

THE SPANISH COLONIAL TRADITION IN PHILIPPINE THEATER

The Spanish colonial period lasted from 1565, when Legaspi arrived in Cebu, to 1898, when Aguinaldo declared Philippine Independence in Kawit, Cavite. During this 333-year reign, the Spanish government introduced into the islands the Catholic religion and the Spanish way of life, which gradually merged with the indigenous culture to form the “lowland folk culture” now shared by the major ethnolinguistic groups, like the Ilocano, Ibanag, Pangasinan, Pampango, Tagalog, Bicol, Ilongo, Aklanon, Kinaray-a, Cebuano, Lineyte Samarnon, and Cuyunon.

Today, the dramatic forms introduced or influenced by Spain continue to live in rural areas all over the archipelago. These forms include the *komedya*, the playlets, the *sinakulo*, the *sarswela*, and the **drama**. In recent years, some of these forms have been revitalized to make them more responsive to the conditions and needs of a developing nation.

The Komedya

Descended from the Spanish *comedia* (play) of the 16th century, the local *komedya* first appeared in Latin and Spanish in Cebu in 1598. In 1609, the *komedya* on the martyrdom of Santa Barbara, the first in a native language, facilitated the conversion of the Boholanos to Christianity. Later, in 1637, a famous *komedya* depicted the defeat of Corralat at the hands of Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera. In the 18th century, the *komedya* depicting conflicts in distant medieval European kingdoms began to be staged. By the 19th century, the *komedya* had become an institution in Manila theaters, and soon after became popular fiesta fare—in Pampanga by the 1830s, in the Ilocos by the 1850s, in Bicol by the 1860s, and in Iloilo and Cebu towards the end of the 19th century. In spite of the attacks on the *komedya* and the rise of the *sarswela* in the 1900s and *bodabil* in the 1920s, the *komedya* still attracted rural audiences until after World War II. Today, the mass media, especially film, has effectively eliminated many traditional drama forms, but the *komedya* survives in a few towns all over the islands.

The *komedya* is a play written in verse (usually octosyllabic or dodecasyllabic quatrains), which uses conventions of the *marcha* for exits and entrances, *batalla* or choreographed fighting, and *magia* or magical effects. At present, the *komedya* may be divided into two principal types. The first, which may be called *komedya de santo*, centers on the lives of patron saints, like the ***Comedia de San Miguel*** (Play of San Miguel) of Iligan City; or on the miracles wrought by these saints, like the ***Haybing*** of Taal, Batangas; or on certain episodes in the life of a saint or of Christ, like the *comedia de misterio* of Paete, Laguna. The second and more secular type of *komedya*, also known as *kumidya*, *moro-moro*, *linambay*, *coloquio*, *araquio*, *tibag*, and *minoros*, may highlight: the epic battles between Christian kingdoms in medieval Europe, e.g., Francia, España, Italia, Alemania,

Albania, and the Moorish kingdoms of the Middle East, e.g., Turquia, Persia, Arabia, as seen in *Doce Pares de Francia* (Twelve Peers of France); or the lives and loves of noble Christian or Muslim characters, like *Don Alejandro y Don Luis* (Don Alejandro and Don Luis) and *Orosman at Zafira* (Orosman and Zafira), respectively.

The komedya de santo may derive its stories from the *awit* and *korido* (metrical romances) narrating the lives of saints, or from the hagiographies popularized by books or sermons, or from the stories of miracles attributed to certain saints. The other komedya, on the other hand, draws most of its stories, characters, and even lines from the *awit* and *korido* set in medieval kingdoms, which were published as *libritos* (pamphlets) and sold together with prayer books outside Catholic churches on Sundays. In the decades after World War II, the komedya began to be influenced as well by the movies and popular magazines.

An example of the secular komedya is *Biag ni Prinsipe Constantino* (Life of Prince Constantine) by Lorenza Pre of Santa Catalina, Ilocos, Sur. Written circa 1990, the komedya follows a traditional plot. A battle is fought between the Christians of Granada and the Moors of Amorabia. The Christians lose, the king dies and in the confusion that follows, the king's children, Princess Proserfina and Prince Constantino, are separated. Similarly, the Moorish Emperor's son disappears. To counter the influence of the Moors, the Christians plot to put up a leader of their own, Miguel. The Moors and Christians continue to be at odds. Meanwhile, the Christian King who is getting older, wants his daughter Florencia to find a suitable husband. A *torneo* (tournament) is called, and princes from far away come to try their luck, including Prince Constantino, Princess Proserfina in male disguise, and the missing Muslim Prince. Prince Constantino wins the *torneo* and the hand of Florencia. After the reunion of Prince Constantino and Princess Proserfina, Constantino and Florencia are married and the king passes on the crown of Granada to them. The Muslim Emperor and his son are also reunited, and in their happiness are convinced to embrace the Christian faith.

Supported by the community, the komedya is usually presented for two or three days to celebrate the feasts of barrio patron saints. On an elevated platform dominated by a set representing a two- or three-level European castle, the cast, composed mostly of barrio youths who participate in fulfillment of personal religious vows, declaims the verses and acts out the scenes of love, battle, and royal counsel, clad in colorful costumes that reveal each character's religion (dark colors for Christians, red for Moors) and position in the political hierarchy (crowns for kings and queens, three-pointed hats for princes, etc.). Trained for months by a *director* (director), who often doubles as the *apuntador* (prompter), these *personahe* (cast) do *regala marcha* (slow marches) and *crisp paso doble* (double-step marches) and dance out their fights to the accompaniment of a brass band.

As in previous centuries, the traditional komedya still propounds the belief that

all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, are superior to Moors; that Europeans are a race superior to all others because the Christians are European; that authority is hierarchical, with the king dominating—in descending order—princes, generals, soldiers, and peasants; that authority must be followed at all costs; and that obedience, humility, perseverance, and suffering are the hallmarks of a good Christian subject.

The Playlets

From the colonial regime to the present century, the teachings of the Spanish Catholic Church—specifically, the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ and of the Catholic saints and the superiority of Catholicism over all other faiths—have been taught the Filipino Catholic laity not only from the book and the pulpit but also from the stage and the street. Revolving around the important seasons of Christmas and Lent, as well as the feasts of barrio or town patron saints, the religious playlets either embroider on the basic, traditional rituals prescribed by the Roman liturgy or create new dialogue and/or music to dramatize an episode in the life of Christ or a saint.

Of the Christmas plays, the most famous are the Tagalog *panunuluyan* (seeking entry) or *pananawagan* (calling out) and the Bicol *kagharong* (going from house to house), both of which reenact the search for an inn by Mary and Joseph on the first Christmas eve. In Kawit, Cavite where the *panunuluyan* is known as the *maytinis*, a young man and a young woman, dressed as Joseph and Mary respectively, sing their plea to the owners of about five houses—to no avail. A procession of about 13 floats depicts characters from the Old Testament, like Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, David, Esther, and Judith; events from the New Testament, like the Annunciation and Visitation; and an allegory of Mother Philippines. Before midnight, the procession winds up in church. At the “Gloria” of the midnight mass, the birth of Jesus in a cave is heralded by the songs of little girls dressed as angels.

Another Christmas play is the *pastores* (shepherds). In Bicol towns, *pastores* refers to a group of young men and women costumed as shepherds, who dance and sing Christmas carols in Bicol and Spanish in front of different houses. In Cebu and Leyte, the *pastores* is a short play depicting the journey of the shepherds to Bethlehem. In Tolosa, Leyte, the *pastores* features young shepherdesses with full skirts and wide-brimmed hats. Going from house to house, they sing Christmas songs in their native Waray and dance as they search for the Infant Jesus. On their way, the devil tries to block them. They debate in verse with the devil until he goes away. They then proceed on their journey until they find and adore the newly born Messiah.

The rarest of the Christmas playlets is that of the *tatlong hari* (Three Kings), which is found only in Gasan, Marinduque. Here, the “kings” parade on horses

following a star on a bamboo pole, then end up in front of a stage which depicts Herod's palace. They ask Herod about the baby boy of Bethlehem. The kings depart, find the Infant Jesus, but fail to return. Herod is livid with anger and sends his soldiers to kill all babies below two years of age. The play ends with Herod going mad and—until a few years ago—destroying the whole set. In Floridablanca, Pampanga, the *tatlong hari* is not a play but a procession featuring three men dressed as Melchor, Gaspar, and Baltazar. In Mabitac, Laguna, the kings are played by three boys, who ride on horses from the church to the *munisipyo* (town hall). From the *munisipyo*'s balcony, they throw candies and money to the screaming crowds below.

In the past, on 28 December, a play on the *niños inocentes* (innocent children) used to be performed in Rizal province, and would depict the beheading of the innocents by Herod's soldiers. Today, it has become a parade of *higante* (giants) followed by men giving out animal-shaped rice cakes in Gasan, Marinduque. More popular than Christmas, Lent features at least nine different playlets. Found in most parishes all over Catholic Philippines is the Palm Sunday *osana* (hosanna). In Santa Isabel, Malolos, Bulacan the *osana*, also called *humenta* (donkey) because it features a *karo* (float) carrying the image of Christ riding on a donkey, begins with the blessing of the palms in a small *visita* (chapel), about a kilometer away from the church. From there to the church, the priest who plays Christ leads the faithful in a reenactment of the Savior's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Stepping on the *tapis* (overskirts) laid out by devout old women, the priest walks in front of the *carro* bearing the image of Christ. He stops in front of four *kubol* (small "balconies"), where little girls sing different versions of the "Hosanna," which praises the Son of David who comes in the name of the Lord. To the pealing of the church bells, the procession winds up in the parish church, where the priest celebrates the mass of Palm Sunday.

In most parishes, the *via crucis* (way of the cross) is a solemn procession of the image of the Nazarene, usually held on the different Sundays of Lent or on Holy Week. The candlelit procession stops to pray at each of the 14 Stations of the Cross enshrined in various parts of the towns. The town of Paete in Laguna boasts of a special *via crucis* called *salubong* (meeting) on Holy Wednesday (Catholic) and Holy Thursday (Aglipayan), which features images which are made to move by an elaborate system of strings and pulleys manipulated from under the images. Unlike most *via crucis*, Paete's does not have altars, and stops to reenact only three scenes. On the first corner, the statue of the *Nazareno* (Christ carrying the cross) standing firm under the weight of the cross, is greeted by the Virgin Mary whose hands reach out to her son. Later at another corner, the image of Veronica applies a towel to Christ's face. At the last stop, the Virgin meets Veronica who show her the three faces of Christ imprinted on her towel. Throughout the procession, a group of singers provides the dialogue between images in hair-raising, high-pitched chant.

In most Catholic and Aglipayan parishes today, the rites of Maundy Thursday

are highlighted by the *paghuhugas* (washing) which dramatizes the washing of the feet of the apostles by Christ in the Last Supper. In the sanctuary and near the altar, the priest, representing Christ, pours water from a pitcher onto a basin to literally wash and kiss the right foot of each of the 12 parishioners costumed as Apostles.

In some Tagalog and Bicol towns, another reenactment follows the paghuhugas, the *huling hapunan* or *ultima cena* (last supper), which commemorates Jesus' last dinner with his apostles. In Gasan, Marinduque, after the washing of the feet, the priest and the 12 apostles proceed from the church to the principal sponsor's house, where they partake of a "last supper" of popular native fare, like sweet-and-sour lapulapu, pancit, chopsuey, and rice, as a huddle of women chant the episode on the Last Supper from the Tagalog *pasyon*. Later, all spectators partake of the dinner.

On Good Friday, the *siete palabras* (seven words) dramatizes Christ's agony on the cross from 12 noon to 3 P.M. In Santa Elena, Buhi, Camarines Sur, a wooden image of Christ hangs from the cross as laymen give homilies on the Seven Last Words. After Christ dies at three o'clock, two men, dressed as Joseph and Nicodemus, take his body down from the cross and lay it out on a stretcher. In a heart-rending chant, a woman playing the Virgin weeps and chants an eerie lamentation over Jesus' hair and the wounds in his hands, feet, and side.

On the evening of Good Friday or Black Saturday, a procession called *soledad* (solitude) dramatizes the loneliness of Mary at the death of her son. In Baao, Camarines Sur, the image of a Virgin in black is brought around the poblacion (town proper) in procession, accompanied by the karo of San Pedro, San Juan, and Maria Magdalena, among others and preceded by the group of young musicians called the *estudiantina*. The procession stops in front of several houses where singers comfort the Virgin with songs in Latin.

On the eve of Easter Sunday, some towns perform plays depicting the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Resurrection play of Lubao, Pampanga, written in the 1920s, uses special effects to depict the Resurrection. So does the new *pagkabuhay* in Angono, Rizal, where the events leading to the Resurrection are enacted by the townspeople on a stage in the church plaza on Black Saturday. Popular in many Catholic and Aglipayan parishes all over the country, the *salubong* (meeting), which is also known as *padafung*, *encuentro*, *sugat*, *sabet*, and *Alleluya*, reenacts the meeting of the Virgin and the Risen Christ in the early morning of Easter Sunday. One of the grandest salubong is found in Angono, Rizal. This opens with a curious dance of the *tinyenta* (female lieutenant) who waves a short flag. After this, the *kapitana* (female captain) declaims a long poem speaking of the fulfillment of Christ's promise. Then birds of bamboo and paper swoop down from the corners of the four-posted structure called *galilea* to open a heart hanging at the center that conceals the little angel of the salubong. The angel is then lowered towards the image of the Virgin below. As she and other angels

below sing the Latin Antiphon “Regina Coeli, Laetare” (Queen of Heaven, Rejoice), she slowly takes off the Virgin’s black veil to signify that her Son had indeed risen from the dead. The salubong is capped with the kapitana’s dance of exaltation featuring a flag emblazoned with the word “Mabuhay” (Long Live).

In Marinduque, the main feature of the Easter celebration is still the *moriones* (literally, helmets). Wearing folk interpretations of Roman soldiers’ costumes, male penitents dramatize the story of the soldier Longino who pierced the side of Christ, but who was later convinced of Christ’s divinity when he witnessed the Resurrection. Pilate and the Pharisees try to pay him off to keep quiet about what he saw. He refuses and instead runs around the town telling everyone about the risen Christ. Pilate sends his soldiers after Longino, who is then captured and finally beheaded, i.e., his helmet is impaled on a wooden sword and held up for all to see.

With the triumph of good, evil must be punished. And so it is on Easter Sunday in *hudas*, the ritual burning of Judas Iscariot which is still performed in some Bulacan and Pampanga towns. In Santa Rita, Pampanga, the bamboo-and-paper effigy of the traitor, Judas Iscariot, stands on a bamboo pole in the church patio, in the middle of four bamboo posts located near the four corners of the large patio. After the Easter morning mass, churchgoers gather to witness the punishment of the traitor. Christian tradition teaches that Judas’ body hanging from the suicide tree was eaten up by black birds. Thus the firecrackers—coming from each of the bamboo poles in each of the corners—are masked with the cardboard figures of black birds. Each of these birds, once “lighted,” rides on a cable connecting the post to Judas’ hands and feet. This way, the birds are made to swoop down to “eat” the limbs of the traitor’s body. In the end, the torso and, finally, the head are blown up—bit by bit to the screaming delight of the youthful audience.

Playlets are likewise performed to celebrate the feasts of patron saints. In some towns of Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, the playlet in Cebuano called *San Jose* used to feature a man, a woman, and a child dressed as San Jose, the Virgen, and the Santo Niño, respectively, walking around town and finally presiding over the feast prepared by a sponsor. In May, in Camarines Norte, the *dotoc* shows a group of pilgrims joining up with another group going to Persia to pay homage to the Holy Cross, while the *lagaylay* features dances by Queen Elena and her son Constantino, accompanied by flag bearers and guards of honor, as they sing antiphonal verses in search and praise of the Holy Cross.

In the 19th century, the most important playlet staged to honor a patron saint was the *moros y cristianos*, performed by rural folk on the street. Invariably, this dance drama focused on the clash between the Christians and the Moors or non-Christians. On the feast of Santiago on 25 July, the Cebuano *kinabayo* (literally, using horses) of Dapitan, Zamboanga del Norte reenacts the Battle of Covadonga (supposed to have happened in 718 AD) where Santiago comes down from the sky on his white horse to help the Christians under Pelayo defeat the Moors

under Alkamah. In Ivana, Batanes, on the feast of San Jose on 1 May, three groups of males—young, middle-aged, old—perform the *palo-palo* (fighting with sticks), which depicts a battle between the Christians and the Moors. In Cabagan, Isabela, the feast of Santo Domingo on 8 August is celebrated with the *sambali*, a choreographed street fight between the Christian Ibanag and the non-Christian Kalinga. In Ibajay, Aklan, the *sayaw* (dance) which is an offering to the patron Santo Niño on the third Sunday of January, features Moorish ambassadors being sent to the Christian Bisaya (Visayan), and a grand battle between the two armies which ends in the defeat of the Moors. The same playlet is called *sinulog* in Calbiga, Western Samar, and the *maglalatik* or *magbabao* in Biñan, Laguna.

A variation of the *moros y cristianos* is the *bakahan* (battle) of San Antonio, Laguna, a unique play performed from two to three in the afternoon of Good Friday. The *bakahan* dramatizes the fight between San Miguel Arcangel, here played by a boy of about 10, and the *Hudyó* (Jews) played by older boys in bizarre masks and costumes—before Christ dies. Unique to San Antonio, this story highlights the struggle between good and evil in the hour before Christ's death.

The playlets flourish to our day because of the support of individuals, civic organizations, and even local government—who continue to believe in the teachings of the Catholic religion, in spite of the inroads of mass media and the “modern scientific” culture. As in the past, participation in and sponsorship of these events are believed to be efficacious in conciliating and persuading Christian deities to grant personal wishes. Moreover, the playlets perform an important social function. Since they involve all classes and sectors of the barrio or town, they effectively reaffirm the values and beliefs shared by the community and thereby strengthen the individual's commitment to society.

The Sinakulo

The *sinakulo* (literally, *cenaele*) or passion play probably began as a dramatization of the events depicted in the first *pasyon*, the *Mahal na Passion* (The Holy Passion), 1703, by Gaspar Aquino de Belen. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the *sinakulo* became a formal play with sets and costumes, performed by travelling commercial troupes like the *Cenaculistang Pasay* in the *teatro* (theater), on the open-air *entablado* (stage), and in the *sabungan* (cockpit) in the barrios of Bulacan and Rizal. Soon Pampanga and Bicol began to organize their own community *sinakulo*, which usually took the whole of the *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) to perform.

As it exists today, the *sinakulo* is a play written in verse (octosyllabic *quintillas*) or in prose, which dramatizes the history of salvation—from the creation of the world and the first human beings to the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin Mary in heaven, paying special attention to the life, sufferings and resurrection of

Jesus Christ. Other names for the passion play are *tanggal* (deposition) in Bicol, *taltal* (nailing) in Negros, and *pasion y muerte* (passion and death) in many towns. A shorter form of *sinakulo* focusing on the events from the Agony in the Garden to the Crucifixion is usually presented on Good Friday morning and afternoon. These shorter versions may be *pagdakip*, as in Malolos, Bulacan, or *penitensiya*, as in Cainta, Rizal.

The *sinakulo orihinal* (script) uses the popular *Pasyong Genesis* as its basic text, following the *pasyon*'s chronology of events and lifting stanzas of dialogue from its episodes. To these are added stories and stanzas taken from the religious *awit* and *korido*, from other *pasyon* like the *Pasyong Candaba* and *Pasyon Truncalis*, from popular magazines like *Liwayway*, from religious novels like *Martir sa Golgota* (Martyr of Golgotha), from other *sinakulo* scripts, and lately, from "Lenten" movies like the *Ten Commandments*, *The Robe*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Jesus of Nazareth*. A full *sinakulo* script would include the following scenes: the Seven Days of Creation, the Temptation of Adam and Eve in Paradise, the Tragedy of Cain and Abel, the Flood and Noah's Ark, the Birth, Education and Wedding of the Virgin, the Annunciation and Visitation, the Nativity, the Debate with the Doctors in the Temple, the Recollection in the Desert, the Miracles in the Public Ministry of Jesus, the events from the Entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, the Ascension, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. Apocryphal stories relating to Herod the Great, Magdalena, Boanerhes, Dimas, Barabas, and Samuel Belibet may also be included.

Presented at the public plaza during Lent and especially on Holy Week, the *sinakulo* uses a proscenium-type stage in the open air. Different types of *telon* (backdrop) situate the action of the scenes, while props (often with no sense of history) are used as required by the scenes. The *sinakulo*'s personae who perform in fulfillment of religious vows, may use the traditional chant and marches, or declaim prose dialogue to canned music. Traditional costumes follow those worn by the images of Christ and the saints on Holy Week processions, while modern costumes imitate those seen in movies about Christ and the Roman times. On top of the production is a main director, who is assisted by the directors for music, sets, and lights.

Even when they use modern staging techniques, most contemporary *sinakulo* continue to propagate values of passivity and blind obedience by making Christ the model of subservience, a God who is "meek as a lamb" and a savior who accepts all the torture inflicted on him with total humility. Taken at their face value in a country with a colonial past, such "passivity" and "obedience" continue to shape contemporary minds which are noncritical, nonassertive, and predisposed to follow authoritarian rule.

The Sarswela

The Spanish zarzuela was introduced to Manila in 1878 or 1879 with a performance of *Jugar con fuego* (Playing with Fire) by the troupe of Dario Cespedes. In the following years, more groups arrived, notably that of Alejandro Cubero, which presented the zarzuela not only in Manila but in Iloilo, Cebu, Pampanga, and Bicol. Inspired by this new “enlightened” form, Filipinos soon created their own original sarswela in Tagalog, Pampango, Ilocano, Pangasinan, Cebuano, Ilongo, and Waray. The sarswela thrived from 1900 to 1940 because of mass support and elite sponsorship, and because of its portrayal of familiar characters, conditions, and concerns. With the rise of bodabil and the movies in the pre-World War II era, the sarswela slowly migrated from stage to screen. Today the traditional staged sarswela may be found only in the Ilocos, while revitalized sarswela are sometimes done in Manila and in Silay City.

The sarswela is a play in prose (less often, poetry) with songs and dances, containing from one to five acts, portraying Filipino types and situations within the framework of a love story, and incorporating contemporary issues. Sarswela may be created to depict lofty themes of love of country at a time of revolution, as in *Walang Sugat* (Not Wounded), 1902; to satirize the foibles of Filipinos, as in *Paglipas ng Dilim* (After the Darkness), 1920; to attack social evils, like usury, as in *Sa Bunganga ng Pating* (At the Mercy of Sharks), 1921; or to tell an entertaining love story, as in *Anak ng Dagat* (Child of the Sea), 1921, and *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden), 1919.

An important sarswela is Julian Cruz Balmaseda’s *Sa Bunganga ng Pating*. The beautiful Nati, daughter of the landlord Don Juan, has just graduated as a pharmacist. The widower Don Juan and his fiance, Doña Irene, both notorious usurers, plan to marry her off to a person with influence and money, but Nati loves Mario, the son of the peasants Andong and Maria, who are indebted to Don Juan. At the party for Nati, Mario introduces Marcelo, who has been sent by the government to establish rural credit for farmers to save them from usurious practices. Later, when Andong and Maria try to pay off their debt to Don Juan, they are shocked to find out that it has more than quintupled in two years’ time. Because Andong cannot pay, Don Juan sends the police to confiscate the farmer’s properties. Andong appeals to the courts, but the judge is a friend of Don Juan’s. In desperation, the farmers harvest the rice from Don Juan’s fields for themselves. Don Juan blames Mario for this, but Nati explains that it is Mario who protects Don Juan’s interests. Angry, Don Juan goes to stop the peasants, but they run after him all the way to his house. Mario intervenes and protects Don Juan. Marcelo explains that the court has reversed its decision and will ask Andong to pay back only the original amount that he had borrowed. Don Juan accepts the court’s decision, reconciles with Andong and Maria, and accepts Mario as his daughter’s fiance.

Since the early decades of the 20th century and to the present, the sarswela has been presented by commercial troupes in the teatros of big cities like Manila, Iloilo, and Cebu or in open-air entablado in rural areas during town fiestas.

Painted telon provide the setting for scenes, and are complimented with appropriate props (sala sets for the houses of the rich, benches for poor abodes). Acting and costuming identify the *bida* (hero/heroine) and the *kontrabida* (villain/villainess). A small or big orchestra accompanies the songs, which usually include the *kundiman*, *balitaw*, *balse*, *danza*, fox-trot, and whatever is popular at a given period. An overall *director de escena* (principal director) rehearses the actors, often acts as impresario as well, and coordinates the work of the *director de musica* (music director), who subcontracts musicians and conducts on stage; the *maestro del coro* (choir master), who rehearses the singing of the actors; the *tramoista* (technician), who works the telons and sets the props; the *electricista* (electrician), who takes care of the lights; the *apuntador* (prompter), who prompts from a *concha* (shell) in front of the entablado; and all the other cast and crew connected with the production.

The sarswela was rightly regarded as an “enlightened” form at the turn of the century because it introduced a more scientific way of depicting reality, which reoriented the Filipino’s eyes from the fantasy of European kingdoms of the komedyas to the social evils confronting him in his time, like oppressive landlords, corrupt politicians, gambling, usury, and colonial mentality. However, although it presented realistic characters, situations, and problems, it merely contented itself with describing these problems and solving them in a conciliatory fashion, reducing class contradictions and structural injustice into personal problems. In this sense and in spite of its social conscience, the sarswela propagated a world view and a value system that in the final analysis strengthened the status quo at the expense of the ordinary people who comprised the bulk of its audiences.

The Drama

The drama was brought into the country by Spanish troupes, many of whom came after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Although these groups presented principally Spanish melodramas in the theaters of Manila, they also did the prose plays without music called drama (to be distinguished from “drama” meaning “play” in general in English), which were written by Manila artists. Among the first drama written in Spanish by Filipino-born Spaniards and Spanish mestizos were *Cuadros Filipinos* (Philippine Scenes), 1882, and *Jose el carpintero* (Joseph the Carpenter), 1880. Two of the early dramas written in the native languages were *Ang Babai nga Huwaran* (The Model Woman), 1878, and *R.I.P.*, 1901. During the American Occupation, the drama was used by nationalists as allegorical diatribes against the new colonizers. Because the Americans censored these drama, it was the romantic melodrama, like *Veronidia*, 1919, and the comic drama, like *Sino Ba Kayo?* (Who Are You?), 1943, that became popular for the rest of the American colonial period. These were often performed together with the sarswela. Sometimes, three of these drama were combined for an evening’s performance. During the Japanese Occupation, the bodabil (vaudeville) incorporated the melodrama as its main feature, expanding the

form into the stage show. As the movies drew audiences away from the theaters, the melodrama and the comic dramas, like the *sarswela*, transferred to the screen and were known as the **drama** and the *komedi*. Today, the same drama and komedi are heard over the radio or are seen on television.

The drama is a play in prose, which revolves on Filipino characters and situations, emphasizing issues current at a given time. Sometimes, the drama may feature a song or two to create mood and provide relief from long stretches of dialogue.

The drama has three general types: the romantic drama which focuses on a love or family story that may end happily or tragically, like *Esperanza*, 1916; the *drama simboliko*, which allegorizes stock characters from the romantic drama to comment on a political/social situation, like *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow), 1903; and the comedy, which may use any kind of plot or character in order to create situations— satirical, farcical, or slapstick—that will make people laugh, like *Mga Santong Tao* (People As Saints), 1901.

Like the *sarswela*, the drama draws its themes, characters, and stories from current issues, whether these be political, religious, or social. A typical romantic drama is *Manotok* by “Makahiya.” Mariano, a poor fisherman, surprises his wife, Lucia, and her lover Don Alvaro, the landlord. Alvaro escapes and Mariano in anger strangles his wife to death. The police arrest Mariano who is then sentenced to a prison term of 15 years. As Mariano serves his term, Pining, Mariano’s daughter, is raised by a kind farmer, Mang Kiko. Pretty and kind, Pining, who runs a little *bibingka* (rice cake) stall, is courted by Arturo, a handsome lieutenant. Mang Kiko approves of Pining’s suitor and everything goes well until Don Alvaro, back from months of travelling abroad, asks to see his tenant Mang Kiko. Alvaro is attracted to Pining and tries to take her by force. She resists and slaps him. When he persists, Manotok, the idiot whom Pining had been kind to, hits Alvaro with a piece of wood, leaving the latter unconscious. In retaliation, Alvaro dismisses Kiko as his tenant; to make matters worse, Kiko goes blind. In the midst of this double tragedy, Arturo proposes marriage to Pining and the latter accepts. Meanwhile, Alvaro has a heated discussion with Mary, a *bailarina* (nightclub dancer) whom he lived with, who demands that Alvaro make good his promise of marriage to her. Alvaro insults Mary and drives her out of the house. As Mary leaves the house, the idiot Manotok enters Alvaro’s house, picks up a letter Mary drops, and goes away with another letter he takes from Alvaro’s desk. Meanwhile, Alvaro follows Mary to Mang Kiko’s house, kills her, and frames Mang Kiko so he would be blamed for the crime. Arturo has the painful duty of arresting his future father-in-law, who gives himself up peacefully. At the trial presided over by a young idealistic judge (Alvaro’s son), Manotok reveals himself to be Mariano, come to claim justice for himself. Using the letters he got from Alvaro’s house, Manotok proves that Alvaro had an affair with Manotok’s wife and that he likewise killed Mary. Mang Kiko is exonerated and Pining and her father are reunited.

Like the sarswela, the drama was presented commercially on open-air entablado in the provinces during fiestas. Using *telones* and appropriate props, the drama was performed by professional or by community actors, who were taught the techniques of acting for melodrama or for comedy. A director-impresario took charge of fees and arrangements, hired and supervised actors, composer-conductors, set and property masters, electricians, and other crew members. Most dramas, like the typical sarswela of the pre-World War II period, depicted familiar characters, issues, and situations, but reduced basic contradictions into personal problems that could be resolved by reconciliation of opponents, the contrition and forgiveness of the offenders, or the conviction of the culprit. With the allegorical dramas of 1900 to 1905, however, the drama successfully exposed the political contradiction between Filipino nationalists who stood for immediate freedom and the American colonizers who pretended to help the Philippine Revolution in order to steal the country's freedom for its own colonial intentions. Here for the first time is drama that does not reaffirm but seeks to overthrow a new status quo established by deceit.

Epilogue

To the present, most komedya, sinakulo, sarswela, and drama continue to propagate ideas that lead to divisiveness (Muslims are bad, Christians are good), passivity (to be Christlike is to be passive and submissive), authoritarianism (“utos ng hari, hindi mababali” or “the king’s word cannot be broken”) and blind acceptance of the status quo (it is not social structures which are oppressive but abusive individuals). Clearly, values such as these can hardly be called progressive, especially in a new nation such as the Philippines, which is trying to create a critical citizenry as well as unity among its varied sectors.

Given the continuing popularity of these forms among provincial audiences, however, contemporary playwrights have seen fit to inject into these plays themes and conflicts that are more consonant with current concerns. In 1962 Max Allanigue rejected the divisive messages of the traditional komedya in his ***Prinsipe Rodante*** (Prince Rodante) which argues that one is bad not because of one’s religion but because one does not respect justice. In 1983 Rene O. Villanueva reshaped the komedya in his ***Sandaang Panaginip*** (A Hundred Dreams) which satirizes a “kingdom” (the Philippines) made bankrupt by the extravagance of its “queen” (Imelda Marcos).

The Christ story has likewise been reinterpreted according to current conditions. As early as 1907, Aurelio V. Tolentino’s ***Bagong Kristo*** (New Christ) portrayed Christ as a labor leader, who organizes the workers in the city and the countryside to demand decent wages from landlords and factory owners. From 1988 to 1992, Al Santos’ ***Kalbaryo ng Maralitang Tagalungsod*** (Calvary of the Urban Poor) has focused on the plight of the Manila urban poor, whose calvary is a garbage dump called Smokey Mountain and whose crosses are the various antipoor ordinances issued by the local government.

Of all the traditional forms, it is the sarswela that has had the most number of innovations. In 1977, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio 's *Ang Bundok* (The Mountain) showed the Cordillera groups linking arms to fight foreigners mining their lands. In 1976, Domingo Landicho 's *Sumpang Mahal* (Sacred Vow) satirized the colonial mentality of Filipino *balikbayan* (Filipino-Americans coming back to visit the Philippines). In 1980 Isagani R. Cruz 's *Ms. Philippines* exposed the dreams and frustrations of beauty-contest participants. In 1982 Nicanor G. Tiongson 's *Pilipinas Circa 1907* underscored the conflict between pro-American and pro-Filipino forces in the political, cultural, and economic levels.

These attempts at revitalization prove that the creative use of traditional dramas for aesthetic expressions on contemporary realities is not only possible, but necessary as well so that these plays may survive and prosper in the present. If these attempts succeed, not only will these plays help to form a new citizenry and nation; they will also have proved themselves significant enough to be considered as pillars of a national theater. • N.G. Tiongson

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