

Espectáculos de fantoches em Minas Gerais no final do século XIX

Puppet shows in Minas Gerais in the late 19th century

Daniel Venâncio de Oliveira Amaral*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3272-1174>

Cleber Dias**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9126-5992>

Abstract

This article analyzes the history of the popular puppet theatre in the late 19th century in Minas Gerais, Brazil, a period in which the structure of supply and commercial consumption of shows in the region underwent a significant transformation. Although the available evidence indicates that this type of scenic spectacle was not among the most frequent, occupying a smaller social space than the theater or the circus, for example, it was a very popular cultural tradition. For this very reason, puppet theaters sheds light on relevant dimensions of popular historical cultural consumption preferences.

Keywords: History; Culture; Puppet Theater, Minas Gerais.

Resumo

Esse artigo analisa a história do teatro de bonecos em fins do século XIX em Minas Gerais, período em que a estrutura de oferta e consumo comercial de espetáculos da região passou por uma relevante transformação. Embora as evidências disponíveis indiquem que este gênero de espetáculos cênicos não estava entre os mais frequentes, ocupando espaço social menor que o teatro ou o circo, por exemplo, assim mesmo, tratava-se de uma tradição cultural bastante popular. Por isso mesmo, o teatro com bonecos ilumina dimensões relevantes das preferências populares históricas de consumo cultural.

Palavras-chave: História, cultura, teatro de fantoches, Minas Gerais.

* PhD in Leisure studies, Federal University of Minas Gerais. Professor in the Physical Education undergraduate course at the State University of Montes Claros, Campus Januária. E-mail: dvoamaral@gmail.com

** PhD in Physical Education, State University of Campinas. Professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in the Physical Education, Occupational Therapy and Tourism undergraduate courses, and in the interdisciplinary Leisure Studies Postgraduate Program. E-mail: cleberdiasufmg@gmail.com

Introduction

In the middle of May 1884, after a season of almost a month in the Bragança Hotel Hall, in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, the famous “endiabrados bonecos automáticos” (naughty automatic dolls) company belonging to Mr. Baptista, popularly known as *João Minhoca* (worm John) company, headed toward Minas Gerais for a tour in that region.¹ They first stopped in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, where the company improvised for their performance in the old city hall. In their first performance, on 13th May 1884, a Tuesday, the improvised theater was so crowded that it was difficult to accommodate the audience, as reported by an anonymous collaborator of the newspaper called *O Pharol*. Due to the great interest of the local audience, the “famous Baptista”, as he was called by the local press, promised to extend their stay in the city with “new shows filled with witty scripts”.² For a week, the “theater called *João Minhoca*” promoted daily performances in Juiz de Fora, which were “always crowded”, according to the local press. The season finished on 21st May 1884, eight days after their first performance in the city, when they left to other cities of the state.³

Around three months later, in the late August 1884, João Baptista and his puppet show were in Ouro Preto, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais (possibly after having performed in other cities of the region). A local newspaper published a piece reporting that the puppet show by the *João Minhoca* company enjoyed “the acceptance of a large audience”.⁴ From then onwards up to 1886, the trajectory of Baptista’s company was lost in the archives of the period, until, finally, news about that performer and his puppets were heard again in the cities of Campanha and Mar de Espanha, in “performances that pleased enormously those who attended such a curious entertainment”.⁵

According to Susanita Freire, the company known as *João Minhoca* puppet company first appeared in Rio de Janeiro, in the early 1880s, as an initiative by João Baptista Avelle, a typographer who had previously worked

¹ *O Mercantil*, Petrópolis, 5th May 1883, p. 3; 11th April 1883, p. 3.

² *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 15th May 1884, p. 1.

³ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 20th May 1884, p. 1.

⁴ *A Província de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 21st August 1884, p. 3.

⁵ NOGUEIRA JÚNIOR, João Martins. *Uma história dos divertimentos do sul mineiro: Itajubá, Pouso Alegre e Campanha entre o final do século XIX e as primeiras décadas do século XX (1891-1930)*. Dissertation (Leisure Studies Master’s Program) –Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2017. See also *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 24th November 1886, p. 1.

for an Italian puppet company that toured the federal capital in 1879 and 1880.⁶ The company had twelve puppets, and the most famous was the one characterized as a black rascal from Bahia called João Minhoca. He was so famous that he was named after the company.

Very soon, João Baptista's company conquered public recognition, thus guaranteeing the company's profit and visibility. In his second season in the federal capital, which started in the garden of the Polytheama Theater in September 1883, the local press reported that the "automatic theater" by Mr. Baptista progressed "extraordinarily".⁷ According to the words of an anonymous collaborator of the newspaper *A Folha Nova*, "João Minhoca is becoming successful – each joke is a flood, and each flood an ovation".⁸

The profitability of João Baptista's puppet show did not go unnoticed, mainly because the structure cost in this type of performance tended to be reduced when compared to other theater types. A journalist writing for the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper in Rio de Janeiro summarized the situation. He ironically remarked that "the *João Minhoca* company's staff does not cost much".⁹ Unlike other greater and more sophisticated puppet groups, the twelve puppets in João Baptista's company were controlled by a single puppeteer, that is, João Baptista, which reduced significantly his costs and made his business model relatively profitable.

With the income obtained from the puppets' performances, Baptista invested in sceneries and costumes. In 1884, when they were in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, and soon in the cities of the state of Minas Gerais, the newspapers from Rio de Janeiro reported that the company already owned "a staff of around 300 characters".¹⁰ The company first presentation in the Garden of the Polytheama Theater, for example, had to be postponed due to the delay of the material imported from Europe.¹¹ Soon after, the company told to the audience that the characters' costumes were "new, dazzling, and according to the trends of those times, manufactured by the famous French dressmaker

⁶ FREIRE, Susanita. *O fim de um Símbolo: Teatro João Minhoca - Companhia Authomatica*. Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 2000.

⁷ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 31st May 1884, p. 2.

⁸ *A Folha Nova*, Rio de Janeiro, 17th December 1883, p. 2.

⁹ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 7th March 1884, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 31st May 1884, p. 2.

¹¹ *Jornal do Comércio*, Rio de Janeiro, 2nd September 1883, p. 8.

Mille Suzanne La Bergere. The sceneries and accessories were produced in Europe, at the Baciagalupe Brothers' famous factory".¹²

One of the results of João Baptista's puppet show cultural and economic success was a type of invasion of Rio de Janeiro by puppet shows, to such an extent that theater critics were afraid that puppets would substitute actors on the stages of the city. Because of the gains obtained by João Baptista, soon imitations of his puppets appeared. The first copycat was Philomena Borges, immediately followed by another initiative called Automatic Theater.¹³ More than motivating the appearance of other groups and leveraging this type of show business in Rio de Janeiro, the creations by João Baptista obtained notoriety also outside the theater. The *João Minhoca* character became the title of a poem, which became the lyrics of the "modern polka", a vaudeville theme and synonym of puppet show – which after João Baptista's business success were only called "João Minhoca theater".¹⁴ This reveals the cultural and social influence that this genre and João Baptista company had in the costumes of the late 19th century.

With the credential of "brilliant automaton", João Baptista promoted tours in Minas Gerais throughout 1884, 1885 and 1886. From then onwards, up to the end of the 19th century, other companies exclusively dedicated to puppet shows started to appear in the social and cultural landscape offering commercially these shows in Minas Gerais, even if not much is known about this topic. The historiography of scenic performances in Minas Gerais in the 19th century usually focuses on theater and circus performances, which are more recurrent genres and present more documents available.¹⁵ On the other hand, historical studies on other types of popular entertaining performances apart from the circus and certain popular theater shows such as magicians or puppets have usually focused on Rio de Janeiro, which was in fact the largest and most prosperous consumer market in the country throughout the 19th century.¹⁶

¹² *Jornal do Comércio*, Rio de Janeiro, 6th December 1883, p. 8.

¹³ *Gazeta de Tarde*, Rio de Janeiro, 6th June 1884, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 19th February 1884, p. 2; *Jornal do Comércio*, Rio de Janeiro, 17th January 1884, p. 3; 14th January 1884, p. 4.

¹⁵ DUARTE, Regina Horta. *Noites circenses: espetáculos de circo e teatro em Minas Gerais no século XIX*. Thesis (History PhD Program). Campinas: State University of Campinas, 1993.

¹⁶ FREIRE, Vanda Bellard. *O mundo maravilhoso das mágicas*. Rio de Janeiro: Contracapa, 2011; MARZANO, Andrea; Melo, Victor Andrade de (orgs). *Vida divertida: histórias do lazer no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Apicuri, 2010; MELO, Victor Andrade de. *Cidade divertida: entretenimentos no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2022.

Although being important, theater and circus performances did not exhaust the whole universe of commercial supply of shows in Minas Gerais. Like other popular entertainment scenic genres, puppets were not limited to the commercial market of Rio de Janeiro. Documented evidence revealed the presence of genres such as puppets in other cities in the late 19th century. The main documents found are newspapers, mainly, news or advertisement. Such material presents a fragmented character, with news scattered in different newspapers. However, when viewed under certain perspective, those fragments provide a general portrait of the dynamics of puppet shows at that time.

In this article, we explored the digital collection of the *Gazeta de Oliveira* and *Gazeta de Minas*¹⁷ newspapers, and also that of the *Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira* (Brazilian Digital Library) of the National Library of Rio de Janeiro¹⁸, which provided us with information from several newspapers not only those from Minas Gerais, but also from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In addition, we also surveyed the collection of the Antônio Torres Library, in Diamantina, mainly the *O Município* and *Pão de Santo Antônio* newspapers. Even with all the information available in this media, which was a reasonable amount, the volume of documents addressing puppet shows might underestimate the cultural relevance of that kind of repertoire, both at that time and later. As observed elsewhere, the history and success of this type of performance with the audience reveal something highly relevant regarding popular preferences of cultural consumption, even in more recent periods.

This article seeks to shed some light on the history of puppet shows in the late 19th century, going beyond the knowledge produced from Rio de Janeiro, mainly considering Susanita Freire's research.¹⁹ More precisely, seeking to broaden the knowledge of this topic, our objective is to examine the history of puppet shows in Minas Gerais in that period, when the structure of the supply and consumption of commercial entertainment in the region underwent noticeable transformation.²⁰ At that time, the growing assimilation of the agricultural production of Minas Gerais in exports circuits, as well as the consequent increase in the railway, created minimum material conditions, even if precarious, for a modest enlargement of the consumer market in

¹⁷ <https://www.gazetademinas.com.br/file-share>

¹⁸ <http://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital/>

¹⁹ FREIRE, 2000.

²⁰ DIAS, Cleber (org.). *História das indústrias culturais em Minas Gerais*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras, 2023.

the region, which regarded diverse urban performances and entertainment, including puppet shows.

“Entertainment for the young and adults as well”

In the 1890s, soon after *João Minhoca* was in Minas Gerais, puppet shows gained new status in the region. Throughout the last decade of the 19th century, puppet companies' visits became more frequent in Minas Gerais, and their repertoire became more varied and elaborated, which attracted the press attention. This new phase was materialized mainly in the tours promoted by two groups, namely, the Mexican automatons, directed by Rafael Marin, and the *Briquella* Puppet Theater, directed by Henrique Furnero.

In the middle of March 1891, when the Mexican Puppets performed for the first time in the Ouro Preto Theater, an anonymous collaborator of the *Estado de Minas* newspaper reported positively that group's work. In the same piece of writing, that author cited *João Minhoca* Company, which had been in the city some years before. Such mention was a comparative parameter in the evaluation of the quality of the performances, which reinforces the importance of that company. In other words, up to that moment, it was the company which owned the puppet called *João Minhoca* that served as a reference for that type of entertainment. According to that writer:

We watched the first performance of the Mexican Puppets and can secure the excited audience from our capital that they are part of an excellent and completely new type of entertainment. / The puppets form a group of elegant and tricky performers, skillfully controlled in all gymnastic exercises, routines, bullfighting, and many others, so that they cannot, in any way, be confused with the ordinary clowns of the company called *João Minhoca*. / No: they are good stuff. / The audience, adults and children, now have good entertainment. / To the theater; to the Puppets!²¹

One possible explanation to the perception of *João Minhoca* company as “ordinary clowns” might be related to the greater entrepreneurial and financial capability of the Mexican company that had just arrived in Ouro Preto. Founded in 1883 and having performed in “the main cities of North America”, as emphasized in the news and advertisements, the Mexican group

²¹ *Estado de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 13th March 1891, p. 3.

arrived in Brazil in the late 1890s. Their first destination was the state of Pará, where they toured before going to Pernambuco, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. In the latter, they performed in two important theaters of the federal capital, namely, Apolo and Lucinda Theaters.²² In March 1891, the Mexican company left Rio de Janeiro heading to Minas Gerais, where they performed in several cities of the region.²³ Following the steps of several other artistic groups that visited Minas Gerais in that period, their first stop, on 5th March, was in Juiz de Fora. In that city, they intended to promote three shows in the Novelli Theater (Figure 1). According to the *O Pharol* newspaper, from Juiz de Fora, the company had “excellent puppets”, which had been highly appreciated in the capital, Rio de Janeiro, gaining applauses from the audience and the most flattering references from the local press”.²⁴

Figure 1. Poster advertising the Mexican Automaton in Juiz de Fora.



Source: *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 5th March 1891, p. 3.

Although the puppet company called *João Minhoca* had received positive feedback from the Minas Gerais press, it cannot be compared to the

²² *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 6th March 1891, p. 3.

²³ *Estado de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 13th March 1891, p. 1.

²⁴ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 6th March 1891, p. 2.

enthusiasm shown by the columnists of the region when writing about the Mexican group. In Juiz de Fora, the compliments given to the *João Minhoca* company were limited to comments about their arrival and one of the seven presentations in the city, highlighting the interest and success they obtained from the audience. On the other hand, the Mexican company had detailed records of their arrival, of all performances, as well as of their departure to Ouro Preto. According to some report found in the *O Pharol* newspaper: “residents of Ouro Preto, who are used to applauding with excitement *João Minhoca*’s dusty jokes, will be amazed with the ability of this new company”.²⁵

In fact, when compared to the Mexican group, the general structure of *João Minhoca* company’s performances was rather simple. João do Rio wrote a well-known article in which he narrated a meeting with João Baptista, the founder of the *João Minhoca* company. Published for the first time in the *Cosmos Magazine* (1905) and included later in the book called *Vida Vertiginosa* (1911) (*Vertiginous Life*), the narrative describes the initial involvement of Baptista with the puppets, the creation of the character called *João Minhoca*, the first performances, the tours, and the main characteristics of that company. About the company’s stars, as mentioned before, everything started and finished with João Baptista only: “Who controlled the puppets? I did. Who wrote the plays? I did. Who spoke? I did”.²⁶ Such material structure with puppets controlled by a single puppeteer, even if well dressed and with scenery imported from Europe, indicates the modesty of the company, mainly when compared to foreign and more modern groups such as the Mexican Automatons. Not by chance, on several occasions, the news referred to the *João Minhoca*’s puppet show as “little theater”.²⁷

The Mexican puppet company, on the other hand, owned a more complex and elaborated organizational structure, which included, a director, a secretary, and several puppeteers. They also had greater and more diversified staff; the foreign group also seemed to have greater availability of funds for propaganda. In Juiz de Fora, for example, João Baptista could only buy one piece of advertisement in the local press to draw the audience’s attention to

²⁵ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 6th March 1891, p. 2; 8th March 1891, p. 1; 10th March 1891, p. 1; 11th March 1891, p. 1; 14th March 1891, p. 1.

²⁶ RIO, João do. *Vida Vertiginosa*. Rio de Janeiro: H. Garnier, 1911, p. 291.

²⁷ See, for example, *Gazeta da Tarde*, Rio de Janeiro, 6th June 1884, p. 1; *A Província de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 21st August 1884, p. 3.

João Minhoca and the other puppets,²⁸ while the Mexican puppets had detailed advertisement of each day of work of the group in different newspapers”.²⁹

These factors along with the fact that the Mexican group held the status of having performed in the “main cities of North America” – in a moment when even Baptista recognized the “foreign invasion”³⁰ as one of the reasons for the failure of his show – help to explain the wide coverage by the Minas Gerais newspapers in favor of the Mexican Automaton. In Ouro Preto, the allegation of the local writer that the Mexican Automaton were a “completely new entertainment genre” was not related to a really innovative scenic profile, since *João Minhoca* had already been in the capital of Minas Gerais seven years ago, but rather with the nature and perhaps technical and scenic sophistication of the foreign puppets’ performances.

According to João do Rio, João Baptista’s show was “completely national in this city of colonies and imitation”.³¹ His characters, among which were *João Minhoca*, *Maricota*, *O Galã* (the Star), *O Velho* (the Old Man), *A Velha* (the Old Woman), *A Donzela* (the Maiden), *A Sogra* (the Mother-in-Law), *Satanás* (the Devil), and *A Caveira* (the Skull), reproduced “magic, comedies, operas, representing the vaudeville”. The main character of João Baptista’s company was the smart *João Minhoca* from Bahia, “he was always the protagonist, beating the others and overcoming difficulties by means of his admirable wit and smartness”, according to an anonymous collaborator of a São Paulo newspaper writing when the company was in the city in July 1885 performing in a “modest theater”. In addition, according to the same writer from São Paulo, “murders, suicide, assaults, arson, explosion, poisoning, resurrections, walking corpses, ghosts, witches, all kinds of dreadful things appeared in most scenes of their preferred plays”.³²

The Mexican puppets, on the other hand, in addition to performing comedies, magic and musicals, like João Baptista’s shows, also presented an innovative repertoire for incorporating elements of circus and bullfighting, which justify the perception of novelty in the foreign group shows. Regarding circus performances, the puppets showed gymnastics and acrobatics such as the “tightrope”, “double trapeze”, “elastic man”, “human cannonball”, and the

²⁸ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 11th May 1890, p. 4.

²⁹ cf. *Diário de Minas*, Juiz de Fora, 6th March 1891, p. 4; 8th March 1891, p. 3; 9th March 1891, p. 3; 12th March 1891, p. 4.

³⁰ RIO, 1911, p. 295.

³¹ RIO, 1911.

³² *Correio Paulistano*, São Paulo, 19th July 1885, p. 2.

“American unicycle acrobats”. There were clowns who presented comic plays showing “Mexican costumes”.³³ Bullfighting performances were advertised with “all sorts of styles from Spain and Mexico”, including “banderillas on horseback”. A newspaper collaborator from Juiz de Fora provided details of one of the bullfighting scenes with the puppets: “The bullfighters were fearless experts, and the bull, the most ferocious beast throwing a horse rider on the ground and removing a clown’s pants, which amused the audience making them laugh a lot”.³⁴

In the same year the Mexican automatons performed for the first time in Brazil, the businessman Henrique Fornero organized the *Briguella* Puppet Theater, which performed repeated times in the cities of Minas Gerais in the late 19th century and early 20th century.³⁵ This group had the same style as *João Minhoca’s* and unlike the Mexican Automatons, Henrique Fornero’s puppet show had a more modest entrepreneurial structure, at least in its initial years of existence. News that circulated in the newspapers of Minas Gerais revealed long intervals between the company’s performances, generating “some complaints” by the audience, which were explained by the lack of professionals to develop some processes such as assembling sceneries, and also the need to “change the actor’s clothes and prepare them again to be on stage as a new character”, which hid the “lack of personnel”.³⁶ The spaces occupied by the *Briguella* company’s performances were usually improvised venues rather than “elegant theaters”.

In November 1898, a newspaper writer from Oliveira, in the west of Minas Gerais, commented the first night of performances of Henrique Fornero’s company in the city and warned the readers about the company’s limitations. According to that author: “These puppets are not the best of this style; there are better and more perfect ones”. In the same article, he complained about the distance of the venue where the show was on: “The

³³ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 6th March 1891, p. 3; 8th March 1891, p. 3; 12th March 1891, p. 3.

³⁴ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 8th March 1891, p. 1.

³⁵ Also in 1916, newspapers from Oliveira, after 17 years of the last *Briguella’s* performance in the city, reported that the “dramatic puppet company” had been touring Brazil for 26 years. *Gazeta de Minas*, Oliveira, 24th December 1916, p. 1. Although this is the last register that we found of that company, it might have remained in the puppet show for longer, since at the time there were some reports of the *Briguella* Theater investments in staff, scenery, and a fixed venue. *Gazeta de Minas*, Oliveira, 19th November 1916, p. 1. See also, *Jornal do Comércio*, Rio de Janeiro, 1st October 1900, p. 3; *O Caráter*, Lavras, 2nd December 1894, p. 1; *O Município*, Diamantina, 22nd June 1895, p. 2; *A Lei*, São João Nepomuceno, 11th July 1897, p. 2; *O Resistente*, São João del-Rei, 20th October 1898, p. 2; *Gazeta de Oliveira*, Oliveira, 20th November 1898, p. 1; *Gazeta de Minas*, Oliveira, 20th August 1899, p. 1.

³⁶ *A Lei*, São João Nepomuceno, 11th July 1897, p. 2.

audience has been regular; it could be enlarged if Mr. Henrique Fornero had established his theater in a more central venue. Many families have given up watching the performances due to the long distance”.³⁷ Likewise, in the city of Diamantina, during an excursion promoted in 1895, a columnist of that city reported the precariousness of the improvised room where the performances of Henrique Fornero’s puppet show took place: “the audience is piled up, pressed against the walls, close to the music stage, touching the neighbors backs, leaning, moving, creating such heat that even in the cold season you felt as if you were in an oven, just like a biscuit being baked”. He also informed that “the police suspended the entrance twice with the good intention of preventing such discomfort”.³⁸

The need to change the puppets’ characterization, the lack of staff, the use of improvised venues, which were sometimes far from the busy city center, or which required police intervention evidenced certain precariousness in the commercial structure of Henrique Fornero’s company at that time. Another aspect reinforcing such evidence was the scarcity of advertisement by that company. There seems to be a relation between the economic and commercial robustness of the puppet show and the press interest or disposition to advertise the events promoted by those companies. Therefore, the economic power of a puppet company resulted in better and more diversified characters, scenery and accommodations, consequently they would have more prominence in the press appearing in the news in the cities where the groups performed. Such exposure might result from paid advertisements (propaganda), or spontaneous news, due to the interest such arrangements might provoke in editors and writers, who were usually quite keen on describing activities that might be taken as symbols of cosmopolitanism and modernity.

In December 1916, around 17 years after their last performance in that city, the *Briguella* company returned to Oliveira, where they stayed for almost three weeks. Local columnists reported that “this time the company is much better and bigger, with excellent facilities providing all comfort [...], gorgeous sceneries that resulted in great effect”.³⁹ Therefore, they were in a different position from the previous situation, when they were in the city and improvised a venue far from the city center. This time, Henrique Fornero installed his puppet show in the building of the *Oliveirense* cinema, a concert

³⁷ *Gazeta de Oliveira*, Oliveira, 20th November 1898, p. 1.

³⁸ *O Município*, Diamantina, 22nd June 1895, p. 2.

³⁹ *Gazeta de Minas*, Oliveira, 24th December 1916, p. 1.

venue that sheltered important theater company tours such as the Portuguese Drama Company, by the “acclaimed actor Romualdo Figueiredo” and the Alzira Leão company, directed by the “renowned and applauded actress Ms. Alzira Leão”.⁴⁰

A year before, Henrique Fornero and his puppet show were in Diamantina, in the north of Minas Gerais. Also in Diamantina, the group of performers received positive reviews from the press, unlike the other time they had been there. During their stay in Diamantina in 1915, which lasted over a month, articles in the local press reported that the group was enlarged and acquired “beautiful and eye-catching sceneries” of “stunning effect”.⁴¹ All this seems to reveal that Henrique Fornero’s entrepreneurship obtained some commercial success over the years.

The repertoire of Henrique Fornero’s puppet show was very similar to that of *João Minhoca* company, that is, comedies, fantasy, magic, music, and “dramatic” plays, which always presented the “rascal, funny and witty” *Briguella* as the protagonist. According to a columnist of the city of São João Nepomuceno, of all the characters in Mr. Fornero’s company, the only one that always kept the same features was *Briguella*.⁴² Another writer in the city of Oliveira described that character as “a daredevil who punches everyone, creates schemes, lies and plays tricks, but in the end always gets away with all the trouble he makes”.⁴³ According the description provided by another columnist from Oliveira, *Briguella* was a character that broke everything, “by beating and punching, without respecting the people, nobility, or clergy”.⁴⁴

There is also some news about other three puppet companies that visited Minas Gerais in the last decade of the 19th century, however, this is rather scarce.⁴⁵ One of these records was published in September 1892, when the Automatic Theater, belonging to Mr. Alexandre Aparício, appeared in two pieces of advertisement in the *Gazeta de Oliveira* newspaper (Figure 2), inviting the residents to the show that would be held at the “Brewery new building”. According to the advertisement, the company had 14 characters and another 10 puppets, who would perform in plays with “ships, captains, sailors, illusion,

⁴⁰ *Gazeta de Minas, Oliveira*, 22nd September 1912, p. 1; 10th October 1915, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Pão de Santo Antônio, Diamantina*, 7th November 1915, p. 3; 14th November 1915, p. 3; 21st November 1915, p. 3.

⁴² *A Lei, São João Nepomuceno*, 11th July 1897, p. 2.

⁴³ *Gazeta de Minas, Oliveira*, 9th October 1899, p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Gazeta de Minas, Oliveira*, 27th November 1898, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *O Beija Flor, Viçosa*, 2nd December 1897, p. 2; *Queluz de Minas, Queluz*, 1st May 1898, p. 4.

sleight of hand, fireworks, etc.”.⁴⁶ In November of the same year, Mr. Aparício’s theater was installed in the neighboring district of Carmo da Mata, where a puppet performance was held after the Our Lady of Carmo Fete.

THEATRO AUTOMATICO

HOJE **HOJE**

Illusionist Authomatic Company
(No edificio novo da Fabrica de Cerveja á Praça do Cruzeiro,
perto da Estação)

(COMPANHIA DE BONECOS)
Alexandre Apparicio

Assombroso Divertimento!!!
VARIADOS ESPECTACULOS EM 5 ACTOS
Exibir-se-hão os mais surprehendedentes trabalhos da familia encantada

PERSONAGENS DA COMPANHIA

João Rolando Angico Jequitibá Peroba D. Maricota Rolando Barão de Marimbé Cará Pororó Ussú Capitão Estação, Tibirica Mucury Lindolpho Dr. Berlot, dentista de Paris Pipiuo	Cigano Maluco Sr. Machado Soldado Pernambucano Adão Rolando Jorge, inglez Pedro Gago Rua da mandioca
--	--

mais 10 bonecos Phantoches

Navios, capitães, marinheiros, illusões, prestidigitações, fogos, etc., etc.

Source: *Gazeta de Oliveira*, Oliveira, 4th September 1892, p. 4.

In addition, in the circuses and other entertainment companies that visited Minas Gerais in the late 19th century, puppet shows were always included in the menu of attractions, even after the beginning of tours by groups specialized in this type of performance in the region. In the middle of March 1892, for example, the *Companhia Excêntrica de Variedades* (Excentric Entertainment Company), directed by the comedians Peret and Portilho, after being “enthusiastically applauded” in the city of Barbacena, arrived in Juiz de Fora promising to offer two nights of entertainment at the Novelli Theater.⁴⁷ In the second and last performance of that group in Juiz de Fora, which included comedy, singing, and comic scenes, local newspapers announced

⁴⁶ *Gazeta de Oliveira*, Oliveira, 4th September 1892, p. 4.

⁴⁷ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 16th March 1892, p. 1.

the performance of “American Puppets” (Figure 3), who were responsible for the two last parts of the entertainment company’s show. One of them was a story told by the zombie called Castro Malta, which ended with an “improvised singing-dancing called *Lundu*”, and a play, in the fifth and last part, called *O Velhinho Simão* (Old Simon), starred by the puppet called Perimpimpão.⁴⁸

Figure 3. Poster of the American Puppets’ show



Source: *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 20th March 1892, p. 3.

A common feature among the groups that worked with puppets was the audience they targeted. In Rio de Janeiro, in June 1884, an anonymous collaborator of the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper recognized that “for children” there was only “one logical and possible theater: that of *João Minhoca*”.⁴⁹ In Minas Gerais, also in 1884, an anonymous columnist in a newspaper of Ouro Preto diagnosed the same regarding the audience of João Baptista’s puppets: “*João Minhoca* continues with their performances in the city, with great acceptance by the audience, mainly kids, for whom this genre of entertainment is specially destined”.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 20th March 1892, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Gazeta de Notícias*, Rio de Janeiro, 16th June 1884, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *A Província de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 21st August 1884, p. 3.

Likewise, in the Mexican Automaton's and *Briguella* Company's excursions throughout the cities in the state of Minas Gerais, the child audience was often emphasized in the local news. In March 1891, for example, after the first performance of the Mexican group at the Novelli Theater, in Juiz de Fora, a columnist for the *O Pharol* newspaper wrote that "their performances are enjoyable pastime, mainly for children, who certainly appreciate the ability they show in the execution of the most different works."⁵¹ In October 1898, in the city of São João del-Rei, a columnist in the *O Resistente* newspaper summoned the local families to "have their kids ready to have a lot of fun" after *Briguella's* company arrived in the city.⁵² On another occasion, the same writer commented: "these puppets belong to the children and have entertained them in crowded performances with a lot of laughter".⁵³

However, even if the kids were in fact the main audience, those puppets, according to an article found in the *O Pharol* newspaper, "provided entertainment for the young and adults as well".⁵⁴ In the city of Oliveira, for example, during *Briguella's* stay in December 1898, Mr. Machado, a Portuguese teacher and journalist, published a note in the local newspaper which read "while the Puppet Show was in the city, I missed only one performance because I was ill".⁵⁵

For being a kind of entertainment destined to children, many families accompanied their kids "and laughed a lot".⁵⁶ On the other hand, many adults, who could be accompanying their children or not, sought these puppet plays to have fun, such as Mr. Machado, and certainly many others at that time. According to an article published in 1891 in the *Estado de Minas* newspaper, in Ouro Preto, the puppets offered "real fun" for "adults and children".⁵⁷ The fact that the repertoire of those shows usually involved "witty scripts" already reveals the nature of the humor found in their plots, which targeted adults as well.

⁵¹ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 8th March 1891, p. 1.

⁵² *O Resistente*, São João del-Rei, 20th October 1898, p. 2.

⁵³ *O Resistente*, São João del-Rei, 27th October 1898, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 20th March 1892, p. 1;

⁵⁵ *Gazeta de Minas*, Oliveira, 11th December 1898, p. 2.

⁵⁶ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 2nd July 1904, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Estado de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 13th March 1891, p. 3.

Final Considerations

Puppet shows constitute an old and solid tradition of popular entertainment not only in Minas Gerais, but also in all Portuguese-speaking countries, and even in other European countries, such as England, France, Spain, and Italy, where the group that introduced João Baptista, creator of the famous character *João Minhoca*, in the art of puppeteer came from.⁵⁸ Rafael Bluteau's dictionary from 1720, for example, already mentioned "*presépios*" or "*presepes*", defined as "representations that the specialized industry of some curious individuals expose to the spectators [...] with several characters, appearances, perspectives, dialogues, singing, and some other types of entertainment".⁵⁹ Such representations, usually depicting passages of the Bible, could be carried out by actors or those called "*bonifrates*", who at least since the 18th century became a known theater tradition in the Luso-Brazilian world.

Although the first permanent *bonifrats'* theater in Lisbon dates back to 1732 (called Pátio dos Condes [Count's Patio] or Pátio do Bairro Alto [High Neighborhood Patio]), this type of entertainment was already known in the city at least since 1712. In Brazil, in 1719 there are reports of a partnership contract between Manoel da Silveira Ávila, Plácido Coelho de Castro and António Pereira to set up and explore commercially a *presépio* in Rio de Janeiro. In 1748, a member of French crew docked in Rio de Janeiro watched a theater performance in the city, where *bonifrates* were used. The Theater of Rio de Janeiro in the mid-18th century, known as *Ópera dos Vivos* (Opera of the alive) received this name exactly to mark its difference in relation to the *bonifrates'* theater that operated in the city, which was then the opposite of a theater of live actors, but rather a puppet show.⁶⁰

In Minas Gerais, more specifically, the French naturalist and botanist August de Saint-Hilare, who crossed the region in the second half of the 1810s, wrote briefly about the "*presépios*" he had the chance to know, where scenes from the Bible were performed by puppets.⁶¹ It seems relevant to mention

⁵⁸ MCCORMICK, John; PRATASIK; Bennie. *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁵⁹ BLUTEAU, Rafael. *Vocabulário Português e latino*, v. 6. Lisboa: Oficina de Pascoal da Sylva, Impressor de Sua Magestade, 1720, p. 712-713.

⁶⁰ BRESCIA, Rosana; LINO, Sulamita. O teatro de tradição ibérica na América portuguesa na primeira metade do século XVIII: arquitetura e repertório. *European Review of Artistic Studies*, v. 4, n. 1, p. 31- 53, 2013.

⁶¹ SAINT-HILAIRE, Auguste de. *Viagem pelas províncias do Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 2000, p. 64.

that the *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa* (Portuguese Dictionary), organized by Antônio de Moraes Silva in 1823, had the entry “puppets” defined as “dolls that play certain roles in performances to the audience”.⁶²

Around the 1840s, there is news of a versatile artist and artisan called José Ferreira, “sacristan”, “sculptor”, “bellringer”, “painter”, “decorator”, “actor” and “dramatic author”, who manufactured puppets and performed with them in Ouro Preto, according to some memoirs from the late 19th century. In addition to manufacturing and controlling those puppets, José Ferreira also wrote drama and comedy scripts, and acted in those performances as “presenter”, “theater director” and “chief engineer”.⁶³ Also in the mid-1860s, news of civic fetes in São João del Rei mentioned “fireworks”, “music” and “*presepe* by José Ferreira”.⁶⁴ At that time, around the 1860s and 1870s, “*presepes*” appeared in some tax reports of some municipalities in Minas Gerais, regarding taxes charged on performance values, along with the theater, circus, magician shows, *cosmorama*, mask balls, horse competitions, and bullfighting.⁶⁵

At the same time, we also found the first circus documents, which advertised puppet shows in their repertoire. In January 1876, for example, the Olympico Circus had an advertisement printed in the *Monitor do Norte* newspaper, in the city of Diamantina, promising to show the “highly appreciated naughty puppets”.⁶⁶ From the 1880s onwards, some news was published about the first companies exclusively dedicated to the puppet genre in excursion through Minas Gerais. Between December 1882 and March 1883, just before *João Minhoca’s* tour through Minas Gerais, two “puppet companies” advertised performances in the city of Juiz de Fora.⁶⁷

Despite their solid tradition and popularity, such performances were subject to criticism. An article from 1904, signed with the pseudonym L., published in a newspaper from Juiz de Fora, narrated the meeting between the author and a group defined by him as the “bourgeois resembling artists”. The meeting occurred at the exit of an “art exhibition” in the city, which presented as one of their attractions a “little puppet show”. It was in such context that

⁶² SILVA, Antônio de Moraes. *Dicionário da língua portuguesa recopilado de todos os impressos até o presente*. 3^o ed., v. 2, Typographia de M. P. Lacerda: Lisboa, 1823, p. 765.

⁶³ *O Estado de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 10th January 1896, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Diário de Minas*, Juiz de Fora, 5th July 1866, p. 1.

⁶⁵ cf. *O Bem Público*, Ouro Preto, 8th September 1860, p. 2; *Noticiador de Minas*, Ouro Preto, 20th June 1872, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *Monitor do Norte*, Diamantina, 6th February 1876, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 12th December 1882, p. 4; 16th December 1882, p. 4; 31st March 1883, p. 4.

those “bourgeois resembling artists” criticized harshly the addition of a “little puppet show” to an “art exhibition”. According to L., they spoke “badly of the puppets”, alleging that those “dolls were not worth watching”. The report by L. of such reactions, which might be true or not, seems to capture a cultural conflict that affected the perception of the puppet genre. According to him, such comments seemed “mockery to the audience’s good taste”.⁶⁸ Ultimately, the negative reaction to the presence of a “little puppet show” in an “art exhibition” referred to the legitimacy or pertinence of the popular taste.

In the late 19th century, as before and after that period, there was a conflicting hierarchy regarding taste structure, not only related to performances, but in fact, the whole cultural consumption universe.⁶⁹ Such hierarchy classified certain types of performances as more or less appropriate, according to the occasion and circumstances. In such context, what the “bourgeois resembling artists” from Juiz de Fora tried to express in their indignant words was a kind of rejection to the incorporation of puppet shows, that is, a type of scenic performance with strong popular appeal or addressed to an audience with questionable taste, as believed at the time, to the universe of arts, which should function as a mechanism of social consecration. In other words, this represented an ethical and cultural disqualification.

It was precisely the structure of values implied in that hierarchy of tastes that justified the “indignation” of the “bourgeois” from Juiz de Fora and other places in relation to the “little puppet show”. The same structure of values supported certain predilection by the intellectual elites that managed the media of that time to be in favor of some types of art in detriment of others. Thus, the news about “little puppet shows” tended to have less space in newspapers in the late 19th century, whose editorial lines usually privileged and emphasized their link to sophisticated musical concerts or theater plays performed by companies dedicated to “serious drama”.

However, two components destabilized part of these cultural hierarchies despite the inclination toward the artistic language of a more sophisticated

⁶⁸ *O Pharol*, Juiz de Fora, 2nd July 1904, p. 1.

⁶⁹ LIMA, Tania Andrade de. Pratos e mais pratos: louças domésticas, divisões culturais e limites sociais no Rio de Janeiro, século XIX. *Anais do Museu Paulista*, v. 3, p. 129-191, 1996; SOUZA, Sílvia Cristina Martins de. *As noites do Ginásio: teatro e tensões culturais na Corte, 1832-1868*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 2002; MENCARELLI, Fernando A. *A voz e a partitura: teatro musical, indústria e diversidade cultural no Rio de Janeiro (1868-1908)*. Thesis (Social History PhD Program). State University of Campinas, 2003; GOMES, Tiago de Melo. *Um espelho no palco: identidades sociais e massificação da cultura no teatro de revista dos anos 1920*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 2004; OLIVEIRA, Milena Fernandes de. *O mercado do prestígio: consumo, capitalismo e modernidade na São Paulo da Belle Époque (1890-1914)*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2015.

tone by newspaper writers and producers. These were the audience's interest, on the one hand, and the financial power of the popular theater managers/owners to pay for advertisement, on the other hand. Thus, financial power many times influenced, or even subjected hierarchies of cultural judgement, either due to the interests of those reading the news in accessing information about the popular theater and paying for that by buying newspapers, or for the entrepreneurs of popular artistic companies who could afford publicity in those newspapers.

Large circuses or even puppet shows that were commercially well succeeded obtained greater press coverage at the time. Greater newspaper coverage did not necessarily mean the consent of the literate elites in charge of those means of communication, even if this was sometimes the case. Actually, those puppeteers or companies sometimes also materialized the idea of cosmopolitanism and modernity, which made them specially appreciated. In fact, in the late 19th century XIX, the supply of commercial leisure in a city was very often considered a symbol of progress and civility.⁷⁰ Therefore, it was common to see advertisement or news about those circuses and certain more popular scenic companies emphasizing their international and modern dimensions, which made them meet certain requirements. Moreover, popular artistic groups that were at the same time economically more successful had higher financial power to pay for publicity, which naturally converted in more regular appearance in the papers, regardless of the preferences of editors or writers.

Either among puppet show groups of “simple clowns” or those considered more elegant and sophisticated, the history of this type of entertainment reveals a predilection of the popular taste to certain elements of the scenic repertoire which were not limited to the late 19th century or other periods before that. Actually, some elements of that repertoire were seen to be quite perennial in the popular taste. The first and most obvious was their predilection for humorous scripts. The second was their taste for what we could call *scenic pyrotechnics* with its typical “stunning effects”, “beautiful and eye-catching sceneries”, “orchestras”, “fire abyss”, “arson”, “explosion”, and “illusions”, that is, all those “dreadful things” reported in the sources. The third and last, maybe the most important of them, was the presence of main characters who represented poor people in advantageous situations

⁷⁰ DIAS Cleber; ROSA Maria Cristina (orgs). *Histórias do lazer nas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2019.

or overcoming difficulties, mainly when fighting individuals who were in a higher social position.

All that is not only found in the repertoire of “*bonifrates*” or puppet shows of the 18th and 19th centuries. An analysis of the repertoire of a Brazilian group of comedians with characteristics that resembled circus performances and that was highly successful on television and the cinema in the second half of the 20th century called “*Os Trapalhões*” (The Clumsies), might reveal some of these elements, mainly the poor guy that gets involved in confusion and ends up overcoming adversities by means of his wit.⁷¹ Therefore, the commercial and social success in the second half of the 20th century of characters like *Didi Mocó*, the main character of *Os Trapalhões*, keeps relations of historical continuity in the plan of cultural repertoire with the popular consecration of *João Minhoca* or *Briguella* almost a century before.

The remarkable historical persistence of such discursive and repertoire structures only reinforced the cultural and social importance of practices that materialized them in the past or even in present times. Difficulties due to certain document scarcity should not demotivate the historiographic and interpretive effort of studying this kind of practices. Popular habits have not always been sufficiently recorded in written documents left to the historians. Even the document availability might be part of the hegemonic value reproduction system, which must be considered critically and in the light of the most general social and cultural context of its time.

References

BLUTEAU, Rafael. *Vocabulário Português e latino*, v. 6. Lisboa: Oficina de Pascoal da Sylva, Impressor de Sua Magestade, 1720.

BRESCIA, Rosana; LINO, Sulamita. O teatro de tradição ibérica na América portuguesa na primeira metade do século XVIII: arquitetura e repertório. *European Review of Artistic Studies*, v. 4, n. 1, p. 31- 53, 2013.

D’OLIVEIRA, Géisa Fernandes; VERGUEIRO, Waldomiro. Humor na televisão brasileira: o interessante e inusitado caso do programa *Os Trapalhões*. *Revista USP*, n. 88, p. 122-132, 2010-2011.

DIAS Cleber; ROSA Maria Cristina (orgs). *Histórias do lazer nas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2019.

⁷¹ D’OLIVEIRA, Géisa Fernandes; VERGUEIRO, Waldomiro. Humor na televisão brasileira: o interessante e inusitado caso do programa *Os Trapalhões*. *Revista USP*, n. 88, p. 122-132, 2010-2011.

- DIAS, Cleber (org.). *História das indústrias culturais em Minas Gerais*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras, 2023.
- DUARTE, Regina Horta. *Noites circenses: espetáculos de circo e teatro em Minas Gerais no século XIX*. Thesis (History PhD Program) – State University of Campinas, Campinas, 1993.
- FREIRE, Susanita. *O fim de um Símbolo: Theatro João Minhoca - Companhia Authomatica*. Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 2000.
- FREIRE, Vanda Bellard. *O mundo maravilhoso das mágicas*. Rio de Janeiro: Contracapa, 2011.
- GOMES, Tiago de Melo. *Um espelho no palco: identidades sociais e massificação da cultura no teatro de revista dos anos 1920*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 2004.
- LIMA, Tania Andrade de. Pratos e mais pratos: louças domésticas, divisões culturais e limites sociais no Rio de Janeiro, século XIX. *Anais do Museu Paulista*, v. 3, p. 129-191, 1996.
- MARZANO, Andrea; Melo, Victor Andrade de (orgs). *Vida divertida: histórias do lazer no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Apicuri, 2010.
- MCCORMICK, John; PRATASIK; Bennie. *Popular Puppet Theatre in Europe, 1800-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- MELO, Victor Andrade de. *Cidade divertida: entretenimentos no Rio de Janeiro do século XIX*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 Letras, 2022.
- MENCARELLI, Fernando A. *A voz e a partitura: teatro musical, indústria e diversidade cultural no Rio de Janeiro (1868-1908)*. Thesis (Social History PhD Program). State University of Campinas, 2003.
- NOGUEIRA JÚNIOR, João Martins. *Uma história dos divertimentos do sul mineiro: Itajubá, Pouso Alegre e Campanha entre o final do século XIX e as primeiras décadas do século XX (1891-1930)*. Dissertation (Leisure Studies Master's Program) – Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2017.
- OLIVEIRA, Milena Fernandes de. *O mercado do prestígio: consumo, capitalismo e modernidade na São Paulo da Belle Époque (1890-1914)*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2015.
- PESSOA, Ana. O Teatro de Bonecos na Belle-Époque carioca. *Móin-Móin Revista de Estudos sobre Teatro de Formas Animadas*, v. 1, n. 3, p. 190-206, 2018.
- RIO, João do. *Vida Vertiginosa*. Rio de Janeiro: H. Garnier, 1911.

SAINT-HILAIRE, Auguste de. *Viagem pelas províncias do Rio de Janeiro e Minas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 2000.

SILVA, Antônio de Moraes. *Dicionário da língua portuguesa recopilado de todos os impressos até o presente*. 3ª ed., v. 2, Typographia de M. P. Lacerda: Lisboa, 1823.

SOUZA, Silvia Cristina Martins de. *As noites do Ginásio: teatro e tensões culturais na Corte, 1832-1868*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 2002.

Article received for publication on 10/07/2024

Approved on 16/09/2024.