

TWO MODERN AUTOS BY ARIANO SUASSUNA

Richard A. Mazzara

Two related works by Suassuna, the *Auto da Compadecida* (Rio: Agir, 1957) and *A Pena e a Lei* (Rio: Agir, 1971), demonstrate how their author is one of the leaders of a cultural and literary movement which both continues Modernism in Brazil and parallels that of the novel of the Northeastern part of the country in the 1930s and 40s.

There has been general agreement that the *Compadecida* is perhaps the most representative and exciting play to come of efforts to create a national Brazilian theatre. Several articles have discussed adequately the work's multiple remote sources; its happy blend of traditionally Portuguese, European, and regional elements; its popular religious theme and social satire. Some reference is made always to the author's techniques and styles, and mention of the Auto's universality is inevitable. Yet seldom have critics gone very deeply into these techniques and styles or into the humanity of the characters of the play, portrayed in the main by humorous stylizations on which the universality of the work largely rests.¹

A summary of regional elements on which the great success of the play depends should be given, however, before there is any further discussion of its universality: 1) the incorporation of popular verse and legend from the Northeast; 2) the use of the Palhaço to introduce different parts of the play and circus staging; 3) the picaresque machinations of João Grilo, a character well known in Northeastern literature; 4) the portrayal of the Devil in the leather costume of a **vaqueiro**; and 5) the representation of Christ by the black Manuel. The term "auto" used in the title of the work suggests something beyond the regional, of course, and the name of Gil Vicente naturally comes to mind.²

The prologue, for example, given by the Palhaço or clown, is such as a **jongleur** or **meneur du jeu** customarily recited in medieval literature, with a touch of irony added. In his roles of author, director, and actor, Gil Vicente, too, produced many similar pieces. There is a short pause, after which João Grilo and Chicó begin the first of a series of humorous dialogues repeated in this play as in numerous Vicentine **autos**, **farsas**, and **comédias**. The Final Judgment, in the medieval tradition of religious literature and of Gil Vicente's allegorical *Barcas* trilogy, will be a mixture of grotesque and natural elements. Unlike the **deus ex machina** of the conventional miracle play, the Virgin Mary appears quite naturally after João's somewhat unorthodox but gay and pleasing invocation. The **débat** of this farce-morality-miracle takes on aspects of the mystery play also. In particular, Gil Vicente's *Autos das Barcas* and the *Compadecida* hold a number of

features in common that are typical of the **auto** tradition with respect to the presence of devils. There are especially the efforts of the chief Devil, consulting his dossiers on the sinners, opposed to those of Mary, which are based on mercy and compassion for those who appeal to her for salvation. A very close parallel exists, however, between the Pope in the *Barca da Glória* and the Bishop in Suassuna's *Compadecida*. Through Christ in the first play and the Devil in the second, both authors use very similar language, first to describe the virtues that these highest representatives of the Church should have, then the faults that they in fact possess. Much as in the Middle Ages, everything in Suassuna's play is directed to demonstrating the basic identity of the supernatural and the natural, of the imaginative and the realistic, of the poetic and the humorous. Like Gil Vicente, Suassuna is a gentle satirist, going to great pains to make clear the human motivations of even the most horrible and contemptible of his characters, and to having them humanely judged and pardoned on this basis.

A Pena e a Lei is a work in which Suassuna returns to much the same eclectic sources of inspiration and purposes of the *Auto da Compadecida*. In his preface and stage directions the playwright traces the evolution and composition of the work from stages dating back to 1951 and, as usual with him, explains his intentions. The present first act of *A Pena e a Lei*, entitled "A Inconveniência de Ter Coragem," is more polished but essentially the same as a short play, originally called "Torturas de um Coração, ou, Em Bôca Fechada não Entra Mosquito." It was written as a farcical entr'acte for actors imitating marionettes, with some of the fixed types of the Northeast **mamulengo** plus a few of Suassuna's invention based on his personal, comic conception of the **Sertão**.³ An earlier *Auto da Compadecida* of 1955 was to have some of these same characteristics, as did "O Processo do Cristo Negro," a simpler version of the more serious second part of *A Compadecida*. With slight modification, the "Processo" became the third act of *A Pena e a Lei* with the title "O Auto da Virtude da Esperança." Equally as farcical as the other two short plays, although with more realistic elements than the first and none of the aspects of the miracle play, "O Caso do Novilho Furtado" was written as a transitional second act for *A Pena e a Lei*, between "A Inconveniência de Ter Coragem" and "O Auto da Virtude da Esperança."

As is customary with Suassuna, other modern authors in Brazil and elsewhere, the playwright sets out to break all generic conventions and with "total theatre" to recreate the greater universality and truth of past ages. The actors are to represent figures of the **mamulengo**, whose stylizations in prose, verse, and song, some popular, some original, in turn represent man's creation of marionettes as God creates man. They are made to use all the comic resources of the traditional farce; the seemingly unrelieved **esprit gaulois** of Benedito, a black **pícaro**, with Vicentão and the Delegate Rosinha, both **miles gloriosus** types, has a brief Calderonian moral at the end: life betrays us all. The lesson is drawn by Cheiroso, who with Cheirosa-Marieta serves to introduce and unify the action of the three parts as the puppeteer, author's spokesman, and representative of Christ. In the second stylized as before, with the invisible strings pulled now presumably by God. Despite its more serious nature, the subject — crime and punishment, which gave the play its title — is handled as farcically as the content of the first act. "O Caso do Novilho Furtado" is reminiscent of the *Farce du Maître Pathelin*, although Benedito is more sincere and

act the same types, reminiscent of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, behave in much the same manner. Although no longer marionettes but human beings, they are as disinterested, and less the butt of the action, than *Pathelin*. As in *Pathelin*, however, justice is done, if deceitfully and incompletely, which is perhaps the best that can be expected.

The action of the third part takes place in Heaven, where the author reveals himself once again to be "engaged" in a religious as well as social or moral sense. All the characters, now dead, reappear one after the other, to have their lives judged according to the manner of death. Each death was brought about by someone else, the details of cause and effect revealing an unbroken chain of interdependence, but also exposing each individual's chief flaw. Suassuna's specific point of view here and general compassion shows them to be more human in death than in life and most human as sinners. Yet they are essentially unchanged, except for Padre Antônio, who is rejuvenated in death because of his innocence, and Cheirosa-Marieta, whom the author's symbolism transforms from a kind of Eve to a regenerate Magdalene. Further, they are called upon to judge life and God; for if, despite everything, life is worthwhile, then the Creator and Redeemer is good. All decide that life is worth reliving after all, thus justifying Cheiroso and delivering Suassuna's message, recurrent in his works, concerning the virtue of hope in earthly and everlasting life.

Although not the only one of any importance, Gil Vicente is rightly considered by those in the know to be the first and outstanding dramatist of the relatively scant Portuguese theatre. Equally important in the development of the Spanish as of the Portuguese drama from the sixteenth century, he may be thought of as the Shakespeare of the Iberian Peninsula. Earlier than Shakespeare, and somewhat less receptive to Renaissance currents that interested some of his contemporaries, Gil Vicente represents in the theatre a late flowering of the Medieval in Europe and on the Peninsula. Imitating at first the Castilians Juan del Encina and Lucas Fernández, he soon surpassed them in quality and variety. Further, he pointed the way to the great figures of the theatre of the Spanish Golden Age, which continued and renewed much of the Medieval as the Baroque anywhere often did. Contemporary Brazilian dramatists have hailed Gil Vicente as an illustrious forebear and allowed themselves to be influenced by him in varying degrees. The Portuguese title of the *Compadecida* suggests a religious play, particularly a miracle play; *auto*, like *jeu* in French, can however refer to almost any kind of dramatic work. The use of one of the Virgin's many names, the "Compassionate One," emphasizes the second part of the play. The title of the English-language version, *The Rogues' Trial*, although it too stresses the second half, is perhaps more appropriate to the work as a whole. Certainly both the *Compadecida* and *A Pena e a Lei* are a mixture of many diverse elements in the traditions of the Medieval-Renaissance religious drama and of Gil Vicente. I have attempted to focus on some details showing Suassuna's partial adaptation of more universal European and Vicentine models to the purely regional of Brazil.

NOTES

¹ See my article, "Poetic Humor and University of Suassuna's *Compadecida*," *BSU Forum*, X:3 (Summer 1969), 25-30.

² See Leon F. Lyday, "The *Barcas* and the *Compadecida*: Autos Past and Present," *LBR*, II:1 (Summer 1974), 84-89.

³ For additional adaptations of this and other popular theatre of the Northeast, on which he has done research and written elsewhere, see especially Hermilo Borba Filho's *A Donzela Joana*, discussed in my "Hermilo Borba Filho's *A Donzela Joana* and the Brazilianization of Joan of Arc," *BSU Forum*, XI:4 (1970), 27-32.