

Rubens Barbot

Thinking about the body, thinking about the dance. These were the first of the many expectations when we received the proposal for this exhibition dedicated to the dancer and choreographer Rubens Barbot. Earlier, Wilton Montenegro and Elisa de Magalhães had invited us to see the show *Arthur: First Rehearsal* by Companhia Rubens Barbot Teatro de Dança, based on the life and work of the artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário. There, Barbot and the company magnetized the scene, which, before the show even began, already carried the aura of an art installation. The set design, the scenic elements, everything came together so that we could experience the stage on its floor level, without a clear boundary between audience and actors, under the light.

The exhibition *Dance, Barbot!* was conceived to bring a theatrical experience into the museum space. It features clothing, accessories, and scenic elements. These elements, under Barbot's presence, radiated creation. Yes, creation in its broadest sense, perhaps far beyond what we usually mean by the word "creativity". Here, the body of a Black, gay man from southern Brazil, who performed on international stages, expresses itself through many forms. His creations go beyond dance, embracing sewing, embroidery, imagination, and meticulous planning. To expose oneself, to undress oneself. When the expectations for narrated stories demand from the Black man ability, competence, performance, and entertainment, we find a dancer who, many times, presented himself as a naked man, frustrating the racism that only accepts Black people as performers on stage, far from daily life.

Here, this collective work – named an exhibition –, above all, was carried out by Gatto Larsen, Barbot's partner for many years, and Ricardo Brandão and Ana Paula Dias, members of *Terreiro Contemporâneo*. Thus, Barbot presents himself to us in his face, body, traces, and the full documentation of his performances, including those in which he danced and those in which he did not.

Once, while reading Giorgio Agamben's essay "The Most Beautiful Six Minutes in the History of Cinema," from his book *Profanations*, I was struck by the power of art condensed into a brief moment, an isthmus, a gesture. In the movie directed by Orson Welles, Dom Quixote tears through the projection screen, ending the illusion and, in a single gesture – a dance– telling us the truth.

In the audience of the aforementioned performance Arthur, hoping to see Barbot dance, he appears only in the final moments, in a strong backlight. The intense backlighting prevented us from seeing him clearly. What stood out was an overwhelming amount of clothing that, in fact, restricted many of his movements. The garments blended references to the Navy military uniforms, embroidered by Bispo, who was also a sailor, and the scale of a mantle, like the one Bispo produced for his burial. And we, often voracious spectators, at times even cruel in our demand for the dancer's ability and competence, saw Rubens Barbot dance, for a fleeting moment, in dissociative, not at all figurative movements. And in those six minutes, some of the most beautiful in the history of dance, we recognized the art that lies in the interplay between what we expect to see and what the artist offers us.

But who or what is Dance, Barbot!

First of all, who is this Barbot who dances? One of the leading figures in contemporary Black Brazilian dance, who passed away in 2022, he was born on the border between Rio Grande do Sul and Uruguay and was raised next to a *terreiro de batuque* [house of worship], the equivalent in the South of the country of *candomblé* or *nkisi*.

At the age of 15, he was seen jumping over rain puddles in the city's main square by a man passing by in a car. The same night, the man went to a *batuque* session and saw the teenager again, this time as part of the circle. At the end of the session, the kind stranger asked the young man: "Are you a dancer?". The boy replied: "No, but I'd like to be". The man handed him a business card and said, "If you want to study dance, find me in Porto Alegre".

Rubens dos Santos – Barbot – worked, saved money, and took the first steps toward his dream. He knocked on the door of the address on the card and saw that it was real. There lived Dyrson Cattani, a renowned artist and haute couture costume designer who had achieved great success in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. In his atelier, Barbot learned embroidery, as well as sewing and patternmaking, he developed close friendships with the dance teachers of the time, and became a well-known figure in the world of the samba schools. He was invited to perform in a production of *The Maids*, by Jean Genet, at Teatro Aldeia 2, and to play a character in the dance show *Crime*, at a nightclub.

In 1970, he paraded and won the prize for Best Passista [a samba dancer] at the samba school As Praianas. After the parade, a tourist approached him and asked: “Are you a dancer?”. He replied: “No, but I want to be”. The man pulled out a card and said: “If you want to study in Buenos Aires, come find me and you'll have a scholarship at the school I'm opening in March”. Once again, Barbot worked and saved money, got his international vaccination, bought a bus ticket from the Urquiza company, and left. Thirty hours later, he arrived in Buenos Aires, full of dreams, hope, and faith. He made his way to the 10th floor of a building on Calle Paraguay 1,100... and he saw it was real. It was March 1970, on a Saturday. By Monday, he begun his training at the Escuela para Hombres del Ballet Contemporáneo, now known as the Ballet del Teatro San Martín.

At that moment, perhaps the greatest transformation in Rubens' life began. Waiting him in Buenos Aires were the 1970s, with their radical social changes, great teachers, masters, directors, musicals, connections with artists of all kinds, and choreographers from television shows. A cultural avalanche that would take him far away from Jaguarão, but never made him forget his uncle Demétrio's accordion, the dusty backyards, the beats of the atabaques [a tall Afro-Brazilian drum, to be played with the hands, made of wood], and the family dances. It was there that he met Gatto Larsen, his lifelong partner, who would also become his producer and director.

Six years later, he returned to Brazil, filled with knowledge and techniques, and needed time to understand what had happened to him, the boy who once just wanted to be a dancer. In 1983, he settled in Porto Alegre, where he explored new possibilities in dance and consolidated a choreographic language, which had already gained recognition from critics.

In 1989, he moved to Rio de Janeiro with the firm intention of creating his own company. Two details are important here: first, the Companhia Rubens Barbot was founded in a wing of the former XV de Novembro Technical School, in the Quintino neighborhood – where FAETEC is located today –, which was aligned with Barbot's vision of training dancers from the periphery; second, and no less important, it was the first contemporary Black dance company in Brazil, that is, all the dancers were Black and all them adapted to his choreographic language. Today, the Rubens Barbot Company has its own headquarters in the Cruz Vermelha area, in downtown Rio de Janeiro.

To talk about Barbot – or Ba to the close friends – is, above all, to talk about five major figures in Brazilian contemporary who made their careers around the same time: in Brazil, Barbot and Carmen Luz; abroad, Ismael Ivo in Austria and Italy, Elísio Pita in United States, and Rui Moreira in both Brazil and France. Rubens Barbot was also one of the founders– alongside the latter two – of Rede Terreiro Contemporâneo de Dança. The simultaneity of their research brought the Black dancer's body into the spotlight and helped systematize movement languages, each influencing the other, together shaping forms of bodily expression that today serve as reference points for all kinds of contemporary dance: languages that emerge from everyday, ordinary gestures, from people on the street, from capoeira games, from animals, from folk dances, and from bodies embodied in Afro-Brazilian rituals such as batuque, candomblé, nkisi, umbanda, and tambor de Mina. In the movement of their bodies, in the Black body in motion, in each one of them – there, the Barbot Dances.

Wilton Montenegro