense, and the famous phrase said by Filgueiras stands out in the essay: “Phew, how tiring it is to be a Roman in the tropics.” Elements of the original narrative remain, but Caligula’s empire gave way to a republic of bananas and trinkets, alluding to the novelties of the Free Trade Zone, established in 1967.

The faces of all characters carried a white pancake mask with black highlights in their eyebrows that followed the personality of each figure. Their costumes included long plastic togas that gave way, at certain times, to underwear in those actors who performed erotic movements, unsurprisingly shocking the unaccustomed audience.

The play and its short seasons began at the SESC court due to the absence of a pocket theater at the time. Later, it was staged at Teatro Amazonas during the III Festival de Cultural by Fundação Cultural do Amazonas. The initial scenes cause such surprise that the jury lost the desire to follow the play when they realized it would occur from inside the stage.

Spectators’ experiences were, to say the least, curious as the cast followed no strict markings, acting freely according to the circumstances, which left ample room for improvisation. Rather than Camus, the play offered a reappropriation and a self-understanding of what the work had generated and pulsed in those tropical bodies. This phenomenon was practically non-existent in Manaus until then. Other experiments had taken place but none of the same proportion.

To further the idea of cultural reappropriation/anthropophagy inspired by Oswald de Andrade, we can consider the way in which *Caligula ou Como Cansa Ser Romano nos Trópicos* changed when the Manaus theater group appropriated it. Oswald de Andrade, in his “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928), proposed the idea that Brazilian culture should ‘devour’ foreign influences and reconfigure them in a unique and authentic way. Such cultural anthropophagy, rather than a

10 Cast: José Fernandes Jr. (Caligula), Gerson Albano (Caius), Luiz Felipe (Marcus Lepidus), Maurício Pollari (Mereia), Fábio Marques (Precious), Ivone Castro Menão (Caesonia), Ilka de Castro (Guard), Isabel Iolanda (Guard), Custódio Rodrigues (Chaerea), Carlos Michiles (Scipio), Áureo Márcio (Lepidus’s Wife), and Lucilene Guimarães (Ethiopian). 1971 season (Vale; Azancoth, 2009, p. 70).



simple assimilation, would constitute a radical transformation in which the “devourer” recreated and re-signified the “devoured.” TESC stripped *Caligula* of its purely European and existentialist connotations, imbuing it with local and tropical elements, including the colloquial way of speaking. The concept of improvisation and the absence of rigid markings enabled the actors to incorporate their cultural experiences and sensibilities into the staging. Thus, the play adapted itself to the new context and was fundamentally transformed by it.

We add an even more peculiar fact. The audience included young filmmaker Roberto Kahane, who had involved himself in the Manaus film club movements and had received an award for best regional film at the I Festival Norte de Cinema Brasileiro by the National Film Institute in 1969 for his *A coisa mais linda que existe*, a collaboration with Filgueiras. Note his previous participation at Teatro Universitário do Amazonas, in which he had collaborated with Menão. Kahane, upon watching the production, immediately found an affinity, perceiving in the group’s metamorphosis of Camus a kind of what he called at the time “devastating anthropophagy,” the possibilities of which he would like to explore in films.

Professor and researcher Alexandre Mate (Mate *et al.* 2023) sheds light on an important issue related to amateur groups by stating that, of the diverse and relevant characteristics of theatrical collectives that define the practice of the historical subject resulting from the processes and movements linked to epic theater and popular cultural expressions, it is crucial to highlight the audacity and a certain renewed anthropophagic appetite for the work, rather than only the search to reproduce or adapt an original. This stands in contrasts to hegemonic forms of creation.

This cathartic encounter shows that the play became the first feature fiction film produced in Manaus with local actors at that time. Note that the film maintained the same actors and costumes. The tropicalist approach resulted in a 1970 adaptation entitled *Como cansa ser romano nos trópicos ou Como não sabemos nada de nada da vida alheia*. Locations in Manaus served as the setting, including Praia da Ponta Negra, Largo de São Sebastião, installations of the Amazonas Theater, Avenida Eduardo Ribeiro, Praça da Polícia, among others.

In addition to this experience, a revival in 1971 remained more faithful to Albert Camus’ text. This new version involved more detailed staging work, an in-depth study of the characters, and some changes to the cast. According to Costa and Azancot (2009) and Menão’s (2019) testimony, it was more conventional than the first version. This shows how a theatrical experience can generate new artistic experiences for producers and the public, resulting in the process of cultural anthropophagy mentioned by Mate.

The TESC trajectory outlined new objectives and phases, especially after Menão’s departure and his return to São Paulo. During this period, the group received contributions from other directors until an invitation was extended to Márcio Souza in 1973. Souza, with no previous theatrical experience, implemented a collaborative methodology focused on the cultural studies of the text, promoting seminars with guest professors and scenic laboratories.



4 The fruitful union between Márcio Souza and TESC

As Márcio Souza joined TESC, the Amazon became their focus of action. His pieces highlight aspects that shaped Manaus and the region, enabling us to understand the place of art in this process and the role of TESC in building an Amazonian cultural identity. From then on, the group assumed a politically engaged posture, using theater as a tool for reflection and resistance.

In the essay-manifesto “A questão do teatro regional” (1984), Souza highlighted that the group understood Indigenous culture by the resistance of Indigenous peoples. He argued that popular expression constituted the key to countering capitalist forms, stating that “that is why we have never had complacency for the exotic and we have always sought to manifest our horror for the folkloric” (Souza, 1984, p. 4). This stance was in line with historical revisionism that began with *A Paixão de Ajuricaba*¹¹, written and staged in 1974, a pioneer play that bought an Indigenous myth to the stage and showed the narratives of the Manau people. The play dialogues with Walter Benjamin (1987), who argues that historical materialism, seeking the redemption of the past, must consider the echoes of silenced voices and continuously question the victory of the dominant.

Souza reinforces the refusal of exoticism, a central concern in his work. Although this dramatic play has an Indigenous theme, it avoids falling into the trap of superficial verisimilitude, such as stereotyped costumes and scenarios. Instead, it opts for an epic approach that invites the audience to reflect on human and universal aspects of the staged situation. In an interview, Souza (2005) emphasized that the dramaturgy would avoid a “romantic re-edition” of the Indigenous. To illustrate this, he quoted an excerpt from *Ajuricaba*: “Even if the shamans had said that I would be defeated, we should have done what we did so that in the future they would not say that they inherited cowardice from us” (Souza, 2005, p. 34). And he adds: “That is Demosthenes, see? There are values greater than ‘regionalism,’ so to speak. One should not fear the universal” (Souza, 2005, p. 34). This perspective reinforces the group’s intention to escape the label of exotic and primitive group, seeking a theatrical language that transcends the local without losing its roots.

A Paixão de Ajuricaba can be interpreted as a cry of resistance that was silenced by official history. *Ajuricaba*, the Indigenous hero, represents the struggle for freedom and the refusal of submission even in the face of inevitable defeat. Its ambiguous ending opens space for multiple interpretations, bringing it closer to the thousands of dead and disappeared during the military dictatorship. The parallel plot of *Inhambu*, *Ajuricaba*’s companion, killed at the hands of the Portuguese Commander, symbolizes the hundreds of indigenous nations who suffered exploitation and decimation and the violence indigenous women endured throughout the colonization process. The Portuguese Commander, an antagonistic figure, embodies the values opposite to those of

11 Cast: Stanley Whibbe, *Inhambu*: Denise Vasconcelos, Portuguese Commander and choir: Herbert Braga, Carmelite Brother and choir: Ediney Azancoth, Teodósio and choir: Moacir Bezerra, Manau Warrior, soldier and choir: Mardônio Rocha. 1974 season (Vale; Azancoth, 2009, p. 90).



Ajuricaba: injustice, greed, exploitation, and greed, representing the colonizing and capitalist objectives that also echoed in the oppression of the dictatorial regime. Finally, Teodósio symbolizes the remission and awakening of a new awareness of belonging and recognition of ancestry, calling for a struggle that must continue. This character may parallel the social struggles and the revolutionary movement that mobilized the country in those years, which was interrupted by the military coup.

Thus, the union between Márcio Souza and TESC strengthened the group and consolidated a politicized and engaged theater. This approach transformed TESC into a symbol of cultural resistance, whose legacy continues to inspire and influence Amazonian and Brazilian theater.

In 2024, the play *A Paixão de Ajuricaba* turned 50 years old. That year also marked the loss of Márcio Souza, a central figure in Amazonian culture and Brazilian theater. His contribution was fundamental so that, for the first time, the public could see and recognize themselves in their ancestry, something widely recorded by the newspapers of the time. This legacy of valuing Indigenous stories and identities inspired other theatrical productions, perpetuating the mission of giving voice to silenced narratives.

From 1970 to 1982, TESC participated in several national festivals, won awards, and maintained a critical and irreverent approach to historical processes via systematic research. A highlight refers to their participation in I Festival Nacional de Teatro de Campina Grande in 1974, which also completed 50 years in 2024. Participation in the festival earned TESC several awards, including best dramaturgy and best direction for Márcio Souza, who was aged only 23 years at the time. Prestigious critics such as Luiza Barreto Leite and Jefferson del Rios praised the group's work, consolidating respect for the rigor of their research¹².

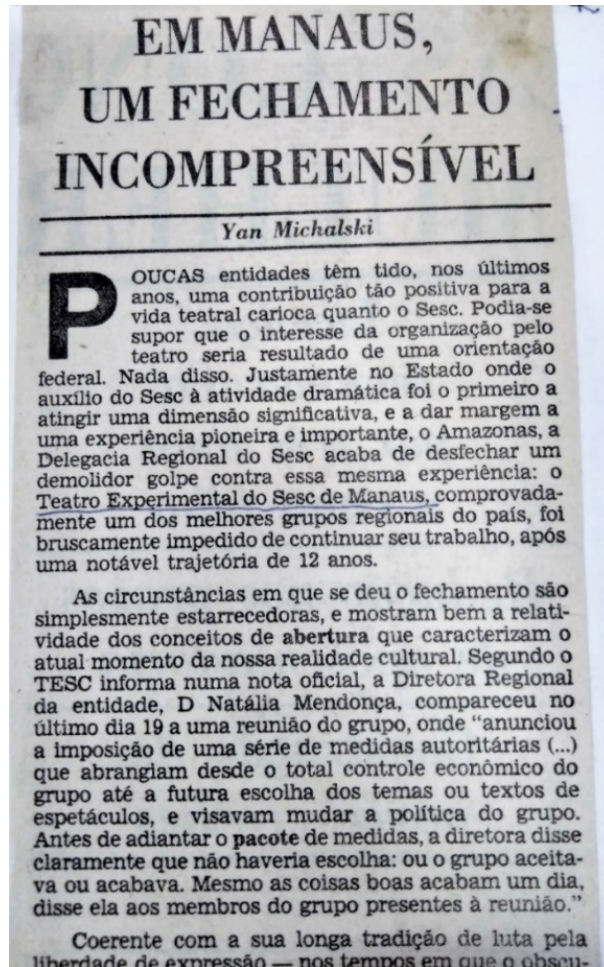
Even with all this success, the relationship between the group and SESC remained tense due to unfulfilled internal impositions. As a result, SESC theater expelled them in 1980. This seeming end found momentum in 1982 with the production of *A Resistível Ascensão do Boto Tucuxi*, staged at Teatro Amazonas under the direction of Márcio Aurélio from São Paulo¹³. Briefly, the play confronted, by metaphors, a populist politician who was running for government that year during the first elections in the democratic opening. Members endured harassment, bomb threats during performances, and media boycotts. The group was unable to resist such antagonism and decreed its end, receiving great support from the national artistic class, such as that of the critic Ian Michalski in his column in *Jornal do Brasil* below.

12 *Jornal da Paraíba*, Campina Grande, July 25, 1974 (kindly provided by Professor Diógenes Maciel at Universidade Estadual da Paraíba).

13 Márcio Aurélio was born in Piraju, São Paulo, in 1948. He is a director, set designer, costume designer, translator, and retired professor of theatrical interpretation at Universidade de Campinas. This internationally renowned director has a line of work on the works of Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller.



Figure 1: Articles by Yan Michalski about the attacks and repercussions of the group's closure in 1982



Source: TESC Collection (Cedoc/Funarte) (Michalski, 1982)

5 Not everything new again: the return and the end

Considering the space limitations of this study, we will summarize the period of the 2000s to contextualize the political landscape and artistic perspectives that revitalized TESC. At the turn of the century, political and economic patterns substantially changed from previous periods, altering working conditions in each era.

With all these changes, Márcio Souza, who had just left the National Arts Foundation, was invited by the new administration of SESC in 2003 to continue his theatrical work. This new phase significantly contrasted with the reality of the first TESC generation, for whom theatrical professionalization was neither a priority nor a concrete possibility. Many of those young and liberal workers ventured into the theater while maintaining other occupations. The political context of the dictatorship strongly influenced the mode of production, discourse, and internal interactions of the group, transforming their meetings into political acts.



The new generation of members found an environment within the democratic context of TESC's resumption. Composed mostly of youths from peripheries, this generation brought technical knowledge they acquired in acting training schools, reflecting a clear desire for professionalization and artistic renewal. Márcio Souza, a central figure in the history of TESC, was also initially unknown to this new group. Over time, a relationship of mutual respect was established as these youths developed their artistic trajectories, aligning themselves with a new model.

The choice of this restart was to restage Souza's first theatrical work (in 1974) *A Paixão de Ajuricaba* due to its historical impact. The media widely publicized his return to Manaus to reactivate the group, creating an imaginary of grandeur and spectacularity, with extensive daily coverage in newspapers and on television. It became a celebratory and symbolic setting, in addition to its theme of resistance that resonated strongly with the new team in a new time.

A Paixão de Ajuricaba was the play TESC staged the most, including in several versions. During the permanence of actor Márcio Braz (2019) in the group, at least 700 performances may have occurred, initially from Thursday to Sunday and, later, from Friday to Sunday, at the SESC theater. In the 2003 revival, the play gained a new version from the relocation of the cast, receiving an adaptation for a French tour¹⁴ in 2012.

Despite the impact of the new experience, critics Macksen Luiz and Omar Gusmão, who attended the premiere, found it a static and, at times, declamatory play since the text underwent no modifications, despite its more epic proposal. A scene that narrated events 10 years after the hero's death was added to reinforce its epic tone, but, according to the evaluators, this intention remained in its argument (Gusmão, 2003; Luiz, s.d.). In any case, the play pleased the visibly moved audience, becoming a success with the public in the following presentations.

The photo below illustrates a performance in the 2005 season, probably at the group's theater, at SESC Amazonas.

14 In 2012, the group toured three French municipalities with the support of the Sorbonne University, staging *A Paixão de Ajuricaba*. It proposed to avoid the exoticism that could be expected by the foreign audience. The group surprisingly opted for a setting with a bare stage and neutral clothes that emphasized the interpretation, text, and the scenic elements of the tragic saga of Ajuricaba. This stage had a small platform demarcating the dramatic scenic action, which seems to us similar to the poetic game proposed by Peter Brook in dealing with empty space.



Image 2 – *A Paixão de Ajuricaba*, 2005, performance



Photo by Danilo Jr. Source: Arquivo TESC/donation: Márcio Souza. Museu Amazônico da UFAM

Over the years, the group repeated and created new feats by excursions, festivals, training workshops in several municipalities, and scenic productions and projects until winning signing a working contract, a quite difficult process.

Since returning from France in 2012, the group showed a strong desire to stage Molière's *The Tartuffe*. When Souza finally adapted the text and rehearsals began as the production and costumes neared completion, two crises surprised the group. The first related to the Brazilian economic crisis in 2016, during the Dilma Rousseff government, resulting in budget cuts, especially affecting the cultural sector and increasing the precariousness of the group; and the second most definitive one: the abrupt rupture of the partnership with the institution due to this crisis, ending a collaboration of almost 14 years in August 2016.

In an interview, actress Carla Menezes, a member of the last TESC generation and active up to its end, said that it could be reborn under a new management and with a new cast. As a phoenix, the group, which had resurfaced after a 21-year hiatus, could find new ways for its continuity.

We had dreams, we wanted to contribute, we wanted to make history, we wanted to expand TESC, we wanted to take it to inner municipalities [...] I think there's a very wonderful history in this group, in this new generation of warriors, you know, of people who have learned. [...] TESC must come back with other people, not with this group anymore because this group is gone, it's done, there are others... Each one created their own story, right? [...] When we left, then we went to the world, we left our world and went to the world (Menezes, 2020).



6 Final considerations

The analysis of the TESC trajectory in Manaus highlights the urgency of decentralizing the studies of Brazilian theatrical historiography, bringing to light the often-neglected cultural richness of the Brazilian North. The group's history of resilience and innovation exemplifies the ability of art to flourish in harsh contexts and illustrates how theatre collectives can positively influence their local communities and the national art scene. The leadership of figures such as Nielson Menão and Márcio Souza and the dedication of its members significantly enriched the cultural panorama of Manaus, consolidating TESC as an agent of transformation.

By its productions and adaptations, TESC challenged the cultural hegemony traditionally centered on large urban centers, inspiring generations of artists and theater groups in the municipality. Before the group, theater in Manaus lacked constancy and rigor, with ephemeral productions that evinced the need for the rapid attraction and maintenance of its audience. TESC was the first to introduce systematic studies and fight for the professionalization of theater in the region, establishing a culture of seasons and repertoire that still exerts its influence to this day.

One of its most notable legacies refers to the inspiration it provided to other collectives such as Companhia de Teatro Vitória Régia, founded in the 1980s and led by Nonato Tavares, a central figure in Amazonian theater. As per Rosiel Mendonça and Jony Clay Borges (2018) in "Nonato Tavares, um homem de Teatro," Tavares' initiatives echo TESC practices and influences, showing the continuity of its impact. Taciano Soares constitutes another example; this multifaceted artist, a professor at Universidade do Estado do Amazonas and director of Ateliê 23, often attributes the influence in his artistic rigor and in the construction of a repertoire theater to TESC. His group was recently nominated for the "Energia que vem da gente" category at Prêmio Shell de Teatro in 2024, reinforcing the relevance of his trajectory.

Many members of the extinct TESC continue to work in the artistic and academic scene, perpetuating its legacy. Daniely Peinado, professor of Dance and Theater at Universidade do Estado do Amazonas; Efraim Mourão, cultural producer; Deni Sales, performer, playwright, and PhD student in Theater; Carla Menezes, cultural producer and lawyer; Robson Ney, actor, performer, and theater teacher; and Dimas Mendonça, actor and performer, offer examples of how the group's influence continues to shape new generations and strengthen theater in the municipality. The departure of Márcio Souza in August 2024 fails to diminish the importance of his work; on the contrary, it remains crucial to understand Amazonian cultures.

Examining a theatrical group such as TESC shows a universe of interconnected themes that open doors to understanding broader artistic and social phenomena. Observing this context involves recognizing the transformative urban movements, intertwining the sociopolitical and cultural factors that shaped these events. Thus, more than a historical review, this investigation



explores the complex dynamics between art, politics, and society, producing new records and preserving the theatrical memory of Manaus.

Recognizing and celebrating TESC's trajectory is key to understanding the vital role of theater in building a more inclusive and representative cultural discourse. By valuing the diversity and richness of cultural expressions throughout Brazil, this study seeks to fill historiographical gaps and to inspire future research and initiatives that strengthen theater as a tool for social and cultural transformation.



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Funding

CAPES

Ethics Committee Approval

Not applicable

Competing interests

No declared conflict of interest

Research Context

This study stems from LEÃO, Howardinne Queiroz. O Teatro Experimental do SESC como urgência política levada à cena: (1968-1982) e (2003-2016). 2020. Dissertação (Mestrado em Teoria e Prática do Teatro) - Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2020. Available at: <https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/27/27156/tde-04032021-161619/pt-br.php>. Accessed in: 29 ago. 2024.

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**Evaluation Method**

Single-Blind Peer Review

Editors

Ricardo Gomes

Priscilla Duarte

Lídia Olinto

Peer Review History

Submission date: August 28, 2024

Approval date: April 16, 2025