



**AFRO-ATLANTIC DRAMAS:
James Baldwin's theater arrives on the São Paulo stage (1966)**

DRAMAS AFRO-ATLÂNTICOS:
o teatro de James Baldwin desembarca na cena de São Paulo (1966)

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Abstract: This article analyzes and reconstructs the 1966 staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a play by James Baldwin, performed by *Grupo Teatral do Negro* (GTN) in São Paulo, Brazil. It situates the production within its broader sociohistorical and artistic context, examining both its critical reception and the cultural climate of the period. Drawing on dramaturgical and theoretical materials, as well as primary historical sources—particularly archival press and critical documents—the study highlights diasporic dialogues between Black theatrical scenes in São Paulo and New York. Special attention is given to GTN's role in the cultural flows of the so-called Black Atlantic. The article also examines the strong presence of Black theater during Brazil's civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985), contributing to a more inclusive and critical historiography of Brazilian theater. As the first production of a Baldwin play in Brazil, the performance marked a significant political and aesthetic milestone, echoing the voice of one of the 20th century's most prominent and radical African American intellectuals. It forged connections between racial and political resistance in Brazil and the African American Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Keywords: James Baldwin; Black theater; Black dramaturgy; Diaspora; Black Atlantic.

Dramas afro-atlânticos:

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Resumo: Este artigo busca analisar e reconstituir a montagem de *Blues for Mister Charlie*, obra de James Baldwin, encenada pelo Grupo Teatral do Negro (GTN) em 1966 na cidade de São Paulo, discutindo seu contexto sócio-histórico, a ambiência artística da época e sua recepção crítica. A análise debruçou-se tanto sobre um material dramaturgical e teórico, quanto sobre fontes históricas primárias, isto é, materiais arquivísticos de caráter jornalístico-crítico. O estudo da encenação salientou as interlocuções diaspóricas entre a cena negra de São Paulo e a de Nova York, examinando como o GTN, em especial, participou dos trânsitos culturais no chamado Atlântico Negro. O artigo também discute a contundente presença dos teatros negros durante a Ditadura Civil-Militar (1964-1985), contribuindo, assim, para uma historiografia teatral mais ampla, crítica e plural. O espetáculo, pioneiro ao encenar uma dramaturgia de Baldwin no teatro brasileiro, constituiu um significativo marco político e estético ao ecoar o pensamento de um dos intelectuais afro-americanos mais importantes e combativos do século XX, aproximando as resistências negras do Brasil e dos EUA.

Palavras-chave: James Baldwin; teatro negro; dramaturgia negra; diáspora; atlântico negro.



1 Introduction

The attempt to reconstruct the 1966 production of *Blues for Mister Charlie* by James Baldwin, staged by *Grupo Teatral do Negro* (GTN – Black Theater Group), encounters a significant initial challenge: the scarcity of studies on Black theater within Brazilian theater historiography, particularly concerning the 1960s. In light of this gap, extensive research was conducted using primary sources consulted in both physical and digital archives¹.

We propose situating GTN and its production within the broader context of theater created by the African diaspora in the so-called Black Atlantic. Rather than engaging in the more common comparative approach centered on national experiences, we emphasize transatlantic exchanges and circuits (Gilroy, 2020), highlighting the dialogue between São Paulo and New York. GTN was not merely part of São Paulo's modern theater movement but an active agent in shaping an Afro-Atlantic cultural scene. The short interval between the play's premiere in the United States (1964) and its staging in Brazil (1966) reveals the attunement of Black Brazilian artists to the diasporic cultural landscape.

Blues for Mister Charlie was the first translation of a work by James Baldwin published in Brazil, and its staging by GTN constituted an important and pioneering episode in the author's reception during the 1960s². Beyond contributing to studies on Baldwin's reception in Brazil—particularly regarding his theater—this article also examines the presence of Black theater during the Brazilian Civil-Military Dictatorship (1964–1985). We therefore seek to narrate this silenced chapter in the history of Black performance in the Americas.

The article is structured in three parts. The first examines *Blues for Mister Charlie*, situating it historically and analyzing its central elements. The second reconstructs the trajectory of its Brazilian production during the military dictatorship, highlighting its transnational connections. The third discusses its critical reception, with particular emphasis on the reflections of sociologist and critic Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira.

1 The research was conducted in the physical archives of the São Paulo State Public Archive (APESP – *Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo*) and the Jenny Klabin Segall Library, as well as in the digital archives of the newspapers *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*, in addition to various newspapers available in the Brazilian National Library's Digital Newspaper Archive (*Hemeroteca da Biblioteca Nacional*).

2 The first books by James Baldwin published in Brazil appeared in 1967, one year after the staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie*: the novel *Giovanni's Room* and the essay collection *The Fire Next Time*. Interest in Baldwin after 1966 remained steady. For a history of Baldwin's reception in Brazil, see Ratts (2011).



2 *Blues for Mister Charlie*: brief contextualization

Blues for Mister Charlie is James Baldwin's second play³. By the 1960s, his achievements as a novelist, essayist, and short-story writer were widely recognized and awarded, establishing him as one of the foremost critics of racism in the United States. The suggestion that Baldwin write the play came from the renowned director and filmmaker Elia Kazan (1909–2003), cofounder of the Actors Studio. In 1958, he suggested that Baldwin write a play based on the murder of Emmett Louis Till. In 1955, the young Black man, accused of having flirted with a white woman in a store in the state of Mississippi, was brutally tortured and murdered by two white supremacists. The judicial system, grounded in racial segregation, fully acquitted both men, who later admitted to the crime. The case sparked protests, marches, and mobilizations that were pivotal to the Civil Rights Movement. The play is also dedicated to the memory of Medgar Evers (1925–1963), one of the most prominent Black activists of the 20th century, who was likewise murdered by a white supremacist.

In April 1964, the play was staged by Actors Studio under the direction of Burgess Meredith (1907–1997) at ANTA Playhouse, a prominent venue within the Broadway circuit. The production managed to remain on stage thanks to a strong publicity campaign in the New York press. Numerous Black sponsors, along with white allies committed to the struggle, rallied in support of the production. The run concluded on August 29 of that year, after four months in performance—a considerable achievement for a play by a Black playwright at the heart of Broadway.

From a historical perspective, it is essential to situate Baldwin's play within the broader political-artistic framework of the U.S. Black Theater in the 1960s, one of the most incandescent moments of the struggle for civil rights. During this period, Black artists adopted a radically engaged stance, committed to directly raising awareness political consciousness. The stage was conceived as a site of insurrection and as a space for producing positive and multivalent representations of the Black population (Martins, 1995).

Broadly speaking, the play offers a searing portrait of a society fractured by profound racial hatred. Beyond its political and economic effects, Baldwin examines how racism shapes subjectivities, consciousnesses, and affect in ways that both incite and normalize racial violence, denying the full recognition of certain forms of humanity. As he writes in the preface: “the plague is race, the plague is our concept of Christianity: and this raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship” (Baldwin, 1964, p. 7). Richard Henry, a young African-American man

³ In 1954, Baldwin published his first play, *The Amen Corner*, a powerful family drama that, over the course of its three acts, portrays the ethical and theological crises of Margaret Alexander, an uncompromising pastor whose fervor has rigidly shaped both her Pentecostal congregation and the upbringing of her son, David. As in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the contradictions of Black churches are explored by means of a realistic dramaturgy committed to examining fraught parent-child relationships, as well as the weight of dogma and unquestionable truths in the formation of affective bonds. The play premiered in 1955 in a production staged by Howard University, a historically Black institution. In Brazil, it was translated in 1972 by playwright Aldomar Conrado (1936–2018) and published by Lidador (Diniz, 2023). Studies in Portuguese on Baldwin's theater remain exceedingly rare—another gap this article seeks to address.



and the son of a pastor, is murdered by Lyle Britten, the white owner of a modest convenience store in a small town in the southern United States. The plot, however, does not center on a criminal investigation of the murder, nor does it aim simply to morally condemn the perpetrators. Instead, the play exposes the collective and individual consequences of racialization in the lives of Black and white characters alike, dramatizing how identities, worldviews, and patterns of behavior are shaped by this technology of power, that is, race.

Rigid racial segregation, institutionalized by the so-called Jim Crow laws (1877–1965), forms the central backdrop of this drama. Baldwin incorporates this implacable division between Black and white populations into the spatial design of the play itself: each group occupies one side of the stage. *Blues for Mister Charlie* embodies the ways in which racial conflict materializes as geographic tension, shaping how the public space is contested and organized. Stylistically, the drama is grounded primarily in a realist mode. However, Baldwin disrupts spatiotemporal linearity by introducing flashbacks that revisit different moments in the characters' pasts, deepening the portrayal of their psycho-emotional worlds. This craftsmanship of time, marked by shifts back and forth, makes it possible for the playwright not only to intensify the characters' desires and fears, but also to break, in a distinctly modern fashion, with the conventions of absolute and Aristotelian drama (Szondi, 2011). Baldwin avoids stereotypical characters or caricatures, instead creating complex figures marked by contradictions, strengths, and flaws.

Richard Henry is an 18-year-old who leaves for New York to study music. After an intense period in the North, he returns to his hometown carrying dreams, bittersweet memories, and, above all, a growing sense of indignation in the face of racial inequality. In New York, Richard is able to experience educational and sexual freedoms that would have been unthinkable for a Black man in the South. Upon his return, he reassesses his life with a critical eye, expressing deep frustration and a desire for retribution against limitations and humiliations imposed by racism. Although at times impulsive and uncertain, Richard is in the process of forging his self-image and identity, confronting racial violence while navigating sexual desires and frustrations within his arduous coming-of-age journey. According to Orozimbo Paolucci Neto (2013), the construction of Black masculinity in a conflicting world that denies Black humanity is one of the central debates in *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

As for Lyle Britten's characterization, Baldwin does not portray him in monstrous terms. The murderer is far from an extraordinary aberration. He is an ordinary man, a family father integrated into society. His supremacism is not displayed by means of Ku Klux Klan robes but rather in the way he demands recognition of his masculinity and whiteness; in his brusque indignation at the "audacity" of certain defiant Black men; and in his refusal to accept any possibility of racial equality. Richard refuses to submit to the social position imposed upon him, and it is precisely this insubordination that enrages Lyle Britten. Baldwin shapes the character not by emphasizing any supposed singularity, but by exposing his narrow mediocrity. Indeed, "Mister Charlie," an African-American slang term in use since the 19th century, refers sarcastically to the ordinary white man, whether authoritarian or condescending.



Along these lines, the playwright examines, particularly in the third act, the racial selectivity embedded within the legal system, questioning the ideological mechanisms that operate in processes of criminalization and animalization of the Black body, rendering it, *per se*, a threat to social order. At the height of his unjust fury, the murderer openly scorns the justice system, convinced that a white man like himself would never be convicted. Baldwin thus lays bare what Charles Mills (2023) has termed “racial contract,” that is, the ways in which white supremacy systematically racializes the state, laws, politics, and the economy, structuring disadvantages for some and privileges for others.

The religious world of Black churches is one of the central symbolic frameworks in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. It is important to recall that Baldwin himself was raised in a profoundly religious environment, as he reflects in *Notes of a Native Son* (Baldwin, 2020) and *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin, 2024). Between the ages of 14 to 17, he served as a fervent preacher. Historically, in the sociocultural formation of African-American communities, Black churches (especially Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions) emerged as physical, psychic, and cultural refuges for a population dehumanized by white supremacy. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2021), in his monumental *The Black Church: This Is Our History, This Is Our Song*, traces the development of Black churches in the United States from the early period of enslavement in Spanish colonies in North America in the mid-16th century to the present day. According to Gates Jr., these institutions have played politically and spiritually decisive roles at key moments in Black life in the United States: they sustained escapes and rebellions of enslaved individuals; trained and supported prominent abolitionists, orators, and Black leaders; backed campaigns, marches, and public protests against racially motivated lynchings; were deeply involved in the struggle for civil rights; and, more recently, participated in protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement.

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, however, Baldwin sharpens his critique of contradictions, rigid boundaries, and conservatisms also present in Black churches (especially regarding sexuality and gender issues), while simultaneously denouncing the ways in which Christianity has been, and continues to be, wielded as an ideological weapon to justify racial discrimination. Reverend Phelps, a white religious leader, embodies many of these tensions, as he manipulates faith to naturalize segregation. At the opposite end stands Reverend Meridian Henry, Richard's father. Pressured by circumstance, he finds that Christian catechism offers no sufficient or satisfactory explanation for the suffering endured by the Black community. Do biblical teachings mobilize the oppressed, or do they pacify them? Such questions deepen his political-philosophical crisis, leading him to grapple with the very idea of “God.”

There is no moralistic or Manichean approach in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Baldwin probes the grave historical-social conditions that produce men like Lyle Britten: “[...] we, the American people, created him, he is our servant, it was we who put the sting in his hands” (Baldwin, 1964, p. 6-7). In this sense, Baldwin insists that these are not issues that concern Black people alone; they are dilemmas from which no one in the United States (or the world) can claim detachment.



3 James Baldwin and GTN: stages and dramaturgies in transatlantic flows

It is essential to understand the development of Black theater in Brazil from a transnational perspective, recognizing direct and indirect connections between local initiatives and international artistic-political contexts. Since the 19th century, such movements have fostered correspondences and dialogues with leaders, movements, and organizations across the broader Black diaspora. In this regard, Petrônio Domingues (2020) argues that African populations and their descendants throughout the diasporas (the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe) have established diverse and multilayered exchanges (both material and symbolic), sharing and re-signifying works, styles, ideas, and projects of resistance.

The various cultural and linguistic exchanges woven among different diasporic communities across the intricate “Black Atlantic”—a concept forged by British sociologist Paul Gilroy—extend beyond structures and boundaries upheld by nation-state and fixed notions of nationality, race, and ethnicity. In rejecting essentialisms or purisms, the diasporic experience embraces heterogeneity, mutation, difference, and hybridity, giving rise to fluid zones of transformation, adaptation, and re-signification of ideas and artistic creations, as well as histories and traditions.

Black theaters in Brazil throughout the 20th century were profoundly shaped by these transatlantic crossings. The circulation of artists, companies, plays, and aesthetic trends significantly nuanced and transformed these stages. One need only recall that the founding of *Companhia Negra de Revistas* (1926–1927) engaged in close dialogue with *La Revue Nègre*, the celebrated musical starring Josephine Baker in 1925 in the vibrant cultural milieu of Paris (Barros, 2005). Both the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (TEN) of Rio de Janeiro (1944–1968) and its São Paulo counterpart (1946–1966) established fruitful exchanges with other diasporic territories, incorporating the propositions of Francophone *Négritude* as well as the later reverberations of Harlem Renaissance in the United States. Likewise, the *Teatro Popular Brasileiro* (1950–1957), founded by poet and playwright Solano Trindade, dancer Maria Margarida da Trindade, and ethnologist Edson Carneiro, along with *Companhia Brasileira* (1949–1973), led by Haroldo Costa and Miécio Askanasy, toured extensively across the Americas and Europe in the mid-20th century (Assunção; Da Conceição, 2024). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the Brazilian staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie* (translated as *Blues para Mister Charlie*) within these networks of contact, reciprocal influence, translation, and reformulation of aesthetic and cultural elements originating in diverse Black territories. In the following years, *Blues* was staged in several countries before arriving on the São Paulo stage.

The premiere of *Blues for Mister Charlie* was widely covered by the São Paulo press, which regarded it as one of the major innovations of the city's theater scene in 1966. On February 18 of that year, *O Estado de S. Paulo* published the first article on the production, announcing that *Teatro Experimental do Negro de São Paulo* (TENSP) was reorganizing to stage James Baldwin's play by



mid-April⁴. After a three-year hiatus, marked by the suspension of its activities and the political context following the 1964 civil-military coup, TENSF appeared poised to resume its trajectory with this new production⁵.

The translation, adaptation, and direction of the play were undertaken by Carlos Murtinho⁶. The cast included TENSF veterans such as Aparecida Rocha, Cynthia Bastos, Raul Martins, Ednardo Pinheiro, Áurea Campos, and José Francisco, with the latter three assuming leading roles. Among new members, two names stand out: Blandina Bibas and Benedito Silva, both graduates of *Escola de Arte Dramática* (EAD), where they were classmates and performed together in several productions. At only 25 years old, Benedito Silva would take on not only the play's leading role but also the presidency of the group. Later known as Benê Silva, he became an important figure in Black and modern theater in São Paulo during the 1960s and 1970s⁷.

Despite the initial plans, the play did not premiere in April. It was only on July 7, 1966, that *O Estado de S. Paulo* reported on the production again, this time under the headline “New group in *Blues for Mister Charlie*”⁸. The company responsible for the staging was no longer TENSF, but a newly formed troupe created specifically for the production: GTN, with a revised premiere date scheduled for August. This shift is partly clarified by an extensive report published on August 1 in *Folha de S. Paulo*, entitled “Racism: initial theme of the new Black theater”⁹.

According to the press, GTN emerged from a “split” within TENSF. Although details of these “disagreements” remain unknown, a plausible hypothesis is that the departure of TENSF's long-standing director, Geraldo Campos de Oliveira—who at the time was involved in trade union activism and had already distanced himself from theatrical life—made it difficult for the group

4 “*Teatro do Negro encenará peça norte-americana.*” *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, February 18, 1966, p. 9.

5 TENSF was founded in 1945, one year after TEN in Rio de Janeiro, and maintained continuous activities until 1966, becoming one of the longest-standing Black companies of its generation. Its first director was Geraldo Campos de Oliveira, a childhood and youth friend of Abdias Nascimento. TENSF produced over 20 plays and actively participated in São Paulo's modern theater scene. Concurrently, it served as a key and dynamic agent in the construction of a vibrant Afro-Atlantic cultural and political circuit, expressed across multiple and significant fronts. Particularly noteworthy was its choice of repertoire, which included Black playwrights from New York such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and James Baldwin. For a detailed account of the company's trajectory, see Mário Medeiros, “*O Teatro Experimental do Negro de São Paulo, 1945–66*” (2022).

6 Carlos Murtinho (1929–1990), born in Belém do Pará, was a prominent director and actor in modern Brazilian theater and the brother of actress Rosamaria Murtinho. He began his career in 1948 and, in 1953, co-founded Studio 53. He acted and directed in several Brazilian cities and, in the 1960s, studied theater in Europe. Upon returning to Brazil, he settled in São Paulo, where he directed multiple award-winning productions. He died in 1990 in Rio de Janeiro. His translation and adaptation of *Blues for Mister Charlie* marked the first Brazilian translation of a text by James Baldwin; a copy is held at APESP, although it remains unpublished.

7 Benedito Vicente da Silva (1941–2011), born in Uberaba, Minas Gerais State, moved to São Paulo in 1960 and, in 1964, became the first Black man to graduate in acting from *Escola de Arte Dramática* (EAD). An actor and lighting designer, he joined *Teatro de Arena* in 1965, participating in international tours with *Arena conta Zumbi* and *Arena conta Bolívar*. In the 1970s, he performed in musicals such as *Hair* (1970) and *Jesus Cristo Super Star* (1972), while continuing to work in theater, television, and film throughout his life. In his later years, he organized a Black film club in Embu das Artes, a cultural hub of Black art in the Greater São Paulo area.

8 Novo grupo em “Blues para Mister Charlie.” *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, July 2, 1966, p. 8.

9 Racismo: tema inicial do novo teatro negro. *Folha de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, August 8, 1966.



to continue operating under the same name. Even so, given that nearly the entire cast came from TENSF, we argue that *Blues for Mister Charlie* can be understood both as the final project of TENSF and as the inaugural milestone of GTN. The production thus symbolizes a transition to a new phase of Modern Black Theater amid the military dictatorship. This latter company had its history largely silenced within Brazilian theater historiography, and we now seek to address that gap, albeit briefly.

GTN's program and plan of action were ambitious, much like those of its predecessor. As with other Black theater companies of the period, GTN faced severe financial constraints. The staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie* required substantial investment: the cast comprised 25 actors, and the scenography was complex. A fundraising campaign was organized, with donations from artists and collaborators, while Benedito Vicente da Silva visited banks in search of sponsorship. Thanks to the intervention of members of parliament, the group obtained authorization to use Teatro Leopoldo Fróes—an already familiar venue for actors from TENSF and *Escola de Arte Dramática* (EAD). The theater was located in Vila Buarque, on the site where the Monteiro Lobato Library now stands.

Carlos Castilho, a renowned musical director best known for his work on *Arena Conta Zumbi*, was responsible for the score, which was based on spirituals and blues and performed by a choir formed specifically for the production. The set and costume design were created by Maureen Bisilliat, a British-born artist based in Brazil, and consisted of large photographic panels and slide projections. The white cast members were recruited from established figures of São Paulo's modern theater scene, including Anilza Leone (who declined television offers to join the group), Serafim Gonzalez (who portrayed Lyle Britten), J. França, Oswaldo Barreto, and Ênio Carvalho. GTN was one of the few Black theater groups of the period to include white actresses and actors as regular members rather than merely occasional allies, although it remains unclear which of them formally belonged to the company.

Before reaching the public, the production of *Blues for Mister Charlie* had to confront the prior censorship imposed by the military regime. In 1966, the third year of the dictatorship, São Paulo's theater scene was under intense surveillance, and repression of Black movements was intensifying in the name of the regime's ideology of "racial democracy" (Kössling, 2007). To secure authorization, Carlos Murtinho submitted a formal statement arguing that Baldwin's play functioned as a warning against racial prejudice and sought to introduce Brazilian audiences to a renowned international author. A Special Commission appointed by the regime was established to attend a dress rehearsal. Surprisingly, the play was approved without any cuts. This outcome may be partly attributed to an unusual stroke of fortune: the censor assigned to the case was Coelho Neto, known for his theatrical background and dialogue with the artistic community. He produced a detailed and favorable report, which contributed to the positive ruling¹⁰. The release of the play in

10 All documents cited regarding the prior censorship of *Blues for Mister Charlie* are preserved in the play's file within the Public Entertainment Division collection of the São Paulo State Secretariat of Public Security, currently held by the São Paulo State Public Archive (formerly the Miroel Silveira Collection at ECA-USP).



its original form was exceptional within the context of the dictatorship and stands in stark contrast to the intensification of censorship directed at racially themed works in the years that followed.

Once authorized, *Blues for Mister Charlie* premiered at Teatro Leopoldo Fróes on August 9, 1966. Although initially scheduled to close at the end of the month, it remained on stage until October—an unprecedented run for a Modern Black Theater production in São Paulo. With sold-out performances, strong public reception ensured the continuation of the season, at a time when a play's survival depended directly on weekly box office revenue¹¹. In September, however, GTN received a notice from the municipal government ordering the group's immediate eviction to enable renovations to the theater. Despite a promise of financial subsidy conditional upon suspending the run, the company refused to vacate the premises. In an act of resistance, its members occupied the space, sleeping at the theater with the support of artists from both stage and television. The mobilization generated significant public attention and placed pressure on Mayor Faria Lima. The victory came when the production returned to the stage on October 1¹², reaffirming the play's impact, the strength of artistic mobilization, and the importance of solidarity within the cultural community amid the military dictatorship.

4 Black stage, Black criticism: the perspective of Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira

In this section, we examine the critical reception of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, by James Baldwin. Five reviews were located, authored by central figures in São Paulo's theater criticism, including Sábato Magaldi and Décio de Almeida Prado, in addition to one unsigned review and another identified only by the initials "CVS"¹³. The only review written by a Black intellectual was published by sociologist Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira, marking a notable development within the history of Modern Black Theater in the field of theatrical criticism. We begin by analyzing the white critics' reviews collectively, before turning to Eduardo's text in greater detail.

The white critics offered valuable technical observations for us to reconstruct key aspects of the staging, including scenography, costumes, music, and translation. Despite differences in tone and emphasis, two points emerged as consensual: (1) criticisms of Carlos Murтинho's direction, which was described as caricatural in its portrayal of white characters as villains. According to these reviewers, such approach distorted the "original spirit" of Baldwin's text, or perhaps unsettled the white sensibilities of

11 "Blues para Mr. Charlie." *A Tribuna*, Santos, August 14, 1966, p. 12.

12 "Protesto: Artistas dormiram no palco." *Diário da Noite*, São Paulo, September 12, 1966, p. 1; "Blues' voltou." *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, September 28, 1966, p. 9.

13 Magaldi, Sábato. "Mister Charlie está bem." *Folha de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, August 10, 1966; "Blues for Mister Charlie". *Folha de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, August 10, 1966; "Blues para Mister Charlie." *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, August 16, 1966; CVS. Blues para Mr. Baldwin. *Artes*, São Paulo, 07-08/1966. The review published in *O Estado de S. Paulo* on August 16 bears no signature. However, based on similarities in style and ideas expressed, we attribute its authorship to Décio de Almeida Prado, a critic of that newspaper between 1946 and 1968.



the critics themselves; (2) unanimous praise for the GTN cast, highlighted for its “homogeneity” and “excellent performance.” Magaldi noted that “some delivered the best performances of their careers” and that “we do not recall another production with so many Black actors achieving a professional standard of this quality.” Although the critics valued the play’s racial theme and Baldwin’s Brazilian debut, they were hesitant about the dramaturgical quality of the text. This reveals a mismatch between Baldwin’s proposal and the aesthetic and political paradigms of modern criticism. In a comparative tone between racial realities of the North and South of the Americas, Magaldi argued that the São Paulo premiere “could not have the same meaning as the North American premiere,” and then went on to question whether it would not be “a case of Brazilian hypocrisy.”

Within this context, the critical essay by Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira takes shape. A musician, advertising professional, anti-racist activist, professor, sociologist, and man of the theater, he was a central figure of the Black Atlantic from the city of São Paulo¹⁴. One of the main findings of this article is his review, published in the prestigious *Suplemento Literário* of *O Estado de S. Paulo*¹⁵. His text departs from conventional theater criticism and approaches the form of a theatrical essay, articulating sociology of culture, theatrical knowledge, and a transnational anti-racist thought grounded in a renewed understanding of Blackness. His focus shifts from the staging itself to a broad debate about race in Brazil, the question of identity and the struggle of Black people in the country, the role of GTN, and the play’s suitability to the local context.

From the outset, Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira demonstrates a deep knowledge of Baldwin’s work, citing novels and essays in the original at a time when no translations of the author had yet been published in Brazil. Despite his admiration for and agreement with Baldwin’s ideas—which would accompany him throughout his own intellectual trajectory—the essayist criticizes the choice of *Blues* for staging by GTN. He argues that although the North American racial problem “is not foreign to us,” it “is unfamiliar to us.” In his view, the play requires from a Brazilian audience a level of understanding that exceeds its immediate lived experience, revealing a “certain intellectual colonialism” in the choice of a foreign text—something the group itself sought to avoid. This divergence, however, is strategic in terms of repertoire selection. It reflects a healthy heterogeneity within São Paulo’s Black milieu and differs from the rejection expressed by white critics regarding the dramaturgical merit of Baldwin’s work.

14 Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira (1923–1980), born in Rio de Janeiro, earned a degree in Social Sciences from the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1964, as the only Black student in his class, and began graduate studies in Sociology at the same institution. Earlier, he had studied music at the University of Brazil (1943) and participated in modern theater in Rio de Janeiro. In 1954, he moved to São Paulo and, in 1957, performed in *The Respectful Prostitute*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, staged in French. He was praised for avoiding the use of blackface, which was commonly employed in Brazilian productions of the play. A figure of the Black Atlantic, he made several trips to New York and, in 1971, published the essay “Black Theatre,” analyzing Black theater in that city in three distinct moments (Trapp, 2020). In the same year, he co-wrote, with Thereza Santos, the dramaturgy of *E agora falamos nós...*, by CECAN, considered a landmark in the transition from Modern Black Theater to Contemporary Black Theater in Brazil (Jesus; Rios, 2014).

15 Oliveira, Eduardo Oliveira de. Blues para Mister Charlie. *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, September 17, 1966, p. 5. The review was later included in the author’s first published collection of texts, *Contraideologia da mestiçagem* (2025), by Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira.



However, what seems most fundamental in Oliveira e Oliveira's essay is the direct dialogue he recounts having personally held with the group's leadership regarding the chosen name and its objectives. At first, the sociologist admits to having found the designation "*Grupo Teatral do Negro*" somewhat unsettling, suggesting it might offend "sensitive ears" and imply complicity with the "alter group" (likely a reference to TEN), while also risking reducing the collective to an ethnic appearance at the expense of its civic condition. After engaging in conversation with its members, he recognizes that the choice was grounded in an anti-racist and strategic position. Eduardo then invokes the thought of *negritude* (Blackness)—especially Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Jean-Paul Sartre—to agree that the group's universality could only emerge by means of the full affirmation of its particularity: "if it chose the name *Grupo Teatral do Negro*, it is because it understands that its universality resides in the affirmation of its particularity, which is not purely ethnic, but also historical, social, and cultural—in a word: human." His reflection expresses a distinctly São Paulo-based conception of Blackness, far removed from any biological essentialism, understood not as a fixed datum of nature, but as a historical, social, and political construction.

At the end of his text, Eduardo makes it clear that his intention is not to assess the artistic merit of the production, but to "announce the appearance of a group that intends to make itself heard, that seeks its own language" within the São Paulo and Brazilian context of the mid-1960s, serving as a call for reflection and a warning against hasty judgments and racial opportunism. He concludes the essay by echoing this message of Blackness and elevating the São Paulo GTN to a global framework:

Let us welcome *Grupo Teatral do Negro* and let it openly manifest its Blackness, so long as it does so in order to present it to the world as a cornerstone in the construction of Universal Civilization, which will be the common work of all races, of all different civilizations—or it will not be, as so well prophesied by one of its most illustrious representatives, the Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira's critical essay not only situates GTN within the transnational context of Blackness and the Black diaspora, but also anticipates the intellectual and artistic project he himself would develop throughout the 1970s. The staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie* was the catalyst for this reflection. Today, this text stands as a valuable contribution to our understanding of both the significance of this episode of Modern Theater in the Black Atlantic and the power of the pioneering dialogue that marked Baldwin's reception in Brazil.

5 Conclusion

The reconstitution of the staging of *Blues for Mister Charlie* made it possible for us to visualize the vibrant participation of the Brazilian Black scene within a transnational artistic context, highlighting how TENSP and its successor, GTN, remained attentive and aligned with the works,



debates, and intellectual currents of the Black diaspora. In this sense, the production, within the concert of modern Brazilian theater, shaped a significant political-cultural interlocution between struggles against racial oppression in different parts of the world. GTN's translocal poetics entered into dialogue with the artistic project of James Baldwin, an intellectual shaped by geographical and linguistic crossings. Between 1948 and 1971, Baldwin lived and traveled across countries in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, with extended stays in France and Turkey. As Douglas Field (2015) observes, the author himself described his condition as that of a transatlantic commuter, underscoring the central role that displacement played in both his work and his activism.

It is therefore legitimate to consider GTN as one of the most important translators of James Baldwin in Brazil. In this sense, the pioneering production contributed significantly to disseminating Baldwin's anti-racist thought in the country, not only bringing the author closer to Afro-Brazilian insurgencies, but also strategically challenging the myth of racial democracy, incorporated as official discourse by the civil-military dictatorship. The theatrical reviews of the time, especially the substantial essay by Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira, reveal that the reception of the African American author was centrally inflected by racial debates.

The very brief existence of GTN reveals how trajectories of significant Black groups were deeply ruptured by abuses of the dictatorship, their paths abruptly interrupted. *Blues for Mister Charlie* was possibly the last Black-authored play to pass unscathed by the censorship apparatus in São Paulo. A company such as GTN would have found no space under the regime's racial authoritarianism, marking the end of a robust period of Black experimentation within modern theater. Also in 1966, the TEN, under the leadership of Abdias Nascimento, was prevented, by order of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from participating in the First World Festival of Black Arts, held in Dakar, Senegal (Nascimento, 1981).

The most traditional and canonical histories of Brazilian theater have generally devoted little attention to Black resistance during the military dictatorship. Therefore, this article sought to confront these historiographical gaps, resituating the forceful role of GTN, and of its sole production, within a broader, more plural, and more critical theatrical historiography—one that remains open to further research, developments, and expansions.



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