

UM BRASIL DE CIRCOS: A PRODUÇÃO DA LINGUAGEM CIRCENSE DO SÉCULO XIX AOS ANOS DE 1930, CAMPINAS: CIRCONTEUDO, 2021. PP. 520. DANIEL LOPES DE CARVALHO AND ERMINIA SILVA

JULIETA INFANTINO

University of Buenos Aires, National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations (CONICET)

U*M Brasil de Circos: a produção da linguagem circense do século XIX aos anos de 1930 (A Brazil of Circuses: the Production of Circus Language from the 1800s to the 1930s)* is an impressive work. Its 520 pages are filled with rigorously presented data from 42 circus companies that performed in Rio de Janeiro during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its lucid organization of this information makes it an important contribution to the history of the circus arts in particular, but also to the performing arts and social history in general.

I am going to highlight some of the main points and contributions of *A Brazil of Circuses*. Its academic rigor immediately stands out due to its historical research based on primary sources. This meticulousness is enhanced by the way in which the authors present their research of each circus company. The presentation of each company specifies the years and places where they performed in Rio. The primary sources (periodicals of the day) from which the information was extracted are occasionally reproduced within this encyclopaedic book. For each entry, a brief biography of the company studied is followed by thorough description of the “main aesthetic, physical, organizational and operational characteristics” of these companies and their productions (19).

This detailed presentation of the information makes it possible to observe time passing. Changes and tensions linked to the social, economic and political history

Contact: Julieta Infantino <julietainfantino@gmail.com>

of Brazil and the relations that Rio de Janeiro maintained with the dominant centres of artistic and cultural production are palpable as the reader advances through *A Brazil of Circuses*. These international sites of production linked to Rio are mainly found in Europe and later in North America, but many are also located in other Latin American countries. This mapping makes it possible to demonstrate how central the contribution of the circus has been to the development of art in Brazil and how important it is to continue investigating it as a cultural phenomenon. The authors argue that, despite the growth in recent years of circus studies as a field of research, most scholarship continues to present the history of circus by focusing on certain European origins and subsequent American developments. The sources shared in *A Brazil of Circuses* demonstrate that the circus shows that were performed in Rio and in the roaming circuits that linked central Latin American cities — in Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Mexico and beyond — made significant artistic contributions to the development of the circus arts worldwide.

One of the central contributions of this research is a deepening of our contemporary knowledge of the history of the circus in Latin American countries like Brazil. The authors are explicit that this is one of their goals:

Esse pouco conhecimento e visibilidade referente às histórias do circo no país aparece constantemente nos meios de produção e debate circense matizado em discursos e posturas que tentam conceituar a complexidade das artes circenses de forma dicotomizada entre ‘nova’ e ‘tradicional’, ou ‘contemporânea’ e ‘clássica’. Ao olharmos para a diversidade das realizações dos circenses no século XIX e início do XX percebemos a mistura, criatividade, inovação e atualidade permanente promovida por esses artistas que são elementos fundamentais para a constante transformação da linguagem circense (20)

[This scarcity of knowledge and visibility of circus stories in the country constantly appears in the means of production and the circus debate nuanced in discourses and positions that try to conceptualize the complexity of circus arts in a dichotomized way between ‘new’ and ‘traditional,’ or ‘contemporary’ and ‘classical.’ When observing the diversity of achievements of circus people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we notice the mixture, creativity, innovation and permanent updating promoted by these artists. These are fundamental elements for the constant transformation of circus language] (20, my translation).

This book values the circus as a central constitutive element of Brazilian cultural heritage and highlights the legitimacy of “circus language as artistic and popular expression” (21). It also promotes the continuity of the historical

research of these arts not only in Brazil but also throughout Latin America. With these contributions in mind, I applaud the way in which the authors valorize these sources and call for the critical study of them. I quote their words:

No que diz respeito mais especificamente à análise/interpretação/cruzamento das fontes, a proposta metodológica possui por base a ideia de que na fonte, por si só, não estão inscritas “a(s) verdade(s)”. Isto quer dizer que toda análise das fontes será orientada pelas escolhas teóricas, éticas e políticas do pesquisador (24).

[Regarding more specifically the analysis/interpretation/crossing of sources, the methodological proposal is based on the idea that, in the source, by itself, ‘the truth(s)’ are not inscribed. This means that any analysis of sources will be guided by the theoretical, ethical and political choices of the researcher] (24, my translation).

This call to think about the potential of historical sources from a critical approach transcends mere data accumulation and is an undeniable strength of *A Brazil of Circuses*. For example, the authors share a primary source documenting the fact that the circus artists Mr. and Mrs. Rhigas, who after their performances of prowess, Herculean strength, and juggling accompanied by singing and instrumental music at the Teatro São Pedro de Alcântara (one of the most prestigious venues of the day), also offered their services of entertainment in private homes as well as piano lessons (46). Specifically, this evidence allows us to see how even in 1827 artists displayed a multiplicity of work strategies that mixed performances in prestigious theatres with others in public or private spaces. These various gigs often included collaborations with other artistic companies (dance, music, theatre and variety).

Glimpses into the lives of performers like Mr. and Mrs. Rhigas demystify what are often thought of as modern-day, innovative work strategies and modalities of artistic production/reproduction that are sometimes perceived almost as exclusive to so-called “contemporary circus.” *A Brazil of Circuses* includes various historical examples of creative and innovative commitment that lead us to attend to the circus as an art that has been permanently redefined, reinvented and reimagined. The circuses its pages describe incorporate various languages onstage — dance, music, theatre — as well as technological innovations and the most varied dialogues with cultural, social, and artistic movements of Brazil within a global context. Through these examples, the authors invite us to rethink ingrained dichotomies, positioning themselves critically against representations that reduce the past to what is obsolete, stagnant, deteriorated and dead as compared to what is innovative, avant-garde and precursor.

In fact, what the book reveals throughout its pages is exactly how circus in Brazil and in various Latin American countries gradually merged with theatrical and variety shows, dances, concerts, sports competitions, political events, religious holidays and festivals to create a complex intertwining of entertainment with cultural life. This intertwining is not only present in the comprehensive pages of *A Brazil of Circuses*. It is also generated by its intertextual dialogue with the works that historians have produced in Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Brazil itself and other countries. This book inspires dialogical investigations that allow us to account for the power of Latin America in the creation of the modern circus and the great importance of activating these historical sources in the present. The authors express this sentiment in the last words of the book:

Temos mais caminhos a percorrer, pois, na aventura de estudar e conhecer as histórias do circo e seus protagonistas, o itinerário nunca cessa, ele se mantém aberto e rizomático e na expectativa de sempre termos parceiros e parceiras para seguir em união por novos caminhos (502).

[We have more ways to go, because the itinerary never stops in the adventure of studying and learning about the stories of the circus and its protagonists. It remains open and rhizomatic and with the expectation that we will always have partners and colleagues to follow new paths together] (502, my translation).

This closing quotation also somehow expresses the generosity that these pages transmit. A generosity that, I argue, is related to a way of conceptualizing the creation of knowledge as a critical and collective construction. *A Brazil of Circuses* is plural, full of dialogues to which Erminia Silva and Daniel de Carvalho Lopez invite us. It opens up pathways to discoveries and makes them available to future generations of artists, researchers and society as a whole.

Biography

Dr. Julieta Infantino is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires and is an Associate Researcher at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). She is a specialist in the development of circus arts in Argentina and in Latin America. Her studies focus on the historical, aesthetic and political aspects of these circus arts as well as the questions about identity they provoke. She has coordinated various research teams linked to the study of popular culture and cultural policies and has published books, compilations and academic articles both nationally and internationally.

