

Brazilian soap operas get their first black lead actor

The introduction of André Gurgel, who plays a more ambiguous character rather than the typical all-good or all-bad supporting role for black actors, indicates the growing influence of Brazil's black and mixed-race population.



Lázaro Ramos (l.) is the first black lead in a Brazilian soap opera. The actress is Camila Pitanga, arguably Brazil's most wanted, best looking, most stylish, who plays his love interest on the soap opera.

(Taylor Barnes)

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Rio de Janeiro

André Gurgel lays his hand on the slender shoulder of Carol Miranda. A stylish career woman, she pitifully thanks the wealthy designer for canceling an evening boat cruise with his colleagues in order to see their injured infant son, the product of a one-night stand.

"Even though I really wanted to check up on my work, [our son] is a priority," says the arrogant ladies' man on the soap opera *Insensato Coração*.

It is a classic soaps scene. But Mr. Gurgel (played by Lázaro Ramos) is about as dark-skinned as a Brazilian comes, and that has caught the nation's attention – even though the country claims to be half Afro-descendant. In this popular evening novela slot, which some estimates say the majority of Brazilians regularly watch, he's the first black male lead.

"Of course it's late," Mr. Ramos says of his casting. But he still welcomes it as an opening for more black actors in Brazilian popular media.

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"There's something visible, perceivable, which is this inequality of the country, of television, of being black, of being in theater. This is the reality we live with. But I like to talk about the positive side," the chipper Ramos says in his break room after filming the hospital scene. Known for his roles in critically acclaimed independent films before becoming a soap opera star, he speaks confidently on the growing "freedom" with which Brazilian society now discusses race.

Brazil's racial history is often compared to that of the US, as both were formed largely by European colonizers mixing with indigenous populations and importing masses of slaves. By some estimates, however, Brazil enslaved far more Africans than even the US, accounting for up to 40 percent of trans-Atlantic slaves. That makes it now the largest nation of Afro-descendants after Nigeria. While many Brazilians praise what they see as their nation's progressive legacy of racial mixing, skeptical historians have theorized that Brazil's early promotion of interracial relationships was seen as a way of "whitening" its largely black population.

That a black actor hasn't had the prominence of Ramos before now is another reason for that skepticism. Joel Zito Araújo, a filmmaker and author of *"A Negação do Brasil"* ("The Denial of Brazil"), estimated that in a nearly half-century of soap operas that he studied, a full third did not have Afro-descendants in their casts, and of the two-thirds that did, none had more than 10 percent.

But Brazil is changing. As Brazil's middle class grows, so do the fortunes of its black and mixed-race populations. A recent study by

Brazil's Fundação Getúlio Vargas said that about half of blacks and mestiços ("mixed" in Portuguese) belong to the middle class. Brazil's 2010 census showed that the nation became, for the first time, "majority-minority," meaning that less than half of Brazilians called themselves white and those identifying as black or mixed grew.

"Brazilian telenovelas denied [for years] our racial diversity," says Mr. Zito Araújo. But he sees the growing movement for mixed-race Brazilians to call themselves black and a rising esteem for interracial relationships – "It's starting to be chic" – as positive steps for integration. "It makes people admire this [black] middle class in Brazil."

André Santana, who worked with an all-black theater group while Ramos was a member in their native state of Bahia in Brazil's northeast, says he and fellow actors have had mixed feelings on the popular novela role.

"We are divided. We commemorate it [but] it's a very ambiguous feeling," Santana says of Ramos's prominent but hypersexualized character, who has an alcoholic father. "We have a step to the front because we have an actor on [the mainstream channel] Globo, but we have two back because it is such a negative role."

But Ramos, who previously played a favela (shantytown) resident who becomes romantically involved with a rich white woman, argues that this ambiguous character of Gurgel is a sign of progress.

"Usually it happens like this [for black actors]: a character is [either] on the margin of society, is excluded, is occupying a subaltern function; or a guy is perfect, a guy who is a lawyer, who is a great father of his family, is marvelous. And the middle ground, which is exactly where the human being is, who's not so great nor so bad, [is where] this character is inaugurated" in this current soap opera, Ramos says. "I think there's a lack of characters offered to black actors that have this humanity, that have a way of being imperfect." The novela's author has said he wrote the role specifically this way, so that Ramos's character would avoid racial issues and would not be a wholly sympathetic character.

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Ramos says the next frontier for integration is what doesn't show on the screen. "There's something on the American side [of media] that I think is great, which we still don't have here, which is that integration isn't just done with actors but with directors, producers, casting directors, cameraman."

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