Chapter 6

Total Theater and Missing Pieces

During the early days of 2005 a perplexing rumor began to wind its way through the artistic community in São Paulo. For over two decades José (Zé) Celso, the notorious director of an avant-garde theater company now nearly half a century old, had waged a relentless campaign against the even more notorious Sílvio Santos, a TV variety show host and entrepreneur who was systematically buying up the historic neighborhood of Bixiga. In interviews Celso stressed that the land where Bixiga stood had once been inhabited by Tupi Indians; during the colonial period it served as a refuge for runaway slaves, and in 1961, when Teatro Oficina built its first theater, it was still a working-class district made up of descendants of Italian immigrants. A few years later the theater was destroyed by fire, and in its place the group constructed a theater in the round with a revolving stage, where in 1967 it created history of its own with its controversial production of O rei da vela (The Candle King), a never-performed play from the early 1930s by Oswald de Andrade that raised the ire of the military dictatorship and helped spark the counterculture movement known as Tropicália. By 1979, Teatro Oficina had outgrown this structure, and so Celso enlisted the modernist architect Lina Bo Bardi to design a new corridor-like addition resembling an alleyway or a narrow city block. This building was now protected by its status as a national historic landmark. Yet the theater, one of several in the area, found itself hemmed in on all sides by properties belonging to Grupo Sílvio Santos, a vast conglomerate with interests in banking, agribusiness, cosmetics, hotels, and media whose owner was eager to further diversify its portfolio by building a vast shopping and entertainment complex—right on the doorstep of Teatro Oficina.

Imagine, then, the shock of Celso’s supporters when the wizened rebel announced he had cut a deal: Mr. Santos would build his megamall, but he would also fund the construction of a thousand-seat “stadium theater” inspired by Walter Gropius’s 1927 design for the TotalTheater in Weimar, complete with a ceiling made of retractable movie screens opening up to the tropical sky. Here, in the heart of Bixiga, Teatro Oficina would fulfill its director’s dream of developing a new mass dramaturgical form based on Oswald
de Andrade’s O homem e o cavalo (Man and the Horse)—another unperformed play from the 1930s, described by Celso as the “total surmounting” of Russian constructivism “blended with the Great Rituals that shape the Brazilian Mixed Races culture.”¹ The deal between Celso and Santos quickly collapsed, and it is possible the whole thing was just another “performance.” In an interview at the time, however, Celso betrayed no hint of irony. After decades of neoliberalism and defunding of the arts, the country was on the cusp of an economic and cultural renaissance with the socialist president Lula at the helm, the Tropicalist musician Gil Gilberto was the new minister of culture, and Brazil was at the forefront of a movement to create “another kind of capitalism . . . a revolution within capitalism itself [uma revolução no próprio capitalismo].” Imperialism still had to be defeated, as the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq showed. But in Celso’s ecstatic vision, “it is only through a total cultural experience, an experience that is not just cerebral but of the body and lived, the experience of another dimension of the individual human and collective human body—all of which the stadium can provide—that this revolution will be achieved.”²

This specter of a “total,” radically transformative performance dogs almost every discussion of and attempt to create “avant-garde” theater, and it shadows the very title of this book. In the opening scene of the first chapter, José Vasconcelos surveys a rehearsal for the inauguration of a “theater stadium” far more immense than anything Zé Celso could ever hope to construct (even with a little help from corporate capital). Using strikingly similar language, the founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico also evoked the idea of a synesthetic experience in which the division between mind and body blurs and all the races converge as actors and audience become one. The actual performance he oversaw at the stadium’s inauguration fell far short of this goal, as he well knew; but even so, mass theater had its historical moment in Mexico, and its intimate association with state power has tended to make it a foil for subsequent efforts to define the avant-garde. No such moment ever occurred in Brazil. Only in the 1960s did a new avant-garde generation make a push to create a theatrical performance so “total” it would retroactively subsume the stage that the modernista movement had been unable to transform and simultaneously catapult the country into the front ranks of the international avant-garde. O rei da vela was raucous and irreverent, and Teatro Oficina’s production spilled off its revolving stage and aggressively assaulted the spectators’ senses. But a far greater challenge remained: the first theatrical text Oswald de Andrade wrote after his turn to radical politics, O homem e o cavalo was a shocking, colossal “spectacle” that might have changed the course of (avant-garde) history had its performance not been repressed by the law. Celso first organized a dramatic reading with 150 participants in 1985, the year the military dictatorship came to an end; yet despite his periodic
efforts to stage the piece, he and others continue to deem its performance incomplete.

In his introduction to the 1990 edition of *O homem e o cavalo*, the eminent theater critic Sábato Magaldi echoed the view already popularized by Celso when he wrote that the play represented Oswald de Andrade’s most ambitious attempt to create a “total theater”—a visionary project that, “by virtue of being at the forefront of its era, hardly even seems to belong to the reality of Brazilian theater.” From this vantage point, Oswald’s drama appears to be the harbinger of a theatrical revolution that never made it across the Atlantic, the missing piece of a movement that shook the aesthetic ground of literature, music, architecture, and visual art but left the nineteenth-century stage intact. Magaldi, Zé Celso, and others insist that Oswald’s reputed plan for a “stadium theater” capable of closing the gap between art and action was of a piece with Max Reinhardt’s expressionist experiments, the Bauhaus TotalTheater project, Vladimir Mayakovský and Vsevolod Meyerhold’s constructivist montages, and the theater of cruelty imagined (if never enacted) by Antonin Artaud. Invoking a discourse endemic to critical accounts of the European and Euro-American avant-garde, they celebrate *O homem* as a valiant effort to mobilize the masses by blending popular performance traditions with the erudite genres of the elite and opening up the hallowed halls of bourgeois theater to new artistic media such as film to create a performance that would be nothing less than “total.”

This chapter reverses the terms of such interpretations by examining the ideal of total theater through the optic of Oswald de Andrade’s ill-fated spectacle and the events leading up to its nonperformance. Discussions of total theater almost invariably start by tracing a genealogy of the phenomenon, and this one is no exception: after a brief reflection on its importance for more recent iterations of the avant-garde, I retread the well-worn trajectory of artists and projects associated with this nebulous ideal in order to tell a different story of diverse and often divergent attempts to reconfigure the agency of art in relation to the new technologies of mass culture, mass political movements, and the expanding powers of the modern state. These issues came to a head in the 1930s, not only in Europe but also in Brazil, where the “Revolution” of 1930 led to the rise of Getúlio Vargas and deepened the ideological rifts among artists identified with the modernista movement; yet unlike in the Old World, factors including race, the relative weakness of state institutions, and the limitations of capital on the semi-periphery continued to stand in the way of avant-garde theater. Following my exploration of this absence and its legacy, I delve into the archives of the political police and make recourse to other ephemera in order to reconstruct the story of the “modern artists’ club” where *O homem e o cavalo* had its genesis. Only then, after telling the tale of the dramatic shutdown of the club’s experimental stage, do I venture a reading of Oswald’s stymied “spectacle.”
Pushing back against the total theater narrative, I argue that this awkward, obstreperous work is more akin to Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of the Trauerspiel.

Benjamin published his rejected dissertation on the Baroque Trauerspiel, or “mourning play,” only a handful of years before O homem e o cavalo failed to appear onstage. Like total theater, the Trauerspiel of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was imagined as stylistically eclectic and geographically expansive in scope; in fact, later German critics regarded Shakespeare and Calderón de la Barca as its most brilliant exponents while shrinking in embarrassment from the bombastic and overly extravagant examples of their compatriots, whose texts were so unwieldy it was assumed they were only intended to be read. Benjamin disagreed, and he insisted that far from being a remake of Greek tragedy (as his predecessors had claimed), the Trauerspiel should be understood as an attempt to wrest a secular drama out of the medieval mystery pageants and reenactments of the Passion of Christ staged by the Jesuit evangelists. In the works of the German dramatists this process remained uneven and incomplete: unable to transcend the mundane materiality of the stage and resolve the vertiginous contradictions of the Baroque with a stunning apotheosis, the minor masters of Saxony and Silesia were embarrassingly unsuccessful in the quest to create a modern-day miracle through the power of spectacle. Yet in failing to overcome the condition of immanence, their hyperbolic, strangely morbid plays also remain true to a certain “allegorical intuition” characteristic of the era; in them, the exuberant pomp of baroque art betrays its own transience and lack of freedom, and “the false appearance of totality is extinguished.”

Although Benjamin neglects to mention it, the Passion plays he cites as sources for the Trauerspiel were also important in the colonization and Christianization of the New World—a fact that partly explains why O homem e o cavalo adopts this same genre as a model. But Oswald de Andrade (like Benjamin) was not only concerned with the dramatic specters of centuries past: he also had his sights set on the changing politics of mass culture and the moves toward what the legal scholar Carl Schmitt would theorize as the “total state.” Contrary to Zé Celso and others who rescued this play from oblivion, I argue that in bringing the aesthetic paradigm of total theater head-to-head with a historical narrative of imperialism, O homem e o cavalo redeploys many of the formal and thematic traits associated with the avant-garde in order to posit a very different model of art—one premised on the work’s incompletion and its incompatibility with a “revolution within capitalism itself.” Benjamin argued for the world-historical significance of a group of ungainly, overwrought plays by forgotten writers far from the main metropoles of international empire and commerce; in a similar spirit, this final chapter suggests that the best place to begin to revise the vexed legacy of total theater might be in a country where what is most notable about it is the missing pieces.
Making Theater “Total” / Theatricalizing Totality

For months, over the summer and fall of 1933, the unusual cross-section of intellectuals, entertainers, and political instigators who frequented a certain “club for modern artists” in São Paulo had observed preparations for the new Teatro da Experiência, a project its participants trumpeted as the most daring theater experiment the country had yet seen. On the program for the opening night was *O homem e o cavalo*, a “Spectacle in Nine Tableaux” by Oswald de Andrade. It was an ambitious undertaking for a group of amateurs: the dramatic action ranged from St. Peter’s pearly gates to a Soviet tribunal, while its huge cast of characters included Cleopatra, talking horses, Madame Jesus, the Voice of Stalin, Fu Manchu, and a Poet-Soldier who casually announces Hitler’s imminent genocide of the Jews. As fate would have it, the author failed to finish the script in time, and the theater made its debut with *O bailado do deus morto* (Dance of the Dead God), a ritualistic drama created by the architect and artist Flávio de Carvalho in collaboration with the samba composer Henricão and performed by an almost entirely black cast. (Only the titular dead god was white.) On November 16, 1933, after an entire battalion of police officers showed up uninvited for the third performance, the premises were shut down and placed under armed guard. *O homem e o cavalo* never made its debut, and the might-have-been revolutionary masses never got their chance to witness the grand spectacle of world history on a small São Paulo stage.

What exactly did they miss?

In identifying what would and should have occurred as a singular act of “total theater,” latter-day critics and directors not only claim Oswald’s work as a missing link to the international avant-garde of its own era but also conscript it as a predecessor to the experiments of subsequent artists who claim the avant-garde mantle. The language of totality was a recurring motif among the “historical” avant-gardes, but only in the 1960s did the term “total theater” gain momentum as a way of lending coherence to disparate projects and creating continuity in the avant-garde tradition of rupture. The concept was embraced by groups such as the Living Theater, which collaborated with Teatro Oficina during an extended sojourn in Brazil in 1970–1971 (cut short by its members’ incarceration and eventual deportation): invoking the legacy of Artaud, the Living Theater took its act into the favelas as part of its effort to push theater beyond its limit to the point where it became “life.”

According to the performance studies guru Richard Schechner, figures such as Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Foreman, Laurie Anderson, and the Mabou Mimes fulfilled the dream of total theater—a dream first articulated by Richard Wagner—by sidelining the text and dissolving all distinctions among media and arts. More recently, it has become a buzzword in scholarly work on African theater, and figures such as the Chinese expat and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian have also used the phrase as a means of framing their own
incorporation of non-European (often ritualistic) performance traditions into the trajectory of the international avant-garde. But if the desire for intercultural communication represents one vector of total theater, another is its association with the drive for national sovereignty. Like Schechner, most who invoke the idea trace it back to the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, a “total work of art” in which music, poetry, and dance were imagined as merging to form an organic unity. Wagner’s “theater of the future” arose out of the convergence of nationalism and popular politics that George Mosse has called the “nationalization of the masses”—a process that “transformed political action into a drama supposedly shared by the people itself”—and its development followed the twists and turns this phenomenon took, as the composer joined the failed democratic-republican revolution of 1848–1849 and then threw his weight behind the movement of conservative nationalism that culminated in the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. Man’s mind, Wagner warned, had been “fragmented” by the mechanization and commodification of modern life; his own Völkisch productions at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (which had been liberated from the constraints of the market by royal patronage) were designed to heal these rifts by crafting absorptive illusions through the use of elaborate stage mechanics, all carefully concealed so that “the public, that representation of daily life, forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork, which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage, which seems the wide expanse of the whole World.”

In his humbler moments (which were rare) Wagner conceded that his works never achieved such expansive aims. Still, in the decades following his death, the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk quickly breached the bounds of the theater as figures such as Mallarmé, Schoenberg, and Kandinsky sought to turn cinema, painting, poetry, sculpture, architecture, music, and even the novel into an arch-medium for the total work of art. Often, it is said to find its most fertile ground at the cusp of new media technologies: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno derided television as a synthesis of radio and film that would take the commodification of culture already at work in Wagnerian opera to an apocalyptic level, and recent genealogies of the Gesamtkunstwerk point to videogames and virtual reality as its latest frontier. But theater has always been its ground zero—the site where the drive to integrate all elements of production and reception has to contend with the agency of actors and the obstacle of a physical and/or conceptual stage. In Russia, the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 initially opened up new arenas of action for formal experimentalism: mass dramas and reenactments such as The Mystery of Freed Labor and The Storming of the Winter Palace were performed by thousands on the streets, while the playwright/director duo of Mayakovsky and Meyerhold sought to create an “October in the theater” by incorporating elements of the circus, commedia dell’arte, and medieval mystery pageants into the production of futurist-inflected plays
such as Mystery-Bouffe, a farce about the proletariat’s rise to power. Meyerhold’s protégé Sergei Eisenstein staged Sergei Tretyakov’s Gas Masks in a gasworks factory, where the “element of actuality” became so palpable that, as the director later stated, it “finally had to leave an art where it could not command” and pushed him over the brink, “through theater to cinema” (and eventually on to “the phase of socialist realism”).

All of these artists were influenced by Wagner, but none used the term “total theater” on a consistent basis (as a matter of fact, neither did Wagner), and the drive to assimilate them into a single teleological tradition overlooks the fact that not all “totalities” are alike: competing conceptions of totality proliferated among the European avant-gardes, and even similar ideas and techniques had different implications depending on the offstage reality in which they were meant to intervene. In France, Antonin Artaud envisioned his metaphysical theater of cruelty as a “total spectacle” that would “make space speak,” though he was notoriously unsuccessful in bringing his projects to fruition. A similar fate befell the TotalTheater project developed during the late 1920s in Weimar Germany by the director Erwin Piscator and members of the Bauhaus school—the utopic plan that inspired Zé Celso’s as-yet-to-be-realized celluloid stadium in São Paulo. The Bauhaus’s emphasis on craft and design was a socialist-inspired attempt to wed functionalism and beauty, but it also gave the school a pipeline to Weimar’s burgeoning industrial class and thus a degree of autonomy from unreliable state funding. Piscator’s “proletarian theater” drew on elements of popular musical revues, the mass pageantry of early Soviet theater, and technological innovations including mobile footways and stages, loudspeakers, and film projections. A key component was the reconfiguration of theatrical space: architect Walter Gropius drew up plans for a monumental hall for two thousand spectators seated on movable blocks of chairs, an arrangement intended to facilitate performances that would spread throughout the entire auditorium and incorporate the spectators. Like its predecessor, this radicalized version of the Gesamtkunstwerk was conceived as an organic whole, though its constitutive elements were manifestly mechanical and the object of its impact was the intellect; according to Piscator, his goal was to “dematerialize the stage by means of a total technique, to make it a light and flexible instrument destined to serve mind and not sentimentality.” Jeffrey T. Schnapp explains that for Piscator, “the revolution was embedded somewhere in the real itself. The theater’s task was simply to strip away all externals and to place that rough and ready reality directly onstage.” Totality, in other words, meant an immediately perceptible “totality of effect.”

The 1929 stock market crash put a halt to construction plans, and as the 1930s wore on TotalTheater became an ever more fraught strategy for the Left. Even before Hitler became chancellor in 1933, the Nazis laid claim to the legacy of Wagner and the infrastructure of civic performance to develop their own mass rituals, open-air theaters, and choreographed parades—aspects of
the “aestheticization of the political” that Benjamin identified as the modus operandi of fascism. Schnapp traces the TotalTheater model’s migration to Italy, where it was embraced as kindred in spirit to Mussolini’s proposed “theater of masses,” and as theoretical confirmation of futurist experiments as well as state-sponsored traveling pageants involving hundreds of performers and up to fifteen thousand spectators. His narrative ends in Rome in October 1934 at a conference held by the Italian Academy and attended by such diverse figures as Edward Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau, Alexander Tairov, Filippo Marinetti, W. B. Yeats, and the special guest, Walter Gropius himself, all speaking a shared language of total theatricality. Noting the “ideological drift and blurring” that facilitated surprising “cultural convergences” across national boundaries (83), Schnapp suggests that artists on opposite sides of the political divide responded to a perceived crisis of bourgeois theater by creating new forms of mass spectacle that fueled what he calls a “modernist politics of immediacy” (89).

Schnapp attributes the search for “total” aesthetic solutions to a postwar milieu in which religion was on the wane and the new technologies of war and peace were calling humanist assumptions into question. As he might also agree, however, these factors were in turn linked to the instability of the global market as well as a shift in the dynamics of capital accumulation marked by the rise of the United States as an axis of economic power. In Brazil, as the two previous chapters detailed, the emergence of the modernista vanguard took place on a stage set by the coffee export boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which transformed the city of São Paulo and its surroundings into a mecca for immigrants from Italy and other countries suffering the fallout from their own economic adjustments. The storied Week of Modern Art in February 1922 was held in the same opera house where the local elite customarily converged—a decision that in hindsight accentuates the ambivalence of the artists’ break with the past and the absence of theater (experimental or otherwise) among the arts on display. For many of the participants, Wagner was not a specter to be shaken or surpassed but a sign of what (despite advances in the other arts) Brazil had never achieved: almost all the operas and singers who performed at the Theatro Municipal came from Europe, and the one famous Brazilian opera composer from the nineteenth century had debuted his foundational romance about white-settler-on-indigenous love in Milan. Like the stark divides of class, region, and race, these cultural displacements were imposing obstacles to any illusion of immediacy or totality; so too was the lack of institutional support for culture, as Mário de Andrade and others argued as modernismo splintered into opposing factions and its “heroic” first decade came to a close.

This would begin to change after the Wall Street debacle triggered the near-collapse of the coffee economy and the weak republic gave way to the Revolution of 1930. Prompted by the breakdown of the “coffee with milk”
alliance between the elites of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, the revolution was a bloodless coup d’état led by military officials who ousted the president Washington Luís (a former governor of São Paulo) and prevented the inauguration of the president-elect (another paulista) before handing over power to Getúlio Vargas, an opposition candidate from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Vargas set up a provisional government and immediately made moves to rein in the regional oligarchies by replacing state governors with federally appointed *interventores*—one of many infringements on the privileges São Paulo had come to acquire that led its squabbling elites and some sectors of the middle class to join forces in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932. In response Vargas agreed to convocate a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, which was ratified in 1934. Legal order, however, would prove to be short-lived: in 1935, following a failed “communist conspiracy,” the state suspended all civil liberties, and in 1937 Vargas declared the Estado Novo, a corporatist dictatorship that lasted until shortly after World War II.

More than five decades after his second stint in office ended with his suicide in the face of a military coup, Vargas is still an object of collective ambivalence and even affection. Although he appealed primarily to the middle class and emerging sectors of business and industry, he also granted women the right to vote and instituted the first workplace protections as well as social security and retirement pensions; on a less progressive note, he subordinated trade unions to the authority of the state, restricted the employment of non-native Brazilians, and sponsored the torture of political opponents by the secret police. During a few key years in the mid-1930s his government was cordial with Mussolini and Hitler and notably chummy with the Ação Integralista Brasileira, the fascist party founded by the modernista poet Plínio Salgado in 1932, though it eventually curtailed the actions of the Integralists and the numerous fascist immigrant organizations, and the need to remain on good terms with the United States eventually led Brazil to support the Allies in World War II. Nothing like the sweeping cultural reforms in Mexico was ever on the table, and the state’s investment in education remained limited; yet in other areas, as the historian Daryle Williams has shown, it “made cultural management its official business” by creating an extensive network of patronage and crafting new regulatory legislation. In 1933 the federal government became the official sponsor of Rio’s annual Carnaval parade, and it regularly paid popular musicians to act as its unofficial publicists. Meanwhile modernista artists of all political stripes were given positions in the new Ministry of Education, while government agencies generated outwardly apolitical, cultural journals that drew in writers who had long lamented the dearth of forums for their work. In a speech delivered in 1951, Vargas aptly summed up the avant-garde myth his government had helped create, claiming that “the collective forces that provoked the revolutionary modernist movement in Brazilian literature . . . were the same ones that precipitated the
victorious Revolution of 1930 in the social and political field.”

The state recast modernismo’s experimental ethic as an authentic expression of the popular and prescient precursor to political change while also circumscribing the movement to the literary realm so as to harness its iconoclastic edge.

Oswald de Andrade belonged to the landowning elite of São Paulo, but like a number of other dissident members of his class, he responded to the decline of the coffee economy and the growing political polarization by veering to the left. In 1931 he joined the Brazilian Communist Party, and along with his new wife Patricia Galvão (Pagu), he launched a journal called O Homem do Povo (Man of the People), which lasted for eight issues before being censored by the police. Two years later the erstwhile dandy bid a public adieu to his past in the preface to his experimental novel Serafim Ponte Grande, completed in 1928 but left unpublished until 1933. In the brief text, he lambastes modernista bohemians for masquerading as agents of social revolution, recalling that in the heady environment of the 1920s, “the modernist movement, culminating in the anthropophagic plague, seemed to indicate an advanced phenomenon. . . . It even looked like the coffee boom might set the semicolonies’s nouveau riche literature on a level with costly imperialistic surrealisms.”

Those illusions crumbled in the face of the economic crisis, “just as almost all Brazilian ‘vanguardist’ literature crumbled, being provincial and suspect if not extremely impoverished and reactionary” (5).

The writer would later qualify this harsh judgment. Yet it would be a mistake to interpret it as a rejection of stylistic experimentation as such, or to dismiss it, as Fernando J. Rosenberg does, as a “theatrical self-accusatory gesture” that “paradoxically seems to save Oswald from any real subjective involvement.” This choice of words hints at the fact that Rosenberg’s own advocacy of a specifically literary “cosmopolitanism” is in part a disciplinary defense against what Loren Kruger calls the “impure autonomy” of theater. As an art that requires the presence of a collective audience, as well as a social and material space in which to perform, theater presents greater obstacles to modes of interpretation that attribute a progressive function to works of art on the sole basis of their symbolic representation of social relations. In fact, the true aim of Oswald’s critique is what Herbert Marcuse would refer to only a few years later as the “affirmative” nature of bourgeois culture, which often entertains the possibility of an alternative to the existing order but ultimately legitimates the status quo by offering “spiritual” progress and “ethical” freedom as consolation for oppression and material lack. The author derides his own novel for proposing the facile solution of “transnational nudism” to the structural inequalities produced by economic imperialism and announces that, having tired of being an “upper-class clown,” he will henceforth aspire to be, “if nothing else, a circus roustabout in the Proletarian Revolution”—a kind of stagehand, in other words, who would rearrange the set and fashion props to facilitate the working class in performing its own creative feats in the political ring.
As was true of other Latin American avant-gardists during the 1930s, Oswald’s political radicalization did in fact prompt a turn to theater. In an article published in 1935, the author explains that *O homem e o cavalo*, his first full-length play in Portuguese, “is a piece of high fantasy in which I place man in the transition—between the war horse and turf horse (bourgeois society) and horsepower (socialist society).” For this reason, it was “a book of interest to the masses.”

Yet the limited print run and low literacy rates in Brazil at this time most likely circumscribed its audience to a small group of intellectuals. His plays *O rei da vela* (The Candle King, 1934) and *A morta* (The Dead Woman, 1937) met a similar fate. It was not until 1967 that Teatro Oficina’s landmark staging of *O rei da vela* became a flashpoint in the birth of Tropicália, whose unofficial spokesman Caetano Veloso adopted Oswald’s notion of anthropophagy as a paradigm for the movement’s cannibalizations of Brazilian popular culture, avant-garde stylistics, and mass media pop. According to the director Zé Celso, *O rei da vela* had been written under one “modernizing dictatorship” and was being staged under another more than thirty years later; his task, then, was to create a “revolution in form and content to express a non-revolution,” jumbling the styles and icons of past and present in a cynical pageant of the “non-history” of Brazil. The military coup of 1964 had unmasked the impotence of the populist politics pedaled by the institutionalized Left, so Celso would change the rules of the game by psychically obliterating those who seemed to be blocking theater’s access to the masses: its middle-class audiences. In his words, “If we take this public as a whole, the only way of enacting an efficacious political process upon it lies in the destruction of all its defense mechanisms, all its Manichean and historicist justifications—even when they are based on Gramsci, Lukács, and others. It is about putting it [the audience] in its place, reducing it to zero.”

A few critics were more circumspect, pointing out that in pursuing this scorched-earth approach Oficina was also being drawn into the belly of the beast; after all, the production was the first in the company’s nine-year history to be subsidized by the state. Celso and others insisted such concessions were necessary to make innovative theater under the current conditions. Furthermore, hidden strings were irrelevant since the political impact of the play’s performative transgressions derived directly from what they characterized as Oswald’s own aesthetic: a “supertheatricality, the overcoming of even Brechtian rationalism by means of a theatrical art that is a synthesis of all the arts and non-arts, the circus, show, revue theater, etc.” Teatro Oficina brought the kitsch of Carmen Miranda and tacky TV personality Chacrinha onto the stage and sent the play’s outlandish characters spilling over into the audience in a calculated attack on the spectators’ senses inspired by the “cruelty” of Artaud. Following acclaimed tours of Brazil the show played at international festivals in Florence and Nancy, and it opened in Paris on May 10, 1968—the very evening of the legendary Night of the Barricades, the violent battle between student
strikers and police that mobilized the Parisian public and led to a real, would-be revolution. Celebrated as the moment when Brazil’s theatrical vanguard finally came into its own, O rei da vela’s deferred debut established Oswald’s reputation as a playwright who, as one of the principal actors wrote, “opens a path toward a national theater, a total theater, that is only now properly understood.”

But on what grounds is Oswald’s theater identified as the missing piece of a national avant-garde? There are surprisingly few detailed analyses of the texts or the events surrounding their nonperformance—though perhaps this is not so surprising, given that total theater aims to render both text and stage obsolete. Instead, the most common touchstone for such claims is a fictional dialogue by Oswald published in a daily newspaper in 1943. “Do teatro, que é bom” begins with an unnamed speaker’s defense of an amateur group engaged in what his partner derisively refers to as “chamber theater.” Speaker number one insists that such efforts should be applauded, if for no other reason than that “they give us a break from the cinema, that growing stupidification by means of the screen with which the United States flooded the world in order to take it over without resistance.” Voicing an Adorno-esque critique of the culture industry, he scoffs that “when they spoke against the opium of the people, they should have made it plural and added cinema and soccer” (85). His interlocutor, however, takes issue with this extrapolation from Marx and contends that what is needed is a “theater of shock,” a “stadium theater” that, along with radio, the sports arena, and the silver screen, will educate and entertain the growing masses. Tracing the history of theater from its inception in ancient Greece, he claims that in the nineteenth century, with the rise of bourgeois individualism, what was lost was “the religious character of the theater, the collective festival, festival of the masses, festival of the people” (90). His list of exemplary figures includes Ibsen, Jarry, Cocteau, and in particular Meyerhold, whose “ethic of spectacle” is lauded as the pinnacle of modern theater. This leads into a discussion of “the war-like image of fascism” cultivated by the acolytes of Stalin and “the petty-bourgeoisie of Mussolini, nursed by bureaucracy and the confessional, wanting to live dangerously in a sensational release of inhibitions” (91–92). His proposed antidote to this attack on the “Hegelian progression of the spirit” is not primarily a playwright (though Oswald may have in mind his famous Pageant of the Paterson Strike): it is the journalist and globetrotting radical John Reed. The text concludes with the first speaker, who has long since tempered his enthusiastic embrace of chamber theater, declaring that “John Reed’s soldier fulfilled his mission on the living stage of contemporary history” (92). Art and history merge, onstage and offstage become one, and thesis and antithesis are resolved in the total transformation of reality.

Or are they? The dialogue’s self-mocking tone calls into question the ease with which the final synthesis is achieved, while the references to contemporary political realities hint at a more serious subtext: Oswald, always
unorthodox, had distanced himself from the Communist Party by this time and would break away two years later, in 1945; Stalin, denounced in the dialogue as a “villain,” had executed Meyerhold three years earlier for his refusal to toe the social realist line; and in Brazil, meanwhile, the Vargas regime was paying samba musicians to sing its praises. The use of the dialogue form is significant, then, because it enacts an unresolved debate in leftist circles and indicates that the outcome is not a done deal. At one point, for instance, the speaker who sings the praises of “chamber theater” points to advances in stage design and cites the work of the French director Louis Jouvet, who spent the early 1940s in exile in Brazil; calling it an “admirable reaction against the corruption brought about by the cinema,” he explains that “sensing itself under attack, the theater improved,” producing intimate theaters that provided a refuge for “the spirit of that fabulous Paris, which that forest ranger Hitler’s filthy boot is unsuccessfully trying to crush.” Rather than refuting this implicit equation of mass culture with fascism, his partner brings up Meyerhold and a long list of earlier playwrights-of-the-people, ending with the comment that “one day, perhaps soon, we may be able to add, in an honest sense, Wagner and Oberammergau” (87). The argument for the revolutionary nature of mass theater thus leads to two disturbing counterexamples that signal its potential as a vehicle for reaction: a composer celebrated by the Nazis as an icon of German nationalism, and a Bavarian village famous for its centuries-long tradition of a massive, day-long Passion Play—famous, too, for the anti-Semitic nature of the pageant and Hitler’s ringing endorsement of it.

Only by turning a blind eye to these apparent impasses that trail off into ellipses is it possible to read this pseudo-Platonic dialogue as a programmatic manifesto for total theater; its relation to O homem e o cavalo becomes even more complex when one realizes that “O teatro” was written nearly a decade later, at a time when, after several frustrated attempts to stage his own plays, Oswald was no longer writing theater at all. Even if we take the advocate of stadium theater to be the unequivocal mouthpiece for the author, his pedagogical injunction to “educate the world” is light-years away from the contumacious circus laborer of the Serafim preface. The two speakers define their framework as international, but the specter of the nation is inescapable because a stumbling block stands in the way of the dialectic’s progression: not just the historic wax and wane of fascism, but the concurrent rise and reification of Brazil’s corporatist state.

A Club of “Modern Artists”?

In drawing parallels between their own situation and the conditions under which Oswald wrote his plays, Zé Celso and others tended to paint the 1930s with a broad brush, equating the entire decade with the Vargas dictatorship.
There is a grain of truth to this, but it obscures the complexities of Oswald’s would-be spectacle and the story of the “Club of Modern Artists” where it was to have been performed. After taking power in 1930, Vargas seemed to have every intention of ruling by decree indefinitely, but as part of his peace with the paulistas who rose up in arms in 1932 he agreed to return the country to constitutional rule. In hindsight, the interval between the end of the Constitutionalist Revolution and the inauguration of the new magna carta in July 1934 looks like a paradox—a phase in which the foundational fictions of democracy flowered even as the groundwork for authoritarian rule was laid. On the one hand, the democratic election of delegates to the constituent assembly in May spurred the creation of a number of new regional parties and an increase in popular participation (with literate women allowed to vote for the first time), and the lengthy lead-up to the assembly’s inauguration in November saw a flurry of activity on both the Left and the Right; at the same time, the federal government made inroads into the state bureaucracies and expanded the repressive apparatus, turning the Ilha dos Porcos penal colony into a notorious political prison for leftists. During the assembly’s eight months of deliberations questions were raised about the nature of democracy and capitalism, yet the final draft of the constitution enshrined most of Vargas’s corporatist and centralist tenets—along with certain protections for workers—and he successfully used it to retrospectively legalize his actions as provisional president. Indeed, as historians note, in 1933 and 1934 his regime reached a tacit accord with industrialists and the landed elites.

Toward the end of November 1932, just a month after the Constitutionalists of São Paulo agreed to lay down their arms, two new centers of artistic activity appeared on the scene. The Sociedade de Pró-Arte Moderna (SPAM) was sponsored by society matrons and took its cues from Mário de Andrade and the Lithuanian-Brazilian painter Lasar Segall. The Clube dos Artistas Modernos (CAM), billed as a less “elitist” alternative, was run by an eclectic group of founding fathers. Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, a visual artist, was the only veteran of the Semana de Arte Moderna among them. The Cubist painter Antônio Gomide had only recently returned from several years in Paris, and Carlos da Silva Prado belonged to a younger generation, though he was a relative of Paulo Prado, the eminent (and eminently wealthy) intellectual who had brought Blaise Cendrars to Brazil and was often regarded as modernismo’s elder statesman. The main mover and shaker behind CAM’s creation was Flávio de Carvalho, an architect, painter, and performance artist of sorts who had already made a name for himself as a wayward scion of the local aristocracy: in 1931, he had nearly been lynched while conducting an “experiment” in which he tested Freud’s ideas on mass psychology by joining a Corpus Christi procession while wearing a hat (a strict taboo) and shouting profanities.

Gomide was a socialist, Di Cavalcanti had been a member of the Communist Party since 1926, and Carvalho professed no political creed, though his
distaste for bourgeois morality was coupled with an interest in the collective impulse and mechanical feats of Soviet society. Both Carvalho and Gomide had thrown in their lot with the paulista forces in the recent civil war, while Di Cavalcanti (who was from Rio) had been accused of supporting Vargas and spent most of the conflict in jail. They shared neither an articulated ideology nor a particular style but something vague called “modern art.” When the four men finally went public on December 24, 1932, it was not with a manifesto but a brief announcement in the Diário da Noite that described their intentions in innocuous terms: the club, housed in a vacant building on Rua Pedro Lessa where three of the four already shared studio space, would serve as a meeting place and also hire artistic models for collective sessions, maintain a small bar, host lectures and exhibitions, form an art library, and defend “the interests of the class.” Members paid dues, but nonmembers could participate in individual events for a small fee. In many respects its operating principles were similar to those of the mutual aid societies that immigrants and working-class organizations had been forming in São Paulo since the late nineteenth century. But who belonged to this so-called class, and what were its “interests”?

Most of CAM’s initial eighty members were familiar faces, and several were also associates of the more upscale SPAM. If CAM differed, it was due to its greater degree of overlap with the commercial milieu—a consequence, perhaps, of the fact that whereas SPAM focused its efforts on exhibitions of visual art, CAM often served as a performance venue. One evening in January, for example, the entertainment began with the renowned carioca baritone Adacto Filho singing Mussorgsky, Yoshinori Matsuyama, and Villa-Lobos, and concluded with a rendition of the hit samba “Favela” by Paul Roulien, who had just filmed Flying Down to Rio with Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, and the Mexican star Dolores del Río. A series of concerts paired German folk songs, sung by CAM’s very own German vocal quartet, with native Brazilian tunes by an ensemble under the direction of Marcelo Tupinambá, the middlebrow composer whose maxixes and tanguinhos could be heard in popular theatrical revues as well as in Darius Milhaud’s ballets. The violinist Frank Smith performed pieces by Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Camargo Guarnieri; the former Brazilian consul in Shanghai gave a lecture on his forthcoming travelogue; a ten-person troupe presented Japanese dances and demonstrations of jujitsu and kendo; and at the beginning of May, the club held a dinner to celebrate its new accord with Pro-Arte, an artists’ association in Rio led by Theodor Heuberger, a German known for his role in popularizing the Bauhaus style in Brazil.

The face CAM presented to the public during this phase was far from polemical. Quite the contrary, if one can believe a gushing newspaper chronicle of a recital by the “mulatta” vocalist Elsie Houston (with piano accompaniment by Camargo Guarnieri) on February 10, 1933. Houston was a classically trained soprano who had studied in Berlin, found minor fame in Paris, and would
soon do the same in New York, where her cabaret act would feature bizarre nonverbal vocalizations billed as “voodoo songs.” The program she performed at CAM was typically eclectic: selections ranged from Satie, Debussy, and Manuel de Falla to arrangements of “Incan and Brazilian songs.” The anonymous reviewer professed his preference for the more autochthonous numbers, imagining the chanteuse (a native of Rio) as a mythic “Mother of the Waters who left the backlands [sertões], turned into a woman, and came to enchant the city people.” Among these enchanted urbanites were Mário de Andrade, the rising samba star Mário Reis, the “poetess” Colombina (whose real name was Yde Schlönbach Blumenschein), and someone called Iokanaan pegged as a talent “all of São Paulo will soon know.” The crowd behaved “like a group of children,” demanding three encores before starting up a dance while the journalist Jayme Adour da Câmarra read palms and André Dreyfus, a prominent scientist, tried to sweet-talk a young lady with technical explanations of why a straight line could at times be curved. The scene reads like an attempt to reconfigure Schiller’s aesthetic state, that “middle disposition” of “semblance” and “play”—linked here to biological and cultural miscegenation—in which sense and reason are reconciled and social divisions overcome.\(^{40}\)

Sure enough, the desire underlying this fantasy is revealed at the article’s end, when the author sheepishly confesses his wish to be an interventor, one of the federally appointed officials who replaced state governors after the Revolution of 1930. The reason, he explains, was that he had discovered the elusive secret that could “reunite” all of São Paulo: it was the incomparable Elsie, who “possesses the marvelous ability to make people love Brazil all the more.”\(^{41}\)

In his haste to gather the nation’s fractious siblings around the mulatta Mother, the writer fails to mention that Houston’s husband, the French surrealist Benjamin Péret, had recently been expelled from the country for his role in cofounding a Trotskyist organization. As the year wore on, however, it would become more difficult to exclude such signs of conflict from the artistic frame. On April 1—the same day the German government launched a nationwide boycott of all Jewish businesses—Plínio Salgado led the fascist Integralists down the streets of São Paulo in their first mass demonstration.\(^{42}\)

In June, the club collaborated with Pro-Arte’s Theodor Heuberger on an exhibition of over eighty drawings and lithographs by the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, who would soon be blacklisted by the Nazi regime. This show was one of CAM’s most high-profile events up to that point and drew praise from a broad spectrum of critics: Mário de Andrade extolled Kollwitz’s humanistic vision in the daily Diário de São Paulo, while the leftist journal O Homem Livre published the entirety of a talk on the artist given by Mário Pedrosa, another cofounder (along with Péret) of the Trotskyist Liga Comunista Internacional and a veteran of early street battles against the Nazis from his days as a student in Berlin.\(^{43}\)

But the not-so-subtle shift in the club’s orientation also drew some less desirable attention. The Delegacia Estadual de Ordem Política e Social
(DEOPS) was a quasi-secret political police force created at the end of 1924, following years of intense labor unrest and shortly after the outbreak of the second Tenentes’ Revolt, an insurgency of dissident army officers based in São Paulo. During the Vargas regime it intensified its activities, acquiring a reputation for repression not surpassed until the military dictatorship of 1964–1985. The archive of the DEOPS (now public) contains files on almost all of the regulars at CAM, and what appears to be the earliest document in the file on the club itself is an unsigned, typewritten note denouncing the association as a “disguised nucleus of the most active communist propaganda in São Paulo.” As evidence it refers to an attached newspaper article from July 12 on CAM’s upcoming events: on the docket for the rest of July were an exhibition of Soviet posters; a lecture by Jayme Adour da Câmara on his impressions from a trip to the Soviet Union; and a discussion of “proletarian art” by the painter Tarsila do Amaral, who had brought the aforementioned posters from the USSR. August, meanwhile, had been designated the “Month of the Insane and Children” and would feature an exhibit of drawings by mental patients and children. The file contains a second unsigned note much

Figure 6.1. A newspaper article on Tarsila do Amaral’s lecture at CAM. The clipping was attached to a report on the event filed by the undercover agent “Guarany.” Acervo do DEOPS-SP, Prontuário 2241, Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo.
like the first, and from then on, the case is taken over by a mole who is identified in reports as “Guarany.”

Whether or not the infiltrator knew it, his moniker was all too apt. The Guaraní are an indigenous people who live in the southern regions of Brazil and other neighboring countries, but the code name was probably also a nod to the canonical novel by José Alencar (a pillar of Romantic nationalism), and possibly even to Carlos Gomes’s Il Guarany—the very opera modernistas had often derided for its attempt to dress the noble savage up in high art, and the ironic inspiration for Oswald’s uncouth anthropophagist. By happenstance, the featured guest at the July 17 meeting (the first one for which Guarany filed a report) was a man named Pedro Faber Halembeck, a sertanista or inland explorer who had lived on and off for twenty years among the Ingay people of the Amazon. Halembeck, like others in the room, might have suspected he had an unwelcome observer in the audience. Perhaps he even made a point of putting on a show: according to the report, Flávio de Carvalho concluded his introductory remarks by announcing that “if an authority of the Social Order [Ordem Social, a division of DEOPS] were present,” the speaker “would certainly land in jail” for what he was about to say. This apparently included making reference to the Soviet posters hanging in the hall and drawing comparisons between Russia and the indigenous societies of Brazil, both of which led the DEOPS agent to conclude that he was at the very least a “sympathizer” of the Soviet regime. And how could he not be in such an environment, where “one has the impression of living among the Russians”? Even the bartenders, Guarany wrote, wore Russian-style shirts. (In fact, a Russian named Pasha Abranova did run the bar.)

The agent observed that the “physiognomic traits” of the woman beside him were not those of a “national,” so he struck up a conversation with her only to find out that she too was Russian-born! This “most modern of communist propaganda” had little to do with art, he warned, but it was dangerously crafty: “The means employed by the ‘artists’ are silent, subtle, they do not inspire curiosity, but whoever enters there comes out thinking [pensativo].”

The authorities might have taken a different attitude if all this talk about Indians and revolution had been confined to a marginal group of “modern artists” with no immediate means of intervening in the productive order. But if Guarany did go unnoticed, it was because his was not the only new face. In a report on Tarsila do Amaral’s July 29 discussion of proletarian art, he refers to her “disguised agitation of praise for militant communism” and sums up her speech with a phrase that is repeated like a litany in all of the reports on the club: “It has nothing to do with art.” Yet the newspaper article appended to his statement suggests otherwise (figure 6.1). There was no difference between bourgeois and proletarian art, said Tarsila, but only “variations in the mode of their application and the ends to which they are put”; the concept of beauty had changed over time, and the “future socialist society” would surely bring with it a new notion, though the artist...
acknowledged she did not know exactly what it would be.\textsuperscript{50} For Guarany, that unwitting emblem of autonomous art, the most troubling part was the public to whom this implicit question was posed. “The audience,” he asserts, “was almost entirely composed of individuals wearing collarless shirts and red ties, with the air of terrorists and undesirables, the majority made up of foreigners.”\textsuperscript{51} This concern with the intermingling of intellectuals and “foreign workers” is a constant throughout the file on CAM. One document specifies that the audience included large numbers of people from Belém and Bom Retiro—two of São Paulo’s largest working-class neighborhoods, where Italian immigrants had recently been joined by Eastern European Jews.\textsuperscript{52} The club also turned out to be a new haunt of Oreste Ristori, an old-timer from the heyday of anarcho-syndicalism who had acquired quasi-mythic stature on the Left (figure 6.2). In a defiantly detailed declaration Ristori gave to the police in December 1935 before being deported back to Italy, where he would be shot by the German army during World War II for his role in the antifascist resistance, he explained his decision to begin frequenting CAM as the result of his desire to “meet diverse [diversos] intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{53}

Ristori disliked being pigeonholed into any of the Left’s proliferating factions, and so it is difficult to know exactly what he said on the numerous occasions he took the floor at CAM, just as it is difficult to know what the Trotskyists, anarchists, Communist Party faithfuls, and others argued in response. The DEOPS reports offer limited evidence of these unscripted debates, because just as Guarany locates the club’s activities outside the realm of art, he exiles all leftist discourses from the “legitimate” political sphere by refusing to ascribe any value to their differences. Even so, there are moments when it becomes clear these did in fact exist. On August 3, for instance, when the featured speaker failed to show up due to trouble with the police, the shoemaker Pedro Catallo spoke in the absent man’s place, outlining “divergences” between anarchists and communists.\textsuperscript{54} Whatever he said prompted Jayme Adour da Câmar to stand up and defend the “Bolshevik regime,” leading to a heated discussion in which the psychiatrist Osorio Cesar tried to discredit Catallo by calling him a police agent.\textsuperscript{55} Such moments hint at the strain of police surveillance, mutual suspicion, and factional disputes and suggest the club was a place where alliances could be broken as well as made. At the same time, perhaps because its organizing principle was not explicitly political but something nebulous called “modern art,” it was a site where adherents of diverse ideologies converged, both to articulate disagreements and to form contingent coalitions.

It was out of such encounters that a theatrical “experience” emerged. The desire to create an alternative to “commercial” theater had been in the air for some time, and several CAM regulars still had vivid memories of their involvement in Teatro do Brinquedo, a short-lived Rio-based project.\textsuperscript{56} An opportunity arose in June when the club had to decide how to utilize its spacious ground floor. Two of CAM’s founding fathers, Di Cavalcanti and Carlos
Prado, were in favor of subletting the space to a commercial vendor in order to finance the club’s increasingly active agenda, and it took some convincing to overcome their opposition to what was perceived as a risky financial venture.\(^{57}\) One vocal proponent of what was to become the ephemeral Teatro da Experiência was Tarsila do Amaral, who in a newspaper interview hinted she would end her upcoming talk on proletarian art—the same talk where she ended up speaking about beauty before an audience of “terrorists” and “foreigners”—with a few remarks on the value of theater. The Brazilian people needed their intellectuals to be a little more “audacious,” she insisted, and the most fitting medium for such audacity was the “theatrical apparatus [or “gear”; *engrenagem”].”\(^{58}\) Needless to say, Carvalho studiously avoided any references to audacity in his application for a theater permit, in which he described the project as a “laboratory” that would “function with the impartial spirit of laboratory research.” Its purpose would be to explore “the world of ideas” by experimenting with “settings, modes of diction, mimesis, the dramatization of new elements of expression, problems of lighting and sound, conjugated to the movement of abstract forms,” all in order “to form a practical base for the psychology of entertainment.”\(^{59}\) Who could possibly object?

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Figure 6.2. Oreste Ristori, an Italian labor agitator who regularly attended CAM, in an arrest photo from 1935 (shortly before he was deported). Acervo do DEOPS-SP, Prontuário 364, Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo.
Later on Tarsila would help design the set for *O bailado do deus morto*, along with Nonê de Andrade (the nineteen-year-old son of her ex-husband Oswald), the engraver Lívio Abramo, and the lithographer and stage designer Osvaldo Sampaio. Oswald de Andrade agreed to contribute a play for the grand opening; Procópio Ferreira, a soon-to-be-legendary actor on the commercial stage, made vague promises to collaborate at some later date; Geraldo Ferraz, editor of the militant journal *O Homem Livre*, wrote to Jacques Cocteau and the Belgian dramatist Fernand Crommelynck (whose *Le cocu magnifique* had been staged by Meyerhold) requesting permission to translate some of their plays, and he also requested rights to *Ubu roi* from Alfred Jarry’s descendants. Among the long list of writers who pledged to contribute texts were the novelist Jorge Amado and Caio Prado Junior, who had just published his seminal Marxist study *Evolução política do Brasil* (1933) and was on his way to becoming a major influence in the Brazilian Communist Party.60

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**Figure 6.3.** Abrão Isaac Naspit, a Romanian immigrant who is mentioned in DEOPS reports as having attended a meeting at CAM. The file identifies him as a communist, lists his occupation as “clothes ironer,” and states that he belonged to the Centro de Cultura e Progresso, a Jewish organization that was under surveillance. Acervo do DEOPS-SP, Prontuário 2049, Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo.
Of course, this flurry of activity would all be for naught unless the organizers could assemble an audience. Yet the club’s expanding network made it reasonable to expect the small auditorium could be filled. On September 9, Caio Prado Junior’s presentation on his recent trip to Russia drew six hundred people to CAM; loudspeakers were placed outside so that the long line of people unable to squeeze into the hall could hear his favorable account of the new Soviet society as well as the ensuing debate. A repeat performance one week later generated two detailed accounts by DEOPS agents, one of whom indicated that the event was also used as an opportunity to fundraise for the club’s upcoming venture: before Prado Junior spoke, Flávio took contributions from the nearly five hundred people in attendance for a project referred to as the “Teatro de Vanguarda.”

A few days later, Guarany reported that the theater, likely to open that same week, would be a “theater of propaganda” where “Russian customs, etc.” would be displayed. But the big “spectacle” was postponed, reportedly because Oswald de Andrade was dealing with personal and financial difficulties and finally had to tell his friend Flávio he would be unable to finish the script of *O homem e o cavalo* in time.
Not until November 15 did the Teatro make its long-awaited debut with *O bailado do deus morto*, a performance thrown together over the previous few weeks by Carvalho and Henrique Costa (Henricão), a black samba composer and chauffeur who orchestrated the music in collaboration with Nonê de Andrade. The piece had little dialogue (most of it consisted of short, incantatory phrases), and were it not for the brief explanatory note included in the program the audience might have had trouble recognizing the strange spectacle as a ritualistic commemoration of a dead god—a hairy, hippopotamus-like deity who betrayed his fellow animals when he allowed himself to be seduced by an Inferior (human) Woman and the “fury of his fiery penis” was subdued. Hugo Adami, a painter who played the chief Lamentor, appears to have been the only white person onstage, though like the faces of the four female performers his too was obscured by a metal mask; the five musicians played instruments of African origin (*cuíca*, *gongô*, *reco-reco*, etc.), with the drumming growing ever more frenetic as the actors evoked the disintegration of the god’s body in the face of increasing mechanization, until a
gauze curtain fell and the voice of the Lamenter delivered the final mournful line: “Psychoanalysis killed god” (92). An allegory of secularization, the play dramatizes the nostalgia for plenitude and presence à la Wagner, but it clearly also spoofs this desire. Its humorous absurdity must have lightened the atmosphere of tension at its debut: less than twenty-four hours earlier, a rally of over one thousand antifascists led by several regulars at CAM had ended in an exchange of gunfire with police after a group of Integralists had provoked an altercation. Even so, Teatro da Experiência’s grand opening received less scrutiny than it might have on another occasion because—whether by coincidence or design—it fell on the same day as the inauguration of the national assembly charged with drafting a new constitution.

None of the artists or spectators could know that just four years later, citing trumped up evidence of a communist uprising, Vargas would suspend the law—a right ascribed to him by this very constitution—in order to assume dictatorial powers and write a new constitution that eliminated any pretense of regional autonomy. But since Hitler (among others) had already pulled a similar move, they might have recognized as an ominous augur the events that transpired at the third performance of *O bailado do deus morto*. Around 9 p.m. on November 16, as a packed audience waited for the show to start, an inspector arrived bearing orders from the chief of the vice squad to cancel

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Figure 6.6. The debut of *O bailado do deus morto* (Dance of the Dead God).
*Diário da Noite*, November 15, 1933.
the show on the grounds that it had yet to be duly censored and approved. According to one sensationalist tabloid, Flávio de Carvalho rebuffed the officer by yelling, “We didn’t achieve the meeting of the constituent assembly just so you could curtail [cercear] freedom of thought!” An unnamed person seconded him: “The revolution wasn’t fought so that you could imprison [enclausurar] the cultural manifestation of the people!” Other accounts dispense with the dialogue, but all agree the officer left only to return a short while later with an imposing number of police officers, civil guards, and the chief, who entered the theater with his men and allowed the performance to proceed. Carvalho later recalled that the audience sat through the entire show in silence. Nonetheless, the strange event appeared to have a felicitous result: as articles from several newspapers tell it, the chief intimated on leaving that he had found the play’s off-color humor amusing, and that although the theater would have to close temporarily, the director had only to bring in the text the next day to receive official approval. It would be several days before it became known that somewhere, a different decision had been made.

When the dead god danced, what did the armed enforcers of the law see? Strangely, for all the warnings about CAM’s new theater in the weeks leading up to its debut, there are no reports on any of the performances in the archive of the political police. A number of reviews appeared in the papers, but like most reviews during this era all are very brief, and by the time the next issue of magazines and journals came out, the theater’s closure and the subsequent legal wrangling were what garnered attention. Reception and critique unfold over time, and the police proved successful in cutting short any discussion about what actually took place onstage. The few critics and aficionados who have since recounted the tale of Teatro da Experiência tend to rely on Flávio de Carvalho’s later account of the club’s activities—a text...
written two years after the declaration of the Estado Novo dictatorship, in an atmosphere of repression and in the wake of the Left’s defeat. Published as part of the catalogue for an exhibition intended to reunite the entire modernista clan in a single retrospective, it is an exercise in revisionist history that has Carvalho echoing the language of the mole Guarany, taking pains to state his disapproval of the “extreme leftist elements, some having nothing to do with art” that “infiltrated” the club and allowed political passions to overwhelm the pursuit of rational beauty. As for the authorities’ response to his play, Carvalho chalks it up to the influence of the Catholic Church and outrage at what he improbably claims was the first utterance of an obscenity on a Brazilian stage.

This explanation is less than compelling because it ignores the elephant in the room. In a column published the morning after the show’s debut, the critic Francisco de Sá scoffed that “‘O bailado do deus morto’ is nothing if not an authentic macumba”—black witchcraft, or a ritual practiced as part of Afro-Brazilian religions such as umbanda, which enjoyed a growth in popularity during this era but also faced increasing persecution by the police. The handful of extant police reports about the theater’s closure are more circumspect: there are no references to race or anything at all about the audience, which Flávio later referred to as “diverse” and far in excess of the theater’s 275 seats. And yet this silence is hardly surprising. The state’s emerging ideology hinged on disavowing blackness as a political factor, even as it celebrated racial mixture as an axis of national culture. (This same year also saw the publication of Gilberto Freyre’s Casa grande e senzala, which helped advance the notion that Brazil was what the author later dubbed a “racial democracy,” free from discrimination based on color.) This maneuver was quite delicate, and while there is no evidence CAM had any connections to groups such as the Frente Negra Brasileira (a black political organization founded in 1931), it is easy to imagine that the mix of people in the audience and the presence of black actors on an experimental stage where generic conventions were less fixed would have raised a red flag.

A few days after the long arm of the law put an end to the fun, Oswald gave a reading of scenes from O homem e o cavalo upstairs in the club. In an article announcing the event he expressed confidence in the artists’ ability to prevail over their opponents and spoke of plans to stage his own play: “The Teatro da Experiência’s task is going to be enormous,” Oswald said, because it would be “attempting to reduce, for a stage four meters in size (doubled in the auditorium, it’s true), a play for a stadium or the cinema, with forty-five characters, a dog, and a horse.” Meanwhile, as the fate of the dead god hung in limbo, the chief of Vice asked Carvalho for scripts of the theater’s upcoming productions and was given O homem e o cavalo along with a translation of a Russian play. He delivered the texts to the director of the DEOPS, only to receive them back just three days later with a terse response: “From a rapid reading of both plays, without dwelling on minute analyses, it can be verified
that this is a case of extremist literature.” The memo makes no mention of talking horses, Madame Jesus, or prophesies of the death of 6 million Jews; about Oswald’s play it says only that “beneath a supposed theatrical plot its true end, that is, communist propaganda, is clearly visible” (sob um supposto entrecho theatral, deixa transparecer claramente sua verdadeira finalidade).

On December 6, several newspapers published the final word of the chief of Vice: Teatro da Experiência was prohibited from reopening its doors on the grounds that the plays it presented were antireligious and/or communist and the space did not conform to the standards of a “proper” theater because it had no box office or dressing rooms.

Men, Horses, and Missing Pieces

“A play for a stadium or the cinema.” Those who link O homem e o cavalo to total theater, then, are not entirely off base. The play does share many formal features with projects that explicitly aspired to this ideal: it incorporates elements of mass culture genres such as teatro de revista, or musical revues; the theatrical action occasionally spills off the stage and into the audience; and although there is no indication that film projectors were to be used (as in the case of Piscator’s theater), the principle of mediation is foregrounded through the use of loudspeakers, which transmit the voices of offstage characters. The title—“Man and the Horse”—also calls to mind the “abstract man” who is the quintessential hero of all total theater projects, while the narrative, derived from the medieval mystery, evokes a messianic sense of time that will presumably culminate in the fusion of the spiritual and the material on Judgment Day.

The moment of sublimation never occurs, however, because O homem e o cavalo insists on placing itself in the uncomfortable crux between the nationalization of mass politics and the emergence of a global mass culture. As a theatrical performance, Oswald’s quote makes clear, the play’s work is to reduce the all-encompassing spectacle of mass society, to cut it down to human size in order to magnify the political, cultural, and material processes that are at stake in representing “the whole.” The play attempts to redraw the connections between art, mass culture, and anti-imperialism by harking back to a moment when the Left and the artistic vanguards appeared to be in step: its structure of nine, loosely connected tableaux featuring an international cast of characters who fight vile capitalists all across the globe seems to be modeled on Mayakovsky’s Mystery-Bouffe, a reinvention of the medieval mystery genre first produced by Meyerhold shortly after the triumph of the Russian Revolution. The Russian play, however, is an unambiguous celebration of an unprecedented revolution, and it employs the conventions of medieval mystery plays as a way of inserting itself into a tradition familiar to its popular audiences. O homem presents a more troubling picture,
one that is structured by the historical and ideological contradictions that had emerged in the fifteen years since the Mayakovsky play was written. By 1933, these kinds of cultural appropriations had become more questionable in light of the newly forged links between “popular” or “folk” cultures and repressive states, and in Brazil they were doubly vexed due not only to the Church’s close ties to Vargas and the Integralists but also the historic role of religious drama in the process of colonization. The extent to which these two plays diverge is evident in their treatment of the holy hero himself: whereas *Mystery-Bouffe* turns Christ into a secular Redeemer who champions the cause of the proletarians, Oswald’s play exposes the troubling role of popular culture in mass society by portraying Hitler as a perverse, modern-day incarnation of the Son of God.

But *O homem* does not simply discard market-driven forms of art and entertainment. In fact, many of the innovations that can be interpreted as adaptations of the medieval mystery also coincide with the conventions of teatro de revista, a genre that was quintessentially “Brazilian” in its depictions of topical events and social customs but also, as a local variant of revue theater, heir to a geographically expansive genealogy of urban mass culture. Introduced to Brazil in the 1870s, the revista had long been derided by the elite as a symptom of the country’s inability to produce a “legitimate” national theater, and in the first few decades of the twentieth century many revista musicians and actors also worked in radio and film. Revista shows aimed to attract spectators of all classes, and while the plots often reinforced social hierarchies, the industry was more open than most to employing light-skinned mulattos (less often blacks) and was an important vehicle for the popularization of genres such as samba. Getúlio Vargas’s ties to revista, radio, and film went back to 1928 when, as a federal congressman, he sponsored a bill establishing the first legal oversight of commercial entertainment that was widely perceived as favoring the interests of authors and performers. As president, he not only frequented the theater but was also known to steal the show. A Brazilian director writing in 1945 recalled that

never was a head of government so prominent on theater stages as the victor of the Revolution of 1930. The figure of Getúlio Vargas was always the main attraction in all the revues, and he was depicted in the most sympathetic manner, incarnated in the most popular types of the masses, once dressed as a gaúcho, another time as a worker, a hunter, a revolutionary, a farmworker, a teacher, a macho, and even a tramcar driver! His figure, cause for the heartiest laughter, lingered in every spectator’s heart after the laughter, touching and conquering all in the most intelligent campaign a governor could merit.

nunca um chefe de governo foi tão focalizado em palcos teatrais, como o triunfador da Revolução de mil novecentos e trinta. A figura
de Getúlio Vargas apareceu, sempre, como atração principal de todas as revistas que se representaram, e da maneira mais simpática, incarnada nos tipos mais populares da massa, uma vez vestido de gaúcho, outra vez vestido de operário, de caçador, do revolucionário, de lavrador, de professor, de galo, e até, de motorneiro de bonde! Responsável pelas mais gostosas gargalhadas, sua figura ficava no coração de cada espectador, após a gargalhada, enternecendo a todos e a todos conquistando na mais inteligente campanha que um governador pode merecer.78

The very multiplicity of these onstage incarnations contributed to Vargas’s construction as the ideal populist subject; his serialized image (farmworker, teacher, revolutionary) confirms what Michael Warner has said of public figures in mass-mediated societies, which “take on the function of concretizing that phantasmatic body image, or, in other words, of actualizing the otherwise indeterminate image of the people.”79 In its opening tableau, O homem e o cavalo plugs in to this “popular” tradition by adopting its stylistic conventions while turning its representational logic on its head in order to foreground the affinities between fascism and capitalist mass culture. The scene takes place in the “universal” sphere of heaven, where the far-from-angelic denizens include St. Peter, who claims that his celestial domain is Einstein’s fourth dimension; the Four “Graças” (Graces), who are transposed into singing “Garças” (Hussies) and are immediately recognizable as the obligatory chorus line of scantily clad girls from a revue; and the Divo, a flamboyant opera singer accused by the others of having lost his “moral sense” onstage. St. Peter warns his squabbling followers, “If we destroy this stronghold of eternal change, the world will plunge into historical materialism!”80 The venerable patriarch’s very words, of course, run counter to his intention. The play reverses the usual terms of reference by placing the “ideal” directly onstage. What we see is a distinctly bourgeois afterlife in which the Garças practice phrases in English, titter over off-color jokes, and embroider handkerchiefs.

Into this mind-numbingly insipid bliss marches the Poet-Soldier, proclaiming the need to “regenerate humanity” and chastising the Garças for being “damned pacifists! Society of Nations!” (24). Although the text gives no cues as to costuming, the Poet-Soldier quotes Marinetti’s mantra (“War is the world’s only hygiene!”), and his strident, exclamatory style is a dead giveaway. This is not Italy, however, but the no-man’s-land of nationalist ideology. The Poet-Soldier is surely a stand-in for the Italian futurist, but he is just as surely Plínio Salgado, leader of the Brazilian Integralist Party, whose slogan “God-Country-Family” is parodied in the legend that adorns the set of this tableau: “God-Country-Brothel-Hymen.” Here, as throughout the play, Oswald exploits the capacity of a single theatrical image to signify multiple referents in order to draw connections between belief systems and national
imaginaries that have been safely ensconced from one another by political and epistemological borders. Rather than multiple manifestations of a single president/people, we see a puppet-like Poet-Soldier raging about the need to “resolve the unemployment crisis of the furies and lightning bolts,” a figure who could easily be Brazilian, Italian, German, Portuguese, or Argentine (24). The parallels are not just formal, and the scene is not just about fascism as style. Marinetti, after all, had visited Brazil in 1926; Nazi organizations funded by the German embassy flourished in southern Brazil; and while Mussolini invoked the sacred homeland, Italian immigrants were struggling to build new lives in São Paulo. By staging the rise of fascism in the realm of the “spiritual,” the scene undercuts the territorialization of nationalist representation, revealing it to be a phenomenon shaped by historical and material forces whose scope is in fact global.

The ribaldry is cut short by the tableau’s surprise ending, the arrival of a giant “aluminum balloon” bearing a black man who proclaims, “What a lovely little people!” (Que povo bonitinho!) (29). Professor Icar, it would appear, is a mutation of Auguste Piccard, the Swiss physicist who in 1932 had become the first person to ascend into the upper stratosphere, reaching some 55,800 feet in a pressurized gondola of his own invention. If O bailado do deus morto played on—and in some ways reinforced—a primitivist perspective on blackness, what this scene presents is a futuristic reversal of the conquest scenario. But colonial domination is predicated on the impossibility of its own reversal—a black man cannot step in to the conqueror’s role and remain unscathed. So it is that in the following tableau, which takes place inside the spaceship, the Poet-Soldier proudly proclaims that he has “disembodied” its inventor (O desencarnei!). When the Garças protest that Icar was just a harmless “chocolate Aryan” who naturally got burned by flying too close to the sun (a wink to his Greek predecessor Icarus), the Poet accuses them of having illicit desires that are liable to “damage the race”; he goes on to explain that “if you’d talked to him before the disembodiment about the need white people have to subdue, exploit, and humiliate people of color, maybe he wouldn’t have understood. Now he understands. Now we can converse about Civilization, Culture, Imperialism, Capital, Race, and other white subjects” (33).

Both mass culture and fascist idealism purport to offer this brilliant black bourgeois the “rhetorics of disincorporation” that Michael Warner identifies as necessary to gain access to mass subjetshood. But for the black man, rhetoric is either purely false or all too real, so the learned Professor is now nothing but speech: he is the invisible pilot guiding the vessel through the ether, present only as the Voice of Icar, which interrupts the action on occasion to alert the passengers to planets, stars (Greta Garbo is the name of one), and other landmarks along their route. Icar hasn’t been disembodied so much as turned inside out: the tableau is titled “The Interior of the Ícaro,” and even the Poet-Soldier grudgingly acknowledges that without the black
man’s novel invention and navigational skills they would all disperse into the nothingness of the stratosphere. Although Ícar(o) is both the protective vessel and the labor keeping the operation afloat, he is unable to take his place as an individual subject onstage because, having been deprived of flesh, he can only play the role of the purely symbolic or the anonymous mass. His Voice is an aural signifier of race around which the others members of this minisociety converge—not unlike the voices of samba stars transported over the Brazilian airwaves, where they were often recast as the expression of an “authentic” popular identity that was at once racialized and yet available to all. Indeed, if radio (and mass media more generally) is the invisible “outside” of the first part of this tableau, it becomes the explicit focal point of the final scene. When the device around which they are gathered begins to emit inchoate noises, the Poet Soldier and the Garças are alarmed—something seems to be afoot “down there,” in South America: “THE RADIO: Oooooo0000! The people are invading, they respect nothing!” The Radio goes on to speak of “police,” “disorder,” and the firing of “shots.” Could it be Revolution? the characters wonder. As it turns out, it is only a Brazilian soccer game. “We can rest easy,” the Poet-Soldier announces. “The deluded masses are still amusing themselves with that business.” But when he turns on the radio again, he picks up a “Bolshevik station” whose announcer is rousing listeners to take up arms in the struggle against capital (39). Rather than reifying radio, or the mass public it hails, as a transparent medium of identity, the scene acknowledges it as an apparatus and as both the means and the object of struggle.

In the following tableau, the spaceship descends to earth and we are presented with a “fascist incarnation” (45): a rapturous apocalypse at the Epsom Derby that involves every power-driven leader and his equestrian sidekick of the past several millennia, both real and fictional. Among the multitudes are Dom Sebastião and Alfonsito V, who expanded Portugal’s territories in Africa; Incitatus and Bucephalus (the steeds of Caligula and Alexander the Great); the fourteenth-century Tartar conqueror Tamerlane (known for his love of the arts); Nietzsche and the Wagnerian hero Parsifal, who have decided to mend fences (“Nietzsche converted in the struggle!” [49]); and even Rocinante and Sancho Panza’s burro. The Divo has attempted to penetrate the body of one of the jockeys but missed his mark and ended up as a horse talking out of its ass; the real power behind the operation is the Poet-Soldier, the “hero of all homelands” and self-proclaimed embodiment of “Spirit” who rouses the global masses to a feverish passion with bellicose demagoguery, conjuring up a host of mythic symbols that culminates in the car of Juggernaut—“the steamroller of capital” (50)—and a nude Valkyrie wearing a gas mask who runs across the stage and through the audience to the music of Wagner’s Lohengrin.

This is a nightmarish version of total theater—described as a “thrilling spectacle,” it is the moment when art and reality become one (46). Or, rather, it would be, if the mayhem were actually seen. Instead, the audience is not
allowed to witness the horrific sight; the desire for immediacy is denied because all of the action, up until the Valkyrie’s mad dash, takes place behind a wall at the back of the stage. The audience hears the shouts and stampedes, the roar of thunder and cannons and cacophonous speech, including an anonymous voice of resistance crying out that the idealization of war leads the young to “mutilation and death” (51). Meanwhile St. Peter and Icar peer over the wall and narrate the action for the audience. A black bourgeois and a saint born a Jew, they have no place in the paradigm of identity underlying this fascist, imperialist fantasy; unable to perform the feat of self-abstraction, they possess an inassimilable “positivity” (in Warner’s terms) conveyed in this scene through the use of scenic space. The Voice of the Divo proclaims, “I am the pathos of destruction! For the white race! For the rich class! For cretinous morality! . . . Heil! Duce! Heil! Duce!” and Icar ironically notes, “Luckily I’m no longer black” (Felizmente eu deixei de ser preto) (51). The ontological status of St. Peter’s body is also in doubt, given that in the previous tableau the Poet-Soldier explained to the Garças that he was secretly leading the saint to his death on earth, where “two days ago in Hitler’s Germany the death campaign against the Jews began” (38).

But how can disembodiment be performed? The text provides no clues, and there is nothing to suggest the use of high-tech resources to conjure up a convincing illusion. What is clear is that the actor is onstage, because the character is no longer described as a Voice. Icar’s dematerialization is not a demonstration of technological power, nor does it show the ability of thought to sublimate the material; the point of the performance is that it fails. The quest for the missing black body becomes a recurring theme that functions as a counterpoint to the overarching narrative of revolutionary triumph—Icar’s “widow” eventually shows up with a femur that has been identified as her husband’s, though by the end it is no longer certain whether it belongs to Icar or to St. Peter, the converted Jew. As the only characters that reappear throughout the play, Icar, his wife, and St. Peter fulfill the role of onstage spectators through whom the audience’s view of the epic struggle between fascism and Red revolution is refracted. Any attempt to identify with them, however, can only be incomplete and discontinuous, because they are not coherent characters but rather multiplex prisms whose changing nature is defined more by its liminal status in relation to the dominant discourse of the moment than by any inherent qualities. Although they are sympathetic figures and are given some of the play’s wittiest lines, they are hardly exemplary. Icar, for example, is often subject to the nostalgia of the petit bourgeoisie, but at other times he is the voice of lucidity. His name is the Portuguese acronym for the Igreja Católica Apostólica Romana, or Roman Catholic Church, yet during the fascist incarnation, he objects to the injunctions delivered by the Voice of Job and points out, “But it’s propaganda for temerity and servility” (49). During the Revolution, when an international crowd of insurrectionary sailors takes over St. Peter’s Ship (represented as the Vatican on a raft, which
serves as a dance floor presided over by Cleopatra), St. Peter the Jew tries to reassert his role as benevolent patriarch of the Christian faith and convince the masses that they are not prepared to take power. The Red Soldier replies, “All men are prepared to eat and *trepar* [“to climb,” but also a colloquial term for sex]” (64). Icar and St. Peter always seem to be on the cusp of this recognition, but none of the play’s contending discourses are capable of incorporating them.

This poses interpretive challenges, particularly when it comes to the treatment of the Soviet Union. Even some sympathetic critics have felt it necessary to concede that *O homem* is marred by a naively optimistic view of communist society and several seemingly propagandistic tableaux, including one called “Industrialization,” which features the Voices of Stalin and Eisenstein proclaiming the glories of the utopic society they have created. Sábató Magaldi, for instance, finds it “almost unbelievable” that a humorist of Oswald’s nature “let himself be led by political passion” to commit such a lamentable “literary slide.” In response, he simply omits any analysis of these tableaux. This refusal to consider that the scenes might indeed have something to do with “art” has its political corollary in the myth of a monolithic Left, a distortion of history belied by the debates that were taking place at the Clube dos Artistas Modernos when *O homem* was written. Magaldi’s judgment is hardly equivalent to the repressive power that shut down the stage where these tableaux were to have been performed, but it does rely on and reinforce distinctions that this earlier police action helped create. It re-inscribes a mirror-like opposition between politics and aesthetics that leaves the limits of literary-critical discourse safely intact by erasing the mediating factor of theatrical representation.

In fact, what is most notable about “Industrialization” is that the “ideal” world the Soviet leader and the filmmaker claim to have created can only exist outside the space of scenic representation; their disembodied voices boom out across a stage that represents “the monumental entrance to the biggest factory in the socialist world” (71). Standing at the door, watching the happy workers entering and exiting, are representatives of the past (“we are the end of a world”): Icar, St. Peter, now playing a *sanfona* (a type of accordion from rural northeastern Brazil), and Madame Icar, who wears her husband’s femur around her neck (looking, perhaps, like the stereotype of an indigenous savage). Once again, they are slapstick figures whose rhetorical inversions draw attention to the bodies we continue to see, though they no longer exist:

*ST. PETER*: I was the eyes of the blind . . . Now I’m a blind man with no eyes.

*ICAR*: I was the legs of the legless. Now I have no legs.

*MADAME ICAR*: I used to have a husband and a home.

*ICAR AND ST. PETER*: Now you have two husbands and no home!
São Pedro: Eu era os olhos do cego . . . Agora sou um cego sem olhos.
Icar: Eu era a perna do manco. Agora não tenho pernas.
Madame Icar: Eu tinha um marido e um lar.
Icar e São Pedro: Agora tem dois maridos e nenhum lar! (73)

As they listen to the invisible Voice of Stalin speak of the new world that is emerging out of the “pathos of construction” (75), the three characters scoff at his hubris. “Can man, even when he possesses a consummate science, possibly compare himself to God?” asks the pious Madame Icar. The fact that they invoke a religious creed that is also an object of critique does not necessarily mean that the audience is intended to discount their words. St. Peter once again takes on the role of prophet: “They’ll be forced to condemn their own madness. Their confidence is like a spiderweb in the hands of the Lord! They’ll rest upon their work and it won’t have consistency. They’ll want to maintain it and it won’t hold up!” (74). One has to wonder: if the purpose of the scene is nothing more than propaganda, what are these naysayers doing here?

Standing in stark contrast to their humorous dialogue is the Voice of Eisenstein, which comes at the end of the tableau and is followed by nothing but “Silence.” His lengthy speech is a laundry list of the gains won by the agricultural revolution, phrases that could have been pulled straight from the Soviet posters that adorned CAM’s walls (figure 6.8):

Fertilizing manure, herds, agricultural machines, all recorded and raising the statistics. Neither the fire of revolt nor the great revolutionary struggle. But, after the struggle and victory, the daily life of those who work and build a better world . . . the herds that are organized, the seed selection maps, the diagrams of progress . . . Model farms. Laboratories, schools. The worker-student, the peasant-student. The conscious, selected reproduction of animal species. The end of magic. The tractor . . .

O esterco fertilizante, os rebanhos, as máquinas agrícolas, tudo escrito-rado aumentando as estatísticas. Nem o incêndio da revolta nem a grande luta revolucionária. Mas, depois da luta e da vitória, a vida quotidiana dos que trabalham e constroem um mundo melhor . . . os rebanhos que se organizam, os mapas da seleção de sementes, os diagramas do progresso . . . Fazendas-modelos. Laboratórios, escolas. O operário-estudante, o camponês-estudante. A reprodução consciente e selecionada das espécies animais. O fim da magia. O tractor . . . (77)

What the audience hears is a representation, not of the style of Eisenstein’s avant-garde films but of their social function. This is art that has been instrumentalized and placed in the service of the state, art that is no longer
distinguishable from political power. Without necessarily undermining the theoretical validity of the ideal to which Eisenstein gives voice (such a judgment must remain contingent on the play’s performance), the tableau very conspicuously refuses to realize it onstage. The happy, productive workers go through the door and out of sight; the people they leave behind are those who, as Oswald said of himself, stand “outside the revolutionary axis of the world.”83 But imperialism is the axis on which this play’s world turns, and it is fitting that this tableau is at its center given that Stalin’s declaration of the need to build “socialism in one state” formalized a historic split between the struggle for socialism and the struggle against imperialism. Over the loudspeakers and through the giant factory door we get a glimpse of what lies on the outside of the play—the marginalization of the avant-garde and the move to enforce an aesthetic of socialist realism, a term introduced by the Union of Soviet Writers and adopted as its official doctrine the year prior to the would-be staging of Oswald’s play.84 In contrast, what takes place within this scene is not a reflection but, in Trotsky’s words, a “deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality in accordance with the peculiar laws of art.”85

*O homem* doesn’t offer up politics as a total work of art, or total theatricality, but a theatrical vision of totality—rather than “dematerializing”
the stage, as was Piscator’s aim, Oswald materializes it, juxtaposing and superimposing historical and cultural references from around the world and across two thousand years. What we get is not Wagner, despite his characters’ frequent appearances; rather, _O homem_ takes Benjamin’s analysis of the Trauerspiel, with its dialectical images, fragments, and ruins, and transposes it back onto the stage. _O homem_ makes a mock-heroic effort to gather together Christianity, capitalism, imperialism, art, mass culture, and fascism, to overcome the contradictions of history by embodying them onstage and in the colloquial language of 1930s Brazil. The Marxist theory that several of the characters cite serves a didactic function, and the teleological impulse is by no means abandoned. But the play’s raucous humor, as well as its critical insight, is a result of the tension between its own aspirations and what is actually achieved onstage.

This becomes evident in the second instance of “total theater,” which occurs after the socialist revolution, on Judgment Day, when Christ himself is brought to trial for a series of heinous crimes that include colluding with Roman imperialism, serving as an agent of the reformist Second International, and, in the guise of the Emperor Constantine, coining the favored motto of all “historic fascisms”—“Let’s make the revolution before the people do it” (_Façamos a revolução antes que o povo a faça_)—a quote whose actual author was a Brazilian ally of Vargas (98). The tribunal is held in the former hall of the Nobel Prize, though the backdrop depicts two crosses at Golgotha. Here, at the moment when history itself is to be transcended, the stage and the audience are joined together and numerous characters are seated in the audience, among them biblical figures, artists, fictional characters, and anonymous spectators who weigh in on the trial while shouting the slogans of political parties in Brazil. For the theatrical audience, the effect would surely be one of immediacy and excitement; what is immediately experienced, however, is how capitalism divides the world in the very process of making it whole.

What drives this sprawling tableau is the attempt to capture and arrest the process through which what was once revolutionary comes to serve the cause of reaction. In the first scene, we see the biblical character Veronica (the “true image”), now a photographer and proponent of state cinema, who holds up a large ID photo of Christ that shows Hitler crucified on a swastika—“the final incarnation of anti-Semitism” (91). _O homem_ thus takes the core of the medieval mystery, its most troubling aspect and the one that led Hitler to celebrate the production at Oberammergau as an expression of the Aryan spirit, and turns it on its head. Instead of the Jews killing Jesus, Jesus is the killer of Jews. Yet there is also Barabbas, the sidekick of Mary Magdalene (now a cubist) and leader of the Jewish “nationalist” resistance against the Roman Empire, whom the people chose over Jesus when given the chance to save one prisoner from death. Once a revolutionary, he is now “Baron Barabbas Rothschild,” a reference to the French capitalist who sponsored Jewish settlement in Palestine in order to establish large plantations reliant on cheap Arab labor.
In another instance Fu Manchu, the pulp fiction and film character known as the Yellow Peril, rises up out of a hole in the floor from among the spectators and shouts that he had started life as a Taoist, wanting to transform the world without bloodshed; instead, imperialism has transformed him into a “cagey beast.” He gets into a scuffle with D’Artagnan (protagonist of Alexandre Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*), whom he calls a “Lackey! Product of the domestication of the masses!” In response D’Artagnan hurls racist epithets at him while bragging, “Today I’m a mass phenomenon! Hitler! Mussolini! Gustavo Garapa!” (This last name is a derisive allusion to Gustavo Barroso, president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and one of the most fiercely anti-Semitic Integralists.)

D’Artagnan pursues the Chinese man backstage, though the English Novelist assures the audience, “Oh! They’ll end up reconciling backstage” (101). Rather than a move to transcend politics theatrically, readers get a reminder of what is not seen or transformed onstage and in the presence of the audience. The aim is not to create a “totality of effect” within the theater’s four walls but to uncover the totality of social relations that defines the spectators’ position in a global system that cannot be revolutionized by “art” alone.

*O homem e o cavalo* doesn’t end with the grand apotheosis that typically capped off revistas, or with the merging of actors and audience that comes at the end of *Mystery-Bouffe*. Like the German plays Benjamin describes, it keeps the faith and fails in the quest for redemption, leaving its hollow characters to confront their (extra)terrestrial fate under the shadow of a death’s head. The final tableau brings us back to the strange ménage-à-trois of St. Peter, Icar, and his wife, who are in a waiting room of the Interplanetary Railway, which connects the Socialist Earth (now the Red Planet) to Mars (home of reactionaries and boy scouts) by means of the spaceship invented by Icar. These marginal figures have been reduced to begging for coins under the watchful eyes of the GPU, the secret police of the Soviet state. “We are Marx’s impoverished proletariat,” Icar sighs (109). In one of the play’s oddly prophetic moments, they mention that a radio announcer has just broken the news of Hitler’s suicide—a path that Getúlio Vargas, too, would take in August 1954 when faced with a military coup. Icar plunges into space, dangling from a cord attached to an Ícaro as it departs the station while shouting that in death he can be the “hero of Wagner, of Jules Verne.” St. Peter offers, “I’ll play our funeral. The funeral of a world,” then cranks out Siegfried’s funeral march on his accordion. His last words, arms raised toward the heavens: “We have been judged!” (119).

**Lost in the Stratosphere**

St. Peter and his fellow travelers would indeed be judged—and condemned for a second time. After the head of the political police delivered his secret
verdict on the play and the chief of Vice prohibited Teatro da Experiência from resuming operations, CAM requested an injunction to block the order from going into effect. In the meantime, as the case made its way to court, the theater continued to push the envelope with “Coisas de negro” (Black Things), a display of “forgotten” dances “from the era of slavery” directed by Henricão and Francisco Pires, another black musician who had been involved in O bailado do deus morto (figure 6.9). Performed twice each evening (at 8:30 and 10 p.m.) on several consecutive nights, the show reportedly drew large crowds, among which were many “women and young ladies of the best society” who fervently applauded the tambu, dança das enxadas, and what was unabashedly billed as “an authentic macumba.” Such a scenario does of course raise questions about the dubious desires, primitivist fantasies, and unequal power dynamics that might have shaped black artists’ involvement in the activities of CAM; yet it would be a mistake to let the desire for a perfect purity of political intention obscure just how unusual such a show and social space were, or what radical potential they might have held for forging new alliances.

These “black things” seem to have been the last performances held at the theater before the legal decision was handed down on December 14. Judge Armando Fairbanks (a member of the Integralist Party, according to Flávio’s account) was clearly intent on establishing a broad precedent, and so in his verdict he refrains from saying much about the particulars of the case, noting only that “the simple reading of the two plays that accompany these reports [O homem e o cavalo and the Russian play] fully justifies the attitude of the police.” In confirming the right of the police to censor or prohibit performances of plays, he cites a long list of laws beginning with an 1824 decree and ending with a 1928 regulation that purportedly outlawed “depressing or aggressive allusions” to religion or figures of authority—along with works that “seek to create violent antagonism between races or different classes of society or, finally, propagate ideas subversive of the order and actual organization of society.” Fairbanks goes on to cite similar laws from Argentina, Italy, Belgium, France, and the United States, and then, in a bold display of Legal Order as pure performance, he substantiates a claim made by the police, who had argued that the International Geneva Convention forbid the circulation of such “subversive” materials. What this all boils down to is that it is not the role of the courts to second-guess those who enforce the law: “The power of the police cannot be imprisoned in formulas, given that police action is by its very nature indefinite and discretionary.” In other words, the law is a function of its own performance, and the performative act is the prerogative of those who have a monopoly on the use of physical force, ergo the state of exception is the rule. The court’s decision provoked an outcry from prominent intellectuals as far away as Buenos Aires (including those associated with the journal Sur) and a fiery speech in the national constituent assembly by an opposition delegate who decried the suppression of a valiant
attempt to form a “completely independent theater.” The club labored on for a few more weeks, hosting a fiery, four-hour talk about Mexican muralism by David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had just been expelled from Argentina while on a visit and was headed to the United States. Yet within weeks the Clube dos Artistas Modernos, beset by financial difficulties and declining membership, had closed its doors.

And what about O homem e o cavalo? Sometime the following year Oswald received a letter from his wife Pagu, who was traveling around the world as a foreign correspondent (she wished him a “good day from the land of Hitler”), informing him that while in the Soviet Union she had met the “organizer of revolutionary theater” and was certain it would be possible to stage O homem e o cavalo there; not long after that, Oswald claimed the play had been translated into Russian, though there is no evidence a performance ever came to pass. Samuel Putnam, a literary critic and communist who would become an important advocate of Brazilian literature in the United States, was also interested in staging the play and perhaps even turning it into a film. This project, too, was abandoned, though a rough translation/adaptation of the script still lies in Putnam’s personal archive in Carbondale, Illinois.
The critic Sábato Magaldi was correct when he stated that this sprawling spectacle “doesn’t even seem to belong to the reality of Brazilian theater.” The wanderings of St. Peter, Icar, and the Missus confirm the necessity of considering the avant-garde as part of a global totality; indeed, the play insists that from the very beginning the avant-garde was a “global” phenomenon. Yet the play also reveals that being integrated into a single system was what sowed the deepest divisions within the vanguard. If *O homem e o cavalo* is difficult to understand within the contours of Brazilian theater, and if the few critics who discuss the play struggle to contain it within the limits of literary discourse, that is because it lies in the middle of a critical split—a “transition” between “the war horse and the turf horse (bourgeois society) and horse-power (socialist society)” —that was never realized on the world stage.