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## The Ponto de Partida Group: Theatre and Music unite Communities in a Restored Silk Factory in Barbacena

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## The Ponto de Partida Group<sup>1</sup>: How Theatre and Music Unite Communities in a Restored Silk Factory in Barbacena<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Based on concepts from Nogueira and Cruz, Bezelga, and Menezes, this article examines the practices of the theatre group which is based in a former silk factory in Barbacena, helping to make these listed buildings sustainable. After the factory closed government agencies took over the buildings. However, in the 1990s, the buildings were unoccupied until taken over by the Ponto de Partida Group in 1998. To restore the deactivated industrial heritage, the group involved the community of Barbacena in fund-raising and competitions, moving into Pavilion 1 in 2004. After the restoration of Pavilion 2, Bituca Music University was opened there, a tribute to the musician Milton Nascimento. Finally, the group established a community library in Pavilion 3.




**Keywords:** Artistic Practices. Industrial Heritage. Sustainability. Community.

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## O grupo Ponto de Partida: teatro e música unem comunidades em fábrica de seda restaurada em Barbacena

### Resumo

Fundamentado em conceitos de Nogueira e de Cruz, Bezelga & Menezes, o artigo examina as práticas do grupo teatral que ocupou a antiga Sericícola de Barbacena, proporcionando sustentabilidade ao patrimônio. Assim que as atividades fabris foram encerradas, as agências governamentais ocuparam os edifícios. Porém, na década de 1990, os casarões permaneceram desocupados até a apropriação pelo Grupo Teatral Ponto de Partida em 1998. Para restaurar o patrimônio industrial desativado, o grupo envolveu a comunidade de Barbacena em doações e concursos e, em 2004, ocupou o Pavilhão 1. Após a restauração do Pavilhão 2, ali foi inaugurada a Bituca – Universidade de Música Popular, uma homenagem a Milton Nascimento, e, por fim, o grupo instalou a biblioteca comunitária no Pavilhão 3.

**Palavras-chave:** Práticas artísticas. Patrimônio industrial. Sustentabilidade. Comunidade.

## El grupo Ponto de Partida: teatro y música unen comunidades en una fábrica de seda restaurada en Barbacena

### Resumen

A partir de conceptos de Nogueira y de Cruz, Bezelga & Menezes, el artículo analiza las prácticas del grupo de teatro que ocupó la ex Sericícola de Barbacena, brindando sostenibilidad al patrimonio. Una vez que se cerraron las actividades manufactureras, las agencias gubernamentales ocuparon los edificios. Sin embargo, en la década de 1990, las mansiones permanecieron desocupadas hasta su apropiación por parte del Grupo Teatral Ponto de Partida en 1998. Para restaurar el patrimonio industrial desactivado, el grupo involucró a la comunidad de Barbacena en donaciones y concursos, y en 2004 ocupó el Pabellón 1. Después tras la restauración del Pabellón 2, la Bituca – Universidade de Música Popular, en homenaje a Milton Nascimento, ocupó el edificio y, finalmente, el grupo instaló la biblioteca comunitaria en el Pabellón 3.

**Palabras clave:** Prácticas artísticas. Patrimonio industrial. Sostenibilidad. Comunidad.



## Introduction

For more than four decades, Ponto de Partida theatrical group has made a name for itself as an artistic community in the city of Barbacena. Its presentations are inspired by Brazilian culture and literature, music from the Jequitinhonha Valley, indigenous music, and the traditions of Minas Gerais state. This text proposes to discuss this group created by artists who used the industrial heritage of the former Barbacena Silk Factory for artistic practices such as theatre, music, and dance. They used the factory to present their productions and to train more than 300 members of the local community over the years.

In 'For another globalization: from unique thought to universal consciousness' (2003), the geographer Milton Santos seeks to explain the process of globalization, indicating some alternatives and possibilities for building another world. He defines space as,

[...] something dynamic and unitary, where materiality and human action come together. Space is the inseparable set of systems of objects, natural or manufactured, and systems of actions, deliberate or not. At each time, new objects and actions join the others, modifying the whole, both formally and substantially (Santos, 2003, p. 46).

According to Santos, the objects he refers to are increasingly products of human action involving work and their value in the contemporary model lies in their effectiveness and contribution to productivity. We understand that the Ponto de Partida Group, through its artistic and community practices, its hard work, and the changes it made to the deactivated industrial heritage, represents this new world made possible, the result of the sum of materiality and human action, as predicted by Milton Santos (2003).

At the same time, according to Cruz, Bezelga, and Menezes (2020, p. 2), renowned scholars of community art practices, the relationship between community artistic practices and education 'generates significant tensions between artistic value, the ethical dimension of participation in artistic processes, and their potential impacts on the lives of communities and on the civic and political participation of the people involved'.



Another scholar, the British researcher Juliet Rufford, believes that a successful experience of space is one that is marked qualitatively differently from the 'city of spectacle' and can transform us from spectator-consumers into active participants with free will (Rufford, 2017). She draws attention to the fact that,

in countless places in the world's advanced economies, cities present a delirious new visuality and buildings appear as true scenic-cultural statements or as large canvases on an architectural scale. Guy Débord had already predicted this back in 1967. Today, as Debord feared, we have reached the point where the saleable images of and for urban space do not seem sufficient to meet the political-economic desires of the capitalist class and theatre, and the performance turned into new opportunities to participate in space experiences (Rufford, 2017, online).

Thus, agreeing with Rufford, we understand that artistic activities developed in deactivated spaces allow the expansion of the scope of theatre, dance, and visual arts involving different layers of the population, benefiting the artists. Directors and performers – having recently abandoned imposing theatres – help reinforce the dynamic between the theatre and the city. Many of these groups of actors and artists develop site-specific work that is critically attuned to issues of space and place, seeking alternative spaces to make art. The issue of eliminating illusionism and discussing on stage - with intense participation from spectators - the economic contradictions, social dramas, and oppressions typical of a society structured by class struggle dates to the modern theatre proposed by Bertolt Brecht. In contemporary times, different spaces in the city assumed a fundamental role in guaranteeing a stage-audience interrelationship and the enjoyment of works of art in general.

Facing the fragmentation of community life in which there is today a need for the self-affirmation of the individual to the detriment of the collective in a world increasingly focused on consumption, art in communities will become one of the possibilities for exercising citizenship.

Theatre and performance have proven to be effective in this dialogue with the city. The challenge for those concerned with socially engaged theatre is to open a path between the impasses of contemporary capitalism using cultural practices in the city space to guarantee the full exercise of citizenship (Rufford, 2017, online).



Various concepts of *Theatre in the Community* exist, especially in the view of Marcia Pompeu Nogueira. She has looked intensely at the topic, concluding that, given the multiplicity of contexts in which people live in the urban world of contemporary societies, very different from the rural life model, one might even think that communities could not survive industrialization (Nogueira, 2008). However, agreeing with Baz Kershaw, she understands that every community is similar regarding its internal differences and the mediation role it assumes between the individual and society (Nogueira, 2007).

Using Anthony Cohen's and Raymond Williams' concepts, as well as those of Kershaw, Marcia Nogueira formulates some different classifications for *Theatre in the Community*. However, she warns that this path is not the only one and represents a look at practices that can contribute as a reference for analysis of theatre practices in the community.

Nogueira discussed three of the classifications she presented at a scientific meeting held in 2007 at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). In the first, inspired by Augusto Boal, she defines *Theatre for Communities* as a model that includes theatre made by artists for peripheral communities in a top-down approach, ignoring the existing reality in advance. As Boal himself pointed out,

we used our art to tell truths, to teach solutions: we taught peasants to fight for their land, but we were people from the big city; we taught black people to fight against racial prejudice, but we were almost all very white; we taught women to fight against their oppressors. Which? We ourselves, as we were feminist men, all of us. It was worth the intention! (Boal, *apud* Nogueira, 2007, p. 2).

When defining *Theatre with Communities*, her second classification, Nogueira considers that theatrical work starts from 'an investigation of a particular community to create a production. Both the language, the content - specific subjects to be questioned - and the form - typical popular manifestations - are incorporated into the production.' (Nogueira, 2007, p. 2). She also argues that working with a specific community means increasing the political effectiveness of the work. She turns again to Kershaw to define *Theatre with Communities* when he states that,



years of contact with specific audiences and specific communities have taught radical theatre workers a meaningful lesson: each type of community or group requires a tailored approach - to become effective culturally and, perhaps, socially, and politically (Kershaw, 1992, p. 165).

In the third model, which she calls *Theatre by Communities*, the author is again inspired by Augusto Boal, as she includes the community itself in the process of theatrical creation, asking people about the content of the plays giving people the means of theatrical production. In this sense, a new *Theatre in the Community* took shape, whose function would be to strengthen communities' identity issues through improvisation and theatrical plays, which could contribute to the expression of silent or silenced voices in the community (Nogueira, 2007, p. 3).

Based on the three classifications proposed by Nogueira, we decided to analyze which would be the Ponto de Partida Group process and which type of community practices were applied. We understand that Ponto de Partida Group wishes to invest in the culture not only because of its twenty-two members but on behalf of all the citizens of Barbacena, and because it is constantly recommencing, it takes different stances, as stated by one of the group's mentors. However, it is always a theatre in the community.

According to director Regina Bertola (2015), one of the groups' founders, the artists decided that even with the group's growth, they would remain in Barbacena because they wanted to contribute to the city's cultural life, which was previously quite restricted.

We refused to have to move to another state to be successful. We wanted to force people to look inside at that city high up in the mountains, but which created a theatre that touched people's hearts (Bertola, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

## A cultural movement in the historic city of Barbacena

The Ponto de Partida Theatre Group was created in 1980 by a group of people who, at that time, just wanted to create a cultural movement in a city in the interior of Minas Gerais. Located on the slopes of Serra da Mantiqueira, with just over 100,000 inhabitants, since the 1970s the city of Barbacena has been known as the

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<sup>5</sup> Interview given by director Regina Bertola to EBC TV. For the full interview: <https://tvbrasil.ebc.com.br/artedoartista/post/a-cidade-de-barbacena-e-o-ponto-de-partida>



city of the insane due to the numerous existing hospitals and also due to the high number of mentally ill people who in that decade were killed or died in asylums and whose bodies and bones were sold to Brazilian universities to assist in the training of new doctors.

Some of the group's founders had an early childhood school called Vila Marquês de Rabió. The group emerged out of this, specifically with the staging of *The Ark of Noah* – an infantile play staged with twelve children. This was created and performed in the same school year as the group was created. After this production, the group began to travel, performing in the capital of Minas Gerais. After the second production the group began dealing with theatrical elements, such as adjusting the lighting design and creating scenery. In that process, theatre issues were resolved with the community, as demand grew.

Member's technical and artistic training was carried out little by little through the work of professionals invited to carry out short and long-term actions with everyone in the group. The leap forward occurred with the production of *Drummond* in 1987, based exclusively on the poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade (Frederick; Mariuzzo, 2015, online). As the director stated 'We wanted to tell his story from childhood to old age, and we stitched this together through poems' (Bertola, 2015). The success of this production allowed the group members to decide whether they would make a living from the theatre.

For one of the founders and main directors of the Group, Ivanée Bertola, who died in 2003, all necessary work had to be carried out by the group members. Increasingly, it was imperative for each member to specialize in artistic, technical, and production activities.

Therefore, through the specialization of its own members, the Group reinforced its initial idea that its creation relied on the cultural transformation of the city and its members. In turn, this spirit helps the Group to exist and resist as a permanent and itinerant group because, as it is based in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais and aiming for local transformation, it had to travel long distances. To this end, Ivanée Bertola always stated that it was important for the Group to be strong, including economically (Bertola *apud* Valle, 2005, p. 47).





Upon deciding it would also be an itinerant group, Ponto de Partida created two projects: the Consolidation Project and the Market Expansion Project. The Consolidation Project consisted of returning to the cities where the Group has already performed to consolidate its image. On the other hand, the Expansion project occurred in two ways: *ad-hoc* (based on invitations) and purposefully (by choosing a location that interests the Group). Normally, when an invitation was made, it induced a purposeful advance, and the Group had to have a repertoire to make advances (Valle, 2005).

In addition to these production actions designed, based on the (Consolidation and Expansion) projects, to maintain the Group sustainably, the artists created a support network in the 1980s called Friends of Ponto de Partida Club (CAPP). This involved group members selling tickets door to door. At first, they were tickets for other artists or groups, but afterwards they started selling tickets for the Group's own shows. Currently, those annual contributions can be deducted from the income tax. When people become 'friends of CAPP' they receive in exchange invitations and tickets for shows and actions that the Group carries out.

As if they were members, people in the community contribute annually to Ponto de Partida's activities. Contributions take place in the same format as for a company, meaning that whoever decides to help can make income tax deductions. Aside from financial support, the initial objective was, according to the Group's website, to raise awareness of the importance of forming partnerships with society so that people realized that they could effectively contribute to making changes happen, changes driven by art, theatre, and music. Therefore, it is once again the partnership between the theatre group and the community that helps to maintain part of the Group's artistic activities.

In one of the productions, entitled *Presente de Vô* (*Grandpa's Gift*, 2013-2014), the Group began extensive research into traditional Brazilian music, including indigenous and African memory, songs by washerwomen on riverbanks, to work in partnership with the Araçuaí Children's Choir, composed of children between 7 and 16 years old (Figure 1)

Figure 1 – The production *Presente de Vô* (*Grandpa's Gift*), created with the Araçuaí Children's Choir from the Jequitinhonha River Valley region. (Photo by Waldir Damasceno, 2013. Courtesy of Grupo Estação Ponto de Partida).



The entire research process resulted in the 80-minute production. For a year and a half, the Group carried out research with the grandfathers and grandmothers of the boys and girls of Araçuaí, collecting stories and songs that are revealed from a treasure trove of memories, throughout the spectacle, in the rhythm of traditional Minas Gerais “stories”. It is intended to convey the message that songs, like memories, must be told and retold, in order not to die. According to the director, ‘The construction of the production is a work in which the entire Group participates, no one receives a ready-made text. The process depends on improvisation until reaching the final format’, (Bertola *apud* Frederick; Mariuzzo, 2015). The show corroborates the ideas of dialogue and transformation of the local community (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Cena de *Presente de Vô*, com a comunidade de meninos do Araçuaí do Vale do Jequitinhonha. Foto: Guto Muniz, 2013. Cortesia do Grupo Estação Ponto de Partida.



The children who participated in the production came from the city of Araçuaí, Minas Gerais. They went to Barbacena to study and participate in artistic training provided by the Ponto de Partida Group and ended up becoming part of the local community and the group's artistic spaces.

Currently Ponto de Partida uses two distinct spaces for administration and training and artistic activities. In the city's Municipal Library building, located in the city centre, there is a room in which the group's administration has been operating since 2004. The other space, given to the group in 1999, is the former Sericícola – or Silk Factory - which houses the music school, spaces for rehearsals and performances, the music studio, and the gardens.

### The industrial heritage of the former Silk Factory

The closure of manufacturing activities at the Silk Factory occurred in 1973



due to competition in the Brazilian market, the main consumer of the silk produced at the Station, as well as synthetic silk, coming from China. Since then, the industrial complex had other ephemeral uses until it was listed in 2004 by the municipality of Barbacena and was gradually taken over by Ponto de Partida.

In 1998, the Ponto de Partida Group took over its first building as the headquarters for its theatrical creations and, little by little, became responsible for preserving that heritage building. Thanks to the alliance, determination, commitment, the work of the group of community artists, the companies that sponsor the group, and the public authorities, the restoration project was carefully carried out. According to an interview with the three architects-scenographers Tereza Bruzzi, Alexandre Rosset, and Luciana Damasceno, the interventions lasted seventeen years. Tereza Bruzzi emphasizes how the group decided what rehabilitation works needed to be done at the old factory.

In 1998, when we were putting on the production *A Roca História de Mulheres (The Spinning Wheel - History of Women)*, the third building of a set of four was loaned to the Ponto de Partida Group to set up the scenography and rehearse. From then on, the Group never left, and the factory became its artistic headquarters. It was the beginning of the saga of assuming responsibility for the heritage building. At the time, the second building was taken over (where Bituca - University of Popular Music is currently located). The first one was used by the Department of Agriculture (belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture, which owns the complex), while the last building was used by the city's Department of Transit. Afterwards, when Ponto de Partida obtained the transfer of use of the occupied building, we started the restoration of the property. In 2015, we completed the restoration of the last building that became *Casa Palavra* (House of the Word), which is the Group's administrative headquarters on the ground floor, a restaurant, and a library on the upper floor, open to the public (Bruzzi, 2022).

At this time the Group took over the set of pavilions as a cultural facility including the Artistic Headquarters (Figure 3), Bituca School<sup>6</sup> (Figure 4), and Casa Palavra (Library), including using the labor of the entire community to restore the gardens of the old Silk Factory.

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<sup>6</sup> The name Bituca – University of Popular Music is a tribute to Milton Nascimento (known as Bituca), who is a patron of the project. Students work in the training process, with the option of learning 11 instruments, in addition to singing, sound engineering & production, piano tuning & restoration.

Figure 3 – Headquarters of the Ponto de Partida Station Group, Barbacena Factory Pavilion, with restored architecture, MG. Photo Gabriel Castro, 2015.



Figure 4 – Headquarters of Bituca University of Music, another Factory Pavilion with restored architecture, MG. Photo Gabriel Castro, 2015.





As Tereza Bruzzi explained, the participants of the community of Barbacena lovingly labored to preserve the area, working not only on artistic activities, but also on the sustainability of the old industrial complex.

We need to point out that the group does not stop, it currently takes care of the surrounding green area, which has become an area for the preservation of local species, with strong community involvement. It is important to mention that use of the properties has been ceded to them, but the property continues to be held by the Ministry of Agriculture (Bruzzi, 2022).

In the process used in the building conservation works, the scenographer-architects explained that,

we sought to preserve the original characteristics and qualities of the buildings, those that were recognizable or in good condition were reconstituted (for example, frames and exposed roof woodwork were redone). Where there were no traces or new uses, new intervention was required, we used aesthetic references and design solutions. We incorporated existing designs in the set and we proposed solutions with new materials. [...] For example, a businessman who owns a quarry, who usually only exports his products, offered his material to Ponto de Partida. We used marble respecting the original geometry of the tiles and the '*doce de leite*' shaped composition, typical of the time (Bruzzi, 2022).

The interviewees have formally participated in the group since 1998, working on projects involving heritage, architecture, scenography, and costumes and reported that, since its creation, the Ponto de Partida group has always brought the city closer to its actions, encouraging community participation in your projects.

According to a report by the same architect-scenographers belonging to the group, the Barbacena community participates in a 'free training action' and helps Ponto de Partida develop cultural and environmental heritage, developing an expressive cultural policy. "In a sense, the group takes on the dual task of having an impact on local communities, but also on the state and the country" (Bruzzi, 2022).

In addition to the positive aspect of the sustainability of a beautiful set of buildings that were deactivated, now a station for various arts, the former factory also reveals the history of Italian immigration in Minas Gerais and industrial development at the beginning of the 20th century, with the beginning of the



incorporation of female labor in Brazil. In this sense, having restored the facilities of the city's former silk factory<sup>7</sup>, the theatre group established Ponto de Partida Station. It is in this industrial complex that the 'cultural training and production center' of the Ponto de Partida Association operates. As Fernanda Fernandes points out,

in three decades of research into Brazilian culture, the group has gone beyond the limits of a theatre company, due to the option of creating a structure that was capable of intervening in the context of its historical time, forging a unique configuration that makes the Ponto de Partida Cultural Association directly responsible for the training or work of more than 200 people, including actors, technicians, and young people involved in projects such as *Meninos de Araçuaí*, *Casa de Arte & Ofício*, and *Bituca: Universidade de Música Popular* (Fernandes, 2009, p. 2).

Finally, it is important to highlight that it was thanks to the alliance established between the local community, the sponsorship of local businesspeople, public authorities, and Ponto de Partida that actions of the magnitude of the restoration of the old factory buildings and its surroundings could and still can be carried out in the city of Barbacena, giving them other functionalities linked to theatre, music, dance, and visual arts. The work at the Silk Factory is the effective materialization of the local transformation that the Ponto de Partida Group was able to carry out in its community.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented here is part of a more comprehensive research into artistic practices, especially in theatre, and appropriate industrial heritage. It was proven that the experience introduced by the theatrical group Ponto de Partida Station stands out due to the possibility of the intense participation of the Barbacena's community and the encouragement of social cohesion based on collective experience, as recommended by Cruz, Bezelga, and Menezes (2020). Using the arts as a driver for cultural and social change, the Group trains young

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<sup>7</sup> In 1915, the Ponto de Partida Station infrastructure allowed the manufacture of silk dresses, vests, scarves, and socks. The main buildings of the factory, which remain standing, were used for the Experimental Section, the Sericulture School, the Secretariat, and the Spinning and Weaving Department.



people and adults in theatre, music, dance, and citizenship.

In addition, to the relevant contribution to Barbacena's culture, the work to preserve the industrial facilities of the city's former Silk Factory and to establish Casa do Ponto, Bituca - Universidade de Música Popular, and Casa Palavra, has been an unprecedented community experience. In this study of the relevance of artistic practices for the community, it is understood that the materiality of industrial structures that had an expressive meaning for the world of work through contemporary human actions obtain a beneficial result for memory and industrial heritage, both material and immaterial.

Given this analysis, we believe that the permanent and itinerant Ponto de Partida Station is a theatre group in the community, according to Nogueira's classification (2007 and 2008), as one of its interests is the transformation of the group's members and the city in which they live and where it was created. Ponto de Partida Group truly fulfils its objective of local cultural transformation not only with its shows, but also with the Artistic Residencies it creates, with shows by other artists or companies, always with the intense participation of the community of the city of Barbacena.

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