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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE IDEAL: A STUDY OF THE
ELEMENTS OF NATURALISM AND MELODRAMA IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS
OF NELSON RODRIGUES

City University of New York

Ph.D. 1986

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A STUDY OF THE ELEMENTS OF NATURALISM AND MELODRAMA
IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF NELSON RODRIGUES

by

LUIZ ARTHUR NUNES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

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by

Luiz Arthur Nunes

Adviser: Professor Daniel Gerould

This thesis is a study of the dramatic works of the Brazilian playwright, Nelson Rodrigues (1912-1980). The description of the author's manipulation of the dramatic techniques derived from the traditions of naturalism and melodrama functions as the methodological approach, leading, eventually, to an analytical interpretation of the fundamental aspects of his dramatic universe.

After a brief history of Brazilian theatre, meant to define the cultural context in which Rodrigues's drama originated, the thesis starts with an analysis of his first two plays: The Woman Without Sin and Wedding Gown, which contain, in embryo, all the basic elements of his subsequent work, such as scenic projection of inner life, use of colloquial language, melodramatic effects, naturalistic observation of Brazilian urban society, anti-illusionistic theatrical procedures and non-linear plot development.

Chapter 3 examines the cycle of mythic plays, in

which the playwright deals with themes related to the collective unconscious. The stylistic treatment of the cycle departs largely from conventional realism and introduces elements of poetry, fantasy, the grotesque and the absurd.

The thesis proceeds with the study of the plays of the realistic cycle. Here the mythopoeic imagery can still be found. Yet, it is contained now within the framework of a dramatic composition based on accurate naturalistic observation. Here Rodrigues's harsh criticism of Brazilian society is strongly asserted. The last two chapters present the final conclusions drawn from the previous analysis. From behind the technical apparatus of melodrama and naturalism there emerges the author's personal vision of human existence, his world-view based upon the idea that human nature is split between an aspiration towards transcendental values (the idealized realm of melodrama) and a morbid attraction to the degradation of the flesh and matter (the debased world of naturalism).

The issue of "realism" in Nelson Rodrigues's theatre is thus a central problem. The final statement of the thesis is that Rodrigues has created a very peculiar and unconventional form of realism, which avoids a superficial reproduction of reality and seeks, instead, an unveiling of the deepest layers of human experience. In a paradoxical way,

in order to get at the core of reality, Nelson Rodrigues undermines, distorts and deconstructs the outer appearances of life.

FOREWORD

Since I started the Ph.D. Program in Theatre at the City University of New York, I have been encouraged to work on dramatists writing in Portuguese. Brazilian and Portuguese drama is almost entirely unknown outside its native countries. Introducing it to an audience of students and faculty at an American university can make a small, yet significant contribution to theatre scholarship in both English and Portuguese-speaking cultures. As I studied general topics, such as the theories of naturalism, symbolism and expressionism in the theatre, I applied these concepts to the works of authors such as Nelson Rodrigues, Fernando Pessoa and Oswald de Andrade. The decision about my dissertation subject for the doctoral degree was not difficult to make. It is generally agreed that Nelson Rodrigues is the most important Brazilian playwright, and I have been fascinated by his theatre since my adolescent days, when brilliant productions of his plays were shown at the old Italianate theatre of my home town by the finest acting ensembles which, at the time, used to tour the country.

The great difficulty I confronted was the fact that I could find but two plays--out of Rodrigues's seventeen--translated into English. I could not possibly

translate his complete works! What I did then was to summarize his plots and select, for quotation, bits of dialogue which seemed particularly illustrative, in an attempt to recreate for the reader who does not know the original, the feel of the author's dramatic universe. The translation of the quoted material cost me an incredible effort. Not only had I to struggle with my limitations as a non-native English speaker, but, most of all, with the impossibility of rendering in another language all the regional flavor, not to mention the dramatic fluidity and poetic suggestiveness, of Rodrigues's style.

I have chosen to study the elements of naturalism and melodrama in Nelson Rodrigues's theatre as a means of getting at what is most important: an investigation of the essence of his fictional world. I consider that his use of these literary and theatrical traditions reveals not merely an esthetic preference, but also a vision of Brazilian society and, more generally, of human existence; in short, a Weltanschauung or worldview.

But before starting with my analysis of Brazil's most celebrated dramatist, I would like to acknowledge the support and help of a number of people and institutions that made this work possible. C.A.P.E.S. (Brazil's Ministry of Education), The University of Rio Grande do Sul (to whose faculty I belong), the Latin American Scholarship Program for American Universities and C.U.N.Y. gave me the financial

support which allowed me to live and study in New York City for three years and realize a four-month research on Nelson Rodrigues in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In this research, the process of gathering information was greatly facilitated by Dona Helena Rodrigues, the playwright's sister, by the critics Sábato Magaldi (Brazil's foremost specialist on Nelson Rodrigues), Jan Michalski and Ângela Leite Lopes, and by the theatre directors Eduardo Tolentino and Antunes Filho. I also wish to thank the intellectual support and encouragement I received from my supervisory committee, Professors Harry Carlson, Marion Holt and Daniel Gerould. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my research director, Professor Daniel Gerould, who, during my three years at C.U.N.Y. made me rediscover the fascinating world of dramatic literature and, thus, brought me back to Nelson Rodrigues.

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A NOTE ON SOME IMPORTANT BRAZILIAN-PORTUGUESE TERMS
AND CONCEPTS USED IN THIS THESIS

Nelson Rodrigues's theatre is centered on a detailed description of a certain social and cultural environment, that is, a large urban center in mid-twentieth century Brazil--more specifically, the city of Rio de Janeiro. Being a typically Brazilian author, many of the terms and expressions he utilizes cannot be translated into a foreign language, as they refer to certain realities, facts or phenomena which have no correspondence in other cultures. Such is the case of umbanda, gafieira or jogo do bicho, for example. In the notes which follow each chapter, I have tried to explain such words as clearly as possible. Yet, two important concepts, which constantly recur throughout the text, deserve a more careful description.

One of them is the term carioca. It is an Indian word which is applied to people and things related to the city of Rio de Janeiro. A native from Rio is a carioca. We have the beautiful carioca beaches and the ugly carioca slums. Yet, the term implies much more than that. It refers to a way of speaking (the very peculiar carioca accent), to specific forms of behavior, attitudes, habits

and values, a way of responding to life, which Rodrigues captures with admirable accuracy in his plays. He, who has spent most of his life in Rio and almost never left the city, is undoubtedly the most carioca of all Brazilian playwrights, not to say of all Brazilian artists in general.

The other important concept is that of subúrbio. It translates as "suburbs." However, no parallel can be traced between American suburbs and the subúrbio of a Brazilian city like Rio de Janeiro. Brazilian suburbs are inhabited by people from the lower middle-class, by the dispossessed. They are not totally dispossessed, as the dwellers of the favelas, the slums, which, by the way, are spread over the rocky hills, scattered right in the middle of the more affluent areas of the city. Rio's suburbs are situated at a great distance from what is known as "the city,"--the downtown section. Suburban dwellers have to take long rides in overcrowded trains or buses to get to their work in the city. Most of them are unskilled workers, performing menial jobs and receiving low salaries. They are exploited, oppressed, frustrated, humiliated people. Nonetheless, they cultivate a very strict code of honor, of decency, of moral values, often placed within a mystic framework composed of disparate religious elements, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Spiritualism, African cults and other minor

sects and superstitions. Of course, there is crime, prostitution, theft and all sorts of illegal practices in the suburbs. But such transgressions do not express a liberal or rebellious attitude. On the contrary, they are a form of responding to all the pressures of society. When such pressures become unbearable, there is a violent explosion.

Geographically speaking, Rio's suburbs occupy the Northern section of the city, the Zona Norte, as opposed to the Southern section, the Zona Sul, where the districts of Copacabana and Ipanema, with their elegant skyscrapers lining up along the luxurious beaches, are situated. This is the territory of the middle and upper middle-class, and of the high bourgeoisie. It is a place of pleasure, of culture, of sophisticated commerce and big business. People there are liberal, open-minded, cultivated, affluent, healthy, beautiful. There is a tremendous cultural gap between Zona Norte and Zona Sul. Zona Sul looks at Zona Norte with contempt and prejudice, whereas Zona Norte sees Zona Sul with a mix of envy and admiration, and with a great deal of fear and hate also. To their moralistic eyes, it appears as a place of sin and perdition. Rodrigues often concentrates the action of his plays on one of these two environments (more frequently on the Northern suburbs), but also, many times, sets them one against the other. Social and cultural clashes are then exposed in all their violence.

INTRODUCTION

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAZILIAN THEATRE PRIOR TO NELSON RODRIGUES¹

Theatre in Brazil, considered as a regular activity based on a continuous and steady relationship between playwrights, performers and audience, begins to occur only in the early nineteenth century, after the independence from Portugal, when the new urban society has already developed more sophisticated cultural demands. Prior to that, the scarce and isolated theatrical events which occurred in colonial times were not significant enough to be regarded as a consistent dramatic production. Yet they are worth mentioning because, to some extent, they paved the way for the emergence of a theatrical life which would attain artistic maturity in the twentieth century with the work of Nelson Rodrigues.

Theatre was introduced in Brasil as early as the second half of the sixteenth century by the Jesuit missionaries, who wrote and staged religious plays inspired by the model of the Portuguese medieval autos,² as a means of instructing the newly converted Indians in Catholic

doctrine and mythology. Secular spectacles appear only in the seventeenth century as part of public festivities to commemorate a historical date or to pay homage to an illustrious personage. Such events related mostly to the chivalric games of the Middle Ages, and thus they were almost devoid of any dramatic content.

It was not before the second half of the eighteenth century that the city of Rio de Janeiro, the new capital, had grown important enough to originate some timid attempts in establishing theatre companies on a more permanent basis, such as the Casa da Ópera,³ directed by Father Ventura, a mulatto priest who specialized in singing lundus⁴ and dancing fadinhos,⁵ aside from being an orchestra conductor. Such early manifestations, according to the vague and scarce accounts of the social and cultural life of the period, had a very rustic and primitive quality. They were produced and attended by the lower strata of society, mostly blacks and half-breeds. In the rigidly hierarchical world of landowners and slaves, such events were seen by the prejudiced aristocracy as a plebeian activity unworthy of any appreciation.

However, a few references to the staging of European masters, such as Molière, Calderón and Metastasio, have been reported by the chroniclers of the time. Also the works of a relatively important playwright, Antônio José da Silva, "o Judeu",⁶ have remained to

our days. Yet he can only be considered Brazilian for the fact that he was born in Rio de Janeiro, since, very early, he moved to Lisbon, where he received his education, wrote all his plays and lived most of his life, which ended tragically as he was sentenced by the Holy Inquisition to be burned at the stake. His dramatic output consists of seven plays, the most interesting of which, As Guerras do Alecrim e da Mangerona,⁷ is still produced nowadays.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the great economical prosperity brought by the exploitation of gold and precious stones in the inland province of Minas Gerais, generated a rich cultural life in the city of Ouro Preto, the main urban center of the region. Some of the greatest works of Brazilian baroque art and architecture were created in such favorable circumstances. An important literary production was also developed by a number of intellectuals, along the lines of European Enlightenment and the poetic school of Arcadism. Names such as Cláudio Manuel da Costa and Inácio Alvarenga Peixoto, whose works stand out among the finest lyric poetry of these early days, also tried their hand at playwriting. Their tragedies, presumably composed in the neoclassic style, were staged in the theatre of Ouro Preto. Again all we have are but historical references, for none of such works survived to our days.

The flight of the Portuguese royal family, with

its entire court, to Brazil, due to the Napoleonic wars in the early nineteenth century, played and exceedingly important role in the flourishing of a more active cultural life in the city of Rio de Janeiro. An elegant theatre house, suitable to the new seat of the Portuguese kingdom, was immediately erected. The political independence in 1822 and the new revolutionary ideas of the romantic movement, of European import, with all its nationalistic implications, also had a strong influence on the evolution of theatrical activity in the country. A number of theatre companies sprang up, and their demand for dramatic works exalting or portraying the life of the newly-born nation, was responsible for the appearance of the first authentically Brazilian playwrights. Two of them, Gonçalves de Magalhães and Martins Pena, are considered by literary historians to be the founders of Brazilian tragedy and comedy, respectively. De Magalhães's grandiloquent dramas have little, if any, artistic quality. If some significance is to be attached to them, it comes only from the fact that they dealt with national subjects. To some extent they also prepared the way for Gonçalves Dias, a later romantic poet, whose tragedy, Leonor de Mendonça, (inspired, curiously enough, by an episode in the Portuguese historic mythology) is the only historical drama worthy of critical appraisal in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Comedy of manners being the genre in which Brazilian drama developed a truly significant tradition for the next one hundred years, the works of Martins Pena deserve careful examination, not only for their historical importance, but also for their undeniable dramatic qualities. The "Brazilian Molière" (a literary cliché frequently applied to him) was the first professional playwright of real talent to appear on the primitive stage of the time. We ignore how he learned his craft and which models inspired him. He was an intuitive entertainer who became immensely popular with an audience capable of an immediate identification with his depiction of scenes and characters drawn from everyday life. Pena's career was very short: he began writing when he was twenty-two years old and died at thirty-three. Yet his works were of such great popular demand that in eleven years he was able to write twenty comedies and five dramas. His early plays portray the rural milieu in a mild satiric mode, with charming naturalistic detail. As he gradually moved towards the observation of city life, his social commentary acquired a sharper edge, while the comic procedures became more elaborated, displaying the liveliness, the physicality and the intricacy of high farce.

Another prominent figure of the theatre of the time is the actor João Caetano. The theatrical scene of that time was entirely dominated by Portuguese actors.

Caetano's main concern was to liberate the stage of such an influence, so that a genuinely Brazilian style of representation could finally come forth, a purpose which was in perfect accord with the nationalistic tendencies of the period. Throughout his career, which spanned for more than twenty-five years, the results he obtained in the improvement of acting and staging techniques cannot be praised enough. Good acting, for João Caetano, should rely upon a deep knowledge of the character's "intimate soul."⁸ He also emphasized simplicity and naturalness on stage, as a reaction to the declamatory style in vogue at the time. As a consequence, he rebelled against the standard procedure, even for Brazilian actors, of reproducing the Portuguese accent and adopted the local way of speaking. In terms of stage production, he criticized the negligence of his contemporaries and strove for unity and a careful organization of the performance elements.

João Caetano's repertory not only reflects the theatrical tendencies of the period, but also reveals a great deal about the taste of the average audience. Being primarily a dramatic actor, he avoided comedy and, thus, completely ignored the works of Martins Pena. Since Brazilian playwrights could not provide him with serious drama of good quality, he limited himself to foreign authors. Caetano tackled French neoclassic tragedy and romantic drama, and even tried his hand at

Othello and Hamlet (in Ducis's adaptations, which fitted the Shakesperean tragedies into the classic unities). It was in French melodrama, however, (Bourchardy, Arago, Anicet-Bourgeois) that he found the best vehicle for his talent and an enthusiastic response from his audience.

The realistic vogue of the second half of the nineteenth century brought the decay of sentimental drama and the emergence of the pièce-a-thèse imported from France. Dumas Fils's The Lady of the Camelias took the country by storm. A number of new playwrights experimented with the genre, but all they could achieve was a mere repetition of the old melodramatic formulas, dressed in modern costumes. Such plays not only displayed the same flaws as their French models (a sententious style in dialogue and an absolute concession to bourgeois morality) but also failed in the depiction of the social milieu and in the evocation of powerful emotions, the two qualities that make Dumas's play a convincing piece of theatre. Even José de Alencar, Brazil's greatest romantic novelist, who strove, in his fiction, for an accurate portrayal of social life, reaffirms, in his play As Asas de um Anjo,⁹ (a domestic version of Camille), the same moralistic principles of the society he criticized in his novels. Such fact attests, once again, the conservative tendencies of the theatrical enterprise, due to its great dependence on public approval. At the end of his life, de Alencar confessed he gave up playwriting because "the

theatre audiences in Rio are a century behind my ideas as a writer."¹⁰

The naturalistic movement at the end of the nineteenth century, which motivated a whole new generation of writers to produce some of the finest achievements of the Brazilian novel, was completely ignored by the theatre. A new shift in the taste of our audiences was taking place. Operetta, burlesque and variety shows took over the stage. A countless number of French, Italian and Portuguese vaudeville troupes flocked to Brazil. Many of these foreign artists remained in the country and eventually organized domestic companies. Thus, one of the richest traditions of Brazilian popular spectacle began to evolve. Brazilian vaudeville was the birthplace of a great number of extraordinarily popular comedians, and its influence on serious comedy, in spite of all intellectual prejudices, was extremely significant.

Comedy of manners, nonetheless, never lost its appeal. By the end of the century Arthur Azevedo managed to adapt the formulas of the French farce of Feydeau and Labiche into the framework of the comic tradition inherited from Martins Pena. His masterpiece, A Capital Federal,¹¹ is a delightful satire on the frivolities of the carioca upper crust. There is nothing very original in the play's dramatic elements, but they are skillfully combined into a cohesive composition of an irresistible theatricality.

Brazil remained totally apart from the esthetic revolution of the European avant-garde theatre of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Names such as Stanislavski, Copeau, Meyerhold or Gordon Craig were completely unknown to our theatre professionals. Nevertheless, new companies with young talented actors continued to emerge. Theatre-going now played an important part in the cultural habits of the population. The effervescence of theatrical life made it possible for playwrights to become fully professional. Authors like Gastão Tojeiro, Viriato Correia and Oduvaldo Vianna wrote exclusively for the stage. Thus, craftsmanship in play-making had an enormous development, especially in the period of the twenties and thirties. None of these playwrights can be praised for the esthetic value of their works. Yet, their ingenuity in plot construction, their ability to manipulate the audience's interest, the fluency and naturalness of their dialogue, all such technical advances were extremely relevant to the evolution of Brazilian drama, in the sense that they paved the way for the major dramatists to come two decades later, the greatest of all being Nelson Rodrigues.

In the early twenties, the other arts-literature, music, painting and sculpture-were undergoing a radical transformation. The cultural-historical event of the Semana de Arte Moderna,¹² which took place in São Paulo in 1922, inaugurated an esthetic revolution which attuned

Brazilian art to the most progressive trends of European culture. The importance of the Brazilian modernist movement is immense. It fructified in the works of our greatest poets, novelists, painters and musicians, such as Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Jorge Amado, Cândido Portinari and Heitor Villa-Lobos, just to cite a few names of international recognition. Theatre, however, remained untouched by all such advances. It is true that Oswald de Andrade, one of the main writers and theorists of the modernist movement, produced three plays: O Rei da Vela, A Morta and O Homem e o Cavalo.¹³ In such plays he utilized, consciously or intuitively, it is impossible to affirm, a number of innovations of the European avant-garde theatre: expressionist and symbolist methods, Brechtian alienating effects, Pirandellian and Mayakovskian techniques. Such procedures were associated with a highly explosive political content, of Marxist and anarchist undertones, the whole thing resulting in a devastating indictment of Brazilian cultural, political and social institutions. Aside from the fact that the official censorship would never allow such plays to appear on the stage, their dramatic form seemed absolutely outlandish and incomprehensible to the theatre professionals of the time, let alone to the audience. Thus de Andrade's plays had to wait for the theatrical experimenting of the sixties to be finally revealed to the Brazilian public. The test of the stage, despite its delay, showed that, thirty

years later, the power of shock of de Andrade's theatre remained undiminished.

It was only in the forties that Brazilian theatre had grown mature enough to absorb modern innovations. An essential factor in this process was the arrival of a number of European directors who fled from the war: the Italians Adolfo Celi, Luciano Salce, Ruggero Jaccobi, Flaminio Bollini, Alberto d'Aversa and Gianni Ratto, the Belgian Maurice Vaneau and the Polish Zbigniew Ziemiński (who played a central role in the promotion of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre, as we shall see later). The fundamental contribution of these artists is not limited to the fact of their introducing into the Brazilian stage a whole array of theatrical procedures of the modern European theatre. Brazilian theatre groups, at the time, were based on the star-system. Actors and actresses of great popularity were the producers and directors of their shows and had very little concern for the problems of mise-en-scène. The European immigrants showed our primitive, yet talented artists, the importance of having a professional director to give a unifying concept to the whole production, to look after ensemble acting and to organize the scenic elements, which had grown more numerous and complex with the implanting of modern techniques. Many of the prestigious actors of the old school were open-minded enough to accept such novelties and adapt them to their more commercial enterprises. At the same time, as a

reaction against the old-fashioned theatre, several amateur groups, with higher esthetic ambitions, began to spring up. Thus the European directors found a fertile soil for their experimenting. Some of these young troupes eventually became professional companies, and their innovative work gave a powerful impulse to the renovation of Brazilian theatre. One of them, Os Comediantes, is particularly important to our purposes, for they were the ones who produced, under the direction of Ziembisñki, the play that revolutionized Brazilian theatre and drama: Vestido de Noiva,¹⁴ written by an unknown playwright named Nelson Rodrigues.

NOTES

¹Most of the information in this section was drawn from Afrânio Coutinho, gen. ed., A Literatura no Brasil, 6 vols., 2nd. ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editorial Sul Americana S.A. 1969), vol. 6: Evolução da Literatura Dramática, by Décio de Almeida Prado, pp. 7-37; and Sábato Magaldi, Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro (São Paulo: Difusão Européia do Livro, 1962) pp. 202-211.

²Autos is the Portuguese term for the texts written in the tradition of the theatre, religious or profane, of the Middle Ages.

³Opera House.

⁴An early Afro-Brazilian form of popular song.

⁵A music and dance form derived from the Portuguese tradition.

⁶"The Jew."

⁷The Wars of Rosemary and Marjoram.

⁸Magaldi, Panorama do Teatro Brasileiro, p. 60.

⁹An Angel's Wings.

¹⁰Prado, A Evolução da Literatura Dramática, p. 16.

¹¹The Federal Capital.

¹²"The Week of Modern Art," a cultural event in which, in the Municipal Theatre of São Paulo, the new generation of modernist artists exhibited their works and promoted their revolutionary esthetic ideas.

¹³The King of the Candle, The Dead Woman and The Man and the Horse.

¹⁴Wedding Gown.

CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN WITHOUT SIN: THE EMERGENCE OF
A NEW PLAYWRIGHT

Wedding Gown was not the first play written by Nelson Rodrigues. In 1941, he had written A Mulher Sem Pecado (The Woman Without Sin), which was produced in 1942 by the Comédia Brasileira, a state-subsidized company. Rodrigues was a newspaperman and had never thought of writing for the theatre before. According to his own testimony, as he was undergoing financial difficulties at the time, he had the idea of writing a chanchada¹ in order to make money.² The Woman Without Sin came out neither as a chanchada nor did it bring money to its author. Nonetheless, it was an extremely significant theatrical event, since it revealed an extraordinary new talent for the stage. In fact, the play contains, in potential, all the dramatic values to come into full bloom in the following works, which would establish the new playwright as the renovator of Brazilian drama.

The play's opening reveals a middle-class living-room, where Olegário, a middle-aged paralytic, is frantically impelling his wheelchair back and forth from

one corner of the stage to the other. In the background sits Dona Aninha, described in the stage direction as a "demented, yet peaceful old lady." Throughout the entire play, she will be constantly wringing a handkerchief, without uttering a single word. The stage direction also mentions "a ten-year-old girl in a short dress . . . , sitting on a stairs step, her crossed hands resting on her vagina." It is specified that such figure "exists only in the sick imagination of the paralytic" and will appear at the "most crucial moments" of the action.

In the first scene, Olegário, in a state of great exasperation, interrogates Inêzia, the maid, about his wife, Lídia, who was out shopping. He wants to know if there were any phone calls for her and if she had received any mail. Inêzia shows him a telegram, which Olegário eagerly snatches from her hands. It is evident that he is tortured by an extreme jealousy and bribes his servants to spy on his wife.

Umberto, the chauffeur, is the next person to be questioned, for he drove Lídia to all her shopping in the afternoon. Before starting the inquiry, Olegário, irritated with Umberto's habit of chewing a toothpick, rudely orders him to spit it out. Such small incident, apparently irrelevant to the plot, besides functioning as an element of characterization (the chauffeur's unrefinement

and vulgarity), hints at an important procedure of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre, to be further developed in the following plays: his exploration of petty, crude and tasteless details.

Umberto's report of Lídia's steps is interrupted by a pause, in which Olegário's eyes follow the little girl crossing the stage. The other characters are completely unaware of this apparition which, as we have seen, constitutes an element of the protagonist's subjectivity, which is materially projected on the stage. In the next scene, Nelson Rodrigues makes a different use of the same technique. In order to reveal Olegário's thoughts, instead of employing the traditional procedure of the soliloquy, the playwright constructs a dialogue between the protagonist and an "Inner Voice," which comes amplified from off-stage. Such dialogue is composed of a jumble of disconnected ideas, attesting Olegário's state of mental confusion. At a certain point the "Inner Voice" announces the entrance of the phantom girl: "There she comes again. She won't leave me alone."

The world of "normal reality" is reestablished with Lídia's arrival. She is described as a beautiful, elegant young woman. Through the conversation between husband and wife, we can discern the deteriorated state of their relationship. Olegário starts a scene of jealousy:

OLEGÁRIO:

How can you say your life has no secrets? I can't be by your side all time. How can I know about the people you look at on the street? I'm not inside you to know your feelings, your fantasies. . . . Those beach boys you see on the street... Are you trying to persuade me you've never felt attracted to them? Are you? Those strong, tanned, wide-shouldered studs! Haven't you ever kissed one of them in your thoughts? Hun? Of course you have! There's no one, no one, to control your imagination!

As the discussion goes on and on, we detect a touch of foreboding in one of Lídia's responses:

LÍDIA:

A husband saying such things! Making such insinuations! Suggesting dirty things to his wife! I'll end up doing... oh, I don't know what!

An obsessive personality such as Olegário's, which makes him lose track of reality and plunge into the delirious world of his imagination, is a recurrent characteristic of Nelson Rodrigues's heroes. Olegário is incapable of realizing, let alone of controlling, his irrational impulses. He seems to be possessed by an irrepressible force emanating from the darkest, deepest core of his soul. Like several other dwellers in Rodrigues' dramatic world, he is ruled by his passions, a marionette of the unconscious. In fact, the irrational drives often operate as a fatalistic agent in the lives of such characters, depriving them of any freedom of choice and dragging them to a tragic downfall. Leading such an extreme life, Olegário is permanently submerged in a state of paroxysm. His emotional reactions are heightened to a level of

exacerbation which frequently transcends the limits of conventional realistic psychology. He, at times, becomes grotesque, almost surreal.

As Lídia goes out, a new character is introduced: Joel, an employee at Olegário's business office. He is also being bribed by his boss, who promised him a job promotion in exchange of information about Lídia's past. Joel could obtain such information with Sampaio, his colleague at the office, who had known Lídia before her marriage. The revelation Joel supplies is the nickname Lídia was given in her neighborhood in her single days, due to the fact that she used to have a lot of boyfriends: "V-8."³ Joel adds that Sampaio had told everybody in the office about the nickname, so that every time Lídia showed up there, the general remark would be: "Here comes V-8!" Olegário is crushed: "I'm the husband of a V-8!" The Inner Voice is heard again repeating: "V-8, V-8!"

In the following scene, while Lídia is trying to feed Dona Aninha, Olegário, in another fit of jealousy, insults her several times, shouting "V-8!" at her face. A stage direction notes Lídia's "hateful and despising" glances at her husband when he turns his back on her. Yet, she manages to control herself and react with indifference at his provocation, which motivates a change of tactics from Olegário:

OLEGÁRIO:

You know something, I think marital fidelity

should be an optional virtue. . . . Each day the wife would decide if she is going to be faithful or not. (Sarcastically) You'd have the right to be unfaithful. How wonderful!

As Lídia keeps ignoring him, Olegário, in his sadistic frenzy, tries a new stratagem. He mentions the telegram, which, supposedly, brings news of a terrible car accident in which a man's legs have been crushed. Olegário cruelly plays with Lídia's growing anxiety, retarding the revelation of the man's identity. Finally, as the curtain slowly comes down on the first act, he shouts:

OLEGÁRIO:

It's him! Him! Your lover! He had his two legs mangled!.... (With a crazed laughter) Your lover! Your lover!

The act ends melodramatically: "Crying like an insane woman, Lídia falls at Olegário's feet." Such an ending carries ambiguous implications, as it suggests that the husband's suspicions were not unfounded after all. Aside from the stage composition, Nelson Rodrigues is utilizing here another typical device of the melodramatic tradition: the impact of a sudden reversal at the close of an act.

The second act opens as an immediate sequence to the previous action. Olegário is pointing an accusatory finger at the woman at his feet. Lídia finally manages to shake off her stupor. In a violent reaction, she tells her husband she can no longer cope with such an unbearable pressure and threatens to abandon him. Olegário realizes

he has gone too far and confesses he had made up the accident story as a maneuver to test Lídia's reaction.

As the discussion goes on, the playwright sheds some light on the couple's past. Lídia complains about her husband's sexual indifference, which dates from the times prior to his infirmity:

LÍDIA:

You've never been a real husband! Even after all these years I remain almost totally ignorant about love. . . . In boarding-school I learned a lot more about life than after I married you.

OLEGÁRIO:

(Curtly) I acted like that because I respected you! . . . You were a wife, not a mistress! I just couldn't, you understand? There are limits to what you can do with your wife. . . . And now let me tell you something else. . . . You want to know my ideal of a perfect marriage, do you? I'd like both husband and wife to remain chaste, chaste with one another, always, day and night. Can you imagine that? Living under the same roof, sleeping in the same bed, side by side, and yet not a single embrace. Making love, even with your own husband, means damnation! Every woman who experiences love should be dragged by her hair...

Such a view of sex, as expressed by Olegário, will later reappear, under different forms, in the speeches of several other Rodrigues's characters. Sex is sordid and, thus, should be banned even, or most of all, from marriage. The strong restrictions implied in such a concept of "conjugal respect" denotes to what extent sexual activity is associated with the ideas of sin and damnation. A great number of Rodrigues's couples will fit into this rigidly moralistic mold. Such an opposition between carnal love and an idealized notion of "pure love" trans-

lates into a vision of sex and marriage as two incompatible elements. Sex can only be experienced as an evil thing, a moral transgression, outside of marriage. Consequently, Olegário's paralytic condition becomes an instrument, both of self-punishment (an expiation of his guilty feelings about his sexual urges) and of self-mutilation, through which he experiences the masochistic pleasure of striving towards an ideal of romantic purity implied in his absurd demand of chastity.

The idea of physical beauty as a form of perversion, sex being a bodily function, is another recurrent motif in the repressed world of Rodrigues's heroes. It is echoed in Olegário's criticism of Lúcia's feminine "vanities":

OLEGÁRIO:

Is it for my sake that you go to the masseur? To the hairdresser? To the fashion shows? Why should a woman make herself beautiful if she wants to remain chaste? . . . You've never been as pretty as you are now. You shouldn't be so pretty. It's almost... indecent. You're becoming a real woman!

The last sentence of Olegário's speech infers that assuming one's sexual identity also carries a connotation of moral depravity. Sexuality has to be sacrificed in the name of spiritual integrity. This form of self-denial is the price to be paid if such an idealistic goal is to be attained.

As the Inner Voices resume their litany of "V-8! V-8!" Olegário complains of having "a hell inside my

head. A private hell of my own." The situation of a man encircled in the inferno of his obsession will be a major conflict in Rodrigues's dramas:

OLEGÁRIO:

. . . I suspect one day I'll end up like my mother... (Approaching Dona Aninha) Endlessly wringing a handkerchief, in absolute silence... She doesn't even utter a whimper... She is incapable of screaming, of howling... (in a strangled voice) I'll end up like that!

The constant presence of Dona Aninha serves to several functions. Throughout the play, up to its very end, her apathy provides dramatic counterpoint to the highly passionate behavior of the other characters. Her repetitive, automatic action creates a disturbing effect of oddity, we can even say, of absurdity, which often helps to deflate the intense display of emotionalism around her. In fact, in his first play, Nelson Rodrigues is frequently on the verge of falling into the excesses of melodrama. Not that he had anything against them--on the contrary. We will have plenty of opportunities to observe, in the following plays, his intentional exploration of melodramatic techniques. Yet, he usually manages to find some clever device to counterbalance such excesses, so that they will not have a ludicrous effect, unless he wants them to be ludicrous--a deliberate procedure he will sometimes choose to explore.

Another function of Dona Aninha's compulsive behavior is to echo, in a minor key, Olegário's obsess-

Givenness. Some critics have also suggested the possibility of an attempt, on the part of the playwright, of dealing with the naturalistic theme of heredity. However, there is a major distinction to be made between Olegário's madness and his mother's. Olegário still keeps one foot in reality, whereas Dona Aninha's numbness implies a total escape from reality. As we will often see in other insane characters of Nelson Rodrigues's plays, life has become so unbearable to them that they choose to alienate themselves completely from it. Olegário's suggestion that he would eventually become like his mother reflects his obscure desire to put a stop to his inner torments by means of retiring into another realm of consciousness, free from the predicaments of life. Living in the real world, thus, is regarded as an intolerable experience; but living in the world of madness will not replace it for a more rewarding one. The world of madness is a realm of emptiness. Nelson Rodrigues's lunatics do not have any fantasies, any sort of psychological activity. They live in a void. Madness is, thus, the opposite of life, the ultimate rejection of reality, the affirmation, in a negative way, of the absurdity of the human condition.

Following the scene between Olegário and Lúcia, an unexpected incident provides further development of the plot. Dona Márcia, Lúcia's mother, who also lives in the house, tells Olegário of her suspicions of a love affair going on between Umberto, the chauffeur, and Inêz,

the maid. The night before she had caught Inézia sneaking into Umberto's room. Olegário calls the chauffeur in order to dismiss him right away. Umberto admits that the maid actually tried to seduce him, but nothing had happened between them, for a very simple reason, he explains: he had an "accident" in his childhood:

UMBERTO:

Well, it wasn't really an accident. It was... an act of retaliation. Somebody wanted to take revenge on my father in the person of his only son... that is, me... (With a wild laugh) I had gone swimming in the river, I was a little boy. Then came my father's enemy. The mutilation happened so fast that I hardly felt it at all... I ran, screaming, leaving a trail of blood behind me.

Olegário feels greatly relieved by such revelation. He decides to keep the chauffeur. Umberto has ceased to be a threat to his jealous zeal.

Olegário is psychologically exhausted. Once more he is assailed by the phantoms of his imagination. The little girl in her short dress returns. Several men come out of Lídia's room, while she, in her underwear, waves at them from the top of the stairs, saying: "Mon chéri, mon chéri!" The hallucination is interrupted by Lídia's entrance. She is upset with her husband's not having fired Umberto after the incident with the maid. Olegário has a different opinion: it is Inézia, and not Umberto, who should be fired, and Dona Márcia should worry about her own sins and leave the other people alone.

Lídia is left alone. She does not perceive Umber-

to silently coming behind her. She turns around, in a start, when she hears his whispering voice: "Dona Lídia..." Unexpectedly Umberto pulls Lídia to him and kisses her. The second act ends as she desperately tries to release herself: "You, creep! You, bastard!"

As in the transition between Act 1 and 2, the action flows uninterruptedly into the third act. Lídia tries to run away from Umberto, but he blocks her way out. He wants her to admit that she is attracted to him: "You like me, you know that." A whole seduction scene starts to unfold. He approaches her, "their mouths almost touching." Lídia's rejection--"I don't want it!"--sounds rather like an imploration. Umberto does not believe her:

UMBERTO:

Oh, yes, you do. Now you want it more than ever. (In a somber, sad tone) Now you know who I am.

LÍDIA:

You're a murderer. . . . Sometimes I think that, if I were left alone with you in a desert place, I wouldn't even have the time to scream. You'd...

Umberto becomes more and more audacious:

UMBERTO:

Let me say something dirty in your ear. An insult.

LÍDIA:

(Voluptuously) No!

UMBERTO:

It's just one word. Listen. (He pronounces

the unspeakable word. Lídia has a shiver) . . . When I desire a woman, I have to insult her!

Lídia finally surrenders to Umberto's seduction. She lets him kiss her. They swiftly move apart, as they hear the noise of Olegário's wheelchair.

In these scenes, Nelson Rodrigues made use of another device of the stock and trade of melodrama: the false clue. By feeding the spectators with wrong information and then thwarting their expectations with sudden veerings, the playwright obtains a great effect of surprise. Through Umberto's bizarre castration story, he has made both Olegário and the audience believe that the chauffeur could not be a threat to Lídia's virtue. Lídia's insistence in having him dismissed because of the alleged affair with the maid is also a misleading device. Soon we will realize that she wanted to get rid of Umberto, not because of his improper conduct, but because of her fear of his seductive powers. Umberto's false claim to impotence is unmasked in the sudden reversal at the end of the act, while Lídia's real feelings about the chauffeur are revealed in the following scene.

Lídia is the first of Nelson Rodrigues's oppressed women. Olegário's morbid jealousy, added to his neurotic ideas about sex and marriage, subjects her to an unbearable pressure. Constant humiliation and sexual frustration will gradually motivate her moral transformation. Even if innocent at first, Lídia is driven towards adultery by

her own husband. Her surrendering to Umberto's seduction can be regarded as an attitude of rebellion against Olegário's oppression. Yet, such rebellion does not mean an act of self-liberation. In fact, Lúdia is contaminated by Olegário's sick notions about sex and morality. Umberto is characterized as a sexually violent man. Lúdia's succumbing to his seduction, thus, has a masochistic quality of self-degradation. In the world of The Woman Without Sin, sex cannot be separated from the notion of moral corruption. It necessarily entails guilt and self-debasement as an act of expiation. Yet, concomitantly with such painful, destructive feelings, characters like Lúdia seem to experience a morbid pleasure in their sinking down into the depths of spiritual and physical abjection. The following scene has a decisive effect on the evolution of Lúdia's behavior. Olegário comes back with his obsessive accusations:

OLEGÁRIO:

Are you trying to persuade me that you'll resign yourself to be forever an invalid's wife? And won't even try to find a substitute for me?

LÚDIA:

(Astonished) Now I understand! (With desperate irony) in your opinion, a substitute is absolutely unavoidable. . . . You don't want me to be faithful. . . . You're doing everything you can to drive me to adultery. Aren't you? You are putting the idea of sin in my head!

Lúdia realizes that, at the bottom of Olegário's horror of adultery, there seems to be an unconscious

desire to be betrayed, as if he were seeking what he most feared. She understands he has entrapped both of them in this insoluble dilemma. Adultery must necessarily happen. Any effort on her part to remain an honest wife would be useless. Olegário's fantasies have completely replaced reality: in his mind, Lídia is already guilty. No matter what she does, she is condemned. After this realization, she ceases to pay attention to Olegário's diatribes and leaves the room. In the following scene Umberto informs Olegário he is quitting his job, on the pretext that his mother is gravely ill. Then Maurício, Lídia's brother, rushes in, in a state of rage, because of an argument Olegário had just had with Dona Márcia, in which he blamed her for his wife's "immoral" conduct:

MAURÍCIO:

If you weren't an invalid!...

At this point, a sensational reversal takes place.

Olegário stands up from his chair:

OLEGÁRIO:

Look! I'm not an invalid! I've never been paralytic! . . . This was all a sham, a farce! . . . It was an experiment... I was testing Lídia . . . Now I know for a fact... There's only one faithful wife in the world... My wife. . . . I want to kneel before her... (In wild excitement) Millions of men are cheated by their wives everyday... Very few of them can say: "My wife..." I can say that: my wife! . . . My wife! . . . Lídia! Lídia!

The maid comes in to announce that Lídia has gone out, leaving a letter for Olegário. As he opens the letter, Lídia's amplified voice is heard:

LÍDIA:

Olegário, I'm running away with Umberto. I'll never come back. I'm not asking you to forgive me. Good bye. Lídia.

As Maurício asks what is happening, Olegário replies: "Nothing important." The brother leaves. Lídia's voice keeps repeating the text of the letter. Then Olegário opens a drawer and takes out a gun. He checks it. He approaches his mother, who remains indifferent to everything. Olegário brings the pistol to his temple, while Lídia's words are heard again and again. The curtain falls.

There is a tragic irony in such a denouement, which will also be found in many other plays by Nelson Rodrigues. At the very moment that Olegário, being finally convinced of Lídia's honesty, decides to put an end to his simulated disability (and, thus, is supposedly ready to become a "normal" man, having a "normal" marriage relationship), he is informed that his wife has finally committed adultery. Through this sudden turn-about, which results in Olegário's suicide, the playwright is making a bitter commentary on the absurdity of life's reversals. Yet, such an outcome is not as gratuitous as it seems. In fact, it is the natural consequence of one of the major dramatic elements of the play: the paroxysm of Olegário's behavior, which makes him a character doomed to destruction. He makes impossible demands on reality. He is incapable of compromising. Like a number of other

Rodriguean heroes, he suffers from a vertiginous attraction towards self-annihilation. His destiny could not have been different. He is the only one to blame for his own downfall.

The Woman Without Sun contains a great number of dramatic innovations unknown to the Brazilian theatre of the time. The renowned poet Manuel Bandeira praised its dialogue as being "swift and direct . . . making it easier for the actors to speak in a more natural tone."⁴ In fact, the characters' speeches are very distant from the "literary" tone used by the playwrights of the time and come very close to colloquial language.

In terms of dramatic structure, Rodrigues's first play also introduces a series of new techniques. Its plot does not follow the convention of logical causation. Still the action has a very swift pace. The playwright does not waste his time in long expository scenes. In each new episode, the dramatic situation is immediately set up, and the necessary information is supplied by the very action and dialogue. Concentration of action is another notable feature. The play follows the traditional three-act division, no doubt as a concession to the audience's habits of the period.⁵ Yet, the plot unfolds in a continuum of time: each new act takes up the action precisely at the moment it was left in the act before.

As far as characterization is concerned, Nelson Rodrigues also breaks the limitations of the theatre of

his time. The bourgeois audiences of Brazil were unaccustomed to such a deep plunge into the souls of such unusual characters. The intensity of the psychological struggle, translated into the excessive quality of the characters' behavior, had never been seen on a Brazilian stage before. In order to go this far into character composition, Nelson Rodrigues could not limit himself to the realistic conventions of his period. The fantasies of Olegário's imagination are materially projected on the stage in the form of the Inner Voices or the apparitions of the little girl. Such counterpoint between the external action and the subjective elements is one of the main innovations introduced by Nelson Rodrigues. However, such antirealistic procedure does not suggest that the action is taking place in an imaginary realm, as is the case in the symbolist drama. The stage designer Santa Rosa comments on the astonishing feeling of "truth" conveyed by the play:

That seems to me Nelson Rodrigues's greatest discovery in his play: . . . the fact that it is real, . . . objective and concrete, in spite of all the phantoms of a delirious imagination. . . .⁶

As a matter of fact, throughout his works, Nelson Rodrigues will often make use of antirealistic procedures, other than the projection of the subjective mind, as we see in The Woman Without Sin. Yet, they do not mean a rejection of reality on the playwright's part. As we will observe many times, what Rodrigues rejects is a superfi-

cial reproduction of the external world. Thus, he will often go against the realistic conventions, but only in so far as he can unveil the deepest layers of reality hidden behind the outer appearances.

The mixture of naturalistic and melodramatic elements is also a typical characteristic of Nelson Rodrigues's drama, which is already apparent in his first play. The substance of the plot--adultery and suicide--seems to be derived from the fait divers he often dealt with in his journalistic activities.⁷ The dialogue imitates the spoken language, and the playwright's concern with an accurate social observation can be felt in his portraiture of Olegário's family (as a typical sample of a certain section of Rio's middle-bourgeoisie) and his characterization of some secondary figures as "social types" (the maid, Olegário's corrupt employee, Lídia's mother). Yet in his treatment of such elements drawn from life, he utilizes a number of procedures from the repertory of melodrama, such as the characters' highly emotional behavior, the exaggeration of the physical action, the false clues, the surprising act endings, the suspenseful effects, the sudden reversals and so on. This combination of naturalism and melodrama will become one of the author's major characteristics, a "trade-mark" of his theatre. It relates deeply to the worldview implied in his dramatic universe. It is the manifestation, in terms of dramatic composition, of such worldview.

Rodrigues's affinity with the esthetics of naturalism can be also inferred from his manipulation of the elements of shock and sensationalism. His investigation of the dark, morbid side of the human psyche, especially concerning the realm of sexuality, no doubt seemed extremely provocative to the puritan audiences and critics of the period. In addition to that, Olegário's absurd statements about sex, chastity, marriage and adultery reveal the playwright's taste for paradox and lines designed to produce impact, a procedure which will be extensively explored in the following plays. In fact, although the impact of The Woman Without Sin is far from being comparable to the great upheaval created by the next play, Wedding Gown, it was certainly strong enough to draw considerable attention to the new dramatist.

NOTES

¹A low form of theatre and movie comedy, derived from vaudeville, which was immensely popular at the time.

²Speaking of A Família Lero-Lero, a vaudeville of great success by Magalhães Jr. which he had seen in his early years, Nelson Rodrigues stated in Edla van Steen, ed., Viver e Escrever (Porto Alegre: L&PM Editores, 1982), p. 273:

I thought: if Magalhães Jr. is making so much money, why can't I make money too, by writing the same kind of play? While walking home, I decided to write a chanchada.

³An automobile model of the time. The nickname is an obscene allusion to the size of the car, in which a lot of people could fit.

⁴In A Manhã, 6, February, 1942, quoted in Sábato Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações." (Post-doctoral dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo, 1983), p. 27.

⁵The playwright, himself, makes the following statement in Van Steen, ed., Viver e Escrever, p. 274:

I didn't dare make it a one-act play. I was afraid the audience would leave the play in the middle. I didn't have the courage. If I didn't follow the rules, I could be discredited in my first play.

⁶Santa Rosa, Preface to A Mulher Sem Pecado in Teatro, vol. 1, p. 17.

⁷Nelson Rodrigues started out as a police reporter. He kept working as a journalist all throughout his life, even after he became a successful playwright.

CHAPTER II

WEDDING GOWN: A REVOLUTION IN
BRAZILIAN THEATRE

If the merits of the new playwright were not immediately noticed by the public in The Woman Without Sin, his second play, Wedding Gown (1943), striking a powerful blow at the Brazilian theatre establishment, turned its author into an instant celebrity.

An initial stage direction, in the play, describes the division of the stage into three planes: first plane, hallucination; second plane, memory; third plane, reality. The play begins in the dark, with a loud noise of a car accident. A woman's voice is heard calling: "Clessi... Clessi..." Light coming up on the plane of hallucination reveals a brothel with prostitutes wearing heavy make-up and old-fashioned long dresses. They are dancing to a music coming from an invisible gramophone. A young lady "dressed soberly and in good taste" comes in. Her name is Alaíde. She anxiously starts asking about a certain Madame Clessi. One of the women, changing an imaginary record, informs that Madame Clessi is dead: "She was buried in white," she comments, "She was lovely. Just

like a bride." Such remark increases Alaïde's agitation:
"A bride? . . . Madame Clessi, a bride? (Her laughter turning into sobbing) Stop that music! How dreadful!"

With a light change, the focus is suddenly shifted to the plane of reality, showing a newspaper editorial office. In a very matter-of-fact way, contrasting with the dream-like quality of the previous scene, newspapermen exchange information on the telephone about the car accident. A young woman had been hit by a car as she hurriedly crossed the street. She was "pretty" and "well-dressed." The last two lines of this brief scene read as:
1st. DOCTOR:

Did she die?

2nd. DOCTOR:

Not yet. But she hasn't chance.

The light shifts back to the brothel on the plane of hallucination. The prostitutes ask Alaïde if she is married.

ALAÏDE:

I don't know... (Doubtful) I forgot everything. I have no memories. I'm a woman without memories. (Pondering) But everybody has a past. I must have a past too, after all!

As an unknown man approaches her, Alaïde gets scared and cries again for Madame Clessi.

MAN:

(Laughing loudly) Madame Clessi died, old and fat.

ALAÏDE:

It's a lie. (Aggressive) What do you mean, old and fat? Madame Clessi was beautiful. (Dreamily) So beautiful...

MAN:

(Still laughing and sitting down on the floor)
She had varicose veins. She groaned as she walked,
dragging her feet in house slippers...

In another anti-illusionistic procedure (the first being the imaginary gramophone and record), the brothel tables are pulled up to the flies, as the women carry the chairs away. It is time for Madame Clessi's great entrance. She appears under a spot-light on the top of the stairs, dressed in the turn-of-the-century fashion: corset and feathered hat. Alaíde is spellbound. "See how old and fat I am?," says Clessi, "With lots of varicose veins... and lots of money..." The ensuing dialogue between the two women explains how Alaíde had learned about Madame Clessi: she had found the courtesan's diary in the attic of her house. As she gradually gathers her reminiscences, lights come up on the plane of memory, showing a scene of her past. It is a conversation which she had overheard, between her parents, about the new house the family had just moved into. The dialogue starts with the end of a remark by her father: ". . . in a terrible orgy." He is referring to the fact that the house had belonged, a long time ago, to a famous prostitute, murdered in a scandalous affair. The strictness of the middle-class morality echoes in the mother's outraged comments: "Alaíde and Lúcia living in Madame Clessi's house! Maybe Alaíde is sleeping in her room. . . . There is a picture of her up in the attic and a trunk full of

clothes. I'm going to burn everything."

The focus moves back to the hallucination plane. Alaíde is uneasy. She cannot remember who this Lúcia is, mentioned by her mother. But, suddenly, the image of her husband comes to her mind in full clarity: "Oh, yes, now I remember. Pedro. He's my husband. I'm married. (Changing tone) But that Lúcia... Oh, Good Lord, I fear I may be murdered!"

She continues to organize her memories. In reading the diary found in the attic, she was immediately captivated by the romantic aura of the courtesan's story, with all its erotic connotations. She went to the public library and looked through all the newspapers of the time reporting the murder. She started, then, to develop a world of fantasy, in which she identified herself with the figure of the prostitute. To Madame Clessi's question: "Do you want to be like me?", she replies: (Veherent) Yes, yes, I do. . . . I want to be like you and wear a corset. (Softly) Oh, I think it's so smart..."

The action shifts, then, to the reality plane, to show Alaíde being operated at the hospital. By this time, it is evident that she is the victim of the car accident, and that the events on the planes of memory and hallucination are taking place in her traumatized mind. The down-to-earth tone of the doctors' and nurses' professional talk (commenting about Alaíde's serious condition), repeats the same effect of the newspaper scene:

the striking contrast between the crudity of reality and the fantastic atmosphere of the subjective planes.

It seems evident that fantasies related to crime and death play an important role in Alaïde's mind. In the plane of hallucination, she comments to Madame Clessi: "Somebody wants to kill me." Then, in the memory plane, she reenacts an episode in which she strikes her husband with an invisible club until he falls dead.

An image keeps interfering in Alaïde's efforts to organize her thoughts. It is the mysterious figure of a veiled woman. It was first mentioned by a brothel customer:

MAN:

There is a veiled woman mixed up in it.
. . . Try to remember your wedding day.

The sounds of a wedding march invade the stage. Alaïde, the bride, is getting dressed. Several people are helping her. Out of a trivial discussion about the Ave Maria (Schubert's or Gounod's?) to be played in the ceremony, emerges the figure of Mrs. Moreira, Pedro's mother, addressing to an invisible person, whose presence she has just realized:

MRS. MOREIRA:

I'm sorry. I didn't see you. (Short pause for a reply that is not heard.)

MRS. MOREIRA:

(Smiling) When is yours? (pause) (Malicious) Oh, don't say that. I don't believe it. You're so young, so full of life.

After this brief scene, as the bride is finally ready, the act ends with everybody following her exit to the sound of the wedding march.

At the opening of act 2, Madame Clessi does not seem to be satisfied with Aláide's endeavors to reconstitute her wedding day. Who was the invisible person Mrs. Moreira was speaking to? The plane of memory lights up again. Most of the action of the second act will take place on this plane, as Aláide, under Clessi's pressure, little by little, manages to reshape her past. The basic dramatic conflict of the play, a triangle affair involving the protagonist, her husband Pedro and a third person, still unidentified, will now be revealed by the playwright.

The Veiled Woman is helping the bride to get dressed. The two women seem to be very uncomfortable with each other. Soon they are engaged in a heated argument:

VEILED WOMAN:

. . . What a monster you are! . . . Stealing the only man I ever loved! (Emphatically) The only one!

ALÁIDE:

It's not my fault. He left you for me.

VEILED WOMAN:

Left me? It was you who courted him, followed him everywhere when I was ill. . . . All your life you took away my sweethearts, one by one...

The discussion is interrupted by another episode

of reality, which brings us back to the hospital where Alaíde is being operated. Aside from the effect of contrast we have observed on the other interferences of the real world, Nelson Rodrigues is also making here a bitter commentary about human beings: their indifference in regard to the sufferings of other people. The surgeons' vulgar remarks express their total unconcern about the dying woman:

3rd. DOCTOR:

Beautiful body.

1st. DOCTOR:

Curet.

4th. DOCTOR:

Married. Look at her ring.

1st. DOCTOR:

We've got to amputate.

2nd. DOCTOR:

Only a miracle.

1st. DOCTOR:

Saw.

Before returning to the recollection of her dispute with the Veiled Woman, Alaíde sees, on the hallucination plane, a funeral ceremony, with two men placing tapers around an invisible coffin. Then the discussion is resumed on the plane of memory:

VEILED WOMAN:

You've always stolen my sweethearts but I'm going to steal your husband... (Malicious) Understand?

Such a harrowing recollection disturbs Aláide's mind's process again. She is thrown back to her delirious fantasies. On the hallucination plane, she visualizes a tête-a-tête between Madame Clessi and her adolescent lover, dressed in school uniform. Two recurrent motifs of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre can be discerned in this scene. One of them is the incestuous connotation in the attraction of an older woman for a young man. Clessi says to her lover: "I like you because you're a child. So young! . . . So blonde and so white! Seventeen! Women should only love seventeen-year-old boys." The death-pact between lovers, another subject the playwright will be frequently dealing with, is expressed in the Young Man's words to Clessi: "Would you die with me? Shall we make a pact . . .?" To which the courtesan retorts: "So handsome! Got such fine hair!"

Once again Aláide gathers her rational powers, and her quarrel with the Veiled Woman follows its course on the plane of memory:

VEILED WOMAN:

The important thing is that you're going to die. I don't know how, but you are going to die... and I shall marry the widower... The most natural thing in the world: for a woman to marry a widower...

The death threat triggers off a new hallucination from the protagonist. The funeral around the invisible coffin is shown again. Through the commentaries of the participants of the ceremony, we are informed that the deceased, a woman of great beauty, had suffered a violent death:

BEARDED MAN:

(Whispering) She's unrecognizable.

WOMAN:

(Whispering) With that deep cut on her face. . . . They say they made a pact to die together, but at the last moment she didn't want to. He then...

Thus, through the death pact, a connection to the previous scene between Madame Clessi and her young lover is established. By this point, the pattern, in terms of dramatic narrative, utilized in this second act of Wedding Gown, has become quite evident. As Alaíde's recollections are continuously interspersed with the figments of her imagination, we are watching a psychic process of association between her death fears-of her real life-and her wild fantasies about Madame Clessi's violent story. Yet, despite the delirious interferences, the pieces are gradually falling together in Alaíde's head. The earlier scene of the wedding preparation is reenacted as before. Yet, instead of the invisible figure greeted by Mrs. Moreira, we have now the very concrete presence and distinct voice of the Veiled Woman:

MRS. MOREIRA:

(To the Veiled Woman who is a little apart)
I'm sorry, I didn't see you.

VEILED WOMAN:

That's all right.

MRS. MOREIRA:

When is yours?

VEILED WOMAN:

Oh, there's plenty of time. (Painfully)
Never.

MRS. MOREIRA:

Oh, don't say that. I don't believe it.
You're so young, so full of life.

Thus, the nuptial cortege of the end of the first act, now with the Veiled Woman taking her place in it, is replayed to the sounds of the wedding march. By this time, it has become quite obvious who the mysterious personage really is. She can now take off her veil and reveal herself as Lúcia, Alaíde's sister, which motivates an intriguing remark from Madame Clessi:

CLESSI:

(Sweetly) Two sisters hating each other so much. Strange. I find it beautiful two sisters loving the same man... Don't know why, but I do...

Playing with the disparate associations of Alaíde's delirious mind, Nelson Rodrigues manages to reconstruct the facts of her life and clarify the events that drove her to the fatal accident. At the same time, the counterpoint of the hallucination plane, projecting

Alaíde's fantasies, related to sex and death, about the story of Madame Clessi, illuminates the dark side of the protagonist's psyche. Following the meanderings of her subjective process, through the reenactment of scenes, with the gradual emergence of Lúcia's character, the playwright displays a remarkable expertise in terms of dramatic construction. While maintaining the impression of psychic disorder, underneath the enmeshed web of facts, memories and dreams, the fundamental elements of the drama are skillfully organized in a cohesive system of extraordinary complexity. The disentanglement of the dramatic threads woven by Rodrigues's prodigious imagination are left to the third act.

Following a quick transition with black-out and noises of the car accident, the hallucination plane lights up again to continue Alaíde's reverie of her wedding day. Both sisters in wedding gowns, their fists raised, are seen with Pedro against the background of a cross:

ALAÍDE:

I stole Lúcia's man! . . . It's so exciting stealing another girl's sweetheart! Especially from a sister...

The mother intervenes. The sisters' discussion turns into childish bickering:

ALAÍDE:

(To Lúcia) Why don't you repeat what you said about mom? . . .

LÚCIA:

. . . I said, mom, that when you sweat... well, you're my mother, but I can't bear it. It's too much. I always have to go away...

The exploration of such trivial naturalistic detail, with no direct connection to the plot and carrying a resonance of coarseness and vulgarity (as it is often related to primary bodily functions), will be a recurrent procedure throughout Nelson Rodrigues's plays. Undoubtedly it must have had a powerful effect of shock to the conservative audiences of the time.

The subplot of Madame Clessi is reintroduced on the hallucination plane. In a new scene between the prostitute and the Young Man, Clessi is impatiently trying to dismiss him, as she is expecting the visit of an old client. The motif of love and crime reappears in the Young Man's sinister comment: "Some day I'll kill you because of that old man. Wait and see." Gradually the scene slides into a parody of La Traviata: the boy's mother suddenly appears and, in an exaggerated manner, introduces herself as "Alfredo Germont's mother." She asks Clessi: "Have you no conscience? . . . He's only a child." Aláide realizes her mind is drifting away again. She makes a new attempt to get Clessi's story straight. This time the scene becomes a parody of Gone with the Wind. Clessi turns into Scarlet O'Hara. A stage direction indicates its "caricatural quality":

CLESSI:

Rhett is not worth of entering a respectable house.

MOTHER:

(Crossing her legs) On the other hand, Ashley is too spiritual. I don't like a man like that.

Alaíde's third attempt is more successful. The scene acquires a naturalistic tone, as the dispute between Clessi and the mother turns into petty squabbling and culminates with the latter being kicked out of the house.

The workings of Alaíde's delirious mind keep being projected on the hallucination plane. Yet, by now, we have no difficulty in reading the dramatic information hidden between the lines of the dream-like images. The next scene, in which Pedro intrudes on the hallucination plane, reinforces the theme of the violent nature of the triangle relationship. He shows up dressed in full mourning:

ALAÍDE:

. . . Yes, you and Lúcia! You both want to see me dead! . . . (More and more excited) You two have planned everything. The whole crime. Murder without evidence.

PEDRO:

(Sardonic) A perfect crime.

In a brief shift to the hospital, we finally witness Alaíde's death. For the first time now, the plane of reality will be occupied by the protagonists of the dra-

ma. Pedro and Lúcia ("in tears") stand before Alaíde's coffin. Yet, the hallucination plane is also lit, showing Clessi and Alaíde holding a wedding bouquet. The conversation between Lúcia and Pedro elucidates once and for all the actual facts which led to Alaíde's death:

LÚCIA:

(With concentrated hate) I don't want to have anything to do with you any more. Never again. . . . Yesterday, before she went out to meet her death, we had a terrible quarrel.

Lúcia's account continues, on the hallucination plane as a flash-back:

ALAÍDE:

You will not have a single moment of peace if you marry Pedro. I will not leave you alone... You will see...

LÚCIA:

(Ironical) Why are you so sure that you're going to die? . . .

ALAÍDE:

Do you know where I'm going now? . . . I'm going to have an adventure. And what an adventure! I'm going to a place. . . . The last time I was there, there were two women, dancing. They had long satin dresses... Yellow and pink... A phonograph. . . .

LÚCIA:

You, liar! . . . You've never been there. . . . all this you read in a book that is upstairs. Shall I fetch it?

After Lúcia's evocation, reality regains the stage. The sequence of her dialogue with Pedro clarifies to what extent they were responsible for Alaíde's

death:

LÚCIA:

. . . She knew she was going to die.

PEDRO:

(Irony) So did we. . . .

LÚCIA:

(Desperate) You put this idea into my head,
that she should die. . . .

PEDRO:

. . . Who said "I'll not allow you to touch
me, unless you marry me?" . . . One of you two had
to disappear. I preferred that she would go. . . .
Didn't we study all the details of the crime?

The dialogue ends with Lúcia's reaffirmation that she would never belong to Pedro. In the next scene, also on the reality plane, she is shown again, a few days later, tormented by remorse, reading to her mother a newspaper report on Alaíde's death. The mother tries to calm her by recommending a trip to the country. Two months later, returning from the trip, Lúcia is "rosy" and "has gained weight." Life progresses with an inexorable force. Alaíde's misfortunes have been forgotten. The intense conflicts involving the three main characters belong now to the past. The play reaches its denouement. In an ultimate reversal, we are informed that Pedro and Lúcia are getting married. Lúcia, in a wedding gown, is being helped by her mother to prepare for the ceremony. On the other end of the reality plane, there is Alaíde's grave:

LÚCIA:

(Stretching her arms) The bouquet, please.
(Crescendo of the music. When Lúcia asks for the bouquet, Alaíde's ghost walks towards her as if to deliver it. At the same time, Clessi's ghost walks upstairs on the other side of the stage, making her steps synchronous with Alaíde's and stopping when she stops. All become motionless in this position. Darkness. Only Alaíde's grave is moonlit. Crescendo of funeral march. Complete darkness.)

An analysis of Wedding Gown shows that most of the action takes place in Alaíde's head. The efforts of the agonizing self to recuperate its sense of identity out of the jumble of remembrances, constitute the plane of memory. Yet the traumatized mind is continually straying from the path of reminiscence and producing fantasies of the imagination which are projected on the hallucination plane. The short interferences of the plane of reality have the function of situating the realm of subjectivity in its external context. Towards the end of the play, it also provides a conclusion to the plot. The alternation of planes is very fluid. Lights fade out on one plane and the action is already starting on another. All the characters have to do is walk up or down a few steps, a platform, a ramp. Such ease is provided by the simultaneous setting. Props and furniture are reduced to the basic minimum. Many times they are simply imaginary. If not, when they are no longer necessary, they are just hoisted up to the flies. Thus the narrative thread flows rapidly and freely in the dimensions of time, space, inner and outer reality. Such

degree of fluidity had never been seen in Brazilian theatre before. The audiences were accustomed to follow, at least for the duration of an act, one single action evolving linearly in time and occurring in a particular location.

Although clearly interrelated, the three planes are usually kept separate from one another. At some instances, however, the images of memory and hallucination tend to blur. The plane of reality, too, which is kept, throughout most of the play, quite distinct from the others, at the end becomes contaminated by the subjective realm.

The projection of the contents of psychic life in terms of stage action had already appeared in The Woman Without Sin. Wedding Gown, however, carries this procedure a lot further. Actually, it is one of the major foundations of the play's conception, giving shape, in its counterpoint with the events of actuality, to the whole dramatic structure. Such novelty, as far as play-writing is concerned, was totally unknown to Brazilian audiences and, thus, became one of the main factors of the play's overwhelming impact and success.

The traditional organization of the dramatic narrative as a logically connected sequence of events is entirely missing in Wedding Gown. Instead of following a linear succession, the episodes rather impinge on one another, their articulating principle being not

external causation, but the free associative process of the mind, which combines mnemonic data with the figments of imagination. Aláide's fantasies, which keep interfering in her attempts to make sense out of her recollections, derive both from the emergence of repressed impulses and from the very efforts of the censoring ego to suppress such impulses or to negate undesirable remembrances. The resulting effect of the crisscross of all such elements is one of a powerful poetic atmosphere.

As the play unfolds, we soon get over the first impression that the disparate workings of Aláide's mind do not add to the development of the action. Despite her lack of rational control, the protagonist gradually manages to reconstitute her past. Little by little, with the help of Madame Clessi, functioning as a sort of guide, the elements of Aláide's story start falling into place. As the play progresses, she succeeds, to a large extent, in separating her reminiscence from her dreams. When the fundamental aspects of the drama have been almost entirely reconstructed (by the middle of the third act), Madame Clessi disappears and Aláide dies at the hospital. In a way, they are not needed anymore. Reality has been re-established. Life can continue its course, and the plot can be unraveled with the remaining characters. Yet, both Aláide and Clessi are never totally eliminated. Their ghosts keep interfering, although in a subtle way, on the plane of actuality, which suggests that the boundaries

between the subjective and objective realms are not as solid as we tend to think.

The complexity of the play's dramatic structure does not result only from this interplay of reality, dream and reminiscence. As we have seen, the emergence of Aláide's story does not follow a linear development. Not only does it keep shifting back and forth in time, but it can also appear in twisted forms, as if the protagonist's mind were playing tricks at her. The whole stratagem of the Veiled Woman, with the reenactment of scenes, or the successive versions of Clessi's subplot reflect the deviations of Aláide's deranged psyche. Yet, she often realizes she is going in the wrong direction and corrects herself. The function of such lapses is not limited to conveying the fluctuations of an agonizing mind. Nor do they serve only to introduce complications which retard the dramatic development for the sake of suspense. Aláide's false steps also provide us with valuable insights into her character's motivations and psychological idiosyncrasies. In addition to that, a great deal of information about the other characters is revealed through Aláide's eyes. The hallucinatory scenes may not contribute to straight plot development, but they are always extremely relevant to the configuration of the play's dramatic elements. The action, in such scenes, is perfectly consistent with the characters' psychological motivations and, thus, the nature of the conflict they

are involved in is greatly illuminated.

Nelson Rodrigues's rejection, in his second play, of the conventions of realistic drama, with its linear time progression, causal links and logical psychic characterization, became a very controversial issue. Some critics used the words "chaotic" and "meaningless" in their review of Wedding Gown. The reaction of the majority, however, both of critics and audiences, was favorable and even enthusiastic in regard to the playwright's innovations. Still, the public of the time was so unprepared for the new style, that the play was often misunderstood, even by those who praised it. A great deal was said about "expressionistic procedures," "stream of consciousness," "Proustian exploration," and "Pirandellian influence," implying that Rodrigues's scenic treatment of the mind's life reflected a lack of concern, on his part, about "real life." According to such views, his true intention was thought to be the exploration of a spiritual realm "above and beyond actuality." His abandonment of the principles of dramatic realism and his drawing from the elements of fantasy and poetry supposedly expressed the irrelevance of reality as the subject matter of art.¹ Such an interpretation derives from a rigid concept of artistic realism, prevalent at the time, in which the work of art was expected to give an accurate, logical account of the external world. Everything outside such strict frame-

work was considered to be "unrealistic," that is, unconcerned with actuality. Spiritual life--the facts of the psyche and the creations of poetic imagination--was idealistically placed on a "superior" level, which not only transcended, but, at times, even contradicted the down-to-earth plane of reality. The concatenation of scenes in Wedding Gown seemed, from such a viewpoint, to obey but to the arbitrary laws of the irrational mind or of the poetic whim. Nonetheless, Antônio Rangel Bandeira, in his review of the play, makes a point of the fact that:

. . . Wedding Gown, despite its exploration of the vagaries of memory and hallucination, . . . respects the basic requirements of logic and rationality. In fact, the playwright did not treat the randomness of the mind in a random way. He submitted it, instead, to a series of technical procedures which gave the play a perfectly clear and rational articulation. . . . Mr. Nelson Rodrigues placed Aláide's dreams in a solid framework, in total conformity with the logic of the external world of the reality plane. He established a tight correspondence between memory and real life. In fact, real life dominates and supplants the imaginary world.²

Bandeira's commentary points to the fact that, underneath the apparent chaos of the action, there is a careful structural design. Dealing with the dissociative processes of the mind, the playwright's expertise actually manages to associate all such diffuse elements in a cohesive dramatic composition. Through the disorganization of Aláide's consciousness, the spectators witness the gradual organization of the drama. The protagonist's mental confusion, as we have seen, is but a surface ap-

pearance. Her itinerary, in fact, is one of self-understanding. Before dying, not only has she managed to trace back the major events of her life, but also her deepest motivations have been completely unveiled, if not to her, at least to the spectators. Consequently, what emerges from the dramatic unfolding is not merely the reality of the psyche, but, more than anything, the reality of life itself. Furthermore, the reality of life ends up supplanting the reality of the psyche, since the action continues, after the heroine's death, on the plane of actuality. The final apparitions of Alaíde's and Clessi's ghosts are ambiguous enough not to be read as a return to the prevalence of fantasy. They may be seen as a projection of Lúcia's guilty conscience, but this, by no means, implies that all the events after Alaíde's death did not actually take place.

The important point to be made here is that, in Wedding Gown, despite the appearances, Rodrigues is not rejecting realism. The play ultimately conveys a full portraiture of life. True human beings are seen confronting each other, under the pressure of their very authentic emotional conflicts. What the playwright refuses, in fact, is the concept of surface realism: the strict conventions of the theatre of the time, which considered a straightforward rendition of external events as the only way to transpose the actuality of life into the stage. Rodrigues is not concerned with the outer

appearances. Moreover, he finds it necessary to undermine such a deceptive façade in order to get at the essence of things. His aim is to unveil the very core of reality: the deepest layers of human experience and the manifold complexities of the world men have created for themselves.

Such is the nature of Nelson Rodrigues's realism in Wedding Gown: realism in the deep sense of the word. Subjectivity is not in the play for its own sake. Dream does not contradict reality; on the contrary: it heightens it. According to critic Álvaro Lins:

The playwright's task was to put together such fragments in order to convey a unified and plausible story. . . . His procedure was to use poetic intuition as a means to achieve total realism, which goes far beyond the mere naturalistic approach. His major device was the creation of a logical framework for illogical material; an effect of verisimilitude, while still giving free course to the flights of imagination.³

Nelson Rodrigues, himself, states his point very clearly:

The reason why, I think, Wedding Gown made such an impact is the fact that, as opposed to the theatrical productions of the time, it is a Brazilian play of high quality. Brazilian reality, and more specifically the reality of Rio de Janeiro, is reflected in it. . . . The expressionistic elements of the play provide a much deeper investigation of reality than the conventional accounts of the trivialities of life. . . . This is an expressionism of form, yet, rooted in a profound realism, almost leading to a naturalistic acting. The complexities of the dramatic composition synthesize and reduce reality's outer appearances. The events lived by the characters, nonetheless, remain within the boundaries of verisimilitude.⁴

The playwright, thus, emphasizes the fact that,

underneath the expressionistic form (whatever the word means to him), the real movement of the play is towards realism.⁵ All the anti-illusionistic devices displayed in Wedding Gown are, paradoxically enough, the means whereby he investigates some of the complexities and contradictions of human existence: of reality, as it appears to him. In fact, notwithstanding the whole array of non-realistic techniques (or precisely through them), everything in the play centers on a story which is, at the same time, trivial and violent. As we have seen, the distortions of the narrative, created by the subconscious workings of Alaïde's mind, are actually a clever dramatic contrivance which is gradually unmasked and eventually removed, as reality takes over. Had the playwright used the traditional methods of surface naturalism, his story about human pettiness and egoism would have seemed cheap and banal. After going through such a process of decantation, this very triviality becomes frightening. What remains in the spectators' minds after the final curtain of Wedding Gown, is the portrayal of a dismal reality. The analysis of such portrayal will lead us to the unveiling of Rodrigues's view of the world.

Yet, before venturing into deeper interpretations, a closer examination of the realistic techniques utilized in Wedding Gown still needs to be made. In his second play, Rodrigues insists, with even better results than in The Woman Without Sin, on an accurate reproduction of

everyday language, as opposed to the artificial tone of the literary drama of the period. The dialogue here is extremely fluent. Most of the lines are brief and incisive, to the point of becoming almost "telegraphic" in the scenes of the reality plane: the "ping-pong technique," as it is called by critic Sábato Magaldi.⁶

Aside from the linguistic aspects, the play is also "true to life" in its depiction of the social environment. As in The Woman Without Sin, the secondary characters introduce "local color" in the drama, while it is up to Alaíde, with her sexual conflicts and romantic fantasies, and her peers to reflect the prejudices and misconceptions of bourgeois morality. In this particular, the playwright is not afraid of making an aggressive social commentary, his main target being the institution of the family. In fact, the psychological deformations exposed in Wedding Gown are rooted in the repressive nature of family life. Similarly to The Woman Without Sin, the characters' attitudes, in the second play, often acquire a melodramatic quality. Rodrigues's utilization of the melodramatic tradition, however, cannot be seen only as a matter of taste. It also reflects his observation of the carioca temperament, often inclined to emotional outbursts and exaggerated displays of passion. Melodrama, here, blends with naturalism.

Essentially, Nelson Rodrigues makes use of all such realistic procedures, not for their own sake, but as

an instrument to attain deeper layers of meaning. He utilizes social observation as a means of giving substance to his creation of a very specific dramatic universe. We can try now to discern the major implications contained in his imaginary world. In Wedding Gown we are immediately struck by the moral baseness of the main characters, showing beneath the external, although strict, principles of bourgeois righteousness. The protagonists, Alaíde, Lúcia and Pedro, are totally devoid of spiritual nobility. Their motivations are selfish and perverse, their ends are petty and mean. The heroine's neurotic personality is given a fuller portraiture. The moral deformities of her husband and sister, however, are also exposed in stark colors by the playwright. Lúcia's remorse is short-lived, while Pedro never shows any sign of regret throughout the whole play. The trio's fantasies related to violence and murder (death being one of the major themes of the play), and their continual betrayal of one another reflect the highly predatory nature of their relationships. No trace of love or any sort of affection can be found in them. Their sentimental bonds result mainly from jealousy, sexual frustration and a sadistic desire for psychological dominance.

Such debased forms of love, which make family ties seem absolutely worthless, will appear several times in the following plays. The marriage of Pedro and Lúcia

does not imply, by any means, that some sort of harmonious resolution has been attained. The triangle conflict is resolved, but the sado-masochistic rapport will continue in the remaining couple. The specific conflict of the plot is unraveled at the end. Yet a larger conflict, ingrained in the very core of human relationships, will be prolonged beyond the denouement. As in The Woman Without Sin, in which Lídia's final decision does not infer any sort of self-liberation, there is no redeeming gesture, no spiritual change in the characters of Wedding Gown. They are inescapably doomed to self and mutual destruction.

Self-degradation, as a self-destructive attitude, is one of the strongest tendencies of Alaíde's sick personality. Her fascination with Madame Clessi does not derive merely from emotional immaturity. It is also an expedient to seek, through romantic fantasies, some form of compensation for her life's frustrations. But why does Alaíde choose a prostitute to embody her nostalgia for romance? Morbidity is a common trait in Nelson Rodrigues's characters. Since their lives are confined within a rigid moral framework, they are often attracted to abjection and evil. As we observed in Lídia's case, human beings are incapable of finding a morally acceptable way of satisfying their libidinal impulses. Sex being necessarily associated with sin, sexual stimulation can only result from the transgression of the moral codes, or at

least from fantasizing about it. Since transgression arouses guilt, self-debasement and, at times, self-annihilation are also forms of self-punishment. The morbid aspects of Alaíde's character, and of Pedro's and Lúcia's as well, can be detected in their fantasies related to violence and crime. Alaíde did not actually kill her husband, but she desired it. In her hallucinatory dreams, she finds a way to satisfy such desire. Pedro and Lúcia did not kill Alaíde, but wished her death. Consequently, the car accident appears to them as a materialization of their wish. No concrete action was undertaken in order to destroy Alaíde. Yet, the accident was evidently the culmination of the deteriorating process of the triangle relationship. Alaíde's stealing her sister's man was an act of violence which provoked a violent counteraction, whose final outcome is the heroine's death. Such a death can be viewed as a suicidal gesture, another form of self-punishment as well. The incestuous connotations of the triangle affair (underlined by Clessi's comment on the beauty of two sisters in love with the same man), also point out to the perverse quality of the characters' emotional links. Such an indirect form of incest will be a recurrent situation in Nelson Rodrigues's plays and novels, together with several other forms (an older woman attracted towards a young man, as in Clessi's case, for example). Alaíde's enchantment with a murdered prostitute, thus,

is totally comprehensible in the framework of her sick personality. It is a morbid tendency, a fascination with the forbidden, the blending of sex with death and sin. Such inclination, on Rodrigues's part, to investigate the dark, buried side of human soul is labeled by Álvaro Lins as "psychology of the abyss."⁷

Indifference--the absence of human solidarity--is another implication of the playwright's harsh commentary on the nature of human relations. We have observed the protagonists' incapacity to love. The secondary figures surrounding them are equally incapable of affection or sympathy. Aláide's parents and Pedro's mother are totally blind to the violent struggle taking course before their eyes. Their simple-mindedness, not to say their stupidity, is reflected in their trivial speeches and conventional attitudes throughout the play. A powerful contrast is, thus, established between the intensity of the triangular conflict and the inanity of its environning circle, an effect which often acquires comic or tragicomic undertones. A similar effect is obtained through the prosaic and, sometimes, gross commentaries by choruses of doctors and newspaper men on the plane of reality.

Pettiness, frivolity, absence of higher values are, in fact, basic aspects of human life, as we see it portrayed in Wedding Gown. Aláide seeks to escape the frustration of living in such world through her romantic

and morbid fantasies. She throws herself in a maelstrom of complications, which eventually leads her to destruction. She is enraptured with the unknown, the dangerous, the prohibited. Her career is vertiginous. In her rebellion against the shabbiness of life, like many other Rodriguean characters, she is incapable of compromise. Such creatures cannot act otherwise. In a way, these are predestined beings. Their inexorable compulsions doom them to chaos and destruction.

Such a quality of inevitability was probably what made the playwright define Wedding Gown as a tragedy. (The Woman Without Sin was called "drama"). Although a car accident is certainly the least tragic (in the sense of unavoidable) of all dramatic situations, we have seen how the complications of the plot lead to it, almost as an inescapable outcome. As Sábato Magaldi states in his preface to the play:

After Alaíde's confrontation with her sister (a culmination of all their emotional conflicts) she goes out to the street as to a place of sacrifice. Belittled and disparaged, she is annihilated in a car accident—the automobile serving as a symbol of the overwhelming, obscure forces of the modern world. To her disrupted personality, the accident is both a final, merciful blow and a liberating circumstance.⁸

Of course, the issue of dramatic genres is very controversial. Wedding Gown does not conform to a strict interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. Yet, if a broader sense is given to the word "tragedy," it can perhaps be applied to the play's peculiar form of

dramatic determinism. It is again Sábato Magaldi who plays with this idea:

In our times, the divine laws have been replaced by the fatality of the inner impulses or by the oppression of the social environment, powerful enough to subdue individual rebellion. It is this kind of approach that allows us to consider O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra or Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman as tragedies. In the former play, uncontrollable psychological drives make up for the God-induced chain of crimes as it occurs in Aeschylus's Oresteia. In the latter, the poor salesman succumbs to the pressure of a society which crushes a timid man's desire of self-assertion. . . . In Wedding Gown, one cannot speak of an inexorable fate, presiding, from its unattainable heights, over Alaíde's destiny. . . . Yet the heroine's self-destruction, which results from her giving up her struggle against an adverse world, can be compared to man's defeat by the sovereign deities. Man's demise can be read as an acceptance of the ephemeral nature of reality, as opposed to the gods' eternity.⁹

Tragic or not, Nelson Rodrigues's worldview, as shown in Wedding Gown, is undoubtedly very pessimistic. If we interpret the car accident as an unconscious suicidal action, Alaíde was evidently shunning away from the heavy burdens of life. The play's denouement, apparently a happy ending, is, in fact, an ironic commentary, by the playwright, on the miserableness of the human condition. Once again, it is Sábato Magaldi who makes this aspect of the play clear:

First Lúcia is guilt-ridden and rejects her brother-in-law. . . . In a succession of quick flashes, however, she goes to the country and returns in a rejuvenated condition. Despite the tragic events of the past, life does not stop. . . . The happy ending here illustrates the fact that everyday life annuls the deepest emotions, while reality forces people to accommodate to its injunctions.¹⁰

Alaíde's obsession with Madame Clessi, aside from

reflecting her morbid tendencies, also expresses her attempt to seek refuge from the limitations of real life in an enchanted realm of romantic fantasy. According to Magaldi: "Madame Clessi crystallizes the poetic myth of the great prostitute, the liberated woman."¹¹ He develops his argument as follows:

As Alaide falls in her hallucinatory state, she identifies her destiny with Clessi's. The courtesan functions as a symbol of a romantic life, free from the pressures of everyday reality. The fantasy world portrayed here seems to be untouched by such pressures.¹²

Yet, the corruptive powers of reality seem to creep even into the idealized realm of Alaide's dreams. Madame Clessi's emblematic figure is continually debunked by a number of references to her physical decay, to her disfigured face in the coffin, to the loneliness of her death and to the disrespectful attitudes of her mourners.

In Wedding Gown Rodrigues gives us a somber portrayal of human life. He asks how human beings can be so vile and he answers his own question by exposing their moral baseness in the crudest way. The low materialism of the world he puts on the stage seems to infer a bitter complaint about the lack of transcendence in men's life and about the predatory quality of social relationships. Such is the nature of Nelson Rodrigues's dramatic realism. His depiction of Brazilian society is the external façade of a much more profound view of reality. However critical he may be about the social milieu, he is not

trying to make a political statement. Society is not blamed for creating such contemptible characters. No doubt, men are influenced by the social environment. Yet, the playwright is not suggesting that such environment should be changed or that, in a transformed world, human beings would be better. He is disgusted with the degeneration of social life and he wants to express his disgust by giving a disgusting portrayal of it. And the best way he found for doing that was through an uncompromising realism: his type of realism.

In Wedding Gown, Rodrigues also continues his exploration of the naturalistic elements of shock and sensationalism. His references to unpleasant details (body odors, varicose veins, etc.), the vulgarity and stupidity of his characters' behavior, all such elements added to the play's impact on the public. Everything and everyone is degraded. The mythical world of melodrama, with its great passions and idealized values, remains as an unattainable goal. Despite the heroine's romantic fantasies and powerful emotions, reality-the naturalistic world-demeans everything. The main characters are certainly depicted with intense colors. Their energy is immense, almost excessive. Their motivations and goals, however, are low and ignoble, which makes their exacerbation seem utterly senseless. Every time some sort of emotional grandeur or poetic beauty seems to prevail, it is immediately deflated by the intrusion

of reality, with its banality and sordidness. Thus, it would not be inappropriate to say that, in Nelson Rodrigues's Wedding Gown, the baseness of the naturalistic world predominates over the idealized realm of melodrama. The dramatic essence of Wedding Gown lies in this battle between the naturalistic and the melodramatic dimensions. The tension of their opposition is a fundamental aspect of the nature of the play.

NOTES

¹A more detailed description of the critical reactions to Wedding Gown appears in Appendix 2.

²Antônio Rangel Bandeira, "Vestido de Noiva e Supra-realismo," O Jornal, 7, May, 1944, quoted in Dionysos 22 (December 1975), p. 76-78.

³Álvaro Lins, "Algumas Notas sobre os Comediantes," Jornal do Brasil, 12, December, 1943, quoted in Dionysos 22, p. 65.

⁴Abílio Pereira d'Almeida et al., Depoimentos V. (Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional de Teatro, 1981), p. 180.

⁵Ronaldo Lima Lins speaks of a "surrealistic naturalism" à propos of Wedding Gown in his book Nelson Rodrigues: uma Realidade em Agonia (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1979), p. 70.

⁶Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 91.

⁷Lins, Nelson Rodrigues: uma Realidade em Agonia, p. 63.

⁸Sábato Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 1, p. 20.

⁹Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues, Dramaturgia e Encenações," pp. 103-104.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 125.

CHAPTER III

THE CYCLE OF MYTHIC PLAYS: AN "AUTEUR MAUDIT"

Album de Família (Family Album, 1945)

Wedding Gown won Nelson Rodrigues general applause. He was hailed as the renovator of Brazilian theatre. With his next play, Family Album, initiating the, so-called, "cycle of mythical plays,"¹ he lost the favor of the public and the appreciation of the critics and he also started to face his long succession of conflicts with the official censorship, the representative of society's most retrograde sectors. His collapse from the position of an acclaimed playwright was as meteoric as his ascension.

The major developments of the dramatic action in Family Album are illustrated by a series of "pictures from the family album." The play opens with the first picture. The year is 1900. It is the day after the wedding of the two main characters, Jonas and Senhorinha. In a silent action, a frolicsome photographer arranges the couple in a pose for a wedding picture. The stage direction also specifies that Jonas "has a stiff attitude," and Senhorinha, "a false and idiotic

smile." The amplified voice of the "Speaker" is, then, heard for the first time. The playwright indicates that such voice, which will accompany the album pictures throughout the play, "will always be giving wrong information about the family," not to mention "the loathsome vulgarity of its commentaries." The Speaker, he warns, functions as a mouthpiece of "Public Opinion." In fact, such device, operating as a sort of alienation effect," will serve to a double purpose: a satire on society's backwardness and hypocrisy and an ironical comment about the characters and events of the play. The Speaker's first speech, for instance, is a pompous display of pseudo literary clichés, focusing mainly on the young bride's modesty and innocence. Such qualities, he observes, were "quite appropriate for a newly-wed wife" in a time in which a woman's crossing her legs was regarded as a disreputable attitude.

After freezing for a moment for the photograph, the two figures gain life. Jonas tries to embrace Senhorinha, who reacts with "hysterical coyness," motivating a new commentary from the "delighted" Speaker: "Decorum is a woman's highest virtue." Next, we are informed that the newly-wed are going to live in Jonas's rural estate, near the city of São José de Congonhas. The Speaker has an ultimate advice for them:

"... don't forget the Gospel's words: go forth and multiply."

After a quick black-out, a new set is revealed: a school dormitory. Time has passed, and Glória, Jonas's and Senhorinha's fifteen-year-old daughter, is lying in bed with her friend Teresa, both dressed in "light, transparent nightgowns." The stage direction points out to the "idyllic atmosphere" of the scene. Teresa is forcing Glória into a "love-pact." Glória must swear to her friend that she will never get married, nor even go out with boys. She is to remain faithful to Teresa until death. Teresa revels in the fantasy of she and Glória dying together and being buried in the same coffin. The scene between the two school-girls, besides echoing the death-pact motif of Madame Clessi and her young lover in Wedding Gown, inaugurates a dramatic situation to reappear in several of Rodrigues's dramas: the lesbian attachment between adolescent girl-friends.

In the following episode, Senhorinha, now "a beautiful, proud and dignified lady," is shown alone in the salon of her husband's country property. "From the outside, somebody comes to the window and utters a horrible, inhuman scream, like the howling of a wounded beast." Aunt Ruth, Senhorinha's older sister, described as a "somber, cruel spinster," comes in. As the scream subsides, we keep hearing the "persistent bemoaning of

a woman in labor pains in an adjoining room." Through the discussion between the two sisters, we learn that the scream came from Nonô, Senhorinha's and Jonas's crazy son, who lives naked in the woods "like an animal." Senhorinha believes that Nonô's incursions near the house reveal his attachment to her:

SENHORINHA:

Nonô, before his infirmity, was very fond of me. He loved me so. . . . He misses me A LOT! . . . It would be so good if I were the only person he missed. Just me: nobody else!

Jonas is the next character to enter the scene. He is described as a "nervous, passionate man." His entrance is accompanied by the pregnant woman's imprecations from outside: "You, wretched man! You tore me apart... Damn you... You're gonna pay for that!" Senhorinha tactfully admonishes him for what he has done to the girl. Apparently he seduced her, and now she is having labor problems because of her excessively young age. Jonas ignores his wife's reproaches and engages in an intense conversation with his sister-in-law. Aunt Ruth's voice is "warm and soothing," as she announces that she has found a new girl for him. She goes into sleazy details in her description of the girl's qualities: sixteen years old, large hips, a dirty mouth and, above all, "virgin," the latter being a necessary requisite for Jonas. Jonas gets all excited:

JONAS:

I like brazen girls. Not women: girls.
Fourteen, fifteen-year-old girls. . . .

Senhorinha manifests her opposition to her husband's attitude, while Aunt Ruth encourages it. Jonas praises the spinster's devotion to him. She is the only person to love him in the house. She would be capable of anything for his sake. "ANYTHING", she passionately agrees, even an infamy, even a crime. The rest of the family, on the other hand, hates him, he continues. Nonô, his demented son, throws pebbles at him from the woods. "You used to beat him when he was sane!" is Senhorinha's repartee. Jonas goes on with his complaints. Edmundo, his second son, cannot stand him either. "Don't forget that you kicked him out of the house three days after his wedding," Senhorinha reacts again. She and their third son, Guilherme, come next on Jonas's list. Glória, however, is not mentioned. At the end of his speech, he is overcome by indignation:

JONAS:

(Screaming) THEY don't know me! I am the
FATHER! A father is a sacred figure. The father is
the LORD!

Senhorinha presents two arguments against the presence of the new mistress in the house. She has received a telegram from the mother superior of Glória's boarding-school, informing that the girl was returning home. No further explanation was given. Also their son,

Edmundo is arriving. Jonas is infuriated with Edmundo. Some time ago, father and son had had a big fight on the subject of Jonas's abuses towards Senhorinha. Edmundo had been beaten by his father and banished from the family. He was never to come back home: "EVER!", shouts Jonas.

As Aunt Ruth keeps supporting Jonas's plans for the girl, Senhorinha harshly criticizes her sister's impudence. The two women engage in a heated argument:

AUNT RUTH:

(Infuriated) Who's impudent here? Me? No, you are! No man has ever touched me!

SENHORINHA:

(Cool and merciless) That's because no man has ever wanted you! . . . It must be very easy for you to be virtuous, my dear!

That was too heavy a blow to Aunt Ruth. She cannot refrain from revealing the great secret of her life: she had once been loved by a man:

AUNT RUTH:

Only once. He was drunk, but it doesn't matter. . . . Still he MADE LOVE TO ME! . . . And that man (suddenly violent) IS YOUR HUSBAND! . . . That's why I love him. . . . Now I do whatever he tells me to do! . . .

As the pregnant woman's curses are heard once more, a light change reveals another page of the family album. In a flashback, husband and wife are seen, many years earlier, with their four children. Coming after the scenes that have just elapsed, the irony of the tab-

leau is devastating. The Speaker's commentaries add to the effect:

SPEAKER:

. . . And to think that some people do not believe in the institution of marriage! (The tableau gains life. Jonas kisses his wife on the forehead and sits his daughter on his lap). Such a mother is a model to be followed by the modern girls of our days, who like to guzzle up soft drinks from the neck of the bottle.

The salon of the farm-house is illuminated again. Senhorinha tells Jonas the reason of Edmundo's return to the family: he has broken up with his wife. Then, Edmundo makes his entrance. Right away, he and Jonas engage in a discussion. Edmundo is outraged with the girl's presence in the house. Jonas criticizes his son's moral conduct: "A guy who walked out on his wife!" and compares him to the exemplary behavior of his brother Guilherme, who is studying in a seminary to become a priest. Yet he makes a nasty comment about Guilherme too: his religious vocation is just a consequence of his being sexually impotent. Edmundo replies curtly: "I am impotent too." Jonas counterattacks angrily:

JONAS:

Impotent, you? . . . You're exactly like me! All you think about is women, day in and out.

Edmundo's retort is very incisive:

EDMUNDO:

I only think about ONE WOMAN, which makes a lot of difference! Just one! . . . I had—I still have—but one love in my life!

"Not your wife, is it?", is Jonas's ironical question. "No!", answers Edmundo. Senhorinha is spell-bound. "Who is it, then?", she asks. Edmundo refuses to answer. Lowering his voice and looking into his mother's eyes, he says: "Maybe you'll know some day."

The incestuous nature of the relationships within the family are made evident already in this first act of Rodrigues's third play: mother and son (Senhorinha-Nonô, Edmundo-Senhorinha), sister and brother-in-law (Aunt Ruth and Jonas) and father and daughter (Jonas's attraction towards young girls) are some of the patterns to be further developed in the following acts, to which new combinations will be added. The deepest, unconscious drives of human psyche had already been dealt with in the previous plays. They appeared underneath the characters' conscious behavior in The Woman Without Sin or in Alaide's delirium in Wedding Gown. They are now the basic dramatic substance of Family Album. The difference is that such primitive instincts, here, seem to be very little affected by the censoring mechanisms of the soul. In fact, the characters, in Family Album, appear to be at least partially aware of their impulses. They do realize they are in conflict with some of the oldest and most rigid laws of social behavior. Yet, the somewhat diffuse social framework of the play does not seem to exert enough pressure to detain them. There is sufficient pressure, however, to generate destructive consequences to

the transgression of cultural taboos. Already in the first act, the violence permeating the family relations is clearly manifested. Incestuous rapports impart rivalry, antagonism and division in the family circle. The members of each incestuous couple share a relation of complicity between them, and, thus, of opposition towards the rest of the family. In order to love his mother, Edmundo must necessarily hate his father. Jonas, on his turn, needs to reject his wife, so that he can make love to the young girls he identifies with his daughter.

What Nelson Rodrigues is aiming at, in his third play, is the theatricalization, the projection, in terms of external behavior on stage, of the irrational life of human soul. His characters convert into action the deep urges which emerge from the darkest side of their nature. They play out the wildest fantasies coming from the recesses of their psyche. The critic Sábato Magaldi says that they practice "an exercise of absolute authenticity."² Social conventions force men to repress a great deal of their instinctive life. What happens to the characters of Family Album is an attempt to abolish all such codes. They refuse to disguise their true nature behind them. They are compelled to assert such nature as strongly as possible, which explains their paroxysm. The playwright eschews the conventional procedures of realistic psychology in order to depict what he regards as the essential dimension of human soul, that which

exposes the veritable face of an individual. Incest, thus, is not seen as an extraordinary phenomenon. On the contrary, it corresponds to the most fundamental impulses of man's nature. Society, in real life, wants to restrain the externalization of such deep psychic undercurrents. The portrayal of social reality in the fictional world of the play, then, needs to be carefully handled, so that it will not inhibit the explosion of the characters' unrepressed energy. In order to get at the substantial core of human soul, a too accurate rendition of the outer appearances, of the external façade of social life, needs to be avoided. In fact, our first impression about Family Album is that the playwright is departing from realistic observation even more radically than in his previous plays. Later on we will examine the true extent of such departure.

Act 2 opens with the third page of the family album. The photographer is taking a picture of Glória, dressed for her First Communion, while the Speaker comments on the refined education she is receiving from her family. He also mentions that "A glow of pure innocence illuminates her angelical face. . . ."

The album scene disappears, and the family salon is shown again. Once more Jonas comments on Guilherme's impotence. He cannot conceive how a son of his flesh would not have inherited his sensuality:

JONAS:

I know what's going to happen, I'M SURE I
KNOW! Guilherme will show up here some day, saying
"I quit the seminary!"

In a coup de théâtre of great effect, Guilherme enters at the end of his father's line and says: "I quit the seminary!" A passionate discussion, then, erupts between Senhorinha and her sister. Aunt Ruth recalls their childhood days and complains about their mother's preference for the younger daughter:

AUNT RUTH:

She never cared about me. For her, there was only you, you! She had an obscene admiration for your beauty. She used to watch you in your bath and wipe your back. . . .

Edmundo and Guilherme are outraged with Aunt Ruth's insults to their mother. The aunt seeks support from Jonas, but this time he reacts against her:

JONAS:

I feel no desire for you. (Changing his tone) I can't stand women I'm not sexually attracted to... THAT'S WHY I'VE ALWAYS ABHORRED MY MOTHER AND MY SISTERS. . . .

The topic of the conversation shifts to Glória. Guilherme claims to know the reason of his sister's homecoming. He had been summoned by the principal of the boarding-school. Glória's romance with her girlfriend Teresa has been discovered. Both girls have been expelled from the school. Guilherme does not want his sister to return to the family. "Why?", asks Jonas. His son's reply is:

GUILHERME:

Because this house is unworthy of her.
BECAUSE YOU MUST NOT HAVE ANY CONTACT WITH YOUR
DAUGHTER! (Very exalted) You sully, you contaminate
everything, this house, the furniture, the walls,
everything!

Jonas challenges him: "And you? Are you any
better? You, my son? A lascivious temperament, just like
his father's!" But Guilherme has an unexpected revelation
to make. He is not lascivious anymore. He has put an
end to the torments of sexual urge. One day, in the
seminary, he had castrated himself. After that, he
became a new man. Thus, he is the only person who can
have contact with Glória.

A new family tableau shows Senhorinha and Aunt
Ruth frozen in an affected pose. The Speaker now exalts
Senhorinha's qualities, "not only as a wife and mother,
but also as a sister. All throughout Ruth's illness,
Senhorinha remained by her bedside like a guardian angel.
. . . Ruth, on her turn, being the older sister, is also
a model of virtues. Such are the rewards of patriarchal
education."

The action of the following scene begins with
Glória and Guilherme seeking refuge in a chapel from a
thunderstorm. Guilherme suggests Glória go behind the
altar and take off her wet clothes. He is in a state of
great agitation. Glória is reluctant about it. Guilher-
me reassures her that she is safe with him and tells his
sister about his voluntary castration. The conversation,

then, shifts to the subject of Glória's affair with Teresa:

GLÓRIA:

. . . She was so hurt when I told her that, every time we kissed, I'd close my eyes and see dad's face in my mind's eye. . . .

Guilherme's agitation increases as he asks for more details about his sister's lesbian relationship. The stage direction notes a "satyr-like expression" in his face. But these are painful memories to Glória. She is revolted by the malicious connotation imputed to a rapport which she considered as absolutely sinless. She is so disgusted with the perversity of the adult world, that she would gladly die rather than going on living in such world. Her father is her only attachment to life. Guilherme's increasing realization of Glória's fixation on the father leads him to try, in every possible way, to discredit Jonas before her eyes. Glória reacts violently:

GLÓRIA:

You're all on mom's side, all of you! But I'M NOT! . . . I don't like mom! I can't help it, she's such a wicked person! She's capable of murder, I can feel that! I'm scared when I'm all alone with her. . . .

"Dad is worse," Guilherme replies. But Glória does not care:

GLÓRIA:

. . . He may be the devil impersonated.
. . . I couldn't care less. I love him just the

same. I adore him!

Guilherme strikes his final blow. He confesses the reason of his joining the seminary and of his self-castration:

GUILHERME:

(Energetically) YOU ARE THE REASON! . . .
You were just a child, that time... But I couldn't
even look at you! All I could think about was you.
. . .

In his mounting excitement, he proposes an elopement or suicide. When the girl refuses, he pulls out a gun and shoots her twice. The curtain falls on Glória's last words before expiring:

GLÓRIA:

When I was a little girl... I had this
dream: mom dying... and dad and I running away
together... OH, GOD, IT HURTS SO MUCH!

In this second act, Nelson Rodrigues develops more extensively the movements of attraction and repulsion within the family microcosm. The information we are given about the older characters' antecedents suggests the cyclical nature of the family struggle. The life-long antagonism between Senhorinha and Aunt Ruth, Jonas's hate for his mother and sisters, the erotic connotation of Senhorinha's rapport with her mother all such elements are evidently at the source of the present situation. The two new characters introduced in the act, Glória and Guilherme, add new complications to the web of conflicting relationships. The brother loves the

sister, who, on her turn, loves the father. Therefore, the son necessarily abhors the father (as the daughter abhors the mother), and is, thus, compelled to kill the sister to prevent her from throwing herself in the father's arms.

The nature of the family bonds in Family Album, plus the overt way in which the characters manifest their impulses towards incest and crime, undoubtedly place the play above or beyond the realistic level. We do not see, in the characters' attitudes, an imitation of conventional social behavior. They seem to be, instead, a theatrical, thus, artificial composition designed to project, in terms of stage action, the fantasies of the irrational mind. The metaphoric quality of the family portrayal is stressed by Rodrigues's referring to Family Album as a "genesis play."³ He wanted to depict a primeval family, in which the archetypical elements of man's basic relationships would be acted out without the inhibitions of society's moral codes. In fact, much has been said about Family Album taking place in an imaginary realm outside the domains of time and space. Such assumption must be carefully examined. However thin the historical framework may be, the play's action is inserted within a precise time span, from 1900 to 1924, and situated in a concrete environment: a country property in the state of Minas Gerais. In addition, a number of details derived from realistic observation are scattered

throughout the play. The social status of the family is clearly defined: they belong to the rural aristocracy, which was still very influential in the early twentieth century (in the third act we will be informed that Jonas intends to run for the Senate elections).

Another element of social commentary, as we have seen, is implied in the platitudes of the Speaker's interventions, which function as a satirical illustration of the shortsighted and pharisaic mentality of the period's bourgeoisie. The fact that the play deals with a family feud from the state of Minas Gerais is significant in itself, Minas being one of Brazil's main strongholds of conservatism. In fact, the characters of Family Album in spite of their outrageous attitudes, reveal their attachment to a rigid moralistic framework of prejudicial concepts related to marriage, sex, virginity and family roles. In Rodrigues's third play, we are confronted not only with the violation, through incest and crime, of some universal laws of human civilization, but also of historically determined codes of a specific society, which gives a more extreme quality to the characters' moral transgressions.

Act 3 opens with another page from the family album: a portrait of Senhorinha and Nonô. The Speaker informs us that this picture was taken one day before he became mentally ill. Nonô's insanity, the Speaker adds, was a consequence from a traumatic shock he suf-

ferred when he saw a burglar irrupting into his mother's room. In the family salon, Senhorinha complains to Edmundo about the continuous humiliations her husband puts her through. The fantasy of romantic elopement, expressed earlier by Guilherme in the chapel scene, reappears in Edmundo's proposition of taking his mother away from the house. Senhorinha does not believe it is possible. Jonas would hunt them down. In this case, there is only one solution for Edmundo: "What if we... if I..." The allusion to parricide is immediately grasped by Senhorinha. Yet, her enthusiasm weakens as she hears Nonô's scream:

SENHORINHA:

. . . You see, Edmundo, I cannot... I just can't run away with you! . . . I'll never have enough courage to leave Nonô! It's impossible! . . .

Edmundo is jealous of his brother: "You love Nonô more than you love me!" He, then, delivers a speech in which some of the major implications of this story about family incest and crime can be discerned:

EDMUNDO:

(Passionately) Mother, sometimes I have this feeling... It's as if the whole world were totally empty... there's nobody living in it... I mean, nobody except us: you, father, me, my brothers and my sister... I see us as the only family, the very first family in the world. (Hysterically) Thus love and hate would be generated for the first time among us! . . . I believe a man should never leave his mother's uterus. . . . (Kneeling before Senhorinha's feet) There's no heaven after death. Heaven comes before birth... your uterus...

As Jonas comes in, a violent discussion erupts between father and son. Edmundo recriminates his father for his immoral conduct, which he opposes to Senhorinha's "saintly virtues." Jonas is infuriated. In order to convince Edmundo that his mother is not as virtuous as he thinks, he counterattacks with the revelation of an act of adultery committed by Senhorinha in the past. He claims that, one day, he saw a man running out of her bedroom. He forced Senhorinha to reveal the man's identity. It was a friend of his. Jonas went out and shot his wife's lover. In a state of utter despair, Edmundo shouts "WHORE!" at his mother's face.

Another page of the album is disclosed to reveal a somber picture of Jonas, "an expression of death in his eyes." The Speaker informs that ". . . fatality had deprived this model of manly virtues of three children. Unable to cope with such a heavy blow, he hanged himself on a door frame. . . . Let us pray for the eternal peace of his soul!"

The next scene shows a funeral vigil at the chapel. Edmundo's and Glória's dead bodies lie in their coffins. Senhorinha, dressed in full mourning, keeps watch to her son. Heloísa, Edmundo's wife, enters in a state of great agitation. She has an outburst of recriminations against her dead husband. She affirms Edmundo had never cared about her. His marrying her, according to his own words, was an attempt to get rid of

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an obsessive infatuation for another woman. In three years of marital life, he had never touched her:

HELOÍSA:

. . . He could not, he did not want to desire another woman. . . . I didn't mean anything to him. Edmundo could only love and hate people from his own family. He was incapable of loving or hating anybody else!

Heloísa seems to be hinting at the real implications of her husband's anomalous family ties. She challenges her mother-in-law: why does she stay all the time beside Edmundo's coffin and totally disregards her daughter? Senhorinha is plainspoken:

SENHORINHA:

. . . I've never liked Glória! Neither did she like me! I started hating her the day she was born. . . . I thanked God when my daughter died!

It is time for the last page of the family album to be shown. The photographer makes unsuccessful attempts to fit Edmundo and Heloísa into the conventional pose of the "happy newly-wedded couple." The tableau is followed by the final episode of the play, in which Jonas and Senhorinha have their last confrontation. Both are standing before Glória's coffin. Jonas is in a state of utter distress. As the scene develops, the exacerbation of husband and wife builds up to utter paroxysm:

JONAS:

I'll never be able to desire another woman!
. . . When Glória became an adolescent, something strange started happening to me: every time I kissed another woman, I'd close my eyes and I'd see her face

in my imagination. . . . I became interested only in young girls. Not women, young girls. . . .

Senhorinha comes up with a new revelation. The man she had betrayed her husband with was not his friend. She had lied to Jonas in order to protect her real lover. Edmundo was the only person to whom she had confessed the truth, a few days ago. And when he heard the name of his mother's lover, he cursed her and shot himself. It is Jonas's turn, now, to know his wife's secret:

SENHORINHA:

I was so happy when you killed your friend! It was such a great relief! Nonô was saved! It was happiness that drove him crazy. He couldn't stand so much happiness! . . . Edmundo took a wife because he was too scared. Nonô's insanity was also caused by fear... (Vehement and challenging) But I'm not scared! . . . There was nothing I would try to forget, nothing I wanted to escape from! I was neither frightened nor ashamed! (Possessed) I didn't bring my sons to life to give them away to another woman!

Jonas has another outburst:

JONAS:

. . . My daughter is dead! SEX IS OVER FOR ME! FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE!

Senhorinha insults him:

SENHORINHA:

There's no way I can describe the disgust you've always inspired me! You and every man in the world! . . . (Caressing her womb) Except my sons!

JONAS:

All your life you loathed and hated me! You wanted to see me dead! You and all my children, except Glória! Why didn't you kill me? Why don't you kill me now? . . .

He hands her a gun, which Senhorinha grabs with some reluctance. Yet, her hesitation is immediately dissolved as she hears Nonô's cries, which sound like an appeal to her. She pulls the trigger twice. Jonas's last word, as he falls to the ground, is: "Glória!". The play reaches its denouement as "Senhorinha leaves to meet Nonô and to start a new life."

The third act of Family Album brings further development and a final resolution to the theme of incest. The first scene deals with two of the love and hate relationships: Edmundo-Senhorinha and Senhorinha-Glória. The main core of the act, however, is occupied by the unfolding of the dramatic forces which activate the major thrust of the action: the incestuous passions between father and daughter (Jonas and Glória) and mother and son (Senhorinha and Nonô), the latter being actually consummated in sexual intercourse. All such incestuous links are far from being a surprise to the spectators. They have been sufficiently developed in the first two acts. Yet, their revelation out in the open in the final act strikes a powerful effect of surprise, very much on the melodramatic mode the playwright has been exploring since his very first play. In fact, startling reversals are piled up throughout Family Album, culminating with the final exposure of the two main characters.

The investigation of the "psychology of the

abyss," to repeat the expression coined by Álvaro Lins, is, undoubtedly, one of Rodrigues's favorite themes. In all the plays we have examined so far, the characters' behavior is always determined by the obscure compulsions of the psychic underworld. However, both in The Woman Without Sin and Wedding Gown, due to the strong pressures of social morality, the characters were incapable of recognizing, in a rational way, the forces operating behind their actions. They are like blind puppets of their irrational urges. It is true that, in Wedding Gown, the fantasies of the subconscious are openly displayed in terms of theatrical action. Yet, the spectacle of the irrational takes place in the realm of the psyche: the workings of Alaíde's agonizing mind. On the plane of reality, the heroes remain unaware of their deep internal motivations.

In Family Album, on the other hand, the manifestations of the dark side of the human soul constitute the basic substance of the external action, which unfolds, not within somebody's mind or in a fantastic, transcendent realm, but in a very tangible world. Such world may not be an exact copy of historical reality: yet, it is a concrete territory, in which real characters, with a consistent, although peculiar psychological characterization, are seen in action. Also the plot, extraordinary as it may seem, remains within the boundaries of

verisimilitude. In this sense, it would not be unappropriate to speak of a realistic quality in Family Album. It is true that such a family, as described in the play, is not very likely to be found in our real world. But then again, the same thing can be said about the heroes of the Greek drama, or of Racine's tragedies, which, by the way, conformed perfectly to the tenets of neoclassic verisimilitude. And yet, the extraordinary truthfulness of such human portrayals has been recognized for centuries. If we are to use the word "realism" in regard of this kind of drama, and Family Album is included in it, it should by no means, be associated to the specific canons of the nineteenth century literary school. We will have to redefine the concept. Our analysis of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre will lead us to such a redefinition.

In his third play, Rodrigues wanted to expose in full light the phantoms of the subconscious mind, instead of confining them to a subjective realm (as in Wedding Gown), or hiding them underneath the conventions of social behavior (as in The Woman Without Sin). The characters of Family Album act out, in the open, their deepest, darkest fantasies. Many critics have interpreted the attitudes of the characters as if totally unaffected by the moral laws of civilization. This is obviously a misunderstanding. These are certainly not innocent, amoral beings, exempt from shame or guilt, and happy to

give full vent to their instinctive drives. On the contrary, society's strict code of conventions, prejudices and moral restrictions is deeply ingrained in them. Their peculiarity resides in the fact that they are capable of, knowingly and willingly, transgressing such code. Yet, this is not an easy task for them. Their transgression is attained at the cost of an intense internal struggle. Moreover, it leads them to self and mutual destruction.

The fact that the heroes of Family Album seem to be aware of their subconscious impulses can be seen as a departure from strict naturalism. They are conscious of their unconscious. In one way or another, all of them, at some point, are able to recognize and verbalize their feelings of love and hate towards each other. Yet, as we have already mentioned, such creatures, capable as they are of accepting their incestuous and criminal impulses, experience, nevertheless, a tremendous difficulty in consummating them. Jonas's longing to possess his daughter is inhibited by intense guilty feelings. His obsession for young girls results from a psychological mechanism of substitution, which he had to develop in order to compensate for his unfulfilled passion.

Similarly, Edmundo's marriage is an attempt to escape from incest, although, he does not succeed in

eradicating his mother's image from his life. His return to her, after leaving his wife, means that Edmundo is both recognizing his failure and surrendering to his incestuous drive. His courage, however, does not go much further: Edmundo is a weak character. The revelation of Senhorinha's sexual rapports with his brother leads him to suicide. Guilherme's attempt to seduce Glória reveals a much bolder temperament. In fact, he seems to be less troubled by moral imperatives than his brother. His alleged impotence is clearly a calculated subterfuge, intended to elude suspicions from Glória and from the rest of the family.

Nonô and Senhorinha are the only characters who actually consummate incest. For Nonô, the experience was traumatic enough to drive him mad. Thus, Senhorinha is the only member of the family who, fully and freely, embraces incest. She is thoroughly aware of the nature of her feelings. The fact that she delays her self-exposure until the last scene derives less from culpability or shame, than from the necessity of being cautious in regard to her family. Senhorinha is the most extreme case of a total acceptance and surrender to the irrational instincts. Hers is a deliberate option, free from any sort of moral restrictions. Furthermore, she rejoices in it. For her, this is the way to achieve total fulfilment in life. She sees the

conventional family bonds as an obstacle to the attainment of a superior level of experience, only to be found in the love between mother and son. By killing Jonas, she destroys the last impediment to the accomplishment of her goals. She is overjoyed as she triumphantly leaves the stage to respond to her son's call. The suggestion of a happy ending, a "new life" starting for mother and son, can only be suggested in performance, since it is only stated in a stage direction. The theatre audience is left with an ambiguous denouement. In fact, the viability of Senhorinha's life project is very questionable. We are inclined to think that, on the contrary, it will initiate another violent page of the cyclical family album.

The issue of the realistic or unrealistic content of Family Album is controversial. Several scholars consider the play as an attempt, on Nelson Rodrigues's part, to give dramatic treatment to the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Brazilian intellectuals at that time were becoming familiar with the Jungian theories. Family Album, thus, was regarded as a metaphoric dramatization of the mythical roots of civilization. It was compared to the Greek tragedies,⁴ in the sense that, instead of dealing with the topicalities of everyday life, it delved into the universal problems of the human soul. The archetypal nature of the family portrayed

in the play is corroborated by Edmundo's famous speech about their being the first and the only family in the world. Such an interpretation surely makes a lot of sense. However, even those who advocated it criticized the way the playwright constructed his dialogue. Since he was tackling with such elevated themes, his dramatic composition should conform to the canons of high tragedy. The characters' elocution, thus, should be leveled up to the loftiness of the subject. What we see in Family Album, instead, is a continuation of Rodrigues's exploration of colloquial language. Even the conceptual complexities and poetic resonances of the dialogue are always expressed in an extremely natural tone, devoid of any literary grandiloquence.

The accusations against the lack of nobility of the playwright's style may well derive less from academic conservatism than from moralistic judgement. The bluntness with which the characters of Family Album verbalize their feelings was unacceptable to the puritanical mentality of the time. Álvaro Lins, who had saluted Wedding Gown as a great masterpiece, makes the following comments about the Album:

The major flaw of Family Album is the absolute poverty of the style. Not for a single moment the dialogue is raised to the formal grandeur of the tragic genre. Furthermore, each and every line is devoid of verbal coherence, literary quality and stylistic beauty. Throughout the entire play, the characters' expression is banal, crude and filthy.⁵

Lins's reference to banality is obviously related to a typical Rodriguean technique, which we can trace back to The Woman Without Sin: his utilization of bits of trivial talk as a means to deflate the excessive emotionalism of a scene. All along the agony of the pregnant woman, for example, someone keeps referring to her "narrow hips." In the highly dramatic confrontation of Jonas and Senhorinha in the final scene, the recollection of Edmundo's association of uterus with heaven motivates the following remark from Senhorinha:

SENHORINHA:

What a beautiful comparison! He surely had a poetic penchant!

All such ordinary talk provides a grotesque contrast to the oppressive atmosphere of a number of scenes. A similar effect is produced by the silly interventions of the Speaker. It seems obvious that the quality of the dialogue in Family Album results not from stylistic incompetence, but rather from a deliberate choice on the author's part.⁶ He was certainly convinced that the high resonances of this dramatic subject would not be minimized by colloquial speech. On the contrary, it would enhance the theatrical impact of the play by bringing it closer to reality.

Nelson Rodrigues's reproduction of everyday language in Family Album can be added to the list of elements drawn from naturalistic observation which have already

been mentioned. But how does the playwright manage to harmonize such prosaic elements with the mythical and philosophical material he is working with?

Granted, Rodrigues's rejection of a superficial reproduction of external reality is carried even further in his third play. He replaces traditional psychological characterization with the exploration of the deepest layers of the human psyche. As in his former plays, he transcends the outer appearances of life through his manipulation of fantasy, distortion, symbol and metaphor, and thus, establishes a heightened level of reality. Yet, his purpose is not the creation of such transcendent universe for its own sake. This is a dramatic expedient he uses in order to achieve his real goal, that is: the critical investigation of real life; the examination of real men and of their interactions in the real world. Family Album is not a poetic evocation of a primitive microcosm, untouched by civilization. Underneath the excentricities of the play, Nelson Rodrigues is making a devastating indictment of modern society, and, more specifically, of the family institution. This assumption is convincingly developed in Flora Sussekind's essay: "Nelson Rodrigues and the False Bottom."

What we discern in Nelson Rodrigues's theatre is a radical exposure of the deterioration of the fundamental values of Brazilian social structure, and of the disintegration of its whole system of relationships. The violations of society's rigid

laws by his characters bring about their exclusion from the social system. Thus, the only escapes left to the transgressors are death or madness.⁷

According to Sussekind, it is the social taboos related to sexual behavior which constitute the basic field of transgression for Nelson Rodrigues's characters. Thus, the result of their acts of violation would be the establishment of what she calls "countertaboos," that is: ". . . an inversion of the fundamental taboos of traditional sexual behavior: incest, adultery, virginity."⁸ One of the most significant aspects of Rodrigues's theatre, then, would be his demythification of:

. . . the masks, roles and functions which have been determined by the social system and have the general acceptance of the community. . . .⁹

According to Sussekind's analysis, one of the basic functions of the family institution is controlling sexual violence by means of a strict delimitation of roles and relationship patterns. ("I am the FATHER! The father is sacred! The father is the lord!", says Jonas in Family Album). The fundamental interdiction is, of course, sexual contact. However strong such interdiction may be, it is matched by an equally strong impulse, on the part of the characters, to violate it. Yet:

. . . even when such impulse is not powerful enough to break the rules and remains only on the level of fantasy, the violence of the desire is not

neutralized. It is then deviated from its primary object (sexual intercourse) and directed towards death.¹⁰

This last assertion can be exemplified, in Family Album, by Edmundo's suicide and Glória's murder by Guilherme.

Dramatic conflict, in Nelson Rodrigues's plays, thus, results from the opposition between the severe pressure of the social code and his characters' uncontrollable compulsion to break it. As the family is the main guardian of such code, the playwright chose the family circle as the basic environment of his dramas (actually, all of his seventeen plays are either pure family dramas or closely relate to family affairs). The disarticulation of the rigid framework of the familial structure is his favorite dramatic material.

Sussekind's interpretation confirms our assumption that Rodrigues's departure from realism in Family Album, as in the case of Wedding Gown, is essentially a dramatic stratagem, through which the playwright continues his probings into deeper layers of reality. His antirealism is a matter of formal construction. Underneath the surface of dramatic design, we can detect a more substantial layer of significance, the problem Rodrigues is really concerned about: the deterioration of human relationships within the framework of a decadent society. In

other words, the problems of real life. The critic Pompeu de Souza corroborates this assertion in his commentary on Rodrigues's techniques of exaggeration and deformation of external reality:

. . . he is not concerned with the naturalistic reproduction of superficial reality. By means of a reduction or an amplification of the appearances of life, he recreates reality in its most profound sense.¹¹

Nelson Rodrigues's manipulation of shock and sensationalism, in Family Album, is pushed much further than in the previous plays: bold language, unrestrained sexual behavior, lesbianism, incest, and crime are packed together in two hours of dramatic action. Rodrigues's use of such ingredients was considered excessive even by open-minded critics. Such judgement is contested by the playwright, himself:

I used the techniques of accumulation, profusion and excess as a means to obtain a specific emotional effect. Another playwright would maybe treat incest as an exception, an isolated fact. . . . Such an approach, however did not fit into the original conception of my drama. . . . In other words, the exact number of incests had to be four or five, instead of two or three.¹²

The elements of shock and sensationalism were evidently borrowed by Nelson Rodrigues from the stock and trade of the naturalistic tradition. A naturalistic resonance—the determinism of animal instincts upon human behavior—can be found in the characters' subordination to irrational drives, as well as in their inclination towards degradation, sordidness and brutality. Pompeu de Souza writes that Family Album:

. . . is a primitive fresco painted with blood and excrement, and exposing the poetic brutality of the human beast.¹³

The identification of the melodramatic devices which appear in the Album is also a very easy task. As far as dramatic narrative is concerned, we have the frequent twists of the action, the surprises of the sudden reversals and the coincidences (as in the scene of Guilherme's arrival). In regard to characterization, we can mention the high emotionalism of the characters' confrontations, their paroxysm and the flamboyance of their physical attitudes. Submitted by the playwright to a process of magnification, they often remind us of gigantic puppets. In fact, they are extraordinary creatures, executing extraordinary actions, and inhabiting a universe in which reality is heightened to an extraordinary level.

In Family Album, Nelson Rodrigues, as we have shown, continues his manipulation of the elements of naturalism and melodrama. The novelty of the play, in comparison with The Woman Without Sin and Wedding Gown, resides in its theme: the exploration of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Such exploration will be further developed in the three subsequent dramas: Black Angel, The Lady of the Drowned and Dorotéia.

Anjo Negro (Black Angel, 1946)

For 22 years, Family Album was banned by the

official censorship. Nelson Rodrigues's following play, Black Angel, also provoked an enormous scandal in the conservative society of the time. Still, with a great deal of difficulty, it managed to find its way to the stage. Its first production took place in 1948.

The initial stage direction describes the main set, the protagonist's (Ismael) house, as having "a completely unrealistic character." In a "vigil" room, in the ground floor, "the small coffin of an angel,¹⁴ draped in white silk, with its four traditional candles, very long and slender, burning. Seated in a semi-circle, ten black ladies, whose function is at times prophetic; they are forever making dismal predictions. . . . Standing, rigid, in vigil, is Ismael, the Great Black One. Throughout the entire play he will wear a white Panama suit, highly starched. . . . Above her back to the audience, Virginia, his white wife, extremely fair. . . . The house has no roof, so that the night can enter and possess the occupants. In the background, great walls that grow, as they increase the loneliness of the Black One."

The play opens with the lamentations of the chorus of black ladies over the dead child, who "drowned in a washtub so shallow!":

LADY:

(Sweet) Little dark one, little dark one!

. . .

LADY:

Little disguised mulatto! . . .

LADY:

(In panic) My God in Heaven, I am afraid of black! I am afraid, I am afraid!

The ladies also inform us that the boy is the third son of Ismael and Virginia to die at an early age. All such deaths, for them, mean that the parents are being punished for their sins:

LADY:

The black one desired the white woman!

LADY:

(Shouting) Oh! God kill all desires!

LADY:

(Lamenting) The white woman also desired the black one!

ALL:

Life be damned, and love be damned!

As Virginia goes up to her room, a young vagabond appears outside. The stage direction states: "It is soon evident that he is blind, hair blond and curly; his face expresses an almost feminine sweetness." Directly after him come four black men to carry the coffin away. The black men warn the blind stranger about the danger of entering Ismael's domains: "The man don't like white folks coming around here." They also tell him that Ismael is a highly competent doctor, but "... don't you go talking

about black, because he get real upset." Through the blind man's reply, we infer that Ismael is by no means unknown to him: "Tries to be white, hasn't lost that complex." As he is informed that Ismael has married a white, beautiful woman, whom he hides from everybody's eyes, he comments: "I knew it, she could only have been white."

Despite the black men's warnings, the newcomer insists on meeting Ismael. As he enters the house, he runs into "the Black One." Through their dialogue, interspersed by fragments of the "our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" of the black ladies, we learn that the blind man, Elias, is Ismael's foster brother. They have not seen each other since long. But now, Ismael's mother, being crippled and bedridden, had asked Elias to seek his brother and deliver the following message: "Ismael, your mother sends you her curse."

Ismael does not seem to be very affected by such message. Throughout the scene, his aggressive attitude (he repeatedly tells Elias to go away), contrasts with his brother's meekness. Elias begs Ismael to stay. He has no place to go. Ismael yields to his pleading, but under one condition: Elias is by no means to have any contact with Virginia. Ismael leaves Elias and goes up to Virginia's bedroom. Through their dialogue we are given a better idea about the nature of the husband-and-

wife relationship. Virginia complains about the state of absolute isolation imposed on her. Ismael reminds his wife that the decision of living in solitude had been primarily hers, apparently as consequence of some traumatic experience she had suffered in the past:

ISMAEL:

(With a certain vehemence) But wasn't this what you wanted? When THAT happened over there (he points at the bed nearby), what was it you said? . . . You said you wanted to run away from everything, from everyone; you wanted no one to see you ever again. . . .

VIRGINIA

After what happened there, if anyone saw me . . . I would feel naked...

But now Virginia is tired of living a secluded life. She wants to go out, to see other people. Ismael, however, remains deaf to her supplications:

ISMAEL:

. . . (With an absolute passion) Virginia, look at me, look here! I did all this so that only I would exist. Do you understand now? Not any other face exists for you, not any white face! Only mine, which is black...

Ismael leaves the room, locking the door from the outside. Virginia's confinement, now, will be narrowed down to the four walls of her bedroom. As she falls to her knees, sobbing, a funeral cortege, with the coffin carried by the black men and followed by Ismael and the black ladies, ends the first scene of the play. Unlike Family Album, scene divisions here are clearly specified.

This is a minor difference. In many other aspects, a great similarity between these two first plays of Rodrigues's mythical cycle can already be perceived in the first scene of Black Angel. Once again, words like "extraordinary," "excessive," "paroxysm" and "morbidity" come to our mind as we watch the characters' attitudes. The use of antirealistic procedures is another common trait: in fact, the playwright carries it to an even further extent in Black Angel. For one thing, we have the presence of a chorus, an element which will reappear with even greater relevance in the next two mythical plays. Secondly, as opposed to the more conventional and static settings of Family Album, the scenic environment, here, as we have seen in the initial stage direction, has a dynamic quality which carries rich metaphorical implications.

In the second scene, Hortência, the maid, informs her mistress of the presence of Ismael's brother in the house. Virginia bribes her into unlocking the door and bringing the blind man to her room. Before her brother-in-law: "She outlines a caress in the air, but hides her hand quickly." Elias speaks about Ismael:

ELIAS:

. . . Ever since he was a child he has been ashamed; ashamed, no; he has hated his own color. When he was a teenager, he wouldn't drink cachaça¹⁵ because he thought it was a niggers' liquor. . . . And he destroyed in himself the desire he felt for mulatto and black girls—he, who is so sensual. As

for me, he never forgave me for being the son of whites and not of blacks like him. When my parents died and I was adopted by his mother, Ismael was already a teenager and I was a child. Ismael mistreated me, he beat me. . . .

Virginia wants to know the cause of Elias's blindness:

ELIAS:

. . . I had a sickness of the eyes and Ismael, who was taking care of me, he switched the medicines. Instead of one, he put in the other... I lost both eyes. . . .

Now it is Virginia's turn to speak of her husband:

VIRGINIA:

. . . I hate him. . . . His perspiration is everywhere, rotting in the walls, in the air, in the sheets, in the bed, in the pillows, even in my skin, in my breasts. . . . And in my hair, my God!

Virginia then narrates to Elias the story of her past. She had been brought up by an aunt, who had five daughters, all old maids, except for the youngest one, who had a fiancé. They all hated Virginia because she was young and pretty. Ismael, who was the family doctor, became infatuated with her. But Virginia was afraid of him: "I was already afraid of the desire there was in his eyes. I already guessed that love with a man like him is the same as being raped every day." Besides, she was in love with her cousin's fiancé:

VIRGINIA:

. . . One night, my cousin's fiancé arrived too early. I was alone. Everything was so sudden! There was not a word. He took hold of me and kissed me. No more, except the hand that ran over my body...

At that precise moment, the aunt and the young cousin appeared. Virginia was locked up in her room and the cousin ran to the bathroom and hanged herself. Later in the night, Virginia heard somebody unlocking her door. It was Ismael, sent by her aunt:

VIRGINIA:

. . . I screamed. He tried to cover my mouth. I screamed like a woman in the pains of childbirth. . . .

(Darkness falls over the rest of the bedroom; light falls only on the bed in which Virginia was raped. All the signs of a savage struggle are seen. . . .)

Virginia wants Elias to help her:

VIRGINIA:

(With rancor) I've already had three sons. Not one of the three was white. This is why they die, because they are black.

If Virginia had a white child, she tells Elias, he would not die. Elias understands the insinuation. They both fall to their knees and kiss passionately. At this moment, a stage direction informs that, in the garden, appear the aunt and the cousins. The curtain falls on the first act of Black Angel.

It is obvious that Nelson Rodrigues is dealing again with a family drama, as in all his previous plays. Some recurring situations are easily discernable. Virginia's stealing her cousin's fiancé evokes Alaíde's seduction of her sister's boyfriend in Wedding Gown. Such a pattern—sisters or cousins in love with the same man—

which carries incestuous connotations, has also appeared in Family Album: the triangle formed by Senhorinha, Aunt Ruth and Jonas. The same motif is repeated, in an inverted form, in Virginia's involvement with Elias: two brothers loving the same woman. In the second act of Black Angel, Virginia bears a child by her brother-in-law. It is a girl. As a consequence, the antagonism of mother and daughter and the attraction between father and daughter (Ismael being supposedly the father), which had already appeared in Family Album, will constitute the dramatic substance of the rest of the play.

As the second act opens, the black ladies count their rosaries around the washtub in which the little boy had drowned. In the sitting-room, the aunt and the cousins see Elias coming out of the bedroom. They immediately realize what is going on and go up to speak to Virginia. A violent confrontation between the women begins to unfold. The aunt threatens to reveal the adultery to Ismael, as an act of retaliation for what Virginia had done to her younger daughter:

VIRGINIA:

You were avenged that day, when you locked
the whole house and sent Ismael upstairs!

AUNT:

That wasn't enough. It was too little. . . .
I swear to you that if a man did to my daughter what
Ismael did there (points to the broken bed), I would
even be thankful, I swear! If you saw the state my
daughter is in, the one who stayed downstairs, if you

saw what she says, what she does...

(At this exact moment the said daughter assumes a series of erotic stances, . . . expressing profound sexual anguish.)

AUNT:

She is almost going crazy. . . . And her sisters—these—are following the same path. . . . They are going to die virgins, because you are a tramp. (Violent) I will tell your husband everything, I will tell him what no one told me, but what I saw!

Following the exit of the aunt and the cousins, Ismael arrives from his son's burial. Virginia invites him for a walk in the garden. He finds her different: "almost loving." Virginia admits: "I am another, Ismael." But he is skeptical about such an unexpected change in his wife's feelings. He always thought she hated him. Virginia denies it vehemently:

VIRGINIA:

(Desperate) No!

ISMAEL:

Why do you lie? . . . I am your husband, but when I come close to you, it's as if I were going to rape a woman. . . . I feel my desire as a crime. Don't you?

VIRGINIA:

My body is yours, it's already yours, it will be yours a thousand times. . . .

Yet, Ismael is not easily convinced. He accuses Virginia of hating their sons because they were black—they looked like him. Furthermore:

ISMAEL:

They died because they were black. . . . Do you think I don't know? . . . You killed them. (Lowers his voice) You murdered them. . . . one by one.
. . . .

VIRGINIA:

(Savage) I wanted to free my house of black boys! . . . I didn't want to caress a black son.
. . . .

But now, she promises, if they have another child, she will let him live and will give him all her love. Ismael reacts:

ISMAEL:

(Violent) And why do you want a new son, if you hated the others?

The aunt, entering the room at that exact moment, answers his question: "Because he's not your son, Ismael." And with a perverse joy, she reveals what had happened between Virginia and Elias: "She betrayed you in order to have a white son." First Ismael is petrified with astonishment, but soon his stupor turns into wild rage. A revenge plan starts to form in his mind. Virginia is to attract Elias to her room, and, then, he will kill the blind man. Virginia obeys him. Elias comes in and sits on the bed, next to her. Ismael is "motionless, in the middle of the room":

ELIAS:

Love my son... as you love me. . . . (Virginia lets go of Elias, and recoils to the back of the room. Elias pursues her and, without wanting to, nor knowing it, he walks in the direction of

Ismael. The latter, with all calmness, raises the revolver and points, not at the belly, not at the heart of his enemy, but at face level. He shoots. Elias falls, instantaneously dead. . . .)

It has become quite evident, by now, that the theme of incest is one of the major ingredients of Black Angel. I believe, however, that the real fulcrum of the dramatic action resides in the problem of racial color. Nelson Rodrigues exposes a "collective abcess," to use the expression coined by Antonin Artaud. In a country like Brazil, largely populated by blacks and half-breeds, the theme of racism is certainly a very significant matter. Rodrigues's criticism is even more subversive because it counters a widely accepted assumption: that color discrimination is an unknown problem in Brazilian society. Such belief derives from the fact that, unlike other countries, Brazil did not develop an officially established system of segregation, and, therefore, violent confrontations between blacks and whites are relatively rare. Brazilian racism manifests itself in a veiled form. Despite the appearances, it is undeniably a very strong tendency among the white population, who controls the political and economical power. By dealing with such a delicate topic, the playwright unmasks the widespread hypocrisy and pharisaism.

The opposition between black and white is continually underlined throughout the play. Virginia is very white and fair. So is Elias. It is impossible for such a woman, in this kind of society, to accept a black husband

and black children. There is more than ample evidence that Ismael, too, is imbued with the prejudices of the white-dominated world. The fact that he never objected to the murder of his sons, for example, reflects his desire to avoid the perpetuation of his lineage. But the theme of racial conflict in Black Angel, should not be reduced only to its social implications. It also functions on a higher level—of metaphorical significance—as an allusion to the antithesis between spiritual purity and carnal debasement. This motif is more extensively developed in the third act of the play.

Scene 1 shows us the "same setting as the two previous acts. . . . Sixteen years have passed and never more did the sun shine. . . . An incessant night weighs over the house. It seems like a curse. Instead of a boy child, a daughter, Ana Maria, was born; she is now fifteen years old . . . The curtain rises and Ana Maria enters, a beautiful young lady, groping among the things in her room. She is evidently blind. . . ."

In an exchange between Virginia and Ismael, we are surprised by a totally unexpected turn in the evolution of the dramatic action:

VIRGINIA:

 Your daughter is everything for you; and me,
nothing?

ISMAEL:

 Nothing.

VIRGINIA:

(Violent) And why "your" daughter? You know you're not the father, that the father is someone else. . . .

ISMAEL:

I'm not the father, but she thinks I am. (In a rapture) She adores me, she's fanatic about me! . . .

VIRGINIA:

. . . One day you took her away. . . . and I thought it was to drown her in the well; or even bury her alive in the garden. . . . I only didn't think you would do what you did. A child, an innocent, and you dripped acid in her eyes, acid!

The great irony was that Virginia had wished for a son. The fantasies she nurtured during her pregnancy are strongly reminiscent of Senhorinha's attachment to her sons in Family Album. If Elias's child had been a boy, Ismael says to Virginia:

ISMAEL:

. . . You would have loved him, not as a mother, but as a woman, as a female!

VIRGINIA:

Yes, as a woman, or as a female! . . . He and I would create a world so small, so closed, so much ours. . . . Like a bedroom. . . .

Virginia was overcome by frustration when, instead of a boy, she gave birth to Ana Maria. She hated her daughter from the moment she was born. Ismael's reaction, however, was exactly the opposite:

ISMAEL:

. . . When I saw it was a daughter, and not

a son, I said: "Oh, thank you, my God! Thank you!" I burned Ana Maria's eyes . . . so that she would never know I am black. (Sobbing laugh) And do you know what I told her? Ever since she was a child? That all other men, all other men, are the ones that are black, and that I, understand? I am white, the only white, (violent) I and no one else! . . .

Their discussion is interrupted by the arrival of four blacks carrying the corpse of a woman who had been brutally raped by a colored man "with six fingers in one hand." At this moment, the aunt appears, "dragging herself." The dead woman, she explains, is one of her daughters:

AUNT:

. . . the last one left, because the others, one by one, died. (With fright) All virgins, except this one. Not this one. . . .

Before leaving, the half-demented aunt has a last thing to say:

AUNT:

. . . Your daughter will die, Virginia! . . . and a VIRGIN! . . . And you, Virginia, be damned! I want you to have for your love only a bed of flames and screams. . . .

Ismael and Virginia are horrified with the aunt's curses. Ismael wants to hide Ana Maria and now he is willing to let her know about his real color. He asks his wife to tell her.

ISMAEL:

. . . Tell your daughter all you want; especially that I'm black. . . . that I'm the only black in the world; tell her that all men, except me, are white, including her father. . . .

As far as the theme of incest is concerned, aside from the mother-and-son relationship reflected in Virginia's projects about the son she thought would come, two other patterns, already explored in Family Album, are reworked in this first scene of the third act: the mother-and-daughter antagonism and the love between father and daughter. We should give some attention, now, to the metaphorical implications of the black-and-white duality (purity versus corruption) mentioned before.

The heroine's name, Virginia, her physical characterization and Elias's "angelical" looks and feminine demeanor, represent the notions of cleanliness and spiritual nobility. On the other hand, Ismael's blackness functions as a symbol of brutality and moral degradation. Virginia relives her traumatic experience of the tragic night she was raped by Ismael every time he makes love to her. The sullied bed of her violation remains untouched in her room as a constant reminder. Her flesh and the entire house are impregnated with the animal fluids of the black man's body. Yet, the way the characters of Black Angel experience such duality of white purity and black degradation is not as one-sided as it may seem at first impression. In fact, a sort of moral ambivalence, a split between contradictory impulses towards the opposite poles of virtue and venality, can be discerned in them. Such conflict will become a recurrent feature of

Nelson Rodrigues's heroes in his subsequent plays.

When the curtain rises for the last scene of the third act, Virginia is revealing to Ana Maria all the untruths made up by Ismael. The initial stage direction refers to a new element in the settings: "Downstairs, in the foreground, a strange tomb, transparent, made of glass, in a very delicate analogy to the coffin of Snow White." Of course, Ana Maria does not believe a single word of Virginia's account. And even admitting that Ismael is not her real father, such a fact is absolutely irrelevant to her, since:

ANA MARIA:

It doesn't matter that you, one day, called some blind man. . . . I chose another father... He is the Fiancé... white, fair. . . .

Virginia invokes her motherly love, as an attempt to appease her daughter's growing irritation. But Ana Maria rejects her with disbelief:

ANA MARIA:

You never loved me. When you come. . . . I feel the coldness of your heart. . . . You hate me; and not just today; ever since I was born!

Virginia proceeds in her debunking of the fictitious world which Ismael had created for Ana Maria:

VIRGINIA:

. . . he lies when he says all men are black. . . . If you only knew how there are beautiful men, white, fair, (transported), men whose caresses make you scream! . . . To hold in your hands the face of a man, to feel inside your hands a living face!

ANA MARIA:

Who knows if I haven't done that with my father?

Virginia realizes with stupefaction the nature of her daughter's involvement with Ismael:

ANA MARIA:

I love my father...

VIRGINIA:

(Suddenly ferocious) It is too that kind of love! . . . (Defiant) Pass your hand over my face, and you'll feel that I've been loved! . . .

We have now a full incestuous pattern: Ana Maria corresponds to her father's love. As an inevitable consequence, the rivalry between mother and daughter is thoroughly established:

VIRGINIA:

(Grabbing her daughter, hoarse) You couldn't do that. He's mine, not yours...

In a state of desperation, Virginia runs to meet Ismael in the mausoleum. We begin to understand now why the mausoleum is there. Ismael coldly informs his wife that she is to leave the house as soon as possible. He wants to be alone with Ana Maria. Virginia hears, in awe, about his plan of burying himself alive, with the girl, in the mausoleum. She, then, affirms her love for him and makes a startling revelation:

VIRGINIA:

I loved you, even when I pretended to hate you. . . . And I never loved you more, loved you so

much as on that day. . . . The day my cousin hanged herself... My aunt sent you. . . . When you came close to me, I breathed your sweat... (Enamored) you black and me, white. . . . I didn't know I loved you, but my flesh begged for you. But now I know!

Yet, there is an obstacle to the realization of Ismael's "love-and-death" union with Ana Maria. The girl, in spite of what she heard from Virginia, keeps thinking that he is white:

ISMAEL:

. . . She doesn't know I'm a "hideous nigger"
. . . She only loves me because I lied. . . . It's
not me she loves, but an accursed white man that never
existed!

Virginia takes advantage of Ismael's conflict to dissuade him from his project: his entombment with Ana Maria. She devises a plan in which only the daughter is to be buried alive in the mausoleum, leaving them free to live their insane passion. Using all her seductive powers, she manages to convince him. Ismael goes to get Ana Maria, while Virginia, "very dignified, very serene, opens the doors to the tomb of glass." The "Black One" and the blind girl come back: "The latter with an absolutely idyllic air." Ismael kisses his daughter and leads her into the mausoleum. Virginia closes half the door and Ismael closes the other half. Ana Maria is now locked in. We see her screaming, but no sound can be heard from the outside. Virginia attracts Ismael away from that place:

VIRGINIA:

Our room is also closed in like a tomb. I'll wait for you.

She goes up to her room and stretches out on her bed. She is followed by Ismael "now tormented by the desire that is reborn." The chorus of the black ladies, placing itself around the nuptial bed, delivers its final considerations about the tragedy of the white Virginia and her Black Angel:

LADY:

Oh, white Virginia! . . .

LADY:

In thy belly now lies another son! . . .

LADY:

Whom thou shalt kill with thine hands!

LADY:

Oh, Virginia, Ismael!

LADY:

(In a contralto voice) Thy love, thy hate
hath no end in this world!

ALL:

(Deep and slow) White Virginia...

ALL:

(Deep and slow) Black Ismael...

The play reaches its conclusion: "The single bed is illuminated, still with the same aspect as the night Virginia was raped. Then all is darkened and only the

glass tomb is left illuminated. The silhouette of Ana Maria is seen in the frenetic and useless effort to free herself. At last, tired, exhausted from her own desperation, she lets herself slide, slow motion, down the pane of glass. She kneels, her arms forming a cross; she seems petrified in this position. This is the final image of the blind girl."

The theme of "moral transgression," which we have examined in Family Album, is also a major issue in the second play of the mythic cycle. The way such transgression is carried out in Black Angel, however, is different from that of the characters of the preceeding play. The moral ambiguity we find in Virginia and Ismael—their split between the opposing impulses towards spiritual elevation and self-debasement (symbolized respectively by the images of "whiteness" and "blackness")—cannot be equated to the single-mindedness with which the heroes of Family Album recognize and express, in terms of concrete action, their deepest irrational urges. With the exception of Ana Maria, who has a clear and guiltless perception of her incestuous inclination towards her stepfather, the two main protagonists of Black Angel are continually oscillating between their contradictory impulses. Their successive psychological changes, creating a sequence of reversals, lend a highly dynamic quality to the progression of the dramatic action.

First Virginia rejects Ismael's blackness (with all its moral implications), and seeks whiteness and purity in Elias. But at the end, she reveals the other side of her nature: her morbid passion for her black husband. Ismael abominates his color and worships his wife's whiteness. His sexual desire for her is, however, metaphorically black, since it reflects his need of degrading the white purity he aspires to. Through his "innocent" love for Ana Maria, he makes a new attempt to attain his ideal of spiritual nobility; but under Virginia's pressure, he ends up succumbing again to his base instincts.

The unexpected revelations and surprising reversals caused by the characters' sudden veerings are clearly reminiscent of the melodrama structure. This type of psychological characterization, itself, which totally differs from the linear progression of the realistic tradition, is also a melodramatic technique. Another procedure of the kind, still related to character composition, can be seen in the fact that, as in Family Album, Rodrigues is dealing again with exceptional figures accomplishing exceptional actions, which accounts for their constant emotional exacerbation and the flashy theatricalism of their physical behavior. According to the stage directions, the characters move with grandeur and display exaggerated gestures and imposing attitudes. This may sometimes even reach the point of artificiality, as, for

example, in the final tableau of blind Ana Maria, her arms forming a cross, sliding down the glass wall of the mausoleum.

The world of Black Angel can be compared to the world of melodrama, in the sense that it constitutes a self-enclosed, independent microcosm, abstracted from the framework of social reality. Granted, in Rodrigues's play, as well as in melodrama, the moral values are dictated by the codes of the outer world. The microcosm reproduces the macrocosm. The notions of good and evil, sin and purity, nobility and degradation are the same. Yet, if the principles are equal, their application differs. In the real world the abstract norms translate into concrete, official laws, whereas, in the autonomous, fictitious orbit of Rodrigues's melodrama, the sanctions of the social system do not affect the transgressors. Violence and crime are freely perpetrated in Black Angel, and the possibility of punishment by some sort of official justice is never mentioned.

The universe of Black Angel is even more immune to the contingencies of "real life" than the one of Family Album. In fact, the playwright is very sparing in his use of naturalistic detail. The dialogue still sounds very natural, but the exploration of colloquial language of a more popular quality is carefully avoided. In many instances, the characters' speeches, in their simplicity,

are imbued with poetical overtones, not to mention the lyric beauty of the chorus's litanies. After displaying his mastery in the reproduction of the spoken language, Nelson Rodrigues, here, exhibits the qualities of a true poet.

Esthetic sophistication, in Black Angel is not limited to the stylistic refinement of its dialogue. In terms of visual composition, the dynamic quality of the settings (the growing walls, the eternal unstarry night gradually penetrating the roofless house, the glass mausoleum), reveals Rodrigues's expertise in creating a theatrical environment of great plasticity and rich symbolic resonance. To all such elements, we can add the pictorial effects obtained through the contrasts between the characters' racial types and costumes: fair Virginia dressed in full mourning, black Ismael in his spotless white suit, the black ladies and the black coffin carriers, Elias's blond curly hair, the aunt's and cousins' dark clothes. In regard to visual elaboration, we should also mention the abundant stage directions which describe, in great detail, the development of the stage movement, concerning both the individual attitudes of the characters and the mass evolutions of the chorus as well. The indications about the speeches, too, are extremely specific, not only as far as dramatic inflection is concerned, but also in relation to the tonal, we can even say, musical

quality of the voices.

At this point of Nelson Rodrigues's career, Black Angel is, undeniably, his highest achievement in terms of dramatic poetry. Again we are led back to the issue of dramatic realism. Black Angel shows us, even more emphatically than the previous plays, that the playwright is concerned, not with a reproduction of the real world in the theatre, but with the creation of a theatrical world, valid in and of itself. As he states in his essay Teatro Desagradável:

Black Angel was never intended to have the journalistic veracity of a crime story. Ismael does not exist in any place on earth. He can only exist on the stage. Such theatrical authenticity is what really matters to me.¹⁶

Black Angel is, also, Nelson Rodrigues's most radical departure from surface realism. But once again we must understand that his invention of such an entirely imaginary world does not imply a rejection of reality. On the contrary, this is his paradoxical method of excavating through the outer layers of the external appearances as a means to get at the depths of human experience. Reality is thus deconstructed in order to be reconstructed in its most profound essence.

Senhora dos Afogados (Lady of the Drowned, 1947)

The third play of the mythic cycle, Lady of the

Drowned, written in 1947, was only released from the censorship ban on performance in 1954. Consequently, the following play, Dorotéia, dating from 1949, was staged first (1950). Such complications led many critics to assume that the latter antedated the former. An analysis of the two plays will show us that, even though Lady of the Drowned is a further step in the evolution of the cycle, Dorotéia, however, is undoubtedly its great culmination.

Once again Nelson Rodrigues presents us a family drama, which he also characterizes as a "tragedy," similarly to the Album and the Angel. The antirealistic quality of the elements described in the initial stage direction does not surprise us anymore: "Two superimposed environments: the house of the Drummond family and the brothel at the docks. In the house, the mother (Dona Eduarda) and the daughter (Moema). . . . They don't resemble each other, except for the movements of their hands, which are perfectly alike, a fact that will exasperate them throughout the play." The stage direction also mentions Dona Marianinha, the demented grandmother and the spectral figures of a chorus of neighbors. There is also an invisible character, the sea, whose ominous presence seems to have an alluring appeal to the family, especially to the women. The dismal atmosphere of the house is enhanced by the constant alternation of light

and shadow produced by a distant light-house.

Through the conversation between the three women and the neighbors, we learn that Clarinha, Dona Eduarda's youngest daughter, has just died, drowned in the sea. The same thing had happened to her sister Dora, a few years before. For Dona Eduarda, both girls had committed suicide. But the crazy grandmother has a more fatalistic interpretation:

GRANDMOTHER:

My grand-daughter, Clarinha, didn't kill herself, the sea killed her. . . . Always the sea. . . . It doesn't like us. It wants to swallow the whole family, especially the women. . . . And when the whole family is extinguished. . . . the sea will come here and drag away the house, with its portraits and its mirrors!

Dona Marianinha also refers to a typical characteristic of the Drummond clan: its excessive prudery. She dislikes Dona Eduarda, the wife of her son Misael, because she lacks the puritanical virtues of the family. Moema, the granddaughter, on the other hand, is "frigid, like all our women." Misael, Dona Eduarda's husband, is a man of great social prestige and political influence. At the present moment, he is being honored with a banquet offered by the local community.

One of the neighbors comments that Dr. Misael is the victim of a defamation plotted by his political enemies: he is accused of having killed one of the prostitutes on the docks. Dona Eduarda is greatly upset by

such talk. "Stop it!", she screams. The neighbors walk backwards towards the upstage area and turn their backs to the audience: "They cover their faces with one hand, which means that they are withdrawing from the action."

Moema is engaged to a navy officer. She knows very little about her fiancé's background, aside from the fact that his mother, who lives on an island, had been abandoned by his father before he was born. Dona Eduarda disapproves of this marriage. Moema wants to know why her mother dislikes so much her fiancé. Dona Eduarda asks the chorus to reveal to Moema "the nature of this man's soul." As one of the neighbors comes forth, Dona Eduarda points to his face:

DONA EDUARDA:

That's not your face; it's a mask. Put on your real face.

According to the stage direction, "the neighbor puts on a horrendous mask which is, actually, his authentic face." The other neighbors repeat the same action, as they start commenting on the venality of the fiancé's character: he has tattooed all over his body the names of all the whores he has met in his life and he says to everybody that he can only marry a prostitute, because this is the kind of woman he likes. Moema is not impressed at all:

MOEMA:

(In a dream) He tells me he loves me... He

kisses my hands... He rarely looks at my face... As if he was engaged only to my hands. . . . (She looks at her hands, as if they had something mysterious about them. . . . Dona Eduarda repeats exactly the same movements. ...

MOEMA:

(To Dona Eduarda) Why don't you stop moving your hands? Why don't you leave them alone?

DONA EDUARDA:

(Desperate) I cannot control them. They don't obey me!

Paulo, Moema's brother, comes in. Like Edmundo, in Family Album, and Elias, in Black Angel, he is young and handsome, and there is something childish and feminine about his demeanor. He becomes very agitated as he hears a chorus of wailing voices: the prostitutes of the docks are crying and praying for the woman murdered 19 years before.

PAULO:

(Laughing and sobbing) Today the whores of the docks don't receive any customer. They keep looking at our house, pointing at it, as if it were the murderer's house...

Repeating the same business of the neighbors' chorus, Dona Eduarda covers her face with one hand as a sign of withdrawal from the action. Brother and sister are left alone. Paulo is terrified with the thought of his mother and Moema having the same fate as his drowned sisters. Moema retorts angrily:

MOEMA:

Why do you identify me with my mother?

PAULO:

. . . You are as identical as two flames.

MOEMA:

That's not true. We are not the same person.
Only our hands look alike. . . . I wish I didn't
have such hands...

As Moema leaves the stage, Dona Eduarda, after uncovering her face, reenters the scene. The motif of the opposition between mother and daughter is further reinforced. Dona Eduarda tells Paulo:

DONA EDUARDA:

She looks at me with hate. . . . She can
say I'm planning to poison your father, . . . or
that she surprised me in the arms of another man.
. . .

The possibility of Paulo believing in such calumnies frightens her. Paulo reassures his mother. Yet, he wants her to swear that she will always remain a faithful wife!

PAULO:

. . . All the women in our family have always
been faithful ... Fidelity has ceased to be a duty
among us; it became a habit. It shouldn't cost you
much to preserve a 300-year-old habit.

In this first scene of the play, Nelson Rodrigues continues his experimentation with anti-illusionistic techniques. A new device of this kind is the use of the mask. Sábato Magaldi has defined its function:

Lady of the Drowned plays with the paradox of the actor's face concealing his real character and the mask revealing his authentic face. . . . In the opening of the second act . . . one of the neighbors

says: "Let's take off our faces!" And another one: "And put on our masks!" . . . The stage direction informs that they all take off their masks and expose their faces. It is evident that the real face is a metaphorical allusion to social hypocrisy, whereas the mask expresses the true nature of the characters.¹⁷

Besides the mask, Rodrigues introduces another novelty: the stage business of the characters covering their faces with one hand to signify their temporary withdrawal from the action. With each new play of the mythic cycle, the playwright takes a bolder step in his exploration of the techniques of representational theatre.

The second scene of act one reveals a static family tableau. Misael, with his long beard and sensual expression, reminds us of Jonas in Family Album. As the frozen group starts to move, Moema lovingly takes off her father's boots and massages his feet:

MISAEEL:

It was Clarinha who used to do that before.

MOEMA:

Today it's me. And tomorrow, and the day after, and forever.

Misael has just returned from the banquet. He is greatly disturbed by an odd incident that occurred at the moment he stood up to make his speech:

MISAEEL:

. . . I saw a woman... on the other side of the table, right opposite to me. . . . Eduarda, I saw that woman all throughout the banquet. (Screaming) But I knew she had died many years ago. . . . Nobody could see her, except me... I just couldn't go on, I stopped in the middle of my speech... I ran away.

. . . Eduarda, the moment she appeared, the room was filled with the smell of the sea... She came from the sea...

The setting of the docks is illuminated, revealing a chorus of prostitutes, their emaciated faces heavily made-up. Their voices, singing a sad litany, gradually fill the stage:

1st. WOMAN:

We, women of the docks. . . .

3rd. WOMAN:

We implore you, dear Lord. . . .

2nd. WOMAN:

Have pity on the one who died. . . .

4th. WOMAN:

Dry up the blood that has been shed...

The women's chanting is clearly heard in the Drummonds' house. In their bedroom, Misael and Dona Eduarda reminisce about the tragic events of their wedding day. One of the prostitutes had her throat slashed with an ax. The crime has never been solved. The rumors that soon started to spread about Misael being the assassin derived from the fact that, as a lawyer, he was dealing with a judicial case in the docks, in which the woman was involved. Consequently, he had been seen with her a number of times before the murder.

Dona Eduarda starts preparing Misael's medicine for his heart disease. From downstairs, without looking at the upper room, Moema cries:

MOEMA:

No, father, no! . . . Don't accept anything from my mother's hands... Death may be contained in this innocent water...

Moema's words inflame Misael's suspicions. He knows that his wife is not happy with him:

DONA EDUARDA:

You've never loved me!

MISAEAL:

I could not... A Drummond cannot love, not even his own wife. He cannot have sexual desire. . . . We are frigid. . . . Our table is sober and sad... Bed is sad in the Drummond family.

He grabs Dona Eduarda by the arms:

MISAEAL:

. . . You're so beautiful. . . . (He contemplates his wife's face; but his enchantment turns into exasperation) But no, no... This face is not yours... It's the dead woman's face... Even if I ripped off your dress, it would be her breasts, and not yours, that would appear!

As we have seen in Flora Sussekind's essay, the major role of the family institution is to control and discipline the irrational instincts of its members. The Drummond family gives us a perfect illustration of such repressive function. Erotic satisfaction is the main interdiction. Misael, despite his sensual nature, is incapable of having sexual pleasure with his wife. As in most of Rodrigues's plays, sexual fulfillment is incompatible with marriage. Family life is subordinated to a severe code of moral obligations and restrictions, such as virginity, fidelity, absence of physical contact,

fixed roles, domination and submission. Thus, the impulses of the libido, being identified with sin, bestiality and abjection, need to be totally obliterated, so that the spiritual side can flourish. In such an ethic framework, human dignity can only be achieved through the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, which depends on the unconditional adoption of a monolithic system of rigid norms of conduct.

In the first scene of act 2, Moema's fiancé arrives in a state of great agitation. His mother, whom he has not seen for many years, has left her island and arrived in town.

FIANCÉ:

. . . She's so young, almost a girl. . . .
 She never grows old. Always the same age. . . .
 It's impossible to see her without falling in love.
 . . .

He describes his mother's island as a paradise of poetic enchantment. He would like to take Moema there, but:

FIANCÉ:

. . . You wouldn't be allowed to go there.
 . . . It's not a place for a woman of your kind.
 It's a place where only dead prostitutes can go...
 Whores!

The scene shifts to the parents' bedroom. The Fiancé wants to speak to Misael. He was told that Misael had seen his mother the day before at the banquet.

MISAEEL:

. . . It was not your mother. That woman was dead. She died a long time ago.

FIANCÉ:

My mother also died a long time ago. . . .
 She was killed on your wedding day with an ax. . . .
 And everybody says you are the murderer. . . .
 (Holding Dona Eduarda by the shoulders) Your husband
 was my mother's lover. . . . (Turning brusquely to
 Misael) Look at me carefully. . . . Don't I look
 familiar to you? . . . Don't you recognize your own
 flesh in me?

Misael admits everything. He killed the prostitute because on the day of his wedding, she sneaked into the house, into the bedroom and lay on the bride's bed.

MISAEEL:

. . . I knew I had to kill her. . . . I
 dragged her by the hair down to the beach. . . .
 Then I ran to my wedding...

But then, asks Misael, if the Fiancé is his son,
 how could he think of marrying Moema, his sister?

FIANCÉ:

(Out of his mind) I cannot marry your daughter,
 but I can be your wife's lover! . . . I don't want
 your daughter, I want your wife, you, murderer!

He embraces Dona Eduarda, who offers no resistance.
 She confesses she has always loved him too. She opposed
 his marrying Moema because she was jealous. She asks him
 to take her away to a distant place, a place that Misael
 would never be able to reach. The neighbors lift up Dona
 Eduarda's body as if she were dead and carry away "the
 first adulterous woman of the family."

Several patterns of incest running in the play

are more clearly discernible at this point: Moema loves her father and, consequently, hates her mother; the Fiancé loves his mother and, therefore, hates his father; Dona Eduarda, evoking the myth of Phaedra, loves her stepson, who, on his turn, loves in her a substitute for the mother-figure. By stealing Dona Eduarda from Misael, the Fiancé is also performing an act of revenge against his father.

The revelation of Misael's affair with the prostitute, contradicting his earlier negation of sex, brings back the theme of the moral ambivalence of the Rodriguean hero. His killing the woman after he saw her lying on the nuptial bed reflects his desire to eliminate the erotic dimension from his marriage. Feminine sensuality, symbolized by the prostitute's figure, had to be extirpated from Dona Eduarda. Misael's killing the woman of the docks can be translated as his attempt to kill the "prostitute" side of his wife. The theme of sex and marriage as irreconcilable elements is here strongly asserted.

In the second scene of act 2, the neighbors are preparing a funerary chamber "for somebody who has not died yet." But death, they foresee, will soon hit the Drummond family again. Misael is in a state of utter distress. In addition to the humiliation caused by Dona Eduarda's betrayal, he is being tortured by remorse. He tells Moema:

MISAEEL:

I'm the only murderer in the world, Moema.

. . . If at least I knew another person who has also committed a crime. . . . I'd have a companion to share my fears and my sleeplessness. Do you know . . . another assassin besides me? . . . Do you?

Moema, then, reveals her great secret:

MOEMA:

Yes. Me, . . . father, . . . I have killed... I'm a murderess like you . . . You're not alone in the world... Father, call me murderess... Scream at my face: murderess!

And she reveals that it was she who, out of jealousy, had drowned her two sisters in the sea. She had been robbed by them of her father's affection. She had to eliminate them in order to become the exclusive object of Misael's love. Misael's astonishment turns into great joy, as he realizes that now, he has somebody to share his remorse, his fears and his sleepless nights. He holds Moema's hands:

MISAEAL:

. . . They look like your mother's hands. . . . If I only looked at your hands, . . . I would believe you were Eduarda... But when I look at your face . . . I realize it's you... If you didn't have a face, I would be able to love you... (Kissing his daughter's hands with passion) As if you were my wife...

Moema realizes that she needs to get rid of her mother too, in order to become the only woman in her father's life. She devises a plan to convince Misael that Dona Eduarda's betrayal must be punished with death:

MOEMA:

Why don't you punish her in the hands? (In a crescendo) Hands are more vicious in the love act... more sinful. . . . They're warm and soft... and swift. . . . They run over the body...

In the funeral chamber, the neighbors start lighting candles. Now they know who is going to be mourned there.

In the final scene of the second act, Paulo is informed by Moema of the latest events. He refuses to believe in his mother's betrayal. In order to convince her brother, Moema proposes to take him to the brothel on the docks, where Dona Eduarda is now living with the Fiancé.

So far, Nelson Rodrigues has been labeling his mythic plays as "tragedies." (The next play, Dorotéia, will not follow this pattern). The question of dramatic genres (a definition of the concept of tragedy) is far too complex a problem to be treated within the scope of this work. Yet, a number of elements which can be regarded as "tragic," in the broad sense of the term, are easily recognizable in Lady of the Drowned. An ominous atmosphere, enhanced by the chiaroscuro effect of the lighthouse, pervades the entire action. An aura of doom (the fate of the Drummond family) is metaphorically expressed by the permanent presence of the sea, alluring the family with its death call. The motif of "insulation" (insula being the latin root of the word island), is reflected in the process of the sea, gradually encircling and eventually engulfing the family and the house. It is as if the Drummonds were being inescapably caught in the inexorable cycle of their crimes, all of them related to the

sea.

The metaphorical implication of the sea image, however, should not be read as the operation of a natural or supernatural force affecting the characters' lives. Fate, in Nelson Rodrigues's "tragedies," does not come from the outer world. It comes from "within," from the human soul. It is man's internal demons which drag him to the abysses of degradation and destruction. Rodrigues's heroes are doomed to ruin because they are incapable of controlling their "dark" impulses. They are puppets, not of the gods, but of the instincts. As we have verified in the other mythic plays, they are able to recognize such obscure forces. The degree of awareness may vary from one character to another, but they always attain some sort of consciousness. Many times they try to repress their irrational desires and strive towards an ideal of spiritual nobility (the moral dualism). With very few exceptions, however, in Nelson Rodrigues's dramas (and none in the mythic cycle), such an attempt is doomed to failure. The characters' compulsion to satisfy their urges, whether they succeed in it or not, prevails most of the times.

Such quality of "inevitability" in the characters' behavior, evokes the concept of tragic destiny. Such destiny, nonetheless, results entirely from their concrete, voluntary actions. All the crimes in Lady of the Drowned are consciously and deliberately executed by human hands,

free from any external pressure. The hands, in fact, are one of the most fascinating dramatic motifs of the play. Through them, the playwright also obtains extraordinary theatrical effects, such as the identical movements of Dona Eduarda and Moema, or the conventional gesture of covering and uncovering the face to signify a character's entering or leaving the action.

Rich metaphorical resonances, both lyrical and dramatic, can be found in the mysterious figure of the dead prostitute, the lady from the island. She is both an image of death (a Banquo-like ghost in Misael's banquet), and a symbol of eternal youth in the idealized visions of her son. Such duality is emphasized by the description of her island: an enchanted realm of paradisiacal beauty (life at its perfection), and yet inhabited only by dead prostitutes.

As far as the dialogue is concerned, Rodrigues repeats, in Lady of the Drowned, the same technique he used for Black Angel. According to Célia Berretinni, in her essay about the use of the language in his theatre:

In Lady of the Drowned . . . we can observe that the language, without ceasing to be colloquial, attains a certain degree of elevation. Despite the naturalness of the word choice and phraseology there is a nobility of tone, which is frequently enhanced by the use of poetic imagery.¹⁸

In his third mythic play, Rodrigues once again makes ample use of anti-illusionistic techniques. Aside from sets, lighting effects, choruses and masks, we can

cite the theatricalism of the stage action (the identical hand gestures, Dona Eduarda's "sacrificial" cortege) and all the "fantastic" elements contained in the story (premonitions, apparitions in the third act etc.) The two first acts of the play are very sparse in the use of realistic detail. The third act, however, will present a different picture.

In the first scene, the aristocratic mansion of the Drummond family is replaced by the sordid setting of the docks brothel. Naturalistic observation can be discerned not only in the characters' delineation (popular types, colloquial speech), but also, on a more basic level, in the strong physicality of the details. The motif of body decay as a metaphor for moral degradation reappears in the figure of the brothel madam: "a fat old woman knitting on a rocking-chair, with dirty rags wrapping the eczemas of her swollen legs." An old man, Sabiã,¹⁹ with a crooked nose, conducts the chorus of prostitutes, banging his beer mug on the table. Besides Dona Eduarda, the Fiancé and the neighbors, there is also the presence of a "Comb-seller."

The arrival of Misael, Moema and Paulo is unnoticed by the brothel people. The Fiancé and D. Eduarda become inflamed with passion. The chorus kneels down in two ranks alongside the stairs which lead to the bedrooms. They throw rice at the couple until they go out of sight. The lamentations for the dead prostitute start again.

After a while, the Fiancé appears at the top of the stairs, naked from the waist up and raising his arms:

FIANCÉ:

Forgive me, mother! I didn't have a single thought for you... I was only thinking of her...

(At this moment, Paulo comes running and stabs the Fiancé in the back. The Fiancé rolls down the stairs. . . . Dona Eduarda appears. . . . and screams at Moema's face:)

DONA EDUARDA:

God answered your prayers! I've betrayed my husband! . . . Come and call your mother a whore!

The second and final scene of the third act brings us back to the Drummond house. It is the end of Dona Eduarda's funeral. She has been killed by her husband. Paulo's incestuous inclination for his mother is now fully exposed. In his dialogue with Moema, he affirms that, rather than killing Dona Eduarda's lover, he should have killed his father. Thus, he could have avoided his mother's death:

PAULO:

. . . I could have killed the husband, instead of the lover. . . . The husband is as guilty as the lover: they both possessed her! . . .

Paulo cannot cope with all such horror. He decides to kill himself. But he needs his sister, the mermaid figure of Moema, to lead him to death. In the sea, of course:

PAULO:

Tell me the sea is calling me and I'll believe you. . . .

MOEMA:

(Sweetly) The sea is calling you. . . .

(He holds his sister's hands; . . . he kisses them with passion.)

PAULO:

(Lovingly) My mother's hands!

Paulo runs off to the sea. Moema has committed her last crime. After eliminating her sisters, her mother and her brother, now she can have her father only for herself. But the neighbors warn her that the cycle of crime and punishment in the Drummond family is not finished yet. All the other members have already been punished, except her. It is Moema's turn now to expiate her guilt. The Comb-seller completes the prophecy: Moema, now the sole woman of the family, will lose her image, her identity: "You'll never see the reflection of your face again... Never!" Moema is horrified. She runs to the mirror; but the image which is cast back is not hers; it is Dona Eduarda's. The mother has no hands. Her wrists are enveloped in bloodstained bandages. She mirrors all of Moema's movements with perfect exactitude, except, of course, the hand gestures. Misael implores Moema to send Dona Eduarda away. Moema goes back to the mirror spirit:

MOEMA:

I'm not your daughter anymore. Our hands were the only thing that united us... You've lost yours... Now I'm free of you. . . . Go! . . .

Dona Eduarda is defeated. With her handless arms

outstretched, she slowly draws back and finally vanishes. According to the stage direction: "It is Moema's triumph. She hurries back to her father. She sits on the floor and rests Misael's head on her lap." In her enthusiasm, Moema "does not realize that, what leans on her lap is the head of a dead father." Her realization comes when she bends down to kiss Misael's face. In a sudden impulse, she runs to the mirror. This time there is no reflection whatsoever on the glass, neither hers nor anybody else's.

COMB-SELLER:

You lost your image. . . . But you've kept your hands...

Moema is left alone on stage with the sole company of her dead father. The final stage direction informs that she "stares again at her hands with utter abomination. She stretches her arms out, as an attempt to create distance between the hands and the rest of her body; or as if she were trying to oust them from her being."

Such is the denouement of Lady of the Drowned. As we have seen, Rodrigues develops his exploration of a number of themes and technical procedures of the previous plays of the mythic cycle. Several of these elements have received here a much deeper and bolder treatment: dramatic structure, visual and literary imagery and stage theatricalism, just to cite a few of them. The utilization of the chorus is one of the most remarkable examples of the evolution of Nelson Rodrigues's dramatic creativity.

The choruses of neighbors and prostitutes in Lady of the Drowned accomplish more varied and complex functions than the black ladies of Black Angel. In some instances, the neighbors seem to be totally alienated from the tremendous conflicts unfolding before their noses. Then, the platitudinousness of their remarks works the same way as the Speaker's speeches in Family Album, both offering a relief to the emotional excesses of the dramatic action and providing an ironical commentary on the hackneyed views of the public opinion. In such moments, the chorus's inadequacy to perceive reality (dramatic reality, as it takes place before them) establishes a rich counterpoint, often of comic undertones, between the falsity of their truisms and the true meaning of the events they are witnessing. Through such effect of opposition, a great deal of light is shed on the real nature of the characters and on the implications of the dramatic action.

Another important function of the neighbors' chorus is to deliver information which is necessary to the unfolding of the play, as in the moment they expose to Moema the venality of her Fiancé. Aside from this utility task, Sábato Magaldi points out the fact that:

Several episodes start with a choral intervention, making considerations about the precedent action and foreshadowing the coming events. A good example of the premonitory function occurs in the beginning of the second scene of act 2, when the chorus prepares . . . an ardent chamber for someone who is supposed to die soon.²⁰

In the third act, the neighbors also foreshadow Paulo's death and preside Moema's tragic downfall.

In addition to the neighbors' chorus, we have the ensemble of the women of the docks, preserving the memory of the dead prostitute and relating her death to the Drummond family. According to Sábato Magaldi's interpretation: "They operate as vindictive deities, asking for the punishment of the guilty."²¹ Such mythical connotation is greatly enhanced by the ritualistic quality of their movements and chantings. "They represent the protest against impunity, similar to the Erinyes of the plague in regard to Orestes and Oedipus."²²

Lady of the Drowned is, undoubtedly, the most "tragical" of all Nelson Rodrigues's mythic "tragedies." The next and last play of the cycle, Dorotéia, will have a totally different character: it was called by the playwright "an irresponsible farce in three acts." Even though we are aware of the difficulty (one might even say "futility") of an attempt of strict genre classification, we will have to give some attention to the problem, since it became one of the most controversial questions in the study of Rodrigues's theatre, generating a great deal of confusion and misinterpretation, both in terms of critical examination and theatrical production.

Dorotéia, 1949

The dramatic focus of Dorotéia turns around the

theme of the irreconcilable opposition between body and soul-body, with its animal urges, being the manifestation of the dark, sinful side of the human nature. Such duality, in the play, is associated to the principles of life and death; yet, not in an univocal manner, since, once again, Nelson Rodrigues will be playing with a whole array of ambiguous implications.

The action takes place in a house inhabited by three cousins: Dona Flávia, Carmelita and Maura. They are all widows and wear "long, straitlaced mourning dresses, meant to conceal their feminine forms." Dona Flávia has a daughter, Maria das Dores. The four women are wearing masks. They stand in a frozen attitude, which is disturbed by a sudden knock on the door. It is another cousin of theirs, Dorotéia, whom they thought to have committed suicide a long time ago. After some hesitation, they decide to let her in, but under one condition:

DONA FLÁVIA:

(Articulating every word) Have you had nausea?
(Dorotéia does not answer) . . . If you belong to the family...

DOROTÉIA:

Yes, yes! I've had it!

Thus, we learn about this peculiarity of the women of the family: suffering from nausea. But a very particular type of nausea, as we shall soon see.

Dona Flávia opens the door. Maura and Carmelita

prudishly and theatrically hide their faces behind colorful paper fans. Dorotéia does not carry a mask. She is a pretty woman, "dressed in red, as the professionals of love of the turn of the century." The three widows are not convinced that Dorotéia is alive. That woman must be an impostor. They climb on stools and stretch their necks over their fans to inspect the newcomer. Abruptly, they dash away from Dorotéia towards one corner of the stage, as if "running from a hideous ghost" and crouch together to discuss the situation in a whispering tone.

Apparently there were two Dorotéias in the family. One of them is dead, and the other one had run away a long time ago and become a "woman of the world." "It's not me!", says the newcomer. In order to convince the widows that she is a member of the family, she brings back the subject of the nausea. She knows all about it:

DOROTÉIA:

It happened first to our great-grandmother.
 . . . On the night of her wedding she had an attack
 of nausea... (Desperate) Nausea of love, of man!
 . . . From that day on, it became the fate of the
 women of the family. . . . All of us, including
 me, on our wedding night...

Besides nausea, there is another idiosyncrasy about the women of the family, which Dona Flávia describes:

DONA FLÁVIA:

The women of our family also have a visual

defect: they are incapable of seeing men... (In a frenzy) And she who does not have this defect will be damned forever. . . . We marry invisible husbands...

Das Dores, has inherited the same fate. She has never seen her fiancé, whom she will be marrying the next day. And, of course, she is expected to feel nausea at the wedding night as well.

The widows are still suspicious about Dorotéia. They want her to swear, on the memory of her dead child, that she has never been a prostitute:

DONA FLÁVIA:

. . . I can see your room at the brothel.
. . . I can see a basin and a pitcher...

(The widows are shocked; they hide their faces behind the fans)

But Dorotéia is incapable of swearing upon her dead son's memory. She admits she has led a life of prostitution. Dona Flávia, "with an abominable curiosity," asks for more details about it. Especially the "pitcher," which is found with a basin in the rooms of a whorehouse, seems to fascinate the widows. Dorotéia narrates the whole story of her life. She had never had the visual handicap of the family women. For some time she had tried to conceal the fact that men were not invisible to her, and, most of all, that she was obsessively attracted to them. She eventually ran away with a Paraguayan Indian and began her career as a prostitute. A few years later, she had a son, who became the redeeming motive of her life. But one

day, the child fell seriously ill. She begged the doctor to save his life; she would pay any price for it. The doctor's price was to go to bed with her. In her despair, Dorotéia accepted the deal. Dona Flávia anticipates the outcome of the story: after satisfying the doctor's desire Dorotéia turned to her son to find him dead. She was consumed by shame and guilt. She wanted to become a virtuous woman again. And that was the reason of her returning to the family, to that house without bedrooms, where the presence of men was never allowed. Dorotéia begs her cousins to let her stay. Her salvation depends on that. Yet the widows have another argument against her: her beauty.

(Maura and Carmelita come close to Dorotéia to insult her)

BOTH:

(Spitting) Beautiful!

DONA FLÁVIA:

. . . Sin is in you. . . . We are ugly!

Physical beauty, the reality of the body itself, is execrated by that family of women:

DONA FLÁVIA:

This is our everlasting shame!... (Sweetly) Knowing that we have a naked body underneath our clothes... But luckily, it is a thin, dry body... It's so thin, so dry, that it seems there is no blood, no life in it. . . .

Before making a final decision, the widows narrate to Dorotéia the story of Das Dores, Dona Flávia's adoles-

cent daughter, who, so far, has remained motionless in the background. In her fifth month of pregnancy, Dona Flávia had had a miscarriage, but the widows decided to keep the stillborn girl anyway. It would be a shame to bury her without her having the experience of the "nuptial indisposition." Thus, Das Dores grew up ignoring the fact that she was actually dead.

Dorotéia brings back the subject of her reintegration in the family. In that environment, she would manage to control and maybe even suppress her sexual urges and her morbid tendency towards self-debasement, symbolized by the haunting image of the pitcher:

DOROTÉIA:

After my son's death, I've never recovered peace... The pitcher haunts me... It pursues me.
 . . . (Begging) If you throw me out of here, . . .
 (Terrified) the pitcher will reappear...

After much debate, the three cousins decide to accept Dorotéia back in the family, but under one condition: she must sacrifice her beauty; she must become as ugly as her cousins. "Even uglier," Dorotéia gladly replies. Dona Flávia is skeptical: "Uglier than me, I doubt it..." In Dorotéia's next speech, we realize that the metaphorical association between physical deformity and moral degradation, which we have observed in other instances, is here entirely reversed:

DOROTÉIA:

I'd like to be... horrible! I swear... Beauty

is a sin... It's because I'm pretty that bad thoughts and dreams come to my mind. . . .

Thus, in order to be redeemed from her sinful past, Dorotéia's beauty must be totally disfigured: her body and face must be devoured by wounds. The widows' plan is very simple: all Dorotéia has to do is spend a night with Nepomuceno, a leprous old man from the neighborhood. First Dorotéia is horrified with the idea, but she eventually surrenders, as the widows affirm that this is her only path to salvation.

In a twist of surprising effect, the horrible sacrifice acquires romantic resonances. Since it is inevitable, Dorotéia comments coquettishly, it might as well deserve some little preparation. The cousins eagerly start to embellish her. Dorotéia has a last hesitation. Will all this be really necessary? She would like to have some sort of confirmation, other than from her cousins: maybe a supernatural sign from "protective spirits." As she is pronouncing these words, all the women turn automatically to the back of the stage, where a pitcher has miraculously appeared on top of a table. Dorotéia is totally convinced now: "Damn my skin!" As she walks out to meet Nepomuceno, the curtain falls on the first act of the play.

It is evident that the world of these women, including Dorotéia, despite her ambivalent inclinations, is based on a radical antagonism between matter and spirit.

Around such theme, Nelson Rodrigues develops a complex web of associations. Sábato Magaldi enumerates some of them:

. . . the identification between sex and sin; beauty meaning damnation; physical decay being a purifying agent to the soul; ugliness as a protection against evil instinct; . . . the negation of the body leading to the rigidity of death. . . .²³

Indeed, the ultimate implication of such network of irreconcilable values is the opposition between life and death. Spiritual fulfillment can only be attained through physical destruction. The figure of Dorotéia, no matter how much she tries to deny her sensuality and beauty, incarnates the vital impulses of the human being. On the opposite side, we have the lifeless world of the widows, which is based not only on their denial of the body, but also on a narrow-minded concept of spiritual growth. Life, for these women, must be subordinated to a tight framework of moralistic principles, whose inflexibility can be easily associated to the immobility and rigidity of death.

In the beginning of the second act, Das Dores is anxiously waiting for her fiancé. A knock is heard on the door. It is her future mother-in-law, Dona Assunta da Abadia, "a widow like the other women, also dressed in mourning, her face covered by a hideous mask." Rodrigues has already displayed his talent for comedy, although on a minor key, in the precedent plays. Now, in the scene

with Dona Assunta, it is revealed in its fullest expression, anticipating the cycle of realistic plays, in which comical and even farcical effects will play an important role. There is an absurd quality about the humor of the scene, which has often been compared to Ionesco's style, despite the fact that Dorotéia was written in 1949, that is, one year before The Bald Soprano. The absurdity derives from the contrast between the content of the dialogue and the tone employed by the characters:

(The ladies display a very conventional social attitude. Great activity of fans)

D. ASSUNTA:

Oh, you're so ugly today, D. Flávia!

D. FLÁVIA:

(Flattered) Do you think so?

D. ASSUNTA:

For sure!

D. FLÁVIA:

And you look really terrible!

MAURA:

Horrendous!

(The tone of the conversation is extremely polite)

Dona Assunta finally introduces the bridegroom. It is a package, gift-wrapped, which she deposits, in a ritualistic manner, on a pedestal. She unwraps it after

having some trouble with the string knots. A pair of unbuttoned man's boots is revealed. The widows, greatly disturbed, retire to an end of the stage, turning their backs to the audience and covering their faces with the fans. The bride is frenetic. She falls to the ground and drags herself towards the boots. The widows climb on their stools to peek at the scene over the rim of their fans. Something unexpected starts to happen:

DAS DORES:

(In a whisper) Can you see? . . .

D. FLÁVIA:

(Terrified) No... I can't see anything...

MAURA AND CARMELITA:

Neither can we. . . .

DAS DORES:

Why are you lying, mother?

D. FLÁVIA:

It's true... I'm lying. I do see... My eyes don't obey me anymore... they see against my will.
. . .

CARMELITA:

I'm scared!

Das Doreis is totally enraptured with the boots. The widows' panic keeps growing, as they realize that the girl is not showing the slightest sign of feeling nauseated. A dreadful change is taking course in the family. Maura is assailed by "shameful thoughts," which she does

not dare to speak of. But under Dona Flávia's pressure, she confesses:

D. FLÁVIA:

You're thinking...

MAURA:

... about the boots! . . . a lot of boots...
I see them everywhere. . . . If, at least, they
weren't unbuttoned. . . .

Maura is "possessed," in Dona Flávia's words. The image of the unbuttoned boots symbolizing male physicality and nudity, has caused the eruption of her long repressed sexuality. Dona Flávia has a solution to the problem: "I will save you," she says. Salvation, in these women's world, as we already know, can only be obtained through the destruction of the body. Thus, as the stage direction states:

(D. Flávia strangles her cousin symbolically from afar. Carmelita hides her face with the fan. Maura dies without being touched)

"It's your turn, now," says Dona Flávia to Carmelita, who, following her cousin's example, is also lost in a delirious obsession with the boots. The same symbolical murder is repeated. At this moment, Dorotéia arrives from her encounter with Nepomuceno. Dona Flávia is happy. Soon, Dorotéia's face will be disfigured. And Das Dores will have her nausea. It would be nice if the two things happened at the same time, the two women comment, as the scene ends in a serene atmosphere:

(D. Flávia sits facing the audience. . . . She starts the cleanest of all activities: knitting. Dorotéia, stands beside her, her face lifted, her eyes closed, her hands together as in prayer.)

Despite this peaceful ending, in this second act, death is already taking over the women's family. Such is their choice: the inevitable outcome of their voluntary actions, the destiny that necessarily awaits them. The utilization of the masks suggests the death-like rigidity of such world. No psychological fluctuations must appear in the widows' faces; their souls are absolutely petrified. Dorotéia is the only exception. Her dynamic temperament, oscillating between her vital, sensual impulses and the desire to adhere to the deadliness of her cousins' world, (once again the moral ambivalence of the Rodriguean hero), is the reason why she is the only character not to wear a mask.

The mask, in Dorotéia, reflects the playwright's rejection of the conventional techniques of realistic characterization. The three widows, Das Dores and Dona Assunta are static figures, somewhere in between the archetype and the caricature. All such characters are even less individualized, in terms of psychological composition, than the ones of the other mythic plays. Such fact is regarded by Sábato Magaldi as another anticipation, on Rodrigues's part, of the theatre of the absurd of the fifties. In the absurdist's plays, as in Dorotéia, he observes, the dramatis personae, instead of imitating real

people, are conceived as abstract entities, embodying a single, univocal attitude towards life.²⁴

Act 3 opens straight away in a moment of high dramatic tension. Dorotéia and Dona Flávia, hiding in a corner of the stage, look with horror at the pitcher, which has reappeared. Why is it, they wonder, that they are still haunted by that emblematic vision of sin? Dona Flávia comes up with an explanation: perhaps the problem is due to the fact that the wounds have not appeared yet in Dorotéia's body. Furthermore, Das Dores, so far, has not yet felt nausea. The girl is still entirely absorbed in her romance with the boots. Dona Flávia warns her that, if she does not experience nausea, the integrity of the family will be threatened. Das Dores reacts unexpectedly:

DAS DORES:

. . . You can curse me as much as you want...
But you'll never kill this love in my heart...

Dona Flávia is not intimidated. She has a powerful weapon against her rebellious daughter: she reveals to Das Dores her real condition: she was a stillborn child; "she does not exist!":

DONA FLÁVIA:

. . . You're dead! . . . I want you away
from me... Go back to your nothingness...

However, instead of returning to her "nothingness," Das Dores introduces a startling reversal in the course

of the action:

DAS DORES:

No, not to my nothingness... I will return to you! Inside you... I will be your flesh and blood again. . . . Look! (In a swift move, she takes off her mask and puts it on D. Flávia's chest) . . .

(Dona Flávia holds the mask with one hand.
It is the emblematic image of her new maternity)

In a sudden twist, the boots start moving in Dorotéia's direction. Dorotéia is scared. She asks Dona Flávia to tell the boots that now she has become a virtuous woman, that soon she will be redeemed from her past through the destruction of her body. But Dorotéia is dominated by a mysterious force, which compels her to act in total contradiction with her feelings. She would like to run away from the boots, but, instead, she starts embellishing herself as if preparing for a love encounter:

DOROTÉIA:

What am I doing?

DONA FLÁVIA:

Arranging you hair.

DOROTÉIA:

It's not me... my hands are doing it. . . .
I'm smiling, aren't I? It's against my will. . . .

Dona Flávia understands that their only chance of an escape is through the destruction of the boots. Struggling against her repulsion, she goes down to the floor and crawls towards them to catch them from behind, "by the heels." Yet, similarly to Dorotéia, her behavior

contradicts her purposes: she starts caressing the boots. Suddenly, the pitcher reappears, brightly lit. The two women are in awe. Dorotéia interprets the apparition as a supernatural sign telling her of the uselessness of her attempt to become a virtuous woman. She cannot efface her sinful past. She cannot, and now she does not want to change her destiny:

DOROTÉIA:

(Overjoyed) The wounds didn't come... They will not come... my skin is beautiful. . . . I'm so beautiful that, all alone in my room, I would be my own lover.

At this point, in a startling last reversal, the play reaches its climax: "In her narcissistic exaltation, Dorotéia, with a sudden motion, turns her back to the audience. When she turns around to face the public again, she has a hideous mask on her face." At last she has been contaminated. The pitcher disappears and the boots move away from her. To Dona Flávia's delight, she gradually realizes her tragic fate:

DONA FLÁVIA:

(Ferocious) Laugh!

DOROTÉIA:

(Astonished) I'm going to... (she laughs. It is a horrible sound) . . . This is not my laugh... (She keeps on laughing in spite of herself)

DONA FLÁVIA:

(Exultant) Go hide . . . your twisted mouth... your bloody eyes... your beastly face! . . .

The two women are now side by side, facing the audience:

(. . . D. Flávia keeps holding her daughter's mask upon her breast. With her free hand, she holds Dorotéia's hand. They are forever together.)

DOROTÉIA:

. . . What will become of us?

DONA FLÁVIA:

(Slow) We shall rot together

Thus, Dorotéia ends with the triumph of death over life. Before analysing the implications of such an ending, let us make some considerations on the issue of the style or "genre" of the play. No doubt, there is something "tragic" about the destiny of this family of women. However, in terms of character delineation, the figures of Dorotéia, if compared to those of the other mythic plays, present very distinct features. Characters like Jonas, Senhorinha, Virgínia, Ismael, Moema, Misael and others, however aberrant may be their behavior, possess a kind of noble stature, of dramatic stateliness. There is a quality of heroic grandeur in their radical acceptance and affirmation of the dark side of their nature. Such quality is not found in the women of Dorotéia. The playwright does not submit them to a process of magnification, as he does with his other heroes. Characterization here is based on the techniques of distortion and ridicule. Instead of archetypes, we are confronted with extremely typified figures on the verge of caricature. The protagonists of

the previous mythic dramas may be morally revolting, but they are dramatically admirable. On the other hand, those of Dorotéia, besides being repulsive, are despicable, ridiculous, grotesque. Such conclusion sheds some light on the question of the "farcical" style of the play. According to Ângela Leite Lopes:

This is probably the play in which Nelson Rodrigues's deconstruction of the theatre of his time has been pushed to its outermost limits.²⁵

Lopes relates the farcical quality both to the artificiality of the stage businesses (the women's frantic fanning, their running around, crouching, crawling, climbing on chairs, etc.) and to the techniques of inversion and paradox utilized in the dialogue with Dona Assunta and in the final scenes, in which the characters' speeches are contradicted by their physical action.²⁶

Dona Assunta is undeniably the most specifically comic figure of the play. The way she deals with her boots-son, her prosaic remarks, her fidgeting with the package string, all these elements are extremely ludicrous. But, most of all, it is the triviality with which she treats the whole affair of the wedding, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that creates a higher effect of ridiculous absurdity.

In terms of absurd, however, the most striking example in Dorotéia is the representation of Das Dores's fiancé as a pair of boots. Yet, Nelson Rodrigues, in his

manipulation of such elements as the boots or the pitcher, is not merely aiming at theatrical impact. These images also operate as dramatic metaphors (for sex, physicality, libido etc.) of a kind which had never been seen on a Brazilian stage before.

The figure of Das Dores, functioning as a materialization of Dona Flávia's frustrated maternity, is another fascinating invention of the playwright. The bizarre, grotesque quality of all such devices certainly produces a great number of farcical moments. Nonetheless, an atmosphere of high dramatic intensity is constantly present throughout the action. The strict classification of the play as a farce is, therefore, very arguable. The epithet of "irresponsable," applied by the playwright to the word farce, makes the problem even more complicated. The implication of lightness and inconsequentiality contained in the term "irresponsable" is obviously contradicted by the complexity of the themes and by the rich imagery found in Dorotéia. The repressive role of the family institution is once again brought into question. The motif of moral dualism is powerfully expressed in all the characters. Dorotéia broke the oppressive family circle when she ran away to become a prostitute in order to satisfy her sexual needs. Nevertheless, she has preserved in her soul the rigid moralistic principles with which she was brought up. Becoming a prostitute shows her inability

to dissociate sex from the idea of sin and degradation. As a consequence, she returns to the family to seek punishment for her transgression. Yet, throughout the play, she hesitates several times in renouncing to her physical beauty. Her sensuality is constantly coming to the surface; in many occasions she falls back in the typical attitudes of her former profession. The widows, on their turn, who seem so unshakable in their moral integrity, are deeply affected by the erotic power emanating from the boots. There is no escape from such contradictory tendencies, except by means of the utter destruction of the flesh. Maura and Carmelita are killed. Das Dores, because of her excessive display of vitality, unsuitable to someone who is already dead, must return to a moment prior to life: in her mother's womb. Dorotéia's destiny, after finally acquiring the wounds, is to rot together with Dona Flávia. The final lines of the play leave no doubt about the total triumph of death.

The heroines of Dorotéia share with the characters of the previous plays the same radical nature, expressed in their search for absolute values. Dorotéia is the best example in her passage from utter degradation (prostitution) to purification through self-sacrifice. The moral universe of the play is extremely ambiguous. Rodrigues operates with an inversion of the conventional concepts of good and evil and their association with life and

death. The erotic instincts, usually linked to life, are seen as evil, therefore, as spiritual death. On the other hand, spiritual nobility (good, life) can only be attained through the annihilation of the body: death.

In every sense, Dorotéia is the apex of the mythical cycle. In terms of dramatic innovations, the play breaks with all the limitations of the theatre of the time, and even anticipates future trends. Rodrigues's indictment of the distortions of the social-cultural system could not have been more devastating. On the other hand, his questioning of the moral and existential problems of the human being seems to have reached an impasse: the impossibility of a clear apprehension of such transcendental values as good and evil, spirit and matter, life and death. As he shifts to a more realistic style in The Deceased Woman (1953), new perspectives will open up, with new answers for all those questions. Yet, in the transition between myth and realism, we will find a very intriguing play: Waltz Number 6 (1950), a dramatic monologue which the playwright has called "a quasi-play in two acts." Of course, Waltz Number 6 connects in several ways both to the preceding works and to those to come. It also has a very peculiar quality of its own, which deserves some specific attention.

NOTES

¹The other plays of the cycle are: Anjo Negro (Black Angel, 1946), Senhora dos Afogados (Lady of the Drowned, 1947) and Dorotéia (1949).

²Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 2, p. 16.

³Nelson Rodrigues, "Teatro Desagradável," Dionysos 1 (October, 1949), p. 19. In this essay, Rodrigues explains his concept of an "unpleasant theatre."

⁴Nelson Rodrigues called Family Album "a tragedy in three acts."

⁵Álvaro Lins, Sagas Literárias e Teatro Moderno do Brasil (Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro, 1967) p. 147.

⁶Nelson Rodrigues is very explicit in Teatro Desagradável, p.19: "Everybody remarked that the language (in Family Album) was not 'noble'. Of course, it was not; it should not be. The discussion about the means utilized by an author to produce his desired effects has always seemed byzantine to me. Any means is valid if the desired effect is obtained. . . . The real issue, in terms of dramatic criticism, is to verify if the language contributes to the configuration of a dramatic universe of a higher esthetic quality."

⁷Flora Sussekund, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Fundo Falso," in I Concurso Nacional de Monografias (Brasília: MEC-FUNARTE-SNT, 1977), p. 13.

⁸Ibid., p. 13.

⁹Ibid., pp. 13-14.

¹⁰Ibid., p.23.

¹¹Pompeu de Souza, Introduction to Teatro, p. 11.

¹²Rodrigues, "Teatro Desagradável," pp. 18-19.

¹³De Souza, Introduction to Teatro, p. 10.

¹⁴The word anjo (angel), in Portuguese, besides its original meaning, is also applied, in popular speech, to a dead child.

¹⁵A liquor distilled from sugar-cane. It is the Brazilian national drink. Its association to blacks derives from the fact that, being the most unexpensive alcoholic beverage, it is widely consumed by the poor sections of the population.

¹⁶Rodrigues, "Teatro Desagradável," p. 20.

¹⁷Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 2, p. 31.

¹⁸Célia Berrettini, O Teatro de Ontem e Hoje (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1980), p. 167.

¹⁹Sabiã is the name of a common Brazilian bird.

²⁰Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 2, pp. 42-43.

²¹Ibid., p. 43.

²²Ibid., p. 43.

²³Ibid., p. 31.

²⁴Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p.87.

²⁵Angela Leite Lopes, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Palco Perdido," in Ensaio Teatro V (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Achiamé, 1983), p. 48.

²⁶Ibid., p. 48.

CHAPTER IV

WALTZ NUMBER 6: A TRANSITIONAL PLAY

Up to this point, Nelson Rodrigues, in his treatment of stage setting, has oscillated between conventional realistic techniques, such as in Woman Without Sin, Family Album and Dorotéia, and a less orthodox approach (Wedding Gown, Black Angel, Lady of the Drowned). In Waltz Number 6, he does completely away with scenery. The initial stage direction mentions a single element: a white piano against a background of red curtains. An adolescent girl, "dressed as for her prom ball," is playing with passion a section of Chopin's Waltz Number 6. She abruptly interrupts the music, her face now expressing terror. Her voice progressively rises to a scream, as she repeats the name: "Sônia!... Sônia!... Sônia!..."

Sônia is a name without a face which haunts her. She cannot remember who Sônia is. In fact she knows neither who she is nor what she is doing in that place full of people staring at her: "My God, why are there so many eyes in the world?"

She manages to recollect something from her past: the figure of the family doctor, Dr. Junqueira. She used to be afraid of him, she explains to the audience, as she

acts out a short dialogue between the doctor and herself:

(In a low voice, imitating an old man)
How old are you? ha, ha!

(With terror)
No! No!
(Old man imitation)
Fourteen years old, already?
(Recoiling)
Don't touch me!

She recalls another episode. One night the whole family was awoken by her screams. She was seeing a face on the wall and hearing voices. Once again she splits into several types to reenact the pandemonium in the house.

Call the ambulance! . . .
Dr. Junqueira! . . .
A washbasin!
A washbasin? What for?
A washbasin, of course!
(Maids' invocation)
St. George!
St. Benedict!

She remembers Dr. Junqueira's arrival, but she has forgotten his face. Actually, she has trouble in visualizing people's faces in general, she informs the audience as she steps off the stage and into the auditorium:

(Picking a spectator)
. . . You, for example, . . . yes, you, sir.
I can see your jacket and your shoes. . . . But I
can't see anything else. . . . (Shouting) Yet, you
must have a face!

She runs back to the apron and resumes her reminiscence. Now she gathers more details about Dr. Junqueira. He was old and had asthma. All his clients were women:

(Laughing)

He'd pay the streetcar fare for young girls... girls he'd never seen before... School-girls, can you imagine?

She reenacts now a conversation in which the family doctor explains to her parents the cause of her night hallucination. It was due to the age transition. She was going to be fifteen. She was becoming a woman:

(Painfully)

I've changed so much!

(With sudden euphoria)

Before, I was just a little girl. . . . I was happy then. But now...

According to her mother, there seemed to be another reason for her nervous breakdown, some grievance, some trauma caused by a man named Paulo. The protagonist remembers nothing about it. Yet, the name Paulo puts her in an evocative mood:

Paulo... That's a sweet name. . . . Was he my cousin?

(Looking down, coyly)

Or maybe my fiancé? . . . What happened between us, Paulo? . . .

(Elated, sensual)

You kissed me, didn't you, darling? . . .

(Furious)

Or you betrayed me? . . . With Sônia, maybe?

She is absolutely sure that Paulo did her terrible wrong, although she is still unable to remember what it was. All she knows is that she hates him. She would gladly kill him, stab him with her "silver dagger," a birthday present from her father. But:

My dagger was stolen . . .

(Sweet)

That day you bent your head, Paulo. . . . for
a quick kiss...

(Astonished)

But it wasn't me you were kissing, Paulo!

(In a wild scream)

Sônia! You were kissing Sônia! (She runs to
the piano and plays Waltz Number 6 with fury. She
sobs, her face turned to the audience.)

As far as dramatic content is concerned, a number of typically Rodriguean themes are easily recognizable in this first act, which will be examined later. On the other hand, the dramatic structure of Waltz Number 6 differs a great deal from the preceding plays. We have here the question of the monologue. The playwright who chooses this format is confronted with the difficulty of creating dramatic conflict with a single character. Action tends to be static in monologues, due to an overburden of descriptive and narrative passages. Nelson Rodrigues finds a very interesting solution in Waltz Number 6. In order to avert the undramatic quality of the genre, he invents a series of clever theatrical devices designed to convey an impression of dialogue. The protagonist, in her attempt to reconstruct her past, not only speaks to herself and to the audience, but also frequently splits into several other characters. The single heroine becomes a multiple figure, in which a number of different dramatic personae are synthesized. In an interview to the newspaper Diário Carioca, the playwright justifies such a technique in a rather curious way:

I have always thought that one of the major practical shortcomings of the theatre is the excessive number of characters. By "excessive number" I mean more than one. Since long I have considered the possibility of . . . concentrating everything in a single character. This multiple character would be a synthesis not only of several personae, but also of the settings and of many other theatrical effects.¹

The protagonist addressing the spectators directly and invading the auditorium was already quite a novelty. Her multiplication into several characters was certainly something the audiences of the time had never seen before in the theatre.

By the end of Act 1, it seems evident that the heroine was the victim of an act of violence, apparently committed by the mysterious Paulo. At the opening of the second act, she digs out some more information:

(She sits at the piano and plays a few bars of Waltz number 6)

Someone asked me to play this waltz. . . .
Then somebody slowly came towards me behind my back.
. . . .

I stopped playing. The person asked: GO ON!
GO ON!

He screamed: MORE! MORE! I WANT MORE!

She cannot go on with such painful reminiscence. Her thoughts shift to Paulo and Sônia. She reveals to the audience that Sônia had an affair with a married man!

She hates young guys!

(Despisingly)

She can only think of, dream of...

(Covering her face with shame)

... Older men!

Sônia's story gradually emerges. The protagonist dramatizes a conversation between her mother and Dr. Junqueira:

(The Mother, anxiously)
 Sônia is always sad. She cries for no
 reason... And all of a sudden she starts laughing!
 . . .

(Doctor imitation)
 It's because of her age, m'am, her age. It's
 the age transition.

Images of violence and death start haunting her
 as she remembers Sônia's attempts to separate her from
 her boyfriend Paulo:

But I have my silver dagger!
 (In a frenzy, holding an invisible dagger)
 I wish I could stab Sônia's name! Pierce it
 with my dagger and watch it agonize at my feet! . . .
 (Astonished)

But somebody stole my silver dagger!

Suddenly, she utters a scream and splits into a
 chorus of whispering old wives:

What's that? What's that? A girl... A girl
 was killed! She was killed by a married man! . . .
 They say...

She steps out of the scene to interrogate the old
 wives:

What do they say? I want to know! I must know!
 And back to the chorus:

(Whispering)
 Apparently the victim...

She becomes herself again and yells:

No, not "the victim!" The name! I want to know
 the name!

She goes back to the piano to reenact the crime.
 She impersonates the victim. It is the same scene she
 visualized earlier. She was playing Waltz number 6, when
 somebody, approaching behind her back, cried for: "MORE!"

MORE!" She kept playing louder and louder and then:

The murderer thrust the dagger on the girl's back.

In a flash she realizes who the victim was:

When people arrived, Sônia was already dead.

The chorus of old wives comes back to reveal the murderer's identity:

The murderer! . . .
A senile old man!
Such a brilliant doctor!
So competent!

A drunkard intervenes in the chorus:

Do you know what the mother said? . . . She said that the victim, in spite of the wounds, in spite of the dagger on her back...

(Sobbing)

... she still wanted to keep on playing.
That's talent, for sure!

The last stage direction finally names the protagonist:

(Sônia runs to the piano. Waltz number 6.
She screams)
Always! Always!

Notwithstanding its peculiar dramatic format, the monologue, Waltz Number 6 is a continuation of certain techniques first used in Wedding Gown. In both plays, the protagonist tries to reconstruct her past life. Memories come in a jumble, instead of following a linear pattern. As in Alaïde's case, Sônia's recollection wanders back and forth in time, in a succession of episodes free from the constraints of causality or chronology. Dramatic action in Wedding Gown and Waltz Number 6 is the projection

of the heroine's mind. The difference between the two plays lies in the fact that Alaíde is confronted with the materialization of her fantasy on the imaginary realm of the stage, outside of herself, whereas the phantasms of Sônia's world are externalized through her own body and voice.

Another similarity between Wedding Gown and Waltz Number 6 is the question that the protagonists' fate, in both cases, is known beforehand. Sônia is already dead in the beginning of the play, and Alaíde's death is seen as an irreversible fact. The action does not progress towards an unknown future. There is no conflict to be solved at the end, no obstacle to be overcome. The starting point is also a terminal point: death. What constitutes dramatic action: the heroines' lives, can only be backtracked. The narrative, in both plays, consists in the gradual illumination of personal experiences, already happened, which, because they are past, are crystallized in a fixed form that can be neither modified nor allowed to evolve.

Waltz Number 6 displays a strong antirealistic element. Here Rodrigues takes a step further than in Wedding Gown in the sense that his protagonist is not dying: she is already dead. The playwright is not concerned with any sort of logical explanation for that. Sônia is neither a spirit nor a projection of somebody

else's mind. Sônia is biologically dead, but dramatically alive. This is all that matters to the author. He states:

I've put a dead person on stage because I see no reason why a character should necessarily be alive. Such a requirement is totally irrelevant as far as dramatic effect is concerned.²

In regard of dialogue, Rodrigues counterbalances the realism of colloquial speech with the use of poetic imagery. Here follow some examples:

"My screams hit the walls like blind birds."
 "When it rains over the churches, you can see angels trickling down the walls."
 "Paulo is growing within me like a lily in awe."

In fact, it seems that one of Rodrigues's main purposes in Waltz Number 6 was not exactly realism, but the experimentation with dramatic poetry. He aimed not so much at the reproduction of the external world, but rather at the conveyance of an atmosphere of poetic evocation. According to his own words, he wanted the spectators:

. . . to feel deep esthetic tension and pleasure. It does not matter if they do not follow the play in terms of intellectual apprehension.³

Despite antirealistic techniques and poetic evocation, once again it is the establishment of a view on reality that emerges from the play. A psychological profile is gradually built, with a clearly defined outline; the passage of a lifetime is reconstructed; a crime story of incestuous connotation is narrated, the story of the

love of an old man for a young girl and of the love of the young girl for an older, married man: Dr. Junqueira, Sônia and Paulo. Again it is a dreary portrait of reality we are confronted with. Sônia's transition from childhood to adolescence implies the loss of purity and the entanglement in a maze of obscure, unwholesome feelings. The external world is even more menacing. The lurid figure of the old satyr lurks over its young prey. Youth is already sick in the inside. From the outside, it can only await degradation and destruction.

In Waltz Number 6, Rodrigues withdraws from the mythic universe of his four previous plays, with its exploration of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, and returns to the meanders of the subconscious mind of an individual, as he did in his first two plays. The novelty here is his original manipulation of the monologue. In terms of worldview, Rodrigues's pessimism has not changed a bit. In his next play, The Deceased Woman, the bitterness of his vision of human existence will acquire even sharper edges. A number of themes we are already familiar with will reappear. The play, however, constitutes a turning point in the evolution of the author's dramatic style. It initiates the cycle of realistic drama which he will develop to the end of his life.

NOTES

¹Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 1, p. 22.

²Ibid., p. 23.

³Ibid., p. 22.

CHAPTER V

THE REALISTIC CYCLE:

THE RECOGNITION OF A GREAT PLAYWRIGHT

A Falecida (The Deceased Woman, 1953)

Nelson Rodrigues's shift from myth to a realistic exploration of life in the suburbs of Rio is already apparent in the subtitle he gave to The Deceased Woman: "a carioca tragedy in three acts." Sábato Magaldi explains such a change as a desire, on the playwright's part, to regain the favor of critics, intellectuals and audiences, who had been alienated from his theatre due to the violence and outlandishness of the mythic plays.¹ Moreover, he wanted his plays to be staged, instead of being buried in the files of the Federal Censorship Department. His adoption of a stricter form of realism was an attempt to come closer to his contemporaries, to speak a common language with them. I have pointed to the strong presence of naturalistic elements in the previous plays. However, all throughout the mythic cycle, such elements had been gradually submerged in the waves of myth, absurd and poetry. Now, with The Deceased Woman, they will come back to the forefront.

As a newspaper reporter, Nelson Rodrigues had a

close contact with the aspects of daily life in the orbit of social reality. In 1951 he started writing for A Última Hora, a column called A Vida como ela é (Life as it is), in which he sketched brief stories making a faithful account of the suburban life in Rio, with its popular types and typical forms of behavior.² Such stories, crônicas, as they are named in Brazil,³ soon became immensely popular, even causing an increase in the newspaper sales. According to Sábato Magaldi, it was almost inevitable for Nelson Rodrigues to abandon his "unpleasant theatre" and to seek to impregnate his new plays with the direct and accessible style of his crônicas in order to extend his communication with the masses to the theatre.⁴

However, this does not mean that the playwright abdicated entirely from making incursions into the labyrinths of the subjective mind, or from the utilization of mythopoetic elements in his new plays. The change in his drama is a matter of perspective in regard of dramatic technique. Myth and introspection will continue to appear, but they will be framed in a very concrete social context. In this sense, the realistic cycle is not only a poignant testimony on the miserable conditions of life of the lower classes. Through its combination of the outer and inner aspects of human existence, it constitutes an ultimate synthesis of the Rodriguean universe.

The Deceased Woman tells the story of a married couple: Tuninho and Zulmira. Tuninho is unemployed and

spends most of his time going to soccer games and hanging out in botequins.⁵ Zulmira, who has a lung problem, goes to see a tarot reader, Madame Crisálida, who warns her about "a blonde woman," inferring that her husband has a lover. Tuninho and Zulmira are completely alienated from each other. The husband's sole preoccupation is his soccer team, and the wife's anxieties are a mixture of jealousy and fear of death. Quite by accident, she betrays her husband with an unknown man in the toilet of an ice cream parlor, while Tuninho is peacefully eating an ice cream cone. She goes back to her normal life as if nothing had happened. But her frustration and loneliness compel her to meet again the man she had sex with and to become his lover. Apparently she wants to punish her husband by doing to him the same thing she suspects he is doing to her. Curiously enough, she never questions the affirmation of the fortune-teller. She accepts Tuninho's adultery as a given fact. His being unfaithful seems to be a natural complement to his carelessness about their financial situation.

As she learns from her doctor that, in fact, she is seriously ill, she tries once more to call Tuninho's attention, but he refuses to even listen to her complaints. His team has been beaten and he is terribly depressed. Zulmira, then, starts developing a fantasy. If her life is meaningless and empty, at least she wants her death to be spectacular. She dreams of having a lavish funeral.

This project becomes the only concern in her life. She pictures herself lying in a luxurious coffin and, for the first time, she seems to be happy. She prostitutes herself and blackmails her lover, Pimentel, a respectable married man from the upper class, to save money for the funeral expenses. As her health condition deteriorates and she still has not obtained the necessary amount, she makes Tuninho promise that, the day she dies, he will run to see Pimentel, "an old relative," she explains, and ask for financial help. She dies and, when Tuninho learns about her infidelity, in an act of revenge, he gives her the cheapest funeral. The same day he goes to a soccer game in a state of utter despair. He wants to bet with the 20.000 spectators in the Maracanã Stadium that his team will win. He insults people around him and throws the money he got from Pimentel in the air. He falls to his knees, sobbing, "as the most solitary of men." The play ends with this scene superimposed to the image of Zulmira lying in her bare wooden coffin.

The action of The Deceased Woman unfolds in a succession of brief scenes taking place in a number of different settings: Zulmira's house, Madame Crisálida's parlor, the funeral house, Tuninho's botequim, a taxi, the Maracanã Stadium and several others. To facilitate fluidity in the staging, Rodrigues, in the initial stage directions, asks for:

(An empty space with curtains in the background. When necessary, the characters bring in and out chairs, tables and props functioning as emblematic indications of the different settings. Lighting effects must be very mobile.)

This constant shift of focus from one place to another gives a cinematic quality to the narrative. The scenes are short and go directly to the point. Dramatic preparation is compressed in a few fundamental strokes setting up the basic situation and delineating characters and types. The unity of the action is by no means hampered by this spacial fragmentation. On the contrary, dramatic progression flows in a fast pace, following Zulmira's vertiginous course towards death until it is stopped at the end of Act 2, when the death occurs. Nonetheless, dramatic action continues to unfold. When Tuninho finds out about Zulmira's adultery, in a flash-back, the heroine is brought back to the stage and new aspects of the couple's relationship are revealed. As the action returns to the present, the play reaches an epilogue of bitterly ironic overtones: the blending of the images of Zulmira's cheap death and Tuninho's desperate loneliness amid the crowds of the stadium.

It is clear that the author, notwithstanding his project of a more understandable form of drama, continues to innovate. In its handling of dramatic narrative, The Deceased Woman presents a very unconventional development. The heroine dies at the end of the second act. Yet she is kept dramatically alive in the third act, and the themes

of frustration and loneliness which she embodies, are prolonged through the husband figure.

The absence of scenery, the use of imaginary props and devices of presentational theatre (an open umbrella meaning it is raining, a taxi conveyed through a few chairs with a chauffeur using a rubber horn), are anti-realistic techniques far beyond the practices of the time. Nevertheless, despite all such innovations, The Deceased Woman remains a perfectly realistic play. After exploring the possibilities of the language in terms of metaphor and absurd in the mythic cycle, the playwright returns to a faithful rendition of the colloquial speech, specifically, the language of the lower classes, with its slang expressions and grammatical errors. The social background is strongly delineated. Suburban life: bars, botequins, billiard saloons, the beach, soccer games, jogo do bicho⁶, popular religion and superstition (Zulmira belongs to the "Theophillic Church"), the "lower depths," in short, of a big city like Rio de Janeiro, are depicted in minute detail and bright colors. Regarding characterization, social types are portrayed with great accuracy. Aside from the typical suburban figures of Zulmira, Tuniho, their families and neighbors, there are three fascinating characters inaugurating Rodrigues's Fellinian panoply of social stereotypes: Madame Crisálida, the tarot reader, who loses her foreign accent when Zulmira starts to haggle over the price of the consultation; Timbira, the

employee of the funeral home, a perfect example of the popular Don Juan, making passes at Zulmira, and Pimentel, the prototype of the corrupt businessman, who will reappear many times in other Rodriguean plays, as a symbol of Brazilian predatory and authoritarian capitalism of the fifties. Through such personages, the playwright criticizes the petty bourgeois values and forms of conduct of a low-minded, hypocritical society.

A strong naturalistic quality is clearly discernible in The Deceased Woman. Nelson Rodrigues's contemplation of the banalities of daily life becomes almost excessive, as if he were trying to shock the audience through the intentional use of elements of bad taste and vulgarity, regardless of their contribution to dramatic composition. A good example is the famous bathroom episode:

(Light on Zulmira coming in with a stool. She places it center-stage and sits on it, her chin resting on her hand in the pose of Rodin's Thinker. Tuninho comes in, very anxious. He stops before the imaginary bathroom.)

TUNINHO:

Somebody in?

ZULMIRA:

Yes.

(Tuninho walks to and fro)

TUNINHO:

(Low) Shit! . . . (Loud) Are you going to be long?

ZULMIRA:

Not very.

(Tuninho wipes the sweat in his forehead)

TUNINHO:

Come on!

ZULMIRA:

Don't rush me!

(Zulmira comes out. As she crosses Tuninho, she mumbles.)

ZULMIRA:

All right! All right!

(Tuninho goes in. Sits on the same stool, adopting the same pose.)

In another scene, Tuninho asks his wife to remove a pimple from his back. Later on, in the botequim, a secondary character "picks on his tooth with a match." When Zulmira tells her mother of her dream of having white-feathered horses in her funeral, the mother recollects a scene of her past: "When the hearse left, the sidewalk in front of the house was absolutely disgusting! You couldn't get in or out. Such big, beautiful animals! Made such a mess!... Very annoying."

However, such episodes are not so gratuitous as they may seem. As a typically Rodriguean technique, observed in the other plays, they serve to deflate the atmosphere of scenes where sentimentality risks to become excessive. As Tuninho mourns on Zulmira's death, his billiard pal comments on the fact of her dying right on

the day of an important soccer match: "That's what I call bad luck!"

Rodrigues's exploration of sordid, scatological elements was already very evident in the mythic cycle. The difference introduced in the first realistic play lies in the choice of the material. According to Décio de Almeida Prado: "Family Album dealt with mass incest, primitive, grandiose, biblical morbidity. Morbidity, in The Deceased Woman, on the other hand, is intentionally diminutive, petty and low."⁷

Impact on the conservative sensibility of the time was also obtained through another Rodriguean device: lines aiming at a comical effect of absurd and paradox. I have already pointed to this device a propos of Olegário's speeches in The Woman Without Sin. Some interesting repartees can be picked in The Deceased Woman too. Zulmira, jealous of Glorinha, Tuninho's cousin, accuses her of doing macumba witchcraft⁸ against her. Tuninho affirms it cannot be macumba, since "the girl is protestant, you know." When somebody from Zulmira's family suggests psychoanalysis to her, another relative observes: "Freud was a fraud!" Some other examples:

Jogo do bicho is the only solution to the problems of Brazil!

A woman in a bathing suit is naked!

No woman should belong to no man!

A stronger emphasis on humor, wit and sarcasm is,

in fact, one of the major changes in Rodrigues's drama occurred in The Deceased Woman. Such elements were already present in the previous plays, especially in Doro-téia, where comical effects came tinged with elements of absurd and grotesque. But in no play, so far, comedy has been so apparent as in The Deceased Woman, despite its being called a tragedy by the author. The association of comedy and naturalistic observation made many critics see it as a renewal of Brazilian comedy of manners.

Strangely enough, Rodrigues, in many moments of his life, stated his dislike for comedy. He could not understand the fact that: "I do an unpleasant theatre and yet they laugh...⁹"

In his memoirs, he recalls his going once to see a farce:

Throughout the three acts the audience was rolling in the aisles. Only one spectator did not laugh: me. . . . Towards the second act I had come to the conclusion that no one should ever laugh in the theatre.¹⁰

In a text he wrote for the program of the first production of The Deceased Woman, he declares:

There is a fundamental sadness in my work. Neither in this play nor in any other have I wanted to cause laughter. My temperament inclines me to the tragic genre.¹¹

Later in his life, however, he would admit he actually used humor in his theatre. Specifically in regard of The Deceased Woman, commenting on the film version of 1963 by Leon Hirzshman, he said:

There was a problem in the film. It eliminated all the humor of the play. Thus, the script was deprived of a very important element, one of the main values of my theatre, that is, the combination of the pathetic with the comic.¹²

The comic in The Deceased Woman, indeed, is one of a peculiar kind: there is no gladness, no gaiety in it. The author laughs at his characters, not in a sympathetic way, but with bitter sarcasm. Zulmira and her peers are miserable, pathetic creatures, maybe more to be pitied than to be laughed at. Yet, they are ludicrous in their pettiness, ridiculous in their vulgarity, grotesque in their exacerbation. It is hard to give The Deceased Woman a straight genre classification, either as a tragedy or a comedy. Neither can it be considered a tragicomedy. The play does not alternate tragic and comic episodes: it is simultaneously funny and sad. Pompeu de Souza called it "a sad comedy of manners."¹³ The playwright himself avoided conventional labels:

How to define The Deceased Woman? Tragedy, drama, farce, comedy? Does the label "carioca tragedy" make any sense in terms of genre characterization? Let's make something clear: there is an undeniable sadness in the play. It may be comic at times. Yet, . . . characterization, plot, atmosphere, everything is permeated with pessimism.¹⁴

Pessimism is a key word to understand Nelson Rodrigues's worldview as it appears in his first realistic play. Throughout the three acts, Zulmira carries on her frustration with the life she shares, in this narrow-minded, prosaic, degraded world, with an unloving husband who, already

in their honeymoon, after having sex, "would get up and go... wash his hands!" She gives herself to a stranger in a public toilet as an act of self-debasement and, then, tries to compensate for all the misery of her life by a glorious death. At the source of her megalomania there is both a strong complex of inferiority and a deep feeling of dissatisfaction and disillusionment caused by the absence of meaning and lack of transcendence in daily life.

Zulmira turns to death as a form of redemption. In her short-sightedness, such a redeeming death is envisioned in an utterly superficial way: as a luxurious funeral, a mere apparatus of external pomp. Yet, as it is suitable to a Rodriguean heroine, her dream is pursued with extraordinary obstinacy. In Zulmira's self-destructive compulsion, she "produces" her death. It is not a rational act. She is driven by the same obscure, internal forces that operate in the characters of the previous plays.

But, as we know, the protagonist's grandiose project fails completely. Rodrigues's pessimism is again confirmed in the play's denouement. Life is a great fraud. Frustration is man's inevitable fate. While Zulmira lies in a humble coffin, Tuninho, with all the money extorted from Pimentel, sobs "like the most solitary of men."

The playwright comments on his dismal vision of human existence in an interview on the subject of a new production of The Deceased Woman in São Paulo, 1977:

The Deceased Woman, just like all my other plays, is about human suffering. For me, life means suffering. We are here on earth to suffer. In Paradise, in Heaven, it may be different, who knows? But here in this world, as an artist, I am committed to the tragedy of the human being.¹⁵

For Nelson Rodrigues, the tragedy of the human being derives from the fact that we live in a prosaic, base, degraded world. A world exempt of transcendental values. Zulmira seeks transcendence in her dream of an apotheosis in death. Yet, she is so contaminated by the banality of life that she can only have a banal dream. That is why, despite her extraordinary efforts, such a dream does not have a redeeming quality. It does not sanctify her. In fact, it seems to be as stupid as her jealousy, her religion, her adultery and her prostitution. Rodrigues is showing us an absolutely meaningless life and an absolutely meaningless death. Nonetheless, Zulmira puts such a tremendous energy in her project that it is fascinating to watch this spectacular display of stupidity. Indeed, this is what redeems her, if not as a human being, at least as a dramatic character.

Perdoa-me por me Traíres

(Forgive Me For You Betraying Me, 1957)

Forgive Me For You Betraying Me premiered at Rio's Teatro Municipal in June, 19, 1957. Notwithstanding the author's wish to become a more popular playwright, the second play of the realistic cycle was again a great

subject of scandal. He gives an account of the opening night:

Act 1 and 2 got good applause. Backstage, I thought: "it's a hit!" But when the curtain fell on the third act, the whole theatre just went wild. It was the greatest boo ever heard. Elegant high-society ladies climbed on their seats and hissed like Indians. My play didn't have a single dirty word. It was the audience that swore like mad. In a box, a city representative pulled out a gun. I guess he wanted to shoot my script. . . . I also remember a nice old lady perched on a chair, yelling: "Sex maniac! Sex maniac!"¹⁶

Rodrigues called the play a "tragedy of manners in three acts." Such subtitle is consistent with the characteristics of the drama. By preserving the genre classification, tragedy, Nelson Rodrigues is reaffirming his pessimistic worldview. On the other hand, characterizing it as a tragedy of manners and not as a carioca tragedy implies that the play's realism is situated in a more general, less localized way. Indeed, Forgive Me For You Betraying Me could take place in any big city in Brazil, and not necessarily in Rio de Janeiro.

The first scene shows two adolescent girls in school uniforms, Nair and Glorinha, entering Madame Luba's brothel. The environment is depicted with naturalistic rigor. Luba is another of Rodrigues's madames: a Lithuanian procurer who arranges fifteen-year-old girls for older men. Such a figure also echoes a traditional type of the Brazilian comedy of manners: the foreigner, the gringo, speaking a broken Portuguese with a heavy

accent. Pola Negri is a typical figure of Brazilian brothels, which reappears in other Rodriguean plays: the mulatto servant, homosexual and very effeminate. Dr. Jubileu de Almeida, a distinguished politician and an old client of the bordello, completes the ensemble.

Nair is trying to persuade her friend Glorinha to work for Madame Luba. Glorinha is reluctant at first, but eventually agrees. She is sent to Dr. Jubileu, who reaches an orgasm without touching the girl. All he does is look at her and masturbate, while reciting a problem of Physics. Glorinha, frightened by the old man's strange conduct, interrupts his speech several times. He complains to Madame Luba of the girl's disrespectful attitude. After all, he is a senator, a college professor, his wife's grand-parents were barons and the press calls him "a stronghold of morality."

Glorinha's initiation into this world of moral degradation continues in the second scene, when she accompanies Nair to the office of an "angel maker."¹⁷ Nair got pregnant at Madame Luba's place. The abortion was at the procurer's expense, but she was stingy enough not to pay for the anesthesia. The doctor's office is also depicted in a heavy naturalistic manner. In the waiting-room, there are "frightened, darkish girls." The doctor is eating a tangerine and spitting the seeds. Dramatic tension in the abortion scene increases in a fast pace. We soon perceive

that the doctor has made an error. He starts a quarrel with the nurse, in which a liaison between the two is inferred: "Here you call me doctor, understand?", he admonishes her. They run out of water. Glorinha flees, while Nair bleeds to death. The doctor grows desperate. "Do something! Pray, at least!", he shouts to the nurse. Act 1 ends with a coup-de-théâtre of great impact:

(The nurse bursts out singing a ponto de umbanda.¹⁸
The doctor sobs.)

Act 2 opens at Glorinha's house, where she has lived with Uncle Raul since she was two years old, when, allegedly, her mother committed suicide and her father became insane. Uncle Raul's wife, Aunt Odete, is also insane. Echoing Dona Aninha, from The Woman Without Sin, she has a peaceful, but compulsive behavior. She keeps walking around the house, saying every now and then: "It's time for the medicine."¹⁹

In the first scene, there is a confrontation between Uncle Raul and Glorinha. He knows everything his niece did the day before (the playwright does not bother to inform us now he learned it): Madame Luba, Dr. Jubileu, Nair, the abortion. In a state of great agitation, he decides to reveal to Glorinha the truth about her parents. The action immediately shifts to the past. Most of Act 2, thus, is a flash-back, interrupted, now and then, by Uncle Raul's comments.

To everyone's knowledge, Glorinha's parents, Gil-

berto and Judith, were very happily married. But one day, Judith makes a phone call to her brother-in-law, begging him to help her. Her husband is driving her crazy with his jealousy. Raul rushes to her house, but Gilberto arrives at the same time. Judith is incapable of maintaining her accusation in front of a husband who seems to dominate her by sheer terror. Gilberto starts a scene of jealousy, at the end of which, he is so out of his mind that he decides, himself, to seek a treatment at a mental institution.

Six months later, he returns home, catching his wife by surprise. Having undergone malarioterapia,²⁰ he is apparently cured. Anyhow, he has suffered a great change. He is now serene, loving and repentant. Judith, on her turn, has also changed a great deal. Now she is distant and cold and does not seem to be very happy with her husband's homecoming. Soon, her attitude is explained. Gilberto's entire family arrives, mother, brother Raul and other brothers and sisters, to accuse Judith of adultery. They hired a private eye to make the investigation. They have irrefutable proofs. Gilberto has an absolutely unexpected reaction to such a revelation. He could not care less about his wife's betrayal. He even approves it. He launches on a series of startling utterances, in which we recognize Rodrigues's taste for shocking, outrageous and paradoxical speeches. First he explains the reason

why people go mad: "It's because they are incapable of love. . . . Nobody loves anybody. That's why lovers betray each other, in the hope of an impossible love. Everything derives from this absence of love. Breast cancer or a simple eczema is but love unaccomplished: . . . The adulterous woman is free from the desire that rotted inside her. Desire unsatisfied corrupts and destroys the soul. The adulterous woman, once she satisfies her desire, is purified." Gilberto affirms that he, not Judith, is the one to blame. He tortured his wife with his jealousy, he did not know how to love her. Then, in a melodramatic gesture, he falls at Judith's feet to say the line of the title: "Forgive me for you betraying me!" Everybody, including, Judith, is convinced that he is crazier than ever and must return to the madhouse. While being dragged out, Gilberto shouts: "To love is to be faithful to the one who betrays you! . . . An adulterous woman should never be abandoned!"

Now it is time for Judith's trial. Raul asks the family to be left alone with her. In this confrontation with her brother-in-law, Judith confesses everything:

JUDITH:

A lover? Just one? You know about this one and not about all the others? . . . I've been with many men, so many! . . .

Raul forces her to drink poison. While agonizing, she utters: "I regret my husband, not my lovers!" The act

closes with Raul saying to his mother: "She will never betray again."

Act 3 returns to the present. It consists basically of a long confrontation between Uncle Raul and Glorinha. The uncle reveals why he forced his sister-in-law to die. He was in love with her and she rejected him. She would go with any man, except with him. In his niece, he sees a double of the mother: "You resemble each other like two flames..."

In the heat of the discussion, he starts addressing to Glorinha as Judith. It is obvious that he wants her. He admits that he raised her for him. Glorinha's feelings, on the other hand, are very ambiguous. She oscillates between attraction and repulsion towards her uncle. A liaison between them would be unacceptable by social standards. Therefore, Uncle Raul brings back the motif of the death-pact. He wants the two of them to drink poison. Glorinha cunningly has him drink first and runs away, leaving him in death pangs. But before going out, she calls Madame Luba's brothel to tell she will soon be there. Aunt Odete appears and, for the first time, comes out of her automatic behavior. In a replica of the death tableau of Moema and Misael in Lady of the Drowned, she sits down, puts Raul's head on her lap and whispers: "My love!"

This second play of the realistic cycle presents

many similarities with previous works. The relationship between Glorinha and Nair evokes Glória and Teresa from Family Album. They are both school girls undergoing a devious initiation into sex life. Nair, after learning she is pregnant, tries to talk Glorinha into a death-pact. They would take poison and go see a Gregory Peck movie: "And when the lights come up at the end, they'll find us dead..." Judith echoes Madame Clessi when she confesses to Raul her attraction for young boys: "I love young boys, at the age of pimples!" In Waltz Number 6, there was the motif of the old satyr attacking the innocent youth, which reappears in the scene of Dr. Jubileu and Glorinha (not so innocent a victim, incidentally). The incestuous attraction between father and daughter (Jonas and Glória, Ismael and Ana Maria, Misael and Moema) is the basis of the relation of Raul and Glorinha, Raul being the girl's foster father. In the love of the two brothers, Raul and Gilberto, for the same woman, we have the classical incestuous triangle, which is reworked under multiple variations throughout Rodrigues's theatre. The recurrence of the figure of the old demented woman has already been observed. Through Aunt Odete, the playwright is commenting on the incapacity of fragile souls to cope with the hardships of life, and, consequently, seeking refuge in a world of numbness and void. Madame Luba has common traits with Madame Clessi and Madame Crisálida. Like most of Rodrigues's secondary figures, however

brief is her apparition, she is by no means a one-sided character. The author humanizes the caricature, making her say to Pola Negri: "For two weeks me dreams with little carrousel horses. Me lies on bed and zere zey come, ze little carrousel horses." Gilberto's mother, who has an even shorter appearance, is also an extremely interesting personage. As Raul is going to have his confrontation with Judith, she gives him this piece of advice:

MOTHER:

Go and insult her. Humiliate her as much as you want. But don't be violent. No violence, please. No beating.

In Forgive Me For You Betraying Me, Rodrigues once again adopts an unconventional dramatic structure. The action on the plane of actuality has a swift progression within the classic framework of 24 hours. It is intersected by the long flashback of the second act. The function of the narrative in the past is not only to illuminate the present. It constitutes dramatic action valid in and of itself. This counterpoint between present and past is the foundation of the play's structure, eliciting rich dramatic resonances. The transitions from one plane to the other, therefore, must be very fluid. Uncle Raul starts his story, and it straight away gains life on stage. Raul participates actively in the past action, but, every now and then, he slips out of it to become the

narrator again, making some commentary on the last episode and introducing the next.

The merging of past and present into each other is a fundamental aspect to be considered in Forgive Me For You Betraying Me. The repetition of elements gives the play a circular structure. Two generations, mother and daughter, (who "resemble each other like two flames"), follow the same path of transgression and self-debasement. Another link between them is Raul, who loved the mother in the past and now loves the daughter, (or loves the mother through the daughter) and tries to kill the daughter the same way he killed the mother.

Through the flash-back, the past becomes as actual as the present. The revelation of the past, however, does not contribute to change the present, as it happens in Ibsen's plays, for example. On the contrary, it emphasizes the idea of the imutability of time, the circular pattern described by the events of life. The same situations, the same conflicts recur again and again. There seems to be no solution, no way out for the human being, entrapped in the vicious circle of his morbid, obscure passions.

Viúva, Porém Honesta (Widow, Yet Virtuous, 1957)

In the same year of Forgive Me For You Betraying Me, Nelson Rodrigues wrote a play which falls neither on the pattern of the mythic cycle nor of the realistic drama. He called it an "irresponsible farce," like Dorotéia, written

ten years earlier. The two plays, nonetheless, are very dissimilar in style. Indeed, Widow, Yet Virtuous is a peculiar case in Rodrigues's work. As usual, he was introducing new forms into Brazilian drama. This time, he created the absurd farce.²¹ Widow, Yet Virtuous was his only experiment of the kind. After it, he returned to the realistic mode, a path he would follow up to the end of his career as a playwright. For this reason, Widow, Yet Virtuous has often been misunderstood by the critics, who consider it as a minor play within Rodrigues's works, written for the sake of entertainment and diversion. I will try to show that this is not so inconsequential a play as it may seem at first sight. Furthermore, it can be an exception as far as style, but its themes, types and situations relate closely to the other works, mythic or realistic. They are treated in a different form, that is all. And the view of man and the world implied in the play remains essentially Rodriguean.

Widow, Yet Virtuous opens at the office of J. B. de Albuquerque, great tycoon of the press, and director of the newspaper A Marreta.²² He talks with his chief-editor, Pardal,²³ whose subservience he is testing:

J.B.:

. . . If I want, I can mount you and ride you like a horse. . . . You, my chief-editor, you, my fellowman, owner of an immortal soul! . . . Would you let me do it?

PARDAL:

Without witnesses, gladly.

J.B., a man powerful enough "to nominate ministers through the phone," however, has a problem in his life, which all his money and influence are incapable of solving. His daughter, Ivonete, who betrayed her husband four times in her wedding night, has become an inconsolable widow and, as an act of self-punishment, refuses to sit down for the rest of her life. According to Sábato Magaldi:

Here is a remarkable metaphor which implies one of Rodrigues's favorite paradoxes: it is all right betraying a living person, but a dead one, never.²⁴

J.B. calls a whole array of specialists to find a cure to his daughter's abnormal condition. These are Dr. Lambreta, the family doctor, Dr. Sanatorium, a psychoanalyst, and Madame Cri-cri, an old cocotte with a heavy French accent. As soon as the specialists start confabulating:

(There is an explosion. . . . Out of the smoke appears a man wearing a swallow-tailed coat. . . .)

It is Diabo da Fonseca.²⁵ His papers say: profession: Beelzebub. He was passing by and smelled a widow in the air. And it just happens that he is absolutely crazy about widows. He asks about the antecedents of the problem being discussed. Pardal accedes in narrating the story from the beginning. A flash-back, then, brings the deceased husband. One day, interrupted in the

office of A Marreta a young man escaped from S.A.M.²⁶ J.B. has a brilliant idea: in order to strike a blow at the government, through its system of social assistance, he will prove that an organization like A Marreta is more fit to reform the youth gone astray than S.A.M. itself. Thus, he will employ the fugitive, an effeminate type named Dorothy Dalton, to be the theatre reviewer of his newspaper. "Isn't he the spitting image of the modern theatre critic?", he asks.

A new flash-back in the second act tells us the continuation of the story. Aunt Assembléia takes Ivonete to the gynecologist's. Ivonete is three months pregnant, which is quite strange, since the only person she seems to care for is her girlfriend Lucy. A husband, then, must be immediately found. Ivonete makes her choice: Dorothy Dalton. The wedding ceremony is reenacted, with all the characters playing as guests. Ivonete is all excited. Besides a husband, she also wants to have a lover. Madame Cri-cri comments: "So soon! A lover comes a little later, dear." As J.B. also reprobates his daughter's whim, she reacts:

IVONETE:

Oh, Dad, you really suck!

PSYCHOANALYST:

Well, that's the role of the family: to suck.
Or else it's not a family, it's a nuthouse.

J.B.:

You see, dear? My duty, as a father is to suck!

But the bridegroom, Dorothy Dalton, could not care less about being cheated in his wedding night. As a matter of fact, he prefers to go to the theatre. He has a review to make that night. Ivonete, thus, feels free to choose Pardal to inaugurate her nuptial bed with. She starts by sitting on his lap. J.B. turns off the lights. After a short black-out, when the lights come up, everything is changed: Ivonete is sitting on the devil's lap, Madame Cri-cri sits on the psychoanalyst's lap and Aunt Assembléia on Pardal's.

It is the next day. We infer that, during the wedding night, Ivonete has slept with everybody. "Even I got a little something," affirms Madame Cri-cri. The chorus of betrayed lovers protests energetically against the bride's scandalous conduct. But Ivonete is very consistent in her reasoning:

IVONETE:

. . . my friend Lucy used to tell me that a woman cannot love the same man for more than 40 minutes. And now, shut up, please. It's time for my soap opera.

She turns on the radio and the news announces a terrible traffic accident: "The well-known theatre critic Dorothy Dalton, the critic of the young generation, . . . has been smashed by a bus, according to some sources, or by an ice cream cart, according to others."

Ivonete, guilt-ridden, dismisses all her lovers:

"The true husband is the one who dies. Only a dead husband deserves fidelity," she exclaims. To expiate her guilt, she decides not to sit ever again. We are, then, brought back to the plane of actuality. J.B. is asking the advice of the specialists he called. The family doctor recommends some gargling. Madame Cri-cri, another lover. Dr. Sanatorium does not utter a word. After all, he is a psychoanalyst. His function, he says, is just to listen, without saying anything. Diabo da Fonseca is the one who finds the solution. He makes a phone call to Hell and asks his secretary to look into the files for somebody named Dorothy Dalton, under the letter C, of critic. The secretary finds it in letter V.²⁷ "They are filing the theatre critics of the young generation under letter V now," comments the devil. He orders the secretary to send Dorothy Dalton right back to Earth. There is an explosion and Dorothy resurrects. Everybody is happy because, now, Ivonete can not only sit down again, but also commit adultery as much as she wants. The men are all excited. But Diabo wants the ex-widow only for himself. "Why you?", asks the psychoanalyst. "You shouldn't even be here in this respectable family house." Diabo da Fonseca is infuriated. He decides to show that: ". . . the family, psychoanalysis, the press, patriotism, morality, everything is a fraud!" He goes center-stage and shouts: "The cops are coming!"

Everybody, including the old aunt, runs away in panic. Only the trio, Ivonete, Dorothy, and Diabo, wife, husband and lover, remain on stage for the happy end. The curtain closes on a romantic kiss of Diabo and Ivonete, while Dorothy reads comic strips.

As in many of Rodrigues's plays, in Widow, very little happens on the plane of actuality. It is the assembly of specialists, in the beginning, and, at the end, Dorothy Dalton's resurrection and the final denouement. Most of the action of the play is developed through a series of flash-backs showing Dorothy's appearance, Ivonete's visit to the gynecologist, the wedding ceremony, the wedding night and the next morning. The transitions are indicated by means of a series of simple and imaginative theatrical devices. Pardal blows a whistle and the bride and bridegroom appear dressed for the wedding, as J.B. distributes hats among the guests. The father, then, shoots a gun to give the start to the wedding night. A few moments later, he announces very straightforwardly that he will make a time transition by turning off the lights, and when he turns them back on, it will be the next morning.

In terms of dramatic structure, Nelson Rodrigues continues to eschew the linear narrative and, as usual, finds interesting artifices to give fluidity to his shifts in time and space. However, this is not exactly what makes Widow, Yet Virtuous a fascinating play. We are already

accustomed to the author's ingenuity regarding playwriting techniques. Despite all the criticism viewing the play as an inconsequential divertissement, its sharper edge being satire on theatre critics, I tend to think that Widow is, by no means, an "irresponsible" farce, as the author himself affirms. On the contrary, I see it as a violent indictment of the Brazilian social system, disguised under the apparent lightness of the farcical style.²⁸ In this sense, I totally agree with Flora Sussekind's analysis of the play in her essay "Nelson Rodrigues and the False Bottom."²⁹ Sussekind's point is that Nelson Rodrigues dismystifies the mechanisms of intellectual and social prestige and, thus, reveals, under this "false bottom," the incompetence, the corruption, the total failure of the system:

At the top of our cultural system there are the doctors.³⁰ Among the rituals of intellectual consecration, receiving the title of doctor is the magic wand that opens to the greatest possibilities and privileges in society.³¹

The very names of the doctors of Widow reveal the playwright's purpose of satire: Dr. Sanatorium and Dr. Lambreta.³² Another form of debunking is the fact that J.B. places them, as "sex specialists," on the same level as Madame Cri-cri, the procurer, a personage of the lowest degree in the social scale. The doctors are all incompetent, as we can see by the treatments they prescribe. Dr. Sanatorium wears a fake belly because:

DR. SANATORIUM:

All doctors must have a potbelly. It inspires respect and confidence! Husbands are very impressed by a potbelly.

Sussekind observes that Nelson Rodrigues's criticism of cultural institutions is not limited to doctors. Through the characters of J.B. he attacks the press. The name itself is an allusion to one of the most important Brazilian newspapers: Rio's Jornal do Brasil. The transformation of a young delinquent into a theatre reviewer is not merely a satire against critics. It also implies an unscrupulous manipulation of public opinion. J.B., being the prototype of the almighty capitalist, whose omnipotence is not tempered by any sort of moral concern, anticipates a series of characters of the same kind to appear in the next plays, the quintessential model being Dr. Werneck from Pretty, But Cheap (1961).

Among the institutions, however, the main target of the playwright is the family. The order of conventional values is totally inverted in it. Adultery is a necessary consequence of marriage, and marital fidelity can only be possible in widowhood. The theme of moral hypocrisy is expressed through the figures of the two aunts. The aunts are usually the guardians of family morals in Rodrigues's plays. They are the agents of maintenance of a strict code of behavior. Aunt Assembléia and Aunt Solteirona³³ are in charge of such a repressive function in Widow, Yet

Virtuous. Yet, their moral integrity is continually debunked throughout the play. Aunt Assembléia has "improper dreams." She also hides in the maid's room to have a smoke, and once Ivonete surprised her swearing before the mirror. Aunt Solteirona, on her turn, in the delirium of the wedding night, while Ivonete cries for a lover, dreams of having 3500 lovers.

The corruption and decadence of the institutions is thus exposed, in the play, through the utter inversion of all expectations. Nothing functions as it should. Not even the "institution of the theatre." Nelson Rodrigues utilizes the traditional elements of the farce, such as the fake belly, but unmaskes the trick by revealing its fakeness. The narrative links, as we have seen, are absolutely artificial and so is the denouement.

According to Eduardo Tolentino, Widow, Yet Virtuous was a prophetic play. It prefigured the deterioration of the system in a period when the country was living in the euphoric atmosphere of President Juscelino Kubitscheck's administration. In this sense, it anticipates the dark years of the military dictatorship which would follow the coup-d'etat of 1964.³⁴

Widow, Yet Virtuous ends in chaos. The characters sink into utter abjection, into absolute madness. There is no redemption for them, no epiphany. The devil triumphs over everything and everybody. Yet, perhaps such a triumph

of the powers of evil is precisely the epiphany of the drama. Widow is the only play by Nelson Rodrigues in which moral transgression does not entail guilt, self-punishment and destruction. There is a dionysiac quality in its denouement, which, in this regard, is undoubtedly a happy end.

Os Sete Gatinhos (The Seven Kittens, 1958)

One year after Widow, Yet Virtuous, Rodrigues wrote The Seven Kittens, which he called "a divine comedy in three acts." He was, of course, playing with the words. The reference to Dante has nothing to do with the play, and, although The Seven Kittens has many comic moments, it is, by no means, a straight comedy as far as dramatic genre is concerned. Sábato Magaldi refers to the play rather as another "carioca tragedy," since Rodrigues once again situates his story of the decline and destruction of a family in the suburbs of the Northern section of Rio de Janeiro.³⁵

The first scene, starting at a bus stop, conveys information about two of the main characters: Aurora and Bibelot. They have just met and feel very attracted toward one another. He is a married man who likes to go out with other women. At the moment, he is having an affair with a sixteen-year-old girl whom he has deflowered. A stage direction indicates that he is always dressed in a white suit and wears around his neck a golden chain and medal

with a saint's effigy. Aurora is the daughter of Mr. Noronha, janitor at the Chamber of Deputies. She lives with her parents and four sisters, all unmarried. The family has but one goal in life: to see Silene, the youngest daughter, well married. They all work very hard to give the girl the best education and to save for the expenses of her future wedding. Aurora has to prostitute herself because her salary, as an employee of the Social Security Bureau, is very low: "I sell my body, all right, but all the money is for the wedding..."

In the development of the scene, the playwright utilizes a series of anti-illusionistic techniques. Bibelot takes Aurora to an apartment in Copacabana.³⁶ A taxi is suggested by the movement of their bodies sitting on two chairs facing the audience. At the building in Copacabana, they walk in circles around the stage, as if climbing flights of stairs. As they are going to make love, the stage direction mentions a "symbolic" strip-tease (they throw off imaginary clothes), and the sex act is performed at distance.

In the second scene of Act 1, we meet Aurora's family. A whole sequence of details exploring the effects of vulgarity and bad taste cascades before the spectators' eyes. The mother has varicose veins and her sweat is said to have a sour smell. Deborah, the eldest daughter, arriving from work, takes off her shoes and massages her toes,

complaining of a sore bunion. Meanwhile, the father, Mr. Noronha, picks up a newspaper and runs to the toilet, to come back, a few moments later, unbuttoned, in a fit of rage, because he found dirty words and obscene drawings scribbled on the bathroom walls. He calls for a family meeting in order to find out who did the graffiti. Two other daughters appear: Arlette comes in her underwear and Hilda comes shaving her armpit. Mr. Noronha starts to complain about his miserable life. On top of being poor, he has had the misfortune of seeing all his daughters, except the youngest, lose their virginity without getting married. As a believer of Spiritualism, he is convinced that there is a sort of ominous fate weighing over the family. Such evil is brought about by a living person, whom they must discover and destroy, so as to be free of the curse. He has heard all this from a medium possessed by the spirit of Dr. Barbosa Coutinho, the private doctor of Emperor Dom Pedro II³⁷ and also a poet. "He wrote all the poems attributed to the emperor. Dom Pedro just signed them," Mr. Noronha triumphantly announces. In the last session, the spirit of Dr. Coutinho also revealed him the face of the malignant creature. Looking in an old mirror, Mr. Noronha saw "two big eyes, . . . one blinking quite normally, and the other, much bigger, absolutely still. (With sudden violence) And the horrible thing was that one tear was coming out only of the bigger eye. The other one

was totally dry. . . . This man who cries with just one eye knows there's a virgin among us!"

The family starts to panic with the father's prophecies. Silene, the youngest daughter, their last hope of purity, is threatened by a malevolent entity.

MR. NORONHA:

We must save our little virgin. She hasn't even grown breasts! . . . you better attract and bring here this man who cries through one eye. . . . We have to destroy the tearful eye!

At this moment, Mr. Saul, an old Jew, who has a shop nextdoor, enters. He brings them a message (The Noronhas do not own a telephone): Silene is leaving the boarding-school and coming back home. The reason of such unexpected return in the middle of the school-year is left unexplained.

In the first scene of Act 2, the girl is brought home by the school principal, Mr. Portela. In a private conversation with the father, Mr. Portela tells him the reason of Silene's homecoming. It was a scandalous incident that shocked everyone and endangered the reputation of the institution, he explains. There was a female cat in the school, which Silene was very fond of. One day the cat was found pregnant:

MR. PORTELA:

(In a crescendo) And yesterday, in the schoolyard, in front of all the girls, the cat was killed with a club! . . . Mr. Noronha, have you ever seen a cat giving birth? . . . Wait, the question was not well put: have you ever seen a dead cat give

birth? . . . Well, that's what happened. . . . The kittens came out of their mother's womb, one after another, before the eyes of the little girls and their teachers. . . . Can you imagine? The dead mother and that outburst of life! They were seven kittens. . . . All alive!

It was Silene who killed the cat with the club, Mr. Portela finally reveals. The story does not seem to impress Mr. Noronha too much. But he goes out of his mind when Mr. Portela informs him that, due to the unhappy event, Silene has been expelled from the school. The father looks possessed. He calls the women and tells them to close all the doors. If Silene admits Mr. Portela is telling the truth, they will let him out. If not, he will regret his lies. Of course, Silene denies everything. The women encircle the principal. The father grabs a silver dagger and threatens him:

MR. NORONHA:

. . . If you had insulted any of these (shows the women), even my wife, I wouldn't have minded at all... But not Silene. . . . You cannot understand my daughter's purity. . . . She has no hips, no breasts, her breasts are just starting to show! Silene is pure for the sake of all of us! . . . You just want to humiliate me because I'm nothing but a janitor. . . . So, call me "janitor" now!

MR. PORTELA:

Why?

MR. NORONHA:

I want it!

MR. PORTELA:

(Weakly) Janitor.

MR. NORONHA:

Good. Janitor. Now, start crying.

MR. PORTELA:

But why?

MR. NORONHA:

(Yelling) Cry!

MR. PORTELA:

I can't! (Yet, he cries. Both his eyes are filled with tears)

MR. NORONHA:

(Frustrated) You didn't shed the tear I'm expecting! . . .

They try to make Silene slap Mr. Portela in the face. The girl, under such pressure, bursts out:

SILENE:

You want to know the truth? . . . All right, I did it! . . . I killed the cat!

MR. NORONHA:

But why, my daughter, why?

SILENE:

Out of disgust! . . . And hate! . . . Oh, that loathsome, pregnant cat!

Mr. Portela goes out triumphantly as Mr. Noronha holds his daughter in his arms:

MR. NORONHA:

(Kissing her forehead) No school is worth of you! Everybody is envious of your purity! . . . The other girls are not girls, they're little females. Only you are a girl, a pure little girl, only you! (He sobs)

In the second scene of Act 2, Dr. Bordalo, the family doctor, after examining Silene, calls Mr. Noronha to reveal that his daughter is three months pregnant. He tries to appease the father's fury and despair. All he has to do, says Dr. Bordalo, is to find the girl's boyfriend and arrange the marriage. After all, he adds, "virginity is nothing but a little film." Mr. Noronha reacts:

MR. NORONHA:

(Very exalted) You too have a daughter, doctor. The age of mine. I'd like to know if your daughter's virginity is also just a little film. . . . You know nothing about purity or about innocence. . . . You don't realize that, among all the girls of the world, only my daughter is chaste! . . .

Mr. Noronha convokes another family meeting. He wants Silene to confess who the child's father is. First the girl denies her pregnancy. But as the father threatens to kick her belly, she yells:

SILENE:

He's married! (Savagely) Married! Lives with his wife and loves her! . . .

The whole family goes crazy. The sisters demand their share in the savings for Silene's wedding. They all want to leave the house and become prostitutes in the open: "Now that we know that Silene is just like any of us... or even worse..."

But Mr. Noronha has an even better idea. The girls do not have to go away. They can be prostitutes at home.

The house will become one big brothel, a brothel of daughters. Mr. Noronha will leave his job at the Chamber of Deputies and run the business. It will begin with Silene, and Dr. Bordalo will be the first client. He forces the girl to go into her bedroom and wait for the doctor. Bordalo is outraged:

DR. BORDALO:

I should shoot you in the face, you rascal!

MR. NORONHA:

Me, a rascal? (Incisive) Not only me! We're all rascals, all of us! . . . Do you know why this family hadn't rotted yet? (Sobbing) Because there was a virgin among us! . . . Silene was a virgin, an angel, a child only for our sake! (Ferocious) But now that she's in that room, waiting for you, (laughs with despair), now we can finally let ourselves stink and rot...

The entire family undergoes a catharsis. The mother reveals it was she who did the obscene scribbling in the bathroom. Arlette confesses she is lesbian: "I abhor men! Nothing disgusts me more than a man's dirty underpants!" Mr. Noronha admits he sells his older daughters to the deputies. They all want, they demand Dr. Bordalo to go with Silene. "I don't want!", says the doctor, when a voice is heard from the outside: "Then, I want!" It is Saul, the old Jew, who had overheard the whole scene. He walks straight to Silene's room, closing the door behind him. The doctor shouts:

DR. BORDALO:

I'm next! . . . Silene, oh Silene! You're the age of my daughter!

But before going into the bedroom, after Saul has come out, the doctor asks one of the women to spit at his face. The act ends with Mr. Noronha grabbing his silver dagger and saying: "This dagger is still waiting for a tear!"

The third act opens with a spiritualist session in the Noronha's parlor, in which Hilda is possessed by a spirit named Cousin Alípio. It is evidently a low, primitive entity, for the stage direction describes "her crossing the stage with large, masculine steps; she pants and puffs, screams and speaks in a man's voice."³⁸ Mr. Noronha asks Cousin Alípio about the man of the tear. The answer is that the man will come "dressed like a virgin."

After the session, Aurora reasons that, instead of worrying about the man of the tear, they should try to "fix the bastard who disgraced our sister." She devises a plan: her boyfriend, Bibelot, who, incidentally, was an ex-cop, fired for excess of violence, could easily do the job. All she has to do is convince Silene to reveal her lover's name. At this moment Mr. Saul comes in with the news that Dr. Bordalo has hanged himself with an electric iron cord, leaving a note which said: "I do not want my daughter to kiss me in my coffin."

Silene does not let herself to be easily persuaded by Aurora. She loves her boyfriend and does not want to see him harmed. But she goes into the details of their

relationship. She was the one who seduced him and wanted to have the baby. In her childish manner, she confesses she felt attracted to him because he resembled "Lana Turner's gangster. The one her daughter killed. Baby Stompanato, right?" Gradually, Aurora is left absolutely astounded by the bits of information given by Silene about the man. Once she saw him crying and there was only one tear in one of his eyes. Her classmates used to call him "the man who dresses like a virgin," when he passed in front of the school, because he always wore a white suit. He had a golden chain and a medal with a saint's picture around his neck and used to take her to an apartment in Copacabana.

Aurora has gathered all the puzzle pieces. Bibelot, her boyfriend, is the father of her sister's child. Coincidentally, he is coming to visit her that afternoon. Alone with him in the living-room, she makes a desperate attempt to change the course of events. If he agrees with marrying her after his wife dies, (she is seriously ill), she will not say a word to the family about the facts. Bibelot is rude with her. He never thought of marrying Aurora. Granted, he wants to keep their liaison, but in the terms it is now: "Didn't I tell you I need to have two women, a wife at home and a whore in the street?" The whore is Aurora, and his new wife, as soon as the old one dies, will be the "chick" he impregnated. Aurora hides her humil-

iation and frustration and calls the rest of the family, except Silene. She shows them "the man who disgraced our sister and cries through only one eye." Mr. Noronha stabs Bibelot with the silver dagger. The victim's both eyes, in his death pangs, are filled with tears. He was not the man they wanted. The women turn all against Mr. Noronha. They call him "murderer" and accuse him of prostituting his daughters, including Silene. The father begs for forgiveness and falls to his knees, crying. Arlette holds his face in her hands:

ARLETTE:

. . . Let me see your tears... (Slowly, in awe) One tear, only one tear... (In a triumphant scream) Old man, you're the devil who cries through only one eye! . . . (She snatches the dagger from her father. The others get hold of him. She lifts the dagger) The dagger into the tearful eye!

At this moment, Hilda falls in a trance, possessed again by the spirit of Cousin Alípio:

HILDA:

(With a man's voice) Kill him! Kill this old bastard! Kill him and bury him with his tear in the backyard! Old bastard!

As usual, we recognize in each of Rodrigues's new plays a number of situations which he keeps reworking again and again. Silene's homecoming, for example, expelled from school due to a scandalous affair, repeats the story of Glória in Family Album. Also, the unexpected pregnancy of the young daughter, creating havoc in the family circle, had already appeared in Widow, Yet Virtuous. The inces-

tuous connotation of the old man's attraction to the young girl, often seen in the other plays, can be detected in Dr. Bordalo and Mr. Saul in regard of Silene. Aurora, Silene and Bibelot form the triangular pattern of the two sisters in love with the same man. The situation of the older sister prostituting herself to preserve the purity of the younger will be relived by the heroine of Pretty, But Cheap, a few years later. The mother makes obscene scribbling on the toilet walls the same way the aunt of Widow, Yet Virtuous swears before the mirror, giving vent to a repressed sexuality. When she is asked why she did it, she answers:

MOTHER:

. . . (Aggressive) It's because I don't have a husband! (To Mr. Noronha) I don't remember the last time you made love to me! . . .

A masochistic pleasure in self-debasement, derived from guilt and from a depreciative self-image, is another common trait in Rodrigues's characters which can be found in Mr. Noronha's wish to be called "janitor" by the school principal, in Dr. Bordalo's wanting them to spit in his face and in Aurora's exclamation, at the climax of her love act with Bibelot in the first scene of the play: "Insult me! Hit me in the face!"

The characters of The Seven Kittens manifest the same characteristics as their peers in the other plays: morbidity, irrationality and an irrepressible compulsion

towards violence and destruction. They plunge into a vortex of delirium leading irreversibly to chaos and annihilation. Even the family doctor, described as a model of decency, is dragged in this vertiginous process. Madness is highly contagious in such a world.

The Noronha family can be compared to Zulmira, the protagonist of The Deceased Woman, in the sense that they live for an ideal which will supposedly redeem their miserable lives. In their case, it is an ideal of innocence, decency, purity, virginity, which they all have lost, but which they want to see preserved in Silene.³⁹ Mr. Noronha refers to the girl as a saint's figure of stained glass in a church: "In the early morning, the sun shines through the glass. Silene is just like that: a virgin with light shining through her." Silene is the last hope of redemption for that decayed group. When she is dismystified, their world crumbles, All they can do is "stink and rot in the middle of the street." The importance of virginity as an ethic, or rather, as a mythic value in Nelson Rodrigues's world is noted by Paulo Mendes Campos in his preface to the play:

I believe that one of the fulcrums of Nelson Rodrigues's world is the virgin figure, . . . symbolizing the yearning for purity which devours his characters. . . . The contradiction between virginity and prostitution (there seems to be no other alternative) is treated in The Seven Kittens with greater dramatic power than in any other play. Here such contradiction seems initially to be annulled, since prostitution is exerted so that virginity can be maintained. The author seems to be telling us that

in this corrupt, hypocritical world, a miracle is occurring: whores have become the vestal keepers of virginity. In other words, . . . only the whores are conscious of the value of virginity. Evidently, such value is neither social nor religious. For Nelson Rodrigues, virginity has a poetic and dramatic meaning which transcends rational standards and logical codes and is linked rather to the sources of myth and to the archetypes of the human soul.⁴⁰

In fact, notwithstanding the naturalistic quality of The Seven Kittens, there is an undercurrent of magic and myth flowing throughout the play. A sort of inescapable fate hovers over the characters' lives. The sisters believe that prostitution runs in their blood. Bibelot always carries a gun because it was predicted to him that he would be killed by a whore. Indeed, it is Aurora who provokes his death. The love of the two sisters for the same man can also be seen as a predestined circumstance, since it happens spontaneously, without any knowledge of the people involved in the triangle. But the strongest of these motifs of foreboding and doom is the image of the man with the tearful eye, to whom all the evils chastening the family are associated. Ironically enough, the man of the tear is found to be the father. The family undergoes a process of exorcism and sacrifice. The mythopoeic connotations of this circumstance are discussed by Sábato Magaldi:

The symbolic meaning of such a reversal carries tremendous implications. The play functions as a mythological allegory. In an Oedipus-like manner, Mr. Noronha creates the world (the private world of his family) and, at the same time, destroys it. There is also an Oedipal quality in the figure of Bibelot. He was appointed to be the avenger of the family by killing Silene's seducer. . . . Mr. Noronha, who generated

the family, brings about its perdition. A ritualistic sacrifice, then, must be made. . . . But the myth of the eternal return can also be evoked here: after chaos, orgy, annihilation and death, a new life is coming. Similarly to the cat, which, after being sacrificed, gives birth to seven kittens, Silene carries in her womb the seed of a new life. The destruction of the world at the end of the play is followed by the generation of a new world.⁴¹

In The Seven Kittens, parallel to this mythopoeic tissue, runs an accurate description of the social milieu. For some critics, this constitutes the main value of the play: the indictment of an unjust social system, in which the miserable conditions of life of the lower classes destroys any possibility of personal accomplishment. The father and the daughters of the Noronha family have regular jobs. Both Mr. Noronha and Aurora work for state institutions. Their salaries, however, are not sufficient to guarantee a proper life. Similarly to Zulmira, in The Deceased Woman, they try to compensate their distress with an idealized dream and pay with prostitution and self-debasement the price of such a dream. Prostitution is clearly seen in the play as a consequence of a corrupt social and economical system. It is the characters' low status that motivates their existential failure. Nevertheless, they are unable to recognize such condition and to rebel against it. On the contrary, they buy the values of the bourgeois order which explores and humiliates them. Silene's wedding represents their hope of ascension in the social scale. The characters' despair, caused by the failure of their

project, instead of being channelled into an attitude of revolt against society, turns against themselves and brings about their total annihilation.

Boca de Ouro (Golden Mouth, 1959)

The first scene of Golden Mouth, functioning as a sort of prologue, explains the title of the play. It takes place in a dentist's office. A man with perfect teeth wants to have all of them pulled out and replaced by a denture of pure gold. At first, the dentist is reluctant, but he quickly changes his mind as the man stuffs his pockets with money bills. The operation starts. The mythological figure of Golden Mouth is about to be born:

GOLDEN MOUTH:

Since I was a kid, a poor barefoot kid, I've had this wish of having a golden mouth. . . . Yesterday I had a wonderful dream. . . . I dreamt I had died and my body was buried in a golden coffin. . . . Doctor, I swear to you, I'll have enough dough to be buried in a golden coffin the day I croak.

The action shifts to the office of the newspaper O Sol.⁴² Sensational news has just arrived. Golden Mouth, the king of jogo do bicho⁴³ in Madureira,⁴⁴ has been murdered. The newspaper wants to make a report of the story. Golden Mouth, a gangster, dead, ceased to be dangerous. Therefore, all his "horrendous crimes" can be brought to light. He will be depicted, in the report, as a "social cancer." A reporter, Caveirinha,⁴⁵ and a photographer are appointed to interview Dona Guigui, the bicheiro's ex-lover.⁴⁶ She must

surely have fantastic revelations to make.

Dona Guigui was a married woman who had left her husband and children to live with Golden Mouth. She was abandoned by the bicheiro one year later and returned to her family. Not knowing of her ex-lover's death, she gives full vent to her resentment against him in the interview. She boasts to know of at least twenty crimes committed by Golden Mouth: "Every mysterious crime the police isn't able to solve, believe me, Golden Mouth is involved in it!" Caveirinha asks her to narrate a good one. Dona Guigui's narrative is dramatized in a flash-back, which constitutes the basic dramatic material of the first act.

The flash-back introduces two new characters: Leleco and Celeste, a suburban couple experiencing financial difficulties. Celeste's mother is about to die and, since Leleco is unemployed, they do not have a penny to pay for the funeral. They decide to borrow money from Golden Mouth. The next scene takes us to the bicheiro's house. A stage direction informs that "Dona Guigui's evocation has but one definite goal: to denigrate Golden Mouth's image."

Golden Mouth does not show the slightest sign of commiseration in regard of Leleco's lamentation. He agrees to lend him money, he will even spare a much larger amount, but on one condition: Celeste is the one to come ask him. He does not bother to hide the real purpose of his demand.

When the woman arrives, Golden Mouth asks to be left alone with her. The husband is to wait in the adjoining room. Celeste reacts against Golden Mouth's brutal attempts to seduce her and screams for her husband. As Leleco comes in, Golden Mouth threatens him with a gun. In an act of supreme humiliation, he wants the husband himself to tell Celeste to go into his bedroom. Leleco "cries ignobly," as he begs his wife to obey the bicheiro. After Celeste has left, Leleco asks for the money. "Not a penny!", says Golden Mouth. In an outburst of rage, Leleco shouts:

LELECO:

. . . You, bastard! I know where you come from! . . . Your mother delivered you in the sink of a gafieira toilet!⁴⁷

The allusion to the degrading circumstances of his birth infuriates Golden Mouth. He will not admit such an insult to his mother. Act 1 ends with him striking Leleco on the head several times with his gun.

The second act starts with Dona Guigui's commenting on Golden Mouth's attitude. He was greatly ashamed of his low origin, too low even for suburban standards. Thus, he tended to deny it and to idealize his mother:

DONA GUIGUI:

. . . When he got drunk, he would refer to his mother as "the golden virgin." Can you believe that? A whore who picked up men in the street!

She finishes the story. Leleco's body was dumped in the Tijuca woods. When the police found it, "the com-

munists were blamed for the crime."

Agenor, Dona Guigui's husband, intervenes in the dialogue. If the interview is published, he fears Golden Mouth's retaliation. Caveirinha tranquilizes him. The man is dead. Murdered. Dona Guigui's reaction to the news is absolutely unexpected:

DONA GUIGUI:

(In utter despair) My love is dead! My love is dead!

(She walks in circles around the stage, followed by Caveirinha. The expression of her pain is typically suburban. It is so exaggerated that it almost seems comic.)

Now she does not want the interview to come out. She admits that she distorted the facts: "You know what a rejected woman is capable of." Golden Mouth was not that bad, after all. Indeed, he had some excellent qualities. In order to convince the reporters, she is willing to tell the story again the way it truly happened.

In this second version, the relationship between Leleco and Celeste appears under a different light. Leleco has seen his wife in Copacabana in the company of an old man "with a bald head and a potbelly." Celeste does not deny it. The adultery does not seem to bother Leleco too much. On the contrary, he would be happy to exploit his wife's "talents." He suggests a much more profitable business: Celeste would seduce Golden Mouth. Thus, in Dona Guigui's second account, the roles are reversed. Golden

Mouth becomes the victim of the unscrupulous couple's machinations. The stage direction indicates that he will now appear "rectified, embellished, transfigured."

In the bicheiro's house, Celeste meets a committee of high-society ladies asking for a donation for their philanthropic league. Rodrigues's satire of the upper crust is conveyed through the "glittering frivolity" of the ladies' comments: "Oh, Golden Mouth, you seem to have come out of a neorealistic movie. . . . De Sica would love you! More than anything, the ladies are motivated by a morbid curiosity. They are thrilled to know a legendary figure of the underworld, a gangster, a criminal, the "Dracula, the Al Capone of Madureira." Initially Golden Mouth treats them with consideration. But the ladies make a serious mistake. They ask him to tell the story of the gafieira sink. The stage direction describes his reaction as of deep suffering. But he soon recovers himself. He devises a stratagem to humiliate the women. He proposes a "breast contest." The prize to the prettiest breasts will be a pearl necklace. The ladies accept the game. "My husband," says one of them, "finds everything very natural after he underwent psychoanalysis." Celeste also participates in the contest and wins it. Then, she and Golden Mouth throw the women out of the house.

As we can see, the bicheiro here is totally rehabilitated. He is also innocent of Leleco's murder.

It is Celeste who stabs her husband because now she wants to be Golden Mouth's only woman.

In the third act, Dona Guigui prepares to disparage the bicheiro's image again. Her motivation now is the fact that her husband, vexed with her open confession of her passion for another man, threatens to abandon her. Caveirinha arranges their reconciliation. Dona Guigui decides to recount the story, this time, she affirms, "as it really happened."

Celeste and Leleco are brought back to stage. He has just found out that his wife betrays him with Golden Mouth. Leleco has played at jogo do bicho. If he wins, his rival, who runs the gambling, will have to pay him a million. But a messenger comes to inform him he lost.

The action shifts to Golden Mouth's house. Dona Guigui mentions a phone call from "that high-society broad . . . who's crazy about you." Golden Mouth explains that this woman, Maria Luísa, has joined a religious sect and all she wants is to reform him. Celeste arrives, very anxious, to tell about her husband's discovery. Golden Mouth's repartee is a typical sample of Rodriguean humor. Even though Leleco had surprised them kissing in a taxi, she should have denied everything, he affirms. That is what adulterous women should always do at all costs and under any circumstances. To justify his theory, he describes the day he was caught with a woman in an hotel

room. Her husband broke into the room with the police: "The broad was absolutely naked, yet she denied everything adamantly. Would you believe that the husband was in doubt, the police officer was in doubt and even I was in doubt? Babe, next time, just deny. That's the trick!" Leleco butts in, holding a gun, and tries to force Golden Mouth to pay the lottery prize he did not win. Celeste uses a stratagem to distract her husband so that Golden Mouth manages to snatch the gun from his hand. They both hit and stab the man to death and hide his body behind a coach.

The third act is brought to a climax in the scene with Maria Luísa, the "high-society broad." Celeste cannot hide her jealousy. She is sure that the woman is sexually interested in the bicheiro. Maria Luísa reaffirms her missionary purposes. Golden Mouth declares he is ready for conversion. After all, he is not such a bad character. In fact, he swears, despite all the defamation against him, he has never killed a person. Celeste perceives his seductive manoeuvres and decides to dismystify him by uncovering Leleco's corpse. Golden Mouth, then, announces that somebody will have to be sacrificed so that the crime will not be denounced. Against all expectations, the victim is Celeste. He slashes her throat with a razor blade. Maria Luísa is both horrified and spellbound. She calls him: "murderer!" He tells her to go away, but, instead,

she slowly walks into his bedroom. After covering Celeste's body with a newspaper, he goes to join her.

The play shifts back to the plane of actuality. At the coroner's office, a radio reporter announces that Golden Mouth's murderer has been found. It is a lady of the upper crust: Maria Luísa. She has stabbed him twenty-nine times. And the great irony is that the body is toothless. Thieves have yanked out his gold denture. The play ends with the speaker promising to come back in a few moments with more sensational details about this bloody affair.

The dramatic structure of Golden Mouth is shaped by the alternation of two different planes: the plane of actuality and the plane of memory. The technique of the flashback as the scene projection of a character's reminiscence has been frequently used by Rodrigues. The novelty here, thus, is not the action's shifting back and forth in time. It is the fact that the accounts of the past are filtered through the oscillations of the narrator's subjectivity. Memory does not constitute a static, absolute category. Dona Guigui's emotional fluctuations reshape the past events. At each new version, they are radically transformed, to the extent of contradicting one another. Not only the facts, but also the characters' psychological traits, their motivations, their moral profiles are seen, each time, under an entirely different light.

Such form of dramatic composition is reminiscent of Wedding Gown, in the sense that the essence of the action resides in the workings of the subjective mind. In Golden Mouth, too, the plane of actuality is reduced to a few brief scenes designed to frame, within the context of objective reality, the material derived from the operations of the psyche. Similarly to Alaíde's case in Wedding Gown, the dramatic substance of Golden Mouth is the scenic projection of the meanderings of a character's (Dona Guigui) inner world.

Rodrigues's narrative process in Golden Mouth was often associated to Pirandello's methods. The playwright denies such an influence. Sábato Magaldi points to the fact that:

In Pirandello, the character is multiple because it emits a different image to each new interlocutor. Yet, such an image remains unaltered to the eyes of the same interlocutor. Rodrigues develops this process to a further point. Depending on the viewer's emotional state, the character in question acquires new dimensions, and often contradictory ones. It is a more complex form of psychological exploration.⁴⁸

As in Pirandello, the truth is relative in Golden Mouth. Which of Dona Guigui's three versions corresponds to reality? Again, in the Pirandellian manner, Nelson Rodrigues refuses to give an answer. He prefers to explore the effects of ambivalence and ambiguity. The action is not a puzzle to be solved by the spectator. By gathering the successive bits of information, he will not arrive to any conclusion about "what actually happened" or "what the

protagonist really was." Yet, unlike Pirandello's plays, which confront us with the total impossibility of knowing a human being, Golden Mouth allows the audience to reach a certain type of consistent knowledge. What actually emerges from the play, what can be effectively grasped by the spectator is not the psychological or moral profile of the protagonist. It is, instead, his mythological dimension. At the opening of Act 3, the stage direction says:

(By this time, it has become evident that Golden Mouth belongs much more to the suburban mythology, than to the normal reality of Rio's Northern Section.)

No doubt, the main reason of the play's enormous commercial success was the great popularity of its protagonist. The audiences were delighted to recognize on stage an authentic reproduction of a well-known social type. He becomes a sort of popular hero, due to his ability to overcome the limitations of his low extraction, thus growing powerful enough to defy the bourgeois establishment. He is a sort of Robin Hood of the suburbs, who shows his solidarity with his equals by protecting them and defending their interests. At the same time, his being a criminal, a killer, capable of violence and cruelty, adds a morbid charm to his figure. He is a genuinely carioca type, a malandro: witty, nonchalant, ingenious, cunning, self-confident and bold enough to make his way through an adverse environment. He is a

winner in a world of losers and, therefore, a champion, a redeemer of the frustration of the suburban man. Rodrigues's characterization of his hero is superb. The images of the gold teeth, the gold coffin, the gafieira sink and its counterpart, the golden virgin as the idealization of the mother figure, are some of the rich elements used in this character delineation.

In Golden Mouth, the author has probably achieved his most comprehensive description of the suburban milieu. It is a static world. Its inhabitants have no mobility at all in the social or economical ladder. The great exception here is Golden Mouth. In his own words, he conquered the position of "king of jogo do bicho" thanks to the use of violence, through the elimination of his competitors in the business. He is undeniably a great achiever, the only one among his peers who has made money. Hence, his superiority over all the others. Such ascendancy, however, results necessarily in a series of responsibilities in regard of his fellowmen. He supports them in their financial difficulties (the fact of Leleco's asking for help for his mother-in-law's funeral, in itself, is very normal), and protects them against the pressures of the bourgeois establishment, such as the police. The counterpart of the bicheiro's paternalism is his demand for total subordination to him. Leleco, for instance, is sacrificed because he dared to rebel against the lord.

Golden Mouth's authority is based not only on his personal and economical power, but also on the fact that he identifies entirely with his milieu and knows all about it and its inhabitants. Hence, his total control of the "feud." He says to Leleco:

GOLDEN MOUTH:

Here in Madureira, I know everything and everybody. I know each little cobblestone of the street. I know every little tot in T-shirt. (Laughing and panting) I've known Celeste since she was a baby! A baby, man!

Golden Mouth's superior status, although it occurs outside the social establishment, allows him to maintain contact with people from the upper classes, such as the high-society ladies. He is even powerful enough to subject them to humiliation and aggression. People from both the lower and the upper strata, thus, are leveled before Golden Mouth, a fact which is attested by the way he treats all of them: nicely at first, and violently, when they defy his ascendancy.

However, this leveling is only a matter of form. Essentially, Golden Mouth's superiority over the upper class is just an illusion. In the scene with the high-society ladies, the bicheiro seems to be manipulating the rules of the game. Yet, it is but an appearance. In fact, the ladies' conduct is much bolder than his because they are supported by their high status. The whole social system protects them, since it is ruled by

the class they belong to. The breast contest would certainly be an act of humiliation to the women of the suburbs, where rigid moral codes prevail. To the "liberated," decadent women of the jet-set, it even adds to the morbid pleasure of having contact with "the lord of the lower depths." Golden Mouth's aggressive attitudes make him even more attractive to them. After all, they came to meet a criminal, a pervert, and they want to see him act as such. They want to have an illusion of risk, of danger, but they know that actually they have nothing to fear from him. Such impunity marks their superiority over the bicheiro. Adding to this the cruelty of their allusion to the gafieira sink, we can say that it is Golden Mouth who is humiliated and put in an inferior position in the scene. The stage direction mentions "tears in his eyes" when the allusion is made.

Indeed, Golden Mouth is destroyed because he went too far. He transgressed the limits of his class through his association with Maria Luísa. He is blinded by his excessive ambition. In a system characterized by the immobility of social categories, it is impossible to trespass the limits of such rigid divisions. According to Ronaldo Lima Lins:

If Golden Mouth accepted the limitations of his origin, he would continue to attract and fascinate the members of the upper crust as an "exotic" type. But for that, he would have to remain in his place, he would have to serve and not to be served. If, instead, led by his ambition, he tried to ascend in

the social hierarchy, he would become a "social cancer," and, thus, would have to be eliminated. That is precisely what happened to him.⁴⁹

Flora Sussekind, in "Nelson Rodrigues and the False Bottom," analyses the problem of class antagonism in the play. According to her essay, the world of the suburbs is defined by the marginal position of its members in regard of the establishment. None of the suburban characters has a definite occupation, except illegal ones: gambling or prostitution, for instance. Another common feature is their non-conformity with their situation and aspiration of ascending in the social scale. Celeste often expresses her frustration for leading such a miserable life: "I'm a total failure. I was born to have tons of money and look at me! I hate riding buses! Mother is gonna die and we'll have to take contributions from the neighbors for the funeral expenses." Celeste's aspirations are expressed mainly through her fascination with Grace Kelly, symbolizing the myth of Cinderella. She tells Leleco she is not going out with the bald old man for money, but because "this gentleman promised to take me to Europe to see Grace Kelly."⁵⁰

Sussekind also observes that:

The non-suburban world is composed by individuals with a definite occupation (dentist, photographer, reporter) or with a superior social position (the high-society ladies). An interchange between these two groups can only happen through Golden Mouth's mediation. . . . Such a fact is due to Golden Mouth's ambivalent position in regard of the two worlds. His origin and occupation . . . place him in the suburban

milieu. Yet, a series of other factors will differentiate him from his peers: his ascension in the social scale (something desired but never accomplished by the others), his economical and sexual independence and, most of all, his power, symbolized by the image of gold. . . . The relationship between the two groups is defined by aggression and violence from the suburbans towards the upper class (the breast contest, Celeste's and Dona Guigui's hate for Maria Luísa) and an attraction for the exotic and picturesque on the part of the upper class in regard of the suburbans. . . . In short, the contact of the two worlds is marked by incompatibility, rivalry . . . and antagonism.⁵¹

As far as naturalistic observation is concerned, Golden Mouth is one of Rodrigues's richest achievements. The play gives us a detailed characterization of a whole array of social types and an apprehension of popular language which had not been attained with such perfect accuracy in the former plays. Naturalism, in Golden Mouth, is also evidenced by the search for the effects of shock and impact. The playwright, in the program of the production of Teatro Nacional de Comédia, states that:

A work of art must kick the spectators like a horse. Golden Mouth, as all my other plays, strikes its blows in all directions. Good taste, politeness, correction, propriety have no real function in a work of art. . . . If you laugh at my play, . . . if you praise it, you are absolutely mistaken. Applauding my theatre is complete nonsense. It is as absurd as the situation of a victim applauding his aggressor.⁵²

The denouement of Golden Mouth shows that Nelson Rodrigues's worldview is more pessimistic than ever. Similarly to The Deceased Woman, there is a tragic irony in the final reversal. The protagonist's redeeming dream ends in failure. Golden Mouth will not have his golden coffin and even his gold teeth are gone.

Rodrigues's success as a playwright had been gradually built since his adoption of the realistic style. With Golden Mouth he attained the peak of artistic recognition and public acclaim. Yet, in a way, he continued to be an auteur maudit, always having problems with censorship and provoking the indignation of the more conservative. It is true that he cultivated such an image, himself, for he knew that it added to his success. The fact is that times had changed. A more open-minded audience was emerging. Or maybe the bourgeoisie, instead of rejecting the violence of his plays, now was thrilled by it. His next play, Kiss on the Asphalt, written on the request of one of the finest companies of the country, Teatro dos 7, also immediately became a great hit.⁵³

Beijo no Asfalto (Kiss on the Asphalt, 1960)

The incident which launches the action of Kiss on the Asphalt is the same as in Wedding Gown: a traffic accident, witnessed by Arandir, the protagonist. A man is hit by a bus. Arandir comes to help him. The dying victim asks for a kiss in the mouth. Arandir accedes. The fact is photographed by a reporter and, the next day, it appears in all newspapers. Another reporter, Amado Ribeiro, decides to explore the potential sensationalism of the event. With the help of Cunha, a police marshall, he concocts a story, in which the victim would be Arandir's lover. The insinuation is widely publicized by the media.

Thanks to the machista mentality, the incident becomes the great scandal of the city. The headlines of all newspapers speak incessantly of the "kiss on the asphalt."

The calumny is quickly spread and immediately accepted. In his job, Arandir has to suffer the malicious comments of his colleagues. Dona Judith, the typist, assures them that she recognized the victim in the photograph: "He looks like a man who came here last week, looking for Arandir." Meanwhile, Amado Ribeiro has found out that the dead man was married and his wife had a lover. In the death vigil, he manages to be left alone with the widow and threatens her to reveal the adultery in the press if she does not declare, in an interview to him, that her husband actually had a close friend named Arandir.

Arandir is also married. He and his wife, Selminha, live with her sister Dália. Another member of the family is Arandir's father-in-law, Aprígio. In the family scenes, the playwright suggests some dubious aspects in those people's relationships. Dália seems to like her brother-in-law in an exaggerated manner. Aprígio, on the other hand, detests Arandir. Apparently, he loved his daughter Selminha so much that he never accepted her marriage. He is jealous of his son-in-law.

Amado and Cunha's next manoeuver is to kidnap Selminha to force her to declare that she also knew the man her husband kissed. As she refuses, they bring the vic-

tim's widow to her presence. The woman assures Selminha that she saw Arandir several times in her house. He and her husband seemed to be very intimate friends. In fact, one day she surprised them taking a shower together. In spite of such accusations, Selminha keeps defending Arandir's manliness: "I know many couples who do it once or twice a week, or even every two weeks. But with my husband, it's everyday! Everyday! My husband is a real man! A real man!" The altercation goes in a crescendo of violence which culminates with Selminha being abused by the two men.

Amado and Cunha decide to go even further in their manipulation of the scandal. The suspicion of homosexuality, by now, has lost its appeal. Now the insinuation is that it was a "love crime": Arandir would have intentionally pushed the man against the bus. Amado seeks Aprígio and tries to induce him to kill Arandir. No judge would ever condemn him. The public opinion would also give him all support. After all, he would be avenging his family honor, sullied by a homosexual husband. In a machista society, this would not be considered a crime.

Gradually, Arandir feels more and more abandoned. The malevolent suspicion has contaminated everybody. Even his wife, so supportive before, now seems cold and distant. Once, after being kissed by him, she wipes her mouth with her hand. She confesses to Dália that "Arandir . . . some-

times shows such... delicate manners. Did you know that he had never gone with a woman before marrying me? I find this so... so... When we married, he was as virgin as I was, Dália!" The suggestion of crime leads Arandir to leave his house and seek refuge in a cheap hotel room.

Dália is the only person to be faithful to him. In a scene with Aprígio, in which the father accuses Arandir with great vehemence, Dália, highly exasperated, throws at his face that she knows "his secret." She affirms that Aprígio does not like Arandir because he loves Selminha "not as a father, but as a man." From his hideaway, Arandir sends a message to his wife, asking her to come see him. By this time, Selminha has ceased to believe in her husband's innocence and refuses to go. Dália goes in her place. Arandir, who became more and more fragile throughout the play, now reacts with unexpected self-assurance:

ARANDIR:

They all want me to doubt of myself. They want me to believe that I kissed that man because... No! Never! . . . I'd never kiss a man in the mouth if he were not dying at my feet! I kissed because somebody was dying! They do not realize that someone was dying! . . . That kiss on the asphalt has redeemed all my life! . . . For the first time, . . . during a brief moment, I felt I was good! . . . It was beautiful! Beautiful! They cannot understand! It's beautiful to kiss someone who is dying! (Shouting) I don't regret it! I'll never regret it!

Dália confesses her love for Arandir and offers herself to him. The stage direction notes that "softly, insidiously, with very, very slight malignancy," she asks

Arandir if he really loved the dead man. She will not judge him. She will accept everything. Arandir realizes that even Dália is not on his side:

ARANDIR:

You're just like everybody else! . . . You don't believe in me. You think I'm a... Go away!

As Dália leaves, the play reaches its climax with Aprígio's arrival. He carries a gun to shoot Arandir. Then, in a startling *coup-de-théâtre*, he reveals the reason of his hate for his son-in-law. It is jealousy, indeed. But this jealousy does not come from an incestuous love for his daughter. What he cannot accept is not Arandir's love for a woman. It is Arandir's love for a man. The person Aprígio loves is not Selminha. It is Arandir. He could swallow his marriage with his daughter, but he will never forgive him for loving another man. He pulls the trigger several times as the curtain closes on the third act.

Kiss on the Asphalt is perhaps Nelson Rodrigues's play which combines with greatest mastery the elements of naturalism and melodrama. Structurally speaking, the play follows the melodramatic technique of a speedy action which accumulates suspense, as the dramatic temperature is more and more intensified. The play reaches a climax of high tension which is followed by an astonishing reversal and a violent denouement. This reversal derives its effect of surprise from another melodramatic procedure: misleading information. Throughout the entire play, the spectator

is led to think that Aprício's abhorrence for his son-in-law results from his incestuous desire for Selminha. Many critics have criticized the final coup-de-théâtre for lack of verisimilitude. Yet, Aprício's attitude has an impeccable psychological preparation. His motivation is only one: jealousy. Only the object of his jealousy is not the one we are led to think. The playwright, at a certain moment, gives us a good clue about Aprício's real motivation. When Dália tells him of her knowledge of his "secret," he looks frightened. Yet, as she accuses him of being in love with Selminha, his relief is very clearly manifested.

As far as naturalism is concerned, one of the great achievements of the playwright, in Kiss, is the quality of the dialogue. I am not only referring to its colloquialism. In this play, Rodrigues introduces what Hélió Pellegrino calls "syncopated speech." The characters' thoughts are not linearly conveyed. Their speech is fragmentary, interrupted, allusive, reticent and often ambiguous. It reflects the workings of the mind, which function in a system of associations which does not depend on a logical organization. This sort of dialogue is far from being vague or metaphorical. On the contrary, it reproduces faithfully the natural paths of the mind. Such a technique is undoubtedly inherited from the type of naturalistic tradition introduced by Strindberg in his Miss Julie.

But perhaps the strongest of all naturalistic aspects of the play is the psychological basis on which it is built. It has nothing to do with the nineteenth-century theories of heredity or of the predominance of the instincts over rationality. However, whether it was a conscious choice on Rodrigues's part or not, we can recognize, in the play, a number of elements inspired by Freudian ideas. Such an influence is remarkably analysed by H lio Pellegrino, a psychoanalyst and literary critic who was a close friend of the playwright's. I shall try to summarize his commentaries.⁵⁴

According to Pellegrino, Amado and Cunha's invention of Arandir's homosexuality reveals their own homosexual tendencies. Their repulsion and hate against the woman figure are evidenced by a series of significant details. Amado, for instance, admits that he prefers thin women, androgynous types, lacking feminine attributes. Cunha, on his turn, once put a prostitute in jail, and while she was in detention, kicked her in the stomach, provoking a miscarriage. Above all, their sadism against women is manifested in the scene in which they abuse Selminha.

Arandir's kiss aroused the two men's repressed homosexuality. Hence, it was necessary to protect themselves against it through a mechanism of transference. By projecting it on Arandir, they try to free themselves from the problem. Yet, their defensive mechanism can only

acquire "truthfulness," if it is corroborated by other people. Only then, they will truly believe in their fantasy. Thus, they create the whole scandal, they "document" it, they arrange false witnesses and provide "irrefutable" proofs of Arandir's homosexual liaison with a man he never saw before.

The fact that public opinion readily accepted the slander as the truth reveals that the incident also awakened the potential homosexuality of a machista community and, therefore, had to be exorcised by the same projective mechanism, through a scapegoat. Aprígio, for example, was one of the most vehement supporters of the homosexual version of the kiss on the asphalt. Arandir's passivity in regard of the conspiracy against him also attests to his feminine side. Like everybody else, he is gradually led to believe in the homosexual nature of his gesture. However, by the end of the play, he realizes the real meaning of it: the purity and nobility of an act of human solidarity.

Aside from the psychological side, we have, in Kiss on the Asphalt, a very accurate observation and strong criticism of the social system. This is not restricted to the attacks on the press and the police. Arandir is sacrificed by a moralist and prejudiced society. The citizen is assassinated by the city. Nelson Rodrigues makes a severe indictment of the hypocritical code of values of

this society. Amado assures Aprígio that his killing Arandir would be perfectly acceptable. Homosexuality is a more serious crime than murder. Nelson Rodrigues's revolt, however is not turned only against psychological and social disease. The kiss on the asphalt has to be "homosexualized," that is, inserted within a moral framework, in order to elude a much more profound question: the human incapacity of facing the mystery of death.

It is again Hélio Pellegrino who affirms that, underneath the surface of the psychoanalytical content of the play, we can discern a metaphysical meditation on the subject of death.⁵⁵ Arandir's executioners are not protecting themselves only against their potential homosexuality. Deep down in their souls, they are trying to negate "the death which is rooted in the core of every human being's life."⁵⁶ Arandir kissed death on the mouth and, therefore, was infected by it. He had to be destroyed lest he would contaminate everybody. His action implies his acceptance of death as a natural consequence of life. However, man's aspiration for the absolute makes it impossible for him to resign himself to his condition as a perishable being. The misery of man's destiny can only be transcended if it is wholly accepted. The nobility of the protagonist's attitude resides in such acceptance. In this sense, Arandir is an extraordinary individual, a hero. He is an exception in a world inhabited by vile,

low creatures, who need to negate the significance of his gesture by reducing it to a banal case of sexual behavior.

Arandir's realization of the meaning of the kiss on the asphalt occurs late in the play. He acted on an impulse and, thus, had no understanding of what was behind it. He reacts feebly against the pressure exerted over him. He lets himself be persecuted and even doubts himself. Yet, towards the end, when, abandoned by everyone, including his wife, he achieves total solitude, he has a sudden illumination, expressed in his speech to Dália: "That kiss on the asphalt has redeemed all my life!"

In this respect, for the first time, we have a positive hero in a Rodriguean play. In the beginning, we find everybody, in Kiss on the Asphalt, mediocre, sordid or corrupt, just like the characters of all the other plays. Gradually, however, the protagonist's stature begins to grow. Leo Gilson Ribeiro analyses this process:

Arandir, in his increasing isolation, attains a moment of revelation: the "somebody" he kisses is the Everyman of the medieval play. It is the essential human being. . . . The kiss given on the dying man symbolizes Arandir's communion with humanity, his acceptance of the ephemeral, of death, . . . of eternity. The kiss that causes his ruin is a sign of human solidarity towards someone going through the supreme moment of solitude: the moment of death. It is an act of love and fraternity, . . . which shines with metaphysical splendor in a dark, abject world. . . . In this play, despite the tragic denouement, a new dimension, a promise of hope begins to glimmer in the somber horizon of the playwright's world. Such

perspective will be confirmed in his next play, Pretty, But Cheap.⁵⁷

The kiss on the asphalt represents Arandir's spiritual assumption of death. At the same time, it brings about his concrete physical death. Here, once again, Nelson Rodrigues plays with dramatic irony. But this time, the irony expresses an optimistic view, instead of the customary pessimism. When the accident occurred, Selminha was pregnant, and Arandir was going to a bank to apply for a loan for an abortion. The succession of events preserves the life of his child. As death is contained in life, life can also emerge from death.

Kiss on the Asphalt, indeed, represents a great evolution in Nelson Rodrigues's work. Since it infers a new faith in the dignity of the human being, the playwright's view of man has undoubtedly changed. And for the better. Yet, his concept of human existence continues to be permeated by an acerbic pessimism. This play, like all the preceding ones, has a tragic ending. In a world marked by sordidness and corruption, there is no place for a positive hero like Arandir. A happy ending is still to come in Rodrigues's theatre. It will happen in his next play: Pretty, But Cheap.

Bonitinha, mas Ordinária ou Otto Lara Resende
(Pretty, But Cheap or Otto Lara Resende, 1961)

When Pretty, But Cheap came out, Nelson Rodrigues

was in his most prolific phase, writing a play every two years. His popularity was immense. Yet, despite commercial success, he continued to be as daring and provocative as ever in terms of subject choice as much as of dramatic composition.

The play opens with Peixoto, the son-in-law of Heitor Werneck, a great capitalist, carrying a dialogue with Edgard, a low employee of Werneck's firm. He has a proposition to make. Maria Cecília, his wife's younger sister, has been victim of rape. In the moralistic society of the time, it was necessary to find her a husband. Since the family is rich, they are willing to buy one. And they chose Edgard, whose poverty makes him easily corruptible.

Edgard is torn between opposite impulses. He has a girlfriend, Ritinha, whom he loves dearly. On the other hand, he comes from a very destitute family. When his father died, alcoholic and miserable, they had to take contributions from the neighbors to pay for the funeral. The check Werneck gave him and the promise of more money incline him to accept the deal.

Pretty, But Cheap has a second title: Otto Lara Resende. It is an allusion to a famous journalist and writer, who was a close friend of Rodrigues's. Resende was an expert in creating original phrases and epigrams. One of his most famous statements at the time was: "Mineiro só é solidário no câncer."⁵⁸ Edgard is obsessed with

this sentence. He interprets it as a philosophical statement about all human beings. If solidarity only happens in extreme situations, what predominates in everyday life is egoism and self-interest. There are no ethical codes to regulate human behavior. Degradation, corruption are the norms. Such conclusion, at a time, fascinates and frightens Edgard. He reflects: if the phrase is true, man is lost. If it is not, there is a chance of salvation.

Ritinha embodies Edgard's inclination towards virtue, while marrying Maria Cecília would be selling his soul to the devil. At the same time, life with Ritinha means poverty and hardship, a repetition of his father's fate, whereas Maria Cecília can assure him a comfortable and luxurious status. On one side, peace of mind and penury; on the other side, wealth and a guilty conscience. The protagonist's basic conflict is a moral dilemma linked to a matter of material need.

However, Ritinha is not as pure as Edgard would like her to be. She hides from him her life of prostitution. Similarly to Silene's sisters in The Seven Kittens, she sells her body in order to protect the future of her three younger sisters and support her demented mother. Just like the insane characters in the former plays, Dona Berta, the mother, has a benumbed mind and repeats endlessly a single action: she walks around the house, but backwards. Ritinha sees no future for herself. She says:

"When my sisters get married and my mother dies, then I'll be free. Then I'm going to kill myself. Oh, yes, I am! . . . I'm going to set fire to my clothes! I want my body to turn into a piece of black coal!" In this assertion, we discern Ritinha's guilt for being a prostitute, her desire for self-punishment and purification through pain and destruction.

Peixoto functions as a sort of Mephistopheles, tempting Edgard. In Peixoto's opinion, everybody in the world is capable of being corrupted. He seems to rejoice in abjection. At a certain moment, he climbs on top of a table to shout triumphantly: "I'm a scoundrel!" His wife betrays him, but he does not care, because he is the lover of his sister-in-law, Maria Cecília.

Werneck is the almighty capitalist. By the end of the play, he organizes an "apocalyptic party" in his mansion. To amuse his guests, he proposes a "truth game," in which everyone is to confess his most intimate secrets, especially the ones related to sex. A distinguished lady reveals, in her husband's presence, that she gave herself to a dirty, barefoot worker precisely on the day of the inauguration of the new capital, Brasília. An old lady narrates a story of adultery: she made love with her cousin, while her husband, whom she loved passionately, lay dying in the adjoining room. Werneck climbs on a couch to make a speech about "his apocalypse." In his words,

since man cannot determine his fate and is subjected to uncontrollable forces, there is nothing to be done, no morality, no norms can exist. The only law is total permissiveness:

WERNECK:

Let me speak. Shut up. This business of nuclear war. Maybe in 15 minutes. 15 minutes and a Russian rocket will get me. I'm saying farewell. Farewell to my class. . . . Farewell to my enterprises, to my horses. Farewell, horses!

Ritinha's adolescent sisters had been attracted to the party to "amuse" the male guests. Ritinha arrives suddenly and throws herself at Werneck's feet, crying for mercy. Werneck cynically says:

WERNECK:

Don't worry. I'll pay for the operation. Modern medicine now can even restaure virginity. The girls will leave more virgin than when they came in here.

Maria Cecília is the character who leads degradation to its furthest limits. In fact, she was never the victim of a rape. The rape was arranged by Peixoto for her. She was fascinated with a report she read in a newspaper of a woman being violated by four black men and she wanted to go through the same experience.

Towards the end of the play, there seems to be no salvation for any of the characters. Edgard decides to marry Maria Cecília. But an unexpected veering of the action occurs when Peixoto finds out that his beloved Maria Cecília is very attracted to her future husband. He,

then, unmask her in front of Edgard, telling him the whole story of the rape. Edgard, horrified, flees from the house. Peixoto, desperate, kills Maria Cecília and commits suicide.

Edgard runs to meet Ritinha. He has made his decision:

EDGARD:

I'm another man now. I want you. . . . Come with me.

He takes her to the beach. It is early morning. They take off their shoes and walk barefoot on the wet sand.

RITINHA:

I never had . . .

EDGARD:

What? . . .

RITINHA:

I never had an orgasm with a man. You're going to be the first.

Edgard wants to destroy the check he received from Werneck. Ritinha reacts:

RITINHA:

If we're going to start a life, this money . . . can help...

EDGARD:

We're going to start without a penny. Perhaps you'll have to drink water from the gutter with me.
. . .

(Edgard burns the check with his lighter)

EDGARD:

It's dying! It's dead! Otto Lara Resende's
phrase is dead now!

The couple walks hand in hand in silence against
a background of sunrise on the sea.

RITINHA:

Look at the sun!

EDGARD:

The sea is being reborn. The sun. Look at
the sun. The sea is being reborn.

In Pretty, But Cheap, Rodrigues once again manipulates the technique of the flashback in a very creative way. The story of the rape is dramatized twice. The first time, as Peixoto is trying to convince Edgard to marry Maria Cecília, the girl is seen as the innocent victim of a sordid incident. During most of the play, the spectator is led to believe that this is what really happened. It is only near the end, in a surprising reversal, that a second flashback shows the true version of the facts. Such procedure--two versions of the same event--has nothing to do with the process utilized in Golden Mouth, where each version changed according to the emotional fluctuations of the narrator. What we have here is again the melodrama technique of misleading information. The revelation of the true nature of Maria Cecília's character is delayed for the sake of an effect of surprise. None of Dona Guigui's accounts can be considered as "true" in an objective manner,

whereas in the second account of the rape, truth is effectively reestablished in the play.

The action of Pretty, But Cheap is also constantly shifting in space. Rodrigues guarantees narrative fluidity through the use of innovative stage techniques. Slides projections define instantaneously a scenery background, and animated film is used when movement is necessary: sea waves, a street with busy traffic or Ritinha in a taxi running to the "apocalyptic party." At times, such devices, instead of serving to descriptive purposes, function to create dramatic atmosphere. In the first rape scene, for example, the spectators see, projected on a screen, Maria Cecília's frightened expression and Peixoto's bloody face.

Indeed, in Pretty, But Cheap, the straightforward rendition of facts in the realistic manner is sometimes exchanged for a more poetic approach. The first love encounter between Ritinha and Edgard acquires a surrealistic tone as it takes place in an open grave at a cemetery. The scene turns into pure grotesquerie when an old grave-digger, with a heavy Portuguese accent, interrupts their idyll:

GRAVE-DIGGER:

All right, all right. Just one kiss more and then you'll have to go. This is no place for fucking. Besides, there's a funeral coming soon. And the deceased is a general!

Pretty, But Cheap is not a chronicle of suburban life, like most of Rodrigues's precedent plays. Half of

the characters come from the lower class (Edgard, Ritinha, their families and a few more secondary figures), but they are not characterized as belonging to the world of the suburbs of the Northern Section. The other half is part of the upper crust. It is this social segment which constitutes the main target of Nelson Rodrigues's criticism. Werneck is a development of J.B. from Widow, Yet Virtuous: the omnipotent capitalist, who sees no obstacle to the realization of his desires. His amorality, however, does not make him happy. He is tortured by a painful conscience of the transient nature of things. His perception of life as an empty, absurd adventure compels him to plunge into utter abjection maybe as a form of reaching an impossible absolute in a negative way. Since life is meaningless, some sort of sense may be found through the negation of it, in total destruction, in "Apocalypse":

WERNECK:

This business of nuclear war. . . . I may become, all of a sudden, a Hiroshima. Me, Hiroshima. Me, Nagasaki.

Despite all his power, Werneck is consumed by a feeling of impotence. He realizes that man's destiny is ruled by obscure, uncontrollable forces. Man is like a marionette, frantically agitating arms and legs throughout life, with no purpose, no end whatsoever, until he is finally struck by death. Such perception fills Werneck with a sensation of vertigo, which can only be appeased

with the utter saturation of the senses.

In such a perverted world, there seems to be no place for ethical concerns. Yet, the basic conflict of the play is of a moral nature. It is Edgard's dilemma: yielding to the corruptive power of money or preserving the spiritual values. The equation can be described as: on one side, Maria Cecília, representing fortune, pleasure, materialism; on the other side, Ritinha, embodying poverty, hardship, spirituality. Sábato Magaldi summarizes it as an opposition of materialism vs. transcendence; losing the soul and satisfyinig the body vs. saving the soul and sacrificing the body.⁵⁹

Edgard can be compared to Arandir, in the sense that they both fight for the affirmation of spiritual values against a world which tries to debase and denigrate everything and everybody. The difference is that Arandir is defeated in the battle, whereas Edgard comes out morally victorious, even though he will have to "drink water from the gutter." Edgard and Ritinha follow a path which goes in the opposite direction of the other characters of the play. "They evolve from chaos to the positive reordering of their lives, whereas the others end up in chaos," affirms Magaldi.⁶⁰

Ritinha never wavers in her moral choices. Magaldi associates her to the mythical figure of the Lady of the Camelias, refering to the redemption of the prostitute

through love. The paradox, found in The Seven Kittens, of the prostitute being the vestal keeper of virginity is reworked in Ritinha's character. Despite her prostitution, her purity is never shaken. She sells her body to other men, but she refuses to have pleasure with them. She reserves her first orgasm for Edgard, the man she loves. We detect here an aspect of Rodrigues's moralism, which is reiterated in several plays: sex is vile if it is not sanctified by love.

In Kiss on the Asphalt, the playwright, for the first time, expressed his belief that man is capable of aspiring to higher spiritual values. Yet, such aspiration cannot be satisfied in a world dominated by sordidness and degeneration. In Pretty, But Cheap, the author's vision is somewhat softened. The world continues to be filthy, but spiritual nobility is now attainable. Arandir's tragic fate contrasts with the happy end of Edgard and Ritinha's story.

It is true that this is an idealized vision of an ending. Despite their elevated feelings, Ritinha and Edgard will soon have to face the tribulations of real life. Poverty will probably destroy their hopes, just like it destroyed the life of so many other characters, like Zulmira or the Noronha family. This is the reason why the play's happy ending occurs in such an idealized atmosphere. Far from the material world, with all its imperfections and

ugliness, the couple walks barefoot on a realm of dream, in an eden of beauty and enchantment: the sea at sunrise, nature as a realm of purity, opposed to human society as a realm of foulness.

The play's resolution is, thus, an implausible one, if we think in realistic terms. It can only function on a poetic level. Nonetheless, it marks an important evolution in regard of Rodrigues's view of human existence.

It has become more than evident that Rodrigues's dramas are concerned with ethical problems.⁶¹ In his first plays, he portrayed a low, materialistic, debased world, completely devoid of spiritual values. Human beings, then, were totally adapted to such a world. If they sought a form of transcendence, it was always in a mistaken manner, as in the case of Zulmira, the Noronhas or Golden Mouth. In Kiss on the Asphalt, for the first time, we have a character who discovers authentic values, but is unable to defend them against external pressure. In Pretty, But Cheap, the protagonists manage to assert their higher aspirations and do not let them be contaminated and destroyed by the world of chaos. However, they have to retire, at the end, from such a world in order to preserve their values, and seek refuge in a fictitious, idealized realm. It is obvious that, realistically speaking, the playwright has not yet found a resolution to the problem. In the real world, there continues to be no place for

transcendence. Rodrigues's worldview, thus remains absolutely pessimistic. He has regained faith in the human being, but not in a possibility of redemption in this world. Human life is still a tragic adventure for him.

Toda Nudez Será Castigada

(All Nudity Shall Be Punished, 1965)

Despite the fact that, by the time Rodrigues wrote All Nudity Shall Be Punished, he was a consacrated author, several actresses refused to play Geni, the protagonist of the play. Finally, Cleyde Yáconis⁶² accepted the role, and the play premiered in Teatro Serrador, in Rio, June, 21, 1965, under the direction of Zbigniew Ziemiński, 24 years after Wedding Gown.

The action starts with Herculano, a successful businessman, arriving home after a trip. The maid gives him a tape recorded by his wife, Geni. As he starts playing the tape, he is immediately informed of her suicide. The entire action is a flashback of the incidents which led Geni to self-destruction.

Herculano was a widower, who lived with three old aunts, an adolescent son and his brother, Patrício. Patrício hated him because, many years before, Herculano had refused to save him from bankruptcy. In order to avenge himself, Patrício devises a scheme. The family cultivates the memory of the deceased wife. Herculano never wanted to marry again nor had any contact with another woman. In

fact, his wife was the only woman he ever had, and their sex life, apparently, was not too satisfactory ("Once a month, they played mom and dad with the lights off," comments Patrício). Patrício decides to break the adamant virtue of his brother. He gives him the photo of a prostitute, Geni, in the nude, and leaves with it a bottle of scotch and Geni's address. Herculano, fascinated with the picture, gets completely drunk and goes to Geni's brothel, where he spends three days and three nights in an orgy with her. When he recovers from his delirium, he is guilt-ridden. Geni, very matter-of-factly, informs him of the things he has done. He complained, for example, about his wife being frigid and having varicose veins and bow-legs. Herculano leaves the brothel in a state of despair.

However, a few days later, he comes back with the excuse that he wants to free Geni from her life of prostitution. He does not want anybody to touch her again. As he automatically starts taking off his clothes, she stops him, saying: "You'll only touch me again after marrying me." It was Patrício who, knowing that Herculano was madly in love, advised her to do that.

It is evident, by this point, that Geni and Herculano are deeply involved with each other. He promises to marry her, but she will have to wait. It will take time to persuade the prudish aunts and his son, Serginho, who

cultivates his mother's image with exaggerated fervor.

Patrício continues to plot against his brother. He reveals to Serginho the place where Herculano has hidden Geni: an isolated house in the suburbs. The boy goes there and surprises them in a wild sex act in the garden. Such a scene drives Serginho out of his mind. He gets drunk, starts a fight in a bar and is taken to prison. There, he is put in a cell together with a Bolivian thief, a dangerous delinquent, who abuses and rapes him.

The fact arouses tremendous commotion in the family. Herculano finds himself responsible for what happened to his son. Serginho's hate for his father is beyond all measure. It is again Patrício who takes advantage of the situation. He tells Serginho to encourage Herculano's marriage with Geni. Then Serginho would seduce his foster mother. It should not be difficult. After all, she is nothing but a whore. Thus, he would vindicate his father's betrayal of his mother, by making his second wife to betray him with his son.

Indeed, this is what happens. Geni's motivations to fall in love with Serginho are somewhat ambiguous. We can discern a mixture of guilt, pity, maternal affection and, of course, the typical incestuous inclination of Rodriguean heroines for younger boys. Her liaison with Herculano was marked by neurotic conflicts and sado-masochistic compulsions. With Serginho, she experiences,

in her fantasy, the pure, romantic love she never had in her youth.

Patrício's last manoeuver is to induce Serginho to acknowledge his repressed homosexuality, which had been awakened by the episode in the prison. It is exactly the Bolivian thief who abused him, whom Serginho chooses to be his partner in a "honeymoon trip to Europe," according to Patrício's words. Geni's romantic dream is shattered, and she kills herself, after revealing the whole truth to Herculano in the recorded tape. The play ends with her voice saying:

GENI:

Your son ran away, yes. With the Bolivian thief. . . . I am alone. I will die alone. (With hate) I don't want my name engraved on my tomb! . . . (Exultant and ferocious) And you, old cuckold, I curse you! I curse your son and this family of aunts! (With a crazy laugh) Give my regards to the dyke aunt! (In a last scream) I curse my breasts too!

(Geni's voice breaks into sobs. The recording is over. Sounds of the tape being rewound. On the stage, only the empty conjugal bed is illuminated.)

Structurally, the play follows an old Rodriguean pattern: the dramatic action is the projection of a character's reminiscence. Except for a brief two-page scene in the beginning (Herculano's arriving home and receiving the tape) and Geni's final speech at the end, nothing else happens on the plane of actuality. The flashback unfolds straightforwardly with no interruptions, aside from Geni's commentaries linking the episodes or speeding up the

narration. If we compare the dramatic structure of All Nudity with the other plays in which Nelson Rodrigues played with memory, subjectivity and time, this is certainly the simplest and most linear arrangement of all. A tape recorder button is pressed and the whole story unreels before the spectators' eyes.

Similarly to Wedding Gown, Waltz Number 6 and Golden Mouth, the audience is informed, from the very beginning, of the protagonists' fate. In such plays, Rodrigues is concerned basically with the past. The substance of the dramatic action is the facts and motives leading to the tragic ending. There is little place for the plane of the present. It is the understanding of the present through the unveiling of the past, and not the present in itself that really matters.

However, there is something particular in the way the playwright manipulates the counterpoint of past and present in All Nudity Shall Be Punished. Except for Waltz Number 6, in which the present is annulled for the very fact that the protagonist is already dead, life continues its course both in Wedding Gown (the marriage of Lúcia and Pedro) and in Golden Mouth (Dona Guigui's reconciliation with her husband). In All Nudity, there seems to be no way out for the remaining characters, no possibility of reconstructing their lives. Serginho does have a future ahead of him, but he is a secondary figure.

The protagonist, Herculano, is utterly destroyed at the end. He is the greatest victim of all. Sábato Magaldi finds it the most pessimistic denouement in all of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre.⁶³ It seems to me that Rodrigues's oscillating in showing some sort of progression in life expresses the hesitations of his hope in regard of human destiny.

Like Kiss on the Asphalt, All Nudity Shall Be Punished has a startling reversal at the end: Serginho's elopement with the Bolivian thief. Such a technique, derived from melodrama, is certainly explored for the sake of a sensational effect. Nonetheless, as in Kiss, it is by no means an implausible solution. Serginho's homosexuality is totally justifiable, on psychological grounds. The author emphasizes his Oedipal fixation and his refusal to assume his adulthood by remaining a sexless child, overprotected by the castrating figures of the aunts. Aunt 1, when reporting Serginho's violation to Herculano, says:

AUNT 1:

(Walking about the stage) Once, I was a little girl, and I heard my father say: "I could kill a pederast!" . . . But my boy is no such a thing. He's a saint. . . . Father used to say that if he were Hitler, he'd order a massacre of all pederasts. . . . My boy has never been with women. He's never felt sexual desire. His underpants are always so clean. No sign of sex on them. (Suddenly the Aunt looks up and speaks solemnly, with religious fervor) My nephew was impotent as a saint!

I have already cited Flora Sussekind's analysis of

the role of the Rodriguean family in terms of disciplining and repressing the sexuality of its members. The figure of the unmarried old aunt or cousin, bitter, prudish and frustrated, appears in several plays, such as Family Album, Widow, Yet Virtuous, Black Angel and Dorotéia, besides All Nudity Shall Be Punished. Sometimes such personages are organized in a choral pattern, with no individualization. It is their repressive function, not their personal traits, that defines them as dramatic types. In All Nudity, the aunts do not even have names. They are referred by numbers. They talk in a chorus-like manner, as if it were a single speech divided into three undifferentiated speakers. Aunt 3 has the comic function of always echoing the last words of her sisters' lines. The aunts are, in fact, typified to the extent of becoming caricatures. Rodrigues creates a number of comic bits for them. One of the best ones occurs in a scene right after Herculano and Geni's wedding. Since Serginho has convinced his aunts to accept the marriage, their attitude towards Geni has suffered a radical change. As Aunt 2 observes that "Geni showed such fine manners that no one would say that she was a prostitute," Aunt 1 counters her:

AUNT 1:

Are you crazy? . . . Geni has never been a prostitute! She's an extremely virtuous woman. Your brains are definitely working very badly. It's you arteriosclerosis!

AUNT 2:

(Almost speechless, in panic) Oh, please, don't send me to the sanatorium! I don't want to go to the sanatorium!

AUNT 1:

(Incisively) All right, but then you'll have to stop saying that Geni was a prostitute. Geni was a virgin when she got married!

AUNT 2:

(Sweetly, humbly and painfully) Geni was a virgin when she got married...

The scene denounces the moral hypocrisy of the aunts. For convenience's sake, they do not hesitate in falsifying reality so as to adjust the present circumstances to their unshakable moral principles.

The moral rigidity of the aunts in All Nudity, similar to that of the cousins of Dorotéia, symbolizes the paralysis of life, the cult of death. They try to imprint in Herculano's and Serginho's spirits the suppression of the vital impulses, especially of sex. It is this impossible demand that originates all the violence of the action. It is such pressure that provokes the spectacular eruption of the stifled libido. In Flora Sussekind's words: "The stronger the interdiction is, the more violent its transgression will be."⁶⁴ The story of All Nudity Shall Be Punished is, in fact, a vertiginous succession of highly destructive actions. The whole family undergoes an irreversible process of degeneration and self-annihilation. It is true that Patrício plays a capital role in such a

process. He is the villain of the melodrama tradition. Like Amado Ribeiro, in Kiss on the Asphalt, he efficiently manipulates the threads of the plot. As Sábato Magaldi notes:

Curiously enough, the schemes plotted by Patrício never fail. Nelson Rodrigues endows him with an exceptional power, usually associated to demoniac figures. . . . The script explains his attitude as an act of revenge against Herculano . . . : "I want to see Herculano dead! With cotton balls in his nostrils!", he exclaims. This circumstance, however, does not seem to be strong enough to motivate all such malignancy. In this "family album," the image of Cain and Abel, the archetypical model of brotherly hate, is clearly suggested. Throughout the entire play, all Patrício does is to conduct the narrative thread, manipulating his marionettes without much psychological motivation to justify his acts. (We can see he is absolutely conscious of his role when he says a propos of Serginho: "The boy is mad. But it's a kind of madness that sways from side to side in total subordination to my will.")⁶⁵

This disarticulation of the family world is not a mere artificial machination of the all-powerful villain. Patrício finds, in that milieu, a fertile soil to do his work. The germs of decadence are already there. The family's march toward self-destruction would probably go on without his interference. Basically, all he does is to accelerate it. As Ronaldo Lima Lins affirms: ". . . within the universe of All Nudity Shall Be Punished, all forces conspire against life."⁶⁶ Patrício is smart enough to choose Herculano as his first victim. As the head of the family, his downfall endangers the whole family structure.

As far as family antagonisms and incestuous rela-

tions (two themes very dear to the author) are concerned, besides the already mentioned patterns of Cain / Abel and the older woman / young man, we can also discern the opposition of father and son. Serginho confesses to Patrício that he has always hated his father, even before his mother's death. His hate increases enormously due to Herculano's affair with Geni, which the son considers as a betrayal to the dead wife. By seducing Geni, he is avenging his mother. But he waits until Herculano and Geni get married. His becoming Geni's lover can only be an act of betrayal to his father if she is his legal wife. A prostitute, he thinks, cannot be unfaithful because she belongs to everybody. Serginho's affair with Geni is a recurrence of the theme of rivalry between father and son in regard to the wife-mother figure. By becoming Serginho's second mother, Geni is turned into an object of dispute between father and son.

Within the chapter of family life, another of Rodrigues's favorite subjects, the incompatibility between sex and marriage reappears with strong emphasis in All Nudity. Herculano admits to Geni that his first wife was not only "sexually dull," but even repulsive to him. He could never stand the noise of splashing water when she was doing her intimate hygiene. Yet, the cause of his sexual dissatisfaction was not only his wife's frigidity. The moral prejudices inherited from his family, envisioning

sex as something sinful, filthy and base, were certainly the main impediment to a satisfactory marital relationship. After his wife's death, Herculano kept following such a severe moral code, by preserving his chastity, until the discovery of sexual pleasure with Geni. His repressed sexuality, then, erupted with tremendous force. Herculano liberates his libidinous drive; but his prejudiced views do not change. His sexual relationship with Geni will be marked by morbidity, debasement and sadomasochism, until it is finally sanctioned and "sanctified" by marriage. There seems to be no other alternative for people of Herculano's kind. Outside wedlock, carnal intercourse is characterized as a sinful surrendering to low appetites, which will necessarily result in guilt and self-punishment (the sadomasochistic rituals performed by the couple in their erotic encounters).

Serginho incarnates the utmost exacerbation of the rejection of sexuality. Early in the play, we are informed that he does not approve of sex, not even in marriage. His idealization of the mother figure makes him say that: "I'd rather not have been born! I'd have preferred my mother to die while she was a virgin like my aunts." The boy's awakening to sex, as he surprises Herculano's and Geni's wild love-making in the garden, is a highly traumatic experience. His acceptance of his homosexuality is also contaminated with morbidity, perversion and masochism. The

partner he chooses is the man who violated him. In a way, he followed his father's example, going from adamant chastity to a sex life marked by violence and self-degradation. Father and son reproduce the typical dualism of the Rodriguean character, torn between an ideal of spiritual purity and an attraction towards the abjection of the flesh.

With all such neurotic impulses operating within the family, Patrícios's task is an easy one. It is greatly facilitated, besides, by Geni's own morbid and self-destructive tendencies. She falls so easily in his trap because, despite her being a prostitute and, supposedly, a "liberated woman, she shares a great deal of common traits with the family. Her fascination with death is expressed by a hypochondriac obsession with cancer. In her first scene, she reveals her certitude that, sooner or later, a little tumor will appear in her breast, which will eventually destroy her beauty and her life. She admits that one of the things which attracted her to Herculano was the fact that his wife had died of breast cancer: "There was a dead woman between us," she says, "with a wound in her breast." Masochism was probably the cause of her becoming a prostitute (she was an educated woman; "she finished high-school," observes Patrício), as well as the basic motivation that compelled her to bite the poisoned bait offered by Patrício. She must have unconsciously felt that her

involvement with Herculano and his family would draw her into a maelstrom of violence and destruction. And she could not resist to such an appeal. Her fascination with death led her to unite her destiny to that group of people, for whom death was the ultimate goal of life. In this perspective, Geni's suicide carries undertones of tragic inevitability. She is, indeed, a doomed heroine. She says to Serginho that her adultery is an act of revenge, but she does not specify against whom or what. "My revenge is against nobody," she says. Geni's existential failure provokes in her heart a resentment against life in general. In her final words, she wants to efface entirely all traces of her presence in the world. And she curses everybody, including herself.

Geni's utter annihilation is matched by Herculano's condemnation to absolute solitude in the end. He has lost everything. The playwright does not even bother to show his reaction to Geni's tape. He disappears in the middle of the third act. There is no need to show him again. He is totally finished. He has no hope, no future ahead of him. Symbolically, at the end of the play, he is as dead as Geni.

Rodrigues called All Nudity Shall Be Punished an "obsession in three acts." Indeed, the typical characteristics of the Rodriguean hero: radicalism, irrationality and paroxysm seem to have reached here a degree of intensity

unequalled by the characters of the other plays. Patrício makes this significant remark: "The human being is mad, and nobody realizes it. Only prophets are capable of realizing such an obvious thing like that!" In another moment, Herculano affirms: "Between sanity and madness there's a line so thin that it almost fades out."

All Nudity Shall Be Punished seems to be the darkest of all Rodrigues's plays. Strangely enough, it comes immediately after two plays in which the author manifests his belief in man's capacity to find spiritual values in life. In a dialogue with a priest, friend of the family's, Herculano expresses his faith in God and in the salvation of the soul: "If God exists, what counts is the soul. Thus, all human suffering, all the baseness of this life are but irrelevant details." Such words sound hollow when confronted with the radical pessimism conveyed by the play. Sábato Magaldi gives the following interpretation to the apparent ambivalence of the author's final message:

As the years pass, Nelson Rodrigues's conflict between his somber pessimism and his need for some kind of faith in eternal life becomes more and more excruciating. His religious feeling can be compared to the Jansenist view of man's passage through life as a moment of total darkness, which can only be redeemed by the divine grace.⁶⁷

Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, 1973

There was a lapse of almost ten years between All Nudity Shall Be Punished and Rodrigues's next play. Such silence was due, in the playwright's words, to health

problems, which left him with just enough energy "to make a living," that is, writing his newspaper crônicas. He also declares that he wrote Anti-Nelson Rodrigues to be free of the "siege" which the actress Neila Tavares submitted him to, in the attempt of making him write an original for her.⁶⁸

The first question that comes to mind is the reason for such a curious title. The interpretation of the play will give us the key to the problem. The play's protagonist is a millionaire's son, Oswaldinho, who, for the last ten years, has been writing anonymous letters insulting his father with words like "faggot" or "dirty cuckold." He also has the habit, when he is short of money, of making checks with no funds, which are immediately covered by his father, and also of stealing his mother's jewels. Women are but sex objects to him. If he cannot seduce them with his looks, he buys them with his money, for he will never admit being rejected. Well, it just happens that this apparently incorrigible enfant terrible is touched by "the blessing of true love." He becomes greatly infatuated with Joyce, a secretary in his father's firm. He wants to have her at all costs. Yet, Joyce is a virtuous girl, who will only belong to the man she loves. For the first time in his life, Oswaldinho meets an incorruptible woman, a fact that drives him mad, until he realizes he must go through a radical transformation in order to gain Joyce's heart.

This love story constitutes the basic plot of the play. It is, no doubt, a very anti-Nelson Rodrigues subject.

The author opposes such a romantic fiction, where "love conquers all," to the somber world of Gastão and Teresa, Oswaldinho's parents, a world where love is totally absent. Gastão's obsession is the fear of not being mourned when he dies. He speaks of buying "the mercy of a tear" at his funeral. Hated by his son and ignored by his wife, he lives in miserable loneliness. In a conversation in bed with Teresa, he says that "the worst form of solitude is my wife's company." He asks her if she will cry in his deathbed. He recollects an Italian movie, in which "the most Sicilian of all Sicilian mothers" screamed and howled before her son's dead body. She kissed, she licked his toes "as if they were asparagus stalks." But Teresa is not listening to him. In his total loneliness, Gastão hears his wife mumble: "Turn off that light. Turn off that light."

Teresa is another of Rodrigues's frustrated wives. She has lost all hope of being loved by her husband and she does not even care anymore about his infidelity. She concentrates all her affection in her son. She forgives his stealing her jewels and satisfies all his whims. She does not hesitate in humiliating herself before him and begs for his love:

TERESA:

(Crying) Oswaldinho! (She embraces him and slides down along his body until she is kneeling on the floor, holding his legs) . . . I'm not ashamed of kneeling at my son's feet. Oswaldinho, I have nothing of my own. I'm a total failure as a woman. Your father does not love me. He never did. Neither did the boyfriends I had before. All I have is my son. I don't care about anybody else. Your father can have all the women he wants, as long as I have my son's affection. (Like a wounded she-wolf) I need you! (Sweetly) Do you love me a little bit? It doesn't have to be a lot. Just a little bit. Do you love me?

OSWALDINHO:

(With a mixture of pity and disgust) Yes, I do.

With Joyce's father, Salim Simão, Rodrigues repeats the same device he used in Kiss on the Asphalt, concerning Amado Ribeiro. These are not entirely fictitious characters. They are real people, whom the playwright transformed into dramatis personae, keeping their actual names. Amado Ribeiro was a reporter at A Última Hora; Salim Simão was also a newspaper man and a close friend of the author's. Rodrigues used to cite him so frequently in his crônicas, that many people thought he actually was an imaginary character. Rodrigues plays with this duality of real/imaginary, making the character Salim Simão say in the play: "I've been asked by a lot of people if I really exist."

Simão is depicted with great sympathy. Rodrigues puts in his mouth a number of his famous statements meant for pure effect of shock. Here follow some examples:

No woman is obliged to get married. Sex is for blue-collar workers.

I trusted your mother (he says to Joyce). She was a saint. Yet, for countless times, I stood at the street corner, spying on her, to see if she received men in my absence.

When it comes to woman, every man is a scoundrel!

At a certain point, he makes a confession to Joyce. He forced eighteen of the thirty girlfriends of his youth to have abortions. And he adds: "Don't ever forget this: sex has never made a saint; sex only makes bastards." In another moment, a flashback shows his wife in her deathbed, asking him to dance a tango for her. The stage direction describes his dancing style as a perfect reproduction of Rodolfo Valentino in The Four Knights of the Apocalypse.

Salim Simão admits to Oswaldinho that he is not afraid of being ridiculous: "Have you ever noticed that every great pain looks ridiculous?" Such commentary prepares a scene between Simão and Joyce, in which she affirms to him that she will never sell herself for money. He falls to his knees before her and repeats Raskolnikoff's words to Sonia in Dostoievsky's Crime and Punishment: "I'm not kneeling before you, but before all human suffering! (Gets up, annoyed) Oh, God, I'm sure I've read this somewhere!"

Anti-Nelson Rodrigues ends with a delightful scene between Oswaldinho and Joyce. He has promised her a fabulous amount of money if she surrenders to his desires. He is impatiently waiting for her in his apartment. When

she arrives, he tries to embrace her, but she rejects him sternly. First, she wants the money. He hurriedly makes out a check and hands it to her:

(With a meticulous fury, she tears the check into a thousand pieces)

OSWALDINHO:

What's that? Don't do it!

(Joyce throws the pieces of paper in his face. Petrified, he would let her go without a gesture or a word. Yet, she, in her woman's rage, slaps him several times and, then, holds his face in her hands)

JOYCE:

You, fool! I don't want your money. I want your love!

(She kisses him passionately)

OSWALDINHO:

Mine, mine forever!

(They kiss in the old movies style)

It seems that the playwright called his play Anti-Nelson Rodrigues because his intention in writing it was to contradict himself, to do something diametrically opposite to all he had done before. In fact, the play introduces some new thematic elements totally different from the customary Rodriguean fictional material. On the other hand, the author, at the same time, reworks a number of motifs, characters and situations which always recur throughout his work. Sábato Magaldi enumerates some of them:

. . . the opposition of father and son, the incli-

nation of the mother toward the son, the solitude of the old couple, the disaggregation of the traditional values, the corruptive power of money .⁶⁹ . and the human search for transcendental values.

Other common Rodriguean elements found in the play are the lines designed for impact (Salim Simão's), the characters' emotional exacerbation and melodramatic physical action (Teresa's scene with Oswaldinho), and the fluidity of the dramatic narrative. Concerning this last aspect, Rodrigues introduces here a new technique: the "scene within the scene." At a certain point, Teresa is conversing with her son about the anonymous letters. The action, then, shifts to a dialogue between her and Gastão a propos of the same subject. Yet, it is not the projection of Teresa's narrative. Indeed, she does not even mention to Oswaldinho the conversation with her husband. The episode is a flashback meant to illuminate the preceding scene. When it is over, the action returns to the exact point it was interrupted. Oswaldinho's last line before the flashback was: "My father is guilty." The scene is resumed with Teresa's repartee: "Guilty of what?" In terms of staging, the playwright indicates a very simple solution. The light focuses on another plane of the stage and Teresa just walks casually to it. Then, as the focus returns to Oswaldinho's room, she walks back to continue the interrupted dialogue.

Another innovation, in Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, is the replacement of secondary characters with pure practical

functions, such as waiters or servants, for the figure of the stage manager, "dressed as such." As we see, Rodrigues, intuitively, keeps introducing techniques of the avant-garde theatre, even before they were adopted by the experimental theatre groups.

Joyce is the most anti-Rodriguean heroine. For the first time, the playwright delineates an entirely positive character, unshakable in her honesty. Joyce is morally impeccable. Her principles have nothing to do with the repressive and hypocritical moralism we have so often seen in other Rodriguean figures. She is not guided by social conventions. Love is her highest value. Her final surrender to Oswaldinho is not dependent on a promise of marriage, but on her certitude about the honesty of his intentions and the sincerity of his feelings. The fact that she is a Jehovah's Witness sounds a bit ridiculous, but it reinforces the plausibility of her still being a virgin, an unusual thing among the liberated carioca girls of the seventies. It is important to notice that Anti-Nelson Rodrigues is one of the very few realistic plays dealing with the middle bourgeoisie of the Zona Sul, the southern section of the city (the action takes place in Copacabana), whose open-mindedness contrasts greatly with the moralism of the Zona Norte suburbs. However, Joyce's preservation of virginity is less a matter of religious principles than a consequence of her idealization of love.

She will only give herself to the man she loves. When she realizes that she is in love with Oswaldinho and is convinced of the purity of his feelings, she does not hesitate to make love with him.

Oswaldinho repeats the moral metamorphosis of Edgard in Pretty, But Cheap. The play narrates the process of his conversion from the state of moral degradation to the heights of spiritual nobility. Indeed, the affirmation of the redeeming power of love is the fundamental theme of Anti-Nelson Rodrigues. Another aspect of this idealized vision of love is its being eternal. The playwright declares:

Since my early days, I've been concerned with the problem of the eternity of love. I suffer a lot when I hear about a couple separating. . . . I'm sure that people divorce because they don't really love each other. Even at my age, sixty-one years old, I keep thinking that the worst form of adultery is a widow who marries again. Yet, I repeat, she does it because she never knew real love. I'm absolutely in favor of marital fidelity, on the husband's part too. Such nostalgia of eternal love makes Anti-Nelson Rodrigues more Rodriguean than all my other plays.⁷⁰

The play also explores the idea of predestination in love. When Oswaldinho is introduced to Joyce, he feels as if he has known her before, "from past lives." Sábato Magaldi states:

The encounter of a couple is not caused by fortuitous circumstances. It results from the machinations of fate, . . . Such a belief derives from Nelson Rodrigues's romanticism, which conflicts with his somber observation of the difficulties of human relations. Such incapacity in establishing stable links of affection is the cause of the essential loneliness which characterizes man's existence. Nonetheless, Rodrigues keeps reaffirming, every now and then, his faith or, at least, his hope on the possibility of eternal love.⁷¹

Anti-Nelson Rodrigues is an ambivalent play, in the sense that it juxtaposes the motif of love's victory (Joyce and Oswaldinho) to the irremediable solitude of human beings (Gastão and Teresa). Nelson Rodrigues, here, combines his customary pessimism with a romantic optimism in regard of human life. Such a positive view was already announced in Pretty, But Cheap, the only play, besides Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, with a happy ending. Yet, in the latter play, the denouement sounds more credible than in the former. The happy ending of Pretty, But Cheap happens in an idealized realm, apart from reality. In Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, it undeniably takes place in the actual world.

After the total darkness of All Nudity Shall Be Punished, Nelson Rodrigues seems to have recovered his faith. Life does not seem to be such a miserable experience, after all. A subtle humor, not exempt of a tinge of irony, pervades the play. The author uses this device to avoid an excess of sentimentality, a serious risk when dealing with such romantic elements. With a little humor, the love story sounds more believable to the modern spectator. The technique utilized is the same as usual: deflating exaggerated emotionalism with references to petty and trivial details. I suspect that, despite Rodrigues's affirmation of his romantic beliefs, sometimes he smiles, imperceptibly maybe, at them. The final stage direction: "They kiss in the old movies style" implies that we should

not take too seriously what we are watching. This leads me to think that Rodrigues is not absolutely sure that all that idealized romance is likely to happen in real life. He would just like it to be possible. And perhaps he wrote this play for the sheer pleasure of seeing his fantasies come true, at least on the illusory world of the theatre.

In any case, the playwright, in Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, seems to be more serene, less aggressive. He is more sympathetic with his characters, even with the negative ones like Teresa and Gastão. Instead of being their implacable judge, he pities them. Anti-Nelson Rodrigues lacks the power of shock and scandal of the other plays. In fact, it shows no deaths, no sexual aberrations, no excessively violent scenes. Even so, the author continued to have problems with censorship. Neila Tavares, who premiered in the role of Joyce, refers to an incident occurred when the censor came to watch the dress-rehearsal.⁷²

In the play, Oswaldinho says several times to his friend Leleco: "I can't resist, Leleco! I can't resist when I see Joyce's ass." . . . The censor considered it an "unpleasant and disrespectful way of calling a part of a woman's body." Nelson Rodrigues knelt down before the censor and said: "M'am, I beg of you, on my knees, leave the ass. You may cut everything else, but, for God's sake, leave the ass! The ass is essential, m'am. Without the ass, there's no play..." The censor was so embarrassed that she released the play with no cuts.⁷³

In Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, the playwright makes large use of self-quotation. Salim Simão's shocking statements

are all drawn from his newspaper crônicas. But, most of all, this is a play Rodrigues wrote about himself. Its very title attests it. It is not an autobiography, of course. It is rather an exercise of metalanguage.⁷⁴ The playwright explores his own clichés, on one side, and, on the other side, makes radical changes in his customary methods and themes. It is, undoubtedly, a self-commentary with a large dose of self-irony. In an interview to Sábato Magaldi, he says:

Now that I've seen the play staged, my impression is that it remains stubbornly Rodriguean. It combines pungency, bitterness and cruelty with a strong feeling of compassion. The great novelty of Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, in my opinion, is this compassion, which has rarely appeared in my other plays. I've never felt so much pity for my characters. At a certain point, Joyce tells Oswaldinho: "One day you're going to kiss the ground where your father has walked." This is the key to the character and to the whole play. All the characters suffer from a violent yearning for purity. What I mean is that no man ever attains absolute degradation. Inside every human being, there is a saint, buried like an umbanda frog,⁷⁵ who can pop out at any moment.⁷⁶

A Serpente (The Serpent, 1978)

Nelson Rodrigues seventeenth and last play (he died in 1980) brings back the theme of the love of two sisters for the same man, which, this time, becomes the basic substance of the dramatic action. The Serpent starts with the decision of a couple, Décio and Lígia, to break up their marriage. The cause is Décio's sexual impotence. In the same apartment, Guida, Lídia's sister, lives in "perennial honeymoon" with her husband Paulo. The sisters have always

been very close to each other. When they got married, their weddings were celebrated in the same church, on the same day and hour. Their parents' wedding gift was an apartment, in which the two couples would live together, so that the sisters remained inseparable. When Lígia tells Guida of her marital crisis, she comments the fact that there is just a thin wall separating the two couples' room: "From my room, I can hear everything that happens in yours. It's indecent! I can hear your moans and Paulo's. But you've never heard mine. Simply because in my room there's no such things. . . ."

Lígia is desperate over her conjugal failure. She wants to commit suicide, jumping out of the window of her 12th floor apartment. Guida quickly thinks up of something to save her sister's life. To compensate Lígia's sexual frustration, then, she offers her a night of love with her husband, Paulo. Lígia accepts. Obviously, the night with Paulo makes Lígia recover her desire to live. Paulo, on his turn, changes his behavior in regard of Guida. He becomes distant and cold and refuses to have sex with her. Guida realizes immediately: her husband and her sister have fallen in love with each other.

Yet, Décio, the ex-husband, has not disappeared from the play. His sexuality is aroused by the house washerwoman, a mulatto girl with "triumphant nostrils," as the stage direction states, with whom he develops a sensual

affair. Full of self-confidence, now, he tries to reconcile with Lígia. As she rejects him he insults her and threatens to beat her. She cries for help and Paulo appears and kicks Décio out of the house. The incident motivates Guida's comment: "It's so strange to see your own husband being violent for the sake of his sister-in-law. . . ."

Guida, tortured by jealousy, maintains Lígia and Paulo under close watch. First, she tries to keep her sister at home while Paulo is absent, for fear of their seeing each other in secret. Next, she changes her tactics: she starts to stimulate Lígia to go out, as if she wanted to facilitate the adultery and, then, catch them by surprise. In fact, they meet in the street. Lígia wants to know which of the two sisters is Paulo's favorite. He admits he no longer feels sexually attracted to Guida. Such comment arouses Lígia's desire. She wants to make love with him right there in the street: "Let everybody come. Let'em stop and see!"

Of course, Guida has followed them. At home she has a violent confrontation with her husband, while Lídia waits outside. Paulo swears he loves his wife. He climbs into the window sill:

PAULO:

. . . Once you said you'd kill me and your sister. . . . All right. Here I am, hands up, no protection at all. . . . All you got to do is toss me out. . . . In three seconds I'll be dead.

GUIDA:

I'd never be able to kill you. With Lígia, it's different. I would gladly kill her.

Paulo invites Guida to come and sit by his side on the window sill.

PAULO:

If Lígia, and not you, were here, sitting next to me, holding me tight, would you want me to push her out?

GUIDA:

Yes, I would.

PAULO:

Wouldn't you be shocked with your sister's death?

GUIDA:

Let me go, I'm scared.

(Paulo pushes her out of the window. A scream. Lígia knocks on the door.)

PAULO:

(Desperate) Let's go down. We'll say she did it in a fit of madness.

LÍGIA:

(Frenetic) I'm afraid of not crying!

PAULO:

Think of your guilt and cry!

LÍGIA:

I know I won't cry!

PAULO:

Let's go! . . .

LÍGIA:

Don't touch me! I'm not guilty! You killed her.
Murderer!

(She runs to the window)

LÍGIA:

The murderer is here! My brother-in-law! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!

The Serpent is a short one-act play, running for about fifty or sixty minutes of acting time. The fundamental conflict, the triangle, is established very early. At the beginning of the play, all the dramatic circumstances are already set. Only a spark is needed (the fight between Décio and Lígia) to trigger the action, which flows in a fast pace towards its tragic denouement. The playwright does not waste much time with preparation. At each new scene, the action is already caught at a moment of high tension, which has little to grow to reach its climax. Thus, the action, in the sequence of scenes, jumps from climax to climax, so to speak, at a vertiginous speed. Such a concentration in dramatic development conveys a feeling of tragic inevitability to the denouement. The characters march headlong towards their goals. It is this powerful psychological impetus that creates an atmosphere of inexorability to the evolution of the events. Once the button is pressed, nothing can be done except start counting down to the final explosion.

In order to give support to such swiftness in

dramatic progression, the playwright, in his last work, creates another innovation in terms of dramatic structure. The scenes are intercalated with soliloquies, a kind of "inner monologues in screams," as the stage direction explains. The actor comes to the proscenium and "addresses to the audience like an opera singer performing his aria." This technique is something half-way between the old aside and the Brechtian alienation effect. It has to do with the aside because it conveys, in a direct fashion, the character's thoughts; and with Brecht, in the sense that it marks an interruption in the narrative flow. However, as far as dramatic function is concerned, these arias are quite distinct from the Brechtian technique. The actor does step out of the action, which is, then, frozen until the soliloquy is over. Yet, he does not step out of character. On the contrary, the aria is an intensification of his emotional drive, the highest point of his paroxysm. In the program of the show, Rodrigues explains that:

The aria should have a violent effect of surprise and aggression. The spectator will be cornered in his seat by this explosion of screams. It is a sort of epileptic seizure, in which the obscure forces of the self are set free.⁷⁷

Let us see an example: as Lígia finishes her account to Guida of her fight with Décio, she falls to her knees, while Guida goes to the proscenium "to do her aria":

GUIDA:

(Referring to Lígia) You've always meant everything to me. One day I told you: "Shall we die together?" And you answered: "Yes, I want to die with you." We went out to kill ourselves. Then, suddenly, I said: "No we'd better wait." I'd rather see everybody else dead, even mom and dad. But not you. If you died, I'd die too. Already at that time, I feared the day you and I would fall in love with someone.

The soliloquy illuminates the nature of the two sisters' relationship and, thus, prepares the next scene, in which Guida will do her "sacrifice," offering Lígia a night with her husband Paulo. Later on, after the scene with Paulo, it is Lígia's turn to go downstage and shout:

LÍGIA:

When I entered that room, it was as if Guida were taking me by the hand. I was afraid of incest. A brother-in-law is a sort of brother too. I felt as if Guida were undressing me. . . . Guida, only you would be capable of doing this: to give your man to your sister.

The arias are points of transition, as far as psychological and narrative progressions are concerned. The action, being limited to the climactic moments of the story, leaves no time for gradual character delineation. The actors have to jump from one crucial state to another. Thus, the arias compensate these gaps in their psychological development. Regarding plot structure, they also provide factual information and establish narrative links between scenes. Without them, the compactness of dramatic progression would probably seem excessive and, therefore, artificial.

Waltz Number 6 and The Serpent are the only short plays by Nelson Rodrigues. All the others have three acts.

Sábato Magaldi has offered a practical explanation:

When Rodrigues started writing for the stage, the standard procedure of the theatre of the time was the three-act division: act one presenting the conflict, act two developing it and act three bringing the denouement. In The Woman Without Sin, despite his following the common practice, the playwright was already innovating it by having each new act begin with the final line of the preceding one. The show, thus, did not necessarily have to be interrupted. The spectator of the forties and fifties was accustomed to an intermission following each act. Nowadays, modern audiences prefer not to have such breaks in the flow of the action. . . . Rodrigues preserved the three-act tradition only as a matter of external format, which does not necessarily imply an arrangement of the dramatic action in three stages. . . . The flexibility of the dramatic structure can allow just one intermission or none, if wanted.⁷⁸

It is a common trait of Rodrigues's characters to be extremely changeable. They shift in a flash from one idea or emotional state to another--sometimes, the very opposite. The dramatic concentration of The Serpent accentuates even more such fluctuation. Let us take Guida's case for example. First she offers her husband to her sister; next, she becomes jealous of the two and tries to keep them apart; then, she stimulates the adultery until it is finally consumed. Lígia and Paulo are also highly changeable characters. We see them, one moment, surrendering to their passion, and the next moment, guilt-ridden, avoiding each other. All such sudden shifts create a sequence of reversals, very much in the melodramatic mode. The best example of all is the final scene, in which Paulo,

first, affirms his love for Guida and, then, kills her, whereas Lígia, who was supporting him in the murder, suddenly turns against him. Such a method, as I have observed in the analysis of the other plays, is in total opposition to the linear psychological development of the realistic tradition. I have also pointed out that the playwright always provides enough psychological support, justifying the apparently paradoxical attitudes of his protean characters. Such support, however, is never made too explicit, along the lines of a scientific explanation. Which is the real motivation of Guida's "sacrifice"? Sábato Magaldi enumerates some possibilities: ". . . pure generosity and sisterly love . . . ? Disguised homosexuality? A desire of superiority? An exorcism of old guilty feelings?"⁷⁹ The psychoanalytical implications are all there, but they are not submitted to a scientific diagnosis. The effect the playwright is aiming at is the suggestive power of subjective ambiguity. What matters to him is the exploration, for the sake of poetry and drama, of the mysteries of the soul.

The motif of morbid, violent and incestuous family links is extensively explored in The Serpent. The nature of the two sisters' relationship is clearly expressed through the following dialogue between them:

GUIDA:

My husband is everything to me. You are everything to me. . . . If you kill yourself... Are you

going to kill yourself?

LÍGIA:

Perhaps.

GUIDA:

We live on the 12th floor. If you jump out of the window, I'll do it too.

LÍGIA:

Do you swear?

GUIDA:

I do.

LÍGIA:

Liar. You'd never leave your husband. Your husband is much more important to you than death. . . . Do you remember our wedding? When I looked at you, I realized you were the happy bride, not me. I felt you were more deeply in love than I was and more loved too. . . . You left the church filled with this nauseating happiness.

GUIDA:

(Crying) Lígia, there has never been a love between two sisters as strong as ours.

Aside from the theme of incest, implied in Lígia's and Paulo's love affair, another typically Rodriguean situation which is highly emphasized in The Serpent, is the presence of violence and death permeating family relations. The web of destructive impulses, here, is extremely complex. Guida, for example, confesses she would be equally capable of killing either her husband or her sister:

GUIDA:

. . . If you're thinking of spending another night with Paulo, I'll kill you. Or else, I'll kill the only man I've ever loved. (With a crazy look) Paulo, sleeping and dying...

When Lígia and Paulo meet in the street, she says:

LÍGIA:

. . . I was so touched when you said, the other day, you'd kill Décio for my sake. . . . Now tell me, . . . if Guida were planning to kill me, would you kill her first?

In the last scene, Paulo, first, asks Guida to push him out of the window. Then, he forces her to admit she would want him to do the same thing with Lígia.

In the entanglement of incestuous impulses, roles are easily reversed. Guida says to Paulo:

GUIDA:

(Desperate) I'm waiting for your woman . . . cause I'm not your woman anymore.

PAULO:

Don't say Lígia is my woman!

GUIDA:

(Frenetic) Your woman, yes! I am nothing! Do you know what I am now? I'm your sister-in-law!

Probably because of the dramatic concentration, the characters' attraction for the abysses of violence and self and mutual destruction seems to be more unrestrained here than in any other play. One of the motivations of Guida's "sacrifice" was certainly a morbid compulsion to play a dangerous game. She and Paulo led

a normal, happy life. Lígia's and Paulo's love night, however, breaks the pact of normality, and Paulo is plunged in a vortex of violence, which eventually leads him to murder.

Guilt is another strong force operating within the characters. Guida feels guilty for being happy with her husband, while her sister's marriage is breaking apart. Lígia's and Paulo's passion is saturated of guilty feelings. And guilt is what makes Lígia, at the end, deny her responsibility in Guida's death, by publicly accusing Paulo of murder.

The power of sex has ambivalent connotations in the play. It can be a devastating force leading to destruction, as in the case of Paulo and Lígia. At the same time, it also appears as a liberating force: Eros as a symbol of life's renewal. This belief in the revitalizing power of sex is expressed in Guida's "sacrifice," as she sees that Lídia's sexual frustration is destroying her. Sex is, thus, at the same time, an emblem of life and death. After making love with her brother-in-law, Lígia comments:

LÍGIA:

(Suddenly euphoric) That night I felt everything: life and death. Now I can live and I can die.

The theme of the incompatibility of sex and marriage reappears very emphatically in the figure of Décio. He is impotent with his wife, yet, his libido is aroused by the

mulatto washerwoman. The scene of their sexual encounter is full of sordid details. Another opposition is expressed here: that between love and sex. Décio is attracted to the washerwoman because he knows he will never fall in love with her. Love, for him, has a high spiritual connotation, which cannot harmonize with the low, animal drives of sex.

The power of shock and scandal, which has always marked Nelson Rodrigues's theatre, is stronger than ever in his last work. Although he was already a celebrated author, with theatre companies fighting for his plays, there were still strong reactions against him, as the one he describes in an interview:

When I wrote The Serpent, I was called by a famous TV and movie actress. She told me she was absolutely crazy about my theatre and she was greatly interested in the play. I sent a copy to her. Two days later, I called her back: "Miss So and So, this is Nelson Rodrigues. I'd like to know what you think of my play." She answered: "Look here! Don't you know I'm an honest woman? I have three daughters!" "All right, all right. I'm sorry. Good bye."⁸⁰

Although, in The Serpent, Nelson Rodrigues does not accentuate the naturalistic portraiture of social reality, we are far from the autonomous microcosm of the mythic plays. It is evident that the play deals with the middle-bourgeoisie of Zona Sul. Yet, as we have seen, realism and myth are never dissociated in Nelson Rodrigues's works. It is the emphasis on one or another aspect that changes. In the very title, we have the image of the serpent as the symbol of temptation, leading to the fall from paradise.

It is the same temptation Edgard suffered in Pretty, But Cheap. The difference is that Edgard resists and, thus, realizes his aspiration to spiritual transcendence (nature's beauty as a metaphor of paradise in the final scene), whereas the characters of The Serpent bite the forbidden fruit and are precipitated in the hell of human abjection and punished with utter destruction.

NOTES

¹Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 3, p. 9.

²It is important to observe that the suburbs of big cities in Brazil are inhabited by the lower strata of the population.

³The crônica, a brief piece of fiction or poetic commentary in prose, acquired the status of a specific literary genre in Brazil, since it attained a high esthetic quality in the hands of a number of great writers.

⁴Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 3, pp. 9-11.

⁵Bars frequented mostly by men and prostitutes.

⁶A very good description of jogo do bicho can be found in: Roberto da Matta, "Carnival in Multiple Planes," in Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), p. 239: "This is a kind of game where a number, which is drawn with the state lottery, is associated with an animal, one of a list of 25 bichos or animals in alphabetical order. The totemic association of the number with the animal allows dreams to have greater suggestion, since it translates the impersonal (the number) into a highly personalized system (the animal). At the same time it is exactly this association, and what it allows in terms of the calculating of strategy to encircle the animal and "hit it" (in a language typical of the hunter of luck), that gives the jogo do bicho its enormous popularity. Curiously, the game is illegal, although it is played without the least problem in all large Brazilian cities."

⁷Décio de Almeida Prado, Apresentação do Teatro Brasileiro (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, 1956), pp. 20-21.

⁸An Afro-Brazilian religious ritual.

⁹Quoted in the program of a 1982 production of The Deceased Woman, directed by Paulo Afonso de Lima for Teatro Carioca de Câmara.

¹⁰Nelson Rodrigues, Memórias (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Correio da Manhã, 1967) pp. 144-145.

¹¹Quoted in the program of the Teatro Carioca de Câmara production of The Deceased Woman.

¹²D'Almeida et alii, Depoimentos V, p. 116.

¹³Pompeu de Souza, "Uma Triste Comédia de Costumes," Diário Carioca, 5, July, 1953, quoted in Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 114.

¹⁴Quoted in the program of the Teatro Carioca de Câmara production of The Deceased Woman.

¹⁵In Folha de São Paulo, 10, September, 1978, p. 27.

¹⁶Quoted in Sábato Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 3, pp. 20-21.

¹⁷Fazedor de anjos: an expression of the time, referring to a doctor who makes abortions. Although the situation described in the scene, nowadays, is not so common anymore, abortion remains an illegal practice in the country.

¹⁸An invocation of the umbanda rituals.

¹⁹In the original it is "homeopathic medicine," homeopathy being a widespread practice in Brazil, as all types of alternative medicine.

²⁰An old form of psychiatric therapy (older than the play itself), in which the patient is inoculated the virus of malaria. The fits of fever supposedly had a beneficial effect on the insane.

²¹Notwithstanding the classification given by the author, Dorotéia, as we have seen, cannot be regarded as a pure farce, since it combines its comic elements with more serious matter. In Widow, Yet Virtuous, on the other hand, the elements of comic and absurd predominate to the extent that the play can be undeniably considered a farce, although a very unconventional one.

²²Hammer.

²³Sparrow.

²⁴Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 1, p. 29.

²⁵Diabo means devil, and da Fonseca is a common family name.

²⁶A state institution of social assistance which takes care of the homeless youth and of young street delinquents.

²⁷An allusion to veado, an expression applied to male homosexuals.

²⁸Eduardo Tolentino, who made a very successful new staging of Widow, Yet Virtuous in 1983, in an interview he gave me in December, 15, 1984, in Rio de Janeiro, stated that it is the most political of all of Rodrigues's plays.

²⁹Sussekkind, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Fundo Falso," pp. 37-38.

³⁰The title of doutor, in Brazil, is not applied only to medicine doctors, but also to lawyers and to other professions. In fact, it became an emblem of the highest degree of social prestige. The common folk tend to address to anybody with a certain status as doutor.

³¹Sussekkind, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Fundo Falso," p. 37.

³²Lambreta is a well-known brand of motor scooters, commonly related, at the time of the play, to street delinquency. The name belongs to the family doctor, who is described as a model of decency, with an appearance of "everybody's grandfather."

³³Solteirona: spinster.

³⁴Such statement was also made by Eduardo Tolentino in his interview.

³⁵Sábato Magaldi includes it in the volume of carioca tragedies, which is the first of the Nova Fronteira edition of Teatro Completo.

³⁶In the mythology of the suburbs, at the time, Copacabana, a luxurious beach in the southern section of Rio, was regarded as a "place of sin and perdition."

³⁷Before turning into a federalist republic, Brazil was an empire during most of the nineteenth century.

³⁸A typical phenomenon in Brazil is the religious synthesis of Catholicism, Spiritualism and African cults (sincretismo religioso). The session in the Noronha's house presents very definite characteristics of an umbanda ritual.

³⁹The girl's name has an evident metaphorical connotation (Silene=moon).

⁴⁰Paulo Mendes Campos, Preface to Os Sete Gatinhos in Teatro Quase Completo, p. 104.

⁴¹Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, p. 36.

⁴²The Sun.

⁴³See footnote ⁶ in this chapter.

⁴⁴One of the suburbs of the Northern section of Rio.

⁴⁵Little Skull

⁴⁶Bicheiro: the person who runs a jogo do bicho business.

⁴⁷Gafieira: at the time, a dancing place frequented by the lower classes, prostitutes, pimps, tramps and criminals.

⁴⁸Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 82.

⁴⁹Lins, Nelson Rodrigues: Uma Realidade em Agonia, p. 124.

⁵⁰Sussekkind, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Fundo Falso," p. 15.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 15-16.

⁵²In Gazeta de Alagoas, 13, September, 1961.

⁵³This production toured Porto Alegre in 1962. It was the first time I saw a Nelson Rodrigues's play. I was absolutely startled. It was then that my passion for his work began.

⁵⁴Hélio Pelegrino, Preface to Beijo no Asfalto, in Teatro Quase Completo, vol. 4, pp. 16-18.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 18-25.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁷Leo Gilson Ribeiro, "O Sol sobre o Pântano," in Teatro Quase Completo, vol. 4, pp. 385-386.

⁵⁸It is impossible to render in translation the bitter humor of this mot. Mineiro is the native from the state of Minas Gerais. The sentence implies that mineiros only manifest solidarity to their fellowmen when they are dying of cancer, that is, in extreme situations. Nelson Rodrigues, in the program of the play's first production, declares that "this phrase is the protagonist, the Isolde, the Jeanne d'Arc of my play."

⁵⁹Sábato Magaldi, xerox copy of the original manuscript of the preface to volume 4 of Teatro Completo, p. 48.

⁶⁰Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 56.

⁶¹This is not to say that the esthetic quality of Rodrigues's theatre derives from his moral preoccupations. In fact, his great achievement is to give a highly theatrical treatment to such problems, which transcends the ideological level and creates a world of dramatic poetry of unexcelled beauty.

⁶²A renowned Brazilian actress.

⁶³Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 133.

⁶⁴Sussekkind, "Nelson Rodrigues e o Fundo Falso," p. 23.

⁶⁵Magaldi, manuscript of Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 4, pp. 11C-12C.

⁶⁶Lins, Nelson Rodrigues: Uma Realidade em Agonia, p. 139.

⁶⁷Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 133.

⁶⁸Quoted in Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 1, p. 33.

⁶⁹Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, p. 34.

⁷⁰Quoted in Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, pp. 33-34.

⁷¹Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 130.

⁷²This was a common practice in the years of the dictatorship, which, strangely enough, has not been abolished after the redemocratization. Besides submitting the script to the Censorship Department, a censor would come to watch the dress rehearsal, to judge the "spectacle."

⁷³In Ele, September, 1978, p. 49.

⁷⁴Metalinguagem is a critical term applied in Portuguese to a type of work of art which comments on itself.

⁷⁵A reference to an umbanda ritual, in which frogs are buried.

⁷⁶Quoted in Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 1, p. 33.

⁷⁷Quoted in the program of the first production of the play, directed by Marcos Flaksman in Rio de Janeiro, 1980.

⁷⁸Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," pp. 101-102.

⁷⁹Magaldi, manuscript of Preface to Teatro Completo, p. 4A.

⁸⁰In Ele, November, 1978, p. 22.

CHAPTER VI

THE ELEMENTS OF NATURALISM AND MELODRAMA

In an interview given to Neila Tavares in 1978, Nelson Rodrigues stated that:

Nobody can be a real artist if he does not have something of Vicente Celestino¹. . . . Shakespeare wrote great scenes in Celestino's style. Richard III has a lot to do with A Mother's Heart and with Yesterday I tore up your picture.² In Crime and Punishment, when Raskolnikoff falls at Sonia's feet and exclaims: "I'm not kneeling before you, but before all human suffering!", that is obviously an old effect. That's Rádio Nacional.³ That's heavy melodrama. Yet, such bad taste does not affect in the least the greatness of Dostoevsky's literary genius. All the time, he made use of bad taste. Indeed, bad taste must be used all the time. . . . We must restore bad taste in the works of art.⁴

In another interview, speaking of the serial stories he wrote for the newspapers under the pen-names of Suzana Flag and Mirna (May fate is to Sin, Fire Wedding, Slaves of Love), in which he indulged in all the clichés of cheap melodrama, Rodrigues affirms:

I don't regret this at all. Such work equipped me with new technical resources. Melodrama can be beautiful. It can be as poetic as the noblest tragedy.⁵

These citations attest to the fact that Nelson Rodrigues was not only conscious of his exploration of the tradition of melodrama, but even advocated it as a necessary ingredient of the work of art. In a superficial view, one tends to associate such a tendency to a stereotype of

the Latin temperament, inclined to exaggerated displays of emotion. Yet, it is undeniable that all throughout the history of art, regarding not only drama and fiction, but also poetry, ballet, opera, music, the visual arts and, more recently, cinema and television, the presence of melodramatic elements has always had an immense popular appeal. It is this appreciation by the less cultivated masses that caused a prejudiced view on the part of the intellectual elite of the bourgeoisie, especially after the advent of the nineteenth century movements of realism and naturalism. The Brazilian cultural elite, of course, imitated the European distaste and contempt for melodrama. Nelson Rodrigues's genius, however, was beyond such a discriminatory attitude. He realized that exploring the melodrama tradition was not only a means to be accessible to a broader audience, but, most of all, that it could equip him with an immense repertory of resources of an extraordinary theatricality. Rodrigues did not want to write for the elite. He refused to be an intellectual. Instead, he was proud to be a journalist, a man who was close to the people, who plunged his hands in the rawness of real life. He chose to adopt the melodrama style because he wanted to speak to the great majority and he wished to capture the spirit and flesh of the Brazilian people, no matter how vulgar and coarse it might seem to the intellectual gentility. In this sense, melodrama, in his work,

merges with realism. Being melodramatic meant to him being true to life, to the life of Brazilians, to their tastes, their concepts, their values and modes of behavior.

All along my analysis of his seventeen plays, I have tried to discern the techniques of the melodrama stock-and-trade, manipulated by the playwright. In regard to dramatic structure, all the plays, without exception, make use of a great number of surprising revelations and sudden reversals. The final reversal, leading to the denouement, is usually intended to produce a spectacular effect. Many of these coups-de-théâtre are obtained through the technique of misleading information, inducing the spectator to believe in something which will be radically contradicted at the end. Two flagrant cases are the revelation of Aprígio's homosexuality in Kiss on the Asphalt, which was disguised under the suggestion of an incestuous inclination for his daughter, and the second version of Maria Cecília's rape in Pretty, But Cheap, which dismystifies her image as an innocent victim, projected in the first version. With so many veerings, the action is extremely energetic and flows at great speed. The audience follows a quick succession of events, through which dramatic tension is intensified to its highest degree. We do not have here the neutral narrative tone of the orthodox naturalistic play. There is no time for long exposition, dramatic preparation or detailed psychological delineation. Exposition, prepa-

ration and characterization spring up from the very substance of the action and dialogue. Each new dramatic situation is set up right away with a few strokes so that the action can follow its course.

Nelson Rodrigues deals with extreme situations and extraordinary actions, rooted in incest, depravity, violence and crime. Such actions must necessarily be performed also by extraordinary characters, impelled by obscure forces and uncontrollable impulses, totally incapable of compromise. Radicalism, intense emotionalism, exacerbation, paroxysm, these are common traits of all Rodriguean types. They are by no means the "normal people" portrayed in realistic drama. They are heroes in the original sense of the word, even though their heightened stature, their grandeur is attained through an inversion of the usual process: not by the achievement of spiritual nobility, but through a precipitous fall in utter abjection. These are operatic figures, gigantic puppets sweeping the stage with their convulsive, frenetic movements, living in total confusion and constant turmoil. The secondary characters, in their turn, even if they do not go so far as the protagonists, are also singularized by some peculiarity, some idiosyncrasy, which also distinguishes them from the "common folk." They are usually strongly typified, reaching, at times, the point of caricature, presenting some sort of moral or physical deformation. They are often ridiculous,

grotesque or pathetic.

Extraordinary, exorbitant, violent situations, actions and characters are certainly the stuff of which melodrama is made. Rodrigues's heroes perform their feats, in the physical sense, also along the lines of the melodramatic style. Their external attitudes, their gestures, their bodily behavior, their elocution and tone of voice are carefully described by the playwright in the stage directions. We see them, for countless times, pointing fingers in accusation, kneeling at each other's feet, throwing one another on the ground, stretching imploring hands, screaming, sobbing, howling, vociferating, haranging. Such attitudes, however, many times, are not to be taken too seriously. I have pointed to the technique of deflating this excessive emotionalism through the introduction of some vulgar or trivial element, as in the scene of the grave-digger interrupting Edgard's and Ritinha's love encounter inside an open tomb in Pretty, But Cheap. The resulting effect is then tragicomic or pathetic. At times, it may be overtly comical, as in the moment in which Dona Guigui, after being informed of Golden Mouth's death, bursts into sobs and starts walking in circles around the stage, followed by the solicitous Caveirinha. The stage direction describes it as a "typically suburban" pain, reaffirming the idea that the sentimental excesses of Nelson Rodrigues's heroes are perfectly justified through a naturalistic observation of

the population's modes of behavior. Rio's "suburbans" are indeed melodramatic. They do not have the inflamed, grandiloquent style of the Hispanic tradition, but they certainly know how to make a big fuss.

As it happens in melodrama, the basic motivation of Nelson Rodrigues's *dramatis personae* is their emotional drives. The rational faculties do not have much influence on them. As a consequence, they cannot be delineated according to the logic process of realistic characterization. Realistic characters evolve in a gradual, progressive fashion, each of their psychological changes being very rationally justified. In melodrama, the exacerbated heroes suffer abrupt shifts of mood, of feeling, of opinion and attitude, which are often left unexplained. The same thing occurs with Nelson Rodrigues's characters. Many of the dramatic reversals are provoked by their sudden emotional fluctuations. Yet, such psychological inconsistency is but a false appearance. Rodrigues deals with subconscious forces, with complex undercurrents of primitive impulses, not filtered by the censoring mind or erupting in spite of it. A psychoanalytical interpretation would easily discern structural patterns operating in these characters' psyche. In fact, the playwrights's works are frequently scrutinized by the critics through the psychoanalytical approach. It does not matter if he knew nothing of psychoanalysis, as he often declared. His investigation

of the depths of human soul can certainly be regarded as the fruit of a genius's intuitive perception. In any case, once again he is adding realism to melodrama. It is a sort of psychological realism, however, that was too advanced for the theatrical conventions of the time. Yet, the logical coherence underneath the apparent incoherence of Rodrigues's characters would not have any esthetic value, were it not translated into an action of great dramatic power and rich poetic suggestions.

The process of melodramatic characterization utilized by Nelson Rodrigues, based on the prevalence of emotion over rationality, can be associated also with the standard naturalistic view of man. In naturalistic fiction, the hero is guided by his instincts. There is a sense of fatality in this blind compliance with the unconscious drives. Man is doomed to follow irrevocably a path which is written inside his soul or, rather, on his flesh, since naturalism has a materialistic worldview. Rodrigues's characters are drawn by the same forces. At times, they are aware of the currents which carry them away and they uselessly try to resist to them. Yet, very often, they do not question anything. They just let themselves go.

Nelson Rodrigues is consonant with the canons of naturalism also in his portrayal of the social milieu. There is no doubt that the extreme accuracy of his observation of life was a consequence of his journalistic

experience. His crônicas of Life as it is were a reworking of the faits divers which appeared in the press. These were stories of crime, adultery and disaster, the majority of which took place in the suburbs of Zona Norte. They were, evidently, enriched by the author's prodigal imagination, which added strong melodramatic colors to the naturalistic description of the vulgar and petty incidents of suburban life. In the crônicas, we can discern themes, situations and types which were later to be developed in the dramatic works.

Already in The Woman Without Sin, his first play, the playwright's desire to make an accurate portraiture of social life is very noticeable. Even the mythic cycle, as we have seen, is full of elements drawn from realistic observation. Yet, it was since The Deceased Woman that the faithful reproduction of reality started to predominate or, rather, to frame the other dimensions of his work. In the interpretation of the plays, we saw that, notwithstanding the author's predilection for the description of suburban life (The Deceased Woman, Seven Kittens and Golden Mouth are the most typical cases), he is also concerned with the middle and high bourgeoisie of Zona Sul and often mixes individuals from distinct social classes in the same play, as in Pretty, But Cheap.

Such social typification, opposing different ways of life, modes of conduct, moral values, occupations, forms

of speech and of physical behavior, is depicted by the playwright with such vivid colors that sometimes it is amplified beyond the limits of a straight naturalistic approach. I have observed how often we are confronted with caricature, deformation and grotesquerie. Also, the use of the spoken language, with its interruptions, allusions, elipses and redundancies meant to reproduce the randomness of the train of thought, can be pushed so far as to acquire, at times, a certain quality of strangeness, which reminds us of the techniques of hyperrealistic stylization.

Social observation almost inevitably implies social criticism. And Rodrigues's indictment of the problems of Brazilian society is particularly violent. Just to cite some of his concerns, in a play like Black Angel, he deals with the question of racism; in Golden Mouth, the antagonism of social classes is strongly emphasized; the corruption of the police and the press is attacked in Widow, Yet Virtuous and Kiss on the Asphalt; the authoritarianism and power abuse of the capitalist tycoon is exemplified by J.B. in Widow, Yet Virtuous and by Werneck in Pretty, But Cheap. In the latter play, the venality and moral decadence of the high bourgeoisie is another target to the playwright's acid commentary.

Flora Sussekind analyses the debunking of the representatives of the cultural establishment in Widow, Yet Virtuous. She also makes an extensive examination of the

repressive role of the family, a theme which appears in almost every play. In fact, moral backwardness, intolerance and hypocrisy are some of the author's favorite subjects, brilliantly developed in plays like Kiss on the Asphalt, Dorotéia or All Nudity Shall Be Punished. The deterioration of the institution of marriage, as well as women's frustration as a consequence of machismo, too, are topics which Rodrigues liked to emphasize.

Even though, during his entire life, the playwright kept reaffirming that he was not interested in political theatre, (and he often manifested reactionary opinions through the press and even, initially, supported the military regime), it is clear that the frustration and failure of his characters cannot be explained only through his pessimistic view of human existence in the metaphysical sense. In a play such as The Seven Kittens, for instance, the loss of human dignity and people's easy corruptibility are clearly attributed to the pressures of social and economical injustice.

Aside from the elements of social observation and criticism, Nelson Rodrigues drew on the naturalistic tradition in several other aspects. I frequently pointed to his exploration of the effects of shock and sensationalism. His esthetics of an "unpleasant theatre," conceived for the mythic cycle, is described in his own words as follows:

Starting with Family Album, . . . I chose a path which can lead me everywhere but to popular success. Which path is this? Here is the answer: a theatre which may be characterized as "unpleasant." I write . . . "unpleasant plays." This classification applies also to . . . Black Angel and Lady of the Drowned. But why are they "unpleasant"? . . . Because they are pestilential, fetid plays, meant to spread typhus and malaria among the audience.⁶

Such a stern attitude of aggression and rejection towards the public appeared to be somewhat relaxed when the playwright started writing in the realistic mode. As we have seen, he wanted to recuperate the general acceptance which he had lost after Family Album. Yet, underneath the accessibility of realism, he continued to develop the same kind of characters, situations and themes. Incest, violence, abjection and aberration can be found in the realistic plays as much as in the mythic ones. The only difference is that all this matter was, then, treated along the lines of a more faithful reproduction of external reality and, thus, seemed less outlandish and more believable to the public. The provocative impact of Rodrigues's theatre, however, was by no means softened. For a long time, his new plays continued to arouse the wrath of the conservative and the intolerance of censorship. Yet, times changed, and, with the liberalization of social standards and the critical recognition of the esthetic value of his work, he gradually ceased to be an "auteur maudit" to become Brazil's most celebrated playwright. He never made any concession, however. Not once did he compromise with the bourgeois sense of propri-

ety. To the very end of his life, he kept perceiving theatre as an instrument of attack. In an interview published five years after his death, he stated:

In order to be a playwright, you cannot cater to the audience. That's why, twenty years ago, I used to call my theatre "unpleasant" and said that all theatre should be unpleasant. I was condemning the author's subservience to the audience.⁷

It seems that Nelson Rodrigues was proud of not being accepted. In a way, he cultivated this image of "maudit." He soon realized that playing such a role would certainly add to his popularity. Like any other playwright, he, undoubtedly, wanted his plays to be seen. His pretending not to care in the least about success was just another artifice to attract general attention:

For twenty years, I was Brazil's only obscene author. . . . I did what might be called suicidal theatre. Actually, I preferred to stay home writing more and more plays and praying God to make them flop. I am ashamed of being successful.⁸

He would also say about the audience:

It is the audience that spoils and infects the theatre. Great theatre, true theatre should only happen behind closed curtains, with no witnesses, nobody looking at it with critical eyes. Just a perfect communion of artists.⁹

Of course, these were just his typical outré statements, meant for effect. This way, he maintained his attitude of aggression and rejection. Yet, in his paradoxical fashion, he turned it to his advantage, by utilizing it as an instrument to obtain a more intense communication. In his view, the spectator should be

exasperated as at a bull-fight:

If piqued, the spectator becomes more sensible, more intelligent, more capable of grasping the mystery of theatre.¹⁰

Thus, in the playwright's words, the theatre is a place of torture for everyone, except, he observes, for the critics, who remain "protected inside the carapace of their natural stupidity."¹¹

It is evident that catharsis was a fundamental aspect of the theatre for Nelson Rodrigues:

[The effect of my work] is to purge. Fiction, in order to purge, must be atrocious. The characters are vile so that we remain pure. They act out our hidden misery. To save the audience, the stage must be filled with murderers, adulterous and demented people. It must be swept by a hord of monsters.¹²

The playwright is very clear about the purpose he is aiming at through this treatment of schock. He wants to stir up a wave of ". . . psychological and emotional reverberations, which must be worked out by the spectator in an inner process of psychic elaboration."¹³

Indeed, Rodrigues removes the spectator from his comfortable position as a voyeur of the drama, watching from the outside the degradation of fictitious figures. He stimulates a process of identification of the spectator with such characters, and, thus, he places him in the inside of his dramatic universe. According to Maria Helena Martins:

. . . Nelson Rodrigues works basically with the contents of the id, that is, with the most primitive

impulses which are common to every man. He deals with a pathological realm, in the sense that, in his characters, the ego is unable to find acceptable ways of satisfying the id. They are stuck in immature stages of personal development; they are incapable of spiritual growth. Rodrigues, thus, creates an extremely unpleasant theatre which treats of the unconscious desires and unresolved conflicts emerging from the deepest core of the self.¹⁴

Through his *dramatis personae*, Rodrigues sticks, in the spectator's face a mirror in which he is forced to recognize the dark, hidden side of his self. The author exposes things which we would like to deny, things we are ashamed of.

Yet, such things are not only those related to the psyche or to the collective unconscious. Rodrigues's plays were disturbing also because, as we have seen, they unmasked society's hypocrisy and decadence. In Tristão de Athayde's words, the playwright:

. . . provoked scandal as a means of revealing to society's eyes its most sordid aspects. His scandal . . . was meant maybe not so much to heal social disease, but, at least, to lead a community, unconscious of its corruption, to an attitude of self-recognition. He was not a moralist because his art was not edifying. . . . He wrote an immoral theatre. . . . as an instrument of punishment, the way it was conceived by the Roman Juvenal.¹⁵

Rodrigues's adoption of the naturalistic tradition translates also into an attitude of indulging in detailed description of triviality and in the exploration of bad taste, kitsch and vulgarity. This was used not only as another element of shock. It also functioned, as I pointed out many times, as a technique to deflate an excessively

inflamed dramatic atmosphere. When the scene risks to rise too far in the heights of melodrama, a little touch of banality brings it down to the low grounds of naturalism. Bad taste is regarded, by the playwright, himself, as a fundamental element in his work.

[Bad taste] contributed enormously to my work. In Lady of the Drowned, for instance, there's this person with the body covered by eczemas. . . . Gilberto Freire was the only member of the censorship committee not to be horrified by the word eczema. All the others were appalled... The influence of bad taste is a capital aspect of my work.¹⁶

I have examined Nelson Rodrigues's appropriation from the repertoires of melodrama and naturalism, which include aspects of dramatic structure, psychological and social characterization. Yet, the playwright did not borrow only the technical apparatus of these genres. Otherwise, he would have built but an external framework, devoid of all significance.

We know that the universe of melodrama is characterized by a rigid dualism: an irremediable opposition between good and evil, spirit and flesh, purity and degradation, earthly pleasure and transcendental values. The characters--heroes and villains--are either on one side or the other. There is no possibility of conciliation. They may change sides through sin or repentance, but there is no midpoint--a good man with weaknesses or a bad man with some good qualities, for instance.

Nelson Rodrigues's universe is also a dualistic

one. The problem is that his heroes have great trouble in finding their place in one of the opposite poles. They oscillate between an aspiration toward the transcendental values of purity, spiritual nobility and idealized love, and a morbid attraction vis-à-vis the material world, the world of the body, of the instincts, of sex, which usually leads them to abjection, degradation and destruction. It is impossible for such characters to harmonize these two tendencies. The dichotomy is absolute. With very few exceptions (Arandir, Edgard and Ritinha, Oswaldinho and Joyce), they succumb to temptation and are, thus, punished with a tragic downfall. The perfect ideals of melodrama, based on the triumph of spiritual values, find no place in a world dominated by the lowness of matter; the world of naturalism, in other words. Such a tension is at the core of Rodrigues's view of man and of the world.

FOOTNOTES

¹A Brazilian popular singer of the thirties and forties, who obtained enormous success, singing the most outrageously sentimental songs in a grandiloquent, operatic style.

²Coração de Mãe, Ontem Rasguei teu Retrato, two great hits by Vicente Celestino.

³For a long time, one of the most important radio stations of the country, whose popularity derived greatly from romantic soap operas, very much on the style of the nineteenth century melodrama. They are the origin of Brazilian TV soap opera, which, throughout the years, acquired a more "realistic" tone: naturalness in acting, verisimilitude in plot construction and in the reproduction of external reality, and liberality in the treatment of up-to-date topics. At the same time, under this apparently "modern" style, one can find all the basic devices of melodrama. Produced with extreme sophistication, Brazilian TV soap operas are receiving international recognition, not only in Latin America, but also in European countries and even in China.

⁴In Ele, 32, p. 49.

⁵D'Almeida et alii, Depoimentos V, p. 116.

⁶Rodrigues, "Teatro Desagradável," p. 18.

⁷In Pasquim, 814, 31, January 1985, p. 10.

⁸Quoted in the program of Teatro Carioca de Câmera production of The Deceased Woman.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 144.

¹¹Ibid., p. 144.

¹²In Ele, 32, p. 49.

¹³D'Almeida et alii, Depoimentos V, p. 125.

¹⁴Maria Helena Martins, Nelson Rodrigues (São Paulo: Abril Educação, 1981), p. 104.

¹⁵In Folha de São Paulo, 6, February, 1981.

¹⁶D'Almeida et alii, Depoimentos V, p. 132.

CHAPTER VII

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The View of Man and of the World

Amália Zeitel, in her essay: "Nelson Rodrigues, a Vital Author," observes that:

Undeniably, there is a sense of brutality in Nelson Rodrigues's vision of the human being. And, mainly, because you can translate his characters' behavior as: "I want it, so I do it." This type of impulsive and uncontrollable actions makes us think of a direct operation at the level of pulsions, for they are immediate and concrete actions. His characters solve their conflicts neither through symbolic mediation, nor through reflection, nor even through self-knowledge. In his plays, when someone turns out to be undesirable, the "elimination" of this person does not happen on a mental level of elaboration or comprehension of the dynamics of a relationship: it happens literally and concretely through death. They either kill the other, or kill themselves.¹

The critic points to an essential characteristic of the Rodriguean characters: their being dominated by the violence of passion, by obsession and madness. There is a strong denial, on their part, of rationality, of measure and equilibrium. Hence, their exacerbation, their paroxysm. They are moved by the most legitimate forces of human nature, those derived from the instinct. Yet, "they squander this heroic exuberance in their rash gestures."²

Thus, Rodrigues's characters, in their extravagance, are necessarily ugly. The author is interested in

the dark side of their nature, in the "psychology of the abyss," mentioned by Álvaro Lins. He affirms:

I have this urge to penetrate, to plunge inside the human being, to reach the bottom of his soul. I admit that art can show the beautiful side of human nature. Yet, there is the hideous side too. . . . the human being can only be saved if he is confronted with his own hideousness. And such is the function of my theatre: to recognize man's hideousness.³

Rodrigues's dramatis personae, at the same time as they pursue high moral values, experience a morbid delight in transgressing them. Morbidity comes from the fact that the pleasure derived from perversion never has a pure dionysiac quality. With the only exception of Widow, Yet Virtuous, pleasure is never exempt of shame and guilt. On the contrary, the more the characters delight in abjection, the more they suffer from a guilty conscience. Such suffering, at the same time, seems to add to the pleasure. They are caught in a vicious circle: surrendering to sin leads to guilt and, thus, to self-punishment through self-degradation, which, on its turn, creates pleasure and, thus, more guilt.

Sex is the strongest of all instinctive drives, hence, the most dangerous. In Rodrigues's plays, it is often incompatible with love, at least, with an idealized, romantic concept of love, adopted by his heroes. The playwright, himself, declares:

Everybody makes sex. A very small and special minority makes love. . . . Love can exist without sex. Sex is only a pretext. It should only happen when you're in love.⁴

The denial, on the part of the Rodriguean character, of the erotic libido, leads him to a negation of the body, of the senses, of physicality in general. As a consequence, self-punishment for yielding to the sexual impulse often comes in the form of physical mutilation or destruction. Such theme is greatly developed in a play like Dorotéia.

The decay or deformation of the body is, many times, utilized by the playwright as a metaphor of spiritual corruption. Physical anomalies also have the same function in several instances, such as Mr. Noronha's tearful eye in The Seven Kittens or the six-fingered man who rapes and kills Virginia's cousin in Black Angel. In the latter play, racial color is both a social stigma and a symbol of the dark, obscure forces of the human soul.

It seems that the abnormal, the aberrant, the exorbitant are Nelson Rodrigues's favorite material. Yet, the playwright affirms that he does not deal with the exception, but with the norm. Through his characters, he reveals human nature as it is in its essence.

People . . . used to ask me: "why aren't your characters just like everybody?" And I answered: "They are!" . . . Even Manuel Bandeira, who loved my plays, wanted my characters to be less repulsive. He didn't realize that he shouldn't blame me. Human nature is like that.⁵

When asked, in an interview, why his characters were all sick people, he retorted:

No, honey, they're just like everybody else. If you think that everybody is sick, then, they are too. In All Nudity Shall Be Punished, I wrote that the human

being is insane. The human being, mind you. Which means that, if everybody is sick, then, sickness doesn't exist.⁶

In another interview, Rodrigues comments on man's destructive impulses:

Killing is one of man's favorite sports. . . .
Man is a natural killer. . . . Man is a false
Narcissus who spits at his own image.⁷

Human relations, in fact, are defined, in Rodrigues's world, through conflict, antagonism and violence. We have observed the intricate mesh of movements of attraction and repulsion within the microcosm of the family, resulting, most of the times, in incest and crime. In the macrocosm of society, on the other hand, what we see is prejudice, corruption, economic exploitation, oppression and power abuse. Over and over again, the author complains, through his characters, of the absence of love in the world. Love relationships never seem to work. Solidarity does not exist. Personal links are characterized by envy, rivalry and mutual hostility.

In such a world, man is doomed to frustration and failure. He is incapable of being happy. That is why he must find an escape, some sort of compensation for his tragic destiny. Romance is Alaíde's solution in Wedding Gown. For many a character, it is the numbness of mental insanity. On the other hand, people like Zulmira, the Noronhas or Golden Mouth seek happiness in some frivolous or impossible ideal.

In any case, life is always absurd and meaningless in Nelson Rodrigues's plays. In one of his most famous statements, he said:

I believe that . . . man is lost. He is a tragic being, living within the narrow limits of love and death. Nothing can diminish human anguish. Even if you are a Rockefeller, if you have 800 yachts, fifty lovers and mansions at the French Riviera, you'll still be a miserable creature, you'll continue to live in hell. It's stupid to think that human anguish can be eliminated.⁸

And yet, such somber pessimism, stressed by fourteen tragic endings, out of seventeen plays, is counterbalanced by a stubborn belief in transcendental values, such as spiritual nobility, God, the soul, and by the hope of redemption through the attainment of such ideals. All Rodriguean characters yearn for transcendence, but very few seem to come close to it. In Nelson Rodrigues's drama, the nostalgia of the supernatural must exist in a world saturated with matter so thick and hard that it seems impossible to transcend it. Rodrigues's heroes, especially those of the realistic cycle, live in a realm where everything is very concrete, particular, trivial and contingent. It is the realm of the journalistic account, of the documentary, of the realistic photograph. They suffer because their hearts and minds aspire to an unreachable "beyond." Such an aspiration has, undoubtedly, a quixotic quality. As José Antônio Ferro states:

In Nelson Rodrigues's works, we find . . . men of our time living with passion the nostalgia of chivalry novels, of heathen divinities, of paradise. The tragic

aspect of his theatre resides in the fact that his characters, who possess a tremendous vital energy, as they refuse to live in the immediate human reality, squander such energy in their obstinate search and struggle for something to satisfy their nostalgia for a divine, heroic era.⁹

At the heart of Nelson Rodrigues's theatre, thus, lies this constant tension between materialism and idealism. This brings us back to the idea expressed at the conclusion of Chapter VI: that the essence of Rodriguean drama is the eternal struggle of the laws of naturalism against the forces of melodrama.

The Nature of Nelson Rodrigues's Realism

In my interpretation of Nelson Rodrigues's plays, I observed the anti-illusionistic quality of his work and commented on his use of presentational theatre techniques, such as non-realistic sets, imaginary props, symbolic stage actions, masks, choruses, slides and film projections. Dramatically speaking, the playwright constantly avoided the straight realistic narrative through the exploration of dramatic metaphor, poetic language, absurd and surrealist imagery, deformation and amplification, archetypes, stereotypes and caricature, alienation effects and self-quotation. But, most of all, instead of limiting himself to an imitation of external behavior, Nelson Rodrigues revolutionized Brazilian drama by projecting, for the first time on stage, the life of the subjective mind.

On the other hand, all this rejection of orthodox

realism, paradoxically enough, coincides with a taste for an accurate reproduction of the social environment. Such a tendency, which can be verified from the very first play, The Woman Without Sin, is maintained throughout the mythic cycle, as we have seen, and becomes one of the playwright's basic tools after The Deceased Woman.

However, for Nelson Rodrigues, being realistic meant much more than making a careful portrait of society. Reality, in his view, goes far beyond the external appearances. In his exploration of the subjective realm, mixing dreams, memory and fantasy, or in his technique of giving several accounts of the same episode, it seems that he is trying to confound the spectator, to hinder his decodification of the facts. Yet, what the author is aiming at is precisely to impede a superficial reading of things, so that a deeper layer of meaning can be unveiled. His method works in a paradoxical way: through hiding reality behind different masks, Rodrigues wants to unmask it more fully.

As a matter of fact, the playwright never considered himself a mere portraitist of reality. He thought that an excessive literary objectivity impoverished art:

If I have some merit, it's the fact that I belong to fiction. Actually, I don't see myself as an author committed to facts. . . . I rectify facts. I lend them a new dimension.¹⁰

Nelson Rodrigues's realistic style is but a surface appearance. He is a man of the imagination. He does pick

right out of life types and situations which look incredibly natural. That is his raw material. Yet, he submits it to a highly sophisticated process of deformation, of deconstruction and stylization. The sophistication derives from the fact that such process is not blatantly visible. The impression we get is that we are actually seeing a faithful imitation of life. Rodrigues's method may be called "processed realism." According to José G. Mendes, his theatre:

. . . wants to be real, in that it deals with topics drawn from common life and with people so true that they seem to have been fished right out of everyday reality. Yet, what we have is not reality as it is perceived by everybody. It is reality processed by a man who, on his turn, does not seem to be real and looks rather like a creation of his own hand.¹¹

For Nelson Rodrigues, "processing" reality means demystifying it, revealing what lies below the "false bottom" of things. His realism is based on the belief that the outer surface of life is but a façade meant to hide the essence of things. Human beings need to ignore such an essence because it is too frightening, too hideous for them. Obscure, primitive forces are brewing underneath. Their unleashing can be devastating. That is why society, so as to control life, must freeze it in a system of notions, concepts, norms and fixed values. For that, an ideology--a system of ideas--and an ethics--a code of behavior--have to be rigidly established. For Rodrigues, being realistic implies an exposé of all such hypocrisy.

A superficial reproduction of facts in the theatre would only reinforce the maintenance of the false apparatus which masks the deep core of reality. Nelson Rodrigues's drama is realistic not because it copies reality, but because it unveils it.

What lies underneath the veils--the nature of things, of human soul--is something beyond history. Thus, it is unchangeable, it is there for eternity. And it must be contemplated in full light, without fear. Rodrigues's theatre is revolutionary not in the usual sense, as a proposition of historical transformation, but as far as it accuses society of creating a system of lies which impede men from confronting their true face. According to Amália Zeitel:

As for the aspect of "play a part in History," it is true that we see his characters against a real social background: they have professions, they take taxis, they are part of a familiar social structure. In this, they differ from the characters of a Beckett or a Ionesco, for example, who live in some rarified atmosphere, better identified as "inside the psyche." But they are apart from History, in that they do not play a role in social conflicts (although they reflect them), but in a struggle between divine and demonic forces. Their time is the eternal present, in so much as they scorn the event as being of any value in itself and they act according to the mythical image behind it. Nelson Rodrigues's character is the common people with whom he was in such close contact during his years as a police reporter, and the common people are the unconscious of a nation.¹²

Nelson Rodrigues, thus, in spite of his harsh criticism against society, is not doing political theatre.

His work opens itself rather to a metaphysical, or more particularly, to an ethical dimension. It is a theatre which contemplates human nature and is concerned with its possibilities of transcendence and redemption. This is not to say that Rodrigues is a moralist, in the sense that he would teach moral lessons to reform humanity. It is hard to say, for one thing, to what extent his views on sexuality, contradictory as they are, result from personal obsessions or from an outlook on social behavior. It is possible that they are a mixture of both things. Yet, he never engages in any kind of proselytism. He is, indeed, concerned with the problem of good and evil, but he seldom knows where to place one or the other. In his plays, sex can be associated either with a principle of vital energy or with sin and corruption; sometimes, with both simultaneously, as in The Serpent. On the other hand, chastity can have the connotation of purity and spiritual elevation, or symbolize the rigidity of death. It does not matter, actually, on which side of the moral spectrum the author or his characters situate themselves. What counts is the dramatic tension resulting from the moral conflict, whatever it is, and, most of all, the superb theatricalization of such conflict, attained by the author's creativity.

It is true that Rodrigues, in his journalistic work, often supported bigoted views and reactionary positions. One has to admit that, in his drama, too, there is sometimes

a puritanical resonance in the severe way he chastens vice.

Yet, as Sábato Magaldi affirms:

. . . Nelson Rodrigues is a great fictionist in spite of his moralism. In other words, his talent as a fictionist breaks up the restraints of the moralistic outlook and offers a rich and revealing image of reality.¹³

Such is the nature of Nelson Rodrigues's realism, and the greatest quality of his theatre. It is a form of approaching reality through fictional procedures which are powerfully dramatic and beautifully theatrical. It is a highly critical type of realism, too, a passionate excavation of what lies underneath lies--the falseties created by human society: rules, customs, institutions, religions and ideologies, so as to conceal and stifle the strong undercurrents of life. Such undercurrents are what Rodrigues envisages as the essence of reality, which he wants to expose on stage. He sees them, in fact, as violent and dangerous, but he does not find they must be denied or suppressed. Their suppression, to him, is synonymous with death. They have, instead, to be acknowledged fully, and then, disciplined by a code of authentic ethical values. Yet, he by no means attempts to define such a code. As I have said, he is not a preacher. All he does is to claim the urge to find such values meant to transcend the pettiness and misery of existence. Otherwise, similar to his characters, men will continue to live in perpetual crisis, torn between an obligation to comply with the established

norms and a compulsion to shatter them. The playwright offers no solution to humanity's great moral struggle. We, spectators, of his theatre, offer no objection. All we want is the pleasure of admiring the tremendous spectacle of the struggle unleashed on stage by his extraordinary creative power.

NOTES

¹Amália Zeitel, "Nelson Rodrigues, um Autor Vital," Nelson 2 Rodrigues (São Paulo: SESC, 1983), pp. 6-7.

²Ibid., p. 8.

³D'Almeida et alii, Depoimentos V, p. 125.

⁴Van Steen, ed. Viver e Escrever, pp. 266-267.

⁵In Pasquim, 814, p. 8.

⁶Ibid., p. 10.

⁷In Gente, 52, September, 1980, p. 46.

⁸Quoted in the program of the Teatro Carioca de Câmera production of The Deceased Woman.

⁹José Antônio Ferro, "O Universo de Nelson Rodrigues," Nelson Rodrigues e o Eterno Retorno (São Paulo: Grupo de Teatro Macunaíma, 1980) p. A-2.4.

¹⁰In Ele, 30, July, 1978, p. 60.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 60-61.

¹²Amália Zeitel, "Nelson Rodrigues, um Autor Vital," p. 13.

¹³Magaldi, Preface to Teatro Completo, vol. 3, p.31.

APPENDIX 1

NELSON RODRIGUES AND THE STAGE

Nelson Rodrigues's first play, The Woman Without Sin, was premiered at Teatro Carlos Gomes, in Rio de Janeiro, on December, 9, 1942. Literary critics and theatre reviewers were impressed by the new playwright's innovations, especially those concerning the scenic projection of the protagonist's subjectivity and the colloquial tone of the dialogue. The staging, by Comédia Brasileira, however, was not considered suitable to the text, probably because the company still followed the old conventions of the theatre of the time. The critic Pompeu de Souza stated that the script was "assassinated" by the players.¹ In terms of audience response, the production drew very little attention.

The tremendous impact and success of Wedding Gown, on the other hand, was due to the fact that it was produced in more favorable circumstances. Os Comediantes were an amateur company which fought for the renovation of staging techniques. Under the leadership of the Polish director Zbigniew Ziemiński, with his experience of European avant-garde theatre, they gave a modern and, thus, adequate treatment to Rodrigues's play.

Ziemiński was capable of understanding the complex dramatic structure of Wedding Gown, with its alternation of planes, and rendering it in terms of stage action with clarity and poetic power. He was greatly helped by the set designs created by Santa Rosa, a painter influenced by European expressionism. Wedding Gown was hailed as a landmark in the history of Brazilian theatre.

Os Comediantes kept Wedding Gown for a long time in their repertory. Other stagings of the play were done in the fifties, but they all seemed to follow too closely the original production. It was Sérgio Cardoso, in 1958, (Rio de Janeiro, Teatro Bela Vista), who first devised a different treatment to the play. Cardoso avoided the visual expressionism of Santa Rosa's settings and divided the stage only into two planes: the plane of objective reality and the plane of subjectivity. The differentiation between memory and hallucination was obtained through lighting effects.

In 1976, Ziemiński attempted to reconstruct the original mise-en-scène at Teatro B.N.H. in Rio. Santa Rosa's sets were faithfully reproduced by the designer Fernando Pamplona. The production was considered as "dated" by the critics. Nonetheless, they saw it as a valid enterprise, in the sense that it aimed at the reconstruction of a "classic."

Family Album was released from the censorship ban on performance only in 1965. The stagings of the play

which were done thereafter, were more attuned to the modern theatrical methods. Martim Gonçalves's production, which premiered at Teatro Ateneo in Caracas, Venezuela, in September, 6, 1968, utilized abstract sets and movie projections. Jaime Barcelos's direction, presented at Teatro de Bolso, São Paulo, 1970, introduced a chorus of black dancers so as to emphasize the ritualistic elements of the play. Apparently, the great difficulty in these versions of the first work of the mythic cycle was finding a suitable acting style which combined a certain necessary realism to the expressionistic exacerbation of the characters' behavior.

In Sábato Magaldi's opinion, the first successful rendering of Family Album was attained by Antunes Filho (who directed the world-famous Macunaíma) in a production called Nelson Rodrigues e o Eterno Retorno,² presented at Teatro Anchieta, São Paulo, 1982. The director put together, in a single staging, the Album and The Seven Kittens, Kiss on the Asphalt, and All Nudity Shall Be Punished. Antunes's show, which arose great controversy will be discussed at the end of this appendix.

Ziemiński directed Black Angel and Dorotéia at Teatro Fênix, in Rio, in 1948 and 1950, respectively. Although the plays were given the same modern treatment as Wedding Gown, neither of the productions was successful. The plays of the mythic cycle would take time to become acceptable to the audience's taste and to the critics'

judgement.

Lady of the Drowned also had to wait for a release from the censorship ban to be put on stage. Its first production was directed by Bibi Ferreira for the Companhia Dramática Nacional, a company sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which attests to the prestige that the playwright had already obtained by the time.

The first staging of Waltz Number 6 was done by Henriette Morineau in 1951 at Teatro Serrador, Rio de Janeiro, with Dulce Rodrigues, the playwright's sister, playing the protagonist. The play was not easily understood by the audience, due to an excess of novelties introduced by the author, such as the absence of settings, the heroine's speeches to the spectators and her splitting into several other characters.

By the mid-fifties, Nelson Rodrigues had already acquired intellectual esteem. Popular acclaim, however, came only with the realistic plays. Even though he continued to experiment in terms of dramatic techniques, the audience's identification with his accurate portrayal of the social milieu and human types brought him an immediate popularity. The productions of the realistic works outnumber by far those of the mythic cycle. Some of them are worth mentioning.

As far as The Deceased Woman is concerned, for Sábato Magaldi, the best artistic achievement was attained

by Osmar Rodrigues's production at Teatro Popular do SESI, São Paulo, 1979. The director ignored the playwright's demand of an empty stage, and commissioned the sets to the famous designer Flávio Império. Império managed to give fluidity to the play's rapid succession of short scenes taking place in different locations, through the use of ramps, panels, curtains and props which slid, ascended or descended under an extremely mobile lighting design. Nelson Rodrigues, himself, who was always very strict about having his staging instructions followed, also found it the most significant stage version of The Deceased Woman.³

The scandal in the opening night of Forgive Me For You Betraying Me is described in the analysis of the play in Chapter V. Forgive Me was staged a few more times, but it is, no doubt, one of the less successful of Rodrigues's plays. Widow, Yet Virtuous had to wait for the TAPA production, directed by Eduardo Tolentino, (Teatro do SESC da Tijuca, Rio, 1983) to become a hit. Tolentino's merit was to disregard the critics' prejudice which considered Widow as a "minor" work. He revealed, for the first time, the anarchic and subversive implications of the play.

Ziemiński directed the first production of Golden Mouth for the state-subsidized Companhia Brasileira de Comédia at Teatro Federação, Rio, 1960. He also made the mistake of playing the title role. In spite of his acting talent, he was not able to make a convincing portrayal of a

typical carioca bicheiro, due to his European temperament and foreign accent. Milton Moraes replaced him the following year with much better results.

Kiss on the Asphalt, which opened at Teatro Ginástico, Rio, 1961, became a instantaneous hit. It was directed by Fernando Torres, and performed by Teatro dos Sete, possibly the finest theatre company of the country at the time. The role of Selminha was impersonated by Fernanda Montenegro, considered nowadays as "the first lady of Brazilian theatre."

All Nudity Shall Be Punished was also acclaimed by critics and spectators in Ziemiński's mise-en-scène at Teatro Serrador, Rio, 1967, whereas the two last plays, Anti-Nelson Rodrigues, directed by Paulo César Peréio (Teatro Nacional de Comédia, Rio, 1974) and The Serpent, directed by Marcos Flaksman (Rio, Teatro B.N.H., 1980) did not make a great impression.

Rodrigues's plays continue to be widely produced nowadays throughout the country. None of the recent productions, however, has caused so much sensation as Antunes Filho's Nelson Rodrigues and the Eternal Return. It obtained universal acclaim both in Brazil and in its European tour. Antunes believed that Rodrigues's famous "realism," that is, his portraiture of the carioca society, was but an external façade underneath which, richer layers of significance were hidden: the mythopoeic elements, which,

as we have seen, permeate the realistic cycle as much as the mythic works. Antunes criticized the superficiality of the Rio productions, which concentrated only on a faithful rendition of the "local color" and, thus, averted more fundamental elements. He made use of the Jungian theories about the archetypes of the collective unconscious to give intellectual support to his directorial concept and stripped the four plays of all the topicalities of the realistic style. He had, of course, to cut a great deal of the dialogue, not only to take off the abundant naturalistic detail, but also to give the show a reasonable length (it ran, nonetheless, for several hours). The result was impressive. All the magic, the fantasy and the poetry interwoven in the realistic tissue, emerged in theatrical images of incredible beauty.

The question that remains after Antunes's deconstruction of Nelson Rodrigues's drama is to what extent naturalism "conceals" the mythopoeic undercurrent (and thus, according to the director, should be completely discarded). Perhaps naturalism is the method consciously followed by the playwright, through which myth and poetry are revealed. My belief is that realism and myth do not necessarily run on separate tracks that contradict one another. They are, indeed, the two sides of the same coin. One does not have to be sacrificed so that the other can be illuminated. On the contrary, the glow of myth and

fantasy will shine better if reflected by the distorted mirrors of Rodrigues's naturalistic madhouse. Apparently, such a blending of myth and naturalism has not yet been achieved on the Brazilian stage. A theatrical solution, in which all the complexities and richness of Rodrigues's theatre are given equal importance, is still to be found. After so many years, Nelson Rodrigues continues to challenge the imagination and creativity of Brazilian theatre artists.

NOTES

¹Pompeu de Souza, Diário Carioca, 3, March, 1946, quoted in Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p. 140.

²Nelson Rodrigues and the Eternal Return

³Quoted in Magaldi, "Nelson Rodrigues: Dramaturgia e Encenações," p.174.

APPENDIX 2

NELSON RODRIGUES AND THE CRITICS

Nelson Rodrigues was--and perhaps still is--the most controversial of Brazilian playwrights. His work had a tremendous impact in the artistic and intellectual circles, not to mention its power of shock on the moralistic mentality of the period's bourgeoisie, attested by his continuous conflicts with censorship. The critical reactions to his plays were, thus, extremely varied. He was, at a time, acclaimed as the renovator of Brazilian drama, and condemned on esthetic, ethical and political grounds. In terms of moral and political ideology, he was considered puritanical and reactionary by some and pornographic and subversive by others.

The most violent attack against Rodrigues's theatre, as far as moral judgement is concerned, is contained in Fonseca Pimentel's essay O Teatro de Nelson Rodrigues, published in 1951, which was the first book entirely dedicated to the playwright's work.¹ It is a critical survey covering the first two plays and the whole mythic cycle. Pimentel praises the dramatic innovations in The Woman Without Sin and Wedding Gown, but is extremely severe in regard of the mythic plays. He accuses Rodrigues of dealing exclusively

with "abnormality and depravation"² in a "sordid, low and obscene" fashion.³ Referring specifically to Dorotéia, he affirms that the playwright's intention, in this play, was to denigrate "the respectable institutions of religion and the family."⁴ He even states his approval of the censorship ban on Family Album.

Rodrigues was seen as a reactionary by the left-wing intellectuals, not so much because of the analysis of Brazilian society expressed in his plays, which is undeniably extremely critical, but mostly due to his personal opinions manifested in his journalistic work. In fact, the playwright's stern anticommunism led him to give full support to the military dictatorship. The excesses of political repression, however, which fell upon many of his friends--artists and intellectuals--and also upon his son, Nelson Rodrigues Filho, accused of being a terrorist, made him, later on, reconsider his political viewpoints.

During the late sixties and early seventies, a period in which Brazilian theatre artists' basic concern was attacking the regime, Rodrigues's drama was not considered revolutionary enough. His plays undoubtedly exposed society's mechanisms of oppression and exploitation. Yet, the fact that his characters were essentially moved by irrational passions--and never became conscious of the state of degradation to which they were submitted by the social system--was unacceptable to the leftist playwrights, espe-

cially to those influenced by the Brechtian ideas. Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, one of the most important authors of "social theatre" once wrote:

Nelson Rodrigues, you are a reactionary.
 You expose human contradictions, it is true; but you see them as a consequence of the struggle between the rational and the natural and not as a conflict of consciences, generating the destruction of old values and the reconstruction of new ones. You negate rational knowledge, which is man's only weapon to survive . . . Your plays exalt the man who gives up his aspiration of mastering reality and decides to spend the rest of his life . . . hollering and pounding on his chest like an animal; a man who is perfectly content with his incapacity to think. . . . You exalt the man who has chosen not to be a man.⁵

In fact, as we have seen, Nelson Rodrigues is not concerned with the perspective of transforming society. Nowadays, when artists and intellectuals do not have anymore such strict and biased views on the social function of the theatre, the revolutionary content of Rodrigues's drama is recognized, not as a mere political statement, but as a stark exposure of the psychic mechanisms of repression and self and mutual destruction which men have developed throughout history in all forms of society.

Also esthetic criticism was often very harsh against Rodrigues's dramatic creations. He was accused of being excessively melodramatic, of inventing implausible characters and situations, of making concessions to popular taste and dealing with violence and sex for the sake of pure sensationalism. Many critics, educated in the European tradition of esthetic "elevation" and decorum, condemned his explora-

tion of bad taste, vulgarity and kitsch.

However, despite all such criticism on so many different levels, Nelson Rodrigues's contribution to the renovation of Brazilian drama has never been denied. His bold experimenting with dramatic structure, his introduction of colloquial speech in the dialogue, his delving into the realm of subjectivity, the extreme theatricality and, most of all, the poetic and dramatic power of his work were recognized and praised from his very first play throughout his entire career. In Tristão de Athayde's words, he accomplished, in the theatre, the modernist revolution which the other arts had undergone twenty years earlier:

Rodrigues arrived late, when the modernist turmoil had already gone through several stages. Yet, he came to stay. His works are perhaps even more creative and powerful than the poetic and fictional production of the twenties. With Nelson Rodrigues, theatre in Brazil became, together with popular song, the most significant artistic expression of the century.⁶

NOTES

¹Fonseca Pimentel, O Teatro de Nelson Rodrigues.
(Rio de Janeiro: Edições Margem, 1951)

²Ibid., p. 87.

³Ibid., p. 88.

⁴Ibid., p. 95.

⁵Quoted in Fernando Peixoto, Vianinha - Teatro -
Revolução - Política (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1983)
pp. 84-85.

⁶Tristão de Athayde, "Caminhos e Descaminhos," Folha
de São Paulo, 6, February, 1981.

APPENDIX 3

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON NELSON RODRIGUES

Nelson Falcão Rodrigues was born in August, 23, 1912, in Recife, a large city in the Northeast of Brazil. He came from a middle-class family of genuinely Brazilian ascendancy--Nelson, despite its Anglo-saxon origin, being a very common name in the country. In 1917, his family moved to Aldeia Campista, in the Northern suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

According to his sister, Dona Helena Rodrigues,¹ the family did not follow any particular religion. Yet, the young Nelson was fascinated by the pomp and spectacle of the Catholic rituals. Throughout his life, despite his rejection of any religious practice, he often stated his belief in God and in the existence of the soul.

In the Rodrigues family circle, there were strict rules of mutual respect and obedience to the elders. Dona Helena refers to Nelson's idealization of his mother's figure, whom he compared to the Virgin Mary. The father, on the other hand, seemed to be extremely severe. No vulgar speech nor swearing was tolerated in the house. This may be one of the reasons why, notwithstanding all the shocking ingredients of Rodrigues's plays, not a single

dirty word can be found in them, with the only exception of the last one, The Serpent. When The Serpent was written, vulgar speech since long was being used by other Brazilian playwrights.

Rodrigues's exposition to suburban life, thus, started in his early childhood. Yet, after a few years, the family left Aldeia Campista and moved to Ipanema, which was, at the time, a quiet sea-resort in the Southern section of the city. However, the fact that Nelson started working as a police reporter, at the age of thirteen, in his father's newspaper A Manhã,² kept him in permanent contact with the world of Zona Norte. Dona Helena observes that her brother's knowledge of this milieu is also due to the strong influence of his wife, Dona Stella, who was born and raised in the Northern suburbs.

Even after he started writing for the theatre, Rodrigues did not like to think of himself as an intellectual. Yet, he enjoyed the company of artists and writers and wanted his work to be recognized and appreciated not only by the masses, but also by the cultivated elite. His snobbish and even aggressive attitudes in regard of the cultural establishment (very frequent in his days of the auteur maudit) can be justified by the fact that he sincerely believed that his work was ahead of the times.

Nonetheless, even after he was raised to the status of a national artistic celebrity, Rodrigues continued to

pose as an enfant terrible, but now rather for the sake of sensationalism, knowing that this would surely add to his popularity. He developed a public image for himself: a person who was always "anti"-something: anti-conservative art or anti-bourgeois decorum, for example; and later on, as the bourgeoisie became more liberal and open-minded, he began to express puritanical views and reactionary opinions.

In regard to politics, Rodrigues always refused to adhere to any tendency, right, left or center, and repeatedly asserted his belief in individual freedom of thought, action and expression. His stern anticommunism was rooted in his abhorrence of any sort of authoritarian social system. Thus, he saluted the 1964 military coup-d'etat as a victory against communist totalitarianism and gave full support to the new regime. However, as he gradually started seeing his friends--artists, intellectuals, scholars, journalists, scientists, writers--being imprisoned, tortured or exiled, his views began to change. In 1969, his son, Nelson Rodrigues Filho, a militant in a leftist organization, was arrested, put to trial and condemned to fifty years of confinement. He then used all his prestige and access to the media to attack the regime and intercede for the victims of the political repression. He eventually succeeded in helping people, such as the novelist Antônio Callado, the dramatist Augusto Boal,

the literary critic Hélió Pellegrino and his own son, Nelsinho, to get out of prison.

It is difficult to say how much of an education Rodrigues had access to. He never went to college. Yet, very early, he was attracted to literature and music. His sister affirms he was an opera fan. He even wrote opera reviews in his father's newspaper. Following his contradictory temperament, he was also very fond of tango and other kinds of cheap, over-sentimental pop music. He read an enormous amount of fiction: Brazilian novelists of the nineteenth century, Émile Zola, Eça de Queirões and, most of all, Dostoiewsky, whom he regarded as the main influence on his dramatic work.³ This jack-of-all-trades also adapted classic novels for a children's magazine and even held for some time the position of literary critic at O Globo, one of Rio's biggest newspapers.

As far as dramatic literature is concerned, however, Rodrigues delighted in stating his total ignorance on the subject. Aside from the fact that Portuguese translations of classic drama were rare and usually very poor, we know that until the mid-forties, no play of a higher esthetic value was likely to be seen on the Brazilian stages. Besides, Rodrigues would never admit the idea of traveling abroad. He hated trips, and rarely left the city of Rio de Janeiro throughout his entire life. It was only towards the end of the decade, due to the sustained efforts of Os

Comediantes, in Rio, and the creation of Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, in São Paulo, that Brazilian audiences became acquainted with authors such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlink, Chekhov, Pirandello or Eugene O'Neill.

How can one explain, then, the fact that Nelson Rodrigues, since his early works, displayed a number of theatrical innovations which had never been seen before? He proudly explained it as a result of the intuitive power of his creative genius. But, of course, this is just half of the explanation. As international modern drama started reaching Brazilian stages, he was, no doubt, wise enough to absorb the new techniques and rework them in his own fashion. After all, this is the way artists work.

Nelson Rodrigues was always very reticent about his private life. He had two sons from his marriage with Dona Stella, and a daughter, who was born blind, from a liaison with a well-known actress. He attributed to his failing health the fact that, as he grew older, his dramatic output became more and more infrequent (there is a seven-year gap between All Nudity Shall be Punished - 1967, and Anti-Nelson Rodrigues - 1974, and his last play, The Serpent was written in 1979). He claimed not to have enough stamina to keep up with such demanding activities as theatre and journalism at the same time. And since he could not live solely on art, he was forced to sacrifice it. He died of a heart disease in December, 21, 1980, in his beloved city

of Rio de Janeiro. The whole country mourned the loss of its greatest playwright.

NOTES

¹All the information attributed to Dona Helena Rodrigues in this appendix, was recorded in an interview which I held with her in Rio de Janeiro, December, 17, 1985.

²The Morning.

³Nelson Rodrigues declared in an interview to Irineu Guimarães and Ib Teixeira: "Before I wrote Wedding Gown, I had read one single play: Joracy Camargo's Maria Cachucha. . . . However, a person who reads Dostoevsky learns a lesson in absolute theatricality." In Manchete, (xerox copy, without number and date).

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