

From Puppets to Opera: 300 years of the first permanent theatre of Brazil

Rosana de Moraes Marreco Orsini Brescia (Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal)
rbrescia@fcsb.unl.pt

Abstract

Although theatrical performances were being produced in Portuguese America since the 16th century, it was only in 1719 that the first permanent public theatre was established, offering puppet performances for locals and foreigners who visited the city of Rio de Janeiro. This paper analyses the foundation of the first permanent theatre in Brazil through primary sources and travellers' journals and suggests a new approach to the theatre built in 1719 and the subsequent permanent theatrical buildings of Rio de Janeiro constructed during the 18th century. The contextualisation of the puppet theatrical activity in the early 18th-century Lisbon is also crucial to our understanding of the importance of this form of art, which figures as one of the most fascinating pages of Portuguese and Brazilian theatre history.

Keywords: Public Theatres. Rio de Janeiro. Puppet Theatre. Opera House. Portuguese America.

Resumo

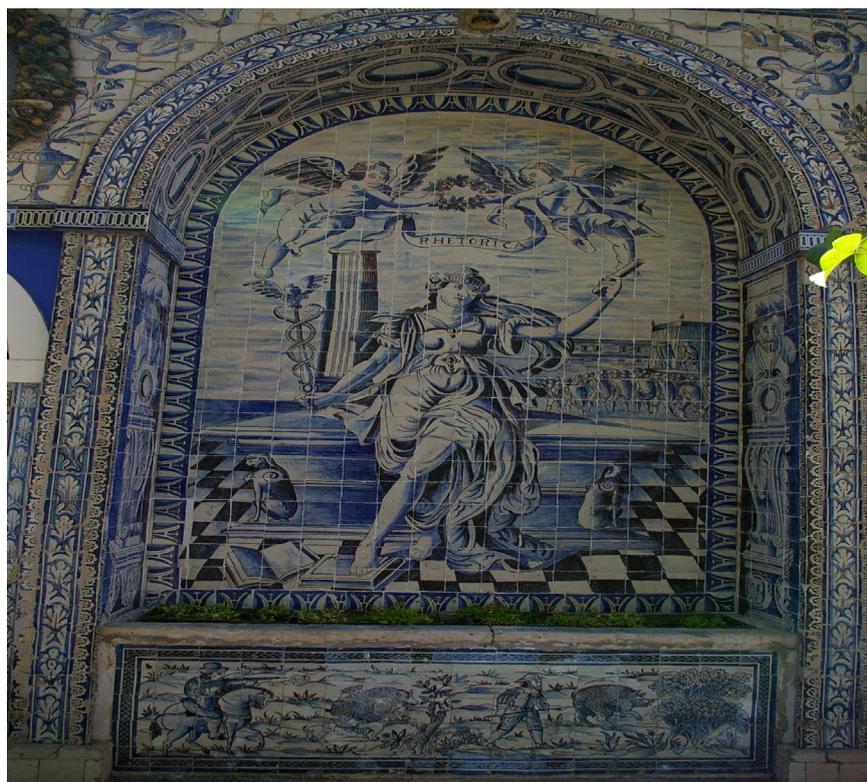
Ainda que as representações teatrais tenham sido introduzidas na América Portuguesa no século XVI, foi somente em 1719 que o primeiro teatro público permanente foi estabelecido, oferecendo récitas de marionetes para os habitantes locais e estrangeiros que visitavam o Rio de Janeiro. O presente artigo analisa a fundação do primeiro teatro permanente do Brasil através do estudo de fontes primárias e relatos de viajantes estrangeiros, propondo uma nova abordagem sobre o teatro construído em 1719 e os subsequentes edifícios teatrais construídos no Rio de Janeiro ao longo do século XVIII. A contextualização da atividade dos teatros de marionetes em Lisboa no princípio do século XVIII também se revela crucial para o entendimento dessa forma de arte, que figura como uma das mais fascinantes páginas da história do teatro em Portugal e no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Teatros Públicos. Rio de Janeiro. Teatros de Marionetes. Casas da Ópera. América Portuguesa.

Ephemeral Theatres in Portuguese America

Theatre as a form of art was introduced in Portuguese America during the first decades of colonisation in the 16th century, when the first theatrical performances were introduced by Jesuit priests both in their colleges and in the native Indian villages. The theatrical performances were very common throughout the 17th century, not only in the colleges and villages but also during the most important celebrations related to the Portuguese crown and their mandataries in America. The acclamation of a king, the birth of an heir, a royal wedding or the birthday of a local governor was celebrated with great festivity, which included the presentation of one or several dramatic works, most of them originating in the 17th-century Spanish tradition.

Fig. 1 - Rethorica. In the background one can see a public theatrical performance. 17th century tile panel. Palácio Fronteira, Galeria das Artes, Lisbon. Photography by Dr. Luzia Rocha.



For these occasions, ephemeral theatres were built in public squares; most of the time, the main structure of the permanent theatres was maintained, such as elaborate stages and boxes for the prominent authorities, containing the main scenic machines of the period. After all, these performances were given to reinforce the power of the Portuguese crown and their local mandataries in the foreign territories, and nothing could have been more powerful for this purpose other than appealing to all the senses of the audience.

An important description of these festivities was printed in Lisbon in 1718 concerning the celebrations held in Salvador da Bahia, then the capital of Brazil, to laud the birth of the grandson of the vice-king, the Marquis of Angeja. For this occasion, a theatre for dramatic performances was built opposite the palace and had its façade reproduced. Since performances were held at night, torches were placed in the windows of the palace, making the occasion even more special. Three arches formed the main structure of the theatre, through which actors came out and where sets, such as towers and gardens, were placed in perspective, according to the circumstances of the plays performed. Amongst the works performed were *El Conde Lucanor* and *Afectos de Odio y Amor* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca and *Rendirse a la obligación* by Diego and José de Córdoba y Figueroa; all with “good music, odes and a variety of ballet” (APLAUSO NATALÍCIO, 1718. p.7).

However, the fact that memorable performances deserved a grand temporary stage built exclusively for special occasions bears limited relevance to the existence of permanent theatres; probably the artists engaged in both occasions could have been the same sometimes. Even in the second half of the 18th century, when several permanent theatres were working throughout the Portuguese American territories, especial celebrations were still performed in public squares for one very simple reason: they were non-profit performances and the audience could and should have included all the representative groups of the population—an effective reminiscence of the kingdom’s power. In contrast, permanent theatres were

businesses which pursued financial gain; tickets were sold, albeit not always affordable, targeting a certain section of the society. Therefore, although many theatrical performances had already been performed in several cities of Portuguese America, there were no records of a permanent theatre or an opera house until 1719.

Next, we propose an analysis of the theatrical activity in 18th century Rio de Janeiro through the analysis of primary sources, namely a deed of the society which established Brazil's first permanent theatre in 1719 and a few documents related to Boaventura Dias Lopes, owner of two of the city's most important theatres in the second half of the century. Besides these documents, there are two essential travellers' journals mentioned in the present paper: Pierre Sonnerat's *Voyage aux Indes Orientales et à la Chine* and Louis Antoine de Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate "La Boudeuse" et la flute "L'Étoile"*. The reports written by these two Frenchmen bring unique information about the theatrical buildings approached in this study and the functioning of the companies' in the city of Rio de Janeiro throughout the 18th century.

The first Permanent Theatre in Rio de Janeiro

On November 28, 1719, Manoel da Silveira Avila, Placido Coelho de Castro and Antonio Pereira established a society to perform a crib on Christmas eve and the following nights. Each one of them had a specific role in the company: Mr. Manoel da Silveira Avila oversaw the paintings, Mr. Placido Coelho de Castro supervised the puppets and Mr. Antonio Pereira took care of the music, composed for four voices and accompanied by the necessary instruments. These three gentlemen relied on the income from the ticket sales to have all their expenses reimbursed; the profits would be equally divided amongst the partners. According to the contract, Mr. Antonio Pereira was appointed as the treasurer of the society, in charge of paying the other partners (ANRJ, 1719, pp.186-187).

The above-mentioned information was extracted from a document entitled "Escritura de Sociedade Prezepio que faz entre o Sr. Manoel da Silveira Avilla, Placido de Castro e Ant^o Pr^a", currently conserved at the National Archives in Rio de Janeiro and mentioned for the first time by Nireu Cavalcanti in his remarkable work *O Rio de Janeiro Setecentista* (2004, pp.171-172). This is an extremely important source not only for being the first document attesting the activity of a permanent theatre in Rio but also because it provides inestimable information about the functioning of the company. It confirms that the performances had a financial goal and that they were produced in an enclosed space to allow the partners to control the audience members' access, assuring the theatre's economic progress, common practice since the end of the 16th century (ALLEN, 2003, pp.629-653). This was the first permanent building in the Portuguese America that was dedicated to the presentation of dramatic works, followed by the theatres of Salvador da Bahia in 1729 (AHU, Cx.45, D.4043, Microfilme Rolo 50) and Vila Rica by 1751 (APM, CMOP, Cx.25, doc.13, fl.03).

The three men involved in the society were very likely artists who were responsible for the adjudication of other professionals involved in the performances. Mr António Pereira, for example, could have assumed the role of the composer and perhaps one of the musicians; however, he certainly had to hire other singers and instrumentalists to accompany the performances since the deed confirms that the music should be written for four voices accompanied by the necessary instruments. Mr. Manoel da Silveira Ávila could have been the painter of the decorations of the theatre and the sets in perspective, since these two domains are inextricably linked in baroque theatres. If he had been a painter

only, he would have had to recruit all the other professionals to build the theatre, including the stage and all the scenic machines. Similarly, Mr. Plácido Coelho de Castro could have been the puppet maker or even one of the puppet handlers or could have been responsible for engaging the required professionals to handle the puppet ‘actors’. The puppets that were used in Portugal at the beginning of the 18th century were of natural size and the plots performed included several scenic effects as we will see in advance, which means the personnel required for the proper functioning of a puppet theatre would not have differed from the professionals working in a regular 18th-century opera house.

Returning to cribs, Raphael Bluteau (1728, pp. 712–713) defines them as being ‘performances of the Nativity with real actors, live [and] in private houses, churches [...] Cribs are also called [...] some performances which the wit of some curious men bring to the eyes of the audience according to the reasons and circumstances of the Nativity, performed by several figures, sets in perspective, dialogues, harmonies and gay entertainments. In fact, the word crib (*prezéprio* in Portuguese), which describes public theatres in general, was commonly used during the first half of the 18th century, not only in the Portuguese America but also in Portugal. The crib founded in Rio de Janeiro apparently did not only perform the scenes of the Nativity during the late 1719, since other documents reveal the activities of a permanent puppet theatre in Rio de Janeiro several years later.

Puppets Theatres in Portugal and Brazil

To fully understand the importance of cribs in the history of theatre, both in Portugal and Brazil, one should understand the role of the puppet theatres during the first half of the 18th century. Although the *Bonifrates* were quite common since the 16th century, it was during the first decades of the 18th century that this form of theatre reached its zenith of splendour. From the 1730s onwards, two permanent theatres in Lisbon offered comedies in Portuguese with music and all the scenic effects known at the time to Portuguese audiences. These two buildings, Teatro do Bairro Alto (a.k.a. *Casa do Presépio* or House of the Crib) and Teatro da Mouraria, became extremely famous for combining the two theatrical influences in vogue in Lisbon of the previous years—the Spanish plays of the *Siglo de Oro* and the Italian opera, recently introduced to the Portuguese court. The first reference to the existence of the Theatre of Bairro Alto dates back to 1732, and these were the first performances with music in Lisbon that were sung in Portuguese, while the other theatres active in the court offered performances in Spanish (at *Pátio das Arcas*) and in Italian (at *Academia da Trindade*). An interesting report at the outset of the 18th century tells us about this new kind of theatre, which had recently been introduced to the court:

Not too long ago, it was introduced to this court a kind of opera which is not performed by living figures but by artificial ones. They were true comedies and operas, made in the same style and with music, performed publicly in some houses rented for the purpose and accepting whoever could afford the prices established by the authors (NOGUEIRA, 1906, p. 536-541).

The allusion to the quality of the puppets by several authors of the time illustrates that they were so real that the unaware audience would not believe that they were not living models. A letter mentioned by Jacqueline Monfort (1972, p. 590) claims that the puppets’ movements were so realistic that even the Inquisition launched an inquiry.

Amongst the authors who wrote theatrical plays for puppets in Portugal, the name of António José da Silva stands out. He was born in Brazil in 1705 in Rio de Janeiro and,

without doubt, is one of the most brilliant Luso-Brazilian playwrights of the first half of the century. Although Silva began his activities as a playwright only a few years after his arrival in Lisbon, his works became extremely popular in the Portuguese American colony and were performed until the 1770s both in temporary and public theatres.

It is worth noting that António José da Silva's plays alongside other plays by anonymous authors, included in the collection titled *Theatro Comico Portuguez*, mention a significant number of scenic actions, such as the representation of storms, naval battles, fast set changes, fire-spitting monsters flying over the set, etc.; this suggests that these theatres relied heavily on the major scenic machinery, known in regular opera houses of the early 18th century.

Recalling the theatre of Rio de Janeiro, a few years after the presentation of the crib in 1719, another report, dated 1748, confirms that a puppet theatre was still active in Rio de Janeiro. This report was made by a French salesman on board *L'Arc en Ciel* and published by Pierre Sonnerat in 1748:

A few days later, we went to a performance, given from time to time, to edify the population, actually people had to edify themselves, including spending their own money, since places in this performance cost 40 coins of the country, which shocked us. Puppets of natural size acted in the play, where the subject was the conversion of some pagans by Saint Catherine. These puppets were good and richly dressed; their voices and movements were pleasant, and the mechanism was way too good to escape the view; however, the whole plot seemed more like a hot discussion between the Saint and the alleged doctors, where the latter ones were miraculously converted in the end. Also, at the end of the third act, two phantoms appeared on the stage (a monk and a devil) to debate and fed themselves cruelly to a fire which opened in the theatre to swallow them, putting an end to the performance. This ugly catastrophe did not seem very fit for the profound veneration that the Portuguese people had for their monks. This event helped us judge the manners of this nation, where we very often came across this sort of shocking paradoxes. The space where this performance took place was about 15 by 10 feet, and the theatre was five feet deep, excluding the rest of the space in the square. The theatre was a bit lower than ours, and it was closed by a wire net through which, with the help of a great number of candles, we could see the actions of the puppets. The square served as parterre and it was filled with benches, such as the ones we have in our churches. All the men are placed indistinctly, because the women were placed in the boxes, spread throughout the building, which was 9 or 10 feet high, and where they comfortably saw the performance and leered at the audience members playing around the curtains intended to hide them. The orchestra had quite good violins, and there was an Englishman who played the flute excellently (1806, pp.26-27).

The report stands out as a unique description of the theatrical space and the puppet performances held in Rio de Janeiro in the first half of the 18th century. Although it provides a detailed description of the building, it does not mention the location of the theatre. Nireu Cavalcanti (2004, p.172) believes that the company described by the French sailor occupied the same space as the 1719 theatre; however, there is no document or report which proves that the theatrical activity in this venue was interrupted for almost 30 years, even though it is likely that the company working in 1748 could have profited from the structure created in 1719, mainly because of the complexity of the building, especially the stage with all the scenic machines.

Theatrical Architecture in 18th century Rio de Janeiro

To envision the type of the building of the theatre of Rio de Janeiro in the first half of the 18th century, we need to know about the theatres common in Portugal in the early 18th

century. The first permanent theatres in Portugal were built in the late 16th century (ANTT, HSJ, liv.940, 1595, fl.377v-380), the notable and oldest example of which was *Pátio das Arcas*, erected by the Spaniard Fernando Díaz de la Torre in 1582 (DE LOS REYES PEÑA, BOLAÑOS DONOSO, 2007, p. 265-315). In Spain, this theatre was an extension in every sense of the word. Not only did the repertoire and the actors come from Castile but the architectural typology was also significantly close to that adopted in the Spanish *Corrales de Comedias*. According to some documents, still preserved in the National Archive of Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, the theatre had a quadrilateral shape with three orders of boxes besides the ground floor (ANTT, HSJ, liv.1186, ff.161-163). The boxes, known as *cazuelas* in Spain, were allocated to women and were closed by curtains. Ordinary men occupied the parterre (a.k.a. *Patio de los Mosqueteros*), while the clergy and other figures occupied the boxes in the front of the stage. The description of the elements associated with the architecture of the theatre in Rio de Janeiro closely resembles the architectural features of the Iberian theatres of the 16th and 17th centuries with a few interesting exceptions.

Fig. 2 - *Corral de Comédias de Almagro*, Spain. Photography by the author.



The report of the French traveller tells us that performances were lit by a large number of candles, which implies that performances were held in the evenings. Although theatrical plays in Spain were performed in the afternoons, performances in Lisbon appear to have taken place during the evenings, like those in Rio de Janeiro.

Figure 3 - Pátio de Comédias - 17th century. Oil on Canvas. Museu da Cidade de Lisboa.



Another important fact is that the 16th- and 17th-century Iberian theatres had open audience spaces like a courtyard; only the *cazuelas* had a coverture. The *Patio das Arcas* of Lisbon followed this typology until 1697, when a disastrous fire destroyed the building (BNP, 1699, Mç22). After its subsequent reconstruction, it did already count on a full coverture (BNP, 1690, Cod. 510). Considering the climate of Rio de Janeiro and assuming that the building that was visited by the French traveller was the same one that had been constructed in 1719, it is hard to imagine a fully open-air theatre active in the month of December, mainly because Rio has extremely showery summers, seriously affecting any economic activity which depends on good weather. The Frenchman also complained about the price of the tickets, which he considered very expensive for most locals, suggesting that the theatre would have been visited by a certain social elite of the city (SONNERAT, 1806, pp. 26–27). Soon after the French sailor had attended the performances, one of the prominent figures in Rio de Janeiro's theatrical scene emerged—Boaventura Dias Lopes, who later became a priest and passed into the Brazilian history as Padre Ventura.

Priest Boaventura and the Opera of the Living

On August 30, 1754, Boaventura Dias Lopes leased out an opera house of his property, known as *Ópera dos Vivos*, to an empresario, called Salvador Casino de Brito, for 300.000 *réis* per year, paid in cash every four months. The rental included all the musical scores, costumes and sets as well as all the belongings of the *Casa da Ópera*. At the end of the contract, the tenant was required to hand over all the new productions made during the rental period to the owner of the theatre. In case any musical scores disappeared, the tenant was required to pay a fee of 50.000 *réis*, and the same fee applied if it was proven that the tenant had allowed others to copy the scores. Boaventura, a secular priest back then, had the right to use the first box next to the staircase during the performances.

The name of the opera house indicates that performances were led by living actors instead of puppets which had previously been used in Rio; however, even though Nireu Cavalcanti (2004, p.172) believes that Boaventura had replaced the puppets with living actors in the same theatrical building used in 1748, leading many other major authors

to infer that this is what effectively happened, it is most likely that he had built another theatre dissimilar to the existing one. In fact, what we know is that the *Ópera dos Vivos* was built on land which belonged to Boaventura's mother, who left him the property at the time of her death in 1760. The documents relating to the activities of *Ópera dos Vivos* show that it was located in *Rua da Alfândega* on the way to *Campo de Santana*, but there is no document or reference confirming the location of the 1719's or the 1748's theatre.

About 1758, another theatre, also belonging to Boaventura Dias Lopes, appeared in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It was called *Ópera Nova*, and it was built very close to the Palace of the Governors of Rio de Janeiro. A map conserved at the National Library in Rio de Janeiro, dated c1758–1760 (CAVALCANTI, 2004, p.174) indicates the existence of the 'New Opera'; it is fascinating that this map does not refer to the location of *Ópera dos Vivos*.

Fig. 4 - Map of the city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro, (c1758–1760). RIO DE JANEIRO: National Library, Cartography Section, ARC.025,06,001.)



In fact, there are no references to *Ópera dos Vivos* after 1760. Historian Lino de Almeida Cardoso (2006, p. 77) quotes a document which mentions that, during the time of Marquis of Lavradio as the vice-king of Brazil, *Ópera dos Vivos* was consumed by a terrible fire; however, its reconstruction was guaranteed by Marquis a few months later. Marquis of Lavradio, Luís de Almeida Portugal e Mascarenhas, was the vice-king of Brazil between November 1769 and April 1778. Musicologist Rogério Budasz (2008, p. 35) writes that, in 1776, the building was devastated by a fire during a performance of *Os Encantos de Medeia* by António José da Silva. The author affirms that this incident became part of the collective memory of Rio de Janeiro, and the story was told repeatedly by chroniclers and historians. The fact is that no other documents confirm the activities of *Ópera dos Vivos* after the fire, which happened between 1769 and 1778. However, as we mentioned before, *Ópera Nova* was in full operation since 1758 or 1760, and, apparently, it was the principal theatre in Rio

de Janeiro until the arrival of the Portuguese court in 1808. Frenchman Louis Antoine de Bougainville visited *Opera Nova* in 1767 and left us his impressions:

Meanwhile, the attention given by the vice-king remained for several days; he offered us small dinners on the border of the ocean, under beds of jasmines and orange trees and prepared a box in the Opera for us. We could, in quite a beautiful room, watch the masterpieces of Metastasio performed by a company of mixed-origin artists and listen to the divine pieces of great Italian masters performed by a bad orchestra, conducted by a hunchbacked priest with ecclesiastical costumes (BOUGAINVILLE, 1970, p.77).

Most of the authors who have studied this subject believe that the hunchbacked priest in the ecclesial costumes must have been Boaventura himself; some even add that he was the mixed-origin who played the guitar (FREDERICO, 1999; DIAS, 2012; CORREA DE AZEVEDO, 1962; amongst several other authors). Besides knowing that he came from a wealthy family, which undermines the hypothesis of him being of mixed origin, there are no other documents to point to the theatre owner's activities as an artist. In fact, we know he was a frequent visitor to his opera houses, having a private box reserved for his personal use. Besides that, there are several other priests associated with theatrical activities in the 18th-century Brazil, which confirms that Boaventura was not the only priest whose activities transcended religious purposes.

Conclusion

From the second half of the 18th century, several permanent theatres were built throughout the Portuguese America, including cities such as Belém do Pará, Salvador, Recife, Vila Rica, Sabará, Paracatú, Arraial do Tejuco, São João del Rei, São Paulo, Porto Alegre and Vila Bela de Goiás. Regarding puppet theatres, the one that was built in Rio de Janeiro in 1719 was the first permanent building devoted to puppet theatrical performances in the Portuguese kingdom, since documents show that puppet theatres in Lisbon were built in the 1730s. However, it seems the practice began to lose momentum from the second half of the 18th century. Both active theatres in Lisbon were destroyed by the earthquake of 1755 and were never reconstructed. There are no records of puppet performances in permanent theatres in the Portuguese America after 1748.

The Portuguese puppets, described in the collection *Theatro Comico Portuguez* as being actors 'with wire soul and cork bodies', were responsible for writing one of the most intriguing chapters of the Portuguese and Brazilian theatre history. Absorbing the influences of Spanish theatre and Italian opera, these puppets performed the first musical theatre works in Portuguese, oscillating between sacred and profane repertoire. In Rio de Janeiro, where they had the first permanent theatre built for their performances, the puppets introduced theatre as a professional economic activity, offering a new type of public entertainment in a fast-growing city, which later became the capital of the Portuguese kingdom, the Brazilian Empire and the Republic. Although the location of the theatre is unknown, no visual records of its existence are available and no music scores or theatrical plays from this building have survived, the intense theatrical activity of Rio de Janeiro today, with over 150 spaces devoted to performing arts, reaffirms that the contribution of the three partners who, 300 years ago, undertook the initiative of building a permanent theatre in a relatively small city on the coast of the new world could not have borne any better fruit.

Notes

1 This is the case of actress and singer Violanta Monica, who was engaged in the Opera House of Vila Rica and performed in the theatrical performances, celebrating the wedding of Prince D João and Princess Carlota Joaquina in 1786. LANGE, Francisco Curt. La música en Minas Gerais. Un informe preliminar. *Boletín latino-americano de música*, Rio de Janeiro, tomo 6, p.409-494, 1946.

2 This is the name that was most commonly used to designate the Portuguese puppets in the first half of the 18th century. According to Raphael Bluteau, *Bonifrates* were small statues which represented people or animals and could be handled to move or walk around. BLUTEAU, Raphael. Op.cit., pp. 162-163.

3 His surviving works were published for the first time in 1744 by Francisco Luiz Ameno in a collection titled *Theatro Comico Portuguez*. The first António José da Silva's play, *A Vida do Grande Dom Quixote de la Manche e do Gordo Sancho Pança*, was performed in 1733 at *Teatro do Bairro Alto*. THEATRO Comico Portuguez, ou collecção das operas portuguezas, que se representaraõ na Casa do Theatro publico do Bairro Alto de Lisboa, v. I. Lisboa: Regia Officina Sylviana e da Academia Real, 1747. 426p.

4 Theatre was the word that was most commonly used to refer to the stage during the 18th century.

5 The Evora's diaries makes an indication that the British admiral, Norris, did not allow his officials to attend the performances because they had to return to the ship at 8 p.m. DIÁRIOS... DIÁRIOS de Évora. Codice CIV/1-7 d, fol42v (Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital, Évora).

6 In 1749, Boaventura Dias Lopes was ordered secular priest on the order of Saint Peter, giving one of his properties as warranty of estate. NAZARETH, Gilson. Da Identificação Histórica através da biografia individual e coletiva. *Revista do Colégio Brasileiro de Genealogia*, Rio de Janeiro, tomo IV, p.10-17, 1990.

7 João de Deus de Castro Lobo, composer and musician in Vila Rica; Padre Amaro de Souza Machado, empresario and owner of the Opera House of Porto Alegre; José Maurício Nunes Garcia, composer of Opera Nova in the early 19th century, etc. BRESCHIA, Rosana Marreco. C'est là que l'on joue la comédie: les Casas da Ópera en Amérique Portugaise (1719-1819). Tese de Doutorado. Faculdade de História, Université Sorbonne – Paris IV; Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2010. Paris/Lisboa: Sorbonne – Paris IV, UNL, 2010, 770p.

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Rosana de Moraes Marreco Orsini Brescia: Possui graduação em Musica pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (2001), mestrado pela Manhattan School of Music (2004), pós-graduação em canto pela Royal Academy of Music (2006) e mestrado em Historia do Brasil- Universite Paris IV (Paris-Sorbonne) (2006). Solista convidada de vários teatros já tendo atuado no Stavovské Divadlo de Praga e no Palácio das Artes de Belo Horizonte. Desenvolve pesquisa relativa a historia da Casa da Opera de Ouro Preto e do Teatro Municipal de Sabará. Atualmente é aluna de doutorado da Universidade Sorbonne Paris IV onde desenvolve estudos sobre a história dos teatros de Opera do Brasil sob a orientação do Professor Luis Felipe de Alencastro.
