

## THE AMERICAN COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONS IN PHILIPPINE THEATER

With the establishment of American colonial rule in 1901, the United States introduced into the Philippines American ideals and lifestyle, through a nationwide grassroots-level educational system and later through print and broadcast media, and film. Through the decades and beyond the end of American rule in 1946, what came into the country were the American forms of art, and with them, the European, specifically, the English.

The American tradition in Philippine theater is evidenced in *bodabil*; the Western plays done in the English language or in Filipino translation; and the original plays produced by contemporary theater actors which use styles like theater of the absurd, epic theater, expressionism, and various forms of realism.

The American tradition entered the Philippine stage principally through the educational system established in 1901, and since then has continued, developing with fresh inputs, merging with or transforming traditional theater, siring translations and adaptations, participating in the formation of new playwrights, new trends, new theater, and on the whole contributing ideas and energy to Philippine theater.

The colonizers who arrived to establish the American Insular Government in the Philippines came upon a theater scene they could not understand. They found religious dramas and dramatizations, long “hyperbolic” verse plays (*komedya*), and the plays they came to call “seditious” because these had the temerity to espouse Philippine independence from the United States. Arthur Riggs, military journalist and eyewitness, wondered in 1905 what would happen next, since this “inspiring drama, exactly suited to...[their] tastes and wishes” had been squashed by the American laws, arrests, and trials. The Filipino stage he called “a wholly quiescent and hibernating creature, awaiting the sun-warmth before its emergence from seclusion and futility...”

He did not know, of course, that the rites and rituals, the verse debates, songs and dances of the indigenous theater did and would continue, as would the folk theater represented by the dramas and dramatizations, the *komedya*, and the budding *drama* and *sarswela*. Each simply found its place on the different stages outdoor and indoor, in barrio, town or city, and its own audience, paying or nonpaying—on religious feast days, town fiestas, civic occasions, and eventually evenings at the theater. Inevitably, however, the entry of a new culture would have its indelible effect on the Filipino stage.

### **Bodabil**

Vaudeville was the first visible influence from America. Although a French form,

it was adapted in the United States as a show made up of assorted entertainment numbers. These shows composed of songs and dances, magic and music acts, skits and stand-up comedy, chorus girls and comedians, were first brought in to entertain the American soldiers at about the turn of the century. They entertained the native audience as well, who found them convenient and portable showcases for entertainment spectacles.

The songs and dances of bodabil (*vodavil*, wrote the writers in Spanish; bodabil was the Filipinized word) came to fill in between short sarswela or between acts of a long one. They were called **stage shows** in the Japanese Occupation, and much later **variety shows**. In some provinces the bodabil intermissions were called “jamboree,” a word that had originally been applied to the opening musical numbers of stage shows.

Bodabil eventually went on stage in such venues as the Manila Grand Opera House and the Savoy (later Clover) Theater, forming images of “what’s entertainment” in the minds of the Filipino audiences. Bodabil-type acts appeared and still appear on political stages, and decades later deteriorated into burlesque and strip shows in cheap theaters in suburbs or around the American bases.

While it reigned, bodabil formed musical trends and musicians, performance genres and performers. Lou Borromeo tuned in to jazz music. Dancers like Benny Mack and Bayani Casimiro (called “the Filipino Fred Astaire”), comic magicians like Canuplin (billed as “the local Chaplin”), a superb torch singer a la Sophie Tucker called Katy de la Cruz, singers like Diana Toy and Miami Salvador, and, much later, Eddie Mesa (“the Filipino Elvis Presley”), Diomedes Maturan (“the local Perry Como”), and Nora Aunor (who started as “the Pinay Timi Yuro”) developed in the following decades, showing the impact and influence of American popular entertainment. They also proved how limber was the Filipino entertainer, how easy it was for him/her to tune in to American rhythms—and how painless and effective a tool popular culture was in the Americanization of the Filipino. The songs, dances, and entertainment forms of most Filipinos till the 1960s were undeniably patterned on “the American dream.” In American popular culture were embodied, for decades, their images of beauty and excellence, of life and self.

### **English-Language Theater**

Historically the next, and certainly the major, American influence on Philippine theater was the English language propagated by the educational system established so systematically in 1901. Unlike the Spaniards, who had only reluctantly and sporadically taught the Filipinos their language, the Americans established a public school system and teacher-training institutions immediately upon the installation of an insular government. English, it was decided, would be the vehicle of education, and to accomplish this American teachers were fielded—at first soldiers and their wives; eventually the Thomasites, a shipload of teachers who came on

the *USS Thomas* in 1901, sent expressly to teach Filipinos English and, perhaps unbeknownst even to the teachers, the culture that comes loaded into the language.

Theater in English was the immediate result of both the language and the educational system. Considering, however, that these teachers were the fruits of a Victorian education (not enthusiastic about theater), and had only witnessed, if at all, an American theater in its infancy, the effects of American-style education were not immediately felt in the theater, but in the classroom.

There was the change of language, first of all, which inferentially made vernacular theater fit only for the provinces, for the fiestas, for the unschooled, and English the language of the schooled and eventually the learned. Certainly *sinakulo* and komedya would not be performed or mentioned, much less studied, in schools. And then there were the examples of drama discussed in classrooms: “textbook plays” aimed at teaching the language, at practicing the students in the speaking of it, and not linked to the life outside the classroom, in contrast to the folk plays entrenched so deeply in community and folk life.

Thus plays, staged in classrooms as language exercises, came to be many a student’s first (and lasting) impression of theater. Stories like “The Monkey’s Paw” were dramatized, as was Longfellow’s poem “Evangeline.” Playlets, dramatizations, and longer plays were staged, for example, *Arms and the Man* and *Polly with a Past* at the University of the Philippines (UP) directed by Jean Garrot Edades.

Eventually there came out of the classrooms native playwrights who spoke the new language with some ease (more ease is required to write a play than a poem), and who wrote plays based on the classroom examples. The first play written in English by Filipinos was *A Modern Filipina* by Jesusa Araullo and Lino Castillejo, 1915, both of the Philippine Normal College. In it a young woman speaks her mind and plans her future quite independently, then decides to accept a suitor who uses an old trick—he falls out of a tree and plays on her sympathy—because she had really liked him from the start.

With mastery of the language came more playwrights, like Jorge Bocobo, Carlos P. Romulo, Vidal Tan (all of them eventually became UP presidents), who progressed from writing occasional plays for Rizal Day, for school foundation days, and similar occasions, to commenting on local mores, e.g., marriage, customs, and election promises. We note that where the folk play had been written for fiestas and religious feasts like Holy Week and Christmas, the new plays came to be connected to civic occasions. The best of these plays, such as Vidal Tan’s *The Husband of Mrs. Cruz*, 1929, a comic rendering of elections and their effect on community and family relationships, showed the Filipino’s ease with the language and with the one-act play, and his successful adaptation of both Philippine subject matter and life.

Into this place and time soon came the concept of “legitimate” theater, on “legitimate” stages, as distinguished from the temporary, open-air, built-for-the-occasion, or built-for-other- purposes stages of folk theater. The legitimate stage was only for drama, and for access to it the audience purchased tickets to a play that was an event in itself, and not part of a community or religious celebration. Legitimate theater required not only playwright and director, but a support organization for production, publicity, and the box office. Unlike folk theater, there was a clear division between performers and audience, between stage and backstage, and between theater and the life out there.

By the 1940s and 1950s, when drama had moved out of the classroom and onto school and “legitimate” stages, and Shakespeare and the Greek tragedies had been performed in public by the Ateneo de Manila and the UP theater groups, playwrights such as Severino Montano, Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, and, later, Alberto Florentino developed. For them theater was no classroom exercise, but a real and earnest art.

Montano, who had studied drama in the United States, still considered it a means of education, and established the Arena Theater at the Philippine Normal School (now University), fielding plays like *Parting at Calamba* and *Sabina*, 1953, and teacher-actors throughout the country to bring modern drama to the schools and communities. Realizing that not many communities could provide real stages, his plays were presented in school auditoriums and classrooms, meeting halls and open spaces. He also introduced the arena style of production. His most popular play, *The Love of Leonor Rivera*, 1953, had continuous productions all over the Philippines from 1953 to 1964. It is about the undying love of Leonor Rivera for Jose Rizal, even through marriage, to someone else, unto and beyond death. The lyricism is in English, but the view of the national hero as suffering man and the object of romantic love is most compatible with the native sensibility.

Guerrero, who taught at the University of the Philippines, wrote about the emerging middle class who were being educated in English, and were adapting the mores and manners of the Americans they read about and watched in the movies. His most popular plays include *Wanted: A Chaperon*, 1940; *Forever*, 1941; *Condemned*, 1943; and *The Three Rats*, 1948. His UP Mobile Theater took the substance and techniques of his theater around the country, while his UP Dramatic Club trained the actors and directors of future productions in and out of the UP. His plays about basketball players, movie actors, parents and children, suitors and chaperones, put the Americanized Philippine world on campus and other stages. The plays from Anglo-American repertoires that he staged at the UP provided theater experience and ideas for audiences of many ages, among them those who later became leaders in the arts as well as in politics.

Florentino brought to the attention of theater directors and audiences, the world outside the English-speaking universe—the slums and denizens of Tondo, which he made the material for his plays like *Cadaver* and *The World is an Apple*, 1954,

and *Cavort with Angels*, 1959. Clear proof of the English dominance in theater was the fact that Florentino's audiences accepted without question or discomfort the fact that his Tondo stevedores, prostitutes, and slum children were speaking correct and idiomatic English. Years later, these plays would be staged in Tagalog translation, and Florentino himself would declare an end to his writing plays in English.

Aside from plays in English about the Philippine present, Montano, Guerrero, and Florentino introduced realism, an element not in the *sinakulo* and the *komedya*, and only nascent in the *sarswela*. The Biblical stories (and apocryphal like the tales of Samuel Belibet and Boanerhes), the romances of the royalty of Albania and Persia, as well as those of the *Estrellas* and *Anitas* of *sarswela* land, and the poets and professionals who love them, were now replaced by stories about a country lass falling in love with a (married) American, politicians and their empty promises, basketball players and movie stars, love triangles, and the plight of stevedores, prostitutes, and squatters. The real Philippine world was creeping up on the stage and creating a new theater.

At schools, drama groups without resident playwrights—the Aquinas Theater Guild at the University of Santo Tomas, the various Ateneo groups, the Paulinian Players Guild at the St. Paul College, and so forth—staged American and British plays by writers like Shakespeare, James Barrie, George Bernard Shaw, Gilbert and Sullivan, and occasionally, European plays in English translation, like Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and the Greek tragedies, and made these the lexicon, the models, the experience of drama for Filipino urban youth. For these and for all the theater lovers bred at the schools, who watched the European classics at the Ateneo and modern theater at the UP, English was the only language for theater, and Anglo-American plays and English translations the only input and models from world theater.

Thus, although theater in the 1950s was fairly active, it had no connection or relation to the vernacular theater, the chasm between them having been dug by both language and ignorance. The centuries-old theater tradition that had linked the indigenous communities to the hispanized regional cultures—community-based, often outdoors, and in various vernaculars, was effectively cut off from this new theater that knew “legitimate” theater as being schooled, enclosed in edifices, and in English.

This was the time, therefore, of such nonschool groups as the Barangay Theater Guild, The Manila Theater Guild, The Penmouth Playhouse, and various others aiming for legitimate theater, and suffering from a lack of funds and audiences, which the school groups had, although in modest amounts and sizes.

Through the educational system was pumped in, as well, the idea of modern theater. Students came to be conversant with Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, with George Bernard Shaw and Longfellow, and later with Arthur Miller and

Tennessee Williams—without ever having heard of the sarswela. The idea of theater came as well with these dramas: proscenium stages, box sets and hand props, the “fourth wall,” later Stanislavsky and the Method, even later the various manifestations of realism and Brecht and other trends and techniques.

This was reinforced by the movies, and later by television shows and videotapes, as well as by material in the print media. The images of musical theater held by the schooled and the young were generally not sarswela and Rogelio de la Rosa-Carmen Rosales romances, but the Broadway musical as typified by *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and *South Pacific* and the Hollywood musical extravaganza, as exemplified by the musicals from Busby Berkeley and the Ziegfeld Follies to *Singing in the Rain* onward. Through the movies too would come models of heavy drama or light comedy, the classics in traditional or new modes, schools of acting and directing, techniques of staging and presentation. Thus, in the contemporary plays, playwrights and directors might refer to (and were certainly influenced by) the acting of Greta Garbo and Clark Gable, or situations like those of *Back Street*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Casablanca*.

The idea of theater, its form and content, and its social function of education and entertainment were thus, for the schooled Filipinos of the first half of the 20th century, according to the American model. Because of the gap between vernacular and English theaters, there was no consciousness of the community base of Philippine theater, or of the forms it had taken before the advent of English and the educational system.

### **Local-Language Theater**

Bridging the gap, as well as linking the indigenous, Spanish, and American traditions of theater of the Filipino, became possible in the late 1960s because of the nationalist movement. An awareness of the inordinate impact of the American orientation on Philippine cultural life was a hallmark of the movement. In reaction, there was a conscious search for Filipino artifacts, culture, identity, and language.

In the theater this took the form of research into pre-American theater. Theses and shorter studies explored the komedya, sinakulo, sarswela, and other native theater forms. Scholars and librarians undertook to retrieve texts kept by writers and their families in trunks and under beds and thatched roofs. Theater groups like Dulaang Babaylan, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), and the UP Repertory Company realized that research was one of their primary tasks, along with revival and revitalization. In lectures and discussions there was a deliberate effort to synthesize Philippine theater tradition and influences.

Just before the imposition of Martial Law in 1972, some kind of merging happened among these theater traditions in the activist (also called street, protest)

theater. Influences from American, European, Chinese, and native theaters converged in the need to convey urgent messages of protest and change, and resulted in the street plays staged at Plaza Miranda, in front of factories and buildings, and during rallies and demonstrations. Adaptations were made of Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, of Rogelio Sicat's *Moses, Moses*, of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, of the Chinese *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, sometimes in combination with Philippine folk songs and dances. The young playwrights, directors, and actors were calling on everything they knew and remembered of theater, in the urgency of their expression. The language was Filipino—or Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano—but the theater experience reflected in the plays was an amalgam of traditions.

Education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels was in these decades, still strongly Anglo-American. Dramas were read and discussed in English, the choices determined by their availability in American textbooks, and by the tastes of teachers trained in America. The pensionado, Fulbright, and other grant programs were not only convenient and helpful, but seen as highly desirable, necessary for ascent in the academic and cultural ladders. Few went for higher education anywhere but to the United States, and thus the first directors, actors, and theater specialists who pursued careers in Philippine theater knew the American theatrical scene well, and held it up as model and ideal.

The theater groups formed in this intercultural matrix, e.g., the UP Repertory Company, Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), the Ateneo Experimental Theater, *Repertory Philippines*, *Dulaang UP*, and the directors who led them—Behn Cervantes, Cecile Guidote, Rolando S. Tinio, Zeneida Amador, and Antonio Mabesa—were a potent factor in the absorption of foreign theater influences and the formation of contemporary Philippine theater. The directors not only staged plays written by Filipinos, but interacted with playwrights, making the plays richer and more stageable.

In effect, the educational system and study abroad supported the Anglo-American orientation of Philippine theater, and although attention started to be given to the native-born and hispanic theaters, these did not have the books, scholars, films and videos, touring opportunities, grants for workshops and conferences, and the glamor of Anglo-American theater in the educated Filipino's eyes. Add to this visiting theater troupes, lecturers who visited universities and provincial centers, directors and actors who gave masteral classes, books on theater available at the Thomas Jefferson Cultural Center and the British Council, films and videos shown to classes and workshops, and one understands the ease with which Anglo-American theater entered the Philippine experience and consciousness.

Realism soon stretched into the other areas it already occupied in Western theater. Psychological realism, the study of human beings within, is seen in Tony Perez's explorations of *usap-usapan* or human interaction in family, school, and workplace, among intimates, peers, and superiors, as seen in *Biyaheng Timog*

(Trip to the South), 1984, and *Sa North Diversion Road* (On North Diversion Road), 1988; in Bienvenido Noriega 's inquiry into ideas of home among Filipino expatriates in Europe in *Bayan-bayanan* (Little Country), 1975; and in Elsa Martinez-Coscolluela 's evocation of individual and familial disintegration in *In My Father's House*, 1987.

Focusing on people and their formation, aspirations, and interaction in the context of society, plays of social realism have explored many levels and angles. Rogelio Sicat's *Moses, Moses*, 1968, is about the actual practice of "justice," with some people being "more equal" than others; Rene O. Villanueva 's *May Isang Sundalo* (There Was a Soldier), 1982, is an exchange of life stories and beliefs between a soldier and a prostitute; Reuel Molina Aguila 's *In Dis Korner* (In This Corner), 1978, examines the fate of young boxers in the fight-fixing game; Chris Milllado 's *Buwan at Baril sa Eb Major* (Moon and Gun in Eb Major), 1985, weaves together stories of farmers, urban workers, socialites, insurgents, and their families, religious and students struggling and surviving in the post-Martial Law and pre-Aquino era.

The elements of expressionism learned from Brecht's "theater of instruction" and Augusto Boal's "theater of the oppressed," which suited the Martial law strictures against the realistic portrayal of oppression, served well such plays as Al Santos ' *Mene, Mene Thekel Upharsin*, 1981, with its scenes of political prisoners and torture; and such musicals as *Nukleyar!*, 1983, and *Bien Aligtad*, 1985, in which music expresses alongside the dialogue the feelings generated by the surrounding reality. The documentary style is effective in Bonifacio Ilagan 's *Pagsambang Bayan*, 1977, especially the later versions, which had slides and statistics in counterpoint to the ongoing Mass and its questioning congregation; and Al Santos ' *Mayo A-Beinte Uno atbp. Kabanata* (May 21 and Other Chapters), 1977, which juxtaposed the person and aspirations of Lapiang Malaya leader Valentin de los Santos against the perceptions of the state, and the street massacre that resulted therefrom.

Elements of absurdist theater have surfaced in such works as Paul Dumol 's *Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio* (The Trial of Old Serapio), 1968, in which loving is a crime, and eye-gouging a kindness because blindness is an asset for beggars. In Al Santos ' *Ang Sistema ni Propesor Tuko* (Professor Gecko's Way), 1980, the absurdity of an underpaid and overworked teacher's situation generates equally absurd teaching practices and students.

Plays like *Oratoryo ng Bayan* (People's Oratorio), 1983, which was based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and transgressions thereof in Philippine life, and *Panata sa Kalayaan* (Oath to Freedom), 1987, which focused on the freedom lost and freedom won in recent times, combined chanting, singing, monologues, documentary and expressionist theater, bodabil, "forum theater," and folk forms like carnivals and games in the need to express the multifaceted reality of the Philippine present.



The contemporary Filipino playwright has obviously learned well from his American texts and teachers, and has successfully synthesized this learning with that from other teachers, and with his own Philippine and Asian dramatic heritage. It is not only a predilection for performance that has made this possible. It is also the press of circumstance, the situation of struggle, the onus of oppression, all of which demanded expression in public and for the community, an expression for which theater has provided the very best possible venue.

As theater and film actor-director Laurice Guillen told other directors at an international conference, modern theater in the Philippines does not follow trends or evolve styles for artistic reasons alone. Theater is a need and an urgency, not a luxury, not an entertainment, but a necessity and part of life. It becomes art because of the artists in it, but it is urgency first. And it was this urgency that took the theater in English from classrooms and legitimate stages back home to the community.

Thus, although the theater of modern times and with American influence participates in the concepts, structures, philosophies, and styles of Western theater, it is at base still theater born in and serving the community, although the community has in many cases grown from village and town to cultural or political community, region, and nation.

Since there are very few local schools, degrees or courses for playwriting and stagecraft, and since local theater groups and institutions like the Cultural Center of the Philippines offer only workshops and apprenticeships, purposive training for the theater is still obtained mainly in the United States and in England, and occasionally in Europe. Only very recently have there been workshops on how to write a komedya or a sarswela for the modern audience, but there have usually been courses and workshops on the structure of the tragedy, or the three-act play. Only in recent years has there been contact with Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian theater, or with Brechtian theater in Germany and mime in France. The contemporary theater scene is enriched by a synthesis of all the traditions that have entered and influenced Philippine culture. The indigenous and hispanic theater is seen not only in revival and revitalization, but as recreated for the modern stage: new sarswela like Nicanor G. Tiongson 's *Pilipinas Circa 1907*, 1982; new komedya like Max Allanigue's *Prinsipe Rodante* (Prince Rodante), 1962; contemporary *panunuluyan* and sinakulo; dance drama like Al Santos, Rody Vera, and Denisa Reyes ' *Diablos* (Demons), 1989, and Edwin Duero and Agnes Locsin 's *Hinilawod*, and Al Santos, Joey Ayala, and Agnes Locsin's *Encantada* (Enchantress), both 1992. Puppet theater, children's theater, mime, masks, Brecht in translation and adaptation, prove the presence as well of various Asian and European theater influences.

There is still English-language theater in some schools, and most prominently in Repertory Philippines, which has regular seasons featuring current successes on

Broadway and the London West End. It in effect continues the training in English-language theater, this time on a professional level, and its successful proponents, such as Lea Salonga, have gone into careers in theater abroad. Most contemporary Philippine theater, however, is discourse with the people and not only with the educated or the elite, and is therefore in the vernacular languages, whether originally so or in translation from foreign or other local languages.

### **Conclusion**

The American influence is still undoubtedly the most strongly felt, not only in the training of playwrights and theater artists, but in the management of theaters and theater groups, in the structure and presentation of plays, in the idea of professional theater. Even when playwrights like Tony Perez, Bienvenido Noriega Jr., and Reuel Molina Aguila write plays solidly founded on Philippine experience and ethos, the European and American influence of their education, reading, and play viewing is visible, and usually for the good. There certainly are plays shaped by Philippine social forces, artistic forms, historical perspective, community traditions, and values, such as Paul Dumol 's *Francisco Maniago*, and Domingo Landicho 's *Dupluhang Bayan* (National Joust), 1975, but it would be almost impossible to distinguish the native impulse from the shaping given the playwright's art by his education and its American bias.

The American influence on Philippine theater, therefore, is found in: the tradition that grew out of the educational system, which with its English language, textbooks, and training produced preferences and an orientation; the theater experience acquired through training in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in England, thanks not only to available scholarships, but also to the choice and predilection of the trainees; the theater exposure acquired through films, videos, workshops, conferences, libraries, visiting experts, and the mass media; the models created by all this; and the continuing consciousness bred by all this and the colonial experience.

It is an influence that at worst reflects the colonial cast of mind, in which the foreign is seen as always superior and preferable to the homegrown. At best, and often it truly is influence for the good, it is enriching, and the avenue for entry into Philippine theater of the tried and the proven, the new, the experimental, the alternative; experiences of other ways of thought and discourse, other cultures and other theaters that, as in the beginning, merge with and/or transform traditional theater. • D.G. Fernandez

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