

Brazil Theater's Grande Dame Makes Her Debut in New York, at Age 90

Written by Ernest Barteldes
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When someone speaks about theater in Brazil, it is inevitable to mention the name of Bibi Ferreira, who is undoubtedly the Grande dame of the country's theatrical scene since she first stepped on a stage under the direction of her father, the legendary Procopio Ferreira.

With a career that spans eight decades (she turned 90 in 2012), Ferreira has done it all: she has directed, produced and been at the head of the São Paulo Theater that carries her late father's name.

She has also been an activist for many causes – among them having the acting profession officially recognized by Brazilian authorities who initially denied her father – a demigod in the Brazilian theater scene – his retirement benefits because his profession was not considered exactly a job.

Among the hits of her career was directing and playing the lead in the Brazilian version of *My Fair Lady* in the 60s, directing Bizet's *Carmen* in the 90s (when she was celebrating her sixth decade as a theater personality) and countless TV specials for singers like Maria Bethania and Clara Nunes. When musical theater producers there need advice, they go to her - and so do the French.

In the 80s and 90s, Ferreira went on tour celebrating the life and works of French singer Edith Piaf – that has arguably been her greatest achievement, since she wrote, directed and took the leading role performing the legendary singer's songs in French.

She has come back to that role many times – in 2009 she once again reprised that role during the Year of France in Brazil, when she not only performed the entire book but also "The Marseillaise," hitting all those high notes at the 'tender' age of 87.

We caught up with Ms. Ferreira over a phone interview in which she talked about her upcoming New York performance and also about the highlights of her long career.

You've had this amazing career, but this is the first time you are performing in New York – how did this come together?

How it happened I am not sure, because my manager takes care of this kind of business. But I am very excited but also very cautious and also a little bit nervous because it is a great responsibility to perform to an American audience.

Can you tell us how the show is going to be?

It is the same show that I have been doing in Brazil – it is a concert of Brazilian popular music covering many genres. There is also a comedic part in which I take well-known Brazilian lyrics and perform them in an operatic format. This is a very interesting and funny part of the show, for those who get it, of course (laughs).

Which are the composers you are covering in the concert?

I cover Noel Rosa, Pixinguinha, David Nasser, Julio Iglesias - I'm playing the music in my head as we speak - Jobim and others.

How long have you been doing this show in Brazil?

Oh, I've been doing it for years. It is the exact same show that I have been touring with for about three years. I'm not making any changes because you shouldn't 'mess with a team that is winning' (note: a popular Brazilian expression that is close to "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"). Since this show is very concise, there is no need to change anything.

You have made adaptations of many American musicals in the past, can you tell us about that?

Adaptation is not the right word – I was the first person to stage a production of an American musical in Brazil – *My Fair Lady*, for example, *Hello Dolly* and *Man of La Mancha* were all musicals that I staged here with great success. I have always been interested in American music, because I believe it's the best kind of music to put on stage in a musical format.

It is a kind of music that moves you, that really gets under your skin. I recall going to the movies when I was a youngster – I would go repeatedly and transcribe the words to the songs, and would learn them. It was wonderful – *Footlight Parade* was one of my favorites.

Every year, (Vaudeville-era Broadway producer) George White would produce his annual "George White Scandals." I learned a lot from watching his shows. Every year he would do a different edition of his Scandals, and they were very successful in the US, and I did many shows here with his music.

You also worked a lot on TV as a director...

They don't really make musicals on TV here in Brazil – there are shows, but that is quite different – they are basically a selection of tunes put together, with some theater. I directed many shows on TV... Elizeth Cardoso, who was one of our greatest voices, I directed Maria Bethania and Clara Nunes many times.

You also did a Hollywood movie called *End of The River* back in the 40s with Indian-born actor Sabu...

That was not Hollywood. That film was an English production, made at Pinewood Studios.

That is where they produce the James Bond movies today...

That is correct. That was a great experience. The producers came to Brazil to find someone for the female co-lead. They went to all the theaters and made screen tests and they chose me. I was considered 'cult.'

Did you develop any friendships with the other people on the production?

No, it was just the time of the shooting. We didn't even stay in the same city – the movie was all made in blocs. Most of the footage was made in the Amazon, and very little in the studio. My social time with them was minimal – I went to England to do a few scenes, a lot in the Amazon, and there was no real social interaction among us. I made no friendships with Sabu or anyone else, and life went on.

You didn't make many other films after that...

No, I am very busy with the theater, I can't leave the theater to make films because movies are too time-consuming, and the theater takes a lot of my time.

You also directed opera, how was that experience?

I directed two, actually. I did Bizet's *Carmen* with a cast of over one hundred people – it was very difficult, because you have to really know the music. I studied a lot for this – I am a musician, I play the piano and the violin – I directed that production for the Belas Artes Theater in Belo Horizonte and later I did *Rigoletto* at the Municipal Theater here in Rio de Janeiro.

You say it was very difficult, is that because of the content or the size of the production?

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Because of everything. It is not easy to deal with people and artists' vanities. I'm not sure you know, but opera demands a lot – it's not just the main singers and the cast, but actually you have to rehearse with two separate casts – you do the whole thing with the main cast and then you start from scratch with the understudies. So you do double work, and that is not an easy thing to do.

In 2003 you were honored by the Viradouro Samba School in Rio de Janeiro...

It was exhilarating. The moment you are inside that giant float feeling like an ant and then you enter the avenue and everyone is screaming your name. You feel like a shining star in a clear night. We feel so small, you see those stars in the sky and all those people around you, and you simply don't know what to think. I was in a trance that night. It was a beautiful thing, a very Brazilian moment. It is so emotional that you can't even express your feelings.

Back to the show you are doing in New York, how big is the band?

It's not a band; it's an orchestra with 27 musicians.

So we should expect a grand show...

The thing is, we are not taking this lightly. It is a very serious thing to come to New York, and it demands a lot of respect from all those involved.

I asked that question because many times when a Brazilian artist has a large-scale production in Brazil, they scale back a bit when they go abroad...

It is true that the cost is pretty high with the hotels, feeding, the artists' fees and all, so the smaller the crew the better. In our case, we are committed to taking 27 musicians. If we can't take all of them, we will take at least 21, but we are bringing a large crew from Brazil.

How long did it take to prepare the show?

It takes a lot of time, about nine months to a year, but when you get to rehearsals then it's faster. I start out just with the pianist (who is my musical director), then he passes the music along to the other musicians. We then have four or five rehearsals and then we open.

One of your most memorable shows was the one on the life of Edith Piaf... You also did a CD of her music... Will there be a little of that on the show?

The show ends with Piaf – her three principal songs – "La Vie En Rose," "Non Je ne Regrette Rien" and "Hymne à L'Amour"

How long is the show?

About 65 minutes, it depends on the audience. Sometimes people ask questions, and there is the applause. Here in Brazil people shout, "wonderful, "beautiful," and sometimes I respond with "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," from Don Quixote. And towards the end of the show, people always ask me to sing Piaf (laughs). I sing a lot of tunes, some in English, and at the end people always shout, "What about Piaf?" Then I do the three songs.

Piaf was a very important part of your career...

Yes, she was. Before I did the show just with her songs, I did the play. It was a huge hit, we stayed on for over a year. After that, we did the concert series with just the music.

I think many people in Brazil did not know the music of Edith Piaf until you reintroduced her to audiences there.

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You have just said something very correct. I think that I that – without attempting to pat myself in the back – I was responsible for introducing her music to Brazilian audiences, because I didn't really know her music that well until we started preparing the play.

What do you think will be your greatest legacy as an artist?

I think it was the courage to produce *My Fair Lady* in Brazil. That was a very important thing in my life, and it was also important for the country to have a show of that magnitude. Not only to actually do the show, but to see the talent of the American composer come to life on stage – all the songs in that musical are not only perfect but also beautiful.

Bibi Ferreira performs at the Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center on April 14, 2013, at 8 PM. For tickets and more information, visit www.lincolncenter.org or call the box office at (212) 671-4050.

Ernest Barteldes is a freelance writer based on Staten Island, New York. He can be reached at ebarteldes@yahoo.com. This article appeared in The Brazilians.