

The New York Times

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1988

THEATER

In Brazil, It's Lonely in the Avant-Garde

By ALAN RIDING

SAO PAULO

WHETHER GERALD THOMAS's principal objective when he returned here from New York four years ago was to introduce a new genre of theater, to upset the local cultural establishment or simply to gain fame, the Anglo-Brazilian stage director can fairly claim — and frequently does — to have achieved all three.

"The ego side has been more than satisfied," he said, peering through Brechtian spectacles as if confessing to the sin of pride. "I have become a presence in Brazil's cultural life. People are already talking about the pre-Thomas and the post-Thomas eras of Brazilian theater."

Indeed, by exciting some, angering others and stirring jealousy among quite a few, the 34-year-old director has in a remarkably short time emerged as the most polemical figure on the Brazilian theatrical scene, polarizing public, critics, actors and fellow directors with his provocative views and avant-garde work. Starting Thursday, New Yorkers will have a chance to see what the fuss is about when three of Mr. Thomas's most recent pieces start a three-week run in repertory at the La Mama Annex at 86 East Fourth Street.

Mr. Thomas is, for a start, a master of publicity, with interviews, reviews and tables about his pieces — and opinions — frequently occupying entire pages of the cultural supplements of major Brazilian newspapers. But he is also, at least for Brazil, a daring innovator of form and content, inspired by what he describes as the "subversion" by the likes of the American director Robert Wilson, and the East German playwright Heiner Müller.

So far, he has used works by Beckett, Wagner, Mérimée and Kafka as vehicles for his productions, but he is moving toward highly personal and visually beautiful creations that

he calls "dry opera," characterized by a cinematographic use of lights and blackouts, pre-recorded music, almost choreographic acting and a sort of anti-language that he describes as "verbal hemorrhage."

The three pieces he is taking to La Mama — "The Process," "Praga" and "Carmen Com Filtro" — are Thomas creations within borrowed frameworks. "The Process," the most critically praised of the three, follows the story line of Kafka's "Trial" and uses music from Wagner's opera, "Parsifal." "Praga" (which in Portuguese means both Prague and plague), with music by Shostakovich, is evocative of Kafka but not based on a text, and "Carmen Com Filtro" ("Carmen With Filtertips"), with an original score by Philip Glass, adapts and satirizes Bizet's version of the Mérimée story.

The works have been adapted to reduce the number of lines spoken in Portuguese; La Mama's artistic director, Ellen Stewart, saw versions of them in repertory in São Paulo before deciding they would work in New York. A recorded narration in English will accompany each piece.

Although Mr. Thomas directed 18 plays by



The Brazilian director Gerald Thomas with the actress Bete Coelho during a rehearsal for "The Process," one of his works to be performed in repertory at La Mama

The director who has stirred up his country with Kafka and Carmen brings 'dry opera' to La Mama.

Beckett at La Mama between 1979 and 1984, he says he is nervous about the reaction to his new pieces. "New York looks like a very open-minded place, but it is in fact very narrow-minded," he explained. "The most interesting things happening in New York are brought from Germany. The most important theater artist of the second half of the 20th century is Bob Wilson, and he can hardly

work in the United States."

Certainly, Brazil still seems unsure what to make of Mr. Thomas. In a sense, Brazilian theater was ripe for the shakeup he provided; in the 1970's it was suffocated by the censorship of a military dictatorship and in the 1980's swamped by highly commercial productions that Mr. Thomas dismisses as "soaps without cameras." Young people in particular have embraced his works with enthusiasm and even turned him into something of a cult figure, while the fury of some of his critics has helped draw the world of drama into the public spotlight for the first time in almost two decades.

At times, though, it seems that his critics are reacting more to the man than his works. When he speaks scathingly of the theater here, for example, they ask: Is he doing so as a Brazilian (he was born here and is fluent in Portuguese) or as an Englishman (he spent his late teens and early 20's in London and he

sounds English) or as neither (his father was a German Communist who fled Hitler and his mother was a Welsh psychoanalyst of Lithuanian Jewish extraction)?

Similarly, when he introduces and interprets the somber colors of Beckett, Wagner or Kafka in the sensual and tropical environment of Brazil, is he colonizer or colonized? Is he a foreigner imposing American or European theatrical values or a Brazilian who has become alienated from his own cultural roots, "posing as a colonizer without being English," as one critic put it?

Mr. Thomas clearly enjoys the controversy. In the program for his Kafka trilogy in São Paulo (it included his version of "The Metamorphosis" and excluded "Carmen Com Filtro," which was put on here last year), he printed a page of quotes from his

harshest critics. One called him "a false Englishman who is inventing vanguard theater of the 1960's." Another described him as "interesting as a person but profoundly ridiculous in what he says." A third said "he was a precocious boy who went senile at the age of 30."

Such antipathy was not immediately apparent when he first returned here in 1984 and presented four short plays by Beckett. They were not only well received for their minimalist direction but also praised for their sets, which were designed by Mr. Thomas's wife, Daniela, who is Brazilian. Subsequently, Mr. Thomas directed Mr. Müller's "Quartet," which received mixed reviews.

Even then his work was marked by distinctive use of stage smoke and spotlights. "I used to play around with a flashlight in the pitch dark to test how my son's toys reacted"

Continued on Page 14

Kafka Transformed, Via Brazil

Continued From Page 3

to the light, he recalled. "And since I smoked incessantly, I would see the effect of smoke. That was probably the best training I had. I became a fanatic for flashlights and use all kinds of them."

By the time he took on Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" at Rio de Janeiro's grand Municipal Theater last year, however, his attacks on recent Brazilian theater had earned him an army of enemies waiting to block the incursion of an experimental director into the cultural mainstream. He in turn set out to provoke by setting the opera in Berlin 1987, changing Wagner's ship into a train and crowding the stage with surrealist imagery.

The reaction of some critics was immediate, with Mario Henrique Simonsen, a former Finance Minister who writes opera reviews for the weekly magazine *Veja*, describing the scenery as "an exercise in the absurd and anyone can do the absurd." Others were no less harsh in their judgment and, when Mr. Thomas responded to them in print, the exchanges insured that "The Flying Dutchman" did not go unnoticed. It sold out for all 17 performances.

For that opera, Mr. Thomas re-

Young people in particular have embraced Thomas's works and turned him into a cult figure.

spected the original words and music. But since then, in "Carmen Com Filtro" and "Eletra Com Creta" as well as in the Kafka trilogy, he has imposed his personal vision. "You can't control how a book is read in the privacy of the home," he explained. "Well, my pieces are in the privacy of the theater. After all, Kafka is a symbol. I don't need Kafka's lines. I can make better use of him by putting other lines in the bucket he has created."

At times, some critics argue, Mr. Thomas almost trips over the myriad political, literary, mythological and artistic references he scatters through his works. "Puns are my real interest," he explained, "visual, philosophical, musical puns that subvert meaning. It's good for any artist

machine-gun conditioned values." And to those who complain that his pieces are difficult to understand, he added: "As written language, they may not be understood, but visually they will be sensed. And anyway, when does 'understanding' come? When a piece ends? An hour later? A week later?"

One sign that the Brazilian cultural establishment is learning to live with him is the decision by the Municipal Theater in Rio de Janeiro, which competes with São Paulo as the country's cultural capital, to present "The Process" in January, but this time as a "wet opera" with a full orchestra, choir and soloists rather than the pre-recorded sections used for Wagner's "Parsifal." "They know they will sell out," Mr. Thomas suggested optimistically.

What seems clearer is that, while under contract to take "The Process," "Praga" and "Carmen Com Filtro" on a European tour next year, Mr. Thomas has won a permanent place for himself here. As it was put recently by Octavio Frias Filho, publisher of the daily *Folha de São Paulo*, "always pleasant and vain, at times confused and contradictory, Thomas is the most lively and animated presence on the moribund stage of the Brazilian theater today." □