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The pursuit of a life less ordinary. The trajectory of afro-brazilian actor Milton Gonçalves.¹

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The pursuit of a life less ordinary. The trajectory of afro-brazilian actor Milton Gonçalves.

Abstract: Milton Gonçalves is one of the most awarded actors in Brazil. He is a descendant of slaves, born in 1933 and, as such, he faced the challenges imposed on Afro-Brazilians during post-abolition: poverty and racial discrimination. This article utilizes interviews, newspapers and other media to examine the trajectory of Milton Gonçalves: his origins, life in São Paulo during the Vargas Era, the Teatro de Arena, the TV Channel Globo. Milton goes from being a shy young man to becoming the face and voice recognized by hundreds of millions in Brazil. He also became engaged in the struggle for racial equality in Brazil.

Key words: Post-Abolition; Afro-Brazilians; Theater; Television; Racism; Milton Gonçalves.

En busca de una vida menos ordinaria. La trayectoria del actor afrobrasileño Milton Gonçalves.

Resumen: Milton Gonçalves es uno de los actores más premiados en Brasil. Un descendiente de esclavos, nacido en 1933, enfrentó los desafíos impuestos a los afrobrasileños: pobreza, discriminación racial y humillación diaria. Este artículo utiliza entrevistas, periódicos y otros materiales para examinar la trayectoria de Milton Gonçalves: sus orígenes, su vida en São Paulo en la era de Vargas, el Teatro de Arena, y la TV Globo. Milton pasa de ser un joven tímido a ser el rostro y la voz reconocidos por cientos de millones en Brasil. Además, se involucró en la lucha por la igualdad racial en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Pos-Abolición; Afrobrasileños; Teatro; Televisión; Racismo; Milton Gonçalves.

Em busca de uma vida menos ordinária. A trajetória do ator afro-brasileiro Milton Gonçalves.

Resumo: Milton Gonçalves é um dos atores mais premiados do Brasil. Descendente de escravos, nascido em 1933, enfrentou os desafios impostos aos afro-brasileiros no pós-abolição: pobreza, marginalização e humilhações. Este artigo utiliza entrevistas, jornais e outras mídias para examinar a trajetória de Milton Gonçalves, desde suas origens, vida São Paulo na era Vargas, o Teatro de Arena, e a Rede Globo. Milton vai de um jovem negro e tímido para se tornar o rosto e a voz reconhecidos por centenas de milhões no Brasil. Além disso, ele se envolveu na luta pela democracia e igualdade racial no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Pós-Abolição; Afro-Brasileiros; Teatro; Televisão; Racismo; Milton Gonçalves.

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Introduction

Studies of Black History have recognized the contribution of biographical research to understanding the history of a society from a Black point of view. Biographies provide the reader an opportunity to appreciate the person's struggles in everyday life, and to understand how historical events may have impacted a group or individual. Therefore, the proposal to examine the life of Milton Gonçalves, a renowned Brazilian actor and prominent activist against racial discrimination in his country, presents an opportunity to review major events of the 20th century related to the social, economic, political or cultural history of Brazil, from the point of view of a Black man who would become one of the most awarded Brazilian actors, with important work in theater, radio, cinema and television. Born in a region of coffee plantations in the southwest of Minas Gerais in 1933, Milton Gonçalves is the son of a maid and a peasant. Gonçalves' trajectory illuminates the experiences of Black people in Brazil's post-abolition period and during the 20th century, when Afro-Brazilians struggled for inclusion and equality, amidst two dictatorships, the effects of the Cold War and the country's quest for democracy. It was also during this century that the powerful Brazilian TV network *Globo* emerged as a powerful media network and soap operas became part of the daily lives of millions; carnival parades developed into a festival of international influence, generating millions of dollars. At the same time, Brazilians struggled for democracy, facing and challenging their own racism, despite the image of a racial paradise.

The very successful Milton Gonçalves who gave life to numerous characters, from slaves to pimps, from doctors to priests, judges and even the first ever Black President of Brazil, has led a rich life of struggle and challenges that somehow mirror the trajectory of his own country, from slavery to the 21st century. As a citizen, he was searching for a better life, as a dreamer, he wanted a less ordinary life.

Monte Santo de Minas

I'm *mineiro*. I was born in a small town in the interior of Minas Gerais nearer to São Paulo than to the state of Minas, called Monte Santo, which is near to Guaranésia, Guaxupé and São Sebastião do Paraíso.

My parents were coffee pickers. Literally coffee pickers.

I have in my memory some images of when I was a boy, three, four, five years old, when my parents moved to the capital, São Paulo, in search of a better life, of course. My father moved there to be a bricklayer, a bricklayer's assistant, my mother, obviously, was to be a maid, a washer woman.

I remember we used to move often. We went roaming up and down ...²

2 Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/17/ 2013. Author's translation.

Monte Santo de Minas is a small town of approximately 22,000 inhabitants, located southwestern Minas Gerais. Research shows the presence of large plantations since the early 19th century, some with more than 50 slaves, employed in the cultivation of sugar cane or food, and in masonry, carpentry, spinning, and other jobs. According to Marcelo Magalhães Godoy (1996), who studied the mining economy of the period, the distance and difficulty in transportation forced the diversification of activities to support the large property.

Coffee would arrive in the state of Minas Gerais gradually from the second decade of the 1800s and, in the region of Monte Santo, during the second half of the 19th century. Historians estimate that many coffee plantations developed in the region as a result of the displacement of capital and people from other areas of the state of Minas, attracted by the new monoculture that promised great profits. (MARTINS, 2014; OLIVEIRA, GRINBERG, 2007).

The initial labor force was composed predominantly of enslaved blacks. The 1872 population census registered a population of 7,361 people in the Parish of São Francisco das Chagas do Monte Santo; of this total, 1,195 were enslaved (713 men and 482 women), and with light-colored people predominant among the free colored population - 995 brown and 471 black men, and 720 brown and 421 black women.³

I, like millions of black and Afro-Brazilian Brazilians, do not know where I came from. We talk about Africa, but we don't know where. So, when I had the opportunity and traveled, I visited several places in Africa. Going to Africa was good for me. Lagos, Dakar, where I went for the first time around 1977, as an envoy of the Brazilian government. It was my first time in a black country: I saw a black pilot, a flight attendant... In 77 there were few blacks driving cars in Brazil, I get there and there are blacks flying a plane! Several times I saw one or another black man who looked like me! And then he kept looking at me like that ... and me looking at him ... I saw people who looked like my relatives.

I went to Ivory Coast, and to Cape Verde. And I saw people, with their customs.

I know who I am, but I don't know where I came from. And I'll probably never know. Because that is what slavery has taken away from us.⁴

The ban on the African slave trade - in 1831 and 1850 - caused an important increase in the internal slave trade, mainly in the intra-provincial trade, since governments imposed heavy taxes on the import of slaves from other provinces. Evidence shows that Minas Gerais had the largest number of slaves on the eve of abolition. The same data does not confirm the thesis that slaves employed in mining were sold to coffee growing areas, demonstrating the trend of regionalized

3 IBGE. Recenseamento do Brasil em 1872. Biblioteca Digital do Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, accessed 19 July 2020. https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv25477_v7_p1_mg.pdf

4 Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 07/22/2011. Author's translation.

transactions, even among family members. Robert Slenes (1999), who studied slavery in coffee producing areas in the Southeast, talks about the predominance of African slaves on coffee farms before 1850. According to him, 80% of adult slaves (over 15 years old) registered in the Census period were Africans and those born in Brazil, called *crioulos*, were mostly children of Africans.

The family of Milton Gonçalves, on the paternal and maternal sides, are descendants of enslaved blacks on coffee farms in the region of Monte Santo de Minas. Considering the drop in the number of slaves as a result of the end of international trafficking, the taxation on the slave trade between provinces, the Free Womb Law enacted in 1871, and the Sexagenarian Law of 1885, combined with the increased value of coffee in the international market, one can conclude that slave emancipations in southwest Minas Gerais were not common, given that plantation owners needed all the labor force they could get. According to the 1872 census, the slave population of the parishes of São Sebastião do Paraíso and S. Francisco das Chagas do Monte (Monte Santo de Minas) totaled 2,735 enslaved workers. The Report of the President of the Province of Minas Gerais in the year 1887 records a population of 2,251 slaves in the parish of São Sebastião do Paraíso, which included the municipalities of Itamogi and Monte Santo de Minas. In other words, there is a small decrease of around 17% of the enslaved population between 1872 and 1887, even if no one was born a slave in 15 years and slaves over 60 years old were emancipated after 1885. Based on these data, it can be said that there is a high probability that Milton's ancestors remained enslaved until the signing of the Golden Law in 1888.

Somehow, the region's large coffee farms managed to keep black workers, even after abolition. Oral records and reports show that even after May 13, the families of black workers in general remained on the farms, working as contractors, sharecroppers or *jornaleiros* (day labourers). Many worked on several properties, depending on the work available in different seasons, enduring very precarious conditions. As families were important part in this system, it was the heads of households who negotiated working conditions with the employer. To get an idea of the labor relations at the end of slavery, we need only read the newspaper *Lavoura e Comércio*, intended for farmers in the state of São Paulo, for that period. On March 6, 1898, this newspaper published complaints about the high wages that coffee farmers were forced to pay to workers. The same complaint is found in subsequent editions, demanding that the state government take steps to lower the costs of labor for farmers.

In the existing situation, changing jobs was no simple matter. A worker traveling in the parish in search of work had to display a certificate, issued by the last employer, that attested to his action. Changing jobs was also hampered by the debts contracted with employers using a credit system, in which employees acquired tools, seeds, clothes, shoes and food at the *armazém* of the

farm, for which the employer would deduct from their salary. In most cases the worker was prohibited from buying outside the farm and even from selling any surplus from his small farm to buyers other than his employer. Living under extreme oppression, men and women commonly encountered violent repression when demanding payment for their work, whether in domestic work or in the fields. Plantation owners and managers often pointed to the ingratitude of black workers, and their lack of respect in demanding their due wages. (MATTOS DE CASTRO, 1995).

Milton Gonçalves' family was among those who continued to work on coffee plantations after abolition. In February of 1933, on the occasion of his parents' marriage, the registry records indicate that his grandparents and his father were sharecroppers in coffee farms of the region. Apparently, his paternal grandparents, Veríssimo Gonçalves da Costa, born around 1860, and Edwirges Custódia, born around 1870, were part of the slave population of Monte Santo. The records examined show that both were born in Itamogi, a small district that was part of Monte Santo until the beginning of the 20th century. The IBGE library provides a brief history of the municipality of Itamogi:

Itamogi (formerly Arari) was created around 1870s. Its virgin forests were cleared by the vigorous and daring Antônio Gonçalves da Costa, aka “Gronga”, a rich owner of a vast expanse of land in the vicinity of the municipality of São Sebastião do Paraíso.

After settling with his sons Vicente and Bernardino, and a large number of slaves in the vicinity of the area where the municipality of Gronga is located today, he made sure that they cleared a part of the forest, started the first construction and then began to plant coffee and cereals.⁵

Considering that many slaves adopted the surname of their masters, and that the first great landowner and slave owner in the region was Antônio Gonçalves da Costa, it is possible that Veríssimo Gonçalves da Costa was da Costa's property. Also, by the year 1872 the first chapel had been built and the provincial government recognized the settlement in an area of almost 600 acres. I am suggesting that Veríssimo was born in that region.

In the Cathedral of São Francisco de Paula, in Monte Santo, I found the marriage record of Veríssimo Gonçalves da Costa and Edwirges Custódia, married on July 7, 1888 – less than one month after Abolition! He made a declaration that he was the son of Matheus da Costa and Rita da Conceição, and she that she was the daughter of Misael Custodio Leme and Rozaria Teixeira da Conceição.

Milton Gonçalves' maternal grandparents were born after the 1872 Law, therefore were free

⁵ IBGE Enciclopédia de Municípios. Itamogi. Accessed 21 September 2017. Author's translation.
<https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/biblioteca-catalogo.html?id=35438&view=detalhes>

black people. Leopoldino Vieira, born approximately 1874, worked in the fields at the Mandu farm, as did Josepha Basília, born around 1888. Leopoldino Vieira died on June 26, 1931 at the age of 57, the victim of a “cardiac collapse” while he was working. The record of the death and burial reports that his body was lying among the rows of coffee bushes when the inspector arrived. According to what is known about the work regime at the end of the 19th century, although Leopoldino was a beneficiary of the Free Womb Law, he would have stayed on the farm with his mother, and started working around the age of six. By the time of his premature death, he would have been working in the fields for some 50 years.

Maria Vieira, daughter of Leopoldino and Josepha, was born in 1913. When her father died, on the coffee plantation, Maria was working in the same fields with her family. About three years later, in 1933, Maria was working as a domestic servant in the small town of Monte Santo de Minas. According to the marriage certificate of February 28, 1933, she married Bonfim Veríssimo Gonçalves, who worked as a farm hand in the district of Arari (later Itamogi), along with his parents. Bonfim was illiterate and six months younger than Maria; both were 19 years old. The sources are silent about the courtship between the two. Beyond considerations of romantic love, marriage was a common strategy for families to protect young women from possible abuse and “dishonor”, and was a way to establish kinship within the community. Despite being from the same region and practically the same age, Maria and Bonfim were very different. Bonfim was the son of an ex-slave who had remained on a single property, was illiterate and had always worked in the fields. It is almost certain that the families knew each other, and the presence of the parents as witnesses to the civil marriage attests to the approval of both sides. However, we can’t speculate about the feelings between the couple, as the sources reveal nothing.

I remember little of my father with my mother. They fought a lot ... I don't remember well. One day, I was about six or seven years old, working in a greengrocer. I would stay there in front, take care of the Portuguese fruits so no one would steal. My father came and said to me: - “I'm leaving!” And so it was. I met him some thirty years later.⁶

Life in Monte Santo de Minas during the second decade of the 20th century is similarly described in the memories of Mário Américo, a former masseur of the Brazilian football team, also a black child of Monte Santo de Minas, born in 1913. He talks about life in the poorest areas of the small town and the coffee plantation, where part of his family worked, including his father and grandfather. Working from a very young age, he and other darkies, black boys combined work and play in the dusty roads with very little school time. At the age of 7, his mother, a widow, sent the

⁶ Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/07/2013. Author’s translation.

boy to live on the plantation, where a cousin worked as a cook. His mother's hope was that her son would have access to better food, eating fresh and regularly. Something that did not happen, because he received – from the said cousin – only left overs, and never enough. Waking up at dawn, he worked all day until sunset, taking care of stables, feeding and herding animals, helping in the fields or any necessary work. One day, the planter's wife sent for him, saying they needed to visit his grandfather, an old black man who lived on the outskirts of the property. The purpose of the visit was to ask old Francisco Sabino to "give" her the boy. "When Dona Mulata left, I waited back to ask him, "Grandpa, did you just give me to the lady? As a present?" He responded, in a bad mood, "Yes, I did! What do you think a nigger is for?" (MATTEUCCI, 1976, p.14. Author's translation). Considering that Mário, Maria and Bonfim were born in Monte Santo de Minas around the same year, and were linked to the plantation, we can imagine that the idea and reality of freedom were quite different. As explained by Butler (1998), the rural exodus for blacks after abolition was neither immediate nor all at once. People moved to cities little by little, sometimes going back and forth. Individuals relied on family and other kinship ties to build a network for survival in the new environment, helping to get a job, shelter, and move around.

In 1890, the Companhia Mogiana de Estrada de Ferro opened a train station in the town of Mococa, at the border of São Paulo and Minas Gerais states. Mococa was only 40 km away from Monte Santo de Minas and the railway linked the region to the city of São Paulo, where great transformation was taking place from the economic boom generated by the coffee exports and the development of industry. The city was growing, attracting workers from rural areas. Black people started to leave the surrounding area for São Paulo. In 1913, migration from the region to São Paulo increased after the opening of another train station in Monte Santo de Minas. Mário Américo took that train to São Paulo while still a boy of 10-11 years-old, running away from the plantation. Maria and Bonfim Gonçalves took the same train in 1936-37, with then 3-year-old Milton, to meet family members in São Paulo. (ROCHA, 2019).

To be Black in São Paulo

The city of São Paulo has had a sizeable black population since colonial times. Authors like Maria Odila Dias da Silva (1995), Maria Luiza Marcílio (2004), Fabiana Schleumer (2011) and Enidelce Bertin (2010) have examined the presence of free and enslaved black people in the capital during colonial time and the 19th century, and their impact on the economic development of the city over centuries. Black people faced great difficulties in the city that imposed limitations on and openly discriminated against people of color. The situation was made worse with the increased arrivals of European immigrants in São Paulo, between 1890 and the 1930s. During the first forty

years of the Brazilian Republic (1890-1930), when the government once again claimed to be mounting a program of modernization, many Europeans moved from the rural areas to towns and cities, seeking a better life away from the demands of farming or the difficulties of isolated areas. Their efforts towards progress coincided with the apex of adherence to the thesis of scientific racism, and immigrant workers found jobs in the recently opened industries of São Paulo that refused to hire blacks.

Apart from industry and coffee exports, urban development demanded services, housing, transportation and the creation of infrastructure to support the rapid growth. Edson Roberto de Jesus (2010) located the black population in the last decade of the 19th century in neighborhoods such as Liberdade, Sé, Moóca, Consolação, Barra Funda, Bexiga, Casa Verde, Ponte Pequena and Bairro do Limão. Urban growth already demanded changes to accommodate the modernization project envisaged by the new Republic. In that modernization, blacks were seen as potential criminals, a dangerous class and an evil presence that should be removed to avoid “contamination” of other sectors of the population. However, their labor was still needed, as they performed the menial, lowest paid jobs in the cities. Competition also extended into the housing, or rather the lack of houses to accommodate the working class.

Black families always sought housing in places that were affordable and close to where they worked. They occupied decaying buildings, erected precarious shacks in unsuitable areas such as floodplains and hillsides, rented rooms in communal houses built to low standards. Newspapers devoted to black readers in the 1920s denounced the racial discrimination in job competition and in housing that added to the burden of being black in São Paulo:

[He] goes to the factory and they don't give him a job, many times they don't even allow him to talk to managers. He searches newspaper ads, runs hopefully to the place that is hiring and, although he is the first to arrive, earlier than any other candidate, because of his color, he is pushed aside and dismissed.⁷

Bonfim Gonçalves was an illiterate man who only knew how to work in the fields. On arrival in São Paulo, the only job he could get was on a construction site as general helper and security. It was considered a good deal, because the small family could live in a small room in the construction yard. Still, life was very difficult. Milton, remembered when he was very small, walking around, after the workers left, looking for food left over or forgotten by the men, and usually he would get some sugar that workers used to sweeten their coffee. One day, by accident or as a prank, someone left out caustic soda, and the boy swallowed it, mistaking it for sugar.

⁷ *O Kosmos*, São Paulo, 19 de outubro de 1924, p. 1. Accessed in 17 August 2016. Author's Translation.
<http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/docreader.aspx?bib=844896&pasta=ano%20192&pesq=outubro>

With no job security, the family moved constantly. Sometimes they had to rely on relatives, finding a place to rest their heads in an already crowded house. Milton refers to the experience of living with the extended family in a very crowded basement. Other people interviewed by José Carlos Gomes da Silva shared similar memories of the period:

In the basement, it wasn't like today, a place where one family lives. It could be two or three families [living in the same place] ... Sometimes the ceiling was too low. [Someone] 1.70m tall had to bend over to walk. Because where would the black man live? He didn't make any money... it's not like today, the poor didn't make money, the poor didn't earn enough to buy a loaf. (SILVA, 2010, p. 50. my translation).

The precarious living conditions for Black people in São Paulo was examined by Samuel Lowrie (1938) and Florestan Fernandes (2008). Both refer to communal houses, basements, housing arrangements that led to promiscuity, violence, and diseases. Milton Gonçalves lived in such conditions until his twenties. After his father left, he stayed with his mother, living in one room in the house where she worked as a maid. From the age of six he was already working, helping in the house, babysitting, minding the fruit stall of a vendor, running errands. Sometimes his mother would live with a partner, and even with three people working in the same family, there wasn't enough money to afford better living conditions.

Although living in difficult conditions, Milton Gonçalves managed to complete primary school education. Also, on Sundays his mother would give him a few pennies, enough to get in the neighborhood cinema, sometimes only a small room with a projector. The boy fell in love with film, and soon the cinema became his place to forget all sorrows. "My mother was wise in her simple ways. She liked the fact that I was in the cinema, because I would stay off the street. I would not get into trouble. So, she would encourage me to go to the movies every week. Sometimes a few coins paid for two movies."⁸

Growing up, Milton Gonçalves had various jobs, but to study beyond primary school education was difficult. There were not many schools that he could attend at night, and he needed to make work his priority. Similarly, he tried out several sports: football (influenced by stars like Diamante Negro and Pelé), karate, cross-country, boxing; but there was never enough money to concentrate on any of them. The one white linen suit was for leisure: samba dancing and cinema. He had friends and they had fun together, like other youngsters, but was never completely happy because of poverty and marginality. In an interview, the actor told of living in a compound, basically the backyard of a pub, with rooms running along the walls. With only one room per family, some people improvised kitchens right outside their rooms. There were a few taps and sinks

⁸ Milton Gonçalves. Interviewed by the author in 08/07/2013. Author's translation.

for doing laundry. People fought over clothes disappearing from the clothesline, over a bar of soap, a few ounces of stolen salt. Couples fought, screaming obscenities. Men would leave the pub and urinate along the walls, taking advantage of the poor lighting. The stench of human waste hit from a distance.

I was always embarrassed. When I lived next to the Police headquarters, a friend who was the son of a colonel, he and his sister, who in my view was the most beautiful woman, she was the “Queen Sheba”... once wanted to drive me home. Can you imagine my embarrassment?

I lived in some shacks covered with asbestos sheets, where the toilet (silence) ... It was one toilet for everybody in the compound. And the Portuguese man, who was the owner of those shacks, placed an iron bar across the toilet pot, because many people climbed the pot to evacuate and the pot often broke. With the bar, the dirt got worse, because feces got stuck in that bar. And sometimes they did things on the floor, and the iron pipe from which the cold water came for showering was right beside it, in the same room. So, I had to go in with clogs, and that water on the floor ...

I didn't want anyone to know where I lived, so I asked my friends to pull over three blocks before. I was very shy. I was ashamed of my life... When I got out of the car, I walked to the compound crying. I needed to get out of that place!⁹

The *Teatro de Arena*: School of Citizenship

Another period of change in São Paulo occurred in the 1940s, when the city underwent a major cultural transformation, linked to the urban development of the capital and the large influx of migrants from Europe and from other states of Brazil. Improved public education was established under the Vargas government and, in the city of São Paulo, especially in the years of the Estado Novo, efforts were made to expand the system and educate the working masses, in addition to meeting the needs of the São Paulo middle class. As a result, the number of the literate grew, with more (free) primary and secondary schools, the opening of night schools and accelerated programs for adult students. These efforts also created a fertile market for the development of the written press and for diverse cultural events, such as theater. Juliana Neves (2011) talks about the economic development of the city in the sphere of communications, the opening of newspapers, publishing houses and the book trade in the city of São Paulo. She shows the growth in the capital's daily press and its role in promoting cultural activities, creating interdependence in the two sectors.

In public administration, the proposal of a government policy to encourage the arts, which included theater, fit in with the modernization proposals for the city of São Paulo, which took shape from the 1930s onwards, with the *Plano de Avenidas Prestes Maia*. This plan remodeled the city center, eliminating some of the low-income housing, and paved the way for the development of

⁹ Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 18/07/2011. Author's translation.

areas on the periphery through the designing of main roads that in turn made possible the expansion of the public transport system. This type of planning progressed in the following decades, resulting in a bus system that made traffic faster and more efficient, facilitating the movement of people between regions of the city. The construction process attracted more national migrants, and the city was constantly changing. “In 1947, trams and buses carried around 1.5 million people daily. In 1952, they started carrying more than 2 million passengers a day.” (ROCHA, 2016. Author’s translation).

In line with the plan for urban extension towards the periphery, Lineu Prestes, mayor of São Paulo between 1950 and 1951, commissioned a study from an American group coordinated by Robert Moses to include recreational areas for adults and playgrounds for children. (MOSES, 1950). It also included the construction of popular theaters in peripheral regions of the city and in 1952 theaters were opened in working class neighborhoods like Moóca and Brás. The companies that ran them paid no rent for their use, which made tickets cheaper for the public. (NEIVA, 2016).

The expansion plan included the development of commerce in these regions and the opening of churches, schools, and cinemas. Once completed, the plan made it easier for people living in peripheral areas of the city to access theaters, both as public and as potential actors. Also very important was the opportunity for better housing, away from the old buildings of the city center and regulated by authorities that tried to prevent insanitary constructions. In 1950, 17-year-old Milton Gonçalves moved with his mother to a small house in Santana, a working-class neighborhood in the Northern Zone of the city.

São Paulo changed greatly in two decades. In the 1950s, the economic growth of the post-war period and the reduced inflow of foreigners seemed to benefit Brazilian workers. However, racial discrimination was still a problem. Newspapers aimed at the black public, such as *The Alvorada*, *The Senzala*, *The Novo Horizonte*, and *The Quilombo*, had limited reach due in part to the prevalence of poverty and low levels of literacy among the black population. Even so, these newspapers frequently denounced racial exclusion and inequality in the country. (ANDREWS, 1992).

An article in a February 1950 issue of the *Quilombo* refers to racial discrimination suffered by actor and director of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, Abdias Nascimento, and his guests the actresses Ruth de Souza and Mariana Gonçalves and actor Claudiano Filho, who, despite having invitations, were blocked at the entrance to Hotel Glória where the “*Baile dos Artistas*”, celebrating the 1949 carnival, was held.¹⁰ In the same year, in July, the famous African American dancer Katherine Dunham arrived in São Paulo to perform at the Municipal Theater but on reaching the

10 Quilombo. Fac-Símile, December 1948 to July 1950. Rio de Janeiro: Editora 34, 2003, p. 74

Esplanada Hotel, one of the most prominent in the city, had her reservation canceled because she was black.¹¹ The Law Afonso Arinos, which criminalized racial discrimination in Brazil, had limited impact on everyday racist practices. In interviews, Milton Gonçalves refers to experiences of racial discrimination that prevented him from entering clubs or other public spaces during the 1950s.

From age 14, Milton started to work in printing shops in São Paulo, starting as an apprentice and moving up to print revisor. In 1954, part of his job was to design and print tickets for theater. One day, the theater director, Leonel Cogan, came to collect the tickets for his new play and gave Milton, who still in love with cinema and never had gone to a theater, free tickets for the weekend show. The young man fell in love with the theater as well. So much so, that later on the same Cogan invited him to participate in a children's play.

And this show was presented in a theater that no longer exists, the *Teatro Colombo*, near the so-called *Estação do Norte*, in Brás. And Leonel Cogan played a prank on me. He invited my entire neighborhood. At that time, I already lived in Ponte Grande [near Santana], where the Tietê, Floresta and Associação Atlética São Paulo clubs are located. And he took everyone, and I was wearing heavy make up to look like an old black man... Look, I think I must have done a lot of nonsense, but anyway, the debut for me was auspicious. First, because I didn't forget my lines, second because the heartthrob, the one who played the good guy, forgot the words and screwed up the lines, I had to help him... And it was a great feeling, everyone clapped.¹²

Milton's powerful voice and his ability to memorize lines and perform were soon recognized and he started being invited to act in other plays, while still working in the printing shop. There was no money involved, it was amateur theater, but he enjoyed it all the same. Rehearsals were at night, sometimes on weekends; shows were a few nights per week, sometimes on weekend afternoons. The money was still tight and his work responsibilities meant that he sometimes had to drop theater activities, but Milton had taken a liking to the art and, apart from acting, whenever he could, he went to see a play.

It was a wonderful adventure!

I was mesmerized with the stage. I used to love cinema, but I never imagined that the theater had that energy! The curtains open; and suddenly, you immerse yourself in the show. I went deep into it. I tried to learn everything about theater! (VALENTINETTI, 2005, p. 22. Author's translation)

In the theater he made new friends, some directors, some actors and actresses, and worked in several companies and theaters. One night in his audience were two people who would play a large

11 "Manifestação de Desagravo à Negra Katherine Durham". *Jornal de Notícias*, 14/07/1950, p. 2.

12 Milton Gonçalves interview. Museu da TV. ProTV, Youtube channel. Uploaded on 31/10/2016. Accessed in 17/08/2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQli2TbTSVw> Author's translation.

part in changing his life: Oduvaldo Vianna Filho and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, two major figures behind the *Teatro de Arena*, which has had great impact on the cultural history of Brazil.

The *Teatro de Arena* was a theater company founded by José Renato Pécora in 1953, as an arena theater, instead of the traditional linear theater. The aim was to make a theater (both building and company) that was cheaper and, at the same time, that created greater intimacy between the audience and the actor. Pécora had little concern for style in the composition of the scenes - always adapted to the small, circular space he had. He expected his actors to search out the truth of the character, with intense facial expression and less exuberant body movements. (BASBAUM, 2009; PASCOAL, 1998).

What the *Arena* proposed was a theater closer to the people, with a national repertoire, in tune with the movement already established by the novels of Jorge Amado and Graciliano Ramos, and others. It was a popular theater that distanced itself from both the magazines and the classic aesthetic of a drama of elaborate dialogues and Europeanized speech. In short, it proposed a new theater, created by young people in their 20s and 30s and with a repertoire engaged with the nationalist project, without major expenses on sets or costumes.

In 1956, José Renato Pécora invited two talented youngsters from the *Teatro Paulista do Estudante* to join the Arena Company. Gianfrancesco Guarnieri and Oduvaldo Vianna Filho both came from a history of amateur theater but brought great cultural, artistic and political baggage. Guarnieri was an Italian immigrant, the son of a conductor of orchestra and a classical harpist. The Guarnieri family embraced anarchist and communist ideas, and fled to Brazil to escape the persecution of Italian fascism just before World War II. Vianna Filho, better known as Vianinha (Little Vianna), was the son of the famous playwright Oduvaldo Vianna, with a long career in theaters in Brazil and Argentina and a member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and an actress. Vianinha and Guarnieri came from highly educated intellectual families, members of the upper middle class in Brazil and with international experience.

The Teatro Arena Company was recruiting new performers for a regular caste, and Milton Gonçalves was advised by a friend to audition. He was recruited in 1956, only a few months after Guarnieri and Vianinha. His first appearance with the Arena was in a John Steinbeck play, as told by Milton:

Then, Sérgio Rosa approached me at the printing shop, where I continued [to work]. He said, “Look, there is a new director who is working on a play called “Of Mice and Men”. He is a newcomer from the United States, it will be an Arena Theater, and he is auditioning several characters.” The director was Augusto Boal. And Sérgio said, “I went there. I already have my role. Don't you want to go? I told him that there was a

black actor who could play the character of Crooks..." "Of course, I want to!" I replied. And there I went. (VALENTINETTI, 2005, p. 23-24. Author's translation).

With Guarnieri and Vianinha, the Arena, started on a more radical trajectory. The socialist influence soon became clear, in the writing and in the general relationship between the company, the public and the political environment. In addition, the Arena became a school for actors, writers and other theater professionals. There were rehearsals, but there were also "study sessions" in which actors were expected to discuss very sophisticated intellectuals like Karl Marx, Weber, Lukacs. Part of its purpose was to become an education center, promoting the study and discussion of dramaturgy, literature, society and politics. Within this plan, the *Teatro de Arena* would be a space for art and a place of education (in line with the Communist International, to raise political awareness through education). In addition, the troupe was expected to perform various functions, combining technical support, such as lighting, scenery, maintenance, with other more artistic functions like writing scripts, directing and acting.

It was there that I found my direction. Where I refined my ways. It was there that I found myself. I found a new way of thinking about life. It was the *Teatro de Arena* that stimulated me to improve as a citizen and as an artist. Because when I got there, I found out that I didn't know anything, I just had the will.

No one there ever asked me if I was white, black, blue, or yellow. I was Milton Gonçalves.

I'm still at the Teatro de Arena. Nobody takes me out of the *Teatro de Arena*!¹³

Milton Gonçalves was the poorest member of that troupe and the only black person. In his interviews he explained that as he was deeply fascinated with the experience of theater, he started to consider quitting his day job at the printing shop and dedicate full time to the Arena. After all, his salary was not much and his mother, while still working as a maid, was in a stable relationship and his siblings were living nearby. The economic pressure was not as serious as before. Given all that, he decided to quit his job and move in with the Company. The theater was quite small, but there was a room upstairs where artists could sleep, if necessary. From around 1958 he would spend day and night with the troupe and learn to perform every task, including driving. In response to a request from Pécora, Milton got his driver's license, a huge achievement for someone from a family where nobody had a car.

I, who could barely walk through the city of São Paulo, was travelling to see Brazil. In some places I was harassed because I am black. Not everything was easy. But the ammunition I had: I'm black and I'm an actor.

I was part of a team. I was working on a fundamental, necessary, and much needed ideological discussion in

13 Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 07/18/ 2011. Author's translation.

the country. That encouraged me a lot. [In the group discussion] the issue of racism never arose.¹⁴

The absence of a discussion on racism against blacks can be explained, in part, by the communist conviction that once class divisions were resolved, racial equality would follow; and the general belief of Brazilian intellectuals that as there was no official racial segregation in the country, issues of racial discrimination in Brazil were not as serious as the problems of poverty and political alienation. The Communist Party of Brazil in 1962 dealt with racism in just one paragraph of its manifesto (IANNI et al, 2005).

What Milton claims to have witnessed, in the interior of the country, was the same racism that he knew well in the city of São Paulo - sometimes subtle, veiled in the manner of speaking, in a joke, in a look, or even by just ignoring his presence. Lacking the romanticized political views of his comrades, Milton Gonçalves knew that racism also existed among the poor. At that time, the Teatro Experimental do Negro was the only group that denounced discrimination and racial exclusion, finding little support in the cultural and intellectual environment. Milton expressed his feelings about this situation in an interview. "I felt very lonely, being the only black person in the group."

During the Arena study sessions, political debates developed around the oppression of the working class, alienation, and the like. Interestingly, the debates were led by those with a more sophisticated level of education, from an economic, social and culturally superior class, who talked about the oppression that the poor suffered. Some were university students and could follow the arguments; others from the working class could barely follow the conversation or understand the texts that fed those arguments. For Milton, with his limited education, the discourse of people like Vianinha and Guarnieri, and of other left-wing intellectuals who were often invited to lead discussions, was too complex.

There at the *Teatro de Arena*, and obviously also in the print shop, [I experienced the reality] of reading and not understanding. Most of the time I did not understand. And sometimes I did understand, but too late. I used it often ... sometimes they used phrases ... that I knew the meaning was there [gesturing to his head] but I didn't know how to get it into the discussion with the group. Some of the communists who frequented the *Teatro de Arena* made fun of me. They didn't disrespect me, but they made fun of me...¹⁵

The embarrassment of Milton Gonçalves among his colleagues is understandable considering that most of the readings were proposed by people like Guarnieri and Vianinha, heavily

14 Milton Gonçalves in interview with the author in 08/07/2013. Author's translation.

15 Milton Gonçalves. Interviewed by Gaby de Saboya. Rio TV Câmera, 21/04/2014. Accessed in 13/09/2018. Author's translation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgbL7ughAh4>

influenced by socialist or communist philosophers. Most analysis was way too complex for someone with only five years of formal education (MORAES, 1991). However, in the same Arena, Milton found opportunities to learn skills that advanced his career, like directing, writing, rhetoric, and other more technical skills like lighting, and stage support. He would say that later in his career, as a director in television, he was able to use many things that he had learned in the Arena. And he would later make sense of some of the “communist” ideas and incorporate them into his political views.

The play *Eles não usam Black-Tie* (They don't wear Black Tie), written by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, was a milestone in Brazilian theater and, obviously, in the *Teatro de Arena*. The play premiered in São Paulo, on February 22, 1958 and ran for eleven months, “with 512 performances, including forty towns in the interior of the country, shows at the Metalworkers Union in São Paulo and a show in a public square for 5,000 people.” (MORAES, 1991. Author's translation) Milton Gonçalves played Bráulio, a blue-collar worker in the union, one of the best friends of Otávio, the union's president and central character. Alongside the young actors in the cast were two veteran performers: Lélia Abramo, a Trotskyist sympathizer and the daughter of Italian anarchist immigrants who participated in the 1917 General Strike in São Paulo, and the Russian Eugênio Kusnet, a veteran actor in the Moscow theater. The theme of the play is the oppression of workers and the organization of a major strike. The success of the show generated good income for the Company, but from then the *Teatro de Arena* was seen as a company linked to the Communist Party.¹⁶

The success of *Eles não usam Black Tie* was followed by other plays and the troupe grew to the point where it could put on more than one play at a time. The play went to Goiás state, to entertain workers during the construction of the new capital of Brazil, the city of Brasília. The group travelled to various states, to big cities and small towns, always encouraging debate over the socio-economic and political condition of Brazilians. Milton declared more than once that, travelling with the Arena troupe, he was able to know Brazil and the Brazilian people.

In 1950 television arrived in Brazil, with a slow and modest beginning. Without staff and cast, in 1958 the television channels recruited from the theaters to produce the first Brazilian programs for television. On more than one occasion, Milton was invited to participate in and even to direct a program, carrying those occasional jobs while still dedicated to the Arena.

Still in 1959, as the Company's repertoire increased, with *Chapetuba Futebol Clube*, and *Gente como a Gente*, among others, and as the size of the troupe also increased, the opportunity

16 About 20 years later, the play was adapted for cinema, with huge success. The producers kept some of the original cast, including Milton Gonçalves.

arose to create another *Teatro de Arena* in Rio de Janeiro and was well received. Part of the company stayed in São Paulo and part moved to Rio. Milton Gonçalves decided to leave São Paulo once for all.

One of the things that changed my mind was that I arrived here in Rio and one day, soon after, I went walking on the beach, to see the ocean. We were in a hotel in Copacabana. That day I went out, wearing shorts to walk on the beach, a little scared, because I had in my heart what the policeman said to me on *Avenida Paulista*, when I was a child, and I was walking there. He was very threatening, and told me that [part of São Paulo] was no place for black people to stroll. That stayed with me. It was always in my head.

So, I was here in Rio, and I went to a bar right on the beach. I sat there at the table, a little suspicious, and the waiter greeted me: "Good afternoon, Sir! What are you drinking?" I say: "A draft beer". He said, "Yes, Sir!" Then he came back with the beer and told me that if I wanted anything else, I could just call. Can you imagine? He called me Sir, he greeted me, invited me to sit, treated me like a person!

It was right there, sitting on a bar stool, having a beer, watching that sea and the beautiful girls passing by... I fell in love with Rio de Janeiro!

São Paulo is a much more difficult place for blacks.¹⁷

In Rio, he became a passionate supporter of *Flamengo*, a club of which he later became a member of the board. He got to know the samba schools, and the bars that brought together the artists and intellectuals. To meet expenses, he got occasional jobs as a voice actor for television, at a time when Brazil's television imported most of its shows from the United States. He also worked in other theater companies, like the National Theater of Comedy, for example. He started to act in cinema: in 1958 he was in the film *O Grande Momento*, then in 1960 in *Cidade Ameaçada*. He was thus able to make some money and continue to support his mother, by now a widow and still living in São Paulo.

The Military Dictatorship

Between 1960 and 1964 the world experienced the increase of hostilities between capitalists and communists, during the Cold War. Tension in Brazil was also high because of divisions among politicians and an increased dissatisfaction within the working class. Rio de Janeiro was the epicenter of such tensions and the artistic class was involved. Vianinha became more radicalized, and the Arena moved closer to students and workers associations, strongly influenced by the Communist Party. They were becoming what Renato Pécora called a guerrilla theater (PÉCORA, 1987, p.22).

At that time, disputes within the Arena generated a rift between the groups in São Paulo and

¹⁷ Idem.

Rio de Janeiro. Those in Rio decided to break with the Arena and started the *Centro Popular de Cultura* (CPC), which as well as a theater company was a center that used culture and popular culture to propagate ideas of social justice, political responsibility and community organization. Vianinha, as leader, believed that the Theater had to take part in the coming revolution (GARCIA, 2007; MORAES, 1991; NEIVA, 2016; PASCOAL, 1998). Milton was not a communist, as he emphasized on several occasions, but he liked Rio de Janeiro and its troupe. And although he never quarreled with the São Paulo group, he decided to stay in Rio. The CPC attracted new actors, some of whom to Milton's delight were black, including Haroldo de Oliveira and Jorge Coutinho who became close friends.

Soon enough, the CPC established a partnership with the União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE), the national organization of mainly university students, but with some from secondary schools, which held a very combative position critical of the government. Apart from the political radicalization of both entities, the partnership impacted the cultural production of that period. In 1962 the movie *Cinco X Favela* (5 Times Favela) was produced by UNE and CPC. It told the stories of poor people living in the favelas and had Milton Gonçalves, Haroldo de Oliveira and Jorge Coutinho as part of the cast. The film won awards in Italy and Germany.

Outside the theater and cinemas social turmoil increased: strikes, public protests in the streets, riots, and even rebellion in military garrisons, all formed part of the protest against authoritarianism and economic oppression (SKIDMORE, 1973; GA SPARI, 2011). Vianinha, with a few artists, took the Theater to the streets to perform sketches intended to educate the masses against the oppression of capitalism. The CPC also took part in public demonstrations organized by the UNE. When the military took over the government in a successful coup d'état against the civilian president, the CPC and all its members became targets of a violent repression organized by the State.

On the morning of March 31, 1964, Vianinha, José Serra (then president of the UNE) and other members of the both groups already knew that a military coup was in motion. Luís Carlos Prestes, leader of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), had visited the UNE headquarters the day before to reassure them, confident in the ability of the communists and the people to defend the government. In the midst of tension, students and militants of the CPC began to build improvised barricades, using their own furniture, to avoid a possible invasion. As the news of unrest and shootings increased the general anxiety, Vianinha decided to call as many artists and intellectuals as possible, summoning them to defend the building shared by UNE and the CPC (MORAES, 1991). Among those summoned was Milton Gonçalves, although he was at that time working with the *Teatro Nacional de Comédia*. When called he agreed to go as he was still part of the Arena.

For left-wing intellectuals, students and actors, the UNE headquarters was the place to be that day, when everyone seemed unsure of what was really happening and what action to take. More than 200 people were assembled, including 30 soldiers sent by the legal government to protect the buildings. Around midnight, in the midst of the confusion, and with so many people offering conflicting suggestions, Milton decided to stand vigil outside the headquarters, with his friend Haroldo de Oliveira.

So, on the day of the Coup, the people were all there, talking. I decided to stay outside, to raise the alarm [if necessary]. We thought that something could happen. (...) It was late at night.

I stood there on the sidewalk and Haroldo de Oliveira was also there. Next to the Alcaparra restaurant, there was a fishbone truck, with soldiers on guard. I was walking outside with Haroldo. We crossed the street and stood on that island, in the middle of the avenue, talking. I was very suspicious. I am a spiritualist. You can call it intuition. There were two soldiers guarding the UNE, one in front and one on the roof.

Suddenly, I looked in the direction of the city, and there were four cars with lights out. I shouted, "Run Haroldo!" They shot past, with revolvers and machine guns. I ran and threw myself on the ground, pretending to be dead, praying that no one would come to check if I was hurt. Haroldo kept running and then he turned. He took two shots: one in the arm and one in the chest. The soldier who was in front of the building also fell, shot in the leg. The one above shot back: "Boom! Boom! One hit one of the cars, which was a Rural, and the Rural hit a piece of wood. The guy in the passenger seat fell. The cars behind them stopped, took the guy and drove away. Then I saw that Harold was hurt. I got up to help. There was no car passing, the taxis were gone, the buses were gone ..."¹⁸

Milton's memories of the events of that night complement what was told by Vianinha and recorded by Moraes (1991). There are two different perspectives: one, from those inside, trying to lead and organize the resistance; another, from someone who happened to be outside the building when the disturbance started. According to Vianinha, the shootings caused panic inside. He had to block the exit to prevent people running outside and being shot. When the shooting stopped, people started to leave the building in small groups. Up to then they had not seen Milton and Haroldo, who were now on their way to the hospital. Fortunately, Haroldo survived the attack, the bullet in his chest having missed his heart by just a few centimeters.

The attack on the headquarters of UNE that night is part of the historiography of the military coup of 1964. Similarly, the attack to the CPC is also part of Brazilian history. However, the events witnessed and experienced by Milton Gonçalves and Haroldo de Oliveira are not part of the narrative; even though the newspapers over the following days described the shootings, the victims are never mentioned. This is an example of how history is written by the upper class. The narrative

¹⁸ Milton Gonçalves interview in 10/07/2011. Author's translation.

of the event is based upon Vianinha's declaration. Considering that Milton went back to CPC after that night, I am assuming that he told his friends what happened, and the same for Haroldo, who died some 30 years later. Vianinha was interviewed several times, and spoke about the events. Moraes, one of the biographers, also interviewed Milton Gonçalves, and I find it difficult to believe that Milton would skip such traumatic moments. In the following days and years of the coup, many people fell victim to the state sponsored violence; very few made history.

The Military Dictatorship imposed censorship over all cultural and political expression. The artistic class suffered greatly: persecution of authors, directors, actresses and actors identified with communism (true or not) who were investigated, prosecuted, and sent into exile, along with musicians, journalists, academics. The great majority lost their jobs, as theaters were closed and shows cancelled. (BASBAUM, 2009; MORAES, 1991; VELLOSO, 1997). Milton faced serious financial difficulties but luckily was invited to play in a film. The project took him to the interior of Minas Gerais state where he stayed for several months, long enough for the first turmoil to settle. While there, someone told him about a new TV station about to be inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro, encouraging him to apply for a job there. It was Globo Television.

Global Celebrity

Milton often refers to the Globo Network with great affection and gratitude. It was there that he had his first steady job as an actor, with a signed contract, benefits and good salary.

In January 1965, I went there and spoke with Otávio Graça Melo, who is the father of Guto Graça Melo. I did all the tests, interviews and such. And in February 1965 I signed my first contract with Globo. Where I have been since. My first salary was 500 cruzeiros (...) It was a lot of money.¹⁹

Inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro on April 25, 1965, the TV Globo, Channel 4, was beneficiary of economic and cultural agreements between the dictatorship and the government of the United States, which supported the coup. The channel also took advantage of the rampant unemployment among the artistic class, hiring writers, artists and technicians from the theater business (HAMBURGER, 2007). Milton Gonçalves premiered on the channel on April 26, in the series *Rua da Matriz*, where he played an inventor. His first soap opera on the station was *Rosinha do Sobrado*, which aired between August and October of 1965. From October to December, he acted in another soap opera *A Moreninha*, and between December and February of the following year, in the soap opera *Padre Tião*.

¹⁹ Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/07/ 2013. Author's translation.

At Globo Network, I trod every path you can imagine: I directed, acted, consulted, participated. Mine was the first contract to be issued for an actor. I am the employee that is longest in continuous employment. I have always been treated with respect. I have always been able to express my ideas and to offer my opinion. There were disagreements, because that happens. Nobody, nothing is perfect. But I can say that there has always been a lot of consideration. And not because of saying "poor thing", or that I was taken as a "pet" here ... when I say respect, I mean respect for my work, for my history and experience, which I brought with me (...) And from what I've developed over the years too, of course.

(...)

Whenever I am interviewed about my career, I always make a point of talking about my training and my experience in the theater. Because a lot of people think I started at Globo as an extra, and that is not true.²⁰

Despite being very busy in television, that same year Milton played in the film *Uma Rosa Para Todos*, produced by Franco Rossi for cinema. The Arena had not been completely dismantled and in October of that prolific year Milton worked with the troupe, in the play *Arena Conta Zumbi*, in their Rio de Janeiro season. The show was a musical, written and produced by Guarnieri and Boal, in which characters are played not by individual actors but by all the cast, taking turns representing every character, a system they called rotation. It had premiered at the *Teatro de Arena* in São Paulo, but in Rio it was shown at the *Teatro Miguel Lemos*. The show tells the story of an Afro-Brazilian hero and his Maroon comrades, emphasizing the oppression of one class by another. Interestingly, Milton Gonçalves was the only black actor on the set. The producers justified the absence of black actors with the claim that the aim of the show was to emphasize the human aspect, showing actors portraying diverse characters in the same show.²¹

Between 1966 and 1969 Milton started to appear in comedies at Globo, with short sketches, combining this type of work with more dramatic roles in cinema and theater. He says, for example, that in those comedies he was often the stupid, ugly bad guy, whose appearance and attitude contrasted with that of the white people to make people laugh. He was aware of this and was humiliated by it but he needed the work. Milton Gonçalves explained the issue in an interview:

My first jobs were in comedy programs. In one of them (...) I was shooting a scene where my head was the center of a big target and a (white) actor throws a ball at my forehead. When the ball hit dead centre, I would tell a joke and the orchestra would strike a chord. At the end of the scene, Pedro Paulo, who at the time was a medical student and a trumpeter in the TV Globo orchestra, caught up with me in a corner and said that I could not continue doing that, that I had the capacity for more expressive roles and less of the racist jokes. He was also black. I was so ashamed I went and cried in the bathroom. (ARAÚJO, 2000, p. 80-81. Author's translation)

²⁰ Idem

²¹ Jornal do Brasil, 07/10/1965, Caderno B, p. 7.

In contrast, in 1966, Milton played in a show considered revolutionary in Brazil, when Millôr Fernandes adapted the literary novel *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* (Memoirs of a Police Sargent) into a musical for theater that was performed in the street. The play ran every night at *Boticário Square*, in Rio de Janeiro, between September 24 and October 9. The scenery incorporated the old houses that line the historical square, but the most surprising element was the composition of the cast, highlighted in the *Jornal do Brasil*:

Millôr Fernandes made a very free adaptation of Manuel Antonio de Almeida's novel, transforming it into what, according to him, can become the "great Brazilian musical". The play has a cast of 43, among them Antônio Pitanga, Milton Gonçalves, Zeni Pereira, Zózimo Bulbul, Esmeralda Barros, Clementino Kelé and Procópio Mariano, all black actors.²²

That was not the first time that a Brazilian theater put on a play with an entire cast of black actors and actresses. It had been done at the turn of the 20th century, and in the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, active during the 1940s and 1950s; but being performed in the middle of an important square in that historic neighborhood, and in such political and cultural circumstances made the show revolutionary.

Political persecution continued in the years following the 1964 coup, becoming worse in 1968 following increased protests among workers, students and artists. By then Milton was married with two children and working several jobs, struggling to provide a decent life for his family. He also knew of friends, among them the historian Joel Rufino, who had been jailed or forced to flee, abandoning their families, because of their political activities. Milton decided not to take part in the protests, not even in 1969 when artists and intellectuals protested Globo's airing a soap opera (an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's American novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), casting a white actor in the main role, using "black face".

Things started to change in 1970, when Janet Clair wrote the soap opera *Irmãos Coragem*, in which Milton got a more important role, part of the central casting. He was also one of the directors for that soap opera. Over the years, other soap operas gave him the opportunity to perform major roles: a psychiatrist, a judge, a priest, a member of parliament. In 1974, Milton Gonçalves played a homosexual criminal, the central character in *Rainha Diaba*, in the cinema, receiving four major awards for his performance.

As Milton gained more recognition from the public and in show business, Milton started to

²² "Árvore no Boticário para Sargento de Milícias", *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B, 15 de setembro de 1966, p. 3. Author's translation.

get involved in other projects, but he also embraced the need for active participation on behalf of the black population. In 1975, with friend Jorge Coutinho, he founded the *Instituto de Pesquisa da Cultura Negra* (IPCN), an entity to research and celebrate black culture and history. In 1977 he was part of the Brazilian delegation that attended the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, in Nigeria, a month-long event that brought together more than 17,000 artists from around the world.

Today I know who I am.

Going to Africa was a discovery for me. I went to Lagos, Nigeria, around 1977. It was my first time in a black country. Black pilot, flight attendant, authorities, different clothes. In Brazil, in 1977, there were few blacks driving cars. I got there and there was a black pilot flying a plane! I went as a Brazilian government envoy, I stayed there for seventeen days. I went to Fela Kuti's house ...

It changed my life, my view of the world.²³

In the following year Milton and Zózimo Bulbul coordinated the project *O Negro na Cultura Brasileira*, promoted by the IPCN and held between May and June 1978, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The event featured an exhibition of fine arts, dance, music, literature and cinema and brought together names such as Grande Otelo, Ele Semog, Raquel Trindade, Heitor dos Prazeres, Iberê Cavalcanti and Antônio Pitanga.

The second half of the 1970s marks the resurgence of the Black movement in Brazil, with *Ile Aiyê* in Salvador, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* in Rio, artists and intellectuals supporting the struggle for independence in Africa, the influence of reggae music in Brazil and the rising questioning of racial inequality. Debates on racial discrimination would develop through the 1980s, as more Afro-Brazilians demanded action. It was the period of struggle against the dictatorship, and Black leaders were there to remind the society that there is no democracy without equality.

Suddenly, I started to be called everywhere to discuss racism. My fate was to discuss the black man, wake up black and sleep black. Because most Brazilians did not like to speak about that. Can you imagine, like in the past someone saying "You are black!" That was an insult. To call someone black was to curse them. That all changed at that time. I must have read about a hundred books about the Negro²⁴ (...), because I think that we blacks have to arm ourselves with knowledge (...)

Then, when the opportunity arises, and I present my position, which is the black man's vision, someone would come up and say: "Hey, there goes the annoying Milton talking about the blacks!" But I cannot be

²³ Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/17/ 2013. Author's translation.

²⁴ In the late 1960s, Milton finished the *Ginásio*, Brazilian equivalent to Junior High in the United States. In the 1970s he finished the equivalent to High School, he even enrolled in university, but could not keep up with studies because of his hectic schedule.

silent. And the more I know, the more I have to speak.²⁵

The first public celebration of the maroon leader *Zumbi dos Palmares* was held in 1981, organized by Milton Gonçalves and Jorge Coutinho with the IPCN, in collaboration with other artists and intellectuals. According to the announcement in the *Jornal do Brasil* on November 19, 1981, the commemorative took place in Maracanãzinho, with famous black musicians such as Clementina de Jesus, Alcione, Bebeto, Yvone Lara, Gonzaguinha, Djavan, Elza Soares, Zezé Mota, Luiz Melodia, Xangô da Mangueira, Aniceto do Império, among others. Grande Otelo, Ruth de Souza, Jacira da Silva, Antonio Pitanga and Léa Garcia were among the artists who also participated. It was Pedrina da Silva, teacher, writer, sambista and active member of the Black movement and a leader in the IPCN, who wrote a letter to the *Jornal do Brasil*, on the day of the event, explaining the massacre of runaway slaves and the meaning of the celebration of Zumbi, on that day, November 20.²⁶

Milton remembers with emotion the event as one of the first in his activism in the black movement, still as part of the IPCN, and the first show he organized for a large audience.

Acorda Zumbi was planned from early 1981, with the support of Jorge Leite. One of the consequences was the creation of the November 20 holiday. Among its organizers were: Dulce Alves, Jorge Coutinho and myself. We invited fifteen of the best black singers, fourteen black presenters and one white, we went to Maracanãzinho. Mário Monteiro was the stage director (lighting, sound, etc.).

The show was on a Friday, Oxalá's day, we asked everyone to come in white. I went to the governor to ask him to prevent any censorship of the script.

Mr. Aniceto and Clementina de Jesus singing a *partido alto* ...

The Maracanãzinho erupted in an ovation.

Nobody was paid. The other expenses were covered with government money. The meetings were at my house, the phone wouldn't stop. Everything was done with extreme passion.²⁷

The show suffered no problems from the repression, occurring as it did after the attack on Rio Centro, which provoked a reaction from the entire country and forced the government bring its most radical wing under control. Additionally, the group that organized the show was not seen as a political group, never mind that *Acorda Zumbi* means "Wake up, Zumbi", a clear message to black people to become aware of the inequalities and injustices. On the day of the show, the *Jornal do Brasil* published a half-page article, giving more details about the show and the participation of the actors:

25 Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/17/ 2013. Author's translation.

26 "Chacina Histórica", letter from Pedrina de Deus. Cartas. *Jornal do Brasil*, 20/11/1981, p. 3.

27 Milton Gonçalves, interviewed by the author in 08/17/ 2013. Author's translation.

Acorda Zumbi will not only have music. An audio visual with Afro-Brazilian themes will be presented, and a script, written by the historian Joel Rufino dos Santos, will be read by several actors. Without sacrificing production value and the technical quality of the show, the black party has a cultural and even ideological purpose, highlighted by two of its organizers, Milton Gonçalves and Jorge Coutinho.²⁸

It was the beginning of Milton's campaign against racism. Over the next years, he would be called on to talk about racial inequality in Brazil and criticized for some of his positions on the topic. As he gained more visibility and became a celebrity, Milton Gonçalves embraced some – not all – demands of Afro-Brazilians activists.

On the occasion of the celebration of 100 years of Abolition, in May 13th of 1988, he was one of the major organizers of the *Marcha Contra a Farsa da Abolição* (March Against the Falsehood of Abolition), side by side with other black leaders, like Abdias Nascimento and Januário Garcia and others, and which was planned as a march in protest against the oppression of blacks in Brazil.²⁹ The participants started at the Candelária Square and walked along the Getúlio Vargas Avenue, past the Central Station to the Monument to Zumbi, at Praça Onze. The event was organized in cooperation with the Osvaldo Cruz Foundation and the AIDS Interdisciplinary Association, which combined the protest with a massive donation of blood for the campaign led by Herbert de Souza against AIDS. The idea was to give visibility to the problem of blood contamination in blood banks and, at the same time, reinforce the idea of “sangue bom”³⁰ among the black community. Yet, half way through it, the military police violently repressed the march detaining Black participants who were coming out of Central Station. Milton Gonçalves who, by this time, had overcome his own poverty and marginality had no power to stop the repression.

Over the coming years, he would be called to speak about racial inequality in Brazil and be criticized for some of his positions. As he gained more visibility and became a celebrity, he got more involved in the debate about racial discrimination. As he recognized that Afro-Brazilians still had a long struggle ahead, he started to use his influence to help others to achieve a life less ordinary.

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28 “Acorda Zumbi. A cultura negra faz sua festa no Maracanãzinho”. Beatriz Bonfim. *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B; 20/11/1981, p.5.

29 *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno Cidade, Capa, 12 de maio de 1988.

30 Sangue Bom is a popular expression among Afro-Brazilians, the literal meaning is “good blood”, but it means brotherhood, reliable person; it is also used in contrast with “sangue ruim” (bad blood), which refers to a mean person.

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