

## PHILIPPINE THEATER

Theater in the Philippines is as varied as the cultural traditions and the historical influences that shaped it through the centuries. The dramatic forms that flourished and continue to flourish among the different peoples of the archipelago include: the indigenous theater, mainly Malay in character, which is seen in rituals, mimetic dances, and mimetic customs; the plays with Spanish influence, among which are the *komedya*, the *sinakulo*, the playlets, the *sarswela*, and the *drama*; and the theater with Anglo-American influence, which encompasses *bodabil* and the plays in English, and the modern or original plays by Filipinos, which employ representational and presentational styles drawn from contemporary modern theater, or revitalize traditional forms from within or outside the country.

### The Indigenous Theater

The rituals, dances, and customs which are still performed with urgency and vitality by the different cultural communities that comprise about five percent of the country's population are held or performed, together or separately, on the occasions of a person's birth, baptism, circumcision, initial menstruation, courtship, wedding, sickness, and death; or for the celebration of tribal activities, like hunting, fishing, rice planting and harvesting, and going to war.

In most rituals, a native priest/priestess, variously called *mandadawak*, *catalonan*, *bayok*, or *babalyan*, goes into a trance as the spirit he/she is calling upon possesses him/her. While entranced, the shaman partakes of the sacrificial offering, which may be a chicken, a pig, a carabao (depending on the gravity of the spirit's anger) or simply rice uncooked or in cakes, rice wine, and betel nut. This act, which represents the death of the supplicant at the hands of the spirit, adapts itself to the occasion for which the ritual is held.

Among the Tagbanua of Palawan in southern Philippines, the ritual of the *diwata*, which crowns a series of activities addressed to the spirits of ancestors, is held after the rice harvest on the last three days of the last moon, to ask the supreme deity Mangindusa, the other gods, and the spirits of ancestors for a bountiful harvest and for the well-being of the supplicants. For this most significant socioeconomic and religious event, the interior of the home of the *babalyan* is decorated with stripped palm leaves and bamboo slats with Tagbanua writing and designs. In the center of the large room, the ritual offerings are carefully arranged: a small wooden boat hanging from the ceiling (on this the ancestors "ride"); a mat on which are spread the bowls or plates of uncooked rice, jewelry, betel nuts, rice cakes (which are later consumed by the people), ginger, onions; a ritual bamboo swing which the *babalyan* rides or chants on; a stool on which are arranged more food offerings; and the all-important wine jars set in a line in front of the swing and provided with oil-rubbed straws through which the spirits will sip the rice wine (wine is not found in the spirit world so it is the one item that best attracts

spirits to the celebration).

To the heady music of gongs and drums, the babalyan's assistant, dressed in a sarong skirt, tight blouse, and sash from which the wavy long knife called *karis* hangs, opens the ritual by performing several dances and shaking in both hands the *ugsang* (stripped palm leaves) with bells, in honor of Mangindusa who is supposed to be perched on the roof of the house. This part ends with the babalyan letting out a scream and pulling the ceremonial staff attached to the ceiling to denote that Mangindusa has departed. Soon after, the babalyan herself, also in a similar skirt and blouse, but with a black hood covering her face, works herself into a trance, as she sips wine and swings herself in the middle of the room. Then she dances, balancing on her head a bowl with rice or a bowl with candles or a *karis*, while brandishing the palm leaves or two porcelain bowls or a piece of cloth in her two hands, as she is followed by an assistant. To the continued beating of the gongs, the babalyan may then shake the palm leaves violently and strike the sides of the wine jar angrily and sip wine, denoting that a spirit has come down. As other spirits take turns possessing her, the babalyan's movements may change—one spirit may prompt her to sip wine or softdrinks or water; another may want to smoke cigarettes with those participating in the ritual; others may dance with a long knife or bolo on their heads; or oil the women's hair; or lead the singing of the spirit song. The series of possessions is capped with those present drinking and smoking and participating in the activities of the ritual (Fox 1982).

Interestingly, these animistic rituals survive today even among Christianized Filipinos. In Isabela, the *atang-atang* ritual of the Ibanag features a gaily decorated small bamboo raft with offerings of rice, oil, eggs, cigarettes, rice cakes, and a little chick representing the soul of the sick person. Around this raft situated on the ground, two women dance, drink, and chant Christian prayers to cure the sick. Later, the women take oil from the raft and rub it on the face, legs or hands of the sick.

Aside from rituals, tribal dances which were more often than not mimetic may also be considered as proto-dramas. A majority of these dances, which mark important events like baptism, courtship, marriage and even death, depict important tribal activities.

The tribes of the Cordillera have dances that reenact the hunt for and the killing of a boar, as well as the practice and ways of headtaking; the Aeta of Zambales perform dances which show the techniques of gathering wild honey in the forest as well as hunting for fish; the Tausug of Sulu boast of dances that represent how oranges are picked or how not to catch a mudfish. The most important dance, however, among most Philippine tribes is the war dance. The war dance of the Mansaka of Davao del Norte imitates the movements of model warriors called *bagani*, as the latter fight with spears, bolo, and shields.

Other tribal dances which may be considered proto-dramas as well are the dances which are playful imitations of animal movements, like the monkey, fish, and fly dances of the Aeta of Zambales in Luzon; the hawk dances of the Higaonon in Mindanao; and the butterfly, monkey, and bird dances of the Tausug and Sama in Sulu.

Mimetic too are some of the customs associated with courtship, marriage, and death among the ethnic communities. Of the courtship customs, the most common is the debate between a male and a female, which may employ verse, song, and dance. The Maranao panonoroon has a boy and a girl chanting metaphorical verses to each other, with the boy offering his love to the girl and the latter warding off his verbal advances. The Cebuano balitaw features antiphonal songs performed by male and female, which talks not only of love, but of the problems of married couples and rural workers. Among the Tagalog, the debate in song and dance becomes an exchange of spoken verses in the *duplo*, where poets called *bilyako* use proverbs, riddles, the *pasyon*, and the *awit* as well as contemporary events to advance their suits to the *bilyaka* of their choice. In the 1920s, the *duplo* became a formal debate on an issue, and was called the *balagtasán*.

Mimetic customs related to weddings include: the Tagalog *pamanhikan*, where representatives of the families of both the boy and the girl speak in metaphorical language to settle the dowry or bridal price; and the Bilaan samsung, where, after the bride-price is paid, the bride and the groom are “forced” to sit beside each other, and their hair “tied together” even if the bride “objects.”

Finally, mimetic customs related to death are, exemplified by the *baraning usa* of the Aeta of Camarines, where a deer made of banana stalk and twigs “hunted down” and offered to the dead to take to the next life.

As a whole, indigenous dramas are well integrated into the lives of tribal Filipinos. These rituals, dances, and customs express their very beliefs and depict their activities and material culture. Furthermore, they help fulfill the basic needs of the tribe for a good harvest and victory in war, as well as the physical and spiritual well-being of the sick, the newly born, the youth, and the newly wed members of the tribe. Finally, these plays bind the members of the tribe in a stronger bond for the common good. Rituals of baptism, circumcision, marriage, as well as the dances that instruct children on the techniques of looking for honey or fishing or fighting in war, clearly work for the collective good. A good harvest and plentiful honey and fish obviously benefit the tribe, while the display of war dances teaches the young boys the primary duty of manhood, namely, fighting to ensure survival of the tribe against all aggressors. Similarly, the customs associated with courtship, marriage, and death provide a way of expressing personal emotions in a socially accepted way, and of informing all of bonds that will have to be respected by everyone, so that harmony may reign in society.

## The Spanish Colonial Tradition

In the three centuries of Spanish rule from 1565 to 1898, the Spanish colonizers, specifically the friars, showed a keen awareness of the power of theater both as a tool for the Christianization of the natives and as a magnet to attract the latter to the pueblo or town which constituted the foundation of Spain's empire in the archipelago. Consequently, the Spanish regime gave rise to and popularized the various types of secular and religious plays, the former usually staged to celebrate town fiestas, and the latter, to highlight important Catholic liturgical feasts or seasons like Christmas, Lent, or Easter. Many of these plays and playlets continue to be popular among the Christianized folk who live in the rural areas and compose the majority of the total population.

Of the plays, the most important is the komedya, also known as *moro-moro*, *linambay*, *arakyo*, which is a play in verse introduced into the country from Spain in the 16th century and institutionalized in the 19th century. This theatrical spectacle takes from 3 to 15 hours and several sessions to perform. It has two principal types: the secular, which concentrates on epic stories of love and vengeance; and the religious, which narrates the lives of patron saints. Elaborate marches, lengthy choreographed fighting between individuals and/or armies, and magical artifices wrought by heaven to save saints or Christians in distress ensure the popularity of the *komedya* as principal entertainment during town fiestas.

Deriving stories from native versions of European metrical romances, the *orihinal* (script) of the secular komedya usually depicts the conflict between Christian princes and princesses and their Moorish counterparts. Typical of the stories of the secular komedya is the *arakyo* still performed in several towns of Nueva Ecija, which revolves around the search by Elena and Constantino for the Cross of Christ and the obstacles they encounter in that search. As performed in Peñaranda, Nueva Ecija in 1987, the story of the *arakyo* remains basically what it was at the turn of the century when this play, also known as *tibag*, first became popular.

After his father, King Constancio of Rome and Constantipole, is killed by the Turks, the young Constantino sits on the throne and brings war to the Emperor of Turquia to avenge his father's death. Worried about the outcome of the war, Elena is assured by a voice from heaven that victory would be given to Constantino, but that he and Elena should in turn look for the cross on which Christ died. Constantino wins the war and kills the Emperor of Turquia. Meanwhile, Queen Elena has left for the Holy Land to look for the Redeemer's cross. Princess Ordalisa of Turquia now bids farewell to her father, Emperor Costroas, and leads a mission to the Christian court. She demands Constantino's surrender and exacts vengeance on Constantino's general, Lucero (with whom she is secretly in love), who with his companions made trouble when they joined the

tournament in Turquia some years back. Meanwhile, Queen Elena has found the cross, but loses it to the Moors who intercept and attack her. Informed of this, Constantino sends Lucero on a mission to Turquia to demand that Costroas give back the cross. The mission fails to retrieve the cross, but it brings Lucero face to face with Ordelisa once again. The general pledges his undying love for the Moorish princess and proves it by laying down his arms. But the other Moors pounce on, imprison, and sentence him to death by beheading. Ordelisa, who is now convinced of Lucero's love, decides to free him. In the end, a big battle is waged between the Christians led by Constantino and Elena, and the Moors under Costroas and Ordelisa. Elena is about to kill Ordelisa when Lucero intervenes and begs for her life. Defeated, the Moors agree to be baptized "so that the dirt of their souls may be washed away."

Traditional are the arakyo's sets and costumes, its stylized gestures and rhetorical delivery of verses, its *marcha* (slow march) and *paso doble* (fast march), accompanied by band music, as well as its scenes of love between Moorish princess and Christian general, of the *embahada* (mission) between kingdoms, of dances to relieve long stretches of monotonous dialogue, of theatrical artifices.

Supported by *hermanos mayores* (sponsors) and by donations from individuals, the arakyo, like many traditional komedya today, is cherished by the townspeople as a form of dance-prayer or an extended dramatic devotional to the Santa Cruz so that it may shower favors and blessings on both kin and community.

Not as entertaining as the secular komedya, the religious komedya called *komedya de santo*, hardly survives to our day. Typical of these didactic komedya which were used by Spanish friars to teach Christianity and inculcate Christian colonial values is one still staged in Iligan City—the *Comedia de San Miguel* (Play of San Miguel), written circa 1890. Also called *Yawa-Yawa* (literally, Devil-Devil), this komedya tells the story of how Lusbel rebelled against God, and how God, through the Seraphim, ordered San Miguel Arcangel (Iligan City's patron saint) to quell the heavenly revolts and drive Lusbel, his cohorts and the Seven Capital Sins represented by a huge sevenheaded monster, to hell where they are punished forever for their pride and rebelliousness.

Of the Philippine religious plays, the most outstanding and enduring has been the *sinakulo* — also known as the *pasion y muerte* (passion and death), *tanggal* (literally, to remove) or *centurion*— which probably saw light in the mid-18th century. Staged commercially or as community activity during Lent and often for eight consecutive nights during Holy Week, the *sinakulo* started as the dramatization of the *Pasyong Genesis*, the most popular verse narrative on the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ, and later augmented by apocryphal stories from other *pasyon* and religious books like the *Martir sa Golgota* (The Martyr of Golgotha) and popular reading materials like *Liwayway*.

In Tambo, Buhi, Camarines Sur, the passion play known as *tanggal* is a folk

interpretation of events of the passion that is distinguished both by its charm and naivete as by its faith and fervor. For almost three whole days and with financial support from the barrio, older members of an itinerant group of *tanggalista* (members of the *tanggal* group) chant the Bicol pasyon and other episodes from the Creation of the World to the Search for the Holy Cross by Elena and Constantino, while the younger members of the group dramatize the actions narrated by the chant. Most popular are the following: doleful scenes like Christ saying farewell to his mother before he goes to his martyrdom; comic scenes featuring the antics of Judas Iscariot, the great comedian in any passion play; scenes of spectacle like the storm at sea where the Apostles take a little boat ride on Lake Buhi (sometimes with an escort of carabaos); colorful scenes like the descent of the Holy Spirit on Mary and the Apostles; and finally, dramatic scenes like the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin in heaven.

In urbanized towns like Cainta, Rizal, the *sinakulo* has reached heights of technical sophistication in terms of sets which are more “realistic,” costumes which are more historically accurate, dialogue which approaches colloquial prose, and lighting which produces effects of night and day, darkness and lightning. In spite of all these, the *sinakulo*’s world view, whether in Buhi or Cainta, and like those of other religious plays, remains as simple as that of a medieval morality play where absolute and certain is the victory of good over all forces of evil.

As popular but more numerous than the komedya and *sinakulo* are the playlets, which attest to the importance placed by the Spanish friars and the local priests after them on teaching Catholicism. Many religious playlets in the Philippines merely embellish the Catholic liturgy or dramatize more fully the feasts narrated by that liturgy, especially the events of Christ’s birth, passion, death, and resurrection. Others are performed to honor saints on their feast days.

Some of the most important playlets are associated with the Christmas season. The Tagalog *panunuluyan* (seeking entry) and Bicol *kagharong* (going from house to house) dramatize through a street procession the search by the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph for an inn in Bethlehem on Christmas eve. The *pastores* (shepherds) may be a playlet depicting the journey of the shepherds, their encounter with Satan, and their adoration of the Christ Child, as may be seen in Cebu and Leyte; or simply a group of males and females in colorful costumes dancing and singing Spanish and native Christmas songs in front of different houses, as practiced in certain towns of Bicol. The *niños inocentes* found in the Tagalog areas, may be a short play showing the beheading of babies below two years of age as ordered by Herod, as was the custom in some towns of Rizal; or a parade of *higante* (giants) as in Gasan, Marinduque. Lastly, the *tatlong hari* (three kings) may be a simple procession highlighting three males costumed as kings, as in Floridablanca, Pampanga, and Mabitac, Laguna, or a short play reenacting episodes in the search for and adoration of the Infant Jesus by the Three Kings, as in Gasan, Marinduque.

The Lenten season, specifically the Holy Week, has many more playlets associated with it. The *osana* (hosanna) found in almost all Christian areas, features the blessing of the palms and reenacts Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The *via crucis* (way of the cross), observed in most Catholic parishes, is a procession of the image of the *Nazareno* or Christ carrying the cross, which meditates at 14 altars where the Stations of the Cross are enshrined. In Paete, Laguna, the stations on the meeting of Christ and his mother, and Christ and Veronica are dramatized with chanted dialogue and moving images. The *paghuhugas* (washing), performed in almost all Catholic and Aglipayan churches, dramatizes the washing of the feet of the Apostles by Jesus on Maundy Thursday. The *huling hapunan* or *ultima cena* (last supper), staged in some Tagalog and Bicol provinces, reenacts the Last Supper in an actual dinner eaten by the priest and 12 men playing the apostles. The *siete palabras* (seven words) observed in many Catholic parishes features a lifesize image of Christ hanging on the cross, which moves its head each time one of the seven last words is spoken (with accompanying "thunder and lightning") during the three hours before Christ's death at 3 P.M. on Good Friday. The *soledad* (solitude), still done in Bicol and Pangasinan, is a procession of the image of the grieving Mater Dolorosa after the "burial" of her son on Good Friday or Black Saturday. This stops at designated houses where songs are performed to lighten Mary's sorrow. The *pagkabuhay* (resurrection) of Lubao, Pampanga, reenacts with special effects the Resurrection of Christ in the early hours of Easter Sunday. The *salubong* (meeting), also known as *sugat*, *encuentro*, *sabet*, *Alleluya*, and *padafung* in Catholic and Aglipayan parishes all over the country, dramatizes the meeting of the Risen Christ and the Virgin on Easter Sunday morning in dance and song. This is climaxed by the removal of the Virgin's black veil by a little angel, who descends from the "heaven" of the four-posted *galilea* to sing "Regina Coeli, Laetare" (Queen of Heaven, Rejoice). The *hudas*, found in Pampanga and Bulacan towns, shows the burning of the effigy of the traitor Iscariot. The *moriones* (helmets) of the Marinduque parishes dramatizes the story of the Roman soldier, Longino, who while guarding the tomb of Christ witnesses the Resurrection, becomes a Christian, proclaims Christ's divinity, and is beheaded by Pilate's soldiers.

The major genre of playlets performed in honor of patron saints is the *moros y cristianos* popular in Manila and many towns all over the archipelago in the 19th century. Today, this dance drama survives in a few isolated towns. Known by different appellations, these playlets still dramatize the conflict between Christians and Moors/non-Christians. Notable examples of this genre are the *kinabayo* of Dapitan, Zamboanga del Norte, which depicts the conflict of the Moors and Christians in the Battle of Covadonga; the *palo-palo* of Ivana, Batanes, which survives as a dance with sticks between Moors and Christians; and the *sayaw* of Ibajay, Aklan, which underscores the defeat of the Moors in the hands of the Bisaya. A form of *moros y cristianos*, too, is the *bakahan* (battle) of San Antonio, Laguna, which reenacts the fight between San Miguel Arcangel and the Hudyo (Jews) on Good Friday.

The secular and religious plays and playlets are drastically different in content and function from the indigenous plays. While the latter depict the life and activities of the tribe, the dramas with Spanish influence either showcase alien stories of princes and princesses from ideal worlds peopled by the “beautiful” white race or narrate the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ and the saints of the Catholic Church, which were introduced into the country by the Spanish friars. Moreover, the komedya propagated and continues to propagate a colonial mentality that looks up to the European as superior in race and religion, even as the plays and playlets on the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ and the saints discourage self-initiative, a critical attitude, and decisiveness, preferring to forge a passive will that bows to autocracy and its hierarchy of authority. It is not difficult to see how these plays contributed to the shaping of the native Filipino as colonial during the Spanish period and how they continue to discourage the development of persons and citizens in contemporary Philippine society.

Introduced into the country by Spanish artists in 1878 or 1879, the sarswela had its heyday from 1900 to 1940 in Manila and the provinces. Original sarswela were created in Tagalog by writers like Severino Reyes, Hermogenes Ilagan, Patricio Mariano, Julian Cruz Balmaseda, Servando de los Angeles, and composers like Fulgencio Tolentino, Juan S. Hernandez, Leon Ignacio, Alejo Carluen, and Bonifacio Abdon; in Cebu, by writers like Vicente Sotto, Buenaventura Rodriguez, Piux Kabahar, and Fernando Buysen; in Pampanga, by writers like Juan Crisostomo Soto, Aurelio V. Tolentino, Felix Galura, and Urbano Macapagal; in Bicol, by writers like Asisclo Jimenez, Jose Figueroa, and Valerio Zuñiga; in Iloilo, by writers like Valente Cristobal, Jimeno Damaso, Angel Magahum, and Jose Ma. Ingalla; in the Ilocos, by writers like Mena Pecson Crisologo, Mariano Gaerlan, Leon Pichay, Isaias Lazo, and Barbaro Paat; and in Pangasinan, by writers like Catalino Palisoc and Pablo Mejia.

Usually in three acts with music and dancing interspersed within the prose dialogue, the sarswela focuses on a love story between members of the upper classes, which is spiced up with comic love episodes between servants, and made more relevant with satirical attacks on usurers, corrupt politicians, oppressive landlords, lazy husbands whose husbandry is wasted on cockfighting and other vices and, lately, students hooked on drugs and “Saudi” recruiters who take advantage of naive workers.

One of the most popular sarswela of all time is *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden), 1919, which tells of the love between a pretty young flower girl, Angelita, and a young handsome law student, Cipriano. Principal obstacle to their love is a rich old man, Don Silvestre, who frequents the *kabaret* where the dalagang bukid sells flowers, determined to get the girl for himself. Taking advantage of their addiction to cockfighting and cardgames, Don Silvestre lends Angelita’s parents all the gambling money they want, certain that they would then easily agree to deliver the girl to him as payment for their debts. Moreover, Don Silvestre uses his money to make sure that Angelita wins the beauty contest that



means so much to Angelita's parents. In the end, after a series of romantic misunderstandings and comic misinterpretations, Angelita is crowned queen, but sidesteps Don Silvestre's trap by eloping with Cipriano, who has just finished his law studies.

The traditional sarswela now survives only in the Ilocos, from where about half a dozen commercial troupes fan out to other Ilocano-speaking provinces for performances during town fiestas. In Bantay, Ilocos Sur, veteran sarswelista Barbaro Paat continues to put up his sarswela in May. Typical of Paat's stories is one which depicts the plight of a wife, who has been sent away by her husband and mother-in-law, and the sufferings of their young daughter under the father's new wife. Although its costumes are contemporary, Paat's sarswela has all the ingredients of popular traditional sarswela—namely, the love songs, the scenes of melodrama, and, most of all, the comic scenes which the audience loves above all.

Introduced from Spain in the 19th century, the drama (to be distinguished from the generic English term "drama") is a play in verse and/or prose and usually in one act. As written by Filipinos at the turn of the century, it often revolves on an aspect of Filipino contemporary life, e.g. divorce, gambling, and other social vices, usually in the framework of a love story. During its golden age from 1900 to 1940, the drama was performed in a series of three-in-one performance, or by itself before a sarswela. Like the sarswela, it could be presented commercially or as a community activity, on a proscenium stage in a *teatro* or on an open-air rural *entablado*, using *telon* (theater curtain or backdrop) and appropriate props to denote setting. Although the drama is hardly ever staged today, it still enjoys immense popularity on radio, television or film, either as tear-jerking, sala-set melodrama popularly known as soap opera, or as comedies with a lot of slapstick or toilet humor.

The drama as a Philippine form could be one of three types, depending on its emphasis: melodrama, comedy, or *drama simboliko*. The pre-World War II melodrama which aims to make people cry is typified by *Veronidia*, 1919, by Cirio H. Panganiban, which depicts the tragic death of a divorcee who only wants to visit her dying (first) husband. The comedy which entertains with laughter is exemplified by Julian Cruz Balmaseda's *Sino Ba Kayo?* (Who Are You?), 1943, which weaves its hilarious situations around the mistaken identities of the main characters—a widower and his pretty daughter, a widow (the widower's new wife) and her handsome son (who turns out to be the boyfriend of the widower's daughter), the male and female servants. The drama simboliko (allegorical drama), popular in Manila and environs from 1898 to 1910 as a vehicle of political protest, is exemplified by Juan Abad's *Tanikalang Guinto* (Golden Chain), 1902, and Aurelio V. Tolentino's *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow), 1903.

*Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* chronicles the struggle of the Filipinos, here represented by Inangbayan (Mother Country), under the leadership of Taga-ilog

(patriotic Filipino) to overcome the oppressors in the country's history: the Chinese, the Spanish, and the Americans. Act I opens with Inangbayan reprimanding Asalhayop (Filipino collaborators) and his friends for feasting on the tombs of those who perished when Balintawak fell to the Chinese. Taga-ilog exhorts everyone to rise against Haring Bata, the Chinese King. For a fee, Asalhayop informs Haring Bata of the planned revolt, but is exposed by Inangbayan and burned alive by Taga-ilog for his treachery. The Filipinos launch the revolt against the Chinese and win a signal victory. But another power comes to the Islands, represented by Dilatnabulag (Spain) and Matanglawin (Spanish colonial government), who make a blood compact with Taga-ilog. In Act II the Halimau (Spanish friar) strips the natives of their little wealth. Taga-ilog defies him and is imprisoned. Ignoring Matanglawin's orders to release Taga-ilog, Halimau forces Inangbayan to surrender all her riches in exchange for Taga-ilog's freedom. Dahumpalay (Filipino collaborator) wants Taga-ilog shot, but instead is killed by Taga-ilog, who burns the traitor's face and uses his clothes to escape from prison. Halimau orders Inangbayan buried alive, but the latter is liberated by the forces of Taga-ilog who finally overthrow the Spanish colonizers, even as the third colonial power, represented by Bagonsibol (America) and Malaynatin (the American insular government) arrive to pledge friendship with the Filipinos. Act III opens with women sewing the Philippine flag which will be raised when the new moon rises. Taga-ilog persuades Malaynatin to give the Filipinos their independence, but the latter is reluctant to do so. Malaynatin then falls asleep and in a dream sees Taga-ilog and his army preparing to fight America with cannons, air ships, and tanklike vehicles. In the end, Inangbayan begs for the country's independence but is refused. But when young children kneel before Bagonsibol in support of Inangbayan, Bagonsibol's heart softens and he grants the people freedom.

In general, the drama and the *sarswela* represent a significant development in Philippine theater history, if only because they pioneered in a more realistic portrayal of Filipino life and culture, showcasing not only Filipino costumes and sets, but typical Filipino characters, dialogue, and situations as well. Moreover, unlike the colonial plays, these forms trained their sights on current issues of Philippine society, launching diatribes against those they perceived as social "offenders." If these plays can be faulted, it would be for the simplistic way in which they solve the very real problems they present. Coincidences, accidents, and other *dei ex machina* are used to eliminate all obstacles and to come to a correct (not necessarily happy) ending for all concerned. By a stroke of the pen, the villains all mend their evil ways and become model members of the establishment church and community.

The "seditious" dramas, however, are an exception because they dared to paint the bloody struggle of Filipinos against the American colonizers, hoping thus to enlighten and exhort the Filipino masses to support the revolutionary movement based in the mountains, and thus prevent colonization by another Western power.

### **The American Colonial and Contemporary Traditions**

Short as it was, the American colonial regime from 1901 to 1946 had a profound effect on 20th century Philippine theater, first in form and later in philosophy. This influence is seen in the Philippine bodabil (vaudeville), the Western plays presented in English or in Filipino translation/adaptation, and the original modern plays written by contemporary playwrights.

Introduced in the 1920s from the United States, bodabil is not a play per se, but a potpourri of songs, dances, and comedy skits which showcase what is popular in the United States. As may be expected, the Filipinos who perform in bodabil cannot help but imitate, and naturally end up as the “local versions” of the American “originals.” During the Japanese Occupation, the bodabil began to include a short melodrama at the end, to accommodate the popular prewar film actors and actresses who could no longer appear in films since the Japanese had confiscated all film equipment. This expanded bodabil, which reigned supreme as entertainment during the Occupation, was known as the *stage show*. After the war, the return to popularity of the movies drove the stage show into small, cheap theaters or to open-air stages in the provinces.

Through the Westernized educational system established by the Americans all over the archipelago, Filipinos were introduced to the first examples of “legitimate” theater in the Philippines, i.e., plays which have so-called “artistic merit.” Exclusive schools for the rich, which were steeped in “good” Western education, led in the production of Shakespearean tragedies and comedies in the 1930s, until other groups presented contemporary Western classics in the original English or in English translation. Later, a few groups presented Broadway plays, especially Neil Simon comedies and grand musicals like *Annie* and *Evita*, while others continued to perform translations of “classics” of the Western stage (Sophocles, Plautus, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Moliere, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Wilde, Miller, Williams, Beckett, Arbuzov, Fugard) into Filipino. Finally, other companies adapted Western plays like Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* and Bertolt Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Life of Galileo Galilei* because of their social or political messages.

Needless to say, the bodabil and the Western plays presented in the country by Filipinos contain very little of Philippine life and culture in them. The bodabil has Filipinos twisting their tongues, belting/mellowing their voices to approximate American singers, and gyrating like Elvis Presley or flexing their limbs in the air a la Fred Astaire. In the same manner the Western plays have Filipinos imitating Laurence Olivier’s accent to be convincing as Macbeth or adopting a New York accent to do justice to Neil Simon.

Furthermore, these shows transport audiences into the American dreamland through the songs, dances, comedy skits, and production numbers on stage, while richer Filipinos try to get their catharsis from empathy with the characters of a Williams play, an endeavor which does not always succeed since Filipino

audiences tend to situate these plays within the context of colonial culture in the Philippines, often to the detriment of the reality they present. Finally, because of their proven effectivity in Americanizing Filipinos, bodabil and Western plays certainly help to make more acceptable to the Filipino America's continuing presence in the Philippines.

On the other hand, although the Filipinos were Americanized in thought, taste, and temper by these plays, so were they equipped with many dramatic theories and styles that opened new avenues for growth and expanded the horizons for theatrical expression of Filipino playwrights, directors, actors, designers, and stage managers. Even as foreign plays strengthened the colonial bias, they also introduced many styles of Western theater and the theater of Asia, Africa, and South America that eventually enabled the Filipino to write and stage plays that represent Philippine realities with greater fidelity.

Raised in the Anglo-American tradition, theater artists have created original plays using the literary styles and tendencies of the West—both the representational style which seeks to create an illusion of reality through three-dimensional characterization, and the presentational style, which uses the play as a vehicle for the exposition and promotion of social issues and ideas. As these artists learned more and more about the folk dramatic traditions of their country and of Asia, they likewise also began to experiment with traditional Filipino dramatic forms, like the sarswela, komedya, and sinakulo as well as with Asian styles like the **Noh** and the *kyogen*.

Most of the original plays of today were written for literary contests or evolved through workshops or created for semiprofessional companies, student drama organizations, and numerous community theater groups all over the country. Outstanding directors who have contributed to the development of modern Philippine theater are Lamberto V. Avellana, Henry Lee Irwin SJ, Severino Montano, Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, Onofre Pagsanghan, Rolando S. Tinio, Zeneida Amador, Antonio Mabesa, Behn Cervantes, Nonon Padilla, Anton Juan Jr., Lutgardo Labad, Soxy Topacio, Joel Lamangan, and Tony Espejo, all Manila-based; and Leo Rimando, Joonee Gamboa, Nestor Horfilla, Steven Patrick Fernandez, Frank Rivera, Rodulfo Galenzoga, Karl Gaspar, Edward Defensor, and Orlando Magno, who are based in the regions.

Of the representational types, it was Western realism, which seeks to move an audience through empathy with well-rounded, flesh-and-blood characters, that was adopted and adapted by Filipino playwrights. Realism in the contemporary modern theater follows two tendencies: the psychological which focuses on the problems of individuals; and the social which situates and roots individual problems within the larger framework of a class society.

Outstanding psychological studies of character are first found in some English plays, such as Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero's ***Three Rats***, 1948, which is about the affair

between a woman and her husband's best friend, and Nick Joaquin's ***A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino***, 1955, which depicts the tragedy of two unmarried sisters in the Spanish City of Intramuros, who are slowly being devoured by the new, growing commercialism and pragmatism under America, but who stubbornly cling to the genteel, albeit impractical, world of hispanized culture.

From these seeds grew and blossomed the dramas of psychological realism in the last two decades, among them: Orlando Nades' ***Paraisong Parisukat*** (A Square Piece of Paradise), 1974, which shows how a young girl decides to sacrifice love and idealism to the banality of a stockroom assistant's life; Bienvenido Noriega Jr.'s ***Bayan-bayanan*** (Little Country), 1975, which exposes the personal dreams and heartaches of Filipino expatriates in Switzerland; Rene O. Villanueva's ***Hiblang Abo*** (Strands of Gray), 1980, which portrays four tragic characters in a home for the aged; Isagani R. Cruz's ***Kuwadro*** (Portrait), 1980, where an aging sarswela star pathetically "relives" the glory days of the sarswela; Tony Perez's ***Biyaheng Timog*** (Trip to the South), 1984, which shows how an autocratic patriarch meddles in and destroys the lives of his children and how after his death, his children finally become whole as persons; and Elsa Martinez-Coscoluella's ***In My Father's House***, 1987, which depicts the slow destruction of an Ilongo family and the personal disintegration of its members during the Japanese Occupation of Negros island in the 1940s.

Social realism on the modern Philippine stage was pioneered by Alberto Florentino's plays in the early 1950s, such as ***The World is an Apple***, 1954, which shows how a poor man steals to buy medicine for his child. Plays such as this, however, became more popular only in the 1970s and 1980s. Reuel Molina Aguila's ***In Dis Korner*** (In This Corner), 1978, tells of a boxer who sacrifices his personal and family interests in order to buck the system of "fixing" which exploits boxers like him. Paul Dumol's historical play, ***Francisco Maniago***, 1987, presents the painful realization of Francisco Maniago that absolute and unquestioning fidelity to the King of Spain is possible only with his betrayal of his own community, family, and self. Jose Y. Dalisay Jr.'s ***Sugatang Lawin*** (Wounded Hawk), 1978, explores the meaning of "heroism" during the Japanese Occupation and his gradual realization of the meaning of true heroism. Finally, Chris Millado's ***Buwan at Baril sa Eb Major*** (Moon and Gun in Eb Major), 1985, shows in monologue or dialogue the politicization of two brothers (a farmer and worker), a socialite, a priest and a tribal woman, a student activist, and a teacher.

The presentational style on the contemporary Philippine stage, which emphasizes the discussion of social ideas derives principally from Brecht's Theater of Instruction and later from Augusto Boal's ***Theater of the Oppressed***. Proliferating especially during the Marcos regime which censored realistic portrayals of poverty and oppression in media, many forms in the presentational style point out and discuss social ideas in a less realistic but no less effective manner, consciously destroying the illusion of theatrical reality and employing symbols, mime, dance, songs, stylized sets, costumes, props and almost anything that

would clarify and intensify social/political/economic ideas for their audiences.

The documentary style was employed by some playwrights in order to relate historical events or persons to the present. Using narrators and slides of newspaper clippings, Al Santos' *Mayo A-Beinte Uno atbp. Kabanata* (May 21 and Other Chapters), 1977, traces the life of Valentin de los Santos through three periods of struggle against colonial rule to explain why "Tatang" was obsessed with freedom and why he founded the Lapiang Malaya.

The Brechtian style with touches of absurdism is evident in Paul Dumol's *Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio* (The Trial of Old Serapio), 1968, one of the most performed modern plays of the last two decades, which shows how a syndicate rigs the trial of a beggar, Mang Serapio, who "wastes" the earnings of the syndicate by loving and caring for a "child." Serapio's eyes are gouged out—a punishment considered "humane" because it will make him a "better" beggar.

A similar style is used in Al Santos' *Ang Sistema ni Propesor Tuko* (Professor Gecko's Way), 1980, which pokes fun at the authoritarian rule of a fascistic professor to comment on Philippine society under the Marcos regime; and Rolando S. Tinio's *May Katwiran ang Katwiran* (Reason Has Its Reason), 1972, which shows how a landlord manipulates a peasant's simple mind to accept the landlords "superiority."

Typical of the inexpensive, portable, and short plays called *dula-tula* (drama-poem), which were evolved for symposia or rallies, is Jose F. Lacaba's *Ang Mga Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de la Cruz* (The Fantastic Adventures of Juan de la Cruz), 1976, a poem which narrates one day in the life of an ordinary Filipino, who realizes that wherever he may go he has no real rights; and Richie Valencia's *Iskolar ng Bayan* (Scholar of the People), 1976, which narrates one day in the life of a University of the Philippines student.

Brechtian techniques have also been used for full-blown musicals, which may be: rock or pop musicals on contemporary themes, like *Nukleyar!* (Nuclear!), *Bien Aligtad*, and *Magsimula Ka* (Make a Start), 1983; "ethnic" musicals, like *Maranatha* (Make Haste, Lord), 1974, *Halik sa Kampilan* (Kiss the Sword), 1978, *Ranaw: Isang Alamat* (Ranaw: A Legend), 1985, and *Sinalimba* (Magic Boat), 1986; or ethnic dance dramas, like *Diablos* (Demons), 1989; and *Hinilawod*, 1992. Featuring a band of rock singers and musicians on a separate platform and a group of dancer-actor-singers on stage, Al Santos and Joey Ayala's *Nukleyar!*, 1983, strings together songs, dances, and slides that explain nuclear reaction, exposes the horrors unleashed by the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and finally attacks the establishment of nuclear plants in the Philippines. Another important musical is Dong de los Reyes' *Bien Aligtad*, which describes the "necessary" evolution of a simple slum dweller into a notorious "criminal" because of police corruption and military violence. One of the most popular musicals of our decade is Gines Tan's *Magsimula Ka*, which focuses on the

decisions made by individual young graduates to be themselves by pursuing careers of their choice above their parents' objections.

Important achievements in the successful use of ethnic performing, visual, and literary arts to convey the problems of Mindanao, like the insurgency, militarization, landlordism, exploitation of the ethnic communities, and landgrabbing, are: Rodulfo Galenzoga's *Maranatha*, which uses an old Lanao tale about a big, black, predatory bird, to expose corruption of politicians and the growing militarization in Mindanao; *Halik sa Kampilan* which uses the *bayok* (debate in chant) tradition, the *kapamalong-malong* (dance with the tubular skirt called *malong*) and the Pilandok character of *Maranao* culture among others; *Ranaw: Isang Alamat* which creatively combines the *pangalay*, ethnic martial arts movements and chants with contemporary musical idioms; and Fe Remotigue and Don Pagusara's *Sinalimba* which brilliantly uses *Bagobo* musical materials and instruments for contemporary artistic expression.

Dance dramas which use the ethnic music and movements in order to dramatize both traditional folklore and contemporary myths are the most recent developments of the presentational style. Examples are Denisa Reyes' *Diablos*, which uses a Bagobo tale about the evil bird Minokawa in order to comment on the violence of nuclear arms; and Edwin Duero-Agnes Locsin's *Hinilawod*, which narrates the epic of *Labaw Donggon* and his brothers *Humadapnon* and *Dumalapdap*.

Some plays successfully blend realistic and nonrealistic styles. *Juan Tamban*, 1978, focuses on an upper middle-class social worker, who gets politicized while studying her thesis subject, the street urchin Juan Tamban, who eats roaches and lizards. In this play, Malou Jacob uses a chorus as narrator and commentator to tie together a series of highly realistic and moving episodes. Tony Perez's *Sa North Diversion Road* (On North Diversion Road), 1988, has two actors acting out the roles of different married couples and their various reactions to the problem of marital infidelity. Anton Juan Jr.'s *Death in the Form of a Rose*, 1992, intersperses realistic scenes with choral passages using masks and symbols, in order to dramatize the "execution" of Paolo Pasolini at the hands of the "establishment." Floy Quintos' *Fili*, 1991, "deconstructs" Rizal's novel, *El filibusterismo* (Subversion), and creates a fictitious Rizal friend whose frivolity becomes a parallel to the apathy of the *Fili's* protagonist, Simoun.

With the recent realization among theater scholars and critics that traditional forms of drama still popular among the masses should not only be studied but be imbued as well with positive contemporary messages, urban playwrights have "revitalized" traditional forms to comment on contemporary issues and concerns. Virgilio Vitug's *Sinakulo ning Balen* (Passion Play of the Nation), 1983, as presented in Lubao, Pampanga, unveils a new Christ, Jesus Makabalen, who condemns fiscals who accept bribes, fake recruiters who victimize hapless peasants, candle sellers who commercialize the blessing of the pope, and

government officials who are insensitive to the needs of the people. Although his enemies succeed in crucifying him, Jesus “rises again” because the ordinary people decide to continue his struggle.

The traditional komedya in San Dionisio, Parañaque found its first innovator in Max Allanigue, who wrote *Prinsipe Rodante* (Prince Rodante), 1962, which uses all the conventions of the komedya but rejects its divisive anti-Muslim message, and instead argues that a person’s respect for justice, not his religion, should be the basis for judging that person.

Because of its enduring popularity among Filipinos, the sarswela has been successfully updated by Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio in her *Ang Bundok* (The Mountain), 1976, which shows the harassment of the Igorot by foreign speculators digging for gold in the Cordilleras and the unity the mountain people forged to fight their oppressors.

The “seditious” drama of nationalist playwright Aurelio V. Tolentino, *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (also known as KNB), has been revived and reinterpreted several times in the last two decades. One of the most successful productions of KNB was that of Chris Millado, 1990, which reinterpreted the main protagonist Taga-ilog as a tattooed native datu, a Bonifacio-type revolutionary, and a contemporary New People’s Army fighter.

Finally, the oldest of all traditional drama, the mass, was given new meaning in one of the most popular protest plays of the 1970s. *Pagsambang Bayan* (People’s Worship), 1977, by Bonifacio Ilagan reinterprets Christ’s sacrifice, the parables of the New Testament and the priesthood itself, according to the problems of the peasants and workers in our time.

Because of the growing awareness among Filipino playwrights of other Asian theater traditions, a few of them have experimented with Asian forms. Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio’s *Ang Paglalakbay ni Sisa* (Sisa’s Quest), 1976, calls back from the dead the madwoman in Rizal’s *Noli me tangere* (Touch Me Not), so that she may narrate in the ancient incantatory style of the Japanese Noh, the travails she underwent in life; while her *Ang Madyik na Sombrero* (The Magic Hat), 1976, takes a picaresque Filipino character for a kyogen-style farce in Tondo, Manila. Bonifacio has likewise pioneered in the use of local folktales and various Asian puppet traditions for her children’s plays.

## **Conclusion**

Modern Philippine dramas display a vitality and urgency that surprises theater enthusiasts of whatever persuasion. For one, this theater has finally come into its own, at least as far as subject matter is concerned. An amazing range of characters, all painstakingly portrayed as individuals or types—from salesgirls,



peasants, factory workers to landed gentry and Ateneo basketball stars, from boxers and slum dwellers to social workers, and historical characters from Andres Bonifacio to Valentin de los Santos—all move and speak in situations that almost always ring true. Urgent too are many of the issues that these plays speak about—the danger of nuclear warfare, the exploitation of farmers by landlords, the boredom and heartaches of Filipino expatriates, the dilemmas faced by personalities in Philippine history, the violation of basic human rights among the poor and the powerless, the enlightenment of students and social workers about the world outside of the academe, the massacre of the Lapiang Malaya. Slowly but surely, Philippine theater is finally coming to fulfill the most basic expectations of a national theater—the faithful depiction of native experience, the perspicacious interpretation of the many realities Filipinos struggle with, the vital expression of the Filipino's needs, concerns and aspirations, and the use of dramatic styles that are rooted in Philippine ethnic or folk traditions and/or enriched by foreign dramatic contributions. As these needs, expressions, aspirations, and dramatic styles coincide more and more with those of the majority of Filipinos and of the nation as a whole, the closer will this theater grow towards becoming a truly national theater by and for all Filipinos.

• N.G. Tiongson

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