

A Brief History of Group Bardo

GROUP BARDO

A group of young artists moves to an old neighborhood by the sea. Families that work for the wealthy houses in the surrounding areas form the population. Some ladies are married to the few resistant fishermen that keep fighting the big companies, which rule the fishing business in town. Most men are unemployed or have no permanent job.

Hidden, isolated but still downtown (you just get off the main road, turn right and then downhill), that is Villa Brandão. In the past, a bold community living by the bay, with its own rituals and traditions based rather on African rituals brought by the slaves in the beginning of the 19 century than on the ancient European culture of Portuguese colonizers. A small piece of land that, by fortune, had not been demolished by the construction business, although that's always been a sad menace for everyone in the village: the ghost of becoming homeless.

There we were looking for shelter, searching for an environment that would stimulate the flow of our ideas, the practicing and consequent development of our art. We wanted to be anywhere away from the middle-class neighborhoods we originally came from, but still not too far... close enough to use the phone, open the mail box and keep some contact with our families as to the external world.

Marcondes was the first to arrive; he had been working on combining video and dance theater with a group of professional actors for years. He wanted to continue experimenting, but this time, with people that would face theater practice as part of their own lives, as a spiritual matter rather than a professional activity.

In the beginning it was just the three or four of us to occupy the central little plaza of the neighborhood, a site of children's

play where adults sit together to watch the sunset, talk about daily events and update information about the most popular “artform” in Brazil: TV Soap Opera. The plaza was the best place for us. There was also a soccer field downhill... but when it started raining it was impossible to keep on rehearsing in the red mud. Besides that, people in the village didn’t really dig the idea of that group of crazy folks making strange movements in their soccer field – the soccer field is kind of a sacred place here.

We went on practicing, every day at the same hour. After maybe two months, we noticed some children had started to imitate our movements. They would walk behind us and mimic every movement. First it seemed that they were just making fun of us, but if we took a close look... they could do it even better than us! They were so natural, not afraid of falling on that harsh ground, so creative when improvising! ... Somehow, they were really willing to participate. Far from our eyes, a whole world had opened its doors to them.

Let’s play with Marcondes...

The same week we invited them to do the practice with us. About 15 children came at the start.

Many others wanted to get on the training but they were still too small, we were afraid they would hurt themselves. Parents were not familiar with such practices of theater and dance improvisation. They found it unusual but never opposed their children participating.

Now by sunset, everybody in the Villa had something else to watch...

Santa Fábula – Mixed Media Performance

After some months of practice it was time to think of performing with the group. Marcondes thought of a play that would give us room to improvise with body consciousness and express the memory of our own body experience, our basic instincts and the way we deal with them in a social situation. Nobody had a special role or act, the subjects themselves should give shape to their sensitivity using the techniques of dance and theater

improvisation. We worked on body sounds but had no special dialogue or speech.

The play, as most of Marcondes work, was very influenced by the writings of Antonin Artaud (*The Theater and Its Double*) and Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*). He was trying to make a parallel between theater and religion, ritual and practice, bringing to the surface that precious part of the individual that often gets oppressed by education and society.

What does it look like

The costumes are very simple, made of low-cost material, but still impressive under the lights. We wear stockings as a second skin; some wear also a white robe made out of a thin material over the stockings. Then we rub on healing clay all over our bodies. The clay is available at health food stores. Sometime we also get it from friends who live near river areas.

The decor is made of little plastic bags filled with colored water. We fill the bags and then tie them to nylon threads that we hang on the ceiling of the stage area as curtains. That gives an amazing transparency effect under the lights. Everyone in the group works on the decor, it's like party day when we do it.

How could little children get into it?

They didn't have to go through complex intellectual questioning. They could feel it in themselves, in their breathing that changed as they became stronger and life was still not perfect, but for them life was not as heavy as to their parents and to other children who were not involved with the performance. The difficulties of daily life in a low-income family continued, but now they felt somehow stronger, they felt like individuals with a will and power, with a choice. They could communicate better and even fascinate the others with their acting skills.

We started performing the play at the rehearsing site. The most important was to be spontaneous, to keep our concentration and feel at ease in front of the audience as during the rehearsals, to make acting become as natural as playing for everyone. We performed at the Villa a couple of times till we were confident enough. Then we started presenting at some theaters in town.

The friends of Bardo

Some families would get more involved in the project than others. Some mothers would support their children and help us get them ready every time we'd go perform somewhere. They recognized how important the rehearsal was to them and would hurry them to the training instead of keeping them at home to do the households or sending them to church. Others would look down at our efforts, claiming that it was "a crazy idea that didn't bring bread home." In a community like Villa Brandão, where survival is the priority, to go on with the practice of theater was sometimes insane. Children had other needs and it was hard to keep on practicing and close our eyes to it.

In an attempt to provide a better and self-supported living standard to the children's families, we started to show them how to make a living selling handicraft, selling food, etc. We also gave



Photographs by Emil Miraztchiev

them information on how to prevent some diseases and how to treat them. We even got involved with local politics to encourage the sense of community and the understanding of laws and institutions. We didn't go too far in that direction, though.

Simone Dourado, Marcondes' sister, started to teach classes of jewelry handicraft to some mothers, Pascal Heranval had the children come to his house for painting workshops, Mariella would give singing lessons as a part of the training for the play, Alana and Leo were giving history and literature classes to the ones going to primary school or about to enter high school... We had a lot going on.

The friends of Bardo never existed as a formal institution. They are people who would gather and be there every time we had to organize a performance or take the children somewhere, like visit to museums, plays, music shows... the list includes some mothers whose kids were not necessarily in the play, other artists, our families and the bank cashiers' trade union.

Art and Politics

In April 2001, we organized with the community a festival called "The Assembly of the Gods Festival." The name was chosen as a joke in reaction to the protestant church "Assembly of God" which is right in the middle of the little square where we rehearse. It was also a response to the Protestants' negative attitude to our practice. All the publicity was made over the Internet. We had an audience of 400 people that night who came downhill to see



Performance by Group Bardo and friends, Shedhalle, 13 December 2002

video exhibitions, painting exhibitions, music performances and a big variety of handicraft, and delicious food made by excellent cooks of the Villa was available.

Many people wanted to move to the Villa after that. Its amazing view and fresh cultural life attracted them.

By then we thought our peaceful days there were over.

The People who came to the Villa

Some would just fall in love with the project and wanted to get involved with it straight away. We were visited by doctors, professors of sociology, agriculture (rational use of the urban



space), education experts that came and gave lots of ideas... We were very criticized for our informal procedures that had nothing to do with the way professionals of the social science work with their communities. But nobody seemed to have the magical key to all problems either.

We knew that we are not politicians, and each one of us had his own way to go. We had other art projects that required a lot of energy from all of us to take care of. We had our own bodies and souls to take care of. Up to that point, all we had been doing in this project was based on enthusiasm. We loved the practice, but who wanted to write a project and give it to the government, then enter a dog eat dog competition to get sponsored and be supervised by the state? Who among us was willing to get in the bureaucracy machine? – Deep silence.

We refused to be trapped by procedures that would kill our will to create with people. We refuse repetition. The Villa should emancipate itself without giving up to the system, learn to deal with the laws that rule the city and with its lords, learn to surf on a sea of institutions and create new possibilities not to drown.

Things were happening too fast. Mariella had won a prize that would give her the opportunity of recording her first album after 11 years of singing. Pascal had dates for exhibitions of his paintings and had to concentrate on it, Luciana had a proposition to tour with a big company and Sr. Antonio, the founder of the Villa, who is now 94 years old, was very ill. Many among us were so stressed. We were all running out of money for the expenses with the children, and lots of strange responsibilities were coming to us all at once.

There was no room for creation any more, and we decided to give it a break.

We finally understood that our action in the Villa had its limits: We could not go against the flow that way. That process was hurting us. People would even blame us for exploiting the children and making money out of their artwork. We wanted to quit, to go back to the times we didn't know the Villa, to forget the project and even move from there.

But it was not so easy for us to let go an ideal just because of gossiping and human misery. Besides that, some children wanted to go on with the play, and mothers complained that children



had nothing to do after we stopped, that the grown up ones would sit on the sidewalk of the main road after school and not come back home after class. We were upset.

Santa Fábula 2002

Santa Fábula has become an independent entity, like a being with a soul and its own life. It would stand regardless of the obstacles; it survives with its own inner power.

We decided to cut all kinds of involvement with the Villa but still continue training, rehearsing the play and giving history and Portuguese classes to a small group of children.

Children are growing...

When it comes to call people's attention we have big competition here: the 6, the 7, and the 9 o'clock TV soap opera. No matter where they are, people jump to go sit in front of their TV screens to watch it, it's stronger than their biological clock. The girls want to dress fancy as the stars they see on TV, and the boys want to have big cars... besides that, their spontaneity to improvise has suffered, many try hard to imitate the manners of TV characters and can't give themselves to acting anymore. The environment is taking over with no mercy. Parents are hardened by the tough lives they have, some even become violent, and life at home turns to be like hell.

Here we come to another phase of the project. The adults as the kids who still practice with us are the ones whose interest in the project is greater than any catastrophe. Children who even consider acting as an important alternative for their lives in the future.

We keep practicing at least three days a week, and the training is open to any one who wants to participate.

We are fewer but in a way more decided. Maybe more prepared to go further in the fields of creation.

I AM NUMBER ONE
YOU ARE NUMBER TWO
I DO NOT HAVE TO TAKE SHIT
FROM YOU
THE GERMAN GUY IS NUMBER
THREE
YOU DO NOT HAVE TO TAKE SHIT
FROM THE GERMAN GUY
THE RUSSIAN GUY IS NUMBER FOUR
THE GERMAN GUY DOES NOT HAVE
TO TAKE SHIT FROM THE RUSSIAN GUY
THE MEXICAN WOMAN IS
NUMBER FIVE
THE RUSSIAN GUY DOES
NOT HAVE TO TAKE SHIT
FROM THE MEXICAN WOMAN
THE CHICKEN IS NUMBER SIX
THE MEXICAN WOMAN DOES
NOT HAVE TO TAKE SHIT
FROM THE CHICKEN
PETER IS NUMBER EIGHT
THE CHICKEN DOES NOT HAVE
TO TAKE SHIT FROM PETER
THERE IS NO NUMBER NINE