

# ***Realm of the Dead: An Installation Performance***

**Rogério M. Pinto**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In *The Realm of the Dead*, Rogério M. Pinto tells a story of deep and abiding grief, of gender nonconformity, and of the struggles, fears, and eventual accommodations of an immigrant. In the winter of 1966, when Pinto was 10 months old, his three-year-old sister was killed by a bus outside the family's home in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Gradually, with no explicit discussion, the little boy came to replace the little girl. He was dressed in her clothes. Like his sisters, he was molested by his father. In 1987, he made an impromptu trip to the United States with friends. His dead sister came, too. When he decided to stay, she did, too. In *The Realm of the Dead*, she is at last laid to rest.

*The Realm of the Dead* is given as an installation/performance, but the text can be used by itself as a monologue.

The performance takes place within the installation, using it as a set: audience members move amongst 25 sculptural pieces created from vintage suitcases and trunks, set on an installed floor in a space at least 40 feet square. A small stage is required, with a screen on which images are projected. Preceding the main performance space, an outdoor canopied area is needed for a samba band, and a lobby or similar indoor space accommodates a ticket desk, video displays, and a live tableau. A team of five ushers welcomes audience members, distributes tickets, guides the audience through the performance, and monitors those sculptures that have recorded audio components.

Tickets assign each audience member to one sculpture as their starting point. Two to three audience members start at each sculpture. The performer tells his story in a series of short monologues. The ringing of altar bells (Mass bells) at the end of each monologue signals audience members to advance to the next sculpture.

The *Realm* requires a small space is required beyond the sculptures where viewers can record their reactions on sticky notes and post them.

## **Scene 1: Wishes**

Outside the performance space, carnival music is playing. A samba ensemble playing live music is encouraged.

## **Scene 2: Wake**

Right before the audience enters the Realm of the Dead: The protagonist is dressed as his mother, praying the Rosary, looking at her daughter inside the coffin.

## **Scene 3: Baggage**

This text can be projected on a screen in the back of a small stage or narrated live

I'm so happy you're joining me today... I just came back from one of my many visits to Brazil, where I was born ... where I lived ... before I came here, the United States of America, in 1987.  
[*Heavy pause*] I am exhausted from all this traveling, carrying heavy suitcases ...

But this trip was incredible! It included four days of Carnival! It was summer! It was sunny! Carnival is my favorite holiday! [*Music played by the samba ensemble gets louder as R speaks his lines and dance*]

People, all over, playing wonderful music, dancing, wearing stunning costumes like the beautiful woman I saw yesterday on my way to the airport. Every year, for four days, everything stops in Brazil, and people

embrace beauty, desire, fantasy, and hope for better days to come. Carnaval is a “welcome” to *all*, it stretches social boundaries that outside Carnaval would be a real drag!

[R dances samba with the boa and drop before “Yesterday”]

Yesterday was the last day of Carnaval. I thought about the *Christ the Redeemer* in Rio de Janeiro, His welcoming arms, inviting us to stop, pray, listen ... Today is Ash Wednesday; we look upon the Christ and from the ashes we bear his cross, a reminder of our mortality. Lent starts today: the beginning of forty days of fasting and abstinence. But fasting is really hard to do for me! When I’m in Brazil, I eat way too much – pounds of candies, delicious candies! I gain ten pounds in my belly and I come back looking pregnant. Do I look pregnant to you? [R touches the ribbon around his wrist]

I hope you like the ribbon I got for you...did you make a wish? Since I was a child, I’ve wanted to tell the story of my sister Marília. How did she die? What happened to my mother after the funeral? What happened to my family after she died? what happened to me, to all of us? In Brazil, I visited her in the cemetery ... Now I wish to share with you what I found, my memories, my baggage...

## Scene 4: Puzzle

[R enters the Realm from behind audience still looking at the screen on the stage]

[Opens “Acidente”]

I’m so angry and sad no one was there to save Marília from that bus. Where were my mother, my sisters, everybody? [Places the focal light under chin]

I was 10 months old when she died. Marília wasn’t even three years old. It’s strange, as an adult, to think of my elder baby sister who died on the last day of carnaval (the day we call Fat Tuesday in the United States). Yesterday was the anniversary of her death.

[Places focal light on the Acidente box]

(Somewhere in the following text, the protagonist gets off the platform and moves towards the outer lines of the exhibition – possible towards Bebê A)

My mother told me that the day Marília died, Marília took my mother’s lipstick and smeared it all over herself; she did the same to me and to our little pet rabbit! With Marília’s encouragement, I kept pulling the rabbit by the ear over and over until it made funny faces. Marília, very worried, rushes to tell my mother, “Mommy, mommy, o *Rogerinho tá matando seu gatinho.*” Little Rogério is killing your little cat! [Pause]

I don’t remember any of it; I wasn’t even one year old. (pause) My mother told me that, later that day, Marília died; she was in a fatal accident involving the local bus that stopped in front of the apartment building where we lived. I often asked my mother to tell me more about it, but she would say that that was all I needed to know; that and that Marília looked like an angel in her casket.

I grew up conjuring up all sorts of images about an angel in a white box inside the earth. I was curious to know how the long wings could fit inside the little box. But I knew not to ask. [Pause]

Even today, I still hold those images in my head, faint recollections of stories I heard about my sister, a never-ending puzzle, further complicated by my immigration to the United States. As an immigrant, the only possessions I had were some clothes, a few photographs, letters, and a rosary. Sometimes I feel I can pack my entire life into a little box, like the one you’re carrying.

Would you like to try?

I left small objects, sticky notes, and pencils in three stations. When you get to them, please choose objects that conjure up your own images.... Perhaps someone you miss? You may wish to write a note to that person? Perhaps one to yourself? Put all that you collect inside your box. At the end, you can take it with you, or you can make your box a part of the *Realm of the Dead* by placing it with all the other boxes at the last station of the installation [*Points to the back where the station is located*]

Now, with help from the ushers, please unveil the sculptures I created to convey my life and my grief at the loss of my sister. When you hear a bell [*Bell chimes*], it is time to move to the next station and the next and the next... along the way, I will tell you my story... and together, we will assemble this puzzle.

[*Ushers help turn on the lights inside the boxes, speakers, and unveiling the cases*]

## REALM 1

[Contemplation. No text]

**[Bell Rings]**

[Contemplation. No text]

**[Bell Rings]**

There is one more thing I know. Early day Marília died, my mother told my older sisters to watch me and Marília while she went downtown to run some errands. Before she left, she promised Marília that she would bring cookies for us. Marília loved cookies! Later on, when the bus arrived in front of our building, Marília saw my mother and ran in front of the bus. Like many poor children, Marília died because a few cookies made a big difference.

**[Bell Rings]**

After the wake, my father cut a loaf of bread, one slice for himself, one for my mother, and one for each of us kids. The slices were bigger now that Marília was dead.

**[Bell Rings]**

My mother mourned Marília in 1966 and my father in 1973. She didn't remarry because she didn't want any other man raising her kids. She worked all day in a grammar school, cooking for the children and cleaning, two hours away from home. Then she came back home to cook and clean for us, *her* children. She was like a bull to me: big; beautiful; grounded; loyal; and tender. In retirement, she painted a picture of a bull for me. I think of it as her self-portrait.

**[Bell Rings]**

Marília was the youngest of my five sisters. I also have two brothers, but I'm the youngest of them all, I'm the baby! By the age of 3, I sounded like Marília, I smelled like her, too. They even dressed me up in Marília's clothes. It was hard to tell us apart. My mother was embarrassed that her boy was so much like a girl, and she was ashamed for wanting me to replace her dead daughter.

**[Bell Rings]**

Throughout my childhood, my mother asked a few doctors, "*Why is he so much like his sisters? Why are his friends all girls? Why is he so sensitive? Is he normal, my son?*"

**[Bell Rings]**

Growing up, the same boys who mocked me also chased me around and treated me like a girl. In public, they taunted me; in private, they seduced me into doing things for them. I was particularly

confused and scared when adult men asked me, “Are you a boy or a girl?” I had many questions about how my dead sister figured in my gender identity.

**[Bell Rings]**

With the exception of Marília, every year, in May, all my sisters participated in the Catholic pageant, the coronation of the Virgin Mary. Only girls were allowed... From the church floor, I watched the flowing angels singing in church. [Sings] *Mês de maio...mês d’alegria. Cantemos louvores a virgem Maria*. At the end of the pageant, the girls received little bags filled with candy, but, according to the authorities, I wasn’t a “real” girl, so all I could do was dream of lollipops, chocolate, jelly beans... all the candy we would never have – I wasn’t a “real” girl” and Marília was dead!

**[Bell Rings]**

Even today, 50 years later, I still ask myself, “*Did Marília see the tires before she closed her eyes? Did she feel the weight of that bus? Did she feel any pain? Does anyone know?*” The brain controls everything we do, everything we feel... brain cells allow us to feel love, pleasure, and pain... Those miraculous cells are the caretakers and wardens of all our feelings and memories.

**[Bell Rings]**

I often wonder ... How would Marilla look today? What type of hair would she have? As a child I looked at her photograph on her grave. I felt that my boy’s body was just like hers; I even felt her inside me, as though we were one and the same... I suffered not from multiple personality disorder; I simply longed for her, desperately.

**[Bell Rings]**

Before my mother passed away, in one of my many visits to Brazil, I talked with her about how I felt when I first came to New York City in 1987, long before I moved to Ann Arbor. I explained to her how I still hated the memory of the cold and the fierce loneliness I felt as a newly arrived immigrant in a big city like New York... I don’t know how, but I ended up revealing to her how I had imagined Marília in her coffin all these years – an angel, cold and lonely, deep in the earth. My mother listened and then showed me a letter she had received from the public cemetery where Marília had been buried.

**[Bell Rings]**

[Contemplation. No text]

**[NO Bell]**

## **Fragments**

[*On stage: R is sitting on a stool holding a small white suitcase containing Marília’s remains. R will not ring the bell here and will instead perform this scene*]

The letter my mother received explained that heavy rains had destroyed all the graves in the children’s section of the public cemetery where Marilia was buried. They told us that we had to move my sister’s remains to a safer place. So, my mother and I went to the cemetery to unbury her.

There, the gravedigger swung his pick; the pick hit the ground; the ground opened. There we were, inside the Brazilian earth. The pick pierced the ground over and over; the first few moments felt like an eternity waiting to see my sister. Suddenly, from down below, I heard the muffled sound of metal against metal. The pick hit the handle of her coffin. I looked at my mother; she looked back “Is this the handle of her coffin?” I heard not a sound from her. Dirt piled around us. I began to dig with my bare hands, searching for anything I could find. Deep in the pile, I found pieces of fabric. [*To mother*] Could this be from the lining of her coffin? I asked my mother; she nodded “yes.” I kept searching ... Deeper in the

pile, I found her little sock, and deeper still, I found what appeared to be bones. “Look Lora, these must be her bones; Marília’s little bones...” And then ... as if by a miracle, I found a lock of her hair... and then another. Oh God! My baby sister’s hair, so pretty, so soft, good hair! [*To mother*] Oh Lora, there is nothing here. No flesh! There is no more Marília. Oh Lora, I’m so sorry, so very sorry, my love.

Witnessing my mother’s dismay, I asked the gravedigger, “where is my sister”? [*Pause*]

[Bell Rings]

[Contemplation. No text]

[Bell Rings]

## REALM 2

By the time I was a teenager, I already believed that straight hair was good and curly hair was bad. And mine was bad! I felt doomed! So, I made my hair straight! I felt that *straight* hair could save my life! I was so happy ... but my mother was furious, “*Você ficou parecendo uma puta!*” My long straight hair made me look like a whore, she said! So often, I felt like one, from the moment my father first touched me.

[Bell Rings]

As a child, I thought that what made a girl a girl was having a pussy, like my sisters had. If I had a pussy, I’d be just like Marília, right? But though I didn’t have a pussy, I knew I was a girl. Did my father know? The way he looked at me... showed special interest in me... he touched me, intimately ... he was a man; so, I must be a girl.

[Bell Rings]

My father died when I was 7. If I was a “real” girl, like Marília, would he have stayed? Could I have made him happy? Could my sisters have made him happy? He touched me, he touched my sisters, he molested all of us. We all avoid thinking that my mother might’ve known what my father was doing. Yet she did nothing...

[Bell rings]

Under the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964 to 1985, lack of privacy was commonplace. The police often raided our building for no apparent reason. I was terrified. Ten of us lived in a small two-bedroom apartment in a housing project ... plus the rabbit. I shared a bed with two of my sisters. When my father died, I slept in my mother’s bed, to be close by, in case she might die. [*Sings*] “*Dorme nenê ... mamãe tem o que fazer ... ..tem roupa pra lavar e costura pra cozer...*”

[Bell rings]

In the 1980’s, when I was in college, there was no LGBT liberation in Brazil. Not yet. No possibility of a “gender non-conforming identity” such as the one I carry toady... I so wanted to get out of Brazil... Being gender non-conforming, I feared I’d be killed by bigots or the military police. Voices that I still hear today, echoed inside my head: *Bichinha! Mulherzinha! Veado! Sissy! Little girl! Faggot!* ... these voices were meant to drown me.

[Bell Rings]

I came to New York City in 1987 after I received my degree in biological sciences. There I wanted to be a hairdresser. But I didn’t speak English, I didn’t have a cosmetology license, and, for nearly a decade, I was an illegal alien! A threat to the United States of America! So, I took different jobs: As a dishwasher, I worked seven days a week, eight hours per day, for \$200. Delivering pizza, believe it or not, I fell off my bike in the busy streets of Manhattan in the middle of a rainstorm.

[Bell Rings]

In construction, surprisingly, I did well painting, patching things, doing “butch stuff;” but one of the construction workers attacked me, he called me “faggot,” and smeared patching compound all over my face and eyes. I couldn’t see a thing. I didn’t complain... poor immigrants die at the border, shot, of

heatstroke, suffocated in shipping containers... Knowing all that, we take any shit to keep any job we can get.

**[Bell rings]**

I feel old and fat! Growing up I was skinny! Several times a day, I opened the refrigerator hoping to find food and found nothing. I hoped to find candies...lots of candies! Now that I can buy all the candy I want; I worry about my weight. Do I look fat? Does it even matter ... knowing where we all will end up? [*Moves to Station #24, Cápsula, for next 2 scenes*]

**[Bell Rings]**

Yesterday, coming back from Brazil, I could hear the faint carnival music coming from the streets of Rio de Janeiro. At the airport, they weighed my suitcases. I weighed my emotional baggage... all the things my mother and sisters gave me over the years —time, love, encouragement. I felt the weight of pink lipstick, hair products, [*Picks up mirror from the capsule*] mirrors reflecting our faces ... [*Holding mirror to the face*] Without my mother and all my sisters, I would not be here today. I am at once each and all of them. [*Puts back mirror and picks up Rosary from the capsule*]

**[Bell Rings]**

[*Holding Rosary*] Before I flew from Brazil, my sister Millie gave me this rosary. As the plane was landing this morning, images of Marília took over my mind... Holding my rosary, I contemplated the mystery of Jesus' *Resurrection*, his welcoming Marília to life everlasting ... the Holy Spirit *descending* upon her. My sister's *Ascension* to heaven. I felt the ribbon around my wrist... so many wishes fulfilled, so many yet to come...

**[Bell Rings]**

[Contemplation. No text]

**[NO Bell]**

## **On STAGE: Lullaby-Ninar**

[*Building lights out and stage lights on focusing the audience attention on the stage. R will not ring the bell here and will instead perform this scene. R is sitting on a stool holding shrouded Marília on his lap, after picking her up from the open casket. As the scene unfolds, a different sound, i.e., relief, letting go, freedom, will fill the space*]

[*To audience*]

Marília's epitaph said: "Fui para Deus e voltarei na memória de meus pais e meus irmãos." I went to God, and I will be back for my parents and siblings.

I've waited for her to come back even though she's been here all along... my dead sister lives on inside me.

Have you seen her? I cling to her; she clings back. Can you see her? I cling to her; she clings back.

[*Still to audience*] *My Sweet Sister*

[*To Marília, calling to her*] *Marília*

*Where did you go?  
Leaving me here,  
So lonely a boy  
Without you*

*I went to school  
Learned about the earth  
The turns it takes  
There you disappeared*

*You left me here  
Without direction  
To join you; how?  
Where are you?  
Have you left?  
I never let you  
Held you closely  
Made my chest cry*

*My most darling  
I'll forever miss you  
But you stay no more  
I'm letting you go*

*You deserve to rest [Kisses her forehead]  
Sweet sister, Marília  
Go, go to heaven  
On earth no more*