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Brazil's Unique Culture Group Stays Busy Sharing the Wealth

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)



Lalo de Almeida for The New York Times

SÃO PAULO, Brazil — All over the world cultural organizations are tightening their budgets and paring back productions. But Danilo Miranda faces a different challenge, one that makes him the envy of his peers. As the director of the leading arts financing entity in Brazil, his budget is growing by 10 percent or more annually, and he must figure out ways to spend that bounty, which amounts to \$600 million a year.

Standing at the window of his office here one afternoon late last year, [Mr. Miranda](#) pointed to one of his group's most ambitious initiatives. In the courtyard below, the avant-garde French troupe [Théâtre du Soleil](#), based in Paris and led by Ariane Mnouchkine, was erecting a giant tent where it would begin a tour of Brazil.

Mr. Miranda's organization, [SESC](#), a Portuguese acronym for Social Service of Commerce, is also strengthening ties with American artists. It sponsors a jazz festival in conjunction with Nublu, the New York record label; has signed an "institutional partnership" with the Spanish-language

TeatroStageFest company; and has presented work by David Byrne, the salsa drummer Bobby Sanabria and [Robert Wilson](#). Mr. Wilson, a director whose works include the operas “Einstein on the Beach” and “the CIVIL warS,” is discussing a long-term collaboration with SESC, as is the Globalfest showcase of world music held in New York every January.

“Our fundamental guiding principle is to use culture as a tool for education and transformation, to improve people’s lives, and we’re in a position to fulfill that mission, thank God,” Mr. Miranda said. “Over the last decade our budget has been doubling every six years or so. It’s incredible, no?”

SESC owes its enviable position largely to a financing model that its leaders believe is unique in the world. A private, nonprofit entity whose role is enshrined in the national Constitution, the organization derives its budget from a 1.5 percent payroll tax imposed on and collected by Brazilian companies, so as the workforce in this nation of nearly 200 million people expands, so does the organization’s budget.

In the United States and [especially Europe](#) the economic crisis that struck in 2008 has prompted severe cutbacks in government and business financing of cultural undertakings. But the Brazilian economy, now the world’s sixth largest, is surging, having grown 7.5 percent in 2010 and just under 3 percent last year.

The labor force has been growing even faster. Abram Szajman, who in his capacity as the president of the São Paulo state chamber of commerce also oversees SESC’s regional council here, estimated that receipts from the payroll tax increased 10 to 12 percent last year.

“Brazil is growing, and so our needs, and those of our workers, are also growing,” he said. “They want access not just to sports and health facilities but also to art, music and other cultural activities, whether from Brazil or abroad, and that’s part of our charter.”

The group’s big push may not have registered yet with arts consumers outside Brazil. But its emergence as a global force has not gone unnoticed either by artists or the people who pay for their work.

“The Brazilians are rolling in money,” said Jennifer P. Goodale, director of the [Trust for Mutual Understanding](#), which works with Eastern European and Asian countries on cultural exchange programs. “What with the Olympics and all, it’s their turn, their time.”

SESC is not the only entity making an effort to expand its activities and to raise Brazil’s cultural profile internationally. The Brazilian foreign ministry and states and cities have programs to assist musicians’ tours abroad and promote films and other works, and the federal government is looking at ways to strengthen [a 20-year-old law](#) that gives tax breaks to corporations that finance arts programs.

“The cultural dynamism, the monetary stability, the process of social inclusion — all of that makes Brazilian culture a very valid pathway for the exercise of soft power, a way to make our society better known and better understood by others,” said Celso Lafer, a former foreign minister who is also an author and a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

SESC is, however, the country’s most active arts organization, operating in all 27 of Brazil’s states, financing not just arts programs but also recreational activities, educational courses and health clinics. In São Paulo, which has 41 million people and is Brazil’s most populous and prosperous state, one quarter of the group’s state budget is spent on “expansion and renovation” of its arts and recreation centers, with another 20 percent going directly to cultural programs, and the remainder

divided among other activities, Mr. Miranda said. He receives nearly as much for those cultural programs as the National Endowment for the Arts spends on the entire United States.

Today there is scarcely an area of the arts in Brazil in which SESC is not involved. The organization has its own book-publishing arm, as well as a record label and cable-TV channel, and also operates art galleries, theaters, cinemas and concert halls, often as part of larger complexes that include restaurants and sports facilities.

“The SESC model is a wonderful model that we should have all over the world,” Nan van Houte, director of the Netherlands Theater Institute and a former president of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, said. “To integrate everything, to have theaters, pool, library, restaurant, workshops and museums all together, is so very clever. It makes culture part of everyday life, not something apart.”

For artists the organization offers a respite from commercial demands and encourages experimental work. Because the SESC model is “focused on community involvement in arts and culture,” it “removes marketing or promotional pressure that can come with corporate sponsorship,” Mr. Wilson, who has been talking with the group about producing as many as half a dozen works, wrote in an e-mail.

In 2010, to cite one decidedly nonmainstream example, SESC commissioned a Greek musicologist working here to record a two-CD set of compositions, which languished in Brazilian monasteries for nearly 300 years, written for the piccolo cello, now abandoned. But the organization [also releases CDs and](#) presents shows of samba and other types of Brazilian popular music and regularly sponsors exhibitions of Brazilian naïf art.

“Since we’re an institution that, although private, has public commitments, we can’t limit ourselves to just one tendency or style,” Mr. Miranda said. “We can’t say, ‘I’m only going to do traditional music or modern music or hip-hop or bossa nova.’ ”

SESC was founded in 1946, a moment when Brazil’s commercial and industrial sectors were worried that workers might be attracted to Communism. Since Brazil is the largest Roman Catholic country in the world, the Social Christian doctrine espoused in papal encyclicals like “Rerum Novarum,” which called for greater social solidarity and a more harmonious relationship between capital and labor, was also an important influence.

Brazil and the world have changed since then. Not only has Communism collapsed, but Brazil’s economy is also larger than that of Britain, Italy or Russia. Still, Brazilian business leaders continue to see great benefit and utility in the SESC system, and none of the country’s more than 20 political parties opposes it.

“Part of the payback is social, in the sense that it’s important to us as businessmen that society see that we are participating,” said Mr. Szajman, the São Paulo chamber of commerce president. “But there’s a practical return too: Our workers go to their jobs as better-informed citizens, with better training, and happier, which makes them more productive.”