

Studying Arts and Empowerment in Brazil

by NATALIE ARSENAULT

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CONFIDENCE RADIATES FROM THE women of Banda Didá every time they play their drums—during street rehearsals, in concert with famous artists like Daniela Mercury and Carlinhos Brown, and leading 3,000 women during

Carnaval. The actors of Nós do Morro exude that same self-assurance when they present first-rate productions of works by both Brazilian writers and international staples like Shakespeare. The children studying music with Guri Santa Marcelina enthusiastically attend class twice a week, returning to the school almost every day on their own time to practice what they have learned on school-owned instruments. These groups produce quality art and share it with their communities. What distinguishes them is that they comprise children, adolescents, and adults from Brazil's lowest socioeconomic classes.

Throughout Brazil, dancers, musicians, actors, and other artists have created programs that provide rigorous arts training—which in turn develops personal, social, and economic potential—to youth from poor communities. In addition to their belief that all people have a right to culture, these projects demonstrate that the arts can foster a sense of dignity and self-esteem and, by extension, provide opportunities for education and employment. Interested in exploring this innovative programming, LILAS and Texas Performing Arts applied for and were awarded primary funding under the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program to take fourteen educators on a four-week seminar focused on the role of the performing arts in educational and social projects in Brazil.

“In Brazil, many of the country's most celebrated performing artists have created or led programs that provide educational opportunities for young people through the arts,” observes Joe Randel, Director of ArtesAméricas at Texas Performing Arts. “Their efforts are highlighted by an unwillingness to compromise the quality or scope of artistic instruction, a commitment to exposing young people to the best of the performing arts, and the belief that everyone has the right to a life enriched by the arts. When you see a dance performance by Corpo Cidadão or a play by Nós do Morro, you are struck by the quality work

on stage. The fact that the performers are poor is neither evident nor relevant. Not all of these kids will become professional dancers or actors, but all stand a far better chance of being successful citizens as a result of these programs. We think that educators in the U.S. can learn a lot from this model.” Since 2001, Texas Performing Arts and LILAS have collaborated on ArtesAméricas, a program that promotes cultural dialogue in the Americas through the performing arts. This partnership has strengthened ties to cultural organizations in Latin America and has led to a 2006 Fulbright seminar in Mexico and this year's program in Brazil.

Cultural production in Brazil provides a lens through which we can better understand poverty and inequality, as well as struggles over social inclusion and the rights of citizenship. Arts programs across Brazil fill in gaps left by the state by providing basic services such as health care and vocational education in addition to their cultural programs. While these programs include empowerment, elevated self-esteem, and economic potential among their goals, they are rigorous in their commitment to the highest artistic standards. This combination of inclusion, empowerment, and world-class art can lead us to a better understanding of Brazil.

The Fulbright program in summer 2010 visited four cities specifically selected to expose participants to the diversity of artistic disciplines, arts inclusion programs, and regional cultures in Brazil. The arts projects that agreed to participate in the seminar granted us full access to their programs: participants learned about their educational and artistic philosophy, witnessed their teaching methods, and heard students talk about their personal experiences. This “backstage” approach allowed participants to see the various facets of these educational and social projects and enhanced their understanding of how the performing arts provide access to those on the margins of Brazilian society.

The program launched in the northeastern city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil's first capital. As the seat of the early sugar industry, Salvador was the first port of entry for many African slaves throughout the centuries of slavery in Brazil. While their cultural legacy—as seen in religion, music, dance, and food—is strong, Afro-Brazilians continue



Dance performance by Corpo Cidadão, Belo Horizonte.

to constitute Brazil's lowest socioeconomic classes, due to lack of access to property and education. In Salvador, the group worked with Didá Educational and Cultural Association, which focuses on transformational teaching through the drum and other art forms. Until Neguinho do Samba, one of Salvador's most important percussionists, opened Didá in 1993, women did not play drums. But he believed that teaching women to play the drums would foster a sense of dignity and self-esteem and, by extension, provide opportunities for education and employment. Today, Didá's serves 600–800 girls and young women every year in eleven arts courses, and provides services like basic meals and vocational training. As former president Víviam de Jesus Queiros states, "We are convinced that our activities are fundamental to the development of Bahian women. We know that the power of our image contributes to self-esteem and confidence in hundreds of women ... The sound of our drum brings hope to hundreds of people ... The samba reggae drum inverts positions, transforming someone who is ignored by society into someone admired, respected, accepted, and important within the development of that same society." Through Didá, participants learned about Afro-Brazilian cultural traditions, women's issues, and social empowerment.

The second stop, Belo Horizonte, is capital of the state of Minas Gerais and Brazil's third largest city. Belo Horizonte is an important center in Brazil's productive heartland, coming to

prominence when the gold and diamond mines in Minas Gerais attracted a rush of migrants that helped to establish rich colonial towns. Belo Horizonte introduced participants to Brazil's leading contemporary dance company, which is both rooted in Brazilian tradition and engaged in dialogue with the world of dance. Founded in 1975, Grupo Corpo is concerned with three things: the definition of an identity linked to the idea of national culture (with all of the fluidity that this implies); the continuity of its work in the long term; and integrity in the maintenance of its self-imposed creative standards. All three of these concerns, which are intellectual as well as artistic, join together in Corpo Cidadão, a nonprofit organization established in 2000 that works with 690 at-risk children and youth in six arts programs and three vocational training courses. Corpo Cidadão's mission is to promote educational and development opportunities through the arts. "Our work is promoting the transformation of the reality of children and young people in low-income communities, making use of art and education as restorative instruments of self-esteem and citizenship," writes Miriam Pederneiras, General Director. "Our desire is to continue to make new viable spaces for performance and dialogue that value the multiple languages of our culture, distributing the opportunity to develop their talent and abilities to the often overlooked." Through Corpo Cidadão, participants could see how different kinds of arts—traditional as well as

contemporary—concern themselves with Brazil's future and the development of its youth, all under the supervision of world-class instructors.

Participants also visited Rio de Janeiro, an important city throughout the history of Brazil. Today, Rio de Janeiro is known for many things: the *Cristo Redentor* statue sitting on Corcovado, its gorgeous setting between the mountains and the sea, and, unfortunately, the violence and degradation of its favelas (shantytowns) on the hills overlooking its stunning beaches. Founded in 1986, Nós do Morro wanted to create a cultural movement using the artistic talent of young residents of the favela of Vidigal. The project sought to cultivate actors, technicians, and an audience, presenting the magic of theater to a community that did not have access to art. Everything was made inside the community and specifically for it. Nós do Morro states, "Be it either in Vidigal Theater ... or in any theater of the professional circuit, our cast has always taken to stage the message that life is more beautiful if it is lived with art ... The audience—a great deal of it shaped along the years by the very existence of [Nós do Morro]—leave the theater certain that they have witnessed a process of transformation in their lives. Dedication, talent, joy, and pride to be on stage. Discipline, organization and a continual search for the quality of what we do collectively as a team. This is the philosophy of Nós do Morro, which is taken everywhere the Group presents a work." It works with 380 students to provide access to culture, citizenship, and learning through courses in theater, cinema, and other art forms. After twenty years of intense theatrical production, Nós do Morro has earned several awards, placed actors and technicians in TV and cinema, and built its own theater and cultural center in Vidigal.

Finally, the group settled in São Paulo, Brazil's most cosmopolitan and modern city and home to 10 percent of Brazil's population. São Paulo is Brazil's economic hub, where helicopters buzz the wealthy around the city to avoid the congestion on the streets below. Like Rio de Janeiro, however, São Paulo combines incredible wealth with modern problems: pollution, overcrowding, poverty, and violence. Guri Santa Marcelina, launched in 2008 as part of an initiative of the government of the state of São Paulo, provides quality classical music education to children and young people,



Student in a rehearsal at Santa Marcelina-Guri, São Paulo.



Percussion group at Corpo Cidadão, Belo Horizonte.

age 6–18, as a way to offer an opportunity for cultural growth and social inclusion. It provides an important point of comparison between the nonprofit and government arts programs that operate in Brazil. Guri Santa Marcelina works with 8,000 youth in twenty of São Paulo’s poorest communities, where access to the city’s world-class cultural facilities is only a dream. Guri Santa Marcelina offers artistic training of the highest caliber as well as social services aimed at serving the students, families, and communities with which they work. The program has created a network to provide the social services necessary to foster the maximum potential of each student. Paulo Zuben, Executive Manager of Santa Marcelina Cultura, comments, “I am fully aware of the effectiveness and power of the arts in the improvement and transformation of people’s lives. All of the projects developed by our institution have always shared the goal of social inclusion of children and young people by

means of music education.” Recently, Guri Santa Marcelina has extended music training to the parents of its students: parents began to show a strong interest, based on the experiences of their children, in learning to play music themselves. Guri Santa Marcelina has shown how programs for children can help transform families and communities.

With a broad understanding of the important role played by these innovative programs, participants have returned to the U.S. to create curriculum units for use in fine arts, language arts, and social studies classrooms. Explains Thomas Waggoner, Director of Fine Arts at the Texas Education Agency: “Arts education encourages cultural understanding, promotes self-expression, and inspires students to actively engage in learning. [This Fulbright] project will generate dialogue between artists and educators, which is essential to the development of stimulating curricula. The arts are central to history and culture and should be

studied within the context of a country’s cultural history and international trends.” We are working with participants to develop interesting, accurate, standards-based units that are complete and readily usable in a variety of classes where vibrant resources such as current photographs, personal interviews, and performance materials can add depth and breadth to the subjects being taught. We will then develop and publicize a multimedia Web site for wide dissemination of the new curriculum. These resources will provide a deeply engaging approach to support the teaching of contemporary Brazil in classrooms across the nation. In this way, the students of Didá, Corpo Cidadão, Nós do Morro, and Guri Santa Marcelina will teach students in the United States about Brazilian culture and the transformative power of the arts.

Natalie Arsenault is LILAS Outreach Director. ☀