

# When Theater is at the Vanguard: Ludovina Soares da Costa and *The Deaf and Dumb or the Abbé de l'Épée: an Historical Drama*

Lucia Reily<sup>I</sup>

Cássia Geciauskas Sofiato<sup>II</sup>

<sup>I</sup>Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil

<sup>II</sup>Universidade de São Paulo – USP, São Paulo/SP, Brazil

**ABSTRACT** – *When Theater is at the Vanguard: Ludovina Soares da Costa and The Deaf and Dumb or the Abbé de l'Épée: an Historical Drama* – This article investigates the staging of Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's play *L'Abbé de l'Épée*, [*The deaf-mute or the Abbot de l'Épée*] during Brazil's imperial period. The objective was to analyze how multiple discourses on deafness that circulated in the media, combined with the performance of the Portuguese actress Ludovina Soares da Costa as a deaf-mute young man motivated the founding of Brazil's first institution for the deaf, in Rio de Janeiro. The documentary study surveyed material from the newspaper collection at the Hemeroteca da Biblioteca Nacional, for periodicals from 1810 through 1860, reviewing ads, news and reviews of the performances. The results highlight the transmission of conceptions about deafness in the local society through theater.

**Keywords:** Performance. Gender. History of Brazilian Theater. Deaf Studies. History of Deaf Education.

**RÉSUMÉ** – *Le Théâtre Devancé: Ludovina Soares da Costa et L'Abbé de l'Épée, comédie historique, en cinq actes* – Cet article étudie la mise en scène de la pièce *L'Abbé de l'Épée* de Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, dans la période impériale. L'objectif était d'analyser comment les multiples discours sur la surdité qui circulaient dans les médias, ajoutés à la performance de l'actrice portugaise Ludovina Soares da Costa en tant que sourd-muet, ont motivé la fondation de la première institution brésilienne pour les sourds. La recherche documentaire a été effectuée par balayage de 1810 à 1860 dans l'Héméothèque de la Bibliothèque Nationale, cherchant les annonces, les notes et les critiques des présentations. Les résultats montrent le transit des conceptions sur la surdité dans la société fluminense au théâtre.

**Mots-clés:** Performance. Genre. Histoire du Théâtre Brésilien. Études sur les Sourds. Histoire de l'Éducation des Sourds.

**RESUMO** – *O Teatro se Antecipa: Ludovina Soares da Costa e O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* – Este artigo investiga a encenação da peça *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée*, de Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, no período imperial. O objetivo foi analisar como os múltiplos discursos que circularam na mídia sobre a surdez, somados à atuação da atriz portuguesa Ludovina Soares da Costa como um jovem surdo-mudo, serviram de motivação para fundar a primeira instituição brasileira para surdos no Rio de Janeiro. A pesquisa documental foi realizada por meio de varredura nos periódicos de 1810 a 1860 da Hemeroteca da Biblioteca Nacional, buscando mapear anúncios, notas e críticas das apresentações. Os resultados destacam o trânsito de concepções sobre a surdez na sociedade fluminense por meio do teatro.

**Palavras-chave:** Performance. Gênero. História do Teatro Brasileiro. Estudos Surdos. História da Educação de Surdos.

Imperial Theater of S. Pedro de Alcantara

On Sunday the 7th of this month, the Portuguese company will perform the new and excellent drama in 5 acts entitled O SURDO E MUDO OU O ABBADE DE L'EPEE. This play, due to its good plot, excellent locution, delicate scenes, and useful morals, has received decisive approval in the theaters of Europe.

Following the example of these theatres, the character of the Deaf-Mute young man was assigned to the *primeira Dama* Ludovina Soares, which is somewhat difficult; however, the actress trusts in the indulgence of a generous audience, and in the absence of perfection she hopes to deserve the subterfuge, which she does not deny, and through the performance of her role, she ardently desires, and places all her glory into pleasing.

The Direction omitted nothing to ensure that the drama was staged with the propriety and decency that is always due to an illustrious public (Imperial..., 1830c, p. 8).

This is the comment we read in the announcement of November 7, 1830 about the first showing of the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* [The Deaf-Mute or the Abbot de l'Épée] at the Imperial Theater S. Pedro de Alcântara, with the Portuguese actress Ludovina Soares da Costa in the role of a young deaf man. The note piqued our curiosity about the play that portrayed Charles-Michel de l'Épée, known as the father of deaf education in France (Rée, 1999), and about the performance of Ludovina Soares da Costa in the unconventional role of a deaf and mute young man.

How did this play appear on the social scene in Rio de Janeiro even before the foundation of a specialized institution for the deaf in Brazil, which only occurred in 1856<sup>1</sup>? How was the play received in Rio de Janeiro at the time? And who was Ludovina Soares da Costa?

Given these questions, the aim of this study was to understand how the multiple discourses about deafness that circulated in the media in the imperial period, combined with the performance by the Portuguese actress Ludovina Soares da Costa as a young deaf-mute in the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée*, motivated the founding of the first Brazilian institution for the deaf in Rio de Janeiro. The study follows a qualitative documentary approach. We used first-hand documents which, according to Gil (2002, p. 46), are those "that have not received any analytical treatment". The corpus was made up of numerous periodicals from Rio de Janeiro<sup>2</sup> and

the following documents: the original publication of the play in French (Bouilly, 1799) and its translation in Spanish (Bouilly, 1800) and Portuguese (Bouilly, 1828), as well as the memorial text by the author Jean-Nicolas Bouilly (1836).

The documentary research was carried out by searching the periodicals mentioned in the previous note housed in the Hemeroteca Digital for the periods from 1810-1819 and 1850-1859, using the following search terms: Ludovina Soares (actress), Abbé de l'Épée, Sicard, E. Huet (educators of the deaf), Bouilly (author of the play), *surdo*, *surdez* and *surdo-mudo* [deaf, deafness and deaf-mute]. We sought to map advertisements, news, and reviews of performances of the play in the Rio de Janeiro<sup>3</sup>.

These materials provided clues that allowed us to make inferences to fill in important narrative gaps and understand how Ludovina constructed a deaf and mute character on stage at a time when sign language was still not used in Brazil. We sought to analyze how the play promoted conceptions about deafness in Rio de Janeiro society through the medium of theater at a time when there were still no institutions that welcomed and educated students with disabilities, and who had until then been excluded from all school initiatives. We found more than 20 mentions of the play in newspaper advertisements available through the Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional [the digital newspaper archive of the National Library], which allowed us to uncover a chapter of cultural history related to Rio de Janeiro society's awareness that it was possible to promote the education of people with deafness – ideas that stimulated dialogues between the fields of culture and science.

In this study, we understand theater from the perspective of Becker (2008), for whom the world of theater is not limited to the playwright and actors directly involved in staging a play. Theater employees, event promoters and the public are also significant agents that influence the meanings of art and its impact on society. Throughout the text, we seek to highlight and value the participation of multiple cultural agents in their different roles of mobilizing the lines and gestures of the characters beyond the confines of the stage.

### Rio de Janeiro's theaters in the first half of the nineteenth century

A theater company and its entire repertoire wasn't imported to Brazil just to satisfy the royal family's desire for entertainment. The colonizing process, which brought religious values, aesthetic models, and urban development projects to Brazil, sought to bring the lights of knowledge to the wild and uncivilized world of the tropics. In this sense, the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* carried in the baggage of Ludovina Soares da Costa's theater company, together with other discourses circulating in different social spheres, formed a perspective that illuminated opportunities for education for deaf people based on the French model.

To assess the impact of the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* on Rio de Janeiro society and Ludovina Soares's role in the construction of the deaf character, it is important to put the Rio de Janeiro theatre scene in the first half of the 19th century into historical context. The effort to track the venues where performances took place was somewhat complicated by the fact that Rio de Janeiro's theaters were renamed several times due to major renovations, changes in their administrations or political issues. According to the advertisements found in local newspapers, the play that is the focus of this article was staged in two theatrical venues: (1) the Imperial Teatro de São Pedro Alcântara/Teatro Constitucional Fluminense/Teatro de São Pedro de Alcântara and (2) the Teatro da Praia de Dom Manuel/Teatro de São Januário.

The largest theater in the city at the time was the Real Teatro de São João, inaugurated in 1813 under the rule of Dom João VI. With a full house, it had room for 1,020 spectators in the main seating, as well as 300 people in the boxes (Rondinelli, 2010). The building on Tiradentes Square suffered a fire in 1824; it was renovated and opened to the public in 1826 under the name of Imperial Theatre of São Pedro Alcântara (Dias, 2012). It was temporarily closed in 1831 due to political disputes, marked by a confrontation with fatal casualties between the police and opposition groups in Brazil's post-independence period. It came to be managed by José Fernando de Almeida, son of the previous owner. It reopened under the name of Teatro Constitucional Fluminense and was reinaugurated in 1839 as Teatro de São Pedro de Alcântara. Today, this cultural center, managed by the Rio de Janeiro Arts Foundation (Funarj), is known as the João Caetano Thea-

ter, in honor of the playwright João Caetano dos Santos (1808-1863), who worked in the capital of the Empire between 1831 and 1863.

Ludovina Soares da Costa (1802-1868), a famous Portuguese actress, arrived in Brazil in 1829 with her theater company, composed of her husband João Evangelista da Costa and several family members, all hired by the owner of the Imperial Teatro de S. Pedro Alcântara, Fernando José de Almeida. According to Dias (2012), the businessman died on the same day that the company arrived in Rio, so Dom Pedro I took over the group's patronage. When the monarch returned to Portugal in 1832, the company lost its benefactor and split into three sub-groups. Ludovina and João Evangelista obtained support from the imperial government to build a new theater on Rua do Cotovelo, between Praia de Dom Manuel and Rua Dom Manoel (today an area of downtown Rio, near Praça XV de Novembro), which opened in 1834 as the Teatro da Praia de Dom Manuel. Azevedo explains:

The theater was located at the end of Rua do Cotovelo, between the foot of the Morro do Castelo (a hill that is now gone) and the beach, near the ferry port to Niterói, a place that was always considered out of the way and far from the city center. The contract between the group of artists and the government stipulated that, since the building had been erected on land provided by the government, the theater should pass to the government after about three years, as it did (Azevedo, 2016, p. 8).

The Teatro da Praia de Dom Manuel (whose name was changed in 1838 to São Januário) was run by Ludovina Soares and her brother Manuel. According to Rondinelli (2017, p. 39), "alongside her husband, the actor and rehearsal João Evangelista da Costa (?-1840), she was responsible for systematically introducing the French dramaturgy of the romantic theater to the court's stages".

About the theater, Souza (2007, p. 1-2) comments:

Despite being a comfortable room of reasonable proportions, the São Januário theater had one drawback, according to the assessments of some contemporaries: the place where it was built, in a region considered dangerous and far from the Sacramento parish, where Rio's theaters were concentrated. Because of this location, the theater carried the stigma of being frequented by spectators who were not very 'refined' and of being avoided by

'good families', serving only to house traveling or displaced theatrical companies, or even as a last 'resort for unemployed artists'.

Meanwhile, the São Francisco de Paula Theater was built in 1832 by French settlers in Rio de Janeiro (Dias, 2012). It was expanded, in cultural terms as well, when Dom João VI subsidized the arrival of a group of French artists and their families to establish an academy of Fine Arts in the capital to train a body of qualified professionals (Coustet, 2022).

It was there that the artist João Caetano dos Santos decided to settle and build his career. He had appeared on the theatrical scene in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 1830s (Dias, 2012); after performing on various stages, he decided to link his name to French drama and he “revitalized the court's theatrical scene, offering several weekly shows” (Rondinelli, 2010, p. 82). There was a dispute over territory due to some discrimination against Ludovina Soares' company because of its Portuguese, not Brazilian, origin. However, after her husband's death, the actress also began to perform frequently with João Caetano da Silva at the Teatro de São Francisco and on other stages (Azevedo, 2016).

The theaters maintained themselves thanks to tickets sales and, in the case of officially supported theaters – such as the Teatro de São Pedro de Alcântara and the Teatro de São Francisco – received government support, as well as permission to raise money through lotteries (Rondinelli, 2010). As Ludovina and João Evangelista's group consolidated, they began to receive official subsidies.

Rondinelli highlights the variety of entertainment genres available to the public in the city, given the interest in reaching a wide audience, as we can see in the ads analyzed.

The repertoire of these theaters consisted of a variety of dramatic genres, such as romantic dramas, sacred dramas performed during Lent, historical dramas, melodramas, neoclassical tragedies, comedies, entremeses, vaudeville and operas. However, the shows were not restricted to dramatic exhibitions. The ads also promoted performances of magic, illusionism, and ventriloquism (Rondinelli, 2010, p. 85).

The author also explains that the curtains usually opened at 19h30<sup>4</sup> to stage the plays announced, which usually had between three and five acts. In between acts or at the end, the audience was treated to short perfor-

mances of music, dance, or magic. "Often an aria from an Italian opera was sung. The closing act was a short play, such as a vaudeville, a farce or an *entremez*" (Rondinelli, 2010, p. 85).

These were ways to attract a wider audience, including the participation of local artists, singers, instrumentalists or dancers and other light performances during the interval or at the end of the main play. According to Souza (2007, p. 2):

[...] after all, the audiences in Rio de Janeiro were very heterogeneous and took their seats in a wide variety of theaters in the city, for example, it was possible to see the presence of salesmen at the Teatro Lírico Fluminense, supposedly a stronghold of the elites, or of the emperors at the São Januário theater and even in circuses.

Rondinelli's studies (2010; 2017) offer support for the hypothesis that the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* and the adapted versions of it, which ran for countless performances between 1830 and 1855 (according to our research in the Hemeroteca Digital), reached a very wide audience, and not just the Rio de Janeiro elite.

### About the play

Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, the author of the play *L'Abbé de l'Épée*, presented his work as a historical comedy in five acts. It should be noted that the meaning of *comedy* in dramaturgy at the time is different from that of today. Comedy was used to refer to a romantic plot with a positive outcome for most of the characters, but it does not imply humor. To situate the meaning of the comedy genre, we borrow the differentiation made by Ribeiro (2017, p. 57) in his dissertation:

Supposedly born from the same Dionysian cult, Tragedy and Comedy are defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a primordial reference for theatrical practices throughout the entire tradition. Obeying the rules of mimesis, the two genres differ: tragedy 'imitates' men better than they really are, while comedy reflects the average, the crude, the banal and the ordinary, imitating men worse than they are. This definition is also linked to high and low character; in the classical Greek sense, men of high character are heroes like Homer's characters, and low character men are those who belong to the crowd.

In this way, it is understood that the characters, including the Abbé [Abbot] de l'Épée, are not represented as heroes of high character, but as ordinary people. The term *historical* refers to the contextualization in time.

For McDonagh (2013), more than a historical comedy, the play performed an important role in the inauguration of a new genre, the French melodrama, which emerged as a genre after the French Revolution (1789) in which theater sought to distance itself from the traditional and sacred characterized by the power of the state and the Church, which together forged a highly hierarchical and cohesive society. The play escapes a Manichean structure by representing the conflict between good and evil in the complex interplay of characters and plot. With no miraculous ending, the play assumes that individual qualities can overcome obstacles such as inherited authority and money, conveying the notion that “Deaf-mutes could not be cured of their condition, but their state – moral, intellectual, and spiritual – could be ameliorated, bringing them more fully into the fold as citizens of the Republic” (McDonagh, 2013, p. 659).

When, during our research, we came across advertisements for the play, we initially thought that the plot would be about the Abbé de l'Épée's work with deaf children and young people in Paris, from the 1760s until his death in 1789 (Rée, 1999). In reality, the fictional adaptation of Abbé de l'Épée's character is presented differently.

In short, two concomitant stories intertwine in the play. In one, the abbot accompanies a young deaf student (the Count d'Harancourt) in his search for his rightful inheritance. Eight years earlier, he had been picked up from the streets of Paris and was under the abbot's care. He was only able to communicate after several years of study with the abbot at the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets in Paris. Until then, for lack of an effective means of communication, he had not been able to tell his story or indicate where he had previously lived. However, the abbot had noticed from his behavior that he came from a noble family. In the play, the abbot's mission is to find Theodore's origins (the name given to Julio at the deaf school) and he decides to search the towns near Paris for any clues to the young man's origins, starting from the south gate that Julio had recognized as the entrance to the city.

In addition, there is the son of Darlemont (an imperious and violent man), Saint-Alme, who is in love with Clemencia, but can't propose because her father would prohibit the marriage, since Saint-Alme is poor. Franval, Clemencia's brother, a famous lawyer in Toulouse, is a friend of Saint-Alme's who would like to help him be happy. When he was little, Saint-Alme had been close friends with his cousin, the deaf boy Julio. However, his uncle took him to cure his deafness, but he did not bring him back, and said that the boy did not survive the treatment. The two stories meet when Theodore recognizes landmarks in Toulouse and, from his memories, identifies the palace where he had lived. It is then discovered that when Julio's father died, the boy's uncle, the evil Darlemont who had taken care of the estate, had abandoned him in Paris and took his title of nobility and his estate. With Franval's help, Julio recovers his inheritance and, as a gesture of friendship, offers half of his estate to Saint-Alme, who can then marry Clemence.

In his memoirs (Bouilly, 1836), the playwright affirms that the play's narrative accurately portrays Abbé de l'Épée's personal quest, which took him tirelessly along roads in the south of France until Theodore recognized his family's palace in Toulouse. He reports that he learned of the abbot's mission to claim the rights of the deaf young man robbed of his rightful name and patrimony through the lawyer Tronçon-Ducoudray – who later defended Queen Marie Antoinette and ended up paying for this service with his life in 1798. The lawyer's efforts to defend the young man were in vain, but in the process he was convinced of the veracity of the claim.

The French play accessed online on the website of the National Library of France opens with a dedication, followed by a preface written by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, which contains some valuable explanations. In addition to these sections, the edition includes a description of the characters by the play's director, which is also quite revealing. These three sections do not appear in the translations we have found in Spanish (Bouilly, 1800) or Portuguese (Bouilly, 1828). We don't know if Ludovina's company relied on the original French text, and did their own translation, or if they brought the recently published Portuguese version with them.

In the first paragraph, Bouilly comments that this work, of all those he created, was the most challenging due to the difficulty of properly develop-

ing the role of the deaf-mute in the overall framework of the play and the responsibility of honoring the memory of the Abbé de l'Épée. In collecting arguments to prove the value of the man of God who gave himself to the deaf, he recounts three good deeds of the type that make up many stories of saints' lives, also present in various biographies of the Abbé de l'Épée. In the first situation, during the harsh winter of 1788, when he was already quite frail, instead of buying firewood to keep warm, the abbot preferred to use his money for the needs of his 40 students. When the students became concerned about the master's health, they tearfully begged him to take care of himself for them. In the second episode, an ambassador from the Russian empress paid him a visit in 1780 to congratulate him and offer financial support for his work. The abbot thanked her for her kindness, but replied that he would not accept gold, but would like her to send him a person who had been born deaf-mute.

The third is precisely the story that motivated the creation of the historical comedy. "Of all his good deeds, the one that seemed to me the most suitable for producing dramatic effects is the historical fact that I narrate in this work and which has generated the astonishment and admiration of the whole of Europe" (Bouilly, 1799, p. viii)<sup>5</sup>. The author doesn't explain the relationship between his play and the legal case, but he does indicate that he didn't face the task naively. He knew that there had been disputes between powerful people over the case, and persecution by the Archbishop of Paris, as well as slander directed at the Abbé de l'Épée. Knowing this, he acted prudently and avoided revealing disagreements, names and quarrels so as not to instigate resentment. Even so, Bouilly regretted, without naming anyone, that there had been attempts to stop the performances by people who felt their honor had been damaged.

He ended the preface by confirming that the abbot's pupil was recognized as the Comte de Solar on 8 June 1781 by the judge of Châtelet in Paris, but this sentence was overturned on appeal in 1792. For Bouilly, more important than this defeat was the fact that the Abbé de l'Épée died convinced that his pupil belonged to an honorable family and that he had been "the victim of the most criminal ambition". And even more gratifying for his efforts as a playwright was the fact that the play was acclaimed by the public, which helped Abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard, l'Épée's replacement, fi-

nally be able to resume his post at the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets after being deposed for political disagreements. In his memoirs, Bouilly (1936) recalls the emotional meeting after Josephine Bonaparte ordered his release after 28 months in prison. Other sources do not indicate that there was an arrest, but rather removal from the institute (Rée, 1999).

According to Rosenfeld (1997), Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's play about the wronged young deaf-mute who regains his inheritance through the efforts of the selfless Abbé de l'Épée, brought the Solar case, which had been tried in French society, back into the public eye in Paris, generating more interest than the trial of the real case that had taken place 20 years earlier. It was a box office success and was translated and staged in many European countries.

Bouilly's drama also encouraged a growing vogue for deaf and mute characters on the stage, where they were increasingly cast as innocent victims unable to express themselves except through an idealized, mimic sign language. Most significantly, *L'Abbé de l'Épée*, by stimulating new discussion regarding the validity of sign language as a means to convey legal concepts, once again opened up important questions about the relationship between the French language and French law and about the status of the pre-linguistic *homme de la nature* (Rosenfeld, 1997, p. 166-167).

The author points out that cases involving deafness in the post-Enlightenment and post-French Revolution period generated fascination at a time when *causes célèbres* – human novelties and curiosities – stirred great social interest. It's worth noting that the anonymous author of a review of the play in *O Moderador* also calls the case a *cause célèbre*, showing that at least the elite had heard of l'Épée's work.

On Sunday, the directors of the theater will treat us to the first performance of ABBADE de l'Épée. This historical fact, taken from **causes célèbres**, is very well known, so we'll explain it quickly. The ABBADE de l'Épée, whose benevolent soul never ceased to be sensitive to the affliction of his fellow human beings, after the most profound inquiries, sustained by his generosity and untiring patience, managed to make himself understood by means of rapid signs, by those born deaf and dumb. In them, the eyes supply the two faculties they lack, and this virtuous man was able to open the door to all sciences for them, to perfect and develop all their intellectual treasures. At a time when the success of his efforts allowed him to extend their application to a greater number of his adopted children, a young man who had been

found wandering the streets of Paris was brought to him. The young man was deaf and mute, and it was only after a long time that, thanks to his intelligence and the admirable art of his protector, he was able to give him a detailed account of his birth and the circumstances that had brought him to Paris (Imperial..., 1830a, p. 3, emphasis ours).

Quoting the historian Sarah Maza, Rosenfeld (1997, p. 159) points out that cases of this type brought to trial often “took on the characteristics of contemporary theatrical spectacles, including complex plots, hyperbolic gestures and a tone of moral didacticism”. In this sense, the Harancourt<sup>6</sup>/Solar case had all the necessary elements for a melodrama, which Bouilly was able to exploit masterfully.

In France, the trials of deaf people, both as victims and defendants, offered a privileged social forum for philosophical debate about the so-called *children of nature*, the *good savage*, in short, the role of language in the constitution of man, in the confrontation with the legitimacy of options for communication in the absence of speech.

The play *The Deaf-Mute or the Abbé de l'Épée* appeared on Paris' cultural scene at the turn of the eighteenth century, at the same time that a wild boy was found wandering the forests of Aveyron. In addition to the drama of the play's text and Jean Itard's reports, the two events have in common “a concern with the place of the mute in society and the presentation of the teacher as heroic advocate of the disadvantaged” (McDonagh, 2013, p. 656).

According to McDonagh (2013), in Europe and specifically in France, the issue of muteness mobilized, on the one hand, philosophers and scientists who sought to understand the possibilities for human constitution in the absence of speech and, on the other, writers and playwrights who created a theatrical discourse and explanatory narratives to understand muteness, the mute and what they had to say, in a dynamic in which ideas circulated among the scientific and cultural spheres, shaping how society interpreted the phenomenon.

Bouilly's play was translated and performed on many stages in Europe and the United States, generating motivation in some countries to establish proposals for deaf education, as can be seen in the case of Sweden, which led to similar developments in Portugal.

According to Brita Bergman, Per Aron Borg (1776-1839) is considered the founder of deaf education in Sweden; from the beginning of his work with the deaf in 1808, he advocated sign language as the basis for teaching the deaf. The author argues that Swedish sign language originated among the deaf themselves, but there is evidence that Borg attended Bouilly's play in the first decade of the 1800s and was then encouraged to study l'Épée's reports, as can be seen in his manuscripts preserved in Stockholm's Royal Library. About his career in the field of deafness, his son Ossian commented:

One evening Borg went to the Opera in Stockholm and saw a play which depicted the Abbé de l'Epée picking up a ragged deaf-mute boy whom he found wandering about on the highway in France, and whose mental abilities he developed marvellously, restoring to him the rights he had been deprived of (Borg, [1876] *apud* Bergman, 1979, p. 7).

Borg's success in educating the deaf in Sweden spread throughout Europe, and in 1823 he was invited by Dom João VI to create a similar institution in Lisbon: "in 1823, Gentleman Pedro Aron Borg, Director of the Institute for the Deaf-Mute and the Blind in Stockholm, was summoned from Sweden to found an establishment of this nature here" (Cunha, 1835, p. 11). Borg spent five years organizing and managing what would become the Instituto dos Surdo-Mudos e Cegos in Lisbon.

It should be noted that, despite the direct involvement of the Portuguese monarchy in the creation of an institution for the education of the deaf in Portugal, at the time the first institution was founded in Brazil, the metropolitan model was passed over in favor of the French model, possibly due to the prominence at court of the French medical doctor José Francisco Xavier Sigaud, Dom Pedro II's private doctor, who advocated the establishment of institutions to care for the needy (Ferreira, 2013). Influential at court, in the scientific community and in the press, Sigaud embraced the idea of creating special institutions, and in 1846 published an appeal directly addressed to Dom Pedro II to advance his project to modernize the country.

This task [...] includes the creation of new institutions that are still lacking in the country, and whose foundation should harmonize the system of scientific studies put into practice since the reign of Emperor Pedro 2<sup>nd</sup>. A complex of new institutions such as dispensaries, special infirmaries, chari-

table establishments or hospices for the deaf-mute, blind children and infirm old people; the creation of new societies, and more than all, that of the natural sciences, are the most formidable means of saving the country from the invasion of charlatanism (Sigaud, 1846, p. 66).

### Actresses and male roles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

According to Russell (1996), since the mid seventeenth century, women replaced the boys who had previously performed female roles in plays. With the opening to female participation on stage, the possibilities for crossdressing became increasingly accepted in theater, initially in light genres such as comedy, pantomime, melodrama and dance, and later in tragedies. The practice of crossdressing in European theater in the comic and tragic genres was consolidated during the nineteenth century, but came to be seen as *demodé* as realistic, naturalistic theater began to occupy the stage.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there was good public acceptance for crossdressing; actresses mainly gained roles only as boy characters and those of young men, as in the case in question. Russell (1996, p. 137) observed that “fragility, beauty, and emotional instability (even semi-idiocy)” corresponded to feminine qualities, which could also have determined the decision to cast actresses to play boys with these characteristics. We have seen that, both in the original play staged in France by the playwright Bouilly and in the presentation in Brazil, actresses played the role of Jules/Theodore, the deaf and mute young man.

Rondinelli (2017) explains that:

[...] in the 19th century, theater was no longer reserved only for male actors, as it had been for a long time in the history of theater worldwide. Appreciated for their beauty and grace on stage, actresses gave life to female characters and, depending on the degree of dynamism of their acting, also created male roles, like the Portuguese actress Ludovina Soares da Costa.

The critic of *O Moderador* (1830b) praised Ludovina's ability to hide her femininity under the costume of the young Julio d'Arancourt and also highlighted the actress's acting quality.

In his memoirs, Bouilly recounts the process of selecting actors for each role. Madame Talma-Vanhove, in the role of Jules, proved to be very sensitive and worked hard to learn methodical signing<sup>7</sup> in order to better

embody her character. She seemed to say, “with her penetrating gaze that no one would be as capable as she of giving my young deaf-mute such an expression, such play with physiognomy, such an interpretation of all the movements of the soul, without the benefit of words” (Bouilly, 1836, p. 142-143). Rée (1999) states that she went to the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets to learn signs from Jean Massieu and rehearse her acting with signs. Berthier (2021) also confirms this information.

Coincidentally, Ludovina also had the opportunity to learn to communicate gesturally to better represent the deaf-mute character. This information can be found in an anonymous note in *O Moderador* (1830b), which states that a deaf educator arrived in Brazil shortly before the premiere to help her:

The Abbé de l'Épée is very difficult to perform. Considerable flexibility and dexterity of talent are needed to play the role of the deaf and dumb. To be interesting without speaking, and precisely because one doesn't speak, is a difficult task. In ordinary pantomimes, this is perhaps easier, because they are almost always clamorous plays, in which all feelings are pushed to excess. *It's not the same in this drama, where the true and naïve expression of simple nature should be used; but where can you find a model in Rio de Janeiro? However, a few days before the play was performed, the first disciple of the Abbé Sicard's successor landed on our shores, we believe by a unique accident* (Imperial..., 1830b, p. 4, emphasis ours).

It was not possible to identify who this disciple was who had come to Brazil. We could speculate that he was a pupil of Jean Massieu, Ferdinand Berthier or Roch-Ambroise August Bébien, but the author did not provide sufficient information. The information appears only once in the articles and reviews consulted.

In the original version, Bouilly indicates which roles each actor and actress would play, and defines the respective costumes. The characters are described in detail by the playwright, with indications about how they speak, their attitudes, and the characteristics of their stage presence.

Bouilly says that the abbot is the most important figure in the play. In terms of stage presence, the role requires the actor to have a simple, patriarchal expression, sweetly pious but without affectation. “He must let shine a penetration from which nothing can escape” (Bouilly, 1799, p. xi). The role of the abbot went to the actor Manvel, who Bouilly considered a perfect fit.

About Theodore, Bouilly (1799, p. xii) says that “this role requires great intelligence and extreme sensitivity”. As well as a lively, penetrating gaze, his gestures must indicate both what he sees and what is explained to him. Talma-Vanhove was chosen to take on the challenge of this complex role of playing a deaf character. Bouilly suggested that the actress “take advantage of the moments when the other characters indulge in their own misfortunes to fixate on them with benevolence and a gentle smile that proves her deafness” (Bouilly, 1799, p. xii, our translation).

### **Acting with methodical signs and gestures**

The critic from *O Moderador* (1830b) highlighted the eloquence of Ludovina's communication in the role of the deaf character; but in fact, in our analysis of the instructions to the actors in the play, there was more gesturing than conventional signing. The deaf man points, expresses thanks, recognizes people and places, shows joy and excitement. However, despite the comments made by the critic from *O Moderador* about the representation of meanings through gestures and postures, we identified few mentions in the reviews and comments about communication in sign language.

Even though sign language was not recognized as a language in that historical period, it was always present in the narratives that encompass deaf education in different contexts and periods. There are records of sign language since the sixteenth century when the first initiatives related to education for the public in question emerged, but not its teaching, due to the understanding at the time that it was a *rudimentary* form of communication. Despite this, in the eighteenth century the Abbé de l'Épée recognized the importance of this means of communication used by the deaf in the French context and began to use sign language in his educational activities. He was successful, and the methodology he created (methodical signs) had repercussions in other countries and even crossed continents. In his public lectures, he emphasized the importance of methodical signs for the development of deaf people (Carvalho, 2007). As far as the play is concerned, it seems that methodical signs adapted for the stage were also used.

The aforementioned critic also commented on another challenging aspect of the role of the deaf person, key to the plot, which are the scenes in

which the deaf character has to demonstrate that he can recognize places and people without using words.

Most of the play is composed of scenes of recognition. This means, so often used on stage, was an unavoidable choice. The hero of the drama does indeed recognize his father's palace, an old porter, his cousin, his uncle, and Dupré, his servant and accomplice. To vary the situations, which are so similar, nothing less was needed than all the diversity of talents that Ms. Ludovina has demonstrated (Imperial..., 1830b, p. 4).

McDonagh (2013, p. 660) clarifies that Bouilly:

[...] adopts an interesting strategy to effect the fusion of stage and historical deaf-mute, adapting the traditional performance of the mute role to reflect the intricacies of de l'Épée's sign system. Rather than following the stage convention of having the mute communicate through mime and exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, de l'Épée and Theodore use hand gestures described minutely in the play text.

In other words, the gestures seem to belong to the lexicon of methodical signs, but are altered to work on stage. In his autobiographical text, Bouilly tells us that Mme. Talma-Vanhove, the actress who played Theodore, studied signs at the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets with Jean Massieu, a deaf student of Sicard (Bouilly, 1836).

In light of previous consulting experiences on how best to communicate using conventional signs, it was interesting to see a reversal in the encounter between theater and deaf education. In 1838, the French play *Simão: o velho cabo de esquadra*, by D'Ennery and Dumanoir, was performed at the Teatro S. Pedro de Alcântara, in which the main character became mute due to severe trauma. João Caetano dos Santos acted in the role of “an unfortunate man who had become mute in the face of a very strong emotion” (Silva, 1932, p. 523) and was highly praised by the critics for sustaining three of the five acts with expressive gestures. “His mime work was remarkable in its detail” (Silva, 1932, p. 523). Ludovina Soares da Costa played a secondary role in the play, along with other actors and actresses.

Edouard Huet, a deaf man and director of the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos-Mudos [Imperial Institute of the Deaf-Mute], the first specialized institute for the deaf in Brazil, founded in 1856 in Rio de Janeiro, took the opportunity of the play being performed to take a group of students from

the institution to see the performance, and later sent a complimentary letter to João Caetano about his performance, which was perfectly understood, saying “they have understood you all the better because natural mimicry is their native language” (Silva, 1932, p. 524).

### **The theater and education of the deaf**

There is no data that directly links the staging of *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* to the foundation, 25 years later, of the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos-Mudos in Rio de Janeiro in 1856. Several authors have suggested that the theater-going public in Rio de Janeiro during this period was not limited to the elite, as we have seen. However, we don't have consistent information on the play's impact on Rio de Janeiro society in general. We do know, however, that one person linked to the founding of the Institute had attended the play: Dom Pedro II.

The Prince Regent of Brazil Dom Pedro II celebrated his 13th birthday on December 2, 1838. The date was celebrated with an extensive program, including a trip to the Teatro de S. Januário to see the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de L'Épée*. The event was advertised in several newspapers.

The *Jornal do Commercio* of 30/11/1838 commented: “This drama, for its good moral, deserved all the preference for this festive day”. The intermissions promised “magnificent overtures” and a painting on a curtain with the “figure of Apollo protecting tragedy and comedy” (S. Januario, 1838, p. 3)

On Dec. 5, 1838, the following note was published in the newspaper *O Sete d'Abril*:

In the evening, the Emperor and the August Princesses honored the St. Januarius Theatre with their presence. The pageant was splendid; the boxes were filled with ladies all in great gala, unlike what we have seen in other years, when many people dressed as on any ordinary day. We regret, however, that there was no choice of a more analogous play; ‘*O Abbade L'Épée ou o Surdo Mudo*’ is certainly interesting, but it wasn't suitable for the solemnity of such an important day (O Dia..., 1838, p. 3; emphasis ours).

The author doesn't explain why he didn't think the play was suitable for the prince. Was it because of the disabled character? Was it its melodramatic genre?

It is not possible to gauge how memorable this experience was for the future emperor from the various sources consulted. However, Dom Pedro II encountered the narrative about the Abbé de l'Épée on several occasions. As he points out in his diaries, he was a regular at the theater; he even mentioned some of the shows he had seen and commented on them, which suggests that he knew what shows were running. Considering the number of performances, the play *O Abbade L'Epée ou o Surdo Mudo* was staged for at least thirteen years.

When he was asked by Edouard Huet and other members of the government to found an institution to educate deaf boys and girls, wouldn't his memories of that important day, when he went to the Teatro de S. Januário and saw Ludovina Soares in the role of a deaf person, opposite the Abbé de l'Épée, have come to the surface?

Certainly, the multiple exhibitions of the play about the Abbé de l'Épée sensitized society at the time to the cause of the deaf. By praising the work of the first European educators, they managed to implicitly show that the deaf in Brazil also deserved educational opportunities<sup>8</sup>. On Brazilian soil, the medical doctor José Francisco Xavier Sigaud and the blind teacher José Álvares de Azevedo had already founded, in 1854, an institute specializing in the education of visually impaired people, with the consent of Dom Pedro II.

This episode opened the possibility of working with people with sensory disabilities, which in relative terms placed Brazil at parity with other countries that had already begun these practices. Furthermore, enabling the intellectual education of deaf people and preparing them to exercise a trade that was in keeping with the conditions of the time and their social status was essential so that they wouldn't "burden" society with their "disturbing" presence (Leite, 1869). This was the prevailing thinking and it seems to have strengthened the initiative to found a specialized institute aimed at this public, combined with the aspects mentioned above.

As stated, the play was staged regularly between 1830 and 1843. After a 12-year break from the Rio de Janeiro theatrical circuit, it returned to the stage on October 6, 1855, at the Teatro de S. Januário, not in the original version, but as an adaptation in three acts. *O Assassino e a Orphã ou o Abbade de l'Epée* [The Assassin and the Orphan or the *Abbade de l'Epée*].

Coincidentally, E. Huet landed in Rio de Janeiro on May 9, 1855, coming from Le Havre on the galley *Imperatriz do Brasil* (Registro..., 1855, p. 4), with the mission of founding a school for the education of the deaf or, as he put it in multiple announcements, “destinée à la régénération moral [sic] et intellectuelle des sourds-muets du Brésil” (Annonce, 1856, p. 7). On June 22 of that year, he presented a detailed project to Emperor Dom Pedro II for the foundation of a deaf education institute along the lines of other French institutes of this kind. It seems that it was only possible to submit a proposal so quickly because the project had been ready and awareness about the education of people with sensory disabilities had been established in previous years.

A few months later, specifically in October, the play about the Abbé de l'Épée returned to the stage of the S. Januário theater. We found no direct data linking the return of the play about the abbot with the foundation of the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos Mudos. However, other evidence has emerged showing links between the theater and the deaf French professor who played a leading role in the creation of this institution in Rio de Janeiro. In May 1856, as a result of a public campaign by the Marquis of Abrantes, the Teatro de S. Januário, where Ludovina Soares so often played the role of the deaf-mute, responded to the public appeal with a donation to the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos Mudos (Brasil, 1856, p. 70-72). We don't think that the theater's initiative to make this contribution was random.

## Conclusion

Delving into the documentary sources allowed us to understand the exhibition of the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* from multiple aspects, considering the cultural, social, and educational spheres. Studying the various sources enabled us to develop a narrative encompassing theater in Rio de Janeiro society in the first half of the nineteenth century, highlighting the performance of Portuguese actress Ludovina Soares da Costa, who took on the role of the young deaf man in the play when it was shown in Brazil. In addition, we highlight the complex process of developing the play itself and Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's choices.

The play has us reflect on the power of theater, considering that the context of deaf education in other countries and, it seems, in Brazil, was impacted by the performances of the actors and actresses who were able to show how these people communicate. Using as a reference the character of the Abbé de l'Épée, a well-known figure in deaf education, the play contributed to the circulation of ideas about the possibility to educate deaf people.

It can be said that the mobilization of ideas about deafness was effective in the social field, so much so that several newspapers in the 1850s pointed to the imminence of the foundation of an institute for the deaf in Rio de Janeiro along the lines of the initiative of the Abbé de l'Épée and the Abbé Sicard. In some European countries, such as France and Portugal, this was already a reality and Brazil needed to follow this trend, considering the urbanization in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 19th century.

However, the chronology in Brazil was the opposite of that in France. There, the institute for the education of deaf children was established before the play, which sought precisely to illuminate and perhaps mythologize the benevolent work of the Abbé de l'Épée. In Brazil's, first came the play, which crossed the Atlantic to mobilize the social imagination about the possibility for other paths for this socially marginalized group without access to education. It is known that France was considered a cultural model for Brazil, and we believe that this play, in addition to entertaining the population, contained a *cause célèbre*, which piqued social curiosity and circulated ideas about deafness and the possibility of educating deaf people, which were made explicit through the deeds of the Abbé de l'Épée.

During the thirty years that preceded the foundation of the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos-Mudos, articulate men of science and the elite of imperial society warned the population about the risks of producing an army of vagrants and beggars who could contaminate society with their moral degeneration if the problem of children with limitations, weaknesses and disabilities was not resolved. They called for institutions that could remove them from common spaces to educate them separately. They appealed to Dom Pedro II to establish other educational institutions for blind and deaf-mute children, just as he had done in the case of the Hospício de Pedro II [an asylum] in 1841 to solve the problem of the mentally ill who were cared

for in the basements of the Santa Casa hospital. They turned to the successful and consolidated examples of French and German institutions for the deaf. They argued over who had a more important role in inventing the method of instructing the deaf – the Portuguese man Jacob Rodrigues Pereira, the German Samuel Heinicke or the abbot Charles Michel de l'Épée. They argued that the commitment to meet the needs of these groups was in line with the process of modernizing Brazil pursued by the emperor. And they mobilized the population to get involved in assisting the needy.

While the men of the elite were publishing their ideas and proposals in the media, Ludovina did something concrete: she put a deaf man on stage. With her body and gestures she gave visibility to a young man who showed himself capable of learning and was able to defend his heritage, because he had a teacher who showed him how to use methodical signs. Rio de Janeiro society got to know a deaf man who was intelligent, articulate, God-fearing and grateful to the selfless Abbé de l'Épée.

It is clear that there was a confluence of factors that led to the foundation of the Imperial Instituto dos Surdos-Mudos in Brazil. In view of the evidence presented throughout this article, we would like to highlight the importance of the exhibition of the play *O Surdo-Mudo ou o Abade de l'Épée* and the influence of the cultural aspect in this process which, together with other forces, led to the foundation of a specialized institution for deaf students that throughout the nineteenth century established the foundations for the education of this public, foundations that are still discussed today in the construction of a Brazilian history of schooling for the deaf.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In some parts of this article, we have kept the term *deaf-mute*, in keeping with the way deaf people were referred to in nineteenth century documents. Currently, in Brazil we use the term deaf person, based on the Decreto-Lei n. 5.626 (Brasil, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> The Almanak Laemmert (1856) reported the foundation of the Collegio Nacional para Surdos-Mudos de ambos os sexos, the first name given to the institution for deaf education in Brazil. In 1857, it was relocated to another

building and the name was changed to the Imperial Instituto para Surdos-Mudos de ambos os sexos.

- <sup>3</sup> The periodicals used to map the performances were: *O Jornal do Commercio*, *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, *O Despertador*, *O Sete d'Abril*, *Correio Mercantil*, *O Moderador*, *Courrier du Brésil: Politique - Litterature - Revue des Theatres - Sciences et Arts - Industrie - Commerce e Marmota Fluminense*. The articles on deafness, health and education came mainly from *Novo Correio do Brasil*, *Brasil: Ministério do Império: Relatório da Repartição dos Negócios do Império* and *Annaes de Medicina Brasiliense: Jornal da Academia Imperial de Medicina do Rio de Janeiro*.
- <sup>4</sup> In 1824, an interventional edict was published by the royal court police establishing rules regulating the duties of theaters and public conduct. The 19 items included a requirement to arrive at the announced time (Rondinelli, 2010).
- <sup>5</sup> In this preface, Bouilly (1799) recounts events that took place after the play's premiere, which leads us to deduce that the edition we have access to was not the first or that he worked with the manuscript used in the first public stagings.
- <sup>6</sup> We have used the spelling of the play translated into Portuguese for the names of Julio (Jules) and d'Harancourt (d'Arancour or d'Arancourt), except in quotations from the French text or newspaper articles.
- <sup>7</sup> Methodical signs were developed by the Abbé de l'Épée and were a “system that used a gestural language (sign language) in the grammatical order of French” (Carvalho, 2007, p. 24). According to the author, in this way, deaf students “were able to read and write any text in French”.
- <sup>8</sup> See the article *Invento dos Portugueses*, by an anonymous author, published in the *Jornal do Comércio* in 1842, which highlights deaf education initiatives in the nineteenth century by the Portuguese man Jacob Rodrigues Pereira and by Charles Michel de l'Épée (*Inventos...*, 1842).

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**Lucia Reily** has a Bachelor of Arts from the Independent Learning Program at Indiana University. She earned a Revalidation in Art Education for the Plastic Arts from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas (1978). She has a master's degree in school psychology and human development from the Universidade de São Paulo (1990) and a PhD in School Psychology and Human Development from the Universidade de São Paulo (1994). She is currently an associate professor at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas. She works in the field of education, with an emphasis on special education and art education, mainly on special education, disability studies, art and disability, teacher education and visual arts.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2792-8664>

E-mail: [lureily@unicamp.br](mailto:lureily@unicamp.br)

**Cássia Geciauskas Sofiato** is a professor at the Faculdade de Educação Teachers College] of the Universidade de São Paulo (FEUSP), in the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences (EDF) and the Graduate Program in Education. She conducted post-doctoral studies at the College of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Universidade do Porto, Portugal. She worked as a visiting professor at the Universidade de Porto, in Portugal, under the call for projects Edital Print-Capes (2020 and 2021). She holds a PhD and a master's degree in the arts



from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp) and a bachelor's degree in pedagogy, in the field of teacher education for special education from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5291-9658>

E-mail: [cassiasofiato@usp.br](mailto:cassiasofiato@usp.br)

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