

# BRAZIL'S ANTUNES FILHO: A TAO FOR ACTORS

By Joanne Pottlitzer

What was it like working with Brazilian director Antunes Filho?" I ask a member of Repertorio Español's acting company during rehearsals for the New York theatre's current production, *Nelson 2 Rodrigues*. His eyes light up. "Burbuja," he answers with a big smile. "What is 'burbuja'?" I ask, intrigued. "It's hard to explain. Ask him," the actor shrugs, nodding toward a colleague. "Burbuja, burbuja," the second actor mutters, equally at a loss. But the word is everywhere, murmured among the cast and administrative staff, uttered with a chuckle by Repertorio executive director Gilberto Zaldivar, shouted out by artistic director René Buch: "Burbuja!" Finally Antunes's young assistant Rita Martins, who, with set and costume designer J.C. Serroni, has accompanied him on this

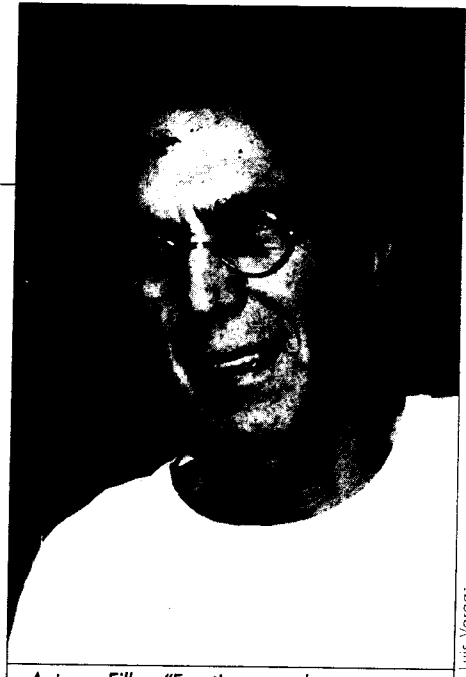
trip to New York, tries to explain. "Burbuja is an exercise we do. In Portuguese, it's 'bulha.'" That helps. "It means 'bubble.'" Perfectly clear.

The voice and movement exercises that seem to have permeated the theatre's consciousness are held every day before rehearsals begin, Martins goes on to explain. They are part of an actor-training program that the 60-year-old director, best known in the U.S. for his widely toured, much-acclaimed production *Macunaima*, is developing in São Paulo to create a technique that will work for actors in any theatrical style. "It's not like Suzuki," Antunes is quick to point out when I bring the subject up, referring to the Japanese master-trainer Tadashi Suzuki, whose actors are steeped in their teacher's own distinctive style. "I want my actors to be trained in a way which allows them to do anything—a realistic play, tragedy, farce, children's theatre, anything they want."

Antunes bases his "burbuja" exercises on concepts of Eastern mysticism which are common to those of modern Western physics—relativity/harmony, fluidity/continuous movement/change—and asks the actors to read such reference books as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*. "When an actor is on stage," Antunes elaborates, "he is working in his own atemporality—his own 'no-time.' And he will play with the atemporality of those in the audience. He will create illusions, a kind of distancing, à la Brecht. But Brecht did this out of a political mission, a discussion of classes, and to show social justice. I want to be like Jung, to look for the connections between East and West."

Modern physics, Antunes believes, will be "very big in the next century. I am interested because it deals with a subatomic world, and a subatomic world is a poetic world."

Eager to experience "burbuja" for myself, I sit in on a session led by Martins. Taped Hindu music plays while the actors concentrate on relaxing their elbows and knees and, through a series of breathing techniques, getting in touch with "the



Antunes Filho: "Emotions are the worst enemy an actor can have."

fluid and dynamic motion of the atomic universe."

"Let the electrons, the bubbles, carry you on; follow the bubbles, let them take you where they may, until you lose your balance, but don't fall," the leader intones. The postures and movements discovered by the actors in these bubble/disequilibrium exercises may eventually appear (though never through the intervention of the director) in the production itself.

"The exercises have helped me enormously—I find myself using them in the other plays I do," says Ricardo Barber, a veteran actor of the Spanish Repertory Theatre. "They have given me a feeling of relaxation that I will never lose—I'll never have a rigid body onstage again."

It was in 1979 that Antunes's voluptuous theatrical adaptation of Mario de Andrade's classic Brazilian novel *Macunaima* arrived at the Theatre in the Americas Festival, the Kennedy Center and in New York. "I had never spent four hours like that in the theatre—I flipped," recalls Buch, who immediately invited Antunes to direct at Repertorio. Ten years later, with the help of a three-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, Antunes's high-intensity staging of *Nelson 2 Rodrigues*, a pair of raw melodramas by Brazil's most revered playwright, has entered the repertory at the company's 140-seat theatre on



Ricardo Barber and Virginia Rambal, center, in *All Nudity Will Be Punished*, one of two plays about society's taboos included in *Nelson 2 Rodrigues* at Repertorio Español.

Gerry Goodstein

East 27th Street.

Antunes had directed the plays of Rodrigues—and those of Inge, Miller, Odets and Albee—in a conventional, realistic style during the mid-1960s. But the worldwide success of *Macunaima* kept him on a more experimental path. It also strengthened his association with the Social Service of Commerce (SESC), a state agency in São Paulo which had sponsored *Macunaima's* development. With SESC backing, in 1982 Antunes founded the Vila Nova Center for Theatre Research to develop theatre works and train actors. Two years later, in an unusually generous show of state arts support, SESC provided a permanent theatre, year-round rehearsal space and production funding.

That's when Antunes decided to restage Rodrigues, approaching two of the dramatist's tragedies, *Family Album* and *All Nudity Will Be Punished*, not in realistic Freudian terms but from an archetypal, Jungian point of view. He dared to edit the plays down to their essences and made them fit within a two-hour evening; Rodrigues took on a new meaning and a new life. For the New York production, Antunes incorporated his techniques—including "burbuja"—developed from the Tao and modern physics, which he had introduced in *Paraiso, Zona Norte*, another Rodrigues pairing, in 1988.

All Rodrigues's plays deal with society's taboos: incest, adultery, homosexuality, passion killings. Both *Family Album*, a 1945 work that was banned for 22 years in Brazil on grounds of pornography, and *All Nudity Will Be Punished*, written in 1965, comment on the oppressive moral and religious codes which govern the country's upper-middle classes, suffocating their emotional expression and growth. By abandoning naturalism, Antunes—supported by the elegant, transparent settings of his designer Serroni—treats the works as expressions of the collective psyche, exposing their symbolic and mythical levels. As Buch puts it, "He goes into an element underneath all the anecdotal and societal levels and centers it in something that is eternal."

In New York, Antunes was working for the first time with a company other than his own and with actors who did not know his language, Portuguese. (Like all Repertorio plays, *Nelson 2 Rodrigues* is presented in Spanish, having been translated from the Por-

tuguese by Buch.) In the exercise work, the director struggled with the high tensions of everyday New York living that the actors brought with them to the theatre. "I detest emotions," he growled during one conversation. "Emotions are the worst enemy an actor can have. Actors must work with their sensibilities, not their emotions. If emotions are suffocated or thwarted, the muscles tighten up, and they no longer obey the actor."

Not all the 18 actors in the production welcomed Antunes's relentless drive for perfection. Virginia Rambal said she consciously struggled to discard previously learned techniques so that she could receive Antunes's methods on a blank slate. "He gives you so much to work with for each scene—so many layers of ideas. And at times you have no choice but to mimic what he tells you or shows you."

Overall, Antunes's presence has given Repertorio an electric charge: rehearsal schedules have changed, new people have joined the company (including a movement teacher and voice coach from Antunes's São Paulo company) and audiences have grown. For the director himself, the experience meant the chance to put something on stage in New York that was "not folkloric, whether it be pure folklore or Brechtian folklore." His aim, he says, is "to let people here know that we Latin Americans are people—that we think, that we have ideas."

Joanne Pottlitzer reports frequently on Latin American theatre.

#### BRIEFLY NOTED

**E**sqire magazine knows who's who. And among the whos whom it knows is Hartford Stage Company artistic director **Mark Lamos**, who made the "Esquire Register" last fall after having a year worthy of writing home about. In addition to becoming the first American to direct an American play with Soviet actors in their own theatre (O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*), Lamos mounted a five-hour *Peer Gynt* at Hartford Stage and a modern *Measure for Measure* at Manhattan's Lincoln Center, starred in a new American Playhouse film, *Longtime Companion*, and with his partner, managing director **David Hawkan-**son, picked up a Tony award for HSC.

Lamos was in good company among the *Esquire* arts-and-letters elite. His picture and bio ran alongside those of composer/performer team **Paul Dresher** and **Rinde Eckert**, actors **Billy Crystal** and **Michelle Pfeiffer**, epigram artist **Jenny Holzer** and *Do the Right Thing* auteur **Spike Lee**. The register also took a peek back at a member of its class of '84: postmodern clown **Bill Irwin**.

The nuptials fell on a night the theatre was "dark" from a run of Calderon's *Life is a Dream*, but it looked more like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when **Rabbi Bruce Goldman** pronounced the pair husband and wife. The couple exchanging vows on the stage of Manhattan's Jean Cocteau Repertory on Dec. 18 were longtime company members **Elise Stone** and **Craig Smith**. The veteran actors saw no reason to send for whom the wedding bell tolled; they knew it tolled for them.

The Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Conn. has named names for its distinguished panel on "Witch Hunting in America," a forum sched-

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